



Lion's Legacy of Flame

(Company 417 Shifters #52)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: This evil developer wants to destroy everything I've built but an amazing man shows up to save me from the fire. The situation is terrible but it's hard to be upset when it brought this sexy firemen into my life.

CLAIRE

"He can't just be a man. He has to be some sort of magic man, like a CGI special effect in a movie. He has the body of an ancient hero and the face of a god!"

Brady is such a powerful man!

He saved my life.

Sexy isn't a good enough description, too.

How about tall, handsome, and perfect?

He saved me from a fire.

And he kept my building from just being ashes.

A lot of people depend on the charity I started.

But I'm standing in the way of a man who's willing to crush anyone who opposes him.

And that's dangerous.

I don't know what's going to happen.

But I know with Brady, I feel comfort and safety.

Before long, the two are engaged in a passionate affair, something made even more powerful by her fearful and increasingly desperate situation.

What she doesn't know is that Brady isn't just a sexy fireman. He is a lion shifter, and he doesn't take kindly to people preying on those

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Chapter One

Claire

I'm not proud of myself for immediately thinking about how losing everything is an acceptable price to pay if it means that I get to spend a lot of time with this man in front of me. It's a horrible thing for me to think because losing everything isn't about losing a place for me to live or my possessions or even all of my photos or something.

No, in this case, losing everything means losing the offices of Mealttime, and that means hundreds of people no longer having the food security they need. I don't like acting like I'm some sort of saint but it's not bragging to say people rely on the charity I created. It's not bragging to say that if it goes belly up, a bunch of people lose out.

So, I feel guilty for the thought that passes through my mind. Of course, I wouldn't trade the food bank and the community gardens and cooperatives for anything at all. Not even for Firefighter Brady Calvin of Fire Company 417. I'm just kind of blown away by the man. That's all.

That's where I am right now. The Company 417 firehouse, I mean. I need to be here right now, at least for a minute or two, because I need to thank this man for saving my life. I need to thank everyone involved, but I specifically need to thank Brady.

And he stands right in front of me, and I feel like I'm some kind of absolute dork because I can't even speak. I'm not exaggerating here. It feels like I've just become mute as I stand here and try to figure out what the heck I'm supposed to be saying to

him, and what the hell I'm supposed to be doing. I finally blurt out, "I want you to come to dinner."

Where the hell did that come from?

"What I mean is that I want to invite you to dinner. I want... You and all of the people who fought the fire." Okay, so this is all on the fly. "To thank you."

He smiles and shakes his hand. "No, that's not necessary. We were just doing our job."

"I started this nonprofit when I was in junior high school. Now, some people depend on it. Even if you guys don't need to be thanked, the people involved need to do that thanking."

"Well, I can't argue with that, I guess. When do you want to schedule this?" Okay, so I've persuaded him to do a dinner I didn't plan and now I have to figure things out.

Ah... Bingo!

"Well, I thought maybe you and I could get coffee or a bite to eat. I could tell you about the program, and then we could figure out how to schedule after that. How's tonight?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," he says, "I can't." Okay, so now I'm devastated, and I have to do a dinner that's way too much additional work. "I'm still at the station tonight. I stay here either three nights or four nights every week. Today is my fourth night and then I'll have three nights off. If the offer's good for tomorrow, I can do it. Otherwise, I can find someone here who can do it tonight."

"No!" I blush for how loudly I say that. "I mean. Tomorrow would be wonderful."

He smiles and nods. I muster up the courage to say, “Brady, thank you for saving my life.”

He says, again, “Just doing my job.”

“You’re not allowed to say that again,” I say.

He pauses for a moment and seems to look at me, which makes me blush even harder. “Okay, I accept your thanks without another word about how it is just me doing my job. I look forward to dinner tomorrow night, Claire.”

“Me, too, uh, looking forward to it. Very much. Thank you. Again.”

I walk out slowly, my steps punctuated by that very poor delivery. I finally get out of sight and run for my car like a child. What the hell is wrong with me?

I’ve been operating like a professional for a good portion of my twenty-three years, and now I can’t act like a mature adult for two seconds straight in front of my rescuer?

I get in my car to head back to my temporary quarters for Mealtime. The fire was damaging, though it didn’t destroy the building, it has set us back for the immediate future. Thankfully, a businessman who has donated to our organization in the past had an empty warehouse he was willing to let us use rent-free.

I feel I should be happy that operations haven’t been upended too drastically, but I have a gut feeling about who might be responsible for our fire and it makes me livid.

Mealtime has been my life for the past ten years. I created it when I was thirteen for a school project exploring philanthropy. I started it in my garage, but it soon outgrew the space. I got the entire community involved and it wasn’t long before I realized

that it was my passion.

I still went to college and got my degree. I have learned everything I could learn about running a non-profit. I've lived the pros and the cons. Really; I thought I'd encountered all possible snags on the road to success.

The moment I met Danton Steele, I knew I was wrong.

He is a big honcho developer used to having his way. He throws money around like empty compliments. He always is looking for the next big real estate bonanza, and he doesn't care what it takes to make it happen, even if it means displacing businesses and people.

Well, Mealtime just happens to be planted in a pretty peachy spot, at least as a greedy developer sees it. It's in a building that was once a strip mall, and we only have one other neighbor, a small office supply store.

That is, we had one neighbor. They agreed to Steele's price and moved out just two weeks ago. It made me furious, but I really couldn't blame them.

Steele offered me twice as much, and I turned him down. I couldn't see Mealtime becoming some soulless shopping district. There's some beautiful land around us. It doesn't need more parking lots.

The fire was awful. I was still in the building, the only one still working on a Sunday. When that fire hit, it started in the other corner and rushed across the front of the building. I didn't realize what was going on until too late.

I was trapped and terrified. I thought, for the first time in my life, that I was going to die. I was backed into a corner, crouching under a desk and typing messages to friends and family when Brady smashed through the burning door to get me.

I looked up and it was like a god had stepped down from Olympus. Of course, I was starting to suffer from smoke inhalation, but I remember watching him walk over to me like fire was nothing to fear. He just came right over to me and scooped me up into his arms and carried me out.

Others rushed in behind him to check for other people, but I only talked to Brady. He brought me to an ambulance outside and as they took over my care, I begged him for his name. I couldn't talk well, but he pulled his mask down long enough to tell me and to insist I let the EMTs do their job.

I held him in my dreams for the next few days as I worked through the mire that Mealtime became with just a few short minutes of fire.

Anyway, Brady is my hero. I'm determined to make him understand that.

The fact that he's a very good-looking hero is just a bonus.

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Chapter Two

Brady

I spend the whole day thinking about her, and when I wake up in the morning, my mind is still filled with thoughts of her. It's a damned good thing I am able take off after breakfast because the pressure is building, and I need to go wild big time. Forty-five minutes after breakfast, I'm in the state forest far from prying eyes. My clothes are folded neatly in my car, and I'm not a human anymore.

Go wild.

That's when we shift. Wait. No, not all shifting. If you just shift to be the animal for a while, but there's no particular reason, we don't call it that. When we shift to get the ability to handle human life, it's called going wild. Sometimes, a wolf shifter needs to go wild because of the constraints of civilization. They need to be a wolf for a little while to experience the wildness, to enjoy the untamed animal for a while.

I'm not a wolf. That's not what I'm saying. I'm just illustrating that going wild is when we shift for a reason that has to do with enabling us to survive in the human world, if that makes sense. I'm a lion, not a wolf. A lion, like the king of the jungle lion, is not a mountain lion. I'm a lion, and we're far less wild than wolves. We're more likely to need to go wild because our human life isn't constraining things enough.

We thrive on order. We have regimented social structures and social demands on us. That's lions. Some people call us the administrators of the shifter world.

There are dozens of shifter types. Tigers. Bears. Wolves. Lions. They're the ones people know about since we announced ourselves to the world. Horses, gorillas, and eagles are a little less known but not too secretive. Non-shifters don't know about dragons at all. They're still not out to the world. Hell, dragons only announced themselves to shifters a few years back.

Anyway, the point I'm trying to make is I need to go wild and I'm glad I have the day off. I need to go wild because of Claire. I need to go wild because the way I feel about her makes no logical sense. She's not the first woman I've rescued from a fire. She's not the first woman who's gone out of her way to thank me. She's not even the first woman who does good for the city I've helped rescue.

She's the first woman I think might be my legacy, though.

You know, there are mystics among us who think that there's a supernatural force that brings shifters to certain situations. They believe that's why a girl like Claire gets rescued. She does a great deal to increase food security for people in the city who are at risk. So, the mystics would say I rescued her because that's part of my purpose, to rescue important people, like shifters are sort of divine agents or something.

Interestingly, Claire knows David, a tiger shifter who's also a Company 417 firefighter. She doesn't know he's a shifter. She knows him because he has a charity that does a whole lot of good for the city, and so they've done some work together. I guess she's good friends with Maddy, his wife. Maddy's not a shifter. She's human and she works at his charity. It's called Tiger Treasures. The charity focuses on fixing neglected neighborhoods.

Anyway, Claire is focused on food security, and the charity she started makes a difference. With community gardens, food cooperatives, and support services for food banks and other food distribution charities, she's making a real difference. Maybe that's why I find her so alluring. There has to be more to it, though. I'm

almost obsessed with her right now.

I pick up speed and try to outrun my thoughts of Claire. Eventually, my senses become filled with the forest around me. There's a lot of movement because, well, the animals don't enjoy my presence all that much. I'm not a typical lion.

Shifters tend to be about almost twice the size of the actual animal. So, I'm quite a shock to see in the wild. It's why, when we're going wild, we try to go out as remotely as possible. Humans would lose their minds if they saw us just loping down some suburban street. So, the forest is a good place to get lost, as long as you choose the farthest points.

It feels wonderful to be out here. I haven't gone wild for a bit and, well, letting my lion out of the cage is very relaxing. I turn back reluctantly, and then, I hurry as my thoughts return to Claire.

I make it back to my car and shift back. I grab my clothes and start dressing. When I'm still pulling on my shirt, I peek at my phone. Damn! It's already four and our dinner reservation is set for six. I finish dressing at lightning speed and race out of there.

I make it on time to the restaurant with two minutes to spare.

"Brady, you are very punctual."

I turn and see her smiling and, well, it does, you know, light up the room. I know that cliché is used all the time, but it fits her perfectly. Her eyes are alight and she's just glowing.

I can't help but smile in return. "Well, being a fireman, punctuality is pretty much drummed into you. It wouldn't do to hear the alarm then see a fireman sliding down

the pole five minutes later.”

She seems to like that. “Well, let’s go have some dinner.” She takes my hand and pulls me over to the host podium. We were walked to our table. It’s a very nice, private booth.

We sit and look over our menu. It doesn’t take her very long. “I come here quite a bit for pick-ups for Mealttime.”

“Ah, well, then you would know if the chicken parm is any good.”

“Everything here is sensational, and that is especially good. Also, the portions are huge.”

“Okay then, chicken parm it is.”

She smiles again and I feel like our table is hit by direct sunlight.

The waiter comes back and we put in our orders. A moment later, we’re left alone again, but this time with no menus to get in the way.

“So, you go to restaurants for food as well?”

She nods. “Oh yeah, restaurants and grocery stores and even convenience stores. We make a lot of deals with restaurants, though, to also come and teach some free cooking and meal prep classes. We try to teach people to make the most of the food they get from us. That’s why we started the gardens, too.”

She explains a little more about Mealttime and I find I just love the sound of her voice. So, it does take me a minute before I realize that she’s talking about the fire.

“...so, I suspect that fire might be connected to Danton Steele. It’s just too coincidental.”

“You think Danton Steele of Steele Development is responsible for Mealtime burning?”

She tilts her head and looks at me a bit quizzically. “Yes, I think that’s...I mean, I think, having dealt with him, he’s entirely capable of arson, in my opinion. He wants that property badly enough. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Well, I can see what the reports say, if they’ve found any accelerants. Maybe I can go back and take a look myself.” I liked playing hero for her before. I can do it again.

Our food arrives and we talk a little more about ourselves. And she’s right, the chicken parm is excellent.

Time seems to fly by, something I’ve never experienced on any other date, but wait. Is this an actual date? I feel drawn to her, but I can’t assume she’s looking at things on any similar level.

These thoughts swirl around in the back of my mind as she talks about growing up in the area and her drive to make a difference. I find I just want to let her go, that I just want to be with her here for as long as possible.

“Oh wow, it’s getting pretty late. We didn’t talk about the thank you dinner. We’ll have to reschedule doing that. I think I should, um, probably get going. I love this neighborhood, but I don’t want to be walking home too late at night, you know. Stranger danger.”

“You walked here?”

“Yeah, I only live like three blocks from here. That’s why this is one of the first places that signed up to help me build Mealtime. I love Antonio’s.”

“Well, let me drive you home.”

She gives me a look that could almost be called coy, if this were a date. “That would be very nice, thank you.”

We leave and head to my car. I want to hold her hand or, maybe, do something more. I have to put on repeat in my mind that this is not a date.

The drive is indeed a very quick one. In just a minute or two, we’re at her house. It’s a nice little place with a huge yard. I hurry out to run around and open her car door.

She gives that smile again. “Thank you.”

I walk her up to her door and suddenly feel as lost as I did after my first freshman dance in high school. This, though, is just business.

She unlocks her door and swings it open.

“Thank you very much for ...” I don’t finish because she turns around and kisses me.

Her arms are around me and she’s on tiptoe. Her body presses against mine as she kisses me, and my mantra dies.

This is most definitely a date.

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Chapter Three

Claire

I forgot about Maddy and her husband David. I forgot all about David being a fireman.

And don't ask me to explain why the hell that thought occurs to me right now while I'm kissing Brady. Who knows how the mind works, I guess. Who knows how and why something happens one way in my head.

You better believe I don't think about Maddy and David for long. As we kiss, my hands move over his chest, and the feeling of his muscles is so profound, even under his shirt. I don't know how in the world a man can be so damned perfect.

All right, sure. I'm gearing up to experience this perfect man, so I imagine a lot of my thoughts at the moment have to do with that simple reality. So, they're a bit concentrated and amplified, sure. His hand is on the small of my back, and it occurs to me he might think this is just a goodnight kiss. I feel like I'll be an awkward dork trying to tell him I want him to come inside.

I pull away, step into the house, set my purse on the entryway table, and lift my shirt up and over my head. I toss it on the floor and think about how weird I am. How in the world can I feel more awkward about telling him to come inside than taking my shirt off?

In any case, it has the desired effect, and he steps inside. He doesn't take his eyes off

me as he reaches for the door and closes it. Then, he crosses the distance between us and kisses me again. This time, the kiss is really powerful. I mean, the first kiss was powerful, too, but what I mean is that this kiss kind of puts me under Brady's power.

Aw, hell, I'm screwing up how to talk about this.

The first kiss was a kiss. It was a kiss that, for all intents and purposes, just ended the date. This kiss isn't an end but a beginning, and my hands are a great deal freer now, moving over his body and pulling at his shirt and then his belt buckle and then his shirt again.

I give up because I'm not effective at undressing him. I take a step back to work on my clothes, and soon my bra is on the floor. He steps to me and his hand closes over my breast as he kisses me again. This time the kiss has an altogether different flavor to it. This kiss is almost a message, like Brady is communicating to me just how much he intends to enjoy what I'm giving him, if that makes any sense.

All right. Damn it. Let me try to be less of an idiot here.

I'm horny. He's kissing me. It's hot.

There, that's the translation. I just want to let you know, though, that it's pretty highly likely I'm going to be saying more of those idiotic things, too. I'm kind of a goody two-shoes. I started a food security charity at the age of thirteen, so you know I'm a total goody-good. I worked on the charity all through high school, and right around my junior year, it was starting to work.

In my senior year, I got some funding and an old man I'd helped keep fed for four years won two million dollars in the lottery. He donated half a million dollars, and that meant I could buy two buildings for food storage. More money came in college and I was able to buy another warehouse building.

Now, I get just enough donation money every month to let me pay all of my mortgages and break even on the operations. Okay, I'm not bragging. I'm just trying to explain that I don't have a lot of experience when it comes to sex or, for that matter, anything that's any fun at all.

My thoughts take an abrupt turn as Brady steps back and gets to work taking his clothes off. I almost feel like a cartoon, you know, where the character's mouth just hits the floor and her eyes bug out. Brady is fucking amazing! I know that might sound objectifying, but the man is, after all, undressing for me in my house.

I can't contain myself. I step up to him and try to help get his belt unbuckled and his pants undone. Yeah, I don't help but at least I feel like I'm participating. He lifts me up and together we get my pants undone and off. Now, I'm just in my (thankfully skimpy) panties and he's just in his open pants and boxers.

I take his hand and aim for the couch, but he pulls back and heads down the hallway. Like two kids exploring an abandoned house, he looks into a dark room and then, walks on. I know he's looking for my room. I could lead him there, but this is building an excitement in me that makes this whole thing wild.

He finally finds my room. He pulls me in and walks me to the bed. He turns me to face him. Then, he slips his pants down. I can see the large bulge barely contained by his boxers. A thrill runs through me. Holy crap, he looks huge!

To my dismay, though, he leaves his boxers on as he gently pushes me back onto the bed. A moment later, my panties are off, and I have to say that I feel entirely exposed and vulnerable now. I guess even though he only wears boxers, it is pretty terrifying for me to be completely naked while he is not.

Then, he kneels, and before I understand what's going on, he has my legs resting on his shoulders and his mouth is on me. I breathe in with the shock of his tongue thrust

into me. It's the most intense and instantly earth-shattering thing I've ever experienced. I mean sure, I have very little experience but I feel like if I were prodigiously promiscuous, it would still be earth-shattering.

How do you like that? Prodigiously promiscuous. Alliteration.

Okay, I'm losing it. Can you blame me? Every nerve in my body wakes up and I can't even get the breath to moan.

He doesn't take his time or worry about being gentle. He just goes after every bit of my pussy like it's something for him to consume and like it's the last thing he'll ever taste on Earth. He moves up to tease my clit and I gain enough voice to gasp, "Holy... oh, Brady! Oh!"

I've never had a guy do this for me before, although, let's be clear, I haven't exactly got experience here. I'm just too busy with Mealtime.

Right now, though, Brady is focused on me and it's intense. I mean, it's going through the roof. I twist and turn beneath him, but he holds onto my waist with those strong hands of his and so, I just have to handle his onslaught. It's so powerful I try to escape, you know, even though I love it. Somehow, though, he manages to keep his mouth on me.

And then escape is impossible because my orgasm hits me like a cannonball, slamming into me and shaking my entire body to its core. My muscles tense and I shudder hard. His tongue just doesn't stop as he slides fingers into me. "Too much! Brady, too..." I mumble faint protests as he keeps things going and going.

I begin to think I can't handle anymore. I'm ready to beg him to stop, but he finally pulls away. I lay there, gasping and then, the next shockwave hits me before I catch my breath.

That's when he thrusts that monster cock into me.

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Chapter Four

Claire

It's like an entirely new way to experience sex. Okay, that's a silly thing for me to say since I've only had sex a half dozen times and all with the same boy when we were in high school and stupid kids. For all I know this is a run of the mill way to experience sex. However, I can promise you that it's a brand-new way for me to experience sex. That's something I can promise you!

This is the first time I've ever experienced an orgasm with something inside of my pussy. I never came with that boy even though I kind of enjoyed the sex with him. All of the orgasms I've ever had before now were from masturbation. I just rubbed myself to a climax back before I bought myself one of those wand vibrators for my twentieth birthday. After that, I mostly use the vibrator.

I think it was then, when I was twenty, that I realized I'm not the kind of girl to have a fulfilling social life. When I bought it, I thought the thing would pretty much be the only boyfriend I would have had for a while. I wasn't bitter about it. I just had priorities that seemed more important to me than a social life. Anyway, the wand vibrator delivered powerful vibrations but no penetration.

The point is I've never had an orgasm and penetration at the same time even though I've experienced both of those things apart from one another. I have to tell you that I'm shocked at how good it all feels. I can promise you if I knew before what penetration does to an orgasm, I'd have experienced it.

Wow.

I just keep going on and on, don't I?

Well, this is a pretty significant moment for me, so I apologize if I seem a little too worked up over everything. I don't think I can handle it even if I ought to. I just can't get over how different it is to have my pussy filled up when I'm cumming. I guess for people who are used to having sex regularly, this is no big deal at all. It's a really big deal for me, though.

I can feel my pussy clamping and releasing his shaft. It does it constantly but irregularly. Wait. That sounds like a contradiction. What I mean is that my pussy clamps his shaft, lets go, clamps, lets go... Like that. But it doesn't do it in a rhythm, I mean it's like Clamp. Clamp. Clampclampclamp! Clamp! Clamp. Clampclamp... ... Clampclamp.

Yeah, I'm not doing a good job explaining it but I guess the point is that my pussy is going crazy around his cock, which I just love having inside of me. As he thrusts, I lose myself in the sensations. It's a good thing that I kind of move automatically because it means that I'm not just lying here like an inflatable doll.

On the contrary, I'm moaning and squealing. I say his name now and then. My hands move all over his back and I wriggle around beneath him. Again, it's not a decision but I kind of just do it. It happens without any active decision on my part. I guess I just do what feels good.

I end up with a leg hooked over his butt and I use the leg to pull myself up against his thrusts. I have never been like this before. Okay, sure, the last time I had sex was years ago and I was a teenager having sex with a teenager so there are a lot of reasons I wasn't like this before. I wasn't sleeping with a god of a fireman, for one thing. I wasn't cumming like there's not tomorrow.

“Brady,” I whisper as I freeze up. I freeze because I feel my body gearing up. Again!

I shriek suddenly, “Brady!” as another orgasm or maybe just an intense explosion from the same orgasm hits me hard. My excitement seems to directly hit Brady because he starts thrusting into me faster and faster. I figure he must be close.

Even as my orgasm overpowers me, I feel desperate for things to be good for him. I try to move in a way that will make things better for him. I hook both legs around him now, and I pull him to me while I lift my hips to meet his thrusts with more power than before. I mean, I’m just assuming this will make things good for him but it seems to work.

I think I sense him about to explode and I reach a hand up to stroke his face. He looks at me, his eyes searing into mine. We move against each other and then he kisses me hard. He moves tongue in my mouth, and it matches the timing of his cock’s thrusts. That gives me the strangest and most amazing sense of pleasure. It seems to rocket through my center as he moves in me.

Then, Brady pushes himself to a position where he’s sitting upright, dragging my body along with him so that I’m off the bed. With a power I didn’t know I had; I pull myself up to sit in his lap as he drives that massive shaft into me.

I wrap my arms around his neck and just hold on. He grips my waist and powers into me until, finally, his body shudders as he thrusts deep into me and cums. It’s intense as it can be. It’s breathtaking, the power of our climaxes mingled together, and I cannot stop shaking.

We hold each other and kiss until the tremors inside of me fade. I slowly slip off his lap and we fall back onto the bed. I can’t say how long it is before I speak but it’s a while. I eventually turn to Brady and smile. “Well, I could use a shower.”

He chuckles and I think it is the first time I'd ever describe laughter like that, but it was. It was chuckling. We get up and walk to the restroom, holding hands and pressing against each other. It feels like (and I don't think this is just hopeful thinking) he's reluctant to lose physical contact and, as we step into the shower's spray, that contact becomes heated again.

This time we go slower, taking our time to explore. His hands roam over me, tracing a childhood scar from a bike fall I took when being chased by a bully. I brush my hands over his face, pressing away the worry line between his eyes. The sex is slower but the impact is as powerful. I don't know how I can compare it to anything other than to say it is beautiful.

We finish in the shower, energized but even more exhausted. Yeah, I don't know how I can be energized and exhausted at the same time but I am. We walk back to my rumpled bed and climb on. He pulls me to him and I curl into his side, my head lifted onto his chest.

And we sleep.

The next morning, we seemed to awake at the same time, like our bodies knew the other was ready. We kiss and grab each other, our exploration of the night before becoming a hungry need.

And all I can think about is how complete I feel in his arms.

Chapter Five

Brady

This situation is strange for me. I have enjoyed more than my share of human women. Shifters, in general, are more physically fit than purely human men. So, we tend to have very nice bodies. Lions are perhaps the handsomest of the shifters. Bears look like mountain men. Wolves look like dark action heroes. Tigers look aristocratic and a little haughty. Lions tend to look like handsome businessmen. It's just our nature. The point is that there is no shortage of companionship for me.

The companionship I often enjoy, however, is entirely unlike Claire. The girl is perfect. Not only is she lovelier but she's brilliant, too. I enjoyed my time with her far more than any other, and it has nothing to do with her level of experience or skill when it comes to sex. She seemed inexperienced, in a way, just overwhelmed and wide-eyed and happy about everything.

And yet it felt to me as good as it might have felt if she'd been trained as part of a sultan's harem!

Sorry, the point I'm trying to make (poorly, I might add) is that my feelings for Claire go beyond physical even though the physical experience with her was, without question, quite extraordinary. I feel much more for her than makes sense to me. I feel deeply for her. It doesn't confuse me because Claire is unworthy of deep feelings or anything like that at all. On the contrary, I believe Claire is a remarkable woman more than worthy of affection, adoration, and more.

But I know so little about her, and Lions are plodding thinkers. We don't make enormous life decisions immediately. Friendships develop over years, not weeks. Relationships happen with the girls we grow up with. We keep our surroundings organized, and we keep our lives organized as well. We are driven by thought and by organized processes.

We don't discount emotions like the aliens in... Vulcans. Like the Vulcans. We don't discount emotions at all. We have things organized to maximize our joy. We avoid chaos because chaos is likely to cause negative, unhappy emotions. Lions are quite emotional. We just don't make emotional decisions. All of this is hardwired into us. It's hardwired into our natural counterparts as well. A pride survives because it operates as a pride.

Human scientists think they understand prides, but they don't. It's not as egregious as the misunderstandings about wolves where naturalists came up with the entirely incorrect alpha wolf concept. They weren't studying a pack of wolves in the wild but a family of wolves in captivity. The leader wasn't an alpha. It was a father. Anyway, scientists aren't quite as egregiously wrong about Lions but they're still wrong.

In the wild, a lion pride is organized around a core group of closely related female lionesses. These are most often littermates and their mothers and daughters. They form the foundation of the pride. A coalition of male lions joins to defend the territory the tribe claims. Human scientists mistakenly treat the prides as matriarchal because of the female core, but they're not. Every male or female has a role, and the leader is a male lion.

The females are primarily responsible for hunting and raising cubs. The males guard against threats, which are almost always other lions. Putting matriarchy or patriarchy on a pride of lions or, for that matter, almost any predator species, is foolish. One lion usually emerges as the dominant male, leading the pride and making key decisions in some cases, but for the most part, decisions are made cooperatively. Those are natural

lions.

Shifter lions are a little bit different but still based on a clear structure and division of duties. So, we're very good in team roles that are clearly defined.

"Hey, uh, Brady?"

My internal monologue ramblings break apart with Thomas' interruption. I step off the treadmill in the house gym and look at our newest recruit. He's a wolf shifter, young and full of energy. I kind of envy his free spirit. Right now, though, he looks terrified.

"What's up, man?"

"Um, there is a school bus sitting outside and the teacher and some other guy, just stepped off and said they're ready for the tour. Do you know about any tour? Garrett didn't mention anything and I don't know what to do about ..."

"Hey, just relax. Tell them I'll be right out to get things going. Now, you're going to be around to help me wrangle these guys, okay, but I'll do the heavy lifting. So, again, just be calm and give me enough time to check the schedule. Okay?"

Thomas almost sags with relief. "Yeah, okay, I'll, uh, go let them know."

He takes off and I start swearing under my breath. I want to believe that Garrett didn't schedule something like this for when he would be out of the firehouse, but I know how distracted he can get.

Sure enough, when I check the calendar, I see a notation about the tour. The date is correct, today's date, damn it. He just got the day of the week wrong, putting it on next Monday instead of today. So, they showed up right when they should.

I shrug off the instant thought I have about how Lions make better organizers. Garrett is an outstanding squad captain, and I have no problem running the tour.

I get myself changed into a shirt and jeans, a little more presentable than the gym clothes I was wearing. Then, I head out to meet the group.

Thomas turns to me with such gratitude I almost laugh. The guy didn't want anything to do with this. Well, he's going to be my wingman, so he better pull it together.

The kids are fourth graders from the local school. They're right on that edge between thinking something like this is cool and trying to act too cool to like it. I don't mind. I'm pretty good with kids, and I've done this tour a million times.

I start right at the heart of things, with the trucks. I go over the different types and tell them they'll get to take pictures in one at the end. Now, they're showing some interest.

As the tour progresses through our kitchen and our gym and our living quarters, my mind wanders a little. I think of Claire and how she might think about me with these kids. Then, I have the wild thought of what it would be like to have a kid with Claire.

Yeah, this is crazy.

The kids all end up with the trucks again. I hand out stickers and badges and plastic helmets. Again, some are just too cool to put them on or act excited about the gear. Others are super excited and put the stickers and badges on instantly.

I let Thomas handle taking the pics. I hand him the camera and grin. "Your turn to be the cool guy."

He rolls his eyes but I can see he's happy as he helps kids hop up into the engine. He

even shows them some of the controls and what they do. A few boys talk him into letting them turn on the siren. He needed to be warmed up, but he does great.

Overall, it's a great tour and everyone is happy. Crisis averted and we have a great story to tell Garrett when he's back at the station.

An hour later, I'm back in the gym and my mind wanders back to the ins and outs of lion shifter society. I am thinking my fixation can only be down to one cause, and it's a beautiful one.

Claire.

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Chapter Six

Claire

I think I'm being stupid.

I'm pretty sure I'm being stupid.

But what experience do I have to tell me what's the right thing to do or what's the wrong thing to do? Brady spends all three of his days off with me. Then, he calls me while he's on his three-day shift and asks if I want to go out when he's off.

And I tell him I want to cook for him, so I want him to come here. Here to my house. Where I am now.

To my house where I am right now feeling like I'm being stupid. I think this may be the dumbest thing I've ever done. I'm not being smart.

I'm naked.

I'm on my knees.

I'm waiting for him like I'm one of those silly college girls who posts about doing this all the time on social media.

I'm not entirely naked. I'm wearing a garter belt and stockings. Oh, and deep, wet red lipstick. Damn it, even my fingernails are deep red. I swear, he's going to look at me

and laugh at me. I mean So, I look like some sort of a whore, not like a naked girl. I mean that literally, by the way. The profession. I'm not putting down...

What the hell is wrong with me?

I can't think of anything more stressful than waiting for him right now. Yeah, of course I look like a prostitute. That's the whole point. I should look really sexy and slutty right now. That's what I'm doing. I'm not on my knees waiting to suck his dick because I want him to imagine just how wholesome I am, for Pete's sake.

I think it's a minor miracle I don't pass out when I hear the knock on the door. My heart beats pretty damned powerfully, and I feel hot all over. Feverish, and in the kind of way that makes you feel weak and almost delirious. I start to speak but it doesn't come out well at all. I try again. "Brady?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he says, and his voice is just so perfectly wonderful. I find myself smiling at the sound of him.

"Come in." It occurs to me suddenly that he might have someone with him. I know that's an utterly stupid thing for me to worry about. Of course, you don't bring someone to another person's house for what's intended to be a date. Of course, you don't. He's never once brought anyone here! I still get this stupid fear about that happening. Like this is the time he'll step in with some chairman of some firefighters benefit fund or something. It's dumb as hell but I feel a measure of relief when he steps into the house alone!

I plan to say, "I've been waiting for you."

Instead, I say, "Dinner is in the oven so there's plenty of time." Okay, that's not the sexy and adventurous kind of thing I'm trying to portray here but it's not that terrible. I see his eyes that he's very happy to see me exactly as I am right now.

He closes the door and says, “You’re stunning.”

Well, I think I’m already blushing so I doubt I turn any redder than I already am. I say in not nearly as seductive a voice as I’d like, “Come over here, sexy fireman.”

He comes over and the new challenge is that I feel like my hands are trembling enough that they will look like I’m shaking. So, I don’t reach for his belt. I put my hands on his legs instead and then use them to steadily move my hands upward without looking like I’m going to shake apart or something.

I’m very thankful that Brady just leaves me be to undo his pants. I think I’d feel immensely embarrassed to have him help me in this seductive moment. And I surprise myself. My hands stay steady as I undo his belt and unzip his pants.

I slide my hands inside them and around to his ass. I slowly move his pants down his legs and then, I come back for his boxers. I smile a bit as I see his cock already creating quite a tent under them. I run my fingers along the waistband, and I feel him shiver. My smile gets bigger, and I dare to look up at him.

His look of complete lust is like an electric shock to my system. I lick my lips hungrily, and he takes a deep breath. Then, I open my mouth wide, and, at the same time, I pull his briefs down. Then, I hurry up and plunge my mouth down on his cock. Um, horizontally on his cock because he’s standing and... Hell, you know what I mean.

And I don’t stop there. I keep pushing, relaxing as much as possible to take him as deeply as I can. He’s quite big, so I don’t expect to get all the way down to the base, but I get damn close. I feel a silly sense of accomplishment even as I feel myself fighting for air.

His body shakes hard again, and I hear him groan, “Claire... damn... Claire, I...

holy...”

Again, my body reacts as if it's me getting the stimulation. I hear his groan and it shoots straight to my pussy. I shift a bit on my knees. I feel very tempted to start playing with myself. I resist because I want the focus to stay on Brady right now. That's where it is, and I intend to keep it that way. I pull up and off him, and then I raise one hand to cup his balls while I run my tongue around the head of his cock and up and down the underside of it.

He almost stumbles and uses a hand on the wall to steady himself. We move a little and he ends up leaning against the counter. Can you imagine how good that feels for me? I mean, I'm making him change position so he doesn't collapse because of how good it feels! I move my mouth down his shaft again. I move, now. I dive deep and pull up faster and faster. Brady's legs tremble a little and his muscles tense. I bring my unoccupied hand up to rest on his left leg.

Damn it's powerful. I can feel the strength of this man, and it sends excitement through me. I move more wildly. Licking, sucking, moaning. I let my control go a little astray and pretty much attack him. His groans become just a continuous hum through his body.

I'm shocked at how much I desire to please him. Oh, not in some subservient way, so just cool your jets. It's just that I'm stunned that I feel so much for someone I've known for so little a time. I know that the reason I'm so invested in this blowjob is not solely because I find him attractive physically.

Nope.

I'm not in love with the package in my mouth. Um wait. Yeah, I probably am but what I mean is that it's not just that. I'm in love with the whole package.

I'm so into it that I don't even get a hint that he's about to cum until I'm fighting to swallow as fast as I can so I can breathe. He reaches down and strokes my hair but I keep my mouth on him for a long while. Then, I finally back away and keep my distance because I want to just jump on him right now.

But I stop myself and get back on my feet. I love the suspense of what will come later, though, I can tell you. I sit him down and then run to my room. I put on a robe and then get dinner on the table and call him in. As we talk, my feelings for him start to become very present in my mind. I talk with him in a way that I can't talk to anyone else.

I feel comfortable enough to tell him about the continuing threats from Steele. The man is pushing for me to vacate the property and making comments that scare me. I tell Brady about the vague threats he's made to our food trucks, about how they can suddenly crash and such. I get a bit overworked about it, but Brady just listens.

"I think he started the fire but, of course, I can't prove it," I say. I feel kind of insane. I mean, I feel stupid even as I talk about Steele. I realize that I might sound like a wacko conspiracy person, but I just can't shake my feelings that Steele is behind the fire at Mealtime and that he intends us more harm in the future.

But Brady doesn't shake his head and dismiss me. He listens.

I can't express how wonderful that feels, to have someone just listen. He doesn't throw out doubts or opinions or solutions. He just listens. Once more, my feelings for the man well up and I get quiet.

After a moment, I almost sob. "Am I just nuts?"

Brady doesn't answer, just pushes his empty plate back and gets up. I have a sudden fear that he's about to walk out the door and leave the crazy conspiracy lady behind

forever.

Then, he's standing by my chair and taking my hand, kissing it and then, pulling me close and kissing my lips.

He doesn't say a thing, but I know in that moment without a doubt that he is with me.

He sweeps me up into his powerful fireman arms and carries me to bed.

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Chapter Seven

Brady

I look at the text and put the phone back in my pocket. “You know,” I say, and I suppose I’m definitely in a gray area here, “A good buddy of mine is a fire inspector. Name’s Clyde Anderson.”

“You got a point to make?” Steele asks. I want to punch the man so badly it hurts.

“A fire inspector can make construction difficult, you know. A good one identifies potential fire hazards in a building design that you might never even see. A good one might come up with problems that will require significant modifications, additional safety features, extensive documentation, evidence of compliance... More.”

“I always build to code, and I don’t...” His phone rings. He frowns and answers. I see the anger building in his eyes. My guess is Clyde has already shut something down. “What the hell is this?” he asks when he hangs up.

“Clyde is always delaying construction progress with re-inspections and stop-work orders. I guess it’s a common thing for a fire inspector.” Clyde isn’t breaking any rules right now. He’s just interpreting fire safety codes very strictly. Forest for the trees sort of stuff.

“What the hell do you want?” he asks.

“Sometime, the fire inspector might require extra smoke detectors, sprinklers, fire

alarms. They might even make you add doors and emergency exits, right?”

“Damn it, what do you want?”

“Inspectors can request detailed plans, calculations, and certifications for fire-related systems...”

“Okay, you made your point! What do you?—”

“Follow-up inspections, specialized engineering calculations, materials inspections. I mean, can you imagine if every delivery of lumber had to be sampled and sent to a lab?”

The man roars and leaps to his feet. He steps toward me and says, “I’ve had enough!”

“Think very, very carefully about your next move,” I say, “because I’ve been fighting with myself to resist putting you in the hospital. You don’t want me to have an excuse to do what I very much want to do.”

He stops short and finally says, “Okay, what do you want?”

“You’re going to donate eighty-four thousand dollars to Mealttime.”

He scowls and then pretends to be confused. “Mealttime? What is that?”

“So, you’re going to donate one hundred thousand dollars there. That’s the estimated repairs to the building plus some capital. She has fire insurance but you’re donating the money anyway. Your downtown project isn’t going to happen. Every inspector will ensure that every single damned thing you do is done ten times, twenty times. You’ll have more failed inspections than you can even imagine.”

“This is blackmail!”

“Extortion. It would be blackmail if I threatened to tell the world about how you set a beloved charity’s building on fire if you don’t pay me. The building you already bought there, the charity will be happy to buy that. I mean the property right next to Mealtime’s. Mealtime will buy it for twenty-thousand dollars. If you like, you can just reconcile that ahead of time and cut your check for eighty thousand.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I’m the man who’s likely to kill you, Mr. Steele,” I say. “If you ever threaten the life or livelihood of anyone associated with Mealtime ever again. I don’t mean that metaphorically. I will quite literally kill you.” I say these things in a pleasant voice. I hope that makes them a little bit shocking. I hope that makes the words terrifying.

“Get the hell out of my office. You know how many cops I own? How many politicians?”

“Have a nice day, Mr. Steele,” I say as I stand. Then, I say, “It’s amazing how little it helps to own a cop when you’re alone with a man who will tear your throat out until there’s nothing but a jagged, gaping hole there, and you’ll drown on your blood. The good news is you won’t overcome the shock fast enough to know what’s going on before you die.” I nod and walk to his door.

I’m not afraid of any politicians. You’d have to own the governor to be able to do anything to anyone in Company 417. We know where the shifter bodies are buried, so to speak. As for any corrupt cops, they’re just not a consideration for a firefighter. There’s already a cop/fireman rivalry, so even the slightest hassle will bring too much scrutiny. Oddly, firefighters are almost more untouchable than anyone else.

The whole point of this visit is to scare the man into giving up his harassment of

Claire. It isn't going to work. Something like this never does. The man has far too high an opinion of himself. He thinks he's untouchable and, more than that, he needs to believe that he is. He needs to think nobody can get between him and whatever he wants. A man like him will never stop.

I still must give him a chance.

Of course, it's also fair to say that part of that whole exchange was to get him to try something. I can't pretend I didn't want to... What do they say online? Oh yeah. I got it. I can't pretend I don't want to provoke him so he fucks around and finds out. I very much want him to find out. Oh, not in the beginning, but the fact that he reacted to my statements not with denial but with an attitude that he could do whatever he wants to do confirms everything Claire suspects.

I walk out and play a little game with myself about how long it will take the man to call someone to take care of the situation. To take care of me. It doesn't matter. I've got several days off and I'll be shadowing Claire so I'll have no trouble protecting her. Some of my Company 417 brothers will take up the slack while I'm working my shift. Realistically, she'll only be left alone if a fire breaks out that's so large nobody gets a day off.

That happens a hell of a lot in movies but not a whole lot in real life, especially not in the spring when the grass is damp, there's plenty of rain, and the temperature is moderate. I head to the station and check in. There's no reason to at all. It's just to let Garrett know about the situation. He says to enjoy my time off and let me know if I need more. He doesn't tell me he's got my back. He doesn't have to.

All of the firefighters at Company 417 have my back.

Before shifters announced themselves to the world, some petty rivalries might have made some unreliable. These days most shifters have most shifters' backs. But when

you add to that the brotherhood that firefighters share, there's no most involved. Every one of the firefighters at Company 417 will lay their lives down for me, and I'll do the same for them.

I see a few of the others as I make my way back to my car. I wasn't worried before coming here but now, the idea of worry seems pretty damned silly. I leave the firehouse feeling good, and I head to Claire's place hoping we'll have time for a little bit of fun before she has to get to her charity.

No luck.

She's already gone. The door is open like she said it would be but she's left. There's a note telling me where she is complete with a heart at the bottom. Yeah, it's a silly thing for me to feel so good about that heart but I do. I can't help myself. She doesn't know I intend to show up at Mealttime. I'm looking forward to surprising her.

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Chapter Eight

Claire

I've just got things organized how I want them, and it feels pretty good. "All right," I whisper to myself. "Now I just need to call everyone and open the floodgates."

Yeah, I talk to myself a lot.

"You guys can take off now, if you want," I say a little louder. There are six people here who helped get all the food organized and ready. "Come get your bags from me." The bags I'm talking about are for them to fill with some of the food they've organized so they can take some home. We have a free store. It's just like a corner grocery store except you come in and get the food you need and don't pay for it.

No questions asked.

It lets people shop like normal human beings, just for free. They still check out because we scan everything, so we have an inventory. It also makes them feel like they're doing a normal thing, not receiving charity. It humanizes people who too often feel like they're less than human. Anyway, I love our free store and anyone who works for me always gets a bag.

When these guys get their bags, they'll also get their checks for today's work. We can only afford minimum wage, and it is always day labor. We never have to find the people. The people we help with food are also the people who need day labor jobs, so we're pretty much always able to get the help we need.

I feel really good.

Good.

We're operating in a temporary location while I figure out all of the insurance stuff and rebuilding with our other property. It sure feels good to be operating again, though. The relief I've seen on some of the faces is pretty profound, too. I feel good about this situation.

I watch as the men fill their bags and throw out some suggestions as well. "You guys, you have to try that spaghetti sauce. It's a premium brand. Hey, don't forget the spices. You never find oregano at a place like this. Pick it up!" I love this stuff, like I'm a carnival barker trying to sell to people. I think it helps the clients feel better, too.

People don't like to feel like charity cases. This is why I have so many volunteer positions here, to give everyone a chance to work. And, of course, it's why I always hire people to help with the deliveries and such. Giving people dignity is an important part of what I do.

Sure, some people would rather I spend the few thousand a month that goes out for payroll on food and such. You know who the loudest people are, the ones who bitch most about stuff like that? They're the ones who don't ever do a damned thing for others. They love to criticize but not to make changes. They're the ones who tear down others because they know they're not doing a damned thing. It's easier to feel okay with ignoring starving kids if you put down the people trying to help them.

Wow.

Okay, now you know my pet peeve.

And I need to say many people don't think it's good, what I do. I mean, I disagree with them but they believe safety nets like mine keep people impoverished. They're far more likely to admire me but think I'm not helping more than others. We learn from each other. I listen to their criticisms and make adjustments so people not only get food from me but also get tools to eventually no longer need my help.

The guys leave and I start up with the things I'll need to do when I open to the public tomorrow morning. There are food trucks that will come to stock up for meal deliveries and their routes. We have two food trucks that run through neighborhoods and take pledge IOUs as payment. In other words, a person pledges to volunteer for an hour at anything. Babysit your neighbor's kids. Clean up a park. Whatever, with a charity or just by yourself.

I'm in the back checking inventories and, honestly, I'm just amazed at how we've managed to get things back up and running. I certainly couldn't have done it alone. For some reason, my mind flashes to Brady and I get a wonderful warm feeling.

Wow, I'm being an idiot about that whole situation. I should just ...

My thought stops as I hear a door open and close up front. Our doors are like a lot of shops, and a bell rings when they're opened. It rings now.

I start walking towards the front, wondering if someone forgot something or, even better, if Brady is coming by to say hello.

I stop dead and any warmth I felt earlier is gone.

Danton Steele is standing there with two larger men flanking him. It's like a cliché with the short, tiny man and his big goons. I would almost laugh to see this guy with actual goons, but it's clear they're not here to be nice.

“What are you doing here? I told you I would never sell, Steele.”

He smiles and moves closer. “It’s a shame, you know? I thought you were a smart enough girl to figure out when to listen.” He gets even closer and his goons follow right along.

“I’m much smarter than you, Steele. I don’t show up with the clown posse and expect to get anywhere.”

His smile dissolves and he moves faster than I’d think possible. My heart jumps into my throat as the three of them close in on me. Steele steps right up to me and sneers. “You’re a fucking idiot, little girl. You should’ve learned your lesson.”

I’m shaking but, thank God, my voice stays steady. “HMMMM, and what lesson would that be? How to be a complete asshole and tell myself that my dick isn’t that small even if I have to push women to feel good about myself?”

His face turns red as a beet. He motions to his two guys and they walk casually over to the nearest shelf, where there are some jams and jellies and such in glass jars. They each take a shelf and run an arm through it, knocking everything to the floor. I notice then that there are a few other men with him as well. They step through the door.

My mind tries to wrap around the evil I’m seeing in the flesh. How is it possible for someone to be so Goddamn heartless?

“Let me tell you something, darling. I will have them break more than this if you don’t sign the agreement. You are going to...”

The bell on the door rings again and Brady steps in. “Hey, how did your first day back go? I...”

It takes him just seconds to assess what's happening. Now that he's here, I feel some freedom to let my fear and anger free. I start to shake harder and tears well up.

Brady takes one look in my direction and then, he stares at Steele and sighs. "You have five seconds to get out of here with these rejects from a cheap mob movie."

Steele is not in any way a strong man, but his guys come up behind him and bolster his bravado. "I'm not going anywhere. We're conducting business that you're interrupting. Keep it up and someone's bound to get hurt."

"If you men stand with Steele," Brady says, "you'll die. It's that simple. Five. Four. Three." The men look at each other. "Two. One." I try to wrap my head around this. It's insane.

Brady shakes his head and then, holy fuck...

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

The place where he stands seems to blur out of focus and then out of nowhere I see what looks like a cloud of shreds and dust. I finally figured it out. His clothing has exploded off his body. I stare along with Steele and his men. Standing where Brady stood is a giant lion. That's right, a giant, straight from the African Savannah except bigger, actual animal, freaking lion.

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Chapter Nine

Brady

Things get very violent.

And very dark.

And very dangerous.

Not to me. Dangerous to others.

This is where some people recounting the events might issue a trigger warning.

Steele's eyes grow pretty damned wide. Of course they do. Who expects to see a two-hundred pound man turn into a twenty-two-hundred-pound lion at a food bank? Well, I suppose this place isn't exactly a food bank. You get the point, though. The closest thug pulls a gun and points it at me. Honestly, there's no chance this man is going to kill me.

I don't mean that he won't shoot me. He very well may shoot me. It would take a military grade heavy machine gun to do any real damage to me while I'm in my lion. That's why I can't claim as much moral high ground as I wish I could. I let him fire. I feel a barely discernable, slight sting. Then I roar, leap forward, and send him hurtling through the air with a backhanded swipe of my paw.

I hear a crunch and a whistling sound. Something broke from the impact of my paw,

and I hear him wheezing. It's possible I broke a rib that then punctured a lung. The man crashes into a mostly empty shelf. He hits his head, and I hear more crunching. Maybe his skull. I don't know. A few things fall onto the floor, bags of flour, I think. He's out cold. The man will probably never wake up.

I hear more shots and feel a few stings in my side. I turn, leap, and land in front of another man. He fires wildly to the left and then to the right. I don't want him hitting anyone other than me, so I break his arm with a swipe of my arm. He screams but then either shock sets in or the pain makes him freeze. I knock him down as I leap up over him and land on top of the third man.

I feel his breastbone breaking from my weight. He screams and tries to lift his arm to shoot at me but I lean down and bite. My head and half his arm come up with me. I incline to get off the man's chest but by now, the blood rage is upon me. Nobody threatens the woman I love and walks away unscathed.

Lions don't lose control amid rage. We rarely lose control at all. I suppose that means I have no excuse for what I'm doing. I'm levelheaded. Rage motivates us but it doesn't control us. Don't take that to mean that it's safe to enrage us.

I rake my claws over the man's face. When I leap from his body, I sink my claws deep into his flesh, so blood, skin, and muscle are torn when I leap. I land on the last man, and a moment later, his mangled body is on the floor. The man with the punctured lung is struggling to breathe. I let him struggle. The man with the torn-off arm is whimpering and bleeding out. The man whose breastbone I broke is unmoving as well.

I've just killed two or perhaps three men without even thinking about it. The other one or two will die before I am done. There's no justification. No legitimate justification, anyway. I could have protected her without killing.

I ought to feel bad about it.

I do not feel bad.

I quickly look around. Steele is a few feet from the exit, and two leaps bring me right in front of him. He looks defeated. Good. I want to close my mouth over his neck and feel his bones splinter under my bite. It's a miracle I resist, and the only way to guarantee I resist is what happens next.

I swipe his legs so he falls, and then I rake my claws over his back. It will take a long time to heal and he will hurt for a while. Then, I back off and shift. "You could have avoided all of this," I say.

I stand on two legs, human now.

He stares at me in shock, no less terrified of my human body. "And now, you'll donate half a million dollars, Steele. You'll donate half a million dollars and you'll have your engineers get together with Claire to make sure nothing you do interferes with her vision for the community. Do you understand?"

He stares at me and stands up. Then, he nods almost imperceptibly as he hurries for the door. I catch him and then I hear a whimpering sound of despair. I look to my left and see Claire watching us. "I'm not going to kill him, Claire," I say. To him, I say, "As long as you understand. Do you?"

He nods and I glare at him. It doesn't take long for him to squeal the words, "Yes! Yes, I understand!"

I throw him toward the exit. I get the satisfaction of watching him stumble and then fall down. I can't pretend I'm not happy about that.

I'd be happier if he didn't just get up and walk out afterward.

I stand there watching and then decide it might be a good idea to make sure that he's gone. I get right to the door but stop when Claire says, "Brady!" She sounds panicked and I turn around, ready to fight. She runs to me and grabs my arm, pulling me back inside. "You're naked, Brady," she says in a more measured tone. "You're naked. You can't follow him."

"We sometimes forget we're naked. It doesn't mean the same thing to us."

She nods and takes my hand. She pulls me inside and then to a hallway. She keeps pulling and, as stupid as I am, I get it in my head that she intends to take me somewhere to make love to her, something I'll of course be happy to do. She does indeed bring me somewhere but it's not to make love to her. We end up in a room about fifty feet by fifty feet. It has clothes on racks and shelves.

She grabs clothes for me quickly and efficiently and soon I'm wearing a surprisingly fashionable outfit. "These are much nicer than I would expect you to have."

"Dignity is important," she replies simply, "and too many places forget that. I try to develop relationships with brands so that they send some things here when they send them to the outlet stores."

"That's a very good thing to do," I say.

"Yes, it helps people to feel like they're... No. No fucking way. Brady, we're not going to talk about the clothes and pretend nothing happened." She doesn't say the words angrily at all. It's her normal, beautiful voice. It's her normal beautiful tone. "There are... there are four dead men out there."

"They were going to hurt you."

“Yes! I’m not a child.” She stares angrily at me for a moment. “Yes, they were going to hurt me, and you stopped that, and I’m grateful. But there are still four dead bodies! There are four...” Her anger disappears and then she starts laughing. “Holy crap!”

“Are you okay?” I’m not sure if I can step closer or not right now.

She laughs louder. “I’m screaming at the thing that killed those four! I weigh a hundred and twenty-two pounds soaking wet and I’m screaming at you!”

“I think you might be in shock.”

She stops laughing but she’s still mirthful as she says, “Oh, shut up pussycat. I’m fine. And I’m pissed because I lost inventory and I’m pissed because I need to get things cleaned up, and I’m pissed because we’ve only known each other a few weeks but I’m so fucking in love that I can’t even... I mean, I should be running from all this craziness but I can’t.”

“Did you just say that you...”

She laughs loudly again, and says, “I can’t even be angry that you didn’t tell me you were a shifter. It’s like every single day with you is Christmas morning. I just... there’s something new.”

“Would you like tomorrow’s present right now?” I ask.

She looks at me and rolls her eyes. “Sure. Why the hell not, right? Go ahead. What now?”

“Marry me.”

She stops laughing and stares at me in shock. I get that. I'm in shock, too. What I just did is a very un-lion thing to do. "What did you just say?" she asked.

"You heard me," I say, "and you better answer quick because I have some calls to make to clean up the mess out there."

She starts laughing again. "Merry Christmas!"

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Chapter Ten

Two Months Later

Claire

There are a whole lot of things on my bucket list. See, I heard the phrase when I was nine and so I wrote down a list right then. That was close to fifteen years ago, so you can imagine how much has been added. I mean, of course, a lot has been done. When you're nine, you write things like having your first kiss or getting a puppy and stuff like that. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that I have a robust number of things I want to do in life.

But there's one thing on my list that sure as heck should have been there. That's riding a lion as though I'm riding a horse.

Holy wow!

I don't think there's anything I can do to explain it to you. I might just write it on my list just so I can cross it off. This is the most wonderful experience of my life! We're in a forest I didn't even know was so close to the city. Maddy is minding MEALTIME at the moment because I'm on vacation and I made a deal with Tiger Treasures to help them with some food needs.

Anyway, I don't think I can describe how amazing this feels. I've seen the terrible destructive power of the lion beneath me. I've seen what it can do, and it almost feels like that power pulses beneath me and just flows through me as I hold tightly to

Brady's mane and he runs. I have to admit something, too. Uh... I'm really getting turned on. The reason that's a little embarrassing is because it's physical, not emotional.

What I mean is that I'm not on a saddle. I'm bareback and Brady's muscles and movement are essentially stimulating me through my jeans. The stimulates me enough that it's fair to say I might end up having an orgasm if he keeps it up!

That makes me giggle a little as we run through the forest. That's okay. There has been a whole lot of laughter on this ride. There has been a whole lot of laughter since what happened at Mealtime. I guess now I understand why this man seems like so much more than a man, right? What a crazy set of circumstances, and what a wonderful life I get to lead.

Suddenly, the trees give way to a little rise over a beautiful little pond. The lion sits and I slide off his back. I walk around and hold the giant head in my arms. He's so beautiful and so huge! I tell you, he's bigger than the lion in the movies about the wardrobe and the evil witch. He's a lot more savage, though, I can tell you.

I mean, don't get me wrong. He's so kind and gentle when he's a man but the wild power of his lion will never leave my mind. I can promise you that. I'm not afraid of him but I saw what he can do. I don't know why I'm not terrified of him. Well, sure I do. I'm not terrified of him because he's Brady, and that means that I'm safe even if he's an apex predator wild animal. Hell, I think I feel safer because he is one. He's not just a badass lion. He's my badass lion.

All mine.

"Be you again for me, Baby," I whisper and instantly, my arms aren't cradling the giant lion's but instead are against his thick, muscular chest. I lift myself immediately to kiss him, and even though I say this almost every time, it's the best kiss of my life. His hands come around me and I press myself against him. I guess I'll seem pretty

dramatic but...

Well, how the hell am I supposed to not be dramatic? Seriously. Give me an answer to that one. My fiancé is a lion! He's a giant fucking lion! If you can come up with a way for me to not be dramatic when I'm marrying a god of a man who turns into the biggest king of the biggest jungle that ever existed? I'm getting married to a freakin' lion shifter!

Okay, I needed to get all that out of my system. In all seriousness, though, can you imagine anyone being all prim and proper about something like this? I mean, seriously, can you imagine that? Tell me you're not that much of a silly fuddy duddy.

And I'm stroking his cock.

Wow.

I want to tell you this is the first time he's turned back, uh, shifted back into a man and I've ended up surprised to realize I'm stroking him. I just do it automatically, I guess. I can't tell you why I do it. I can't explain it at all.

Oh, I guess I ought to explain a few other things, though. He called the police and the police showed up as well as an ME. He didn't say a word to them and they didn't talk to him. I watched as the men who threatened me and shot at Brady were put in body bags and taken away. The police officer returned so I could sign my statement and so Brady could sign his.

The statement I signed said these men were chased into the property by a pack of feral dogs. Brady scared the dogs away but not before they killed the men. Then, they left. Essentially, it's a shifter clean-up crew. I mean, Brady didn't specifically say that. I asked about a lot of the firefighters and he said he couldn't tell me about anyone's shifter status. There aren't a lot of violations of trust as great as that would be. So that was that.

Anyway, all of that was two months ago.

So yeah, I'm going to marry a guy I've known for next to no time at all. Well, what can I say? He's everything I want. He saved my life. He's a freaking shifter. And he's got a really big dick. Okay, that last one was just so I could check and see if you were still paying attention. Are you?

The bottom line is that even though he intended me harm, Danton Steele set me on an important path when he tried to burn Mealtimes offices down. Now, Mealtimes is stronger than ever, and my life is better than ever.

I get to be the princess and I have a lion for my Prince Charming.

Did you enjoy reading Lion's Legacy of Flame ? I hope so. I 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 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 bears, and on vacations with dragons.

I wish!

I loved writing about Brady, 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 not just a shifter but a proud and powerful lion, it makes him even more irresistible, right? If he's the king of the jungle, did Claire become the queen?

Naturally, I fell in love with Brady while I wrote Lion's Legacy of Flame . 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 write about. Well, maybe I do that but I can't help but fall in love with every one of these hot shifters! I always imagine I'm the lucky girl involved, and you better believe I imagined I was Claire even though I certainly never accomplished all the

wonderful things she's accomplished for humanity.

Claire got herself a sexy man, an incredible firefighter, and more than just a lionheart, right? She got an incredible guy who's a whole lot more than just a man. I think she's going to spend the rest of her life head over heels in love with Brady. How about you?

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 hope you enjoyed reading about Claire and her Lion shifter lover. These two are going to have a wonderful life, and I think Claire is going to do a whole lot of good for people who need the help. She'll do even more with her lion to protect her!

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

Gianna Ricci is at the end of her rope. She's done all she can to help her brother but he's lost in a downward spiral of drugs, alcohol, and petty crime. But then, something horrible happens and it almost costs both of them their lives. She and her brother are rescued by an incredible fireman who carries both of them to safety.

The fire isn't an accident. Gianna is sure.

If she's going to keep herself safe, she's going to have to find out who's out to get her brother and what's going to solve the problem. The good news is she and the fireman that rescued them are experiencing some sparks.

She doesn't want to ruin the relationship that's starting here so she keeps her troubles to herself. The thing she doesn't know is that Firefighter Colton Tanner is more than an incredible firefighter. He's a bear shifter, and he might be the only one who can help her. She'll have to risk being open and honest with him. As for Colton, he'll have to risk everything to keep this woman safe.

Find out all about it in *Bear's Blaze of Betrayal* , the next exciting tale in the sexy, steamy age gap shifter firefighter romance series *Company 417 Fireman Shifters* !