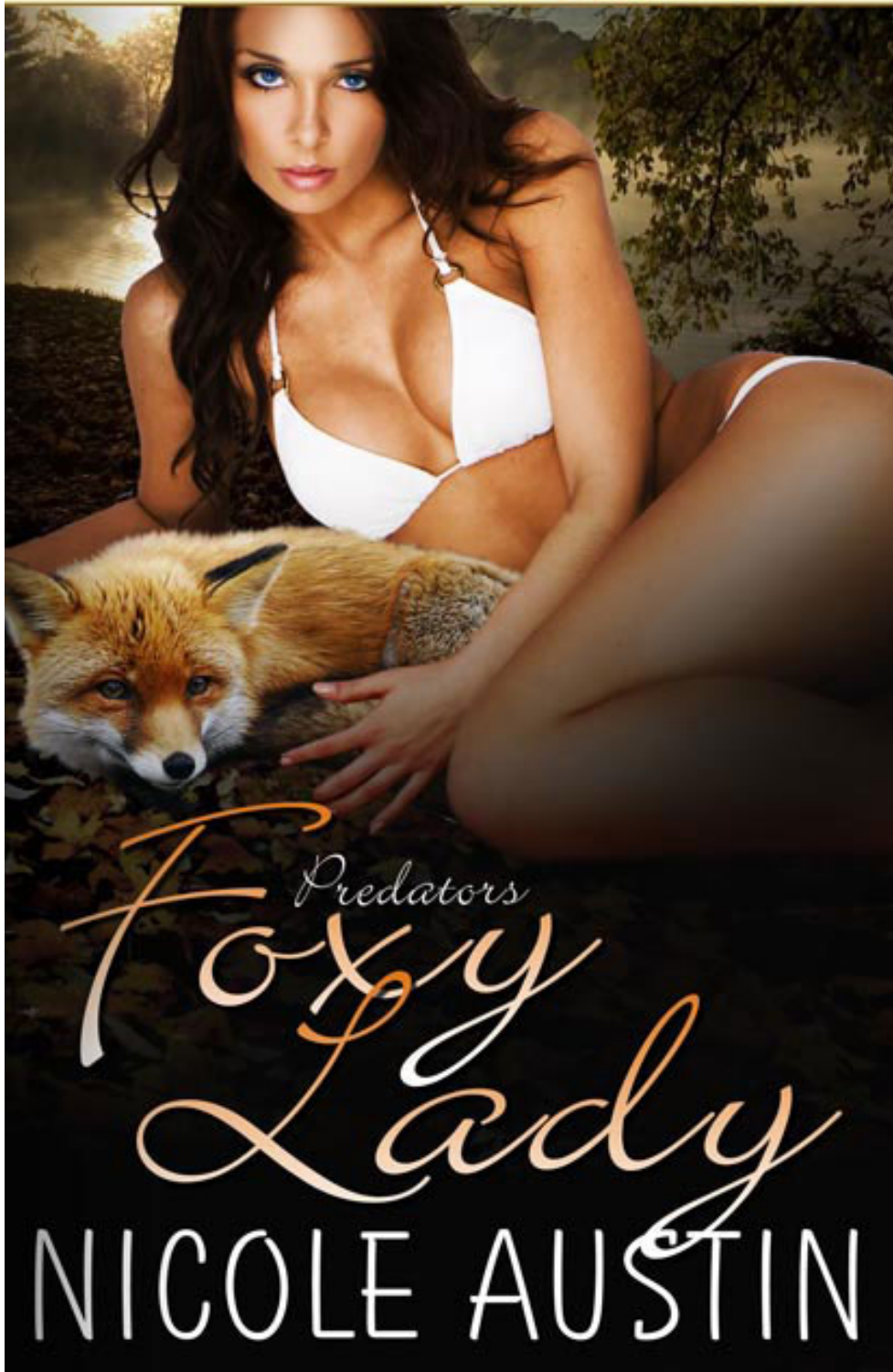


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Predators
Foxy
Lady
NICOLE AUSTIN

Foxy Lady
Nicole Austin

Predators series, Book Three

For Lance Corporal Renard, her career is everything and she's anxious to tackle the latest training exercise. But the scientists at Nanotech have more in store for Shira than she could've imagined.

Restrained, injected with jacked-up DNA, she's become part of a twisted experiment. Escaping the lab is only the beginning. There can be no return to her old life. No outside knowledge of what she's become. The permanent leash around her neck is more suffocating than a hangman's noose.

Tasked with helping Renard adjust, Army medic Lex McLean had no concept of the challenges Shira faced. Not until he receives a very personal lesson in genetic manipulation.

There's no denying the intense sexual chemistry between them. Not even Lex's hate for Renard has the power to curb his lust. Regardless of a rocky start, survival means joining forces and working together against the true genius behind the Predator Project.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Foxy Lady

ISBN 9781419926457

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Foxy Lady Copyright © 2010 Nicole Austin

Edited by Shannon Combs

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication March 2010

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

FOXY LADY

Nicole Austin

Dedication

To Chad, Mike, Ryan and Daniel. You never fail to inspire me.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Band-Aid: Johnson & Johnson Corporation

Girl Scouts: Girl Scouts of the United States of America

Humvee: AM General Corporation

Jeep: DaimlerChrysler Corporation

Prologue

“You are one seriously sick fuck!”

And that was putting it mildly.

Shira Renard was well and truly screwed. Thick leather restraints bound her wrists and ankles to a cold metal examination table. The quack scientists had also secured leather straps across her chest, pelvis and thighs.

She'd considered Gabriel Weltman a bit quirky, but weren't all the geeky science types a bit touched? With his gray hair and expensive suits he looked the part of a seasoned businessman. Now she knew different. His appearance had deceived her. The kook had gone way beyond weird and shot right to the top of the totally-out-of-his-freaking-mind category.

While only half listening to his screwy plan for world domination, she searched for a way out of this mess.

“Through my diligent work, Nanotech is decades ahead of any other scientific research organization. What we've accomplished is better than curing cancer—more important. Not only have we discovered how to splice human DNA and combine it with that of the world's fiercest predators, we have perfected a procedure to successfully bind the manipulated DNA in a human subject, modifying genes that would normally reject such an incompatible pairing.”

She glanced at the ceiling and although she didn't see any security cameras the doors were air-locked, requiring the swipe of a magnetic card. Of course, first she had to get out of the restraints before worrying about the door or any security personnel.

As Weltman continued blathering on, he picked an imaginary piece of lint from his expensive suit. “Just picture an army of soldiers more powerful than any other. Trained fighters with the strength and instincts of the world's most dangerous animals. Extreme

predators. Imagine how much governments would pay to possess such an unstoppable force.”

Interesting, but she had no desire to become one of his freaky experiments.

“Sure,” he shrugged, “we’ve had our share of failures. Some of the early subjects didn’t survive the procedure. Others didn’t maintain their human intellect. They were reduced to savage beasts intent only on hunting prey and had to be put down.”

Put down? Jesus! He was talking about the human beings he’d screwed up as if they were insignificant, of no real consequence. The man was a psychopath with delusional fantasies of power and wealth—a total megalomaniac. And she’d landed right in his clutches.

“We have had two major successes, both felines. A lion and a tiger.”

Oh my!

“And let me guess, next will be a bear.”

Ignoring her flippant remark, Weltman continued as if she hadn’t spoken.

“In your case, I have created something a bit different.”

In her case? Oh hell no!

“A hybrid, so to speak. The combination of DNA from two animals—*Vulpes vulpes* and *canis lupus*.”

“Huh?” Shira had no clue what *vulpes* meant but didn’t *canis* refer to canines? No way was he turning her into a dog! Not in this lifetime. She’d kill him first.

“You, Lance Corporal Renard, will receive the DNA of the crafty red fox and vicious gray wolf.”

“No. Fucking. Way!” Shira spit out the words while struggling against the restraints, frantic to break free. “I didn’t sign up for any hokey genetic crap.”

Weltman merely smiled and that cocky grin was by far the most frightening thing she’d ever seen. The man had gone completely off his rocker.

“You won’t get away with this, Weltman. You can’t go and fuck around with my DNA without my consent. I’m a Marine. You’ll have the entire Corps on your ass.”

The old bastard tossed his head back and laughed with such maniacal glee icy tendrils of dread skated along her spine.

“You are priceless, Renard. Where do you think I got the funding for the Predator Project?”

No! No fucking way! She didn’t want to hear any more. If her hands had been free she would have stuck her fingers in her ears and chanted “lalalalala” to drown out his words.

“I have the full backing of the United States Marines, and you volunteered for this detail.”

“No!” she hollered. “I didn’t sign on for your insane Predator Project. I’m here for fitness evaluation and training.”

“So very naïve for a soldier.” With an absent gesture, he made some notes on a clipboard.

“There are twenty-two ways to kill a man with no weapon other than bare hands.” Shira spoke calm and clear. Her statement had the desired effect, drawing his attention to her. “I am trained in each and every one of those ways. But before I kill you, Weltman, I’m going to make you suffer. You see, I have also perfected the most painful interrogation techniques known to man. It’s my specialty. I can draw out the process, make it nice and slow. Excruciatingly slow.”

“Hmm.” He considered what she’d said for a moment. Good, maybe he’d see the light and stop this insanity before it went too far.

“Those skills will come in handy once we start your predator training.” He scratched down more information on the papers then tossed the clipboard onto the counter.

She flexed corded muscles, yanked at the restraints, creating a metal squeal of protest from the table but getting no closer to freedom. Jesus, this was like some bizarre nightmare or late night movie. How the hell could it be happening to a Marine in the United States?

“Give her the sedative.”

One of Weltman’s assistants stepped forward and ran an alcohol swab over the bulging vein in her forearm then shot her up with a clear fluid. The effects were almost instant. Lethargy stole through her body, zapping both her strength and will to fight. Her vision wavered and her mind grew sluggish. Shira screamed long and loud. All that came out was a pathetic whimper.

“Now, my dear, we make history.”

She fought against the drugs, focused on survival. Regardless of the medication, her heart slammed into her rib cage as the techs approached with a much larger syringe. The liquid it contained swirled and various colors shimmered like some kind of psychedelic light show at a rock concert. Weltman’s voice distorted, slowed and stretched, making no sense to her muddled brain.

The pinch of the needle drew her attention back to the tech. A silver needle attached to the syringe disappeared beneath her skin. The man smiled at her as he pushed the plunger. “Don’t fight it.”

Easy for him to say.

Fire raced up her arm and Shira screamed in her head, the sound never made it past the lump of fear clogging her throat. She felt the liquid burning through her veins, slamming into arteries. Organs shriveled, contorted in agony. Her back arched as her entire body fought against the foreign substance, the leather straps cut into her skin. She prayed for the sweet escape of death from the misery spreading through her, altering more than flesh and blood, warping her brain functions.

The door swished open and two men entered the room—strangers. Weltman turned, stood in front of her, blocking her view of the newcomers.

“Ah, if it isn’t my two wayward shifters. Welcome back, gentlemen. You’re just in time to meet our latest subject.”

Shifters, were these men the ones he’d turned into cats?

Oddly, the stuff changing the very fiber of her being helped to clear her thoughts as she caught a glimpse of the two hunks. Both men were tall and rugged, probably in their mid-thirties, military background obvious in the way they held themselves and handled their weapons.

One man had wavy dark blond hair pulled back in a tail. His dark brown gaze swept the room and zeroed in on Weltman. The other had straight black hair, a bit long and ruffled, and laser-sharp blue eyes that missed nothing.

“Step away from her,” the blond ordered. He seemed to be in charge.

“Wouldn’t be a smart move to harm me,” Weltman taunted, and tapped the side of his head. “I’m the only one with the details you need.”

“Step back from the woman.” The dark one actually growled, moved closer. “We already downloaded everything we need from the computers.”

The lab techs moved to the side, giving her a clear view of the soldiers. No, Weltman had called them shifters, whatever the hell that meant.

Weltman rambled on about some expert feline doctor. Shira tuned out the useless information and reassessed her body. The fires eating her alive from the inside began to lessen and she was able to take a breath that didn’t singe her lungs.

Another growl registered and her gaze snapped to the blond. Maybe the drugs were still screwing with her vision because his eyes were doing something funky. They glowed and his pupils warped, stretched.

“Has she been injected?” This from the dark one.

The bastard lab tech held up the empty syringe.

“With what?”

Good question! She'd like to know a hell of a lot more about what had just burned through her body.

"She's a hybrid—red fox and gray wolf." Weltman spouted the same line of crap he'd given her. "That is, if she survives the conversion."

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

Surprisingly, the techs moved to follow the blond's orders and began untying the restraints.

"None of you are leaving."

Weltman really was bonkers if he believed that. The two guys had guns trained on him. How the hell did he think he'd stop them from doing whatever they wanted?

The idiots in the lab coats grasped her arms as Shira struggled to make her legs work. Not wanting their slimy hands on her, she shoved them away.

"Are you okay? Can you walk?"

She whipped around to face the dark-haired guy. Genuine concern shadowed his eyes. Could she trust him enough to go with him?

Did she have any other choice?

"I'll walk out of this loony bin on my own two feet—"

Her words were cut off as a shot rang out. Weltman squealed and grabbed his side. Blood seeped between his fingers, darkening the suit material.

"Jesus, Micah. What the fuck are you doing?" the dark one asked.

"He was reaching into his pocket."

Weltman interrupted the argument. "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."

The blond, Micah, threw back his head and laughed. "It's over. Your team has been taken out. No one will be coming to save you from paying for your crimes."

Shira pitched forward, fought to remain upright, and stepped closer to her would-be saviors. “Mind telling me who the hell you are?”

Nash Crosby introduced himself and gave her a few down-and-dirty details, including the fact that both men had worked security for Nanotech before being brought into the Predator Project. Micah had actually agreed to the injection—crazy bastard. Nash had been jacked, taken into the project by force.

Her gut instinct told her these two men were on her side.

“Lance Corporal Shira Renard. Second Division out of Camp LeJeune. 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.”

The side door opened and another dark-haired hunk stuck his head into the room. Damn, all these gorgeous guys were from the deep end of the gene pool. Shame she was in no shape to really appreciate her handsome rescuers.

“Locked down and secured. Charges are set.” The new guy nodded toward her. “She get injected?”

The door behind them swished before anyone could answer. They all turned in time to see Weltman slip out of the room, taking advantage of the distraction.

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

“Stick to our objectives.” Micah 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. You can track him down after the lab’s destroyed.”

For a moment, Nash looked ready to argue before he nodded. “Fine, let’s move.”

“You good to go?” The new arrival, Kyle Slater, flashed a penlight into her eyes, checking her pupils.

"I'm fine. Let's get the fuck out of here." She'd figure out what to do about the shit they'd jacked her up with later. These men were now her best chance of making it out of Weltman's fun house alive.

They hit the hall running. Slater tossed her a gun. Shira checked the chamber and clip then thumbed off the safety.

The place had seemed pretty normal before. Now, with only the illumination of backup strobe lights and the staff gone, it was eerie as hell. They'd already cleared out the lab employees and gotten what they needed from the computers. God, she hoped that meant they knew how to fix what had been done to her.

Once outside they moved across the yard at a rapid clip and gathered near two SUVs while Slater prepared to blow the place. Micah got on the phone, setting up a meeting with a general he thought would be able to help her.

She already noticed differences in herself. Everything ached but she felt stronger and all her senses were on high alert. Her vision was sharper, better in the dark. And her nose was on overload with all the different scents of first the lab and now the wilderness.

"Renard," Micah called. "Come on, you're with me."

She climbed into the back of an SUV. The driver wasted no time getting out of there. The vehicle barreled down the private road.

"So what now?"

Micah raked his hands through his hair, pulling the long strands free of the elastic band, and turned to look back at her over the top of his seat. "Sam and Kyle—"

They were almost at the main road when Slater detonated the facility. The multiple explosions were followed by an impressive fireworks show. She sighed as debris and flames shot up into the sky.

The lab may be out of commission but she had a feeling the nightmare was just beginning for her.

Needing answers, Shira brought Micah back to the conversation. “Who are Sam and Kyle?”

“This is Sam Atherton,” he clapped the driver on the shoulder. “You already met Kyle Slater, who just blew up the lab. They’re going to take you to General Hughes. He’s a good man. He’ll figure out how to handle your status with your unit after the dust settles.

“I have to make a stop in Africa but I’m not deserting you. I’m picking up Dr. Southerby, who helped me after I’d been injected. I’ll be sending a medic to work with you until we can make it there. His name’s Lex McLean. Lex will have access to all the Predator Project files.”

Micah sighed, scrubbed at the beard stubble covering his jaw. The man looked prepared to drop some heavy info on her. Shira sat up straighter, listened carefully.

“Look, I’m not going to sugarcoat it. The next few weeks are going to be hell. The human body isn’t designed to accept animal DNA. You’re facing several surgeries to help your body adjust. Then we’ll have to see if you’ve gained the ability to shift—”

“Shift? Weltman called you and Nash his wayward shifters. What exactly does that mean?”

“This part is going to be hard to believe. If we had more time, I’d show you but for now you’ll just have to take me at my word.” He searched her expression, she wasn’t sure what he was looking for but he must have found it because he kept talking. “Nash and I were injected with feline DNA. Both of us can change forms or shift into our animal counterpart. For Nash that’s a tiger. I shift into a lion.”

She came real close to laughing but something in his dark eyes stopped her cold. Whether it was true or not, Micah believed what he said.

Oh Christ!

“So that means...” She couldn’t say it. Didn’t even want to think it.

“I’m not sure what it will mean for you. Weltman said he did something different with you, injected you with a combination of—”

“Red fox and gray wolf,” she finished for him. “Yeah, I know.”

“So in a couple of weeks...”

Shira forced down her rising terror. “In a couple of weeks, I may or may not turn into a furry beast.”

Great!

Let the games begin.

Chapter One

What day is it?

Hell, he wasn't even sure what time zone he was in.

Lex McLean had made a rough drive out of the Congo and hopped on a tiny puddle jumper that bounced around the sky, threatening to crash at any moment. Next had been the long flight over the Atlantic to New York crammed like a sardine into an uncomfortable seat with no leg room. The final insult of the endless journey had been a seemingly endless drive upstate into the Adirondacks.

He was tired, cranky and hungry as hell. Standing at the door to the infirmary, he sniffed the air and realized the rank scent assaulting his nose was coming from him. Great, he could add stinky to his list of complaints. He desperately needed a shower, a good meal, a firm bed and at least eight uninterrupted hours of sleep, not necessarily in that order.

Since he was running on pure caffeine, the smart thing to do would be putting off meeting the Marine he'd been sent to help until tomorrow. With his curiosity running so high, Lex knew he'd never shut it down long enough to sleep.

Might as well get this over with.

He'd read the file on Lance Corporal Renard from cover to cover. Her rise through the ranks had been marked with commendations and praise from her commanding officers. Renard pushed herself hard, took on the toughest assignments and every available training opportunity. Water survival, evasion and resistance, jungle warfare, interrogation, escape training – you name it and Renard had not only mastered the skill but excelled while doing so.

On paper she was one badass bitch. He wondered how well she'd coped with the physical changes and new reality since becoming part of the Predator Project. Red fox and gray wolf—a wicked combination. The first and only hybrid.

The woman he watched through the observation window lying on a hospital bed took his breath away. Midnight black hair followed the graceful column of her throat to brush the top of her shoulders. Tempting golden skin covered toned flesh. In repose, she appeared so soft and sweet it was hard to imagine her facing combat situations, regardless of what her file said.

Of course, he also had a difficult time picturing her turning into an animal. Never would have believed it possible until he'd seen two of his friends shift right before his eyes. One second Micah Lasiter and Nash Crosby had stood before him as men. In the blink of an eye he'd been looking at a lion and a tiger. He'd also got a real up close and personal glimpse of the lion's sharp teeth.

Lex had seen a lot of things during his time in the military but nothing had prepared him for watching his buddies turn into animals.

How the hell he was supposed to help Renard deal with her new reality was beyond him. Other than the information he'd gathered from Micah, he had no concept of what she faced. Plus, she didn't know him from Jack so why the hell would she trust him?

In the same situation, after having already been tricked and genetically altered, he'd go on the offensive. Fight to take back his life, no matter how fucked up it had become.

Lex moved into the room quietly, not wanting to disturb Renard's sleep, but the desire to get closer wouldn't be denied. Her chest rose and fell with each deep, even breath. Thick black lashes fanned out over her cheeks and her eyes moved rapidly beneath her eyelids. He wondered where her dreams had taken her, what her fantasies were.

God, she was beautiful.

His cock swelled and stood stiffly at attention as Lex pictured her naked body caged beneath him, the two of them moving together. He'd capture the sweet sounds of her pleasure, take them into himself. Fuck her all night long.

He added getting laid to the top of his growing list of needs.

Jesus, McLean. Get your shit together.

He had to be professional, detached, stop thinking of her as a woman and remember the lance corporal was an assignment.

Yeah, and the erection tenting his scrub pants was real professional.

Lex took a calming breath and fought to get his own racing heart under control as he placed two fingers against the firm pulse beating in her slender neck. The immediate electrical charge racing up his arm almost made him jerk away from her.

Holy shit! What the hell just happened?

Felt as if she'd electrocuted him. Damn, he must be more tired than he'd thought.

* * * * *

Finely honed instincts had Shira playing possum. She kept her breathing even, forced her body to relax. Not one muscle twitched as she lay perfectly still and assessed the situation.

Her arms and legs felt heavy, weighed down but thankfully not restrained. Whatever they'd drugged her with had affected her vision. Indistinct shapes surrounded her, giving the impression of a hospital room. She closed her eyes, relying on her other senses. The astringent smell of antiseptic filled her lungs and various equipment beeped. Sure seemed to be a hospital but she knew better.

She'd been here before, visited often in her nightmares since being rescued. Funny thing was she didn't remember returning to the Middle East or being captured. Must be the drugs fucking with her memories.

Then there were the really bizarre visions racing around in her head, wreaking havoc on her nerves. Vivid dreams that felt so real. Her, racing through the forest,

jumping over downed trees, splashing across a stream, digging her claws into damp peat moss, tail whipping out behind her like a flag. Yup, in her sleep she had fur and a tail. Damn drugs had her mind convinced she'd turned into a fox. Now all she needed was a henhouse to raid.

Thank goodness her sense of humor remained intact. Shira had a feeling she was going to need it.

The air-locked door opened with a whoosh. Someone wearing blue scrubs took a syringe from a med box and injected fluid into the IV line connected to her left hand. Her head swam but the moment she was alone again, Shira rose and stumbled drunkenly across the room, leaning heavily on the IV pole. Her hip banged into a metal table as she reached the drug box and pulled out two pre-filled syringes that had needles attached. With her blurry vision she couldn't read the labels and had to hope it was something powerful.

She made it back to the stretcher and struggled to heave her leaden body onto the thin mattress. Sweat coated her skin and she was out of breath by the time she got settled with the syringes secreted beneath her thigh.

Consciousness came and went, along with fleeting impressions. For a while, Shira swore she heard the incessant plink of water dripping. At one point the fluids entering her vein burned a path along her arm and into her chest. And she heard the Arabic bastard's taunting comments ringing in her head.

This time she'd take out as many of them as she could before making good on her escape.

The door swished open again. She bit the inside of her cheek, the pain helping to clear muddied thought processes. Someone moved into the room. The pungent scent of sweat and male musk moved in on her right side. As two thick fingers came to rest against her neck she heard a masculine gasp.

Shira struck out at her adversary. Her right arm came up under his, fingers grasping firm triceps. Caught off guard, she was able to pull him closer. Her left hand

came out from under her hip, swung across her body. She slammed both needles deep into his shoulder and depressed the plungers, holding on tight as his large body bucked.

Having no idea what she'd injected or how it would affect her captor, Shira gritted her teeth and held on tight. He cursed and thrashed, dragging them both to the hard tile floor. Darkness closed in, fading her vision until everything went black.

* * * * *

Jerking awake, Shira shoved at the heavy body sprawled against her side, weighing her down. The crisp scent of pine and musky outdoors still filled her senses from her latest romp through the forest. For a minute her head spun before settling in the present. Her vision cleared and she gasped, shocked to her core.

The sexy blond was not at all what she expected to see. Sun-kissed skin covered lean muscle and gave the impression of a California surfer. A fox but not the furred kind. And definitely not Arabic. Either the man had turned traitor or she wasn't in Afghanistan...

But then where the fuck was she?

Surely she wasn't being held prisoner by her own people. Her mind refused to wrap around that horrible idea. No it had to be something else, but the last assignment she remembered had to do with physical assessment and training.

Fuck it. She'd figure out this mess later. Right now she wasn't going to squander what might be her only chance to make a break for it.

She ripped off a strip of tape securing the IV line in her arm. Grabbing the blond's ID badge, she quickly patted him down for any weapons. Finding nothing, Shira used the bed rail to pull herself up and staggered to the door. She swiped his badge through the card reader and watched as the light turned from red to green.

Too easy!

She smelled a trap but there was no choice other than play out the hand she'd been dealt.

Her left leg wasn't working well, forcing her to lean heavily on the wall as she lurched down a hallway lined with rooms similar to the one she'd just escaped. Turning a corner, she spotted a portable x-ray machine and other devices that convinced her she wasn't back in the Middle East. They didn't have such advanced medical equipment.

She spotted the security camera at the same time a shrill alarm pierced her aching head. A cold draft on her rear end told her all she needed to know about the flimsy hospital gown. Barefoot, the left half of her body refusing to function, she didn't stand a chance of taking down the two burly soldiers headed straight for her.

They were Army. American Army.

Aw, fuck. This was really bad.

Refusing to go down easy, Shira fought with everything she had until they got her pinned to the ground and a sharp needle pierced her thigh. Whatever they pumped into her hit as they dragged her back into the room with surfer boy. As the darkness closed in again, she stared at his handsome face, memorizing his features and plotting his downfall.

* * * * *

With his last memory one of being attacked, Lex came up swinging. His fist made a satisfying connection with someone's jaw before General Hughes' booming voice brought him up short.

"Sergeant McLean – at ease, son."

Memories flooded into his mind as he rubbed at gritty eyes. He'd been checking on Renard, feeling for her pulse when she'd stabbed him with a needle. Whatever she'd shot him up with had burned through his body. While the drug had left him groggy, he also felt strong. Stronger than ever before.

"What's the damage, sir?"

He watched the general's expression turn grim and steeled his spine in preparation for bad news.

The general appeared fit and commanding as always, but Lex noted new streaks of gray in Hughes' brown hair, along with deeper lines and obvious signs of fatigue marring his hard features.

Waiting the other man out, Lex glanced around his surroundings. He was still in Renard's exam room, lying on a second stretcher someone had brought in for him. She'd been returned to the room and this time leather restraints secured her at the wrists and ankles. He pushed away images of her nude and erotically bound, and focused on the general.

"When Nanotech was hit, Lasiter's team confiscated copies of their records and procedures. We've been going over everything with a fine-toothed comb, looking for ways to combat the altered DNA."

Shit! This was worse than he'd thought. The general never stalled or wasted time sharing well-known facts. Usually the man got right to the point. That meant bad news for Lex. He fisted his hands at his sides and struggled to remain calm as he listened to Hughes talk.

"Slater grabbed a drug box on his way out, which has been helpful with treating Renard. Poor girl had a bad reaction to medications and her last surgery did not go well." Hughes paused to clear his throat. "Our doctors believe the hybrid combination of fox and wolf she received to be the problem.

"She'd passed the point of no return and the only way to help was to choose one of the animal's genes over the other. Following Weltman's procedure notes, she was injected with red fox genes this morning. She's had some adverse effects from the anesthesia but had otherwise been doing well."

Lex didn't like what he was hearing. The general resorting to following Weltman's procedures meant everything had gone FUBAR. Tired of waiting for the other shoe to

drop, he interrupted. "With all due respect, Sir, just tell me. What the fuck did Renard shoot me up with?"

Hughes sighed, scrubbed at the day-old stubble covering his jaw. "One syringe contained Haldol."

Okay, a large dose of the antipsychotic drug explained why he'd dropped like a rock. Still, Lex sensed there was more to it than that. "And?"

"The second syringe contained one of Weltman's genetic cocktails."

Christ, no!

His heart palpated and his chest tightened as if trapped in the jaws of a powerful vise. One second he experienced a heat wave and with the next erratic heartbeat he broke out in a cold sweat. His hands went numb and breathing became a chore as Lex was hit with the overwhelming desire to escape. He shoved away the oxygen mask a nurse tried to fit over his mouth and nose.

"What?" he panted. "What was it? What the fuck am I?"

"Wolf."

With one word the general changed his entire life. All the information Micah had shared with him filled his head. He faced multiple surgeries to help his body adjust. Then at some point in the not-so-distant future it would happen—he'd sprout fur, claws and fangs. He'd shift into a wolf.

A freakin' werewolf.

Life as he'd known it was over. His career shot to hell.

Lex glanced over at the restrained Marine and silently vowed to get his revenge. When she least expected it the bitch was going down.

Hard. Slow. Painfully.

Chapter Two

For the first time in—had it been weeks?—he felt human, which was a joke because part of his humanity had been stolen from him. Lex had been living in hell since that first night on base, when the spitfire Marine had attacked him. After too many surgical procedures to count the doctors deemed him adjusted.

Physically—sure. Mentally was a whole different ballgame.

And later today they expected him to shift.

Christ. He didn't know if he could go through with it. Sure, they'd told him the basics of how it worked and what to expect. But the idea of turning into a wolf still freaked him the fuck out. Considering the things he'd seen and done, for fear to grab hold of him, twisting his insides in knots, took some seriously bad shit.

He felt good—stronger than ever. And he knew making it through this day would require all the strength he could muster.

"Mornin', Sir." He paused to acknowledge a lieutenant he met in the hallway before entering the security office. Something was up. As the door opened he was hit by a high level of chatter and excitement buzzed in the air. His entrance had gone unnoticed by the security personnel who had gathered around a monitor, debating over a black and white image.

"What the fuck is it?"

"All three components are wired into the base, which controls the device."

One of the guys tapped the screen. "Here's the power source."

Moving in closer, Lex studied the oddly shaped device unlike anything he'd ever seen in the field. Three prongs from a central base, each vastly different. He didn't see any components of an explosive or communications device. There were also two sets of

batteries, something he presumed to be a power charger, and a tube containing a liquid or gel-like substance.

Short and thin, the first probe curved inward. The second was thick and long, phallic in appearance. The third consisted of four balls of increasing circumference connected by a thin shaft.

He had definite suspicions as to what the image represented. Listening to the men's conversation confirmed his thoughts.

"We need to open the box."

"Renard will throw a fit. I'm not crossing that bitch."

Renard? The package was the Marine's?

"So you're just going to hand it over to her not knowing what the hell that is?"

"Oh come on, it's some fancy vibrator. What else could it be?"

"Who the fuck knows. You haven't taken the time to find out."

"Captain will be pissed if we don't open it."

"The captain will never know unless one of you dumbasses tells him."

"I'm going to offer to do the job for her."

Lex almost laughed aloud as he imagined what the kick-ass-and-take-names-later Marine's response would be. Would almost be worth it to hang around and watch.

Unseen, Lex slipped back out into the hallway, turning over what he'd learned in his mind. Renard had ordered one hell of a sophisticated sex toy and had it delivered to the base. Ballsy move. Knowing it would get scanned, pretty desperate too. Must be damn important to her.

Exactly what he'd been looking for – a weakness.

His lips curved up into a twisted grin. Poor little Renard, all jacked up and in need of sexual release. Probably spent a fortune on the toy. She'd sure miss it if something happened to her new best friend.

She'd just made it easy for him to hit her where it hurt most. Take away the toy and he'd be taking away her fun. The bitch deserved that and more for what she had done to him.

And he intended to make sure she got exactly what was coming to her.

* * * * *

Standing naked before the mirror in her quarters, Shira chewed on her bottom lip and struggled to still the slight trembling in her hands. This wasn't her first attempt at shifting from human to animal – far from it – but it would be her first glimpse of the red fox that now shared her body, mind and soul.

Not separate entities sharing a body, the woman and the fox were a combination of each other. And the ability to shift came with many benefits – increased strength, sharper senses and the keen instincts of a predator.

“Yeah, so why the hell are you so afraid to see the fox?” she asked her reflection.

She had no answer other than the old adage that seeing is believing. Witnessing her shift would make this craziness all too real.

The process of shifting was neither difficult nor painful. It happened fast. Blink and she'd miss the whole thing. Yet somehow being able to alter her form and watching it happen were two vastly different prospects.

“Stop being such a baby. Just get it over with already, Renard.”

Shira took a couple of calming breaths then reached out for the animal. The shift took over and she rolled with it. Familiar disorientation briefly stole her focus. When she looked at her reflected image once again, the fox sat on its hindquarters, tongue lolling out of a mouth full of wickedly sharp teeth.

The kooks at Nanotech had injected her with a hybrid combination of gray wolf and red fox, which fucked her up. She'd been reinjected with only fox but the lingering wolf DNA made her larger than the average red fox. The reddish-brown fur was lightest at her snout and grew darker along her flanks. Her tail, legs and ears were black and

brown. Covering her jaw and trailing down her breast and belly was a patch of soft-looking white fur Shira longed to run her fingers through.

Preening before the mirror, she decided that she made one heck of an exquisite fox. She turned around and looked over her shoulder at her bushy tail swishing around in the air. *How freakin' cool!*

Like a kid before a funhouse mirror, she tried out different expressions and found she could manage a rather comical parody of a smile. Then she scrunched up her snout, pressed back her ears and let a low growl rumble up from her chest. With a sharp yip she jumped back a few feet, startled by the ferocious image.

Holy crap! She wasn't just a pretty face.

Ha! Take that, Lex.

The medic was such a grump. So she'd attacked him while in the grips of some wild hallucinations, shot him up with wolf. She'd apologized. What more did he want? He should be thanking her for the enhancements he'd gained with the animal DNA.

Micah Lasiter—the guy who'd gotten her out of Nanotech's insane asylum—had sent Lex to help her adjust. Well, she had screwed that all to hell. Now he was in the same boat as she, adjusting to the animal sharing his body.

Mmm...and what a body it is.

Tall, muscular and sexy as all get out—Lexilicious was one fine hunk of man. Shame he was such an aggravating, cocky dickhead.

And he was scheduled to go outside and shift for the first time today. If she wanted to get in a peaceful run without the grump along, she had to shake her tail.

Another quick shift—paws and doorknobs were a no go—she shrugged into a robe and headed for the security desk. She saw no sense in getting fully dressed since she'd be shucking her clothes again in a few minutes.

The pre-run ritual was one she despised. A general announcement went out on the security communication band. Those not involved with the Predator Project were told

they were working on training animals. Then a special collar—for tracking and control—was fitted around her neck.

Understanding the need for the device didn't mean she had to like the intrusion on her freedom. And if one of the supervising soldiers thought she was out of control they could shock her with almost a million volts.

Shira shivered. As part of her training she'd been tased. It was an experience she never wanted to repeat.

In its remote location, untamed mountain lands surrounded the base. A huge chain-link fence kept civilians and large wildlife out. It also kept her from going too far while in animal form.

Once out of sight from the populated section of the base, Shira stripped off her robe and set it on a tree stump, along with her flip-flops. Picturing the fox allowed the change to sweep over her.

The scent of a hare hit her snout and she scampered off into the underbrush for an exhilarating game of chase.

* * * * *

Picture the wolf. Don't fight the change. Let it happen.

Micah's words echoed through his head on a continuous loop. Years of training helped Lex remain calm, keep his breathing even and his thoughts focused.

There's nothing to it. Just let go.

Yeah, easier said than done. Micah's first change had been effortless. He'd been angered by a perceived threat to Becca. The change had taken him by surprise. Lex had to work to make it happen. He stood outside—cold, naked and vulnerable—with a shock collar around his neck.

He took a calming breath and allowed the pictures of gray wolves the scientists had showed him to fill his mind. Some of the wolves he'd seen were gray and white, others had mostly brown fur and a few had been shades of black. He tried not to think about

the color variations and instead trained his thoughts to their form. Wolves were pretty similar in structure to large dog breeds. Tapered snout, narrow chest, powerful back and legs – they were built for stamina and ideal for covering long distances quickly.

How the hell was he supposed to get his human body to change into a wolf? Especially when he experienced an odd sense of disorientation.

Tossing back his head, he groaned in frustration. Only what escaped him was a long, mournful howl. Lex shivered as he looked down to find a furry chest, lean forelegs and big black paws.

Holy shit, he'd done it. A yip left his throat and the wolf's body took a quick sidestep. Glancing around, he realized that everything looked sharper. Most colors washed away to crisp variations of black, white and gray. And the smells...wow.

Run!

The word had barely entered his brain before the animal took over and he zoomed through the woods, hurtling downed trees with ease, sniffing the crisp air. He felt wild and free. Powerful. On top of the world.

Instincts kicked in as he explored the landscape, pausing to leave his own scent in various locations. He called out, searching for others of his kind, but got no response.

Lex ran for miles, avoiding areas occupied by the soldiers. He played in a stream, chasing fish, and eventually lay down in the shelter of some shrubs to rest. He must have dozed off at some point because he jolted to awareness as the most glorious scent teased his nostrils. His entire body went on high alert as he crouched in the bushes, patiently waiting to catch a glimpse of his prey.

His nostrils flared as a rustling nearby captured his intense focus. He remained still and in place until the most amazing creature appeared. The female bounded, twisting in the air, snapping at the butterfly it tried to capture.

Drinking in her heady scent had his groin tightening as his cock swelled and his balls tingled. He had to have her. Yet Lex continued to wait.

Eventually, the butterfly flittered away and something else caught the female's attention. She shot off through the brush. In an instant, Lex was on her, giving chase. Peat moss cushioned his paws as he ate up the distance, closing in on her flank. When the female noticed she had company, she put on a burst of speed.

Over, under and around obstacles, the pair raced through the woods, across the stream and along the fence line. Faster and stronger, he could have taken her to the ground at will but found the game too much fun to cut short. He enjoyed the way her lithe body quivered when she felt his hot breath across her backside. And if he didn't know better, Lex thought the canine grin shot in his direction had come-and-get-me written all over it.

The female enjoyed the game as much as he did.

But running with his painfully hard cock flapping against his belly and his balls bouncing was not fun. Putting on a burst of speed, he overtook the female. Sharp teeth grasped the soft, vulnerable flesh of her neck as his bigger body drove her to the ground beneath him.

She whined and barked a sharp reprimand. Lex didn't let go. He'd won and she belonged to him. He had every intention of ramming his cock deep inside her warm body and filling her with his seed.

Sudden jolts of electricity slammed into him, driving his shaking body from the female. He rolled to his side with a sharp yelp. Muscles contracted involuntarily, the pain leaving him breathless and incapacitated. He watched in shock and disbelief as the female rose and raced away.

Damn it!

Then he saw them. Half a dozen soldiers surrounded him, moving forward with caution. One held a black box. Human intellect warred with animal instincts. He wanted to rip the soldiers to shreds and go after that sweet piece of tail. But he'd been taken down because what he'd been doing was wrong.

God, he hadn't cared if the female had been willing or not. He would have taken her either way.

There was a lot more to being a shifter than he'd considered. Not the least of which being that when his intellect won over and he changed back, Lex lay nude on the ground surrounded by a military team.

Off to the side, holding a robe wrapped tightly around her, witnessing his humiliation—his nemesis. Renard.

Jesus, the female his wolf had been so desperate to fuck was Renard.

Could this day get any worse?

* * * * *

Shira counted her lucky stars as she made her way back inside. One minute she'd been happily playing in the forest. The next she'd been trying to outrun a wolf. A very aroused male wolf.

When he'd covered her, caging her beneath his powerful form, she'd been so wet and ready to fuck. The wolf's shaft had been long and hard and she'd wanted every firm inch slamming into her dripping folds.

Then the soldiers had arrived, just in time, and she'd realized the wolf had to be Lex. The bastard.

Jesus, and she'd almost let him fuck her in their animal forms.

There may be tons of sexual tension between them but their mutual hatred kept their lust in check.

Until today.

The animals didn't give a shit if they liked each other.

She needed to get off in a big, bad way. It was the only way to ease the need to fuck her sworn enemy.

Lex was such a baby, holding her hallucination-induced attack against her. Sheesh! When the hell would he get over it and move on? Then they could get it on.

First things first. A stop at the security office would get rid of the hateful collar.

“Hey, Renard. I was just headed to your quarters. You got a package.” The security officer, Jake Hampton, held a plain box bearing a generic shipping label just out of her reach.

Thank you, Jesus. Her prayers had been answered.

It was about time. She’d called her favorite toy store and placed a rush order—paying extra for express shipping—and waited impatiently for it to arrive. Sweet relief from the constant ache Lex inspired was almost within her grasp.

Jake shot her a sultry grin as he rubbed his fingertips over the white cardboard. “Of course, we had to scan it...”

That stopped her short for only a moment. But with the tension and frustration riding her hard, she didn’t care if the whole base knew she’d ordered a vibrator.

“You could have the real thing, darlin’,” one of the other guards taunted and crudely grabbed his crotch. “All you had to do was ask.”

Another joined in the game. “Or maybe begged a little.”

“Not if you were the last man on earth, Chavez,” she huffed.

“If the lights start to dim...” Jake teased.

“Well then you’ll have all sorts of yummy visions dancing around in your head.”

“Hell, I already have those,” he muttered under his breath.

With that, Shira snatched the box out of his hands, turned and dashed down the hallway, anticipation putting extra pep in her step. Her own fingers had never been enough. She required extra stimulation to find release. And the bad boy in her hands was guaranteed to send her soaring.

Halfway through the door she had the box ripped open then upturned it over her narrow bed, shivering in delight as each item hit the mattress. Grabbing scissors off the desk, she set to work on the air-tight plastic imprisoning her new playmate.

Her hands shook as she traced her fingertips over the most wonderful device ever created by man, the Ultimate Pleasure Wand. Damn, was it gorgeous and worth every penny she'd paid.

The first articulation was short, thin and covered with little bumps, perfect for pleasuring the clitoris. The second was what every woman dreamed to find in a man. Eight inches long, perfectly curved to hit the G-spot, thick as her wrist, and riddled with simulated veins to create the most delightful friction.

But that wasn't all. Oh no. The final wicked appendage consisted of four balls of increasing diameter connected together by a thin shaft for anal play.

The entire device was covered by the latest compound that felt like human skin and contained six vibrating bullets to ensure maximum enjoyment. And it heated up too. *Oh hell yeah!*

Damn thing did everything but take you out to dinner, practically rendering men obsolete. The only drawback she could see were batteries losing their juice but she'd purchased both regular and rechargeable ones. A tube of tingling mint lube completed her order. Shira figured she was better prepared than a Girl Scout.

She twisted off the base, grabbed the first battery, considered which way it was supposed to go in and dropped it into the chamber. When both batteries were in place she screwed on the bottom and hit the power button.

Nothing happened.

Okay, so she'd probably put the batteries in upside down. Fixable. Shira opened the bottom again and upturned the vibe. Only one battery plopped out onto the mattress.

"What the fuck?"

She peered into the guts of the vibe and saw the other battery nestled in place. Firmly in place.

“No. Don’t do this to me,” she pleaded. The battery wouldn’t budge no matter how much she shook and jostled the toy. Damn thing was stuck, wedged in tight.

“Noooooooooooooooooooo! This can’t be happening. No fucking way.”

All right, she had to be calm and rational. How the hell could she get the battery out?

She glanced around the small room, looking for an answer. Her gaze landed on the large wooden wardrobe. Taking slow, easy breaths, she walked across the room, placed the vibe against the side of the cabinet and proceeded to bang the hell out of the damn thing.

Breathing heavy now, Shira again peered inside and there was the battery, still lodged firmly in place.

“Son of a bitch.”

Possessing better-than-average intelligence, she should be able to figure this out. It couldn’t be that hard to get a battery out of the confines of the blasted device. She just needed to think.

She glowered at the battery and tapped her fingers on her chin. Obviously it was a tight fit between the walls of the compartment and the battery. She needed something to grasp the end and drag it out.

Inspiration struck. Tweezers.

Shira raced into the bathroom, grabbed her tweezers and set to work, quickly discovering that the job required something much longer. Shaking with frustration, she pulled on her robe and secured the belt in place before racing out into the hall. Her destination—the lab. They had lots of implements in there. Surely they’d have something that would reach the battery.

When she arrived at the locked glass door, Shira pounded as if the hounds of hell were on her heels. She imagined how she would appear to the technicians inside, wearing a silk robe, mussed hair framing her face, eyes wide and wild. Her entire body shook with frustration.

The startled lab geek who came to the door appeared frightened. Instead of opening the door, he pressed a button and talked through the intercom. “W-what is it, Corporal?”

“Let me in, Sims.” Even she heard the desperation in her voice. Shira fought for calm control. “I need to borrow some tweezers to fix a very important, top-secret device.”

“Umm...Ma’am. You’re out of uniform.”

No shit, Sherlock!

Irritation boiled and she pounded her fist against the barrier. The tech trembled as she spoke through tightly clenched teeth. “I know. Just give me what I need and you can get back to work.”

He reached toward the lock, hesitated. *Jesus, what a wimp.* He was enlisted Army for crying out loud.

“Private,” she growled, using her most commanding tone. “Open the damn door or you’ll be running bunk drills for the next sixteen hours.”

That did it. The geek must be well versed in the torture of bunk drills because without second thought he opened the door and stood out of her way.

She knew what she wanted, and where it was kept. Had seen the techs using the long-limbed tweezers in their work. In less than five seconds she had what she’d come for and was running down the hall.

Back in her room, she fought to steady her hands. The first few tries resulted in scraping against the end of the battery but failed to dislodge it. Finally – on the tenth attempt – she grabbed hold of the cylinder and began rocking it loose. It seemed to take

forever but finally she had the damn thing free and in anger, threw it across the room. The battery hit the wall with a loud thunk, leaving a mark, then fell to the floor and rolled under the wardrobe.

Shira took the time to read the instructions and successfully loaded fresh batteries into the wand. As she screwed on the base and depressed the power button, she held her breath.

The toy came to life in her hands, buzzing and gyrating. She let out a whoop of pure joy and triumph. Disaster had been averted and now she was going to have some fun. Blow off some steam.

Get off.

Oh hell yeah!

Chapter Three

As painful as it would be for him, Lex needed to apologize. For the past few days Renard managed to avoid him. Not that he could blame her after what had happened during his first shift. He looked for her everywhere to no avail. That's how he wound up standing at the door to her quarters – completely innocent in his intentions.

Hey, technically his intentions were good. At least when ignoring his ulterior motives.

And as luck would have it, Renard presented him with an opportunity Lex could not resist when he knocked on the door. An unsecured door that swung open, granting him entry.

“Hey, Renard. Anybody home?” he called out as he peeked through the opening.

No answer.

Nudging the door wider, he glanced around her personal space. He shouldn't go in. Should respect a fellow soldier's privacy.

Good one. He almost laughed. Unsecured possessions were fair game.

Neat as a pin, the room could have come straight out of a Marine SOP handbook. Nothing personal on display, everything in its place. Even the blanket on her bed was stretched taut and tucked in precisely. Hell, a quarter would probably bounce off the damn thing.

Unable to resist, Lex pulled a coin from his pocket to test the theory. Sure enough, the quarter rebounded.

Holy shit! Talk about a buttoned-down-tight soldier.

He glanced into the wardrobe, not surprised to find her gear folded and displayed with precision. If he had a ruler, no doubt the distance between each item and its

placement on the shelf would be within a fraction of an inch of what regulations required.

Far from the state of his room, that's for sure. He followed SOP – for the most part. Just not to such an anal-retentive extreme.

Sliding open the desk drawers revealed only the most basic supplies and manuals, nothing personal or of interest. He moved to the nightstand, hesitating for a moment as his conscience nagged. Recalling a certain image on the security scanner, he brushed aside those pesky morals, pulled open the drawer and struck pay dirt.

“Well, well, well...look what we have here.” The perfect means to exact his revenge. Not that a vibrator could measure up to a life-altering event.

As he plucked the flesh-toned, rather intimidating vibrator from its resting place, Lex's blood pressure went through the roof. While he walked around horny and in serious need of relief, the sneaky little fox was busy satisfying herself with an electronic marvel.

Well her good times were about to come to an abrupt end. No way in hell would he walk away and leave the toy there. Not happening. If he had to suffer then so did she.

“So think fast and get out of here before she comes back.”

He couldn't walk down the hallway of a military unit carrying the three-shafted vibrator. The ribbing would never end. Why the hell hadn't he brought something to conceal the contraband sex toy?

Because then he would have had to admit premeditation. At least to himself.

Moving to the wardrobe, he grabbed a white towel and spread it open on her bed. He tossed the vibe on top, along with the lube, battery charger and spare batteries. Rolling everything up in the towel, Lex paused. An image of the Grinch slinging a sack of stolen Christmas presents over his shoulder came to mind, which he ruthlessly ignored. Renard deserved to have her joy snatched out from under her.

With the towel tucked under his arm, he wasted no time heading for his own room at the opposite end of the building. Although it wouldn't be a good idea to keep the contraband. God forbid if they had an inspection and someone discovered the sex toy. There would be no explaining that away.

Fuck! He had to figure something out. Moving quickly through the halls, careful not to draw unwanted attention, he barely breathed until the door to his quarters closed behind him. Now he just needed a temporary hiding place while he figured out a better solution.

Lex's gaze scanned his room, landing on the locked briefcase containing the Predator Project files as someone knocked on the door.

"Sergeant McLean?"

"Yeah. Uh...just a minute." Shoving the bundle into the front compartment, he closed the flap. "Enter."

The door swung open to reveal one of the security team. "General Hughes wants you in briefing room A."

"When?"

"Now." The man's expression let him know the situation was serious. "Everyone's waiting."

Fuck!

Lex grabbed his case and double-timed it toward the briefing room.

* * * * *

General Hughes sat at the head of the big polished oak table. Beneath his drumming fingertips rested a file labeled Predator Project with Top Secret stamped across the front in red.

Shira hadn't known the general long, but the highly controlled man did not make careless gestures. His obvious agitation filled her with dread. Shit was going down and she was determined not to be left out of whatever happened.

Masculine voices drew her attention to the doorway as Micah Lasiter stepped into the room with Lex right behind him. Lex dropped his bag on the table and saluted the general.

“Sir,” Micah greeted and offered his hand.

“Daddy!” A petite brunette squealed from the doorway and raced toward the general, who jumped up and caught her in his arms.

Micah raked a hand through his hair and mumbled, “Daddy? Oh shit!”

The general’s gaze never left Micah as he addressed the woman. “Princess? What are you doing here?”

“Holy shit. This is priceless,” Lex said and sputtered in a valiant effort to contain his laughter.

Shira’s gaze darted from one tense man to the other. The general’s eyes shot daggers at Lasiter who looked as if his balls had shriveled up and were attempting to crawl into his body to hide.

Damn, this was going to be good. An ex-soldier from the general’s unit somehow involved with his daughter. She sat taller in her seat, hungrily drinking in every nuance of the unfolding drama.

“Micah and I just got in from Africa. We’re here for a meeting about a project I was involved in at work that went bad.”

“You were at Nanotech?” the general growled.

“Not now, Daddy. We’re going to be late.”

He turned and finally looked at his daughter. “You told me that you were working with lions somewhere in the South.”

“I was. A lion and a tiger –”

“Then why the blazes are you with him?”

“But your last name’s Southerby.” Micah scrubbed at the stubble on his chin. The poor man appeared to be thoroughly confused.

On pins and needles, Shira waited to hear the rest. Her gaze bounced back and forth between the players as if watching a tennis match.

“It is,” Becca shrugged. “Mom and Dad weren’t married when I was born.”

“Shut up, Lasiter.” The general shoved Lex’s bag out of the way and pulled out a chair. “Rebecca, sit down.”

All attention in the room turned to the leather satchel that started to hum and thud against the wooden surface. Lex made a lunge for it but Hughes got to the bag first.

“What the hell. Who does this belong to?” Hughes opened the flap, which had been left unlocked, and rooted around. The rolled-up towel he dropped on the table buzzed and skittered about.

Oh no he didn’t!

Lex started to protest. Hughes just held up his hand, signaling for silence, then unrolled the towel. Shira’s brand new vibrator danced across the table. Batteries rolled this way and that. Hughes stared for a moment before gingerly picking the toy up by its base. “Who belongs to this?”

The general made eye contact with each person in the room. Heat crept up Shira’s neck and into her cheeks. As his stern gaze landed on her, Shira swallowed hard and the bottom dropped out of her stomach.

Busted!

What the hell was she supposed to say?

“It’s my bag,” Lex confessed. “I...umm—”

Every eye in the room focused on him. Somehow he still managed to stand tall and appear unruffled.

“Son, I don’t even want to know.” Hughes shook his head, tossed everything back into the bag and slammed it against Lex’s chest.

Numb, shocked to the core, Shira didn't move or breathe as she struggled to process what had happened. The sadistic dickhead sacrificed his dignity to save her? She couldn't believe it. The jerk hated her. Why the hell would he protect her?

Then a different kind of heat blasted through Shira. The bastard had been in her room, gone through her private things. Stole her fucking vibrator.

She held the edge of the table in a white-knuckled grasp as her entire body vibrated, demanding action. A red haze clouded her vision as she watched Lex fumble around. The vibrator stilled and the sudden silence in the room was almost deafening. Contemplating all the pain she would inflict, Shira began to rise as she fought back her body's urgent need to shift.

"Everyone sit down," General Hughes commanded.

Reluctantly dropping back into her chair, she tuned out the conversation as Lasiter briefed the general on his daughter's involvement in the highly classified project.

Shira debated the slowest, most painful methods of killing a man. Nothing quick or painless for the bane of her existence. No, Lex would suffer.

She watched him from the corner of her eye. He didn't appear to have any weaknesses. Tall, packed with solid muscle. Sexy as all get out. Would be a shame to ruin his devilish smile by knocking out some of those perfect white teeth. And marking up all that taut, tanned skin – criminal.

Maybe she'd fuck him first. Hell, the way she saw it since he took her toy Lex owed her orgasms. Multiples. The explosive kind that left her boneless and put a satisfied grin on her face.

Mmm...she'd love to have that hard body of his beneath her. And if his cock was in proportion to the rest of him, she'd have one hell of a sweet ride. She'd taste him before fucking herself on his shaft. Dip her tongue into every groove, sink her teeth into meaty flesh.

Shift and find out if a fox and wolf going at it would be half as amazing as she'd imagined.

Ever since the guards had interrupted them in the woods thoughts of wild bestial fucking had teased and tormented her vivid imagination. The idea of leaving human worries and niceties behind and engaging in raw, primitive sex thrilled her to no end.

The large, powerful wolf forcing her to the ground and thrusting his huge shaft between her slick pussy from behind. Sharp teeth piercing her thick pelt, holding her captive for the savage pounding of his cock.

Her breasts swelled and grew achy. The rough material of her shirt abraded diamond-hard nipples with each deep breath. Her belly quivered and hot cream rained from her folds, soaking her panties.

Shifting in her seat, she clamped her thighs together. The slight pressure wasn't enough. She needed more.

"Renard," the general barked.

Lex watched Shira closely. Startled when the general called her name, her head snapped up and wide, crystalline blue eyes locked right on him. There was a plea in her gaze.

Poor thing. She'd missed the entire conversation.

He could relate. For a moment he considered taking pity on her and restating the general's question. Almost. He enjoyed seeing her flounder too much to help her out. Instead, he leaned back in his chair, folded his hands and let her squirm.

Hmm...on closer inspection he reconsidered the cause of her distress. Dilated pupils were surrounded by only a thin circle of blue. Her hungry gaze devoured him. That cute nose of hers flared and her cheeks were suffused with a pink flush. The pulse point in her neck pounded and her breathing came too fast.

Renard wasn't displaying signs of anger over the vibrator incident. Nowhere close. The naughty fox was fighting some serious arousal.

For him.

Now that was something he'd be glad to help her out with. At a more appropriate time and place.

Shit, he couldn't believe what he was about to do.

"What do you think, Renard? A team of four to go after the scientist trying to reestablish the Predator Project should be sufficient."

Relief and gratitude flashed in her eyes for a split second before she went into serious soldier mode.

She nodded. "A small team can get in and out quicker, be more efficient."

Feeling the general's assessing stare, Lex turned his attention back to the head of the table and nodded. "Lasiter on point, Slater for demo —"

"Both civilians," Hughes interjected.

"Who you've included in this briefing, have knowledge of the unique situation, and military training under your command. The less people who learn about the existence of shifters the better."

"Fine. Who else?"

Lex sighed inwardly at the general's capitulation. "Renard on search and rescue, and me." He rushed on to head off any potential argument. "You've gotta have a medic who understands shifters in case the bastard has injected anyone."

"No." Hughes' hard tone made Lex's hackles rise. "I understand your desire to be involved, McLean. Problem is you've only shifted a handful of times over the past few days and you don't have control over —"

"I'll help him," Shira piped in.

Stunned speechless, Lex marveled at her confident expression.

"Daddy." Becca placed her hand on the general's arm. "I'll work with Lex. Give me two days and he'll be ready."

"Princess, this is a military matter. You're not getting involved."

Becca laughed. "I'm already involved. I worked with Micah and helped him gain control of his lion. I can certainly handle a wolf. Where else are you going to find a zoologist trained in animal behavior who won't freak when a human shifts form right in front of them?"

"She has a point, Sir."

"Shut up, Lasiter. You got her into this mess, which we will discuss later."

Becca slapped her palm on the table. "Oh no you won't. Micah had nothing to do with Weltman recruiting me to work on the Predator Project."

"But he has everything to do with your continued involvement," the general growled.

This was headed south fast. Time to bring the focus of the meeting back to the mission.

"I know the doc and trust her skills. Give me two days to work with her and Renard. At the end of that time if you're not completely satisfied that I've got the wolf under control, I'll stand down."

"Fine," Hughes grumbled. "Two days. Get the animal under control and come up with a detailed mission plan. Then I'll consider giving the team a green light."

The general rose and dismissed those under his command and placed a restraining hand on Becca's shoulder. "Not you two." He glared at Micah. "We have a lot more to discuss."

As they left the room, Renard brushed against his side and Lex's skin tingled.

"I'd love to be a fly on the wall for that conversation." Her husky whisper heated his blood and made his cock ache.

Fuck! He needed to get her under him but they had to work closely together. Fucking would only complicate the situation.

The next two days were going to be pure hell.

"Oh, and another thing!"

Taking advantage of his distraction, Renard shoved him against the wall and fisted his balls. “If my vibrator is not back where it belongs within the hour—” She applied enough pressure to ensure she had his complete attention. “These will be hanging from the rear bumper of my truck.”

Chapter Four

Private showers – what a luxury.

The unit's digs must have been housing for officers at some point because regular enlisted grunts had to share communal bunkrooms and showers. Being assigned to General Hughes' unit sure had benefits. Hot water that didn't run out and high-pressure showers were on top of the list.

Shira stood under the pounding spray, let the tension slowly melt away. Each time she shifted and the fox had a vigorous workout the afteraffects were the same – ravenous hunger, sore muscles and an insatiable desire for sex.

Before the meeting she'd pigged out. This glorious shower would take care of the aches and pains. And next, if the jerk-off had returned her vibrator, she would go for the Big O. Several of them.

Shira squeezed some lavender-mint gel into her palm, worked up a thick lather and let her fingers wander as she thought about the meeting. And Lex. Taking her toy had been a ballsy move. On the other hand, walking around with it in his satchel – stupid.

God, the look on his face when the general had accidentally tripped the power button. Of course, her expression would have been pretty damn comical too. Then Lex had gone and turned into Mr. Gallant, claiming ownership and saving her from total humiliation.

Now she owed him. And he'd expect payback. The question was what he'd want?

Maybe sex.

Nah, he hated her, right?

Mmm...what she wouldn't give to go a few rounds with the sexy medic. Her body heated as she pictured dropping to her knees and taking his cock deep into her mouth.

Flicking her tongue in the slit to get a taste of him. Wrapping her lips around the silk-over-steel shaft. She'd bet her life savings he'd taste smooth and rich.

Taking her aching breasts into her hands, she tweaked diamond-hard nipples as she imagined lightly scraping her teeth over the sweet spot beneath his ridge. Sucking him hard and teasing the sensitive strip of flesh behind his balls. Hearing his moans and watching him come apart. Swallowing around the head as hot jets of cum shot down her throat.

Hell yeah!

She pinched her nipples harder and moaned as the tug shot through her belly to echo in her clit. Soapy fingers glided over slick folds. As she circled a fingernail around the distended bundle of nerves, her head fell back between her shoulders. Wanting more, she thrust two fingers into her pussy and located that amazing spot so few men were capable of finding. She rode her hand hard, fucking her fingers deep and scraping her nail over the head of her clit.

So good.

With her free hand, Shira lifted her breast, dropped her chin to her chest and sucked her nipple between hungry lips. The sharp edge of her teeth nipped at the turgid peak as she fucked her hand, reaching for the orgasm hovering just out of reach.

So close.

And yet so far.

No matter what she tried satisfaction evaded her grasp.

Her mournful cry reverberated around the tiled stall. Disgusted by the failure to push herself over the edge, she rushed through the rest of the disappointing shower that had become more routine task than special indulgence.

"Damn you, Lex!"

Shaking out her hair, she finger-combed the short strands, rubbed lotion into still-damp skin then headed straight for the nightstand.

“My toy better be in that drawer or —”

Shira stalked into the room and nearly swallowed her tongue. Stretched out on her bed was more than six feet of hard male flesh. Nude flesh. Miles of bronzed skin covering rippling muscle. A big hand fisted the most gorgeous cock she'd ever seen. Mesmerized, she couldn't take her eyes away from the hand making lazy strokes from base to tip, a pause for his thumb to swipe over the crown, gathering the fluid beaded there, before descending.

“Or what? I could make a few suggestions.”

Thick fingers tensed, gripped the shaft hard, increasing the pace. Shira licked suddenly dry lips. His masculine moan sounded distant as she stared at the living, breathing wet dream. She wanted to trip and fall right on top of that long, thick cock.

“Come closer, little red fox. This big bad wolf won't bite...hard.”

His fairytale come-on snapped her out of her sexual stupor. Until then she'd almost forgotten about the pain in the ass who inhabited that incredible body. She didn't even want to consider the fact they were both naked, aroused and all alone in her private room.

Crossing her arms under her breasts, she glared at him. “What do you think you're doing?”

“Offering my assistance. From the sound of it your shower didn't provide any relief.”

Shira groaned inwardly. “Just return my vibrator and no one will get hurt.”

Undeterred by her attitude and ignoring her demand, he continued to stroke his cock. “Tell me, Renard, does shifting leave you hot and bothered too? Aching to fuck? 'Cause it drives me crazy.” His gaze dropped and she couldn't help following suit to watch his fist work his cock. “And my hand isn't enough.”

She understood all too well. While the toy helped, she craved more. The warm friction of a real cock sliding along the sensitive walls of her pussy. Fingers and a

mouth—other than her own—sucking her tender nipples. Gaining mutual satisfaction with someone who shared the same burning needs.

“I know what you need, Shira. I need it too. We’re both unattached adults with clean bills of health. Why not indulge.”

All valid points. And birth control wasn’t an issue since she had an implant in her arm. Why was she having such a hard time remembering the reasons she shouldn’t fuck him?

Lex watched Shira as she watched him, taking in all the signs of her arousal. Keeping his ass on the bed severely tested his restraint. He was dying to suck on those ripe pink nipples. Couldn’t wait to gather the cream glistening on her slender thighs and spread it over his throbbing cock. Thrust his tongue between the bare lips of her beautiful pussy.

He groaned as her hands cupped full breasts and pinched her nipples. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. “Come on, honey. I guarantee it will be better than that fancy fake cock. Take what you need.”

Shira stood at the foot of the bed, her gaze skated over his body like a hot caress.

“Lex.” His name rolling off her tongue in that husky tone had his fist tightening on his cock.

“Yeah, baby?”

“Shut up!” She took a step closer. Then another. “You talk too much.”

Shira crawled onto the bed and he couldn’t take his eyes off her. She moved over his body, a hungry predator locked onto its next meal. Him.

Fuck yeah!

Pushing his legs apart, she made a place for herself. With her lips hovering above his erection for the space of several heartbeats all she did was stare. As if that wasn’t enough to drive him insane, the tip of her tongue traced a path over her lips, moistening the plump curves.

Elegant fingers pushed his lax hand out of the way and covered his dick, drawing a harsh moan from him. Then her dark head dipped toward his groin and Lex knew he wouldn't last long.

Shira didn't tease or play games—she went right for the brass ring. Warm breath washed over his tense balls and then they were engulfed in the damp heat of her mouth.

“Oh yeah, baby. Suck 'em. Use your tongue.”

She hummed around his sac, creating a wicked vibration that blasted straight through his cock and his hips bucked. “Damn that's good.”

Sucking him hard, her talented tongue lashed at his tender flesh. She hummed again then opened her mouth. His wet balls slapped against his perineum and another fiery jolt raced through his shaft.

Far from finished, she fisted the base and proceeded to lick his cock as if it were her favorite treat. Watching her pouty lips part and swallow him whole was the most seductive thing he'd ever seen. Shira nosily slurped and sucked, consuming him with a voracious appetite that took his turbulent lust to a whole new level. Needing an anchor in the violent storm, Lex speared his fingers into her silky hair.

Taking him to the back of her throat, she swallowed and strong muscles pulled at his crown. Damn, that quick he was close to exploding. But he didn't want to come this way. He desperately wanted to feel her pussy tighten around him as his seed bathed her womb.

“Christ,” he gasped. “Stop, baby. I don't want to come yet.”

Heavy-lidded eyes gazed up at him from beneath thick lashes and he knew he was in trouble. Her fist tightened on the base of his cock while her other hand moved between his legs to roll his balls gently in her palm.

“Too good, baby,” he warned. “Can't hold back.”

Eyes sparkling with glee never left his. But her fingers, they slid from his balls, danced along his perineum and circled his anus.

She wouldn't dare.

Renard did more than dare. As she slurped and sucked hard on his cock, swallowing against the head, her finger breached the tight ring of muscle and plunged deep. Back and forth that devious finger thrust until she stroked the small protrusion that ended his fight.

"So fucking good. Keep going, baby," he gasped. "Here it comes."

Each shallow stab of his hips made his tight balls thud against his perineum. Every stroke of her finger whipped up lightning that gathered in his sac before shooting through his shaft.

His entire body tensed and his eyes slammed shut. Pure bliss detonated in his groin, streaked outward and practically blew his head off. He was vaguely aware of powerful sucking drawing every last drop of cum from his balls.

Lex floated for a while. When he came back down it was to find Renard licking the remaining semen from his still semi-hard shaft.

Crawling her way up his body, she placed small kisses and playful nips of sharp teeth along his torso. "There's an advantage to being a shifter you probably haven't learned yet." Her husky voice rasped over his nipple and his cock jerked to attention.

"Micah filled me in before sending me here," she purred.

Hearing his friend's name on her lips while she was in bed with him stirred unexpected anger in Lex. Foreign emotions tightened his chest but he ruthlessly pushed them aside. He would not allow himself to get wrapped up in this woman.

The witch who turned me into a shifter, he reminded himself.

He'd take her body, fuck her every way possible. Use her for sex. There would never be more than sex. Really good sex. Mutual satisfaction.

"Shifters have an abbreviated recovery time and can go for hours."

A knife plunged into his heart and twisted as he wondered how Micah had imparted this information. Had he told Renard or shown her?

From out of nowhere, a low rumble rolled up through his chest. The menacing growl was a clear warning. She just grinned and straddled his hips, nestling his hard cock against her slick pussy.

Something in him snapped and the animal's instincts took over. Before he realized what he was doing, Lex grabbed her hips, reversed their positions and flipped her onto her belly.

Stunned and more than a little turned on by Lex's sudden aggression, Shira didn't fight – at first.

A firm hand between her shoulders shoved – none too gently – thrusting her chest and face into the pillow. She took a deep breath and her lungs were flooded with Lex's unique masculine scent. His other arm slid under her belly, yanking Shira to her knees.

The same heady rush she'd experienced when the wolf had run her to ground and prepared to mount her had Shira's fox fighting to be set free. Barely restraining the urge to shift, she burst into action.

She kicked out at his legs and groin and Lex pushed her knees apart. He moved into the opening, his muscular thighs preventing her from clamping her legs shut. Shira went wild beneath him. She bucked, trying to dislodge him until sharp teeth closed on her vulnerable throat. Shira went completely still. Her heart beat wildly and her breathing came in harsh pants.

In the wild, weaker animals were subjugated by those who were stronger. Although she didn't have a submissive bone in her body, the fox reveled in being dominated by the powerful wolf. Had she shifted, the fox would have rolled over and bared her belly.

He didn't wait or give her time to refuse. The fat head of his cock swept along her folds, notched at her entrance and in one swift thrust, hilted inside her. Tossing back

her head, she howled, the sound more animal than human, as Lex pounded into her at a punishing pace.

Wet and ready for him, she slammed her hips back, meeting each hard thrust. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh joined with their primal grunts of pleasure, creating a music all their own. Each glorious time his cock plowed through the quivering walls of her pussy ended with his balls striking her clit.

Pushing her ass higher made him go deeper. His crown tapped on her cervix and the tension coiled in her belly.

“Yes,” she hissed. “Fuck me. Harder. Faster.”

He met her impossible demands, taking their frenzied fucking further, driving her to the brink. Suddenly the coil sprung. Immense waves washed over her, threatening to drown Shira. It went on and on, stealing the breath from her lungs. Smothering her face in the pillow, she sank her teeth into it as her pussy clamped down on his cock, which swelled impossibly larger, stretching Shira to her limits. Hot spurts of cum filled her. His teeth let go of her neck and he shouted.

Lex collapsed against her, his big body covering her back. He somehow managed to roll them onto their sides.

As she struggled to gain control of her breathing, Shira realized the sweaty skin touching hers didn't have her racing for the shower. And the heavy arm draped possessively over her abdomen didn't bother her in the least.

Strange.

She yawned in contentment and brushed off the odd thoughts, deciding to think about them later.

Much later.

Maybe after another fantastic round...or six.

* * * * *

While the phone pressed to his ear rang, Lex stared out his office window into the quad and waited for the line to be answered. He shifted on the chair, sitting gingerly on his sore ass and wounded pride, his thoughts circling back to the woman who had him so wound up in knots.

Shocked the hell out of him but when he sparred with Renard, she'd slipped beneath his defenses and taken him down. Several times. The woman had serious skills in hand-to-hand combat. She kept her body in amazing shape, earning his grudging respect. And he had carnal knowledge of every sexy inch of her body. He'd tested her flexibility and strength in a variety of ways. She never failed to please and impress.

Respecting someone you hate shouldn't be possible. Caring about them—no fucking way. And yet somehow, she'd gotten to him, no matter how ridiculous he found the idea.

Renard had a great military record but reading a file didn't give you the whole picture. You had to talk to others who knew the person and observe their actions. Every single person he'd called couldn't speak highly enough about her.

As if on cue, Renard stepped out into the quad. She stopped in a shaft of sunlight and her head dropped back between her shoulders. Undertones of blue glistened from within the glossy strands of black hair. She took a deep breath, causing her breasts to lift toward the sky as if in offering to the gods. A tingling awareness skittered through Lex's body.

He may not like her, but he wanted her. Bad!

"Yo."

"Hey, Gunny. This is Sergeant McLean."

"McLean, hey man. Been a long time. How're you doing?"

"Good, thanks. Listen, I need some information on a jarhead you worked with a while back."

"Anything you need."

Lex knew he'd be able to get an honest assessment of Renard from Gunnery Sergeant Ramirez. They'd met while serving in Iraq, the Sunni Triangle. After pulling a wounded Ramirez out of the line of fire, Lex had delivered treatment doctors later insisted had saved his leg from amputation. It was those kinds of bonds, forged in battle, a man could trust.

He continued to watch Renard as she neared a PFC working in the hot sun, struggling with his task of dismantling a section of broken sidewalk. She didn't continue walking and ignore the grunt or his menial task as everyone else did. Not Renard. She stopped, studied his efforts and using simple body mechanics, showed him an easier, more effective way to complete his job.

And this wasn't the first time. He'd seen her commit multiple acts of random kindness, making it increasingly harder for Lex to hate her.

"You were in Afghanistan, the Kunar province, with Lance Corporal Renard—"

"Hell yes, I was," Ramirez interrupted. "There's no one else I'd rather have at my side going into bad shit. Not even you...no offense. You won't find a stronger, more honorable or skilled soldier out there, male or female.

"Our team got blindsided. Renard ran right into it, drew the insurgents' fire, allowing everyone to get out. Except Renard, she got pinned down and captured. I was part of the extraction team that went in after her. She was in bad shape after being held for several days and still she managed to hump out a wounded soldier—one who'd been sent to rescue her."

Ramirez's version of the incident confirmed what he'd already heard and explained Renard's long list of commendations and medals. What impressed him the most was the loyalty she inspired in other hardened soldiers.

"You get the chance to work with Shira, don't pass it up. And when you see her, give her a big juicy kiss and tell her Rico says hi."

Lex wasn't aware of the snarl rumbling through his chest until Ramirez started laughing.

“Ah, so you’ve already gotten a taste of sweet Shira. I owe you, McLean, but hurt her and there’s nowhere you can run that I won’t find you. And when I do, I’ll reach down your throat, grab your balls and yank them out. Then I’ll teach you the real meaning of pain. *Comprende, amigo?*”

Oh he understood all right. And he had no doubt the Gunny would follow through.

“I hear you, Gunny, loud and clear.”

“Good, then you won’t fuck this up.”

That still remained to be seen.

Chapter Five

Forty-nine. Fifty.

Falling back, Shira dangled upside down, knees hooked over a horizontal bar. The taxed muscles of her abdomen quivered after the brutal set of vertical crunches but her workout was far from over. She pulled herself up, grabbed the chin-up bar, untangled her legs and dropped to the floor. After downing some water, she picked up a jump rope to get her lower body warmed up before starting on lunges and squats.

As distraction techniques went, some hard exercise was usually all it took to clear her mind. But even the tried-and-true method failed under the pressure and her thoughts kept circling straight back to Lexilicious.

For two days they'd been almost inseparable. They ate together, planned the mission, fucked, sparred, worked with Becca, fucked some more. He even intruded upon her showers. In theory, she should be enjoying this peaceful time alone instead of working her body past the point of exhaustion in a lame attempt to ease her restless anxiety.

So much for theories.

No matter how hard she pushed her body her mind still raced, hitting her with over a thousand thoughts of Lex per minute. She worried how things were going with the general. Had he passed the test? Remained in control of the wolf? Would he be permitted to go on the mission?

What about after the mission? Would he drop her faster than a bad habit? Was it just convenient sex to him or did it mean more? And when the hell has it started meaning more to her?

All questions she refused to voice aloud.

God, what had happened to her? All of this was so not her. In the past, she'd run from intimacy. When the sex was over, she was the first one in the shower then out the door. Not with Lex. The sticky, messy aftermath of sex didn't bother her when he lay by her side. Neither did the lack of privacy or personal space. Quite the opposite. She slept better when he passed out in her bed, his loud snores ringing in her ears. Even his gruff attitude turned her on.

Lex had gotten under her thick skin, become an addiction. One she didn't know how she would survive without.

The gym door burst open and hit the wall with a resounding bang. Startled, Shira lost track of the rope, which got tangled up in her feet. Last thing she saw on the way down—before she face planted onto the blue mat—was Lex's feral grin.

The truth pounded her harder than the floor, knocking the breath right out of her. Didn't matter the blond surfer dude wasn't anywhere close to her type. Contradictory to how the jerk annoyed the hell out of her. Not even the awareness that he fundamentally hated her made a difference. She'd gone and done the unthinkable and fallen for the jerk.

Aw shit! Idiot!

Big hands grabbed her under the arms and pulled Shira onto unsteady legs, holding her up as she wobbled.

"What the hell, Renard? You overdid it, didn't you?"

He muttered several choice curses under his breath. Gathering the last of her strength, she flattened both hands on his chest and shoved. When he didn't budge it pissed her off.

"How are you going to hold up your end of things on this mission when you can't even fucking stand up?"

Her? He worried about her fitness to complete the mission? Ha! Funny when it was Lex the general had doubts about. Why the hell couldn't she hate him? Sure would make her life simpler, not that she ever took the easy route.

“I’ll be fine after a soak in the hot tub. You just worry about yourself and keeping the wolf in check.”

Ooh, score. Direct hit!

His forehead furrowed and his gaze narrowed. She noticed his jaw had clenched tight as the hands holding her up fisted the material of her sports bra. Lex shoved her toward the locker room and followed right on her heels.

“We’re gonna have to rub those muscles down or you’ll be useless to the team.”

He wanted to do a lot more than rub her down. As usual, shifting had left Lex with the profound need to fuck Renard senseless.

Thinking about rubbing all that lean sinew, oiled fingers sliding over petal-soft skin, gave him an instant hard-on. He was helpless to do anything other than fuck her...again.

God, his head was messed up. He hated her, wanted payback for what she’d done to him. And yet he fucked her every chance he got. Justified using her because this situation was all her fault. If she hadn’t injected him none of this would’ve happened.

Keep repeating ‘em and you might start to believe those lame-ass reasons.

Directing Renard to one of the massage tables, he growled, “Lie down.”

She crawled up onto her belly and the sight froze him in place. So much bare skin. The sports bra and jersey shorts barely covered anything, and the way the material clung to the full curves of her perfect ass—

Fuck, no panty line. She probably had on one of those lethal thongs she liked to wear.

His sly little fox was trouble with a capital T.

Lex shook his head. No, not his. No matter how badly the wolf wanted to claim her, mark her. Mate her.

My bitch.

“Something wrong?”

Oh, if you only knew, baby.

“Nope, not a thing.”

After sliding off her running shoes and socks, he grabbed a bottle of massage oil and started with her feet. She purred when the pad of his thumb slid along her arch, which had him groaning. This was going to be pure torture.

“Oh damn. That feels so good.”

Lex ground his teeth and continued to work her muscles, blocking out the smooth glide of sinew beneath his fingers.

Think about something else. You can't jump her bones every other minute.

Why the fuck not? He had no answer for that one.

Her breathing slowed and she made the sexiest noises as he worked her thigh muscles. His erection pressed against his zipper, aching to sink into the tight, hot, wet clasp of her pussy. Or better yet, her ass. He'd wanted to get inside her gorgeous ass since the first time he saw her.

Think about something else. Anything else.

They could be walked in on at any moment so he had to stay in check. Deciding to avoid temptation, he skipped over that lush ass and moved on to massage her arms, shoulders and back.

He still needed more answers about Renard and the best way to get them would be to ask. “The general told me the anesthesia they used gave you hallucinations.” Her entire body tensed. “What did you hallucinate?”

Rolling to her back, Shira searched Lex's light brown eyes. All the wonderful gooeey arousal his talented fingers had stirred went right out the window. She had known the questions would come sooner or later. Clearing the air between them would be a relief.

“Medications have always hit me hard but the anesthesia...shit. The stuff fucked with my head. When I woke up, every instinct—everything I saw, heard and smelled—

told me I was back in Afghanistan.” There was no controlling the shudders that raced through her. She didn’t even try.

Shira met his hard gaze head on, not flinching from the anger tightening his expression. “I heard the insurgents’ voices and had no doubt I’d been recaptured, even though it didn’t make sense because I had no memory of going back to the Middle East. But it was so real and everything was exactly the same.” She shrugged. “I did what I’ve been trained to do.”

For several minutes he didn’t speak. Then he surprised the hell out of her by pushing her upper body back down on the table and resuming his massage of her arms.

“Did you know what was in the syringes?” His voice had deepened, turned raspy.

“I assumed I’d been drugged because I didn’t feel right and my vision was fuzzy. Figured the syringes held more of the drug. And the needles were the closest thing to a weapon I found. Lex—”

She sat up and grabbed his hand. “I would never intentionally go after a U.S. soldier. And after everything I’ve been through since Weltman injected me, I wouldn’t deliberately inflict the same misery on my worst enemy.”

God, I’m so sorry. I love you. Please...forgive me.

For now, those sentiments, no matter how heartfelt, were better left unsaid.

When he turned away her heart shattered and her lungs burned. She wanted to reach out to him, hold him close. Comfort him. She was afraid to move, barely breathed.

Without a word, Lex’s calloused fingers began to work on her quads. Lying back again, she tried to relax. She knew acceptance would take time and forgiveness may never be possible.

Damn, even with their serious conversation, his touch had a profound effect. Especially when his fingers were a mere inch or two from her soaking wet pussy. She hissed as his knuckles brushed against her swollen lips.

Had to be accidental.

“You’re wet, baby.”

Without warning, he grabbed her shorts and whipped them and her panties down her legs, shoving her knees apart in the process.

“I love that you keep this pretty pussy bare. Such a fucking turn-on.”

Two fingers slid along her slit and slammed deep into her core. His palm rubbed against her clit as he finger-fucked her, fast and hard. Her hips began to move of their own volition and she grabbed onto the table frame. Those wonderful fingers unerringly found her G-spot, stroking the bundle of nerves so sweetly. Intense waves of pleasure rocketed through her.

“As much as I love fucking your pussy there’s something else I’ve been dying to try.”

“Anything,” she gasped then squealed in shock as he flipped her over and positioned her on her hands and knees. Fat drops of oil landed on her lower back and rolled down her crack. His wet fingertips returned to circle her pucker. Moaning, she pushed back, shivering in delight when he breached the first ring of muscle.

“Ever since I saw that toy of yours, I’ve wanted to get inside this ass.”

Far from a considerate lover, Lex didn’t ask if she wanted it. Didn’t attempt to convince her. He simply took what he needed, leaving no room for her to think, control or direct. All she could do was accept what he gave.

Fuck if she didn’t love that about him.

His fingers thrust and scissored, stretching her sensitive tissues, making room for his big cock. Briefly she panicked, gasped for breath. His cock was huge—long and thick. She’d only ever taken slender toys in her ass. He would split her in half.

“So fucking hot and tight.”

Lex’s palm slapped her ass and she yelped, startled by the loud sound and heated sting. He dragged her down the table and spread her legs wide until they split open to

dangle over the sides—good thing she was flexible—and her pussy rested on the padded frame.

His oiled crown pressed against her opening, which clenched tight. Her instinct for self-preservation was strong.

“Relax,” he demanded.

Shira fought to breathe and made a conscious effort to loosen her muscles. His fat crown entered slowly, stretching, burning. She cried out at the pleasure-pain ripping through her.

“Let me in, baby. I need in.” A plea entered his tone, making Shira’s heart flip-flop. Determination filled her. She would refuse him nothing.

The second ring of muscle loosened and in one firm stroke, he hilted deep in her ass.

Sweet Jesus.

It was too much. Afraid to even breathe, Shira held statue-still as her body slowly began to adjust and what had been overwhelming mere moments ago was no longer enough.

“More,” she gasped. “Move.”

Flexing her muscles, she tightened around him, which must have been the signal he’d been waiting for.

“So tight. Hot. Good.”

Lex pulled all the way out before slamming back in, stretching Renard without mercy. His balls slapped against her pussy and the hellion went wild beneath him. Her hips thrust to meet him. Her narrow, hot channel fluttered around him, milking his cock, sucking him deeper.

He rammed into her ass over and over, the loud slapping of flesh on flesh fracturing his mind, sending him spiraling out of control.

“Jesus, Lex. You’re a fucking animal.”

The wolf. His animal was close to the surface, fighting its leash. His fingers dug into soft curves, hips pistoning, the loud echo of flesh slapping on flesh. Rutting like a wolf.

How the hell had he forgotten the wolf? The beast hadn't left his mind, not for a second since she'd first inject him. It had influenced his thoughts and actions, shared his body. Hell, he'd even dismissed where they were, ignoring the high chance of discovery and potential consequences.

He faltered, lost his rhythm.

"You're stopping?" Shira shrieked and hammered back against him. "Don't you dare stop."

Lex dug down into the well of hatred that had driven him and found it nearly empty. God, how he wanted—needed—to hate her.

How could she do this to him? Make him forget, lift the weight of the world from his shoulders and make his problems disappear?

He called on the wolf, gave it some freedom. Revelled in its fierce howl. The wolf recognized its bitch and had no issues holding him back from taking what belonged to him.

Mine. The single word roared in his mind.

Hard and relentless, he savagely drove into his fox. Her body tensed, strong muscles clamped down. She met him thrust for punishing thrust but he sensed her holding back. Not that he'd allow it.

Lex changed his angle, rocking her pelvis against the table. Her fingernails scabbled for purchase to no avail. He was in complete control. Powering into her, wanting her to feel every inch of his cock plowing through her spasming tissues.

When she gave in and the orgasm broke, her entire body shook. He continued to fuck her, drawing out the pleasure, losing track of how many times she orgasmed for him.

Finally, with a ferocious howl, he joined her. The heated flood of his cum pumping into her ass induced a barrage of aftershocks. The small spasms milked every last drop of seed from his balls.

Collapsing over her back, he panted, starving for air. For more of her heady scent. God, how good she felt beneath him. Hot, vital, strong. Perfect.

His mate!

No. Lex shook his head to clear the insane idea. There would be no permanence or tender emotions with this woman. He had to get away from Renard before he did something really stupid like cuddle up close, fall asleep with her cradled in his arms, and never let her go.

He had his cock zipped into his pants and made it out the door before the passion began to cool from their sweaty bodies.

Chapter Six

Eight steps, about face, eight more steps. Over and over again, Shira repeated the same endless loop. Pacing like a caged animal, changing her mind with each change in direction.

Go talk to the general, explain the situation.

No, her military career was already in doubt.

Go to Micah Lasiter, another shifter.

No, he's a civilian.

Maybe Kyle Slater, a human.

Even worse, a human civilian male.

Maybe the doc, Becca Southerby, soon to be Lasiter. Army brat, zoologist, female.

And the general's daughter. No, not even the doc would understand.

Damn it, do something other than pace!

Her last encounter with Lex made it clear she could not go on this mission with him. Not with the tumultuous undercurrents running between them. Too much of a distraction.

She still didn't understand what had happened. The man was all over the place. He went from pissed off to caring concern, normal conversation to the silent treatment, gentle seducer to crazed animal.

Jesus, the way he'd taken her—raw and savage. More beast than man. She'd loved it while he was on top of her but once the bastard got his rocks off he'd zipped up and then couldn't get away from her fast enough. And in the process, he'd torn her heart out.

After such intense sex, popping her anal cherry, she had needed more. To be held—treated as if she mattered. Really stupid because she knew the score. They weren't friends or even lovers. She was nothing more to him than a convenient outlet for the sexual aftermath of shifting. A means to scratch the itch.

"Fuck this!"

Lance Corporal Shira Renard being wishy-washy instead of taking charge of a situation—hell no! Squaring her shoulders, she moved swiftly down the hallway, head held high. At her destination she didn't hesitate. Shira lifted her fist and delivered three solid raps to the door.

"Enter."

She moved into the office and stood at rest, feet shoulder-width apart, hands clasped behind her back. "Sir, do you have a minute?"

General Hughes kept his nose buried in the paperwork that held his attention. "Barely. What is it, Renard?"

"I need to discuss a personal conflict concerning tonight's mission."

His head popped up and she was subjected to Hughes' assessing gaze for several long, uncomfortable seconds during which he seemed to look straight down into her soul. She may have bought more of his attention than she wanted.

Finally, he nodded. "What's on your mind, Corporal?"

Similar to ripping off a Band-Aid, she got right to the point. "I don't believe McLean and I can put aside our personal issues and work together."

Hughes leaned back in his leather chair and rubbed at his temple. "I had shared similar concerns. Especially with the way McLean came to be injected and his initial animosity toward you. But watching you and McLean work together this week allayed my fears." He sighed heavily. "What's changed? Has McLean done something I haven't been made aware of?"

Other than fuck me blind? She quickly shook off that train of thought.

Shit, now the general thought Lex was the problem. “No,” she rushed to assure. “It’s me. I don’t feel that I can keep my focus and properly execute my duties.”

“McLean would be a distraction to you in the field,” he nodded. “Fine. He’s cut. I’ll take care of it.”

No! Not Lex. She needed to be cut. It couldn’t go down like this. Lex would think she’d set him up, made Hughes doubt his fitness. Fuck, she had to fix this.

“With all due respect, Sir, I should be cut. Not McLean.”

Hughes braced his forearms on the desk and gave her a hard stare Shira found difficult to meet.

“Your opinion is noted, Corporal, but my mind is made up. McLean may have done well today but I have more faith in your ability to control the animal. Fact of the matter is you’ve had longer to work with the fox and prove your mastery. Now I suggest you go prepare to head out, unless there’s anything else?” His brow arched quizzically.

The general stating his decision meant he would entertain no arguments from her. She bit back a defeated sigh. “No Sir.”

“Good. You’re dismissed, Renard.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Closing the door behind her, Shira realized she should have anticipated this move, more carefully considered the possible outcome. Put in the same position as the general, her decisions would have mirrored his. Unfortunately, Lex would view getting cut because she’d expressed concerns to the general as outright betrayal.

What a colossal disaster.

* * * * *

Cut from the mission because General Hughes didn’t think he’d be able to control his wolf. What a crock of shit. He had more than proven his capacity to keep the wolf on a tight leash. Something about this stunk to high heavens and he intended to find

out exactly what. At least he still remained on the team in a support position so he wasn't completely out of the loop.

Using every last ounce of his discipline and training, Lex hid his anger deep and turned on the charisma. With his patented charm-their-panties-off grin in place, he approached the general's admin. He'd caught several longing stares coming from the specialist and figured she'd be his best shot at information.

"Specialist Kamachi?" He sat on the edge of her desk and gave her a long, heated once-over. "What's different, darlin'? There's something...can't quite put my finger on what, but it's driving me crazy." Taking her hand in his, Lex nuzzled her inner wrist. "New perfume?"

Kamachi shook her head, her big brown doe eyes never leaving his.

"Hmm...have you done something different with your hair?"

"No, Sergeant." She fluffed her curls. "I haven't."

Lex laid it on thick until the petite brunette practically purred. Then he went in for the information he sought. "I'm sorry, honey. I'm such a mess today. I just can't believe what's happened."

"Oh no." She held gripped his hand tighter, scooted closer. "Is there anything I can do to help? What happened?"

So sincere and concerned for him. Damn. His conscience nagged, told him it was wrong to play her. His need to know had him pushing aside shame and carrying out his own agenda.

"Hughes bumped me down to support on a special mission. If I just knew who or what convinced him to do so..." He sighed dramatically and put on a hangdog expression. "Well, maybe I'd be able to fix things, get back on the mission, save my career."

"Y-your career could s-suffer because of being bumped?"

At his nod she chewed her lower lip, leaned in closer and spoke in a low, conspiratorial tone. "Well, a Marine came to see the general right before he had me send for you. Lance Corporal Renard."

That miserable bitch.

He'd hoped it had been anything or anyone else. She'd already fucked up his life by altering his DNA but now she'd gone too far. Sabotaging his military career. Making the general doubt him. *Not gonna happen but nice try, Renard.*

"Sergeant," Kamachi whimpered. "Please, y-you're hurting my hand."

Aw fuck!

He had to get his rage under control before this situation went from bad to worse. "Sorry, sugar!" He placed a chaste kiss on each angry red fingerprint then stepped back. "And thank you. This conversation will be our little secret." He winked on his way out.

As he stormed down the hallway, Lex imagined all the ways he'd make Renard pay. The devious fox had fucked him over for the last time.

Musical feminine laughter caught his attention when he approached briefing room D, the room the team had been using to plan the mission due to be launched within the next hour. A husky, teasing voice he'd become intimately familiar with froze him in his tracks.

"You are such a big baby. It's just a little paper cut."

"You suck, Renard."

"Swallow too," she retorted.

"Oooh, baby. Soon as we're done here."

"In your dreams. I don't do civilians."

"Will you at least kiss it and make it better?"

From his position outside the open door, Lex ground his teeth. If Slater and Renard continued to flirt he'd be spending a lot of time in the dentist's chair getting his teeth fixed. Sure, harmless banter often helped relieve stress before going into a potentially

dangerous situation. He'd indulged in it himself at times. But that was *his* fox Slater was talking up, damn it.

His fox?

Lex shook his head. The woman had him so screwed in the head that even when she made him furious he still wanted her.

"All right," Renard said. "We're go at 1630. Grab your gear."

Lex took that as his cue to get moving. He had to come up with a plan, find a way to convince Hughes they needed him on this mission.

His lucky break arrived a short time after the team had deployed in the form of critical new intel. The identity of the scientist attempting to resurrect the Predator Project would have a profound effect on the team and their mission. It sure as hell was blowing his mind.

"Why the hell didn't we know this sooner? Christ, we have copies of the death certificate." General Hughes reread the classified document then balled it up in his fist.

"The death certificate is genuine. Probably paid someone off." Lex shrugged. "Because of their history with Nanotech and Gabriel Weltman, that team can't proceed with this mission, Sir."

"And how the hell do you propose I stop them, Sergeant? We have no contact with the team to protect us all. This is not a sanctioned op. It won't show up in any file or record, no matter how highly classified. If anyone outside the team caught wind of this we'd all be stripped of rank and dishonorably discharged." He raked his hand through his hair. "Good Lord, if anyone found out I've been harboring genetically altered soldiers who can shift into animals, I'd be tried for treason and live out my days in Gitmo."

He was well aware of everything Hughes said but remained silent as the general vented. When his CO ran out of steam, Lex seized the opportunity. "There is a way to save us all, Sir."

The general tensed and his sharp gaze locked in on Lex. "Go on."

"I helped plan this op, know the details better than anyone else. When they arrive on the scene, the team will do their own recon, which will take time. Time I can use to get there before they go in. If I leave right now, I can stop them. Then I'll put together a team of soldiers who know not to ask questions and we'll take down the target."

"We haven't tested you in the field. What if the stress brings out your wolf?"

"Oh, I completely intend to use the wolf, Sir."

"You what!" Hughes' hands slammed down on the desk with a thunderous bang.

Lex took a slow breath. Everything rode on him remaining calm and convincing the general. "A human would draw the team's fire, alerting the target to our presence. The wolf can get in undetected."

Hughes rubbed his brow, pinched the bridge of his nose then moved in close. Lex stood toe to toe with his mentor, refusing to back down.

"Son, you pull this off without all of us getting thrown under the bus and not only will your career be guaranteed, I'll owe you my life."

Lex vehemently shook his head. He would never be able to repay the general for all he'd done for him and the other members of the Predator Project. Hughes had his unconditional loyalty and respect. "No Sir. It's the other way around. I will forever be in your debt for making sure Lasiter, Crosby, Renard and I didn't become caged lab rats. We all know what would have happened to us if anyone learned about the existence of shifters."

Just the thought chilled Lex down to the very marrow in his bones. Scientists would want to study them, the military would want to use them and the general public would want them locked away or destroyed. All equally frightening prospects.

Hughes clasped his shoulder, neither requiring further words. They both were well aware of how much rested on this mission coming off without a hitch.

* * * * *

Crickets chirped, small animals scurried through the underbrush and something splashed in dark water that strikingly resembled a moat. The big splash was a little too close for comfort. Shira prayed it wasn't an alligator. Or a snake.

Jesus, she didn't even want to contemplate the snakes. Their intel on the area had cautioned about poisonous water snakes and pythons big enough to eat a full-grown gator. She shuddered and eased a bit farther away from the water's edge, swatting away yet another house-sized mosquito.

This damn swamp sucked big fat hairy donkey balls. Perfect place for a mad scientist to set up shop though.

In the light of day, the area was probably pretty with its dense growth of oak and palm trees. Even the saw palmettos were appealing until getting too close and the sharp spines covering the stalk bit into tender flesh. Not even her thick swamp boots provided adequate protection.

In the dark of night, the place gave her the fucking creeps.

A low, throaty bark-like noise aroise from somewhere behind her. Fuck, she really didn't like that sound. Even her fox recoiled as she wondered what kind of animal gave such an ominous call and what it meant.

Keying her earpiece, Shira spoke softly. "Simba, being stalked. Gotta move. Now."

Simba. She laughed inwardly over Micah Lasiter's code name on this mission. Of course, hers wasn't much better.

"Negative, Foxy Lady. Hold your position."

"Can't. It's getting closer."

"What is?" Slater asked.

"Not sure but it's big."

"Hold position until I take out the perimeter guard," Lasiter ordered.

Following a civilian's orders irked. So what if he'd put more years in and had been some big shot at Nanotech? Taking a backseat didn't sit well with her. She thrived when in charge with one exception—sex with Lex.

No, don't think about Lex now. Stay focused.

When word came down to move in, she wasted no time putting distance between her and the swamp thing. She went through the door low, quickly scanning the anteroom before heading deeper inside. Adrenaline pounded through her veins as she headed down a narrow hallway toward the main workroom.

From intel, heat signature readings and their own scouting, they knew four people were in the lab and two guards were stationed outside. Lasiter had already taken down the two outside. He and Slater would come in from the back, secure the four remaining targets and take them back to the base for questioning. The medic, Wilson, would stay with the Humvee and only be called on if someone required immediate medical attention. Since he wasn't in the know, the farther they kept him from the action the better.

Her job was to destroy all evidence, including any DNA, so no one else could carry on with Weltman's sick vision.

Clearing the doorway, Shira could only stare open-mouthed at the bizarre laboratory that made her think of old late-night horror flicks. The entire left wall of shelves housed large jars containing various organs and body parts floating in a brownish liquid. At the back of the room a long table held a series of interconnected fluid-filled containers. An old-fashioned green chalkboard dominated the right wall, covered with symbols and scribbled notes. On a table at the center of the room were stacks of notes, a microscope, slides and vials of blood. Strange lighting cast a green glow over everything.

Approaching the table, she scanned the labels on several vials. *Carcharodon carcharias, ursus arctos horribilis, crotalus...* All Greek to her.

She picked up a stack of drawings revealing strange sci-fi creatures. A frog with bats ears, wings and fangs. An owl with a cat's head and front legs. A shark with armored scales. A toucan with an alligator's snout. Holy shit! She holstered her weapon, removed a compact camera from her pocket and began snapping pictures.

Strange sounds emanated from a birdcage that sat on one corner of the desk. Curious, she pulled off the cover.

"Sweet Jesus." Taking a quick step back, she covered her mouth and stared at the strange creature. It had the body of a large bird, possibly a vulture, with a long monkey tail and the head of a wolf. The abomination stared at her, black forked tongue lolling out of a snout full of sharp teeth.

Hands grabbed her from behind, taking full advantage of her momentary shock. One arm held Shira's back against a flat chest and the other held a sharp instrument at her throat. In her peripheral vision she saw the large syringe held in a masculine hand.

Not again!

Slater's warning over the comm device in her ear came a few seconds too late. "Heads up. Three secured, one remains unaccounted for."

Thanks a lot, slick.

"You don't like my creation? Shame! Egor was my first success. He can't shift but is a great companion. I wouldn't recommend trying to pet him though. Those teeth are very sharp."

That voice. She'd recognize his evil tone anywhere. Heard it in her nightmares. Gabriel Weltman.

No. Couldn't be. Nash Crosby, the man Weltman had turned into a tiger, had chewed him up and spit him out. No fucking way had Weltman survived.

She ignored the shouts coming through her earpiece—something about an intruder—different words from a long-ago conversation echoing in her head.

“Just picture an army of soldiers more powerful than any other. Trained fighters with the strength and instincts of the world’s most dangerous animals. Extreme predators. Imagine how much governments would pay to possess such an unstoppable force.

“We’ve had our share of failures. Some of the early subjects didn’t survive the procedure. Others didn’t maintain their human intellect. They were reduced to animals intent only on hunting prey and had to be put down.

“We have had two major successes, both felines. A lion and a tiger.

“In your case, I have created something a bit different. A hybrid, so to speak. The combination of DNA from two animals – vulpes vulpes and canis lupus. You, Lance Corporal Renard, will receive the DNA of the crafty red fox and vicious gray wolf.”

Catching movement in her peripheral vision, Shira glanced toward a shiny silver container on a nearby shelf. In its reflective surface she glimpsed a vision from her worst nightmares. Gabriel Weltman, gray hair a bit longer and unkempt, same cruel eyes though. And he once again held a syringe, prepared to inject her with another of his fucked-up concoctions.

To hell with that. She’d fight to the death. And this time, she’d kill him herself to make sure it got done right.

But something was very wrong. Her knees trembled, threatened to buckle. Her chest hurt, making it hard to draw enough air into aching lungs. A wave of warmth flashed over her and she broke out in a cold sweat. Bile churned in her stomach and her bowels weren’t feeling very stable either.

“I-I don’t feel so good.”

Talk about an understatement.

Absently she wondered if that weak whisper had really been her voice. It sounded so distant. Detached.

Something skittered across the tile floor and she glanced down to see a big gray wolf staring up at her, sharp teeth bared and growling low in its throat. There was a camo bag hanging from its neck.

The wolf didn't scare her, although she wasn't sure why. Her brain seemed to be shorting out but she experienced a moment of clarity.

"Lexilicious?"

Chapter Seven

A sense of déjà vu washed over him as Lex stared out over the boggy sawgrass marsh. He'd taken a Jeep, then a plane, and a harrowing airboat ride through the swamp to help Lance Corporal Shira Renard. He was tired, cranky, hungry and smelled bad. He had desperate need of a shower, food and a firm bed.

The difference – this time he didn't want the bed for sleeping. He wanted Renard in that bed with him, naked and wet, his cock sunk balls-deep inside the velvet clench of her pussy.

When had fucking her stopped being a predictable result of the shift and turned into a constant desire?

Shaking his head, he concentrated on the mission. He stripped, stowed his clothes and gun in a small duffel and looped the strap around his neck. The shift came over him quick and within moments he raced across the sawgrass on four paws. Other wildlife gave him a wide berth. The medic sitting on the hood of the team's Humvee didn't even see him pass by.

Soon as the laboratory came into sight, Lex sensed an unnatural stillness in the air. Finding two downed guards confirmed his suspicions. He was too late. The team had already gone in.

Damn it!

Forgetting stealth, he rushed around the structure. At the back corner he found Micah Lasiter and Kyle Slater busy securing zip cuffs on three more suspects. That left one more out there. Renard was nowhere in sight.

Slater, first to notice the wolf, drew his gun. "Holy shit. What's a wolf doing in the fucking swamp?"

Lasiter shoved the other man's arm, throwing off his aim. "That's gotta be McLean."

Lex didn't stop to confirm his identity. He ran straight through the open door and into the building. Maintaining traction on the tile floor was nearly impossible. His nails clicked as he scabbled across the slick surface.

Lifting his snout, he found Shira's soft scent and followed, only peripherally checking other rooms as he passed. A kitchen that stank of garlic and tomatoes, a rec room with the television playing the theme song of a popular sitcom, shared sleeping and bathing quarters.

Turning a corner, he heard voices.

"You don't like my creation? Shame! Egor was my first success. He can't shift but is a great companion. I wouldn't recommend trying to pet him though. Those teeth are very sharp."

That had to be Michael Weltman, Gabriel's twin. The true genius behind the science of the Predator Project.

"I-I don't feel so good." Renard's voice sounded odd – weak and slurred.

Putting on a burst of speed, he charged into the room. What he found nearly dropped him flat on the floor. Weltman held Renard against him, a human shield. Glassy gray eyes shifted wildly from one place to another, never settling anywhere for long.

Michael didn't seem surprised to be facing a wolf in his remote facility. The info they'd gathered on him revealed a long history with various mental facilities until his twin had take over care of his brilliant yet insane sibling.

"Lexilicious?"

He made a quick assessment of Renard, who appeared to be in shock. Dilated pupils, shallow breathing, diaphoretic, dazed, slurred speech. Weltman held a large

syringe with his thumb on the plunger. The needle had pierced Renard's skin and a thin trickle of blood rolled down her neck.

Lex dropped his head, letting the bag slide to his feet. As he shifted, he crouched over the bag, blocking his actions from view as he drew his weapon. In one fluid motion, he stood and took aim at the quack's temple. The other man's gleeful grin sent chills racing along his spine.

"Canis lupus," Michael breathed. "And able to shift. How delightful."

"Put down the syringe and I'll tell you all about it. Nice and slow now."

Michael's maniacal laughter flooded the room and turned Lex's stomach to rock.

"Shift again. Show me."

"Soon as you put down the syringe."

"No." His hold on the syringe tightened, depressing the plunger, shooting some of the fluid into Renard's pulsing vein.

Take the shot, she mouthed.

Lex caressed the trigger, focused on the target frighteningly close to her head. If his aim was off by the tiniest fraction, he could inadvertently shoot her. Statistics and probability factors echoed around in his mind while the threat to Shira brought everything into proper perspective. His reluctance to shoot boiled down to one startling fact.

Had it been anyone else held by the loony bin reject, he wouldn't have hesitated. Not for a second. But that wasn't just anyone.

That was the wolf's mate. His woman. He would not risk hurting her.

A vise closed around his heart and the truth hit Lex like a sucker punch to the solar plexus, knocking the air from his lungs. At some point he'd learned to rely on the wolf's strengths and instincts, stopped seeing the ability to shift as a curse. He'd even quit blaming Renard for injecting him and gotten over her part in changing him. He'd used

hate as a shield, a way to maintain distance and hide from the frightening feelings Shira stirred in him. And the wily fox had managed to sneak in under his defenses anyway.

Take the fucking shot, Renard mouthed. He ignored her demand and focused on her captor.

“What’s in the syringe?” That information would be crucial to counteracting whatever circulated through her bloodstream.

Michael’s deranged grin grew even more disconcerting and he was all too happy to share his twisted deeds. “Metaxalone and succinylcholine.”

Christ!

Anesthesia drugs. Lex had no idea which medications had resulted in Shira’s violent hallucinations. Metaxalone would sedate her brain stem, inhibiting normal body functions such as spontaneous respiration. Succinylcholine, typically used in emergencies to intubate a patient, would paralyze her. If given enough, Shira would be conscious, aware of what happened, yet unable to lift a finger in her defense.

Fighting to control the shaking in his hand, Lex lowered the gun to his side. “Come on, Michael. Put down the syringe. We don’t need her. We’ll go outside and I’ll show you the wolf. The shift is amazing, it happens so fast.”

For a brief moment, Lex thought he’d gotten through to Weltman, whose fingers relaxed their tight grip on the syringe. Then understanding passed through his stormy eyes and his thumb slammed down on the plunger.

Shira muttered something unintelligible. Lex had no trouble reading her intention to take down Weltman in her turbulent expression. When her body refused to respond, going lax in the psycho’s arms, her eyes widened in sheer terror. The mental anguish in those blue pools was nearly his undoing.

Seeing his chance at escape, Weltman shoved her at Lex and ran.

He caught her limp body, struggling with her dead weight, and moved Shira as gently as possible to the floor, adjusting her neck to keep her airway open. "I've got you, baby."

The wolf paced beneath his skin, howling in outrage, demanding he go after the man who had dared harm their woman. Ingrained training as a medic fought against the predator's instincts. He couldn't leave Shira in her vulnerable state.

Making a quick search of the room, he found basic first-aid supplies, including an oxygen tank, bag and mask. After gathering what he'd need, Lex returned to her side and assessed her vitals. Shira's panic drove her pulse rate through the roof while her breast barely rose as her body attempted to draw in oxygen. Her frantic blue eyes constricted his chest, limiting his own ability to breathe.

A grayish cast crept over her skin and her fingernail beds turned white. "You're not getting enough oxygen. I'm going to put a mask over your face and breathe for you." He continued to speak, hoping his voice would help ease her anxiety. Holding the mask sealed over her mouth and nose, he turned on the oxygen and squeezed the bag.

Terrified, fighting for her life, Shira latched onto the lifeline Lex provided. His voice helped soothe her and his constant presence assured her she wouldn't face this nightmare alone.

"Lasiter and Slater are right outside the door. They won't let him get away. Weltman's the whole reason I'm here. New intel came in after you left. That wasn't Gabriel Weltman. It was his brother, Michael." He chuckled. "Pretty ironic their mother named those two evil bastards after archangels.

"Michael has a long psychiatric history. Regardless of his mental issues, he's a brilliant scientist. Gabriel had the business smarts. Together they made a frightening team. They faked Michael's suicide to get him out of the institutions. We figure he's been hiding out here fucking around with DNA for the past twenty years, staying below the radar. Everything he discovered, Gabriel took to Nanotech."

She tried to express understanding in her eyes since she couldn't speak or move. Completely helpless, she listened and watched Lex, drinking in the sight of him. Tall, strong, competent and gorgeous as all get out. He would protect her. She believed in him, trusted he'd get her through this crisis. And she prayed that at some point he'd forgive her mistakes, allowing them a chance to develop something real and lasting.

"Being scrubbed from the action and relegated to a support role pissed me off. When I found out the general had done so because of you —

"I've never felt like such a fool. The betrayal cut deep, Shira."

Shira.

Lex never used her first name. Too personal. It was always Renard or during sex, baby. Damn, did it sound good though. She wanted to hear him say it again, only not in conjunction with the pain of being betrayed. She didn't care for that part.

With her eyes, she pleaded for him to understand. She had not betrayed him.

"General Hughes explained how he came to his decision. I know you didn't intend for me to be cut. Still, you and I need to have a long talk when this mess is cleaned up."

Thank goodness the general had made him understand!

"We need to clear the air between us. Talk about what happens next."

Next? Was there a next for them other than goodbye and don't let the door hit you in the ass on your way out?

"You see, I've been thinking."

Dangerous that.

His gaze darkened and for the first time she noticed his brown eyes were flecked with brilliant shards of amber. She could get lost in his eyes.

"There's something between us. Something more than intense attraction and phenomenal sex."

More than sex? Could he possibly mean...

“When I saw Weltman holding that syringe, not knowing what it contained.” He growled. “Scared the hell out of me, Shira.”

Okay, he’d just used her name again so it hadn’t been a fluke. Her heart beat faster but her chest still rose slow and steady each time he forced air into her decompressed lungs.

“I like you, Shira.”

Like was good. She could work with like.

“And my wolf...well, he has a thing for your fox.”

As if on cue, her fox lifted its head and concentrated on him. She stared up at Lex, trying to let him see the strength of her feelings.

“We have this undeniable connection. I want to see if it can be more, how far we can take it. Find out if there’s a chance for a future. Together. You and me.”

Oh God. She never would have guessed Lex harbored this sweet, uncertain side under the hard-ass attitude.

Her heart clenched and tingling awareness started in her toes as the drugs began to wear off. The sensations grew as they spread through her body, similar to the pins-and-needles sensation of restored circulation. She coughed, choked and he stopped squeezing the bag. When her chest rose on its own, he removed the mask from her face.

There were a million things she wanted to say and do. Her fingers itched to reach out and touch his face. She floundered, staring up at him, more helpless than when the drugs had shut her body down. The paralysis from the drugs had been horrible. This was worse.

Warm fingers brushed along her neck to check her pulse. He shined a bright penlight into her eyes then he grabbed a stethoscope, rubbing the end between his hands before placing it over her heart and listening.

When he finished his examination, she struggled to sit up. A firm hand over her breastbone pushed her back down.

“Not too fast, Shira. You’re going to be lightheaded and your muscles will be uncoordinated for a while.”

She wanted to be anywhere other than this horrible place with that freak of nature growling at them from the desk. “Lex.” Her voice cracked. She swallowed and tried again. “Get me out of here.”

“Sure thing, baby.”

He lifted her carefully and held her close against his chest as if she were the most precious burden. Her muscles better hurry up and get with the program because she had definite plans, things she wanted to try out with the big bad wolf.

They stepped out into the humid night. Someone had pulled the Humvee up close to the building and Lasiter stepped around the vehicle.

“Renard? What happened? Are you all right?”

She lifted her hand. “I’ll be—”

“That crazy bastard shot her full of paralytics. Please tell me you got him.”

Lasiter directed them to the open tail of the Humvee. Inside were all six men, cuffed at the wrist and ankle. Weltman squirmed and mumbled into the strip of duct tape covering his mouth.

Shira arched her brow and Slater shrugged. “Bastard wouldn’t shut up. I got sick of listening to him.”

His sharp gaze didn’t miss Lex’s tight hold on her or the way her head rested on his broad chest. “You okay?”

“I’m fine...now.”

Wilson stepped forward, reached out toward her and froze as Lex growled.

“Not a smart idea unless you want to pull back a bloody stump,” Lasiter warned.

The medic cursed under his breath and headed for the safety of the vehicle.

“I take it you’re not riding back with us.”

Slater's words were more statement than question but Lex answered anyway. "We've got our own transport."

Lasiter and Slater would take the suspects back to the general for questioning. She and Lex would be expected to report for debriefing too.

"Tell the general..."

What?

She had no idea what explanation would smooth over a delay in their return to base.

"We'll tell him the drugs made immediate travel impossible and McLean stayed behind to make sure you're okay," Lasiter offered. "May even take a day or so before you're up to the trip."

Damn quick for a civilian. Shira grinned.

"Still," Slater cautioned, "I wouldn't suggest being AWOL for long. The general's not the most patient man. He's going to want to see you for himself to make sure you're all right."

Lex nodded. "Thanks. I owe you one."

"No," Lasiter corrected, gripping Lex's shoulder. "Now we're even." He shot her a knowing glance. "Consider this payback for protecting my mate."

Chapter Eight

Red taillights disappeared around a curve. Not willing to let Shira go, Lex carried her away from the lab and deep into the heart of the swamp.

"I can walk. I'm not an invalid."

"Um-hm," he agreed and continued to hold her close. Shira was a strong woman, both physically and mentally, yet in his arms she felt soft and delicate. He didn't want to ever put her down.

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace we won't be disturbed."

"Um, but you're going farther into the swamp."

"Um-hm."

She swallowed hard. "That's where the gators and snakes are."

"So."

"So," she echoed in disbelief. "Lex, they're dangerous."

"Yeah, and so am I."

That shut her up but not for long.

"I'm afraid of them."

Her whispered confession almost made him pause. He smiled down at her indulgently. "I'll protect you."

She smacked his chest and breathed a frustrated sigh. "You're such a caveman."

Ouch!

The barb stung deep. He was trying to be romantic, damn it. Find a quiet, pretty spot to sit and hold her, watch the sunrise. He wasn't that much of an ape. When he

wanted to, Lex could turn on the charm. Of course, considering how he'd treated her over the past several weeks, she had every right to doubt him.

Well, he'd just have to prove her wrong. Shame he didn't have any flowers, wine or candles in his pack.

He continued to carry Shira until he discovered a small prairie bordering a shallow channel. Setting her down at the base of a large palm tree, he gathered kindling and started a fire. Not candles but it would have to do. At least it would help with the chill in the air. The idea was to get her soft and relaxed for him, not cold, tense and terrified of other predators. He was the only predator getting anywhere near her.

Sharp blue eyes watched his every move from beneath a thick sweep of dark lashes. Once he established a small blaze, Lex sat next to Shira and drew her back into his arms. "That will keep the little beasties away."

"And what about the big beastie?"

"Sorry, I'm afraid you're stuck with the wolf, Shira."

"Say it again." She spoke so softly he almost didn't hear her.

"Say what?"

"My name. I like hearing you say it."

"I've said your name before —"

"Uh-uh." She shook her head. "In bed I'm baby and out of it I'm Renard."

"Ah, back when I was being a callous dick."

"I never —"

"Called me a callous dick," he interrupted. "Not to my face, no."

Her lips clamped shut, forming a thin pale line. Shit! He was fucking this up. He sighed. "I'm sorry. I don't want to fight."

"I know. It's part of your nature to be contrary."

Damn if she didn't have him all figured out. "Can we start over? I've been a complete shit toward you. I'd like a second chance."

“You have every right to hate me after what I did –”

He placed a finger over her lips. “Let’s not rehash the past. I’m sorry, baby. Will you let me make it up to you?”

Shira stared up at him with those big expressive eyes and the bottom dropped out of his stomach.

“For now, just let me hold you and know you’re safe in my arms. How’s that sound?”

“Heavenly.”

She wiggled in his lap, stirring his randy cock, before settling with her head pillowed on his shoulder. A comfortable silence fell over them, which neither felt the need to fill with idle chatter. They simply shared the peaceful reprieve from the hectic pace of military life.

Shira had to admit that nighttime in the Everglades did hold a certain beauty. Sitting in the muted firelight with Lex as his fingertips absently traced the curve of her spine, listening to the music of the night creatures and watching stars twinkle was rather romantic.

The fox didn’t share her desire to cuddle though. As the strength slowly returned to her body, the animal grew restless. After a while, so did Lex.

When the sky began to lighten, she couldn’t sit still for another minute. Shira kissed the tip of his nose, jumped to her feet and started to strip. Lex watched her, his eyes darkening with lust.

“Does the big bad wolf wanna come out and play?”

He rose slowly, every inch the predator on high alert. Lex matched her movements, stripping along with her. Once bare, for the space of several long heartbeats, she couldn’t move as she drank in the glorious sight of him. Her sexy blond medic.

My mate, her fox corrected.

The shift came over her fast, without conscious thought. One moment a woman stood naked in the swamp, the next a crafty red fox turned and fluttered her tail. As enticements went, it worked for the wolf. Lex shifted, tossed back his head and howled.

The chase was on.

A red fox and gray wolf were foreign to the swamp and although its natural inhabitants were curious, they stayed well away from the pair streaking across the prairie, playing hide-and-seek within tall sawgrass, yipping and barking with a pure joy for life.

Sensing a change in the air, the fox lifted her snout and caught sight of the wolf's hungry expression. Fun and games were over. The wolf wanted to finish what they'd started on the base. And this time, there would be no guards or shock collars to stop him from taking her.

Whoo-damn!

She'd dreamed about this. Hot, wet dreams that left her aching.

Instinct took over and she bolted. The fox would not just bare her belly and submit. The wolf had to prove himself worthy first. She faked right, dodged left. The wolf matched her every move.

Exhilaration electrified her senses. Anticipation made her quiver. His hot breath on her backside had her pussy clenching and cream flowing.

Sharp teeth nipped at her side then his bigger body came down over her, flattening the fox to the ground. The wolf rubbed against her until she bore his scent. Their bodies bumped together and as she rolled belly up, his long tongue slid over and around her snout. He nuzzled her neck and moved down her body, licking soft fur, gentling her.

Finding her vulva swollen, he sniffed her, taking her musky scent into him. At the first flickering caress of his tongue over her sex she whimpered with need. He continued to lick her, his tongue rasping along sensitive tissues. Sweet fluids gushed over his tongue and she writhed beneath him.

Jumping to his feet, the wolf snapped and barked, ordering his mate to stand. No sooner did she lift up on four paws before he covered her from behind. Sharp teeth sank into the scruff of her neck, holding her in place. Staking his claim. She shivered as the broad head of his cock notched at her wet, pulsing opening. The wolf filled his mate with one hard thrust and both animals howled in bliss.

Their mating was wild and uninhibited, frenzied and dominant, similar to their coupling in human form. The wolf pounded into the fox as she cried out her pleasure. He thrust into her hard and fast until her vaginal walls constricted around his shaft, gripping him tight as his cock swelled, knotting inside her.

Collapsing to the ground, they lay on their sides, remaining locked together. The wolf continued to lick the fox's snout, nuzzle her neck and gentle her after their fierce mating.

A new connection forged between them. There were no words to express his strong emotions. No need for words during the loving, post-coital glow. They shared a speaking glance and shifted while their bodies were still fused.

Lex stroked Shira's hair and held her tight until well after the last aftershocks fluttered around his shaft and the knot eased. She gazed at him with love shining in her eyes.

Two animals joining—fox and wolf—had been better than either could have imagined. And in the process, more than bodies had joined. Their hearts were now tightly intertwined.

Lex felt that elemental bond to the bottom of his soul.

* * * * *

On a bed of moss beneath the dazzling orange and red glow of sunrise, Shira experienced a sense of peace, belonging and rightness unlike anything she'd ever known. She felt complete, as if all the pieces finally connected, making her whole.

The fox and wolf had mated, forging a permanent, unbreakable bond. For her and Lex, building a lasting relationship would take time and effort. With the animals' help she figured they had a pretty good shot at it.

Rolling up on his side, Lex tucked her hair behind her ear. "Shira?"

She'd never get tired of hearing him say her name. "Hmm?"

"I know you like hard, fast, sweaty fucking."

"Um-hmm." She loved the primal way he rocked her world.

"Would you mind slow and soft? I really want to make love to you."

Her heart seized then pounded against her sternum. If she hadn't already fallen for him that would have sent her plummeting.

"No." Her voice thickened into a husky whisper. "I wouldn't mind at all. In fact, I think I'd like that."

Lex laid one of his patented mind-melting kisses on her. The kind that knocked her socks off—if she'd been wearing any. Her toes curled into the rich earth as he proceeded to reshape her idea of what making love meant.

Tender caresses and sultry kisses created a slow burn. Lex's mouth was a warm, wet haven, his tongue stroking hers. Their bodies merged as one in a slow, rocking rhythm. Filling her. Joining them.

Taking both of them to dazzling new heights of ecstasy.

With each thrust his broad crown rasped over her pleasure spot and his pelvis ground along her clit.

She loved this other side of Lex—unhurried, tender and giving. Almost as much as she craved him untamed, rough and raw.

The slow and easy buildup created a wave of bliss, the orgasm claiming her before she was ready for it to end. But Lex was right there with her, going over the edge as one then gently floating back to earth in his loving embrace.

She and Lex would face many tests, trials and adjustments in the future. Being shifters guaranteed they would live with secrecy. Shira had faith he'd be by her side, taking on whatever challenges that may come.

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.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Nicole Austin

Candyman

Ellora's Cavemen: Dreams of the Oasis I *anthology*

Enough

Erotique

Flyboy

Have a Little Faith in Me

Master's Thief

Passionate Realities

Predators 1: Cat's Meow

Predators 2: Eye of the Tiger

Rakahnja's Haven

Restless

Savannah's Vision

The Boy Next Door

Trip My Switch



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com