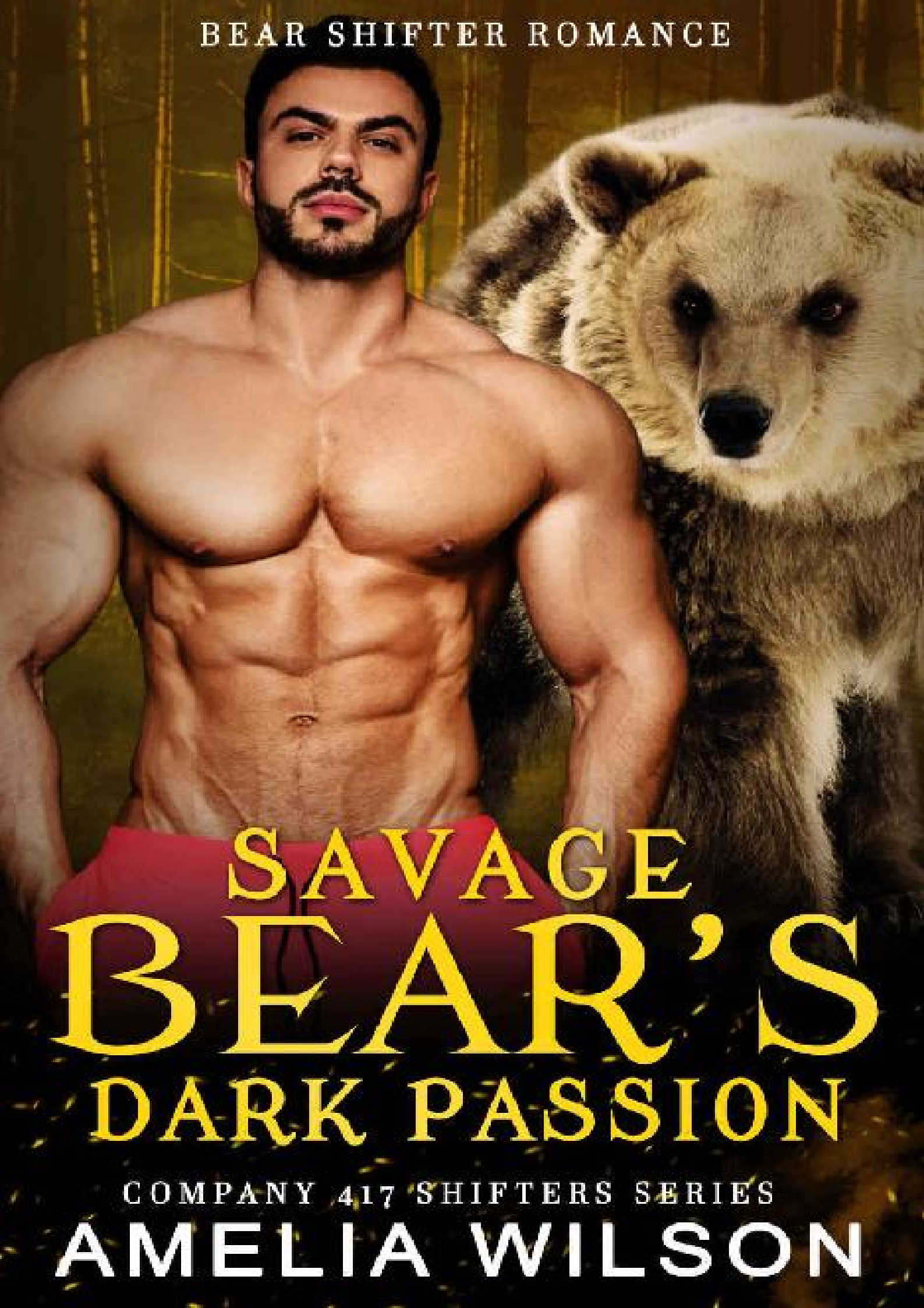


BEAR SHIFTER ROMANCE



SAVAGE
BEAR'S
DARK PASSION

COMPANY 417 SHIFTERS SERIES

AMELIA WILSON

SAVAGE BEAR'S DARK PASSION

Company 417 Shifters Series

AMELIA WILSON

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Chapter One

Livia

If this were a movie, a very sexy fireman would arrive any second now. Then, the camera would pan out and show the door bursting open and this burly god of a man carrying me out in his arms. I'd be kind of limp but just conscious enough to stare up at him with lust-glazed, worshipful eyes. Since it would be a movie, my hair would somehow be perfect and I'd look beautiful even with soot all over my face.

Don't think me too foolish when I tell you I've imagined that situation. In fact, I've imagined that situation while lying naked in my bed and imagining how I would show that sexy fireman exactly how grateful I am. I guess that fantasy is the fantasy that has fueled pretty much all masturbation my whole life. I'm talking about from the time I first ever masturbated. Even now, thoughts of the sexy fireman with his jet-black beard and his big muscles has my nipples hard.

Damn it!

I don't think I've inhaled any smoke yet but it seems pretty damned stupid to start fantasizing about firemen when I'm going to die any minute now.

Actually, I probably have at least an hour and a half and maybe two-hours. Actually, if the construction of this building is good enough, I might have three hours. If you're going to be trapped in a burning building being four floors above the fire isn't ideal but...

Aw, hell, I don't know what the hell is going on with me. I'm not even supposed to be here today. I'm only in this damned building because I'm doing a client a favor and picking up paperwork that he forgot to send so that I'd have it today for the filings I need to get done tomorrow.

There might not be a tomorrow.

That thought hits me pretty damned hard and it isn't easy to keep my wits about me. I huddle in the corner of the hallway and try to calm myself. There's a thin layer of smoke near the ceiling and right now it doesn't seem to be getting any worse.

The sexy fireman rescuing me right now would be a good thing.

I think about sexy firemen a lot. I guess a lot of women do but I have an excuse most people don't. I come from a family of firemen. In fact, a great, great, great (or whatever) grandfather was a New York Fire Zouave. Ever heard of them? Do a search online. Fascinating stuff. My Grampa Claudio fought the most dangerous fire in U.S. history.

In July of 1866, a massive fire broke out in lower Manhattan, destroying numerous buildings and causing widespread damage. The Fire Zouaves were among the first responders on the scene and worked tirelessly to contain the blaze, earning praise for their efforts. The Great Fire of New York was a devastating event that forever changed the landscape of the city. It began on the evening of December 16th in a building located near the present-day South Street Seaport. What initially appeared to be a routine fire quickly escalated into an inferno that consumed more than seventeen blocks, leaving thousands homeless and numerous businesses in ruins.

I know about this fire and the Zouaves. I wrote a paper on it in third grade and in sixth grade and in eighth grade and in eleventh grade. I wrote a play for a drama class in college and a history paper in college, too. It's a big deal in my family, a big part of our history. If I'm going to die in a fire, how come

it's at this stuffy office building and not something significant like the Great Fire of New York?

Anyway, there was a lot of wind in New York that day. Fanned by strong winds, the fire spread rapidly through the densely populated and primarily wooden structures. Despite the best efforts of the fire department, the flames proved unstoppable, leading to widespread panic as people evacuated their homes and sought safety. Many displayed tremendous acts of bravery, rescuing their neighbors and saving valuables while the fire raged around them.

And the Zouaves behaved like they didn't fear death.

See, that's what set them apart. If you want a comparison, the New York Fire Zouaves were to ordinary fireman what special forces are to regular soldiers. Yeah, I'm a biased observer but... Damn. The smoke is getting thicker, just a little. I guess it could all be in my mind. It's not like I'm thinking clearly.

I could use a Zouave right now.

Anyway, the blaze continued to rage for almost two days. News of the disaster spread across the country, and assistance poured in from Philadelphia and Boston, and other cities, too. Army Engineers showed up and demolished buildings in the fire's path to create firebreaks to contain its spread.

The Fire Zouaves were a volunteer firefighting group made up of former soldiers from the Civil War who brought their military training to combat fires in the city. So, they knew what they were doing and fought fires in an entirely different way than others might have.

Why am I obsessing about them right now?

Damn it, I look good today. I know that seems like a pretty damned insane thing to think when I'm about to die but I actually went through the process of getting myself all doled up. Professionally, I mean. I didn't dress with obvious intentions to be sexy but this particular building is filled with executive suites, and that means there are a great many start-

ups or tiny companies managing their costs. Those companies are my target audience.

So, dressing up like some kind of super-sexy professional woman while simultaneously maintaining decorum is something I did this morning as a strategic choice. Most of these people are extraordinarily overworked and stressed, always trying their best to stay right ahead of the next financial crisis. It's the nature of penny stocks and startups. As horrible as it might sound, looking attractive makes me seem more appealing from a professional standpoint. It helps them to look past my lack of experience.

So, great.

I'm going to die wearing a stylish white blouse that's tight enough to show off my figure, a black blazer that doesn't take away from anything the blouse accomplishes, a black pencil skirt that comes down just past my knees, black stockings, and black heels. Someone is going to see me and immediately assume I sucked my boss's dick during lunch break. I don't even have a boss! Of course, that's assuming I die of smoke inhalation. With any luck, the fire will reach here and they won't see any of my clothes at all, just a burned husk of a body.

Damn, it's crazy the kinds of thoughts that run through a girl's head when she's facing death.

I have to tell you, in my family history, there are, of course, the Zouaves but that's not it. There are more firefighters in the family than I can count. Uncles. Great uncles. Grandparents. My father, of course, was a firefighter. He lost an arm rescuing people in an earthquake when I was still in my mother's belly so he ended up becoming a fire inspector. The point is that, the idea that I'm going to die in this fire and not even see a fireman before I do is horribly and sadly ironic.

I have no hero.

Chapter Two

Joshua

People don't know a damned thing about bears. They think they do but they don't. People have three basic ideas about bears. First, you've got the Gentle Ben concept. You've got what television up until about the 1980s said about bears. You've got a lumbering and gentle giant that likes to play with children, walk along with them, and protect them if things get scary. Essentially, bears have a whole hell of a lot in common with Lassie according to that perspective. Similar to that concept is the whole Grizzly Adams thing. Well, Adams was a real mountain man but this idea of him having a bear on hand to be his companion is a television concept. Gentle Ben was a bear named Bruno whose mother was killed by a hunter when he was just a cub. He was raised and trained in captivity. All bear actors are trained. They're not naturally compliant and they're sure as hell not pets. But that's one view. Bears are pets. It's that view of bears that makes for the entire Teddy Bear idea. Killing a wild animal parent and raising its newborn young as your own makes it different but it doesn't make the behavior natural. The resulting bear certainly isn't wild.

Scientists will tell you that bears are one of the most fascinating animals found in nature. People use terms like *magnificent creatures* and *misunderstood, noble* animals. Blah, blah, blah. They don't know the first thing about bears. To be sure, bears possess a distinct place in wildlife, known for their strength, agility, and adaptability. There are several species of bears found across the world, each exhibiting unique

characteristics and behaviors that make them truly remarkable. I don't deny that but humans always put human characteristics on bears.

Bears don't have human characteristics.

I do, but I'm more than a bear and more than a human. Not all bears are shifters, though, and the personification people insist on making part of bear existence is just unwarranted and sometimes dangerous.

One of the most popular and recognizable species is the polar bear in the Arctic. People think polar bears are cute and a soft drink company making them some kind of Christmas-themed mascot doesn't help. People don't realize of all bear interactions with humans, the ones with the most fatalities involve polar bears. These creatures are perfectly adapted to survive in the extreme North's icy conditions. They have a dense layer of insulating blubber and thick fur that helps them retain body heat. Polar bears are proficient swimmers and rely on sea ice for hunting seals and other marine life. They are designed to live in conditions where very few creatures can survive.

So, there are more fatalities with them than any other bears.

Why? I'll tell you why. They're not cute. They don't have human characteristics. They're carnivores and because they live in conditions that aren't hospitable to humans, most polar bears who encounter a human being are encountering a human being for the first time. What's a human to an apex predator? Meat. It's that simple. A polar bear isn't going to wear a scarf and a winter cap and sip cocoa with you.

I'm not a polar bear.

I'm a black bear.

Granted, when I shift, I'm larger than any polar bear. Hell, I'm almost as large as some species of elephants.

But I'm a black bear.

I'm not an Asiatic black bear, which is native to Asia and is often referred to as the moon bear due to the distinctive

white crescent-shaped patch on its chest. These bears are smaller in size but are incredibly agile. Their diet consists mainly of fruits, nuts, insects, and sometimes small mammals. Asiatic black bears are highly skilled climbers, competent enough to ascend trees with ease. They're a relatively small species but not as small as the sun bear found in Southeast Asia. These bears possess a sleek black coat and a yellow or orange crescent mark on their chests, the yellow making them sun bears instead of moon bears.

To tell the truth, I don't think there are any moon bear or sun bear shifters. I'm aware of polar bear shifters and some grizzly shifters but there aren't many of them at all. For the most part, black bears are pretty damned standard in the shifter world. I don't know why that is. I will tell you that it's pretty irrelevant when it comes right down to it. We bear shifters tend to be pretty damned caught up in own worlds anyway.

Right now, being caught up in my own world means sitting on my haunches at the foot of an enormous oak tree as I consider whether or not the tree will be able to support my weight. Like I said, I'm far bigger than a natural black bear. It occurs to me that in the wild, bears likely never think about this situation. They likely know instinctively what's going on.

I pass on the tree, sighing inwardly. I realize I'm lost in thought.

That's usually my cue to return to civilization. The whole point of going wild for me is to give myself a chance to shake off all the confines of civilization so I can return to some of the savagery that makes me who I am and what I am. Just the fact that I can sigh inwardly means I've already gotten the wildness out of my system. At least, I've gotten it out of my system as much as a shifter like me can.

I'm a little disappointed but it's difficult to be too upset about it when I've been a bear for two days straight. I look longingly at the tree one more time and then get up and walk back through the forest to my car. It takes about two hours. I guess part of that is just dealing with how reluctant I am to leave, how I allow myself to be distracted by everything I smell and hear.

But I get there.

And I shift. I go from being almost four thousand pounds of muscle and fur to being a naked man once again.

I sigh, open my car door, and pull on my boxer shorts. I get as far as everything other than my socks and shoes before I notice my cell phone blinking in the center console. It's a text message. I glance at it and sigh. It's from my captain. *AHOD* All hands-on deck. I need to go fight a fire. Ordinarily, it would be out of the question. I'm more than three hours from home by car. This time, though, I caught a ride on a chopper with a fire company up here. They'll get me home within an hour. I get my shoes and socks on, start the call, and make the call.

So much for vacation.

Chapter Three

Livia

During the Great Fire of New York, one act of heroism by a New York Fire Zouave stands out as an act of incredible bravery and selflessness. It wasn't Grampa Claudio who performed that act but he was there. It's a story that's been passed down from one generation to the next in my family. I can't even remember the first time I heard it. It seems like I've known it all my life.

As the fire raged through the Lower Manhattan area engulfing building after building, chaos ensued with people fleeing and firefighters struggling to keep up with the inferno. Amidst all that confusion, one Fire Zouave named John Smithson emerged as a true hero. Smithson, like most of the Zouave's had fought in some of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War as part of the Eleventh Volunteer Infantry Regiment from New York. He displayed exceptional courage and leadership during the crisis. As buildings collapsed and people panicked, he organized a team of his fellow Fire Zouaves and ventured into the heart of the blaze to rescue trapped civilians.

Grampa Claudio was part of that team. The words that traveled down generations in my family were something like, "I dedicated myself to God that day because I'd already visited Hell."

Smithson entered a burning tenement building because he heard desperate cries for help. Disregarding his own safety, he led his team up the smoke-filled staircases, fighting against

intense heat and collapsing structures. They searched room by room, breaking down doors and guiding terrified residents to safety. In one particularly treacherous moment, a weakened floor gave way under Smithson's weight, causing him to plummet several levels. Grampa Claudio tried to catch him but couldn't.

Smithson told everyone else to get back to work and while Grampa Claudio and the others were pulling people out of the building, Smithson, despite being injured and disoriented, managed to crawl his way back to his feet and continue his mission, saving several lives before the building collapsed entirely.

And he wasn't done!

Smithson's heroic actions continued throughout the night as he tirelessly fought to contain the fire and rescue others. When the flames were finally extinguished and the city mourned its losses, John Smithson was hailed as a local hero. He received numerous accolades for his bravery and so did his Zouaves. In the program for the play that I wrote in college (and it actually performed for three shows at the school theater to pretty good review) I wrote this:

Smithson's selfless and courageous actions during the Great Fire of New York stand as a testament to the indomitable spirit of the firefighters and volunteers who risked their lives battling the devastating blaze. His heroism serves as a reminder of the extraordinary feats ordinary individuals can achieve in times of crisis.

It was an uplifting, exciting, and (I don't mind saying) well-written play. The third performance almost sold out, which pretty much happened at the college only when word of mouth was great.

But you know what? There's no nineteen-year-old college student with an interesting family history putting pen to paper here right now. There's no girl feeling like the center of attention and still thinking about whether or not the frat boy she almost screwed might really have been interested in more than a quick lay. There's only a twenty-four-year-old college

graduate trying her best to navigate the world of investment banking and getting ready to die in the building where a little penny stock company leases space.

The smoke is thick now. I can't see the ceiling and I can't see the walls from about four feet up. I'm going to die and there's no fireman coming to save me. There's only the realization that I never got a chance to accomplish any of the things I'd hoped to accomplish in my life. My entire life has been wrapped up in stories of heroic firemen but there aren't any here. There's only me and from the look of the smoke, there won't be me for very much longer at all.

The Zouaves were known for their bravery, discipline, and unique military-inspired uniform. They were inspired by the French Zouaves, a famous light infantry regiment renowned for their bravery and skills in combat. The Fire Zouaves put military discipline in their firefighting work, and that's what made them so effective.

Yes, I'm going to die.

I obsess in times of stress and my mind is going over what I know about the Zouaves like meditating on them is some sort of compulsion. I envision their uniforms, bright red baggy pants, a blue shirt, and a kepi-style hat. Just like their French inspiration, they also wore a black leather belt with brass buckles. I remember drawing a Zouave carrying an axe and coloring it carefully back in junior high.

I almost convinced myself that drawing is going to break through the wall right now and rescue me. I have to tell you, and this is embarrassing, I kind of invented the guy as a hero, a lover. This drawing was my first real crush, an archetype of a fireman I could think about and fantasize about. I mean, I made my own guy to have a crush on.

I guess that's the archetype of a fireman I always imagine rescuing me when I imagine being rescued. Of course, I'm not going to be rescued right now. Nope. I'm a goner. Even if I were in New York, and I'm not, the Fire Zouaves aren't around anymore.

The New York Fire Zouaves were an all-volunteer firefighting company in 1860. They became well-known after participating in the inauguration parade of President Lincoln in 1861. They got the spot because of their impressive reputation as firefighters. Lincoln was impressed. They ended up performing a fire drill at the White House.

The Union Army asked them to take part in the Civil War. That's what created the 11th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, the Fire Zouaves Brigade. During the war, the Fire Zouaves saw action in multiple battles and earned a reputation for their courage and tenacity. Their distinctive uniforms also made them stand out on the battlefield, making them an easy target for enemy fire. They didn't care.

Zouaves are badasses.

"*Were* badasses," I whisper and I feel a tear falling down my cheek. I'm going to die here. I'm going to die right here in this office building.

I hear a loud cracking sound and when I look, I see an axe, the red and silver explosively jarring against the pall of the smoke. I feel more tears coming. I'm hallucinating now. I slump down and there's black at the edges of my vision. This is the end for me. Livia is no more.

I try to say, "I'm sorry Grampa Claudio," even though I don't know why I need to apologize to him. As my consciousness slips away, I feel my Zouave lift me up into his arms. I even feel us moving. He's carrying me. The whole thing makes me sad. I know it's not real. My brain doesn't have enough oxygen and I'm hallucinating before dying.

My Zouave never came.

I never expect to feel so sad when I die.

Chapter Four

Joshua

“Just stay out. We’re not going in.”

“What? What about the girl?” There’s a girl in there still trapped. Nine or ten people confirm it, and there’s a damned car out here that belongs to her.

“Nothing we can do about it,” the fucking idiot captain says. He’s a pipsqueak little prick. He’s not my captain. Company 417 is here in a supporting role. My captain isn’t a pipsqueak or a prick. There’s nothing little about him and he’s not an idiot, fucking or otherwise. “You stay put.”

“No,” I say.

The pipsqueak prick’s eyes narrow. “What did you say to me?” he asks.

“You heard me,” I say and I start walking toward the building.

“Firefighter Drake!” he says, “I gave you a direct order!”

“I heard it,” I say without slowing, “but I don’t recognize your authority.” I really don’t have much of a leg to stand on. This is his fire even if I’m not exactly in his direct line of command. Still, even if it isn’t directly stated in the regulations that when two firefighting companies are fighting a fire together the firefighters of the company not in charge obey the leadership of the company in charge, it’s pretty much understood.

If I find this girl and get her safe, the man will hate me but he won't be able to do a damned thing about it. If I don't rescue this girl, my career is probably over in this city and maybe the state. On the other hand, I've been thinking about moving to a small town with more wilderness around it and working at a smaller department. I've even been considering getting a job with the Department of Forestry or one of the various equivalent departments in one of the states. They need firefighters as well.

The one thing I'm not going to do is let a woman die in order to limit this fire department's potential liability with the firefighter's union. I'm a bear. Let me tell you, the reason there's an idiom about not waking the sleeping bear is because we sure as hell love our sleep. If I let this woman die, I'm not going to be able to sleep because of the guilt.

He's still shouting at me and the last thing I hear is him squealing, "Fuck!" when I walk past the doors.

In my ear, I hear Garrett's voice say, "Well, that was fun to watch. Four of us are circling around the back to get in and help. The police are already getting in front of the main doors. What do you see?"

"The smoke is on the other side of the stairwell," I reply, "so I'm going to take the stairs up as far as I can."

"Do me a favor," he says.

"I'll think about it."

"If you shift, will you at least get undressed first so we don't have to figure out how to get you out of the building?"

"No promises," I say with a chuckle. There's some static when I step into the stairwell. I step back out. "You may lose me in the stairwell. Right here it's clear. I'll check back in after a few floors."

Almost every firefighter in Company 417 is a shifter. It's a kind of pilot program designed to allow us to use our particular skills and abilities in ways we couldn't in a regular company. Even though shifters are out in the world now, there

is still plenty of distrust on both sides. In my opinion, the distrust is far more powerful on the shifter side.

You see, we're the reason people are afraid of shifters. Humanity is the reason people aren't really afraid of shifters anymore.

Humanity is a hell of a lot more enlightened than it used to be. Today, humanity realizes that werewolves, vampires, and other monsters are works of fiction. The truth is, though, people believed in them before. Exactly how it happened, nobody really knows, but in the world of shifters, it's pretty much general knowledge that we created the myths. Our ancestors knew that humanity would react to our existence with suspicion and fear. We also knew that it would be impossible to completely avoid people occasionally seeing one of us transform.

So, these myths were created as ways to essentially make us terrifying and then, later, as ways to make anyone who claimed to actually see us seem like a fool. For many years, this worked well. There were still occasional times when a shifter might be seen transforming but by the Nineteenth or Twentieth Century, anyone who said they saw it was treated like a loon or a fool.

And then, in the late Twentieth Century, someone wrote a vampire book that romanticized vampires. Soon, there was a romanticization of werewolves. That gave way to an entire genre of romance that had to do with shapeshifters. For a large group of pure humans, shifters went from scary monsters to romantic heroes.

The truth is that shifters are like any other group of individuals. We are individuals. There are shifters who are assholes and shifters who are kind. There are shifters who are driven to succeed and shifters who are lazy as hell...

I know this seems like I'm getting off track. This is my process, though. Letting my mind run over things like this is what allows me to get up four floors, call and let my guys know I'm still alive, and get back on the stairs. After not too

long, I reach the burning floors and now I'm careful, opening the stairwell doors as I go for a quick check.

I find her.

She's on the floor at the other end of the stairwell, and as I rush to her, I realize the fucking stairwell door doesn't have a plaque to even indicate what it is. That angers me enough I almost shift right then and there. I manage to keep myself from it, though. I get to her and lift her up into my arms. She's still breathing and I take off my mask. Right before I get it over her face, she says, "I knew... I knew you would come." Then she loses consciousness.

Ten minutes later, I step out of the front of the building to applause from everyone there and a scowl from the pipsqueak prick. I carry her to the EMTs and stay with her. She's beautiful but I can honestly say that's not why I stay with her. Something in her voice, the way she told me she knew I would come for her. I can't shake it.

Pipsqueak Prick tries to get me to step away to talk to him. I tell him I'm not even on the clock and he can call me when I'm back at the station at the end of my vacation next week. As if to punctuate that, I pull off my gear, right down to my boxers, and ask a brother from 417 to bring me my normal clothes. Pipsqueak Prick is not happy about me just undressing like that in front of him. Truth is, I only do it to piss him off, so I'm fine.

I ride with her in the ambulance and visited her several times at the hospital over the next few days. She's badly shaken and I always catch her right at the point that she's sedated or just waking up. The good news is that she's going to be okay even if she's never in a state of mind that allows me to ask what she meant about me coming to rescue her.

Chapter Five

Livia

He opens the door and his eyes reveal shock. “Livia!” he says, “you should be resting!”

I shake my head. “I was discharged with a clean bill of health.”

“Still, you should already be asleep!”

I smile nervously and say, “It’s not too late yet tonight.”

“But why are you here?” he asks.

I reach forward and try to touch his arm. “I need to... I want to make sure you’re really real,” I say. I feel foolish but he doesn’t treat me like I am. He takes my extended hand and gently leads me over the threshold. He presses my hand to the forearm I was trying to touch and I sigh. “Sorry,” I say, “I was... I...”

“You hallucinated when you were in the building,” he says softly, “Is that right?”

I nod and he says, “and you hallucinated your rescue except it happened, too. Your mind was trying to reconcile knowing that you hallucinated with also knowing it happened.”

I nod and say, “I knew... I knew I was rescued but...” I look at the floor and a moment later I feel his hand on my chin.

He cups my face and lifts it up so I make eye contact with him. “It’s okay, tell me.”

I feel myself blushing and I say, “I’m not... I wasn’t sure if you really visited me in the hospital or if it was more hallucinating.”

He does something astounding. I only realize I have one hand that’s still resting on his forearm when he takes my other hand and guides it to his chest. He presses it against him there and then a little lower to his midsection. Then, he lifts it to his shoulder and then to his cheek. The whole time, he didn’t break eye contact with me and I let out a sigh. I know it’s entirely inappropriate but I can’t keep from moving my other hand to his other cheek and letting my fingers run through his full, perfect beard.

He’s real.

I mean, he’s larger than life, an impossibly handsome and muscular man who’s also a firefighter. I might joke about him not being real just because of how he looks exactly like what I imagine the man perfect for me will look. But he’s real. He’s not my imagination. He’s real. All of my fear that the fire left me with brain damage (regardless of what the doctors told me) disappeared. “Oh, Joshua,” I say. Tears flow freely as I slide against him and put my arms around his waist. I can’t actually get all the way around him but I don’t care. “You’re real,” I sob, “you’re real.”

He holds me, gently rubbing my back as he says, “I’m real, Livia. I’m real. You’re not seeing things.”

“You’re...” I pull back. “Never mind. You won’t even know what they were.”

“Try me,” he says with a gentle smile.

“My family. We’re firefighters. A lot of generations. Somewhere a lot of great grandfathers ago there was one who was a Zouave.”

“Really, the original 11th Regiment?”

My head snaps up and I whisper, “Now I know you can’t be real.”

He takes my hands and puts them back on his cheeks. “I’m real. You were oxygen-deprived and you hallucinated but you’re fine now.” He smiles at me. “I’m real.”

“And you’re...” I slide my fingers through his beard. “You’re my Zouave.”

His eyes register delight at that and he says, “I like that, Livia.”

“I do, too,” I whisper. Then, I press myself against him, lift myself up onto my tiptoes, and kiss him. He’s shocked at first but I’m insistent and after a moment or two, his hands move down to the small of my back and he holds me against him as our tongues intertwine.

But he stops us.

He’s sweet and gentle but he still stops us.

He pushes me back and says, “Livia, you’ve had a dramatic shock and you’re just not thinking clearly about—”

“No,” I say, “you don’t get to do that. You don’t get to say I’m fine now and then tell me I’m not in my right mind. I was oxygen-deprived but I’m not now. You’re my New York Fire Zouave. I knew you long before I met you, and you don’t get to tell me anything about how I’m thinking.” Then, I kiss him again. I guess I kiss him even more aggressively that before but he responds this time immediately, kissing me back and holding me tightly so I don’t have to press myself against him as much and it isn’t any kind of strain at all to be on my tiptoes.

But he stops us again. I’m about to protest and ask him if he finds me unattractive but I don’t get a chance to say anything, thankfully. He leans past me and pulls the door closed. As relief that he isn’t rejecting me floods my mind, he pulls me back to him, and this time it isn’t about me kissing him at all. It’s about him kissing me and whether or not it’s his job to put out fires, he’s igniting one inside of me.

This one burns very, very, very hot.

I don’t think when I kiss him the first time or even the second that I intend to do more than that but I find myself

pulling at his shirt, lifting it out of his pants. Hell, I don't even realize I intend to kiss him before my lips are already on his and my tongue is already wrestling with his.

I don't want to get all spooky and mystical or anything but it really feels like my body is acting independently. I get his shirt pulled out of his pants, and my hands move over his abdomen as I kiss him. His muscles are so damned defined. I've never been with a man with such obvious physical power, such attractiveness, or such... Well, hell, this man is a perfect ten. I think even if my body count were a thousand men, I wouldn't have ever been with a man as incredible as Joshua.

I move my hands down and pull at his belt. I can't believe how desperately I want to take my mouth away from his mouth and to put it on his cock. I don't think there's ever a time in my life I have ever so desperately wanted to give someone a blowjob. I mean, I want it as desperately as I've ever wanted anything!

I don't get it, though. I get his belt undone and I even get as far as getting the pants unbuttoned and unzipped. That's when he takes over, though, and he lifts me up like I'm weightless. It's just like when he carried me from the fire except, I'm not in danger of flames consuming me. I'm in danger of this man consuming me, and all I can say to that is, let me burn!

I don't want to say that something magical happens but I can tell you that I end up on a bed in what I assume is his bedroom and I'm completely naked watching him step out of his pants before I even register that he carried me to this bed and undressed me. I'm so damned worked up and the fact that he has a penis that's far larger than any I've ever seen makes the whole situation seem even more surreal.

Chapter Six

Livia

The size of that thing between his legs is very alluring and tempting but simultaneously pretty damned terrifying. It becomes immaterial to me, though, because when he climbs on the bed, I stop trying to prepare myself mentally for the penetration. That isn't because of willpower. I stop trying to prepare myself because he kisses me and the kiss takes all the fear away.

And I do something I don't expect to do.

I take hold of his cock and put it right against my pussy. When I do, I feel how slick I am as the head slides along my slit. I can't believe it. I mean, I can't believe I'm desperate regardless of the fear and I can't believe I'm so turned on.

Well, he naturally assumes I'm guiding him because I want him inside of me but there's no doubt when I breathe out, "Fuck me, Joshua! Fuck me right now!" like some kind of... well, I don't like the word slut but if the shoe fits, right? He thrusts, sliding into me, stretching me, and giving me an entirely new perspective on pleasure. "Joshua!" I cry as his cock drives into me. I'm not promiscuous by any means but I'm also not inexperienced. Nonetheless, this whole situation feels entirely new and unprecedented for me. Sure, that most certainly has a great deal to do with how this feels like the culmination of a long-held fantasy. I understand that's a big part of things. Still, this feels like experiencing sexual pleasure for the first time ever.

I don't understand a lot of it. Usually, I need a lot more foreplay in order to be ready. I've most certainly never asked a guy to screw me before. I don't know if I can say that every time I've had sex before now the sex has been with too little foreplay to prepare me but I can't think of any time in my past where it felt to me like I needed to get to the sex right away, that I just couldn't wait any longer at all.

Fuck me, Joshua! Fuck me right now! As silly as it might be for me to be embarrassed about that dirty outburst when I have an enormous god of a man on top of me and he's most certainly doing exactly what I begged him to do in the middle of my vulgarity but I do. I feel my cheeks coloring as I think back to my nympho-like begging.

It's hard to stay embarrassed for long. It's hard to think of anything negative for long at all while I experience the way his very large shaft stretches me. His weight atop me is beautiful. Even though he caresses me gently, it's impossible for me to ignore the sheer power of this man. I mean, compared to me, he's a giant and I'm a... well, a small human being.

Every thrust seems to push me more than I've been pushed before. I don't understand it except it has to do with Joshua being powerful enough to snap me like a twig but keeping all of his power in check. That contradiction is just astounding to me, wonderful and astounding. I try to hook my legs over his ass but he's so big my heels just end up on one of his hard-as-a-rock ass cheeks. I don't know why I find that so remarkable, so completely overpowering.

I guess it's a reminder of the contradiction of this man. He's fierce and powerful but the kindness of his eyes when he pressed my hand against him to reassure me that he was real and the way he's touched me from then until now shows that he's capable of great gentleness and sweetness. Somehow, he does that but not once makes it seem like his power is diminished at all. It's a remarkable display of power, a breathtaking display.

Okay, so I almost died.

I met him in the hospital. Sure, he met me before then when he rescued me but I wasn't in my right mind then.

I met him in the hospital and saw him four times over the three days I'm there for observation.

So, this is the fourth day I've known him, and it's damned insane of me but my mind is already flitting to ideas of love and a life with this fireman.

I mean, sure, it's easy to let my mind go to crazy places when I'm right in the throes of pretty astounding sex that not only feels really good but simultaneously feels challenging just because of how massive this man is. I mean, it feels like I'm sleeping with a supernatural being, a very strong and powerful supernatural being who could snap a person my size right in two!

He doesn't snap me in two, though. He thrusts with a great deal of power but it feels simultaneously like he's very carefully holding his strength at bay. That's what really makes this sexy, I think. I mean, the knowledge that this man has the power to break me but keeps his power under control adds an element of danger to the situation that...

I don't know.

I mean, if you think about it, a fireman must be pretty much, the exact opposite of a bad boy, right? Well, it feels like I'm getting bad boy treatment from a good guy. Hell, I don't know. I'm just constantly trying to analyze every fucking thing in my life, I guess. I really wish I could stop that.

And then I stop.

I stop because I climax. The orgasm is like a blow to the face. I don't mean it hurts. I just mean that it's kind of like getting sucker punched because it hits me with no warning. I mean, the sex feels good and overwhelming but I don't feel any of the buildup to orgasm. Instead, I just feel the orgasm hit me and hit me hard. I don't understand it but I cling to him and just try to breathe as pleasure rushes over me.

For about four or five seconds.

Then, my body goes crazy.

I mean, I don't consciously decide to move like some kind of frenetic sex-machine. I just do. I hook a leg over his ass and use it to lift myself up to meet his thrusts. I wiggle my ass so that I'm almost rotating my pussy around his cock. I moan like some kind of crazy, over-the-top porn star for about ten seconds and then my breath disappears for a similar length of time and then I moan like the porn star again. This goes on in cycles or porn star moans and breathlessness as I move and as I dig my fingers into his back, clutching him tightly as the pleasure claims me as powerfully as... as powerfully as...

Well, the only way I can really describe it is like a roller coaster. I'm not talking about the ups and downs, though. I'm talking about when the roller coaster curves and the force of the curve affects your body, you're just helpless against the gees. I read somewhere that some people can actually pass out because of the g force of some roller coasters. Well, I'm not going to pass out but I sure as hell feel just as helpless as a girl in a roller coaster with no choice but to be swung about inside the car.

You might imagine that when Joshua cums, I'd be relieved and finally stop moving. Instead, I go even crazier! I hold him and my body moves another forty-five seconds or so and I think my body wants to keep moving but I'm just too overwhelmed and I end up just holding him tightly and shuddering underneath him.

I swear to you that when I fall asleep on his shoulder just five or six minutes later, it almost seems like I can still feel this man inside of me.

Chapter Seven

Joshua

I leave the house before the sun is in the sky. I'm an asshole but I'm not a total asshole so I scrawl a note and leave it on top of her clothes, which I've carefully folded and placed on the chair in my room. It tells her to feel free to help herself to anything in the kitchen and to make herself at home. It also tells her that I enjoyed our evening together and while I don't in any way believe that she's obligated to be there when I return, I'd be thrilled if she was.

I'm off today.

I leave early because I need to deal with what happened, and that means I need to let my bear free. That means a three-hour drive to an area that isn't officially reserved for shifters like me but nonetheless is a safe place by default, deep in woods thick enough that even aircraft above won't see anything other than brief snatches of what's below.

As I drive, I can already feel my bear pushing to get out. In general, I think, bears need their bear form more than other shifters. Of course, that's just an assumption and I'm willing to accept that the assumption is based entirely on unprovable feelings and ideas rather than on actual, provable data. All I know is that the desire to shift is an undeniable need that happens often with no impetus at all. When there's a reason to shift, like the emotional uncertainty I feel right now, it moves from an undeniable desire to a need, an imminent and absolute need.

The drive is nearly untenable. I actually have to resist an urge to pull over somewhere that's only slightly private. It even runs through my head that I could pull over, shift, spend a few minutes as a bear to take the edge off, and then return. I know, however, that no matter how much I want that to be the case, once I'm a bear, there will be no shifting back after a few minutes. I need to operate by instinct for a while and I need that instinct to take over so that my unconscious mind can process everything else.

I heard once that dreams are just the subconscious mind's way of organizing things and processing things in the waking world. I think that was a line in a television show or something like that. I don't remember where I heard it. Maybe it's true. I'll tell you now, though, that when my subconscious mind needs to organize and process things, it happens while I'm a bear.

I always keep a fresh change of clothing in my car. Most shifters do, I guess, in case of an emergency shift. If you shift with your clothes on, you're going to reduce your clothes to tatters. Natural black bears range from a hundred and twenty-five pounds to five hundred pounds. I'm talking about males. The largest black bear on record is just under nine hundred pounds. A typical bear shifter child of twelve will shift into a bear larger than nine hundred pounds. I think the biggest expense for bear shifter parents is, without question, clothing for their kids. Can you imagine a hundred- and ten-pound boy becoming nine-hundred pounds? Can you imagine what just happened to his school clothes?

Well, when I shift, my bear is close to two-thousand pounds. I keep an extra set of clothes not for an emergency but because when we plan to shift, we're often unable to stop ourselves, to wait to get our clothes off when we arrive. This time, though, I manage to get my everything off except my boxer shorts before the bear beats the human and I'm transformed. Bears don't really chuckle but in my head, something similar happens as I see my carefully folded shirt and jeans on the seat of the car. I nose shut the door and take off into the trees.

Immediately, my senses are filled with the forest.

Clarity comes a hell of a lot faster than I expect it to. Clarity comes before I'm ten steps away from the car. I love this girl.

How?

How the hell do I love this girl so quickly? Is it that nurse syndrome? What is it? Nightingale. That's it. Is it Florence Nightingale syndrome? I mean, I understand that's supposed to be for caregivers and patients but it's not a big stretch to think it might be the same thing when you rescue someone from death, right? It's hard to wrap my head around being in love so quickly, so instantly.

And then, I don't give a damn about it because a scent in the air distracts me entirely and my bear is far, far more interested in the scent than in any of my human issues. In fact, my bear cares more about this scent than any other fucking thing in the whole damned world. This is the kind of a scent that (as cliché as this might be, and I know it's a cliché) makes the world disappear until the source of the scent is discovered and appropriate actions are taken.

Well, if you're a big fan of A. A. Milne, you might already know what I smell. I find the hive in a fallen log and it isn't long before twenty to eighty thousand bees are pretty damned angry with me. I guess this hive is right in the middle of the number, so let's say forty-five thousand bees are pissed off at the giant bear who decides their right to a hive isn't nearly as important as his right to honey.

You know, bees and bears share an interesting dynamic. In the wild, black bears are often observed interacting with bees in various ways. Naturally, while most animals instinctively avoid bees due to their potent sting, black bears have been observed actively seeking out beehives. The reason behind this peculiar behavior lies in the bears' love for honey. Natural bears can smell honey a mile away. I'm pretty sure my range is wider than that. Of course, bees fearlessly defend their hives, swarming and stinging any intruders. While wild black bears are generally tough-skinned enough to withstand bee stings,

they are not entirely immune to their effects. Bears often end up with swollen faces and limbs from the stings, but this does little to deter them from enjoying the golden honey.

A bee stinger can't penetrate a shifter bear's hide. I get the honey without the consequences. It's not fair but at least I can take comfort in the knowledge that black bears also act as inadvertent pollinators during their honey-seeking adventures. When they raid hives, they inadvertently spread pollen on their fur and bodies before moving on to other areas. As they travel, this pollen is transferred from one flower to another, aiding in the cross-pollination process. But honestly, I don't need to take comfort. The honey is plenty comforting.

As I drive home, pretty happy, I realize I've figured out the whole falling in love with Livia thing. Specifically, I've figured out that there's no need for me to understand it at all. Just like the honey, I only need to enjoy it. I'm pretty sure Livia is on the same page because when I get home and open my door, she's at my house. She's also wearing lingerie.

Chapter Eight

Livia

I can say honestly that this is the first time in my life I had sex with a man and then immediately shop for lingerie to make the second time with him even better. I stare at him a little bit nervously but the look on his face is thrilling as his eyes move over my body. Any nervousness I might feel quickly changes from worry that he might not like the deep green corset, garters, and stockings to the sudden realization that this man could fuck me right into the hospital!

I know I'm being silly.

And I need to say that the nervousness about the difference in power between the two of us is part of what has me so damned turned on. The fact that this man is so much stronger than me, that this man could... Well, I already said what he could do. The fact that he could do it is part of what makes the idea of sex with him such an incredible thought. I lick my lips softly. I'm not trying to be sexy. It's a nervous reaction.

"Welcome home," I say. My voice sounds very small.

He closes the door without ever taking his eyes off me. I know it's silly but I immediately wonder if the focal point for him is on the deep red lip color, the red on my fingernails, my breasts only half-covered by the cups on the corset, or the sight of my pussy where panties I'm most decidedly not wearing should be.

I stop wondering when he steps to me and kisses me savagely. I didn't stop wondering because I got my answer. I stop wondering because that kiss is astounding. The kiss from last night is a kiss driven by me, something I initiate. Last night, Joshua kissed me back, responding to me.

This time, it's all Joshua's show.

This time, his kiss makes it very clear to me that he's in charge. Actually, it kind of makes it clear to me that for right now, I belong to him. I mean, it's like this kiss claims me as much as using one of those tools to etch your name on a piece of technology or using a laser to etch ownership information on a diamond stakes a claim.

I'm his.

The kiss says he's entitled to anything he wants from me. I need to tell you that I'm in complete agreement with him. He can have anything he wants. He can have anything at all. He can fuck me this way, that way, up, down, or any other kind of he can come up with. His kiss claims me. There's no question about that at all. But the claim is redundant because I already belong to this man.

And this time, I desperately want to prove it. I know this won't win me any feminist of the year awards but I want to please him, to worship him, to focus on his pleasure regardless of my own. As soon as I can manage, I fall to my knees and work on getting his pants down. See, I figure if I'm already on my knees, he'll let me get my mouth on him.

Let me.

Wow. In what universe does a girl need a guy to *let* her give him a blowjob. In what universe is that the girl's primary concern?

In this universe. That's the answer. It's in this universe that all that happens as long as I'm the girl and Joshua is the guy. The bottom line is that Joshua is entirely in charge right now and there's no way I'll be able to give him a blowjob or, for that matter, anything at all unless he's interested in letting me.

Damn, I don't know that I've ever wanted to give a blowjob as desperately as I want to right now. My hands are shaking a little bit as I get his belt undone and as I get his pants unzipped and then down. Even though I saw him last night, when I get his boxers down to his ankles, I still pause at the sight of his dick, intimidated just a little.

The intimidation, though, doesn't even come close to the need I feel.

I know this is going to make me seem really silly. I suppose, especially given that I'm a business professional who regularly handles million-dollar transactions, I'll seem kind of flighty. Well, the bottom line is the thought that hits me when I get my mouth over the head of his cock is that it's still difficult to believe Joshua is real. Certainly, when I put my hand on his balls to caress them, it's because I know that will make things good for him. It's also because feeling the weight of them reassures me that he's real.

He gets his shirt off and even though I let my other hand slide up over his firm abs and as high as I can reach on his muscular chest because I enjoy the intimacy of the caress, there's no doubt in my mind that I also do it because the feel of his skin against my fingertips is further reassurance that he isn't a smoke-forced hallucination, some kind of inferno-driven fugue state that brings my Zouave fantasy to life.

He's real.

He's real and right in front of me.

I moan as I suck. Now, I've moaned while giving a blowjob before but let me tell you something. When I moan while giving a blowjob, I don't do that out of any authentic sincerity except for a real and sincere desire to make the blowjob good for a guy. I know it's better for a man when he believes the girl enjoys it. Well, I'm not moaning for that purpose. I'm not moaning because of any voluntary decision to moan at all. On the contrary, I'm moaning automatically and the moans come from the enjoyment I get from sucking Joshua's dick and the way it turns me on in a real and physical way.

You know, it's impossible to get much depth. The man is huge. My inclination is to use my hand along with my mouth but my hand is way too comfortable where it is, not only feeling intimate but reminding me that I have a real human being's cock in my mouth and not a figment of my imagination. I don't know if not getting much depth makes me focus more on my tongue technique but I get him where he wants to be and the thrill I feel when he cums is pretty damned significant. Usually, I swallow after a blowjob purely for ease of cleanup. I imagine a lot of girls are like me.

This time, I do it as though it's part of the blowjob. I swallow and I keep my mouth on him, really reluctant to end the blowjob, reluctant to stop the process of him being where he wants to be. Of course, I do stop eventually. I stop because Joshua also wants to get me where I want to be.

Several times.

He gets me where I want to be enough times before I just lose count and the two of us are together on his bed with darkness closing in. I think my last thought before I sleep is that I need to make him breakfast because instead of enjoying dinner, we enjoyed each other.

Chapter Nine

Joshua

Things are happening to me I don't understand.

I'm not talking about dramatic things. I'm talking about subtle things. Right now, for example, I'm working on the equipment at the firehouse with a number of the guys. Apart from the camaraderie any group of shifters experiences just because we're shifters, there's more going on. (And yes, even though shifters are officially out in the open, the reality of the world is that most pure humans still don't believe in our existence. I mean, how many times do people need to see a shift occur on television, caught on camera, before they stop believing that shifters aren't real but are just some kind of a conspiracy?) There is also the camaraderie of firefighters, of course. Like any group that risks death together, there's a closeness that's impossible to deny.

But there's still more.

Right now, there is friendship at play.

I'm laughing along with the jokes and engaging with the playful banter.

I don't do that.

It's not my personality. My personality is detached and distant. My personality is wary. My personality isn't one that exactly despises my human form but my personality is most definitely not geared toward being some kind of... Hell, whatever kind of thing I am when this is what I'm doing. I'm

laughing at comments about how Garrett is putty in his girl's hands or how Tony is pretty clearly kept in line by his wife, also a lion shifter. Maybe it's just the fact that they also tease me, about how Smoky the Bear has a girl scout to keep his fire under control. Maybe it's just joy about having that girl scout, so to speak.

Let me tell you something. If there's one thing that absolutely doesn't describe this woman, it's girl scout. She might be the most brilliant woman—no, the most brilliant person—I've ever met in my life. She sees things in numbers that make perfect sense when she explains them but that I would never see without her as a guide to make them clear.

It's not just numbers, though. It seems to me that she has a remarkable ability to instantaneously see a complex situation in terms that simplify it so that it just doesn't seem complex at all. I don't understand how she can do that. It makes no sense to me at all but there's no question she manages it. There's no question about that at all.

“And there goes Josh, lost in his head again,” Richard Larkin says. He's not with Company 417 yet. He's a bear shifter from Montana who's going to be transferring here. He's just at the station helping out because he's on vacation and bored. Strictly speaking, he's not allowed to touch the equipment before he's on the payroll but there isn't much strict about Company 417, at least not procedurally.

“You know,” I say, “that girl scout was on the phone with a panicking couple who faced bankruptcy yesterday.”

Marco smiles and says, “Please, tell us all about it. We really want to know.”

“Okay, smartass,” I say, “I will. They built a pneumatic supply company up over thirty years so it had about a million dollars of revenue every month. They built it into something amazing but now they couldn't pay the bills and they couldn't understand why. They got in touch with her because the wife's sister credited her for saving her hair salon business.”

“But is she good in bed?” Garrett asks.

“Better than you’ll ever have,” I reply. There are hoots and hollers all around.

Garett says, “I don’t know. Chicks love gorillas.” That’s what he is, a gorilla shifter. He’s the only one I know. I didn’t know they existed until I started at Company 417. Hell, I thought dragon shifters were a myth as well. They’re not. They exist, too.

“Shut up, Mighty Joe Young,” I say, “and let me finish.”

“Fine, fine, Yogi,” he replies, “you gonna finish or do I need to find Boo Boo to tell us the rest of the story?”

“So, they call her and tell her they don’t know what to do or how to do it. She tells them to email her the balance sheet and... well, some other accounting documents. That’s it. They do what she says and before long, she calls them back. In five minutes, she’s identified how to stop the bleeding. She tells them to do that and if they want more help, she’ll drop by to talk about a consulting contract with them.”

“I thought she bought companies and sold them?”

“Kind of,” I say, “investment banking is more than that, though. I... I’m going to explain this wrong.”

“It if was honey instead of dollars, you’d totally understand it,” Rob says. He’s a wolf.

“Shouldn’t you be howling at the moon or something?” I ask, “or making a recording with Warren Zevon?” There are chuckles all around. “Essentially, investment banking is like guiding a company through... fuck it all,” I say and I pull out my phone. I did a quick search and read, “Investment banking is a crucial sector of the financial industry that primarily deals with facilitating large-scale transactions. It involves numerous financial services such as underwriting securities, assisting in mergers and acquisitions, providing advisory services, issuing and selling new securities, and managing corporate restructurings.”

“So, is she rich?” Rob asks.

I haven’t asked her but I’m pretty sure even though she’s early in her career, Livia is pretty wealthy already. I ignore

Rob and finish reading, “Additionally, investment banks offer advisory services on various financial matters, including risk management, debt financing, and corporate restructuring. They provide expert insights and analysis to guide companies in making informed decisions that optimize their financial performance.”

Roger, another bear shifter, says, “I hope someday to have a girl with a job I have to look up.”

“The point is, the girl is brilliant,” I say, “and she’s not a Girl Scout.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Garrett says, “but everyone here can tell how much you love her cookies.”

I certainly can’t argue with that.

As it always does, the conversation moves to the next guy’s girl or the next guy’s sports team or musical taste or inability to play poker effectively or whatever else. We get through the maintenance on the equipment and break up to attend to other tasks. At Company 417, there are some firefighters who stay overnight and live at the station with alternating two-day or three-day periods off, and some like me who work either the day or morning shift.

The point is that after the work is complete, I get to go home to my brilliant woman.

And her cookies.

Chapter Ten

Livia

“Not at all,” I say as I look at the numbers on my screen. “Accounting is often seen as a discipline that primarily focuses on recording and reporting financial information, yes. However, when effectively utilized, accounting can go beyond its conventional role and become a powerful tool in driving operational decisions within organizations. By analyzing the financial data provided by accountants, managers, and decision-makers gain valuable insights into the operational aspects of a business, enabling them to make informed and strategic decisions.”

“So, you’re saying we need to hire a full-time accounting person?”

“I’m saying that it’s a good idea for your company and I’m willing to add to the amount I invest in order to bring accounting in house rather than continuing to outsource it.”

“And you think this will help me run the company more effectively?”

Harrison isn’t a bad guy at all. In fact, he’s driven and he’s very smart. Like most entrepreneurs, though, he’s better at building something than he is at positioning a company to succeed in the long term. “In a number of ways, it can. Do you want an example?”

He’s wary still. “But wait. If I want the investment, we originally discussed but not the additional amount for an

accountant, is that off the table now?”

“It’s not off the table, Harry,” I say, “but there are countless investment bankers and venture capitalists who want to get you or give you money. Is anyone else here giving you crap about doing this? Is anyone else telling you not to save money by outsourcing this department?”

“No.”

“Because they want to get you money, get the money back and the return, and they don’t care what happens to you four or five years from now. By then, you’re someone else’s problem. I’m not saying they actively think that way but I can tell you with a lot of confidence, that’s what’s happening beneath their surface thoughts.”

“But I thought bootstrapping was the key to doing things right.”

“Bootstrapping is important. The best companies don’t think of profit and loss as something they have to think about later. They don’t think about running at a loss to have a liquidity event at some point. Your company is good enough it can be profitable sooner rather than later but not if you run it like a late 1990s internet startup. You need an accountant to inform your operations.”

He sighs. “Okay. Can you give me your example of how that might happen?”

“There are a number of examples,” I say. I almost really screw up the call because I notice suddenly that Joshua has stepped into the room and is staring at me with a big smile as he listens to me talk. I almost start giggling nervously and bashfully. I turn in my chair so I can’t see him. “One way accounting drives operational decisions is through cost analysis. Cost accounting techniques help identify the various costs associated with producing goods or delivering services. Management can use this information to optimize their operations by evaluating different cost structures, identifying cost drivers, and making informed decisions about pricing, production volumes, and resource allocation. You don’t get

that when an outsourced accountant is just processing your numbers backward.”

“Go on,” he says. He’s still wary, though.

“For example, if a company conducts a cost analysis and realizes that a particular product line will have high production costs compared to low sales figures, the company may decide to discontinue or modify the product to improve profitability and operational efficiency. You’ll get the reports from the accountants you outsource but they’re not personally invested in the company. They’ll do their jobs right and when it comes time to file your taxes or reports to shareholders, you’ll have correct data. What you won’t have is a translation of that data from accounting speak to actionable decisions.”

“What else?” he asks. He’s convinced. He already agrees with me. Now, he just needs to realize it. “Inside accounting allows for the timely identification of trends and variances from expected outcomes. You don’t have a delay in receipt of key performance indicators. You get the metrics in real-time. Your accountant can give you data to support risk management and decision-making in operational contexts. Organizations face various risks, such as market volatility, inventory obsolescence, or regulatory changes. Through the analysis of financial and non-financial data, accountants can assist managers in quantifying and mitigating these risks. They can provide insights into investment decisions, resource allocation, and pricing strategies that help safeguard the organization’s operational stability and competitiveness.”

“But can’t an outsourced accountant do some of that?”

“Certainly,” I say, “but is an outsourced accountant going to understand your business enough to understand the implications of a process change they suggest?”

He doesn’t respond right away. When he does, he finally says, “I want to be clear. You believe hiring the accountant will be better for us regardless of the impact on the burn rate?” The burn rate is essentially the amount of money a company spends per month that they don’t make back in revenue. It’s how much investor capital they’re *burning* through.

“I’m telling you that a company like yours needs an in-house accounting department in order to stop thinking about a burn rate and start thinking about profit margins.”

There’s a moment of silence. He says, “Okay, I need to think about this a little bit.”

“No, you don’t,” I say.

He sighs. “No, I don’t.” There’s a pause and he says, “Okay, I signed it all. You want to send someone to pick it up?”

“I’ll drop by with a check tomorrow morning,” I say, “and a few resumes. I can countersign for you and get my copy then.”

We say our goodbyes and I hang up with a triumphant feeling running through me. I look over at Joshua, eager to see if he’s impressed but also kind of desperate for him not to know how eager I am to impress him. I say nonchalantly, “I’m done now if you want to go out to dinner now, Babe.”

I almost moan when I call him *Babe*. “Dinner sounds great, Honey,” he says and the urge to moan is even stronger. *Babe. Honey.* It’s... Well, I guess we’re together now.

He walks over and suddenly lifts me up, cradling me in his arms. “But if you think for one second I’m going anywhere at all after watching you work... Well, we’re taking a trip to the bedroom first.”

I moan that time.

We don’t go to dinner. We order pizza about a half hour before the pizza parlor closes.

That’s okay. As the weeks pass, we go out to a number of restaurants. We also order a lot of takeout food, and on more than one occasion we have to work hard to find one that’s still open. One night, I ended up saying, “Unless you stop turning me on, I’m going to have to learn to cook.”

“I’ll pay for the classes,” he says with a smile.

Chapter Eleven

Joshua

Her hips move in a blur. I don't think there has ever been a time in my life when I felt paralyzed like this right in the middle of sex. I feel paralyzed right now, though and it's damned strange to feel helpless. In fact, it's unprecedented! I mean, I've fought a three-thousand-pound bull shifter and felt more empowered than I feel right now!

But the orgasm, which was already shockingly good, is now in the stratosphere. The ejaculation is long since over but as she moves her body, it's like the pleasure increases, like she somehow breaks right past the limits of my capacity for pleasure and forces more upon me. I want to slow her down. Hell, my hands are on her waist. It would take nothing for me to stop her from moving and to get a break from the intensity.

But I can't get my hands to work. I can't get my arms to work. I can only watch her through my increasingly blurry vision as her perfect body moves and I sink deeper and deeper into a pool of pleasure that seems like it's determined to become my new normal state of being. I mean, I don't have any real frame of reference for this kind of helpless surrender to sensation.

I'm fortunate.

I mean, that's the only way I can describe things.

I'm fortunate that she doesn't have limitless endurance because after far more than I can possibly take (but that I

somehow actually do take) she falls forward, no longer moving her hips but heaving in great gulps of air as she clings to me and tries to murmur my name. My arms start working again and I let my hands slide from her waist to the small of her back. I keep one hand there and move the other up along her spine until I'm holding her tightly to me.

I'm still all the way inside of her, and I can't believe that it feels like I'm still cumming. I don't feel the urgent contractions of ejaculations. I just mean that I can still feel the pleasure. It's still intense and still centered between my legs and flowing outward over my body. I don't have any experience with this kind of lingering pleasure after sex. I mean, this isn't typical afterglow, I don't think.

Fuck.

It's amazing.

I manage to get my hand up to gently stroke her hair as both of us get control over our ragged breathing. My breathing gradually becomes regular but at the risk of sounding both vulgar and unbelievable, I have to tell you that it doesn't really feel like my cock will ever feel the same again. I'm only half joking when I say that. The sex itself is five minutes or more in the past but it still feels like I'm in the middle of orgasm regardless of whether or not there's ejaculation happening.

This is entirely unprecedented for me. I not only haven't experienced this in the past but I haven't experienced anything like this. It's completely beyond the scope of my experience. It's entirely new and completely stunning. I'm still just as rock-hard as I was right in the middle of things and, frankly, I won't be surprised if I'm still rock-hard a few hours from now. What is it all of those drug commercials say? I'm supposed to call my doctor if I have an erection that lasts longer than four hours, right? Well, this erection may never end.

She remains still for the whole time but then she nuzzles my neck and then kisses her way up to my face. Her lips press tenderly against mine and as she caresses my cheek, she asks, "What was it you wanted to tell me before I so rudely interrupted?"

I smile and say, “If that’s you being rude, please don’t ever be polite to me.”

She giggles at that, and the giggling moves her body just slightly but impacts me almost as much as if she were rapidly moving her hips again. She kisses me a little more passionately and then says, “Seriously. I’m sorry I got wrapped up in what I wanted. What did you want to tell me.”

I sigh and say, “I don’t think you’ll believe me. Maybe it’s best if I just show you.”

“Don’t be silly,” she says, “I’ll believe you. I trust you.” I look at her but don’t speak. After about thirty seconds, she says, “Tell me. You can trust me.”

I take a breath and say, “I’m not just a man.”

She smiles broadly, giggles again (sheer, perfectly wonderful torture), and says, “I know. You’re an amazing and perfect man.”

I close my eyes and take another breath. When I open them, I see her expression isn’t happy anymore. She’s worried. “What is it, Joshua?” she asks, “Whatever it is, we’ll work through it. We’ll find a way to get past it.”

I smile, reach forward, and caress her cheek. “It’s not something we need to get past or survive. It’s just who I am or, more accurately, what I am.”

“Tell me,” she says, “you’re scaring me.”

“I’m sorry, Babe,” I say, “it’s just not easy to say.” I take another breath and manage to spit it out. “I’m a shifter. I’m a bear shifter.”

She smiles and rolls her eyes but the mirth on her face disappears a second later when she sees that my expression doesn’t change. She looks at me with an unreadable but very serious expression. Then, she climbs off me and it’s a substantial miracle that I manage to keep from crying out as she moves up and I feel her along the length of my shaft until I’m out of her entirely.

I think she's about to end things but she's not. Instead, she looks at me and says, "Show me. I want to see."

I stand up, and it feels pretty damned strange to have a raging hard-on still, for it to jut out from my body and still feel like it's pulsing with need and desire. I look around. "If I shift inside, I'll break something."

"Really?" she asks, "There's plenty of room, even for a bear."

"Shifters... well, our animals are bigger than natural animals," I say. "Let's go to the backyard." I walk from the living room to the kitchen and I turn on the porch light. I'd rather not shift in the middle of the neighborhood, of course, but I have a high fence precisely so I can shift inside of my backyard. I have tall trees along the fence for the same reason.

I stand on the grass naked and wonder where the hell Livia is. It's only when she steps out, her clothes on again, that it occurs to me she was delayed to get dressed. Part of me wants to give her a warning but regardless of the seriousness of the situation, I see in her eyes the same affection for me she displayed yesterday and the day before, and an hour ago.

So, I shifted.

Her expression remains the same for a second or two. It's typical for a human who witnesses her first shift to require a moment for the brain to process it. The expression that follows surprises me. I've never revealed myself to a human who didn't first display fear. She doesn't show even a trace of it. She steps forward, studying me, and says, "I didn't realize you would be so big." Then, she smiles and says, "I should have. Everything about you is big."

I shift back and stare at her in wonder. She giggles and takes hold of my cock. "See," she says, "big."

Chapter Twelve

Livia

I realize the sense of fear never leaves me with Joshua around. I still hate that I can't come up with a better way to put that. I'm not afraid of him but from the moment I met him, he's been fearsome. I guess it's more that the sense of... I don't know, scariness... Maybe that works. That sense never leaves me.

It's a pretty strange thing to feel right now given that he's above me and his cock is driving deeply into me while I hold onto his shoulders and feel my entire body responding. No. Not just my body. My entire being responds. This is so much more than just a physical thing. "I love you," I whisper, "I love you, Joshua."

I freeze immediately.

I mean, it doesn't really matter. Other than holding his shoulders and having my leg hooked over his ass, it isn't like I'm really participating at the moment more than receiving what he delivers.

And now I just threw out the damned love word. Then, like a fucking idiot, I moan because he keeps moving even though I locked up. Still, the words hang in the air like a cloud of doom. I can't believe I blurted them out and I especially can't believe I blurted them out during sex like some kind of experimenting high school girl who thinks she...

"I love you, too, Olivia," he says, "more than you know."

Well, he doesn't say the words nearly as much as he growls the words. The growl is sexy as hell but more importantly, I think, the growl reminds me of the contradiction of this man I love. He's a man and he's an animal. He's fierce and he's gentle. He's wild and he's civilized. He's a loner and he's a companion. He speaks and he growls.

Well, I come back to life, and while before I just relaxed and accepted his ministrations, I lift my other leg up and cross my ankles over his butt. I use my legs to lift him up, meeting each of his thrusts while I moan and keep whispering of my love for him.

We're in the middle of a forest.

I'm not exactly where we are but it took six hours to drive here and there are very large, very old trees. I don't even know how to explain what it's like to be naked beneath him on the forest floor. I don't know how to explain knowing that a man who can become a giant nobody could ever describe as gentle is above me, thrusting into me with more power than any man has ever demonstrated but still only a tiny, tiny fraction of the power that he possesses.

I still haven't wrapped my head around this, of course.

I mean, I'm not one of those people who adamantly deny the existence of shifters with the same kind of absolute certainty as some of the flat earthers or the people who believe the moon landing was a staged exercise in film propaganda. I'm not one of those but refusing to think of the existence of shifters as some kind of complex Illuminati hoax even though there's a ton of evidence for the truth of them isn't the same thing as ever expecting to meet one.

And yet I'm in love with one.

I'm in love with one and only now do I understand why there's always a sense that this perfect man... Can I even limit Joshua to that word now? Can I even call him a *man*? Maybe not a perfect man but a perfect *being*, right? I'll just stick with perfect Joshua, my perfect Joshua. And now, I understand why there's always a sense that my perfect Joshua is holding back from unleashing unbelievable power.

I think it's that power that makes me more of a participant, that power along with the realization starting to hit home more powerfully. I'm in love with this guy and he's in love with me.

From a military perspective, after the Civil War ended, the New York Fire Zouaves returned home and resumed their firefighting duties. They continued to participate in parades and exhibitions, showcasing their discipline and agility. They also became a symbol of pride for the city of New York and were widely celebrated for their bravery and skillfulness. Today, the legacy of the New York Fire Zouaves lives on through various firefighting units across the country. The group's dedication to discipline and bravery has served as an inspiration for countless firefighters. Although the original New York Fire Zouaves ceased to exist over a century ago, their impact on firefighting history cannot be understated.

So you know what?

That means I can believe that Joshua is part of the legacy.

I got my Zouave.

I got him.

I got the man I've been dreaming about and waiting for all my life since I ever started dreaming about men at all.

"Joshua," I whisper, "I love you." Damn, that feels so good to say. "I love you so much." I just keep it up, continuing to repeat the words in various ways and with various superlatives added. I'm not really trying to communicate anything to him. It's more of a celebration of the facts than anything else. I'm in love and that's a damned good reason to celebrate! Of course, Joshua (when he can get a word in edgewise) returns the sentiment. That's an even better reason to celebrate.

I celebrate when my orgasm hits and when he hits. I celebrate when I walk with the enormous bear through the forest and I celebrate on the way home. I celebrate when we get back and I celebrate before we go to bed. Hell, I think I celebrate as I sleep, dreaming of my Zouave who now has a face I've touched and a name I know.

You know, I never lose sight of the fact that I'm probably the most fortunate girl on Earth. I don't think people have their dreams come true usually. I think usually people have dreams that are far too big and settle for what they get or they have small dreams and discover that life is better than their dreams. Even though movies make it seem like people who dream big have their dreams come true, I think that's just Hollywood romance and not real. I think someone's dreams coming true is a rarity, something that just doesn't happen.

But it happened to me, and I'll never forget it.

I'll never stop telling Joshua that I love him and I'll never stop doing everything I can to prove to my wonderful Zouave, my giant bear of a man, that there's more than words behind the sentiment. It's wonderful to love someone, far more wonderful than I ever thought it could be.

But you know what's even better? This perfect man-bear of mine, he loves me, too.

And that's what makes this happily ever after.



DID you enjoy reading *Savage Bear's Dark Passion*? Joshua and Livia are well on their way to a truly wonderful happily ever after, aren't they? You know what I love? I love that Drake can't believe how fortunate he is to have the most brilliant woman, the most beautiful woman, and the most incredible woman he's ever seen. Meanwhile, Livia can't believe she landed what she thinks is the perfect man, or, her perfect Joshua. Joshua thinks he's the lucky one. Livia thinks she's the lucky one. These two are head over heels, and I know they're going to really enjoy the future they get to share. Joshua and Livia might be my favorite among all of the couples I've ever written, and I hope you love them, too.

If you couldn't get enough of the steamy shifter romance in *Savage Bear's Dark Passion*, get ready for *Noble Tiger's Unchanging Desire*. When Curt Wilde joins the firefighters at Company 417, he's absolute unyielding moral code becomes

apparent immediately. There's nobody more disciplined, more certain, or more ready to do whatever it takes to live up to his ideals. When he meets Denise Porter, he's immediately smitten but he can't figure out why. She's a free spirit, a street musician who's content to have no plan, no guarantee of tomorrow, and no security. He can't understand why he can't stop thinking about her and, more to the point, why he can't stop imagining a future with her. Has this tiger found love? Find out in *Noble Tiger's Unchanging Desire*, the thrilling new installment in the *Company 417 Fireman Shifter* series.

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