



The LOYAL  
WOMAN

M.L. Lexi

LOVE TRANSCENDS EVERYTHING

# The Loyal Woman

M.L. Lexi

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Published by M.L. Lexi

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For every lonely woman. You're not alone.

Fantasy fuels the extinguished fire in us and breathes life into our existence.

—M.L. Lexi

# One

Monday, September 7, Morning

SOLEDAD THOMAS STARTED her ordinary day by making breakfast for her family, something she had done on hundreds of Mondays. However, today, her day would turn from ordinary to the worst.

White cupboards and tan quartz countertops gleamed under the September sunshine pouring bright through the windows. The smell of frying bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast painted the air. Monday's breakfast menu was always bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast. Consistency was of the utmost importance to Elliot and what he expected of his wife.

Breakfast finished, and the family was off to their busy lives. Elliot was off to carry out his COO duties at zzzThomas and Partners, his father's accounting firm. The twins, Allie and Annie, and Soledad's youngest, Noah, were off to school to fill their minds with knowledge and teenage angst.

As Soledad did every morning, she watched everyone pile into Elliot's Maserati from the living room window. The usual routine played out precisely as it did every morning. The twins opened the back car doors, always Allie on the right and Annie on the left. Always toss backpacks in, slide into the seats, snap seatbelts in, and set the AirPods in their ears, proceed with head bobbing

to the music. Noah got into the front passenger seat, and Elliot behind the wheel. Off they went at eight-fifteen. Always at eight-fifteen. Elliot would drop the children off at school at eight twenty-five, and he would be in his office by eight fifty-five. Always.

Monotony and repetitiveness had become Soledad's life, and Christ, she hated the feeling of boredom and predictability that was her life.

Her family wasn't tedious, her children anything but monotone. Soledad loved her children and husband, and she loved who they were. Or did she?

Doubt had become the essence of her being.

When Elliot turned right on Maple, and the car disappeared, on a long, exhaled breath, Soledad swirled from the window and got on with her humdrum Monday. She had a long list of chores to get to.

First on the day's schedule was laundry, and in the laundry room, Soledad separated, sorted, and tossed the first of many loads she'd do that morning into the washing machine. There was never a shortage of dirty laundry with three fashion-conscious teenagers and a husband.

Soledad was glad Hope and Jasmine, her two eldest, no longer lived at home. As much as Soledad missed them, she was glad they'd moved out when they started university and that independent living stuck after graduation. Two fewer bodies at home took off some of the pressure from her hectic days.

Since birth, Soledad cared for her five children on her own. There had been no nannies, babysitters, or family support. There was no help of any kind. It hadn't been



easy. At times, it had been stressful. It was often taxing on the body and mind, but Soledad had done it.

Elliot was the professional, the educated one, the breadwinner. Soledad was the stay-at-home mom, and her job was to care for the children and home and organize her family's lives. Soledad had sacrificed her life to meet their needs. She'd done her part for the past thirty-one years to meet her family's needs and make them happy—at the cost of her happiness.

As much as Soledad loved her children and enjoyed being a mother and wife, her resentment was ready to burst.

Soledad told herself every married woman went through the existential crisis she was going through, and it would pass. It hadn't. The emptiness and disillusion with her life were mounting to distraction, and she feared what she might do. Everyone had a breaking point.

Adding detergent, Soledad turned the dial and set the machine to wash. Her lips curved when Buddy's head spun in chorus with the spin cycle swirling through the glass window. The silly-looking, brown pug with deep wrinkles around the big, dark eyes always put a smile on her face no matter her mood, and this morning's mood was sad and broody.

Today was Soledad's fiftieth birthday, a day she'd dreaded for weeks.

She'd cruised past twenty into thirty without much thought. Her mind was occupied then with marriage and children. She'd inched her way into forty with a hope and a prayer her fiftieth wouldn't come anytime soon. Yet here was her fiftieth birthday, sooner than expected and adding to her feelings of hopelessness.

Soledad hated feeling as she did about a silly birthday, but it was her fiftieth—the worst number in her books.

The big five-oh was the crossover into old age, the time you re-evaluate your life and doubt your choices. It brought on menopause, giving rise to gray hair and hot flashes, a constant reminder of your ageing body. The five-oh brought on dormant disorders and pain you never imagined would touch you. Worse, fifty brought on drooping boobs, the horrors of the turkey neck, and sagging arms, sagging everything.

Soledad's mood was somewhat lifted by the idea of her family coming home tonight. She didn't doubt they would all make it home to surprise her. It was why no one had mentioned her birthday at the breakfast table.

Elliot would show up with a chocolate-chip ice cream cake, the family's favourite and a bouquet of roses. Noah would present her with a bundle of variety-store bought flowers. Hope and Jasmine would override their father's set menu and order Chinese and pizza, and the entire family would gather around the dining room table.

Tonight though, Soledad decided there would be no fast food. With everyone's life going in different directions, it was a rare occasion when her family shared family dinner together, and Soledad planned to make it memorable. She planned to prepare a grand dinner with everyone's favourite foods.

Right now, though, it was time for Buddy's morning walk. The last thing she wanted was a present from Buddy scenting the house.

Walking to the foyer, Soledad looked at herself in the closet door mirror. Her chestnut hair was bound into a messy ponytail. Black leggings designed to smooth out

her long legs were paired with a short sleeve Lycra shirt that tightly hugged her body and gave her feminine curves. Except for the gold wedding band on her left hand, she wore no jewellery. She wasn't June Cleaver, and jewelry and housework weren't an ideal match. The same went for makeup, but she needed none. The long, lashed blue eyes, the dainty nose, and delicate pouty mouth on the alabaster face needed no enhancements.

Soledad reached for her pear-yellow running jacket. She slipped on her white running shoes and strapped the running belt that held her water bottle and cell phone around her waist.

Eyeing herself in the mirror, Soledad looked every bit the runner. Too bad she didn't run, hadn't since Hope, her firstborn, came along. Women her age who were mothers and wives, managers of their homes, ran in the movies and fiction novels. Women who were their husband's caterers and hosted the many functions to promote their scaling careers didn't have time to run.

Soledad eyed her screen's phone for the time. Eight-thirty, time for Buddy's half-hour morning walk. Elliot's motto was that schedules made for an efficient life, and he was a stickler for efficiency.

"Buddy, can you pull yourself away from watching the washing to go for your morning walk?" Soledad smiled when Buddy made a mad dash from the laundry room and slid across the polished hardwood and into her. "I thought that would get your attention. Let's get going. We have exactly thirty minutes for your walk. I have a lot to do today." She attached Buddy's leash to his collar as his tail happily thumped against hardwood.

## Two

WHILE BUDDY RAN around the dog park with his friends, a Chihuahua named Thor and a terrier named Fenton, Soledad did a mental check of her To-Do list.

Her mind rolling, Soledad tilted her face up to the sky and let the sun pour over her face. She watched a pair of blue jays wing by and followed the flight of Canada geese in V formation, heading for warmer temperature. Fall was starting to show its face, and the rich hues of rust and gold on the park's trees hinted at the incoming season. That lightened Soledad's mood some. She loved this time of year.

Tonight wouldn't be the usual Monday pasta night. Everyone would get their favourite foods. Feeding six people with different tastes was a challenge. It was the reason Elliot set the daily menus, and everyone had to accept it.

"There are too many varied tastes in this house, and accommodating each one is a burden on you." Elliot had told her. "Set meals will make your life easier."

Who was she to doubt Elliot?

Soledad wasn't a respected doctor like her sister or the COO of a company like her husband. Soledad didn't have the career her children looked up to or aspired to become. She was a homemaker, pure and simple, the guardian of her children. It was her sole contribution, and as such, she'd take care of them to the best of her ability.

When Soledad's phone alarm alerted the end of Buddy's playtime, she tapped it silent and called for him. Thirty minutes went by too fast for Buddy's liking, and it took another fifteen minutes, time Soledad hadn't accounted for in her busy schedule, to coax him home.

Once home, Soledad traded her running belt for her purse. She slung the cross-body bag on and called for Buddy. "Come on, Buddy. We're going for a ride, Buddy." In seconds, Buddy ran out the door and straight to the car.

Soledad turned the ignition and backed out of the driveway. Soledad was about to floor it when she saw Hazel shuffling toward her but was forced to come to a complete stop at the end of the driveway when the old woman waved her flabby arms as if taking flight.

Without an escape option, Soledad rolled her window down and waited for her eighty-year-old neighbour to approach the car at a sloth velocity. Bent over her walker, Hazel's floral dress scraped the pavement. She wore white open-toe sandals with skin tone knee-highs. One sock was wrinkled around her ankle, and the other pulled to her knee.

Foreshadow? Soledad wondered. "Good morning Hazel. I'm making a supermarket run. Do you need anything?"

"Hello, dear, are you going somewhere?" Hazel pushed the thick black-rimmed glasses higher on her nose.

"I'm going to zzzGino's Market. Can I pick anything up for you?"

Cupping her ear, Hazel leaned in closer. "I'm sorry, dear, can you repeat that? Oh, is that Buddy?"

The old woman couldn't hear much, but Buddy's bark she heard from a mile away. "It is." Soledad rolled the back window down and Buddy put his paws on the windowsill and leaned out.

"Hello, boy. How are you this fine morning?" Hazel delighted the dog with head scratches. "That's a lovely boy. Why don't you come to the house with me? I have treats."

On the invitation, Buddy jumped out the car window like a bullet. "Christ on a bike, not now, Buddy. I don't have time for this." Soledad jumped out of the car. "Get back in the car, Buddy. Hazel needs to get her exercise and take her nap afterward." Soledad gestured Buddy into the front seat. Grudgingly, he jumped in. "He'll come to visit this afternoon, Hazel. Right now, I'm in a bit of a rush."

"Okay, dear. Are you going to the market?"

"I am." Soledad slid behind the wheel.

"Can you pick me up some eggs and milk and..." Hazel raised a finger to her lips and rolled her eyes to the sky as she thought deeply.

"Shit." Soledad pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger.

"What was that, dear?"

"How about I pick up the usual things I get for you?"

"But I may not need them."

"You can pick and choose. I can keep whatever is left over." Soledad strapped herself in.

"I guess we can do that, dear."

"I'll see you later, Hazel," Soledad said, and from the passenger seat, Buddy barked his goodbye.

"Soledad, honey."

“What, what is it, Hazel?” Soledad almost snapped before she caught herself.

“Happy birthday.” Hazel’s eyes, made to look huge by the thick lens of her glasses, remained riveted on Soledad. “Yes, dear, it’s what I wanted to say from the start. My brain doesn’t think as well anymore. Anyway, I hope you have a lovely day, dear.”

A remorseful smile replaced Soledad’s irritation. “Thank you, Hazel,” she said and moved on.

The first stop on Soledad’s To-Do list was the cleaners to drop off the chocolate suit Elliot needed for the meeting with a highfalutin client in a couple of days. Soledad made an additional note to iron his cobalt shirt and set out the matching silk tie for him to wear.

The next stop was the art supplies store for the Bristol board and Styrofoam spheres Noah needed for his science project. Next on her list was the drug store, where she picked up Elliot’s blood pressure prescription and the twins’ vitamins.

Soledad drove to Swift Lube for the car’s scheduled oil change. She was late for that, but as a loyal customer for decades, Tyrone, the manager, told her she had preferred standing with a wink and snuck her through. That would take a twenty-dollar tip.

Soledad planned to use the thirty minutes her car was in the shop to do her grocery shopping. Kill two birds with one stone. Elliot could never question her efficiency.

Soledad walked three doors down from Swift Lube to zzzGino’s Market. Making her way down the familiar aisles, Soledad picked up everything she needed and a few extra things for Hazel’s benefit. Soledad was in the habit of shopping with a prepared list. Elliot had rooted the idea in her that lists were conducive to efficiency and

a cost-effective shopping trip, but today, she was winging it.

“I got everyone’s favourite food, and won’t they be surprised? I got roast beef for Noah and ham for Elliot. The ham bone is for you, Buddy.” Buddy’s tongue lolled out from the back seat in a canine grin. “For Jasmine and Hope, I got salmon portions and tofu for the twins,” Buddy whined at the mention of tofu. “I know, yuck, right? Why the girls would want to eat that stuff is beyond me too?” Soledad said to Buddy, turning onto Main Street.

Next on the list was zzzPetCo to pick up a bag of Buddy’s food. “I’m sorry, Buddy, but today you can’t come in with me. Today it’s an in-and-out visit.”

Soledad left an upset Buddy barking in the car, but she had no choice. Buddy would head straight to the toy aisle, and getting him out was an uphill battle, and she had no time for nonsense today. She had to get home to get dinner on the stove.

Buddy forgave Soledad when the car started rolling, and the back window went down. It was two o’clock. As much as her schedule didn’t allow it, Soledad couldn’t bypass the wine store to pick up a bottle of Riesling Elliot couldn’t go without.

“I’ll only be a minute, Buddy.” The dog’s paws planted on the car window, whining, he watched Soledad head into the wine store and return within minutes.

Soledad steered the car for home with the happy thought of her family’s visit floating in her mind. Tonight wasn’t going to be an echo of past nights.



# Three

Tuesday, September 8, Morning

THEY DIDN'T COME, not Hope, not Jasmine. Elliot didn't make it home until nine after his usual twelve-hour day at the office. Once home, Elliot barely acknowledged Soledad, picked up a glass and the bottle of Johnnie Walker, and headed into his home office to work some more. Bed followed an hour later. Noah hung out with his hockey teammates after practice, and the twins had dinner with the Conservation Club at zzzMarcello's Pizzeria.

Worse than not making it home for her birthday dinner, no one mentioned it at the breakfast table in the morning. After breakfast, Elliot, Noah, and the twins walked out of her insignificant life into their meaningful ones without saying a word.

Soledad never felt more alone.

Soledad received an email birthday card from her sister Christine, from Africa or whatever God-forsaken place she and her surgeon husband were doing their yearly stint with zzzDoctors Without Borders. No one said anything other than Christine's half-assed but well-meaning birthday wish. No one remembered.

Her parents would have remembered if they weren't long gone, Soledad thought. They always remember.

Untold disappointment flowing in Soledad, she went mushy inside. Sensing Soledad's hurt, Buddy planted his

head on her lap. His eyes, all but dripping love and concern, looked up, and it put a smile on her face.

Soledad sniffed back the tears. “You, Buddy, are the best doggie in the world. You always manage to make me feel better.” She kissed Buddy’s head. In return, Buddy gave Soledad a beaming grin and lapped her face. “And you’re also the silliest dog, but now we must get on with the day. We have a lot to do today,” she said, setting her sorry feelings aside and crossing from the kitchen to the laundry room.

Tapping the playlist Noah loaded on her phone, Soledad searched through for a song to match her mood. Bill Withers’s *zzzAin’t No Sunshine* playing in her ears, Soledad fished the bucket from the supply closet, loaded it with the mop and the necessary cleaning supplies, and turned to the laundry pile.

“Join me in the kitchen when the entertainment is over,” Soledad said to Buddy, who remained in the laundry room mesmerized when she set the washing machine to wash the clothes she didn’t get yesterday.

In the kitchen, Soledad cleared the breakfast dishes off the table. She washed them, the pan, and the bowl she used to make the pancakes. Tuesday was blueberry pancake day, not banana, not buttermilk, not chocolate chip—never anything other than blueberry. It was what Elliot expected and what she’d done for the thirty-one years of her married life.

Soledad craved excitement, and blueberry pancakes weren’t it.

She should have listened to Christine and joined her on her crusade to save humanity. Had she taken heed of her wiser, older sister’s words, she would have pursued a

medical degree and travelled the world. Soledad would be making her mark on people who'd appreciate her.

But mistakes were made, and our lives took diverging paths when the wrong decisions were made. And here Soledad was.

Soledad wiped down the countertop and stovetop. She mopped the floor until it sparkled. The kitchen spic and span—as Elliot liked—Soledad packed the cleaning supplies into the bucket, grabbed the mop, and started up the stairs. She stopped halfway up when Buddy scrambled past her.

“The washing machine stopped, huh?” Buddy barked his confirmation from the top of the stairs. “Let’s go set another load for your entertainment.” Buddy’s grin wide on his face, he ran down the stairs and slid across the wood floor into the laundry room.

The washing machine spinning, Soledad headed upstairs. She went from room to room, making beds, and cleaning bathrooms. Retrieving the vacuum from the hallway closet, Soledad ran it over rugs as Aretha’s voice came through her earbuds.

“R-E-S-P-E-C-T,” Soledad chimed in with Aretha and followed with, “A little respect, just a little bit. Damn straight respect,” Soledad added before jumping in to croon, “I get tired, just a little bit. Actually, I get tired a lot.” Soledad’s foot stomped in anger on the vacuum’s OFF button and sent Buddy from a leisure stroll into the bedroom to a mad dash under the bed.

“You’d think my husband would remember.” Soledad set teeth against temper and tossed the vacuum cleaner with a thump into the closet, and Buddy hid deeper under the bed. “Sorry, Buddy.” She slammed the closet door. “I’m not so much angry, but disappointed. You know?”

Buddy peeked his head from under the bed. “It’s safe to come out.”

Soledad could understand her five children not remembering. At seventeen, Annie and Allie, influenced by Christine’s adventures of her travels and the destruction she saw, aimed to become the earth’s saviours and the next Greta Thunberg. Annie and Allie’s focus was on everything but their mother. As for Noah’s forgetfulness, he was a sixteen-year-old boy. Girls, friends, and sports—in that order—were a young boy’s nucleus, not his mother.

Soledad understood her eldest daughter’s oversight. Hope’s pursuits of fulfilling her doctoring dream—again, Christine’s influence and not Soledad’s—her focus was work and Ethan Sutherland, fellow pediatric resident and live-in boyfriend of three years.

Soledad gave twenty-five-year-old Jasmine the same consideration. Six years Hope’s junior, Jasmine’s head was buried under the demanding workload at her grandfather’s accounting firm. Jasmine’s goal was to step into Elliot’s shoes and take over the company’s management once he inherited it. Dedicating every waking hour to prove herself was where Jasmine’s head was.

Soledad gave all of her ambitious children a pass for forgetting, but she couldn’t excuse Elliot. “How could he, Buddy? How could he forget my birthday?” she mumbled as she headed down the stairs to the laundry room.

“How could Elliot forget my birthday? Not a call, not even a birthday card. And as for birthday sex, pfft, as if that would happen.” She heaved the wet load of clothes from the washing machine to the dryer and lobbed the

next load into the washing machine. “Not a ‘happy birthday, honey.’ A simple happy birthday, Buddy. It’s not too much to ask, is it?” Soledad interpreted Buddy’s bark as tacit agreement. “Christ on a bike, he could have made an effort. It’s my fiftieth.” It brought on insecurity and led to her existential crisis.

Back upstairs in her bedroom, Soledad looked at the eyes in the mirror over the dressing table, staring at her. “I feel as old as I look.” She yanked the earbuds out of her ears and tossed them onto the bed.

Soledad was an optimist by nature, but her life and marriage had been verging on boring for so long that she was at the point of no return. How could she not be when the loneliness had encased her like a tight blanket for too long? Loneliness felt worse than the sadness that came with it. Loneliness, by its very definition, can’t be shared. Sadness could.

Soledad wasn’t demanding or unreasonable. She recognized Elliot’s work responsibilities. It sustained their family. She even empathized with Elliot’s desperate need for his father’s validation. As the successor to zzzThomas and Partners—the accounting firm the over-achieving Charles Winston Thomas built from the ground up—the pressure on Elliot to prove himself to his demanding father was overwhelming.

Soledad accepted her children, getting on with their lives. A timely assertion of the truest adage known to humankind was life goes on. Still, Soledad couldn’t help but feel sorry for herself, like a footnote to her family’s life.

The sadness leaked out as the misery pushed in.

Soledad didn't hate her life. It was that life wasn't living up to her expectations. She wanted more of one, needed more out of life.

Soledad never regretted opting to raise her children over pursuing her dancing career—her true love. She'd trained for ballet since she could walk and had dreamt of becoming the next Sylvie Guillem on the stage, but electing to be a wife and mother was the right decision. It was then as it was three decades later. As rewarding as being a wife and mother was, there was a void in her that needed fulfillment.

Fire in her life and bed was what Soledad needed in her life.

Maybe it was the onset of mid-life hitting, burnout or the impending empty nest syndrome crushing down on her.

Hope and Jasmine rarely came home anymore or bothered to call. Soledad saw that look in Hope's eyes for Ethan that a woman gets for the man she plans to walk her down the aisle. Hope was already lost to her work and Ethan and in time, she would be lost to her family. Jasmine wasn't far behind, and the twins would soon be off to university to save the world or wherever the feeling of the day took them.

As for Noah, the boy liked his independence.

Perhaps Soledad's loneliness stemmed from the lack of intimacy and lack of emotion she and Elliot hadn't shared in what felt like forever. They claimed men were the sexual ones, Not Elliot. Debits and credits got him more excited than Soledad ever could.

Whatever the reason, Soledad had an itch she needed scratching, and Elliot wasn't doing it.

She craved attention, a night of wild, uninhibited sex. Elliot was a loyal husband, but Soledad couldn't remember the last time she and Elliot had sex, let alone when the last time was that Elliot made her toes curl in bed. Elliot had never been a toe-curling type lover, but she'd enjoy the connection, the intimacy of touch. Soledad had long forgotten what it was to be kissed, held passionately, and told she was loved.

It had been too long since there had been whispered romanticisms between them. Those had gone by the wayside shortly after their marriage when Soledad and Elliot became comfortable. The goodbye kisses, the I love you, and passionate moments shared between husband and wife had gone the way of the Dodo—extinct.

Soledad took part of the blame. She'd shrugged off passion as something no longer as important when Hope came along. A young nineteen, Soledad was overwhelmed by a baby, motherhood, and running a household. By the time Noah arrived, Soledad's concentration was on the children. So absorbed was Soledad with their nurturing she failed to grasp the magnitude of how she and Elliot were drifting into separate lives.

Wasn't that what happened to all couples? Soledad wondered. Marriage wasn't like what Soledad grew up watching on television. The foundation of the flawless Cleaver family was as farcical as the pearls around June's neck.

Her insecurity was playing a part in the downfall of her marriage. She wasn't the slim ballet dancer of her teens. She'd bore five children, and stretch marks and a saggy tummy were an unavoidable evil. She'd eaten a few too many carbs over the years, which showed in the

twenty-five-pound weight gain. It didn't help that her morning runs had gone by the wayside after the children came. That didn't mean she was primed to be put out to pasture. She was a young fifty-year-old virile woman with a few years left.

If only Elliot could see that. A woman liked the music of lovemaking with the man she loved.

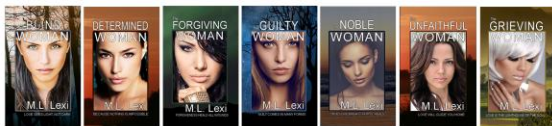
Wishing things were different, Soledad stepped into the shower and let the hot water rain down on the tears that began to fill her eyes. As hard as she tried to hold the tears back, they began to flow unchecked. Cried empty, Soledad stepped out of the shower and wrapped her wet body into a white towel.

Walking into her bedroom, Soledad's red-rimmed eyes curved into a soft smile when Buddy aimed loving eyes her way, and his tail crazily thumped on the bed when he saw her.

"If everyone were as doting as you, I wouldn't feel so blah." Soledad fell back on the bed next to Buddy, who cuddled with her, and stared at the ceiling. "I'll tell you a secret, Buddy. This empty feeling chokes me and makes my mind wander, and I'm afraid of what I may do."



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