

The  
DECEITFUL  
WOMAN



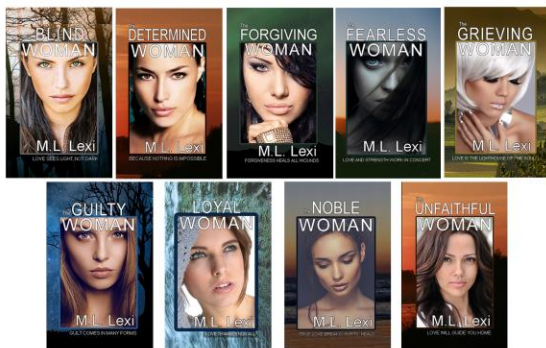
M.L. Lexi

LOVE HAS NO BOUNDARIES

# The Deceitful Woman

M.L. Lexi

## Books by M.L. Lexi



“The Deceitful Woman” eBook & Paperback Edition  
Published by M.L. Lexi

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To mothers.

Everyone is hiding something—always.

—M.L. Lexi

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# Prologue

IT WAS TWO a.m.

Things were quiet. There was no sound in the room or outside. But for the sliver of hallway light that shimmered through the half-closed door, the room was dark.

Madison was exhausted from what she had endured the past six hours and fast asleep. The powder-blue hospital bedcover raised to her chest warmed her anemic body. Her makeup had washed off, and her face looked sallow and haggard. Her long, black hair was a knotted mess around her young, heart-shaped face.

Madison looked awful but peaceful in sleep.

It was now five a.m.

Someone had closed the door and rolled down the window blinds. The room was pitch dark.

Madison thought she heard footsteps from somewhere in the darkened room, maybe one person, possibly two people. She heard a voice, a soft murmur, perhaps that of a man and a woman. Two women?

“Who’s there?” Madison’s voice was slurred, incoherent, and barely audible.

Madison thought she heard a cry. Yes, it was a baby’s cry. Maybe. Madison wasn’t sure. Her head was swimming in confusion.

Where was she? Madison tried hard to remember.

Nothing came to her. She was too dazed, her mind too clouded. They must have given her drugs, something strong for the pain to calm her nerves.

Madison thought she saw a flash of light for a few seconds. She thought she heard wheels rolling on the tiled floor. There was a creaking sound. What creaked? Her mind was too fuzzy to form coherent thoughts, her vision too blurry to paint images.

Voices, one, two, possibly three, said something. A vague murmur. Madison thought she heard uncertainty and panic in one of the voices and confidence in the second.

The first voice said, "Relax, I've got this. It's all right." Maybe. The voice sounded familiar.

Whose voice was it? Madison tried to reach into her memory, but she came up blank.

"Who are you?" Madison's soft voice was hoarse, bristling with fear.

A hush followed, and the silence came and stretched.

Through her squinting eyes, Madison made out the vague movement of shadows. There was the smell of something flowery. No, it smelled of creamy sandalwood or musk with a touch of lavender, Madison determined after a few seconds. It was a comforting scent with familiar notes.

She couldn't figure out what was happening around her, but instinct clenched her insides and tightened her chest.

Madison warred with her mind to snap clear, but the darkness came now.

# Part I

## The Beginning

Secrets are the universal language of survival.

—M.L. Lexi

# One

Five Years Later

THE AIR WAS ripe with the scent of coffee and the sound of grinding beans. A commercial for a dream Caribbean destination lashed from the television screen that hung between the menu boards. Despacito flowed from the overhead speakers. Those waiting to place their order bobbed their heads to its picante rhythm. The tables and the bench seats were crowded with the after-school crowd of voluble teenagers in hoodies, jeans, and white trainers ingesting more caffeine than needed.

Lacy leaned a hip against the counter and stared at her daughter. “Organic milk only, Maddie,” Lacy said and watched Madison on the opposite side of the counter set down the carton of skim milk in her hand and reach into the refrigerator for the organic milk.

Madison waved the carton of milk at her mother. “Satisfied?” she said after pouring into the tall coffee cup.

Nodding, Lacy flicked her eyes to the cold-cut sandwich in the display case. “And how about one of those subs, heated, to go?”

“It’s a Panino, not a sub.” Madison snapped the lid on the coffee cup and placed it on the counter before Lacy.

“It’s a sub. That Panino crap is snobbish gobbledegook to triple the price.” Lacy took a sip from her cup and hummed. “Christ, that’s a good cup of coffee.”

“You know none of this is free. It’s deducted from my pay.” Madison reached for the tong, clamped it on the Panino Lacy signalled, and walked it to the hot press. “You complain enough as it is about my meagre paycheque, and

if you continue to eat it away, I'm never bringing home that executive salary you want."

Blue eyes steady on defiant blue eyes, Lacy looked at the face so much like hers. Madison's waist-long glossy black hair was pulled back into a ponytail, accentuating her heart-shaped face, with large, round eyes crowned with long, dark lashes. Madison's face had the silky smoothness of a twenty-two-year-old, which Lacy, at seventeen years her senior, had lost to lines etched by a hard life.

Madison was lean with a fit frame, a genetic trait Lacy or possibly her father had handed down—if she knew who he was. Madison was five-eight, four inches taller than her mother. She wore her customary jeans, a white T-shirt, and scuffed running shoes from many years of use.

Lacy sighed. "Oh, honey, I stopped expecting anything of any consequence from you long ago."

Madison set the bagged Panino on the counter. "Well, ditto, Mother dearest."

Lacy's smile spread wide at Madison's sharp tongue, which came from her side of the family. "Touché daughter, touché."

Despacito segued into Paris by The Chainsmokers. Some in the crowd mouthed the words to the song, and Lacy's eyebrows furrowed. Music died a gruesome death after the eighties.

"Raisin cinnamon bagel, toasted with butter, Madison," Mike called out from the cash register.

Madison acknowledged the order with a "Coming up."

Wiping her hands dry on the front of the green apron emblazoned with the words *The Coffee Shop*, Madison slid on a pair of disposable gloves. Reaching for the bagel, she cut it in half with the serrated knife and set it to toast.

"What's that?" Madison asked when Lacy set the papers on the counter.

"Those are copies of the monthly bills. You're going to start contributing to the household expenses, Maddie. I've carried you for long enough."

Madison sucked in air and hissed it out. Her mother could be such a depressant injector. “Can we have this conversation later, Mother? As you can see, I’m swamped right now.” She put the bagel with two containers of butter, a plastic knife, and a napkin into a paper bag and handed it to the girl in the green and burgundy plaid uniform scrolling through her cell phone. The girl didn’t acknowledge or thank Madison. That was the sum of her life.

“Whether we talk about it now or later, the outcome is the same. You’re an adult now and need to pay your way, and you’re contributing to the household expenses.” Lacy reached into her tote, and Madison assumed her mother was going for her cigarettes.

“I told you, you can’t smoke in here? You think as a nurse you’d know better.” Madison hooked the tongs onto a blueberry muffin and bagged it. Pointing at table five, she signalled to pick up the bag.

“I was reaching for the additional bills, internet, taxes, and miscellaneous to add to the pile.”

“Madison, two Grande coffees, a scone with peanut butter, and a strawberry cake lollipop.” Mike handed the young pimpled face kid change from a ten-dollar bill. “All separate orders.”

Madison reached for two cups and flipped the handle on the urn to let the coffee pour. “You know I make a pittance and can barely make ends meet. How am I supposed to contribute to pay the bills?”

Lacy watched her daughter manage the multiple orders with ease. If only Madison would put her skills to better use. “You’ll have to figure it out. It’s about time you carried your weight. We’re splitting costs fifty-fifty.”

Madison slammed the two coffee cups on the counter. “I can’t afford that, and you make way more money than I do at this crappy job.” She wouldn’t dare tell her mother that much of her pay cheque went toward paying for the private investigator working for her for the past seven months. That

wasn't a conversation she was ready or willing to spar over with her mother.

"Madison, this," Mike raised a hand, palm out and circled it before Madison, "is not the attitude we want to convey to our customers. There's too much negativity there."

Madison turned and flashed Mike a forced all teeth smile. "Better?"

Mike's slash of dark eyebrows rose. "Right. Well, I need three regulars. Leave room for cream."

"Go away, Mother. You're finking up my workspace and generating too much negativity in peaceful Madison."

Lacy rolled her eyes dramatically and reached for the bag containing the Panino. "This is my dinner, so make arrangements for yours," she said as Amber Fox-Roche flashed on the television screen.

The words to her lauded, syndicated show Tell Me All appeared on the screen before fading, and the camera closed in on her. Amber's straight, black hair was perfectly groomed, and her makeup was expertly applied. Her large, cerulean eyes were dusted in bronze, her high cheekbones rouged, and her full lips traced in dark plum lipstick. Her nails were long, painted salmon-pink on manicured hands.

Amber wore diamond studs at her ears, a gold chain around her long neck, gold bangle bracelets on her wrist, and a gold wedding band encrusted with diamonds. The sharp red suit she wore with matching stilettos suited her tall, slim frame and added to the poised, confident image she portrayed on camera. On the matching gray chair beside Amber, handsome Keanu Reeves up-talked the newly released John Wick movie. Amber smiled with all her warmth and force.

The epitome of manufactured perfection, Lacy thought, staring at Amber. As beautiful as Amber was on the outside, she was morally corrupt on the inside. Or was the term moral turpitude more apt? The public would know who the real Amber Fox-Roche was if Madison told all.

Lacy flicked her eyes from the television toward her daughter, who had stopped what she was doing and transfixed her eyes on Amber. The look on Madison's face was a worrisome cagey stare out of blue eyes.

Nothing good came from that look.



## Two

SAMANTHA HALLSTEAD WAS the complete package. Samantha had steel-blue eyes, long legs that never seemed to end, and a curvy body that never quit—literally. She advocated for great sex and enjoyed it as often as possible. Because that's what men are for, she said in response to Amber's probing of her liberal lifestyle.

Samantha Hallstead was intelligent, independent, and opinionated. She went by Sam Hallstead purely for entertainment purposes. She enjoyed the expression triggered in clients and adversaries who assumed Sam was a man and instead got a flaming red-haired goddess with menacing blue eyes.

Since Sam and Amber met in drama class during their first year of high school, the two women became besties and were inseparable. Sam and Amber did everything together and vowed to one another to pursue careers behind the camera.

However, along the way, Sam's umpteenth boyfriend gave her a taste for the law, and she redirected her life's ambition. The news was a great relief to Amber, who felt Sam would be a formidable adversary, and she'd lose every time in the ratings.

Sam was the stronger of the two. Sam was more competitive, more cunning, and more ruthless. Friends or not, Sam's ultimate goal was to win no matter what. Amber didn't resent Sam for it. It was how she was wired. It was

why Sam Hallstead was known in prosecution circles as The Piranha. It was why Sam formed and ran Hallstead Law at thirty-three, with thirty employees and generated millions of dollars in revenue.

Sam was single by choice. She didn't believe in monogamy or sharing her money with any man. Sam was eternally grateful to the feminists before her who'd challenged prevailing attitudes toward women and afforded her the privilege to live as she did.

From Sappho to Gloria Steinem, Sam was sure each would concur with her belief that her hard-earned money was hers to spend as she liked, unlike Amber, who was happy to support her useless, mooching husband and continued to finance Carpaccio Ristorante, his money-draining dream.

"So, things are ... good?" Sam watched Amber walk across the shiny, white marble floor to the glass wall that presented a panoramic view of the colourful gardens and the green roll of the land. Straight ahead was the lake, where two white swans skirted along the water carving a path.

Sliding the doors open, Amber breathed in the perfumes of spring floating in the air from the gardens in glorious bloom. The late afternoon sun washed out of a cloudless sky and spilled into the living room, lighting it bright.

The room was a cozy oasis of ivory walls, long white sofas, reclaimed wood tables, and the console table crowded with framed photographs of her family and daughter Lily.

"Why do you always ask the same thing?" Amber leaned a shoulder against the doorframe and watched Hunter, her husband, throw the ball to Lily. "Yes, things are great. They've never been better." With a beaming smile,

Amber watched her boisterous five-year-old daughter, with an abundance of energy, chase after the ball and kicked it to her father, laughing as she did.

“I’m happy for you, Amber, that you got your shit together.” Sam tucked her legs up under her and leaned back on the sofa.

“Don’t ever let it be said lawyers aren’t articulate.” Amber made her way to the sofa and sat beside Sam with Bessie, the white and brown Ba-Shar, between them.

The smirk twisted Sam’s lips. “Damn straight.”

“Bessie, go outside to play with Lily.” Amber got a droopy raised eye from Bessie. “I had to get the laziest dog at the pound. Move, Bessie, and get your ass outside. Go on.” When the dog didn’t budge, Amber rose and gestured for Bessie to follow her to the door. Once there, she waved hands to encourage the dog outside onto the terrace. Amber waited as Bessie weighed the benefits of going out. “Go on,” she said, stepping out the door, hoping the dog would mimic her.

Bessie took a moment longer to debate before she walked outside, strolled across the terrace, down the stairs, and belly-flop onto the grass.

“That’s one lazy dog,” Amber murmured with a smile.

“Makes you wonder who the master is.” Sam waved her empty glass at Amber, signalling her to bring the Zinfandel bottle to the sofa. Sam gave Amber a half-amused look when she did as told.

“I love watching Hunter and Lily play. He loves that little girl so much. He’s become a different person since Lily came into our life. He’s loving, caring, and so involved, not to mention thoughtful. Just yesterday, he showed up with a bouquet of roses for me and a bouquet of

lilies for Lily, her favourite flower.” Amber aimed her eyes at the overflowing vases on the console table.

“They’re lovely.”

“The inexplicable powers of a child’s love.”

“Yes, the inexplicable powers of a child’s love.”

As close a friend as Sam was to Amber, as well as she knew her, she wouldn’t voice her true thoughts. How did you tell someone you loved that the glue that held her relationship together was their child and nothing else? Amber was so in love with Hunter that it blinded her to his shortcomings, and she forgave him for his indiscretions.

Hunter was a horndog before Amber met him, and he would continue to be one until he reached the fires of hell. Because once a horndog, always a horndog. Why couldn’t Amber see that as clearly as Sam did? Love, Sam thought, blinded you, cut off your sense of smell and diminished common sense.

Why Amber, a strong, intelligent, successful woman, allowed her heart to rule over her common sense boggled Sam. Sam would never let herself fall into that trap. Luckily for Sam, she was in no danger of falling under any man’s spell. She was too self-centred for that to happen.

Selfishness was an underrated trait.

“Hunter comes straight home from the restaurant and spends as much time as he can with us here at home.” Amber refreshed Sam’s drink and hers. “You can set the toppled hamster in your head, back onto the wheel.”

“He never fell off, and good to know,” Sam said, but Amber heard so much more.

“And the sex is ... incredible.”

It should be. He’s had enough variety in his life to perfect it. “That’s great.”

Again, Amber heard Sam's judgment, saw the withering scorn in her eyes, and gave her a sidelong glance. "Why can't you try to like Hunter? He's been nothing but good to you, even after the way you treat him."

There's nothing to like. "I'm trying my best."

Annoyance flicked briefly in Amber's eyes. "Try harder." Amber reached for Sam's hand. "Please, Sammy. You're my best friend, and I need you to get along with my husband."

Hope was an eternal spring in Amber. If Sam hadn't been able to get along with the man during their ten years of marriage, Amber should accept that the ship had long sailed to the point of no return.

"I will. I promise." Sam looked away from Amber's hard, unwavering eyes. "And who's this beautiful girl?" Sam said when Lily came running into the room with Hunter and Bessie following.

Bessie wore purple tights, a pink-ribbed top, and matching running shoes. Her hair was tied into curly pigtailed with ribbons. Lily was adorable, lovable, and the closest thing to a niece Sam would have.

"Auntie Sam," Lily shrieked and jumped into Sam's arms. "Did you bring me a present?"

"Lily, what have I said about that?"

"Sorry, Mommy, but Auntie Sam always brings me the best presents." Lily pushed her lower lip out, slightly pouted and aimed the large, round, dark eyes that melted her mother's heart in her direction.

She was her child, Amber thought, brushing her lips over the chestnut hair with motherly love. "Still, asking for things we haven't earned is not polite. Agree?"

"Agreed, Mommy." Lily nodded, and her pigtailed bounced.

“Speaking of asking for things you haven’t earned, how are you, Hunter?” Sam asked, avoiding Amber’s slitted gaze.

“I’m good, Sam. Haven’t seen you at the restaurant parading the boy-toy-slash-victim du-jour?”

Taking a sip of her wine, Sam studied Hunter over the rim of her glass. He wore black Gucci loafers, charcoal pants, a cream polo shirt, collar up—douche style. His hair was thick and black as coal, his mouth wide. He had sea-blue eyes and bore a fashionable stubble on his square jaw. He was a couple of inches short of six feet, with a muscular frame and the indefinable hint of sensuality a woman liked in a man. Wasted good looks on a douche and certainly not the look you’d expect of a chef.

Sam opened her mouth but closed it when Lily jumped on the sofa beside her. “As Mommy said, it isn’t polite to ask for things, but Auntie Sam wouldn’t dare come see her favourite girl without a gift.”

“What is it? What is it? What did you get me?” Lily said excitedly.

Amber framed her daughter’s face with her hands. “Stop harassing Auntie Sam. The present is upstairs in your room. Take Bessie with you,” Amber said when Lily jumped off the sofa.

“Okay, Mommy. Come on, Bessie. We’re going to get my present.”

Amber caught Lily’s arm before she turned to go. “What do you say to Auntie Sam, young lady?”

“Thank you, Auntie Sam.” Lily pecked Sam’s cheek. “And thanks, Mommy, for letting me keep my present.” Lily wrapped her arms around her mother, and Amber embraced her tightly.

Sam saw the pure love between mother and child that radiated across the space between them, and it arrowed into her heart. Although Sam had opted out of motherhood long ago, she wondered if she could nurture such a loving connection with a child of hers.

“I’ll go with Lily to see if the present you gave her is suitable for a child.” Hunter emptied the whiskey in his glass and turned to follow his daughter.

Caustically, Sam smiled. “Impersonating a moral person doesn’t suit you, Hunter.”

“I wish I could say it was a pleasure, Sam. You’re welcome to show your way out at any time,” Hunter called out on his way out of the living room.

Amber huffed out a breath. “Honestly, what am I to do with the two of you? Don’t make me choose, Sam, because, in the end, he’s my husband,” Amber said flatly.

Sam tilted back the wine glass for a long sip. “Both you and I know you’d never choose between us.”

Amber smiled a little. “No, I wouldn’t. It’s why you need to try to get along with Hunter.”

“Fine. Okay. I promise I’ll try harder.” Sam vowed, and Amber looked at her in an odd sort of triumph.

A bottomless well of hope was Amber.

## Coming Soon



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