

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



EYE OF THE
Predators Tiger

NICOLE AUSTIN

Eye of the Tiger

Nicole Austin

Predators, Book Two

Between working as a trauma medic and attending nursing school, Jenny Crosby has more than her share of stress. At least that's what she thought. Then her husband packed a suitcase, withdrew money from their joint bank account and abandoned her. She didn't buy it for a second. Nash wouldn't run. Something horrible happened but the police won't listen. Even her closest friends are encouraging her to get over him and move on.

A few days away from it all is exactly what the doctor ordered. She'll sit in the hot tub, drink hot chocolate and escape her troubles. If only it were that easy.

Nash Crosby is damn good as second-in-command of security. Perhaps too good. Discovering his employer's unethical practices turns him into a liability they can't afford. Nothing will be permitted to stop the Predator Project. Not even a few unwilling test subjects.

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Eye of the Tiger

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EYE OF THE TIGER

Nicole Austin

Dedication

To Rachel, whose heart is even blacker than mine. Thanks, creampuff!

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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Formica: Formica Corporation

OnStar : General Motors Corporation

Oreo: Kraft Food Holdings, Inc.

Tony the Tiger: Kellogg North American Company

Chapter One

“Make illegal u-turn. What the fuck?”

Jenny Crosby shook her head in disgust. “Look, you crazy GPS bitch. I’m not about to try something so incredibly stupid in the middle-of-nowhere North Carolina on a curvy mountain road with no streetlights during a moonless night. Sheesh!”

Okay, so the GPS unit in her SUV wouldn’t even hear her argument, but Jenny was sick of dealing with the damn thing. “I’ve seen nothing but trees and dark, winding roads for hours now. No other cars. No houses or hotels. Not even a lousy fast food joint. *Nada!*” In frustration, her fist slammed down on the console. “Just lots of ‘sharp curve ahead’ signs. If you made me take a wrong turn, I’m going to fry your little electronic brain. Ha! That would sure teach you who’s boss.”

Jenny shivered. “If I don’t find the cabin soon, I’m gonna be screwed. And not in a good way.” Hell, at this rate she’d be sleeping in the car and it was way too cold for that nonsense.

Whenever nerves got the better of her, Jenny ended up talking to herself. The random thoughts rushing through her mind flowed from her lips in all their unedited glory. Her husband claimed it was an endearing quality. She figured he probably said that just to bring her diarrhea of the mouth to an end.

She took another quick glance at the map displayed on the screen. “You and I need to come to some sort of understanding, find a way to communicate. Oh, and another thing—”

Her diatribe was cut off by a ding as the GPS alerted her she’d reached the point where it wanted her to turn.

“Make a legal u-turn.” The modulated female voice remained calm and emotionless.

“A legal u-turn? That’s a little better, but where the hell am I supposed to make a u-turn?” She slowed the car to a crawl and peered through the windshield. One side was mountain, the other a cliff with no guardrail. The road itself was only two narrow lanes with a solid yellow line dividing it in half. “There isn’t even a freakin’ shoulder along the side of this road. Only a long drop and a sudden stop, you dumb bitch.” And another sign warning of a sharp turn.

A one-hundred-eighty degree hairpin turn.

“Infernal damn machine! That’s not a u-turn.” After coming out of the curve, the road straightened for a brief stretch, allowing her to go a bit faster. She hated driving in the dark and had been warned to watch for black ice on the road. Of course, since she was from Florida, she had no idea what that meant.

Jenny glanced down at the small square screen showing a map and her current position. “What now, genius?”

With her attention divided between the monitor and the road, she studied the details. The picture was very sharp, and a bit too detailed. It looked like she’d driven right off the map into uncharted territory, which is exactly how she felt. Yet according to the know-it-all device, she was within five miles of reaching the rental cabin.

“Wahoo! I am so ready to stretch my legs.” She’d been traveling all day and late into the night. Her leg muscles were cramped, her rear end numb and molded to the seat. It would be a major relief to get out and walk around.

She had found the cabin rental notice through an e-mail posting at work advertising things other employees had for sale. An image of the rustic living room flashed through Jenny's mind. A fire burned in a large, flagstone hearth. This glorious amenity, along with the hot tub, had sold her on renting the place. "Damn, I can't wait to take a long soak in that baby." If her hands had been free she would have rubbed them together in anticipation.

For several days she'd dreamed about lying before the fire, sipping a glass of wine and reading a good book. She'd stocked up on supplies before leaving home and was ready to veg. "Mmm...some hot chocolate with marshmallows would go down real good right about now." The perfect vacation from her stressful job at the trauma hospital, plus much needed time to lick her wounds and let her broken heart heal.

Her demanding job as a trauma tech and simultaneously attending classes toward getting a nursing degree was tough, but she loved it. The drama, excitement and adrenaline rush of saving a life kept Jenny motivated. She'd learned a heck of a lot, made some great contacts, and was sure the hospital would hire her on as an ER nurse once she graduated.

Working evening shift kind of sucked, not allowing any opportunity to have a social life, but she still had a good time. Many times after work her co-workers would all get together at the sports bar down the street to relieve the strain of a difficult shift. She loved hanging out with the medics who also worked at the firehouse. They were a great group of guys and a ton of fun. She would miss her co-workers, but needed this time off to prevent herself from burning out.

It was also time to accept the unsolicited advice everyone kept giving her. "*Time to face facts and move on. He left you in the dust, Jenny.*" Her broken heart wouldn't heal until she came to terms with reality.

She would never forget arriving home in the early morning hours to an empty apartment. The red light on the answering machine winked at her from the darkness. When she pushed the button, it had not been a message from her husband. Instead she heard her own voice letting him know she'd be late. Jenny had gone to bed alone, not really worrying about her husband until she woke the next day ready to rip him a new one.

She'd walked through the apartment searching for a note and cussing him but found nothing. On further inspection, she'd discovered some of his clothes and a suitcase missing. The idea he'd gone on a business trip without a word made her even madder. The first twinge of unease had surfaced when she'd called his office at Nanotech.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Crosby. We haven't heard from him since yesterday morning." The department clerk had acted as if the whole thing put her out.

Jenny had tried calling his supervisor but the man was out on medical leave. At the police station a bored detective informed her nothing could be done until her husband had been missing for forty-eight hours. She'd been checking their bank balance online when she discovered the large withdrawal that had been made the day before.

The policeman who helped her fill out the missing persons report had been helpful but offered no hope. Every day she called the station, at least twice, to see if they'd discovered anything. Every day the overworked officer assigned to the case told her the same thing. "Mrs. Crosby, your husband left you. He packed his bags, took some cash, and drove away. He may come back or contact you at some point, but that's doubtful. There's nothing else we can do for you."

Friends and co-workers had been supportive...for awhile. She knew what they believed. She was beginning to wonder if they might be right, even though she still had faith in her husband. With so much time gone by doubt plagued Jenny, tearing her apart. "Maybe I have been dumped and I'm just too stupid to admit it. Abandoned by the love of my life. The man

who vowed we'd have a lifetime together." The idea took away some of the shock and numbness, allowing anger to creep in.

"Son of a bitch took off. Probably with another woman. Typical rat-bastard man!"

A glance at the small navigation screen showed she was getting closer to the cabin. "Almost there," she sighed in relief.

Jenny shivered a bit and shifted in her seat. She was anxious to sit before a roaring fire and warm up. The cold night air had long ago seeped into her bones, but she kept the window partly opened and the heater off. The drive from Florida had left her fatigued and sleepy and the chilly winter air helped her stay awake and focused. The last thing she wanted was to wreck her car on this lonely mountain road.

She glanced up through the windshield and a shrill scream rose from her suddenly tight chest. Her heart stopped beating and everything moved into slow motion. She held the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip and reacted on sheer adrenaline.

Some suicidal maniac stood in the middle of the dark street not fifty feet ahead. Jenny did everything possible to avoid hitting the person, but her options were limited. Turning right meant crashing into a solid wall of rock. Probability of survival—slim to none. In a split-second decision she yanked the wheel to the left. Crashing into the trees or a drop down the side of the rolling mountain seemed the better choice.

She stood on the brakes, hard. The tires began to squeal then slide. Jenny said a quick prayer the heavy SUV wouldn't roll and stared in horror at the thick tree trunk illuminated by the headlights and coming closer by the second.

"This is so not going to turn out good," she said to the GPS bitch, who all of a sudden had nothing to say. Then everything went black.

Adrenaline pumped through his system, keeping Nash going. He didn't know where he was and it didn't matter as long as he kept moving. If he stopped, he'd be a dead man.

He considered shifting into his tiger form. The newly acquired ability to alter his physical shape frightened him. He hadn't mastered the phenomenon and wasn't sure he could control the animal. And a tiger would scare any rational person. They'd run rather than offer assistance. Not to mention tigers didn't have thumbs and there'd be no way of hitching a ride. He would have laughed at the thought if he wasn't running for his life.

Things were dire. No ifs, ands or buts about it. When the bastards from the lab caught up with him, they'd kill him, drag his dead carcass back to their diabolical hellhole and continue to experiment on his decomposing remains.

Normally, he had a great sense of direction. Too bad it seemed to have failed him now, when he needed it most. He was having a hard time determining which way was up, much less north from south. For several precious moments, he leaned against a tree praying for his head to stop spinning. A rustling sound somewhere nearby got him moving again.

He might stand a chance if he could reach a town, or even a house. If not...

He shuddered, not wanting to consider what would happen.

He had no clue where he was. His captors had been too careful. All he remembered was being yanked from his car, blindfolded, drugged and taken God only knows where. He didn't know what state he was in, or even what country for that matter.

He was well and truly lost, not just his body. His mind had taken a hike too. He didn't remember anything prior to being snatched. It was as if his memory had been wiped clean leaving no trace of the past. Erased as easily as a chalkboard and left blank.

At least he was out of the lab. He had bided his time, watched and waited for a lapse in security, and then took matters into his own hands.

When he found the road, Nash wanted to weep with relief. Instead, he held his emotions in check. A road was good, but he wasn't home free yet. Not by a long shot. He didn't know where to go, where his home was or even if there was anyone he could trust.

He stumbled out onto the blacktop, struggling to stay upright as violent shivers assaulted his body. The temperature must be somewhere below freezing, and the thin medical scrubs he wore were soaked from a tumble into a frigid stream. He had no feeling in his fingers or toes, and his lungs burned with each wheezing breath. Shifting into his feline form would help with the cold, but there were other risks he wouldn't take. Like the possibility that once he became the tiger he might not be able to change back. He was terrified of becoming trapped within the animal.

Bent over, gasping for air, he figured things couldn't get much worse.

"Aw shit!" He was so fucking wrong. Things can always get worse!

Bright headlights cut through the inky darkness from around a curve and there wasn't enough time to avoid being run down. It might even be the goons from the lab. If so, they wouldn't slow down anyway. In fact, they'd probably run right over him to eliminate the threat to their insane project.

His thoughts scattered in a million different directions, and time did that funky thing. It slowed, moving through thick molasses. The vehicle raced forward, and Nash stared into the shocked face of the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. It was like watching a sports instant replay. Imminent death or not, nothing seemed more important than drinking her in, memorizing her features.

Golden blonde hair framed an oval face. Her mouth opened to form a perfect O, and her big brown eyes widened in surprise. At the last second, she seemed to pull herself together and wrenched the wheel.

He wanted to clamp his eyes shut but stared in stunned fascination, frozen in place, as the car came closer. Too close for comfort. A blast of glacial air hit him as it skidded past with mere inches separating them.

Jesus!

Wasn't your life supposed to flash before your eyes when you came close to dying? He didn't see the past, only the frightened expression on the woman's face.

Unable to maintain traction the tires locked up and the woman lost control of the SUV. He watched in horror as the driver's door slammed into a huge tree and the vehicle came to a shuddering halt. At least it had saved her from going over the side of the steep mountain and plunging to certain death.

"Holy shit!"

He wanted to check on her, make sure the woman was all right, but he couldn't breathe. Nash clutched at his chest, felt his heart thudding against his sternum. If the woman had been hurt it was his fault. "Please let her be okay!"

If she survived the crash, this could be the answer to his prayers. It would be warm inside the vehicle, and since it hadn't been going too fast or taken the tree head-on, it might still be drivable. He tamped down the hope. Better to not get excited before investigating and making a thorough assessment of the situation.

Instinct and training kicked in and he went to work. His first priority, assure the safety of the innocent woman. Only then would he start revising his impromptu escape plan according

to the new circumstances. He hated the idea of drawing her into his troubles but she was his best chance at making it out alive.

Nash entered through the passenger door and was engulfed by a fog of white powder hanging thick in the enclosed space. The airbags had deployed making it difficult to see. He found the woman crumpled against the driver's door, her body cushioned by the side-impact airbag. She appeared to have been knocked unconscious. He placed two fingers on her neck, relieved to find a steady pulse. He watched the even rise and fall of her chest, relieved she had no trouble breathing. Bruised and battered for sure but she should be all right.

After several minutes of careful maneuvering, he got her settled into the passenger seat, fought the airbags into submission, and slid behind the steering wheel. He shifted into park and turned the key in the ignition. The engine turned, but didn't catch.

"Shit!"

They both desperately needed the SUV to work. Neither one of them would make it through a night exposed to freezing temperatures.

Nash resorted to sweet talk. Hey, it worked with temperamental women. At least he thought so but what the heck did he know. "Come on, baby. Turn over and I'll get you a nice oil change as soon as possible."

This time when he turned the key, Nash lightly pumped the gas pedal. The engine coughed, sputtered then roared to life.

"Yeah, baby!" In triumph, he punched his fist into the air then turned the heater to full blast wondering why the hell it hadn't been running.

It took infinite patience and agonizing time they didn't have to slowly work the car off the tree. He put the SUV in reverse and moved a few inches, switched to drive and gained a few more. Finally, with a sharp squeal, the twisted metal peeled away from the tree.

Now the remaining issue was to find adequate shelter.

The map on the glowing LCD screen caught his attention. The unit had been programmed for a destination within a few miles' drive. After a bit of snooping in the center console, he discovered a rental contract, keys and pictures of a cabin.

"Good a place as any," he muttered, glancing over at the unconscious woman.

He drove slow and easy, not wanting to push the mangled vehicle too hard. Almost a half-hour later, following the computer's directions and limping along, they arrived at a cozy A-frame cabin tucked away on a private dirt road. Nash hoped it would prove to be a safe haven for the night. Some rest would do his tired and battered body a world of good.

Chapter Two

The firm, insistent slap of something solid against her cheek was starting to piss Jenny off. Her head ached, feeling as if it was being split in two by a dull axe. Must have had one too many B-52's at The Dugout last night after her shift. She batted ineffectually at the irritant, but that only seemed to make the annoying person more determined.

"Wakey, wakey. Time to rise and shine."

Oh, hell no!

The masculine voice increased the pain slicing through her throbbing head. He needed to back off before she got really mad.

"Come on, honey. I'm too tired to carry you into the house."

Say what?

What the heck was going on? Must have been one doozy of a night.

Jenny cracked open one heavy eyelid enough to see his handsome, rugged face hovering only inches away. Too bad she couldn't see him clearly, but her eyes refused to focus. Must have really tied one on to have ended up crashed out in some strange place and not know what had happened. This was bad and entirely out of character for her. Jenny always remained in control and never drank to the point of passing out.

Her interest piqued, she let her eye open a bit more then slammed it shut, but it was too late. Images of Nash filled her splintering head.

She'd seen enough to get her blood pumping and generate a sexual ache, which spread through her faster than an out-of-control forest fire. Mentally, she catalogued his sensual features. Rumpled, wavy black hair and dark complexion lending him a dangerous air. Square jaw sporting a few days beard stubble. Add in the most stunning blue eyes and it added up to her husband being one gorgeous hunk.

Dayum, she was one hell of a lucky woman!

Everything about him was strong and masculine, but his eyes stirred her the most. She would gladly lose herself within the fathomless blue pools. Something she'd seen in the brief glimpse had been off, though. He appeared to be a bit agitated and almost seemed lost.

She was confused. Her fuzzy brain seemed to be playing tricks on her. The man sure looked like her husband, but how could he be here? He was long gone. The victim of foul play. Someone had killed him or he would have come back to her.

"Oh my God. If you're here that can only mean one thing. I-I'm dead. Killed in the car crash."

And doesn't that just bite the big one?

"You're not dead, but you probably have a concussion. Let's go inside where it's warm, beautiful."

A concussion? That would explained why she was seeing a handsome ghost of the past. As delusions went, this one was pretty nice though. He spoke in the sexy voice she loved, creating an instant sexual response.

Jenny creamed her panties.

Okay, so maybe she wasn't dead, but how could he be real? Where did he come from?

Confusion and fear made her head pound harder. Did she dare risk believing he was real when finding out this was all from a concussion would crush her spirit?

Maybe it's all some crazy dream and in the morning everything will be back to normal. The last few months will have melted away and I'll be tucked into Nash's arms, at home, in our own bed.

Eh, not likely but a girl could hope.

It grew blessedly quiet and he no longer slapped her cheek. Thank goodness. He must have given up the futile idea of waking her up and left her alone when all Jenny wanted to do was hold onto the dream as long as possible.

She must have lost consciousness again because she was startled when a strong arm slid beneath her legs and another behind her back as he lifted her not insubstantial weight. Being a tall and voluptuous size sixteen made carrying her a difficult task for the strongest of men. If the hallucination carrying her was indeed her husband, he had more than enough strength to pull off the feat. Nash had a definite romantic side and had carried her to bed on numerous occasions.

A wet blast of cold seeped right through the layers of clothes she wore. Jenny snuggled closer. Holding her tight against his chest, his heart beat in a soothing rhythm beneath her ear, and she began to relax.

He staggered a bit as they went through a doorway, seemed to lose control of his hands then lowered her to her own shaky legs, which resisted standing. Her rescuer made it several more stumbling steps before dropping onto the wood floor.

"Ouch!" Oh great! Okay, Jenny. This is serious. Time to snap out of it and figure out what the deal is.

With great effort, she forced the horrific headache into submission long enough to take stock of the situation. A quick glance around and she discovered the rental cabin. She had stared longingly at the pictures of the place and had no trouble recognizing her surroundings.

Jenny shivered as a gust of wind shot through the cabin and twined around her like a lover, delving into every susceptible crevice. She shut and bolted the door, locking the cold air outside.

Pushing emotion aside, she used her trauma training to evaluate the gorgeous apparition sprawled on the floor. Just the sight of him had her trembling and on the verge of breaking down. She couldn't be weak and selfish. Jenny had to be strong for him. If this turned out to be real and not some dream, she'd celebrate later. With Nash.

"Come on, Jenny. Get your head straight and assess the patient. Medics can't afford to be distracted, no matter the circumstances."

Because this was her husband she had to be twice as strong about focusing on her patient. If she lost control, panicked, she wouldn't be able to do either of them any good.

Taking a deep breath, she set out to do her job.

Nash had lost consciousness. She touched his arm. The icy coldness of his skin had her yanking back her hand. He breathing was quick and shallow. His skin, which had gone pale, was covered in goose bumps and he shivered uncontrollably. His lips and fingertips held the blue tint of cyanosis.

Diagnosis—hypothermia.

She raced around the cabin, hands shaking, struggling to remain cool, calm and collected. In the small bedroom she found several thick blankets. Jenny peeled away his clothes, growing more concerned because his shivering had decreased. That wasn't a good sign.

“Damn it, Nash. Come on. Don’t do this to me.”

If he wasn’t a ghost she had to work fast to save his life. Still, her fingers lingered, tracing various white and pink lines that hadn’t been there before, wondering who had created the surgical scars and why.

Her mind spun as hope surged no matter how hard she’d fought to concentrate. Jenny tried to sort out the situation, prayed this was really happening. She had somehow managed to stumble upon her missing husband two states away from home in the mountains.

“That sounds insane. Next thing they’ll be taking me to my very own padded room.”

But the man she touched felt real. And her raging emotions were certainly genuine. She bit her lip and went back to work. Once she had him wrapped up snug, she moved to the hearth, thankful someone had set out tinder and wood. She found a box of matches on the mantle, struck a long taper over flint and lit the fire.

The hot tub would be wonderful but wasn’t about to happen. He was five inches taller and outweighed her by about forty pounds. Plus, warming him too rapidly would not help their cause.

There was only one remaining option—body heat.

Kicking off her shoes, she stripped down to bra and panties, and climbed under the blankets with him.

“Come on, Nash. You’ve got to fight for me. For us! I can’t do this alone.”

His skin was freezing but she gritted her teeth and lay down on top of him, sharing her warmth. Jenny rubbed her hands up and down his arms in an attempt to get his blood moving. She wouldn’t lose him now that she’d found him again. That idea was unacceptable.

The changes were gradual. His body temperature began to rise and she started to relax as they made it past the critical point. Somehow she’d make him well and figure this tangled mess out.

It grew warmer beneath the mound of blankets and her energy ebbed as fatigue settled in. They fit together so well, and his chest made a comfortable pillow. She’d missed the simple pleasure of lying with him.

Her emotions ran the gamut from elation to anger and doubt to contentment. Her heart surged with joy that he was alive and in her arms. She was mad at him for having deserted her without a word. A brief doubt of his love and commitment surfaced. Finally, a surge happiness she hadn’t felt in months allowed her to rest and breathe easier. Now that the crisis had passed, exhaustion seized control, still she held him tight.

“I’ll never let go again,” she vowed as sleep claimed her.

Something hard ground against his sternum bringing back the nightmare of captivity in vivid detail. The small cell, cold steel bars and constant observation. He was being held down and subjected to more painful torture at the hands of the insane scientists.

Needles, catheters and excruciating surgeries without anesthesia.

The lab.

Nash woke with a gasp and sprung into action. He grabbed hold and flipped over, pinning his tormentor beneath him. Only it wasn’t one of the scientists but the startled face of a beautiful woman looking up at him.

Long golden hair fanned out around her face. Light brown eyes flecked with amber crinkled at the corners and seemed to smile at him. Her body was curvy and warm, generous breasts flattened against his chest. Long, smooth legs rested between his, and his cock nestled comfortably against the warmth of her sex. Half-naked, wearing only a satin bra and panties,

miles of soft skin brought his every nerve ending to life. His cock jerked, happy to be pressed to such a lush woman.

The huge shift in circumstances made his head spin. He'd gone from being held captive and subjected to horrendous medical procedures to running through the woods, freezing his ass off and finally found himself in the arms of a goddess. The sudden change gave him mental whiplash but his body had no trouble in making the leap. He went from flaccid to rock-hard arousal faster than ever before.

There was something about her that drew him in like iron to a magnet—potent and irresistible. He felt as though he knew this woman, had known her forever, yet they were strangers. How could that be possible? He cautioned himself to be careful while unraveling the mystery.

The minx had his number. A wicked grin crossed sensual pink lips and her fingernails slid down his back, scoring the skin and heating his blood. She didn't stop until the bare cheeks of his ass were held firmly within small hands.

His luck sure had changed in a hurry.

"Don't start something you aren't planning to finish, Sunshine."

The endearment was perfect for her. From her golden hair to bright eyes filled with desire. All the way down her luscious body burned hot under his and her brilliant smile certainly outshined the sun.

"I always finish what I start. You know that."

The saucy reply, spoken in breathless whisper, turned Nash on even more. She pressed closer, wiggled along his cock and he nearly rocketed past the point of no return. He wanted nothing more than to sink into her body and stay there forever, but something nagged at the edges of his mind. She seemed so familiar.

"I'm having this major sense of déjà vu. I don't even know your name. Yet at the same time, I feel like we've always known each other. It doesn't make any sense."

She remained quiet for a few seconds, cupped his cheek in her hand and stared into his eyes. God, how he'd love to lose himself in her soulful gaze, but her words shocked him down to the tips of his toes and affected him as if he'd been doused with ice water.

"Don't act as if you don't know me, Nash Stephen Crosby."

Uh-oh! He may not know much, but he knew whenever someone used your full name it meant you were in big trouble. And how did she know his full name anyway?

"You've always known me better than I know myself. What the hell happened to you? What are you doing out here in the mountains? You've been missing for weeks."

He stared into her tawny eyes, willing himself to put the pieces of this bizarre puzzle together but no matter how hard he tried, he wasn't able to make things fit.

The woman began to shake. Looking down, Nash followed the trail of tears flowing from her eyes as she struggled to keep the intense emotions bottled up inside. Her tears created a tension that fisted tight around his heart. An ache worse than any pain he'd suffered at the hands of the scientists. She affected him in ways beyond comprehension.

A name flittered around the edges of his consciousness and he fought to capture the elusive word. His heart screamed in agony. This woman was important to him. He felt it down to the marrow of his bones. The answers were right there, just out of reach, teasing his memory.

"God, Nash. Whatever it is we'll deal with it...together. Stay with me. Don't run away again. I love you!" She stared up at him, eyes begging for understanding. "Please. I need you."

The panic in her eyes and the strain in her sweet voice tore at his soul. Something shifted in Nash. Like the massive impact of a wrecking ball crashing through a brick wall, the barrier keeping his memories hidden crumbled and fell. Pain sliced through his skull, seared his brain and blinding white light filled his vision. He felt as if a red-hot poker had pierced his eye and been shoved deep into his head.

All at once he was bombarded by flashes of the past racing through his mind. A pattern developed and one constant emerged—the woman he loved beyond anything else.

Chapter Three

“Jenny!” he breathed. “Sunshine? Is it really you?”

He knew her name but still seemed confused, which irritated the hell out of her. “Of course it’s me. What other woman would you be sleeping with?”

Why the hell did he keep acting like he didn’t completely recognize her? But her anger fled as fast as it had arrived, replaced by need. The most important thing was the fact she held her husband, alive and well, in her arms. Wherever he’d been, whatever had happened, they’d deal with it later. Together.

She’d been without him for too long. He was where he belonged and she had a strong desire to reconnect with him. Affirm he was alive. Reestablish their bond. Feel him everywhere. Hold him inside her, tight and intimate.

“I need you, Nash! Please. I’ve missed you so much.”

She wiggled seductively, pressing her damp panties against his hard length. Jenny was desperate for him fill her. To share their bodies, be as close as possible. Tangling her fingers in his hair, she pulled his face down to hers. With the first brush of his lips the fear and desolation of the past months washed away on a tidal wave of euphoria. She traced the familiar curves of his mouth with her tongue and surged into the warm cavern when his lips parted. His somewhat spicy, masculine flavor flooded her senses, breathing life back into the shattered shell she’d become, cleansing away the grief.

Only Nash was not quite as she remembered him.

There was something she couldn’t put her finger on. Some essential change in him. For the time being she let that go. All she cared about at the moment was holding him, loving him.

Their tongues tangled, caressed and explored as her heart pounded against her ribs. He tasted incredible. The power of their kiss had her trembling with desire. She didn’t need or want foreplay. All Jenny needed was to hold Nash as close as possible, take the man she loved deep within her body.

Desperate for his cock, she lifted her legs, wrapping them around his waist. The hard length settled against her folds but remained separated by the thin barrier of her panties.

“Nash. I need you. Now...please!”

He shifted his hips and the head of his cock bumped into her engorged clit, sending shock waves through her entire body. His hands clenched, took hold of her panties and made quick work of ripping the material. Whether his mind recognized her or not, instinct guided Nash’s body in tempting and teasing her in all the ways she enjoyed. The wicked devil made shallow thrusts along her slit, coating his shaft in her slick response, stoking the burning need without giving her what she wanted. What she needed.

“You want my cock, Sunshine?”

Jenny’s heart surged, logging in her throat as the cherished endearment passed his lips. She’d always loved it when he called her by the pet name.

“Yes, Nash. Give it to me. Give me all of it.”

On the next downward sweep of his cock the broad tip lined up with her entrance. Jenny held her breath as he stared into her eyes. In one long slow stroke, Nash filled her—heart, body and soul. They held still for several heartbeats, absorbing the rightness of the moment.

“Damn,” he gasped. “Feels like home.”

They fell into a natural rhythm of give and take, reacquainting their bodies. With each driving thrust his cock head tapped against her cervix. On the withdrawal it dragged along her G-spot creating the sweetest friction. His girth stretched her delicate tissues, which closed in around him, fighting to hold him deep within her grasping body.

Jenny held on tight, enjoying the flex and play of his firm muscles beneath her hands as they moved together. Passion mounted and tension coiled in preparation of a stunning release. Their hands were busy touching every inch of flesh they could reach.

Nash was right there with her, matching thrust for thrust, taking her higher than ever before, giving her mind-blowing pleasure. His musky scent enveloped her, the slap of sweat-slicked skin a sensual music for this erotic dance.

The sudden tensing of her body stunned Jenny, arriving faster than she wanted, hurtling her into ecstasy beyond compare. Nash jerked once then thrust hard twice and filled her with hot jets of cum. His shout of completion guided her back down to earth. Tender fingertips smoothed the damp hair away from her face.

“My Sunshine!”

The words were filled with heart-wrenching sentiment. She watched in amazement as it happened. Like a bolt of lightning piercing a dark, cloudy night, Nash’s face cleared and he began to tremble. Myriad complex emotions passed through his dark eyes—recognition, grief, tenderness and bewilderment.

None of it could top the jumbled feelings assailing her. Seeing the flash of memories burst through the fog clouding his mind made her heart soar and lifted some of the horror of his disappearance. The past weeks melted away.

She had met Nash through mutual friends. They became lovers, fell for each other hard and fast, gotten married within months of meeting. They’d shared a great life in a beautiful beach bungalow on the Gulf of Mexico. Everything had been wonderful right up until Nash got out of the military and joined a company conducting scientific research. The work was so hush-hush he had not been allowed to tell her anything about what he did. And with each day she’d watched as he become more withdrawn and distant, until the day he vanished.

In the intervening weeks Jenny had talked to anyone who would listen, and hounded many others who refused to hear her out. She’d known there was no way he had left her without a word, no matter what the evidence showed.

The police had been sympathetic at first while laying out the obvious facts. Nash had made a large withdrawal from their joint savings account. A suitcase and some of his clothes were missing from the closet. His car was gone and there had been no signs of foul play. It appeared to everyone as if he’d left her, but she’d known better. He would never willingly leave her behind.

“Why did you leave? Where’d you go? Where have you been all this time?” In her urgency, the questions spilled from her, one blending into another. She glanced at the white circle of skin on the fourth finger of his left hand. “And where is your wedding ring, Nash? God, what happened to you?”

Nash rolled to his side, gasping as even more vivid memories rushed through his mind. He wanted to answer all her questions, but wasn’t sure how to explain it all or what to say.

“It’s complicated. I’m still trying to catch up and don’t know where to start.”

“Why don’t you just start at the beginning? There’s no need to rush.”

What a mess! He’d gotten too close, discovered too many company secrets, and seen what the scientists were doing. “Actually, there is a big need to rush. We don’t have much time.”

They were looking for him. And no matter how much he longed to tell Jenny everything, doing so would put her in danger. Nash wasn’t willing to put her at risk.

“It’s better that you don’t know most of it. There’s a laboratory somewhere not far from here. The scientists are messing with recombinant DNA, stem cells and gene-splicing. The test subjects are not there on a voluntary basis.” He paused, stared down at her confused expression. “I saw too much, Sunshine. They’ll be coming after me.”

Nanotech’s plan was genius. Abduct homeless people from the streets, men and women who won’t be missed. Take them to a containment lab in the mountains and play with their DNA to see if a race of powerful soldiers was producible. By skipping years of testing and not applying for government approval, Nanotech stood to make a quick and tidy fortune.

He’d been assistant supervisor in charge of security and had not even known about the laboratory facilities. Finding out what his employer was doing sent him into a panic and Nash had gotten sloppy. The bastards had easily caught him and then taken precautions to make it appear as if he’d left Jenny. They inducted him in their diabolical project, adding tiger DNA to his own.

Hell, it sounded insane in his mind and he’d lived it. Jenny would never believe him.

He gazed down into her sweet, beloved face. His wife. The love of his life. Somehow, the bastards had managed to expunge her from his mind. A chill raced along his spine at the idea of never having remembered her and the love they shared.

Erased wasn’t the right explanation for what had happened because his memories were back. It would be more accurate to say they’d locked his memories away behind a thick barricade. She was the key that had unlocked the door.

Being back with her was wonderful, but she wasn’t getting back the man she’d known. They’d altered him, turned him into a bizarre freak of science. Making her understand was not going to be easy.

Nash vividly recalled the shock of shifting into an animal for the first time by accident. One second he’d been a man standing in the holding cell, the next he’d morphed into a new form, falling down onto four paws. His hearing had sharpened, distinguishing the lowest levels of sound. Colors had dulled from his widened field of vision, which sharpened into contrasting shades of gray. The tests had revealed incredible night vision better than with any enhancement goggles he’d worn as a man.

The lab had been taxing on the animal’s acute senses. Strong antiseptic smells wreaked havoc with his nasal passages and created intense headaches. On the trips they’d taken into the mountains, the carnivore had come alive. The urge to hunt had been irresistible. Nash had stalked smaller animals, captured his prey with an innate skill and ripped apart the carcasses with sharpened claws, devouring the warm meat with pointed teeth.

As a tiger, he moved with grace and stealth, able to get close to the scientists without them detecting his presence. Put him in a rocky area and he became almost impossible to locate due to the uncanny ability to blend into his surroundings. His captors never had any problem keeping up with his whereabouts though. The bastards had implanted a tracking device beneath his skin and used a shock collar to control him. To get away, after removing the collar, he’d shifted and chewed through his thick pelt in order to remove the chip, which now rested at the bottom of a steep ravine.

No way would Jenny believe any of the insane events of the past weeks. She'd figure it was paranoia, a conspiracy theory or that he'd lost his mind. Until he got to the right people and found a way to shut down the lab they were both in extreme danger. He had to keep his mouth shut. Without the details, she didn't present a threat to his former employer.

Jenny's trembling hand fluttered over her mouth, holding back her horror.

"The scars? Wh -What did they do to you?"

This would be really hard. Would she turn away from him when he'd just found her again? Hell, would she even trust him or believe anything he said if he told the truth?

He made a mental note to figure out how they had ended up in the same place. It was too big a coincidence to ignore.

"I don't know much about the science, but they did things to make me...stronger. And they messed with my memories. While I was in the lab, I didn't remember you, my job or our home. I was kept heavily drugged to make me pliable for their experiments and testing."

Nash didn't want to think about the things they'd done to him, much less tell Jenny. Eventually, he'd have to reveal the beast hidden beneath the exterior of the man, but he'd have to figure out the best way to ease her into this new, altered reality.

"I managed to escape when someone messed up." Another odd occurrence he'd have to think about. He left out the fact that the tiger had gutted a man and left him for dead, too. "I ran all night through the woods trying to figure out where I was and how to get help." There were still big questions he needed to answer for himself.

"Where are we and what are you doing here?"

"I-I had to have a break. Between the stress of school, work and you... No one would listen to me. They all said you'd left me and I needed to accept it, to move on. I needed to get away from...everything."

Her words were cut off on a sob. Nash offered comfort, wiping her tears and holding his wife until she once again calmed.

"It's going to be all right now, Sunshine. I'm here and I won't let anything hurt you." Nash prayed he could live up to that promise.

He had to get in touch with the one man in the company he trusted. Micah Lasiter would help him sort this mess out. As long as they hadn't gotten to Micah he still had hope. If they had—

He shook his head to clear away that unthinkable idea.

It was urgent he make contact, but not as important as reassuring Jenny. The rest of the world melted away when he was in her arms. For this one precious night, which could be their last night together, he would focus on her. Live a lifetime in a few short hours.

How she'd ended up here didn't matter. They'd figure everything out in the light of day. Right now, he needed to hold on to his wife and bask in the warm glow of her love.

His cock jerked to attention as she brushed against his hip. Nash had a lot of lost time to make up for, and he planned on starting right here and now. The romantic setting couldn't be any more perfect—a cozy cabin in the mountains, lying on a bearskin rug before a roaring fire. They had both been in a desperate rush earlier. He intended to slow things down and make love to his wife.

"Want to fool around, Sunshine?"

Chapter Four

Jenny took in her husband's come-fuck-me expression and melted. His heavy-lidded eyes had darkened with lust and his sensual lips sported a naughty grin. The rapid recovery surprised her since in the past he'd required a few hours to be ready again.

A little alarm bell rang in the back of her mind, insisting this was important and had something to do with the changes in Nash. She ignored the warning.

"Already?"

His smile broadened. "Mmm-hmm," he purred.

"There's a hot tub on the back porch. I've been daydreaming about it since I signed the rental contract." Her thoughts scattered as she pictured water glistening on Nash's body in the moonlight. She imagined licking each drop of water from his tanned skin.

"Come on." Nash helped her stand. "You go climb into the hot tub. I'll fix us a snack and join you in a few minutes."

He leaned forward and took her lips in a slow, seductive kiss with none of the previous urgency. His tongue made a lazy exploration, delving into every recess of her mouth, teeth nipping lightly. Jenny leaned into his strong frame, enjoying the slight abrasion of his chest hair over her beaded nipples. Tingles started in her breasts and spread outward, bringing every sensitive nerve ending to life. Liquid heat gushed from her core and her renewed arousal dampened her thighs. By the time he broke the kiss they were both gasping for air.

"Go, woman." Nash turned her with a gentle push to get her moving in the right direction. "Get moving or I'll be fucking you against the wall."

She failed to see anything wrong with the idea.

His hand came down on her ass cheek and she yelped, more from being startled than the small sting created in the fleshy globe. She put extra sway in her hips then paused to give him a salacious grin before opening the door. "Don't take too long. It's cold out there."

Nash's eyes twinkled with mischief. "Don't worry, Sunshine. When I join you in the hot tub, I'll have you heated up again in no time."

Once outside, Jenny wrestled the cover from the tub and figured out the controls for the jets. Her nipples tightened almost to the point of pain in the chilly air of the enclosed porch. She dropped into the warm churning water with a blissful sigh and leaned back, resting her head on the padded edge. "Damn, now this is worth every penny of the rental fee."

The tub had more than adequate room for her to stretch out and float on the surface. Languishing in the hot water, her body and mind relaxed. Tense muscles eased and her thoughts drifted, for once not fretting over every little thing.

"I am one hell of a lucky man!" Reverence and honesty rang clear in Nash's husky voice.

"If you'd get that fine ass in here you'd be getting lucky."

Nash laughed and the happy, throaty sound soothed her battered soul.

"Yes, ma'am. But no funny stuff until you've eaten. It's gonna be a long night. You'll need your strength."

"Yeah, right. After round two you'll be sawing logs until well after sunrise." Two go-rounds had always been his limit.

He set a large tray laden with food on a nearby table, dragged it closer to the tub then slipped into the water with a hiss. "Damn, that's hot."

"Which is the whole idea, honey?"

Large hands grasped her hips and tugged, drawing Jenny closer. Nash cradled her in his lap, one arm supporting her back. She closed her eyes and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Open," he commanded as something cool and smooth brushed her lips, which parted for him. Her teeth pierced the fleshy piece of fruit. The rich sweetness of the red grape burst over her tongue.

Jenny's jaw dropped when she glanced over at the tray to see what other treats he'd prepared for them. Grapes, strawberries and banana slices overflowed a large bowl. Thick ham and cheese sandwiches were stacked high on a plate. He'd opened her stash of Oreo cookies and next to the package sat a jar of peanut butter. The fact he remembered her favorite treat touched her heart and made her tummy gurgle in hunger.

"Jesus, Nash. That's about three days worth of the food I brought. You've got enough there for six people."

He gave a sheepish grin and shrugged. "I'm starving!"

They took turns feeding each other bites of food. As their bellies became full other appetites arose and eating became teasing foreplay. Nash dug his index finger deep into the peanut butter then held it out to her. Knowing how it would affect him, she tipped her chin down and held his heated gaze from beneath her eyelashes. She licked down one side of his finger, up the other and circled the tip with her tongue.

"Suck it, Sunshine." His rough groan set off tremors low in her belly.

Nash basked in the glow of his wife's innate sensuality. Jenny's lips parted and she nibbled on the tip of his finger, driving him to distraction before slowly sucking the digit into the warmth of her mouth. Her busy tongue twirled around the length until she reached his last knuckle. As she reversed direction, she sucked hard, hollowing her cheeks. He pictured her taking his cock between her lips and the rock-hard organ jerked against her hip. It had been too long since he'd felt her talented mouth suck him to the back of her throat.

Surging to his feet, he sat on the cushioned edge and placed Jenny between his spread legs. Dipping two fingers into the jar, he painted his cock from root to tip with the salty treat.

Jenny didn't need any further enticement. She enjoyed her ability to bring him to his knees by pleasuring him with her sexy mouth. The fingers of one hand circled the base of his cock while the other cradled his balls. Her wet tongue lapped at him, devouring every last drop of the peanut butter before drawing the crown past her lips.

"Damn, that's good."

Sharp teeth nipped at the sensitive rim sending sparks shooting straight to his balls, which drew taut. She flicked her tongue into the slit, hummed while tasting his pre-cum. Nash's head fell back between his shoulders as her tongue circled the head then probed the most amazing spot on the underside.

During their years together she'd learned how to take him right to the edge and keep him teetering there. Putting her skills to good use, Jenny used every trick she knew. Nimble fingers rimmed his anus, stroked his perineum and massaged his balls. She used her lips, tongue and teeth—sucked, licked and nibbled. Even the noises she made were a tool of pleasure, loud slurps stoking his arousal higher, and her hummed moans vibrating through his flesh.

When his climax would be held back no longer, Nash didn't bother to warn Jenny. She knew how to read his body and was be prepared for the hot jets of cum hitting the back of her

throat. Her convulsive swallowing drew out his pleasure. He couldn't prevent the loud roar from rolling through his chest any more than he could stop the release of his semen.

The tiger pulled at its leash. Nash gave in to the untamed instincts and acted on the impulses bombarding his body. He didn't pause to catch his breath. One fast sweep of his arm cleared the remnants of their feast from the small table. Plates shattered and the tray landed with a resounding thunk on the wooden deck.

"Nash!"

Jenny quivered as he turned toward her. His wild and hungry eyes had become so dark they appeared black. His jaw looked more prominent, his expression savage. A jolt of panic shot through her, but she pushed it aside and focused on her excitement.

This was Nash, her tender and loving husband, not someone to be feared. The whole beastly routine started having a very different effect on her. She found this new primal edginess was a major turn-on.

He lifted her out of the water as if she were lighter than a feather and laid her on the table with her bottom resting at the very edge. The primitive intensity radiating from him in waves made her think of a cartoon animal putting on a bib and sharpening a knife as it prepared to dine. That image failed to lighten the impact of his carnal stare.

Hands that trembled parted her knees and he barked a warning. "Stay!"

Yeah, not a problem. She was pinned to the spot as effectively as a deer caught by headlights.

And damn if he didn't look sexy as hell with his dark hair wet and rumpled, clinging to his face. Beads of water glistened in the moonlight, streamed over ripped muscles, and raced along delineated indentations. One fat drop quivered where it clung to his taut nipple. Jenny longed to capture it on the tip of her tongue then lick away all the remaining water from every inch of skin.

She screamed as he fed on her pussy as if starved. Broad shoulders forced her legs wider, almost to the point of pain. There was no slow buildup or finesse, Nash ravished her. Eager slurps and moans filled the air as he consumed the cream from her slick folds. His tongue felt rough, abrading tender tissues, creating the most delightful friction. The wet appendage thrust deep into her grasping pussy. Jenny swore it almost hit the back of her throat before the tip curved upward to stroke her sweet spot as it retracted.

Her fingers wound through his hair and held him in place as her hips bucked, her pussy fucking his face. The dominant behavior and rough treatment, so uncharacteristic of Nash, drove her into a wild frenzy. Unfathomable pleasure gathered in her core as he took her to incredible heights.

"Nash," she gasped. "Oh God. Please." Overwhelmed, she wasn't sure if she begging him to stop or keep going. Uncontrollable spasms shook her entire body and all she could do was to hang on tight.

Her orgasm hit with the force of a tsunami. Wave after wave swelled then crashed over her, bombarding her with endless ecstasy. He stayed with her, sucked her engorged clit, riding out the storm until her body calmed, lapping at her folds until he'd devoured every drop of pleasure.

Aftershocks still burst through her body as he gently lifted her, dried them both, and carried her to bed. She lost count of how many times throughout the night they made love, always in a different position.

He'd become a tireless sex fiend.

If this was a side effect of what they'd done to him in the lab, she might have to volunteer for the program just to be able to keep up with him. She'd definitely have to order some mega vitamins.

Not that she was complaining. Nope, so far she was very satisfied with her new-and-improved husband.

Chapter Five

Jenny yawned and rubbed her eyes. She had not managed to get much sleep. She would doze off then wake up in a panic, reaching out for Nash. Each time she did they made love again, reestablishing their strong connection.

Nash prepared a huge breakfast feast and wolfed down massive proportions, but she had little appetite. Finally, she stopped pushing food around the plate and set it aside. Nash had shared small pieces of the horrible information he'd discovered while held captive at the lab. She'd taken time to think about it and was ready to talk.

She'd been proud of his job as the second-in-command providing security for a research company committed to developing a cure for cancer. Never would she have suspected the scientists' discoveries had lead them on a very different path. One that paved the way for unconscionable actions and a frightening goal—creating genetically enhanced humans.

"Let's see if I've got this right. The company is kidnapping innocent people and fucking around with their DNA. They're going against all ethical and legal regulations governing research. Their morals are corrupted, bent to suit their own purposes. When you found out, they abducted you and turned you into one of their guinea pigs."

He rolled his neck then stared at the ceiling for a minute. "Yeah, that's pretty much the issue in a nutshell. The military took interest in the concept and gave them funding. I don't think they realize the company has taken the idea past the research stage and are experimenting on humans."

He reached across the table and picked up her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze before releasing it again. She stared into his eyes, seeing the awful truth in his steady gaze.

"Nash, what the hell did they do to you?"

With a heavy sigh, he scrubbed a hand over this face in a telling gesture. She knew he was trying to find a way to sugarcoat what he had to say. That was the last thing she needed or wanted. She decided to steer the conversation in a different direction, ask some of the other questions bothering her.

"Okay, so this secret lab of theirs, with all this fancy, state-of-the art security in place. Yet you somehow managed to escape after weeks of not finding any point of weakness." Jenny drummed her fingers on the table. "Don't you find it suspicious that their tight security became lax at the opportune moment, allowing you to get away?"

"Was that a rhetorical question?"

She nodded. He seemed to know where her line of reasoning was headed. "So how do we, working on our own, bring down a major organization with strong government connections?"

His expression hardened. "We don't. I need to get in touch with Micah Lasiter. He'll help me sort this out. Get me in touch with the right people."

"Your boss?" she gasped, certain her skepticism showed in her expression. "But he's one of them."

"I trust Micah. He's not just my boss. You know we're old friends. He wouldn't condone illegal research. Once he knows what's going on, he'll help me."

Yeah, and leave her completely out of everything. "I'm in this now, Nash, so don't even think of trying to shut me out."

They had brought her luggage into the cabin earlier. She went to her purse, got her cell phone, and pushed it across the table. "Here. If you trust this friend then call him."

Nash shook his head. "I can't, Sunshine. Cell activity is too easy to monitor and intercept. I need a secure, untraceable way to contact him."

Frustrated, she dropped down into her chair. Okay, no cell phone. The cabin had a landline but caller ID ruled out that as an option. Considering their location, finding a payphone was a long shot.

"Oh, I know. We could send up a smoke signal." She wanted to bite back the sarcastic comment as soon as it left her mouth.

He merely snickered.

"Do you think they could have followed you here?" Jenny cast a nervous glance around the cabin.

"No!" His tone was firm and confident. "I took care of the tracking mechanism." Pausing, he seemed to reconsider. "They might be able to use another...altered subject to follow my trail, but I don't think it would work. The training process has not progressed that far. I doubt they've had time to teach the others how to track or hunt."

"Oh, oh, oh." Jenny shot up from the chair as if her ass were on fire. "I know. The SUV has that OnStar satellite thingy. You can use it to call Micah."

Nash rubbed his chin. It was an old habit she knew well. It meant his very analytical mind was busy picking her idea apart, determining potential problems and probabilities of success. Without warning, he grabbed her, spinning Jenny around in circles.

"You are amazing!" He stopped twirling, but her head continued to whirl for a few seconds. She stared into his eyes, delighting in the enlarged pupils and darker blue color reflecting heated desire.

Lowering his head, he drew her into a slow kiss. Nash traced her lips with the tip of his tongue before delving inside to tease and tantalize. He nibbled and sipped, tasted and explored.

Jenny's body softened, melted into her husband. Her hands traced the planes and angles along his chest, noting changes in him. During his captivity his body had become leaner and more defined, roped with muscle. His kiss tasted different too, the sweetness now seasoned with a spicier flavor and boldness. When they'd made love he'd been insatiable and aggressive. Almost primal. Animalistic.

She pulled back, needing to catch her breath. One kiss and she was ready for him. Her body hot and wet. But now was not the time. They had to sort through this tangled web of deceit first. After exposing the lab and ensuring Nash would be safe they could fuck like rabbits.

"I doubt the security team has thought about monitoring satellite communications." He considered their situation for a moment. "Have you noticed anything strange lately? Seen anyone watching the bungalow or taking an unusual interest in your schedule?"

Jenny thought about it. Working evening shift, paying extra attention to her surroundings when driving home late at night had become habit. When Nash had disappeared, she'd experienced the creepy crawly feeling of being watched those first few weeks.

"For a while, I would have sworn someone was watching me, but it all figured in with your disappearance. I told the police. They brushed off my concerns, said I was imagining things because of you leaving." Tears stung the back of her eyes. "The detective made me out to be a hysterical and hormonal woman scorned. He made me feel as if I was losing my mind."

“Anyway—” She shook off the useless anger and frustration. “There was a van, one of the windowless deals used by plumbers and other businesses. I noticed it sitting several houses down the block for the first week. But I decided someone was having work done on their house and shrugged it off as strung-out nerves. I haven’t seen anything odd since then.”

His grip on her shoulder’s tightened and his expression turned hard, taking on a dangerous glare. “Fucking bastards. My guess is they were watching you to see if the police gave any credence to your belief something had happened to me. God, Jenny—” His eyes closed briefly before he stared down at her. “If they’d hurt you...”

Nash didn’t need to complete the statement. His anger over any potential harm she’d faced was evident in his clenched jaw and pained expression.

“How many people knew you were coming here?”

She considered his question for a moment. “Only my mother and I didn’t tell her specifics. Nobody at work knows what I planned for vacation other than to get out of town.”

He brushed the tip of her nose with a tender kiss. “Good! Even if the organization checks up on you they shouldn’t realize you’re gone yet. We’ll have to risk it and hope Nanotech isn’t monitoring satellite communications.”

“Make sure you get Micah to bring you some clothes.” Jenny gaze swept his body clad in only the thin medical scrubs and grinned. “Not that I mind you being naked or going commando.”

* * * * *

“I want to know more about this lab and what they did to you? And why haven’t I heard about Micah before if you’re such good friends?”

They sat before the fireplace, sipping hot chocolate. It was early afternoon and would still be a few hours before help reached them. Nash had known the hard questions were coming, seen them in her eyes, but wasn’t eager to discuss the particulars. He’d didn’t want Jenny to be in danger but she deserved to know details.

“I’ll start with Micah. The only contact I’ve had with him since you and I met revolves around work. You know that I signed a confidentiality agreement so I can’t get too into Nanotech business.”

He settled with his back propped against the couch, legs stretched out toward the hearth, casually crossed at the ankle. “I met Micah in the Army when both of us were green recruits. Micah excelled in espionage. My marksman skills took me in a different direction, although we did work together at times it wasn’t often. Our paths crossed again when I applied for the security job with the company. Micah had already been with them and was one of the reasons I took the job. He’s a good guy. Fiercely loyal.

“Even though he’s my supervisor, he works in another part of the country. We don’t see much of each other. I started hearing rumors about top-secret research and experimentation, which I didn’t give much attention. Not at first. When one of the scientists went missing after stating ethical concerns to higher-ups, I began to investigate on my own.” He glanced at Jenny. She watched him close, hung on every word.

“I discovered things. About the lab, and what they were doing. Word got back to the wrong people. I intended to get Micah involved but didn’t reach him in time since he’d gone on medical leave. Someone found out I was asking questions so they sent a cleaner after me.”

Confusion clouded her eyes. Nash changed course for a moment to explain. “A cleaner is similar to a hit man. When the situation goes FUBAR the cleaner is called in to purge any

trace of the organization—scrub the scene. This can include destroying evidence and eliminating witnesses. I became an unacceptable risk, but they still had certain uses for me.”

Jenny gasped. He took hold of her freezing cold hands, rubbing them between his own in an attempt to warm her up. Her brown eyes were wide with shock and fear. “I’m okay, Sunshine,” he reassured. “Do you want me to continue?”

Jenny nodded.

“I got sloppy, panicked. The cleaner got the drop on me, knocked me out with an electroshock weapon. I was drugged and bound for transport, taken to the lab, and woke up strapped to an exam table. The scientists explained their project. It was quite brilliant really. Abduct the unwanted dregs of society for testing no subject would willingly submit to. The initial goal of altering DNA to remove cancer changed when other potentials became clear. The new government sponsored goal, create an unbeatable team of enhanced soldiers. Combine the DNA of the world’s strongest, fiercest hunters with that of the test subjects. I doubt the government knows how far the scientists took things.”

He rubbed his chin. “The results weren’t quite what they’d expected. A dozen or so people were altered that I’m aware of. They received DNA from wolves, bears, big cats, sharks...you name it. When the human’s bodies revealed weakness, operations were performed to alter organs, muscles and bones. Some didn’t survive. A few had to be terminated.”

Fat tears streamed down her cheeks, but Jenny didn’t make a sound. Nash pulled her into his arms, offering what comfort he could. She remained stiff and on edge. Tremors rocked her body.

“Oh my God. What...how...Jesus...” Her voice trailed off as she buried her face against his chest.

Anticipating her next questions, Nash prepared to plunge ahead. Jenny surprised him by leaping to her feet.

“I need to take a break.” The words were spoken softly. She appeared weak, her complexion pale from shock. “I’m going to take a walk.”

He moved to join her, but Jenny held out a hand to stop him.

“Alone!”

Nodding, Nash gave her the space she needed to sort through everything he’d said. It was a lot. Hell, he still had a difficult time coming to terms with everything that had happened. For Jenny, it was all new territory.

Chapter Six

Restless and needing to move, she paced the dirt driveway, afraid to go very far while sorting through what Nash had told her, along with her conflicted emotions. Anger, betrayal, shock, disbelief and joy all warred for dominance.

In the weeks since he'd disappeared, she had spent a lot of sleepless nights watching late night television. Her mind latched onto episodes of *Science Fiction Theater*. The whole situation, everything that had happened, made it seem as if she'd been tossed into the middle of a bizarre movie starring mad scientists and brutal killers.

It was a lot to stomach, requiring a huge leap of faith. She wanted to believe in him, but Lord, talk about far-out craziness.

Maybe the drugs they'd given Nash had caused vivid dreams. Dreams so real his mind had been tricked into thinking those mental trips had been real. Or he could have suffered a head injury. Yeah, it was something to consider.

Hell, maybe he'd been abducted by aliens.

Anything was better than his employer having screwed around with his DNA. That horrifying nightmare was unthinkable.

Then there was the matter of him never telling her anything. Sure, Nanotech required silence and he'd signed a confidentiality agreement, but she was his wife. For that matter, why had she never asked more questions about his work? Until his disappearance, she'd been happy with her ignorance.

Frustration overwhelmed her and Jenny took it out on a tree, kicking the hard trunk. The soft sneakers she wore provided no protection against the blow. "Ow! Smart, Jen. Real smart." She hopped around on the good foot, rubbing her injured toes through her shoes.

At the end of the drive, she turned and headed back toward the cabin. "This was supposed to have been a stress-free vacation. Rest and relaxation. Ha!" While she rejoiced at having found Nash, she wanted to rail over the injustice of how their lives had been pitched into total chaos.

Jenny came to an abrupt halt. What had happened didn't matter. She would stand by her man no matter what trouble came their way and get him whatever help he needed.

Something he'd said raced to the forefront of her mind. "*They received DNA from wolves, bears, big cats, sharks...you name it. When the human's bodies revealed weakness, operations were performed to alter organs, muscles and bones.*"

What the hell had the whacked-out scientists done to her husband? He'd only given her sketchy information. Jenny had no clue. But she sure as hell was going to find out. Armed with medical knowledge she could combat any ill effects.

Fixated on her immediate goal, she started off once again, ready to get some answers. A low, resonating rumble filtered through the trees, making her gut clench. It was a menacing, animalistic growl. A warning.

A twig snapped, branches rustled and the growling grew in both volume and nearness.

Well, didn't this new predicament just make her damn day. Here she was out walking in the wilderness, by herself, being stalked by what sounded like a very large animal.

When you step in it, you really step in it.

RUN!

Her entire body froze to the spot, regardless of what her head screamed the message wasn't getting through. Fear paralyzed her muscles. Instinct told her to get far away from whatever it was, but she knew predators were enticed by the chase.

Too late!

The biggest cat she'd ever seen strolled from the forest, blocking her path. Lions in the zoo had nothing on this enormous creature. Walking on all fours it was only about a foot shorter than her. If the beast rose on its hind legs—

I'm going to be eaten alive.

"Nice, Simba," she crooned in what she hoped to be a soothing tone. "Easy now. Holy shit, you're one hell of a big kitty."

He had a huge head and intelligent golden-brown eyes that seemed to study her. A thick mane covered his chest almost down to the knees and flowed more than halfway across a very muscular back. His coloring ranged from light buff on his torso to a dark cocoa brown at the tip of his tail. The lion's proud stance gave him a regal quality.

The cat yawned, revealing a sharp set of immense teeth, and he flicked the brown puffed end of his tail in her direction. His lazy demeanor didn't fool Jenny. The animal was on high alert, waiting and watching.

"Getting sleepy? That's good. You go take a nice long nap and I'll catch ya later."

She had no way to warn Nash. Eventually, he'd come looking for her and the lion would get him too. Well, unless the lion got filled up on her first and took a nap.

What a delightful thought.

"People don't taste very good, you know. Not one of those cases where they say it tastes like chicken." As she spoke, Jenny took slow steps away from the animal. "Nope, we taste horrible. Meat's all tough and gamey. You'd be much happier with a nice filet of venison."

Prepared to take another step back, she was stopped by the sharp cry of what sounded to be another large cat.

"Oh great. This just gets better and better!" She quivered, made a snap decision and stepped to the left, pivoting to get a look at the new arrival while moving from between the two animals.

Let them fight over her. She was okay with that. Maybe they'd kill each other and she could make a break for it.

A large tiger stepped into the open. Jenny blinked a couple of times, trying to clear her vision. Nothing changed. There were still two big jungle cats eying each other warily.

"A lion and a tiger. Oh my! Now all we need is a bear." Her voice came out squeaky, pitched high, bordering on hysteria.

The two animals facing off made a very surreal sight. She fought down the hysterical laughter threatening to burst free. God, if only she could chalk this up to a hallucination.

Talking softly, Jenny continued to take tiny steps away from the building confrontation. "Play nice, kitties. Ignore the silly human. You'll have a better time chasing each other."

With her back to the trees, careful of making sudden movements, she eyed both animals. Somehow, a tiger showing up made perfect sense to her spiraling-out-of-control mind. The tiger's stocky body stood tense and on edge, prepared for action. Shiny fur, ranging from almost white to reddish-orange, was overlaid by a pattern of dark stripes. While not as large as the lion, the tiger was still a force to be reckoned with.

The beast turned his intense blue gaze on her. Jenny felt her legs wobble. She backed into a tree. Unable to remain upright any longer, she slid down onto her bottom.

Blue eyes?

Those eyes, they looked so similar to Na—

“Oh my God. No. Please, no.”

All thoughts of slinking off evaporated as her brain struggled with what she was seeing. Her mind raced as she put two and two together, not liking the result, grasping for alternate answers.

Nash had told her Nanotech’s scientists were playing with crazy shit but what she imagined couldn’t be possible. Over the years, amazing leaps had been made with genetic research. More than ten years ago they’d cloned that damn sheep.

What the hell was its name?

“Either Molly or Dolly? Fuck, I don’t know the stupid sheep’s name,” she mumbled, knowing the animal’s name didn’t matter. Not with the two cats preparing to fight. But the scars on Nash’s body—those mattered. The sick fucks had done things to him, enhanced his strength, operated. What if they—

Dammit , no.

If you wanted to perform illegal groundbreaking research, you’d set up a secured lab in the middle of nowhere. Do whatever it took to protect your secret. Especially if the potential return on your investment was huge. Men with the ability to change into animals was beyond huge.

Military agencies, foreign interests, terrorists— They’d all shell out big bucks for technology that advanced the strength of their soldiers. Make regular soldiers stronger, turn them into some of the fiercest hunters in the world and the superpowers would hand over a fortune.

The tiger moved to position himself between her and the lion. He seemed protective or maybe possessive. Shit! She had a hard time figuring out men. Animals were a whole different story.

Each step the tiger took was matched by the lion and the cats began an odd dance of advance and withdraw.

“There’s no sense in having a catfight over me.” She glanced into the stunning blue eyes of the tiger again, and her heart beat so fast she was afraid it would burst.

If he is...

That means...

Then who the hell is the lion?

Bits and pieces clicked into place from her earlier conversation with Nash and her mind made a huge leap. Panic bubbled up in her chest, strangling anything she would have said as she scrambled around the tree trunk, keeping her eye on the animals.

Good Lord. She had to be wrong.

The two cats growled and roared, each taking the other’s measure. Jenny hoped to fade into the background and miss the fight.

No such luck.

The lion crouched down, ready to spring at the tiger. No, at Nash. He’d be torn to shreds. She trembled, her mind raced, searched for a way out of this nightmare.

Should she run? Scream? There was no one to hear her cries or offer aid. The cabin’s isolation was one of the reasons she’d rented it for her vacation.

Fuck! She couldn't run. She had to reach her husband. He was in there...somewhere. And he was her only hope. That's why he was here, to protect her, right? But how much of Nash's intellect did the tiger share? Would he even know her?

A ferocious growl vibrated from the lion's broad chest as he leapt, nearly scaring the piss out of her.

"Nash!" His name erupted from her lips in an anguished scream as the cats attacked. Growls, roars and shrill cries of pain rang out from the tumbling, churning mass of fur. Claws ripped at tender flesh. Teeth sunk into a vulnerable throat. An endless, dark river of blood flowed over the dirt.

Jenny had to do something to help Nash, but what? How the hell did a human break up a fight between two bloodthirsty predators?

No, one of them was her husband. Something about the way the lion moved made her believe this animal also shared a human's intelligence.

Considering what she believed to be the reality of the situation, she saw only one sure-fire way to bring an end to the skirmish. She had to react, fast. There was no time to think about it.

Pushing past her fears, Jenny squared her shoulders and waited for an opening. Where she found the courage, she had no idea but a gap appeared between the two cats. She hollered the first thing that came to mind and stepped right into the middle of the fight.

"Hey! You two morons, please stop this nonsense. I'm not going to watch you kill each other."

Oh, please let there be human men under all that fur and muscle!

A trail of fire burned down the back of her right calf as a powerful paw and unsheathed claws met with denim covered skin and muscle. No doubt the strike was intended to land on the other cat. That knowledge didn't ease the excruciating pain. Air exited her lungs in a rush leaving her breathless. She glanced over her shoulder to get a look at the damage. Ragged, blood-coated strips of denim covered her lower leg. A pool of blood soaked into the ground around her foot.

Cold sweat slicked her body and her field of vision narrowed. Funny, the sight of blood had never bothered her before at work. Of course, that was always someone else's blood, not her own. Damn if it didn't hurt too.

"I don't feel so good." Her voice dropped to a weak whisper as she plunged face-first toward the ground. The last thing she heard was Nash calling her name in a harsh tone full of fear.

Chapter Seven

Nash's claws sliced through fabric and flesh easy as a hot knife through butter.

Spending the rest of his life in the deepest, darkest, most vile pit in hell would not atone for hurting Jenny. There was too much force behind his movement to stop the momentum when she stepped between him and the lion.

She swayed and he shifted. Leaping forward, he wrapping her in the protection of his arms. Nash rolled as they fell, allowing his body to take the brunt of their impact against the hard-packed dirt road and keeping the lion in sight.

"Jenny? Talk to me, Sunshine."

As he rose, holding Jenny in his arms, the lion shifted form. He'd never seen anyone else make the change before, but Nash sure knew how it felt. The sudden flash of bright lights as the senses and body altered. The momentary disorientation created by such a drastic change in perspective.

Observing the shift was mesmerizing. If he'd blinked, he would have missed it. But the naked man covered in bite marks, gashes and abrasions now standing where the lion had shocked the hell out of him. A heavy sense of dread settled in his gut.

"Oh God. They got to you, too."

Micah Lasiter nodded. "Let's get her inside and take care of that wound. Then we'll talk."

Nash paced the confines of the small cabin. Thanks to his new super DNA, his wounds had already started to heal. He'd cleaned the gashes in Jenny's leg and covered it in bandages, but she required more advanced care. While Micah had placed a call to someone he trusted, Nash located the first-aid kit Jenny kept in the car and coaxed her into taking a couple of pain pills. The medicine had done its job and knocked her out.

"Talk to me, man. Make me understand."

Micah raked his fingers through shoulder-length dark blond hair. "While thirty-five may not be old, my body has taken a beating over the years. Hiding my physical limitations became harder after taking that bullet last year. Then I blew out my knee. That's why I was on medical leave." He rubbed at the damaged muscles.

"They came to me with a proposition to join the Predator Project. I became the first non-civilian their new and perfected procedure was tested on."

Micah sighed. "I had few options. Once they told me what they were doing, I knew too much. It was either become their test subject or be eliminated. It all sounded so simple and amazing. Inject me with some souped-up lion DNA and I'd be stronger than ever before." He laughed but the sound held no humor. "They left out a few minor details, such as the fact that I'd turn into a lion."

Nash couldn't believe what he was hearing. Micah had gone into this as a willing volunteer?

"They kept me isolated, hired a zoologist to help me through the transition and teach me how to handle my new abilities. I didn't find out about your disappearance until after everything had gone down and Dr. Southerby met you at the lab."

Nash remembered Weltman bringing in a woman to meet him right before things got crazy and alarms started going off.

“Weltman confronted Becca and I had to get her out of there. I didn’t know about you until later or I would have pulled you out too.”

“Wait a minute,” Nash interrupted. “The head of the organization is in on this? I got the impression a few of the scientists had taken it upon themselves to circumvent the standards for research and experimentation.”

The lines of strain furrowing Micah’s brow grew deeper. He closed his eyes and took several calming breaths. “The project has Weltman’s full backing and support. It’s his baby. Upon discovering a solution for binding the DNA and delivering it into the subject’s bloodstream the plan was to begin testing on disposable subjects. After perfecting the process they’d go for a few specific trials on individuals with previous military training. Strong men capable of handling the alterations. That’s when I was recruited. Weltman himself plans to undergo the procedure once proven safe.

“From what I’ve learned, the project has been in place for more than a year. All the previous test subjects either died during the transformation or their bodies rejected the DNA cocktail. A few went insane. I was the first success.”

Stress and exhaustion had taken an obvious toll on his friend. His thick hair now had a sprinkling of gray. Deep lines bracketed the corners of his eyes where before the golden skin had appeared youthful and smooth.

“All those poor unsuspecting people.” Nash muttered some creative curses and rubbed at his aching temples.

Micah nodded. “How’d you wind up in this mess?”

Nash continued to pace, wearing a groove in the wooden floor. “A tech arrived at headquarters to find out what was being done about a scientist who had gone missing. Took me by surprise because I hadn’t heard about anyone being missing. Hell, I didn’t even know about the facility until the tech gave me details.

“He also wanted to report ethics concerns over how things were being done at a lab. Since you were out on medical, I conducted his first interview. Never heard much though. We were being monitored. As soon as he started talking about unwilling subjects and taking homeless people from the street, Jennings busted in and took over.”

Steve Jennings, head of operations, was the man to whom both he and Micah answered. Nash remembered the older man storming into the room and directing him to forget about everything he’d heard. He’d been told the issue was top-secret and would be handled personally by Jennings.

“They left me out of the loop, but I refused to let go. There were too many unanswered questions, especially about the secret facility. Many of the things the tech had said bothered me. Two days later, I heard about his disappearance and began checking into the matter on my own.” He rubbed at the beard stubble covering his jaw.

“I screwed up, got too close, and learned things they didn’t want me to know. Got busted by Jennings while talking to the wrong person.”

In his panic, he’d attempted to contact Weltman, certain the man had no idea about the immoral practices being carried out right under his nose. The mistake had cost him.

“I got careless, overestimated myself. They snatched me right out of my car.” He glanced at Jenny’s motionless form on the couch. “Made it look like I’d bailed on Jenny. They kept me prisoner in the lab until yesterday when security got lax and I escaped.”

Micah chuckled. "Yeah. I recommended everyone on the lab's security force. When I learned where you were, I arranged for the breach in procedure and waited in the woods to get you out of there. Ran into a bit of trouble myself with Jennings." A look of regret crossed his face. "He's no longer a concern."

Nash held up his hand. "And how is it that my wife wound up here on the very same night security became lazy and I escaped? That's too much coincidence for me!"

"I purchased this cabin. Posted notices on e-mail bulletins at the hospital where Jenny works offering it up as a very affordable vacation rental. She e-mailed back and set up the rental dates." Micah gave a negligent shrug.

"Anyway, that's how I was able to get here so quick. I've been here for weeks. Just had to clean things up and cover my tracks." He drummed his fingers on a thigh that vibrated with nervous energy. "Speaking of which, it won't take them long to find this place. We've been lucky so far but it's not a safe location."

He'd already known they couldn't stay here much longer, but what now? His conscience wouldn't allow him to walk away. There were still innocent people in the lab, suffering as he had. He also had to consider the frightening consequences of the military gaining access to the procedure or the altered subjects.

"We've got to take them down."

Micah raked his hand through his hair and nodded. "Doing the right thing won't be easy or come without significant risk."

Nash glanced at Jenny again. Even if his conscience had let him turn his back, his love for Jenny gave him determination. She was such a good, caring and compassionate person. She would never walk away from innocent people in need of help. If she knew the details, she would want him to do whatever he could to save them.

"Make some calls," he growled. "Assemble a team. We'll need electronics, computer and explosive specialists. We go in, get the subjects out, fry their records then blow the place sky-high."

"Good. I already have a team. Sorry, but I had to find out where you stood on things before bringing you in."

Micah being a step ahead didn't surprise Nash. His friend had an uncanny ability to analyze a situation and find all the possible pitfalls with deadly efficiency.

"We have to consider our status, Nash. They've turned us into animals with the ability to reason and walk among humans. The public will be frightened and can never find out or there'd be nowhere we could ever live in peace. This will have to be a silent mission. None of the team has full disclosure. Any subjects we pull out will have to be handled with kid gloves."

Shit. There was no way of just letting the subjects walk out of there. They'd have to be isolated, taught to deal with their new status.

"I want to get General Hughes involved, keep everything hush-hush. The subjects can be trained under his guidance and protection."

Nash nodded. Hughes had been their mentor in the Army. Next to Micah, he couldn't think of anyone else he'd trust with something so critical. "The General will be a powerful asset to have on our side."

"We also have to consider the chance they've established a failsafe. If the records have been stored elsewhere then taking out the lab doesn't mean we've cancelled the project. We have to take out the entire Nanotech network."

“This has to go down without any mistakes...” Nash let his words trail off. Micah knew the consequences of failure as well as he did.

Remaining silent and still was a struggle for Jenny. The horrors being perpetrated in the lab made her blood run cold. Hearing Nash recount what had been done to him, how they’d turned him into a shapeshifter with DNA from a tiger, boggled her mind.

It all felt too strange to be real. Yet this was now her life. Her husband had a tiger lurking beneath his skin. His best friend was a lion. And people who’d been turned into God only knew what were still being held in the lab, kept in what amounted to cages, while horrible tests were conducted on them.

Pride was an emotion she’d become familiar with in regard to her husband, but never to the extent she felt now. Nash was a good man. He wouldn’t let this injustice continue and he’d make sure the others got whatever support they would need to cope with what had been done to them. From the brief exposure to Micah, she felt certain he also had a good heart and would make sure the right thing was done.

Their lives had been thrown into turmoil. Nothing would ever be the same again. Not only would they both have to adjust to Nash’s new abilities, there would be the necessity of hiding what he was from the rest of the world. Other scientists would want to study him, figure out how the procedure worked and try to replicate the result. The general populous would be afraid, while the government and military would want to use him for their own purposes.

She wondered what would happen to her education and career. Moving, changing schools and jobs all seemed to loom on the horizon.

No sooner had the thoughts entered her mind than Jenny chastised herself for being selfish. This wasn’t about her. She had to protect Nash, regardless of what personal sacrifice was required. She loved him and would do anything for him.

Including follow him back inside the lab to make sure he made it out alive.

Two more men arrived at the cabin and the team of four discussed their plans never suspecting she listened to every word. Jenny kept a tight rein on her emotions, schooling her features into a blank mask and controlling her breathing so they’d think she remained asleep.

Chapter Eight

An entire day came and went in a blur of activity. Kyle Slater gave Jenny an antibiotic injection, irrigated the lacerations and closed the wounds with a special compound—one of the good things to have come from Nanotech—that eliminated the need for stitches.

Nash scowled as he watched Jenny limp around the kitchen, preparing sandwiches for everyone. She'd been too quiet and subdued. Without her running dialogue, he felt at a loss, unable to get an accurate fix on her emotional state. He tried to convince her to take it easy but understood her need to stay busy.

Layouts and maps were scattered across an old wooden table. The team had gone over every step of their plan until the details were second nature. They were as ready for tonight's raid as they were going to get. Tensions ran high and they all needed a little down time. Nash knew exactly how he wanted to spend the next few hours. First he needed some privacy.

"Someone should check the perimeter to make sure they haven't discovered our location."

Micah nodded. "Sam, Kyle and I have got it covered. We'll be back in two hours."

Jenny ignored their departure and continued to clean the same stretch of countertop she'd been working on for more than ten minutes.

"Come on, Sunshine. Let's take a break."

"I'm fine," she insisted.

He put on an exaggerated hangdog expression, which wasn't very hard to do since his ass was all but dragging. "Good, then you can keep me company while I get some rest."

She hung the cloth over the faucet then rinsed and dried her hands. Her anxiety made his heart clench. They both dreaded the dangerous night to come and needed some alone time to talk before the team headed out. He knew there were many things weighing on her mind.

Nash moved in behind Jenny, sliding his arms around her waist and brushed tender kisses along her neck. "I need you." She leaned back into him, and he settled his erection between the lush curves of her ass. "Let's spend the afternoon making love."

The shiver of arousal that raced through her body was more than enough encouragement for him. He guided her to the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind them.

Jenny wanted to make love but not yet. She needed more answers first. Nash had left out a lot of specifics and made it clear he didn't want to discuss it. That was too bad. She needed to know.

"Exactly what did they do to you in the lab?"

He didn't seem surprised by the question even though his body did tense. Jenny sat on the edge of the bed and watched him closely. He stance was rigid, legs shoulder width apart, hands behind his ramrod straight back. The strain he felt showed in his drawn features. While she wanted to lessen his burdens before he went and risked his life, the white elephant in the room had to be addressed first.

"I need to hear the rest of it."

His body clenched tighter and his eyes narrowed on her. She wouldn't back down.

"Tell me, Nash. What are the end results of everything they did?"

“This is going to sound insane.” He sighed and rubbed at his temples. His voice started out quiet, gaining strength as she nodded in encouragement.

“They changed me, infused my body with DNA taken from tigers and altered my organs to accept the foreign genetic code.”

He stared somewhere in the vicinity of her knees, not telling her anything she hadn’t already learned when she wanted concrete information. She knew a lot from when the guys had talked while thinking she was sleeping. It wasn’t enough.

“In the driveway—the tiger and lion. That was you and Micah?”

Startled that she’d made the connection, his gaze snapped to hers. He nodded, confirming her suspicions, and dropped to his knees. Nash took her hands into his larger ones, his fingers absently stroking over her knuckles.

“It’s hard to explain, Jenny. The first time it happened, I thought I was having a drug-induced hallucination. Then they taught me how to shift at will. I picture the tiger in my head and my body transforms. All my senses sharpen. It’s awe-inspiring and terrible all at once.”

“You didn’t know about Micah?”

“No. It came as a shock to find out he’d allowed them to screw around with his genes.”

She scooted back on the bed, away from his touch. Putting distance between them didn’t help settle her frazzled nerves. Thinking she’d seen him in the eyes of a tiger and hearing random bits of conversation between the men had not made it real. This, the seriousness in his expression and tone of voice, gave all the rest substance and legitimacy. Her husband, the man she loved, had a wild animal living inside of him. It didn’t get any scarier than that, yet her curiosity refused to be shelved.

“I want to see.” Maybe if she witnessed his change with her own eyes she could better understand.

Blue eyes narrowed on her as Nash searched her face. “See what?”

“Why are you being obtuse?” She folded her arms over her chest and glared at him. “You know what I’m talking about. Show me, Nash. I need to see it happen.”

He rubbed his temples again, but rose and began to strip until his clothes lay scattered around his feet, talking to her the whole time. “I know you, Sunshine. You’re going to have lots of questions. I haven’t lived with the tiger very long so I don’t have a lot of answers. We’ll have to figure things out together.”

She nodded, distracted by the sight of tanned skin stretched taut over rippling muscles. Jenny’s gaze wandered over broad shoulders, defined pecs and six-pack abs. She longed to run her fingers through the sprinkling of dark hair, trace every dip and swell of masculine flesh. She glanced lower, drinking in the sight of trim hips and delineated sinew. Even flaccid, his thick cock was impressive. The base of his long shaft surrounded by a nest of black hair, and his weighty sac hung between powerful legs. She loved everything about him, from the new scars adding to his rugged appearance, to the shimmering awareness in his gorgeous eyes.

This was Nash, her handsome husband, the man she loved regardless of any changes wrought by a bunch of quack scientists. She didn’t see any wounds from his fight with the lion—with Micah. She wondered if they’d be visible on the tiger and found she was anxious to see his other form. With a slight nod, she indicated her readiness for him to continue.

Transfixed, Jenny watched as the transformation began to take place. A shiny pelt sprouted from his skin as his legs shortened, his body compacted while simultaneously his nose and mouth elongated into a snout. The whole process took mere seconds before he’d dropped down onto padded paws, Nash’s steady gaze observing her from a tiger’s face.

If she'd blinked, she would have missed the whole thing.

"Holy fucking hell!" She was shut up in a small room with a huge tiger and unlike at the zoo, there were no bars between them.

Jenny scrambled farther over the bed until her back hit the headboard. Her vision blurred as she squinted then slammed her eyes closed.

Okay, I didn't see that. When I look again, Nash will be there, not a tiger.

She took a deep breath, opened her eyes and blinked, hoping to see something less frightening.

Nope, still a tiger.

Rubbing her eyes didn't make any difference either. That old saying about seeing being believing ran through her mind. What a major understatement. She didn't want to trust her eyes or believe but the terrifying truth stared her right in the face.

Nash had turned into a humungous living, breathing tiger.

If he'd confessed to having an affair, that would be hard to overcome but they would survive. If he'd lost his job and they wound up homeless, Jenny figured she could handle that too. But this was something she had no way to combat. She had no real-life frame of reference to deal with such a shocking event.

Yes, she had seen the tiger before, even registered the fact that its eyes looked very similar to her husband's. But she had not seen Nash turn into an animal. One whose tongue lolled out from between a sharp set of teeth and dripped saliva onto the floor.

Any minute now she'd pass out then wake up to find out it had all been some wacked out dream.

Wait for it. It'll happen.

Only it didn't.

She never lost consciousness. And the big feline's stare didn't waver. He remained motionless with the exception of a rapid twitching of his tail.

A strange rush of excitement swelled. The amazing feat awed Jenny and her curious nature got the better of her. She wanted to see it happen again. Wanted to reach out and explore the animal, feel the changes in his body.

"Does it hurt? It happened so fast." The cat didn't move and she smacked her forehead. "Yeah, like you can answer questions now."

Her entire body vibrated with a combination of excitement and stunned disbelief. She had a powerful urge to stroke his fur but without knowing who was in control, Nash or the tiger, she held back.

What the hell was she supposed to do now?

The overload of conflicting emotions wrung her out and sapped her energy. Drained, she dropped onto the bed, curled her arms over her face and plunged her fingers into her hair. A slight tug resulted in sharp pain along her scalp, which helped center her frenzied thoughts. She wavered back and forth between shock and awe.

"This is so not happening. My husband didn't just turn into a cat and I'm not carrying on a one-sided conversation with Tony the Tiger."

Something cold and wet pressed against her forearm. With slow, measured movements, she lowered her arms. There wasn't even a full inch in between his flaring nostrils and the tip of her nose.

“Jesus, you’ve got a huge mouth. You could probably remove my head from my shoulders in one bite.” Every fiber of her being longed to reach out and touch him but a strong survival instinct stayed her hands.

One corner of his mouth curved upward in a feline parody of a devious smile. That extra long tongue rolled over parted lips.

“You look hungry, but please don’t eat me.”

The catty grin expanded.

“Ha, a catty grin. That’s a good one. Don’t go getting any frisky ideas, mister. You can wipe away that foolish smile. I don’t care about the rules of the jungle. There will be no interspecies sex happening so get those lascivious thoughts out of your head. A girl has to draw the line somewhere and that’s a biggie for me. No bestiality.” She glared at him. “I mean it, Nash.”

Once again, saliva dripped from his pink tongue.

“Gross. Since you’re new to being a cat, I’ll give you credit for not knowing this.” Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “Only dogs drool. Cats are supposed to be more sophisticated and higher class. They don’t fetch, lick their balls in public or come when called. You really do need to study up on this stuff if you’re going to put on a cat suit.”

Tilting his head to one side the tiger seemed to consider her words.

“So.” Jenny fisted fingers that itched to explore. “You’re in there somewhere, aren’t you, Nash? You understand everything I’m saying and are in control of the beastly, right? ’Cause I’m dying to touch you, but I’d be really upset to pull back a bloody stump.”

His warm tongue rasped over her knuckles. Jenny smiled at her husband, taking the action as encouragement. Under all those layers of fur lurked the man she loved, and he would never hurt her.

“Okay, I’m going to pet you now. Remember, no biting.” Jenny didn’t give herself time to think about the insanity of her actions. She thrust out a hand, sinking her fingers into his soft pelt, enjoying the teasing caress of the silky strands along the sensitive skin between each digit. Her hand came away with excess hair clinging to her skin.

“See that.” She held her hand before his face. “You’re shedding. Guess who won’t be sleeping in bed with me when we get home? Not that you’d last five minutes in Florida wearing that heavy fur coat. All the humidity will make you a frizzed-out mess. That is if the subtropical temperatures don’t give you heat stroke first.” She snorted over the visual that popped into her head.

“I guess we’ll be relocating. I’m setting you straight right now though. I don’t care what kind of tiger you are, no way am I moving to Siberia.” Just thinking about snow made her shiver. “We’ll have to figure out a way around the grooming issues. No matter how much I love you, I won’t be able to deal with you hocking up hairballs.”

Her mind raced. “I have so many questions that I’m betting you don’t have answers for. I guess we’ll have to learn about all this together.”

Jenny let her hands wander over the powerful creature, learning every roped mass of muscle. She luxuriated in the sensation of his beautiful fur beneath her hands, knowing it would feel glorious to rub her naked body against him.

Tracing each stripe, she took her time getting to know this new part of her husband. She placed a palm flat on the floor and compared the size of his paws to her hands. “You’ve got some big feet, buddy. Any muddy pawprints on the floor will be your job to clean up.”

A sudden stream of tears took her by surprise. She hadn’t realized she was crying. Giving in to the irresistible impulse, Jenny wrapped her arms around his big neck and hugged

Nash close, seeking comfort. Her emotions were all over the place. While she was thrilled to be holding him in her arms, she wept for the ordeal he'd gone through. And she longed to feel his arms wrapped around her while they made love.

Sitting back on her heels, she stared into his eyes for several long moments, laughing as he licked the tears from her face. "Okay, I like the kitty but it's time to switch back."

Blue eyes tracked her every movement as Jenny rose and flicked open the buttons of her blouse. Her voice dropped to a husky, seductive tone as her fingers skimmed over her bared belly and went to work on her jeans. "I need you, Nash."

He watched as she shrugged off the shirt then shimmied her hips while smoothing the denim over her legs. Soon, her bra and panties joined the growing pile of clothes on the floor. As she crawled onto the bed, he had yet to move. Once settled in the center of the bed, she cast him a questioning glance.

Finally the tiger walked to the foot of the bed, crouched down then launched his body into the air, landing on all fours directly over her. A brief flash of fear caused her muscles to tense. Being pinned beneath a fierce tiger had her heart pounding against her ribs. But then she looked into her husband's eyes and relaxed, if only slightly.

Fiery fingers of desire spread through her. Man, beast or a combination of both—they were all Nash. And she needed to feel him held tight within her body.

Her legs rubbed together restlessly. "Nash, I want you. Make love to me."

Extending her hand, she held her breath and waited to see what he would do. There was no hesitation. He rubbed against her outstretched hand, a gravelly purr rumbling up from his chest.

The tiger playfully licking her wrist was gorgeous, but the urge to hold the man within her arms became too powerful to deny. Jenny scratched behind his ears, basking in the cat's enjoyment, before trying to tempt him again.

"Don't you want me?"

He remained in the same position—head cradled in her hand—and allowed his body to change form. In the space of time between one stuttered heartbeat and the next, her husband took the place of the cat. The bristle of a few days' beard stubble rasping against the tender skin of her palm.

"I know it's a major adjustment and a lot to take in. If you need time..."

Maybe it was all the crazy movies she watched that made Nash's changes exciting for Jenny. Could be her endless hope there were other life forms in the universe and to one day meet one. Possibly her love of animals. She didn't know or care why. He was still Nash, and she still wanted and needed him. For better or worse.

"Jesus, Nash. Would you get with the program and fuck me already."

Jenny's other hand shot forward, fingers trembling against his sensual lips. Acceptance and love and need all crashed over her. "I don't need time, Nash. Just you. All of you."

Chapter Nine

How he'd ever managed to find and marry such an amazing woman never ceased to blow his mind. From the first time their eyes had met across the yard at a mutual friend's barbeque, Nash had known Jenny was special.

Her irreverent hard-ass attitude and flippant wisecracks were an attempt to disguise the truth. One only had to look past the surface to see great depths of compassion and love. Over the years, life had taught her to hide that soft, vulnerable underbelly. Otherwise people took advantage of her abundant generosity and walked all over her.

There was no mistaking the love and acceptance he saw in her warm brown eyes. Acceptance for all of him. He knew coming to this point had not been easy on her. He loved her all the more for her steadfast faith and trust in him.

He hated that they didn't have much time. There was so much he wanted to say. In a few hours he would go back to the lab, put his life on the line to bring an end to their immoral practices, save others from suffering as he had. Their plan was dangerous and he might not make it back out alive.

Nash was a master at hiding his emotions. He had learned to keep his inner thoughts off his face, but he let the mask slip now so Jenny would see everything he didn't know how to say. In response, her body tensed and she shook her head.

"No! You wipe that look off your face, Nash. This isn't goodbye." Her breath hitched. "You're coming back to me. In one piece! Anything else is unacceptable." In desperation she grabbed his shoulders and tried to shake him. "You hear me, Nash? I will not lose you a second time. I can't!"

Previously, he hadn't felt the need to tell Jenny about the precautions he'd taken. His current work had not been extremely dangerous, but he'd learned in the military to take steps in protecting those things precious to you in case of the unthinkable. He never imagined they'd actually have use for the safeguards he had put in place, but in light of recent events he knew the time had come to prepare her.

He took a deep breath and forged ahead. "The jewelry box I gave you on our wedding day has a false bottom."

She kept shaking her head, refusing to listen. Nash held her face in his hands. Stubborn to a fault, Jenny clamped her eyes shut.

"Sunshine, you have to listen. This is our insurance policy. I took these precautions for you but never thought they'd be needed before this mess."

When she looked at him, Nash felt as if the weight of sadness in her eyes would crush his heart, but he had to continue. "If you can't figure out how to get the panel open then smash the box."

"Nash," she gasped. "I can't destroy my wedding present."

"Jenny, if something goes wrong tonight you will do what I tell you. Get the key from the jewelry box and go to the airport. The bank is in the Bahamas." Nash gave her detailed instructions, all the while praying she would never need to access the contents held within the bank box—a new life. He'd always worried about his old life and enemies catching up with him. Not only had he obtained new passports and IDs for them, he'd also stashed away funds

in an untraceable account. Enough to support her in comfort for the rest of her life. “You go find yourself a villa in Spain or Italy, anywhere far away, and never look back.”

“Fine, I’ll get out of the States and go somewhere no one knows me.” She gave him the words but her dark eyes were defiant.

“Whatever crazy plan you have running through that pretty head of yours—forget it! I need to know that you’re safe or I’ll be distracted. The only way I have a chance tonight is if I have my head on straight and focus on what I’m doing. I can’t do that if I’m worrying about you.”

She tried to turn away but he held her steady. “Promise me, Jenny.” Her word was a bond she didn’t take lightly and wouldn’t go back on. “Promise me that if things don’t go as planned you’ll do as I said.”

“Fine.” She all but spat the word at him. “If anything goes wrong, after I kill Micah for not bringing you back, I’ll get out. But that’s not going to happen, Nash. You’re coming back here. Back to me. So don’t tell me that you’d want me to continue living and find a new love. No way would you leave me alone to lie on some sultry Mediterranean beach in a bikini with slick foreigners circling me like sharks.”

A possessive rage swelled in his chest and rumbled from his throat as the threatening growl of a fearsome animal.

“There, keep that image in your mind for motivation. The last thing you want to do is leave me alone, brokenhearted and vulnerable. The perfect affluent and susceptible target for Rico Suave, the gigolo anxious to find a meal ticket.”

The sassy witch had the nerve to flash a triumphant smile at him. “Not gonna happen, Sunshine. You’re mine!”

“That’s right, you big, bad beastly. I’m all yours. Always!”

Jenny intended to keep her promise, but she never specified exactly what part she agreed to. Should the unthinkable happen, she’d empty out the safety deposit box and get lost. That she’d do for him. But she could not, would not, stay hidden in the cabin while Nash risked his life to do the right thing.

Hell no!

This would not be their last time together. They’d have a tomorrow, a future together. She intended to make sure of it.

She took a long hard look at her husband, no longer seeing the man he’d been but the one he had become. A dichotomy—part man, part tiger. An intelligent human with high moral values, a protector of life, combined with one of the world’s largest and most powerful alpha predators, a true carnivore that must kill to thrive.

God help her, but the idea of unleashing the beast thrilled Jenny. She wanted him, all of him. Not the restrained Nash or the slow and tender lovemaking they usually shared. She wanted him wild, crazed with need. Feral.

He brushed a soft kiss across her lips and while she found it to be sweet, it was the last thing she wanted...so she bit him. Hard. A crimson bead formed where she’d punctured his lip.

Momentary shock dilated his pupils, crowding out the blue and darkening his eyes. “Sunshine, I’m hanging on by a thread here, trying to be gentle.”

“Don’t you dare hide from me, Nash. I don’t want nice, polite sex.” To emphasize her words, she dug her fingernails into the thick muscles of his shoulders. A brief flash of pain narrowed his gaze before heat spread across his handsome face.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for,” he growled.

“Yes I do. I want all of you. Everything. Man and beast. I want savage fucking. Raw, untamed hunger. Carnal mating. Take me, Nash. Claim me. Mark me as yours.”

Stunned, she stared as he tossed back his head with a violent roar. Muscles swelled, rippled beneath his skin. When he grinned down at her, Nash and the beast had truly become one. His pupils were elongated slits and his teeth— Holy shit! His canines had turned into wickedly sharp fangs.

Icy tendrils of fear skated through Jenny but didn't have time to take root. He moved with inhuman strength and speed, flipping her over onto her hands and knees. Not giving her a chance to steady herself, Nash lifted her hips, holding her right where he wanted, and shoved her legs apart, creating a space for himself.

His rough tongue rasped a heated path along her spine from the crease of her ass to the nape of her neck, firing Jenny's blood. Her dangling breasts felt swollen and heavy, her nipples ached, needing to be touched. His teeth raked over the sensitive curve where neck met shoulder and she trembled in anticipation. Would his teeth pierce her skin? She didn't want to consider why the mere idea caused her pussy to clench, a hot gush of arousal readying her.

She nearly wept with joy as the broad head of his cock probed between her legs, parted her folds. He stroked over her slit once, twice.

Quivering in need, Jenny moaned, “Nash. Now! I need—”

Anything else she would have said was lost as the full length of his cock slammed into her, hard and demanding. Without pause he withdrew, leaving her empty. Her body convulsed, belatedly struggled to keep him inside her.

Her cry of dismay cut off on an abrupt thrust, the force of which would have driven her forward had he not kept a secure hold around her waist.

She'd done it. Jenny had freed the beast within the man. On each forward thrust he slammed against her womb and his balls slapped her clit. Each withdrawal was a complete retreat. The rapid pace kept her from catching her breath. Her fingers dug into the linens, scrambled for purchase. Nash never slowed. His movements were fluid as waves crashing into the shore, in and out, fast and relentless. Like a machine—tireless, precise and devastating. All she managed was to hang on and enjoy the incredible ride.

Pleasure coiled in her core, winding tighter and tighter, building to mammoth proportions. She wanted to slow down the orgasm hurtling toward her at a breakneck speed, but lacked the strength to resist. The violent pounding made her breasts swing. Her nipples dragged across the sheet, sparking embers that shot straight to her pussy. The flames burned hot, enveloping both of them.

The weight of Nash's sweaty chest pressed her torso farther into the mattress. His teeth scraped her flesh then pierced the skin, animalistic and possessive. The bright flare of pain fanned the fire, igniting her orgasm.

Consumed by the conflagration, Jenny soared. Coiled tension burst, showering her in ecstasy. It was too much for her body to contain. Her back bowed and she was assaulted by brutal spasms. She felt as if she exploded, shattered into a million pieces.

A tremendous roar echoed around the room as scalding jets of semen filled her, driving her even higher until her body, unable to withstand any more pleasure, gave out. She collapsed with Nash covering her like a damp electric blanket.

At some point the pieces floated back to Earth and reformed. She came back to herself—sated, exhausted and happy—held within the shelter of her husband's strong arms.

The room dimmed as day turned into night and still they clung to each other.

With all her might, Jenny prayed the sex had scrambled Nash's brain enough that he'd forget all about saving the world. She was weak. Neither her heart nor soul would survive losing him a second time.

As if hearing her thoughts, Nash spoke the four words she dreaded.

"I have to go."

Jenny wanted to be childish and greedy, throw a tantrum, demand he stay. Instead she kissed him, putting all her emotions into the soft mating of their lips. "I know."

She slipped from his embrace, pulled on her robe and gathered his clothes. "I'll make some coffee while you get ready."

The forced smile was meant to be supportive, but if the worry lines etched into his face were any indication, had missed its mark.

Chapter Ten

Strapping on weapons reminded Nash of gearing up for a military mission. The familiar rush of adrenaline surged through his blood and kicked up his heart rate. He knew the other three men were skilled and had confidence in their abilities. That didn't stop him from worrying. Not about the others, they would remain focused and do their part. But what about him?

In his peripheral vision, he observed Jenny as she fiddled with her coffee cup. Her hands shook and she shifted about on the chair, unable to sit still.

She looks more nervous than a whore in church. He almost laughed over the irreverent thought, spoken in Jenny's voice, playing through his head.

He hated the idea of leaving her there alone and knew she'd have a hard time keeping her promise, but taking her with them wasn't an option. He considered having one of the men stay to protect her. There were too many reasons that wouldn't work. Jenny would throw a fit over having someone stand guard. Plus the team already had too little firepower and couldn't afford to leave any of their limited resources behind.

He moved in behind her and stroked a hand over silky blonde hair. She startled and would have jumped out of her own skin had he not firmly placed a hand on her shoulder.

"It's just me, Sunshine." Nash massaged her tensed shoulders. "Relax. Everything's going to be fine." At least he hoped so.

"I-I should go with you. As a lookout—"

"Jenny!" His tone was harsher than he'd intended. Nash took a breath and made a conscious effort to soften his voice. "We've been through this. If you're out there, I'll be distracted. I need you here, safe and sound, waiting for me. I need you to be patient. Just a little while longer. Then I'll take you home."

Vivid images formed in his mind. Him and Jenny, strolling along the beach holding hands as they'd done on many occasions. This time they silently observed the antics of the two children frolicking at the water's edge. A family.

The scene felt right. Good. So good he decided to do whatever it took to make it reality. Jenny had always wanted kids but he'd asked her to wait, give him a few more years before fully settling down. Life was short. He didn't want to delay anymore. In fact, he experienced a sudden yearning to take that final step with his wife.

He leaned over, brushed her hair away from the slender column of her elegant neck. Unable to resist the temptation of her smooth skin, he placed a tender kiss on the sensitive spot behind Jenny's ear before speaking in a soft tone so only she would hear. "I've been thinking. Scary, I know. But isn't it past time we start making some babies?"

She gasped as he breathed the words against her ear. "It's time for me to grow up, find a less risky career. Hell, maybe I'll even stay home with the kids while you're out nursing the world back to health."

Jenny turned to face him, her big brown eyes full of hope and longing. She reached out to trace the line of his jaw while searching his expression. "Do you mean it, Nash? You're finally ready?"

"Yeah, Sunshine. I mean it. If you still want to have kids—" Her fingertips pressed against his lips and cut off the words.

“Of course I do! I know what you’re thinking. I’m not afraid of what you are...what you’ve become. I love all of you, which now includes the tiger.” She shrugged. “If you pass the ability on to the kids, we’ll deal with it—together.”

There was no mistaking the resolve in her steady gaze or assured voice. And no denying the end result or its affect on him. His chest grew tight as his pulse soared and his breathing turned erratic. He had not thought it possible to love Jenny more than he already did but he’d been wrong.

“I love you too, Sunshine. You stay here...safe. One last time, Jenny. Then I’m done saving the world. Someone else can take a turn.”

A lone tear rolled down her cheek. Nash kissed away the salty drop.

Without another word, Jenny walked the men to the door and wished them luck. The pounding of booted feet stopped until the lock clicked into place, then resumed. Feeling suddenly weak, she leaned on the heavy barrier and whispered a prayer for her husband’s safe return.

Busy—she had to stay busy. She needed the distraction. Otherwise, she’d drive herself crazy with worry and never be able to keep her word.

A glance around the small cabin didn’t offer any ideas. She’d cleaned the kitchen, almost scrubbed the Formica right off the countertop. The table had been put to rights with a red gingham cloth in place. Nash had stoked the fire before he left.

Her lip quivered and she clutched at her tight chest.

Don’t dwell on him, she chastised. Nash is fine. He’s well trained and knows what he’s doing!

Jenny moved around the room, straightened the pile of magazines on the coffee table and fussed with the crocheted blanket hanging over the back of the couch. She shifted a few knickknacks on the mantle, brushing away imaginary dust. When she ran out of tasks in the living room, she headed for the bedroom.

Her gaze landed on the rumpled bed where such a short time ago, Nash had fucked her. Hard and wild. More like the animal than the man. God, how she’d loved every hot and glorious touch. Every frantic second of their coming together. The air still reeked of sex. Jenny took a breath, drawing the seductive scent deep into her lungs.

She rubbed her flat belly, remembering the words she’d waited so long to hear. *“Isn’t it past time we start making some babies?”*

Perhaps they had already gotten a start on their family. The seeds of their future could even now be growing in her womb. At the mere thought, heat spread through Jenny.

The waiting was going to drive her insane. They’d only arrived at the cabin two days ago, but for lack of anything else to do, she stripped the sheets from the bed and found a fresh set in the cedar chest. Making the bed only took a few minutes. Since she had yet to even unpack, the room was as tidy as it had been the night before.

In the bathroom, she gathered the towels they’d used then took all the linens to the small laundry room off the kitchen. Jenny added some detergent to the washer and turned it on. Back in the main room, she glanced at the door then to the clock on a side table.

“Twenty minutes,” she huffed. “Stupid clock must not be working. No way has it only been twenty minutes.” With exaggerated stomping she made her way over to the table, grabbed the clock and shook it a few times. Then she held it to her ear, irritated by the sure and steady ticking sounds.

“I can’t do this!” She set down the clock with a decisive *thunk*.

“Sorry, Nash. I tried. Really I did! But if I stay in this cabin for another minute, I’ll pull my hair out.”

Nash had left a loaded pistol in the nightstand—just in case. She made sure the safety was on and tucked it into the side of her fur-lined boot. Her jacket hung on a coat tree by the door. Jenny pulled the warm down-filled garment over her arms and drew the zipper all the way to her throat.

“I’m just going to check the perimeter.” The lie didn’t relieve her anxiety.

After locking up, she pocketed the key. It didn’t take her long to make a complete circuit around the property. The crisp night air and open space eased the sense of claustrophobia she’d felt while inside.

Without the cloaking haze of city lights and pollution, millions of stars were visible in a sky that appeared endless. She wasn’t much of a nature girl, but enjoyed the musical sound of crickets chirping.

“What a beautiful night.” The peace and serenity made it hard to believe violence would be shattering the calm a few short miles away. “It’ll be safe to take a short walk.”

Sometime later, God only knows how long she’d been tromping around in the woods, Jenny had to face facts. She was well and truly lost. “I’d give twenty bucks to have the damn GPS bitch talking to me in that unflappable monotone of hers right about now.”

“Fuck!” A root hidden beneath some crumpled leaves caught the toe of her boot and she almost face-planted. “The things I do for that man. Ugh!”

Perhaps a strenuous walk in the dark over rough terrain after having wild-monkey-sex with her shapeshifter husband had not been one of Jenny’s brightest ideas. Sore muscles protested the activity and the wound on her calf ached something fierce. The cold had long ago penetrated her warm clothing to settle deep in the marrow of her bones.

“I could be sitting in front of a roaring fire, sipping hot chocolate laced with brandy, but noooooooo. What fun would there be in that? I’d much rather be lost, freezing my ass off in the middle of a scary forest on a pitch-black night.”

Having arrived in a clearing, she plopped down on a fallen tree for a good pout. “All right, smartass. Find yourself a way out of this one.” With her elbows propped on her thighs, Jenny hid her face in her hands.

Rustling sounds in nearby foliage ended her self-disparaging train of thought and she snapped to full attention. Tentative yet curious, a brown-and-white rabbit hopped out of the safety of its hiding place. They studied each other for several moments. The animal’s eyes appeared intelligent. She wondered if it might be a shifter like Nash and Micah.

“Hey there, Thumper. I bet you know the way back to the cabin, don’t ya.”

The rabbit cocked its head to the side as if considering what she said.

“How about you do that presto-magico thing Nash does and turn into a human?”

They continued to observe each other. “No? That’s okay. I don’t mind. How about if you hop on over to my cabin then and I’ll follow you?”

The bunny merely twitched his whiskers at her in a rather suggestive manner. “Don’t be getting any frisky ideas there, Thumper. I’m married to a tiger, and to him, you’re nothing more than a light snack.”

She looked around the quiet clearing. “No, huh? Well maybe there are some frogs around here somewhere. I wonder how many I’d have to kiss before finding a handsome prince who will take me to a land far, far way.”

All of a sudden the rabbit went on high alert. Its tall ears twitched and moved this way and that, picking up the faintest sounds. If she wasn’t so frightened, Jenny would have

laughed as the image of an old rabbit-ear T.V. antenna being moved around to find the best reception popped into her head. But this was no laughing matter. The small animal sensed danger nearby and without sparing her another glance, it darted off through the underbrush to safety.

“Hey, wait. Where are you off to in such a hurry?” Jenny could remember no other time in her life when she had felt so alone and vulnerable as she did in that moment. “Thanks a lot, pal.”

The night had become devoid of all sound and movement except for the gentle breeze flirting with tree branches high above. Nothing else moved as the entire forest held its breath along with her, waiting in keen anticipation.

Something stirred off to her left, made no attempt to cover its passage. She considered attempting to hide, but her body froze to the spot and wouldn’t follow orders. “M-maybe it’s a hiker or a forest ranger?” Not that either would be wandering around in the dark. “Only deranged serial killers and horror movie starlets would be that stupid.” How had she managed to sink so low as to join such dismal ranks?

The man who entered the clearing, definitely no hiker, wore a tailored business suit. If that had failed to clue her in to his importance, his posture, the very way he held himself, projected confidence and superiority. There were a few things out of place screwing up the image though. His gray hair was in a state of utter disarray, decreasing the impact of his expensive haircut. A dark red stain had been absorbed into the fibers of his otherwise impeccable clothing. And then there was the gun held in his right hand and pointed directly at Jenny. Not a chance in hell he hadn’t seen her either. The man’s angry gaze was locked in on her.

“Well, I’m just fucked six ways to Sunday now, aren’t I,” she mumbled. The verbal banter usually had a way of easing her tension and drawing a secret smile from Nash. Too bad he wasn’t there to smile and ease her stress.

Oh boy!

When Nash found out she had not stayed in the cabin...shit. He was going to be one hell of a pissed off beast. She’d hate to be in this guy’s shoes when her husband caught up with him.

He moved closer and she just couldn’t keep her mouth shut. “Didn’t your mother teach you it’s not polite to point?”

Chapter Eleven

Nash sighed in relief as the facility's alarms were silenced. The harsh sound was hell on his sensitive hearing. And being back in the building made his skin feel too tight. He had to get out of there...soon.

The team had made quick work of neutralizing the security force and clearing the building. While Kyle and Sam were checking another area, Nash and Micah came to the last exam room along the corridor. He shivered in revulsion. The whole place brought back memories he'd rather forget.

A glance through an observation window stopped his heart. Weltman and two of his white-coat lab rats were busy hovering over a woman, who was restrained to an exam table.

Micah swiped a card taken from one of the security agents through the access panel. The door opened with a soft *whoosh* into a scene straight out of his worst nightmares.

The woman muttered incoherently and made sluggish attempts at breaking free of the restraints. Nash knew how strong the sedatives favored by the facility were and was shocked she wasn't unconscious.

Weltman turned to face them, blocking their view of what was being done to the woman. "Ah, if it isn't my two wayward shifters. Welcome back, gentlemen. You're just in time to meet our latest subject."

"Step away from her," Micah ordered.

They both held guns leveled on him but Weltman didn't appear to be concerned in the least. In fact, he shrugged off the threat. "Wouldn't be a smart move to harm me." He tapped the side of his head. "I'm the only one with the details you need."

"Step back from the woman." Nash growled, taking a step closer. "We already downloaded everything we need from the computers."

The lab techs turned, hands raised, and moved to the side.

"You're a little too late. I decided to take a different approach with Ms. Renard, since my feline expert turned out to be such a disappointment." He glanced toward the doorway. "Will Dr. Southerby be joining us?"

A loud growl rumbled from Micah's throat. Nash glanced at the other man to see his eyes had changed. The lion was very close to the surface, barely restrained. Nash wondered what exactly the zoologist was to his friend.

Ignoring the question, his attention moved to the techs. "Has she been injected?"

The man simply held up an empty syringe in answer to the question.

"With what?"

"She's a hybrid." Weltman puffed up his chest with pride. "A combination of red fox and wolf."

"Damn it! Get her untied. She's coming with us."

He glanced at Micah, concerned over the way the other man remained silent, except for the occasional growl, while staring at Weltman. Something must have happened between the two men that Micah hadn't felt the need to share.

“None of you are leaving.” Weltman’s calm statement should have given him pause, but the man had obviously lost his marbles. Nash stayed focused on his mission objective—getting out alive.

The techs helped the woman to stand. He admired her strength as she pushed them away, standing on her own two feet, even if she was rather wobbly. “Are you okay? Can you walk?”

Her head whipped in his direction, a curtain of thick black hair with crimson highlights flaring out over her shoulder. Her ice blue gaze locked onto him with piercing intensity as she took his measure. Clear eyes, unaffected by the drugs they’d pumped into her system. “I’ll walk out of this loony bin on my own two feet, thanks.”

A shot rang out, the sound almost deafening in the small space. Weltman cried out in pain and grabbed his side where blood darkened the fine material of his suit.

“Jesus, Micah. What the fuck are you doing?”

“He was reaching into his pocket.”

“Whether I use the device to summon security or not, my team is going to take you two down. You’ll never step foot outside the facility.”

Micah tossed back his head and laughed. “It’s over, old man. Your team has been taken out. No one will be coming to save you from paying for what you’ve done.”

The woman took a lurching step forward, steadied herself, and moved closer to Nash. “Mind telling me who the hell you are?”

Nash gave her a quick rundown of both his and Micah’s involvement with the lab and their plans. When he finished speaking, she nodded. “Lance Corporal Shira Renard. Second Division out of Camp LeJeune.”

A Marine. Good. It explained her fortitude and unwillingness to take assistance.

“I was selected for this special detail. The first of several dozen scheduled to arrive here over the next few months. We were told this would involve specialized fitness testing and training for battle.”

A side door they hadn’t noticed opened and Kyle Slater stuck his head into the room. “Locked down and secured. Charges are set.” He nodded toward Shira. “She a subject?”

The door behind them swished. Nash and Micah turned in time to see Weltman slip out of the room while they’d been distracted.

“Son of a bitch!” Nash moved to follow, but Micah held him back.

“Stick to our objectives.” He pointed to a blood trail on the white tile floor. “Weltman won’t be hard to find. We have to get everyone out and blow this place. Then we can worry about tracking him down.”

Against his better judgment, Nash relented. “Fine, let’s move.”

The rest of the mission went smooth as silk. Itchy to get back to Jenny, he glanced at the assembled group. Slater was the explosives expert and because of his previous job working security for the facility, he knew the place inside and out. Micah was on a call with the General making arrangements for a meeting with the woman. There was nothing left for Nash to do and his instincts were screaming that he needed to get back to Jenny. And he had to go after Weltman. He wasn’t letting that bastard get away.

Perceptive as ever, Micah seemed to read his mind. “Are you headed back to Florida after this?”

Nash shrugged. “Briefly.” He and Jenny would have to relocate. Make a start somewhere no one knew their names.

“If you need anything...”

Micah didn't need to finish. Nash knew what he was saying. The sentiment went both ways. “Same here.”

“Get out of here then. Go take care of your wife. We'll wrap this up and be on our way soon.”

Nash said his goodbyes and left the conventional weapons behind. Everything he needed lie inside him. Rather ironic that the weapon Weltman had created would be the means to his own destruction.

Once he moved out of the open and into the shelter of the dense woods, he shifted. The tiger had no problem sniffing out the blood trail. Silent and deadly, he stalked through the forest. In no time at all, he'd caught up with his prey.

Each minute away from Jenny was like a thorn in his side. Soon he realized that she had left the safety of the cabin. He could smell her scent lingering in the air. His hackles rose.

In a hurry, Nash didn't waste time circling Weltman or surveying the area. Never slowing in his rapid stride, he crouched low and sprung forward in a powerful leap, landing a short distance from his target. He would have pounced, attacked Weltman from behind, but not with Jenny in danger. He roared a warning to the other man. If he hurt Jenny—

Nash's heart froze when Weltman spun around, holding a gun to his wife's temple. Tucked tight against his side, she was undeterred by the weapon. The spitfire fought his hold—kicking, biting and cussing. From the smug expression on Weltman's face, the bastard knew exactly who he'd captured. Hell, Nash himself had placed her picture in his personnel profile while instructing subordinates on Nanotech's stringent requirements for background checks.

“Ah, there you are, Crosby. I figured you'd be along eventually. Imagine my surprise at finding this hellcat out here alone.” Weltman flashed a truly evil smile. “You really are slipping. Don't you know better than to leave a woman wandering about unprotected? She is a rather pretty liability though. And feisty. I like them feisty!”

“Let me go and I'll show you feisty, you warped motherfucker.”

“Your woman has a rather foul mouth, Crosby, but that's okay. I'll teach her discipline and respect before I'm finished with her.” The sick bastard suggestively rubbed his crotch against her ass. “After we have some fun first, of course.”

Weltman stroked her temple with the gun. “Not quite adequate compensation for all the grief you've caused me, but I'll make do.”

“Aww, do you expect us to feel bad for you? If you're looking for sympathy, it's in the dictionary between shit and syphilis.”

The bastard pulled back his arm and hit her with the gun. It didn't knock her out, but Jenny sagged against him, forcing Weltman to support her weight. She almost succeeded in pulling him off balance.

Nash didn't blink as he watched, waiting for the perfect opening. The slightest slip from Weltman was all he'd need to make his move. No matter what else happened in the small clearing, he would not allow Weltman to leave with Jenny.

Her physical assault got nowhere, and Weltman simply ignored her verbal attack. He spoke of his big plans in an almost wistful tone that raked on Nash's nerves worse than fingernails scratching on a chalkboard.

“You and your friends have only succeeded in delaying the inevitable. Do you really think I'd be so stupid as to keep everything in one place? Thanks to you, I know better than

that. All you've managed to do is slow my plans marginally. Before winter's end, the Marine Corps will have an elite unit of powerful shape-shifting soldiers. But that won't be the end."

Nash didn't blink and his attention didn't waver. He remained crouched low to the ground, ready to spring into action at the opportune moment. Hearing Weltman's plans made him sick and sealed the man's fate. When he struck, it would be a fatal blow.

"Once word gets around, as it always does, the technology of the Predator Project will be in great demand. Can you imagine the bidding wars between foreign nations, each desperate for what only I can provide."

Between the blow and listening to his diabolical plot, Jenny appeared stunned. She hung limp over Weltman's arm as he continued. He spoke loud and sure as if lecturing before a captivated audience.

"I will have all the power. I will control nations, decide who will be the strongest, who will survive. I alone will rule the world and have control over its armies."

Weltman shifted his weight and Jenny dropped to the ground as he made a sweeping gesture with his right hand. She rolled, pulling a pistol from her boot, but before his arm completed the movement or she took aim, Nash sprung.

Weltman landed on his back with more than four hundred pounds of enraged tiger coming down on his chest, knocking the breath from his lungs.

Nash didn't hesitate. He followed the beast's instincts, went right for the man's throat, sharp teeth tearing at vulnerable flesh and bone. He bit, clawed and growled, blinded by the bloodthirsty predator's anger over the threat to its mate. Only Jenny's soft voice brought him back from the edge.

"Stop, Nash! Come on, honey. I doubt he tastes very good. Too much piss and vinegar." She moved to his side, placed her hand on his head and stroked behind his ears. She showed no fear, secure in the knowledge that he would never hurt her.

"Come on, hot stuff. Take me home and I'll let you eat me instead."

She took a firm hold of the scruff of his neck and he immediately became passive. He stared down at Weltman, morbidly fascinated by the blood gurgling from the open wound and soaking into the ground.

Jenny dropped to her knees beside him. Grabbing his fleshy jowls, careful to avoid the blood on his fur, she turned his face toward her and away from the grizzly remains of his former employer.

"It's over, Nash. Let's go home. I need you!"

Jenny expected him to shift, but Nash remained in tiger form. At least he'd stay warm with all that fur covering him, even after taking a dunk in the stream to wash away the blood. If he shifted back and walked the distance naked, he'd probably freeze to death. The temperature had dropped drastically since she'd left the cabin.

She laughed aloud over the idea of Nash walking through the woods, bare-assed and shivering, his limp dick slapping against his thigh with each step.

The tiger's big head swung in her direction and he glared at her. That only got her laughing harder. "That new fur coat of yours comes in pretty handy."

He continued to walk at her side and she began to wonder if he'd be able to shift back again. She sure hoped so. Shifting into a tiger was a handy trick, but she wanted a man sleeping next to her in bed at night.

"You can change back, right?" She eyed the big beast warily. "You're now unemployed and I'm only working part-time. I sure as hell can't afford to keep your big butt supplied with raw meat."

She got the distinct impression he was doing his best to ignore her. “Cat got your tongue?” That one got her laughing so hard she had to stop walking and catch her breath.

By the time they reached the cabin her fingers were numb and her entire body ached. She looked forward to a long soak in the hot tub. Still a tiger, Nash walked the perimeter before letting her unlock the door. “Just ’cause you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you, right?”

He growled a warning and head-butted Jenny’s thigh. She stumbled into the room, cursing him until she caught what appeared to be a feline smile on his big mouth. “All right, catman.” She licked her lips, noting how his blue gaze followed the movement, and peeled off her jacket. “You’re gonna have to switch back if you want to get laid. Otherwise, I’ll have to unpack my vibrator.”

She headed for the bedroom, peeling off her clothes and left a trail in her wake. She was reaching for the suitcase when strong arms wrapped around her, drawing her into the shelter of Nash’s warm body.

His nude and very aroused body.

“There’s no need to unpack your rabbit when you’ve got a tiger by the tail, Sunshine.”

Epilogue

Six Months Later

Nash stepped out onto the wraparound porch and drew the clean mountain air deep into his lungs. Out of habit, his gaze swept the landscape for any potential threat. Spring had arrived in their little corner of the world almost overnight. Bright wildflowers and green grass swayed in the gentle breeze.

They had made a cross-country move—left crowded beaches of Florida behind for a rural home near the Continental Divide. He still didn't feel completely safe.

Over the past few months he'd learned to utilize the tiger's sharp senses while in human form. That's how he heard the SUV rambling along the dirt road toward the house long before it became visible. The vehicle parked beneath the shade of a huge cottonwood tree. Jenny climbed out, swung a backpack over her shoulder and shot him a bright smile.

He toyed with the gold wedding band she'd placed on his finger the day they married. It had only ever left his hand once, when taken by the wacked-out Nanotech scientists. Nobody would ever take it from him again.

Her bag hit the floor with a loud thump as Jenny's arms wrapped around his waist and her body pressed close.

"I take it the test went well?" Never once had he doubted her, but she'd been nervous about the series of written tests to become a nurse. Not that she had to work. The money he'd stashed away over the years would last a lifetime if they were careful about their spending. But Jenny needed to be busy taking care of people. She thrived while helping others.

"They're actually going to hand me a license to torment sick people. Can you believe it?"

"Congratulations, Sunshine. You worked hard and earned it. I'm very proud of you."

She held him tight, her tongue sneaking out to create a hot trail along his neck. His body hardened as she nibbled at the corner of his jaw.

"Mmm..." she purred. The vibration of her lips heated his blood. "I learned some interesting things in that anatomy class." She feathered kisses over his jaw until their lips met.

Taking full advantage of what she offered, he fastened his mouth on hers, their tongues tangled, devoured. Never losing contact, he walked backward, taking her inside, moving together through the house until the mattress hit the back of his thighs.

He needed to be inside her, a part of her. They pulled at clothes, both eager for each other. He had planned an evening of romance, but it would have to wait.

They fell onto the bed, a tangle of limbs with Jenny on top. Her eyes were heavy-lidded and filled with desire. He knew that look, what it meant—she wanted to take control, which suited him fine. For the moment.

"Show me what you learned."

Jenny wanted to show Nash how much she loved and appreciated him. She told him, often, but words couldn't express the depth of her emotions.

Their life wasn't perfect. She didn't expect it to be. But Nash made her truly happy. She spent more time laughing than crying. With each passing day, her love for him grew even

stronger. They had no idea what the future would hold or the long-term effects of what the Nanotech scientists had done to Nash, but they'd face it together.

"I'm going to make you come so hard, Sunshine."

One of the benefits of his altered DNA was his amazing recuperative abilities. He could go all night, his body ready for her again only minutes after climaxing. They would make love over and over until she finally collapsed in exhaustion. The man was killing her with sex. *Oh, but what a way to go.*

"You always do!"

He moaned as she moved down his body, tasting and arousing him with lips, teeth and tongue. She knelt between his legs and watched his pulse beating in the thick veins snaking around his long cock. Without hesitation, she fisted his shaft, fingers failing to meet, and took the velvety crown into her mouth. She sucked him deep, found each of his sensitive spots with her tongue. Reaching lower, she took his weighty sac in her hand and began the gentle clenching she knew he enjoyed.

His fingers tangled in her hair, massaged her scalp, touching her in the only way available to him. "Yes, Sunshine. Take it all. You love sucking my big cock."

Yeah, she did. But she had a surprise for him. She watched him from under her eyelashes, knew he was close from the tension in his jaw and the way his balls had drawn tight. Never breaking eye contact, she released his cock and sucked a finger into her mouth, taking care to get it nice and damp with her saliva.

"Oh shit," he groaned. "What have they been teaching you in those classes?"

She pulled the finger from her mouth and laughed over his worried expression. "You're gonna love this."

Jenny took his cock back into her mouth, lavishing his soft skin with attention. Applying strong suction, she drew him to the back of her throat, distracting him from the damp finger rimming the tight pucker of his anus. Finally delving inside, she fingered his ass, searching out that magical spot guaranteed to blow his mind. When she found it, Nash tossed back his head and roared. The sound was much more animal than human.

She launched an all-out attack on his senses, sucking his cock in a steady rhythm while fucking his ass with one finger, another stroking the shallow groove behind his balls, massaging his P-spot from the outside.

The combination had a powerful effect. Nash bucked his hips, matching the pace she set. His sac, cradled in her palm, spasmed. Jenny swallowed convulsively as hot jets of cum hit the back of her throat. His climax seemed endless, continuing until he begged her to stop.

She curled up next to him, pillowed her head on his chest. His heart pounded frantically beneath her ear as he struggled to breathe.

"Jesus, woman. I think you sucked the life right out of me. I can't move."

"Oh, I don't know about that, tiger." She took his still semi-hard cock into her hand, grinning when it immediately responded, swelling and lengthening. She'd woken the beast, felt it prowling, pulling at its chains.

That wasn't good enough. Jenny wanted him unleashed. "Maybe some more mouth-to-mouth resuscitation will fix you right up," she taunted.

Nash moved—fast. Before she knew what had happened, Jenny found herself flat on her back. His knee nudged her legs apart and he settled his pelvis in the cradle of her thighs.

"You wanted the animal, Sunshine. Well, you've got him." With one commanding thrust, he hilted inside her.

She asked for no quarter and he gave none. Nash fucked her, wild and untamed. Wrapping her legs around his hips and digging her fingernails into his back, she held on tight, riding out his passion. She would never get enough of this side of him, when he became more animal than man, driving her to amazing heights of pleasure.

Nash pulled out suddenly, flipped her over onto her stomach. He lifted her hips, putting her on her hands and knees, their favorite position. One hard thrust and she came apart.

As she orgasmed—each of the many times he propelled her over the precipice—Jenny screamed his name.

Life with her shape-shifting husband would never be dull. She wouldn't have it any other way.

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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