

HOOD

BOOK 4
WANTON WEREWOLF
SERIES

CARYS WELDON



The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal, and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Hood—Book 4: Wanton Werewolf Series

Copyright 2006 Carys Weldon

ISBN: 1-55410-626-5

Cover art and design by Sara Creasy

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by eXtasy Books 2006

Look for us online at:

www.extasybooks.com

Dedication:

To those who find trust to be the hardest part of loving.

Special acknowledgement and appreciation to those who helped this book in its production process:

My acquisitions editor, Stefani Kelsey

Cover art: Sara Creasy

Editor: Cindy Speer

Introduction

By Hood

Family is everything. We all know that, but taking care of business? That's more important than anything, because, you do that wrong, everybody that depends on you dies. Yeah, I'm under a little pressure.

I fully believe in that line from The Godfather: 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer'.

Nothing's simple any more. The older I get, the more power I gain, the harder it is to see black and white. Everything's a shadow. Everybody's a suspect. I'm just trying to find out who's on my team, and who isn't.

Worse, I can't say I'm getting more control with age. I'm pretty sure I'm about to lose it. I mean, a man can't do it all alone. Eventually he's gonna have to trust somebody, right? And that's when he gets it. Everybody knows that.

Prologue

Just inside the door of his campus home, to the tune of jazz music coming from the bedroom down the hall, young Professor Burkett rested his hands easily on Giselle Racini's waist as he kissed her. Swaying with the rhythm, rubbing himself against her, hoping to coax her into staying, he had to nudge his cat from between their legs.

They hadn't been out of bed long, and Giselle already had her coat on. Pulling her long, dark hair out from under the collar, she pushed him away with a smile. "It's late. I need to go. I swear, you'd keep me all night."

He'd already tried every manner of persuasion he could think of, given her every sexual favor in his arsenal of talents, but he still wanted her company.

The clock rang one.

"Stay with me." Ardent in love with his brightest student, he insisted for the umpteenth time, "Marry me, Giselle."

She reached up, cupped his cheek and said, "I couldn't stand to be a professor's wife and live in this town forever."

Sick at heart, he said, "I know I'm not exciting enough for you, but—"

Giselle cut him off with a peck. "Just enjoy it while it lasts, Brett. What we have is good. Don't try and put more between us than we can stand."

He admitted, "I have never made love with a woman like you before."

That made her chuckle.

"You could make money at it."

"Oh. There's a compliment." She tugged on the door.

Impeding her departure by insinuating himself between her and the door, he said with fervor, "I love you. Don't leave me."

"If you loved me, you'd let me go."

"Let me walk you home." There was a hint of desperation in his voice.

"I'm not a schoolgirl, Brett. I can manage a walk through the University Park in the dark. It's not that far."

"Still."

Going up on tiptoe, she kissed his lips quickly, one more time. "Still. You stay. I'll be fine."

But she wasn't fine. The minute she stepped out the door, she felt uncomfortable. It wasn't the first time, but Giselle chalked that up to a growing paranoia—brought on by her illicit affair with the good professor, a man she truly loved, but wasn't in love with.

Every step away from him, she questioned their relationship. Brett Burkett was handsome, intelligent, steady. Why wasn't he enough for her?

She wanted him to be enough. She had tried a million times to convince herself that he was, but every time he pressed the marriage issue, she'd run away. Being honest with herself, and him, too, she'd admitted that he wasn't enough of a challenge.

Memory of his tenderness in bed, the sweet respect he always gave her had her smiling, forgetting her unease. That part was just too sweet. She liked reliving the sensation of his hands sliding over her skin and the way he laid his head on her bosom while he told her about the life he pictured for them. It was cozy, felt good, but too perfect, impossible.

Near the middle of University Park, a sound jerked her out of her revelry. Without thinking, she spun around and looked into the trees off the side of the path. "Who's there?"

Silence.

After a minute, she started walking again, but it wasn't another minute later before she heard a second noise. "All right. Come out. I hate being stalked." She couldn't see who was following, but she suspected it was Burkett.

"Brett?" She hoped he'd followed her, just to keep an eye on her. He did that sometimes. Not that he ever admitted it. That was better than the alternative ... a fraternity group on the prowl, looking for a little fun.

A noise on the other side of the path had her jumpy now. More than one—and on either side of her? Obviously not Brett Burkett. She warned, "Don't piss me off, guys."

False bravado. She started walking again, doing her best to not look uncomfortable, but a voice inside her head was saying *run*.

Just as loud, another voice was saying, *Don't run, they'll know you're scared.*

She glanced down. Stilettos. Definitely not running shoes. Pulling her coat close around her, she watched the path in front of her. One foot at a time, she'd get home. That's what she told herself.

But far behind her she heard a howl, and then another. Then Burkett yelled, "Run!" It sounded like a pack of dogs attacking him, and was followed by an agonized scream of, "Oh, my God!" and then a desperate, "Run, Giselle, run!"

Giselle didn't have to think twice. She panicked. She ran.

She didn't get very far before they were after her. Pounced from behind within seconds, they knocked her to the ground and held her there. Dogs snarling, the weight of one really big one on her back, sniffing her, growling like it would chew into her if she moved. And in the background, Brett's screaming stopped.

"Oh, God. Oh, God," she said to herself repeatedly, in tears.

Why weren't they biting?

Over her shoulder, she heard, "It's her." A female voice.

That made her jerk and try to look around. But what she saw was straight out of the movies. They weren't dogs. Wolf men. Wolf women.

Giselle blinked. They were all over the place, slinking around, eyeing her with hunkered down shoulders, peering at her with great interest. She was frozen with fear, afraid to say anything, not believing her eyes.

Another voice, just coming upon them, said, "I had to kill him."

"Oh, God." She knew they were talking about Burkett.

"Feast," someone else said. A ton of them ran off in the direction of Brett's house.

All she could do was lay there facedown and cry. The voice of the one holding her down said, "She's not taking this well." It was followed by a snicker and joined by the hoarse cackle of other females.

The murderer said, "Fuck. You knocked her down? I hope you didn't mess her up. Hood will kill you."

"Where is he?"

"He should be along any minute."

"Where the fuck is he?" The voice on top of her was angry. "I'll bite her myself." The nose was all over her again.

"He's sniffing around the house. He won't be long."

She felt teeth tugging at her coat's collar, so she screamed and tried to cover the back of her head with her hands. Too late, the coat ripped and she felt teeth sink into the back of her neck, in the fleshy part of the muscle. Sheer pain. It wasn't an instant later that she felt the bite rip as her assailant was knocked from her back.

With a furious snarl, and no mercy, Hood shredded the bitch—to death. Blood went everywhere.

Giselle didn't watch. She rolled up into a protective ball and prayed and then went numb. But she registered the face of the man who picked her up off the ground and carried her to safety. Handsome, strong. Hood's crooning, "It'll be okay, Giselle, just relax, I'll take care of you," brought her great peace.

Chapter One

As Told By Giselle Racini

Most of the lights are off. The doors are locked. There's no one in the building but me, security, a few graveyard doctors and the experiments. I'm burning my brain out in an executive office at Lobos International's largest lab facility: a bio-genetic miracle factory, the place where DNA testing was honed to perfection, where hormone therapy truly evolved.

Don't worry. I'm not gonna get all technical on you. They'd kill me for that.

The work we do here sounds pretty mundane, doesn't it? Not scary at all. Ha. If the world knew what we really did, they'd blow us off the face of the planet. Our specialty is wolf/human integration. We call it Project G.S.—Garou-Sapient.

Are you familiar with the term garou?

How about werewolf?

I can talk about that all I want. No one would believe me, except maybe those who already suspect the truth, and they're the ones you think are nuts anyway. People assume you're joking or off your rocker when you say you believe in werewolves.

Seeing is believing, though.

Here's the thing ... movies, media, books, role-playing games ... those are just out there to integrate the idea, to entertain you with the possibility, to warm you up to the lurking truth. Maybe the makers think they're giving you fair warning; don't walk alone at night; lock your doors; be afraid of what lurks in the dark.

I'm trying not to think about that, how I found out—damn, I'm tired, or my mind wouldn't be going there. What was I saying? Oh, yeah. Lobos International—

Think Frankenstein meets the Werewolf. Jekyll and Hyde. Reality goes sci-fi.

Nothing you ever thought you knew is true.

At least, that's the premise we work on here. Stop looking at the boundaries that you already see. Look past those fences. See what hasn't been envisioned yet—then make it happen.

Yeah. We're working on world peace, too. No. Really.

I'm not seeing all that clearly at the moment. I'm going on hour forty-four. The clock on the computer screen says it's after two a.m., which is about the time I usually get a second wind, only I got that last night, had a third wind about noon, and I'm running on empty now. It would be fine with me if another one would kick in any minute, but I think I'm going to have to go to bed soon. I hate that idea. I'm an insomniac and a workaholic for a very good reason. Nightmares rule my sleep.

There I go again, letting my mind drift to—

Man, I hate to sleep alone. He knows that. Where the hell is he?

The hall is empty. I can see through the glass. Everything has an open feel here. They're all freaking claustrophobic.

I have to keep telling myself to pay attention to what I'm doing. My gaze keeps straying—to the clock, the hall—wondering where he is.

I've been checking international flights for hours, days?—Weeks, actually, only two days on this stretch since I slept—looking for anything that will give me a clue to where the hell Hood's sister's run off to. He's probably waiting for me to come through—before he rewards me.

Hood's my boss.

I take that back. He's not just my boss. He's an icon, the face of Lobos International—a world renowned bio-geneticist. But more than that, he's my nemesis and my heart. He's every breath I breathe, the love of my life.

And every mistake I make.

Even more than that, he's the sexiest man walking. I'm not kidding. Coming or going, there isn't a man alive that has more natural grace. He totally belies the nerd-scientist stereotype. He single-handedly boosted the female interest in the fields of biology, science, and medicine as a whole—across the world.

He does his own commercials. No. Really.

Tall, dark and handsome never had half a chance beside the stalker of my dreams.

He's brilliant, too. You probably got that already. Sorry.

It's just that I can't outthink him. I can't get past his defenses. And my mind is always working on that. But, I swear, I'm gonna get around him one of these days, or die trying. You can take that to the bank. Or you can see me at my grave. One way or the other.

He knows I'm working on something—on my own time. And I think that's why he's so edgy. But I don't know how to reassure him, and let him know what it is. I sure as hell can't tell him that I'm trying to figure out how to make him fall in love with me.

Yeah. Like that's gonna happen.

That would be like, what? Bringing down a mountain? Stopping a raging river?

I don't want to do that, exactly. Just ... make him love me. Which would be totally impossible.

He doesn't trust anybody. I call that the alpha complex. No. It's not a vitamin we're working on. It's more like 'pack mentality'.

Although, I think Amway sells a vitamin by that name. Hm. I should check their scientific database and see who, from Lobos, is working under their umbrella. Talk about your sense of humor. Alpha complex keeps you going, and going, and going, like the Energizer bunny. There's a double-straight-forward analogy. You'll understand that more when I explain about alphas in the habitat room.

Anyway, they sell just about everything. It's no surprise they've got a hand in the wolfy market, too, is it?

There's a ton of name brands in on the conspiracy. Cross-market products. Just think about it. Shampoo and conditioner you can use on your horse, yourself or your dog. Breath mints for humans that you can feed to your dogs. I'm telling you, all you gotta do is open your eyes. You'll see what I'm talking about.

But, hey, I got off track. You can tell I wasn't born Lupey. What was I saying? Oh, yeah. Alpha complex. Hood. I'm never far off that track. There's a man who knows his sex, and how to use it.

So, any guy at the top of a pack is gonna be looking over his shoulder, because there's always somebody on his tail, somebody wanting his tail—for one reason or another. It's all instinct: kill, eat, screw. Gotta kill to eat. Gotta eat to get your strength up so you can screw and kill some more. Totally a dog eat dog world.

Luckily, they've worked on getting civilized. They have a cafeteria at Lobos now.

But—the same thing's true with the bitches around here. Everybody wants to be top bitch. There's a whole lot of backbiting. Not that that's all that different from any other kind of woman. Anyhow, I steer clear. I mean, I wasn't born a wolf. Or a shifter. Sure as hell wasn't born a garou. So, thank God, I don't think like they do.

I might sound crazy, but I have some sanity left. The rest went the night I was attacked. The night I was made into a werewolf.

That was pressed on me. Bitten into me.

Okay, thinking about that gives me the shivers. The nightmares. Damn, I'm tired.

What I'm beating around the bush is ... I'm not at Lobos by accident. And the whole werewolf-biting thing you see in the movies? That's bull. Garou are a helluva lot smarter than the Hollywood version. They don't snag a victim without a little forethought.

First of all, they call the bitten the unnaturals. Most of them go nuts and end up being hunted down and put down. And that's no good for anybody. Could end up exposing the whole can of worms. They can't have that.

No. I was handpicked, plucked from the international genetic database as a good match for breeding, for the DNA acceptance program. That's what they call those of us that won't go insane from the bite. Yep. You get what I'm telling you, right? Selective breeding and integration. Better brush up on your genetic basics. Maybe get your DNA run. Learn a little more about pedigrees. But don't call the AKC. They don't care about breeding—not like I'm talking about.

You know about the A.K.C., American Kennel Club, don't you? They think they're keeping track of all the good dogs, registering the bloodlines. Ha. They don't even have a clue.

Before long, there will be DNA scanners everywhere instead of metal detectors. Crazy, huh?

So, yeah ... tested at birth, put on a list, watched. Mentors put in my path. Damn my mama for going to a hospital.

I know. That's a little scary. They're 'chipping' babies now. That way they can track them by radar, and satellite, not just by paperwork and scent. That's another reason why it's not smart to sleep. It only takes a few seconds to put one of those little puppies in.

Anyhow, if I get pregnant, I'm disappearing into the night. You can bet I'm not putting my kid on the list. Well ... that is ... unless it's Hood's.

He'd kill me if I ran off on him. Hunt me down and frigging rip my head off.

Not that he cares about me. But he'd care if I got pregnant.

High I.Q., specific physical requirements. Selected specially for the program.

I wonder who I've been assigned to. I know they've got me lined up for somebody unique. Hood's keeping too close an eye on me. I thought it was this guy named Jack that they brought in, but I was

wrong.

They hooked him up with Hood's sister, Fera. That was about the biggest surprise I've had in a long while—ever since I got bitten.

See how tired I am? The nightmare wants to sneak up on me while my eyes are open now. Ah, I'm rubbing them again.

I've gotta find that bitch before somebody else does. Not just to get Hood's appreciation, either. I could just strangle Jack for running off with her. I might, if I can, hunt them down. He better pray it's not on a full moon. He'll be a dead man if I go crinos on him.

The flight lists are endless, blurring together. I'm seriously falling asleep at the keyboard.

Whoosh. The electronically controlled door startles me, but I don't have to turn around to know who walked in. There's a creep climbing up my back. One of those static impulses that make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up? It's gotta be Hood. He's the only one that does that to me. He probably thinks I'm ignoring him, but I'm tuned into every single move he makes.

Closing my eyes briefly, I struggle for composure, steel myself for the next attack. Oh, he doesn't full frontal you. He's way too smooth for that. Testing me. Seeing what I'll do for him. Pushing me to the limit.

I want to rip his throat out.

Every step he takes, I have to inhale. *Breathe, girl. Don't let him know what he does to you.*

Stretching my neck a little, I spare a glance in his direction. Damn. Even to my tired eyes, he looks hot. All I can manage is, “Hood. Nice of you to drop by,” but I'm thinking how much I hate him. I mean, he knows I've been waiting for him.

For two freaking days.

He's too calculating, knows which of my buttons to push. Slipping up behind me, he puts his hands on my shoulders and starts to massage. That stiffens my back, and my resolve to resist.

"Relax." His voice is velvet, coaxing and his fingers, they're just—heaven. “Any luck?”

"No." I can't think when he's near me. The only thing that goes through my brain is, how can I get him to fall in love with me? Trust me? Want me for more than a romp?

The hands dig deeper, forcing the tension from my muscles. It's all I can do not to melt under his touch. And he's just warming up.

Yeah. We sleep together. His familiarity gives it away, doesn't it? He expects it. I never turn him down.

I'm all in, but he doesn't get it.

I wish I knew what he thought.

Click. Click. Click. Page down. Keep working. Don't let him distract you.

I want to ask where he's been. I'm pretty sure he went to Pack City—the wolf reserve we set up in North America. P.C. is what we call it, not the name the public uses for it. Can't divulge that. It's a neutral zone for werewolves to heal up, find asylum. I won't go into the politics, but suffice it to say that Jack pulled a big fucking no-no when he stole Fera out of there. He's got the whole damn pack of garou, the *whole* pack, up in arms. I know they're gearing up to hunt him down. That's why I've got to find them first. They're gonna climb off an airplane or a boat somewhere and face a frigging death squad.

I'm not just looking out for their lives. I have other reasons why I need to be the one to find them first. Not to mention Hood would reward me big time for that.

That thought literally makes me wet.

Who's purring? Me? Or him? I swear he can smell every change in my body chemistry. Gotta distract him.

He doesn't talk a lot, actually. A man of action. One of those guys who carries silence around like a gun, so you end up running your mouth, telling him everything you know? That's the big grip a girl has to learn. How to play poker with a straight face.

Getting him to talk is a trick in itself. So, conversation—

"Ah, man, you can keep that up all night." It came out on a sigh, I know, but I can't help it. He's doing magic on me. It was the best I could come up with.

Never stopping, he leans to my ear and kisses just below it, pausing to inhale right before he does it. That's the wolf in him. Always gotta appreciate. How sexy is that?

I'm telling you, there is no defense from a garou in a mood, and I can tell by his approach what he wants. As much as he'd like me to find his sister, Hood is all over being a man with instinct in overdrive.

He probably smelled me the minute he walked in the door on the bottom floor. I was down there just a little bit ago, getting a little fresh air. Watching the parking lot for him, wondering where he was.

I'm always thinking about sex with him. Hot and hungry. Lonely and needing attention from him. No one else really does it for me. So what if he sniffs a bit, catches a whiff, then beelines it for me because that's in the air? Or because sex is one of his main drives? I'm cool with it. I mean, I'll take what I can get.

Trying real hard to pretend disinterest, I shrug, click another screen.

Thank God he doesn't stop.

His lips trail down my throat, forcing me to close my eyes, tip my head and moan. He answers that with a little growl. One of those things that come from deep down in his ribcage. I can tell he's just starting to get his fire going.

I've gotta make him work for it. Fighting the urge to turn into his arms, I struggle to lift my eyelids and click again.

"I don't know how you do it, Giselle." It sounds like silk, sleek seduction. I love to hear my name on his lips.

"Mm." Yeah, it sounds more like reciprocal appreciation. I'm telling you, it's impossible not to swoon. He's got his hands on me, and his lips on my neck. I force myself to add, "What's that?" My voice is husky.

He's talking about going without sex for days. If I'd had it, he'd be able to smell it on me.

Lips back at my ear, he says, "Come to bed."

I want desperately to know where he's been. I can smell more than one female on him. I try not to focus on that. But I don't have much luck. I'm jealous and hurt over it. I wonder if he does that to make me angry? Sleep with someone else, more than one woman, and then come to me. He knows I can tell.

You can't be bitten and not have heightened senses. It's the first gift of the curse. You can smell everything, and from a mile away. And your eyesight gets better. Your stamina improves. Your muscle tone firms up. That may be from your increased urge to run.

I can't say anything about where he's been. I'm not his keeper. And he doesn't like being questioned. It's a real good way to get myself on his bad list. Been there. Hated that.

He reads my mind. So I have to concentrate when he's with me. Reading the names. Just do the introspective thing in between—when he's miles away from me. But still, he knew I was pissy and he thought it was funny.

He chuckled, bit the lobe of my ear and said tightly, “You remind me of a cat.”

I have my own feline type grace. Everybody says I move with something they can't quite imitate. I say it's because I'm a total woman, not a freaking wolf-blood. But, anyway, bringing it up—that's an insult from a dog. Foreplay.

"Fuck you." Click. Click. Click.

Spinning my chair without warning, putting his hands on the arms, and his face an inch from mine, he waited for the full effect of his intense gaze to sink in before he said, oh so quietly, “That's exactly what I had in mind, Giselle.”

It was a battle of wills. I wanted nothing more than to be in his arms, and he wanted me there. But I was mad at his neglect, his cheating—not that he owed me monogamy—and his alpha sex appeal commandeering, ah, that made me furious. It was a matter of principle to look him in the eye, something I don't think many people did, and come up with a suitable retort. It took me a minute.

A long minute while I looked at his black eyes and knew he was trying to pin my brainwaves. But while he was gone, I lined myself up for a new experiment he didn't know anything about. A freaking mind-blocking serotonin derivative. He was fresh out of luck if he was looking to read my mind then. I had to let a slow smile creep onto my face ... about the time I think he figured out that he wasn't getting in my head.

He had to admire me, I think, as much as he hated me. I could see wonder cross his features very briefly before his gaze hardened even more.

As it turns out, I didn't have to come up with anything clever. He surprised me by saying, “You are one fucking beautiful bitch.” And he kissed me hard.

Now, I have to explain this ... Hood's kisses are more like assault. He plunders your mouth. It doesn't matter if you try and fight the urge to give in. Not that you can fight for long. Or that you'd ever really want to.

It's just an act you have to try for. You know, a little self-preservation?

My chair's tipping back and he's all over me, and before long, I'm clinging. That's about the time he pulls up, when he has me gasping and wanting.

Letting my chair come back to upright, he looks in my eyes again, satisfaction on his face. He knew he could get me hungry, licking my lips, and that makes him completely proud of himself.

The perfect time for a good retort. So, I respond with a small smile, and a killer gaze, “You must've been practicing.”

A clever cut that lets him know that I really am furious with him. Brilliant, right? Of course, it backfired.

He calculated his response before asking, “Can you taste where I've been?”

I could, but I resisted the urge to spit. What could I say to that?

Chapter Two

A million things ran through my mind. How much I hated him. How much I hated myself for falling in love with him. How much I needed to show him that he would always come back to me. Or why he should, anyway.

I reached up, grabbed him by the tie. As he pulled away, I came up out of the chair. One fluid motion.

He realized that stepping back would tighten the noose and empower me a little bit, of course, so he didn't give me the satisfaction. In fact, he crowded me, wrapped his arms around me, pulled me up into his chest with no escape, clamped his hands on my ass and pulled me against him with a little more force than was needed.

Things are like that between us, all the time. Sexual tension steals our air, forces us to be aggressive. Enhanced DNA. You can't fight the friggin' facts of life. Once you have it, your animal tendencies come to the fore. Fighting it just makes you miserable. Embracing it just makes you crazy. *Fucking* crazy. Go ahead and laugh. We think it's funny, too. I'd write a book on it, but you can't put that on a cover. Can you?

Anyhow, I pulled on his tie, forcing his head down, so he'd kiss me again. See how we play? I was the one putting the moves on there. Like I said, his air supply was a little snug. I made sure there was no question who was plundering who that time. He could grope me if he wanted, but I was the one doing the kissing. I mean, the real kissing. He might have lowered his head, but my lips—there's an art to softening them up, to making a man want everything you have—my lips did their job. I practice elsewhere, too.

I wasn't really strangling him. And he could have got out of my hold with very little effort. He outweighed me by what? A hundred pounds? Hood's not puny and I'm no Amazon. So don't think it was like that freak choking thing.

I put my tongue in his mouth and I made damn sure that when he walked away from me, that I was the only thing he'd be tasting. Or thinking about. I don't care how many other women he fucks. I know he'll be thinking about me and how they all compare.

Okay, I do care. But you know what I mean.

Within seconds, I let go of the tie and snaked my arms up around his neck, pressing my whole body against his, crushing breast to chest. He wanted sex? I'd give him that, and then some.

You see, if he's screwing around, he's doing garou. For the most part, Hood's a racist, a Lupe supremacist. That's what I call him in my head. As far as I know, I'm the only woman, real woman, Hood sleeps with. Ever slept with.

And that gives me a slight advantage over him. I don't think like garou do. I don't respond like a typical bitch. Never mind that I have their DNA in me now that I've been bitten. I have a few moves he can't get anywhere else.

Hood didn't need any more invitation. He scooped a little, and the next thing I knew, his hands were under my skirt, gripping my ass cheeks fully, letting his thumbs slip under the garter straps.

Yeah, I wear that. Suspender hose. Just for him. Though, I don't think he realizes that it's just for him.

He rumbled in his chest again. A sure sign that he's totally turned on.

Which is really the only reason I backed off to look him in the eye. I could feel his erection against my belly. There was no mistaking the pressure he was applying to keep me against it.

I pretended to taste my own mouth. Licked my lips like I was thinking and maybe not too sure about what I was tasting. Like it was a bad flavor. Or his kissing didn't sit well.

Wary, his lids narrowed. His gaze went from my eyes to my lips and back.

Lying, I said, "Maybe you need to go back and practice some more." I pushed against his chest. Like I would really send him into the arms of another woman on purpose. Yeah, right. But you gotta front. Ya know?

He never lets me go that easily, so, of course, he squeezed my ass and bounced me against him again. I watched his nostrils flatten. He could have been inhaling a full draw off a cigarette and holding it in, the way his chest tightened before he exhaled.

Smelling the heat of my desire? You betcha. Double-checking that I hadn't been in bed with someone else? Oh, hell yeah. This time, I didn't disappoint him. Told ya, been on his bad list. Didn't like it.

Hood grinned then, and I'm telling you, if I hadn't been weak in the knees already, I would've been then. Sheer appreciation filled his eyes, and his sense of humor resurfaced.

He whispered, "You can't fool me, Giselle, I know what you want."

I wanted him to take me. To claim me. To make love to me like he'd never done before, like he'd never done to another woman. I wanted him to put his heart into it, not just every ounce of his physical prowess. But I'd settle for whatever he wanted to give me.

I taunted, "Prove it."

"Maybe you should ask for what you really want."

That had me shaking my head. "I don't want anything."

I was lying point blank, so it was no surprise that he didn't trust that answer. It checked him, I think, for me to be so obviously lying, and looking him in the eye, but I knew he couldn't read my mind because of that pill I'd taken. He loosened his grip and stepped back from me. Just a step, but it made me feel like I'd made another mistake.

"Everybody wants something, Giselle."

I denied that. "Not me."

Hood is the great studier. It's kept him alive a long time. Not that he's old. He's in his prime. His whole life is a poker game, though, and everybody he meets and does business with is holding a card he needs. It's just a matter of time before he takes that card from them. That's why I had to hold my cards close to my chest. Or, rather, protect what I knew. And I knew one thing; that as long as I kept him guessing about me, he'd keep me close—so he could keep an eye on me.

I could never let him guess that I was head over heels in love with him, that I wanted nothing more than to snuggle up to him and give him his precious, perfect, DNA-blessed, supreme race. And everything else I could, too.

Loving is a weakness to him, I think.

The only person he ever loved, as far as I know, is his sister, Fera. And she's been nothing but a worry. I don't think he plans to let anyone else get that close. But then, he didn't have a choice with her. Their parents died when they were young, and he had to take care of her.

Don't get me wrong. Hood cares about a lot of people, keeps an eye on a lot of people, watches out for every garou on the planet—in one way or another. And ... when I say that he's a racist, I don't mean that he has a thing against skin color.

He has a thing against weakness. He doesn't tolerate it. Color means nothing to him. So don't go and label him like that. He wants a race of the strong and brilliant. The best of all breeds brought together.

Okay, he has no use for cats. But you know what I mean, don't you?

Don't even get me started on the bastets. You do know about them, don't you? Cat people? Their world organization isn't as strong as ours, but maybe that's because we're above them on the food chain. I hear they're getting their shit together. I wouldn't be surprised if we hear more about them in the future. I just

thank God one of them didn't bite me. But then, I don't know that they transfer DNA like garou do. Hm. I might have to check into that.

"What are you thinking about, Giselle?"

I blinked like an owl. Innocent. Very happy that the serotonin derivative was working. "Cats."

"You want a pet?" Total distrust in his eyes now.

"Maybe." I used to like cats—before I was bitten—but I find they aren't too fond of me now. Go figure.

"Slip down to the lab a little more often, that'll put you off that."

He meant—go down to the place where they do experiments on felines. Oh, sure. PETA would have a heyday with Lobos if they had any clue whatsoever. We are careful to label all our products 'Not tested on animals'. Those labels should actually read, 'Not tested on animals that survive to tell about it'. Or by anyone brave enough to tell. We wouldn't hurt a puppy to save our lives.

"I could get you a pup."

That had me squinting. Was my S.D.—serotonin derivative—wearing off?

"Do I look like I need another dog lapping at my heels?" I spun on those, walked away, poured myself a drink—didn't offer him one. Took a big swig.

For fun, I propped my foot on a nearby chair, set my drink down, hiked my skirt up, and adjusted my garter snap. He moved like a flash. Silent, deadly, sensual. Next thing I knew, he was up against my back, had his hand over mine—touching the skin of my thigh, slipping his hand toward the inside. His other hand was around my waist, holding me against him. He nuzzled some more.

Turning my mouth into his, I asked, "See what I mean?"

Chapter Three

Hood took my lips in a passionate way and he reached to slick his fingers, inside, you know? Stroking me. I enjoyed that. I made no secret of it. I returned stroke for stroke with my tongue as I kissed him, one hand up behind me, around his neck, holding his lips to mine.

The more he stroked, the stronger my scent got, the more lost in the kisses we became, until he lifted his lips and told me, darkly, "I'm going to fuck you right here."

I knew he'd want that. I liked bringing him to the need, where he didn't care about anything but getting off. I didn't say anything. He unzipped his pants, pushed my skirt up and stepped closer to sink himself in me. I leaned over my propped-up leg a little, and let him put his hands on my hips. I think he had about five thrusts in before I asked, "You think this turns me on?"

He growled, and pumped me more roughly. I'm sure it pissed him off that I put it like that. He came, and he held me there on his shaft while every last drop emptied into me.

With my face practically on my knee, I watched the image in the glass window, reflecting my calmness and his anger. I wondered if he could even guess that I felt dead inside.

Too tired.

He closed his eyes, just briefly, after he was done, and he rolled over my back, kissed the place where I was bitten through my shirt. I don't think he realized the spot. I did, because the scar there is numb, never got the feeling back. So, I couldn't feel the kiss, but I watched him in the window.

Someone else might have thought it was sweet, the way he kissed me and held on to me. But there was nothing sweet there. Just ... possession.

He repeated, "Come to bed, Giselle," and pulled himself from me, zipped his pants in one deft move, and pulled my skirt down.

I didn't even twitch in response, except to close my eyes. I could have fallen asleep right there. Something about his presence makes me feel safe. I swear he's a drug.

Maybe it's the fact that he saved me from the bitches that attacked me that night, so long ago.

There I go again, thinking about that.

Soft, but firm, Hood put his arm around my waist again, and lifted me from my position, forced me to stand up. Smoothing the hair back from my face, he said, "You're beat," then he scooped me up and

carried me through to his apartment.

Lobos is a full community, complete with cafeteria, direct from kitchen dumbwaiters and intercoms, living quarters, and employment areas, among other things.

I was asleep in his arms before he got me to the bed, secure in the knowledge that he'd chase my nightmares if I had any sneak up. He undressed me, tucked me under the thick goosedown duvet and sat beside me on the edge of the bed. I know because I woke up and watched him. He propped his elbows on his thighs, leaned forward and ran his hands through his hair.

His back rolled, his shoulders hunched, and I could see the liteness of the wolf in his graceful posture. I thought he was beautiful—but carrying the weight of the world. I made a little noise in my throat and closed my eyes. I hated the fact that he handled everything on his own, that he never opened up to me. I would've cried for him, for us, if he hadn't been there.

At the small sound, he turned, tilted toward me and touched my cheek. "I'm here, Giselle. You can sleep."

That didn't help my desire to cry.

I reached out for his hand, and took it in mine, and whispered, "Hold me, Hood, please."

"Scoot over." He pulled his hand from mine, stripped quickly, and then climbed in beside me, spooning up to me with an arm around my tummy, letting his fingers splay across my belly. When he nuzzled at my neck and whispered, "You sleep," I did.

At least, I did for a bit, a couple of hours, maybe, before the nightmares came back. Somewhere in the night, he'd fallen asleep and rolled his back to me. Abandoned me to the madness.

I woke up to the sound of my own voice screaming, "Brett! No! Oh, God, no! Brett!"

That jolted Hood from any rest he'd been having. Within seconds, he was over the top of my thrashing, had turned me from my stomach to my back, pinned my hands so I wouldn't pummel him and was saying, "Giselle!"

When my eyes came open to the realization that I'd been through it all again, and once more, he'd come to my rescue, I started that crying that I'd been holding in, telling him in a whimper, "I hate this."

Hood released me immediately, as soon as he realized I was really awake, and dropped down to kiss my temple, and curl me up to his chest, snuggling me over him like a blanket, wrapping his arm around my back. He cocooned me and crooned, "I'm gonna figure out a way to stop this."

Crying into his chest, I said softly, "Just kill me."

His arm tightened and I thought his heart skipped a beat, but I must've been imagining that.

It took me ages to stop the sniffing. When I did, he kissed the top of my head.

I swiped at the wetness on his chest that my tears had caused, and pressed my cheek over the spot. I love his chest. Big, strong, firm. Solid rib cage, thick, corded muscles. It's odd, because he appears tall and thin when he's up and dressed.

Pressing my lips to him, I whispered, "I missed you."

He chuckled. "Because you don't sleep. Tell the truth, you just miss the bed partner."

That irritated me. It wasn't like I couldn't get half the male population of Lobos in my bed. Maybe all the male population. All you had to do was crook a little finger or swish your tail. I propped myself up and looked at him with my annoyance. "That's it exactly."

I could have sworn his heart skipped another beat under the hand I had still on his chest.

"If I'd stayed away another day, who would you have slept with?" His gaze was hard.

We both knew that three days was about my limit.

"Why didn't you stay away another day and find out?"

He lifted his arms and tucked them behind his head, taking his time in answering. He closed his eyes and said, "Maybe I was just being considerate. Did you ever think about that?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I smacked his chest with a small thump of my hand. "You're a son of a bitch, you know?" I turned to get out of bed. Four hours sleep was enough.

Hood grabbed my wrist though, before I managed it. "Don't go. I'm still tired."

"So?" I pulled my hand from his grip. It never occurred to me that he didn't sleep much either when he was away from me.

God, he was beautiful. The duvet had slipped down, and barely covered his manhood. In the dim light before dawn, I could see the planes of his upper torso, shadowed ridges and the spiraling hair that made its way from his navel, disappearing beneath the blanket. In human form, Hood was not hairy at all—which really is crazy, considering he was born a wolf. He sure didn't spend much time in that form. Or

maybe he did—when he was away from me. I never considered that he left me so he could be like that. Not then, anyway.

"Don't be a bitch, Giselle."

"If I am, you're the one that made me that way."

His lip turned up a little. "If you want to get into the semantics—"

"Fuck you." I didn't care if he hadn't been the one to bite me. It was his plan, the whole stupid genetic integration program.

"That's exactly what I want, now that you mention it." Yeah. He's insatiable. Great, huh, to know he always wants you.

I was up off the bed, but that arrested my departure. I stretched, my back to him, knowing that would just turn him on more.

"Giselle."

The blankets rustled. I looked over my shoulder at him. He'd pushed the covers off. Hard and ready, his cock throbbed, beckoning me to climb on. I stared at it for several minutes, debating the issue.

He watched me, but didn't say anything. Maybe he noticed the way my nipples puckered up, or the way I got instantly wet at the thought of straddling him. I knew I could come in that position. Not that I really cared about that. Sometimes, I just wanted to feel him inside of me, and know that he needed to put it in.

That I could ease that ache he felt.

There was an ache inside me at that moment. A need to be needed, to be fulfilled. A little bleakly, I let my gaze travel over him, from his cock to his face. I lifted one eyebrow and asked, "You want something from me?"

There was no question what he wanted. It was on his face, and in every tense part of his body.

"I'm not begging."

He wasn't, either. I knew, if I didn't ease that ache, he'd ease it somewhere else. He was giving me the choice. I lifted my chin. How to go back to bed without losing something?

"That's a shame. I think I'd like that."

"Liar." A little pissed, he said, "Get the fuck over here."

That didn't set well. But most importantly, I couldn't figure out what had gotten into him. He never treated me like that. The whole liar, liar thing. What was up with that? I didn't like it. I turned my back and went into the bathroom, locking the door behind me.

What the hell was going on?

Liar. Last night. And now this morning. The accusation had been odd. Not playful, like usual. More—edgy, angry.

I couldn't hide in the bathroom all day. I couldn't do much in there at all, actually. I had no clothes, no make-up. So eventually, I opened the door and peeked out.

He was gone.

Chapter Four

I took a shower, found clean clothes. Yes, I had some there. Just not in the bathroom.

Instead of going to find him, I went back to the computer, and went through more flight lists. No. I didn't stop to eat. At this point in time, I wanted one thing. To find Jack and Fera.

Getting pissier by the screen, I asked aloud, "Where the hell did you take her, Jack?"

Racking my brain for memory of anything he said that might give me a clue—Jack and I had spent some time together—yes, having sex—I decided to give up on the manifests and called down for security to bring me the video files on Jack. They were delivered on a cart.

Plopping onto the sofa in the apartment, I plugged in the first tape. Jack in the foyer, when I first met him. The next was Jack and I in the elevator as I brought him up. Just small talk, niceties. Not one damn clue to where he went.

The third one I watched was a meeting he had with Hood. I probably wouldn't have been able to see that, if I hadn't been in Hood's apartment. I'm sure they thought I'd called for the tapes so he could review them.

The body language on the tape showed Hood tense. I didn't really like the feeling I got from it, so I thumbed over the others. Hours and hours of Jack at Lobos had been recorded, but the one I really wanted to view wasn't there.

Jack and me.

I rummaged around. If it wasn't in the vault, it had to be there, in the apartment. It took me a while, but I finally found it. In the bottom drawer of Hood's desk. Unlocked. Obviously he wanted me to find it there?

I plugged it in. It wasn't rewound. I had my finger on the rewind button, but stopped myself. What had he been watching, specifically?

Jack and I had done some serious romping, victims of a sexual stimulant Lobos is developing. You could hurt yourself on it. I took it voluntarily, not believing its purported properties, and stepped up for Jack's initiation just to irritate Hood. We—I—duped Jack into taking it. Then I let myself go, and totally enjoyed his company—which, I'm sure, didn't improve my relationship with Hood. I mean, I knew he'd see it all on video. Nothing happens at Lobos that he can't replay.

The tape was right smack in the middle of the sex. Right before Hood came in and bit Jack. I staggered back and sat down. The camera showed us on the floor, Jack on top of me. We'd been all over the place.

Just thinking back to it made me smile.

Jack had been so fun. Made me laugh. You could actually hear him cracking jokes, and me giggling hysterically.

When Hood entered, it was like a fleet shadow. He was fully dressed, wasted no time before he jumped on Jack, effectively stopping our action. The expression on Hood's face appeared incensed, wrathful. I slow-framed it so I could examine that.

I'm sure he was pissed at me, but I figured that he was mostly irritated because he'd been held up elsewhere—an issue in the habitat—thus the reason I was annoyed, took the shake, met Jack, got it on with Jack. Yeah, I was in a mood to irritate Hood, but I won't go into why here. That doesn't mean I was actually expecting him to break in on us. I thought he had more couth than that.

I rewound that and watched it a few times over and over again, tried to make sense of the intrusion, and Hood's body language afterwards.

I knew that Jack had been selected for the integration program, but, honestly, Hood doesn't usually do the DNA infliction himself. I thought the procedure had been scheduled for when Jack was sleeping—recuperating from the wild sex shake.

Let me explain that shake. Viagra meets Spanish Fly, or something like that. The scientists at Lobos like combo-drugs. Jack was supposed to be dosed with it. They really did want him to endorse the product for the open market. He's a tri-athlete Olympian with a high international profile. One of those golden boy types, but he's tall, dark and handsome. Funny, how he and Hood are so alike and so different. Hm. Maybe that's part of Jack's appeal?

Too in-tune to the scene before me and into comparing, I never heard Hood enter. Not until he asked, “You like that?”

"Yes." I didn't take my eyes off of the screen.

"Which part, in particular?"

Hitting rewind on the remote, I backed it up to the spot, right before Hood came in, where Jack slid into me, making me laugh at the same time. “This spot, I suppose.”

Hood silently came around the edge of the sofa and sat down beside me. My nose wrinkled. He'd been with somebody else. She'd been all over him, judging from the strength of what I could smell. The bitch better stay clear of me on a full moon night. I'd kill her.

"What do you like about it?"

I turned to look at him. "Jack."

He didn't like that answer, which, of course, is why I gave it to him. I could tell by the way the muscles in his upper arm bunched. He said, "Jack's a prime specimen, I guess."

"You selected him yourself." Without blinking, I said, "I thought you picked him for me."

"You were wrong."

"Apparently. You gave him to Fera."

His gaze narrowed, but he was watching himself enter the room, not looking at me. "I gave Fera to him."

"For safekeeping? You wanted someone who could—"

"Don't try and second guess me, Giselle."

I, too, turned to watch the T.V. again. Just in time to see Hood sink his teeth in Jack's back. I hit the pause button. "Look right there." I pointed. Then asked, "Why did you do that?"

I remember being squished under the weight of the two men, with Jack still inside of me, and the way he'd thrust more when he'd been bitten, hanging onto me. That had brought back the horror of my own initiation. In fact, I thought I'd gotten the terror of that approach across to Hood, and talked him into drug induction before the bite, plus painkillers to alleviate the excruciating agony.

Hood didn't answer, though, he just watched the screen. It ran on while I stared at his profile, wondering what had been going through his head.

"You'll never guess, so stop trying."

The video now showed me taking care of Jack. He'd gone numb and I was doing my best to make him comfortable, and explain what had been done to him. I hadn't taken care of a man, with that tone, since Brett—but that seemed like a different lifetime.

"You know what that reminds me of?" Hood surprised me by asking that.

I had no idea. "What?"

"That professor." He was reading my mind again. Guess that answered the question of how long the S.

D. lasted.

I couldn't believe my ears. "What ... professor?"

"You know."

Very carefully, I shook my head and said, "No. I don't ... know." I had a feeling, though, that I wasn't going to like whatever he was going to say.

Hood didn't look away from the video. But succinctly, he said, "Burkett."

I gasped, "Brett?"

He didn't have to answer. And I suddenly knew that he'd been watching us, that night, before I left Brett's place. For the life of me, I couldn't understand how he ticked. How did he justify all the stuff he did? Prying into my life, playing God, stealing my world out from under me.

Oh, he'd replaced it. I now had plenty of money at my fingertips, and my work at Lobos stimulated my brain. And I could say that I wasn't bored. But I'd often wondered if Brett would have eventually talked me into that picket-fence life.

"You loved him." He dropped that, dead, between us. "I could tell."

We had never talked about Brett, that night, or anything about my life before Lobos. Except what I've already said, and the fact that he knows I call out for 'the professor' in my nightmares. That's because I feel so guilty, though.

But ... I always called him Brett, not Burkett.

Feeling cold all of a sudden, I said, "Yes. I did."

That's when he turned his cold, dark eyes on me, and said, "I'm glad he's dead."

I knew that Hood didn't kill him, but that didn't make his confession any better. I looked away, back at the screen, and said, "You can't kill every man I love."

I had to block my sudden worry for Jack's safety. Surely Hood wouldn't kill a man that both Fera and I loved?

Yes, in a way, I loved Jack. And, briefly, that flashed through my mind.

He'd been the one soul at Lobos that I'd connected with. Besides Hood. Maybe that's because we'd both been bitten. Or maybe it's because we'd had a marathon sex session and hours and hours of conversation. Real talk. He'd let me help him understand things. He'd let me take care of him. He'd looked at me with gratitude, total, grateful appreciation. Forget the fact that he'd been somewhat paralyzed and scared. But he'd been there for a long time, being integrated into the pack, before he ran off with Fera. I'd had plenty of time to get to know him.

"Watch me," Hood said.

I turned the video off. I couldn't stand to watch Jack, unable to move. He'd been a tri-athlete, clever, funny even, and Hood had brought him down from that, made him dead to the world. All but Fera and me.

Maybe that made me reckless, my irritation. I said, "I would have gladly had his children." We would have had beautiful human babies.

"I know."

I had to ask, "Who's next?"

Chapter Five

"You want me to hook you up with someone?" Hood looked at me. There was nothing in his eyes. No feeling. No life.

I knew exactly how he felt, or thought I did. Saying the words killed me. I admitted, "I don't think I'll ever be happy with anyone else. So, you could just pick anyone. I'll roll over." That's a dog term. It means ... give in.

But I was thinking, and then I'll kill myself.

I thought I saw him flinch, but that had to be my imagination.

"Frankly, I'm surprised you're moving so slow on that. I know the database is full of DNA confirmed matches." He'd explained that all to me, so I could grasp what he was trying to do, and come to terms with the fact that they needed me. That the only way out of the program was death, really.

Thinking to hasten my own demise, I said, "You want me to pick somebody?"

The next thing I knew, he had me on the floor, flat on my back. His anger was a palpable thing. But he wasn't talking. Not English, anyway. Some grunts, straight from feral alley.

Crudely, he handled me. Not hurting me, just—possessively all over me at once. But it wasn't Hood, the man, I was looking up at. It was a crinos wolf. He ripped my shirt with one yanking grip, then the bra, exposing my breasts to his gaze.

In a guttural voice, he promised me, "I'll do the picking."

I should have been afraid, shaking beneath him, but I liked pushing him to rage. I knew what it felt like to go crinos. Although I only shift at the full moon, it's a release of emotion that you can't get any way else. Inhibitions are gone. For Hood to crinos on me like that, I knew he was actually feeling something. Fury, maybe, over something I said—but emotion, any emotion, was an improvement over the controlled man I dealt with all the time.

Maybe it didn't seem like control, the way he screwed me—whenever he wanted to—but that was sex, nothing more, if you understand what I mean. This ... this was raw, honest. I could feel his anger.—I'd have to re-examine that conversation that brought it on—later.

Provoking him more, I shrugged and affected an air of tediousness. "Suit yourself. Just do it quick. I'm getting tired of Lobos." And playing this game with you.

Putting his face nose to nose with mine, he asked, “You're bored?” Before I could answer, he assured me, “This isn't a game, Giselle.”

"Bet me."

Hood curled his lips back, showed me the fangs that had ripped more people apart than I could ever guess, and let out a full, roaring howl.

Yeah. That usually precedes murder.

In my mind, I taunted, *Go ahead, kill me. Put us both out of our misery.*

His ears perked and a little sadly, he pulled himself together and put my shirt back over my breasts. Not that he could actually fix it.

As quick as it had come on him, the crinos vanished. Now, I have to mention this ... it's a mark of amazing breeding that he could do it without a bone grinding, ligament stretching, painful ordeal. That fact that he could do it in a blink of an eye testifies that he is the top of the garou bloodlines.

My own transformation doesn't go nearly as quickly, nor as painlessly. Watching him do it is a marvel, made me appreciate him and his control. Another crinos would have probably gone with the emotion that had helped him shift.

"I can bet you one thing, Giselle." He wasn't moving. Nope. He was sitting on top of me, staring at my shirt. “When you find Jack, Fera won't give him up.”

"How do you know that?"

"I just know."

"We'll see."

His fingers gently trailed over the ripped front of my blouse. The tenderness there made me ask, “Hood?”

"Hm?” He didn't look me in the eye.

"Would you make love to me now?"

So, that got eye contact. I saw distrust there.

And that hurt.

"If you want."

He was always ready to go around me, but it was a little funny, the way he said that, like he didn't really care to. I had to grin up at him, and let out a huffy little chuckle. "I want, or I wouldn't have asked."

I reached up to him, and he met me halfway, kissing me. Like it always was, he put a lot into it. You could never leave his embrace without feeling like he'd given you half his attention.

But his intensity changed pretty quick, and that made me frown up at the ceiling. When his lips left mine and danced a skip over my cheek and jaw, down my throat, it felt too—calculated? Controlled? Before long, he scooted his attentions lower, and pushed my blouse aside. Tender flicks of his tongue ministered to my breasts and nipples and I wondered ... what was he doing?

Usually, Hood devoured me. Made me feel like he couldn't get enough, fast enough. So, this change bothered me immensely. It was the flipside to the coin I craved. When he slid even lower and dropped his cheek to my breast and went still, it hit me.

Déjà vu to my last time with Brett Burkett.

I couldn't move. Especially when he finally asked, "What do you want, Giselle? A pretty little house in a quiet town where people don't know about the big bad wolves at the door?"

What could I say?

I wanted to push him off of me, and crawl away—scramble for a place to lick my wounds, and my pride. A place where he couldn't watch, and see what he was doing to me. Worse—I didn't want that—fantasy of Brett's.

Sure, I pondered it from time to time, wondered what it would have been like if I hadn't left his house that night. But I know now that Hood was there already. That there had never been a choice for me.

He let me think about his words for several minutes before he lifted his head and said, "The wolves aren't outside the door, Giselle."

I knew that. They were inside. In my heart. In my head. Like he'd been inside Brett's house that night, watching us. Always watching, waiting.

Twisting my lips in the semblance of a smile, I said, "Life's a bitch, isn't it?"

Now you know who coined that phrase. Garou.

His return smile had a hint of sadness in it, but he agreed. “Yeah.” He dropped a kiss on my chin and asked, “You mind if I continue what I started?”

That dragged another little harrumph of a chuckle from me. In my head, I thought, What? Trying to piss me off? But out loud, I said, “Do your best. Who am I to stop you? It's not like it's a full moon, is it?”

Hood thought that was funny. Ducking his head, he said, “No, it's not.”

Then I got the full, honest, treatment I was used to. Pushing both breasts together, he laved one nipple and then the other, sucked them both into his mouth at one time. Wolf suction will drive you wild. Remember, their tongues roll.

In fact, their tongues are magnificent muscles designed for a lot of things. Mostly to stimulate, if you ask me. He had me squeaking and squirming beneath him in no time. So much so, that I asked, “Go down on me?”

“I was working up to that.” He didn't hesitate, though, before he was taking my lower garments down and off me, and sliding his tongue up the side of my clit.

It was good—real good. Garou have long tongues. They can reach up and find those hard to reach spots that have you writhing and clinging when they're touched. And they know how to use their jaw to stimulate the outside. He brought me to a climax more than once before he rose up above me, stripping his own clothes. I didn't argue the point. I wanted him to slide into my wetness.

Here's the thing, though. He read my mind. I could tell by the fast way he peeled his pants, the minute the idea flitted through my mind that I was wet enough to really get him going. Remember, he was trying to please me—fill my request. Maybe make amends for the shirt. Who knows?

It's all a head game. I had to stop him. “No. Hold up.”

He had just tossed the slacks and was about to settle back between my legs. I scrambled up and away, licking my lips.

Again, he gave me that distrusting eye. “What are you doing?” There was a grin on his face, but he wasn't real happy with me. Okay, I'll admit, I'd left him—hanging—before.

Well, panting, anyway.

Maybe that's why he kept coming back? I think every other bitch just backed up for him, and let him have whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. He wasn't used to the tease and taunt of foreplay and after-play that I gave him.

I didn't answer his question. I just got up and walked into the other room, knowing he'd come after me. Usually when I did that, he backed me up against a wall and showed me the hard and furious side of his personality.

But I was ready to surprise him. With all those hours staring at the screen, looking for familiar names, I had plenty of time to think up scenarios to intrigue or mess with Hood by. Yes. I'm good at multi-tasking.

The minute he came through the door, I demanded, "Lie on the bed."

So, Hood doesn't take orders. Ever. From anybody. This was totally new to him. He immediately hesitated, obviously letting his mistrust, and his true nature—of being the alpha in charge—move to the fore. He shook his head, "I don't think so."

At an impasse, we both had our feet planted wide, facing each other. Staring into one another's eyes, clashing wills.

He read my mind again. I'd been going to service him.

I can always tell when I surprise him. He narrows his gaze—just for an instant. Then there's a minute bit of wonder or appreciation that zips over his expression, but he's careful not to say too much.

I licked my lips with a smile, letting my eyes flash a little triumph. "Shame," I said. "You let your pride get in the way of a lot of things, Hood."

He conceded that with the slightest of nods.

When he didn't move or say anything else in response, I asked, "What are you thinking now?"

A devilish grin slipped onto his face. "I was wondering how you'd react if I said—"

I got laughing, interrupted him with, "Oh, please don't say 'on your knees, bitch'."

So, okay, he didn't. But that had been exactly what he'd been about to say. He asked, "You think that's funny?"

"Well ... yeah." Dogs and men are so predictable sometimes.

He chewed on his lower lip, trying to figure me out. "I don't get you."

I scooted on over to him. "Why's that?"

"You were going to—"

Stepping closer, tweaking his manhood with a quick grab, I asked, "What?"

To his credit, he didn't jump.

"You're a fucking tease."

"You just noticed?"

"I just realized that you knew I would read your thoughts."

"Hm." I yanked. Not hard. Just enough to make him jerk a little—you know, defensive worry setting in.

"Stop that."

Offering a pout, I asked, "You don't really want me to, do you?"

"I want you to get serious."

Always so serious.

Slipping around behind him, I tiptoed so I could whisper in his ear. "I am serious, Hood." I let my fingers glide from his manhood, over his hip, across his buttocks, reached lower....

Amazing how quick he can turn—in a flash, he snagged me by the wrist, pulled me around in front of him and said, "What are you playing at?"

Chapter Six

Feigning innocence, I asked, “Whatever do you mean?”

Hood didn't answer. Not out loud, anyway. In my head, I heard, *be careful, Giselle.*

"Or what?" *You'll hurt me?*

Don't tempt me.

I tugged free. I didn't want to tempt him. I wanted to send him over the frigging edge. Instead of thinking that at that moment, though, I simply dropped to my knees in front of him. Shocking the hell out of him, I grabbed his cock, looked up at him—my mouth poised over the knob—and asked, “What happens if I tempt you?”

Not waiting for a response, I went down on him, swallowed him whole. That made him gasp, reach for my head with both hands and groan, “Ah, Giselle.”

There was definite satisfaction in knowing that he hadn't really been expecting it, and that, once again, I'd won the round. I mean, he got pleased, but I got true satisfaction, because in nothing more than seconds, he was out of his mind with what I was doing to him.

He'd be going over that conversational foreplay for a long time.

But true to my wicked ways, I got him right there, to the edge of the precipice he wanted to reach, and ... stopped. My lips were swollen from my efforts, I knew. I could feel how puffy they'd gotten.

It took him a second to get it, before he looked down at me. I mean, he'd been watching me most of the time—or what he could. My hair is layered, full, and I'm pretty sure that it blocked his view much of the time. I'd only stopped, momentarily from time to time, to push it out of the way and glance up, get a breath.

Some of the time, he'd had his head up to the ceiling, and I knew he wanted to howl for how good it felt. He just had that werewolf pose, you know? Head up, knees buckled, shoulders hunched, trying to get more, afraid to move for fear I'd quit ... ?

He gutturally insisted, “Don't stop.” And he looked down at me, his dark eyes even blacker than normal. “For Gaia's sake, don't stop now.”

So, that prompted a small smile from me. “Why, Hood ... are you begging?”

There was a long pause between us before he got some self-control together, let go of my face—his fingers were wrapped up, a little, in my hair—pulled himself from my hand, and backed up. “No, Giselle,” he said.

Tongue in cheek, I waited for him to withdraw completely—because he and I knew this was really a test of all that he was. I could see admiration in his eyes—for the fact that I'd brought him almost to that point.

I rolled my shoulders in an easy shrug. “Shame. Like I said, Hood, you cheat yourself out of a lot.”

Squeezing himself, he beat off in front of me. He was not happy with me. He said, “Wrong, Giselle. You cheat me.”

Okay. That felt like a hard slap. One more mistake to put on the record book.

Watching him spurt onto the floor, I tried not to think, not to give him the satisfaction of knowing that I hated myself at that moment. Always trying to outthink him, to be clever. Always losing.

I had to close my eyes.

Unbidden, I thought of Jack. How he'd made me laugh, and never made me feel less than what I was.

Bastard read my mind. I know because Hood said, “Fuck that,” and he stomped into the shower.

I cried. Not for long, just a few tears, and then I got up, swiped them away and stepped over the mess he'd made. *Get one of your other bitches to clean up after you. I'm out of here.*

I dressed fast, and got out quick. I don't think he really believed I'd be gone. I mean, usually, that was his trick. Leave before the next round, get a little distance. Make me think about what I'd done.

You know what, though? I was tired of thinking about everything. I pretty much figured it was a lost cause.

And I'd considered things a long time—ever since Jack and Fera took off—and thought, *I can pull a Jack*. I mean, he made it look easy. Disappearing into the sunset.

Suddenly, that sounded way too good to me. I had to get out.

The elevators at Lobos are silent, speedy. I was in the foyer in seconds flat, crossing the expanse with purpose before I noticed the security guard on the phone, his gaze on the elevators—me. I knew Hood had called down, given orders to detain me. Damn me for not thinking of this a day earlier, while he'd

been gone. I changed directions, but the security team headed me off. Turning again, I went back to the elevators. I could see the executive lift lights racing downward. I knew he was coming for me.

Hitting the button to go up, I jumped into the first elevator that opened.

What do you think you're doing?

Get out of my head.

Giselle, calm down. Wait for me.

Some frigging mind-talking psychic garou in the foyer had volunteered what I was doing, I'm sure. It's like they're all in a 'Borg connection or something. Only, usually, Hood can filter his thoughts so they aren't all in the middle of his business—but I honestly think that's how he keeps them in line. They can't do squat without his knowing about it.

I hit a couple buttons. So he wouldn't be sure which floor I got off on, though I figured he'd have guards looking on every floor in no time. And someone else in security central giving a playby. I could only hope that the loser there was an unnatural on my side, that would enjoy watching the big boss hunt and peck a little bit. Not that I'd get away with running for long.

There was one place I could hide, that he'd never expect, though. I slipped off on the habitat level and disappeared in the foliage. Habitat is a full floor level that's made to look like a natural wolf reserve. There's fresh water running in waterfall and creek, real trees growing—including nut and fruit trees. I wouldn't starve. All I had to do was bide some time, stay where no one could smell me. There were garou in there at all times, I think. So, I had to be smart about it.

I'd only been in there on full moon nights, and that had been crazy. I don't want to go into the monster I become when I go crinos. Suffice it to say that I'm one insane bitch. I'm not sure that the DNA screen was honest on me. I mean, holy shit if there are unnaturals who get crazier than I do. No wonder they hunt them down. I swear, I could kill anything on a night like that.

You're not getting out. The doors are locked. Everybody's looking for you.

Fuck you, Hood. Get out of my head.

Now, this is how calculating I am. I knew that I'd need a contingency plan. Every day I was getting more and more—what? DNA driven? It's like something garou builds up in your system, concentrates in your brain. You really think you're going nuts, because you can see that the world they've drawn you into is maniacal.

The S.D. was developed by an unnatural scientist. A garou like me. There is a shifting underworld I can't

talk about. But I'm telling you, when the time comes, we'll be ready to fight the Armageddon.

Not that I want to fight Hood. I really want to be on his side. I found my stash, though, and took the S.D. and then sat back, in a dark den, one that the lupus didn't seem to like much, and I prayed.

You'd think I'd give up on God. I mean, knowing that he hadn't saved me from that whole nightmare. But, if anything, it just gave me strength. I knew he was watching, and when I really needed him, when I couldn't do it by myself any more, I had faith that he'd help me.

But yeah, I cried alone in the dark. I don't know how long I had to listen to Hood asking *Where did you go? Giselle, answer me!*

He'd sounded a little desperate, there at the end. He knew I was praying, crying, and someplace dark. That's all.

But there's a whole lot of dark places at Lobos. Little cubbyholes, mini-dens, closets, cabinets, beds to climb under. He could turn the freaking place upside down and not find me for days. Unless he sniffed me out.

Okay, that made me panic. I got up, snuck out, carefully slipped into the water, then rolled in the dirt, covering myself with mud. Then, wading through the water, I found another of the unpopular dens. But I knew I couldn't stay too long. Not now that I realized he'd sniff me out. You see? I still think like a girl. I'd bought myself some time, but I had to get a new plan.

Thank God I have a genius I.Q., and riddle solving is one of my specialties. I went through various scenarios, worked through exit possibilities, including everything from trash and laundry chutes to delivery doors and the roof and fire escapes. Those were too obvious. I knew he'd cover those.

And yes, I thought about how silly it was. How I ought to make him look a complete fool and just sneak back to his bed, and wait there for him to return. Damn, I wanted a shower. But something in me couldn't do that. I don't really know how much of me worried about his saving face. Pride, obviously, was important to him, and all the garou.

So, I wasted a little bit of my time in weighing that. How much pride would Hood lose if I showed up in his apartment versus if I disappeared altogether? Or if he hunted me down? Don't think for a minute that I considered he was chasing my tail for anything other than guarding his pride and his secrets, because I didn't.

I did some of the math on my chances of Hood killing me, too. Pictured him strangling me without a second thought. I considered what Jack would do. Go out fighting?

Somehow, I didn't think so.

Find the humor in it? I grimaced, wishing he was there to point it out to me, because I sure as hell couldn't see it.

I considered going through the animal testing labs. I hated it down there. Or enlisting my friend, the one who'd given me the S.D., but that would be really stupid. I mean, if I survived this, I might need more of that. I sure didn't want my supplier cut down—and I'm sure Hood would do that if he found out what was developed without his knowledge.

But that had me thinking about the other unnaturals. Could I get help from any of them?

That could expose the whole organization they were pulling together. I worried my lip over that, and, in the end, decided I couldn't enlist their help. I couldn't endanger anyone purposely. Certainly not the ones who could end up saving the world from the total insanity that threatened.

I heard voices outside my den. Talk about rolling up into a ball and holding your breath.

A bitch. "Hood's on the warpath."

"Yeah, I heard."

"That bitchin' unnatural's under his skin again."

"Maybe he'll come in here and work off a little more frustration."

They snickered as they moved off.

When they were long gone, I snuck to the edge of my hole and sniffed the ground. Oh, yeah. I was gonna kill those two. Soon as the moon came around. No doubt about it.

But thinking about that just wasted time. Air-conditioning ducts? Heat ventilation? I was small enough to get through most of that, but you could be lost for days in those tunnels. Kitchen dumbwaiters? There was a possibility. All the living quarters and some of the labs were set up for quick delivery like that. Not the habitat, though. At least, I didn't think so. It was self-contained, for the most part.

I was about to move out when I heard a howl I recognized. Hood was in the habitat.

"Fuck." Tucking myself as far back into the darkest, tiniest crevice I could, I scooped dirt up around me, practically burying myself.

The bitches, many more than two, set off a few royal roars, too, and I plotted the murder of the whole

damn lot of them. Hood, included. I knew that he'd run first, let them chase, probably nip at each other a bit. It sounded like a wolf pack on the hunt. And I knew what they were hunting. It wasn't me, that was for damn sure. Not then. All it takes is one bitch in heat to distract them for a bit.

Oh, I had no doubt that the full building search was under way still.

I heard noise outside the den. Then the howls again. More silence and the bitches:

"Shit. We lost him again."

"He's been here. Pissed right ... there."

I made a face. Some things I would never come to understand.

"I can't figure out if that unnatural is doing us a favor, or not."

"Shit. I think I saw him."

They took off. More howling ensued. There was little doubt when the running finally stopped. The bitches started whining, growling, snarling and quarreling, and Hood got quiet. That's when I climbed out of my cubbyhole. I knew it was the best time to get out of the habitat, when he was totally indisposed. I hoped I didn't have to go past them. The idea of all those females all over Hood—I think it would have killed me. But then, he was in lupus. I told myself, "You might not even recognize the son of a bitch, Gis. What are you worrying about? That's not the man you lo—"

All noises stopped. Ever been in one of those spots where you know if you move, you're dead? I couldn't breathe. Silently, though, I cursed their fucking wolf ears.

It didn't take long for them to start up again. So, I crawled out of there. It surprised me to find a clear path to the creek. Quickly, I washed my feet. I didn't want to trail mud. My scent was bad enough. Uh, I think I forgot to say that I peeled my shoes halfway up to the habitat, threw them out on one floor, clear down the hall—hoping to make them think that I was on that level.

Crawling on my knees from the creek so as not to leave footprints, I crept through the place, toward a door that I didn't think was used much. I had to veer away from that when I saw some losers—unlucky, unattached males—hanging out on some rocks there. Probably up high so they could watch the alpha orgy.

The habitat has wind machines that change the airflow from time to time, to give a natural effect. I kept glancing up, wondering where the fans were. Fucking incredible place, actually. It looked like the real outdoors. There are a lot of amazing artists and special effects garou. I had to give the artistic ones some credit. I'm talking serious fantasy island, there. Real enough to lose yourself.

Distracted, a little by that, I almost got myself caught. Almost went around the wrong corner—big time. One glance and a fast duck, and I was licking my own wounds. So, yeah. I recognize Hood in lupus, apparently. But then, who could mistake a male with a perfect ‘hood’ on his head—thus the name, duh—with a pack of bitches tonguing him. He was just standing there, but there were heads sniffing his belly, others licking his lips.

I vowed that I'd single-handedly come up with a way to ruin their tongues. Maybe a seasoning that would kill their taste buds? I was a biology major. Or would have been, if Hood hadn't stolen me a month from graduation. My poor parents thought I'd been abducted. Were probably still hoping I'd turn up.

I decided, if I got out, maybe I'd head there. But then, no. He'd expect that. Little girl runs home to mama and papa. Oh, hell no. I had to find Jack. He could help me figure out what to do next, how to break away completely. Or maybe Fera could just slit my throat for me?

No time to worry about that.

Waiting for Hood to climb on one of the bitches wasn't a long wait. But I hated him for it. Tied to her, as a dog gets, he'd be unable to come after me. Just had to tiptoe—crawl—past the bitches. My only hope there was that he had their full attention.

Almost to the door, feeling a bit of relief, I got stopped two feet from it.

It was my S.D. supplier, who shall remain nameless.

"Psss." Very quiet.

My head came up and my heart stopped. I was afraid to move.

It was just a finger and another, almost inaudible, "Psss."

Yeah. It would have been funny if I hadn't been wetting my pants.

He finally had to put a head out of a crawl hole for me to see—there was room for me to climb in, but just barely. Putting a hand over his mouth in the typical ‘Shh’, but silent, he pointed. There was a trap door, open. I went through, and the lid shut over me. I heard scraping noises and knew he was covering my tracks, and the door. I thought, there's a whole lot more going on in the underworld than I would have ever guessed.

I found myself in an earthen packed closet of some sort. I couldn't find a door, or another way out. It felt

like a claustrophobic little tomb and smelled of dirt and piss. Yeah. It was gross. But it was the smell of several pisses that had me curious. So, they'd disguised the scent trail? I wondered who else had used that escape hatch in the past, or planned to use it in the future, and what, more nefarious, reasons they had for it. Murder? That wouldn't surprise me.

There was no way out, at least, that I could find. I was afraid to cry out, for fear of being found. I knew, if I revealed the getaway hatch, that my saviors would kill me. So, as gross as it was, I settled down for a wait. I had to have faith that my friend would free me, or send someone else to help me out.

Hours later, the door opened. The room outside was dark, too, and I could barely make out two shadows.

Chapter Seven

It took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust. Then, I fainted.

Thank God, Jack caught me. But, before I went completely out, I heard Fera's voice say, "You should have let her hit the floor. Might knock some sense into her."

Blissful heaven. Jack's arms. I didn't want to wake up. I knew he'd hold me until I did. I was so freaking tired.

You know I couldn't nap in that hellhole. If I'd slipped into a nightmare, and cried out—well, I'd have been dead.

Sure enough, when I came around, I was still in Jack's arms. It probably only took a minute or two. Fera was straight in front of me, willing me to wake the hell up, I think, because she looked furious.

The minute my eyes opened, she scathed, "Giselle, I swear to Gaia, you're the dumbest bitch in the whole world."

So, yeah, I flinched, and rolled protectively into Jack's arms. He didn't turn me away, but his sense of humor immediately surfaced, "Oh, honey, I like cuddling—but you gotta get a bath."

"She stinks like every pissing loser at Pack City."

Call me stupid, provoking Fera, but I didn't want to get out of Jack's arms.

She peeled me loose, though, and asked me point blank, "Do you have any idea—"

Jack insinuated himself between us, keeping her at arm's length, and said, "Not now, Fera." To me, he tipped my chin so he could look at my face. "What is going on up there?"

Okay. That made me pull out of his arms and spit, "Hood's doing the whole pack—at the moment." He might've been done by then, but who knew? I didn't care that the rest of Lobos was looking for me. That had escaped me. And, yeah, the entire time I sat in that cabinet, I cursed Hood and his freaking pack mentality.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I looked around. We were in a cave? A dirt tunnel system?

It hit me then. Spinning, I asked, "How did you get here?"

Fera shrugged.

I didn't doubt that her pretty little head was spinning. Going from a life of protection to Jack lugging her all over the world. She probably didn't know if she was coming or going, let alone exactly how she'd gotten there. "How long?" I thought I had a right to know—since I'd been making myself blind looking for them.

She didn't look me in the eye, but she said again, "Not long."

I turned to Jack and said, "Thank God you came."

With his unbelievably sexy smirk, he quipped, "I love it when a woman says that to me."

Fera growled. I don't think she meant to do it. She turned her back immediately.

The minute her back was to us, he touched my lips with a finger, and winked at me. Oh, it felt so good to see a man who could just relax a little, help me relax. I hugged into him, couldn't help it, told him, "Oh, God, Jack. I just love you. I've missed you so much."

He chuckled, wrapped his arms around me, gave me a little squeeze. "I missed you too, sweetheart."

Fera growled, refusing to look at us.

Jack's chest rumbled with a little laugh. "Don't mind her. She's just a little bitchy."

"Am not." She prowled the place, though, sniffing everything.

He said, "Shift to lupus, honey. Get it out of your system. Take a run up the tunnel and back."

She speared him with an ugly look. "I do not need to get anything out of my system."

I pulled out of Jack's arms, and said, "I've been looking all over creation for you two."

"Yeah. Hood told us." Fera responded, although she was doing everything she could not to look at me. Checking out the closet door that led to the habitat, she said, "He hates you, ya know."

I didn't clue in on that first part, that they'd been in communication with him. I turned back into Jack's arms. "Everybody doesn't hate me, though. Do they, Jack?" At that moment, I really needed to hear someone say they loved me. I hadn't heard that for so long ... I think that's why I replayed that last night with Brett so often, now that I think of it.

Oh, Jack and I had talked about love, being in love, emotions of all sorts. That's why I could be so open with him, trust him.

Amused, he wrapped his arms around me again and shook his head. “No.”

Fera said, over her shoulder, “Please don't push me. I'm trying to be nice here.”

I could tell she didn't want to be there with me. She was looking for a way out. She opened the closet and looked up.

“That goes to the habitat,” Jack said. “I told you about that.”

Here's something that's crazy. Hood lived at Lobos—for forever. But his sister had never been there. She was immensely curious about the place, the organization, politics in general—his world, and everything she'd been protected from.

I said, “Hood will kill you, Jack, if he finds out you brought her here.” But I hugged him again, and added, “Thank God you're here.”

You see? We all had little pieces to the puzzle, and no clue how to put them together. It was the ultimate riddle, because we didn't even realize we were putting it together.

“Thank your God later,” Fera said, “And be quiet. I hear someone above us.”

I'm not really sure if she did. Her ears are better than mine and Jack's, since she was born lupus. I think she just said that to shut me up. Whatever, it worked.

We sat in silence for a long time, before she finally said, “I want to go up and look around.”

“Later, maybe.” Jack said, “Shut the door there, so we can talk.”

She did, but she didn't get near us. She sat down as far from me as she could get. Why, exactly, she was afraid of me, I wasn't quite sure. She'd always been afraid of me, though. Hood had taken me to Pack City a couple of times, to show me around, and introduce me to the powers that be in charge there. So, I've been there twice.

I met an alpha named Chaos and his mate, Tee. And then Hood took me to meet their replacements, Leer and Kayty. He had me run blood and DNA samples on them. See what I'm saying? Nothing is random with the garou. I had been a biology major, medical science specialty. It justified my presence but didn't really explain a thing.

And the fact that I did very little in the field, in the labs at Lobos, didn't quite make sense. Nothing did, then. So, going to Pack City just disturbed me.

I don't like the place at all. I need to say that.

Anyhow, while I'd been at P.C., I'd met Fera, been very curious about her once I found out she was Hood's sister. It didn't take much to figure out that she's his one weak point. I think my questions made her uncomfortable. And I think she told him that I'd been asking too much. That I didn't know when to close my trap.

When he'd admitted that it bothered him, too, I clammed up, stopped asking about her. Well, until Jack took off with her. That re-opened the whole can of worms. And all Hood had to say about it was, "It needed to happen. I expected it. We'll find her and bring her home when the time is right."

He let me search, night and day for her, except for when we were in bed together. And he encouraged others to give ideas about where she could be.

Jack said, "I thought I'd have to sneak around to find you. We kind of lucked out to find you here."

"Some luck," Fera said crankily.

"Why don't you thank her for the coat, Fera?"

She wrinkled her nose and cast him a bit of a snarl, then rolled her eyes away from us, to stare up at the far corner.

Jack kissed me. "You are so clever, Giselle."

I had no idea what he was talking about. But before I could ask, Fera groaned, "Could you spare me a little, Jack? I don't know which one of you I want to kill, but I'm sure I feel a shift coming on."

Tongue in cheek, he grinned at me. "She's working on a little self-control. I promised to help her out with it."

I lifted my eyebrows. There's a little 'playing with fire' for ya. I leaned toward him and whispered, "They're hard to train, you know."

He chuckled.

She flicked her ears and made a face. I watched her. *She acts a lot like her brother.*

Fera asked with a frown, "What are you thinking?"

I smiled, thanking God one more time for that S.D., but I knew it would be working off soon, and then Hood would find me, I was sure. “Not a lot. Sorry.” Turning to Jack, I said, “Pretty soon, Hood's going to be able to tune into my head again. I can't hide for long. I'm not far enough away from him to be out of range. I need to get out of here.”

"Oh, hold on, here." Jack's kind expression reached his eyes, but he shook his head. “You're down here, hiding from Hood?”

"Well ... yeah."

Fera snickered. “Oh, that's priceless.”

Jack said, “This is no place to hide from him, honey.”

"Would you stop calling her those pet names? It pisses me off."

"Sorry. Habit.” Jack was a smooth talker, and not real repentant, apparently. I think the dog DNA was making him even more arrogant. He sure smelled ... more pheromonal than I remembered.

"Damn, Jack. What's that cologne you have going on?"

"That's it.” Fera leaped without warning, shifting, just like her brother did, without a pop, a grind or anything.

I never really knew what hit me, but I was slung to the floor in a hard-hitting, shoulder-splintering slam, pounced atop by that little bitch—an inch away from her crinos teeth.

Yeah. It slipped me into a déjà vu of when Hood did that to me. Only this time, I was scared breathless. I mean, I knew Hood's limits. But Jack had just said she was working on her self-control still. And crinos is no toy to play with.

Before she could say anything, though, or rip my head off, Jack grabbed her by the nape and yanked her off of me. But her claws dug in. Twice in the same day, I had my shirt ripped apart. Except she drew a little blood, too, with her kicking and clawing.

Jack's amazing. He held Her Scrappiness at arm's length until she got a grip, then he laughed and shook his head, “If we're gonna have a bitch fight, keep it fair, honey.”

So, that redirected her. She twisted and started to swipe at him instead.

I thought it was funny. Talk about a boon to my soul. I needed something to really laugh at. I'll giggle

over that for a long time.

The minute she heard me laugh, she growled, grunted and popped. She didn't shift to lupus, because he would have still held onto her neck. But, in human, she could slip from his grasp. He dropped her instantly. She bounced on all fours, then sprang a leap out of his range, turned, squared, and rolled up to a standing position. She shrugged a few times, as if to untangle the tension, stretched her neck, and smiled at me like I was a child.

"You better watch your mouth. If Jack had turned his back, you'd have been dead."

I immediately looked at Jack, who was reaching a hand out to help me up, and said, "So, don't turn your back on me ever again, please, Jack." Then followed it up with a "Thanks."

He scratched the back of his neck, obviously thinking. "We need to get a few things straight, here." Sheepishly, he looked at Fera, and said, "You can't go after her like that. I'm not gonna let you hurt her."

I straightened my back, and offered a small smile at her—from behind him.

But he looked over his shoulder at me. I think her wrinkled lip told him exactly what I was doing. "Giselle, what's the matter with you? You got a death wish or something this week?"

Grumbling, I clutched my shirt, but there was no fixing it. I peeled it off and dropped it. I was glad I had a bra on. Yes, I had a death wish. Living with wolves does that to you.

Fera, of course, growled, and I know she sprouted a little hair on the back of her neck. I saw her claws, too.

Jack muttered, "Fuck," and he pulled his shirt over his head, threw it at me and said, "Stop it. We get stupid, we'll be dead before the next full moon." He looked up, as if he felt someone just above us, or heard someone.

Fera and I both looked up, too.

I don't really think he heard something up there. I think he was just trying to get his point across. We were on dangerous ground and we needed to get our wits about us. I pulled on his shirt. A great big, hulking shirt compared to me. I had to tie it in a knot at my waist, and roll the sleeves.

Fera didn't like me wearing his shirt, I know, but then, it was all her fault. I don't know which was worse, me without a shirt, or Jack. We both kept snatching glimpses of his body.

There was nothing not to like there. I mean, he was a freaking Olympian hard body.

Not Hood, though.

No real scars, hidden wounds that drove him. Jack had his own issues, but they were so different from Hood's that they didn't compare. Not really. Not to me. I mean, I wasn't blind, so I looked, I appreciated. But he wasn't what I truly wanted.

Blood seeped through the scratches in places, but everything was superficial.

Fera had a touch of remorse, I guess, because she said, "I really am sorry about the shirt."

I glanced up from patting a scratch with the fabric on my upper left arm. I shrugged, "Hey. I'll live."

That's when I realized it was remorse over the fact that I was now wearing Jack's shirt and he was bare to the waist in front of me. I didn't blame her. She obviously knew Jack's history with me. She had a right to be leery. We had good chemistry between us.

"You are so obviously Hood's sister." I had to smile. Then I commented to Jack, "Distrust is inbred, you know."

She flinched and turned away.

"Winning is a sport, Giselle. We talked about that."

"I know." He was right. Everything was a game. You just had to figure out the rules, and then play it the best you could. I had to play more fair. Hitting below the belt wasn't going to win friends.

"I find a sense of humor helps me through."

I smiled again and I realized that I'd smiled more in the short time back with Jack than I had in ages.

"He's a million laughs." Fera said, "I hate it here. It's too ... tight. It stinks. We gotta get out of here."

"Okay." That simply, she made a request and Jack accommodated her. I marveled at it, and wondered what that would be like, to be able to make a request, straightforward, and have my man fulfill it without any razor comebacks. Jack led us down a tunnel in silence. A mile, at least.

There were no lights in there, but we have enhanced night vision, so that wasn't too bad. At one point, Jack told her, "You can run on ahead if you want out real bad."

She growled, "I can handle it."

What she meant was, there was no way in hell she was leaving us alone in the dark together. Jack and I both snickered.

We surfaced in a park, believe it or not. So, what's that tell you? Master planning. Unbelievable pre-thought.

My stomach was growling by the time we reached it, but I didn't complain.

Fera did. "We've got to feed her. And get her a bath."

It surprised me. I mean, like the light of day brought her humanity out. Though, from looking up at the sky, I could tell that it was waning. I'd lost track. "Is it a full moon tonight?"

Jack chuckled. "Uh, yeah."

No wonder I'd been so bitchy.

"What are you doing here?" I knew Jack preferred the habitat on the full moon—so he didn't have to worry about hurting innocents. And I had a suspicion that was his motivation for returning.

He said, "Tried the tundra. Tried the Sahara. The habitat works best for me. Thought I could slip in, ya know?"

"Wait." That's when the earlier comment about being in communication with Hood hit me. "Did Hood know you were coming?"

"Of course," Fera said, "We've got a suite close by. Come." Irritated, she said, "Gaia, I wish I hadn't ripped that shirt. Everybody's gonna notice Jack."

"Well, yeah." I kind've laughed. "It's not like you can miss his physique when he's got his clothes on, but ___"

Totally annoyed, she rounded on me, "Shut the fuck up, would you?"

We moved in silence for a few minutes before I said, "Why don't you go on up and get a shirt and come back?"

"Well, for one, you dumb-ass bitch, I'm not leaving you two alone."

"I'm not letting her out of my sight." Jack's voice sounded very protective. I loved the way he said it. I don't care that he was talking about her. You have to love a man who makes no secret of his affection.

I volunteered, "I'll go with her, then."

Fera thought that was funny.

"What?"

Jack said, "You can't protect yourself, let alone her."

"Give me a few hours." A second later, I added, "I bet the two of us would make a pretty scary team then."

A couple more steps and I said, "Wait. What can you protect her from, in your current condition?"

"Herself, for one."

Fera let a noise escape her throat.

"I don't understand."

She turned and looked me in the eye. "Giselle, would you stop asking questions? You're making me mad." Her eyes flashed a warning.

Once again, Jack stepped between us, but this time, he pulled Fera into his chest and rubbed the back of her head, "Breathe, honey."

She fought the embrace a little.

And I had to ask, "What's going on here that I'm not quite getting?"

Chapter Eight

Jack said, "Let's talk about it at the hotel."

We all felt an urge to get out of the open, I think. That cranked up a notch when Fera said, with a sniff, "Lupus security team."

Jack and I sniffed, too, but we didn't wait for the scent to carry. I muttered, "Thank God we're upwind."

"They'll pick up your trail." He reached above him, yanked a small branch from a tree, and said, "Stand still." He swept the path we'd followed, all the way back to the entrance of the tunnel. When he returned, he picked me up—against mine and Fera's protests—and said, "Use the branch for a bit behind me, Fera."

She growled, "It won't work."

"It just has to slow them down for a bit," he said. "Long enough so we can figure out what to do."

We were not inconspicuous, but luckily, there was no one out there, but us and the search squad. We made it to the room without any audience, at all, and I had to ask, "You rented this condo-resort room?"

Jack said, "Lobos owns the place. That's why you don't see anybody lurking around."

I didn't like it. Right outside the doors of Lobos, they had another community, but I hadn't known about it? That just showed me how little Hood actually trusted me. A rock settled in my belly.

There was a part of me that thought, *When I crinos, I'm gonna pick a fight I can't win.* I know, it sounds awful, but sometimes you just get too tired to do it any more.

We were in the room, drapes drawn. Fera had her nose to the crack, keeping an eye out, but she turned and looked at me, like she was confused.

Like she heard my thoughts.

I asked Jack, my mind on Hood, "You've been in contact with Hood all this time? And never sent a message to me, one, so I wouldn't worry about you?"

He took a shirt out of a bag. Apparently, they hadn't unpacked. As he shook it out, he said, "Why don't you hop in the shower, Giselle?"

"But—"

"I need to talk to Fera. Please."

Sent. I hated that whole alpha complex. But he was right. I needed a shower desperately.

Fera moved quickly, and rifled through another bag, pulling out a sheath dress. "Put this on." She tossed it to me.

I snatched it mid-air and said, "Thanks," disappearing into the bathroom. Once there, I checked it out. A stretchy thing made of spandex, red. I had to smile. Dancey little number. I'll bet Jack picked that out for her. It was that or more of Jack's shirts? *I got it, Fera. But you've got it so wrong.*

I loved Jack, but I wasn't in love with him. I turned on the shower, tried to block my thoughts, but the water sluicing down my back sort of stopped consciousness, which means my natural train of thought jumped on track again. *What can I do to get you, Hood?*

I have no idea what Jack and Fera talked about while I was in the shower. I took my time, but I'll tell you, the smell of sex was unmistakable when I returned to the main room of the suite. He'd convinced her of his affections? Or she'd staked a claim? It was a little funny. They were across the room from each other. He had the TV on. Discovery channel? She was flipping through a magazine. Fashions and hairstyles?

Rubbing a towel through my hair, I mumbled, "I bet I look great now."

Jack glanced up, a feral appreciation in his wink. "Not too bad."

She tensed, pouted her lips and held her tongue.

"I wasn't fishing for compliments."

Fera slapped the magazine shut and asked, "Just exactly what does that expression mean?"

Okay. I realized, then, that there was nothing I was gonna say that would not be misconstrued.

Jack thought it was funny. The smirk on his face said it all. He was glancing between us, waiting for my reaction.

It was getting closer and closer to dark. I was damn hungry, working up a bloodlust of an appetite, and not about to back down—although I wasn't quite up to the fight. Let me tell you, it was all I could do to take an inhale there before opening my mouth on a retort. I took the safe way out, and without warning, smacked Jack in the head with my towel, announcing, "You are enjoying this too much!"

Neither of them was expecting it. And, to tell the truth, I don't know where the reaction came from. I needed to hit something and he was the safe bet?

Fera had to laugh at his expression, too.

Of course, he snagged the towel and came out of the chair—after me. Chasing me, as I ran giggling. It was fun. Even Fera was enjoying it, squealing, “Run!”

Since it was a Lobos investment property, the place was pretty good-sized. There were plenty of things to scoot around, and leap over. It was nice to let loose, be a girl again, running from the big, bad boy—who was laughing, too, by the time he caught me and threw me down.

Pinning me with his body over my belly, grabbing me by the wrist with each of his hands, I let loose with a squealing cackle, “Jack! No!” I just knew he was going to tickle me, as soon as he got both hands in one hold.

The door flung open, then. And there, in the doorway, stood Hood.

We all jumped.

Okay. Jack and I froze—looking pretty guilty.

Fera recovered first. In seconds, she was hanging off Hood, hugging him, kissing his jaw. Thanking Gaia. Telling him how glad she was to see him.

His eyes were on me and Jack, though, deadly black, flashing red. His back was stiff. And his fists were clenching—clawing in semi-crinos on my shirt—which he tossed the minute he set eyes on me.

The slinky number I had on was climbing, barely covering anything. Not that Jack was noticing that. He had his fat butt squishing my stomach, couldn't see the exposure behind him. Hood got the full twat view. Okay, Jack doesn't have an ounce of fat anywhere, except maybe in his head. But you know what I mean.

So, it took Fera a minute to figure out that Hood was not reacting to her at all. To realize that he was blinking in a freaking shift strobe of some unnatural thing.

She kicked the door shut, backed against it and looked pretty scared.

Time sort of stood still, there.

Jack and I were afraid to move. At least, I sure was. Maybe Jack just knew that it wasn't his turn on the

playing field?

We waited for Hood to do something, anything, besides fight that crinos rage. Finally, he managed a growl. “Get the fuck off of her ... now.”

Jack obliged him, climbed off immediately, pulling me up as he went.

Call me an idiot, I wanted to giggle. *At least you've got your shirt back on, now, Jack. Imagine what he would have done if—*

Hood roared his fury, effectively shutting up any coherent thought I might've been working up to follow my stupidity with.

Flinching, I ducked behind Jack.

Now, Jack's cool as they come. So cool. He tucked me behind him and tried some calm conversation. “Nice of you to drop by, Hood.”

I squeaked. Wasn't that what I'd said the last time he'd been screwing around on me?

Hood caught my thoughts in one, narrowed his gaze on Jack and said, “I should have known you'd come for her.”

So, he assumed that I'd somehow been in contact with Jack all that time, too? He didn't trust either one of us? That's not much of a surprise. But I wasn't registering Hood's words then.

Jack, not knowing what was going on between us completely,—Okay—none of us were really getting the whole picture—said jokingly, “Done that, thought that was part of your plan, friend.”

You know that Hood moves like a freaking superhero, right? One minute he's there. Next, he's on top of you. It was like that. From the door to punching Jack in no time flat.

The only one who could react that fast was Fera.

The minute Hood leaped at Jack, she pounced his back, shifted crinos, and bit him in the shoulder of the arm that plowed Jack in the head. Dead center on the nose. Yeah. Jack went flinging backward, stumbling into me, and we both ended up on the floor.

Blood went everywhere. Hood had broken his nose.

I started screaming, “Oh, God! Oh, God!”

Hood slung his sister off his back. She pounced back.

Meanwhile, Jack was coming up off the ground with a “Son of a bitch!” and a head-butting, barroom brawl style assault of his own.

There was a big “Hmph” when he hit Hood in the midsection and they tumbled backward over some furniture.

I scrambled toward them, screaming, “Jack! No, Jack! Fera—help!”

So, that just pissed Hood off more, gave him renewed frenzy, and he blinked to crinos completely, slashing at Jack with his claws. He wasn't thinking at all. Just clawing. Jack was on top of him, pummeling him in the side repeatedly, boxing him in the kidney. Probably one of the few spots that really could be hurt. With every solid thump, Hood let out a pained groan. I think there were, maybe, three? Four? hits in quick succession.

Fera did the only thing she could do at that point. She hit Jack from the side, knocking him off Hood. If she hadn't, he'd have been shredded. It all happened so fast that if I'd blinked, I would have missed it. I know that for a fact, because the second Hood could breathe....

She rolled, spun and came up at about the same time Hood did. They almost attacked each other—I think—before they realized who they were facing. She snarled right up in his face. There was no doubt, he'd have to go through her to get to Jack.

I crawled to my downed hero, crying, “Jack ... Jack ... are you okay?” Pulling his head into my lap, I smoothed his hair back and kissed his temple. At that point, I didn't care what they did to each other. Or me. I was just worried about Jack.

His head had hit the wall, put a dent in the gypsum board even, and he wasn't altogether coherent. Even then, the first words out of his mouth really told on his heart. He called, “Fera!”

Snapping his dog, you could say.

She flinched, but she didn't look away from her brother. I rather admired her at that moment for not backing down, not giving in, making no compromises whatsoever. Not to either man. I'd have rolled right over. I know I would have. Guess that's the difference between being born a girl, versus being born lupus.

Hood sucked in air and succinctly said, “Move, Fera.”

“Over my dead body.” Barely a whisper. So lethal.

I knew Jack was going to be all right when he tried to crack the tension with a pained half-laugh and, “Family gatherings were never this much fun before.”

Struggling to sit up, with my help, he snapped again, “Fera!” This time, it was laced with annoyance.

She jerked once more, but there was no mistake in her, “Touch him and I'll kill you, Hood.” She backed up, a step at a time, until Jack could put a hand to her side. The hair on the back of her neck was still up, and she had a ready-to-leap crouch going on.

I had to reach forward and flip my still wet hair over my shoulder, and plead, “Hood, please.”

His killer gaze climbed over them, to me, and he commanded, “Come here.”

Jack—I swear sometimes he doesn't think at all—said, “Stay where you are, Giselle.”

Hood postured, rising up, and Fera sank lower on her haunches, ready to counter any move he made.

I didn't know what to do. I wanted to go to Hood, even if he killed me. In fact, my earlier thoughts of that gave me the courage. If he killed me, it would sort of be a relief. Right?

Chapter Nine

The fact that I hesitated, listening to Jack, had some effect on Hood. Stretching his neck, rotating his shoulders, he forced the tension from his body and shifted out of crinos. His gaze never left mine the whole time. And when he was human again, he said quietly, "Giselle ... come." T

Fera growled at him, though, and I didn't want to climb past her fangs.

Jack stroked her side some more. "Fera, relax."

It was funny all of a sudden. Relax. Relax. The mantra of the whole friggin' lupey bunch. I chuckled, "Yeah. Relax. Everybody just relax."

Hood, for some reason, didn't think that was so funny, though. His lip curled a bit, and he said, "I'm not going to ask again."

Fera dropped instantly to lupus form, and her belly. Lolling her tongue out in a very happy dog stance, she turned her laughing face to me.

Jack curled his fingers in her fur, but he looked over his shoulder at me, and said, "Don't be stupid, Giselle. He wants you."

I used Jack to push myself up, getting strength from the smile in his eyes. Not noticing how Hood hated the sharing of slight pleasure—friendship. Anyhow, I got up, crawled over Jack and Fera. Okay, you have to know that Jack's a man and I didn't have any panties on. And that Hood never missed a beat of the lolling tongue in cheek grin, or the nose wrinkle Jack made as he reached with his free hand—to my ass—to help me over.

Almost past Fera, she snapped at me, made me jump and squeak. And bump into Hood's chest.

He reached out, grabbed my wrist in the air and looked me over. Sniffed without moving his nose. Well, he tipped his head ever-so-slightly downward. Then he looked at my wet hair and accused, "You just showered."

Thought I'd washed Jack off of me, out of me. I knew what he was thinking. Everybody did.

Jack groaned, "I didn't fuck your precious goddess, Hood. Jesus Christ." He lumbered up off the floor, but muttered under his breath to Fera, "Stay."

Wonder of wonders, she did.

Now, you may not like the way he handled her, but she was lupus born. She needed boundaries. I imagine they worked out what they both needed, and found some common ground. She didn't argue with him once during this whole thing, so I figure they played a little at S and M.

Jack wasn't stupid. He didn't move toward Hood and me. But he did say, "Ask her." When Hood just stared at me like he wanted to rip my heart out or something—or like I had ripped his out? Jack added, "Fera. Tell him."

She laughed in a hoarse dogged voice, "I'm staying out of this."

I wanted to kick her.

My throat would not move. It convulsed once or twice, but nothing came out. I wondered where all my clever quips and comebacks were. Hurt? They'd crawled down inside of me where things go to die? In that empty cavern where a heart should be?

"For God's sake," Jack looked around, spotted my torn shirt and went for it, breaking our concentrated pain. Holding it aloft, he asked, "You could ask her how she's feeling—you know she was bleeding."

Frowning up at it, he pulled it to his nose—used it for a pack, to stop the bleeding.

Hood yanked my wrist as I tried to pull it from him. He asked, "Who hurt you?"

Proud of herself a little, Fera volunteered, "Uh, that would be me."

He said, "I'll deal with you later."

"Suit yourself, but I think you've got your hands full." She shifted to human, got up and went looking for clothes.

I noticed that Hood's grip had lessened and that he actually was checking me over. Quick visual. His eyes flashed red and he asked, huskily, "You're okay?"

I nodded. "Jack—Jack pulled her off of me."

The toss and tumble of Jack falling on me had actually caused some seeping on the claw mark over my breast. Hood's nose dipped close to it, and he closed his eyes.

Jack turned his back, set a chair upright with one hand. "Pull her dress off and look her over. She's all in one piece."

Fera grumbled, “Not because I had any say in it.”

Hood accused, “You got out by the tunnel. Who showed it to you?”

That gave me what I needed to pull my hand free and get past my stupor. I mean, for a minute there, it looked like he really cared about me.

Lifting my eyebrows, I said, “One of my many admirers.”

Jack threw something against the wall and turned on us. The moon was coming up. He didn't say anything, though, but you could smell him getting ticked off.

He was so much more straight and honest than we were.

Fera held up a shirt she was thinking of putting on and said to no one in particular, “You don't think you're the only one that thinks she's special, do you, Hood?” She decided against the top and held up another. Pulling it on, she said, “Of course not. You wouldn't be that blind. Would you?”

I thought I was going crazy. Full moon rising. Confused, I looked over at Fera and asked, “You ... think I'm special?”

She laughed and stepped into some pants. Spandex Capri. “What would you say, Jack?”

“Not...” he grinned, “Jack shit.” He scooped up her unusable clothing, the things she'd had on before shifting, dropped my shirt in favor of hers, and put that to his nose. “This is stupid. Tell her why you keep her cooped up at Lobos all the time, Hood. Explain to her what just happened. And why you brought her and me into the program.”

“Genetic integration, right?” My throat was tight. I was almost afraid to hear the answers. “Brains, physical specs—”

Hood sighed sadly, stopping me with, “Giselle—”

I knew I wasn't going to like what was coming next. I backed up, but he reached for me, pulled me to him roughly. “I needed you.” The admission seemed pulled from down, clear out of his groin maybe.

He hated telling me—trusting me with his reasons. On that, he was an open book.

He said, “Both of you.”

Fera got tired of waiting for him to get it out. She said, “Hood and I are unnaturals, Giselle.”

So, that made me blink. I coughed up, “Wh—what?”

"It took me a bit to figure it out." Jack came over, flopped down onto a couch, propped a leg up on the arm and said, “Lupus born unnaturals, bitten by garou parents after birth."

"But that—doesn't make sense." I had a sudden urge to run, to get the hell out of there. “You shift whenever you want."

"Not exactly." Jack, again, was volunteering his info. “They shift when they're pissed."

"And when we're scared." Fera climbed up on the couch, under Jack's arm, and cuddled.

"Gives the illusion of the natural garou. And since they do lupus, they don't smell like human born unnaturals."

"But, there are garou that are natural born, not bit. Right?" I was questioning everything I thought I knew—again.

"Yes." Hood said that through a tight jaw. He was watching me, gauging my reaction—which was utter torpor, really.

"How—how did you get so far up in the—"

Jack laughed. “Ha. Very carefully, my dear."

"But, you kept Fera at Pack City all that time."

"I kept an eye on her, believe me."

"Why didn't you tell me all this?" More hurt. More anger. More moon. Turning on Hood, I said, “You son of a bitch. All this time you had me—"

"Prisoner." Hood said the word.

"Both of us, under lock and key." Fera said it gratefully, “He took care of us, Giselle."

I still didn't understand. I mean, Fera and I were worlds apart.

"I had to see how long it took for someone to figure it out." Hood said, “Jack beat you to the punch. I really thought it would be you, Giselle."

Jack was checking out his nose, tenderly touching it, using Fera's torn top to stem the flow of blood when he made it bleed again. He was covered in salty crimson, but being garou, you don't really mind the smell of blood. In fact, Fera was licking, kissing? him as he said, "You broke my nose, Hood."

Looking over me, he said, "You're lucky I didn't kill you. After the last time, I should have—"

I interrupted, "What last time?"

Jack half laughed again, "Honey, the last time you and I were together, he didn't just bite me."

"What do you mean?" I spun on Hood, wanting him to explain.

Hood shrugged. "I put him in the habitat."

"With a fucking shake in my veins."

Okay. So, here is the point where I have to—finally—question ... why. I know, I'm a little slow on the uptake, but Hood's not admitting anything to me. And I'm not trusting the niggling possibility that's snaking through my system—or was that hunger and the rising moon?

I had to ask myself, were Jack and Fera telling me that Hood cared about me?

Chapter Ten

My stomach growled. At least, I thought it was my stomach. But, on second thought, I think it was Hood and Fera in unison. Reading my mind?

Fera said, "If we don't feed her, she's gonna kill something tonight."

My brain flicked to the habitat. I knew what I was going to kill. Exactly.

Hood shook his head. "You can't do that, Giselle."

I backed away from him. "You don't own me, Hood."

Fera snickered over that and muttered, "Bet."

It distracted me just enough for Hood to get a hold of me again. I fought for only a second before I went limp and let him drag me against him. *You can manhandle me, but you can't really own me.*

Again, Fera snickered.

Jack's head came up. "What?"

"Shh." Fera whacked Jack—not hard—to keep him still, so she could concentrate.

Hood looked down at my face and shook his head, "Wrong, Giselle."

I tried to jerk free. "People don't own people, Hood. I'm not a dog."

His other hand came up, smoothed a thumb over my cheek in a very tender touch. Softly, he said, "I never thought you were."

Hood is so intense, he just blocks out whatever he needs to. And, right then, he blocked out the fact that Jack and Fera were watching. I didn't have any defense when his lips descended on mine in a devouring kiss.

To say he kissed me senseless is not an understatement.

Go ahead, pity me a little bit. I wanted him so bad, I would have let him ravish me in front of an army. When he blocked out our audience, I did, too. He had me breathless in seconds, clinging in a minute and drizzling with desire before I could think.

In that dress, I had no secrets from him. My nipples puckered up, and the lobes of my breasts gathered heavily, pressing into him. When I felt his erection between us, I moaned into his mouth.

You'd think Fera or Jack would have gotten up and walked out, but nah. Fera's a total voyeur, loves to watch. And Jack? He's a man, plain and simple. They watched avidly.

Hood reached down between my legs to feel how wet I was. Not that he couldn't smell me. I mean, when my juices are flowing, the fragrance flows up between us. Or maybe that's because he always reaches down there, unleashing the flow? Whatever, I was slick quick.

And with the full moon rising, I was dripping wet.

He tore his lips from mine, pressed them to my temple and whispered, "I thought I'd lost you."

That blinked me out of my little heaven.

First, as far as I knew, there were still security teams on the prowl. His words kind've smacked me with that thought. Second, what, exactly, had he thought he'd lost? A ready romp?

My stiffness relayed itself to him and he, too, became taut. Maybe he realized how close he'd come to expressing his real feelings for me. Damn the search and my running in the first place. Pulling away from me, he asked, "What?"

"Are they still looking for me?"

"Yes, but—shit." He let go of me and went to a phone. Calling Lobos, he told security to halt the search, explained that he'd found me and would be bringing me back personally.

I struggled with that. I'd been content at Lobos before, but now that I knew I'd been his prisoner all along, I had a problem with it. I glanced toward the window, then the door.

"You run, and I'll hunt you down myself," Fera said. "You can't do that to him again."

Spinning to face her, I asked, "Do what?"

I think she wanted to rip her hair out. Fists went up and she gritted, "I swear, you're as dumb a bitch—"

Jack got a hold of her hands, brought them down, interrupting with a calm, "Maybe she's not so much dumb, Fera, as needing a little help understanding."

Hood had his back to us, still talking, but speaking much more quietly. More conspiracy. That's what I

guessed.

"What does she need spelled out? A blind girl could read—"

"What?" All the riddles were bringing out my ire. Tired, hungry, angry. Moon almost up. I growled, "What?"

"Careful, Giselle." Jack climbed up off the sofa. "We need to get to the habitat."

"I don't want to go."

"Yes, you do."

Those bitches bounced through my head and I agreed, "You're right. I do want to go."

Hood hung up the phone. "Giselle can't go in there tonight."

Jack squared his shoulders. "She can't stay out here."

"Why can't I go in there?" I headed for the door. "Try and keep me out."

Jack groaned. "Giselle—"

The door open, I took off running. Barefoot, in that stupid dress. Must've been a great sight to see. Knowing it was all Lobos property, I, apparently, stopped caring about propriety. But that's the crinos rising.

Fera hit me from behind, without a growl. I never knew what hit me.

I was getting real tired of that. We tumbled across the well-manicured turf. My crinos kicked in and I came up gnashing and swiping, popping and bone crunching, with a few agonized howls. It must've scared or shocked Fera because her eyes widened and she backed away from me in horror.

Hood and Jack got to us at that point. Jack leaped in front of her, as if to protect her from me, and that scared me. I mean, I had never looked into a mirror when I was in crinos. Hood had always kept me safe—from myself. Medicated me through it all.

I heard him crooning, "Giselle—it's okay." When my head didn't snap around to look at him immediately, he repeated my name. "Giselle—" but it was sweet, soothing. He was beauty and I was the beast.

When I realized that, saw my hulking shadow spreading out over the lawn, I swallowed, tears gathered in my eyes and bleakly, I looked around for him.

This is how beautiful Hood is. How amazing. We all need crinos at the full moon. To resist it—for an unnatural anyway—is nearly impossible. But he's a man of iron will. And that's why he'd managed to climb the Lobos ladder and create the great underworld—under God and Gaia, both.

Oh, he'd grown in stature, unable to arrest the natural shift his body wanted to make. But his face was still human. There might have been more hair on his neck and back, but he reached out to me with human hands, crooning my name again, “Giselle...” There was appreciation in his eyes, and the smile of awe in his expression when he whispered, “You are one fucking beautiful bitch.”

Of course, I reveled in it for a minute, before jumping his bones, knocking him to the ground, and snarling in his face, “Fuck you.”

I heard Fera over my back, growling, and I knew Jack was holding her back because I heard him growl, “Relax.”

Hood flipped me, shifted crinos full-bore, and said in his sexiest, most feral tone, “Oh, you can bet I'm going to let you.”

But I'm not whipped in that form, so I clawed a little. Never say a crinos werewolf isn't a little hard-headed. Both of us, I mean. He didn't take no for an answer. Not that I was really saying no. In fact, I wanted to have sex, as much as I wanted to kill him, to lash out at him and make him hurt as much as I was doing. Does that make sense?

I'm sure it looked more like a wrestling match than lovemaking—to anyone that wasn't garou—but it was fun, it released a lot of my tension. And eventually, after a lot of catch'em, kiss'em, ditch'em, I landed on my belly, with him on top of me, holding me down while we both got our breath.

He huffed, “I'm gonna have to fuck you, Giselle.” He didn't realize it, but his mouth dropped right to my bite mark. I felt hot air all over it, fanning out on the surrounding skin.

I don't know why, but the fun went out of it all, and I buried my head in the grass, saying, “Just do it, Hood.”

It wasn't that I didn't want it. But I felt defeated there.

I don't think he could have held back any more. I'd teased him to the point of torture. He slid into me with a hard, swift maneuver, groaned, “Aah,” pumped a few deep strokes, and released.

You know what happened then, I'm sure. Jack leaped on him.

The whole world is filled with déjà vu, for me, I think.

We were both pinned as Jack said, “I'm not letting you up until you tell her.”

Hood gritted, “Get off of me, you son of a bitch.”

Jack laughed. He laughed! “Wrong. I'm not a fucking *lupe-garou*!” I can only guess that he had a grip on Hood from behind—perhaps by the balls?

Hood could not move, being still inside of me and caught like that. Because, if he could have, I'm sure he would've ripped Jack's head off. He went for the distraction. “Where's Fera?”

So, I'm under them both, thinking, Great. I can't get off in this position and they're discussing Fera.

But out of the blue, she said, “I'm here. Tell her, Hood. Get it over with.”

He growled.

Jack must've squeezed because Hood yelped, put his lips to my ear and said, “Get ready to roll.”

To tell you the truth, I was calculating my ability to throw them off.

Fera said, “You're not that strong.”

I grunted, “Don't roll me like this.”

“I'll rip your—”

Hood rolled us.

I had to do one of those hump jumps to get off them and onto my feet. Fera leaped into their fray and I watched them go back and forth, wondering what the hell kind of after-play they called that. But, eventually, they had Hood down.

Huffing and puffing over the top of him, they said, in unison, “Tell her.”

He howled.

And that had me curious. I snuck closer, dropped near his head, and asked, “Tell me what?”

It was all they could do to hold him down. Jack was getting tired, I think, because he blurted, “He loves you.”

So, no girl would really like to have a guy tortured just so he'll say he loves her. Okay, maybe. And it's true that any guy who needs to be held down so he will say the words deserves to be tortured.

But it came from Jack, so I backed up, whispered, “That's not funny,” and took off.

I heard swearing, from all three of them, and howling as they came after me. Call me stupid. I made a beeline for Lobos. Not the tunnel, either. Straight to the friggin’ front door.

No common sense at all. None whatsoever.

Fortunately, it was late, and only garou were on the premises. They lock it down more on the full moon phase, clear the place out early.

The doorman saw me coming, and I swear to God, he had that door open and waiting. It was that, or have me claw him open later. I think he knew that a crinos, chased by more crinos, were not really ones you wanted to piss off. I heard him mutter, “Damn unnaturals,” as I went past and leaped into the open elevator. Before the doors closed, though, he apologized to Hood, “I didn't realize it was—”

I heard his body hit the glass and a gurgling noise before the lift went up.

I couldn't breathe. The thing was too tight. Thank God it moved swiftly. I bounded out on habitat level, let out a howl, and a squalling, “I'm gonna kill something!”

You can't yell stuff like that just anywhere these days. It's very liberating.

Next thing I heard was an answering, “Who was that?”

And male howls all around. They smelled me. They recognized my scent. They'd been waiting for me? Or hoping for me?

Chapter Eleven wanted to do them all. No. That's not exactly true. I craved for Hood to come in and find them all over me. See how crinos makes no sense? I wanted nothing more than Hood to agonize over me. That's what I really wanted. I

Remember, in habitat, anything goes. But on a full moon night, the unnaturals rule. The garou who stay in, stay in so they can have an excuse to take out the unnaturals protected by Lobos—but they know it'll take cunning.

A lone wolf is a dead wolf on a full moon night.

Announcing that I was alone was nothing more than inviting it all. Ravishment. Possible death. I didn't care. That's the point. In crinos, insanity takes over.

But, at least in habitat, you know there are no real innocents among the garou. They've all killed something. You can justify, if you need to.

The minute my cry went up, the unnatural pack came for me. They knew they needed to protect. Ya know?

My ears were up, and I was leaping, like a great fool, from rock to higher rock, howling. Kind of funny if you think about it. Thank Jack for pointing that out to me later. So, I promised him I wouldn't do it again.

The scramble of pebbles, the kick of dust in the air, followed me up. Not that anyone would have doubted where I was. I was making enough noise to wake the world.

Good thing habitat is a soundproof room. Er, canyon-sized soundstage.

Almost to the top—yeah, I moved fast—I heard Hood howl. Talk about a great zing, thrilled me to the bone. Jack and Fera followed him, and the pack wailed back.

Hood blanketed the room with the thought, *Anybody touches her and they're dead.*

Fera followed that up with *What else do you need to hear, Giselle?*

Jack, God love him, yelled, “I'm coming for you, Giselle!”

Which, of course, set all the hair standing up. Bitches realized that Hood and Jack, both, were in the habitat. Losers figured that he was coming after their prize bitch.

You see, this is the craziest thing. I'm the only one that didn't get the fact that I was the alpha female at Lobos.

My stunt looked insane to all of them. Inspired awe. Probably in everyone except Fera, who knew I was just plain being stupid. Yeah. We've worked things out since then.

I realized my foolery when I ran out of running room, found myself at the pinnacle of precipice, with nowhere to run—and bitches leaping up the rocks toward me. They had every intention of taking me out. Kill the alpha bitch, and what's left? An open position. Right?

On a full moon night, the roof of habitat opens up. Not that it's open, exactly, but it allows the natural moon to shine in. It was almost bright in there, with the silver laced light glinting off of white rocks and water, and things. I might have marveled at the beauty again, if it weren't for the snarling coming up the hill toward me.

Yeah. I had an 'oh shit' moment.

Backing up, feeling the dirt slip and skitter over the back side of the craggy edge, I dug in my toes. I faced my attackers with a curled lip. Too many looming shapes to fight them all, I singled out the two that had continuously put themselves on Hood.

Sure as anything, I figured I was dead. So, I didn't wait for the cavalry. Like the schizo bitch that I was, I freakin' aggressed.

They're still talking about it. They think it was magnificent.

Fera keeps reminding me that it was suicidal idiocy. We don't talk about it around Hood.

Without a word, I vaulted into the air, hurdling right into bitch number one, snagging her throat with unerring teeth. We tumbled downhill into bitch two. A boulder stopped that momentum—killing two instantly. The jerk of concussion helped me pull the jugular from one. And with that blood in the air, all hell broke loose.

But Jack, God love him again, came charging up the hill, about a dozen tri-athlete leaps ahead of Hood and Fera. I swear, he took to garou like a fish to water. Got game. Ya know?

When I got bounced by three bitches at once, he hit them in full fury, scattered them, and knocked one right over the ledge. I heard him go, "Oophf. Sorry!" But he leaped again—probably to get himself away from the edge, and I lost him in the melee. It wasn't like I had time to stop and gawk.

Picture losers, bitches, all scrabbling on the side of that hill. A whole lot of ass chasing, slap downs, and noise. I spotted Hood and Fera, I don't know how. Her white fur reflected.

Hunching in a good spot with my back against the rocks, I slapped a few bitches down, but I was getting worried. They were gaining on me, surrounding me, and I heard them on the back side of the rocks, nails clattering as they tried to get up. The only thing that saved me is that they were lupus born. Unnaturals would have thought about cheerleading pyramids or a fireman's carry, and lifted each other. But no, they were working on the 'every man for himself' principle.

We call that slaughter hill, now. Started the big war. Armageddon.

As quick as it got out of hand, Hood put a stop to it. Well, him and Jack. It's all a blur. I can't remember much more.

I do remember a few more wolves flying over the edge, splashing below. And I've seen a ton of slinking, broken-boned garou at Lobos since then, so I know a glare when I see one now, and know why I'm getting them—which, I personally think is good. I mean, before, I had no real idea.

Several times, before it was done, I heard Hood in my head alternating between, *Somebody turn on the lights!* and *Giselle!*

Oh, there were a ton of 'fucks', 'son of a bitch's', and 'you're dead's', too.

We watch the playback video for fun. Okay, Fera and I do, so we can watch Jack and Hood—and ourselves. We were awesome.

And we know who our friends are, now.

Anyhow, the lights came up, and pretty much checked the fight. With no cover of darkness, the naturals had to get the hell under cover. The rest of us were left shaking and bleeding on the hill.

I could barely stand, thought I was going to plop right over and roll to my death, but for good measure, I let out a howl. I had never had such an adrenalin rush.

There is a glory to being a werewolf, I don't care what you say. And that night—I got it.

Other howls went up, echoed and reverberated.

"You're right, Hood. She is one fucking beautiful bitch." It was Fera. Bleeding, but not badly, she smiled at me and I knew, finally, that we'd found some tentative understanding. I had earned my place, deserved the homage that Hood had been giving me all along.

Jack asked, "Isn't that what comes next?" Rising up on his hind legs like a bear, he said, "God, I love this place!"

Hood, however, was watching me. Waiting for me to settle down?

I felt, more than saw, the whole pack gathering, sitting. Many of them were behind bushes, peeking from behind boulders and trees.

Stretching my neck, rolling my shoulders, I glanced up at the moon, wondered what God would want me to do next. I prayed. I asked forgiveness. After all, I was standing on a mound of fur at that point. But

more than that, I prayed to thank God for the opportunity to explore the unimaginable, to be free.

A silence settled on us, and I opened my eyes with a reverence to survey the mess we had made. I considered tiptoeing around it all and leaving quietly, to go lick my wounds, but something told me that they expected something more than that.

I let my gaze pass over them all, real slow, to Fera—who I gave a little smile to. She seemed happy, panting, tongue lolling—having shifted to lupus and dropped to her belly. *Go to him, Giselle.*

I looked over, and saw Jack posturing still, glorying in his spot on top of a high rock. But beyond him stood Hood. Almost humble—if crinos can ever be humble. Patiently waiting. He tipped his head.

Not very loudly, I said, “I will come, if you want me to.”

I heard the whispers down the hill as they relayed my words.

He held out his arms and said, “That's all I ever wanted.”

Right there, in front of the pack, I went to him and ruined all doubts about why I was in Hood's heart and soul. I started with my crinos tongue, kissed him well and good, then shocked them all by dropping to my knees, tongue out, laughing up at him with, “If you come, we both win. Right?”

You're probably thinking ... oh, hell no. She did not go down on him there.

But I did. I had him panting, howling at the moon, and right there when I had him at the edge—I stopped. And I asked, “What's it take to get you to beg?”

I heard plenty of begging. A lot of groaning and complaining.

I'm telling you, it's a bunch of voyeurs.

Hood reached for me, though, and pulled me up into his arms, silencing the whiners, proving his fortitude to them all. With a grin, he said, “You should know by now that I don't beg.” He searched my face, pressed a sweet kiss to my lips.

There, in his arms, I crumpled a little in pain as the crinos slipped from me. Dawn rose in periwinkle and mauve splendor above us, but I never noticed. Saw it on the tape. I clung to his arms, trying not to cry out. It hurts just watching it.

He swallowed my moans with kisses.

And I wouldn't believe this if I didn't have it on tape, but he uttered, over and over again, "Ah, Giselle, I wish I could take this pain from you."

And Hood wept.

Big, aching, mountain of a man let a raging river fall in the anguish over what he'd brought on me.

I dragged him to the ground with my wracking spasms, crying out, "God help me."

Hood crooned to me through the worst of it between broken sobs and smoothing kisses, holding me tight. When it was over, he broke down to his manly form, stretched out beside me and kissed me and licked me all over. Healing touches, examining every scratch, every bruise.

It's all on tape.

He doesn't have to say he loves me. I know.

And not a day goes by that I don't show him how much I love him, too.

But that doesn't mean I don't still give him fits, or take him to the edge of sanity.

Epilogue

What's going on?" There was a lot of movement in the halls, much more than I had ever seen before. I practically killed myself, getting through the crowd of stampeding human-garou in lab coats. "Somebody tell me what's happening?"

Hood, from the down the hall, yelled, "Giselle!"

"I'm coming!" Fighting traffic. "What's happening?"

He caught up with me. "The pack is coming."

"What ... pack?" My eyebrows went up. "From Pack City?"

We were jostled back and forth. He pulled me off into a room. "Wolf Enterprise has been attacked."

"Wolf—?" I didn't understand. "By who?"

"We don't know yet. But—" I went to interrupt him but he shook me by the arms to get me to listen. "We're going to have refugees flown here."

"But—Kayty's due any minute. They just brought her in by helicopter. She's in labor."

Kayty Smalls. Alpha female at Pack City.

Hood groaned. "That means Leer's here, too. I'm sure he brought some of his people. Shit." He ran a quick hand through his hair, looking out to the hall. "We've got to get some control."

"Everybody's panicking."

"I am, too. The media's gonna see the choppers coming and going. They'll be at the door—" He was trying to get a game plan.

I suggested, "Put Jack on the satellite. Make up some story—" I couldn't think of one off the top of my head. "Fera's waiting in the hospital. I'll call in the medical staff on hiatus."

Of course we have a full facility. We chew each other up and spit one another out just for fun at Lobos.

We already had guarded gates, and high profile security, and a more visible force would have really alerted the general public. So, suggesting anything like that was out of the picture. I had to ask, "If Wolf was attacked, does that follow that we will be, too? I mean, should we get in the tunnel—"

Hood kissed me hard. With a steely glint, he said, "Giselle, I would fuck you right now if I had time. Get the word out. All the unnaturals need to go below. You, too. Only lupus born above ground."

I panicked. "Me?"

"Wolf won't understand about you." He meant Mark Wolf, alpha and owner of Wolf Enterprises. Hood kissed me again, "But we'll make him understand." At the door, he turned, looked me in the eye and said, "He'll love you, too, once he gets to know you."

That's as close as Hood has ever gotten to saying it.

Before he disappeared, he added, "I hope I don't have to kill him to keep him away from you."

The door slammed behind him. I knew, already, that Hood was on his way to give orders, to lock down Lobos completely, to prepare for a possible siege, and an internal war. Like we hadn't already been through our own.

I closed my eyes, sent up a prayer and whispered, "Oh, God. The pack is coming."

THE END

About the Author

Carys Weldon is a great fan of the White Wolf Gaming system, especially shape-shifters. She writes her horrific romance from a haunted hollow in the Missouri Ozarks, not far from Branson.

Visit www.extasybooks.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors.