

Lion

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Table of Contents:

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two.....	14
Chapter Three.....	25
Chapter Four	35
Chapter Five.....	44
Chapter Six.....	53
Chapter Seven	63
Chapter Eight	73
Chapter Nine	82
Carolyn Faulkner	93
EBook Offer.....	97
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	98
Blushing Books.....	99

Chapter One

He deliberately leaned against the wall and gazed in at her from a point at which he could see her but she couldn't see him.

A uniformed man walked slowly by him, obviously recognizing him and glaring daggers at him, but that was hardly something he hadn't encountered before, and he didn't deign to acknowledge it. Instead, he concentrated his considerable attentions on the woman inside the cell.

She was much too slight, much too delicate to have done what she did, and even more so to be where she was. She shown like a diamond, mistakenly lumped in with the colorful crepe paper that was the flashy, trashy women surrounding her, most of whom were prostitutes, he could readily see.

Despite that, her lovely slim back was straight, her shoulders squared, and he could see her taking in everything about her surroundings, absorbing it like a sponge, no doubt looking to incorporate every nuance of the experience somewhere into one of her stories.

What it was about this woman in particular, he would never really know, but she had intrigued him from the moment he had met her. She was hardly the type he was used to. She was much too open and warm, with none of what he could always discern as the ulterior motives of some sort that most people – women or not – had when they approached him. Some of whom did their best to try to conceal them, some who couldn't be bothered.

Cecelia Kendall was a successful, self-possessed woman, who had made it clear to him from the first that the only thing she wanted from him was conversation, when he'd known immediately that he wanted every single bit of her for his own – some bits more so than others.

They had met through an associate of his, who, because of a long, rigorous association that had involved multiple instances of the two of them fearing for their lives, had – rightly so – recognized that his boss might find her of interest. He had, for the thousandth time, made his bones with the powerful man with that one, brief introduction.

"Mr. Antonelli, may I introduce Miss –"

"Ms.," she interjected softly.

Marcus apologized immediately for his gaffe and then corrected himself, "May I introduce Ms. Cecelia Franklin. She –"

"You may go, Marcus."

His voice hadn't climbed so much as one decibel. It was as smooth and soft as a baby's bottom, yet there was no mistaking the command in it, and it seemed his Man Friday had long since been trained to ask how high, she noted. He closed his mouth immediately, with a small smile, guided her to one of the comfortable chairs in front of the older man's surprisingly normal sized desk – considering his supposed position – and left them alone, closing the door almost abnormally quietly.

Cecelia, however, had remained standing, as he was, her hand extended in greeting, and for an interminable second, she thought he might actually refuse to shake it – for what reason she had no idea.

As if he had reconsidered, though, he then reached out to envelope her small hand in his enormous one, gripping it firmly but in a manner that she knew was highly tempered so that he didn't crush it, pumping politely twice.

But when she made to withdraw hers, he held it gently captive, and, only when her eyes had darted to his, did he turn it to bring the back of her hand to his mouth for a soft kiss, after which he released it immediately with a gentlemanly bow of his leonine head. There was no tongue pressed smarmily against her skin, or a middle finger tickling her palm in an all too familiar manner; he didn't try to make the old world courtesy in any way sexual or uncomfortable for her, except in that he had retained possession of her hand somewhat longer than might have been considered proprietous.

"Please, sit. Make yourself comfortable. May I offer you something? Coffee? Tea? Spring water? Something harder?" He sank into his own chair, and CeCe would have sworn she heard it groan beneath his weight – not that he was in the least fat – quite the opposite. He was just...

Big. Broad. Bodybuilder came to mind, although she seriously doubted – considering his alleged profession – that he had hours and hours to spend in the gym.

Her eyes narrowed on his face, but try as she might, she couldn't find any attempt at innuendo. "No, thank you, Mr. –"

"Please, call me Nico – or Nick, if you prefer."

"Thank you, Nick. Please call me Cecelia – or CeCe. Heck, you can call me 'Hey, you', if you want!"

Her rueful grin invited him to smile along with her, although he suppressed the urge to do so – barely.

"I'm very grateful you were able to carve some time out of your busy schedule to speak to me. Thank you."

He nodded. "Marcus tells me you're a writer?"

She blushed, and he was enchanted. He'd been aroused since she'd stepped into the room – which was why he had been reluctant to stand, although he had done so out of courtesy, he had also paid acute attention to whether or not she noticed what had become rather blatant evidence of his interest, but her eyes had never so much as flickered from his face.

And that beautiful blush that flowered in her cheeks, and where he could see just the slightest hint of the creamy skin of her chest, both surprised and delighted him. He had always been a sucker for demure, reserved women and thoroughly enjoyed drawing them out of their shells, considering it an intriguing challenge to do so – much more worthy of his talents than simply fucking a woman whose body and demeanor blatantly begged him for it.

The sharp, juxtaposed image of her lying spread beneath him, that flush traveling well past the modest V of her blouse to stain her lovely breasts and beyond, had him uncrossing his legs beneath his desk to accommodate his length.

"I don't know if I'd quite categorize myself as that, yet. I'm still really just plugging away at it. Based on what I spend more of my time doing, I'm probably much more of a temporary office worker right now, technically, than a writer."

"Well, I admire your spirit, regardless," he returned smoothly. "With what may I be of assistance?"

Those white, straight teeth bit her lip, and he wished it were his own doing that for her, his eyes flaring, a groan bubbling up in his throat. She seemed entirely oblivious to him sexually, which he wasn't at all used to, and he was finding that...innocence, as he preferred to think of it as that rather than true indifference, undeniably attractive.

"Well, I wondered if you'd give me the benefit of your expertise."

He frowned. "In what area?"

Her non-verbal response was much more telling, he was quite sure, than her verbal one was going to be. She flushed a deep red, which flustered her more than a bit, eyes widening dramatically for an instant, then she cleared her throat and shifted in her chair.

She looked as if he had just told her that he was going to take her over his knee behind this very desk and spank her.

Nico wondered just what she would do – or say – if he threatened to do that, right then and there.

But no, she'd probably storm out of there in a huff and he would have ruined his chance at actually fulfilling what was rapidly becoming a highly titillating fantasy.

He could be patient, if he had to be. Sometimes it was worth it, and he had a notion that she just might be one of those rare times.

"In your...profession."

His eyebrows rose. "Meat packing?"

She hadn't missed the innuendo he had deliberately not avoided, enjoying the way her breath caught, her eyes darting away from his nervously at his choice of words.

He liked her disconcerted like this, he decided. She was on edge because of the subject matter – because of what she was going to try to get him to talk about, which, of course, he wouldn't. Better men – and women – had tried – and she was now even more so because of his two seemingly unthinking innuendos.

"N-no, I'm more interested in..."

CeCe couldn't help but squirm, even though he'd been nothing but polite to her. Not only was she highly uncomfortable about asking him about the subject matter, but also by the way he was...looking at her – not in an openly leering or lascivious manner – he was much too elegant for that.

She didn't feel in any way violated or dirty from how he was gazing at her – as she did when she passed construction sites and garnered whistles, comments and catcalls. Instead, she felt as if he had somehow bypassed the niceties and had her laid out beneath him, held tight and forcibly still as he claimed her body with his.

And what was worse was that she *liked* that image – entirely too much for her own comfort, especially in this situation, alone in a room with a man who had a well-earned reputation for doing the unexpected.

But she didn't harbor any illusions, and she didn't want to blow this miraculous chance to speak to the man who was – allegedly – rumored to be the head of the largest crime families still in existence.

Nicolo "Nico the Lion" Antonelli had a reputation as a vicious, ruthless man – his own compadres didn't call him "Nasty Nico" – but only where its use wasn't likely to be overheard by the man himself – for nothing. His uncle had held the same vaunted position, but Nico's father had forbidden his brother from recruiting any of his children into the...family business. So he had fought his way up the ladder, leaving a trail of bloodied, battered bodies in his wake, until he finally inherited the seat of power in a surprisingly bloodless coup. The first years of his reign, however, had hardly been that as he brought to heel – or did away with – every single bit of his competition, until he had every single tendril of the business under his exclusive control.

Oh, there had been the usual bellyaching about his methods. Those who had lived through the house cleaning had seen him put his Harvard business degree to work, watching their profits quickly quadruple. Every one of the whiners had shut up voluntarily either while they counted their money or they had *been* shut up on a more permanent basis.

For his part, Nick knew exactly what she was stumbling on – what she was hesitating to say to him. Hell, most of the men who had known him all his life would have stumbled doing that, so his estimation of her stock rose again, considerably.

But he didn't help, didn't supply any words for her. Either she had enough balls to ask him what she wanted to, or she didn't.

He was betting on the former, despite their short acquaintance. And he was usually right about these things. His ability to read people had gotten him out of some tough jams and was, in large part, responsible for getting him where he was.

"In, if you'll excuse my terminology, and believe me, I intend no offense whatsoever; I'm interested in your allegedly less than legal business pursuits."

"There it is," he said, but absolutely without malice. "And you think that I'm going to talk to you about such...alleged...things – when I've never so much as stooped to acknowledge any such accusations – because you're beautiful?"

The way she snorted and laughed surprised him, as if she disbelieved *those* particular words more so than anything he had already said or might say to her in the future. "Hardly. I was just hoping, naively, I know, that you might consider that I am not any kind of a threat. I'm not a

reporter – I write fiction. I'm not a cop or a federal agent – you're welcome to do whatever kind of investigating on me you'd like – I'm quite thoroughly boring."

His smile was decidedly wolfish, although his voice was not. "Which is, of course, exactly the kind of woman those with nefarious intent would present to me, don't you think? One that I would consider innocuous, one that I would blithely take into my confidence, and then spill my guts to, believing she would do me no harm?"

Decidedly crestfallen, even though she had done her best not to raise her hopes about getting him to talk to her, CeCe continued, more softly and less enthusiastically than before, "I should have been more forthcoming about the information I want to glean from you. You see, I don't really want specifics about anything you might not want to talk about. I just want...I don't know. The flavor of it, for a story I'm writing, and I figured I'd go straight to the horse's mouth to get it."

"The flavor?"

If she fidgeted much more, her skirt was going to end up around her waist, not that he was going to object. Every agitated movement brought it further and further up her thighs, not that she seemed to notice in the least.

That was okay. He was doing more than enough of that for the both of them.

CeCe shrugged. "I am an only child of WASP parents. They loved and spoiled me, but I can only begin to imagine what it might be like to grow up in a big Italian family. I have a pretty good imagination, but I would really like to talk to you about your upbringing and family life. What it's like now and what it was like while you were growing up. And any thoughts or impressions you might have about your uncle's...position might have affected that."

He sat there for a long moment, just looking at her with such intensity that CeCe almost immediately began to feel uncomfortable. Not sexually, but generally, so much so that she felt compelled to rise precipitously, realizing with horror just how far her small, slim skirt had ridden up her thighs as she reached to tug it compulsively down. She muttered hesitantly under her breath, "I'm sorry to have wasted your time, Mr. Antonelli. This was one of my more truly idiotic ideas." She rounded the chair and had her hand on the doorknob, not bothering to look back at him as she said a little more distinctly, "It was very nice to meet you. Thank you for your –"

"Sit."

One word, one clipped word, pronounced as forcefully as if he was a drill sergeant and she was a raw recruit.

The man was, obviously, used to people obeying him, but even as uneasy as she was, CeCe was not a lap dog. No lap dog would allow herself to be alone with this man, to have made as audacious a request of him as she had. Granted, she would let herself be spooked by what she suspected was his very deliberate stillness, but she was not one of his lackeys, and she was not about to let him start thinking that he could treat her as such.

She heard him rise from his chair.

She should just turn the knob and exit the office. That was exactly what she *should* do.

Save herself.

CeCe had a frighteningly real premonition that she *needed* to save herself, and that meant removing herself from this man's presence *before* he had a chance to touch her again.

But when she finally managed to convince herself to obey her intuition on this and actually open the door, she felt him standing entirely too close to her – not touching her, though. There was no point of contact between them – not one.

But he might as well have reached out and pulled her back to him, pressing his considerable erection into her soft skin. Her knees felt weak, every nerve was standing on end, waiting for him to do just that as her heart hammered away inside her chest.

"Close the door."

The softly given command wafted to her ears, and she automatically began to obey him – then stopped, drawing a dark, hypnotic chuckle from behind her.

"Stubborn girl. I like that. It means you'll be just that much more of a challenge to tame to my hand."

The violent shudder that ran through her jiggled the doorknob loudly where her hand still clutched it.

"You won't like it if I have to tell you again, Celia," he fairly purred, the words deceptively soft and civilized when she knew the man, who was standing so close that she could literally feel his presence surrounding her, although he still remained quite scrupulously detached, was anything but.

No one had called her that in years. It had been her father's nickname for her.

She yelped loudly as two big hands were brought forcefully down onto her ample behind, one to each cheek, her body jerking a step away from the considerable discomfort and the sheer power of his effort, closing the door for her, whether she'd ever intended to comply with his order or not.

And leaving her – for all intents and purposes – trapped against it, unless she opened it again, which would require that she lean back against him to do so.

Yet, other than those two fleeting – if humiliating – shots, he left her untouched.

"I can smell your arousal, Ms. Frankin. Ninety-nine percent of the female population of this planet – most especially the American women – would have long since slapped my face for the liberties I just took with your person, threatened to call the authorities or file what they considered to be a very lucrative lawsuit. Probably it would end up being what they hoped to God would be some lethal combination of all of the above. But, at the very least, they would have made haste to depart the premises, lest I mistake their docility in the face of such treatment for acquiescence or even encouragement."

He took that last step, the one that did crush her both up against the door in the front and against him in the back, neither surface proving to be in the least yielding to her soft flesh.

Still, his hands remained at his sides.

He didn't need them, she acknowledged to herself in an unwelcome moment of raw honesty.

All he needed was that sex on a stick voice of his in alarming conjunction with his impressive body.

"You're very lucky that I'm feeling like I want to indulge impertinent little ladies who dare to suggest to my face that I am anything less than a model citizen. You will meet me tomorrow night at the Montclair Inn, at eight p.m. sharp for dinner, during which – if you are well behaved – I will answer some of your questions."

Unable to stop himself while so close to her feminine warmth, Nico leaned just a bit closer, his nose millimeters from her hair, inhaling slowly and deliberately of its flowery scent.

Then he rumbled huskily, "Personally, I'm very much hoping you're *not so* well behaved."

Apparently, *that* was what it took to get her moving. She pushed valiantly back against him. He paused for an ungentlemanly long moment to press the point home to her that if he hadn't, she wouldn't have been going anywhere. Until he yielded and took, granted, a small, very small,

step back. That allowed her to open the door she'd been grasping the handle of – in her sweaty palmed hand – for quite some time now. She skittered away from him, running three steps before remembering that she didn't want him to see how nervous he had made her with so little effort, after which she slowed her pace to a more sedate stroll.

All while haunted by his soft chuckling as it drifted to her ears, reddening them – and the rest of her body – even further, if that was physical possibility.

When CeCe finally made it to the relative safety of the elevator, she literally collapsed, sinking down the wall her back was pressed against – as it had been seconds ago against him – until her butt touched the immaculate carpet.

What had possessed her to do that in the first place? To walk so boldly into the lion's den, as if she was impervious to the power he wielded with the wave of a hand – police, laws, courts be damned. He'd slipped the grasp of all of them at one time and no doubt would again, in the future.

And he'd seen right through her – right past the gooey, soft, marshmallow heart of her to the part of her he would find the most interesting.

He had pegged her for what she truly was – a skill he had long since honed that had probably meant the difference between life and death for him on occasion – from the moment she had entered his office.

"Ninety-nine percent of women," he'd said, would have done something to discourage him from doing to them what he had done to her.

Why couldn't she have been born a part of that large crowd of average women, rather than one who knew, even as she was huddled, shaking, on the floor, that she was going to have to change her panties as soon as she got home. And, as well, that she would do everything in her power to make sure she was there, at the Montclair, by seven-forty-five, at the very latest, not wanting – or perhaps wanting a bit too much – to know what he'd do to her if she was late.