



Deadly Panther's Fake Fiancée (Company 417 Shifters #50)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: It's like a goddess created this man as a gift to all women. Issac is tall and muscular. He's handsome and his eyes are so beautiful. He moves with cat like grace, and he's a fireman to boot! He's the very definition of sexy!

KATRINA

"Since I moved in, I can't get the image of this incredibly attractive fireman out of my mind. Now he wants me to pretend I'm his fiancé!"

Isaac is a very sexy man.

He's a sexy fireman, maybe the sexiest fireman ever.

My neighbor is everything a girl could possibly want.

I admit I spend a lot of time staring at him from my bedroom window.

Of course, I'm starting my career.

And he can have any girl he wants.

Why would a perfect older man want a girl like me?

But he needs my help.

His parents are trying to fix him up with someone he doesn't want.

And even if I'm just going to pretend to be his fiancé, that's better than nothing.

Right?

What Katrina doesn't know is that Isaac isn't just a sexy fireman, and his parents don't just want their son married. He's a panther shifter, and he's the crown prince. They want him married to a princess, and the longer he waits to get married, the riskier things get for his family's control of the royal house. She's in for a lot more drama than

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Chapter One

Katrina

My neighbor looks like he was designed by George Temple. I'm staring at him. He's in his backyard tending his garden while he's on his cell phone. My neighbor, I mean. Not George Temple.

You have no idea who George Temple is, probably. Unless, like me, you not only majored in architecture and engineering but also took extra classes like some sort of teacher's pet, gave up anything resembling a social life to spend all of your waking hours in class, in the cafeteria, or in the library. Then you might know who he is.

There isn't even any information about him online. You can find George Francis Temple, Shirley Temple's father. You can also find a guy named George Fredrick James Temple. He's a mathematician. A pretty famous one. Anyway, the point is you can't find anything about George Temple, the architect who designed really beautiful municipal buildings between 1893 and 1922.

My neighbor isn't a municipal building, of course, but he's got a damned beautiful design, I can promise you.

His name is Isaac. I don't know the rest of his name. That's okay, who in the word cries out, "Oh yes! Yes, Isaac Smith!" or something else. Like who shouts, "Fuck me, Isaac Porter!" or "Just like that, Isaac Donaldson!"

I cry out all of those things, by the way. I mean, without the last names. The sad thing

is I cry out like that on a pretty regular basis but it's always all alone as I masturbate almost frantically in my bed. I have to say, Isaac produces the best orgasms for me. I mean, I produce the best orgasms when I imagine him.

Isaac leaves the backyard, and I seriously consider masturbating right then. He's a fireman, you know, so just add more reasons that he's hot.

Yeah, masturbation is pretty much my entire sex life.

It wasn't always this way. Just the last six years. In high school, I got a boyfriend my sophomore year and we fooled around a lot. He was a junior. So, I did a lot of things like hand jobs and blowjobs and stuff. I finally went all the way with him in the summer before my junior year and then we were together the whole year. There was a lot of sex and a lot of fooling around. He was all wrapped up in intellectual stuff, too.

And then he graduated and went to Austria for college. We wrote back and forth for a few months but absence didn't make the heart grow fonder, I can tell you. Everything since then is masturbating. And I think I probably masturbate as much as a guy does.

Yeah, I know. What a weirdo, right? Who doesn't have sex for six years and masturbates like that?

I guess the answer to that question is me. In fairness, I really only started masturbating like a teenage boy who lives across from a dirty bookstore since I moved into this house. It's a nice house. It's more than just a nice house. It's just perfect. It's far, far lovelier than I can afford but my Aunt Cathryn left it to me in her will. She was thrilled to have her great-niece study architecture, which is typically a male-dominated field.

She left me the house and her estate lawyer also paid off my student loans and paid the rest of my tuition. I moved in a year after I inherited the place, when I got my

degree. That was about five months ago. It was perfect because one of the top five architectural firms in the world is headquartered in this area, and I got a job with them!

I need to make this clear. This job is not just any job listed on some job site. It's kind of like lawyers getting into a top-notch law firm as the first pick. In fact, when I heard I was hired it felt like I'd just been picked first round in the NFL draft.

But right now, all my energy is focused on Isaac and thoughts of Isaac. I walk away from the window with the thought of enjoying a little bit of fun before work (you know what kind of fun, too.) And then I hear a knock on the door and I try to rearrange my excitement into something presentable and not just pure annoyance.

I march over to my door after the second knock and swing the door open.

"Yes?"

That annoyed answer flies out of my mouth before I realize who is standing on my doorstep.

Isaac blurts out, "Just play along."

"What?" I'm mesmerized but completely confused. Am I seeing things?

"I'm begging you, please, just play along."

He looks over to his driveway where a dark van with tinted windows is pulling up. He turns back to me with a look of desperation that I've seen on some fellow students when they know they're about to flunk out of school and they're begging for a second chance.

“Please do this for me,” he says. Then, he kisses me.

That’s right, he kisses me. Long and hard and... Damn it all, this kiss! It’s so damned sensual.

And while he’s kissing me, I feel something being slipped onto my finger.

I have to say, I don’t shout and push him back and yell, “How dare you, Sir!” Hell no! I lean into him and slide my hands up onto his chest. I relax into him and relish the feel of his hands moving over me. I feel like my finger is on fire, but I can put off my curiosity as long as this kiss lasts.

“Isaac?”

The voice is stately and slightly angry. Isaac and I reluctantly pull apart, for different reasons, I’m sure. We turn to look over at the older couple standing just outside the van in his driveway.

They are very intently focusing their stares on me right now.

“Mom, Dad ...” he begins.

Oh shit.

“...this is Katrina.”

Their eyes go over me like a computer scan.

“My fiancé,” he finishes.

Double shit.

Mom and Dad look like a train has just plowed through their house and they're feeling the backdraft. Their mouths drop in tandem, and their stares become laser focused.

And I waltz over to them like I have all the confidence of a certified fiancé. "It's so wonderful to finally meet you both." I hug each of them in turn, and they're trapped by the moment but I can tell they're not happy. "Isaac has told me so much about you."

Now, they look at each other and then at Isaac as he walks over to us. There's an unanswered question that passes among them that I know I will wonder about later, but right now I'm trying to assimilate the concept of being a newly minted fiancé.

"Mom, Dad," he hugs his mother and father and I can see their regal bearing infusing him, "please come into the house so we can't get you settled. I have everything ready."

He starts walking and I move beside him and take his hand. He looks at me with such gratitude that I blush.

It's not until we're all seated in his living room that I glance down at my finger.

I gasp and muffle it as a slight cough.

Dear God!

The ring is stunning and even the naivest jewelry consumer would be able to see that it's old. The jewels on it are exquisite,

What the hell is going on?

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Chapter Two

Isaac

Mom and Dad are pissed off.

They're also royalty, so they know how to keep from making it obvious. Right now, they appear perturbed to have something this big sprung on them. Katrina has no idea, of course, just how damned livid they are.

She doesn't know about Delilah Van Patton, the woman my parents sent to the United States a year and a half ago. Delilah is the woman they intended me to marry. They can't talk about it right now. It's not just the awkwardness. It's that I introduced them as my mother and father rather than as king and queen. That tells them right there that Katrina is unaware of our nature.

Our panther nature.

No, it's not like the movie. We don't turn into panthers when we have sex and remain panthers until we kill someone. We're panther shifters, and even though shifters have come out to the world, panthers remain the most secretive of all the shifters. Most panthers would very much prefer that no human ever really knows about our existence.

"Really?" Katrina's voice shows a lot of surprise, and I feel foolish for having been lost in thought and missed the context.

“Really,” My mother says coolly.

“Well, I disagree completely,” Katrina says. My heart sinks. A confrontation. “I don’t know how you could travel along the Stadtbahn and see the buildings or to look at the Church on Steinhof and think anyone but Otto Wagner deserves that title. But, of course, I’m looking at it from the perspective of an American architect so I suppose maybe if I’d grown up there, I might think differently.”

She waits, and then Dad chuckles. “You do know Austrian architecture.” My mom begrudgingly nods.

Katrina says innocently, “Was that a test? To see if...” She sighs and says, “Oh! I’m sorry. I was bragging, wasn’t I? It seemed like I was just being a big talker. Do you use that phrase?”

Damn, she’s good. “Angeber,” I say to my parents. “That’s close. Blowhard. Show-off. But I don’t think you were doing that at all. You just love buildings.”

She smiles and says, “And I’m afraid I’ll have to leave in a moment.” To my parents, she says, “I get paid to love buildings, too. I have to go to work. I’m very happy to meet you, and I hope I’ll get to spend some time with you while you’re in town.”

“You won’t be at the dinner tonight?” my mother asks.

“I’m afraid Katrina has to work late tonight. We’ll have a quiet dinner with her tomorrow.” I stand up and put my hand on the small of Katrina’s back to guide her toward the door. I have to say that even that small contact feels damned incredible to me. “I’m going to walk her out.”

A few seconds later, we’re between my house and hers, and she says, “I don’t have any frame of reference for this.”

“I know. It’s just crazy for me to ask.”

“Oh no. Not the fake engagement I understand that completely. I just don’t have any frame of reference for how much you owe me for doing it.”

“You and me both. Well, whenever you figure it out, let me know and I’ll do it.”

“Why don’t we start with you telling me why the hell we’re doing this in the first place.”

“That’s a long discussion.”

“Are they staying at your place?”

“No. Hotel.”

“Okay, well, I’ll stay up tonight and when you’re done with them, you come by here and tell me what the hell is happening.”

“You’re the best,” I say.

I start to turn away, but Katrina stops me. “Hey, you might want to kiss me goodbye, right? To make it look real, you know, for any observers that might be observing.”

She smiles at me and I see just how beautiful she really is, and I’m not just saying that because she’s currently saving my ass from a very hot parental fire. No. I see how that smile lights up her eyes and the soft blush she has going on right now and, well, that goodbye kiss sounds very nice.

“Okay then, have a great day at work, honey,” I pull her to me and kiss her.

And we linger a bit longer than we probably need to, but I enjoy every second of it.

She pulls away and that smile is still there. “See you tonight, darling.”

I laugh and watch as she walks over to her house and closes the door.

My smile drops away. Now, I have to deal with the other half of this equation.

I walk in and instantly my parents begin firing questions at me.

“With this diversion, you aren’t going to be very available to Delilah. How are you going to deal with that?”

“Mother, she is more than a diversion, she is my fiancé.”

“How long has this woman even been in your life?”

“Long enough for me to know she’s the one I want, Father.”

They both click their tongues at me and sigh. They look at each other and then, my mother leans over to me.

“Are you sure she knows nothing about your nature?”

“Nothing yet, Mother.”

She sits back and I can see she’s even more displeased.

“What are you going to tell Delilah?”

I think about that one and almost blurt out that I don’t need to tell Delilah anything

because we both want nothing to do with this arranged marriage.

We are nothing more than childhood friends. My parents have orchestrated quite an attempt, but I've had separate conversations with Delilah and we are very clear about a marriage. We don't want it.

I look at my mother. "I'll have that conversation very soon. Delilah, I'm sure, will be understanding."

She most definitely will be. In fact, though this whole thing with Katrina pretending to be my fiancé was spur of the moment, I'm sure Delilah will applaud my ingenuity.

My Mother shakes her head and waves her hand at me as if dismissing me.

The conversation stalls and we simply head to dinner.

The rest of the night nothing more is said about Katrina. My parents, I know, are showing great restraint about the situation because they are both going to be working together on a plan to fix things so I can be with Delilah.

But it isn't going to happen. There's nothing wrong with Delilah and she sees nothing wrong in me. Perhaps if our parents hadn't decided we would marry, we might have fallen in love and decided on it by ourselves. Instead, they entrenched the relationship as it is. Katrina is going to be my one and only until they leave me alone about it.

So, we talk about the weather and home and work and some human politics in Austria and Europe, and then, dinner is finished and they head back to the hotel. I wave as they drive away and then, I get into my car and blast death metal until my car is shaking.

Yeah, a panther who likes death metal. Don't ask me to explain it to you.

When I get back home, I see that Katrina is already back from work. It feels like everything has happened so quickly, but I realize that between the initial grill session and the dinner, the day is gone.

I park and climb out of my car. I look around and try to pull thoughts together. What am I going to tell Katrina? How much do I need to share about who and what I am?

I shake my head. No use avoiding more questions. I walk over and knock on the door.

She answers and all my answers and explanations melt away. All my thoughts just die.

She's stunning.

She's wearing a short flowing blue dress that falls about her body like a cloud. Her hair is down and soft on her shoulders.

And her smile is just as beautiful as ever.

She steps forward. "Welcome home, honey."

And then, she takes both my hands in hers and pulls me into her house. As she does, she slides up to me and kisses me.

This is not the sweet goodbye kiss of earlier in the day. This is hard and full of need.

My thoughts completely abandon me.

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Chapter Three

Katrina

The kiss is wonderful.

Breathtaking, even.

This kiss is a little different than the earlier kisses. For one thing, there are walls around us, and that means there's automatically a little less restraint than there was before. For another thing, I'm being very aggressive, kissing him eagerly and running my hands up and down on his chest not in a passive, responding way but in a...

Aw hell, the point is that I'm trying to make it clear I want more than the kiss. For all I know, everything else is just in my head. I mean, I have experience back in high school. We were fifteen and sixteen and then sixteen and seventeen. It's not like I can really analyze anything here. All of my experience since then, so all of my adult experience, is fantasy, just silly romance in my head.

But the kiss feels different, and I need him to understand that I want more. Probably because of that need, I take hold of his shirt and pull it so it untucks from his pants. I slide a hand underneath and then under his undershirt. Holy wow, try saying that five times fast! Anyway, I end up under his tee shirt and the feel of his taut, muscular abdomen under my fingertips is so damned perfect.

I'm not aggressive like this by nature. In fact, I've never behaved like this before. In high school everything seemed so naughty and hidden, if that makes sense, so I never

really got to be sexy but not immediately to the point. It was all just sneaking around and getting right to it. So, this is a kind of weird situation for me. No, not weird. Just brand new.

And damn I want him.

He pulls away but thankfully, my hands are right against him and his shirt is halfway down my forearms so I just move with him. “You don’t want to talk?” he asks.

“Not yet,” I say. It’s not the most confident and sexually assured thing I could possibly say but it isn’t too shabby, I think.

Just on the off chance he doesn’t understand that the reason I don’t want to talk right now is that I have other things I definitely want to do, I lift myself up and kiss his throat and his neck. “We can talk after,” I say. Okay, now I feel really... empowered. Yeah, that’s it. I feel so empowered and sexually...

Who the hell am I kidding? I feel awkward and worried that he’s not going to go for it. Damn it all, I’m really desperate for him to go for it!

His hands slide down and it’s just glorious when one reaches the small of my back and the other keeps moving down so he takes hold of my ass cheek. “All right,” he says, “we can talk after but first, they’re in town for two weeks. Can you please keep pretending until they’re gone? Please? I don’t mean I... I mean, I...” He kisses me aggressively.

I almost start laughing because I realize he does that because he’s suddenly worried I’ll think he meant he was going to screw me but only if I agree to keep up the charade. I don’t think that’s what he meant at all, of course, but it’s a kind of sexy thing, you know, the thought that I can kind of make a guy like him my sex toy because he needs a favor.

And then, he lifts me up as he kisses me, and if I have any illusions at all about him being the toy and not me, they disappear when he takes control. He lifts me enough to get me into the house. He can't really lift me because my arms are still kind of tangled up in his shirt, but he manages to get us shuffling backwards.

We move back further into the house and to my living room. At least, I think it's my living room. My sense of direction and location is messed up right now since I'm kissing this guy non-stop and not really focusing on anything else.

I feel the backs of my legs bump into my couch and then, Isaac kind of untangles me from his shirt and his body. I stand there as his hands move over me, grabbing my dress from the bottom and lifting it up and over my head. My bra follows, and just his hands brushing over my nipples makes me gasp.

Finally, he pulls my panties down and off. He kisses me gently all along my legs and I don't know how I manage to stay upright. It does make it easier, I'm sure, as he gives me a small push so that I land on the couch. I'm now completely naked and staring up at him.

He starts to undress, and wow, my body just heats up as I watch his clothing fall away. He is definitely a perfect fit for all those stereotypes of firefighters. His body is toned and sleek. His muscles actually ripple with his movements.

Look, if I seem like I'm getting a bit flowery with my language here, you have to understand that the last male I got close to was a still developing teenager. I mean, he was in shape and all but he didn't have the definition and the bulk and the?—

Holy crap!

He's huge!

When he pushes his pants down and then his briefs, steps out of them and straightens back up, all I can think of is that my high school guy definitely didn't have that! Isaac's cock seems impossibly large, like porn star large but like the porn star with the biggest and thickest cock or something. My eyes can't seem to drift away from it.

I slide off the couch to my knees, entranced. I know that seems a very weird way to say that I'm about to give Isaac a blowjob, but it's like I can't think of anything else. And I want to get closer. I mean, I just want to touch it, kiss it, run my hands over it.

I don't know if any other woman has felt so physically drawn to a man that she just practically centers her whole universe on his shaft, but I don't particularly care what other women would do right now. I'm going to give the most amazing blow job ever in the history of blow jobs.

Okay, still a bit much, but you get the point.

I bring my hand up and start stroking him. The moment I touch him, he groans, low and long. It kind of vibrates through him to me, and it sends a thrill straight to my pussy. So, as I start to kiss and lick the head of his cock, I slip a hand between my legs and start to play with myself.

I get my hand moving more rhythmically on him as I move deeper. I do my best to relax my whole body and open my mouth even more. His groans get louder and come from somewhere down in his gut, and I feel them vibrate pleasantly through me. It makes me moan around his cock in answer.

I'm really excited now, and I pick up the speed. My fingers move faster on myself as well. I start to think that this is how things are going to finish and, really, that wouldn't be too bad for the first time, I guess. But then Isaac moves back enough to pull his cock from my mouth and, before I can protest and crawl after him, he gets down on the floor. He lays next to me on the shaggy area rug and pulls me on top of

him.

He does all that so quickly that I can't react.

I suck in my breath, expecting that huge monster to thrust deep into my very ready pussy. My pussy is ready but my mind isn't yet! That's not what happens, though. Instead, he turns me around on top of him so I'm straddling his shoulders and his hand on the back of my hand pushes my face back down to his cock.

And just as I open my mouth and take his cock in, he grabs my hips and pulls me down so that my pussy presses hard on his waiting mouth. His tongue thrusts into me and starts to move and I howl. Of course, it's all muffled and incoherent sound with his dick in my mouth. I get my own mouth busy. I move my tongue and move my lips up and down as fast as I can.

Isaac moves his tongue to my clit and I can't believe the amount of sensation that just rockets through me. I feel instantly overloaded, but I want more. It's just crazy! I have to concentrate to do anything where he's concerned but I suck and move my mouth on him again, fighting to go deeper.

I keep getting shocked by the slightest movement Isaac makes. He uses his lips to nibble my little button and then, he sucks on it hard and I can't control any part of me. I'm getting closer and closer, and, at the same time, I'm fighting to give his cock some equal attention. I suck more hungrily, moan more loudly, and lick more... well, whatever it is to lick more.

And then, Isaac moves his tongue rapidly over my clit while sucking on it. That double hit sends me over the edge and I scream as my orgasm takes me. Screaming opens my mouth more widely so when I do, his cock slides right into my throat. My scream disappears as he fills my throat and my eyes bug out from the shock.

We hold that position as my orgasm rolls through me in waves. Each hit makes his cock somehow slip a bit deeper. I don't know how it's happening, but it is.

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Chapter Four

Katrina

It's a good thing I have no way to process a damned thing that's going on right now because if I could, I'm absolutely certain I'd be right in the middle of blind panic right now. Isaac is well endowed enough that having him in my throat is terrifying.

Except it's also not terrifying.

Yeah, I know. I realize both of those things can't be true at the same time but It's exactly how it feels. It's scary as hell but it's really almost like that's only an intellectual observation. I mean, just think about your throat being stretched. Just think about that for a minute. Your throat is stretched, your lips are right at the base of an enormous cock, and you're cumming so hard that you can't even process what's going on.

That's me.

And it's that part about not processing what's going on that's my saving grace here. It's the only thing, really, that keeps me from freaking out really badly. It's the only thing that keeps me from struggling and flailing about even though I know all I need to do is lift my head a little bit. I know Isaac isn't going to force me to keep his cock all the way in. So really, why does the image even come to mind?

Holy crap this is crazy!

But thankfully, it's not crazy for very long because suddenly I'm gulping in air and on my back. It takes me a second to realize that Isaac has rolled me off him and so my throat is suddenly empty. I swear it's such an insane situation the way I feel suddenly flooded with oxygen. It's almost euphoric. How does a situation like this even exist?

And then, out of nowhere, my pussy is stretched the way my throat was stressed just seconds before. I use all of that new oxygen to scream, "Isaac!" I know just shouting his name isn't the sexiest thing I can do. I can't really help myself, though. What the hell else am I going to say?

I think about all of the other times I've screamed his name and I almost say the stupidest thing on Earth. "Hey, wait. What's your last name?" Thankfully, I'm too busy dealing with him thrusting into me. It feels like each thrust increases the intensity of the pleasure so that I really can't focus on anything at all. Every single thrust is like a brand-new orgasm.

I'm not just going over the top here. I don't mean that there really is a new orgasm with each thrust. I just mean that my orgasm gets more powerful with that first thrust and it seems like it's not diminishing at all but just as strong as when it started. Frankly, that's almost frightening.

Wow.

How many times am I going to describe sex with Isaac as something scary? I think maybe I should stick with overwhelming. I mean, that's really what's going on. I'm just not used to being utterly overcome this way. Well, I mean, I'm not used to being overcome in any way at all!

I cry out his name another time and realize that I'm not really being much of a partner right now. I'm more like a... uh, a beneficiary. Yeah, that doesn't work. The point is

that I'm not really participating. This is happening to me and for me instead of with me and for both of us. So, even though it seems like an almost impossible task, I rest my heels on Isaac's ass and lift my body up to meet his thrusts.

I can tell that Isaac appreciates the effort because he starts groaning and there's another sound, kind of like a deep hum or rumble that he makes which almost throws me out of the moment. It's so... damn, it's powerful, and I don't understand what kind of power. It almost throws me out of the moment, and almost is the key word there.

But he starts to increase his pace, and my body feels a surge of adrenaline. I reach up to put my hands on his chest and slip them around to pull him closer to me. He looks down at me and I feel a deep thrill run through my body. It's like he just ran fingers down my spine.

His eyes are so beautiful, a light hazel with a darker edge. I return his stare and then I pull at him again and try to lift myself to him. I settle for kissing his chest softly as he continues to move inside me. He groans again and that mystery noise is like an echo.

He starts to move faster and I gasp as he shifts slightly and my body responds to the shift. My orgasm builds again, and I don't know if I can handle more. I mean, I haven't been with a guy in forever and a day and this is my first choice to jump back in the game? I mean, with some sort of a giant sex god? It's crazy, but I've said that enough.

Isaac thrusts hard into me once and then once more. I feel his body tense and then, he shakes hard. His cock throbs deep inside me and then, it's like a flood of warmth and pleasure fills me.

After he finishes, he rolls to the side and grabs me, pulling me close for a kiss. "Amazing girl."

“Why thank you. Now, how about a shower? Maybe we can review some notes.”

We head to my bathroom and climb into the jets of water from the two showerheads. The one above us is almost like a mist and, as we stand beneath it I feel like some wild woman just back from some great adventure. I look up at Isaac like at any moment he’s simply going to disappear and I’m going to understand that this was, indeed, all in my head.

But he never does.

I catch myself staring at him like he’s some alien creature that just touched down and I feel amazed that he’s here. The shower is really sweet and intimate. It’s... well, it’s sexual but directionless. I find myself stroking his cock and his hands move over my body in ways that indicate there’s an entitlement to me... Wow. That came out wrong. We touch each other in ways that only two people who are intimate with each other would.

Damn it, that’s circular. It’s sweet and intimate because we do intimate things. Sorry. The point is that the shower feels emotionally good. I feel vulnerable but safe, and in some ways the shower is more fulfilling than the sex. We get out, dry off, and head to bed.

My bed.

It still feels surreal how this day has gone. I mean, how does it just happen that I’m daydreaming about this incredible guy next door and then, he appears? And more, asks me to pretend to marry him?

I know that the pretend word is the part I should focus on, but as we pull back the covers and I climb into bed beside him, I just can’t help feeling a little bit of an out of body experience. How is this even remotely possible?

I'm sure I'd go on about this if it weren't for Isaac giving me a gentle goodnight kiss. My thoughts get disrupted and I decide to let them go. We settle under the covers and Isaac pulls me against him. I relish his warmth and strength. I've slept alone for so long, I don't know what to do with myself. He takes care of that, too. He pulls me close and I rest my head on his chest.

I close my eyes and sigh.

And the gentle rhythm of his breathing lulls me to sleep. As it does, somewhere in the back of my mind I remember we were supposed to talk.

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Chapter Five

Isaac

It's something like three in the morning and Katrina sleeps peacefully in her bed. We still haven't talked. She's still going to pretend to be my fiancé unless her commitment before we slept together has somehow changed because of the sex.

That sex!

The woman is insatiable, and it has been a very long time since I experienced a woman who could keep up with me, much less one who could challenge me. Actually, I don't think I've ever been with a human woman who had this kind of skill, enthusiasm, or staying power. I don't think that...

"Shut up, grow up, and show up," I say. It's a mantra for me back from my time in the Marine Corps. I learned firefighting there. No. I was in the Marine Corps when I learned firefighting but all military fire fighters are trained at Goodfellow Air Force base in San Angelo, Texas. I went through almost nine months of training because they had big plans for me. So, I did two different programs of three months each in Texas and then at Camp Pendleton for almost as long to learn wildfire fighting.

Shut up, grow up, and show up. It's really just a catch all phrase in my life now, something where shutting up is the most important part, even if only my mind is talking. Okay, you already know that Katrina is sleeping in her bed. I'm in her backyard. I haven't gotten dressed. Her backyard has a tall fence. In fact, only from the second floor of my home can I see into it. Of course, she could see into her

backyard but she's asleep.

No other houses have a view into the yard. This is still at least slightly irresponsible. But I need to shift. I need to feel things as my animal for a little while. If I did this for hours out in the woods, we would call this going wild. Shifters, I mean. When you shift specifically to deal with the pressures of life in the human world, it's going wild. We reset the civilized part of ourselves by engaging the animal. I stretch for a moment and then I'm my cat.

It hasn't been all that long but it nonetheless feels very good to be a panther. A shifter animal is far larger than the natural counterpart so I'm the size of a horse even though I'm a black leopard. I'm a hell of a lot more elegant than a horse, though. Hell, leopards are a hell of a lot more elegant than any animal at any time anywhere. That goes for our natural counterparts, too. There's no comparison.

All right. You can probably tell now that leopards are also very clear on what animal they believe is superior to all others. Relax. In the shifter world, this isn't thought of as something evil or what humans would call racism. Tigers think they're better. Lions think the rest of us are like children who need organization and management.

Wolves think all other shifters are weak. Bears think shifters are too human. And Dragons... well, they're almost as new to us as we are to the rest of the world. They think we're inferior but what are you going to do to convince someone who lives for centuries that your blip of a life is as impactful as theirs?

I walk along the inside of the fence until I come to the oak tree in the far corner. It's an old oak, a strong oak. It can support my weight. I know because I've occasionally leapt up onto it from the other side of the fence. I can hear the sounds of the night, and as I get up and into the tree, I hear various close prey grow silent.

I'm not in a hunting mood tonight, though. Tonight, I just want to breathe and let my

thoughts ease away for a while. I jump down into the scrub on the other side of the fence. Everything is still very dark and very quiet. At least, it is quiet and dark for a human. For me, the night fills with sounds and sights that are almost overwhelming in the first few moments after my shift.

I trot off in a direct line into the increasingly dense trees. This isn't some deep wood or anything, just an area that hasn't been overly landscaped yet.

I'm not being too cautious. There isn't much that is a threat for me in this form. The human threat would just be any report of sightings of a giant panther lurking around. I'd likely become an urban legend nobody believes regardless of the fact that we shifters are actually out now, known to the world.

My coat, though, helps me become almost invisible, so even if some brave adventurer is out and about right now, I doubt they would notice me until I was almost on top of them. And my hearing is top notch. If I were hunting, it would be my main avenue of finding prey. My smell and vision are excellent as well. There is quite a change in the world when we shift.

Long ago, it was our survival mechanism. We could be hunted and well as hunt. It took a lot to bring us down, but it was still possible, and we had to manage our lives as humans. We had to hide our true identities for a very long time.

We don't exactly hide anymore, but we aren't out there hitting people over the head with the fact that we exist, either. We announced ourselves and then, let things settle. Many people still don't believe in us. Katrina probably doesn't believe in us.

I stop and crouch as I hear a sudden shifting to my right. My muscles tense and my claws come out to dig into the earth beneath me. I tilt my head up slightly and try to catch the smell of anything new. After a long minute, I relax. It's only a stray dog, and the moment it caught wind of me it turned tail and ran.

But now my energy is up, and I stretch out and start to run. I eat up ground quickly and have to content myself with going in loops. As my body loosens so does my mind and thoughts of Katrina flood me. Images of her from last night flash by as trees become blurs in the background as I increase my speed. I feel incredible excitement at the thought of getting back to her and a touch of fear as well.

I'm back to the fence before I realize it. I leap into the oak tree's branches and then I leap lightly down from the branches to the grass. There was no real exertion here but I still feel looser.

Freer.

I jump down into Katrina's yard and shift back to my human form. I pause only for a moment before I hurry back into her house. I'm feeling energized in a way I haven't felt in a very long time. As quietly as I can, I slip back to her room so I can grab my clothes.

I don't grab my clothes, though. Katrina is sitting on the bed with her legs crossed... What do you call it? Indian style? Criss-cross applesauce? In any case, she's sitting there and I can see in her eyes that she saw me. I can see in her smile that she's happy she did. She holds out her hand and curls her finger to call me over. "Here, Kitty, Kitty," she says.

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Chapter Six

Katrina

Shifters are real.

Like, really real.

And they are far cooler than I thought they were. I mean, this isn't the stylized crap from the movies. When Isaac just became a leopard, it was like... I mean, it was like that old TV show my parents watched, the one with the power of Greyskull. I remember when the cartoon character sang that song about what's going on.

Well, that was just a meme. It didn't happen in the real cartoon. Anyway, in that cartoon, there were big cats that the characters rode like horses. Because they were as big as horses. The cats, I mean. When Isaac was a big cat, he was definitely as big as a horse. Just huge. A really beautiful leopard.

And now he's in front of me, and I recognize a lot of that cat in how he moves. I guess, "Here, Kitty, Kitty," isn't as way cool as I thought it was when I said it but it's still cool enough that I'm proud of myself. He looks at me, and even though he just stands there, that big, beautiful thing between his legs definitely comes to life. I file away licking my lips with a seductive look for further use.

"You saw me," he says.

"Are you hiding it? I thought it was out in the open now."

He shakes his head. “Officially, yes. Unofficially, most of us keep a low profile.”

“Are you a jaguar or a leopard?” I ask.

He smiles slightly. “Because in the natural world, a black panther is either a jaguar or a leopard.”

“Is it the same in the... What do you call the shifter world?”

“Works for me,” he says. I think he’s reaching his conversation limit because he starts toward me. Of course, it’s just as likely that he’s not far from his limit at all but his cock, which now juts out from his body, hard and straight, might be well past it’s limit.

I know we’re going to talk more about things. This is all pretty damned complicated. I’m a fake fiancé, and the man involved is a shifter. I’d damned well better get to have a conversation about this. You can bank on it.

But damn it, I’m so turned on by the power of the man—well, more than a man—in front of me. I know I ought to be thinking more rationally and maturely than I am. I certainly shouldn’t be sliding down so I’m flat on the bed and lifted up on my elbows, putting my mouth at the perfect height for Isaac when he gets close enough. I should probably be demanding conversation rather than getting my mouth on him no matter how horny I am.

Well, I don’t always do what I should.

That’s what I think a few seconds later while I moan happily as my lips travel along his shaft. His girth rests over my tongue as I try to take him deep in this position. There’s absolutely no hope of that but I don’t mind. I just move my tongue a lot more and adjust myself slightly so I can caress his balls with one hand as I suck. I have to

admit I really love that I initiated all this and I'm setting the pace.

But I also love it when he changes all that. He pulls out of my mouth suddenly and just spins me around. I end up with my feet on the floor and my body bent over the bed. I feel the big, blunt head of his cock against my pussy and I can just barely process the sensation before it's replaced by a more urgent one. As he slides into me, I cry out, "Isaac! Isaac!"

Not very creative but at least I didn't add last names, right?

My sassy thoughts die as Isaac thrusts into me with enough power to drive me up onto the bed and off my feet each time. I yell with each thrust, calling out every crazy word combo. Each thrust is forceful and strong, and I imagine if I were a stranger watching, I would be certain the petite young woman in front of the giant is being hurt with every thrust forward.

I just keep crying out, "Isaac!" mixed with profanity, pleading, encouragement, and moans. And then, I just simply lose the ability to do anything but moan because he grabs my hips, lifts me a little, and hits some magic spot inside me that sends me reeling with the most intense rush of pleasure I've ever felt. I feel like I'm in shock, like I've been pummeled but not with pain or hurt.

My feet have no purchase anymore but hang above the floor with Isaac holding me up and fucking me like I'm a sex doll and not a person. His fingertips dig into my body, and they feel like ten little flames burning into my skin. I don't know why, but I'm hyper-aware of them. I think they're going to leave bruises. I don't know why I enjoy the way he holds me but I do. And I'm so hyperaware right now.

Actually, I'm hyperaware of everything right now. Occasionally a thrust will turn me to one side or the other and I'll feel soft carpet beneath my struggling toes. No matter my position, the bed covers crumple beneath me and every wrinkle seems impressed

into my stomach. I can smell the scent of my laundry detergent from those sheets as I shift wildly on top of them.

Everything is so very visceral. I've never felt so much at once. I mean, I can't really explain it but even the cloth of the blankets—and these are kind of expensive blankets designed to caress and comfort, soft and... The point is I can feel the blankets as though they were sandpaper. I can feel the breeze of the air conditioning moving over me as though it were a massage with firm hands!

I've never felt anything like this with anyone else. Isaac's power and powerful treatment of me seems to transform me and every nerve in my body seems awake and receptive. I know that sounds over the top, but it's the only way I can get across how I feel in this moment as Isaac fills me over and over. I am completely submerged, drowning in sensation. Nonetheless, I just want more.

And more.

Suddenly, Isaac picks me up and pushes me forward onto the bed, moving around until my legs are pressed together and he is straddling me. I'm still on my stomach and his cock never fully slips out. What is this called? I know it. A friend back in college liked this position best. Prone fucking? No. Close. Prone bone. Bone. That's it. I'm flat on my stomach, and he presses his body into mine as he thrusts into me with speed that stuns me. In just seconds, my body tenses and then, I'm electrified by an orgasm that takes my breath away. I can't say anything. I can only lie there writhing beneath him as he continues to move.

I have to say, I'm kind of shocked to feel the orgasm because I have a hard time reconciling how overpowering everything felt beforehand without there being an orgasm involved!

I have no real sense of time at this point, but it feels like it's pretty soon after my

orgasm hits, he shudders hard and I feel him cum deep inside me. Our bodies shake and tremble in unison now, and I sense that purring sensation from him again. Yeah, I know big cats don't purr but that's what I'm going to call that rumbling, growly thing. It makes me feel warm and overwhelmed.

We stay like that for a while, as if we're trying to acclimate to real life again. The whole thing feels surreal and amazing. The weight of his body atop me is perfect. Eventually, though, Isaac rolls away from me, but as he does he slips his arm underneath me and rolls me over with him so that I'm nestled into his side with my head resting on his chest.

I fall asleep to the sound of that wonderful rumble.

I wake up the next morning like a sleepy cat, stretching and yawning. Yes, I get the irony of using that metaphor but it's how I feel, contented and well-rested. I feel, in fact, ready for adventure.

And I wake up alone.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised that Isaac would be gone, but I still feel a momentary panic. Did he not appreciate me discovering his little secret?

I jump out of bed and grab my robe from the chair in the corner, tying it around me as I hurry to the kitchen. There wasn't a message on my phone from him.

I get to the kitchen and grow instantly nervous. There's a little folded paper with my name on it propped by the coffee maker. I rush over and open it, noticing that the coffee is made and waiting for me.

I read the note and smile, relief flooding me. It's short and sweet, letting me know that he's at the fire station but he'll call me with details about dinner.

I smile and pour a cup of coffee, and then I stop cold just as I grab the creamer from the fridge.

Details about dinner.

Oh.

The dinner.

Oh, dear.

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Chapter Seven

Isaac

Damn it all, I'm a prince. I'm the crown prince, in fact, and that means I don't get to act based on my emotions and my desires. I need to think in larger scope, to look at the entirety of the situation and not just my little part of it. These are the thoughts that fill my mind as I arrive at the Company 417 firehouse. I'm on a three/four schedule.

That means I work three days, living at the station, and then I have four days off. Then, it flips to a four/three. For the next two weeks, though, while my parents are here, I'm working a regular shift, seven to four. It's an adjustment for me. I feel almost temporary, and that's irritating because everyone here is my brother. It sucks to feel almost like a visitor in my own home.

We're all shifters, the firefighters at Company 417. It's unofficial but it's official. The state fire authority plan is for us to be the best fire company in the country and then for them to reveal that we're all shifters. That's the grand scheme.

But we've been the best fire company for more than two years. We accomplish impossible things. We're still not public about the shifter thing. Most of us don't mind. Some of the guys are certain to quietly transfer elsewhere once the plan is in place to reveal us to the world. Honestly, though, most of us think the state will never get around to it.

It's wonderful in theory but the world deals in reality.

Anyway, it's good to be here even if I'm dealing with the strangeness of the schedule. I see Garrett up ahead. He's a fire captain now, which is appropriate. He's a great guy. He's skilled and has remarkable leadership skills. He's a gorilla shifter but other than that, he's almost as good as a panther. He sees me and calls me over. "Your Majesty," he says, "I hope you'll show grace on your subjects today?—"

"I should never have told you I'm royalty," I say.

"C'mon, Isaac. We knew before you ever showed up." That doesn't really surprise me. Most shifters know what's going on with all shifters. At least when you're talking about things like royalty. I might not know the internal politics of each lion pride or each wolf pack but I certainly know about the governing authorities (so to speak.)

"Well, what do you actually need apart from harassing me?"

"We got the King Cobra. It arrives tomorrow, and I'm putting you in charge."

"Holy shit. That's amazing." He's not talking about a snake shifter (and yeah, they exist.) He means a new platform truck from a German company that makes the best fire apparatus in the world. The King Cobra is a hundred-foot articulating platform fire truck designed to reach tight spaces and even operate below grade. That's ground level. The platform can go below ground level.

This truck is an important purchase. I've been trying hard to get one. It will allow our firefighters to work safely and efficiently in a variety of situations. An eight-foot jib allows us to reach roofs, balconies, and below grade windows and courtyards, and more. We'll be able with short jacking to reach over water or guardrails. It's got full circle 360-degree movement. The damned truck can set up on slopes and in tight spaces.

This thing will be safer for firefighters and the public whether we're talking about roof penetrations, tight spaces, multi-story buildings, multiple level bridges or more. This is a big win for us. And, since I'm like a kid in the candy store when it comes to fire equipment, it's a big win for me. "Well, enjoy it because that was a very big purchase, and I don't see them okaying a lot more in the near future."

"So, enjoy the Christmas present and wait patiently for my birthday. Gotcha."

"And you say you don't understand how government works. You're lying on both counts, your highness."

"Is that going to be the joke of the day?"

Garrett laughs. "Absolutely, Shere Khan."

A new recruit, Billy, walks by. "Wow, Cap's getting wild today!"

Garrett's expression changes instantly. "Have you gotten the equipment sorted, probie?"

Billy's whole demeanor turns serious. "Yes, Sir."

"Good. Now get those trucks clean."

"All of them?"

Garrett nods and not a muscle twitches as he answers. "Every single one."

Billy actually gulps. "Um, ..."

"Are you suggesting it's too big a job for you, probie?"

“No, Sir!”

“Then get to it.”

Billy runs off and Garrett shakes his head chuckling. “Look at Bambi go. Sometimes it’s just too easy.”

Billy is a deer shifter, but really nowhere near to Bambi. When he shifts, he’s hulking, more like an elk or caribou and twice as large as a natural one. He’s the first one, though, in this company, and honestly, not a lot of us have had dealings with them. They tend to be very insular as a community. You can understand why when they’re surrounded by natural predators.

“Well, Isaac, I’ll let you get to it.” He looks in the direction of where Billy took off. “I guess I’ll go ahead and send him some help.”

I laugh and the day starts.

I check my equipment and we go on a small run that turns out to be nothing much, but the whole day I’m distracted. I run the dinner through my head over and over, trying to plan for every scenario and every possible question.

It’s not like me to feel so unsure about a situation. It just irritates the hell out of me.

So, though my day started great with the news of the King Cobra, by the time I’m clocking out, I’m practically hissing and spitting.

The drive home helps to settle my nerves a little. Then, I walk through my door and see Katrina. I wasn’t expecting to see her here, and it feels like someone has splashed refreshing cool water on my face.

“Welcome home, honey bunches. I went shopping.”

She pulls out a cat toy, the kind with the fluff ball on a fishing pole. A grin lights up her whole face as she jiggles it up and down.

My God, she’s just so beautiful. And smart. And funny.

“Wow, I ought to just ...” I take a few steps her way and then, she jumps up and we play chase until I catch her and she’s in my arms and we’re kissing and, well, dinner very much seems a waste of time, even if it’s my parents we’d be standing up.

But, like I said, she’s one smart cookie. She wriggles free and waggles a finger at me as she heads for the door. “Uh huh, no time. This dinner is way too important for you to blow it off. I’m going to head home and get ready. You need to do the same, Mr. Fireman.”

She blows me a kiss and then, she’s out the door and gone.

I sigh and head for the shower. She’s right, of course, but it doesn’t mean I don’t wish we could avoid this whole charade.

But this whole charade is what gives me time with a girl I never thought I’d be spending this kind of time with, so the trade is acceptable.

I eventually get my head in the game and about an hour later, I collect Katrina, who is now stunning in a strapless, form-fitting, shimmering silver dress that makes her look like starlight took human form. “You got the money I sent for the dress,” I say. I was worried she’d be uncomfortable.

“No,” she says, “I just have six-hundred-dollar dresses in my closet.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Dummy! She laughs. Of course, I got the money and it bought you this.”

We head to the restaurant. It’s in the city an hour and a half outside our town because nothing here met the standards of my regal parents.

We pull up and Katrina gives a low whistle. “Maybe I should’ve worn the Tom Ford dress in my closet.”

I look at her. “You look beautiful in this one.”

She laughs. “Tom Ford is a famous clothing designer.” She leans in and whispers, “It was a joke. I only have this one you bought for me.”

I shake my head and kiss her cheek. “Mmmmm, I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Always.”

The valet takes the car and we step inside. My parents are instantly obvious. They’re more elegantly dressed than anyone in the place. This might be a step up from our town, and a very expensive restaurant for this area, but it’s still small potatoes next to old money back in Europe.

I take Katrina’s hand and put it on my arm. We give each other a look, switch to matching smiles and head to the table.

My mother looks up and immediately the claws are out. “My goodness, how very shiny.”

Katrina sits down in the chair I pull out for her. “My Tom Ford was being mended.”

I manage to choke back my laugh.

My father snares me with a look. “We are going to be clear about this. We are only going to entertain this fantasy so far, son.”

And so, the fun begins.

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Chapter Eight

Katrina

I probably shouldn't get angry but I do. We're at a fancy restaurant, and I can't pretend that it doesn't feel good to get dressed up like this. On the other hand, I'm tired of these two trying to control their son. They just won't stop. I know I shouldn't speak because when I watch Isaac, I can see that his intention is just to suffer through it until they leave. He plans on just enduring it and that's that.

On the other hand, I'm not going to have to actually be their daughter-in-law. That gives me some freedom, I think.

"The two of you are the most insufferable parents I have ever met," I say. "Your son is not your property and he's not your pet."

"This is none of your concern," his mother says.

"Why is that?" I ask. "Why is it that anyone else who has an opinion doesn't matter to you? You have any idea how many lives your son has saved? Do you even know what he does? I mean, you know the word firefighter but do you understand that? Do you know what it means for someone to rely on you because if they don't, they'll die?"

"Of course I do!"

I roll my eyes. "You do not. I mean, is this some sort of panther thing? You think that

people rely on you or they'll die? People may rely on you but it's not life and death."

They both look at me in shock and I look at Isaac. He has a faintly amused look on his face. I look back at them and say, "Of course I know about you guys. Isaac and I aren't just a dalliance no matter how much you wish we were. We're serious, and you need to get used to the idea. But that isn't relevant at all to something far more important."

"She's right, Mom and Dad," Isaac says.

"An outsider can't possibly know what's right in this?—"

I interrupt his mother. "You need to stop treating him like he has no choices of his own. Shifters are announced to the world, not hidden. You don't need to manage every aspect of his life to protect him. Real threats, yes. You should protect him from real threats. Him making his own decisions and loving whoever he wants to love isn't one of them!"

Okay, I'm about to start screaming. So, I stand up and say, "Now if you'll excuse me, there's a hot dog stand a few blocks from here, and I'm going there so I can enjoy a nice meal." I turn around and start walking, and I guess I feel pretty damned sexy and powerful right now. I mean, I just stood up to rich snots (I'm assuming they're rich) and then walked away wearing a slinky cocktail dress and behaving like a fucking boss.

At least, that's how it feels to me. I'll take it, I can promise you.

As I walk I notice there are women staring at me, and these are the kinds of women I'd never ordinarily hang out with. Diamond earrings. Hairdos that probably cost as much as I spend a week on groceries. The only thing I have to compare with them is the slinky dress Isaac bought me for this dinner. All of the women are looking at me

with admiration, though.

I guess I have to admit that I feel pretty darned affirmed over that. These are women I would probably never spend any time with at all. They don't run in the same circles as I do, and my circle is known for envying theirs while their circle is known for looking down on mine. I guess I'm just saying that it feels damned good for a girl like me to impress a bunch of rich girls.

So, I get outside floating on air, and it hits me that I really am very hungry. The hot dog stand is real, thankfully. I'm still fuming and, as I march down the street in my heels, and in my head, I continue dressing down his parents like I did in the restaurant.

I get to the hot dog stand and the smell is wonderful. My stomach growls and I laugh out loud at the absurdity of me in a beautiful cocktail dress standing in line for a hot dog, hopefully slathered in chili and cheese.

I get up to the front and give my order. "One chili dog."

"Make that two, please."

I whirl around and catch my heel in a crack. As I start to stumble, Isaac's father catches me.

I straighten up and fix my dress. I mumble a quick thank you and turn around the other direction again.

"Please, Katrina, I'd like to say, on behalf of my wife and myself, how very sorry we are for how we've treated you."

I'm about to answer but get interrupted by the vendor handing me my two hotdogs. I

hand one off to Isaac's dad without a word and shuffle over to the condiment caddy. He follows me.

"Katrina, I have to say, after you're display in the restaurant ..."

My eyes flash up to his face and shoot daggers at him.

"I was going to say that I think that you may be the only woman who could match Isaac for strength of character. In fact, I think you may supersede him. He needs someone like you to knock some sense into him from time to time because he certainly won't listen to us."

I try to ignore the suggestion that Isaac is unwilling to obey his parents and focus on the positive, which is that Isaac's dad really seems to like me. "What I'm saying is, well, I'm thrilled that you're going to be joining our family."

I stop smearing mustard on my chili dog, which is going to taste awful, but I had to have something to help keep my nerves in check. I look up and see Isaac's dad smiling at me. "You're sure about that?"

"You made some excellent points back there at the restaurant. Isaac is a grown man capable of making decisions for himself."

"Yes, he is."

"But you must understand that being royalty, we are used to handling the lives of our children even in their adult years. We see it as similar to, how should I put it, ah! It's like we all work for the same company and we must learn to put the interests of the company ahead of our own."

"That sounds very sad."

He nods. "In many ways, it is. Still, things are changing and yes, the world knows of us now so, our subjects aren't risking death like in older times."

He sets his hot dog down and takes my hands in his. "Isaac is the crown prince, but his duties are very light currently. So, he can be a firefighter."

He leans closer to me. "And he can marry a very incredible, spirited woman if he so choses. We are happy to give our blessings."

I stand there, feeling accepted and loved, and I feel so happy!

And then, my bubble bursts because I remember.

I remember that this is all fake. I'm not really going to be marrying Isaac. I'm just helping him get out of a marriage he didn't want. I'm just winning him the right to live his own life.

But I'm not winning anything.

Of course, I can't let Isaac's dad know that I'm a phony. He just gave me the biggest praise of my life.

I smile. "Does your wife feel the same way?"

He smiles and winks. "I'm the king. She doesn't have to like it as much as I do."

I giggle a little at that and say, "Thank you for following me out here."

He leans forward then and gives me a tender kiss on the cheek. "Thank you."

I nod and keep smiling.

And all I want to do is cry until I can't anymore. It's all fake but now I really, really want it.

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Chapter Nine

Isaac

Katrina won over my father enough so that he put his foot down with Mom. I have a hard time imagining anything that could make this girl more... more everything. How in the world did I stumble into her the way I did? The terrifying thing, though, really, is that she's having fun. She gets to screw a firefighter and (now she knows) a shifter. But that's not the same as wanting something more than that. In just a week and a few days, my parents go back to Europe. Once they do, she's done what she promised.

And then what?

Is the relationship over at that point? It's difficult to believe it wouldn't be. Katrina is a beautiful young woman and more than that, she's a very talented architect, and although I possess substantial wealth when it comes to my royal family's assets, she makes far more than I do in terms of salary. She doesn't need me. I don't bring anything to the relationship she can't get without me except a panther shifter.

And there are dating sites now for humans who want to date shifters. There's an extraordinarily difficult vetting process for humans but she'll have no trouble getting through it. So, she doesn't even need me for that. She could date a number of different types of shifters. In the shifter world, you won't find the same stigma over a woman with multiple men in her history.

You'll find shifters far more territorial and aggressively protective once they're in a relationship but in terms of judging a woman for having a lot of men in her past; it

just doesn't happen. So, if she'd like, Katrina can sign up for a few of the sites and enjoy as many shifters as she likes.

Damn, I'm just obsessing over her and not thinking as clearly as I should. It's just after midnight. With an early day at work tomorrow, Katrina didn't spend the night but left an hour or so ago. I sit here on my back porch sipping bourbon I don't really need to drink and watching the night sky.

How did I go from thinking the girl next door was nice to feeling distraught at the thought of losing her? And our relationship is fake in the first place! How in the world am I afraid to lose something that doesn't even really exist? Panthers are given to more introspection than most shifters. This is crazy, though.

I imagine only dragons are more introspective. Since they can live for a thousand years or more, it seems to me there's really no option other than introspection. Other than dragons, the only ones who can come close to us are bear shifters but it's difficult to tell if there's any introspection at all. The thing about bears, though, is you don't know if they're introspective or just living in the moment more effectively than any other creature possibly could.

Who knows?

In any case, I'm so wrapped up in this girl that I just can't think clearly at all. I'm stressed out about losing something I don't even have. It's a strange set of circumstances and all I can really think about at the moment is how much fucking sense it makes that leopards are solitary creatures. Life would be a hell of a lot less complicated if I were alone except to mate!

All right. That's enough bullshit. Time for me to wake the hell up. Shut up, grow up, and show up. Well, in this case, I guess it's time for me to get the hell to sleep and not to wake the hell up but the point is I need to stop moping. I finish the bourbon and

walk back into the house.

As I set my glass on the kitchen counter, I hear a knock at the door. My body tenses, but not from fear. Nope. I stupidly hope that it's Katrina and she came back because she just can't handle not being near me and ...

Cue the fucking romcom movie music.

Still, I head to the door really hoping it could be her even if it's probably not. It could be my parents, but they're sticklers for routine and, unless it's an emergency, they'd be sleeping right now.

I get to the door and swing it open.

And ... "Delilah?"

Definitely not at all on my radar for possible house guests right now. We haven't really talked much since I sent a brief message detailing how I managed to get out of the marriage.

She looks at me and tries to smile but instantly breaks down crying instead.

"Honey, Delilah, what's happening? Here, come in."

I usher her into the house, walk her to the couch and seat her. I go to the kitchen and get two new glasses and an unopened bottle of bourbon.

I get back to the living room. She hasn't stopped crying.

So, I give her time, opening the bourbon and pouring each of us two fingers. She takes the glass, immediately downs it and, eventually, she calms enough to start

talking.

“They’re planning another marriage for me.”

“What?”

“My parents. They’re pressuring me to agree to another marriage.” Her eyes flash up angrily. “But I told them I’d rather abdicate than accept another arranged marriage!”

“Whoa, Delilah, I’m sure they’ll change their minds if you just talk to them. Explain how ...”

“Has that ever worked?”

The desperation in her voice makes me pause. She has had a similar childhood to mine, a child of a royal house expected to obey the family dictates without question. I think about the ruse with Katrina and how desperate a move it really was, pretending to be marrying someone else just to get my parents off my back.

But I think of my father’s apology and acceptance of Katrina and I feel some hope for change. “Delilah, I know this seems like a no-win situation, but my parents have come around to accepting Katrina and our fake marriage. They’ve changed their views. I think your parents might be willing to also listen if you were to ...”

“Stop it, Isaac, just stop!”

I sit there and wait for her to let her anger settle down again. I’m confused at the viciousness in her tone, but I know Delilah will explain.

She shakes her head and sighs. “Isaac, who do you think spoke to my mother and told her about broken promises and how my mother really would need to get looking as

fast as possible for a new match?”

“Are you saying my mother did this?” Now, I feel a slow anger building steam.

“I don’t know for certain; my mother never mentioned her by name, but she told me that she had just had a long conversation with a dear friend who had just shared a very interesting rumor with her. That’s when she heard about our engagement being off. That’s when she started to accuse me of being rebellious and selfish.”

“How?”

“She was told that she needed to nip my independence in the bud before it upset our royal house like it had upset theirs. She suggested she find someone older and more in control to be better able to handle my willfulness.”

I jump up and grab my phone from my pocket and dial my father’s number.

I let it ring and, finally, a sleepy voice answers. “Hello?”

“Did Mom tell Delilah’s mom about the broken engagement?”

“Well, we are obligated to let the family know that we are no longer staying with that commitment.”

“But did she tell Delilah’s mother that Delilah would need to hurry and get another beau locked down because she needed to be controlled?”

“Look, Isaac, there was no ill intent. I think your mother ...”

“I don’t care what you think she was trying to do. What she did was unnecessary and cruel, and, you know what? I think I also am, as of this very moment, abdicating ...”

“Now, son, please don’t be hasty, your ...”

“I am abdicating the throne as of this moment, Father.”

I can hear him still protesting as I end the call. My hands are shaking and I see through a tunnel for a moment.

I turn off my phone and go back to Delilah.

We talk for about another hour. I want to make sure she is okay before I let her go. I pour another drink for each of us.

A bit later, another knock on the door interrupts my second pour.

“Damn it, what now?”

I walk over and fling the door open, ready for more drama.

Katrina stands there.

“Bad night?”

Chapter Ten

Katrina

The first thing I see when he opens the door is a goddess.

An absolute goddess.

I mean, this woman is the kind of a goddess that makes bombshell movie stars seem plain. Think about the latest flavor of the month movie star tartlet, and you're thinking of someone who can't compare. Think about supermodels, but old school supermodels from the eighties and nineties, not heroin-chic weirdos like you see these days. I mean Christie Brinkley and Carol Alt. I mean Paulina Porizkova and Cindy Crawford. I mean Heidi Klum and...

What, a girl can't really be into fashion even when she can't afford it? The point is that this woman makes all of those supermodels go from cream of the crop to just above average.

"Delilah," I say softly. If you can think of a more soul crushing thing than realizing your competition for the man you love—and yes, I have to admit that I love him regardless of how insane that is from a logical perspective—is so far beyond you that it can't even be overstated... Well, if you can imagine that situation, you know how I feel right now.

She steps forward, smiles a little sadly, and extends her hand. "Hello. You must be Katrina." Damn, the woman pronounces it as Kat-Er-Ina, and it's so alluring and

beautiful even I want to sleep with her. All right, that's an exaggeration but you get the point. And then she does something impossible. She gathers me in her arms and hugs me warmly. "Thank you for rescuing us or, at least, thank you for trying."

"Trying? Okay, I'll leave."

"Leave? What do you mean?"

"It didn't work. So, you two will want to be alone now. Sorry about that. I tried."

Delilah says, "We're still not marrying. Being with him would be like being with my brother. But he has refused his parents. He has abdicated his throne."

"Abdicated?"

"He refuses to submit to his mother's will."

"Abdicated... but..." And then suddenly I remember the conversation with his father. I was so overcome by him accepting me that I just glossed over the whole royalty thing. "You're... you're the crown prince," I say.

He smiles and says, "I was."

"I... Your father said being royalty impacted their decisions, and I didn't know what he meant but... you... you're giving up the throne?" I add at the end, "For me?" just because I have no idea at all if Delilah knows what we're doing is fake.

"I would give up a thousand thrones for you," he says.

"You don't have to give up one damned throne!" The voice comes from his father, and I turn around to see him standing on the doorstep. "Your mother had no right to do any of this. By the king's word! By my word, Delilah, you are free to marry whom

you please, and should any of my subjects pressure you, they shall deal with me.”

She immediately falls to her knee. “Your majesty, you do me too much kindness.”

“The Hell I do. And get up.” She stands and he says, “You have one obligation, though. You’d damned well marry someone who makes you happy.”

Isaac’s father looks at me and says, “You must think poorly of my family now. Please understand there were limitations that were very necessary back in the old days before we became known to the world. And now, they aren’t. My wife has a harder time adjusting than most.”

“Thank you for telling me,” I say.

“Thank you for giving my son and Delilah a reason to stand up to us.”

I don’t know what to say, so I hug him.

That’s right, I hug a King.

And he hugs me back. Isaac comes up behind me and I sense a wonderful thawing of emotions between him and his father. Quite honestly, I feel kind of proud of myself.

“Son, I really think it would do all of us a lot of good to,” he gives me a look, “go for a run.”

Isaac laughs. “Remember, Dad, she knows all about us. No need to hide it.”

“Of course, of course. Well then, let us enjoy the night.”

We head out to the backyard. Isaac takes my hand and pulls me back. “I know he sounds like we’re all about to be vampires, but he really is trying to loosen up.”

“He’d make a great vampire, though.”

Isaac smiles. “A damn fine one.”

We all get outside and it’s getting darker by the minute. Isaac’s father and Delilah step out onto the grass and start undressing. I begin turning three different shades of red.

“Hey, once I’ve shifted, I’d really love to have you along for the ride. You can climb onto my back once I’m my panther.”

I turn away from the 70s porn shoot happening in front of me and stare at him. “What?”

“I will still be me, Katrina. I won’t harm you, none of us will. So, will you climb on board and go for the ride of your life with me?”

I nod and then to seal the deal, I give him a kiss.

He steps back with the others and quickly undresses. As always, I admire his body. Maybe that makes me an awful human being, objectifying another like that, but you probably haven’t seen a shifter in real life so don’t pass judgement too fast.

Also, I’d rather focus on him than his father, and I definitely don’t want to dwell on Delilah. I glanced at her briefly and, well, she’s fucking amazing with or without clothing.

So, I watch Isaac and, holy shit!

One moment there are three humans standing there, and then everything seems to get blurry, like a wavy segue to the dream segment in a show except far faster than one of those segues. When it clears mere seconds later, there are three beautiful, huge

panthers standing where they stood.

The biggest is where Isaac was. I stand frozen as it walks away from the other two and heads for me.

Let me just say, watching that huge cat pad over to me makes my heart beat so hard I figure he can hear it. There's just no explaining how large and intimidating a shifter is in their animal form. No wonder they stayed hidden for so long. They would've been hunted and killed just for being so very frightening.

But I find him beautiful.

He stops in front of me and crouches down in front of me. It still takes quite a jump and some scrabbling to get on his back. I grip him hard with my thighs as he stands and walks over to his father and Delilah.

Then, the world rolls away. The wind bites at my face, and I press down onto the sleek coat and wrap my arms around the thick neck. Well, not all the way around but you get what I'm saying. There's a gap in Isaac's fence, and now I know why he's never bothered to repair it. The three cats jog through and then increase their speed.

I can't explain the feelings and sensations that rush through me as we go through the sparse trees that night. His moves are full of grace and elegance, but there is a joy and playfulness about all three of them that is incredible to watch. They are playful and beautiful.

They are panther royalty. What a... wow. They're panthers and they're playful and beautiful like... Yeah, I have no frame of reference to explain it.

We move pretty fast at first, and then we seem to loop out in a circle and slow down. With the darkness robbing me of sight, my hearing picks up. The night feels alive in a way that books and movies like to describe it.

That is the perfect way to think of this whole thing, I realize. It is a fascinating, unbelievable story that is real. All of it, real this whole time. We finally get back to the fence line and trot along until we make it back to the gap in the fence. I'm exhausted and exhilarated all at once.

Once we're on the other side, I slide off his back and walk back to the patio. I know they're padding behind me, but I hear nothing until Isaac calls me. "Go ahead into the house if you want. It's a bit cold out here."

I wave my understanding and head in. I'm pretty thankful I don't have to see anyone naked again tonight. Of course, I don't mind seeing Isaac naked, but you get what I'm saying.

A few minutes later, Isaac steps in fully clothed.

I watch him walk over and I'm hit by the realization that he's probably about to thank me for releasing him from the obligation of marriage and going to send me on my way.

And I don't want to go.

I don't want to let this end between us. I really don't.

I start to cry like a big baby.

Isaac's big smile fades. "Katrina?"

"Oh God, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I try to stop crying, but it's a lost battle. "Isaac, I love you. I have to say it, I'm sorry, and I don't expect you to reciprocate. This was just a ..."

He takes me into his arms and proceeds to kiss my tears away. "It's a good thing

we're getting married, then, and hey, hey," he tilts my head up and makes me look at him. "I didn't even have to give up one throne, much less a thousand."

"Wait," I say, "I can't... is this really happening or is this part of..."

He cuts me off with a kiss. I can tell you honestly it's the second-best kiss of my life. The first best kiss comes from my panther shortly after we both say, "I do."

That's a much better kiss!

Did you enjoy reading Deadly Panther's Fake Fiancé ? I hope so. I really enjoy writing about the Company 417 firemen shifters. You already know that if you've read any of the other books I've written. I'm definitely a shifter-loving girl. I don't just have book boyfriends. I have a menagerie full of them! I go on picnics with wolves, to movies with lions, and on vacations with dragons.

I wish!

I loved writing about Isaac, and I hope you found him as sexy as I did. Any girl can go for a firefighter, I think. At least, any girl I know! When he's got the power and the grace of a panther, it's even more irresistible, right? And he's a prince! What a combination!

Naturally, I fell in love with Isaac while I wrote the book. That isn't going to surprise any of you out there who've read my other Company 417 books. At the end of all of them, I just go on and on about how much I love the shifter men I wrote about. Well, maybe I fall in love with every sexy shifter leading man I write but can't help myself! I always imagine I'm the lucky girl involved, and you better believe I imagined I was Katrina even though I can't even design a room, much less a whole building.

Katrina got herself a sexy man, an incredible firefighter, and a strong and powerful shifter. She got the real deal, I think! I have a feeling that she's going to spend the

rest of her life head over heels in love with Isaac. I get the feeling she's going to learn a whole lot more about panther royalty, too. What do you think?

Do you love these two together like I do? What do you like about the characters? Let's face it. When it comes to shifters, I'm a hopeless romantic! How about you?

Anyway, I really hope you enjoyed reading about Katrina and her panther shifter lover. These two have a really tender and sexy life together ahead of them, don't they?

If you enjoyed this story, then I think you'll love the next tale of paranormal romance in the Company 417 Fireman Shifters series.

Ashlyn Brady won't let life just happen to her. No way. She didn't study her rear end off and then start her business empire to let life happen. No way. She's going to happen to life, not the other way around. Of course, right now her business empire is just a small office building and a lot of ideas. But that's all right because everyone needs to start somewhere. She just needs to keep taking the bull by the horns.

And then life happens to her.

And there's no control at all.

In this case, life comes as an Earthquake that leaves her trapped in her building and then an impossibly attractive fireman who saves her in a way that seems almost miraculous. Firefighter Dalton Kelsey may be the most perfect man in existence, and Ashlyn doesn't have time for any man at all, much less one that consumes her every thought!

What she doesn't know is that Dalton isn't just a sexy fireman. He is a dragon, the most elusive of shifters. And he has a destiny that must come to pass whether or not he falls in love with this incredible girl. Can these two find happiness or will they be

crushed by the workings of fate?

Find out all about it in Dragon's Destiny of Fire , the next exciting tale in the sexy, steamy age gap shifter firefighter romance series Company 417 Fireman Shifters !