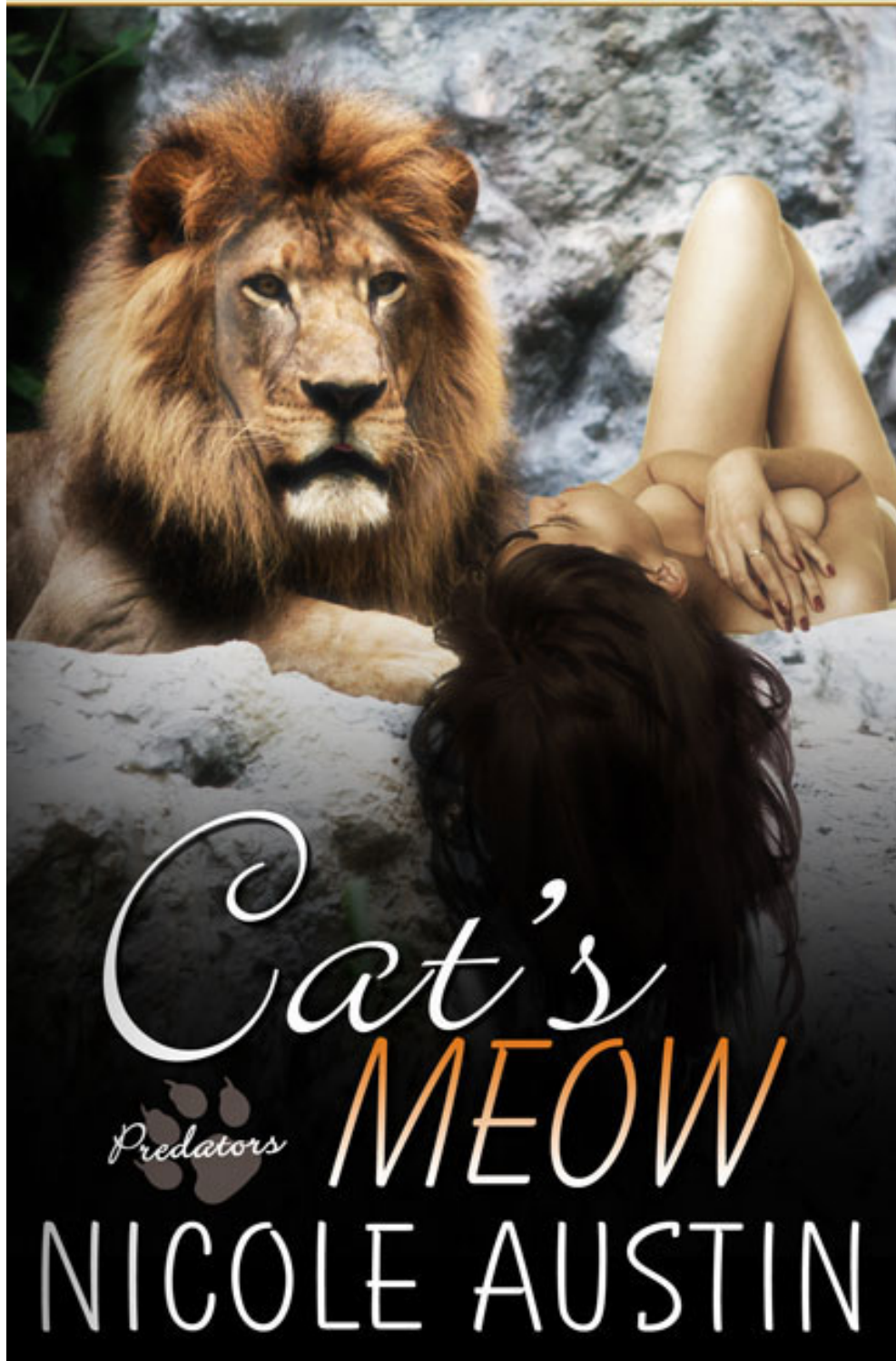


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Cat's Meow

Nicole Austin

Predators, Book One

Micah Lasiter won't let age or physical wear and tear slow him down. Presented with the chance to be stronger than ever before, he doesn't hesitate to join the Predator Project—not that refusing is an option. Too bad nobody warned him about the possible side effects.

Dr. Rebecca Southerby works with cats. Big cats. She's not sure why a scientific research organization wants a zoologist on staff but the great perks make it easy to overlook a few peculiarities. What's shocking is finding her one-night stand at the secret lab and discovering how much he's changed.

Ensnared in a strange new reality, they'll have to work together to bring down the corrupt organization and untangle a web of secrets with the power to either bind them together—or kill them.

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Cat's Meow

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CAT'S MEOW

Nicole Austin

Dedication

To Annmarie McKenna, without whom this story would have crashed and burned.

And to Candy, the first person to read everything I write. Thanks for keeping me from falling into those big fat scary plot holes.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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Superman: DC Comics

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Chapter One

"We hope to have a table for you in about thirty minutes, Mr. Lasiter."

The perky blonde hostess flashed a bright smile, taking a bit of the sting out of the message, and held out one of those pagers shaped like a drink coaster.

"You're welcome to wait in the lounge if you'd like to have a cocktail."

Micah took a cleansing breath and tried not to take out his frustration on the hostess, who was only doing her job. "Thanks, that sounds good."

He rubbed the stiff muscles in his neck and waited for his vision to adjust before glancing around the dimly lit, jam-packed bar for an empty seat. A long wait to have dinner alone topped off his horrendous day. He'd started with a vigorous predawn workout, followed by one hell of a tedious business meeting and a miserable cross-country flight.

I'm getting too old for this shit!

Thirty-five was hardly ancient, but he'd packed a lot of hard living into those years and had the physical scars to prove it.

A rather intoxicated man vacated a stool toward the end of the long bar and staggered from the room while muttering under his breath. Micah made a beeline for the open chair and sat down next to a tiny brunette, dropping his pager next to hers on the bar. "Mind if I join you?"

The woman studied him for a moment then grabbed his arm in a death grip. "Oh thank goodness, yes! Please." Big moss green eyes sparkled up at him and she sighed in relief. "How about you keep that drunk away and I'll pay for your dinner? I can't bear another moment of the idiot groping me."

A powerful surge of protectiveness came over him. His spine stiffened and Micah turned, intent on going after the fool. The instinct was ingrained from years in the military and working security, but he didn't view it as doing his duty. He'd always felt protective toward women.

"No! Don't go." She sat straighter, squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. Firm, determined and strong.

Micah's gaze trailed over her petite frame. Narrow shoulders, small breasts and waist, slightly flared hips. She had a delicate, angular face, pert nose. By far, her best features were those beautiful green eyes that missed nothing and her genuine smile. Not the classic definition of a beauty, he thought she was pretty. And there was a certain indefinable quality that drew his interest.

"You look respectable...and sober. I don't think he'll come back, but I'd feel better with you sitting here in case he does."

He swiveled to face her and extended a hand. "Micah Lasiter, barroom white knight at your service."

Her musical laughter sent a shiver of awareness zinging from one nerve ending to the next. She placed her hand within his for a surprisingly firm shake. The instant their skin touched his blood heated, surging through his veins and heading straight for his cock, which jerked to full attention behind his zipper.

What the fuck?

The sudden corporeal response threw him off balance. She wasn't anywhere close to his type—tall, blonde and easy. He didn't go for brainy, complicated women. Too much work. With her hair pulled back in a simple chignon and practical business attire, she appeared prim and proper—a lady.

Ladies never went for him.

"Rebecca Southerby, distressed traveler."

Micah felt dizzy as she turned the full power of that megawatt smile on him. Then he did the most confounding thing. He gave a slight bow, brushed his lips across her knuckles and breathed her in, intoxicated by her warm cinnamon-and-honey scent.

With obvious reluctance, she drew her hand away to trace the rim of her wineglass, gaze downcast, focused on the task. The shy response balanced out her bold strength and was damn sexy.

Signaling the bartender, he ordered a scotch. She enchanted him and Micah wasn't going to watch her slip through his fingers. Not before he investigated this bewildering attraction. He pretended to misunderstand her offer to pay for his meal and took control of the encounter. She was his...for the night. Or part of it anyway. "Would you like a refill while we wait for *our* table, Becca?"

His words had an immediate effect. Honest pleasure lit up her sweet, pixie face, transforming her from stuffy businesswoman into an exquisite beauty. Her eyes sparkled, her lips spread into a dazzling smile and an appealing pink blush spread across her cheeks. When was the last time he'd seen a woman blush? He couldn't remember.

She must see something in him too because she'd put her faith in him, asked for his protection. He sensed a fiery spirit at her core. Intrigued by the enigmatic woman, he was unable to resist the challenge she presented.

* * * * *

"You are a very cunning linguist."

Catching only part of what her unlikely savior said, Rebecca's gaze snapped from the pager, which had started flashing red lights and vibrating, to Micah. She studied his calm expression and shook her head.

He did not just say something about cunnilingus.

No, she had to be mistaken. Or perhaps it was a case of wishful thinking. "You're not so bad yourself."

He'd been a perfect gentleman for the short time they'd been talking, damn him. From the first moment he'd sat down her heart had beat faster. She wanted him, badly. Her ploy of being the timid damsel in distress had worked to keep him close, giving her a chance to be certain he was worth her attention.

Micah rose and extended a hand to help her down from the tall barstool then offered his arm as they walked to the dining room, where he held out the chair and seated her. His good manners impressed her, but he seemed to be holding back. The subtle flirting didn't tell her if he shared the strong, sexual pull exciting her.

She wanted him to feel it. To be turned-on. To want her as much as she wanted him.

Rebecca overlooked the fact that she had not invited him to join her for dinner. All she'd offered was to pay for his meal in exchange for protection from the touchy-feely drunk. At first, anyway. But once they had started talking, she found him to be fascinating and didn't want their time together to end. Not that soon. Not before she got to know him.

Yeah, and it's such a hardship looking at him too! She almost snorted.

There were no words to do him justice. Tall, fit and muscular, more than handsome, but not quite up to the Hollywood standards of gorgeous pretty boys. His long, dark blond hair tied behind his neck added to the severity of harsh features in a face full of character. There was stark menace in brown eyes that missed nothing, implacable resolve in the hard line of his jaw. While his sexy lips were very kissable, she felt certain they could turn vicious under the right conditions.

Beneath the façade of cultivated charm lurked dark shadows he kept hidden from polite society. She sensed an affinity for action and risk. The suit he wore, tailored to his tall, powerful frame, felt wrong. He was no desk jockey.

She had grown up around military men and had no problem spotting one. It was easy to picture him in fatigues, heavily armed, making his way through a jungle. Strong, intense and aggressive. Rambo times ten. Or better yet, in a white billowy shirt, tight pants and boots, brandishing a sword.

"Now what's brought that naughty smile to your pretty lips? Thinking about me?"

Ah ha. There's the bad boy she'd sensed lurking. The kind of arrogant guy who went for shallow beauty and stayed far away from intelligent women like herself.

She decided to test the theory. "Just calculating quadratic equations in my head."

His robust laughter turned her insides to mush. "Need a calculator?"

A sense of humor and not afraid to use it. Nice. She intimidated most men, but Micah was proving to be a delightful exception to the rules. Perhaps there was more beneath the exterior than she'd thought.

Sure, he oozed charisma and sex appeal. Their waitress salivated over him and thrust her fake breasts in his face at every opportunity. Micah remained polite and ignored the blatant flirtation. In fact, she was impressed. Not once had his gaze wandered to the waitress's more than ample cleavage.

"Is there a boyfriend or husband waiting at home?"

For her? That would require having a life outside work. She shook her head.

"What's brought you to Asheville, business? Family?"

"A job interview."

"Really? What do you do?"

"I'm a zoologist. My studies are focused on Felidae—big cats." Her life was boring. She'd much rather talk about him. "What about you?"

"I'm in town for an art show."

Rebecca laughed then coughed, nearly choking on the sip of wine she'd just taken. She didn't buy his answer even before she caught the devilish sparkle in his eyes, belaying the serious expression.

"What, I don't look artsy to you?" He appeared offended.

A crack in the veneer? Interesting. Perhaps even men of steel require reassurance once in a while. "Somehow I can't imagine you having the patience for artistic pursuits."

Micah appeared relaxed as he took a sip of his drink then leaned back in the chair. He didn't fool her. The piercing intensity in his dark eyes told a different story. What she thought of him mattered a great deal to Micah.

"I can be very patient. Want to try me?"

The sexual implication in the simple statement sent tingles racing along her spine.

"How do you see me, Becca?"

His deep, sensual voice flowed over her, heating Rebecca's blood. Their conversation was rife with double entendres, a subtle and skillful mental seduction stimulating her intellect. But the way his hungry gaze devoured her brought new meaning to their playful banter.

The sexual tension that had built between them soared. His expression told her the time for teasing had ended. Awareness spread through her, awakening her body. Her breasts were swollen and heavy. Too bad she'd taken off her suit jacket earlier. Her taut, aching nipples had surely become visible through the thin silk blouse she wore, an indication of her arousal he couldn't miss.

Her head spun and she said the first thing that came to mind. "You're a swashbuckler—a pirate captain."

She wanted to recall the words as soon as they left her mouth. It had to be the wine loosening her tongue since Rebecca did not often imbibe. She had a strong aversion to feeling altered and losing control.

Emboldened when he didn't laugh, she went into vivid detail. "You're supremely confident, larger than life. You buck convention, living by your own rules and code of conduct. Freedom and being in command are your ultimate goals. You're brave, a mysterious renegade with an insatiable lust for life. A total scoundrel, pillaging and plundering women, stealing the hearts of those who are turned-on by the danger you represent."

He remained silent when she stopped speaking and Rebecca bit back a groan. *You idiot. Now he'll make a hasty retreat.*

Micah's unwavering gaze was disconcerting. He made her antsy, but she refused to turn away as he studied her for several long moments.

"Your tone and attitude give the impression you're afraid. That you dislike what I make you feel," Micah stated.

She narrowed her gaze, wondering how he'd come to such an outrageous conclusion. So what if she was leery of the unaccustomed arousal bombarding her. The man made her long for hot, sweaty sex and screaming orgasms. For all the good it would do him. She wasn't a one-night stand kind of woman.

He leaned over the small table, encroaching on her personal space until they were almost nose to nose. Getting way too close for her good intentions to remain intact. She wanted to thread her fingers through his thick hair and feel Micah's lips on hers.

"Your body is sending a very different message."

She figured the weighty, knowing stare was an attempt to intimidate. Her spine stiffened. She would not be the one to avert her eyes or pull back. Not going to happen even though she knew he was baiting her, waiting for a reaction.

"You want me."

Then again, why hold back? She hated games and preferred to make sure people knew where they stood with her. "You're right. I was wrong. You're no pirate. You're an arrogant ass!"

Tossing her napkin on the table, she started to rise. Micah's hand shot out, strong fingers encircled her wrist in a solid but loose grasp, shackling her.

"No, it's my turn and I'm not finished yet."

Oh, great. She couldn't wait to hear more. This should be hilarious. Hurtful words from the past raced through her mind. *Uptight...prudish...cold.*

She settled on the edge of the chair, ready to bolt. Micah didn't release her. His thumb stroked her inner wrist, slow and gentle, making her pulse race. His voice dropped to a low and provocative whisper.

"Nice speech. Too bad it's not how you really feel. Your body tells me you want me." Micah held her securely when she tried to pull away.

"Your eyelids are at half-mast and your pupils are dilated, looking up at me from under those thick lashes. Your cheeks have turned the most enticing shade of pink and are flushed with desire. Even now, your shoulders are pulled back but you're leaning in toward me and restlessly rubbing your legs together."

Rebecca made a conscious effort to still her movements, but she'd given too much away. Micah was right. The light touch of his fingers on her wrist wasn't anywhere near enough. She was desperate for more.

"You're breathing fast and shallow. A blind man wouldn't miss your beaded nipples lit up like headlights, aching to be touched. Those beautiful, pouty lips are parted. I'm sure you're not even aware of how often the tip of your tongue has slipped out to lick them."

Rebecca worried her bottom lip between her teeth and he sucked in a harsh breath. He read her as if she were an open book, laid bare for his examination.

"Damn, baby. That's so fucking sexy. You've got me so hard. I can't stop picturing your mouth stretched wide around my cock."

Their waitress rudely dropped the check folder near their joined hands. Dismissing Rebecca's presence, the girl addressed Micah in one last-ditch attempt to gain his attention. His gaze never wavered from Rebecca's.

"If you're sure there's nothing else you want, I'll take that to the cashier when you're ready."

He released Rebecca long enough to toss some money on the table then moved around to her chair and held out his hand.

"Are you ready?"

If she passed up a night in his arms, she'd spend the rest of her life kicking herself.

Rebecca tossed caution to the wind and seized the opportunity. One night of hot, reckless abandon before returning to her real life. For one night, she could set aside years of discipline and ironclad control. Give in and experience true passion.

She nodded. "Oh yes."

She was more than ready.

Chapter Two

Throughout the evening he had caught glimpses of the fiery passion Rebecca kept locked up tight, covered by the pretense of a prim and serious businesswoman. But the second he kicked the hotel room door closed and they were alone the protective smoke screen surrounding Rebecca Southerby evaporated, along with his plans for a sophisticated seduction.

While she may be a lady in public, it turned out that in private she was every red-blooded man's wet dream—a sexual siren.

She pulled the pins from her dark hair and shook her head, sending a riot of silken waves tumbling to her waist. With her hair down the lights revealed hints of red and gold he hadn't noticed before.

Micah sucked in a harsh breath as in one graceful glide, she dropped to her knees. Watching him from beneath thick lashes, Becca licked her lips and reached for his pants. His belt buckle offered no resistance to deft fingers. A flick of her wrist opened the fastener then she tugged on the zipper.

A feminine hum of appreciation as she dragged the material down his legs made his cock jerk against the confinement of his boxer-briefs. Following her lead, he lifted one foot, then the other, and she slipped off his shoes.

Short, manicured nails scraped a light, tingling path over his legs. When she reached his hips, she paused and leaned forward, pressing soft lips to his cloth-covered erection. The stream of warm air heated his entire body, a fine sheen of sweat breaking out on his skin.

"Jesus, baby!"

The carnal grin that spread across her red lips had his knees shaking. Her fingers slid under the waistband and she pulled the soft cotton over his hips. Eager for more of

her attention, his cock bobbed and a slick pearl of cum beaded at the slit. Slender fingers encircled his shaft, rasped over sensitive flesh as she stroked from base to crown, finally breaking eye contact to take a good, long look at his cock.

"I'm so hungry," she whispered.

God yes!

Taking his balls into her other palm, she rolled the taut sac and continued the slow strokes along his shaft. He longed to bury his fists in her hair, directing her mouth to his needy flesh. Through sheer force of will, he held the urge in check, fisting his hands at his sides instead. As her hot tongue trailed along an engorged vein he couldn't prevent the involuntary thrust of his hips. Her soft lips and tongue glided over his length, kissing and licking. Fingers touching. Destroying him.

Perspiration slicked his body, which shook in anticipation as her mobile mouth moved higher, her tongue tracing a scorching path around the sensitive ridge. She lapped at the underside of the crown and he moaned, causing her to focus on the responsive spot. His legs almost gave out as she nipped at the tender spot. Her tongue snaked out to ease the slight pain then delved into his slit.

"Sweet Jesus." His breathing turned rough, choppy.

She had yet to take him into her mouth and the torment was killing him. He certainly hadn't expected she'd be so uninhibited and skilled. Micah didn't know how much more excruciating pleasure he could take. Slickened with her saliva, the cool air in the room added to the amazing sensations. The wicked temptress laughed as he struggled just to breathe. Hungry green eyes watched him as her pouty lips hovered over the tip of his cock. After what was surely an eternity, her lips slowly parted and descended.

Unable to take any more visual stimulus, Micah banged his head against the door and his eyes rolled upward to stare at the plain white ceiling. He found the view safer for his sanity, right up until she sucked him into the silken heat of her mouth.

"Oh Christ, baby."

Unhurried, she suckled the head. Her wicked tongue flicked at the explosive area she'd discovered earlier and Micah came close to detonating. His balls tensed against her palm as a damp finger slid along his perineum. She sucked him deeper and mumbled, creating vibrations that surged through him.

His restraint snapped. Micah's fingers delved into her lustrous hair, flexing and clenching against her scalp. With her firm breasts and torso pressed tight against his thighs, he felt the sensual shivers racking her slender frame.

Good, she was as affected as him.

Her greedy mouth consumed him, tongue lashing his flesh as her lips tightened. Becca sucked hard and took him to the back of her throat.

"Fuck yeah, baby. Take it all." His strained voice sounded raspy.

She didn't fall into a predictable rhythm, keeping him on edge by changing her motions often. One moment she massaged his balls and her lips slowly dragged over his length. The next she plunged fast, swallowing around the head of his cock and twisting her fingers at the base.

He stared down at her, panting and thrusting his hips, concentrating to keep his fingers loose in her hair, following her lead instead of trying to direct her movements.

"Becca—" he warned. "I'm close."

She hollowed her cheeks, sucked his cock with voracious hunger. That damn finger slid farther back, circled his anus. When her fingertip breached the tight pucker he was history. His balls clenched and sizzling-hot jets of cum surged through his cock.

Her throat convulsed, drawing out his climax. She drank him down and then licked him all over, searching out every last drop before finally releasing his spent flesh.

Jesus! She'd sucked the very breath from his lungs. He couldn't breathe, couldn't move. He felt weak as a baby and barely managed to keep himself from sliding down the door.

Wow, now that was hot!

And what an ego boost. It sure explained why some women loved giving blowjobs. Rebecca had never felt more powerful or sure of her sexual prowess. She was almost giddy.

Her previous lovers hadn't brought out this side of her personality. She hadn't even known it existed, regardless of her vivid fantasies. Imagine that, she had an inner porno babe who'd been waiting thirty-two years for someone to set her free.

Ouch! There was a downside though. Her knees ached from kneeling for so long. Probably had indentations from the carpet in her skin too. This inner-slut thing may not be all it's cracked up to be. And she had no idea of proper post-blowjob etiquette. What was she supposed to do now?

She glanced up at Micah. He looked like a sprinter after running a marathon—sweaty and ready to collapse. Although still a rather impressive size, his cock had deflated and hung limp along his leg while her body hummed with sexual want. Her nipples ached, her clit throbbed and slick arousal coated her thighs.

She needed to fuck!

Typical damn man. All that mattered was he'd gotten his rocks off. Now he'd crawl into bed, go to sleep and snore louder than a chain saw, leaving her to her own devices.

What a buzz kill.

Rebecca used a nearby chair to steady herself as she rose. Sure enough, her knees bore an interesting pattern of red depressions from kneeling on the carpet. Lovely!

"Well, umm..." Damn, she had no idea what to say. So much for making a graceful exit. "This was...nice. I should be going. Got an early —"

"Going?" Micah frowned, his expression turned hard and uncompromising. "Nuh-uh, baby. We're just getting started. Don't shut down on me and hide all that fire again. All that passion."

She almost looked around to see who he was talking about. Fire and passion? Certainly he wasn't referring to her. She was a lab geek for crying out loud. But she needed...more.

"I didn't plan this very well. Didn't get my...er, you know...before you got yours. Now you're tired and spent—"

"Becca..."

She waited for him to finish but he hesitated. Perfect. For a minute she had thought things couldn't get any more awkward. She was wrong. Now he'd come up with all kinds of lame excuses she didn't want to hear.

"My name is Rebecca. Nobody calls me Becca." Or any other nickname. She was plain old boring Rebecca. Becca sounded too racy for her. Something a bolder woman would be called.

"Ah, baby." Micah pushed away from the door. "Haven't you figured it out yet?"

Obviously not. Voice stuck in her throat, Rebecca shook her head.

"I'm not like every other man you've known. We're far from finished."

Not finished? She liked the sound of that. A lot.

He moved closer. Really close. Until her breasts flattened against the hard planes of his chest and he cupped the side of her face in his huge hand. Of course, big hands went with a big body. Same as in the animal world with her cats—the bigger the paws, the bigger the kitty. That theory sure applied to other parts of his anatomy. Micah had the biggest, tastiest cock she'd ever had the pleasure of encountering.

Rebecca gave herself a mental shake, trying to clear her rapidly disintegrating train of thought.

"I'm different. I want to be more for you. Special for you. Your own pirate captain."

Oh wow. His eyes had darkened, appearing almost black and smoldering with lust. For her? Men looked at other women that way, but not her. Mousy Rebecca Southerby didn't draw sexual attention.

"You're a combination of Rambo and a pirate. I'm not sure what that would make you. Rambate maybe."

Micah's deep, throaty laughter went right to her core and gave a hard tug. Lord, she could get addicted to his laugh.

"I like that, *Becca*." She didn't miss the emphasis he put on the nickname. "I get to kick some ass Rambo-style and then make off with all the booty."

She returned his smile. This lighter, playful side of the man appealed to her. She doubted let his guard down often.

His arms skated down her side and around her back to grasp her butt. Micah's firm hold had her trembling with desire.

"You won't be left wanting, baby. You see, I plan on making you come." He squeezed her butt suggestively. "Several times." His head lowered and warm breath caressed that amazing spot behind her ear. "Multiple orgasms so strong you'll be hoarse from screaming my name."

He nibbled on her earlobe then bathed the tender flesh with his tongue.

"Again and again."

She shivered as he pressed soft kisses along the column of her throat.

"All night long."

Hell yeah!

She must be dreaming because Micah was too good to be true. A real fantasy come to life, in vivid color even.

Rebecca squealed in surprise as he picked her up and in three quick strides, tossed her onto the bed. Good thing too. His intense expression made her go weak in the knees.

In no time at all he'd divested Rebecca of her clothes. As he stood beside the bed to strip, she drank in the glorious sight.

She'd always thought laws against nudity in public were to protect the innocent from the trauma of seeing potbellies and saggy old people. Now she knew the truth. They were to prevent Micah Lasiter from causing public riots. It had to be illegal for a man to look so good!

The only men she'd ever seen who even came close had been on the pages of magazines. The ultimate in perfection. But Micah wasn't perfect. He'd worked his body hard. Various scars marred the landscape of ripped body covered by tanned skin. In her opinion, they enhanced his rugged sexiness.

His muscles had muscles, and in between were deeply carved indentations. A sensual roadmap Rebecca found she was hungry to explore. She wanted to let her fingers do the walking. To feel the difference in texture from the long mane of dark blond hair framing his face to the darker smattering over his chest, narrowing to a fine trail along his abdomen and becoming a lush nest at the base of his rejuvenated cock.

What the hell was a hunk like him doing in a hotel room with her? He'd climaxed, but he wanted to continue? Wanted to give her screaming orgasms all night long?

Yup, he was unique and should be prohibited for the sanity of womankind.

A rough growl rumbled from his broad chest, reminiscent of her babies. A member of the family Felidae in the genus *Panthera*, also known as one really large, non-domesticated cat. A carnivorous woman-eater. A jaguar or leopard. Perhaps a tiger.

No, those didn't fit.

Rebecca's gaze took in his big golden body and wavy mane of hair again. Micah brought to mind the most fearsome predator, the king of beasts – a lion.

As if proving her conclusion, he pounced on the bed, caging her beneath his larger body.

"I was wrong. You're neither Rambo nor a pirate. You're an animal."

"Mmm...yes." He leaned down and licked a nipple. She arched her back, thrusting the peak closer to his mouth. "A famished animal, hungry for a taste of you."

Micah proceeded to prove just how rapacious his appetite could get. After a long, slow, drugging kiss he attacked her body, emitting animalistic vocalizations as he feasted. Not one inch of skin was passed over. Lips, teeth and tongue tasted. Deft fingers stroked, teased and tweaked. He dominated her, using his weight to anchor her writhing body to the mattress, his strength to bend her to his will.

And she loved every second.

He sampled all except where she wanted him most. Her sex. Shameless, she writhed beneath him. Begged and pleaded with abandon. Micah would not deviate from his planned route.

When he finally settled between her legs, massive shoulders spreading her wide, her heightened level of arousal was almost painful. She nearly came with the first bold sweep of his tongue over her drenched folds but he held her on the edge, pulling back whenever she got close.

"Oh god. Please! I need..."

His tongue circled her entrance then plunged deep, rasping the quivering walls of her pussy. Her hips bucked, reaching for the orgasm that hovered just out of reach. Her channel clenched as he withdrew to circle her clitoris. The bundle of nerves spasmed and pulsed. All it would take was one firm stroke, but again he moved on.

"Fuck," she grumbled, frustrated beyond her normal restraint, reduced to cursing. "You bastard!"

"What, sweet baby?" he teased. "What do you need? Tell me, Becca."

Inhibitions be damned, her need to orgasm was far greater than any sense of propriety. If he wanted specifics, she'd give him explicit, in-your-face instructions.

"Suck my clit. Flick your tongue over it, fast. Fuck me with your fingers, hard. Three of them. And don't stop 'til I come."

Holy shit. Where had that come from? She was a completely different woman with him. Bold and brazen. Daring and free. And damn if she didn't like the new her.

While Micah may be all dominant alpha male, he was pretty damn good at following instructions. He held her clit captive between his teeth, his tongue flicking against the tip and his lips exerting glorious suction. At the same time, two thick fingers powered into her pussy. He twisted his wrist, added a third finger and homed in on the perfect spot where the stroke of his fingertips drove her wild.

Rebecca bucked, fucked his face, muttered incoherent praise. Her entire body tensed to the point only her heels and shoulder blades remained in contact with the mattress. Micah mumbled something, creating amazing vibrations that tore through her pelvis. She strained, grabbed for the prize, screaming his name as overwhelming pleasure exploded, ricocheting from one nerve ending to the next.

He didn't let her down. Micah kept the devastating sensations rolling, building the pressure until all she could do was surrender to the ecstasy. Dazed, she lost count of how many times she came, each peak higher than the last. And when she thought she could take no more, he proved her wrong. Repeatedly.

He gave her no chance to recover. Micah rolled on a condom, aligned his cock with her pussy and slammed forward. He filled her in one great thrust—stretched tender tissues to new limits—reached previously concealed and ignored pleasure centers. She felt full, whole. Blissed out beyond belief.

He took her hard and fast, then slow and deep, constantly changing the tempo. Just barely coming down from one peak he built her back up until she lost all concept of anything other than him. Finally, Micah brought her to one last stunning crest and followed in her wake.

They collapsed in total exhaustion and satiation only to wake a short time later. The slightest touch was all it took to reignite the passion and start all over again. He fucked her from behind then changed position so they both lay on their sides.

The next time she woke up he was carrying her to the bathroom. She'd never had shower sex but soapy bodies sure made for devilish fun. Hands sliding over sensitized skin. Slippery bodies moving in sync. It blew her mind.

For a magnificent finale, she took control and told Micah what she wanted. She got a heady rush from directing their play. She straddled his hips and rode his cock as if she were a rodeo queen, feeling powerful, sexy and beautiful in Micah's arms. He set her free and helped her to fly.

If only the night could last forever and they didn't have to return to their real lives in the morning.

* * * * *

Rebecca woke in the predawn hours held tight against the curve of Micah's body. One heavy arm was slung possessively over her waist, shackling her. Devastating her emotions. The sheets were tangled around them and the room reeked of hot and sweaty sex.

She wanted to stay with him. But she couldn't. Rebecca wasn't stupid. She knew the score. One-night stands did not turn into relationships. Unconscious loving behaviors displayed while asleep didn't equate to true sentiment. He appeared to have laid claim to her, but it wouldn't stand up to the light of day.

The night had been out of character for her. They were opposites and while opposites attract, they also repel. Micah was a man of action, the kind of guy who wouldn't go for long-term relationships. If he did, he would go for beautiful arm candy, not a socially inept science nerd.

She didn't do casual sex, with this night being her one exception to the rule. When she picked a man for the long haul, it would be someone with similar interests. Even though she'd been assertive in bed, she didn't have enough confidence in herself as a woman to believe she could hold the interest of a man like him.

Quiet as a mouse, she slipped from the bed, trying not to moan over all the aches and pains in muscles that had never received such a vigorous workout. He reached out and a pang of regret pierced her heart. If only they could form a lasting bond from their very brief time together.

The realist in Rebecca shook off the destructive thoughts. Lust and mind-blowing sex did not equate to love.

She had to fight not to giggle upon spotting the numerous discarded condom wrappers littering the floor. They'd made some great memories. Ones she'd cherish and hold close on cold nights.

Dressing in the rumpled clothes, feeling sticky and longing for another shower, she brushed a light kiss across his forehead. Then Rebecca did what had to be done. She walked away, closing the door on one of the most exciting chapters in her life.

Chapter Three

“Not yet. Wait for it,” Micah instructed.

Rubbing at his temples, he struggled to concentrate on his job and clear the erotic images from his mind. Two weeks had passed since his night in Asheville. Fourteen hellish days of torment. More than twenty-thousand minutes—not one of them free from thoughts of her. She filled his mind every moment while awake and invaded his dreams when he managed to sleep.

Dr. Rebecca Southerby, the one who’d gotten away. Not that he was unable to go after her. Finding her had been child’s play. He knew where she lived, worked and spent her free time. He knew lots of facts and figures but longed to know her more intimately. Investigating her background was part of his job since she’d applied for a position at Nanotech Industries, the company where he worked as head of security. Strong work ethics had kept him from using what he’d learned to contact her.

“Hold your positions,” Micah ordered. “He has to leave the building or the charges won’t stick.”

“Suspect’s reached the security scanners,” Simpson stated. The competent security specialist was on the ball, staying almost a step ahead. “Silence the alarms.”

During the break in action, Micah’s mind wandered back to Becca. Intimate details haunted him. Facts impossible to know without having slept with her. Facts he couldn’t forget once he had. Little things, like how her hair smelled of warm cinnamon, her skin of sweet honey. Amazing details such as the musky, slightly spicy flavor of her arousal. The explosive passion hidden beneath layers of respectability.

Rebecca had shoved her sexuality so deep he doubted she’d known it existed before they met. He’d noticed it from the start. It was in every sensual move she made, the

subtle innuendo and veiled meaning in how she phrased things. And soon as he'd gotten her alone, the potency of her innate eroticism had blown him away.

"Suspect's almost to the doors. Ten feet, eight..."

Rawlins' countdown echoed in Micah's earpiece, the security guard's voice cutting through his wayward thoughts. He had to stop thinking about her. Stop fantasizing and replaying every sizzling moment in his mind.

"Five, four —"

"Hang on," Simpson interrupted. "Suspect is stopping."

Damn it! Get your fucking head on straight and in the game before you fuck this up!

"What's happening?" Micah spoke into the microphone concealed by the cuff of his shirtsleeve.

"He's set down the package," Rawlins informed. "Hand's in his pocket. He's pulling out —"

"It's a cell phone." This from Gardner in the security room. "Locking on to the signal. Give me a sec."

After a few tense minutes and several electronic clicks, the ongoing conversation echoed over their com link.

"Stop boring me with the details of your job and answer the question. Do you have it?"

"Yes."

"Good. A black SUV will meet you at the entrance to the parking garage."

"What about the money?"

"Once you hand over the formula, the funds will be transferred to your account. We've already been over this. Stop stalling."

"Fine."

As the conversation ended, Rawlins resumed his countdown. Micah forced his wayward thoughts to the back of his mind and watched for the suspect from across the

courtyard. Industrial security didn't offer the same thrill for him as serving a decade of covert ops in the Army had, but he enjoyed his work. Scientific research was a highly competitive field full of spies who would bribe, coerce and steal in order to gain an advantage.

Case in point, the weasel was willing to sell his employer's new technology. A look at his financial records spoke volumes. His wife's lavish spending habits had gotten them deep in debt. Now he risked his career and even his life for money. Micah had no sympathy for the idiot.

What did bother him about the whole thing was the weasel in question had been in daily contact with Dr. Rebecca Southerby. And the organization was in the process of courting her for a top-secret project. Not even Micah knew details of what her job would involve.

He didn't want to believe the sweet and demure woman he'd shared a night with could be wrapped up in theft. The sad truth was she appeared to be in this mess up right up to those big green eyes.

"Suspect is on the move. He's cleared the doors."

"I've got him," Micah said. "Move in."

Either the weasel sensed the impending danger or something tipped him off. Whatever the reason, he started to run.

"Suspect's gone rabbit." Micah began issuing orders rapid-fire, while racing after the target. "Donovan and Moore, seal off all exits. Hendry, isolate all known associates. Don't lose him, Gardner."

"Got him, boss," Gardner replied. "Pick-up vehicle has rolled up to the southwest gate."

"I'm on the suspect. The rest of you converge on the garage. I want whoever is in that vehicle. Lethal force is *not* authorized. Take 'em down, but make sure they'll still be able to answer questions."

Taser in hand, Micah hurtled decorative planters and dodged employees outside enjoying their lunch breaks. He had no trouble closing in on the suspect, a pasty, out-of-shape researcher who spent most of his time working with his mind while neglecting his body.

Seeing the team converge on the SUV, the suspect turned and headed toward the nearby forest surrounding the facility, probably hoping to lose his pursuers in the dense foliage. There wasn't a chance in hell of Micah letting that happen.

"He's headed for the trees."

And Micah was the only one close. Putting on a burst of speed fueled by the adrenaline of the chase, his legs ate up the ground between them, and he gained on the weasel.

Almost there.

He went down, hard. His foot caught in a hole, wrenching his ankle. Micah landed flat on his face and left knee with excruciating darts of pain shooting through his leg.

"Fuck, I'm down. Suspect's in the woods. Call in local law enforcement."

* * * * *

"Where the hell am I?"

"Relax, Mr. Lasiter. We'll be there soon."

Micah got the hazy impression of a face hovering over him then it disappeared before he could focus on the image.

"There"? Where the fuck is "there"?

He tried to reach up and rub his temple but his hands didn't work right. They were sluggish, unresponsive. And what was wrong with his eyes? Everything looked fuzzy and surreal. Detached.

He detected movement, saw flashes of green trees through a dark-tinted window. Heard the hum of tires on asphalt.

The darkness at the edges of his vision closed in. Someone spoke but he didn't understand the garbled words.

* * * * *

Micah's body jerked. His brain struggled to process the information his senses took in. White walls, beeping instruments, numbness in his legs, his left arm freezing cold from the IV fluids.

Oh shit!

They'd operated again. How many surgeries did that make? Three or was it four? He'd lost count. The anesthesia messed him up, and whatever other drugs they pumped into him fragmented his memories. He wasn't sure how much time had gone by since he'd blown out his knee.

"Ah, you're awake. Good!"

He knew that voice. Micah rolled his head to the side to find the head of Nanotech, Gabriel Weltman, sitting in a chair next to the stretcher he lay on.

"You have decisions to make, Micah. With extensive therapy, you may be able to walk again...one day."

He caught some of the words but not all. Stuff about shattered bone and inability to restore function. Enough to understand he was royally screwed.

"There is another way. We've made great strides with our recombinant DNA and gene-manipulation research. There's a procedure our scientists have perfected. The Predator Project."

Weltman rattled off a bunch of scientific stuff that went way over Micah's head.

"We can make you strong again. Stronger than ever. The intended application is military in nature. We believe you are the perfect candidate. Your DNA would be altered, infused with *Panthera leo*."

Panther what?

Certain words rattled and echoed around in his head. *Stronger than ever. Able to keep working. Top-secret program.*

Micah grasped two important facts. The Predator Project would prevent him from being an invalid. He'd have a second chance. But something wasn't right since he'd never heard of the project before. From the little he knew about research, it sounded as if they'd broken some laws, maybe done things that circumvented moral and ethical standards for experimentation.

And he no longer had an out. Now that Weltman had shared this information, Micah had to either keep quiet and reap the benefits or blow the whistle, which would probably get him killed. Weltman couldn't let him walk—or limp—away. Turning this down would be signing his death certificate. He no longer had a choice.

"Do it!"

* * * * *

What the fuck have I done?

Damn, had they ever done it. They'd infused him with animal DNA, performed more operations to help his body accept the new genetic soup. Stuck him with needles, poked and prodded. Then they became afraid of their own creation, shoved him in a cage, locked up behind steel bars. Security cameras watched him every moment, studying him as though he were an animal in the zoo.

Confused, strapped to an exam table, helpless and in pain, Micah endured the researchers torturing his abusing and battered body. Angry and frightened, he felt something elemental within him begin to shift, an altering of reality.

Glass shattered, pulling Micah from his confused thoughts.

"Oh god."

A nervous female technician had dropped a vial and one of the scientists yelled at her. In his rage, the man lashed out at the woman, striking her face.

"Leave her alone," Micah demanded. The scientist ignored him.

He fought the restraints to no avail as the woman was slammed against the wall and slapped until she dropped to the ground. It brought back vile memories from his childhood.

Rage blasted him, heating Micah's blood. His body jerked, snapped the bindings and changed. In the blink of an eye his world reshaped. Antiseptic scents assaulted his nostrils, creating blinding pain in his head. His vision sharpened, turned to shades of black and white. He felt strong and had a powerful urge to stalk and hunt.

Shrill screams pierced his skull and made his temples ache. He shook his head in an effort to ease the pain, relieved when the horrible sound ended. The rapid pounding of feet brought his attention to the doorway as men rushed into the room. One of the men drew a weapon and Micah dodged behind a table.

A piercing burn slammed into his flank and suddenly his body weakened. His head swam drunkenly, muscles stopped responding. Heavy limbs faltered, causing him to stumble and fall to the floor as his vision dimmed.

* * * * *

"Good, the sedative has worn off."

Weltman's voice jerked him back to the present. Micah glared at his boss, who stood on the other side of steel bars.

"I have to say, Lasiter, you going all feral and shifting into a lion has created quite the stir around here. No one ever suspected the procedure would give subjects the ability to change form. We'd hoped for greater strength but this — Amazing."

Jesus Christ, it's true then. It really happened. I turned into a lion.

Shocked beyond speech, he listened, absorbed. After all, information was power and he needed all he could get.

As he spoke, Weltman motioned for a guard to unlock the door. He moved into the small space, appearing unafraid. Of course, the fact the guard held a tranquilizer gun pointed at Micah's chest would provide a measure of safety.

"We believe your anger brought about the change. Our researchers are currently devising a series of tests to determine what other factors will have the same effect. Thankfully, I had the foresight to hire a specialist in zoology, specifically in large cats. You might remember a bit about her since you performed a rather thorough background check."

Weltman turned to the side, motioned to someone. "I assure you, my dear, it's quite safe. Please join us, Dr. Southerby."

"Becca?" Jesus, how deeply was she involved in this mess? How much did she know?

She stepped into view, sucking all available oxygen from the cell and he forgot why it mattered. His heart and lungs ceased to function, while his cock roared to life. She appeared small and fragile standing next to Weltman.

Dressed in sensible clothes and a white lab coat with wire-rimmed reading glasses perched on the end of her pert nose, Becca was a sight for sore eyes. As before, her chestnut hair had been pulled into a chignon at the back of her head. He longed to release the pins and free the silky mass.

His memories had not done her justice. She was more beautiful than he'd recalled.

Desire shot through him, heated his blood, which sizzled within his veins. Lust arced between them, drew them together. Famished, he drank her in, noticing the signs that Becca was not unaffected by his presence. Her nipples puckered, pressed against the material of her blouse. With trembling hands, she reached for him, only to be stopped short several feet away.

"That's close enough, dear."

"M-Micah. What's going on? What are you doing here? I don't understand."

His gaze was locked on her arm where Weltman's fingers wrapped around the slender muscle, holding her back from him.

"I thought you brought me here to work with a lion?"

Had she not been told what she was getting into? Had she been kept in the dark?

"I did," Weltman responded.

"I-I don't understand."

Seeing Weltman grip her arm so tightly made the anger swell. "Let. Her. Go," he roared.

"Now, now, Lasiter. Don't go getting yourself upset. Remember what happened the last time?"

Too late. There would be no stopping his transformation. Possessive rage grew, urged on by protective instincts. "No one touches her!" The words were spoken in a soft, deadly tone.

Weltman didn't heed the warning. Instead, he pulled Becca tight against his side, held her shackled to him and started dragging her toward the door.

The change hit him fast, altering his body before his mind could object. As before, his senses sharpened. The acrid smell of fear polluted the air, covering the purity of Becca's wonderful scent. Her shocked gasp hit him as hard as a punch to the solar plexus. A heartbeat later, she fainted, slipping to the ground. Weltman let her go.

"Don't shoot," his boss told the guard. Concerned only for his own hide, he made a hasty retreat, slamming the cell door behind him with a resounding clang.

"You're just going to leave her in there," the guard objected, "with that...that animal."

"I'm late for a meeting. And I'm sure as hell not going to fight him for her anyway. She'll be fine. After all, he's the reason she's here."

More likely it served some purpose only Weltman was aware of.

Under the animal's control, Micah followed its instincts. He moved to Becca and stood over her, shielding her body with his. He stood rigid and immovable until the other men left, removing the threat.

Lying down next to her, he licked her face then rested his head on her belly, safeguarding the woman the lion claimed as his mate. Regardless of how much the idea frightened the man, the beast had made its choice. The die had been cast.

There was no going back.

Chapter Four

Her body was sore in wonderful places from muscles unaccustomed to such vigorous activity. Rebecca should be satiated and sound asleep but her lover shifted positions and one solid thigh moved between her splayed legs.

She wanted more of him. After all, they had not done everything. There was still a great deal of uncharted territory. This time she wanted to take the lead, be the one in control of their lovemaking.

Careful not to wake him, not before assuring she got what she desired, she rolled Micah to his back. Mmm...what a sight. All that bare male flesh—solid muscle divided by deep chiseled indentations. The difference between his hard masculine sinew and her soft curves were delightful, and deserved thorough investigation.

She started at the thick column of his neck, trailed her tongue over the length, across his clavicle, dipping into the shallow depression at the center before traveling south. The straight line separating his pectorals didn't hold her focus for long. Not once she spotted the darker flesh of his nipples. Rebecca's course veered sharply.

The first wet flick brought the tiny nub to life. The second puckered the areola. On the third, he moaned and shifted. She held her breath and remained still until he settled before resuming her explorations.

She teased and tasted every muscle over his washboard abdomen. Pleased to discover he had an innie, she circled his navel then thrust into the tiny recess. Moving lower, as she sucked the head of his cock past her lips, he woke with a rough groan.

"Damn, baby. That feels so good."

Rebecca took more of his length, bobbed a few times, then released him with a soft pop. "Yes, but I want to ride you."

She attempted to sound bold, but the slight waver in her voice gave her away. Thank goodness he ignored the slight falter.

"Well then, cowgirl, come on up here and take what you want."

His generous nature had her heart jumping for joy as she slid up his body, slow and salacious.

"Lock those pretty thighs on my hips, Becca."

He helped her into position and held his cock upward, never losing patience as she took her time finding the right angle before easing down his shaft. Awkward at first, it took a bit of trial and error to find her rhythm but once she got going...oooh yeah.

Being on top was turning out to be her favorite position. Controlling the pace, depth and angle of each thrust put her in command of her pleasure. His too. And with her on top, the broad head of his cock had a farther reach, tapping against her cervix.

Her orgasm built fast and arrived in a powerful blast, exploding over her body. The long, sustained rapture shook her from head to toe. Micah joined her in ecstasy, the hot splash of his cum washing over her womb extending the earth-shattering elation.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Awareness returned in the form of someone lightly smacking her cheek, bringing an abrupt end to memories of a night she held dear.

"Stop that," Rebecca grumbled. "I'm awake."

Even if she didn't know what had happened. Wasn't too sure she wanted to know, either.

"Come on, Becca. Open up those pretty green eyes for me, baby." The deep masculine voice made it past the layers of fog clouding her mind.

Becca? Only one man had ever called her Becca. Someone she left behind more than four weeks ago, sleeping among rumpled sheets that failed to cover miles of sexy, hard muscle and tan skin. A fallen angel who gifted her with one amazing night of pleasure beyond her wildest dreams.

But he couldn't be here, in the mountains. In the top-secret research laboratory she'd been touring with Mr. Weltman, head honcho of Nanotech. She remembered her new boss's brief explanation of the work being conducted. Gene manipulation, a cocktail blending the DNA of humans with that of predatory animals. Surgeries to make it stick.

"Refusing to open your eyes isn't going to change anything."

No, but the delay gave her a chance to gather her composure. She compromised, opened her eyes the barest fraction, just enough to see the gorgeous man who'd invaded her dreams, before slamming them shut again.

She didn't want to face reality. Rebecca would rather be a coward, pretend to be asleep. But the hard, cold surface she lay on was not her bed. The man leaning over her was not her imagination. This was no dream.

And the object of her desire had turned into a lion.

She skittered away from the man she'd once trusted with her body, seeking safety, moving until running into a wall. With her knees tucked up against her chest, she fought to calm her breathing and figure out what on earth was happening.

"W-why am I here? I'm not a genetic scientist. Mr. Weltman said that's what they're doing in this lab." She coughed, choking on the words. "I'm a freakin' zoologist, for crying out loud. I work with—"

The words echoed in her head. *I work with big cats. Tigers, jaguars, leopards —*

And lions. Oh Jesus!

A light bulb snapped on, illuminating the darkness. She'd been hired because Nanotech had been testing their insane genetic concoction on humans —

On Micah.

And he'd turned into a lion.

She slapped a trembling hand over her gaping mouth and stared.

He didn't appear any different. Same dark blond hair bound in a ponytail. Same hard features and observant brown eyes. Same sexy mouth that had done such wonderful things to her body. And the same tall, muscular body she touched in her dreams every night. The same gorgeous man who had brought her to multiple screaming orgasms.

Had they done this to him before the night they'd met? Had she slept with an animal?

Oh my god!

On the heels of that thought came another, more distressing concern as she remembered how her morning had started. With a pregnancy test.

Her cycles had never been regular so being late had not been a concern. Not until her period was two weeks overdue. Last night she picked up a test kit at the local pharmacy. This morning she peed on the stick. When a blue plus sign showed up she raced back to the pharmacy and bought two more kits, different brands to be sure.

One showed two hot pink lines.

The other spelled out the dreaded word "pregnant".

As she toured the facility with Mr. Weltman, Rebecca had barely paid attention. There was so much she had to think about, figure out. Her number one worry, the father. Micah.

Should she try to find him? He deserved to at least know about their child, whether he chose to be a part of either of their lives or not. But how was she supposed to break such life-altering news? She didn't even know if he wanted children or where he lived. She didn't know much about Micah at all.

And what about the child?

Rebecca swallowed hard. Forget wondering if it would be a boy or girl. Concerns about the child's health. If Micah's DNA had been altered before she slept with him –

She didn't want to think it, but would have to get answers. Was it even possible for a human woman to carry an animal fetus? Would the baby be human, lion or able to change form, same as its dad?

She searched her memory for facts on pregnancy in lions. Gestation for lion cubs was around fifteen weeks. And lions birthed litters of one to four cubs.

Could she be carrying more than one fetus?

The room spun, her vision narrowed and Rebecca's consciousness wavered for a few seconds.

Were you? Did they? Before we?

She couldn't bring herself to say the words out loud. She decided to start with the basics. "What's going on, Micah? Please, help me sort this out."

He seemed reluctant, gave a heavy sigh and finally began speaking.

"I worked covert ops in the Army. Got shot and had to retire. When I got out, I took a job as head of security for Nanotech. Figured it was an easy job. Guard some scientists, secure their research."

He paused, rubbed at his temple. Rebecca took a closer look, noting the new lines of fatigue along his brow and bracketing his eyes. Signs of stress.

Hah! Wait until she sprung her news, then he'd know the real meaning of stress.

"I blew out my knee trying to catch an employee stealing information. That may have been weeks ago. I don't know. It's hard to judge time in here."

He extended his arm indicating the caged-in room. She glanced around. No windows or clocks. Just bare walls, narrow cot, exposed sink and toilet, steel bars, and mounted high on each wall, security cameras. Tiny red lights blinked menacingly from the devices.

They'd locked Micah in a cold prison cell, watched his every move, allowed him no privacy. In essence he was a prisoner. In a research laboratory? Good Lord, what was Weltman hoping to achieve?

Hell, she was a prisoner now too. God forbid what would happen if her new employer learned of her pregnancy and who sired the fetus, or fetuses.

She scooted closer, wanting to offer comfort, maybe receive some in return. But she was still very frightened and held back. He continued to talk, telling her about the operations and extent of damage to his knee.

"My body was getting older, weaker. I've put it through a lot over the years. With this latest injury." He shrugged. "I would not have been able to keep working. But I can't even imagine being retired. I need action. I'd go stir-crazy within a week. Give me a month and I'd be climbing the walls. I could take a desk job—"

"But it wouldn't satisfy you."

He nodded and some of the tension eased from his broad shoulders.

"Weltman came to the hospital, told me he could help. Told me they'd perfected a procedure that would make me strong again, stronger than ever before, able to keep doing the kind of physical work I love. Once he gave me details of what they are doing there was no turning back. I knew too much."

And now, so do I.

His story made it sound as if this had all happened since she'd last seen him but she had to be sure. Rebecca kept her gaze averted as she asked the question she dreaded. "So all this happened after we met?"

"Yeah."

Thank goodness! A wave of relief surged through her. There would be no litter of lion cubs, no child able to change its form. A huge weight lifted off her shoulders. She'd still have the normal pregnancy worries, but those were easily manageable in comparison.

She'd edged close enough that when Micah reached out, he touched her arm. Rebecca took the comfort he offered, thinking only of her own bleak situation for a moment. She was trapped in more ways than one.

Tremors assaulted her and she shook uncontrollably. Micah pulled her into the shelter of his strong body, made her feel protected, soothed some of her fears. They were joined now in this and no matter what happened, they'd face it together. Be strong for each other and their child.

"It's called the Predator Project. They started out kidnapping homeless men and women from the streets, people no one would miss."

Rebecca gasped. "But there are safeguards in place, rules governing how research is conducted. You can't leap from conception of an idea to clinical trials on humans. It doesn't work that way."

"Nanotech has circumvented the safeguards, ignored all legalities and moral principles of ethical research practices. The project started out innocent and with good intentions." Micah sighed. "I don't know what motivated the change. Greed, ambition, an external influence—something made them deviate from the initial objective and took the project down a different path."

"I'm their first real success. Weltman himself injected me with the altered DNA. Since then they've done multiple surgical procedures altering my body to accept the changes. No one expected me to turn into an animal. The scientists were almost as shocked as I was when it happened."

A barrage of questions raced through her mind. Was he able to change into the lion at will? If not, what brought the shift on? Was his metabolism higher? When he was the lion did he still have the man's rational thoughts and intelligence? Would he have to fight the natural predatory instincts of the lion? Would he attack her, eat her? Try to mate her? She whimpered.

Micah's warm palm rubbed soothing circles on her back. "Shh, baby. I don't know much about being the lion. It's only happened twice, and both times seem to have been triggered by intense emotion—frustration, anger, fear. We'll figure everything out together. I'll make sure you're safe."

And for the time being, she'd make sure their child remained safe. She decided not to tell Micah. Not until they figured out how to deal with what had been done to him. They would tackle the pregnancy issue later.

The man amazed her. He was the one who'd had his entire existence reshaped and here he was comforting her. She'd been brought here for him, probably to help him adjust since she had a better grasp of felines and their behaviors than she did for people, but she knew one thing for certain. Micah needed her support and knowledge.

She sat up straighter, determined to see him through this bizarre situation. "Tell me, I'm dying to know, what's it like? Does the change hurt? Are your senses different when you're the lion? Are your thoughts still human?"

His smile was tentative, but she sensed his relief over her acceptance.

"I can help you, Micah. We can both get through this, together." Sure, there would be an adjustment period. It would take time for the shock to wear off and for her to come to terms with the overwhelming circumstances. She was certain of one thing, she would not turn her back on him. Rebecca had to come up with a plan and get him out of the lab. This time, there would be no walking away.

Micah had known she was a special lady. Becca's response to this insanity proved it. He shifted their positions, turned so he could see her expressive face. He wanted to give her answers, but he had a few questions of his own. Important questions.

"We'll talk about that later."

His thoughts wandered to the night they'd shared, as they often did. Becca sparked a strong emotional response in him. She made him want things he'd run from in the past. He wanted to wake up holding her every morning. For a man who never spent the entire night with any woman that was a big step. He longed to know everything about her. What made her happy or sad. Her dreams and ambitions. Her heart's desires.

"Why did you walk out on me?"

He didn't have to spell it out. Judging from her body language, she knew what he was talking about. She flinched and lowered her gaze to her hands, which she twisted

in her lap. Her response reminded him of how her confidence had faltered after she'd sucked his cock dry. At first, blinded by pleasure, he hadn't recognized the signs. Later, when he'd thought back, he put the pieces together. She didn't put much stock in her sex appeal or prowess. This was the perfect opportunity to give her a boost.

"Becca." With the tips of his fingers, he tilted her chin up, forcing her to make eye contact. "When I woke up alone, I was devastated. I'd thought we really connected, and I wanted more time with you. More *of* you."

"You did?"

Her voice was soft and uncertain. Micah felt the deep primal compulsion to hunt down whatever asshole had shaken her confidence and beat the living hell out of him.

"Damn, woman. You're so hot, sexy and passionate you nearly burned me alive. You're all I've been able to think about since that night. I can't sleep, my concentration has been shot. When you walked through that door, regardless of this fucked-up mess, I had an instant hard-on."

"Really?"

This time her voice was stronger, and her pouty lips curved up in the stunning smile that had lingered in his mind while they were apart.

"Mmm...if there were no cameras..." He sucked in a hard breath. "Damn, baby. We'd be reenacting that night down to the last, delicious detail. But I'm feeling very possessive. I don't want anyone else to see your gorgeous body. It's mine!"

She snuggled against his side, rested her head on his chest and held him close. "For now, all I need is for you to hold me. Please hold me, Micah."

I'll never let you go! He left that unsaid for the time being.

"I've got you." There was a slight catch in his voice as unfamiliar, tender feelings swamped him. While he wouldn't wish being trapped in the lab on his worst enemy, he was glad to have Becca there. With her by his side, he had a reason to fight and a chance of actually making it out alive.

"We'll get through this together." He didn't make the promise lightly. Regardless of what it took, he intended to make it happen. And he wouldn't let her slip through his fingers again. They'd walk away from this side by side.

Chapter Five

Rebecca figured she spent close to two hours locked up in the cell with Micah before the security guards, casting wary glances in his direction, finally released her. She'd come to the decision that if she was going to be of any help him, she had to gather information. This meant spending at least a little time with Weltman, the crooked jerk. His total lack of morals and ethics disgusted her.

She figured he'd left her in with Micah for a baptism by fire. Let her get over the shock by seeing firsthand what they were dealing with since messing with his DNA. There really was no way to prepare for something no one has ever dealt with before.

"Rebecca...may I call you Rebecca?"

You already have.

She bit back the sarcastic reply and pasted on a phony smile. "Certainly, Gabe."

He patted her shoulder and directed her to a steel door with a digital plaque bearing her name. Next to the door was a handprint scanner. She placed her hand on the panel and a few seconds later the door slid open to reveal an ultra-modern workspace.

She shivered, the coldness of the room having a profound effect on her. Front and center sat a crescent-shaped, frosted glass desk with steel legs. At the center of the desk was a thin flat-panel computer monitor, stationed between a sleek phone and an adjustable gooseneck lamp. Everything was shiny silver. The windowless walls and tile floor were pure white. Stainless steel cabinets lined the back wall, several with frosted glass doors. The only bit of color came from a silk bird of paradise placed atop one of the cabinets.

Weltman edged around her to gauge her reaction, anticipation brightening his features. "I hope you like it?"

"I'm stunned," she answered honestly. "It's so..."

"Elegant," he supplied. "I know. I picked it out with you in mind. I think it suits you."

Elegant was not the right description. Cold, sterile—those fit. And he thought it would appeal to her? Not in a million years. She preferred warm colors, living plants and natural wood.

"I...uh, thank you."

She had to fight back a shudder of revulsion as his hand came to rest at the small of her back and he guided her around the desk. He didn't remove his hand or give her any space when they stopped before the computer screen. Instead he moved closer, breaching her personal boundaries.

"The subject's medical files have been uploaded onto your computer. My office, cell and home numbers are programmed into the phone." He handed her a business card with numbers written on the back. "My numbers are on here. You can call me anytime, Rebecca." His voice dropped to a whispery, intimate tone. "Anything you need...or want...I'm here for you. Day or night. I will provide everything you could possibly desire."

Ewww, he's coming on to me.

If she judged correctly by his gray hair and wrinkles the man was old enough to be her father. At least the files being on the computer limited how long she'd have to suffer through his creepy presence.

Desperate to put some distance between them without insulting her new boss, she pulled out the chair and plopped down. She had to tread carefully. She didn't want to piss him off and get fired. Then she'd be separated from Micah, having no idea what was happening to him. That was unacceptable.

"Thank you, Mr. Weltman." Still, she used his last name as a barrier to make the interaction less intimate and bring the conversation back to work.

"I'll require keys to the holding cell." She had to get Micah out of here, and a plan began to take shape. She'd prove the laboratory setting would impede any potential for progress. During her time off she'd find someplace safe to take him. It didn't have to be far away, only private. Not her leased house though. It had to be a place her employer didn't know about.

This delicate balancing act would have to be handled with extreme care. She took a deep breath and plunged ahead, praying it would work. It had to work, for both their sakes. "The files will be helpful, but I'll have to work with the subject one-on-one."

Weltman's face hardened. "The subject is unpredictable and dangerous. Security must remain tight."

She held up a hand, cutting him off. "You hired me because of my expertise with Felidae. Fortunately for Nanotech, I also have a good grasp of human behavior."

In for a penny...

"It is my professional opinion that what you hope to accomplish is not achievable with him under duress." She took a calculated risk, introducing the idea of letting him out of the cell. "For Micah to gain control over the animal, he has to feel comfortable, relaxed. That won't happen with armed guards standing watch. And for the lion to comply, his ingrained need for open spaces must be met."

The color drained from Weltman's face. "You can't be suggesting taking him outside the facility...by yourself."

Rebecca squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. "He will not harm me. I am more than capable of managing both the man and the lion. The security officers gave me a supply of tranquilizers and a Taser should they become necessary, which is doubtful." She held up the business card. "I can also call you at any time I need assistance."

"Yes, the subject seemed very protective toward you, but—"

She held up her hand again. "This is non-negotiable. If you want me to work with him, assist him in adapting, then it's on my terms. Otherwise the whole thing will be a wasted effort."

Weltman rubbed his chin and stared into her eyes, considering what she'd said. Rebecca had to remind herself to breathe. Her heart skipped a beat as she awaited his answer.

"Fine, go into the cell alone. Not outside though. For your own safety, I must insist a minimum of two guards accompany you outside. They will maintain a bit of distance and not intrude unless necessary, but you will stay within sight at all times. I'm not willing to put you at such risk without backup. I'll talk to the techs and have a shock collar put on him for everyone's safety."

She nodded, satisfied with the conditions. She would have agreed to a lot more to get Micah out of the horrible cell. "Thank you."

Weltman raked a hand through his hair and blew out a hard breath. She knew he was readjusting his perception of her. She took a chance by allowing him a glimpse of the iron-clad determination she'd disguised up until that point.

"I'll want written progress reports twice a week."

She bit the inside of her cheek to suppress a triumphant grin. "Agreed."

He watched her for another long moment before moving to the door. "I'll have the security captain bring a set of keys. Let me know when you want to take the subject outside so he can be prepared."

She understood his intention and addressed the situation before it could happen. "I don't want him sedated. Doing so would defeat the purpose."

Weltman stiffened. "Then he doesn't leave the cell." His tone was inexorable.

She opened her mouth to protest but he continued speaking.

"Lasiter has not been outside since the injection and we don't know how he will react or if he'll be able to control the lion. I will not risk the safety of my staff should he

be unable to contain the urge to hunt. He won't be knocked out, but he will be given a mild sedative for the first attempt."

She realized he would not budge and conceded the point. "Fine."

In an attempt to soothe his ruffled feathers, Rebecca turned on the charm. She flashed what she hoped was a flirty smile. "Thank you, Gabe. I'm looking forward to working with you on this project."

His smile returned and some of the tension surrounding them eased. "Perhaps you'll join me for dinner one evening?"

Oh, ick!

Her quick nod seemed to seal the deal for him and Weltman hummed as he finally left the office. She hadn't agreed, not really. And Rebecca had no intention of going out with him.

Once alone, she opened the files and began skimming through the ingredients of the DNA cocktail that had been injected into Micah's blood and bone marrow. The advancements Nanotech's scientists had made with the Predator Project were truly amazing. Shame they were done without ethics or morals.

By circumventing standard protocols and restrictions for genetic research they had zoomed far ahead of the competition. Through discoveries made in the quest to find a cure for cancer they had stumbled upon a particular combination of synthetic and animal DNA, along with a reliable method of insertion. The procedure they developed resulted in a binding of the new recombinant DNA in a human subject, successfully modifying genes that would normally reject such an incompatible pairing.

Her hand shook as she clicked the mouse, paging through the information. Her field was not genetics but she felt fairly certain Nanotech had been close to reaching their initial goal—a cure for cancer. That was before Weltman had narrowed the focus to one particular element, which had resulted in going off on a wild tangent. Weltman's notes on his vision of creating a stronger breed of human soldiers had every fine hair on her body standing on end.

To know a man of Weltman's vast resources and greed possessed not only the means but also the key to altering the human race terrified her. The man was certifiable.

Anxious to see Micah, she had a difficult time concentrating. Rebecca shut down the computer and headed for the security office to get the keys. She had to force herself to take it slow and not run down the hallway. Even though she could view the camera aimed at his cell each moment away from him, she worried about how he was being treated.

The outer door of the security room opened with a muted *swish* and her eyes immediately sought out the monitors. Agitated, Micah paced back and forth before the cell bars, looking every inch the restless, caged predator.

"Better get a tranq gun ready if you're going in. Looks like Freak Show's gonna have to be knocked out again."

She couldn't remember the idiot guard's name. He didn't even bother turn around, obviously assuming a coworker had entered the small room.

"That won't be necessary." She spoke in a commanding tone, standing firm and sure, mimicking her father when addressing his troops. "However, it is critical to your future employment that you adjust your attitude, and do it fast!"

"Dr. Southerby." The guard scrambled from the chair and stood at attention. "Ma'am, I didn't see you there."

Micah had told her most of the guards were ex-military. From his attitude and stance there was no doubt this man had served. His military training would prompt his submission to her authority. At least that worked in her favor. "What's your name?"

"Anderson. Tom Anderson."

"I'm going to be watching you, Anderson. If I find even one scratch on Micah Lasiter, you'll be answering to me." She gave him her hardest, most intimidating glare. "Is that clear?"

"Ma'am. Yes ma'am."

“Good.” She’d almost expected him to snap off a salute. “Now, my keys?”

He placed a plain metal ring bearing two keys into her open palm.

“Thank you.” She glanced around, taking in the state-of-the-art monitoring equipment, somewhat surprised to realize there was no sound. “I take it the cells are not wired for audio surveillance?”

“No, ma’am. We only ever used the cells to secure the unstable subjects before termination.” He shivered. “None of us wanted to hear those horrible cries any more than necessary. There wasn’t any reason to have sound, but if you think —”

She raised a hand, silencing him. “No, that’s fine. I prefer to keep written notes of my work with the subject instead of recordings.” Referring to Micah as “the subject” rankled but it was necessary to follow Weltman’s example when dealing with his men.

“What about the procedure rooms? Are there disks from the subject’s treatments available that I can watch?”

“That depends. The procedure rooms are set up with recording equipment but it does not run continually. There will only be documentation if someone activated the equipment. Any footage on Lasiter will be accessible through his electronic records.”

“Thanks for all your help, Anderson. I’ll be counting on you to make sure nothing happens to the subject. He’s very important to the project. No more tranquilizers unless I give the okay. And no procedures without my expressed approval. Everything concerning the subject now goes through me. Clear?”

“Yes ma’am.”

As she left the office and made her way to the cell, Rebecca said a silent thank you to her father. Her mother had died when she was a toddler. She’d grown up surrounded by military men. The general had not only taught her how to hold her own with powerful men, but how to command their respect. The lessons in fighting and tactics that had seemed frivolous were now coming in handy.

Micah stilled when she approached the cell and remained silent as she unlocked the door. The loud clang as it closed behind her echoed around them. She quickly filled him in on what she'd learned so far.

"The security equipment is top-notch. Palm-print readers control most of the doors. From what I saw in the security room the only places not actively monitored are within individual offices. Every hallway, door and window is wired and carefully watched. The other subjects are housed along the same corridor in dormitory-type rooms instead of cells."

"At first, so was I. They moved me here after I shifted the first time."

She nodded. "They do not have the cell wired for sound, so unless a guard is in the immediate area, we're free to talk."

"Good," Micah sighed.

"Getting you out of here is not going to be easy. As much as possible, keep a tight leash on the lion. My plan is simple—prove to Weltman that you are not a danger to me, and that I can control you."

Micah began to pace again and rubbed at his jaw.

"I've made arrangements to get you outside, but you'll be sedated."

He stopped short, his gaze narrowing on her.

"Weltman insisted on a mild sedative because we don't know if you will be able to control the lion's natural instincts once you get out in the open. I had no valid argument for the point. Two guards will be with us, within sight at all times." Reaching the part of her plan where things go dicey, she took care to school her features. "Once it's proven that I can handle you in both forms, I'll convince Weltman the lab setting is detrimental to what he wants to accomplish."

"How the hell are you going to do that?" he barked.

"Simple. We establish a pattern. Right now Weltman believes strong emotion brings on the shift. You have to become unpredictable around everyone other than me. You

will gradually decrease your activity, become lethargic when here in the cell and come to life when we go outside. I'll convince Weltman the results he wants are not possible in the lab setting. We get you out of here, I gather the records of what's been done to you, then you disappear."

His penetrating stare turned cold and contemplative. "What do you know about making someone disappear?"

"I'm an Army brat, born and raised. My father made sure I know how to survive no matter the circumstances. Helping you vanish off the radar will be child's play."

He advanced toward her. "Do not touch me, Micah!"

She clenched her teeth and forced herself to appear unaffected. "Don't touch me or show personal interest in me or this won't work."

He came to a dead stop. She could tell it grated on his nerves, but Micah fell into the role she'd set for him. Tense muscles relaxed as he took several deep breaths. He sat on the floor, putting himself in a vulnerable position and under her control.

She squeezed the bridge of her nose, fighting off a stress headache. "This is not going to be easy for either of us." She moved to him, blocked the camera's view and stroked his cheek. "All I can think about is stripping off those clothes, getting my hands and mouth on you. Making love until we're both exhausted and sweaty."

A low, warning growl vibrated through his chest. She clearly saw the same desire reflected in his eyes.

"I know. It's okay," she assured. "We have to be strong. There's so much we have to talk about." So much they had to figure out. She thought about the baby and her natural inclination was to rub her belly where their child rested. Instead, she balled her hands into fists at her sides.

"First we have to get you out of here."

That had to be her top priority. They'd deal with everything else once he was safe.

Chapter Six

He kept his eyes closed, breathing even and stayed motionless. He'd been in the facility long enough to figure out the regular pattern and movements of the guards. They'd already made rounds and weren't due for at least another hour. Yet someone moved down the corridor, making no attempt to mask their presence. The light click created by a heel with each footfall made him guess his late-night visitor was female.

The night guard muttered a familiar greeting, which told him it had to be someone on the lab staff. What did they have planned for him now? Micah gritted his teeth in anticipation of more anesthesia drugs and another painful procedure.

Fuck, Becca was right. They had to get him the hell out of here.

His nostrils flared as the delightful scent of cinnamon and honey reached him. What the hell was she doing? There was no way she could have worked out an evac plan this fast.

Keys rattled, metal grated on metal as the cell door swung open. Sheer will and discipline were almost insufficient to keep him from rushing forward. He had to play this out and follow her lead or put both of them at risk.

He'd rather undergo multiple torturous procedures than put her in any more danger than she already faced.

The gentle caress of her fingertips along his jaw was at odds with her abrupt tone. "Wake up, Lasiter. I don't have all night."

"Want me to chain him, Doc?"

"No, thanks. I've got my Taser and we're not going far."

What the hell?

“Come on, Lasiter. Don’t make me change my mind and have them sedate you. Let’s get this procedure done and over with.”

“No more damn procedures.” The thought of her performing one of Weltman’s horrible procedures on him make Micah’s blood run cold.

The guard took a step backward as Micah swung his legs over the cot and sat up. Becca tapped her foot, waiting impatiently, but her sweet face told a different story. The lighting was dim but he had no trouble making out her flushed cheeks and dilated pupils with his enhanced eyesight.

He took a breath, drawing her musky aroma deep into his lungs. She wasn’t afraid or agitated. She was wet and aroused.

As he rose to his full height the guard took another step back while Becca latched on to his biceps and guided him out of the cell. They went through the anteroom where another guard watched a bank of monitors displaying the empty cell, and down a short corridor to one of the treatment rooms. The guard shadowed their every step until the door closed behind them and the lock snicked in place.

Becca lifted a finger to her lips. “Get on the exam table, Lasiter. Now that’s a good boy.” She snapped the wrist restraints shut with a loud click. Once the sound shot through the room a second time, he heard the guard’s booted footsteps echo down the corridor.

“We won’t have long. An hour at most—”

Micah backed her against the door and sealed his lips to hers. She tasted of coffee and her own unique flavor that had been imprinted on his soul. He’d missed her so much and when they both made it out of this mess, he was never letting go!

Pain bit into his shoulders where her fingernails dug deep. He didn’t mind. Especially as her leg rose and hooked over his hip, aligning her warm pussy with his hard and ready to explode cock.

It had been too long since he'd felt the tight clasp of her pussy around his shaft. Too long since he'd been buried balls-deep in paradise. "Becca," he groaned. "This is going to be hard and fast...the first time."

"Yesss. Hard and fast is good. Now is better. Hurry!"

They were on the same page, thank goodness, because he couldn't wait another second. Finesse be damned. Going straight for the tie of her scrub pants, he cursed as it knotted. The hellion just laughed as she released the tie securing his pants with ease then wrapped her slender fingers around his aching cock.

Micah didn't screw around with the knot for long. He simply ripped the drawstring in half. One hard pull tore the crotch from her lacy panties and her slick, warm flesh filled his palm. He sniffed, wondering briefly at the slight difference in her scent but chalking it up to something in the laboratory setting.

"Have you been thinking about me, baby?" Without any preamble, he thrust two fingers between her sodden folds. Wet flesh sucked at his fingers and he came close to finishing before even getting inside her.

"Have you suffered through endless nights, remembering how damn good it was to have this sweet pussy stuffed full of my cock?" Waiting for her answer was torture but he had to know she'd suffered, same as he had.

"Micah," she gasped.

Thrusting his fingers hard, he found the small spot guaranteed to drive her crazy and stroked the area with his fingertips. Becca rose up on her toes, canted her hips and followed the rhythm he set. Her body tightened on his fingers as she neared release but hell if he'd let her get there without him.

Her fingernails dug painfully deep as he withdrew his fingers. He made a point of letting her see the glistening digits before sucking them into his mouth. As her heady flavor burst across his taste buds, Micah dropped his head back.

"Answer me, baby? Did you lie awake every night wishing I was in your bed?"

"Yes, okay. Yes. Now fuck me already, damn it."

He didn't know why it had been so important for him to hear the words. Thankfully, she'd said them. He wasn't sure what he would have done if she'd denied wanting him all those empty nights they'd been apart.

Without another word or further delay, he lifted Becca. As her heels hooked at the small of his back, he slammed her down on his straining cock. He pressed his mouth into the curve of her neck, hoping to muffle the sounds refusing to be held back.

This is where he belonged, buried within his woman's body. Cradled between her thighs. It was so fucking good.

He couldn't breathe, didn't move. The mere idea of withdrawing from her brought the lion closer to the surface. All rational thought fled as Micah gave in to the animal's need for its mate. A roar of possession rumbled up from his chest. He finally had her back where she belonged but they didn't have any protection.

His mouth opened, dangerously sharp teeth closed over her vulnerable throat.

Mine!

"Move, damn you."

Her complaint had his teeth tightening their hold on her neck for a moment before Micah gathered his control. "No condom."

"It's not an issue."

Thank god. He didn't think he could stop. Not with her warm heat surrounding his cock. Micah didn't question her statement. The idea of filling her with his semen was irresistible to both the lion and the man. Of their own volition, his hips began to move in a slow and easy rhythm.

To hell with that, Rebecca thought. Using powerful thigh muscles, she moved in counterpoint, slamming her pelvis against his. Micah took the not so subtle hint and ran with it. He began powering into her, each hard thrust punctuated by the wet slap of their bodies.

It was heaven and hell. She wanted it to last forever but her body screamed for release. The pleasure built quickly, taking her to heights she'd never known existed.

His mouth released her neck long enough to state his claim. "You. Are. Mine."

"Yes!"

"Say it, Becca."

Normally his demanding tone and dominant words would have her spine stiffening. Not with Micah. Hearing the claim on his lips was a total turn-on. She longed to be his.

"Yours. I'm all yours."

His hands spread her legs wider, gripping her thighs tight enough she'd have bruises. Not that she cared. She'd be proud to wear his mark on her skin.

Each forward thrust was harder than the last. Faster. More intense. As if he attempted to get beneath her skin. To lose himself in her body the same way she was losing herself in him.

It was flat-out, balls-to-the-wall sex.

If she had the breath, she would have laughed over that thought. All she managed was to hold on and enjoy the wild roller-coaster ride. As she reached the highest peak her body tensed, preparing for the free fall.

"Now, Becca. Come now."

The command triggered her orgasm and a scream strangled in her throat as mind-numbing pleasure gathered in her core and whiplashed through her body. Micah continued to fuck her through her orgasm then followed her over the edge. He roared again as he climaxed. Hot jets of cum bathed her womb, setting off aftershocks, leaving her limp and shaking in his arms.

Micah collapsed against her, his weight and the wall were all that held them upright. Not until she got her breathing under control and the last tremor ended did she realize his erection still stretched her tender tissues.

"Micah?"

"Not done," he gasped. "Just a second."

It took slightly longer than a second, not that she minded since Micah stayed inside her. Holding on to her ass cheeks, he kept her impaled on his erection and maneuvered them over to the exam table where he rocked her world again. This time they went slower, savored the perfect joining of their bodies. They'd just cleaned up and found a pin to hold her pants up when the guard knocked on the door, bringing an end to the all-too-brief stolen moments.

It was sufficient to renew her motivation to get him the hell out of the lab and hopefully in her bed permanently.

Chapter Seven

After three days of working with Becca his control was tenuous at best. Only two thoughts filled Micah's mind each day when as he woke—sex and escape. Both were very high on his list of priorities, but getting Becca to safety had to come first.

It wasn't as if they had not already had sex, several times, in a variety of different positions. But that had been days ago and he wanted more of her. Not sneaking into unmonitored rooms at the lab under the watchful eye of the security staff, though. He wanted her somewhere they didn't have to be afraid or quiet.

So far everything was going as planned. Their trips outside had gone off without a hitch, although the guards seemed disappointed they hadn't gotten the chance to shock him with the collar.

The day-shift guard was making his rounds. Micah had nicknamed him Smiling Jack because the man always wore a cheesy grin.

"Mornin', Lasiter. Sleep well?"

He muttered a banal response, distracted by the sight of Becca headed in his direction. His cock jerked to attention as his gaze swished from side to side following the subtle swaying of her hips.

Jack's attention shot to her lithe body and Micah fisted the edge of the cot, trying to restrain the lion who wanted to claw the bastard's eyes out. He agreed with the cat but had to stay in character. Part of Becca's strategy involved his appearing to be lethargic and depressed. Jumping to his feet, rushing the bars and reaching through to choke the fucking grin off Smiling Jack's face would hamper their cause.

"Jack." Becca gave the man an absent nod of dismissal.

Hah, take that!

If he were less mature, Micah would stick his tongue out and blow raspberries at the other man.

Becca's green eyes narrowed on him while she unlocked the door. He had no problem reading the warning to behave in her tight expression.

"Did you sleep?"

"What the hell else is there to do in here?" he grumbled.

She pulled back and gave him an assessing stare. "I could bring you something to read or perhaps you'd like a pen and notebook."

"What, so I can write down my feelings or some other psychobabble crap?"

Her brow arched. "I'm not staying if you're going to be nasty. Shall I come back later?"

He ignored Jack's snicker and rubbed his aching temples instead. "No, don't go."

With a curt nod to the guard, Becca closed the cell door and dragged a chair—the only other piece of furniture in the cell—closer to his cot. As Jack ambled away, the tension between them changed, becoming charged with sexual energy.

"I know it's been difficult. How are you holding up?"

"Honestly, right now I'd gnaw off my right hand to get you alone. It's taking a supreme effort to stay put when I want to let my claws extend and slice through your clothes. I want to taste every inch of skin that's hidden from view. Then I want to spend several days recreating that night." The sudden flush spreading over her neck and onto her face told Micah she was remembering their one night together. "I've dreamed up with a few new positions for us to try out."

Becca swallowed hard. Perspiration dotted her brow. He didn't want her to suffer, but damn if being close to her wasn't killing him. "I need you."

She nodded and wrote something down in the notepad she always carried. Had it not been for his feline-enhanced hearing he would have missed her whispered words.

"I need you too!"

Lust boiled his blood and his balls ached. The cat roared and tore at the restraints he'd placed on it. Whenever she got him all tied up in knots, which was most of the time, the cat went wild. Over the past few days he'd learned to control the cat's reactions.

He wasn't the only one feeling the heat. Micah's nostrils flared, drinking in the musky scent of Becca's arousal. If he slid a hand under her sensible skirt, he was sure to encounter warm panties dampened with her cream.

"Fuck! Get me the hell out of here. I have to be outside. The lion is going to make an appearance whether we're ready for it or not."

Their eyes met, voracious desires arcing between them. She fumbled the notebook and dropped her pen as she shot to her feet. At the door, she banged the keys against the bar while trying to fit the right one in the lock.

The ruckus drew Jack, no longer smiling, back down the hallway at a fast clip. "You okay, Doc? What'd he do?"

Rebecca glanced at the guard. "Everything's fine. I'm just a bit clumsy this morning. Must have had too much coffee." She shuddered as the cell door shut behind her with an ominous thud.

"We're ready to go outside. Would you please go get one of the other guards? I'll wait here."

Jack shot her a dubious look. "You sure? Fine doesn't mean the same thing to women. At least with my ex it didn't. When she said she was fine, I had to duck and cover 'cause the shit was gonna hit the fan."

"Jack." Becca placed her hand on the guard's forearm then let it drop again as a menacing bark-like sound rose from Micah's throat.

"It's all good for the moment. We've got to get him outside so it stays that way. Understand?"

"You want the drugs?"

“Not today.” Their previous outings had all gone well and they hadn’t used the medication again after the first time.

Jack spoke into a portable radio and another guard soon joined them. Micah only managed to make it a few steps into the yard before being overtaken by the change. The rapidness of the shift still amazed him. One second he stood tall and human, the next he was a lot closer to the ground with tattered clothes tangled around his legs.

Using sharpened senses, he surveyed the area from his new perspective. He lifted his snout, scenting the crisp mountain air. Fertile land, blooming flora, the distinct saline scent of the guards and Becca’s feminine aroma. He homed in on her, filling his lungs.

Acute hearing picked up a soft sound in the underbrush several hundred feet away. Micah sniffed the wind—hare.

He crouched low, pushed off with a flex of powerful muscle and raced across the yard. Long ears poked up from beneath tall grass and twitched. The jackrabbit detected the predator hot on its trail and the chase was on.

Surrendering control to the lion, he simply enjoyed the hunt for the short time it lasted. When it was over, he pranced back to Becca, head held high, feeling proud and dominant. A primal beast providing for its mate. He dropped the limp brown creature at her feet, awaiting praise for a successful hunt.

The anticipated pat on the back didn’t come. Instead, she made a soft, sniffing noise. He took in her horrified expression and the twin tracks of tears flowing over her cheeks.

Aw, fuck!

She may be accustomed to the behaviors of fierce cats, but she definitely had a soft side. Irritation prickled over his skin as conflicting emotions vied for supremacy. Micah understood her distress at the senseless taking of a life. The lion, however, didn’t appreciate the rejection of his offering and became enraged. Tossing back his head, he released a mighty roar.

Rebecca scrambled to control her instinctive response, but the battle was doomed from the start. Thankfully, no blood marred the brown pelt that lay across the toe of her shoes. She could almost fool herself into believing the rabbit slept if not for the unnatural oblique angle of its neck. At least it had been a clean break and the animal had not suffered.

She squatted down and ran her fingers over its soft fur. The lion paid close attention to her every move, while the guards kept their focus elsewhere.

"Jack—" Her voice came out a weak whisper. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Go get a shovel, Jack. We have to bury it."

Despite the lion's lack of comprehension, the part of his consciousness still occupied by Micah understood. He headbutted her out of the way, knocking her on her ass, gently closed his jaws on the animal then loped away and disappeared into the woods.

The guard's hand tightened on the control to the shock collar and headed out after the lion.

"Jack, no. Wait a minute. I want to see what he does."

"We're not supposed to let him out of our sight."

"I know, but you'll have to trust me. He's not going far."

After a few minutes, Micah returned without the rabbit. Rebecca observed his demeanor. The lion's movements were sluggish and lacked purpose. The internal conflict between man and beast was palpable.

Micah had mentioned his discomfort in making the transition back to human form with the guards watching. Since then she'd had the guards bring along a change of clothes whenever they went outside. She took the bundle from Jack and walked with Micah behind some trees.

Rebecca grinned with the knowledge that Micah didn't have a problem with her witnessing his shift in form. She forced herself not to blink and miss the whole thing. It happened so fast.

She saw no point in wasting the gift she'd been given and drank in the magnificent sight of more than six feet of prime naked male flesh. He was even better than she remembered. With the altering of his DNA, Micah's body had adapted in thrilling ways. He had more body hair. The smattering of baby fine blond hair was almost invisible under the direct sunlight. Her fingers itched, longing to glide over his chest. And his muscles...oh my. His body had been ripped before. Now he was chiseled perfection. Beefy sinew undulated across his broad back as he shrugged into a shirt. She bit her lip to hold back a whimper when the cloth blocked her splendid view. But then he bent to put on the pants and her pussy dampened in appreciation.

Damn, she could orgasm just watching him bend over. The flex of those tight glutes, the tiny dimples above each round cheek... There were no words to do the beautiful sight justice. Her breasts swelled and the soft material of her bra rasped against her hard nipples. Tingles raced to her core with each shallow breath.

Micah turned and Rebecca had to steady herself against a tree trunk as her knees went weak.

His cock had been big before, both thick and long, but now — Damn! She hadn't gotten a clear look at it in the treatment room. Uh-uh. No way could that be the same cock. Full and erect, it hung heavily down his leg. The idea of taking him in her mouth made her lips tingle. Saliva pooled with the memory of his taste. She almost dropped to her knees but she had other, more pressing needs. Her pussy clenched, empty and aching to be filled.

That sure as hell won't fit in me now!

To hell with that. He'd fit perfectly the other night and she'd reveled in every thick inch stretching her wide. She wanted to hold him in her hands, stroke the warm length between her palms. Rebecca started to reach for him then remembered the guards. She had to curl her fingers into the material of her skirt to keep them off Micah. Last thing she wanted was an audience.

"Doc? Everything okay?"

Oh, thank goodness!

She twirled around, latching on to the guard's voice as if it were a lifeline.

"Yes!" The word came out high-pitched, almost shrill. She cleared her throat as she tromped through the brush, racing toward the guards. "We're ready to go back inside now."

Becca tapped her foot impatiently as Micah took his sweet time strolling back into the clearing, arrogant grin firmly in place.

Jack shot her a strange look. "Are you sure you're all right, Dr. Southerby?" He moved closer and whispered so the other guard wouldn't hear. "You're breathing kinda shallow and your face is all flushed."

"I'm *fine*," she gritted out from between clenched teeth. "Now if you're done lollygagging—"

He held up a hand in surrender. "Whoa, okay, Doc. We've already covered that kinda *fine*."

No one spoke on the way back to his cell. Micah covertly watched Becca in his peripheral vision. She was acting strange.

The first time she'd seen him shift, she passed out from shock. That had been days ago. Yesterday her innate curiosity had won out over her reserved demeanor. She had asked tons of questions and developed a few theories. All predictable, expected behavior.

Something was different today. When not being terse with Jack, she'd been quiet and distracted. She'd been impatient with him but he figured it had to do with arousal. Now he wasn't so sure. Especially since she kept rubbing small circles over her abdomen.

Maybe she didn't feel well.

He loathed going back into the cell while Becca went to her office. Of course, in Weltman's place he'd take the same precautions. Until he had full command of the shift, as well as the lion's reactions, keeping him locked up was the safest course of action.

After the guards left, Becca lingered, still unconsciously rubbing her belly.

"Either you're sick or something has happened. Which is it, baby?"

Her head snapped up. "Huh?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I, uh...I have lots of work to do." She backed away. "I'll stop by before I head home for the night."

Damn it!

He was so frustrated that he wanted to rip the bars from the wall. She shouldn't be going home alone to deal with whatever was bothering her. How fucking ironic that he finally wanted more than a quick fuck from a woman and he couldn't be with her.

The only woman he'd ever longed to hold in his arms through the night and he was stuck in a cage. They should be lying in bed together, dreaming of the future. Instead he had to moderate every action and put on a show for the guards, while learning to share his body with a cat.

Micah sat on the cot and stared at the ceiling. His shitty fucking karma had finally come back around to bite him in the ass.

Sometimes life sucked!

Chapter Eight

Rebecca hid out in the office she detested, pacing from one end to the other. No doubt about it—the morning outing with Micah shook her up and proved they had to get rid of their supervision. She had to be alone with him, free to touch him. Hold him and be held. Sooner the better.

The time had come to take action.

But what?

How could she get him out of a top-secret facility that they locked down tighter than a duck's butt?

He's the father of my child. I can't just leave him in that cell.

Yeah, and he also turns into a ferocious lion with sharp claws and huge teeth. Oh, and don't forget that enormous cock.

Hah, as if she could forget that!

Tingles raced along her spine, but she refused to contemplate sex with so much at stake. She had to get him out of here first. Last night she'd found a cabin to rent. She had the keys in her purse. Her plans were coming together so what exactly was she waiting for?

By now the security team would have filled Weltman in on the morning's events. Would it be enough to convince him the lab environment was counterproductive to his goals?

Her father's voice flowed through her mind offering a swift kick in the ass. *You'll never find out with your head stuck in the sand, Rebecca. Stand tall and show them what you've made of.*

Yeah, since when did she hide from adversity? The general had taught her to be strong and face challenges head-on. He'd be ashamed of the way she was behaving.

Rebecca squared her shoulders, steeled her spine and stormed out the door. Her heels beat out a steady rhythm as she moved down the hall. She didn't pause or give Weltman's assistant the chance to say a word, she charged right by and into his office.

A guard she had not met shot upright from a chair in front of the desk and turned to face her.

"Rebecca," Weltman gasped, startled by her bold entrance. "That will be all, Martha. Please close the door," he told his assistant.

Weltman stood and extended a hand toward the guard. "Kyle Slater, this is Dr. Rebecca Southerby, the zoologist working with Lasiter." Weltman turned to her. "Rebecca, this is Kyle, head of security here at the lab."

They didn't shake hands, the man merely nodded then followed Weltman's example and returned to his seat. She looked him over and made a quick assessment. Everything about the dark-haired stranger screamed military, from his quick response to the way he held himself.

Instead of sitting, she planted her hands on the desk and leaned in, forcing Weltman to lean back. She would not be able to intimidate him, but the position gave an impression of authority and power. She'd take any advantage she could get.

"This isn't working!"

He sighed heavily. "Kyle and I were just discussing this morning's session."

She kept her focus on Weltman, ignoring the other man. "Then you understand the situation. Being locked up in a cell and under constant guard here at the lab has impeded making any real progress. I'm going to have to take him offsite."

Weltman sprung to his feet and leaned forward, got right in her face. His heated breath washed over her, the smell of onions from his last meal turning her stomach. But she didn't back down and refused to flinch.

"It's too dangerous."

"He won't hurt me, Gabe. He's had plenty of opportunity. If anything, Micah has displayed protective behaviors toward me. The lion is too keyed up here. He won't let Micah take complete control in this atmosphere."

"No. He could turn on you."

She softened her tone and gave the appearance of relaxing her stance. "I know cats, Gabe. That's why you hired me. Working with him here, I won't be able to produce the result you're after. Allow me to work with him from home and I can help Micah get control of the lion."

Weltman dropped back in his chair. He frowned then made brief eye contact with the guard. From the corner of her eye, she saw Slater nod.

"She's right. He won't hurt her."

Holy shit, this is going to work. Because of Slater. She wondered if he knew Micah and was possibly a friend.

"I want results, fast." Weltman rubbed his temple and sighed. "How long?"

She shrugged. "Two weeks for him to fully adapt to the lion and master its instincts. Maybe less. It's hard to predict since I've never worked with anyone like him before."

"He is unique. Our first success." He leaned back in the chair, fingers steepled, and remained silent for several long moments. He seemed to reach a decision and pressed a button on his desk.

"Yes, sir?" The assistant's voice wafted through a hidden speaker.

"Martha, call down to communications and have someone bring a company phone for Dr. Southerby." After disconnecting, he sat back and stared at her. She maintained eye contact and projected an air of competence. Difficult as she found it, she remained silent, waiting him out. She didn't have to wait long.

"Okay, but there will be a few conditions."

She bit her tongue to hold back a triumphant shout. "Of course." She'd agree to anything.

"The phone will be programmed with my numbers, home and work, as well as Kyle's. You will arrange a schedule and check in with him."

"Do not miss a call, Dr. Southerby." Kyle's voice was low with menace. "It will take less than ten minutes for my team to overtake your house."

She'd pegged him as a hard-ass, by-the-book soldier, but he was enabling her to get Micah off the premises. It didn't fit his character and confounded Rebecca. Hell if she'd turn down his assistance, though. And she wasn't about to tell him she had no intention of taking Micah to the house provided for her by Nanotech and make it easy for them to interfere.

Watch yourself with this one, her father's voice warned. You don't know who he has alliances with or if he's working toward a completely different agenda of his own.

She played it naïve, the use of his first name intended to portray a relaxed attitude and hide the fear causing her heart to race. "I won't miss a call, Kyle. Lord, your men would give my elderly neighbor a heart attack."

When she glanced back at Weltman, he coughed to cover an evil grin. "We'd hate for that to happen."

Yeah, right! She bet it would just break his shriveled black heart.

"Since we don't know how the subject will respond to leaving the compound, he will be given the same light sedative that worked for his first trip outside." Weltman glanced down at his gold watch. "Give my men an hour to get him ready then pull your vehicle around to the loading dock."

She hated the idea of them sedating Micah again, but had no reason to object without tipping her hand.

"Thank you."

"If all goes well with Lasiter, we have plans for inducting several more subjects into the Predator Project. I have high hopes for a female soldier and plan to try a hybrid DNA cocktail with her. When she's been injected, I want you working with her exclusively."

He planned to alter more unsuspecting victims? A woman? Jesus! The evil bastard was so crooked they'd have to screw him into the ground when he died.

She didn't have the luxury of worrying about other test subjects right now. She had to focus on her immediate goals. Waiting an hour to see Micah again would be hard. There was so much she wanted to tell him. But copying the files from her computer would keep her busy. She'd need every bit of documentation to deal with any medical issues that developed.

After the phone had been delivered and programmed, Slater cautioned her once again.

"Do not miss a call, Doctor."

She didn't need her father's warnings to know Slater represented serious danger and was someone she didn't want to cross swords with.

"Believe me, I won't."

* * * * *

"I'm telling you, the old man has lost it!" Tom stomped down the hallway.

Jack shook his head. "I can't believe Slater agreed to this bullshit. They're going to get the doc killed."

Slater? Micah figured they had to be talking about Kyle Slater, one of the men he'd had handpicked when approached for names to lead security at a new facility. He didn't believe in coincidence.

With Slater working behind the scenes, he might have a prayer of getting out of this alive. He filed the information away for later and continued listening to the two morons talk as if he couldn't hear them.

"Why the hell would the doc take him home with her? The lion could turn on her at any time."

"Fuck if I know. Doesn't make any sense."

"Well, let's get this over with and shoot him up. It will take at least ten minutes for the sedative to take effect."

Jack unlocked the door and warily approached where Micah sat on the cot. The idiot talked to him as if he were mentally slow or something.

"Okay, Lasiter. You're getting sprung so don't give us any trouble."

"Do I look stupid to you?"

Jack stopped and seemed to consider, lowering Micah's opinion of him another notch. Resting his forearm on his thigh, he held his arm still for the injection. Tom swabbed the skin then jabbed the needle into his vein none too gently.

Finally, as the sedative raced through his blood, they left him alone with his fuzzy thoughts.

He'd actually been thankful for the drugs on his first trip outside. The cat had clawed at his skin, fought to be released, yearned to run and hunt. Once he'd shifted, keeping himself in check had been a true test of his mettle. But he'd done it, with Becca's help. She had become his strength, reason and purpose. With her at his side, Micah felt like Superman.

Becca. God, he couldn't wait to get her alone, somewhere private and fuck her senseless.

He vividly remembered the sweet flavor of her arousal. Had dreamed of it often since their night together. The hot, tight grasp of her pussy sucking at his cock. Her soft mewls of pleasure as she rode him to completion.

Jesus, he couldn't get out of the lab soon enough. He had to hold her, skin to skin, without any barriers as he had that night.

He had been sated and sleepy when she'd started a sensual assault on his body with her pouty lips, warm tongue and agile fingers. She'd straddled his hips and slid down his cock, enveloping him in the damp heat of her pussy. She'd felt like heaven. Hot, wet, tight – a damp silken fist with nothing between them.

He'd felt everything. Every flutter of her walls, all the intense heat. Sensation had overwhelmed higher thought. He'd uttered a protest, made a cursory attempt to stop her and get a condom, but he'd been too far gone.

The way she'd moved above him blew his mind. At first tentative and unsure, but once she found her rhythm, she rode him smooth as a barrel racer – hard, fast and with natural grace.

And she'd ridden him bareback.

A shiver of remembered ecstasy raced through his body. His mind floated along on a wave of memories until the guards came back, securing his hands and ankles. There was no fight in him, no motivation to fight, as they all but dragged him through the hallways then waited at a doorway, watching for her car.

* * * * *

Soon as the car pulled up behind to the loading dock a door opened and Micah was led out by Tom and Jack. The idiots had him chained at both the wrist and ankle.

Muttering the vilest curses she knew, Rebecca jumped out of the car and stormed over to confront the guards.

"Take. Them. Off."

Jack glowered at her. "You don't know what he's capable of."

"He's done nothing to deserve being treated like a criminal." She took in Micah's dilated eyes and slack expression. "Besides, you've got him too doped up to be capable of anything."

"Lady, you're nuts," Tom said. "It won't come as a surprise when I read in tomorrow's paper that you were mauled to death. I can't believe Weltman is going along with this bullshit."

She refused to back down or be intimidated. Rebecca moved closer, going toe to toe with the man, although the effect was somewhat diminished by having to tilt her head back to make eye contact. "The chains were not your first mistake, but underestimating me just may be the one you most regret."

For his next mistake, Tom put his hands on her, grasped her upper arms and shoved her out of the way. Surprised by the sudden move, she stumbled, twisting her ankle.

Son of a bitch thought he could manhandle her? She hated the testosterone-fueled male belief that just because they were stronger and bigger men could push women around. Well, not her. Nobody shoved her around and got away with it.

Size does matter—one of many lessons she'd learned from her father. Larger opponents required more space to maneuver so she moved in close. The big idiot grabbed her again.

Rebecca allowed her lips to spread into a sultry grin. The distraction worked, drawing his attention to her mouth. That's when she struck, hard and fast. She brought the thick heel of her shoe down on top of his foot. The pain delivered was sufficient to break his grasp and throw him off balance.

Tom wasn't letting it go. He tried to maneuver her into a position where he'd dominate. Then his arm started to cock back.

Oh, hell no!

After years of having sparred with her father's troops, instinct kicked in and she reacted without stopping to consider the consequences. Rebecca grabbed Tom's shoulders. Using momentum and her body weight, she pulled on his shoulders while thrusting her knee into his groin.

He didn't go down and started gathering his strength to strike back. She threw a sharp right jab, clipping the corner of his jaw.

Tom wobbled, and she was tempted to yell timber as he fell to the ground.

Micah growled and pulled at the chains, which rattled but failed to budge. Jack just gaped at his fallen coworker.

She glared pointedly at Jack. "You're not going to be stupid, are you, Jack?"

"No, ma'am," he said, and tossed her a ring of keys. "That's why I'm gonna get out of here before you unlock him." Jack helped Tom up and the two beat feet back inside the building.

What a mess. The unfortunate scene would draw attention, not that she'd have done anything different. When faced with a bully she would always defend herself.

Rebecca sensed the electronic eyes of various security cameras watching, but the immediate threat came from the drugged, angry man left standing before her. Weltman was right, she had no idea how he'd react to different situations. The low, constant growl coming from Micah didn't bode well.

His body trembled as if he fought an internal struggle. She knew the lion yearned to be free. It was clear in the brown eyes staring at the tree line, and the taut muscles rippling beneath his skin as she removed the horrible collar.

She spoke in a soft tone, praying it would soothe him. "You have to keep the lion on a leash, Micah. Shift now and we'll never get out of here. They will shoot you full of more tranquilizers and drag you back to the cell."

She feared it was already too late—the lion too close to the surface. Still, she tried to help. "Breathe through it, Micah. You are strong and can do this. Just a few more minutes." If he shifted, they were both in a heap of trouble. Not that she hadn't already done a good job of screwing things up.

"Look at me," she demanded. When he refused, she cupped his chin and gently turned his face toward hers. His eyes were steady and calm. "Good." She released the

breath she'd been holding. "That's good. You have to hold on for a few more minutes. For me. You can do it for me! So I can get you out of here."

He gave a curt nod as she stepped in closer, the warmth of him washing over her. Rebecca worked the lock securing his arms with hands that trembled. Not with fear, but longing. She wanted to be wrapped in his strong embrace, lying beneath his solid mass, taking his cock deep within her body, moving together as one. God, how she'd longed to be with him since the morning she'd foolishly walked away.

Leaving him was her one and only regret.

"Don't be afraid of me. I would never hurt you." He spoke in a gruff tone, having mistaken her desire for fear. "Never, Becca! Neither would the lion."

The chains slid through her hands, landing with a loud clatter at their feet. She stood tall, meeting his hard gaze head-on. She felt like crap for having doubted him even briefly. "I know, but if I don't get your cock in me soon, I'll go insane with the want. So shut up, let me get you out of these shackles and let's get the hell out of here."

His pupils dilated even further and his nostrils flared. Micah held her gaze for a long moment then growled. "Hurry!"

Memories of their night in Asheville flashed through her mind as she sunk to her knees, glancing up at him from beneath her lashes. She made a slow perusal over the rugged planes of his face, along his corded neck and down the roped muscles. Her gaze took in his wide shoulders and chest, narrowing to trim hips sporting a rather large bulge.

"Becca," he barked, "you naughty girl. Stop that or I'll take your right here. Fuck the cameras."

"And that's a bad idea, why?" she teased, thankful to see a bit of the normal spark back in his eyes.

"Don't push me, baby. Weltman would get off on watching."

She shuddered at the reminder of her creepy boss, fumbled the keys and rushed to free his ankles. Before the last chain fell, Micah lifted her to her feet, still strong regardless of the sedation, and got them moving toward the car.

“Where the hell are we going?”

Chapter Nine

Micah opened the car window and took a deep breath of crisp, cool mountain air. His first real breath in weeks. A free breath. Man, did it ever feel good to not be watched constantly by the Nanotech guards. He couldn't wait to take a shower without someone observing his every movement.

When Becca went all commando and attacked Tom, Micah's heart had beat against his ribs so hard he thought they might crack. He had been terrified and frustrated because he couldn't help her. Compared to the big security guard she looked so tiny and frail.

Then she kicked Tom's ass and Micah's dick had gone harder than rock. He had never seen anything half as provocative as Becca pounding a man twice her size into the ground.

"Pull over," he snapped.

"What?" Becca shot him a concerned glance before turning her attention back to the road. "What's wrong? Are you going to be sick?"

"Just pull over."

He unfastened the seat belt and waited for her to shift the car into park.

"Micah, what—"

He leaned across the console, fingers spearing into her soft hair, drawing her closer, and claimed her mouth. His tongue slid along the seam of her lips, plunging inside as they parted for him.

Sweet heaven.

It had been too long. She'd called him a pirate captain that first night, and it fit his current mood. He suited savage action to the description. Micah dominated the

aggressive kiss, demanded her submission to the forceful thrust of his tongue. With teeth, lips and tongue he plundered her mouth, ruthless in his passion, taking everything she had to give and demanding more.

More of her addictive taste.

More of her sweet warmth.

More of Becca.

The need for oxygen separated them, both gasping for breath. Becca wore a sexy, dazed expression, her lips red and swollen from his kiss. *God, she was beautiful.*

And beyond miraculous, she'd fought for him.

"Okay. Now we can go."

"What?"

"That helped, but we have to get wherever we're going. Fast."

"I...uh..."

Damn, she had no idea of the effect she had on him. Her eyes had gone all glassy and slumberous. Her cheeks held a sexy pink flush. If she didn't get the car moving again, he'd have her stripped bare with his cock driven deep into the tight clasp of her pussy in a matter of seconds.

"Becca." He gave her trembling hand a slight squeeze. "Drive, honey."

Not wanting to delay any longer, Micah studied the scenery before talking again. It was late in the fall season. The trees were shedding leaves, which covered the ground in vibrant shades of gold, orange, red and brown. Considering the chill in the air, once the sun went down they were in for a cold night. He hoped wherever they were going had a fireplace.

"So what happened with Weltman? How'd you get him to agree to let me out of there?"

She shot him a nervous glance. "I went to talk to him about the situation and how the lab setting was detrimental to making any progress. There was a security guy in the

office who agreed, but added a condition. I have to call and check in with him. I was given a company phone."

They were traveling a winding mountain road, but she held the steering wheel in an overly tight grip. He knew there had to be a lot more to the story. "And..."

She sighed heavily. "He made it clear that should I miss calling in it would take less than ten minutes for his 'team' to invade my house."

"Fuck!" Sure sounded like Slater. "Where's the phone?" he snarled.

His sudden change in demeanor had her cringing away from him. "In my purse." She gestured toward a handbag Micah hadn't noticed resting between the seats. He grabbed the bag and dug through the various feminine paraphernalia until his fingers connected with a duplicate of the phone he'd used when working for Nanotech. "Damn it!"

"What's wrong?"

"Cell phones can be tracked. The phones are programmed to check for a signal every few seconds, which connects it to any nearby antenna towers and exchanges information. The position of the phone can be pinpointed based on the signal strength. Plus, these particular phones have been fitted with a GPS chip." He dug around in her purse.

"But it's not even turned on."

"Doesn't matter. The company can still track the device." And he would know. Micah had picked out the official communications devices used by Nanotech and installed the chips himself.

He powered up the phone long enough to jot down the stored contact information then located a metal nail file in the bottom of her purse. With great care he pried open the casing and removed the wafer-thin chip, along with the SIM card. Glancing out the window, he spotted a small independent grocery with several cars in the parking lot. "Pull in to the grocery store."

"You can't just ditch the chip."

"Just pull over, baby." He didn't take the time to explain. Once she'd parked the car in a space he said, "Stay here."

She'd pulled in next to the perfect solution—a local vehicle with a trusting owner who didn't lock the doors. A rip in the cloth-covered seat provided a handy hiding spot for the chip. In less than two minutes they were back on the road.

"So Nanotech will be keeping tabs on whoever owns that car now?"

"Yeah." He removed the battery from the phone and dropped both into her bag. "Is there a landline where we're going?"

"Yes."

"Good. Make all of your calls from there or payphones in town. Dial star sixty-seven to block caller id. Keep the calls short. If they try to draw out the conversation come up with a reason to end the call quickly. And don't tell them where you are for any reason." He made a mental note to check her car for tracking devices.

A wicked gleam flashed in Becca's eyes. "Good thing I didn't correct their assumption we'd be going to the house Nanotech provided for my use. They set up the phone service there and probably have a duplicate set of keys to the place."

They'd come full circle to his original question. "So where are we going?"

"I rented a cabin under an assumed name. The physical distance from the lab is only a few miles, but on these mountain roads the drive takes almost an hour to drive it. Cross-country it's much less."

Micah watched her closely, seeing a side of Becca he had been unaware of. He never doubted she was smart, but he looked at his sexy accomplice with new appreciation. Dr. Rebecca Southerby had been endowed with rare, highly valuable qualities found in so few men, much less in women. She had the determined, courageous heart of a warrior and the instincts of someone experienced in battle.

Sure, she'd passed out the first time he'd shifted in her presence. That was a lot for anyone to grasp. In a very short time she'd proven herself to be fearsome, adaptable and fast on her feet in difficult situations.

The woman was damn near perfect...*for him.*

She made him feel things, which was a disturbing prospect. Micah was a soldier, a tough fighting man, not some wimpy guy all in touch with his emotions and shit. What a crock. Real men weren't sensitive and they sure as hell didn't possess some imaginary feminine side they had to get in touch with.

Screw that!

Rebecca glanced at Micah and stifled an inward groan. The man was scowling again.

"What's wrong? You're all pouty again."

"I don't pout," he grumbled.

She couldn't hold back her laughter. "Yeah, right. I'm getting whiplash over here. Your moods swing faster than a menopausal woman. What happened now?"

"Nothing." His voice took on a petulant note.

"Don't have a hissy fit. Sheesh! Forget I said anything."

"That'd be easier if you'd shut up for five minutes and let me think."

"Well," she huffed. "All righty then."

The car filled with thick, almost smothering tension for the rest of what turned into a long drive. At least it cured her pent-up sexual frustration. His current bad attitude had her keeping her distance. Not that she blamed him for the stressed-out reaction. He'd been through hell.

They finally turned onto the private drive and he went into he-man military mode.

Oh joy.

"What kind of security does this place have? How close is the nearest neighbor? And have you taken the time to walk the perimeter?"

She sighed heavily. "Relax, Rambo. There are locks on all the doors and windows, no close neighbors and when exactly do you think I had time to walk the perimeter, even if I was so inclined?"

Muttering something about women—derogatory, no doubt—he jumped out of the car soon as she put it in park and went skulking off into the woods. Well, good, let him go do his alpha he-man routine. She could use a few minutes alone to breathe without him critiquing how she inhaled and exhaled.

Rebecca headed into the cabin alone, locking the door behind her. Let Rambo knock to get in. Served him right.

After hanging her jacket on a coat tree, she glanced around the homey cabin and fell in love with the place all over again. She could easily picture herself living here.

Straight ahead in the sitting area a hunter green, butter-soft leather couch and recliner sat atop braided cotton rugs. The wooden tables appeared handmade. Cute knickknacks were placed through the inviting room.

Off to her right, the kitchen table was covered by a red gingham cloth and the windows bore matching curtains. A large hutch contained stoneware table settings in an apple motif. Throughout the kitchen was a collection of antique teapots in a variety of shapes, sizes and designs.

A doorway to the left led into a bedroom with its huge rustic pine bed covered by a patchwork quilt in warm tones of ivory, rose, sage and cinnamon. Matching pillows were artfully scattered across the top of the bed.

Only one bed.

For the two of them.

And the weather was perfect for snuggling close. If only he wasn't being such a jerk. He'd been through a lot so she cut him some slack but he'd better get over himself soon if he wanted to get lucky tonight.

Rebecca sighed and shook off the wayward thought, instead considering her favorite feature of the cabin. An enclosed porch extended along the back of the building and in one corner stood the hot tub. Images of her and Micah all dripping wet in the hot swirling water drifted through her mind and heated her body.

Oh yeah! She was definitely anticipating some water play.

Her blood had heated up but the air held a distinct chill that made her shiver. She placed a few logs in the fireplace, along with a bundle of dried herbs wrapped in birch bark she'd purchased at a rustic little shop in town. After lighting the fire, she warmed herself before the hearth. Within a few minutes the cabin filled with the scent of bay leaves, sage, rosemary, lavender and cinnamon.

Figuring she might as well get some dinner started, she headed into the kitchen. Busywork should distract her thoughts from Micah and anticipation of the night to come.

She preheated the oven and whipped up some sweet corn muffin batter, which she poured into a pan and put in the oven. While the muffins baked, she opened a large Mason jar of gourmet Southern chili and put it on the stove to heat. With her task completed, Rebecca found herself staring out the window, rubbing her flat tummy, her mind filled with thoughts of the future.

Would Micah be pleased to learn about the baby? Would he want to be a part of their lives? Or would the thought of fatherhood scare the crap out of him? Did she stand a chance in hell of turning them into a family? That's all she ever really wanted – a comfortable home and her own little family.

An arm clasped around her waist from behind and Rebecca screamed. She hadn't heard a sound but someone had gotten into the locked cabin.

She attempted several defensive moves, but her attacker countered them all. Before she knew what was happening, Rebecca found herself turned around, her body flattened against hard masculine planes with arms holding her tighter than steel bands,

giving her no room to maneuver. Blood pounded in her ears and her heart rate was through the roof.

"Whoa, baby. Easy. It's just me."

Her head snapped up and she took in Micah's bewildered expression. "H-how did you get in here?" And how the hell had he managed to sneak up on her?

He flashed a sardonic grin. "I specialized in black ops, baby. No cheap door lock is going to slow me down."

Okay, she'd give him that, but she hadn't heard a sound other than the hum of the refrigerator and the crackling fire. He'd been completely silent. She hadn't detected even the lightest footfall on the wooden floor, no squeak of floorboards, not even the brush of clothing as he moved. He must have been one heck of an operative.

"Sorry for being a jerk earlier."

He took her totally off guard. She hadn't expected an apology. And just like that, she melted. "You're forgiven."

His breath warmed that wonderful spot behind her ear as he spoke in a raspy tone. "Something smells good." She shivered as his hot, damp tongue flicked teasingly over her skin.

"Chili and corn muffins." She was proud of how level and calm her voice sounded. "I thought we would sit by the fire and eat."

"I wasn't talking about dinner, baby." Micah chuckled and her knees shook. "Although, I am very hungry," he nibbled her earlobe, "for you."

Chapter Ten

Holding Becca in his arms had Micah tied up in knots. A sense of peace and contentment warred with growing frustration and searing desire. Hands down, the latter won.

He fumbled with the controls to turn off the stove and lifted her. Becca's arms wrapped around his neck as her legs closed over his hips, perfectly aligning her warm pussy with his cock, which jerked to attention. The material of her skirt bunched up, baring the creamy skin of her lean thighs and capturing his gaze.

"I need you, Micah."

"Soon." He tugged at her blouse, pulled it free of her waistband, fingers searching until he found her soft flesh, smoother than the finest silk. "I've been going crazy seeing you but not able to touch."

He suited action to words, divested Becca of her clothes and laid her on a cozy rug before the hearth. Firelight chased shadows over the subtle hills and valleys of her body, teasing him with tantalizing glimpses of the delicate delights he sought.

Starved for the sight of her, Micah's hungry gaze roamed her supple body noting the new glow to her skin, which appeared to shine from within. Her breasts were fuller than he remembered, the rosy nipples a deeper shade of pink. She was the same beautiful woman he desired, yet there were distinct differences.

"Micah."

Her plaintive tone didn't alter his course. She shifted restlessly, reached for him. "I'm not done looking." With one hand, he held her wrists pinned above her head. "I could spend weeks staring at your gorgeous body and never get my fill."

"You will not!" She began to struggle against his restraining grasp in earnest. "If you don't touch me, I'll kill you."

The idle threat, combined with her scrunched-up expression, made him laugh. "Where do you want to be touched?" His free hand glided along the elegant column of her neck, dipping into the hollow of her throat. "How about here?" His fingertips softly traced her prominent collarbone then down the inside of her arm and teased the side of her breast. He circled the mound and decided he was right, it was fuller. "Or maybe here?"

Becca moaned and arched her back, thrusting her breast against his hand, seeking a firmer touch. "Micah," she pleaded.

Giving in to what they both wanted, he cupped her breast, weighed and measured it against his palm. He tweaked her pouty nipple between his thumb and forefinger. She sucked in a hard breath and pulled back slightly, and he made note of her increased sensitivity.

"How about if I taste you too? Would you like that, Becca?"

"Oh yes," she groaned.

As responsive as ever. He loved it.

He trailed the very tip of his tongue around her areola, which puckered tighter. When he blew a stream of warm air over the damp tip, her entire body shuddered and arched higher. He took her taut nipple into his mouth, sucked lightly and pressed the nubbin between his tongue and palate.

Becca went wild, cried out, writhed. Her hips bucked in an instinctive rhythm older than time, rubbing against his hard cock like a cat in heat. One moment she was all soft and fluid motion beneath him, incoherent nonsense spilling from her lips, the next she tensed, stilled and moaned as an orgasm took her by surprise.

Jesus, that was hot. He'd never seen a woman orgasm just from having her nipples sucked. "So responsive."

When the shudders subsided and she calmed, Micah brushed damp strands of hair from her face. "You ready for more?"

"Mmm..." she mumbled. "Yes, more."

While the release had taken the edge off for her, Micah's body was hard and ready. Still, he refused to hurry, wanting to enjoy the time they had together, however limited it might end up being.

"Good." He pressed her wrists to the rug. "Keep your hands there, baby."

"But, Micah," she complained. "I want to touch you."

"Not now, baby. I'm on a short leash. If you touch me this is going to be over before we even get started."

Those big green eyes blinked up at him from beneath thick lashes and he was lost. A warning growl rumbled from his throat. The sound, more animal than human, would frighten most people. But Becca was far from average. The extraordinary woman affected him in ways he couldn't comprehend, awakening needs and emotions he had no idea how to handle.

The only thing he knew for certain, felt with every erratic beat of his heart, Rebecca Southerby was his. She belonged to him, with him, the same way he belonged to her. The very thought scared the hell out of him, but there was no going back. Not now, maybe not ever.

"Micah."

He met her gaze, staggered by the depth of emotions playing across her delicate features. The breath caught in his throat.

"It's okay. I want you to let go." Rebecca hated the idea of him holding anything back from her. She wanted it all. Every ounce of passion and desire. "I want all of you."

Especially your love.

Not knowing how he'd take such a declaration, she kept it to herself.

The future was uncertain, but she wanted to take a chance with him. She didn't want to consider not having Micah in her life, in their child's life. He was theirs, and she'd fight to the death to keep him.

He faltered, appeared wary. She preferred him strong and confident. "I want everything, Micah. Make love to me."

He swallowed, hard, rose to his knees. A protest lingered on her lips, shattering as he pulled the elastic band from his hair and shook out the dark blond strands. With slow, deliberate motions he unbuttoned his shirt and uncovered his strong chest.

Riveted, she stared as he stood to remove his socks and shoes. She held her breath when his long fingers paused at the waistband of his jeans, coming to rest next to the substantial bulge held captive by the denim.

What is he waiting for? Her gaze shot upward, meeting his intense stare. Rebecca melted, her entire body going soft and liquid beneath the heat of his dark eyes.

The rasp of his zipper was loud in the quiet room. She kept her eyes trained on his face, unable to glance away from the sexy determination etched into his solid jaw. He bent to take off his jeans, breaking eye contact, and allowing her gaze to lower.

The man was a masterpiece, carved by a skilled artisan. Tall, broad-shouldered, classic V-shaped torso narrowing down to lean hips and strong legs. His thick cock hung heavily, a pearl of fluid beading at the head. Longing to taste him, she licked her lips, smiling when he groaned, "Later."

"You're no fun."

He shrugged. "I showed you mine. Now it's your turn. Spread your legs, baby. Show me that pretty pussy I've been dreaming about."

Feeling bold and powerful, Rebecca drew her knees up then let them fall to the side. He sucked in a harsh breath, driving her further. She trailed her hands over her body, stopping to shape her breasts and rub aching nipples before continuing on. He followed her movements as her fingers reached the juncture of her thighs.

She circled her slick clit with a fingernail, pressing into her own touch, then dipped lower and spread herself wide while plunging two fingers deep. It was good, but not enough. She wanted more.

"Micah," she gasped. "Make love to me. I need your cock in me." Her fingers moved faster, thrust harder.

"Mine."

The guttural growl struck a chord of fear and excitement within her. Rebecca looked up at Micah, noting his elongated pupils. If she wasn't mistaken, the downy blond hair covering his body had gotten thicker. Her worry about his screwed-up DNA had lingered at the back of her mind and now zoomed to the front. A frisson of unease trickled down her spine as he knelt between her widespread legs, his expression hard and savage.

"Micah."

His gaze didn't rise to meet hers, remaining on her pussy instead.

"I'm up here."

That brought him up short, a sheepish smile gracing the curve of his sexy lips. "Yeah?"

"Umm...that thing I said about letting go," she bit her lip. "I've reconsidered. You change on me, go all hairy and feral while we're making love, and I'll—"

What? What would she do? How the heck could she level a threat that would have any impact on a man more than twice her size?

"You'll do what, baby?" he prompted.

An idea came to her and she went with it even though she didn't have the surgical skills necessary to follow through on the threat. He wouldn't know it to be a blatant lie.

She narrowed her eyes at him, tried for an intimidating look but figured it failed when his smile grew. *Irritating jerk!*

"I'll neuter you." She nodded, satisfied by his frown and furrowed brow. "You keep a tight leash on the lion, Micah. I'm serious!"

He threw back his head and roared with laughter, shaking so hard she thought he might fall over. When he finally recovered, his response angered and embarrassed her. "Bestiality doesn't do it for you?"

She sat up, spine ramrod straight, put both palms on his chest and shoved. "That's not funny!" He didn't budge, but his laughter did end abruptly.

"Whoa, don't get upset, Becca." He ran his hands up and down her arms in a soothing fashion. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have laughed, but you looked so serious and I wasn't expecting what you said. Created some pretty crazy images in my head."

Oh great. Now she had some wild visuals forming in her mind and had to fight back her own smile.

She didn't resist as he laid her back on the rug. "If I start to shift you can shoot me with the tranq gun, but I'm sure it won't be a problem. Seeing you bare and spread open for me...damn, baby. Drives *me* wild. Not the lion, Becca. Me."

He took her hand, wrapping her fingers around his warm cock, which was harder than steel. She tightened her grip and stroked him from base to crest, his rough groan restoring her confidence. "Come up here. I want to taste you."

"Uh-uh. My sweet tooth is craving you."

She affected an innocent smile and batted her eyelashes at him. "Why can't we both have what we want?"

His eyes darkened, shimmered. The pupils elongating again, but this time she wasn't afraid, realizing it meant she'd turned him on. "I love the way your mind works!" His breathing became more shallow, and she noticed a plump vein in his forehead pulsing.

The obvious signs of his increased arousal stimulated her own. Muscles softened and her blood turned hotter than molten lava, flooding her erogenous zones.

Micah captured her mouth in a scorching-hot kiss that had her toes curling into the rug as she pressed tight against him. He stole her breath, replaced it with his own. Their

tongues tangled, tasted, demanded more until the necessity for oxygen broke them apart.

Catching him off guard, putting all her strength into the movement, Rebecca rolled them over. Once on top, she turned, straddled his face and playfully wiggled her ass.

Hell yeah! The position gave Micah a great view of her wet, pink folds. Her puffy little clit peeked out from beneath its hood, a temptation he didn't even try to resist.

He grasped her hips, preparing to settle in for a nice, long feast. Becca, having the same intention, sucked his cock into her mouth, taking him deep. He gasped, swore, struggled not to come as she sucked hard and teased his most sensitive spots with her devilish tongue.

"Jesus, ease up, Becca. I want this to last more than ten seconds."

She mumbled something around his dick and the vibrations nearly did him in. Bolts of fiery lightning seared his spine, and his balls tensed. Micah gritted his teeth, clamped his eyes shut and fought his body's instinctive urge to thrust. He wasn't able to participate until she came up for air.

Pulling her hips, he launched an equally devastating sensual assault on her senses. He followed a simple battle plan—give her as much pleasure as possible. He started off with slow, tender licks, letting her salty-sweet flavor explode over his tongue. Allowing the intensity to build, he followed her direction, paying attention to what elicited the strongest response.

Rebecca gave no quarter, showering him with lavish attention, driving him to an edge he refused to cross. Not before her.

The instant she tensed, the walls of her pussy spasming, her cries rising to the rafters, he let go, following her into ecstasy. She drank down every drop of his release before collapsing, draped over his chest, right where she belonged.

If he could manage not to mess things up and keep her there, he stood a chance at grabbing the brass ring.

Rebecca continued to surprise and delight him with new discoveries. His release took the edge off, but Micah still craved something deeper. Something...more.

She took the lead again, guided him into loose and lazy movements. It started with sweet arousal, made a slow and steady climb to a deep intimacy he'd never known had been lacking. There was no rush to reach the finish line. The ultimate goal wasn't to get off. None of the frantic, wild, pounding sex he'd found so pleasurable in the past.

Becca touched him in ways no other ever had. In her warm embrace he learned the meaning of making love. The strong connection forged with each measured, deliberate joining. The soul-deep sharing of emotions through shared passion. The satisfaction of bringing each other to a pleasurable release.

She taught him what it meant to fall in love.

Hell if that wasn't some scary shit!

After they recovered, Micah reheated their dinner. The chili, which had smelled so good and stirred her appetite an hour before, now made Rebecca's stomach churn. Sitting before a warm fire, naked, wrapped up in a quilt with Micah should have put her in a romantic mood. It would have if her conscience hadn't picked that moment to kick into high gear and start gnawing on her insides.

She gave up the pretense of eating, stopped pushing the food around in the bowl with her spoon and set it aside. Snuggled close to his chest, she basked in his warmth, breathed his scent deep into her lungs. Knowing she'd be content to spend forever just as they were, she dreaded their uncertain future.

"What's wrong? Don't you like the chili?"

Damn it, him being nice only made her guilt grow. "It's fine."

He rested a palm on her forehead. "You're a bit warm. Do you feel all right?"

Realizing she'd been rubbing her tummy, she wrapped her arms around him to still the restless movement. "Yes, just tired. It's been an exhausting week." And wasn't that the understatement of the century.

Micah had a right to know about the baby. She wanted to tell him, but how? Such weighty, life-altering news couldn't be blurted out. *Oh, by the way, I'm pregnant.* Lessening the impact would take finesse.

She yelped, startled when Micah rose suddenly with her in his arms. "Then it's past time that I tucked you into bed."

"Mmm," she purred as all sorts of lascivious images involving the two of them locked in a variety of positions on the big bed flooded her mind.

Micah laughed softly. "Not for sex. To sleep. You need to rest."

Rest? Hah! She could think of many much more interesting ways to share a bed with Micah than sleeping.

Dismissing her guilty conscience, she let her fingers do the talking by tangling them in his downy chest hair. "I'd rather play."

"Becca," he grumbled. "Relax. Let me take care of you."

"Oh, yes. Please do. I have this itch that needs to be scratched —"

She laughed as he tossed her onto the bed. Rebecca bounced once and came to a sudden stop as he landed on top of her. Damn, she loved this playful side of him.

"An itch, huh? Where?"

He flashed a rare, lopsided grin and all her worries evaporated. When the right time arrived, she'd find the words to share her news—later. But not now, when she had him back in her arms. Rebecca indulged her greedy, selfish urges to keep him to herself for one night and not permit anything to come between them.

She reveled in who she was with Micah. He banished the nerdy and shy zoologist, releasing the inner vixen she normally kept under tight control.

Slipping a hand between their bodies, she thrust a finger between her legs. "Down here," she said, hardly recognizing her own sultry voice. "It's a deep itch I can't reach." She lifted her hand to his lips, tracing the curves with her damp fingertip.

His lips parted and Micah sucked her finger into his warm mouth. Fierce heat blazed through her body, raced from one nerve ending to the next, making her feel as if she'd burst into flames. His eyes sparkled with mischief when he released her finger.

"Well, I happen to have this handy scratching post you can use to take care of your itch."

Rebecca's heart stuttered, seized for a moment, then pounded against her breastbone. Micah looked at her with pure adoration and something else softening his hard features.

Dare she even think it? Could he be feeling what she did? Had he fallen in love with her? Panic tightened her chest with the realization. She'd really gone and done it—fallen in love with Micah. *Holy crap!*

His smile, so rare and precious, returned to his lips. "I don't offer to demonstrate often, but you're special." He cupped her chin and stared deep into her eyes. "How about it, baby? Wanna give it a spin? Every test drive comes with a satisfaction guarantee." The charming rake winked at her. "I'll keep scratching 'til that itch is taken care of."

She had no idea how long she stared at him, not saying a word.

"Becca?" His brow wrinkled with concern and he started to pull away. "I'm sorry. You're tired and here I am fooling around."

"No," she gasped, reaching out for him. "Micah, please." At the sound of her emotion-choked voice, his gaze snapped back to hers. "Make love to me."

The corner of his lips twitched then his mouth spread into a huge grin. He looked happier than a kid set free in the toy store on Christmas morning. She prayed her secret, when revealed, wouldn't destroy the fragile bond they'd forged.

Chapter Eleven

"You have to work with the cat. Don't fight its natural instincts, Micah."

He yowled in frustration. For two days Becca had lectured him on lions and their behaviors. She might be an expert on big cats but she had no clue about the lion within *him*.

His lion had a single thought permeating his one-track mind — fucking.

Micah waged a constant war against the lion's biological imperative to mount and mate Becca, over and over, again and again. He had to fuck her until his seed penetrated an egg and her belly swelled with his cub or, better yet, cubs. Wanted nothing more than to pounce on her and fuck until he was too exhausted to continue.

"Micah." She touched his flank and before he could stop it, the lion snapped at her hand. He jerked the lion back, wickedly sharp teeth missing her vulnerable flesh by a narrow margin. Too narrow for his sanity.

The change overcame him fast. In the blink of an eye his senses dulled, fur receded and his body altered. Each time it happened he anticipated pain but it never came. The experience sapped his energy and left him starving to replenish the massive calories he'd used.

"Jesus, you know better! Never try to touch the lion when he can't see it coming," he barked.

When she didn't respond, Micah lifted his heavy head and met her frightened gaze, instantly regretting his harsh tone.

Aw, fuck! Good job, asshole.

He'd scared the hell out of Becca. She held a hand over her throat, her entire body trembling as she fought back tears. Ignoring his state of undress, he pulled her into his arms, stifling an inward groan as she brushed against his painfully hard cock.

"Shh," he soothed. "I'm sorry, baby. I'll work harder and get the lion to behave."

"I don't know how to help you," she sobbed. "I feel like a total failure."

"We'll figure it out, together. Right now all I'm worried about is keeping you safe. If I hurt you..." he shivered, horrified by the very idea. "I'd never forgive myself."

Becca rubbed at her eyes with balled-up fists. "I have to go to the lab—"

"Absolutely not," he roared.

She jerked back, afraid of him again, making him want to punch something. He hated causing her to fear him. "I would never intentionally hurt you." The words were low, spoken almost in a whisper.

"I know you wouldn't."

Did she? He doubted it was possible considering his actions.

"Micah," she implored. "Neither one of us knows exactly what's been done to you. I only skimmed some of the scientific notes on the procedure, but didn't have a chance to read the specifics on your case."

He didn't have to read the specifics, he lived with them. And he had done his own homework online while Becca slept. The more he learned, the more he realized how drastically what he felt as a man conflicted with the lion.

Micah's feelings toward Becca were possessive and protective. He longed to bind her to him permanently. The lion's primary goals were to dominate and procreate.

According to the information he'd found, the female went into heat for several days and would fuck any available lion, even forgoing food to have sex up to forty times a day. No way could he get it up forty times a day, not that he wasn't willing to try.

Something Becca said broke off his internal musings and drew him back into the conversation. "What?"

"Haven't you been listening?" she huffed. "Kyle has been acting odd when I call to check in. I feel like he's trying to tell me something, but I've been following your advice and keeping the calls short. By going into the lab, I can reassure Weltman we're making progress and also try to get Kyle alone, see if I can find out what's going on."

Micah scratched at his jaw, wondering what Slater was up to. The other man wouldn't do anything without a deliberate plan. And what Becca said had merit. They needed move info from his medical records—something was missing. The opportunity to determine Slater's intentions would be a bonus. It would be good to know who he had in his corner when, not if, the shit hit the fan. He had no doubt it would, because he had no intention of ever being under Weltman's thumb again.

"All right, but we do this my way, Becca. I won't risk anything happening to you."

She didn't quite manage to hold back a triumphant grin. "What could possibly happen to me at the lab?"

Anger surged through him as he remembered Tom's hands on his woman. The lion's rage added to his own had Micah primed for a good knock-down-drag-out fight. "Have you forgotten a rather physical run-in with one of the guards when you were busting me out of there?"

"That was nothing," she shrugged off his concern. "A minor misunderstanding, which proved I can take care of myself."

"The guards won't underestimate you again, and you won't walk away from another confrontation unscathed."

"Fine, I'll be careful and do what you say, but we've got to have those files, Micah."

They settled on a plan, even though he didn't like it. Since he couldn't risk setting foot in the lab, Becca had to go in alone. She'd come up with an idea for transporting his clothes while in lion form. They loaded everything into a duffle bag and put the strap around his neck before he shifted.

"Oh shit! Shift back, Micah. Hurry!" Becca cried.

If the rapid change from man to beast and back again within the span of several moments hadn't been enough to steal his breath, the expandable strap tightening around the lion's thick neck certainly had been. Micah cursed, ripping at the bag even once he could breathe again. "Jesus Christ. I won't have to worry about Nanotech anymore if I succeed at strangling myself."

"Oh my god! Are you okay?" She grabbed the bag and began working the buckle to lengthen the strap. "You scared the hell out of me."

"Scared you?" He shook his head. "Took about ten years off my life."

After she had the strap extended as far as it would go, she placed it around his neck again. Micah rubbed at his jaw, trying to decide whether stupidity or desperation compelled him to give it another try.

He focused on the image of the lion in his mind, pleased to still be breathing when his body reshaped itself. Unfortunately his relief was short-lived. Becca threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him tight enough to cut off his air supply. His deep growl had her stepping back, a sheepish grin on her flushed face.

"Please be careful. I'll kick your ass later if you do anything stupid."

Hah! He was more worried about her impetuous streak getting Becca into a boatload of trouble. With him stuck outside, he wouldn't be able to help her. At least with his technical skills he'd been able to fashion a listening device from materials he'd had her pick up in town. Regardless of the safety measures in place, his heart clenched as she got in the SUV and headed down the private drive.

The lion's powerful legs ate up the distance across the mountain terrain between the cabin and the lab. From his vantage point high on a tree limb, hidden behind the colorful leaves, he had a great view of the grounds surrounding the facility.

Waiting didn't bother him under normal circumstances. He had the patience and calm of a great hunter. Too bad these weren't normal circumstances and he was anything but calm. The lion's keen hearing picked up the sound of Becca's vehicle

before she drove into view. Once she made it past the gates, he jumped down from the tree, shifted and got dressed.

He turned on the receiver and heard her take a deep breath, followed by a metallic bang as she closed the car door. No sooner had she made it through the front doors than the hair on the back of his neck stood on end and all his instincts screamed that she was in trouble.

* * * * *

Approaching the main entrance of the top-secret laboratory, Rebecca rubbed her sweaty palms on her slacks, held her breath and placed her hand on the scanner plate. Blue light glowed around the edges of her hand, which grew warm from the sensors. She didn't breathe again until the door issued a series of electronic clicks and slid open.

Cool as a cucumber, her father's voice coached as she walked down the hall to the echo of her heels clacking on the tile floor. She nodded to a white-coated technician, turned the corner, almost making it to her office before being intercepted by Kyle Slater.

"Hello, Dr. Southerby," he greeted. Kyle wrapped his long fingers, firm yet gentle, around her biceps and guided her down a connecting corridor toward the examination rooms. "We weren't expecting you today." His voice sounded tight as if he were stressed. "You're alone?"

Keep your answer short and sweet. Don't give him anything.

She nodded. "Yes. I just stopped by to go over some files."

When he didn't say anything else, butterflies took flight in her stomach. Her hands itched to rub her abdomen, but she didn't give in to the impulse.

"Where are we headed, Mr. Slater? I have a great deal of work waiting back in my office."

"This will only take a moment. Weltman wants an update on your progress with Lasiter. He will also want to know where Lasiter is and why he's not with you."

Then why were they headed in the opposite direction of Weltman's office?

Kyle stopped before a steel door, swiped his identity card and placed his palm on the scanner. When the door slid open, he drew her into a small room with a table and two chairs at the center. The far wall held a large mirror she presumed to be a one-way window.

"What's going on? This looks like one of those interrogation rooms from a TV cop show."

He didn't answer the question. "Please have a seat. Mr. Weltman will be with us in a moment." Kyle positioned himself next to the entrance, back against the wall, staring blankly toward the mirrored glass.

Rebecca sat straight, hands folded in her lap, schooled features not reflecting the jumbled thoughts racing through her mind.

Did they suspect something? Had she somehow given herself away? Had they discovered Micah was on the property?

She didn't have to wait long for answers. The door whooshed open and her red-faced boss stepped into the room.

Don't panic. Hold your tongue.

"Well, if it isn't our missing zoologist. We've been searching everywhere for you, Dr. Southerby. Imagine our surprise when you strolled through the front door."

She bit her tongue, remained silent.

"Would you mind telling me where you've taken my test subject?"

"I—"

Weltman held up a hand, cutting off her response. "Don't say he's at the house I provided for you. We've already checked."

Don't say anything, her father's voice advised.

Weltman glanced at the guard then nodded toward the door. "Let's introduce the doctor to our latest success, Slater."

Turning on his heel, he didn't wait to see if they followed. Kyle once again latched on to her arm and led her to one of the exam rooms. She knew Micah heard every word, and prayed he didn't do anything rash.

She blinked a few times as her eyes adjusted to the bright lights of the room. Then Weltman moved to the side.

"Oh. My. God!" Her hand flew up to cover her throat as horror filled her.

A tall, dark-haired man struggled against the restraints holding his naked body to the examination table. Freshly sutured surgical incisions riddle his tan skin. "What have you done to him?"

"Dr. Southerby, this is Crosby, our latest subject in the Predator Project. He's been injected with *Panthera tigris*."

Sweet Jesus, they'd screwed with another man's DNA. And he didn't appear to have volunteered for the project. First a lion, now a tiger. What will they do next, create a bear? The whole thing was turning into some surreal, screwed-up fairytale.

The man's wild gaze shot around the room. Perspiration broke out on his brow. "No! No more doctors. No more drugs. No more procedures," he cried. "I can't take any more, you sick fuckers."

"We've discussed this before, Crosby," Weltman said in a cold tone. "If you don't calm down, we'll have to sedate you."

His gaze locked on Weltman and the man's struggles immediately stopped.

Weltman nodded. "Good." He turned to face her. "Crosby has not yet managed to shift. We don't know what the problem is, but you will begin working with him today..."

His dramatic pause had her heart rising into her throat as panic tightened her chest. She knew whatever he said next wasn't going to be good.

"Soon as you return Lasiter to his cell. Slater will escort you to retrieve my shifter."

Nope, not good at all.

She opened her mouth to say...something, she wasn't sure what, but the words died on her lips as shrill alarms began shrieking and red lights flashed in warning. "Security breach, sector four," an electronic voice repeated several times.

"Ah," Weltman exclaimed. "My guess is that would be Lasiter arriving to rescue the fair damsel."

No, Micah. Don't put yourself at risk for me.

Kyle spoke into a handheld communicator, issuing orders rapid-fire. A few moments later the alarms were silenced.

"Slater, bring Rebecca to my office. We'll wait for Lasiter there. I don't want him to meet our newest creation yet."

Kyle reached for her arm and Rebecca bristled. "Don't touch me," she muttered. "I'm perfectly capable of walking on my own."

Chapter Twelve

Kyle shot her a wicked grin and Rebecca's hope rose. Could he be an ally?

"Are you wearing a transmitter?"

Caution, she reminded herself. "Why would I admit it to you if I was?"

"Because I'm trying to help. I served with Micah. He pulled my ass out of the fire more times than I can count. I'm finally getting a chance to return the favor."

There was something reassuring in his eyes. An indefinable quality that had her trusting him. Wary of his intentions, she nodded. "Yes, Micah can hear everything so if you're setting me up, he'll come after you."

"Where is it?"

"Left lapel."

His smile grew. "I almost feel sorry for him. You're gonna give him a run for his money. You're absolutely perfect for the lucky bastard."

"Umm..." she hesitated. "I'm going to take that as a compliment and let it slide."

Kyle laughed. "Priceless." He drew her into the hall but turned down a side corridor she was unfamiliar with.

"Where are we going?"

"Security breach was sector four, the loading docks. Micah will be long gone from that area by now. I suspect we'll find him near the security control room."

He held her shoulders, leaned forward, moist lips parted, and for one startling moment Rebecca thought he intended to kiss her. Instead, he spoke into her collar. "I hope you got that, Lasiter. I cleared the control room. We'll meet you there."

He'd barely finished speaking and lifted his head when white smoke billowed through the corridor and Micah's deep voice echoed around them.

"You're slipping, Slater. I already hit the control room, armed myself and tripped the alarms from there to throw off the hounds."

Rebecca shivered. His voice sounded different – cold and detached.

Kyle laughed and raised his hands, palms outward. "You sneaky spook. Always were a step ahead of everyone else."

"Step away from her, Slater."

Kyle took two measured and deliberate steps backward, but his sharp gaze remained locked in the direction of Micah's voice.

Her knees wobbled as he suddenly materialized from within the dense smoke looking every inch the hardened warrior she'd first pegged him as. His body vibrated with a dark menace she felt rolling over her, paralyzing her with fear that snaked along her spine. She didn't dare take a breath or make even the slightest movement.

She detested her reaction, but the man before her was not the sweet lover she'd fallen head over heels in love with. He'd gone into full Rambo mode, promising violent retribution for anyone who dared to cross his path.

"Micah?" He didn't acknowledge having heard her.

"Unfasten your weapons belt, Slater."

Kyle took his time working the clasp with one hand then let it dangle from his fingers.

"Drop it and kick it over here."

"You're wasting time," he protested while following Micah's instructions.

The belt skittered across the floor, zooming past her, holding her focus until Weltman's nasally voice cut through the tension-filled silence.

"Dr. Southerby's not going anywhere, Lasiter. Not until I test the fetus."

"Oh shit," she gasped. How had he found out about the baby?

No one uttered a word for what was surely only a few seconds, but the silence seemed endless to her. When Micah spoke, his voice was colder than solid ice.

"I won't buy into your mind games so hurry up and spill whatever toxic swill you're trying to sell."

His maniacal laughter rang out, constricting her chest and making it difficult for Rebecca to breathe.

"She didn't tell you." He nodded. "Venomous bitch, just like all the others."

Others? What on earth was he talking about? Had the man lost his mind?

"We were watching her house. When she didn't show up with you, I sent a team in to search the place. Found not one but three positive pregnancy tests in the bathroom trash can."

Rebecca had no problem visualizing her movements. Crumpling up the boxes, tossing in the instructions, staring at the three test sticks lined up on the counter. Picking them up with numb fingers and dropping them into the wicker basket, intending to carry the trash outside but her scrambled thoughts had distracted her from completing the task.

"Is it yours?"

Weltman's wretched voice broke the images. Her gaze shot to Micah, who appeared unaffected by the news. She looked only at him, pleaded with her eyes for understanding. "I only found out the day they brought me to see you. The day I found out..." *that you turn into a lion*. She kept the last part to herself.

There was no way to justify not telling him about the baby.

To her horror and disbelief, he never even blinked or spared a glance in her direction.

"Slater," Micah growled, "don't even think about it."

Other than making sure his open hands could be seen, Kyle remained still.

"Rebecca," Micah said in that lifeless tone. "Pick up the weapons belt and bring it here."

She did as he commanded, moved to his side, placing the belt into his hand. His arm wrapped around her waist and jerked her against his side. His fingers dug painfully deep into her hip and she flinched. Rebecca prayed he hadn't noticed, but when she met his hard glare she knew he'd seen the involuntary reaction.

The same eyes that had showed such warmth and emotion for her a mere hour before were now empty and lifeless. He looked at her as if she meant less than nothing.

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears and she stumbled along as he dragged her down the hallway. Arrogant, macho jerk, issuing orders to her as if she were some green Army recruit incapable of figuring out anything for herself. Passing judgment on her actions and treating her like crap.

She kept her mouth shut, bided her time. Let the impervious idiot think he had all the power and control over her. He'd learn the truth soon enough.

The baby didn't need him. She didn't need him.

Want him, yes.

Love him, absolutely.

Need his holier than thou attitude, hell no!

"Give me your keys."

Becca didn't say a word as they exited the facility, which surprised and relieved Micah. He did a quick scan of the surrounding area and stripped some branches from a nearby shrub, using them to jam the entry door shut. It wouldn't stop the security team but should buy him a few precious minutes.

All his concentration narrowed down to the task at hand, getting them both out alive. He'd sort everything else out when they were safe. Or better yet, when he could breathe again and the vise grip clamped tight over his chest eased up.

In all his years working covert operations and high-level security he had no trouble keeping his mind on the job until it was completed. He had not suffered heart

palpitations or sheer terror when under heavy fire or when things went to shit. Not until he heard Becca describe the room she'd been taken to as an interrogation room.

The lion roared in frustration, demanding to be set free to protect its mate. The sight of Slater holding Becca close, his head leaned into the curve of her neck —

Murderous rage beyond anything he'd ever felt almost had him releasing the lion. He had longed to shift and then slowly rip Slater and Weltman apart, piece by bloody piece.

Reaching the SUV, Micah yanked the passenger door open. "Get in. I'm driving."

Becca did so without a peep, her expression unreadable. He was tempted to lock her in the car and go back inside but knew he wouldn't feel better while she remained on the premises.

Once they cleared the main gate, his thoughts turned to the confrontation with Weltman.

Dr. Southerby's not going anywhere, Lasiter. Not until I test the fetus.

Rebecca's reaction had given the words validity. All the color had drained from her face. Their gazes had met and he'd seen the truth in her eyes.

Becca was pregnant.

Weltman had radiated maniacal glee at having spoiled her secret. *She didn't tell you. Venomous bitch, just like all the others.*

He had hoped it was some screwed-up fantasy from the man's delusional mind. Then Weltman dropped a bomb that had torn through Micah's heart.

We were watching her house. When she didn't show up with you, I sent a team in to search the place. Found not one but three positive pregnancy tests in the bathroom trash can.

Is it yours?

His mind had reeled with the possibility and he'd almost let down his guard, catching Kyle's slight movement just in time.

Becca's frantic words had ripped out the remaining pieces of his heart.

I only found out the day they brought me to see you. The day I found out...

The day she'd found out he now shared his body with a lion.

I'm going to be a father.

The very idea sucked the air right out of his lungs. He took his hand from the steering wheel long enough to rub the ache building in his temples.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. Becca sat rigid and quiet, staring out the windshield. She looked like a cold stone statue—distant and immovable.

Fuck!

He really couldn't blame her for not telling him. What woman in her right mind would want some fucked-up science experiment to be the father of their child?

His life was such a mess. During their night in Asheville, he'd walked on air, thinking he'd found what he had not even know he'd been missing in Becca. Then she'd left him.

For a second time his life had taken a stunning new turn—fatherhood. The woman of his dreams, pregnant with their child.

Her habit of rubbing her flat tummy, the changes in her body, all the pieces fell into place. He imagined the cute little house with a white picket fence, a couple of bicycles lying in the yard.

But an unemployed lion shape-shifter didn't fit in the picture.

Some people just weren't meant to be happy.

Micah checked the mirrors. So far nobody was on their tail, but he needed reinforcements. He had one goal now, get Becca and their baby out of this mess. Once he knew they were safe, he could start thinking about taking down Weltman.

On one of her trips to town he'd had Becca pick up a pay-as-you-go cell phone, which he'd stashed in the glove box for precisely this situation.

"Hand me the disposable phone," he ordered.

Micah cursed himself. His tone had come out harsher than he'd intended and she visibly bristled. Damn it, he had to keep his emotions out of this or he wouldn't be able to function. He didn't have the luxury of falling apart even though the woman he loved beyond reason – the family he'd never dreamed of – was slipping through his fingers.

Wanting reassurance that both Becca and the baby were all right, his first call went to a medic he'd worked with and trusted, Lex McLean. Two other names came to mind. Nash Crosby, who he'd served with in the Army, and his second-in-command at Nanotech. When unable to reach Nash, Micah called a secured, private satellite number.

"Talk to me, man," Kyle Slater said as he answered the call.

"What the fuck's going on?" Micah demanded.

Slater laughed. Then Micah heard footsteps and a door slammed.

"I was wondering how long it would take you to call me."

"Hopefully doing so wasn't a huge mistake." Micah prayed he'd made the right decision.

Slater remained silent for several long seconds. "This is a fucking job, nothing more. You, I owe my life to."

Some of Micah's tension lifted. He wasn't stupid. He wouldn't give Slater his full trust. Not yet. "Is anyone on my tail?"

"No. I have the boys here tied up chasing their dicks at the moment, but they won't be distracted for long. I'm sure you've already ditched the doc's company phone and house. Nanotech hasn't discovered your hidey-hole. The doc did a good job of covering her tracks on that front, but I wouldn't advise staying close for long. The time has come to tap into your emergency resources and become a ghost, my friend."

"Not quite," he corrected. "Consider the doc long gone, but I have a score to settle first."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

He easily pictured the devious anticipatory smile flashing across Slater's otherwise hard face. The man lived for the thrill of a good fight. Thankfully, he was on Micah's side. He'd hate to go up against the mean bastard.

Chapter Thirteen

"When did your life go so far off track?" Rebecca asked her reflection in the bathroom mirror.

On the drive back to the cabin, Micah had busied himself making his plans. He spoke to her for the first time when he turned onto the private drive.

Stay in the car while I check the cabin.

He had searched the cabin then waved her inside with orders to stay there and gone off to do his Rambo routine.

All night.

She'd gone to bed alone and woken up alone.

There were subtle signs of his presence. A mug he'd rinsed out and left in the sink. The scent of bacon lingering in the air. A plate of food kept warm in the oven for her. She'd almost wept over the full pot of coffee.

A firm knocking on the door had her pulse rate soaring as she wondered what he was up to now.

Rebecca took a calming breath and opened the door, stunned silent by the gorgeous man on the other side, smiling at her. A blond Adonis—tall, lean and sexy as hell. And his smile—absolute sin. His smile brought to mind carnal visions of long sleepless nights rolling around between the sheets. That seductive smile was sure to have kept him from ever being lonely.

"Hey, Doc!" He held out a steady hand toward her. "Name's Lex. I'm a medic. Spent some time in the military with the big guy. He asked me to check on you and the bambino, make sure everything's okay."

She shook his hand, but instead of letting go, Lex flashed that provocative grin and led her to the bed, then pressed on her shoulder until she sat down.

“Any cramping or spotting going on that we have to be worried about?”

She shook her head as he unhooked a stethoscope from around his neck and blew on the end to warm it.

“Good!”

He kept up a constant, one-sided conversation and before she realized his intentions, Lex had the first two buttons of her blouse undone. He was quiet as he listened to her heart and measured her respirations.

She didn't even have a chance to protest as the lethal rake laid her back on the bed, placed a pillow beneath her head, pulled up her shirt and unfastened her jeans with nimble fingers. She tried to relax as he listened at several spots over her abdomen, his expression thoughtful.

But when he started to palpate an area above her pubic bone, she came to her senses and shoved him away. “Whoa!”

Rebecca refused to think about her instant reaction to his warm, questing fingers. Nope, some things were better left alone.

“Look, no offense, Lex, I appreciate the concern. I'm fine. The baby's fine. You coming in here, undressing and touching me – not so fine.”

His grin turned carnal but his expression appeared sad. “Aw, come on, Becca. We didn't even get to the good part yet.”

She fastened her jeans and started buttoning her blouse, proud to see the shaking in her hands was almost imperceptible. “I probably don't want to know what you consider the ‘good part’ to be.”

“Well, the pelvic exam, of course.”

“Micah,” she hollered at the top of her lungs.

The rake tossed back his head and laughed.

Lex continued to laugh right up until he got an eyeful of Micah's furious expression as he charged into the room, shoved the medic against the wall and held him by the throat.

"Since I like you, Lex, I'll make your death quick but it's going to hurt. Bad!"

Rebecca smacked the back of Micah's head, fighting to hide her grin as his head snapped forward and the two morons' foreheads cracked together. She enjoyed this caveman protective side of him a bit too much. "Give the rabid feline routine a break already. Jesus, Micah, you sent him in here."

She shrugged. "The man has no concept of personal space."

With obvious reluctance he released Lex and took a step back. Because she was sick and tired of the dominant-alpha-in-charge routine, she smacked the back of his head again. He was ready for it this time and didn't budge.

"You could have asked me if everything was okay or at least warned me you'd called a medic."

Becca turned and walked out gracefully with her head held high. But Micah didn't miss the slur against his masculinity muttered under her breath. Witnessing the return of her fiery passion took his cock from flaccid to rock-hard in less than four seconds flat. God, she was gorgeous when worked up. Not angry, she just wouldn't put up with any crap. It was one of the many things he loved about her.

"Damn, buddy. You said she was beautiful, but you failed to mention the feisty part. I like her." Lex clapped him on the shoulder. "She's gonna keep you on your toes."

She would, if he had a chance in hell at holding on to her or figured out how to tell her he loved her.

He kept his gaze trained on Becca until he couldn't see her anymore, then turned and got right in his friend's face. "Whatever the hell you did, don't even think about doing it again. I'll kill you if you touch her."

"Stand down, sir. I wouldn't have a chance of trying anything. Go figure, but that hellcat is fixated on your ugly mug."

"What did she say?" he huffed.

Lex flashed his patented cat-that-ate-the-canary grin. "She didn't have to say. Hell, a man would have to be blind not to see she's all yours."

Micah bit his cheek to keep his smile under wraps. "And don't you forget it. I catch you cozying up to Becca and I'll rip you a new one."

"Yeah, whatever." He slung an arm around Micah's shoulders as they headed out to the kitchen. "So who else is coming out here to the boonies to play? I can't think of many guys who like you enough to hump it all the way out here."

He stopped Lex before they got within range of Becca. "Right now it's just you. I've got several things in the works, but you've got the most important duty."

Any humor that had lingered in Lex's expression disappeared and he had his game face on. "Which is?"

"Against my better judgment – Becca. You're going to get my emergency cash and take her to my safe house."

Lex studied his eyes for several long moments. "And you haven't told her yet." He scrubbed at his jaw. "Great!"

"There's more. I told you the basics of what they're doing...what they did to me. Now they have Crosby."

"Aw, Jesus! Have they experimented on him yet?"

Micah sighed. "Yes – Becca saw him."

"What about Slater? You trust him?"

"I don't have much choice."

Lex squeezed his shoulder. "All right, man. I'm in. Whatever you need."

The unconditional support humbled him to the point he could hardly speak. Micah muttered out a thank you that didn't come close to touching the gratitude he felt. He had no doubt Lex would forfeit his own life to protect hers.

Once all three of them were in the kitchen, they worked together to prepare dinner. In an attempt to make some point Micah wasn't getting—probably because he lacked estrogen—Becca became very friendly with Lex. She touched the condemned man often and gifted him with flirty smiles, which served to feed the flames of Micah's temper. Lex, the ass, ate up the attention, no matter how many daggers Micah shot at him with his eyes.

After dinner Becca sat down before the hearth and the slick operator dropped down next to her, making every breath burn in Micah's lungs. Hell, he was bound to be breathing fire in a matter of minutes.

"We'll take turns watching the perimeter. Four-hour shifts. You're up first," he growled at the medic.

Lex sighed and took one last stab at Micah, speaking in a soft tone but ensured his voice carried. "I better go or He-man will blow a gasket."

Micah didn't try to prevent the growl from escaping when Becca leaned over and placed a butterfly-soft kiss on the other man's cheek. "I think they messed up and used grizzly bear DNA instead of lion."

He stomped over to the door, held it open, and giving in to the childish impulse, slammed it shut once Lex stepped outside.

Without a word, Becca made her way into the bedroom, locking the door behind her. Hah! She knew that wouldn't keep him out.

He counted to five and strolled into the room as she was shutting the bathroom door. Micah stripped and lay down on the center of the bed to wait. She didn't make him wait long.

She strolled out wearing a simple cotton nightshirt, no makeup, hair in a braid, and stole his breath. "You're so damn beautiful it hurts."

Becca crossed her arms beneath her breasts, which only made her rosy nipples visible through the thin material.

"We need to talk," he stated.

"Talk? Yeah, that's why you're stretched out on the bed nude and sporting an erection, to talk." Her bottom lip pressed out in a sexy pout. "There's only one thing I want to know."

"What's that?"

"You haven't said a word about the baby. I have to know your intentions concerning our child —"

Rebecca didn't have time to finish what she'd been saying. In the blink of an eye, Micah was out of the bed and kneeling at her feet. His arms wrapped around her in a possessive hold and his lips fluttered over her belly in the sweetest of kisses.

"Oh god, Becca. I'm stunned, awed and scared shitless."

His reaction startled her and did bizarre things to her heart. She closed her eyes, praying this meant he wanted their baby.

Micah rose, kissed the tip of her nose, both eyelids, drew her into his embrace, tucking her head under his chin. It felt so right being in his arms. They fit together perfectly. Did they have any chance of making a go of it?

"I never imagined myself as a father, teaching my son to ride a bike, or intimidating my daughter's dates."

He stumbled over the words, his voice tight with emotion, prompting Rebecca to lean back. She stared into his dark eyes and her fears melted away. Her pirate was back. The corner of her lips inched upward even as fat tears streamed over her face.

"Aw, baby. Don't cry. It tears me up!"

His shaky hand wiped at her tears, which had her smiling brighter and crying harder.

"Becca, damn it? You're killing me here. Are you happy or sad?"

"Happy," she choked out. "Relieved. I was so worried when I first realized. Didn't know if I should track you down, how you'd feel about a baby? When you shifted...well, we had to deal with that first. Then Weltman—"

His growl rumbled over her words and that protective streak made her smile stretch even wider. "Down, boy." She patted his cheek. "When he found out and used it against you," she scowled. "I wanted to kick his ass."

"I'm getting you out of here. Somewhere safe." Micah leaned forward, gave up on wiping the tears away and instead began planting loud, sloppy kisses all over her face. "Tomorrow. Lex is taking you—"

"No," she objected. "I'm not leaving without you."

"Becca, I have to know you and the baby are safe. Then I can figure out my next move. The man you saw in the lab, Crosby, I served with him. He's my second-in-command at Nanotech. I can't leave him in there."

She nodded in understanding, had expected he'd go in but had selfishly hoped otherwise. She hated it, but knew the soldiers' code he lived by. Micah couldn't walk away and leave a man behind. "I'll hate it, but I'll go with Lex tomorrow. I'll keep our baby safe, but you have to promise me something."

"What is it, baby?"

"I want you to promise me that you'll come back to us. That you'll be there for our child as he or she grows up."

Then she added the clincher. A soldier would never go back on a promise made on his honor. Once given, he'd do everything and anything to fulfill his vow. "On your honor, as a soldier, promise me, Micah."

His eyes narrowed as he considered her words, likely wondering how she knew exactly how to get an unbreakable promise. Staring into her eyes, wearing his heart on his sleeve, Micah made the vow she prayed would bring him back to her.

"I love you."

"Oh, Becca. I love you too."

Hearing the words made her heart soar. She locked them into her heart, seared the moment into her memory, tried not to think that this could be their last night together. Micah loved her. She didn't need anything other than him.

"Make love to me, Micah. I want you."

"You too. So much, Becca."

She stood on tiptoe and her lips melted over his. The kiss started tender and warm, a display of affection. Soon sparks ignited and Micah's big body wrapped around her – protective, possessive and potent. The kiss changed as he took control, nibbling on her lips, thrusting his tongue deep into her mouth, his addictive taste swamping her senses.

There were certain instances when she didn't the mind him going all dominant alpha male on her.

Her clothes disappeared beneath his persistent fingers. His hands stroked and heat blasted through her bloodstream, melted her muscles, turning her soft and pliable. She pressed closer but couldn't get close enough.

"Micah," she pleaded.

"Get on the bed."

The growled words had shivers racing down her spine. She loved it when he got primal. Still, she teased and taunted, drawing the beast closer to the surface by crawling over the mattress on her hands and knees, wiggling her ass, enticing her man.

He hit the mattress hard enough to make her bounce. She giggled until his hands seized her hips, his knees pushing her legs wide apart, and in one fluid movement his cock slammed forward, completing her.

"Oh yes!"

He became unpredictable, thrusting hard and fast then slow and deep. She yelped as his teeth clamped down on her shoulder, holding her in place. Rebecca took

everything he had to give, met each movement, demanded more, which he gladly provided.

His cock slid from her and she whimpered. Micah flipped her over, moved between her legs, filling her as she wrapped her legs around him, holding him tight. Their lips collided in a fierce kiss. He stole her breath, replaced it with his own.

More than their bodies joined. She felt his heart and soul reach out, entwine with hers, binding them together. Pleasure built, intensified.

He rolled, putting her on top. Rebecca didn't miss a beat as she moved on top of him, the position making her feel him even deeper. He cupped her breasts, tweaked her nipples, bucked his hips to meet her every plunge.

She flew, soared to the heavens then felt herself falling, crying out his name.

"I've got you, Becca. Let go. Give it all to me, baby."

His fingers pressed her clit, shattering her, taking her orgasm even higher. Finally he roared, swelled within her and bathed her womb with hot blasts of cum.

She collapsed on top of him, listening as his breathing calmed then deepened with sleep. He made soft snuffling noises that brought a smile to her face.

When she should have fallen dead asleep her mind churned. In the morning she'd have to be strong for Micah. No tears. She knew the drill—kiss your soldier goodbye, smile and wave. Remain certain of his abilities while praying for his quick and safe return.

"You better come back to me in one piece, Lasiter, or else."

Chapter Fourteen

You promised – on your honor – so you damn well better come and get me. And you better be in one piece or I'll kick your ass.

Becca had punctuated each threat by poking him in the chest. The three weeks they'd been apart felt like forever. Micah indulged in a smile over the memory. His woman was strong and feisty. That knowledge had been his lifeline, something to cling to when he had to send her away with a trusted friend.

"Lex." He growled the other man's name. If the handsome, cocky bastard had touched Becca he was living on borrowed time.

He took a deep breath, struggled for patience. He was dying to see her, touch her, breathe her in, drink from her lips...

Deep in the heart of the African jungle, he took shelter from the drizzling rain beneath large green leaves and observed the small house. His safe house. Restless energy had him amped up. Drawing on years of discipline, he stayed put. He wouldn't let his impatience put everything that mattered most in the world to him in jeopardy.

Once he was sure his tail was clear, that he wasn't leading danger straight to her, only then he would go to Becca.

If he had been followed, the person was highly skilled as Micah found no evidence of another presence. And the house he watched appeared secure.

The front door burst open and anticipation almost had him jumping from his covered position, racing across the distance. Musical laughter reached out, wrapped around his chest, squeezed. Hands fisted at his sides, he rocked forward on the balls of his feet for what felt like an eternity.

And then there she was, dancing in the rain. Too far away to see her eyes, he knew the smile on her sultry lips would extend to their moss green depths.

She stepped out of the door looking happy and healthy. A riot of dark silken hair flowed over slender shoulders to sway around her tiny waist. Rain quickly plastered the thin material of her tank top and shorts to her skin.

Damn, she was a beautiful sight for weary eyes.

His heart stopped and a huge lump clogged his throat.

"Becca." He whispered her name in a broken voice. Many times over the long weeks he had feared failure and worried what would happen to her if he didn't come for her.

A large form slipped from the door way, sharp eyes scanning the surroundings, lips returning her smile. Micah's hackles rose and insidious rage soared. The fact he had sent Lex with her, asked the other man to protect his woman, did not penetrate the red haze of anger clouding his mind.

Mine!

As he watched, Lex drew Becca into his arms and began dancing with her, holding her wet body close to his much larger frame.

Without conscious thought or direction, his body began the familiar process of change. Muscles, bone and tendon reshaped. Short tan fur covered his body while around his face a lush mane appeared.

Before the man could protest the lion's powerful legs drove him forward with single-minded purpose—reclaiming his mate.

* * * * *

Rebecca knew Lex didn't buy her false smile, still she forced her expression to reflect happiness instead of worry and longing. She felt as if a heavy weight pressed down on her chest. Not even the thrill of studying all the various species of animals surrounding the safe house eased the ache.

A desperate compulsion filled her, drew her outside. She didn't question the why of it.

She said yet another silent prayer, plastered on another happy face and danced out into the nearly constant rain. Since the Congo area of Africa where they'd hidden out got upward of eighty inches of rain a year there were only two options—sit inside and mope or get wet.

Lex was one step behind her leaving the house. He'd been so understanding and kind. The two of them had formed a strong friendship during their forced confinement. She thought of him as the big brother she'd always wished to have. At the thought, she flashed him a real smile.

He joined her, humming a tune as he twirled her around the clearing, lightening her mood.

The anguished roar of a big cat thundered through the jungle. Rebecca didn't have to see him to know.

Micah had come for her.

At last!

Her spine went rigid as Lex tensed, his gaze frantically searching the area, and a gun appeared in his hand.

She didn't get a chance to identify Micah or tell Lex not to shoot. One second she was scanning the immediate area, the next Micah hurtled through the air. Five-hundred pounds of pissed-off lion pinned Lex to the ground with his wrist held tight between all those sharp teeth. She didn't know what had happened to the gun.

In different circumstances she would have had a good laugh over the remnants of shredded clothing clinging to the lion.

"Lex," she spoke in the most soothing tone she could manage in the current life-or-death situation. "Don't move unless you want to pull away a bloody stump."

She slowly moved in closer, shushing Lex as he mumbled urgent warnings. The man was scared as hell, not that she blamed him. "Shut. Up. Micah won't hurt me. You might warrant a second thought, but friendship isn't going to save your ass now."

Rebecca put her face right in front of the lion's, staring into familiar eyes and stroking his luxurious mane. "Micah...honey." She considered scolding him but wanted to keep his focus away from Lex. "I missed you so damn much."

She kept speaking in a tone meant to soothe and words intended to coax him away from their friend. "You bite him and get all bloody and I'm not going to want to kiss you."

He watched her for a moment before dropping Lex's wrist. A brief glance had her sighing in relief. "That's a good boy." He'd left the imprint of his teeth in the soft flesh but had not clamped down hard enough to break through skin.

With her fingers buried deep in his thick mane, she began moving to one side, tugging him along. "Come back to me, Micah. Shift for me. I've missed being in your arms. I need you to hold me."

Once they'd moved several paces from Lex, she knelt and threw herself against him. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, her face cushioned by his mane. "Please don't make me wait any longer," she implored. "I love you, Micah."

She fell back as he shifted but didn't release her hold on him. In the blink of an eye her body was covered with by solid male muscle. In particular, she noticed one extra-hard muscle as it nestled against the soft curve of her belly.

"I'll, ah...just make myself scarce while you two catch up."

Neither one of them acknowledged Lex's soft whisper. Micah figured his friend was smart enough to know when to get good and scarce.

Rebecca's busy hands were everywhere, touching every inch of skin she could reach, further arousing him. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, making his heart turn over in his chest.

"You're not hurt anywhere, are you?" Her brow furrowed with concern. "If you've come back to me hurt there's going to be hell to pay."

He couldn't help smiling over her threat. So small and delicate beneath him, but his woman was no softie. Her strong spirit more than made up for what she lacked in stature.

God, the way she made him feel. This was home—she was home. Being in her arms brought him a sense of joy he'd never known possible.

"I'm fine, baby. Not a scratch on me."

She stilled, stared into his eyes. "What about the lab? Did you get Nash out?" He felt a shudder run through her. "Hurry up and tell me so we can make love."

He raced through a very brief explanation between planting loud, smacking kisses all over her sweet face. "Everything is handled. Crosby's fine. Found another 'subject'—a woman. She'll be okay." He paused, hovering above her lips. "We'll talk more later. Need you now, Becca!"

"Yes," she sobbed. "Here. Now."

Clothes tore, were tossed to the side. Becca spread her sexy legs in welcome. He traced two fingers along her slit, growling when he found her wet and ready. With one measured thrust he filled her balls-deep, covered her body and learned the meaning of ecstasy.

He didn't so much as breathe—just soaked in the glorious feeling of being held in the hot, velvet clasp of his woman's body.

Having other ideas, Becca sunk her teeth into his shoulder and writhed against him, spurring Micah into action. He reared back then plunged deep, taking her hard and fast, the way he knew she enjoyed.

"Yes, Micah," she cried. "Hard. Good. So good."

He loosened the lion's leash, gave in to his animal side knowing she'd accept all of him. Strong arms and legs held him tight, not allowing him much room to move. And it was beyond good. Everything he'd never known he wanted and more.

The gentle rain washed over them, rolled down his back. He ignored everything but her. Powerful sensations built, gathered at the base of his spine but didn't slow him down. Not until Becca's entire body tensed then spasmed, taking him soaring with her.

As they settled back to earth, Micah rolled to his side and rested his palm over her belly, imagining her growing large with their child. His world, his future. Nothing else mattered.

"Where should we go?" He stared into her bright green eyes. "We'll make a home and raise the baby anywhere you want."

"I don't care where we go, Micah, as long as we're together."

"There has to be someplace you'd like to go."

"Hmm. Well, I have always wanted to see Paris, Madrid, Rome, Athens..."

"Then Europe it is, baby."

"Are you two done yet? Is it safe to come out?" Lex bellowed from somewhere off in the jungle, sending them both into gales of laughter. "There's a seriously huge python smacking its lips at me."

"No," Becca giggled.

"Come back later," Micah added.

Much later.

He still had a lot of catching up to do. At least they'd have a lot of years together in which to do so.

He knew they'd have their ups and downs. There would be hard times to balance the good. Difficulties to overcome because of his ability to shift. But Micah sensed there would be more laughter than tears and he felt sure, all the way down to the marrow of his bones, they'd always face life's challenges together.

"How are we going to get rid of him?"

"Don't worry, baby. I've got plans for Lex. He's going to be very busy."

Rolling to his back, he kept their bodies joined.

"I've been waiting forever for you to ride me again. Don't keep me waiting."

Her sultry smile filled his heart with joy and had him looking forward to many years with this amazing woman.

"I love you," she gasped and began rocking her hips. "Do that meow thing for me."

Unable to deny her anything he let loose a joy-filled roar that had the native wildlife, along with a human medic, running for cover.

About the Author

Nicole Austin lives on the sheltered Gulf Coast of Florida, where inspiration can be readily found sitting under a big shade umbrella on the beach while sipping cold margaritas. A voracious reader, she never goes anywhere without a book. All those delicious romances combined with a vivid imagination naturally created steamy fantasies and characters in her mind.

Discovering Ellora's Cave paved the path to freeing them, as well as manifesting an intoxicating passion for Romantica®. The positive response of family and friends to her stories propelled Nicole into an incredible world where fantasy comes boldly to life. Now she stays busy working as a certified CT scan technologist, finishing her third college degree, reading, writing and keeping up with family. Oh yeah, and did we mention all the hard work involved with research? Well, that's the fun job—certainly a labor of love.

Nicole 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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