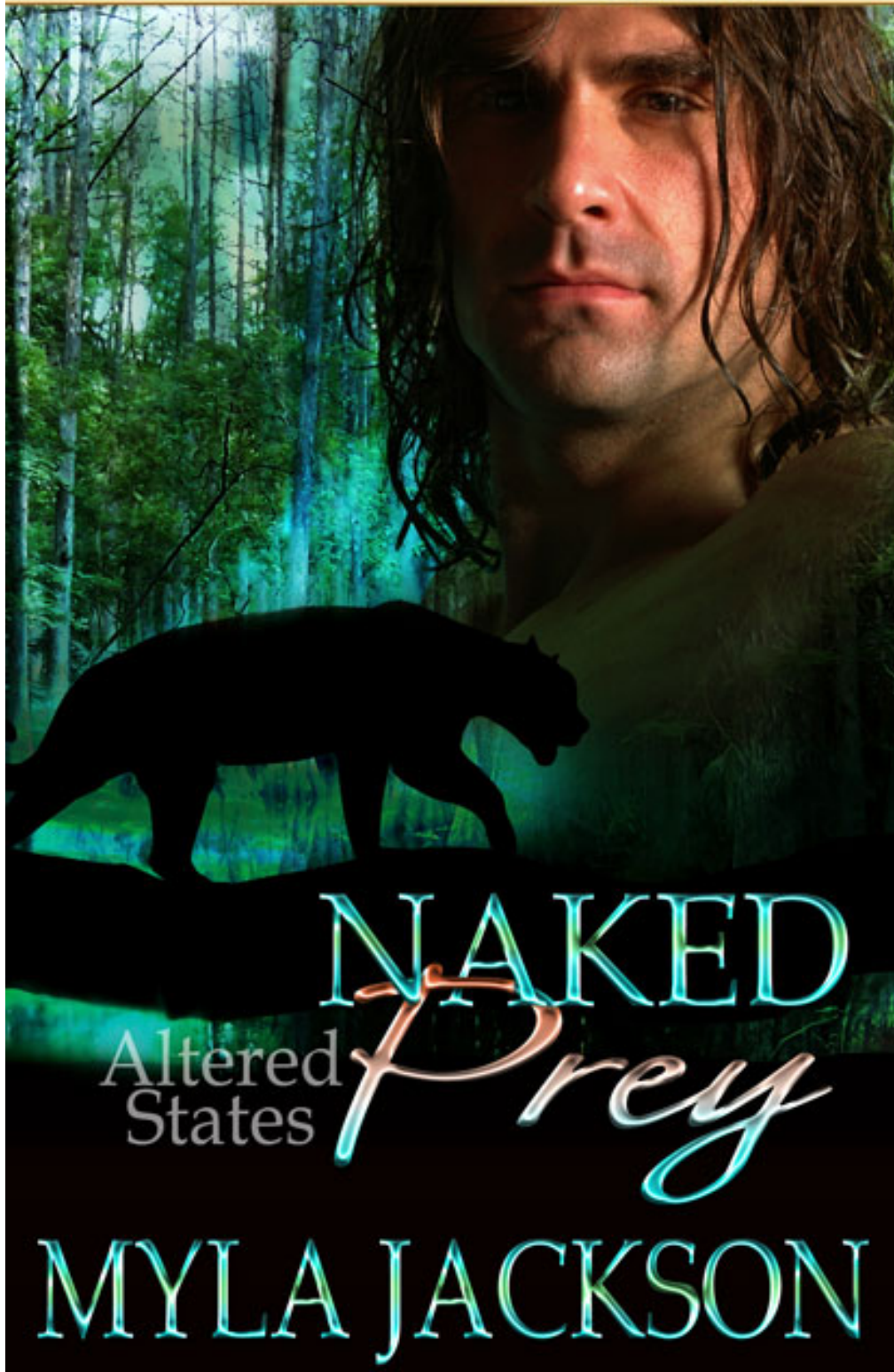


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



NAKED
Altered States *Prey*

MYLA JACKSON

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Naked Prey

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NAKED PREY

Myla Jackson

Chapter One

Florida 2020

Ramon Osceola blended with the shadows of the bald cypress towering over his head. The tree stood tall on the large hummock of land surrounded by swamp in the only place left he could call home. He stared out across the wide expanse of open water, the hair on the back of his neck standing at attention. The roar of an airboat propeller disturbed the usual stillness of the swamp, growing louder as the vehicle skimmed the surface of the algae-covered waters. The sound was headed his direction.

Access to his place was limited to water or air with no roads or bridges venturing this deep into the Big Cypress Swamp of Florida. Which suited him just fine. His special issues required space from other humans and the island in the swamp afforded a place where he could guard his solitude, as well as his life. Thank the gods the conservationists had saved the swamps from encroaching growth and development. They had even reestablished flow of waters to encourage the return of natural plants and animals to the area. Making his utter seclusion possible. He lived off the land and water, his sustenance that of his Seminole ancestors—fish from the water, plants and roots from the land.

He'd inherited the tiny island from his father and rebuilt it to be habitable after his discharge from the Army Special Forces. He'd distanced himself as much as any man could into total solitude. The occasional swamp tour guide ventured in looking for fresh routes to sell to eager tourists searching for the giant alligators and exceptional wildlife found nowhere else in the United States.

Inhaling the musty scent of decayed leaves and stagnant water, he much preferred the natural odors of death and rebirth of vegetation than the stench of sewage and trash of the city life. Especially the acrid smell of alcohol and disinfectant prevalent in hospitals and clinical laboratories like the one in which he'd been held captive for who

knew how long. Even the thought of that place set his heart racing and he needed to take several deep breaths before regaining control.

But the airboat hadn't changed direction and the noise grew closer. The operator ran it at full throttle—too fast for the twisting waterways leading to his remote house and too fast for swamp tourists. A *whop-whop-whop* sound joined the whine of the fan-powered boat.

Instinctively, Ramon tensed. The sound of helicopters—he'd heard them often enough when he'd been deployed as a Special Forces soldier to the war in Syria. Before his capture. Before his alteration. Before his life had changed forever.

The helicopter appeared over the tops of the tallest bald cypress trees at the same time as the airboat rounded the corner of the jut of land blocking the view into his little hideaway. The back end of the craft slipped sideways before it straightened and shot forward.

From his vantage point beneath the cypress tree two hundred yards from his house, the animal in Ramon sensed danger and fought to unleash. The aircraft lean and black, an exact copy of hundreds of others in the military arsenal. The only difference being, this chopper didn't have the usual markings and it was operating in attack mode on the home front.

Clamping down hard on his back teeth, Ramon struggled to maintain his humanity in the face of a relentless metamorphosis.

He'd tried on numerous occasions to control the transformation only to fail, waking up naked in the oddest places. Thus his retreat to the Big Cypress Swamp. If he were to change out here, who would notice? He needed to remain human to face this kind of danger and he concentrated on the airboat and its occupant.

The driver's long blonde hair whipped around in the wind. A woman? Not the norm for the swamp, and she was hell-bent on escape but she was going to wreck if she didn't slow down soon. For that matter, she headed straight for the house he'd built on the little island.

As the airboat plowed through the lagoon's open water, its speed climbing to insane levels, the helicopter dropped low and a side door slid open, the snout of a machine gun pointing out.

Ramon pushed away from the tree trunk, and almost stepped out into the open to shout a warning to the driver, until he realized the sound wouldn't carry over the blast of the propeller shooting the watercraft closer. All he could do was watch as the gunner unloaded a rapid burst of bullets at the boat.

The woman at the helm cried out and jerked the steering grip away from the chopper, the rudder responding a little too well. The boat leaned on its side in the water and then straightened, moving in a zigzagging motion to avoid being peppered by the gunner overhead.

When the helicopter crowded closer, the woman wrenched her steering grip too hard. The front of the airboat lifted from the surface of the lagoon and the entire craft launched into the air, spiraling three hundred sixty degrees. The woman's body was thrown from her seat on the boat, landing hard on the algae-covered surface and sliding beneath low-hanging foliage, out of full view of the gunner.

Heart hammering against his chest, Ramon watched helplessly as the empty craft hit the water upside down, the back cage and propeller separating from the boat, flying through the air in pieces. When the prop hit the water, it broke in two and finally sank beneath the murky depths.

Skin stretched and changed, hairs springing from follicles covering his body in a thick black pelt. Pain shot through every nerve ending as his bones shifted and contracted. Within seconds, he couldn't stand on two feet and dropped to all fours, fighting to retain his human thoughts and reasoning, a challenge he met through each transition. Anger pushed the transformation through his blood. Anger at the relentless and merciless pursuit of the woman fighting to stay alive on the airboat, only to be thrown violently from her vehicle. The helicopter pilot didn't demand she stop over a loudspeaker, the crew didn't fire warning shots to get her attention. They obviously

wanted to kill her. Cops, judge and jury all wrapped in one package. What the hell was going on? Who was she? And why was the military helicopter chasing her? Was she a drug runner or a convicted felon? No matter what she'd done, she deserved a chance to defend herself.

As his transformation neared completion, he shook free of his clothing. Then his haunches bunched, and he leaped through the underbrush, following the lay of the land until he was as close as he could get to rescue the woman without going into the water.

Overhead, the helicopter circled the airboat and finally flew off toward the house another hundred yards away.

A missile left the underbelly of the aircraft and flew straight into the house he'd spent the past two months remodeling. When the weapon touched the cedar exterior, it exploded in a blast large enough to rock the earth beneath Ramon's paws. The sound echoed against the tall stands of cypress.

Apparently the guys flying the chopper didn't think a rocket explosion was enough, they pumped several hundred rounds into the remains of Ramon's home. Had anyone been inside, they would have been dead by the time the helicopter took to the sky and made a wide, sweeping turn, as if searching for driver of the airboat.

Instinct propelled him into action. Ramon leaped into the lagoon and dog-paddled to the woman facedown in the water. He slid his head under her until she rested across his back, her face rising above the surface. Then he applied his paws to swimming with all his might to the shore farthest away from the destruction. He wanted to move her farther from the airboat before the crew of the helicopter had a chance to find her and finish her off. And if he didn't resuscitate her soon it wouldn't matter, she'd suffer irreparable brain damage and die. As he struggled to balance her body on his back and paddle to shore, the rage that somehow seemed to control him burned inside.

The house in the swamp had been his sanctuary, his escape from the harsh world. And now that was gone too. After losing his humanity, he'd come to the only home

he'd known to lick his wounds and hide in the swamp away from prying eyes and heartless scientists who would want to poke and prod the freak.

Sinking his teeth into her shirt, he lifted her and dragged her in the shadows of the banks until she was completely out of the water and invisible to the helicopter circling over the demolished airboat.

The helicopter wasn't the only danger to contend with. Ramon's gaze darted around, searching for the alligators known to frequent the lagoon. He had to get her up and moving to keep her from becoming an afternoon snack.

Out of the water, he walked up her back pressing his front paws into her, pushing the liquid from her lungs, the blades of the helicopter whipping the vegetation into his face.

He ignored the sound of the killing machine and concentrated on shifting into his natural form. Closing his eyes, he willed his body to change back into a man, human frustration warring with animal instinct to run deeper into the woods. To save this woman, he had to be a man to help her. Still pushing against her back, he stared down at his paws as they stretched and extended. Excruciating pain ripped through his muscles and joints as his body lengthened and expanded, the fur retracting into his skin until long slim fingers lay against the woman's shoulders.

When the transformation was complete, he froze, concentrating on the sounds around him.

The rumble of the helicopter faded into the distance, replaced by the roar of insects and frogs as the swamp creatures came alive in the aftermath of destruction.

Confident the killers had gone, Ramon straddled the woman's buttocks and leaned into his effort to expel all the swamp water she'd inhaled. As he pushed against her back, he studied what he could see of her body and the side of her face turned toward him.

She was petite, possibly only five feet tall with nicely rounded hips and a narrow waist. The bit of her face he could see was pale, the skin smooth and creamy where not covered in mud and algae.

His hands slid up the side of her rib cage, urging the water up from her lungs. As his fingers curled around her, he could feel the swell of her breasts beneath her damp clothing. Ramon groaned, his cock resting in the indentation of her ass. The transformation back to his human form always left him horny as hell. At that exact moment, he didn't care what woman, as long as he had a slick pussy to slide his engorged cock into. He alternated between disgust at where his thoughts were headed and desire for the woman lying beneath him—a woman whose eyes had yet to open.

Would her eyes be the color of cornflowers in the spring to match the long blonde hair he'd seen blowing in the wind before she'd been tossed from the boat? Her hair lay in dark wet strands plastered to the back of her head and she was as still as death. He pushed harder and she finally responded, water gushing out of her lungs.

As he worked over her, he prayed to the gods that rescuing her wasn't another mistake on his part. Why had she been racing through the swamps as if being chased by the devil himself? And why had she found her way into his lagoon? Was she from the government? Or worse. Blood ran cold in his veins and his hands hesitated in their work as dark thoughts raced through his mind. Was she one of the sadistic bastards from Hell Hospital? If she proved to be a threat, he'd have no other choice but to kill her.

* * * * *

Dr. Hannah Richards surfaced from the black lagoon of her nightmare when the pressure on her back forced water from her lungs. She gagged and choked, struggling to move only to find herself pinned to the ground, her face lying against the cool, slimy shoreline.

Whatever was pressing against her back let up and she sucked in a deep breath, liquid gagging her lungs again. She coughed to force up the remaining water while clawing against the tangle of vines and decayed leaves. Desperate to climb to her feet, she tossed away a stringy mass of the muck and tried again to push up. The briny taste of swamp water registered on her tongue and her stomach heaved, projecting the vile contents into the dank vegetation.

Weight lifted from her lower back and she was free to climb to her knees where she puked and hacked all the water from her system. Exhausted, she rolled over to her back and opened her eyes. Sunlight trickled through the branches overhead warming her face until a shadow leaned over her, blocking the gentle rays.

As her gaze cleared and adjusted to the lack of sunlight, she stared up into the near-black eyes of the man standing over her. His long, straight black hair lay plastered to his scalp and shoulders, damp from his dip in the lagoon. Besides the hair and eyes, his square jaw, dark skin and high cheekbones gave him away as Ramon Osceola, the man she'd risked her life to find. "Thank God, it's you," she said, her voice gravelly from her bout with swamp water and coughing.

Black brows furrowed on his smooth dark forehead. His hair had grown even longer since the last time she'd seen him in his cage at Hell Hospital.

"God has nothing to do with me." He stood to his full height of six feet two, towering over her, naked and as beautiful as she remembered, his dark skin not a result of tanning, but a tribute to his Native American heritage.

Her gaze traveled upward, from the well-defined calves to thick, muscular thighs.

Hannah stopped when her perusal reached the swath of curly black hair surrounding his erect cock. A gasp escaped her lips. No matter how many times she'd witnessed his transformation from human to black panther and back, she couldn't get over the tantalizing residual effects. Every male subject in the hospital experimentation showed the same result. When they shapeshifted back to their human form, invariably they were left with a painful erection.

Ramon cleared his throat, the small amount of movement making his cock jerk as if beckoning her touch. How many times had she been tempted in the past? Hiding behind her mask and smock, she'd been anonymous to the Special Forces captives. Now her face and every expression became exposed to his advanced interrogating skills and techniques. She could hide nothing from this man.

Her face flaming, Hannah forced her gaze past his magnificent cock and upward over rock-solid abs to the rippling muscles stretched taut across his chest and finally to the strong chin and high cheekbones of a Seminole Indian.

"Ramon Osceola?" she asked, although she knew every incredibly sexy inch of this man. Hadn't she studied him for the four months she'd conducted experiments on him and others of the Special Forces units they'd stolen soldiers from? Soldiers used as guinea pigs for their genetic experiments. A fact for which she would never forgive herself, for the immoral experimentation and reprehensible consequences she'd have to live with for the rest of her life.

Yet hidden behind her doctor's mask, she'd studied him the most, drawn to his dark skin and brown-black eyes. By day, she'd donned her professional demeanor and masked anonymity to perform the highly successful experiments demanded by her captors. But she couldn't block the dreams she'd had of lying naked with this man, imaging those hands and that incredible cock doing all the things she wanted him to do but didn't dare suggest.

He stared down at her, eyes narrowing into slits. "Do I know you?"

"Yes." Crawling to her knees, she pushed herself to her feet, swaying slightly. Once there, she met his gaze head on. "And no."

He crossed his arms over his bare chest, seemingly unconcerned with his nakedness, as if daring her to say something. "Who the hell are you and why did that helicopter attack you and my home?"

For the first time, she glanced around, noting the small rise of land on which they stood. She panned the lagoon to the larger hummock where only a few short minutes

before a rough-hewn cottage had been. Except for a few framing timbers still left standing amidst the smoke and debris, the house was a complete loss. Her chest tightened. Because of her, they'd destroyed Ramon's home. If she'd left him alone, would they have found him? Had she sentenced him to death by seeking him out? Yet another layer of guilt she'd have to live with. "I'm glad you weren't inside when it happened," she said softly.

"Your concern touches me." His lip curled at the edge. "I'm waiting for answers."

Looking at him she was hesitant to spill her story and her plea for help.

Living from moment to moment since her escape from Hell Hospital, Hannah had known her share of terror. Having played life safe up until the day she and her daughter had been kidnapped, she'd been a model citizen. Never hurt another soul, never committed a crime. For all she'd done over the past year, they could lock her in prison and throw away the key. Short of murder, she'd committed enough crimes to invalidate her Hippocratic oath several times over.

And she'd do them all again for Emily. She'd do anything for Emily. After a difficult pregnancy, during which her husband left her, her baby girl had been born two months premature. She and the doctors had fought to keep her alive, succeeding beyond her most fervent hopes. The struggles they'd endured together just to keep the girl alive bonded them for life.

She took a deep breath and launched into the story, hoping he'd listen and understand why she'd done what she did. "I was one of the doctors working at GeneTech in Dallas, researching gene splicing in crossing into different species of animals."

His forehead dipped into a scowl. "Animals or humans?"

"Animals only," she said, her words firm. She hadn't willingly signed on for human testing. "Until Vaughan Mitchell's men stole my daughter, Emily, from our home in the suburbs. They'd left a message on my phone link that if I wanted to see my daughter

alive, I had to go along with everything Mitchell demanded. Which included working in Hell Hospital for the past year."

His lips thinned into a straight line, the muscles in his jaw tightening. "You expect me to believe this?"

"Yes."

"That makes you one of the enemy." A growl rumbled in his throat and his gaze darted to the sky. "How do I know you're not a setup for them to recapture me?"

Her chin dropped to her chest. "If I were you, I wouldn't believe anything anyone says, but please hear me out." Then she looked up and pinned his deep brown gaze with her stare, willing him to understand and forgive. "What I did, I did to save my daughter. They held her captive and threatened to kill her if I didn't. The experiments had been conducted on chimpanzees at first. Then they'd brought in humans to test the effects of the genetic reengineering program. As long as I did what they said, they let me have my daughter with me." With a deep breath, she turned and walked to the doorway. "Emily and I talked about escaping, but they kept us under lock and key when we were together, and I didn't dare leave when we were separated. I didn't know if I'd ever see her again.

"When one of the men escaped before they could 'release' him and still remain anonymous, Vaughan took Emily away, blaming me for assisting with the getaway. I had nothing to do with the escape, and I pleaded with Vaughan to return my daughter. When he refused, I planned my own escape, determined to find and free Emily." She turned to face him, tears pooling in her eyes. "You see, I have to find her before they kill her. Vaughan insisted he'd taken her off the hospital compound. I have an idea where, but they're sure to be waiting for me. I knew I couldn't do it on my own. That's why I had to find you. Don't you see? You're the only one I could trust to help me."

"Damn it! You're the fuckin' enemy." He strode toward her, his hands clenching into fists. "I should kill you now."

She stood firm, refusing to allow his anger and the fire in his eyes to intimidate. Hair sprouted on his cheeks and arms, evidence his control slipped. "Yes you should. But you won't." Her voice was calm, steady, soothing.

"What makes you so sure?" The rumble in his voice was more pronounced.

"You're an honorable man." She hoped she'd read him right—praying he wouldn't slay her. "If you kill me, my Emily will surely die."

"Why me?" He waved his hand at the murky water. "Why track me down all the way out here in the swamp?"

"You're one of the only people I know with the training to pull off a raid on the compound where they're keeping her. Only a man trained by Special Forces has a chance to get through their defenses. I need you." She needed him to help find her daughter. What she wouldn't tell him was that she also needed him in a way a woman needs a man, had longed for him throughout his stay in Hell Hospital. Having him pace in front of her completely naked, his gleaming brown muscles larger than life and within inches of her fingers itching to feel them. No, he would never believe her.

Would he understand why she had to do what she did and help her to rescue her daughter? "When I ran from Hell Hospital, I stole one of the high-tech tracking devices. I wasn't sure which of the subjects I'd find when I managed to track him down, but I hoped it would be you." No, she'd prayed it would be Ramon.

"Let me get this straight. You worked at Hell Hospital tampering with monkeys. What else did you do? Were you involved with the human program?" His face was still, as if etched in stone, awaiting her response.

A chill slithered its way down Hannah's spine. Now that she'd found Ramon Osceola, she hesitated to tell him the full extent of her role in the experiments. Disclosure of her part in this scheme could possibly infuriate him. If he became angry enough, he could shift into the form of a black panther. Would he consider her a threat and kill her as was instinctive to a cornered panther?

She gulped back her fear and squared her shoulders. Her daughter's life depended on her and this man. He was her last hope. "Just remember, everything I did was under duress. They were threatening my daughter's life. I was always behind a mask and smock so you probably don't remember my face, but you'll remember my name. I'm Dr. Hannah Richards. I'm the geneticist from Hell Hospital who made you what you are today."

Chapter Two

That tingling, burning sensation exploded through his veins as the transformation struck him like a blow. His incisor teeth pushed against the inside of his mouth and elongated into feline fangs. He inhaled several times, willing the change to abate. It slowed, but didn't retract. "What did you say?" Words came out in a husky growl, understandable, yet no less animalistic. He hated that. In all his military training, he'd always been in control. Until Hell Hospital and this woman screwed with his DNA. His hands bunched into fists, his catlike fingernails digging into his human flesh, reminding him of his abnormality.

"Look, I know this is a shock, but I had to find you." She reached out and laid a hand on his arm.

Jerking back, his first instinct was to hiss at her and slap her hand away with a powerful swipe of his paw. She was the enemy. Because of her, he was a freak, part man and part animal. And she'd tracked him down in the swamp. "How did you find me? What tracking device?" His gaze panned the sky and he listened for the return of the helicopter. Would they come back to claim their prize? Would they drag him back to Hell Hospital where they'd perform more experiments?

They'd have a helluva fight on their hands this time because he'd die rather than go back. He already had enough problems dealing with his sudden transformations. What more could they possibly do to him and the others he knew were there as well?

His enemy stood in front of him, a petite woman, five feet tall and probably weighing no more than one hundred pounds dripping wet as she was. She wasn't in the bloom of youth and the lines around her eyes put her closer to his own thirty-eight years. But her beauty was ageless, her appearance fragile.

How could he attack a woman no bigger than a child? And he wanted very badly to wreak his revenge on the person responsible for the current hell he'd been living since his return to the States.

Dark smudges beneath her eyes indicated sleepless nights. She coughed and her entire frame shook with its force. "I'll help you if you'll help me free my daughter," she said, straightening to her full height. In the proud tilt of her chin, he sensed strength. In the hollows of her cheeks, he saw fear and desperation. Had remorse set in? He snorted. A little late for regrets.

The cat in him couldn't have cared less about her difficulties. The human in him responded, a matching ache building in the region of his heart.

"How can you help me?" His teeth shrank back into his gums, the black panther fur retreated back into his skin, and his voice returned to normal. He was back in control of this situation. He couldn't hear the sound of a helicopter hovering over the horizon, even with his heightened senses. As long as it wasn't coming back, he knew without a doubt that he could handle one small woman. He could snap her neck and kill her with very little effort at all. He'd done it enough in covert operations where silence was the key to surprise, allowing his troops to overcome an enemy twice their strength.

Screams of others trapped inside their cells in Hell Hospital echoed through his mind and his lips pulled back from his teeth. How many others were there? He'd known of at least three. Were there more? How could this woman look at herself in the mirror after what she'd done? And why was he hesitating to kill her? She deserved to die.

She inhaled a shaky breath and blew it out before speaking. "You have a GPS tracking device embedded in your skin. I'll dig it out."

"That's all? I could do that myself." He moved closer, his bare feet soundless against the damp leaves and decaying vegetation covering the tiny island. "The only way you can help me is to undo what you've done. Can you do that? Can you take away the beast inside me and make me the man I was?"

Her shoulders sagged and she stared at the ground. "No. I'm sorry. Your condition cannot be undone."

"Sorry? You've made my life a living hell and all you can say is 'I'm sorry'?" If you can't undo your chemistry experiment, how did you plan to help me?" His voice ended on a roar, his teeth elongating, hairs pushing through his skin. The fur on his arm caught his attention, reminding him he was losing his temper and that always made him lose his humanity. After several deep breaths, he was back in control, the thread holding him in check frayed but holding.

Her eyes widened and she took a step backward.

He could smell her fear and it made his body quicken, his cock grow harder. She was pretty in a petite, fragile way. Not the kind of woman he was normally attracted to, but she was female and he was...horny.

The fear disappeared and her face hardened into a tight mask. She stood her ground, refusing to back down.

"Not good enough." Ramon continued forward until he stood within an inch of her, his thick cock nudging her belly. Then he dropped his head to sniff her neck and rub his face across the side of her cheek. "I can think of another way you can help me."

"Whatever it takes," she said, her gaze staring straight forward as if she could see through his chest into another world. "I'll do anything you want if you'll help me find and rescue my daughter."

Her determination and willingness to sacrifice everything touched a chord inside him. He squelched that sudden urge to feel sorry for this woman. Pity wasn't an emotion he could afford with the person responsible for ruining his life. But he couldn't help it.

What he'd lost at Hell Hospital only had to do with himself. If this woman spoke the truth, she'd lost more than her own morality, she'd lost her child. As a mother, she was bound by the unwritten duty to protect and care for her offspring, her cubs.

Where was the anger he'd felt a moment before? Since he'd returned to the States and the subsequent discovery of his...abnormality, he'd had to give up his career in the military, the life he'd built for himself as a soldier. The life he loved. He'd hidden in the swamp afraid to venture out for too long for fear he'd change forms and find himself naked in an awkward place, afraid he'd be turned in to a scientist to be poked and prodded like they'd done in Hell Hospital. For two months, he'd lived on the edge of a society he used to be a part of. Now he belonged nowhere. The only home he knew was destroyed. Anger pushed up into his chest, again. And the person responsible for his anger had dared to ask for his help?

Revenge could be sweet. And revenge would be his.

Grabbing her arms, he pulled her to him, rubbing her body against his nakedness. "You'll do anything?"

The sweet scent of skin and the heady fragrance of her fear drifted up to tantalize his nostrils. He ground his cock against her belly, wondering what it would feel like to fuck her until she screamed. Would he morph into an animal as he slammed his dick into her pussy?

He could imagine her horror if he became a panther while buried deep inside her. Any woman would be frightened and disgusted if it happened. One of the reasons he'd chosen to remain celibate. If he turned while fornicating, the authorities would hunt him down and kill him.

Nails dug into his palms again. She'd done this to him. Made him a freak. He could never trust himself with a woman again. Transformations happened sometimes with no warning. How could he have a meaningful relationship—no, how could he fuck someone—if he was afraid of what he might become in the process? He lived in fear that the panther in him would strike out and kill.

Dr. Hannah Richards drew a sharp breath between her teeth and stared up into his eyes. "I'd sleep with the devil himself if it means getting my daughter back safe."

“Good, because I’m the devil.” He bent and claimed her mouth, his kiss angry, punishing. His hands slid down her back and up under her wet blouse.

Her skin was cool and damp, but it made the fire in his veins burn hotter. His grip was punishing and he’d snap her neck in two if he thought it would make him feel better, but nothing short of making him whole again would make him happy. After he’d been discovered on the outskirts of Johannesburg, South Africa, he’d thought he was rescued, freed from the hell he’d been forced to live. At that time, he didn’t understand the full extent of the experimentation done on him in Hell Hospital. Nor had he known what other kinds of hell awaited him back at home. He could never go back to being the man he was.

The starch faded out of her body as he dug his tongue into her mouth, sucking at her lips, delving deep as if he’d crawl down her throat. Releasing her back, his hands circled to her front where he grabbed the lapels of her thin cotton blouse and ripped the buttons loose from top to bottom, laying her open for his perusal.

She gasped, her eyes wide, scared. Then she pushed her shoulders back, her full, rounded breasts jutting out beneath the scrap of apricot lace. “I know the animal in you has a greater sex drive and you might have a more difficult time controlling it. If you need the release, I’m willing to let you fuck me in order to secure your promise to help me free my daughter.”

The thought of sinking into her luscious channel lit his insides like igniting aviation fuel, burning hot and fast through his system. Was she really willing to sell her soul to the devil just to save a child? He laid the side of his cheek against her bra-clad breast and slid his face across until his mouth poised over the lace hiding her nipple. He reached behind her, ripped the shirt from her shoulders and unclasped the bra from behind. With deliberately slow movements, he slid the straps over her shoulder until she stood before him naked from the waist up.

Rosy brown nipples puckered into tight beads, from the tips of her rounded flesh. Her breathing came in short, shallow gasps, but her hands didn't rise to cover her nakedness. She stood like a virgin at the sacrificial altar – the offering to the beast.

That she was so willing to give her body over to his sick pleasure only angered Ramon more. He stared down into her wide eyes as he cupped each tightly rounded orb in his hands and squeezed her, knowing his grip was bruising, wanting to cause her some of the pain he'd felt every time his body changed from human to animal.

A gasp escaped her and she bit down on her lip to keep from crying out.

He bent and ran his tongue up from beneath her left breast to her nipple, tasting her skin. She was like honeysuckle and catnip. Sweet and overwhelmingly tempting. His mouth closed over her other breast and he sucked it between his teeth, biting down until she clasped his head.

"You have every right to hurt me and I won't stop you, but please be quick. I want to save my daughter before it's too late."

Ramon's head jerked up and he reeled backward. A bucket of ice cold water couldn't have doused his desires any more effectively than her words.

With Ramon uncaged and holding her close, Hannah was frightened of his fierce power more than she'd been during her entire stay at Hell Hospital. Yet she couldn't deny the sensations building low in her belly, the purely physical response to this dark-skinned soldier standing naked in front of her.

His skin glistened a deep reddish brown, still damp from his dip in the lagoon to save her life. Muscles stretched over impossibly broad shoulders, narrowing to a firm abdomen and sexy ass. No droop in those cheeks.

How long had it been since she'd had her birth control inoculation? A glance at the slightly faded coloring of the tattoo on her arm reassured her. If he wanted to fuck her, she couldn't get pregnant. Hannah's fingers twitched, the sudden urge to test the firmness of his cock almost overwhelming her good sense.

Ramon had every right to hate her and she wouldn't blame him if he lost his temper and killed her. But her daughter needed her and she had to free her from Vaughan's treacherous hands. If giving her body to this man would secure his promise to help, she'd do it. She'd already sold her soul to the devil back at Hell Hospital. Her body was just a vessel, a tool used to save Emily. That she quivered in anticipation wasn't something she wanted to admit to herself, much less to Ramon.

Her hands shook as they rose to the button of her trousers. She flicked it open, slid the zipper down and pushed the damp fabric over her hips. "Please," she said, easing the trousers down her thighs. "Take what you want. I deserve it. What I did was wrong." She stepped out of her trousers and stood in nothing but her apricot-colored lace panties, her hands fluttering at her side, the temptation to cover her breasts from his intense gaze, instinctive. Then she slipped her fingers beneath the elastic band of her panties and jerked them down her legs. When she stepped out of them, she was naked, vulnerable and breathless.

She'd put herself on equal footing with Ramon. Both stood in the shadows, without clothing, wary and unsure of what the other would do next. Whatever he demanded, she'd comply.

But he stood unflinching, his eyes narrowing to slits.

How much more did she have to beg? Her teeth ground together. Begging grated on her even though the pride and independence that once thrived in her had been completely shattered in her desperate attempts to save her daughter. Pride fell by the wayside months ago. If begging was what he wanted, she would drop to her knees and beg.

Still Ramon stood like a statue, unmoving, unbending except for the slight twitch in his cock. Although he'd backed away, his erection hadn't slackened in the least.

Aware the helicopter could be back at any time, Hannah didn't have the luxury to wait for Ramon to take her. She had to grasp matters in her own hands. With a deep breath, she did just that.

Her fingers reached out and circled his cock.

Ramon's hands clamped on her shoulders, the rough texture of his skin sent mixed signals throughout her body. Fear warred with desire, desire winning the rush to her brain and the lower regions governed by her physical need. Hannah held on, her grip tightening around him, her hands sliding up to the tip, circling the velvety ridge until he gasped.

Fingers dug into her arms, but he didn't shove her away. "What do you really want?" he demanded through clenched teeth.

Her gaze met his. "I want you to fuck me." She told herself she only said the words in order to buy his assistance, but the more her hand moved across the sheathed steel of his cock, the more she couldn't deny her attraction. She'd seen him naked in the hospital, pacing the length of his cell, his body strong and proud. Of all the specimens, she'd been drawn most to this one. Perhaps it was his Native American heritage or the proud tilt of his chin, the dark intensity of his brown-black eyes.

As she stood naked in front of him, without the benefit of the cell bars, her smock and surgical mask for anonymity, her emotions lay raw and exposed to his whim. He'd never seen her behind the mask, but she'd seen all of him and wanted him then. Now their roles were reversed and the danger only increased his desirability. Moisture beaded on her upper lip. A drop of sweat slithered down between her breasts, causing her nipples to tighten and pucker.

His gaze followed the path of the bead of sweat between her breasts and lower.

Her hands moved downward to where his penis emerged from the nest of dark hair. One hand skimmed over his balls and cupped them, rolling them between her fingers while the other hand traced his length out to the end of his shaft, finding the tip and circling the moistened hole, a creamy drop of cum adding lubricant to her ministrations.

"I can't be bribed." His hands tightened on her arms, making as if to push her away. "Especially by you."

"No?" Her own grip tightened. Though her own desires were climbing rapidly, she forced herself not to dart a glance to the sky. The threat of the helicopter returning was real. They might decide to come back and drop ground troops to search for her remains to ensure her silence. To guarantee her survival and his, she had to hurry this effort along. "I'll do anything." Pressing her breasts to his torso, she rubbed her nipples against him, still massaging his balls.

Though he remained still, he wasn't immune to her, his cock twitched in her palm and his body was as stiff as his heavy member, his breath shallow and restricted. His chest heaved as he inhaled deeply, his head falling back. Strong hands planted on her shoulders and pressed her down. "Then suck my dick," he commanded.

For a moment she stared into his eyes, wondering if she was being a fool. As a man, he could hurt her, as an animal, he could easily kill her. Deep inside, she knew he wouldn't harm her intentionally, and she wanted him.

She dropped to her knees, her fall checked by the padding of vegetation and soft, moist soil. All the hours spent in Hell Hospital observing this man had led her to many cold showers. Fraternization with the patients was prohibited. But that didn't stop her dreaming about this one. How would it feel to hold his hard length in her hand, to pull him into her mouth and suck him until he reached orgasm, his cum running down her chin?

On her knees in front of him, her heart pounded against her ribs as she smoothed her hands up his muscular thighs, enjoying the feel of his steely strength encased in dark skin. Her own hands looked pale next to his skin and she liked the contrast. With a glance up into his unwavering face, she took his cock in her hands. Without breaking his gaze, she ran her tongue from the base to the tip. Would he like it? Would he want more? Would he find her desirable? Thoughts tumbled through her head even as waves of desire raced south, making her moist in that one special place.

Ramon groaned, "All of it." Then he dug his hands into her hair and shoved his cock into her mouth until it bumped against the back of her throat.

Instead of annoying her, she found his force even more stimulating. The caveman approach only fueled the fire burning between her legs. With his cock in her mouth, she curled one hand around his hip to push him away then pull him all the way into her mouth again. Her teeth nipped at the ridge of his dick, her tongue flicking the tip in tiny strokes.

Her pussy ached to be touched and she ran her free hand down over her belly. She dipped into her juicy depths, swirling around and tempting with her smooth hand. Her moan wrapped around his cock and she pushed his hip away, slamming him back into her mouth.

With both hands clutching her hair, he pumped in and out of her mouth until his body stiffened and he jerked back on her until her scalp burned and tears came to her eyes. Satisfaction curled in her belly as Ramon lost himself in her.

Cum spurted over her chin and down her neck as the fingers holding her hair curled, the tips sharpening into claws. She knew what was happening to him, but she was too caught up in fantasies harbored for months. Her roots ached as she strained against his hold on her hair. She wanted him in her mouth, wanted to taste him. When he refused to let go, she whimpered, her hands rising to cup his balls.

Glancing up into his face, she saw evidence of what she'd done and her heart compressed in her chest. His irises had formed long slits and his lips peeled back exposing long feline fangs. "What do you want from me?" His voice was a harsh growl, lashing out as he released her hair. "Tell me!"

Guilt warred with her longing to be with this man and she hung her head and sobbed, "I want you to fuck me. Then I want you to help me save my daughter."

"Damn you!" He stepped away and pushed a hand through his thick straight hair. "I shouldn't have done that. You push me, woman."

She knew she should be totally focused on getting her daughter back. Yet, with Ramon standing over her, naked and gleaming in the shadows, her needs overwhelmed her. "I'm not sorry."

"Well I am. I'm an animal, for godsakes!" His fist pounded into his palm. "You should be afraid."

Pushing her shoulders back, she sat on her haunches. "I'm not afraid of what you are."

"Why me? Why follow me out here?" He waved his hand at the swamp surrounding them.

"Yours was the only tracking device I could steal before I escaped, and I'm glad it was yours." He was the one man of all the others she'd altered who she'd felt drawn to in a way even her ex-husband hadn't been able to touch when they were married. It was Ramon Osceola who'd filled her sleeping and waking dreams, making her hot and needy, her body aching for fulfillment. A desire she didn't think herself capable of until she'd seen him naked and pacing in a cage.

He held out his hand. "Get up." His words were spoken gently, but they were a command, nonetheless.

When she placed her hand in his, he jerked her to her feet and into his arms, her bare breasts against his equally bare chest.

Red-hot electric currents seared through her veins and she fought to breathe.

"You don't even know me." He rubbed the side of his cheek against her ear and licked a path across her cheek until his lips hovered over hers. "What makes you so sure you want me to fuck you?"

Hannah grappled with coherent thought, her breathing now at marathon pace. "I know you as well as I know myself." At least that wasn't a lie. Since her daughter had been taken, Hannah hadn't known what she was capable of doing. In all her education, she never thought she'd use her knowledge to alter a person's DNA. For the sake of her daughter, she knew of no limits to the sacrifices she'd make.

Making love to Ramon would be no sacrifice. "I watched you while you were in Hell Hospital. The way you paced your cage, kept in shape and fought back in every

way you possibly could. I knew you'd survive. Your determination helped show me that I too could survive and eventually escape. Which I did."

"And you came after me." He pressed his rock-hard cock against her belly.

Fire raged below. He had to take her before she came apart.

He set her away. "This isn't going to work."

A scream burbled up her throat and Hannah swallowed it back. "Why?" As soon as the word left her mouth, she knew her answer. The *whop-whop-whop* of helicopter blades slashing the air filled made her stomach flip over and her pulse pound against her ears.

Ramon stared down at her with his deep brown eyes. "They're back."

Chapter Three

"Damn!" Hannah ducked farther into the shadows and grabbed for her clothing. "Come on, we have to get out of here."

"No shit, I'm not going back to Hell Hospital," he said. "And neither are you."

"Oh, they won't take me back." As she shoved one leg after the other into her trousers, she muttered, "They'll kill me first."

The words spoken so softly froze his blood in his veins. "Why?"

"That's what they were trying to do when I landed in the water." She zipped and buttoned before she looked into his eyes. Her breasts were still bare, the sun filtering through the trees broke up the shadows across her delicate white skin and rosy areoles.

The animal in him responded to the musky scent of her creamy mound. Despite the danger, he wanted to grab her to him and drive deep into her pussy. He forced his mind to remain human and wrapped around their current dilemma. "I would think they'd want to keep you alive to do more experiments. You already know the program and have the requisite skills." He ground out the word "requisite".

Her lips twisted. "I know too much and they'd rather have me dead than tell all their dirty little secrets or bring the authorities down on Hell Hospital."

Ramon grabbed her arms and halted her struggle to slide her hands into her shirt. "You know where it is?"

"Yes. I know where Hell Hospital is and I know just about everything they're doing there. I can barely sleep nights knowing what I know." She shook his hands loose and thrust her arms into her sleeves, tucking the bra into her pants pocket. "And they don't want me back—they want me dead. And they didn't want me to reach you because I'd alert you to their plan."

"What plan?" he asked.

"I'm not sure what they wanted to do with you but when they released you, I figured it was all part of the same plan. They built a group of Special Forces guys into shapeshifting cats."

The echoes of screams and other voices filled his head, stabbing pain into his temples. As his incisor teeth lengthened, he pressed fingers to his temples and fought the change. He remembered things, horrible things that would make a man scream in agony and then blubber like a babe. It tore your soul away and Ramon was certain it never returned. "You mean there are others like me?"

She nodded.

"How many?"

"I know of at least three others."

The approaching thunder of the helicopter blades forced Ramon into action. "Come on, I know of another place we can stay."

She stared up into his eyes, her baby-blues filled. "So you'll help me find my daughter?"

"What makes you think your daughter is still alive?" He knew it was harsh. But if she knew enough to think they wanted her dead, they wouldn't have any trouble disposing of a kid.

Hannah flinched.

Although he didn't hold out hope for the girl and he had good reason to hate this woman, he shouldn't have squashed her hopes. Revenge wasn't a valid reason to take a dig at her obvious love for her little girl.

"They won't kill her until they know for sure I'm dead." It sounded as if she was trying to convince herself. "She's their leverage to keep me from going straight to the authorities. They'll use her to their advantage. Besides, they have another geneticist on staff."

Ramon's fists clenched at the thought of potentially more victims of the DNA tampering. "We have to stop them."

"You can't if you don't know exactly where the compound is. Or at least you'll take a long time finding it." She tied her buttonless, damp blouse around her middle, the effort pulling it taut over her breasts. Without a bra, her rosy nipples made dark round shadows beneath the fabric.

His cock hadn't calmed from her blowjob and his previous transformation. If they didn't get a move on, he'd be tempted to take her then and there, damn the helicopter!

At just that moment, the aircraft came into view over the lagoon. Hannah shrank against a tree, hugging the shadows, her eyes wide and wary. The helicopter hovered over the shattered airboat and a man wearing scuba gear and flippers rappelled from the skid, sliding down the rope, the hand holding the rope behind his back to slow his descent. When he was within four feet of the water, he let the rope feed out through the D-ring and he dropped into the water, submerging beneath the wrecked craft.

"We need to move while their attention is on the airboat," Hannah said. "And before they use the tracking device to find you."

"Then come on." He grabbed her hand and led her through the dense foliage. "Stay close to the trees and watch for alligators."

She sucked in a breath and blew it out slowly. "Alligators will look easy after what I've been through. Let's go."

Ramon helped her over the little hummock of land, leaping from shadow to shadow until they'd left the helicopter and diver behind. For nearly an hour, they alternated between walking and wading from island to island until they came across a hut thatched in palmetto fronds. In the water close by was a skiff with a trolling motor attached.

"Yours?" Hannah asked.

"One of my escape hatches in the past six months, I've learned not to rely on anyone else. And I refuse to be a prisoner ever again. If it means having redundancy in my escape plans, so be it."

A smile curved her lips and she ducked her head to enter the primitive hut.

Because of his sudden transformations, Ramon had made a habit of stocking various locations with clothing in case he found himself close by after an episode. His condition was too hard to explain to tourists and the Fish and Game Wardens wandering through the maze of tributaries.

His eyes adjusted immediately to the dark and he noted the undisturbed neatness of the tiny hut, glad others hadn't wandered in and taken his belongings. Without a lock on the door, he couldn't guarantee the security. Besides, a lock on a thatch hut would appear as a challenge to whomever ran across the small dwelling, while traversing the twisted channels. Who would stop someone from breaking and entering in the depths of the swamp? For that matter, who would hear Hannah's screams if he decided to take her and damn the consequences?

As if sensing his thoughts, she glanced up, her eyes wide, pupils dilated, making her blue eyes appear black in the limited lighting cast by the setting sun through the open doorway.

"We'll rest for several hours and give the helicopter and search parties time to clear the area."

"We can't leave now?" She wrung her hands together, her gaze darting to the single cot standing against the wall of the building.

"If we take the skiff out in the swamp before it's completely dark, we stand the chance of being spotted. If we go too soon, they might detect our departure. I'd rather wait until they bug out before we make our move."

"We need to get that tracking device out of your back. Do you have a knife, antiseptic, anything?" she asked, searching the dark interior for surgical instruments she knew she wouldn't find.

"I have a knife." He crossed the room to a wooden box nailed to the wall. Inside was a pocket knife and first aid kit complete with alcohol pads and bandages.

"I'll bet you were a good boy scout," she said, a smile tilting the corners of her lips.

He snorted and handed her the items. "Where did they bury the device?"

"Centered between your shoulder blades. It'll only take a minute to get it out. It might hurt a bit since we don't have any pain medication."

"Can't worry about that now. We can't stand around waiting for your friends to blow up this place while we're in it."

"They're not my friends." She ripped the foil wrapping off the alcohol pads, opened the knife and swabbed the blade. "Not the most sterile means, but it'll have to do. She held the knife out in front of her and raised her brows. "Ready?"

Ramon had a moment's hesitation. Turning his back on a woman holding a knife wasn't his idea of smart.

As the moment dragged on, Hannah rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "If I planned to kill you, I would have found a way to do it already. Come into the light and turn around." Her tone left no room for argument.

Without thinking too hard on the subject, he strode to the open door and turned his back. "Just do it." As the knife pierced the skin on his back, he clenched his teeth and thanked the pain for distracting him from her body. Nothing like a knife in the back to take the starch out of his penis. He stared down at the limp appendage. *Not so impressive now, are you?* He would have laughed at the course of his thoughts if she hadn't chosen that moment to dig into his flesh. A roar rose in his throat and his claws extended from his fingers.

"There! I got it." She held the bloody knife in front of his face to show him the miniscule computer chip. "Hell Hospital tagged all of the subjects so they could keep track of your movements. And, for the most part, these little babies are indestructible." She handed him the knife, chip and all. "Hold that while I clean you up."

Gentle fingers cleaned the blood from his back, applied antiseptic ointment and patched him with a small adhesive bandage. "All better and there won't be much of a scar."

"If you'll excuse me, I'd like to get this tracking device as far away from here as possible." Even before he could root around for clothing, he stepped out the door and strode several hundred yards away from the hut before he stopped. He had to get it farther away than that or the helicopter would find them. Frustration bubbled up in his chest, triggering the animal transition within. He placed the device gently between his teeth and concentrated on remembering throughout the change overtaking his body. He was much faster in feline form than in human form.

Several minutes later, he raced through the swamp farther and farther away from the hut and Dr. Richards. Deep inside, he knew he had a mission and it had to do with the tiny little chip in his mouth. In order to protect his den, he had to take this thing deep into the swamp.

When he'd gone as far as he dared, he located an alligator sunning near the shore. He knew they were dangerous, but deep inside that other part of him, he knew this would be the place to drop his prize. Sinking his claws into the bark of a cypress tree, he climbed. On a limb out over the water, he remained balanced on his paws until the alligator maneuvered beneath him. Then he opened his mouth and screamed, careful not to drop the chip. Below, the alligator's tail swished and the giant reptile looked up, his mouth opening wide in the direction of the scream, ready for attack.

Before the massive jaws could close, he dropped the tiny prize into the alligator's gaping maw. Without delay, he eased backward down the tree and raced through the swamp back to his den and the female awaiting him.

Retracing his path, he could feel his muscles stretch and the bones pull and lengthen. By the time he reached the hut, the transformation was complete. He stood on two legs, not four, and he recalled almost all of what had occurred. Elation filled his chest. This was a first. By concentrating on his goal, he'd been able to control the animal

inside and to remember the details of his transition and subsequent execution of the mission. With the tracking device far away in the belly of an alligator, they'd be safer and he could figure out what this woman really wanted from him. Then there was the matter of the incredible hard-on he had following his change back into a man. He shrugged. It couldn't be helped. But it sure as hell hurt, demanding some relief.

She stood in the doorway, a frown denting her lovely brow. Though the sun had fallen below tree level, he could read her features. When she saw him, her frown cleared and she raced out, throwing her arms around his neck, her belly bumping into his distended cock.

He winced and set her away, rubbing at his engorged penis to ease the pain.

"I'm sorry," she said, glancing down to where his hand stroked his flesh. Her face flushed red. "I was afraid you wouldn't come back."

Refusing to turn away, he continued the steady rhythm, his hand barely easing the tension. He wanted more...distraction. "The device," his voice rumbled in more of a growl than normal. Clearing his throat, he started over. "The device is several miles away. Hopefully, the helicopter won't locate the hut until we're long gone."

"Yes, of course." She looked out to the swamp and back to the hut, avoiding looking at his face or his hands.

The idea that she was unsettled by what he was doing amused him. He stepped into the hut, hiding his smile.

"Perhaps you should get some rest before we leave. I'll watch for intruders outside." Hannah hovered on the threshold, her lip caught between her teeth.

Ramon's hand shot out and he snagged her elbow. "No. With your shiny blonde hair, they could spot you in a moment. Best to stay inside and rest. If they don't see movement, they might not investigate.

Her gaze darted back to his naked body and the single bed in the corner. "You can have the hut, I'll rest outside."

The edges of Ramon's lips twitched. Clearly the bed and the close quarters with him had her worried. "What's bothering you? It's not as if you haven't seen me naked."

"I know. It's just—" Her hand waved as if she were trying to pull a word from the air. "I don't know...intimate."

Despite Hannah's role in his transformation, Ramon couldn't help chuckling at the doctor's inability to articulate her misgivings. Twin flags of color stained her cheeks and her lips pressed into a straight line. Ramon relented. "If I promise to put on clothes, will you stay inside?" He expected a look of relief. Instead, her gaze ripped across the breadth of his chest and traveled downward.

Blood surged through his penis, swelling it to full in a matter of that one glance. Heat flooded his own cheeks and he felt compelled to dive for the trunk at the foot of the bed. Why should he be embarrassed in front of the doctor? Hadn't he been naked in front of her for over four months? He willed the heat to fade from his face before he could turn.

"I don't know that it will help," she whispered behind him.

"What do you mean?" He straightened, his hand wrapped around a pair of worn jeans. Did she think of him as a freak? The animal she'd created? Anger spread through his body and he could feel the stiff black hairs pushing through his skin. "Don't you trust me to keep my hands to myself? Afraid I'll change into a panther if we get intimate?" Damned if he wasn't afraid that would happen. He glanced down at his arms growing darker, the hair lengthening and thickening with each passing second. She should see this, face what she'd done. Ramon turned.

Her steady gaze met his. "No, I'm not afraid."

"Well, you should be. I haven't made love to a woman since you and your buddies did this to me." He turned his back to her. "I have no idea what will happen."

A hand touched the pelt on his back, smoothing down over his shoulder blades and down to his waist. "I'm not afraid of you or what you might become," she said, her voice at once both soothing and exciting, like thick cream running down his throat.

He stiffened, his anger invariably fueled his change, pushing the chemical reaction that morphed his bones and muscle tissue into that of a black panther. Over the past two weeks he'd learned to control the change, but he never knew until he stopped whether or not he'd be successful.

His incisor teeth pushed against the inside of his lips and his fingernails lengthened into sharp claws. "Why do you want this?" He didn't even recognize his voice. It came out like the scream of a wild beast instead of the angry tones of a frustrated man. He wanted nothing more than to take this woman and fuck her like there were no tomorrow. But he couldn't. He couldn't trust himself as a cat, a wild beast whose instinct was to kill its prey.

Her hand slipped around his waist and she pressed her face to his back, fur and all. "I'm not afraid of you. I've seen what you become. I know." Her hands turned him to face her and she pulled him close. "I'm afraid of myself. If I let you make love to me, will I be able to leave? I have a daughter who needs me even more than I think you do. I can't leave her. If I fall for you, I don't know if I can walk away." She pressed her forehead to his chest. "I know you must hate me for what I did to you, and you might find this hard to believe, but I've been attracted to you since you were in Hell Hospital. I can't help myself."

Her words hit him square in the chest and he could feel his claws retracting, the anger waning in the light of her revelation. He didn't want to believe her, couldn't. She was them. The sick bastards who had changed him into a monster. "Why should I believe you?"

"You shouldn't. I'm one of the enemy," she said, her words echoing his thoughts. The slender arms around his waist tightened and tears moistened his chest. "But believe this. I love my daughter and would do anything for her."

"Does that include sleeping with an animal?" He shoved her far enough away he could look into blue eyes swimming with tears.

"I won't lie. I told you I'd sleep with the devil himself to keep my daughter safe. But with you, I don't want you to make love to me in order to save my daughter. I need you," she said, her voice fading into a sob. "I need you to hold me and remind me that I am alive and away from that horrible place. I want you to be inside me, filling my body and mind until I don't remember the hell it was, the voices screaming in my memories, the look on my Emily's face when they took her away. I need you to make me forget." She clawed his arms trying to pull him close.

But he held her away.

"I'll hold you and I'll make love to you, but it will be because I want to, not because I owe you anything. And I'm not promising I'll help you in any way."

"I understand. If you choose to help me, great," she said. "If you don't, I'll go on without you. Just hold me now until I have to leave."

Against his better judgment, he pulled her into his arms and crushed his mouth to hers. She smelled earthy, like the Florida everglades he loved. A pleasant side effect to the swim she'd taken when her boat had been attacked, but he wasn't thinking clearly. He just wanted to touch, taste and feel again. Since he'd been held in captivity, he hadn't been with a woman. Hannah was convenient and Ramon was horny. Perfect combination. That she had hair the color of spun gold and eyes the blue of a summer sky didn't mean anything.

"You're taking your life into your own hands," he growled against her lips.

"I'm willing to risk it." Her hands crept up his chest and circled behind his head. "I want you no matter what you are."

A rumble started deep in his throat and he slid his cheek against hers, trailing kisses and nips down her throat.

"Ouch!" Her hand swatted at his cheek. "Not so hard. Besides, your teeth are showing."

Ramon sucked in a deep breath and willed the change to abate. He wanted to make love to her as a human, not an animal. He could do it, with enough restraint. The teeth

pushing against his lips retracted with each breath he took until he knew he was back in control. Best to take things slowly.

Her fingers slipped to the front of her blouse and she untied the knot holding it together.

Ramon opened the edges of fabric, pressing his lips against her collarbone, the swell of her breast and the dip between. When the blouse was completely open, he pushed it from her shoulders. Her pale skin almost glowed in the shadowy room. Her full, bare breasts jutting out, tipped with tight, round buds, begging to be taken.

As he gazed his fill, Hannah went to work on her trousers and panties, slipping them from her hips until she stood naked in the dusk.

Ramon fought back the animal surge flowing through his body. He wanted this female, wanted to claim her for his own, mark her with his scent and fuck her until she cried out his name. Hairs sprang up along his arms and neck, his fingers curled, the nails lengthening into claws.

“Okay, you’re starting to scare me,” she said, her voice shaky. Her arms crossed over her breasts, barely covering the milky mounds.

Tipping back his head, Ramon concentrated on returning to his human state. He’d done it before and he sure as hell needed to now, if he wanted to make love to Hannah. And he did. Oh yes, he did.

His cock was hard and aching to fill her. After several long moments, he could feel the change receding.

“That’s better.” Slender fingers slid around his waist and pulled him against that sweet slim body. He inhaled the scent of her, the musky sexy scent of a woman in the early throes of passion. Her hands dropped lower to cup his ass.

With his cock pressed into the silky skin of her belly, need ached in him like a strong physical pain.

But she was petite and fragile, compared to his six-foot-two frame, and he didn't want to scare her again. Despite what she'd done to his genetics, she was a woman, the weaker sex, to be cherished, her body worshipped.

He dropped his head to one of her breasts and sucked it into his mouth, his tongue circling the hard round bead, his teeth clamping down, tugging gently.

Hannah arched into him, her head falling back exposing the long line of her throat to him, pressing her breast deeper into his mouth. "I want you, Ramon," she moaned and swayed against him. "Now."

"Patience," he whispered against her other breast, treating it with the same attention as the first. He could feel the heat building within her, smell the warm scent of her excitement.

His own body quickened, his cock filled, straining to be inside her. He wanted her need to equal his before he took her — wanted her to beg him to take her inside him, to spread her thighs wide and show him how ready she was for him.

"You don't know how often I dreamed of this," she said, her leg sliding up the back of his.

Moving his hands lower, he traced the line of her waist downward to her hip and across to the silky blonde hairs covering her mons. He parted her folds and rubbed a finger over the swollen nub. She gasped, her fingers digging into his shoulders. "Oh yes. Oh yes." The leg circling his calf convulsed, clutching him nearer as she tried to angle herself closer to him.

"Not yet."

"Why?" she breathed. "I want you now."

"You're not ready."

"Not ready?" she wailed. "I've been longing for this for months. I'm so hot I could spontaneously combust. And you think I'm not ready?"

He smiled down into her face as his fingers dipped lower. First one, then two fingers entered her channel, sliding into the creamy depths clenching around his digits. She was hot and wet for him, but he wanted more. "I want to taste you here."

Her body trembled, her eyes widening. "There?" Her hand slid down his arm to where his fingers lay buried inside her and hers joined his. "Then do it."

Ramon bit hard on his tongue, hoping the pain would keep him focused and stable in the throes of his rising passion. Often he changed without warning and he didn't want to blow it now. He wanted this woman and he wanted to prove to himself that he could have a woman again without succumbing to the animal within.

With a low growl in his throat, he shoved her against the wall and dropped to one knee.

She steadied her hands on his shoulders and looked down. "What are you doing?"

His answer was a long gentle flick of his tongue.

She moaned and her hips undulated to the rhythm of his strokes.

He trailed her juices up to her sensitive nub and flicked and teased it until she screamed, her body stiffening, her orgasm pulsing all the way through her.

Without relenting, he continued his assault until she sagged against the wall. "Umm, Ramon?" Hannah's hands dug into his hair and pulled him away. "Are you changing again? Your tongue is a lot rougher. Go easy."

He breathed deeply and held still for several seconds until he had it in control again. "Sorry."

She shrugged and smiled down at him. "Not to worry. I kinda liked it. Just not so intense."

"I don't want to hurt you. I have other plans before we're done here."

"Ummm. Show me." She guided his head back to her pussy.

With her juices on his lips, Ramon didn't know how much longer he could last. If he wasn't careful, he'd ejaculate all over himself like an excitable teenager—he could change into a panther and hurt her.

With one final lick, he eased her leg from his shoulder and stood, sliding his chest up her torso enjoying the sensation of his body rubbing against hers. Then he lifted each of her legs and settled them around his waist. "Ready?"

"You should know." She eased down over him, her slick channel sheathing him in heat and moisture.

Ramon closed his eyes as sensations rippled across his nerve endings, the need building in his balls, making them tight to the point of exquisite pain. Then he was pumping into her, thrusting deep until his balls slapped against her. She met him thrust for thrust, balancing her hands on his shoulders.

When his orgasm hit, he raised his face to the ceiling and screamed his release, all the primal feelings of man and cat rolled into the sound.

"Ouch. Careful with the claws, big guy," she said into his neck. "You're scratching my ass."

Immediately he dropped his hands and noted the hairs springing from his skin. Damn. The orgasm waned as he realized he'd lost control of his change. A knot formed in his belly and he couldn't look at Hannah. "Get off."

"Why?" Her legs still wrapped around his waist tightened, refusing to release the hold her cunt had on his cock. "I like it just where I am."

"Get off," he growled. His lips curled back baring his feline teeth.

A stubborn look crossed her face and her arms circled his neck, her lips hovering close to his. "No. I told you I want you any way you come."

And he came.

Not once, but twice before they had to leave.

Chapter Four

He was still angry. She could see it in his eyes. Several hours later when they were settled in a jumbo jet heading west, he sat with a pout as good as any eight-year-old's. He'd been half changed, buried inside her and she hadn't let him go. He'd felt so damned good, she'd refused to let him off the hook.

And she didn't care. The man had to know he was sexy and she wasn't afraid of a little cat hair or pointy fingernails. She'd wanted him as badly as he'd wanted her. And she'd known the dangers of fucking a genetically altered man. If anything, his alteration only improved his attraction in her mind. And she could swear his cock was bigger than when he'd been a mere human.

Her panties grew damp at the visual conjured of him standing in the hut, erect and proud. Hannah wiggled in her seat, hot and wanton. If the flight attendants could read minds – oh boy!

Ramon's nostrils twitched as he sat next to her, his eyes closed as if in sleep. But he hadn't let sleep claim him. While trapped on board an airplane, he'd been extremely alert to any changes in his body chemistry. If the change came on while he was in the air, they'd be hard pressed to explain it, and Hannah wasn't so sure the animal in him would respond well to the close environment.

As nervous as he was, she was even more so. She'd sat clutching his hand, trying to appear relaxed while hoping he wouldn't change into a panther. Not until the wheels touched ground in Dallas did she breathe a sigh, hurrying him off the plane and out of the airport as quickly as possible. They still had quite a distance to cover to get to the compound in Waco. The two days that had passed since her escape seemed like a lifetime. She hoped to hell they still thought she was alive. As long as they did, her daughter had a chance.

“Worrying won’t change anything,” Ramon said from the driver’s seat of the transport they’d rented at the airport.

“Maybe not, but I can’t help it.” She shot a glance his way, admiring his high cheekbones and the straight, sleek black hair secured in a leather strap at the nape of his neck. During his time in captivity, his hair had grown longer and despite his release, he hadn’t bothered to have it cut. It was as much a part of him now as the Seminole blood flowing through his veins. As a member of the Special Forces, he’d had his own choice of hairstyles. They were encouraged to grow their hair if they wished to erase all connection with the military. Blending in was their directive. Once back on American soil, the military put him on an extended leave of absence after his ordeal in captivity but had finally granted an honorable discharge. He’d not had call to cut the long, thick black hair.

Hannah was glad. She liked it when it brushed over her skin, the coarse texture stimulating her nerve endings. Her hand twitched on the armrest, her fingers aching to run through its length. For more reasons than his military abilities, she was glad he was with her. He grounded her in confidence, made her feel as if they could conquer the world together, or at the very least, rescue Emily.

The drive to Waco took a little under an hour, the traffic heavy, slowing their progress at times. Based on information Hannah had overheard the past few months, the Branch D compound was located on the historical landmark where a religious cult had fought to survive against fanatical American forces in the early nineteen nineties only to burn to the ground—women and children dying in the flames. The history of the site and political significance had appealed to the leaders of the Genetic Research Institute when choosing to build an alternate complex.

As they drove into the city of Waco, darkness settled over the dry, Texas landscape so foreign from the swamps of Florida. Their timing was perfect. With little vegetation in this part of the state, darkness would be their only cover to allow them to sneak past the security sensors and into the compound.

Hannah's stomach knotted in anticipation. She prayed she was right about where they'd taken Emily. It only made sense. The other geneticist had visited the alternate site on multiple occasions, commenting on the sparse medical facilities available there and the prisonlike accommodations.

"Do you think we have all the tools we'll need?" As if checking off a list, she went through the items she thought they'd require to break through the fences. Then came the high-end security system and concertina wire around the compound. Ramon was a professional, he'd know all there was to know about infiltration and attacks. More so than a geneticist. She only understood how to muck up a human's DNA structure. She bit the inside of her jaw. Her nerves made her want to run off at the mouth.

"We have what we need," he responded, his tone clipped, discouraging further talk.

But Hannah couldn't sit back in the heavy silence they'd shared since leaving Dallas and she needed to clear the air between them. Reaching out, she touched his arm. "I want you to know I'm sorry for my part in your genetic reconstruction. If it had only been me, I wouldn't have done it."

The only indication he'd heard her was the tightening of his hands on the steering yoke. His attention remained focused on the GPS direction finder on the transport dashboard.

So he wasn't ready to forgive her. What did she expect? Would she have forgiven a person so readily if the circumstances had been reversed? Probably not. Her hand dropped to her lap and she stared forward, letting the silence stretch between them like a tightrope on which neither would venture out.

When they were within a mile of their destination, Ramon drove the transport off the road and parked it behind a stand of mesquite and scrub oak trees. Climbing out, he broke off several branches and stacked them against the vehicle on the side visible from the road, effectively camouflaging it from curious eyes. "We walk from here."

Her heart thundered in her chest, Hannah fished the backpack loaded with the tools they'd need from the backseat.

Ramon took the pack and slung it over his shoulders. "Perhaps you should stay here," he said.

Hannah shot a glance at his rigid face. What a difference from the man who'd made love to her in the Big Cypress Swamp. Gone was the passionate lover and in his place was the taciturn soldier, the Seminole warrior bent on going to war without the women. To hell with that! "You don't know what my daughter looks like. I'm going."

"It'll be dangerous."

"I don't care. That's my daughter out there. She might not go with you unless I'm with her."

"So be it. But don't get in the way. I want to get in, get your daughter and get out. Then you can tell me where Hell Hospital is located and we can call it even."

The wind sucked out of her sails, Hannah walked beside Ramon, the lead lump in her belly weighing her down with each footstep. The tall dark warrior meant to be done with her after he'd fulfilled his promise to rescue Emily. The thought of never seeing him again left her chest hollow and achy. Hadn't she gone into this deal with her eyes open? Hadn't she known this man would travel alone and avoid lasting relationships and commitment?

His profile spelled it out. He'd never married, only dated once or twice before moving on, and he never took a woman home to meet the family. Not that he had much family left. His love life read like the history of a sailor with a girl in every port, but none for long. Then why did she feel empty, as if she'd lost her best friend? She couldn't lose something she never had. Besides the great sex they'd shared in the swamp, what did she have?

Nothing.

They moved along in silence. The anticipation of seeing her daughter again, lifting Hannah's spirits, tempered by the realization that they might be in the wrong place. Doubt set in, taking hold and scaring the shit out of her.

For all she knew, Vaughan could have hidden her daughter in Hell Hospital and told her he'd taken her to an alternate site, just to mislead her. When she'd escaped, she knew she was taking a chance. She hoped she'd taken the right chance. If her daughter was inside the walls of the Branch D compound, with Ramon as her guide, they'd bring her out. Of that, she had no doubt.

Stars lit their way across the flat landscape with the occasional live oak tree casing moon shadows across the grasses. After what felt like an eternity, buildings appeared on the horizon, rising up from the lonesome prairie, the boxy lines stark against the endless night sky.

With her heart pounding against her ribs, Hannah fought to remain calm. She couldn't afford to lose it now. Her daughter's life depended on her and Ramon getting inside the compound.

As they approached the outer chain-link fence, Ramon's steps slowed and he ducked low to the ground, his head turning left and right, observing everything.

"Are we going through the fence? Should we get out the tools?" she whispered, her nerves making her mouth shift into high speed.

Ramon held a finger to his lips and eased along the fence line toward the road leading through a gate. A lone guard stood in a lit gate shack, armed with an automatic weapon like those used at Hell Hospital.

Despite the warm night air, a chill shivered down Hannah's spine. "How are we going to get in?"

The low rumble of a cargo transport came from the distance. Ramon's head cocked in its direction. "Come on." He backtracked until they were out of sight of the guard shack and headed away from the compound.

"Where are you going? We can't turn back now! My daughter could be in there! Are you quitting on me?" Her voice rose in a hysterical whisper. Although she'd said she'd get her out by herself, Hannah had no idea how. Ramon was the key to freeing Emily. He couldn't walk away now. "Fine, I'll go back on my own. I won't let them kill my daughter, even if I get killed trying to free her. And I have no idea how I'll do it, but I'm not a quitter." She stomped back across the grass toward the compound, tears blurring her vision.

A hand clamped down on her shoulder and jerked her around and into Ramon's arms. "Don't you ever shut up?"

Before she could respond, his lips clamped down on hers.

All thoughts of conquering the compound single-handedly flew from Hannah's mind in that one blinding kiss. When his mouth left hers, she gasped for breath and sagged against him.

"At least now I know how to shut you up," he said against her hair. Then he shoved her to the ground as lights from a cargo transport lit the road a few hundred yards to their south. It was headed toward the compound, slowing as if looking for the gate.

Hannah shifted closer to Ramon as the sting of prickly pear cactus needles pierced her right arm. "You could have found a better place to hit the dirt than a cactus," she grumbled. The vehicle drew closer. It would pass within ten feet of where they sprawled in the dirt.

Hannah held her breath, afraid of what would happen if the driver spotted them.

After the transport passed, Hannah let out a sigh, which was cut short when Ramon grabbed her hand and yanked her off the ground. "What the hell are you doing?" she hissed, trying not to yell loud enough the driver could hear.

The muscles in her arm screamed as she raced to keep pace with Ramon. He was chasing the back of the transport. When he reached it, he jerked the handle of the rear door and a miracle occurred. It opened.

Without warning, he hurled her into the back and leaped in after her, closing the door behind them.

She lay flat on her stomach, her lungs hauling in huge gulps of air. A small light glowed green, illuminating Ramon's face and the grin tilting his lips.

"What the hell did we just do?" she gasped.

"Hitched a ride inside the compound. So shut up and hide behind those." He motioned toward some boxes stacked against the wall.

The transport slowed and someone shouted outside.

Hannah scrambled to her feet and threw herself behind the stacks. Ramon slid behind her just as the door burst open. Peeking around the corner of the boxes, Hannah could see the gate guard's weapon aimed inside.

From her perch behind the box, nestled in the warmth of Ramon's arms, Hannah could just barely see the guard standing at the rear of the transport.

"Look, I've been driving close to nine hours to get this stuff here. Mr. Mitchell wanted these supplies delivered ASAP. Check the invoice, it's all in order," the driver said.

"I don't care how long you been drivin', this load ain't goin' nowhere until I have a look."

"All I know is Mitchell wanted it fast. If you delay the goods, it's your funeral."

"What's in the boxes?" The guard stepped up into the back of the cargo hold, the bed of the transport shifting with his weight.

Hannah pressed her fingers against her lips to stifle her gasp. A few more inches inside and he'd see them hiding in the shadows like the fugitives they were. Ramon's arms tightened around her and he pressed a kiss to her ear.

The frantic beating of her heart calmed a fraction. If the guard saw them, Ramon would deal with him. No problem, right? Ramon was Special Forces. He could handle

anything. Hannah sure hoped he could. They couldn't afford to alert the entire camp before they had Emily safely away.

"Hell if I know what these guys are sending." The driver stood on the ground outside the door. "I don't ask. I'm not paid to know what's in the boxes. I'm paid to deliver and keep my mouth shut."

"Pretty trusting, aren't you?" said the voice in front of the boxes.

"I like living with all my body parts arranged just the way they —"

Rumbling filled the air as a helicopter swooped low overhead.

"Wonder what the fuck all the excitement's about." The guard leaped from the back of the cargo hold and turned toward the sound of the chopper. "Helicopters have been comin' and goin' all day."

"Beats the shit out of me. Now, if you're done holding me up, I'd like to ditch this stuff and get the hell out of here."

"I guess you're okay. Go on." The door shut, extinguishing the light from the guard shack and the stars.

In the dark interior of the cargo transport, Hannah inhaled a long shaky breath and snuggled into Ramon's arms.

Not for the first time that evening, Ramon regretted bringing Hannah along. She didn't have the military training to perform this mission. And the more she was with him, the more he felt responsible for her well-being. He needed a team of highly trained Special Forces men to get in and free the girl, not just one man and a geneticist. What had he been thinking?

Since he'd joined the service, he'd made an unwritten rule that he'd never get involved to the point he'd lose focus. And he'd done just that. Lost focus.

The scent of woman filled him and made him want to take her in the back of the transport. If he were any less of a man, he would. But they had a job to do first. Like it or not, he was stuck with Hannah as his assistant.

He shifted her out of his embrace and felt his way out from behind the boxes to crouch between the stacks. "When the transport stops, wait for my signal to move, and don't make a sound. Got it?"

"Got it," she said from the darkness.

The vehicle rumbled through the compound and came to a stop a few minutes later.

"Hey, Osceola," Hannah whispered.

He could smell her fear and wished he could reassure her, but he didn't have so much as a plan to get them through the next few minutes. "Yeah."

"Thanks for helping me."

She risked making noise just to thank him for helping her. Ramon would have shaken her, if he could get to her and back to his position before the door opened. But he remained in position and shook his head in the dark. "I just want to know what part of Africa Hell Hospital's in." That place needed shutting down before anyone else was hurt.

"It's not in Africa, Ramon. Hell Hospital is here on the southwestern border of Texas in the Davis Mountains," she said.

"What?" Ramon tilted back on his heels as if he'd been slammed in the gut. "It's in the States?"

"Yeah."

"How the fuck—"

Before he could say another word, the door flew open and a forklift slid up to the back of the transport.

Ramon had been captured on a mission in South Africa and when he'd been released, he'd been in South Africa. He'd assumed Hell Hospital was somewhere in Africa, not the United States. How the hell did something so horrific operate without detection in his home country? How could the government allow it to happen?

Unless the government was involved.

Chapter Five

Hannah hadn't meant to tell him about Hell Hospital until they'd freed Emily. But if she didn't make it out alive, she wanted Ramon to know where it was so he could stop what they were doing before other innocent lives were ruined.

She knew the staff at the hospital took great pains to keep the location secret, especially to the experiment subjects, but she wasn't prepared for the shock in his voice. And now with the door wide open and a forklift's prongs reaching inside their hideout, she didn't have time to explain or reassure him in any way. They had to get out now, or risk discovery.

"In here," Ramon whispered. He slit a hole in the tightly wrapped plastic around a group of boxes and dropped one box on the floor of the truck. Then he grabbed her hand and pushed her between the remaining boxes, shoving the backpack in after her. He followed her into the tiny hole he'd made where they crouched between stacks of cardboard boxes. They were hidden on the very pallet the forklift prongs slid under.

The pallet beneath the boxes shook and rose from the ground and the beeping sound the heavy machinery made when in reverse echoed off the metal walls of the cargo transport. They were moving out of the vehicle and from what little Hannah could see from the tiny spaces between the boxes, transferring them onto the loading dock of the largest building in the compound.

If Emily was here, the biggest building seemed the most logical place to hold her. And if Hannah knew Vaughan Mitchell, he'd have set guards all over her in the event anyone was fortunate enough to make it inside the compound.

The close space and dread robbed Hannah of her ability to breathe properly. Her head felt light and her knees buckled. If not for the hand resting on the small of her

back, she'd have passed out already. But that hand grew heavier and claws poked into her before long.

"Damn," Ramon said behind her. "I'm sorry, but sometimes, I can't stop it." The words started out sounding normal, but by the end of his sentence, they were more of a rumble than coherent sounds.

Her heartbeat skittered to a stop for two full seconds.

The pallet jolted against the concrete floor and she gasped, her heart slamming against her chest. The warmth behind her disappeared and she knew Ramon had slipped out of the hole and onto the loading dock.

Before she could ease completely out from between the boxes, she heard the scream of a large cat and the startled yell of the forklift operator. Another yell sounded from the direction of the truck. Hannah cleared the boxes in time to see a sleek black panther clamp powerful jaws into the neck of the truck driver, piercing his vocal chords and killing the man instantly.

"Who the hell are you?" a voice asked behind Hannah.

Fear sent tingles across her skin, raising the flesh in goose bumps. But she couldn't turn and face this new threat. Her gaze was riveted on the huge cat, staring straight at her with blood dripping from wickedly sharp teeth.

When the panther's muscles bunched and he moved toward her, Hannah's knees shook and she almost fell to the ground. She backed against the boxes and tried to scream, but nothing would come out. The creature leapt toward her, missing her by mere inches.

The man behind her yelled, "What the hell—" his voice cut off and reduced to a gurgle as the cat snapped his neck with one potent bite. The black panther dropped the man and stared at Hannah for a moment, then he ran for the door leading deeper into the building. His sleek movements were soundless in the dead silence of the loading dock.

Hannah fought the bile burning a path up her throat and gathered the backpack and Ramon's clothing and shoes from the ground, before racing after the vicious animal he'd become. As she sidestepped the dead men whose blood spilled onto the concrete from the gaping wounds in their throats, she wondered if she'd made the right decision to enlist his help. It wouldn't be long before someone discovered the dead men and the rest of the compound would be alerted. With only minutes to spare, they had to hurry and find Emily. Then get the hell out.

With the metallic taste of blood in his mouth, his stomach rumbled, but he didn't have time to feed his ravenous appetite. A sense of urgency pushed him through the overhead door standing open and ready for the forklift to carry the load of boxes into the storage room. In the far corner of the cavernous space, another door was secured with an optical scanning device. Ramon struggled to understand its significance, knowing he couldn't get past it without an appropriate scan.

As Hannah hurried up behind him, the handle twisted and Ramon growled a warning, shoving her to the side with his nose, using a little more force than was necessary. She hit the wall and gasped, her eyes going wide. He didn't have time to worry about whether or not he'd hurt her.

When the door opened, a man stepped through.

Ramon lunged at his face, sinking his teeth into the unsuspecting victim's windpipe. The man died instantly, his body falling across the threshold. The door swung closed, but the dead man's body blocked it from closing all the way.

Leaping across the inert man, Ramon led the way down the hall, sniffing every door for the scent of a child or someone resembling the woman hurrying to keep up. He could sense her horror, smell her fear and something deep inside him hurt. Even in his present form, he knew she was the one that made him this way, but he also knew she was forced to. But her horror at how he'd killed those men had shaken him down to his paws. Although he knew he could think more rationally as a human, he didn't want to

change back into a man at that moment. The pain was easier to take as an animal, his emotions more readily masked in the black-as-night face of a panther. If he could, he'd stay a panther forever rather than witness that look in Hannah's face again. She'd been terrified of him and repulsed by what he'd done. How could she ever look at him like a man again without fearing the beast within?

A shout heard around a corner and the vibration of booted feet pounding against the tiled floors reverberated through his paws.

Hannah opened a supply closet door. "Get in," she said, holding the door wide for him to comply.

He hesitated, resisting the thought of being restrained in a small closet.

"They'll kill you, and then how would Emily and I get out of here?"

Another shout echoed in the hallways, energizing him into action. He leaped into the closet as men in soldiers' uniforms rounded the corner. They carried the same automatic weapons as the gate guard and they headed for the loading dock.

"They must have discovered the bodies," Hannah said, sneaking a peek out into the hall. She gasped and jerked her head back when another person hurried by in a white lab coat. "I know that man."

The transition back to human would happen no matter how much Ramon fought against it, but the change overcame him so fast he couldn't focus enough to try to halt it. His bones and muscles stretched and lengthened, the pain of the quick alteration blinding him for the few short moments it took to complete the transformation. When his vision cleared, his heart sank to his knees.

Hannah stood silhouetted in the limited light coming in from the vent in the door. The clothing and backpack held close to her chest like a shield, her eyes wide and wary.

When he straightened into a standing position, he held out his hand.

She jerked away, and then her face softened, a frown denting her brow. "I'm sorry, it's just a lot to handle."

He reached out and tugged on the clothing she held against her body. "Do you mind?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Here let me help you." She dropped the backpack on the floor, flung the jeans over one shoulder and held open his shirt.

"I'm perfectly capable of dressing myself," his voice sounded gruff, the residual of a growl making it harsh. He reached out to snag the shirt from her hands.

She held it away from his grasp. "I know that, but this way will be more fun."

What game was she playing? "We don't have time for fun."

With a brow arched, she shook the shirt. "Then quit arguing."

He shrugged, refusing to read into her gesture, instead he turned sideways and slid his arm into the shirt. When he had the other arm in the sleeve, she moved around to his front and pulled the shirt over his shoulders and together.

When she leaned close to secure the buttons, the lingering effect of his transformation nudged against her belly.

Her brows flared and she gasped.

Ramon tilted his head back and tried to breathe normally to will the reaction to abate. He wanted her so badly, his cock throbbed with need.

It didn't help that her scent wafted toward him, her arousal apparent in the musky aroma filling the confined space. How could this happen when she'd been terrified by him only moment before?

With a deep breath, he snatched the jeans from her shoulders and turned to dress facing the door. Better to resist temptation. When fully dressed, he reached for the door handle. No time like the present to find her daughter and get the hell out of there.

Hannah leaned over Ramon's shoulder, absorbing the heat from his body as he eased the door open and sniffed the hallway.

"Stay behind me." He settled the backpack over his shoulder and slipped around the door and down the hallway, slowing at each door until he stopped in front of one.

Hannah's heart hammered in her chest. "What is it?"

"I think your daughter is behind this door."

"How can you be sure?"

He tapped a finger to his nose. "She smells like you."

"Can you tell if there's anyone with her?"

He sniffed again. "No, she's alone."

"Emily?" Hannah pressed her ear to the door and called out a little louder. "Emily?"

"Mom?" a female voice said from the other side of the door. "Oh thank God."

Hannah almost cried when she saw the door was equipped with an eye scanner-locking device. "How can we get in?" She glanced both ways down the hall.

Ramon calmly shrugged the pack from his shoulders, dug inside and pulled out a wad of lumpy clay. He packed it into the doorjamb next to the handle.

"What's that?" she asked.

"A little old-fashioned explosives."

"Won't it be really loud?"

He shrugged and pressed a metal device into the putty. "Probably."

She twisted her hands together and darted another look up and down the hallway. "Well, just do it." She leaned against the doorframe. "Get behind something, Emily."

Ramon grabbed Hannah's hand and pulled her away from the door and down the hall twenty feet, then pressed a remote control device.

A small bang shattered the silence and a puff of smoke filled the air around the doorway. Other than that, it didn't appear to have budged the door. Hannah's stomach dropped to her knees, her disappointment a sour taste in her mouth. "What now? How

can we get her out without someone who can activate the scanning equipment?" As the words left her mouth, alarms rang out. "Great, now they know where to look."

Chapter Six

If the entire compound wasn't due to converge on them any moment, Ramon would have laughed. "Have faith, doc." He loped to the door. Just as he reached it, the door swung open and a young lady the image of Dr. Hannah Richards twenty-years younger stepped through.

Hannah rushed forward and wrapped her arms around the blonde woman. "Emily!"

"Mom!"

Ramon reeled backward, his mind having a tough time wrapping around what he saw. "What the fuck?"

"We can do the introductions later, let's get the hell out of here." Hannah let go of the young woman and grabbed her hand, hauling her back the way they came.

Ramon shook his head to clear the wool gathering there. "If you want out, going back to the loading dock might not be a good idea."

Dr. Richards turned to face him. "You're right. Got a better idea?"

"We find another exit before they find us."

"Any idea where we could start looking?" Hannah asked Emily.

"This way." Emily led the way around a series of corners and down several hallways until she stopped in front of a door with a brass nameplate. Engraved in brass was the name Vaughan Mitchell.

"Got any more explosives?" Emily asked.

"Yeah." Ramon stepped to the door, digging out another clump of the plastic explosives. As he smashed the pliable product around the door handle, he shot a glance at Hannah. "I was picturing a little girl in pigtails."

Hannah's face flushed and she stared at down at him. "Would you have refused to come if I'd told you she was full grown?" Hannah hooked an arm around her daughter's waist. "Emily's eighteen. But she's still my daughter, and I'd still do anything to save her from these people."

"I get the feeling there's something going on here, but could you two hurry it up?" Emily glanced over her shoulder. "I hear people shouting down the hallway."

Ramon glared once more at Hannah and then pressed a detonation device into the explosives. "Get back." He herded the women down the hallway and pressed the remote detonator. The bang shook the floor and the puff of smoke filled the hallway.

When it cleared, the door stood slightly ajar.

"Is there an exit from inside his office?" Hannah asked.

"Even better." Emily hurried around Ramon and into the office.

Hannah followed with Ramon close behind her. He had a few questions to clear up with the doctor. But first they had to get out of the building.

"Vaughan's the top dog around here and kinda thinks he's above all the precautions," Emily was saying.

"So? Where's the door?"

"He doesn't have a door, but he has a helluva big window." Emily pressed a button on the wall and a shield slid sideways, revealing a floor-to-ceiling window with a view of the fields beyond the compound.

Ramon lifted a heavy office chair and flung it at the window. The window cracked, sending a long fracture across the center, but it held. He lifted the chair and slammed it against the window again. This time a tiny hole appeared and several shards of glass fell to the carpeted floor.

Hannah lifted a smaller chair and crashed it against the window in the same spot. Between the two of them, they enlarged the hole until it was sufficient for them to fit through.

Dropping the chair to the floor, he stripped his shirt from his back, laying it over the jagged edges. Then he motioned to Emily. "You first."

Emily hugged her mother and ducked through the hole, dropping to a crouch outside on the ground.

When it was time for Hannah to go through, a noise caught Ramon's attention, and he glanced toward the doorway.

"Stop right there!" A man stood at the threshold, pointing a pistol at Hannah. "Take one more step and I'll shoot Dr. Richards."

"Vaughan Mitchell, don't you ever get tired of threatening people to make them do what you want?" Hannah stepped in front of Ramon but far enough away, he couldn't knock her aside without lunging toward her. "Don't worry about me, Ramon. Get Emily out of here."

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Blood hammered through his body and the hackles rose on the back of his neck. The change was on him and he could do nothing to stop it. If only he could hold on to his humanity until he figured a logical way out of this mess. But the transformation surged forward. "I'm not leaving without you."

"Don't worry. You won't have to leave without her because you're not leaving." Vaughan said. "You don't have a chance of getting off the compound, even if you make it out of this office alive. Security is on alert and they've been ordered to shoot to kill. That goes for anything that moves." The man's eyebrows rose and he stared straight at Ramon. "Including large animals. Good to see you again, Sergeant Osceola."

Rage mingled with the pain of his transition and he fought to keep from crying out. He knew this man's scent and he knew what he'd ordered done to others in Hell Hospital. Beyond that, his mental functions were sliding into a more primitive instinct for survival and protection of his territory. The woman was being threatened and he had to do something about the predator.

He dropped to all fours, an angry cry rising from his throat in a roaring scream. With slow, deliberate steps, he stalked toward his prey, sliding his body against his mate as he moved by.

"No!" she shouted.

But Ramon wasn't listening. The scent of fear emanated from the man with the hard metal weapon. Good, let him worry. Let him fear the power of a pissed-off panther.

"Stop there or I'll shoot."

His words were garbled, almost foreign to Ramon's hearing, but he understood the intent and his footsteps halted, his back legs bunching up behind him, getting ready.

The man's hand shook and the weapon wobbled. He spoke again.

This time, Ramon wasn't listening, all his concentration centered on the scent of blood running through warm flesh. He knew he couldn't attack straight on. Cunning would be key to taking down this creature.

Ramon leaped to the left as a shot rang out, echoing against the walls of the room. His feet barely touched ground and he pivoted and lunged at the man's throat, his jaws clamping into the jugular. With a twist of his head, he ripped open the throat and blood spurted out. The weapon fell from his victim's hands and he crumpled to the floor, his body jerking several times before he stilled.

"Ramon!"

Someone was calling to him.

His teeth remained buried in the throat and he refused to let go. He wanted to rip out the heart and guts of this predator in warning to others who dared threaten his clan. Hands grasped the ruff on the back of his neck and tugged.

When he looked up, he recognized the eyes of the human staring down at him. Tears streamed from them and she shouted in a language he struggled to understand. She let go of his neck, grabbed the backpack and clothing from the floor and then moved toward a hole in the window, waving at him to follow.

His jaws loosened, the dead predator fell limp. With one last glance at the dead creature lying on the floor, the panther followed the woman. When she motioned him through the hole, he stood firm.

After she stepped through and down onto the ground below, he leaped through the opening and out into the night air.

Sirens pierced the air, ringing in his ears, urging him to run as fast as he could to get away.

Two women stood in the grass, urging him to follow. His mind told him they were his family and he needed to protect them and get them away from this terrible place. Trotting ahead, he spied men carrying long weapons.

Keeping to the shadows, he worked his way toward them. When he was within striking distance, he lunged at the one nearest him, knocking him to the ground and snapping his neck in one fatal bite. The other man aimed his weapon and fired off shots, the rounds missing their mark.

Ramon leaped into his face, his teeth ripping into his eyes and dragging skin and tissue down over his nose. The man screamed, dropped his weapon and clutched at his face. A quick glance behind him indicated the women were still following and he moved on.

When they came to the fence, Ramon set to work digging beneath the wire. Within seconds, he had a hole large enough for all of them to fit beneath. Hannah and her daughter scrambled on their hands and knees, shimmying beneath the wire to the other side. He followed and they ran as far and as fast as they could away from the compound.

The *whomp* of helicopters filled the air and lights beamed out over the landscape. They had to find cover quickly or risk being captured. Ramon led the way, searching for something to crawl under. Behind him, the younger woman stumbled to her knees and fell, crying out. His Hannah dropped back to assist her. Her gasp and shout alerted him to stop his search and return to help.

The scent of another of his kind filled his nostrils and his feet slowed. The woman on the ground writhed, twisted and changed before him.

His humanity struggled to surface from the animal clouding his brain. He needed to understand the significance of what was happening to the woman. The animal in him recognized her as one of his kind.

When the transformation was complete, a sleek jaguar shook out her coat and stood on all fours.

Hannah dropped to her knees, hands over her mouth, her eyes streaming with tears.

Ramon understood grief and rubbed against her, trying to soothe her, to take away her sadness. The jaguar eased up next to her and stared into her eyes as if to reassure her. She nudged Hannah's cheek and licked at a tear sliding off her chin.

With one hand, Hannah hugged the jaguar to her and circled the other arm around him, pulling him close, her tears still falling. For several long minutes, they crouched in a huddle, absorbing their combined strength.

The longer they stayed in one place, the nearer the high-powered beams from the helicopters swept, moving closer to their position with every passing minute.

Ramon urged Hannah to her feet. She gathered Emily's belongings, tucking clothing and shoes into the backpack. With the jaguar on one side of the woman and him on the other, they ran and ran until Hannah could run no more. When they stumbled into a dried-out gully, Ramon left them to search the creek bottom for shelter from the searchlight. A few hundred yards down, the banks were overhung with tree roots and large boulders sufficient to hide a human and two large cats.

Racing back to the Hannah and the jaguar, he urged them to follow him. They ducked beneath the overhang just in time as the helicopter's floodlight swept the length of the gully.

Tucked beneath the jutting rocks, Ramon could feel his body shifting and changing until he lay as a human once again, the rocks and roots digging into his naked skin.

Behind him, the jaguar shifted and changed into a beautiful young woman. Hannah gathered her daughter against her and rocked her, sobbing into her silky blonde hair. "Oh baby, I'm so sorry. I was too late."

Chapter Seven

After a tense half hour, the helicopters moved on. Ramon, Hannah and Emily climbed out from beneath the overhang and continued following the path of the gully until it crossed a road. Moving under the cover of night, they found their way to the transport hidden in the bushes and drove back to the city of Waco and then headed south toward Austin, each quiet, lost in thought.

Hannah moved in a daze, knowing what had to be done, but refusing to talk about what had happened back at the compound. She should say something, but she didn't know where to begin.

"Mom, don't shut me out," Emily said from the backseat of the transport. "I need you now more than ever."

"I'm not, honey. I'm just not ready to talk about it."

"Well, you'll have to someday," her daughter said, settling into the backseat.

"I can't. Not now." Hannah buried her face in her hands, the tears returning. "This is all my fault."

"No, Hannah. The Genetic Research Institute was responsible for all this." Ramon reached out and grasped her hand in his. "You were a pawn in their plan. They used you."

"Look, Mom. I'm alive," Emily insisted.

When Hannah turned to look at her lovely daughter, the tears fell faster. They'd fucked with her DNA!

Emily shrugged. "I'm a little different, but I'm alive. And that's what counts right?"

Hannah stared out at the dry Texas landscape, her deeds weighing heavily against her soul. "I should have refused to perform the experiments. I played God and this is my punishment."

Ramon slowed the vehicle and pulled off the side of the road. Grasping her chin in his hand, he turned Hannah to face him. "If you hadn't done what they demanded, would your daughter be alive today?"

She shook her head. He used the same arguments she'd used when she'd gone to ask for his help—the same rationale she'd used when she'd altered human genes to become animals. Another glance back at her daughter made her feel as if someone was stabbing her heart, it hurt so badly.

"Is the problem that you can't accept me for what I am?" Emily leaned over the back of the seat, her hand resting on Hannah's shoulder. "Is that it? Will you hate what I've become?"

"No, baby." She grasped her daughter's hand. "I could never hate you. I love you more than life."

"She shanghaied me into helping in this rescue, at great risk to herself." Ramon smiled at Emily. "I'd say that's proof enough."

"Then don't be sad," Emily said, smoothing the hair back from Hannah's forehead. "I can't stand to see you like this."

"I'm just sorry it had to happen to you. I wanted so much for you. A life, a family, love someday."

Emily squeezed her hand. "Who's to say I can't have all that still?"

Ramon's gaze met Hannah's. "She's right. Who's to say she can't have all that?"

What was he trying to say? Was she trying to read more into Ramon's words than what she heard on the surface? Did he want her in his life? Had he learned to trust her? Hannah's head spun with hope and the possibilities. Then she fell back to the earth. *Get a grip, girl. He's just trying to help you fix things with your daughter.* "You're right, honey,"

Hannah said, though her gaze never left Ramon. "With the right man, you can have all that."

"I know, Mom. You were the one I was trying to convince. Frankly, I think it's kinda cool to be part human and part animal. I've always wanted a fur coat but never wanted to kill an animal to get it."

Laughter bubbled up inside Hannah and she shot a twisted smile at her daughter. "I can count on you to look at the bright side."

"Yeah, I learned it from my mother." Emily glanced ahead. "Now, what are we going to do to shut down Genetic Research Institute?"

"You two aren't doing anything," Ramon said, his mouth firming into a line. "I'm dropping you off in Austin and going on without you."

The hope she'd felt a few moments early crashed around Hannah's ears. He'd had no intention of continuing on with her.

"Like hell you are!" Emily leaned over the back of the seat. "We're going."

Emily's declaration shocked Hannah out of her quickly growing depression. She'd just gotten her daughter back, she didn't want to lose her all over again. "Maybe Ramon's right. We aren't trained to launch an attack on Hell Hospital."

"I don't care," Emily said, crossing her arms over her chest. "I want to be a part of taking them down. I want to be there when Hell Hospital burns to the ground."

The more Hannah thought about it, the more she agreed with Emily. Her daughter was old enough and had endured enough to make her own decisions. When she opened her mouth to protest Ramon's edict, she halted when he raised his hand.

"It's not up for discussion." True to his word, Ramon refused to discuss his decision all the way to Austin where he left them standing in the parking lot of a transport rental company.

After all they had been through together, and the incredible sex they'd had, Hannah couldn't believe he'd just drop them off and leave. For all she knew, she'd never see

him again and that made her saddest of all. A knot formed in her throat, choking off any final goodbyes as she stared after his vehicle speeding out of sight. Even though she had her daughter back, her life still felt empty without Ramon.

“So, what’s it to be?” Emily asked. “Are we going after him?”

The drive to Southwestern Texas was long and lonely, especially since he’d left Hannah in Austin. He missed her more than he cared to admit. But she’d gotten what she’d been after. Emily. Not a small child, but still her daughter and someone she loved very much. How would it feel to be loved like that?

He didn’t know and probably never would. Now that he was part man and part beast, he might never know that kind of love. What woman would accept him if she knew?

Hannah would accept him. Although she’d been heartbroken by her daughter’s transformation, she still accepted and loved her. Nothing could ever change their connection.

Then why was he, Ramon Osceola, confirmed bachelor and loner, dreaming of happily-ever-after? Even if he hadn’t been a mutant, he wouldn’t have wanted a woman permanently ensconced in his life. Hadn’t he worked hard at discouraging commitment?

Absolutely!

Until Hannah. Her fierce love and sexy curves wouldn’t quit clogging his brain. He couldn’t think without a memory of Hannah taking root in every thought. Her honey blonde hair, pale, silky skin and her ability to love so deeply had slipped beneath his defenses. Now all he wanted was to go back and claim her as his own.

Deep inside the foothills of the Davis Mountains, Ramon knew he couldn’t go back until he’d done what he came to do. Hell Hospital had to come down. After he accomplished that, he might just go back to Austin and look her up. If she was still there.

Fuck!

He slammed his palm on the steering yoke, sending the transport skidding sideways. He hadn't made any arrangements to meet with her. He had no idea where to find her.

Fuck!

With his heart firmly lodged in the pit of his belly, eating a hole through his gut, he pulled into the Last Watering Hole, the combination bar and filling station Hannah had mentioned as the place to stop before he ventured into the Davis Mountains to Hell Hospital.

He'd rather go on, but his mouth was dry and he needed to load up on food and water in case he ended up hiking the rest of the way to his destination.

When he stepped into the shadowy bar, a familiar scent crowded his senses overwhelming him with memories of the cells back in Hell Hospital. Not the smell of Dr. Hannah Richards, but the smell of another. A tall blond-haired man Ramon had never seen before in his life, stood next to the bar, his hand holding a drink frozen midway to his mouth. The glass slipped from his fingers and crashed to the floor, shattering into wicked shards, the liquid spewing across the concrete floor.

"Hey, buddy, that'll cost you," the bartender shouted.

The man didn't answer, instead he stared at Ramon, his head tipping upward slightly and his nostrils flaring as he sniffed the air. "I know you, don't I?"

Ramon nodded without thinking and sniffed. "Yeah."

A man walked in behind him and the same sense of recognition struck Ramon. He spun to face the new arrival, his heart pounding against his rib cage. What the fuck?

The new arrival, a shorter man with dark brown hair and olive-toned skin, stopped in his tracks and stared from Ramon to the man at the bar and back to Ramon. "What's going on?" he asked, his brows dipping toward his nose.

"I don't know, but maybe we better take it outside," the man at the bar suggested.

A creepy feeling slithered across Ramon's skin, the tingle of transformation threatening to launch inside him. He fought back the change and led the way back out into the ovenlike heat of late afternoon in South Texas.

As he stepped out into the sunshine, a transport skidded to a halt in front of them.

Emily leaped from the passenger seat, a grin spreading across her face. "You can't stop us from helping, you know. As soon as you left us, Mom and I rented another transport and here we are!"

He'd never been happier to see someone as when Hannah climbed out of the vehicle, her gaze locking with his, no smile on her lips, her eyes wide and concerned.

With the two men emerging from the building behind him and the two women standing in front of him, Ramon was struck with the feeling something big was happening.

But first things first, he wanted Hannah in his arms.

As if sensing his need, she moved forward, falling into his arms, kissing his face as if they hadn't seen each other in a long, long time, not just half a day.

"I didn't think you'd be happy to see me," she said, laughing and crying at the same time.

"I forgot to get your communication link for when this was all over," he said. "I'm glad you came. I never realized how much I could miss you."

"Me too." She rested her forehead against his chest and took a deep breath. "We wouldn't let you go back in there without help. We care about you." She inhaled a deep breath and let it out. "I care about you. I couldn't bear the thought of you going in alone."

"We didn't have to worry about it," Emily said.

Suddenly remembering the young woman beside them, Ramon stared across at Emily. "What do you mean?"

Emily sniffed the air and nodded to the men standing behind him.

Hannah shot a glance at her daughter and then peered around Ramon, her breath catching in a gasp. "Emily's right. I believe the cavalry have arrived."

The End

About the Author

I've written for Ellora's Cave since September of 2006 when my first release *Trouble with Harry* came out. Since then, I've expanded from reluctant genies to werewolves, chameleons, vampires and witches. For me, reading and writing gives me the freedom to explore strange new worlds and write the characters and creatures clamoring to escape my mind. I like writing everything from romantic comedy to dark and sexy suspense. Mostly I like to escape into other worlds whether grounded in reality or complete fantasy. Come...escape with me!

Myla welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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