

The  
FEARLESS  
WOMAN



M.L. Lexi

LOVE AND STRENGTH WORK IN CONCERT

# The Fearless Woman

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Published by M.L. Lexi

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## Prologue

EVERYONE LIVES WITH the unspoken understanding of their obsolescence. Still, you're never ready when it becomes your reality.

The idea that the inward comfort derived from a job Olivia had devoted twenty-five years of her life could be snatched away overnight made the anger spring hot inside her. Olivia cast enraged blue eyes to the email and reread it. The email from Catherine Sullivan, the president of Sullivan Foods, contained six lines of diplomatically correct legalese and the tenor of a sacking. Six aloof lines on an email were the sum of Olivia's years of commitment and loyalty to Catherine Sullivan.

Olivia's anger hot and pulsing, she bolted from the couch and paced the living room. Oreo, Olivia's black and white Maltese Shih Tzu, followed suit.

"Twenty-five fucking years I gave her. I worked nights and weekends without compensation. I never took a sick day, ever. I gave Catherine all I had, all of me, only to be fired over an email. She didn't even have the guts to say it to my face." Olivia's voice trembled with rage, and she increased her pace. Oreo withdrew to the couch. Comfort over exercise.

Olivia never saw it coming, but she blamed no one but herself for her employer sending her packing after years of loyal service. Deluding herself to believe that devoting her time, effort, heart and soul to her job would lead her

employer to recognize her contribution rather than push her out the door was her mistake.

The boomer mentality of loyalty to your employer ingrained from a young age was corporate propaganda from institutions extorting a surplus of people seeking employment. Olivia knew that now, but it was too little too late.

Wisdom came at great cost.

There had been many little warning bells leading to this moment that Olivia chose to overlook for the sake of a much needed paycheck. The first overlooked red flag was when Catherine, the woman she looked up to and respected, knocked Olivia's salary by four thousand dollars. Catherine did so without explanation or cause at a vulnerable time in Olivia's life, knowing Olivia wouldn't contest it.

Olivia's nasty divorce left her in debt and desperate for money, and she couldn't afford to dispute the pay cut.

The second overlooked warning signal was when Catherine failed to pay Olivia the commission she'd worked for months to get. Again, Olivia did nothing. Financial insecurity leads to compliance, and Catherine knew it.

What Catherine did was beyond the pale and fundamentally dishonest. Still, Catherine continued to take advantage of Olivia, and Olivia had no choice but to allow it. Losing her home and not eating wasn't an option.

The hard-learned survival lessons taught Olivia that life was inherently unfair and pride was a commodity when debts were mounting.

Olivia had Bob to thank for the poor state of her finances. After ten years of marriage to Bob Huntley, he walked out on their marriage and left Olivia with more debt than she imagined one person could accrue. Marital debt,

they called it, when Bob disappeared into thin air, and Olivia was on the hook for the entire amount. Never mind that Bob had forged her signature on the credit card applications or the second mortgage documents and cleaned out their bank accounts.

It took Olivia years to pay off the debt she was left to shoulder and just as long to gain her financial footing. With the debt paid, the massive boulder on her shoulders slid away. Olivia had never felt as free or as secure as she did then.

Independence accomplished, Olivia shed Bob's surname and reclaimed her maiden name. Falco wasn't regal or a legacy name, but it was hers, and Olivia Huntley became Olivia Falco.

Under the name Olivia Falco, she opened bank and investment accounts. Managing her money, bank accounts, and investments, something Bob didn't allow during their marriage, felt liberating.

Bob had controlled their finances and purposely kept Olivia in the dark during their marriage. It wasn't until Bob left that Olivia discovered he was as bad a money manager as he was a husband. It wasn't until then she went over the credit card statements and saw the gambling charges. It wasn't until then she saw the motel charges and, on deeper detecting, found out he was "entertaining" a parade of women.

Aside from trusting Bob and leaving him in charge of their finances, marrying him was something Olivia would regret all her life.

But there was a silver lining to every dark cloud. Olivia's cheating, lying husband helped her recognize her inner strength and self-reliance. That knowledge gave Olivia control over her life, the money she never had with

Bob, and a taste of independence. It tasted great, and keeping her newfound freedom was a powerful motivator for Olivia to do everything necessary to maintain it.

Olivia gave everything she had to her job and the company that helped make it possible to get her life in order. She walked the line and did what was asked of her. She went above and beyond because she was grateful, loved her job and colleagues, and owed Sullivan Foods for where she was today.

That rationale was Olivia's grievous mistake. It was abundantly clear from Catherine's email that Olivia was an employee of Sullivan Foods and nothing more.

The most painful betrayal is always from the people you trust the most.

Broken and exhausted, Olivia curled up on the couch with Oreo and cried.



# Part I

## The Beginning

Life is inherently unfair and pride is a commodity.

—M.L. Lexi

# One

UNEMPLOYMENT IS A mixed bag. The downside is uncertainty, and the upside is the freedom to do what you enjoy on your terms.

Five months on, Olivia was an unemployed middle age, menopausal woman with a deflated ego. Her wardrobe now consisted of shapeless gray sweatpants, a matching sweatshirt, and running shoes. She wore no makeup, and her idea of hair styling was to drag wet fingers through her hair and bundle it into a ponytail.

At fifty-four, Olivia was in the prime of her life with knowledge and experience. Some employers thought so also but weren't willing to pay what she was worth. Many, however, thought otherwise, and the rejections were piling up.

Life didn't seem to hold a lot of promise.

With nowhere to go and too much time on her hands, what Olivia opted to do to process the lingering resentment, anger, and bitterness from her forced departure from Sullivan's was to write. Olivia had always wanted to write. Now, she planned to write the tell-all book to expose the skeletons in the closets of everyone at Sullivan's, who'd made her life a miserable hell and were the reason for her demise.

Sitting at the kitchen table in front of her laptop, Olivia inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. The house was infinitely silent, and the hum of the refrigerator cycling and

her breathing were the only sounds in the room. The ceiling light above the oak table shone incandescent on the polished cream-coloured tile. The lingering smell of sautéed garlic and tomato sauce from the pasta dinner Oreó and she had shared hung in the air.

Olivia read what she'd written, and disappointment came quickly. Why she thought she could write a novel was anyone's guess. After months of struggling to write, it became painfully clear she was not the writer she imagined herself to be—another disappointment to add to the many in Olivia's life.

Not only was the writing not moving along as Olivia hoped, but it was proving not to be the therapeutic process she hoped for. Olivia highlighted the three chapters of poorly written diatribe and pressed delete. Good thing pen and paper were outdated. Deleting typed words on the screen was more environmentally friendly than crumpling paper. By Olivia's estimation, she had already gone through several spruce trees in a few weeks.

Olivia tipped back her head and closed her eyes. "Maybe, there's too much of everything in me. Too many emotions are crowding my head to write anything worth reading. That has to be it. Don't you think so?" Olivia looked down at Oreó. Curled at her feet, he looked up at her with big, brown sad eyes. "I knew you'd understand." Olivia picked Oreó up and set him down on her lap.

"Writing out of anger about the people that instigated it isn't conducive to rational thought or good prose." Olivia reached for the glass of wine and knocked Riesling back to wash away the taste of failure. "Thank God for alcohol," she said, tossing back the remaining wine in her glass. The swallow of wine infused Olivia with some vigour. "To hell

with Catherine Sullivan, Gabe Greene, and Vince Campbell. To hell with them all.”

Setting Oreo down on the floor, Olivia pushed off her desk, stood, and walked toward the French doors. She pushed them open and felt the heat on her face. June had rolled in hot and dry. The air smelled of earth, mowed grass, and the sweet scents from the garden.

“Go on, Oreo, do your thing and don’t go chasing after raccoons. You’ll lose that fight,” she said, stepping out onto the small stone patio.

Soft moonlight spilled from the dark sky, and shadows stretched through the trees and the garden bursting with red roses, pink rhododendrons and bleeding hearts, purple phlox, and a variety of hostas. None of its beauty would exist if Olivia had continued her feeble attempt at gardening and hadn’t hired Mr. Green Thumb. Yet another hobby she’d tried in her time off and wrote off along with photography, painting, scrapbooking, knitting, and cross-stitching, all hobbies that turned into a hard no when she realized she hadn’t the talent or interest to pursue.

Travelling was on Olivia’s bucket list but wasn’t a priority. The bustle of airports, crowded planes, and living out of her suitcase wasn’t Olivia’s idea of pleasure or adventure. Besides, whom would she travel with? Friends had disappeared after she married Bob. He had kept them away during their marriage, and when he left, Olivia was focused on surviving and getting out of debt, not reigniting old friendships.

There was her sister, not that Olivia could pry Lottie from her girls, thirteen-year-old Juliette and twelve-year-old Lexi or her husband, Adam. Being a mom and wife was what Lottie loved, and she wouldn’t leave her family to gallivant the world with Olivia.

The writing was all Olivia had and was what she needed to do. Exposing everyone who'd bullied her and made her life a miserable hell to advance their agenda was what she needed to get the anger out of her system. For Olivia, revenge was a dish best served in print for everyone to read. Come hell or high water Olivia would write her book.

Revenge was a dish best served in print for everyone to read.

## Two

THE SCENT OF salt and brine rode on the mist from the vast blue sea. The pulsating sound of waves propelled by a northeast wind rolling ashore and then rearing back for the next pass soothed Olivia. The hot sun poured over her body, glistening under a layer of cocoa butter sunscreen.

Paradise, Olivia thought and wished her butt was planted on the white sand of a Caribbean beach rather than listening to Gabe Greene—the axis of evil—nasal voice scolding her like a child.

Gabe Greene, the head buyer for one of the largest supermarket chains in the country, was every saleswoman's worst nightmare.

From the head of the oval conference table, Olivia watched the dark, beady eyes that sat exceedingly close in a triangular-shaped face above a cut-glass nose. He was a smallish, round man who appeared taller than he was due to the adjustable height on his chair that he cranked up for maximum effect. He wore a blue cashmere sweater over a soft blue shirt and black slacks. His clothes were worth more than ten of the navy-blue tapered pants suit Olivia wore and did nothing for him. An asshole in fine clothes was still an asshole.

What Gabe Greene lacked in personality, he made up in volume. For the past thirty minutes, the volume was dialed up to the maximum as Gabe beat his flabby chest to assert his male supremacy over Olivia.

Condescending asshole, Olivia thought, but she was a professional or that's what she told herself to maintain her composure. No matter how often she'd endured Gabe's verbal abuse in the past fifteen years, it never got easier.

"You don't do anything without my approval, and you sure as hell don't ship your crap to my stores without it," Gabe said with an imperial tone.

"You mean daddy's stores," Olivia murmured to herself.

Olivia wore a white shirt beneath the single-button jacket and pants accentuating curves rounded over the years. Age, lack of exercise, and genetics tend to do that to a body, although Olivia carried the extra weight proportionately well. She wore flat patent shoes. Comfort over sexuality, the last thing Olivia wanted was to bring sexuality to a meeting with Gabe Greene.

"You answer to me."

Olivia imagined it took all his strength to bite back the "you fucking bitch" segue he wanted to say.

"Me, and only me, has the last word. I don't answer to you or your company." He held his hand up, palm out, to silence Olivia when she opened her mouth to remind him he had authorized the purchase and shipment. "If I want your input, I'll ask for it." His angry stance made him seem like the asshole he was, but he seemed pleased with it.

Gabe rolled into his next rant with the breath of dragons, and the muscles in Olivia's stomach clamped into the tight knots of nerves he always brought on. She could do with some Johnny Walker courage right then. Johnny Walker not available, as an alternative, Olivia lowered her hands to her lap and snapped the elastic band on her wrist to control her anxiety.

Studying the dark eyes lit with anger, Olivia wondered if Gabe knew how much a douche he was. Did his douchery come naturally?

“I,” Gabe stabbed a stiff sausage-thick finger into his flabby chest, “have the ultimate word. Not you or that insignificant, misguided company that insists on keeping such an incompetent as you on their payroll.” Sweat beaded on his bald, bowling-ball-shaped head.

Olivia determined that pent-up sexual frustration made Gabe such an asshole because who’d sleep with a toad. As sex-starved as she was, even a million-dollar offer to spend five minutes with him wouldn’t tempt Olivia into the heinous deed.

Gabe went on with the tirade. If I were your boss, I’d have gotten rid of you long ago,” he spat with authority.

Olivia snapped the elastic band faster. Her wrist was turning a deep apple-red.

Gabe was one of her largest customers, making her the commission that kept a roof over her head and food on the table, and he knew it. Olivia’s patience, however, was wearing thin. The funny thing about patience was that it frayed with age. At fifty-four, Olivia’s was paper-thin. She was too old to put up with the unwarranted rants of a man compensating for the tiny penis between the short, stubby legs.

Gabe rose and slammed his palms on the table with the force his five-two frame allowed. And another thing....”

In a fleeting lapse of control, at the opposite end of the table, Olivia rose to her five-four height, plunked her hands on the table, and aimed lit blue eyes at Gabe. Shut the fuck up, you insignificant little man. I’ve put up with your bullshit for too long and got an ulcer in the process. If only



your mouth and ego were as small as your,” her eyes lowered below his waist, “fragile manhood.”

Seeing the cocky look on Gabe’s face wane into a dazed, stunned stare gave Olivia the strength to go on.

“Does debasing people, women, in particular, make you feel like the man you’re not?” When you’re in the hole, stop digging, said the sensible Olivia in her head, but she’d endured the annoying toad and swallowed her pride for too long to stop. She plowed on. “You’re lucky daddy owns the company and has given you the unearned title, the unearned respect, and that huge entitlement you carry with arrogance. No other company would allow a sexist, uncouth pig like you to do so.”

The expression on Gabe’s face was that of a cornered four-year-old, and by Christ, it felt great. Olivia’s nerves relaxed, and the pressure in her chest subsided.

Olivia’s confidence was soaring like a vulture hovering over death, and she went on. “Any other company would have cut ties with a close-minded, dimwitted employee like you long ago. I have many more adjectives, and none of them pleasant, but you’re not worth my time and energy.”

Shock glazed Gabe’s eyes; all he did was stare at Olivia.

“What’s wrong little man? Oh, did I hurt your feelings, Gabi?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Oops, touched on some mommy or daddy issues, did I, Gabi?” Olivia watched the flush rise to her cheeks. Nothing had ever felt better. Someone rebuking you doesn’t sit so well with you. Imagine how your self-important twaddle has made countless women, including me, who’ve put up with your bullshit for the years just to put food on the table feel. I’ll tell you something, Gabi.”

Olivia held up a finger to silence Gabe when he opened his mouth.

“Oh no, no, no, you’re not interrupting me. Telling you how much of a giant asswipe you are feels great. I should have told you off a long time and saved me tons of money on Tums.” Olivia gathered her papers off the table and tossed them into her briefcase. This is my first time leaving you without my stomach in knots.”

“You know you can kiss your account and commissions goodbye,” Gabe said when he found his voice.

The heat in Olivia’s eyes evaporated, and a smile now filled them. “Hear that? It’s the sound of me not giving a flying rat’s ass. And you will continue to buy from us.”

He set his teeth against his temper. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh, but you will.”

Gabe slammed a hand on the table. “Get the fuck out of her.”

Olivia sank back in her chair. “How do you suppose daddy will react when I wrongly text him confirming your monthly kickback envelope has been dropped off?”

“That’s a serious accusation and completely untrue.” Gabe’s hands went into tight fists.

“Tap, tap, tap.” Olivia mimicked typing on her cell phone. “Hello Gabe, kickback envelope dropped off as requested at your home in the special mailbox at the side of the house. It’s the yellow envelope amongst all the envelopes from your other suppliers.” She tapped the send button on her cell phone. “You didn’t think I knew of your agreement with Vince made behind my back?” Olivia finished.

Savouring the sweet taste of success and feeling empowered, with her head held high, Olivia walked out of

the conference room to face a waiting room of salespeople's eyes aimed at her in admiration.

"Epic, Oliva," Tracy commented with a wink.

Aurora gave Olivia the subtle chin tilt of gratitude.

"The cojones on you, Olivia, are boulder size," said Martin.

That's how Olivia wished the meeting had gone, but in the reality that was her life, she'd sat through Gabe's rebuking in silence. Biting her tongue, Olivia apologized to him because, unlike Gabe, she couldn't bank on nepotism to survive the verbal attack rolling in her head.

Olivia Falco was a woman whose husband cleaned out their bank account and walked out on her after their ten-year marriage. With seven months of back mortgage and a stack of unpaid bills, she accepted the first and only job to come her way.

Olivia Falco was a woman who was grateful to Sullivan Foods for giving her the job when no one else would. She gave everything she had to the company working her way from receptionist to the Director of Sales.

A middle-aged, menopausal, childless, single woman, Olivia Falco, was damned if she would jeopardize everything she worked hard for because of an insecure man with daddy issues. If putting up with an asshole like Gabe was what she had to do, it's what she'd do.

That was who Olivia Falco was.

What Olivia needed at that moment was a sugary treat. A few more pounds to the thirty she'd put on in the past few years wasn't going to make a difference.

OLIVIA READ WHAT SHE WROTE AND liked it. "This is good, Oreo." Oreo barked his tacit agreement. "Yeah, I know. I'll change the names on the edit. This is only a draft.

I just had to get into the moment. Pouring myself, not just my anger, into my story was what I was missing. You, my beautiful boy, are a great inspiration.”

Now there was another louder bark.

“In the words of C.S. Lewis, onward and upward, Oreo.” Olivia set up the next chapter.

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