

Moonlight Protector

Ashton Grove Werewolves, Book 1

Written by Jessica Coulter Smith



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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my husband, Jason, and my children, Devin & Gavin. They have learned a great deal of patience as I have learned how to balance work, family time, and writing... and I'm still not certain I have it down yet! ☺ I love them dearly and couldn't have finished this book without their love and support.

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Chapter One

It was a dark, cold, rainy night. The black and silver wolf ran through the woods, oblivious to the cold wind or the rain pelting his fur. The moon was full in the midnight sky, but there were just enough clouds to block out the stars. The wolf stopped and listened, hearing a faint noise. Cautiously, he approached.

Not far from the road, a car was over-turned. A woman was lying on the ground calling for help in a voice so soft human ears could not have heard it. Upon closer inspection, the wolf saw a gash on her head. The coppery smell of her blood was almost too much to bear. The scent was so strong that he knew there were other lacerations, ones he couldn't see.

Lifting her head, Marin saw the wolf. She knew that she should be afraid, but she was cold and in pain. The wolf might be her only chance of getting help. It wouldn't be long before Stefan returned to make sure she was dead or to drag her back to her prison. If she didn't get away, there was no telling what he would do to her. The last time she had escaped, he had chained her to a wall for a few days and done unspeakable things to her. He hadn't broken her spirit, but she knew her body couldn't take much more.

Looking into the wolf's eyes, Marin pleaded for help. "Please help me." Before she could feel ridiculous for asking a wolf for help, the darkness overtook her. As her head slumped back to the ground, the wolf turned and headed back into the woods. Running as fast he could, he raced around trees, over fallen limbs, and headed for the clearing. As he broke through the last of the trees, he could see the old Victorian house standing on the hill. He bounded up the hill and ran up the back steps, pushing open the door with his paw he rushed into the house.

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“Cole? What’s wrong?” Gabriel asked as he stepped out of the living room, a concerned look on his face.

For his brother to come hurrying through the house in his wolf form meant that something was terribly wrong. The brothers typically kept clothes stashed nearby and changed before coming back to the house. Their nearest neighbor was a block away so they never had to worry about people crying wolf, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Their home was the only one on this side of the street and their auto repair shop was the only thing across from the house, which made their home the ideal place for three werewolves to live. The only thing better would have been a house in the country, but this was their family home and selling it was unthinkable.

The wolf turned in a circle and backed towards the door. Gabriel grabbed his leather jacket and followed. His brother led him through the woods for what seemed like an eternity before they came to the crash site. Gabriel noticed the unconscious woman on the ground and knelt beside her. He checked her pulse, which was weak but steady.

“She’s still alive. Why don’t you go put some clothes on and bring your truck? We can lay her in the backseat and take her to the hospital,” Gabriel said, looking at his furry brother.

The wolf nodded and once more bounded off through the woods, arriving at the house in record time. Pushing open the door, he ran up the stairs to the third floor. Entering the first bedroom he came to, he shifted back into human form. In his wolf form, Cole was larger than your typical wolf. His eyes remained the same as they were in his human form, which were steel gray. As a human, he was six-foot one, well muscled with six-pack abs, and relatively short black hair that barely curled over the collar of his shirt.

Cole threw on a t-shirt and jeans. He put on his boots, grabbed his wallet and his keys and headed back down the stairs. Jumping in his black Ford truck, he drove to the highway and headed in the direction of the crash site. It didn't take him long to locate the place where the woman's car had gone through the railing and down the embankment. There were two sets of skid marks side by side, one belonged to her car and stopped at the railing, but the second set continued down the highway. Cole parked on the side of the road and put on his hazard lights. Climbing out of the truck, he jogged down the hill toward his brother and the unconscious woman.

"Is she doing okay?" Cole asked, as he approached them.

"She woke up for a minute while you were gone, just long enough to tell me she doesn't want to go to the hospital. I have a feeling she's running from something, or someone," Gabriel responded with a worried look on his face.

Cole nodded as if he had expected as much. "I saw some skid marks on the road. I don't think she ran off the highway by herself."

Cole looked down at the woman lying on the ground. What kind of trouble could she be in? Her face was covered in blood from the gash on her forehead, but he had a feeling she was beautiful when she was cleaned up. She had long dark hair and a clear pale complexion. She couldn't be more than five-foot two, if even that, and looked like she was in her late teens or early twenties.

Something stirred inside of him as he looked at the helpless woman, making him feel fiercely protective of her. Cole was a little shocked at his response to her. He wasn't only attracted to her in a human way, but his inner wolf recognized her. The primitive side of him wanted to lay claim to her before either of his brothers

could. He had always thought that only the alpha could detect their mates, but apparently he was able to sense his own when she was present. This was a rather startling realization and one he didn't want to dwell on. Right now his top priority was making sure the woman was taken to safety and cared for.

Gabriel carefully picked her up. "Let's get her in the truck. We can take her to the house and figure out what to do from there."

Cole ran up the embankment ahead of Gabriel and opened the rear passenger door. Gabriel gently laid the woman on the backseat, drew a blanket over her, and closed the door. He climbed into the front passenger seat as Cole slid into the driver's seat. The drive back to the house was silent as both brothers were deep in thought over their mysterious new house guest.

As they pulled around to the back of the house, Gabriel glanced at the woman in the backseat. She was still unconscious. It made him worry about her head wound, but at the same time it was probably a blessing. She had to be in a great deal of pain. Her car had been pretty battered from rolling down the embankment and it looked as if she had fallen out of it when she opened the door. For that matter, he was amazed she had been able to open it at all.

Cole and Gabriel got out and opened the rear passenger door. Gabriel once again gently lifted her into his arms. She didn't weigh much. Then again, he *was* a werewolf; she could have weighed two hundred pounds and it would have been the same as lifting fifty pounds.

The two brothers got the woman into the house and made their way up to the second floor. They very seldom had company, but they always kept the first bedroom on this floor ready for guests. The home had once belonged to their parents, but had belonged to the brothers for several years now. The three of them had

also inherited the auto shop across the street, which provided a decent income. Their parents had made sure they would be taken care of should anything ever happen to them. Sometimes it didn't seem like it had been very long since they had passed away.

Gabriel was the oldest at thirty two years old, and the tallest at six-foot two inches tall. He was slightly broader than Cole and just as muscled. His eyes were a vibrant blue and his hair, which fell in waves to his shoulders, was an inky black. Cole and Michael were twins and fairly close to being identical. They were thirty years old and six-foot one. Michael was a little more muscular than Cole and had blue eyes like Gabriel. All three brothers still lived in the Victorian and none of them were married. They were also werewolves, the last of their family line. Once they found their mates and started a family, the line would continue... providing there was at least one boy born. The women in the family could pass the gene to their children, but could not change into a wolf themselves.

Gabriel laid the woman on the bed. He stepped into the adjoining bathroom to get a warm wet rag and hand towel before sending Cole to the kitchen for a bowl of warm water. Judging from the blood coming from her head and soaking her shirt, they were going to need quite a bit of water to clean the blood and grime from her. It would be a shame for her to survive the crash only to die from an infection.

When Cole returned, he left the bowl with Gabriel and went upstairs to get one of his black cotton t-shirts and a pair of boxer shorts. The young woman was going to need something to sleep in since her clothes were torn and bloody. If he were completely honest with himself, he'd admit that he just didn't want to see her wearing something of Gabriel's or Michael's. When he had seen Gabriel pick her up to carry her to the truck, he had fought the urge to growl at his brother. Shaking

his head to clear his thoughts, he jogged back down the stairs and went back into the guest room.

Gabriel had already cleaned her face and bandaged the cut on her head. He was about to unbutton her shirt when he stopped. While he knew she had to be cleaned, he was a little hesitant to undress the unconscious woman. If she woke up while they were tending to her, she might freak out. Quite frankly, he wouldn't blame her.

Cole sensed his dilemma. "Want me to call Cassie and see if she'll come over?"

"It's ten o'clock at night and she's seven months pregnant. Do you think she's still up? Or that Matt will let her come?"

The brothers had met Cassie at Whispering Lake, North Carolina about six years ago. Her boyfriend, who it turned out had once been a ghost, had shown up in the middle of Cole and Cassie making out. To this day, Cole still wondered what would have happened if Matt hadn't interrupted them at that moment. Matt and Cassie had been married for almost six years now and had two kids with another one on the way. She seemed happy so everything had turned out as it should.

Cole was glad that she had found her happily ever after, but it didn't make him any less lonely. Out of the three brothers, Cole was the only one who'd wanted to find his mate. He'd been ready to start a family for quite some time now. He hoped that the pull he felt toward their guest was an indication that his wish was finally going to come true. Deep in his gut, he knew she was his ... but he wasn't sure if he would be able to claim her without Gabriel's approval, since he was their alpha.

"I don't know, but I don't feel right undressing this woman. Even if it is for medical reasons, it still seems wrong," Cole replied. Once again, he wasn't being completely honest. He himself didn't have as much of a

problem undressing her, but he didn't want Gabriel to see her unclothed. It was bad enough his brother was touching her and tending to her wounds.

Gabriel sighed. "I know. Go ahead and call Cassie."

Cole pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and called Cassie. Matt answered on the third ring.

"Hello."

"Hey Matt, its Cole. I know it's late, but is Cassie still awake?"

"Yeah, I think she's raiding the freezer for ice cream," Matt said wryly.

Cole grinned. "That sounds like Cassie. Would you mind bringing her over here? We have an emergency that requires a woman."

"What's going on?" Matt asked, his curiosity peaked.

"We found a woman in the woods. Her car went off the embankment and she's badly injured and unconscious. Before she slipped into oblivion, she told Gabriel not to take her to the hospital." He paused a moment, "I think she may be in trouble," Cole replied, giving him the condensed version.

"I'll get Cassie and we'll be there in about fifteen minutes. The kids can stay with her parents tonight. They love any excuse to have the grandkids over so I'm sure they will be only too happy to help."

"Thanks. And tell Cassie I'm sorry we're dragging her out so late," Cole replied.

Cole hung up the phone and turned to Gabriel. "He said they'd be here in fifteen minutes."

"Good." The tension visibly left Gabriel's shoulders.

While Cole was on the phone, Gabriel had been looking at the woman on the bed. She looked underfed and like she hadn't slept in a while. Her skin was so pale it was almost translucent and she had dark smudges under her eyes. She had long dark eyelashes, a small button nose and full lips. Her hair was a really dark

brown and hung half way down her back. At the moment, it was full of dirt, twigs and blood, but there was no way to wash it while she was sleeping. She didn't have any jewelry on, but there were marks on her wrists. Something about them disturbed Gabriel. There was no doubt in his mind that she was running from someone, probably a man who had harmed her in some way.

While he had waited on Cole in the woods, Gabriel had searched the woman's car for a purse or luggage, but he hadn't found anything. He had carefully searched her pockets, hoping to find some form of ID. She had to have been going somewhere in a hurry to have left everything behind. Was the car even hers? All of the clues were pointing toward an abusive relationship. He hoped he was wrong. Not only did he not want to think of this poor creature being abused by someone she trusted, but he really didn't want to deal with an irate boyfriend or husband.

"Isn't it a little odd for someone to travel out of state without luggage?" Cole asked.

"Something is definitely going on, but we won't know what it is until she wakes up. I couldn't even find a purse in the car," Gabriel replied, keeping his suspicions to himself for the moment. He knew that if Cole thought for one moment the woman had been abused that he would glue himself to her side. Out of the three brothers, Cole was the most sensitive when it came to women.

Downstairs the doorbell rang. Cole left to answer it while Gabriel stayed with Marin. Gabriel hadn't told his brother, but he had sensed something special about their unconscious guest. As their alpha, or pack leader, he had the ability to sense a mate for him or his brothers, amongst other things. Marin was definitely a mate for one of them; he just wasn't sure which one. Unfortunately, the feelings he got were rather vague.

Gabriel heard footsteps on the stairs and turned to see Cassie and Matt follow Cole into the bedroom. Cassie was seven months pregnant and looked radiant, even at ten o'clock at night and wearing sweats. She was a petite woman with long chestnut hair and green eyes. She also was a Wiccan who had the ability to see and communicate with ghosts, which is how she had met her husband. Now *that* was a story most people would never believe!

"Hi, Gabriel. It's good to see you again, even if the circumstances are bad," she said with a smile.

"Thanks for coming Cassie." Nodding toward the woman on the bed, he said, "She needs to have her wounds cleaned, but we didn't feel right undressing her to do it."

Cassie nodded her understanding. "I'm glad you called. If the three of you will step outside, I'll get to work." Noting their glances at her very pregnant stomach she said, "I'll call you if I need help. Now scoot!"

Cole, Gabriel and Matt stepped into the hall to give the women some privacy. Once the door was closed, Cassie started unbuttoning Marin's shirt. She managed to get the shirt mostly off of the woman, but she couldn't pull it out from under her. Like Cassie, Marin was well endowed. Her white bra was dirty and covered in blood. Cassie unfastened it and started to wipe Marin off with the warm wet rag.

Marin had cuts on her chest and stomach. Her naval was pierced, but it seemed to be okay. Once Cassie had cleaned her off, she put triple antibiotic ointment on the cuts and bandaged them. Marin had a blue and green dragon tattooed on her upper right arm, but it didn't appear to have been harmed in the crash. Cassie noticed some cuts and what looked like rope burns on her wrists. What had the poor woman been through?

Cassie was able to roll Marin over and gasped. The marks on her wrists were nothing compared to the ones on her back. It looked like she had been whipped repeatedly. There was another dragon tattoo across her lower back, but this time one of the cuts went through the design. For the woman's sake, Cassie hoped it wouldn't ruin the tattoo; she would have enough reminders about whatever had happened to her as it was.

Most of the fresh cuts on her back were superficial, but Cassie cleaned and bandaged them just the same. She pulled the dirty shirt out from under Marin and rolled her back over. She managed to pull the black t-shirt over Marin's head and it pulled down to her naval.

Next, Cassie removed Marin's jeans. Her white lacy underwear seemed to be fine so Cassie left them alone. The jeans had protected her legs from getting cut, but some bruises were already forming on her thighs and calves. Her ankles had the same rope marks as her wrists; leading Cassie to believe the poor woman had been bound. Just the thought of what the woman had been through was enough to make Cassie sick.

Cassie wiped her legs off to make sure she was clean and slipped the boxers on her. She drew the covers up over the woman and went to let the guys back in the room. Cassie knew that she should report the rope burns, but she wasn't sure how the guys would take it.

"She's cleaned up, bandaged and dressed. You can come back in now," Cassie said as she opened the door.

The black t-shirt made Marin look even paler than before. Gabriel was going to make sure whoever had done this to her paid, heavily. It infuriated him to think that someone could harm her on purpose. He knew it was mostly the werewolf responding; as a mate for one of the brothers, it made her part of the pack. Since Gabriel was the alpha, it was his job to defend the pack,

which meant defending the poor waif-like creature in the bed as well.

"How bad is she?" Gabriel asked.

Cassie looked at the unconscious woman. "She had quite a few cuts on her chest and stomach and some superficial ones on her back. The head wound has me the most worried, but she should wake up in a day or two. If she doesn't, she'll need a hospital regardless of her wishes."

Gabriel could tell Cassie was hiding something. "What else?"

Cassie took a deep breath. "She's been abused and if I had to guess I'd say she was probably abducted. There are rope burns on her wrists and ankles. It also looks like she was whipped repeatedly within the past week."

Gabriel clenched his fists. "I figured she was running from someone. They probably left her for dead, hoping she wouldn't be found until it was too late. Whoever did this to her should be shot."

Cassie looked shocked. "You think someone ran her off the road on purpose?"

"When I took the truck to pick her up, I noticed some skid marks on the highway where she went off the road. It looked like she'd been forced off the highway." Cole said, in a very calm, low voice. He could barely conceal the rage he was feeling.

Cassie shook her head. "Poor thing. What are you going to do?"

Cole looked at Gabriel. As their alpha, it was ultimately Gabriel's decision. He honestly couldn't see his brother tossing an injured woman out of the house.

"She'll stay here until she's well. If she wants to leave after that, we can't stop her. I'd like for her to stay until I know the danger has passed, but if she's been abused, she will probably be terrified when she

realizes she's in a house with three men," Gabriel responded.

Cassie patted Gabriel on the arm. "I'm sure that everything will work out. If y'all will excuse me, I'm starting to get tired. I think I'm going to head home now."

"Thanks for coming, Cassie." Gabriel gave her a tired smile.

Cole walked Matt and Cassie out, locking the door behind them. He went back upstairs to talk to his brother. Gabriel was right. If the unconscious woman had been abused, she would likely be scared to death once she saw there were only men in the house. However, she knew Cole's wolf form and might feel comfortable around the animal. If he called in sick to work for a day or two, he wouldn't have to shift into human form unless he just wanted to... it would also allow him to watch over her. The thought of being near her made his heart speed up.

Cole was the only one of the three brothers who had attended college. He had a bachelor's degree in biology and worked for one of the bio-med companies outside of their hometown of Ashton Grove, Georgia. He had originally planned on going to medical school to become a doctor, but he was getting old enough now that he just needed to concentrate on the career he currently had. Cole made a good salary, enough that he was able to put a thousand dollars a month in a savings account and still have plenty left over. Their house was paid for so they only had to pay for insurance and property tax, which they split three ways. He had paid his truck off the previous year as well, leaving him plenty of money to spare.

He stepped into Marin's room and stopped. His brother was sitting on the edge of her bed, holding her hand. Cole couldn't remember ever seeing Gabriel act this way around a woman. He had to reel in his inner

beast; seeing Marin with someone else, even if it *was* his brother, made him want to growl in frustration and outrage. He knew it was ridiculous to feel this way, but he wanted to snap at Gabriel and claim the woman as his.

Cole cleared his throat to make his presence known. Gabriel turned his head in the direction of the door. Part of him was embarrassed to be caught staring at the waif in the bed, but another part of him just didn't care... the part that wanted to protect her and keep her safe at all costs. Gabriel had never felt this way about a woman before and wasn't sure he liked the sensation. As the pack's alpha, he couldn't allow his emotions to rule him. It could be dangerous for all of them. The sooner he could get her mated to one of his brothers the better.

"Cassie and Matt on their way home?" Gabriel asked.

"Yeah. I locked the door so hopefully Michael has his key."

Gabriel nodded. He looked back down at Marin. She looked so fragile and helpless. If the rope burns were anything to go by, he knew she was a fighter; otherwise the marks wouldn't have been as severe. You only get those kinds of marks when you fight against the ropes. That was a good sign. A werewolf's mate needed to be strong.

"She's part of our pack," Gabriel said.

"Do you know whose mate she is?" Cole asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"No. I just know that she belongs to one of us. When she wakes up, assuming she decides to stick around, it will be up to her to decide which of us she chooses to be with." Gabriel was determined that she wouldn't be choosing him. He wasn't ready to settle down just yet.

"I had always thought that you would know exactly who was supposed to be with each of us. I never thought about you just receiving a general vibe or message," Cole said.

"I wish it was more specific. All I know is that she's part of our pack, which means that I'll defend her to the death if it comes down to it," Gabriel replied.

"So will I. Any man who treats a woman like this doesn't deserve to live."

Their mother had been abused by their alcoholic father. The werewolf gene had passed from their mother's side, but the women in the family didn't inherit the gene themselves. All of the men on their mother's side of the family had been werewolves, as would any of their future sons. The change hadn't taken place until they were eighteen, but thankfully they had been very tall and well muscled by the time they were fifteen and had been able to defend their mother. In the end, their dad had drunk himself to death and their mother had passed away shortly after. The one thing the brothers couldn't and wouldn't tolerate was a man being abusive towards a woman.

The brothers left the bedroom and pulled the door partially closed behind them. They didn't close it all the way because they were worried that Marin might feel imprisoned in a closed, unfamiliar room. Once they were outside, Cole decided to run his idea by Gabriel.

"She saw me in my wolf form and I didn't see fear in her eyes."

"That's a good sign." Gabriel figured there was more, so he waited patiently for his brother to explain.

"Since she's been abused and is in an unfamiliar room, I was thinking of taking a sick day or two. If I change to my wolf form and stay with her, she might recognize me and feel a little calmer when she wakes up," Cole said, hoping his brother would like the idea.

"As odd as it may seem that a wild wolf would make her feel more secure, I think you might be right. If that's what you wish to do, I don't have a problem with it," Gabriel told his brother. He wondered if Cole's idea had blossomed out of feelings he had for the woman, or if he was just feeling protective because she was a damsel in distress. Cole had always had a soft spot for needy women.

Cole pulled his cell phone from his pocket and called his employer on the way to his room. He left a voice mail for his boss telling him that there was a family emergency and he would miss work for a few days. It was a good thing that today was Sunday; otherwise, he wouldn't have been out in the woods and wouldn't have found their mystery guest. He typically ran through the woods on the weekends and stayed human during the week.

Contrary to popular myth, werewolves did not need to change at the full moon. Cole and Michael had only been strong enough to change at night until recently, but a full moon had never been necessary... or any moon at all for that matter. Gabriel, as pack leader, had always had the ability to change at any time of day. While Cole was now able to shift during the day, he hadn't tried it yet.

After leaving the voice mail, Cole took off his clothes and changed into a wolf for the second time that night. He loped down the stairs and nudged open Marin's door with his nose. Hopping up on the bed, he settled down next to her. At first, he just watched her sleep... looking for signs that she might regain consciousness. When that didn't seem likely, he propped his head on his paws and went to sleep.

Chapter Two

Daylight streamed through the bedroom windows. Marin was drifting somewhere between consciousness and her dreams. Her whole body was aching, but her head was the worst. She tried to open her eyes, but they wouldn't cooperate. Before she had time to panic, she slipped into the blackness again.

It was several more days before Marin regained consciousness. The brothers had taken turns caring for her, but Cole had stayed by her side as a wolf the entire time. He only shifted long enough to eat and even then he barely touched his food. It was like he was afraid to leave her side.

Since Gabriel was certain that she was part of their pack, he talked to Cole about giving her werewolf blood. It had been known to have healing properties if used to heal a werewolf's mate. Cole kept a box of syringes in the house for emergencies, courtesy of his stint as a pre-med student. During his first shift back into human form, he had drawn some of his own blood and injected it into Marin. Her cuts had started to heal within hours and her bruises had immediately begun to fade.

As Marin opened her eyes fully, she took in her surroundings. She was in a bedroom with pale floral wallpaper, large mahogany furniture and pretty sheer curtains at the window. She tried to sit up, but couldn't move. Shifting her arm, she realized the blanket was weighed down.

Looking to her left, she saw a large dog on the bed with her. Upon closer inspection, Marin realized it wasn't a dog but a wolf. Flashes of her accident came back to her. A large black and silver wolf with grey eyes had found her in the woods. Was this the same wolf? Did it belong to the owner of the house? The events after the accident were still shadowy, but she thought

she remembered seeing a dark haired man kneeling beside her.

Marin tried once more to sit up, groaning with the effort. The wolf popped his head up and looked at her. She froze, not sure what to do next. It seemed friendly enough, but she couldn't be certain. Tentatively, she reached out her hand to him.

"Hi there. Did you help bring me here?" Marin asked the large beast.

The wolf nuzzled her hand. She couldn't be sure, but she could have sworn he nodded yes to her question. She must have hit her head harder than she thought. Imagine, wolves answering questions! What would be next? Dancing cats?

"Is your master here?" Marin asked, feeling a little silly talking to the wolf as if he was a person, but she got the impression that he could understand her.

The wolf jumped from the bed and took off out of the room. Cole ran down the stairs, managed to get the front door open and loped across the yard. When he got to the street, he made sure there weren't any cars coming and crossed to the garage. Gabriel was inside working on a Chevy Camaro. Cole nudged his brother's leg to get his attention.

"What are you doing here? Is our mystery guest awake?" Gabriel asked his brother, as he slid out from under the car.

Cole nodded. The down side of being a wolf was the lack of communication skills. At least he could still reason like a human even if he couldn't speak. All in all, the lack of speech was a small price to pay for the gift of his special heritage.

"Let me wash my hands and I'll be over in a minute."

Cole turned and went back to the house. He didn't want to leave Marin alone for very long. When he reached her bedroom, she was still in the bed. She was

sitting up and was propped against the pillows, taking in her surroundings. Cole carefully got back on the bed and lay down beside her again. He had heard of pet therapy, but he wasn't sure if the same held true for werewolves. Hopefully his presence in wolf form would be comforting to her.

Marin cautiously reached over to pet his head. No one had ever petted him before and he found that he liked it. He heard the front door open and went on alert. Even though Gabriel had said he was coming over, it didn't mean that Gabriel was the one in the house. As his brother came into the room, Cole relaxed.

Marin looked up and saw a very tall dark haired man in her room. He looked vaguely familiar so she figured he must have been the one that rescued her. He was broad shouldered and very muscular. If he wanted to hurt her, it wouldn't be difficult. She was a little nervous, but if he had rescued her then maybe she could trust him. After all, not all men were like Stefan and his friends... at least, she hoped they weren't. Her experience with men was very limited, and most of it wasn't pleasant.

"Hi. You must be the one who found me in the woods." Marin spoke in hushed tones.

"I'm Gabriel. My brother and I brought you here." Gabriel paused, not sure what to say to her. "When I asked you about a hospital, you said you didn't want to go."

"I don't remember speaking to you. Thank you for taking care of me," Marin replied quietly, ignoring the comment about the hospital. She wasn't sure how much she should tell this stranger. While he didn't appear to mean her any harm, she was still wary.

Gabriel smiled. "It's no problem. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Pretty good. I must be pretty resilient. I don't seem to have any bruises or anything even though I remember going off the road," Marin said.

Looking down at her clothes for the first time, Marin realized that she no longer wore her own clothing and blushed. "Did you... did you undress me?"

"No. We called a friend of ours. A female friend. She changed your clothes and dressed your wounds," Gabriel told her, stammering through his explanation. He'd never been uncomfortable around a woman before, but Marin was making him feel a little uneasy... or maybe that was just the dirty looks he kept getting from his brother, who was still curled up on the bed by their guest.

Marin nodded. She was embarrassed for having even asked the question, but she was very shy about her body. Besides, she still wasn't sure this man could be trusted. While he had saved her life, it was probably best to err on the side of caution.

Gabriel decided to bite the bullet and get some answers about her scars and wounds. "Cassie mentioned you had a lot of marks on your back."

Marin stiffened. Of course the woman would have seen the marks from the lashing she had received last week, at least she assumed it had been last week. Marin wasn't sure how long she had been out of it. If only she could have escaped without Stefan's notice! Then she wouldn't have been run off the road, landing herself in yet another mess.

Marin looked at her lap, not quite sure how to proceed. This man was a stranger, even if he had saved her life. How much should she tell him? If he knew the truth, would he help her? Or would he toss her out, not wanting to deal with her abductor? Stefan was surely looking for her, which made her a liability to anyone offering her safety and shelter.

Gabriel sensed her uncertainty. He walked toward her slowly. Hunkering down beside the bed, he took her chin in his hand and turned her head so he could look into her troubled hazel-green eyes.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I only want to help," Gabriel told her.

Marin smiled. "I guess I'm just not used to people being nice to me."

"Will you tell me about the marks on your back?" Gabriel asked gently. He was afraid to push her, but he and his brothers needed to know what happened so they could protect her. If they knew what they were up against, it would make things easier.

She hesitantly nodded. Still not certain how to proceed with her tale, Marin showed Gabriel the marks on her wrists. He gently took them in his large hands and softly ran his thumbs over the rope burns. Beside him, he heard his brother rumble at him. Gabriel chose to ignore his younger brother. They obviously needed to talk later if he pup was going to growl at the alpha of their pack.

"How did you get these?" Gabriel asked in a soft voice.

"Ropes. I've been tied up for a few days," she said flippantly, trying to lighten the mood.

Gabriel looked at her questioningly.

"It's kind of a long story," Marin replied with a sigh.

"The car I'm working on can wait. I have as much time as you need." Gabriel watched her patiently.

Marin looked at him. He was being very kind to her and seemed genuinely interested. Maybe she could trust him. She was ashamed of what had happened to her and even more ashamed of how scared she had been, how defenseless she had felt. Normally Marin was a very strong and independent woman, but being tied up by someone twice your size and not being able to stop them from hurting you was enough to frighten

anyone. The worst part was that her time with Stefan had made her doubt herself. She now doubted both her strength and her ability to take care of herself.

"My name is Marin and I'm twenty five years old. I'm from East Tennessee, where I live with my younger brother... or rather, did live with my younger brother." She took a breath and paused a moment. "He developed a drug problem after our parents died and I never noticed. When he couldn't pay his drug dealer, he made arrangements to swap me for payment."

Gabriel watched her patiently. He didn't want to push her. Just watching her facial expressions he knew that it was something painful for her to talk about. While he wanted to know what had happened to her, he didn't want to cause her further mental stress. Marin had already been through enough just with the accident. Asking her to relive the events that had led up to that accident might be asking too much, but he wanted to know as much about her as possible. The more she told him, the more he would be able to help her.

"I didn't realize where we were going at the time; I just thought I was helping my baby brother. When we got to the drug dealer's place, my brother hit me on the back of the head with something. I passed out for a few hours. When I woke up, I was handcuffed to a bed."

Marin paused, remembering her fear and uncertainty of what the future would hold for her. The memories were still painful, but the worst ones were yet to come. She wasn't sure why she felt so comfortable sharing this with a stranger. Marin usually was very reserved around people she didn't know, but there was something about his eyes. When she looked into his eyes, she felt like she could tell him anything. Gabriel's strong, quiet presence comforted her. A man of his size should terrify her, but for some reason he had the opposite effect on her.

"A few days later, the drug dealer sold me to the highest bidder. Because of having to care for my younger brother, I worked so much that I didn't have time for a social life." She paused, looking thoughtful and a little embarrassed. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I was a virgin so he got a high price for me. It didn't hurt that I had no friends or family to miss me, except the brother who had betrayed me."

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." Gabriel didn't want to upset her, and he wasn't sure he wanted to hear anymore. He could only imagine what the man had put her through. Gabriel had noticed that she had *she was* a virgin, which meant she had probably been raped. He was disgusted and wished that he could wipe the horrible memories from her mind, wished that he could give her peace again.

"No, I want to tell you. I don't know why, but I feel like I can trust you."

Gabriel smiled at her. His legs were starting to cramp so he sat on the edge of the bed and continued to hold her hand. She didn't seem to mind his close contact. For that matter, he wasn't minding it either, which took him by surprise... and unbeknownst to him, irritated Cole to no end. Had he looked at his brother right then, he might have rethought the hand holding. Cole was staring at Gabriel's hand as if he wouldn't mind taking a bite out of it.

Marin continued her story. "The man that bought me kept me locked in a small room. It didn't have any windows and only had a small bed and dresser, which were both bolted to the floor. He ... he raped me several times. After three days, I managed to escape."

She stiffened at the memory. She had felt so free until he had caught up with her. Beside her, the wolf growled low in his throat. It was almost as if he had understood what she was saying. It was comforting to think he would protect her.

Marin continued her story. "He came after me and caught me less than an hour later. He chained me to a wall in the basement and whipped me with one of those long leather whips. I could feel the blood running down my back, but he kept doing it over and over. I couldn't stand anymore when he was finished; the handcuffs were the only thing holding me up. I just hung from them. Eventually, he unfastened them and tied me to a table. That's where the rope burns on my wrists came from."

Tears started to slide down her cheeks. Marin wanted to tell him everything, but she just couldn't say anymore. What came next was too horrible to speak out loud. Living through it once had been bad enough, but going through it again was unthinkable. Not only had Stefan found more ways of torturing her, but he had invited his friends to join in the fun. She started to feel nauseated just thinking about it.

Gabriel pulled her into his arms and let her cry. He could only imagine what else the monster had done to her. It was a miracle she was still alive. No matter the risk, he would make sure that she was safe from now on. No harm would come to her if he had any say in the matter.

"You're safe here, Marin. I promise that I won't let anything happen to you. Neither will my brothers," Gabriel told her.

Marin sniffed and dried her tears. She leaned back to look into his eyes. "Are your brothers as nice as you are?"

Gabriel smiled. "Much nicer. I'm the mean one of the bunch."

She smiled at him. It was hard for her to picture him being mean to anyone. Gabriel had been very gentle and kind to her. She kissed him on his cheek and immediately wondered if she should have done that.

Gabriel caressed her cheek. "You can stay here as long as you want. This is a spare room that no one uses. It can be yours if you'd like to stay here."

Marin looked around the room. It was far nicer than anything she'd had in the past four years. She wasn't quite sure she understood what he was saying though. After all, nothing in life came free. What price would he ask for such a nice room?

"I don't have a way to pay you." Marin admitted with a blush.

"You don't have to pay me for the room. Knowing you're safe is payment enough." His reasons weren't quite that altruistic. Since she was part of the pack, he wanted to make sure she stayed nearby.

The wolf next to them groaned and shook his head. Cole was starting to worry that his brother was already falling for Marin. Apparently the pack's alpha was going to get his mate before Cole or Michael would. Not that Cole begrudged his brother a chance at happiness, nothing could be further from the truth. Cole was just tired of being alone. He hadn't had a serious relationship for over five years and he had felt a special kinship with Marin, almost as if they were connected. The moment he had seen her, he had wanted to protect her and take care of her. Surely that meant something.

Gabriel looked at Cole. Marin reached over to pet the wolf again. His fur was much softer than she had thought it would be.

"Is he your pet?" she asked, looking at Gabriel.

Gabriel wasn't sure how to respond. Cole looked at his brother. If Marin was going to stay here, they would have to find a way to explain three different wolves running around and a lack of men during those times.

Gabriel looked at Marin. "Something like that. He's unique."

"Does he have a name?" Marin asked.

"Cole. His name is Cole," Gabriel replied softly.

Marin looked at the wolf and back at Gabriel. "Do your brothers look like you?"

"A little. They're two years younger than me and a little shorter. They're twins, but one has blue eyes and one has gray eyes."

"Will I get to meet them? Do they live here too?" Marin asked.

"They both live here. You'll get to meet Michael later, but I'm not sure about my other brother," Gabriel said as he looked at Cole. Technically she had already met him, but he could hardly tell her that the wolf was his brother. "The three of us have rooms upstairs so you will have the whole second floor to yourself."

"What happened to my clothes?" Marin asked looking at the black t-shirt, wishing she had something more feminine to wear.

"Cassie said they wouldn't come clean. She was going shopping this morning to get you a few things. Essentials I believe she called them. With that woman, there is no telling. You'll probably end up with a whole new wardrobe."

"Oh! I can't let her do that! I don't have a way to pay her for the clothes," Marin said, looking overly distraught. The last thing she wanted was to feel like a charity case.

Gabriel smiled reassuringly at her. "Don't worry about payment. Cassie and Matt have more money than they know what to do with."

"But..."

"No buts. If you offer to pay Cassie, you'll end up insulting her. Just let her buy stuff for you. She loves shopping more than most other things in life. Matt's always trying to get her to spend money, but she won't unless it's for someone else," Gabriel said.

Marin sighed. She was apparently going to lose this battle. "Okay."

Gabriel smiled at her. "Are you hungry?"

Before she could answer, her stomach growled.
“Um, yeah. It seems I am.”

“Do you want anything in particular?”

“No. Were you planning on fixing something for yourself?” she asked, not wanting to put anyone out.

“I figured I’d make some spaghetti and garlic bread. Sound okay to you? I’m afraid you missed breakfast by a few hours,” he said, glancing at his watch.

“That sounds more wonderful than you could ever know,” Marin responded with a shy smile. It would be heavenly to have real food again. Stefan hadn’t exactly been worried about her health so she hadn’t had much to eat, and a lack of money had kept her from eating very much since her parents’ death. Her top priority had been her little brother, who had depended on her to keep a roof over his head and food on the table. She felt a twinge in her heart as she realized that she had failed him. If she had paid more attention, he would have never become addicted to drugs. If only she had been around more... but it was a little late for ‘if’ at this point.

Gabriel headed downstairs to start on lunch. Cole remained in his wolf form and stayed close to Marin. He had stayed close to her since the first night they had brought her home. He had called his boss yesterday and asked if he could have the whole week off. Dave, his boss, was a little concerned since Cole never took time off, but he didn’t ask a lot of questions. Cole promised to explain everything when he returned to work on Monday. He figured it was the least he could do since his boss was being so accommodating.

The doorbell rang downstairs. Cole got up and stuck his head around the edge of the door to see who it was. Gabriel opened the door and Cassie came in with two large sacks. Cole turned around and jumped back up onto the bed, realizing that Marin was safe. He

heard Gabriel berating Cassie and wished wolves could laugh.

"Cassie, what in the hell do you think you're doing? You aren't supposed to lift anything heavy!" Gabriel bellowed at her.

"Jeez. You're as bad as Matt. I'm fine, but I do have two more sacks in the car if you want to go get them for me." Cassie gave him her biggest smile.

Gabriel shook his head. He knew when he had been played. Just the same, he headed out to Cassie's Mercedes SUV to get the other two bags. If he didn't, he knew that she'd be hauling them into the house herself. If anything happened to her or the baby, there would be hell to pay. Matt might not be a werewolf, but if his wife or kids were harmed he would definitely be a force to be reckoned with.

Gabriel followed Cassie up the stairs to Marin's room. Cole was curled up on the bed again. Gabriel hadn't thought to warn Cassie that Cole was in his wolf form... hopefully she wouldn't give anything away. After Gabriel gave Cassie and Marin a brief introduction, he called for Cole to leave the room.

Marin looked down at Cole. "He can stay, if that's okay with you."

Gabriel and Cassie exchanged a look. "I'll make him behave," Cassie promised.

Cassie walked over to the bed and held her hand out to Marin. "I'm glad to see you're awake today. You had all of us worried that first night."

Marin took in Cassie's enormous belly and shook her hand. "Thank you for helping me. Gabriel told me that you cleaned me up and bandaged my cuts. You must have done a fantastic job because they're all healed."

"It's no problem." Cassie assured her, a little curious about the fast healing. She'd have to ask Gabriel

about it later. Either the man had started dabbling with spells, or it was a werewolf thing.

"Not to be insensitive, but aren't you due soon? Should you be running around town shopping for me," Marin asked.

Cassie grinned. "Not going to work. I love to shop for other people. Besides, I'm not due for another two months or so. It will be fine. Now, I got your sizes from your other clothes and bought some stuff to get you through a week or two."

Cassie went to the nearest bag and drug it over to the bed. It was from Victoria's Secret so Marin had an idea of what was inside. She hadn't had the luxury of shopping in a long time. The death of her parents had taken away the niceties she had become accustomed to. Part of her was excited about having such a nice wardrobe, but the other part of her felt guilty that someone was spending so much money on her.

"I know your other bra was lace, but I had a hard time finding any like it in your size. I hope that satin is okay," Cassie said.

Cole groaned next to them. Cassie looked down at him without any sympathy. "You're the one that wanted to stay so hush," she told the wolf.

"It's fine. I actually didn't pick the other bra so it will be nice to have a change," Marin told her.

Cassie pulled out five bras in various colors with matching bikini panties. She pulled out a pair of pale thigh highs and two nightgowns. The first nightgown was a pale pink and the second was a mossy green. Both were the most beautiful things Marin had seen. Their lines were simple and they had spaghetti straps. She was just happy to have something that wasn't sheer. Stefan had either made her go without clothes or they had to be so sheer she might as well have not been wearing anything. Before her abduction, her money had all gone toward paying the bills and making

sure her brother was fed. She hadn't bought anything new in a long while. Most of her recent clothes were donated to her or she had bought them at the local thrift stores.

Marin gingerly touched the fabric. The bras were white, black, beige, teal, and red. She couldn't believe how thoughtful Cassie had been. Fighting back tears, Marin carefully folded everything and sat it on the other side of the bed next to Cole. Deciding that the women were going to drive him insane, he tried to cover his eyes with his tail. It was better to *not* know what Marin was wearing under her clothes. He was having a hard enough time getting his mind to stop wandering into the gutter as it was.

Cassie pulled over a large bag from Macy's next. Inside were three pairs of low-rise jeans, a pair of gray pants and a short black flared skirt. Cassie had also purchased a black cashmere sweater; a teal satin button down to go with the skirt; and three knit shirts in black, red, and green. Next she pulled out socks in both white and black, along with a pair of gray trouser socks to match the pants. Marin had never owned clothes as nice as these before. Cassie's generosity touched her. She was feeling a little bit like little orphan Annie.

Reaching for the largest sack, Cassie pulled out a pair of low heeled brown ankle boots, a pair of black ankle boots with a three inch heel, and a pair of black high heels. The last bag was much smaller. It contained make-up from Christian Dior. Marin normally bought her make-up from the dollar stores or bought it on sale at Wal-mart.

"I don't know what to say. Thank you doesn't seem to cover it. No one has ever done anything like this for me before." Marin whispered in awe.

"I'm glad you like everything. I have one more stop to make and then I'll be right back. Why don't you rest

until then? I'm sure you have to be tired," Cassie told her, noting how wan she looked.

"I *am* a little tired. You would think that I had slept enough lately, but apparently my body has other ideas. You really don't have to buy me anything else though," Marin assured her. She wasn't used to people buying her nice things and not expecting payment of some sort. If people like Cassie and Gabriel had been around when her parents had died, then maybe her life, and her brother's, would have been different. Then again, if things had turned out differently, she would have never met Cassie and Gabriel.

Cassie smiled. "No one has been able to keep me away from stores so don't bother trying. I'll be back within half an hour."

Cassie pulled the door closed behind her and carefully walked, well waddled, down the stairs. She stuck her head in the kitchen before leaving. The last thing she needed was Gabriel freaking out when he couldn't find her. All of the men in her life were paranoid at the moment and it was driving her crazy. It wasn't like she hadn't already delivered two babies.

"Hey Gabriel, I need to run down to Walgreens for a minute. Marin is resting."

"Lunch should be ready in about fifteen minutes," Gabriel said.

"Think it will keep for about thirty minutes?"

"That should be fine," he said.

"I'll be back quick as I can."

Cassie went out to her car and headed to Walgreens. She felt so stupid. When she had gone shopping this morning, she hadn't even thought about buying Marin a toothbrush, hairbrush, hair things, deodorant, perfume or anything. At least she had remembered the make-up! Pregnancy had definitely scrambled her brain cells.

Entering the store, she headed straight for the hair care aisle. She grabbed some Herbal Essences shampoo and conditioner; a nice wide hair brush; pony tail holders and a headband; and some barrettes. Next she grabbed deodorant, toothpaste, a toothbrush, razor, and headed for the bath and body section. Throwing two types of body wash and lotion in the cart, she headed for the perfumes. She wasn't sure what Marin would like so she grabbed three different types of perfume. Feeling a bit devilish, she made sure that she grabbed a raspberry scented spray, remembering how fond of the scent Cole had been. If she didn't miss her guess, he was rather taken with Marin.

Hurrying to the checkout counter, Cassie paid for her purchases and loaded them into the car. She made it back to the Victorian house within twenty minutes. Grabbing the sacks, she headed for the front door. Before she could knock, Gabriel had the door opened and had taken the sacks from her.

"What part of you shouldn't be lifting things did you miss?" Gabriel asked her.

Cassie smiled. "The part where I'm supposed to be an invalid and can't do anything for myself. It sucks."

Gabriel just shook his head and headed upstairs with the sacks. Cassie was following him at a slightly slower pace. Gabriel held his fingers to his lips as he opened the door. Marin was sleeping peacefully. They quietly put the sacks on the floor near the bed and left the bedroom. Gabriel paused in the doorway. Marin looked so innocent lying in the large bed. Cole was still lying beside her and had his head resting on her arm. Gabriel pulled the door shut and followed Cassie down the stairs.

As they entered the kitchen, Gabriel went to the stove and started filling plates with spaghetti and garlic bread. It smelled heavenly! Cassie called Michael at the

garage and told him to come over to the house for lunch.

Thinking his brother might be hungry, Gabriel started for the stairs. He had only taken a few steps when Cassie stopped him.

"How is Cole going to eat if he's a wolf right now? How long has he been like that anyway?" Cassie asked.

"He shifts back into human form long enough to eat. Since Marin is sleeping, he might come down. And to answer your other question, he's been staying a wolf about ninety-nine percent of the time since we brought her to the house. He just lies on the bed next to her all day."

Gabriel had been listening to the news most of the day. So far, no one had found Marin's car. Considering how far this guy had gone to keep Marin, he was wondering how long it would be before he returned to the scene of the accident. Gabriel was pretty sure they hadn't left any tracks that could be traced back to their home, but he might have to check it out later just to be safe. He knew that Stefan couldn't afford to leave any loose ends and would be looking for Marin. Not only could she recognize his face if she saw him, but he had also told her his name... which meant that he had not intended for her to live.

He hadn't expressed his concerns to anyone, but he knew Cole was thinking along the same lines. It certainly would explain why his brother refused to leave Marin's side. It didn't cross his mind that Cole might have other reasons for staying with her.

Deciding to let Cole come down when he was ready, they sat at the table and looked at Michael's empty seat. Before Gabriel could say anything, Michael walked through the kitchen door. He went to the sink and washed his hands before joining them at the table. Being a mechanic was messy work, but he loved being able to take a car apart and put it back together...

having it run better after he'd worked on it than it did when it came into the shop gave him a sense of pride and accomplishment.

"Sorry to keep y'all waiting. I was in the middle of changing out the ignition on that Acura when you called."

"No problem," Gabriel said.

Michael nodded to Cassie. "Hey, Cass. It's good to see you again."

"You would have seen me a few nights ago if you had been home." Cassie told him with a smirk.

Michael looked at the three of them before looking back at Cassie. "When the woman was brought in?"

"Marin."

"Who?" Michael asked with a puzzled look on his face.

Cassie rolled her eyes. Leave it to Michael to live in a house and still be clueless about what was happening in it. She often wondered if he would even feel an earthquake if he were focused on something else or asleep.

Gabriel looked at his little brother. "What time did you come in last night?"

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "About two this morning."

"Do I even want to know what you were doing," Gabriel asked.

Michael just grinned. He had been a womanizer since he was sixteen and that hadn't changed in the past fourteen years. Gabriel wasn't sure Michael would settle down even if his mate walked through the door at that very moment. In other words, he was probably stuck with him for life.

"Marin is the woman's name. The one we've been taking care of all week? Ringing any bells?" Gabriel asked.

"Where's Cole?" Michael asked, ignoring his brother's tone.

"In the guest room at the top of the stairs. He's sleeping next to Marin at the moment." Gabriel paused. "She's a little skittish, but I think she wants to trust us. Be careful with her."

Michael looked at his older brother. "You know I wouldn't hurt her." He glanced at Cassie, "Not intentionally anyway."

Six years ago at Whispering Lake, Cassie's so-called friend, Kari, had cast a spell on Michael and his brothers. Michael had been the only one the spell worked on and it had made him force himself on Cassie. Thankfully, Cole had been able to stop him from doing something stupid and he had only managed to force a few rough kisses on her before Cole had hauled him off of her. Under normal circumstances, Michael would never hurt a woman. It still bothered him that he had tried to hurt Cassie, spell or no spell, it just wasn't right. That week would always haunt him... it's the only time in his life he had even remotely acted like his father and it bothered him a great deal. Of course, he'd also tried to kill her fiancé, which he had thankfully bungled. He tried his best to forget that week. It was definitely not one of his finer moments.

"I wasn't implying that you would," Cassie assured him, also remembering the events at Whispering Lake. "Just move slowly around her and don't approach the bed until she looks comfortable with you. She's nervous and has good reason to be."

Michael nodded. "I'll be careful."

About that time, Cole came down the stairs in a pair of jeans and a black shirt. He hadn't bothered with shoes, a brush or anything else for that matter. He had the look of a man who hadn't slept in about a week... which wasn't far off the mark.

"Did she say anything about the abuse," Cassie asked.

Gabriel noted Cole's ragged appearance, but decided to leave it. Answering Cassie, he said, "A little. Apparently her brother assisted in her abduction. Actually, he practically gift wrapped her for the guy. I won't go into any details."

Cole had a hard time keeping the pain from his eyes. As a wolf, he had heard the entire conversation his brother had with Marin that morning. It had been horrible to hear about the things the man had done to her. He had a feeling that she had endured worse things than what she had revealed so far. If Cole ever saw the guy, he'd rip his throat out... whether he was in wolf form or not.

Conversation turned toward more pleasant things. Gabriel and Michael talked about how well the shop was doing; Cassie talked about her pregnancy; and Cole told them how well things were going with his job. He hoped to get a promotion in the next month or two. His last evaluation had gone really well and his boss had hinted that he'd like to see Cole get into management.

When lunch was finished, they all put their plates in the sink. Cole decided to work on the dishes while Michael went back to work at the shop. Cassie said her goodbyes and headed to her parents' house to pick up the kids.

Once everyone was gone, Gabriel microwaved Marin's food and got her a fresh glass of water. He quietly ascended the stairs to her bedroom. Gently pushing the door open, he peeked inside. Marin was sitting up in bed looking out the window.

"Can I come in? I brought you some lunch."

Marin smiled when she saw Gabriel. "That sounds great."

"I was going to bring it up earlier, but Cassie said you were sleeping. She dropped off some more stuff

for you," Gabriel said with a nod toward the bags on the floor.

Marin peered over the edge of the bed at the large sacks in the floor. That Cassie sure knew how to shop. Marin was going to be spoiled when she left here. At the thought of leaving this peaceful, safe home, pain shot through her heart. Being on her own again was a scary thought, especially with Stefan still running around. She wasn't stupid. Marin realized that she was a threat to Stefan and he would do his best to eliminate her.

After Gabriel sat the tray in her lap, he placed the sacks on the other side of her. Now she could go through them whenever she was ready. He realized that the room didn't have a television. If he had thought about it, he would have asked Cassie to grab a magazine or two for Marin. She had to be bored.

Marin took a bite of her lunch. "Wow, this is terrific!"

Gabriel smiled at her. "Thanks. I'm glad you like it."

Marin smiled back and continued to eat her lunch. She hadn't had very much to eat since being with Stefan. He fed her when it suited him and usually it was just bread and water or maybe some crackers. It was no wonder she had lost weight. If Gabriel kept feeding her like this, she'd fill out in no time. Thankfully the clothes she had worn yesterday were too big. She could gain some weight and still wear the clothes that Cassie had bought her.

"Marin, can I asked you something? Something you might not want to discuss," Gabriel asked her.

Marin stilled. "What is it?"

"Can you tell me a little about the guy that ran you off the road?"

"How did you know someone ran me off the road," Marin asked cautiously. She didn't remember saying anything about Stefan forcing her off the road.

"The skid marks on the street indicated that you didn't go off the embankment without assistance," he replied.

Marin nodded, what he said made sense. "His name is Stefan. He ... He's not as tall as you. He has dark hair, but it isn't black, more of a chocolate brown. He wears it a little long and has sharp facial features."

Gabriel reached over and took her hand. "You don't have to keep talking about him. I just wanted to know what to look for, you know, in case he's still around town."

"You think he's still here?" Marin couldn't quite keep her voice from breaking in fear.

Gabriel could have kicked himself for scaring her. He should have never brought it up. "Don't worry, Marin. You're safe. I promise that no one will hurt you while you're here."

Marin pushed her tray aside and inched closer to Gabriel. Just being near him made her feel safer. After all she had been through, she would have thought that men would scare her to death. Being around Gabriel had the opposite effect. Just being in the same room with him or his wolf, made her feel safe and secure.

She was sitting right next to him on the bed, her leg brushing against his, and put her hand in his. "I just wanted to tell you thank you for everything. No one has ever taken care of me before or cared what happens to me. At least, no one has since my parents died. It means a lot."

"I like taking care of you." Gabriel admitted grudgingly. He didn't want her to get the wrong idea, but he couldn't very well tell her she was part of his pack. She'd think he had a screw or two loose. At the same time, he didn't want her to think he was interested in her romantically.

Marin smiled and kissed his cheek. For the first time since her parents had passed away, she actually

wanted to be in someone's arms. After having Stefan force himself on her, and letting his friends do the same, she wondered what it would be like to be with someone gentle like Gabriel. She hadn't been kissed by a guy since her twenty-first birthday, not really kissed. There were times when she didn't even remember what it felt like. Marin had been so busy with college, and later she'd been busy taking care of her brother, that she hadn't had time to go out on dates or have a social life. Feeling the bed dip a little, Marin noticed that the wolf had returned.

Gabriel put his arms around her and drew her into his lap. He just held her close. It felt amazing to hold her. No woman had ever made him feel like this. It was terrifying and yet wonderful at the same time. It was scary to feel this emotional about someone in such a short time. To make things worse, Cole seemed really attached to her. Gabriel hoped he was only feeling this emotional because she was an unattached female in his pack. Maybe the feelings would die down after she chose her mate... at least, he hoped they would. He wasn't ready for a mate.

Marin snuggled closer to Gabriel. She buried her face in his neck and breathed in his scent. He smelled of the outdoors and a splash of cologne. She had never smelled anything so wonderful. Briefly, she wondered if he might kiss her. While that thought should scare her, she found it oddly intriguing.

Gabriel gently set her from him and put her back on the bed. "You should finish your lunch. I'm sure you're starving."

Marin blushed. "I know I'm skinny as a rail."

"That wasn't what I meant, Marin. I just meant that you missed breakfast and I know you haven't eaten much the past few days. We've been feeding you broth, but that isn't really enough."

"You're right, I did miss breakfast," Marin said.

She finished her lunch in silence. Gabriel took her dishes back to the kitchen when she was done. Marin tried to close her eyes and rest again, but sleep wouldn't come. Her mind was racing. She knew she could trust the men to watch over her, but she wasn't sure if she could trust her heart with a great guy like Gabriel. If his brothers truly were as wonderful as he was, then things could be very interesting.

Speak of the devil; Gabriel came back into the bedroom. "I meant to ask if you'd like to take a bath. I could run the water for you if you'd like."

"That sounds nice. It's been a while since I've had a nice hot bath."

"I'll get it started for you. Since you seem to be doing much better, I'll go back downstairs while you bathe. Take as much time as you want," he told her.

"Thanks," Marin said with a smile.

Gabriel went into the bathroom to start the water. While the tub was filling up, he gathered the sacks of stuff Cassie had bought at Walgreens and put them in the bathroom in case she needed any of it. When he wasn't looking, Marin got a clean pair of white panties and the pale pink satin nightgown off the bed. She was much better, but she still felt a little weak. Marin knew she needed to stay in bed for at least the rest of the day, but no one said she had to look horrible while she was there. Okay, so she was on the thin side, too pale, and look wretched ... but the nightgown would at least help her feel pretty.

She gathered her clothes close to her and walked into the bathroom. Gabriel put a towel out and got her a clean washcloth. Leaving her to her bath, he backed out of the bathroom and closed the door.

"I'll be downstairs if you need anything," Gabriel told her through the door.

From the bed, Cole had watched them with interest. He had sensed Gabriel's unease when Marin

had pressed herself close to him. Maybe had been reading the signs wrong and his big brother's only interest in Marin was that of a brother or a friend. Feeling hopeful, Cole decided to rest until Marin was finished with her bath.

Chapter Three

Marin slowly pulled the t-shirt over her head and managed to get out of her panties. She removed the bloody bandages from her chest and stomach and threw them away. Somehow she managed to pull the bandages from her back as well. Her cuts were completely healed. From the amounts of blood on the bandages her cuts had to have been bad. How had she healed so fast?

Deciding to worry about it later, she stepped into the tub. Sliding into the water, she let its warmth wash away her stress and fears. Marin hadn't had a nice warm relaxing bath in a long time. Grabbing the sacks on the floor, she pulled out some shampoo, conditioner, a razor and some soap.

Once she was thoroughly cleaned and rinsed, Marin shaved her under arms and legs. It had been a while since she'd had that luxury. She hadn't been allowed to bathe or shave in the past two weeks. Stefan had only provided a small bowl of water and a rag for her to clean herself. She tried to shake the memories from her head. It would be best if she tried to forget everything she'd been through. Maybe this was her chance at a new life.

After that task was finished, she rinsed off in the water. Draining the water, Marin got out of the tub and grabbed her towel. She briskly dried her body then wrapped her hair in the towel and grabbed the lotion from the sack. She slathered the lotion on her whole body. It smelled wonderful and made her feel almost normal again.

Next Marin pulled out the hair brush and carefully worked the knots out of her long hair. Seeing the pony tail holders, she braided the thick mass in a single braid down her back. She doubted that she would find a hair dryer in the bathroom and wasn't entirely sure she

wanted to wait long enough to dry her hair. While Marin hated to admit it, her body was still healing and she felt weary.

She slid the nightgown over her head, reveling in the feel of the satin against her skin. Slipping her feet into her panties, Marin pulled them up under her nightgown. She felt like a completely different woman. She was still too skinny, but her skin glowed with health. The dark smudges that had been under her eyes for the past few years had vanished and her eyes looked vibrant again. It was the first time since her parents died that she actually looked and felt alive.

Marin walked out of the bathroom and climbed back into the bed. The wolf was already lying on top of the blankets. Marin had missed him when she had woken up alone earlier. She had gotten used to his comforting presence.

Gabriel knocked on the door and she told him to come in. He opened the door and stepped into the room. The sight of her in the pale satin nightgown was enough to make him speechless. She was a new woman, and a delectable one at that! Cole noticed the look on his brother's face and growled.

"Are these different sheets?" Marin asked, running her hands over the soft cotton.

"I changed the bed while you were bathing. Your cuts had bled through the bandages. Even though they've been healed for a day or two, we didn't want to move you while you were unconscious just to change the sheets."

"Did I ruin the others," Marin asked; her expression troubled.

Gabriel smiled at her. "I'm sure they'll come clean. Don't worry about it. I was mostly changing the bed to give you a fresh set of sheets."

"Thank you," Marin said.

"Why don't you rest a little? One of us will start dinner in a few hours. You should be able to get in a nice nap before then."

"What's for dinner? Not that it matters, any food is wonderful right now."

Marin blushed after she said it. She knew they could tell she had been starved, but she had a hard time voicing it. Her body was embarrassing to her at the moment, even if it wasn't her fault it looked this way.

"We can either make pork chops or baked chicken. The grocery shopping is usually done when Michael is off work, which will be tomorrow. If there's anything specific you want us to make, just let someone know by tomorrow morning."

"Pork chops sound wonderful, if that's okay with everyone else? I don't want to seem demanding. It's bad enough I've turned your world upside down and endangered you," Marin said softly.

"Endangered us?"

Marin's hand flew to her mouth. She hadn't meant to say that, but it was probably best that the brothers be on alert. Then again, what if they didn't want to be bothered with her if Stefan was actively seeking her? Dropping her hand to her lap, she murmured, "Stefan is probably searching for me."

"He won't find you here. And if he does, you have three of us to protect you. You're safe with us. I promise we won't let him have you."

Marin reached for his hand with tears in her eyes. It felt so amazing to have someone take care of her and protect her. The three brothers had taken her into their home and cared for her without complaint; at least she assumed they had. Gabriel was the only one she ever saw. They were truly incredible men.

"Marin, please don't cry," he told her.

"I'm crying because I'm happy. No one has ever taken care of me before. I can't even describe how it makes me feel."

Gabriel put his arms around her and pulled her into his lap. He just sat there and held her while she cried. Cole, in his wolf form, growled at Gabriel. Marin sniffled one last time and looked down at the wolf.

"Is he okay," Marin asked, noticing the wolf had growled at Gabriel twice now.

"He's fine, just cranky," Gabriel replied with a glare in Cole's direction.

Cole looked at him innocently. While he didn't begrudge Gabriel the chance at finding his mate, he had grown attached to Marin and had hoped she would choose him. For all he knew, she wouldn't pick any of them and would leave when she was healed, but deep down he felt that they were meant to be together. He could only hope that Marin would feel the same way... well, once she saw him in his human form that is. His inner wolf was still screaming at him that this woman was *his* and the urge to mate with her was strong.

Marin stopped crying and dried her tears. Most men wouldn't want to take on a woman with this much baggage and yet the brothers were caring for her as if she belonged here. It was enough to almost make her cry again. She reached over and gently ran her hand over the wolf's fur.

"How much longer do you think I'll be stuck in the bed? I'd love to get dressed and walk around some," Marin said.

"You seem to be a lot stronger. I bet if you rest for most of the day, you'll be good as new by tomorrow," Gabriel replied.

Marin smiled. "That would be nice. I don't know about being good as new, but hopefully I'll at least be able to get around a bit."

Gabriel quietly left the room. Marin closed her eyes and tried to sleep. A few mornings ago she had been fleeing for her life from her imprisonment at Stefan's. Now she was in a nice bedroom with a great family and they were telling her that could stay as long as she wanted. It was like being in a dream... one she didn't want to wake up from.

Marin's thoughts were so tiring that she eventually fell asleep. Her dreams were terrifying nightmares of being back with Stefan. He was beating her and raping her over and over. She whimpered in her sleep and reached for Cole. Holding on to his warm furry body calmed her a little. Sometime later, she woke up in a cold sweat.

She looked over at the wolf lying by her side and buried her face in his fur. He made a strange humming sound as if he were content and snuggled closer to her. Wrapping her arms around him, Marin closed her eyes. This time she was able to drift into a fitful sleep. The rest of the night slipped by and was filled with pleasant dreams.

During the night, Cole had shifted from his wolf form to his human form... his naked human form. He was still asleep, even though the sun was shining through the window, and hadn't realized that he had changed. Rolling onto his side, he pulled Marin into his arms. He rested his chin on her head and rubbed her back. Thinking he was dreaming, he pressed his erection against her.

Marin moaned in her sleep. In her dreams, she was being held by a handsome, loving man... someone who cared about her deeply. She lifted her face to his and kissed him. It wasn't the first time she'd had the dream, but this time it felt more real than it ever had before. She didn't want it to end. Marin had never felt so loved or desirable as she did just then. While the man had

always been faceless, this time he had inky black hair and gray eyes.

Neither of them realized that they were acting out their dreams in real life. Marin kissed Cole as if he were the only man in the world for her. Her passionate kiss made Cole want her even more. Running his hand down her back to her hip, he pulled her hips firmly against his and deepened the kiss. Marin felt so warm and soft ... he couldn't get enough of her.

They were so wrapped up in their dreams, and in each other, that they didn't hear the door open. At first, Gabriel was in shock at what he was seeing. How could Cole do this? Then again, Marin didn't seem to mind it too much.

"Cole, what in the hell are you doing," Gabriel bellowed.

Marin and Cole jumped apart. Her eyes went wide when she saw there was a gorgeous, and naked, man in her bed. She quickly scrambled to the edge of the bed to put some distance between them. She had just been making love to a stranger! What was wrong with her?

Cole had a bewildered expression on his face. He grabbed the sheet and wrapped it around his waist. Standing on the other side of the bed, he glanced at Marin and then at his brother, uncertainty written on his face.

"I swear I didn't do it on purpose Gabriel! I had no idea..."

"You had no idea you were naked and making out with Marin? Try again little brother," Gabriel said with a stern voice.

"Gabriel, I swear! I didn't know what I was doing! I thought I was dreaming."

Comprehension started to dawn in Marin's eyes. "You're one of Gabriel's brothers," she asked hesitantly.

Cole looked at her. "Yes, I'm Cole."

Marin looked at him funny. "Cole? Like the wolf..."

She let the sentence trail off. It wasn't possible was it? She got up and walked around the bed until she was standing in front of him. Looking into his eyes, she was shocked at what she saw. His eyes were the same as the wolf's eyes, the same eyes she'd seen in her dream. But men couldn't turn into wolves! They just didn't!

Cole saw that she was piecing it together, and coming up with the conclusion that she was out of her mind. "You're not wrong. I'm Cole, like the wolf." He glanced at his brother before continuing, "I *am* the wolf."

Marin gasped. "But that isn't possible! People can't turn into animals."

"Werewolves can be in human form or wolf form," Gabriel said softly from the doorway.

Cole looked at him in surprise. He hadn't expected any assistance from his brother. It wasn't that he wouldn't trust her with their secret, but it was a little early to be scaring her off with talk of werewolves. If only he hadn't shifted during the night... too late for that now.

"Werewolves," Marin squeaked. She was starting to wonder if she had fallen into an episode of the Twilight Zone. Either that or the men in this house had some serious mental issues.

Gabriel sighed. He hadn't wanted to tell her this way. Why hadn't Cole stayed in his wolf form last night? Things would have been so much easier if he had.

"Werewolves exist, Marin. My brothers and I are all werewolves. It's a birth right that was passed to us on our mother's side," Gabriel explained.

Marin's legs wouldn't hold her up any longer. As she started to fall, Cole put his arms around her and pulled her close to him. Her body was the only thing keeping the sheet from falling. If she moved, she'd see way more of him than she probably wanted to... not

that she hadn't already felt every inch of him pressed against her.

Marin didn't stop Cole from catching her. Truth be told, she kind of liked being this close to him. Those feelings excited her, terrified her, and most of all confused her. After being abused by men so recently, how could she desire a man she'd just met? Especially one who claimed he was a werewolf? Maybe her head wound had been serious after all... how else could she possibly even think they were telling the truth?

Marin put her hands on Cole's arms to help brace herself. His muscles rippled under her fingers. It was probably a good thing he was holding her up because her legs would have definitely given out after feeling how strong he was. She was starting to feel crazy for feeling this way about a man claiming to be able to change into a wolf! A man who was a stranger to her at that!

Stefan hadn't been strong. He had been stronger than Marin, but he wasn't built like Cole. He was definitely not as beautiful to look at. Cole's chest was smooth, tanned, and well muscled. Marin had to restrain herself from letting her hands explore his body. She looked up into his eyes again. They were definitely the same eyes as the wolf that had been sleeping with her. Whether she wanted to or not, she had to admit that he must be telling her the truth. There was no other explanation for it.

"You've been by my side this whole time and yet I never knew you were anything other than a wolf," she told him, sounding somewhat bewildered.

"I thought you might be scared in a house full of men when you woke up. Since you had seen me as a wolf that first night, I thought it would be something familiar to make you more comfortable. I never meant to shift in my sleep last night," Cole replied.

"I believe you. After everything I've been through, I probably shouldn't trust a man that I just met... especially a man who has been lying to me this past week."

Cole had the grace to blush. "I didn't mean to lie to you."

Marin slowly raised her hand to his cheek. "I know you didn't. I appreciate what you did for me. Not only saving me, but staying with me this whole time. I've felt safe with you by my side."

"And now that you know I'm not really a wolf?" Cole asked.

"But you *are* a wolf... it's just that you're a man too." She paused for a moment. "I'm okay with that," Marin replied.

Gabriel backed out of the room deciding to give them some privacy. It looked like the mystery of who Marin would choose had been solved. He was happy for Cole and if he were honest with himself, he would admit that he was a little relieved too. While he would have been happy to claim her as his mate, he didn't feel like he was quite ready for that just yet. He didn't like feeling as if his emotions were out of control.

Back in the bedroom, Cole slowly released Marin and grabbed the sheet before it could fall. He looked at the door where his brother had been standing and saw that Gabriel was gone. Looking back down at Marin, he saw that she was still staring at him. Not surprising since it wasn't every day you found out werewolves existed, and that you'd unknowingly been sharing your bed with one... and kissing one, Cole wasn't going to forget that for a while.

"I should probably go put some clothes on," he told her.

Marin looked at his bare chest again and blushed. Part of her wished that he wouldn't put clothes on, but she knew it was for the best. She took a step back, but

couldn't bring herself to move too far away from him. Even though she hadn't known he was a man at the time, the wolf that had stayed with her since the night of her accident made her feel safe and secure. She didn't like being away from his side. Marin was startled by that realization, but had to admit that she felt safe by Cole's side... and something more, but she couldn't put a name to the other feeling and wasn't sure she wanted to.

Cole started to walk past her, but she put her hand on his arm to stop him. "Will you come back? I mean, after you've gotten dressed?"

"If that's what you want," Cole answered, enjoying the fact that she still wanted him around. It took everything in him to not reach out and pull her into his arms. He would love to feel her pressed against him again, to feel her lips on his. Even now he was fighting the primal urge to claim her as his mate.

Marin nodded yes. She very much wanted him to come back. There were so many questions she wanted to ask about what he was and how it worked. After he left the room, it felt empty. She crawled back into the bed and pulled the covers over her legs.

Upstairs, Cole quickly threw on the jeans and shirt he had worn yesterday when he'd had lunch with everyone. It was hard to believe that he and Marin had slept through dinner. She must be starving! He hurried back downstairs and hesitantly walked back into her room.

She looked up at him and smiled. "I'm glad you came back."

He grinned at her. "I thought I would see how you felt about getting some breakfast. Gabriel probably has something cooking downstairs."

"That sounds good. Just let me throw something on really quick," Marin replied.

Marin jumped out of bed and ran over to the dresser, her questions momentarily forgotten, as well as the fact that she only wore a thin satin nightgown. She pulled out the green shirt and jeans Cassie had given her. She also grabbed the matching bra that went with the panties she had on. Running to the bathroom, Marin quickly threw the clothes on. She washed her face, brushed her teeth, brushed her hair and put on a little makeup. She wanted to look nice for Cole. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she briefly wondered *why* she wanted to look nice for him. She didn't really know him after all.

When Marin stepped back into the bedroom, Cole was sitting on her side of the bed. His eyes widened a little when she walked over to him. She knew that she was still too thin, but the makeup definitely made her look a little better. Apparently her efforts had not gone unappreciated; the fact that he found her attractive lifted her spirits.

Cole stood and took her hand. They walked down to the kitchen together. Michael was sitting at the table and Gabriel was putting omelets on plates. There was a pitcher of juice on the table and everyone had an empty glass. Marin was eyeing Michael with interest. She could tell that he was Cole's twin.

"Michael, this is Marin," Cole said as they sat down.

Michael smiled at her. "It's nice to meet you. I was happy to hear that you were awake and feeling better."

"Thank you. I'm still amazed that I healed so quickly," Marin said.

Michael glanced at Cole. Marin saw the exchange and wondered what was going on. She looked at Cole. Noting his expression, she figured he had to know something.

"Do you know why I healed so fast?" she asked him hesitantly, not entirely sure she wanted to hear the answer.

Cole looked at the table. "Maybe."

Gabriel came over with their plates. He sat down on the opposite side of the table from Marin. He looked at his brothers and at Marin. She had a right to know why she had healed so fast, but he didn't want to freak her out either.

"Tell her," Gabriel told Cole.

Even Michael grew still at hearing Gabriel's softly spoken command. He watched Cole and Marin closely. He could see the questioning look on her face and saw a myriad of emotions pass over his twin's face. Well, well... this was certainly interesting. It appeared his twin *did* have a reason for staying with their guest day in and day out. Fighting back a grin, Michael knew the next few days would prove interesting.

Cole sighed and looked at Marin. "No matter how I explain this it's going to sound crazy."

Marin reached over and took his hand. "Please try. I really want to understand."

"Every werewolf has a mate... one special woman that is destined to be by his side for the rest of his life. A pack's alpha, or leader, can tell when that woman is near. He can't tell which of his wolves she'll belong to, but he'll know that she's part of his pack."

Marin was listening intently, but she didn't understand how this explained her fast healing. She waited patiently for him to continue.

Cole took a sip of orange juice before continuing. "When we brought you here, you were broken and bleeding. From the moment I laid eyes on you, I had known that you were special. After getting you back to the house, Gabriel told me that you were a mate for one of us."

"You mean I'm supposed to be with one of you?" she asked, part of her was terrified and the other part of her was excited about the thought of belonging to

one of these wonderful, not to mention gorgeous, men. There were definitely worse fates.

Cole nodded. "Yes. If a werewolf's mate is injured, he can heal her by giving her some of his blood. It doesn't even matter if she's *his* mate or another wolf's mate. As long as she's part of the pack, it will work."

Marin was shocked. "You gave me blood to heal me?"

"I work for a bio-med facility, but I was in school to be a doctor. I never made it all the way to medical school, but I keep some syringes in the house for emergencies. I drew some blood from my arm, and injected it into yours. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough to heal your injuries in twenty-four hours."

Marin wasn't sure what to say. For that matter, she wasn't sure what to feel. She should be disgusted that he had done that without her knowledge, but she knew that Cole wouldn't have done it if he thought it would harm her. He had probably saved her life by giving her his blood.

"Thank you for saving my life," Marin said after a minute.

Cole looked at her in surprise. He had expected her to be repulsed or even furious. "You're welcome."

Gabriel looked at them. "Well, now that we have that out of the way, how about some breakfast?"

Everyone dug in. Marin was only part way through hers when all three brothers were finished. She couldn't believe how fast they ate. Even though she was slow, she managed to finish her entire omelet.

Looking at Gabriel she asked, "You're the pack leader, right? Is that the correct term?"

"Yes, to both questions, although the leader is usually called the alpha," he answered.

"So you know that I'm supposed to be a mate to you or one of your brothers. You're the one who told them that I was part of their pack?"

"Yes," he answered again.

"Do you know who I'm supposed to be with," she asked him.

"No. It doesn't work that way. I can only tell that you're part of my pack. Who you end up with is entirely up to you." After seeing her with Cole earlier, he knew how her mate was, but it was better for her to think she had some say in the matter.

Marin nodded. "If y'all will excuse me, I think I'll go upstairs for a few minutes."

The brothers stood as she got up from her seat. Marin took her plate and glass to the sink and headed up to her room. She wasn't tired, but she needed a minute to herself. Everything she had learned today was a lot to take in. Her brain was still having a hard time dealing with the fact that werewolves existed; much less that she was part of their pack. And how exactly was she supposed to decide which one she would spend the rest of her life with? That was a huge commitment!

When Marin got to her room, she brushed her teeth and got out a pair of socks and her brown low heeled boots. She put her socks and shoes on and sat on the bed for a minute. After being stuck in the house for several days, she could use some fresh air. At the same time, she was too scared to go out. What if Stefan was still lurking in the area?

Deciding that she couldn't hide in her room all day, she walked downstairs and looked for the brothers. Cole was sitting at a desk in the living room working on a laptop. The television was on, but she didn't see Michael or Gabriel anywhere.

"Where did your brothers go," Marin asked as she walked into the living room.

Cole looked up from his laptop. "They went to work. They own the garage across the street and work as mechanics over there five days a week. Michael usually has today off, but they were swamped so he decided to work. Gabriel will probably tell him to take tomorrow off instead."

"And you said you work at a bio-med company? How is that you're home today?" Marin asked.

"Yes, I work for a company called Sabin Bio-Med. I'm a biologist, but I'm one of the lower level ones. My boss thinks I'd be good in management, but I don't know if he'll move me up or not," Cole said. He knew he was rambling, but he couldn't seem to stop himself.

"You didn't answer my question about how it is that you're home today. I would imagine your job is a Monday through Friday type of thing," Marin said.

Cole smiled. "It is. I took a week off."

Her face fell. "Because of me..."

Cole got up and walked over to her. "Hey, don't be sad. I needed some time off anyway. I've worked for the company for four years and haven't taken a single day off work the entire time. Even taking this week as a sick week, I still have about a month of vacation, a month of sick time and two weeks of personal time. My boss was glad to hear I wanted to take some time off."

She looked up at him as she came to stand in front of her. "Really?"

He put his arms around her and hugged her. "Really."

Stepping back from her, he turned back to his laptop. "Just let me get through some of these emails and we can watch a movie or something."

"That sounds nice," Marin said as she walked over to the couch and sat down.

"Did you want to go somewhere," he asked, noticing that she had put on her socks and shoes.

She didn't want to voice her fears just yet. "Not right now. I don't want to over-do it too much this morning."

"Smart woman," he told her with a grin.

Cole finished his last email and shut down his laptop. He went over to the cabinet by the television and opened it. There were probably a hundred DVDs or more inside.

"Do you have a preference for movies," he asked her.

"Anything is fine. I haven't seen a movie in a while."

He browsed through the titles and decided to pick something light and humorous. After he put *Legally Blonde* in the DVD player, a gag gift to Michael from Cassie, he went and sat beside Marin.

"Cassie bought this for Michael as a joke. When she asked him what he wanted for Christmas last year, he told her a hot blonde; so she bought him *Legally Blonde* on DVD."

Marin smiled at him. "I'm sure I'll like it."

They sat in silence and watched the movie. Not far into it, Marin laid her head on Cole's shoulder and relaxed into his body. She found the movie to be funny and entertaining, but her body was more tired than she realized. By the time it was over, she was sound asleep.

Cole gently picked her up and carried her to her room. He laid her on the bed and pulled her boots off. Pulling the covers up over her, he pressed a kiss against her temple. The werewolf blood might have healed her cuts and any broken bones, but the emotional stress she had been under would have to be healed through rest.

Not wanting to leave Marin for long, Cole went up to his room and selected a novel to read. When he got back to her room, she was curled on her side facing the window. He walked around to the other side of the bed

and stretched out beside her. Propping himself up on some pillows, he read his novel while she rested.

By lunch time, Cole got up and went down to the kitchen. Gabriel and Michael would be coming soon and probably would be starving half to death. Working on cars seemed to give them a hefty appetite. He remembered the days of working in the garage while he was in college. Once he'd gotten the job at Sabin's, he'd signed his part of the garage over to Michael and Gabriel. It was their only source of income so it only seemed fair.

Cole pulled out some angel hair pasta, olive oil, crushed walnuts and various seasonings. He boiled the pasta until it was tender. In a small skillet on the side, he mixed the seasonings and olive oil. Heating it on the stove, Cole slowly stirred the pasta into it and added the walnuts. He buttered some thick slices of baguette and put them in the oven until they were crispy.

Using a damp cloth, Cole cleaned off the table and placemats. After filling four glasses with ice water, he placed them at the table and started filling the plates. He pulled the bread from the oven and placed a slice on the side of each plate. Just as he was putting the plates and silverware on the table, Marin padded into the kitchen barefoot.

"Is it lunch time already," she asked in a sleepy voice.

"Yes, it is. I hope you like pasta. Give me a second to call my brothers and I'll sit down with you."

Cole pulled his cell phone out and called the garage. Michael answered and said they would be home in a minute. Hanging up his phone, he went and sat next to Marin at the table.

"I'm sorry I fell asleep during the movie," she said as he sat down.

Cole smiled at her. "You needed the rest. Don't worry about it."

They ate lunch in companionable silence. A few minutes later, Gabriel and Michael walked in. They both went to wash their hands before sitting down to eat.

"How are things going over there today," Cole asked his brothers.

"Busy, but good. Mostly just oil changes and other light stuff. We've got one engine rebuild to do by Monday and two ignitions to change out," Michael answered.

"Speaking of cars," Marin started. "The one that I was driving didn't belong to me. It belonged to one of Stefan's friends."

The brothers looked at her. They had figured it wasn't her car, but it was nice to know for sure.

"It was totaled," Gabriel said.

"That just means he's going to be even more furious with me when he finds me," she said. She couldn't stop her hand from trembling slightly. The brothers said they would protect her, but what if they couldn't?

Cole reached over and placed his hand on hers. "He isn't going to find you, Marin. And if he does, he isn't walking out of here with you."

"I can't ask you to put yourselves in danger for me," Marin said.

Gabriel looked at her. "That's what being part of our pack is all about. We protect our own."

"But am I really part of the pack if I'm just here but not really with anyone?"

Gabriel sighed; he knew he should have explained things better earlier. "You don't have to be married to one of us if that's what you're thinking. The fact that Cole's blood healed you is proof enough that you're already part of the pack. Selecting your mate isn't something you have to rush through."

Michael smirked. "I think she's already selected him, whether she realizes it or not."

Marin looked at him. Could he be right? Was that why she felt so safe with Cole, because he was destined to be her mate? She glanced at Cole and found him watching her intently. It was obvious he felt something for her.

"I don't understand how all of this works," Marin said, not quite sure how she felt about everything.

Gabriel answered, "You don't have to say anything or do anything special. Just spending large amounts of time with one pack member in particular is enough to claim them as your mate." He looked significantly at Cole.

Marin looked around the table at the brothers. Gabriel had been really nice to her, but she definitely felt differently about Cole. The question was whether or not she felt enough for him to spend the rest of her life with him. It was a big decision to make, and one she didn't want to make lightly. "What happens now," she asked.

"Right now, nothing. You concentrate on getting better. No decisions have to be made this week. Or even next week or that matter," Gabriel responded. "You can take as long as you want. None of us are going anywhere."

Marin nodded and finished eating her lunch. When Gabriel and Michael were finished, they went back to the garage to finish working. Cole and Marin cleared the table and went into the living room. When Marin sat next to him on the sofa, he pulled her into his lap. She was astonished by the move. Did she dare hope that he might *want* her to choose him for her mate?

Cole ran his fingers through her hair. It was so long and so soft. "I love your hair," he told her.

She blushed. "Thank you."

Cole felt her body relax into his. He was glad that she could trust him so easily after everything she had suffered. It showed how strong she was.

"I didn't mean to startle you. I just wanted to hold you for a minute. Is that okay?" he asked. "I don't want to do anything that might make you uncomfortable."

"I like it when you hold me," she said in a near whisper, almost afraid to admit it out loud. Marin was afraid of what he might think of her. He probably already had a bad opinion of her after the way she had kissed him earlier thinking back to the morning, she couldn't believe she had been so uninhibited with Cole.

Cole put his arms around her and pulled her close. Marin buried her face in his neck and wrapped her arms around him. She knew at that moment that she wanted to be his mate, the one woman who was meant to be with him. He was so kind to her and so loving. She could never have asked for more from the man she spent the rest of her life with. It was still a little terrifying, but part of her was already accepting this new life that she had stumbled into.

They stayed snuggled together until it started to grow dark outside. Cole eventually set Marin away from him. She looked at him in confusion, thinking she had done something to upset him.

As if reading her thoughts, he said, "My brothers will be home in a few minutes. Why don't you go lie down until dinner?"

"Okay," she said.

Marin got up off the couch and went up to her room. Stretching out on the bed, she dozed off within minutes. It was amazing that she could go to sleep yet again that day.

Downstairs, Cole worked on his laptop a little. He hadn't told anyone, but he was actually doing some research on Stefan. The man didn't even have so much as a parking ticket. How had he stayed so squeaky clean and yet been so horrible to Marin? Surely she hadn't been the first woman he had bought or kidnapped?

Cole was still working on his project when Gabriel and Michael came home.

Gabriel offered to make dinner and Michael turned on the television. Cole closed down his laptop and headed upstairs. He hadn't had a decent shower today. Running up to his room, he stripped off his clothes and took a hot shower. When he got out, he shaved the five o'clock shadow from his face. Grabbing a clean shirt and jeans, he got dressed, even putting on socks and shoes.

On his way downstairs, Cole stopped to check on Marin. She was awake and was just slipping her boots back on when he walked into her room. When she saw him, she smiled and got off the bed. She walked over to him, but once she was standing in front of him she wasn't sure what to do. Part of her wanted to hug him and part of her wondered what it would be like to kiss him, on purpose this time. She ended up doing neither of those things and mentally chastised herself for being such a chicken.

Reaching out to take his hand, they walked downstairs together. When they walked into the kitchen, Gabriel was putting the last of the plates on the table. They were having pork chops with rice. The aroma was enough to make Marin's mouth water.

Everyone sat down and ate dinner. Marin and Cole kept sneaking glances at each other. Gabriel was watching them, but he hoped he wasn't being obvious about it. He was happy that things were working out so well for Cole. He had been really worried about his little brother after Cassie had fallen for Matt.

Six years ago when they had met Cassie at Whispering Lake, North Carolina, she had ended up sharing a cabin with the three brothers. At first, Cassie and Cole had really hit it off. Later, Matt had shown up. No one had known that Cassie and Matt had been dating. She had told Cole that she wasn't seeing anyone

and things had gotten pretty serious between them. Matt had come as a complete surprise. What they hadn't realized at the time was that Matt had been a surprise to Cassie too. Up until that moment, he had been a ghost in her life... literally. It had all worked out for the best though. Cassie and Matt had gotten married a few months later and now they had two children with another baby on the way. Just looking at them you could see how happy they were, how much they completed each other.

Since that time, Cole had only dated a few women, and none of them had been serious. One of Cassie's friends, Kari, had pursued him relentlessly. She still showed up every now and then, but she'd been out of town for the past year traveling the country. Hopefully Kari wouldn't be back for a while. Gabriel tried not to think badly of people, but Kari made that difficult. She was usually a bitch and felt every man should beg to be with her. Thankfully, Cole had never given in to her and usually did his best to avoid her.

While Gabriel was watching Cole and Marin, Michael had been watching *him*. Michael had thought that Gabriel would be upset when Marin had obviously picked Cole as her mate, but he seemed to be taking it pretty well. Michael had been thrilled that Marin hadn't chosen him! He wasn't ready to stop playing the field so to speak. He fully admitted that he loved going out with a different woman every night. He hadn't had a serious girlfriend since high school, and he planned on keeping it that way! Although, the woman he'd been with the night Cole had found Marin had been worth seeing a few times. Not wanting to give her the wrong idea, he stopped calling after their third date.

When they had finished eating, Michael excused himself and headed to his room. Gabriel figured that Cole would want some more time with Marin so he excused himself as well. It was his way of making sure

that Cole and Marin ended up together. If he and Michael stayed out of the way, she wouldn't have any choice but to select Cole as her mate. It was obvious the two of them were meant to be together.

"If y'all don't mind, I'm going to head back over to the garage for a few minutes. I need to get my schedule figured out for tomorrow," Gabriel said as he headed for the front door.

Cole put his plate in the sink and turned to look at Marin. "Would you like to take a walk if I promise to keep you safe?"

Marin smiled. "I'd like that a lot."

She put her plate in the sink and went to stand beside Cole. He reached down and took her hand. Pulling her toward the back door, they stepped out into the chilly night air. Cole hadn't thought about her getting cold since he typically didn't feel the cold unless it was below twenty. A higher body temperature was part of being a werewolf, which came in handy during the winter months.

Cole squeezed her hand. "Hang on just a minute."

He opened the door and leaned back inside. He grabbed his brown leather jacket and draped it over her shoulders. Marin pushed her arms through the sleeves and laughed. Her hands completely disappeared in the long sleeves and the jacket hung down almost to her knees.

Cole smiled and rolled the sleeves up for her. When he started down the steps again, she slipped her small hand into his large one. It was nice hearing her laugh. It meant that she was healing more than just physically. Cole had been worried that her emotional scars would take a long time to heal, but she seemed to be recovering rather quickly... and it didn't have anything to do with the blood they gave her.

They walked quietly through the woods. The clouds were long gone and they could see every star in the sky.

The moon was still full and illuminated everything around them, making it a beautiful night.

Breaking the silence, Marin asked, "Cole, can I be honest with you about something?"

"Sure. You can tell me anything," he responded.

Marin looked at him hesitantly. "I liked your brother, Gabriel, when I thought you were just a wolf. I don't think of him the same way that I think of you, but I thought you should know. I guess I'm just worried that I'm going to screw up your lives by choosing the wrong guy. If I pick you but I was supposed to be with Gabriel, then does that mean he never finds his mate?"

Cole stopped and looked at her. "Marin, you don't have to put so much thought into it. There's no rush. You can stay with us as long as you want to. Get to know us before you try to make a decision on something like that. It's not like there's a deadline."

Marin looked miserable. "I know, but..."

Cole placed his finger over her lips. "No buts. Just concentrate on getting better and getting back into the swing of things. The most important thing is you... your health and well being. Everything else can wait."

Marin could feel her eyes starting to tear again. Here she was, the key to either his happiness or his brother's, and he was worried about *her*. He was incredible. The more she was around him the more she felt that she had already chosen her 'mate.' She put her hand on his cheek and stood on tiptoe. Even then, she still didn't have a prayer of kissing him; he was far too tall for that.

Cole picked her up and pulled her against his body. Her face was mere inches from his and he wanted to kiss her more than anything, but he hesitated. Would she think he was taking advantage of her? She had just said she was confused and he didn't want to add to her anxiety. Granted, she had appeared as if she were trying to kiss him, but what if he had misread the

situation? He wanted her as his mate, but he also wanted to give her the time and space she needed. She'd had a rough week and he didn't want to do anything that would make it any worse.

Deciding that he was over thinking the matter, he lowered his head to Marin's and claimed her lips in a gentle kiss. Marin gasped and put her hands in his hair, pulling him closer. Timidly she touched her tongue to his lips. Cole groaned and opened his mouth, deepening the kiss. She tasted so sweet; he felt as if he could drown in her kisses.

Marin wrapped her legs around his waist and held on for dear life. She had never experienced anything like this before. Cole made her feel things that she never dreamed existed. She had dated a few guys in high school and a few more in college, but none of their kisses were like Cole's. She could feel his kiss all the way to her toes. It felt as if his soul was speaking to hers... as if they completed each other, two halves of a whole.

Cole pulled back and looked at her. "I didn't mean to take that quite so far."

"I'm glad you did. I've never felt anything like that before."

"Which is why I shouldn't have taken advantage..."

Cole kissed her again briefly and buried his face in her neck. The thought of her kissing Gabriel like that made him crazy. If Marin decided that he wasn't the guy for her, Cole would probably take his savings and move out of the Victorian. He wouldn't be able to be around her day after day knowing that she was with Gabriel, or even Michael for that matter. It would be too painful. He had known from the first moment he had seen her that she was special. Even in his wolf form, he had felt a pull to her. He still hoped that meant that she was his to keep.

He set her back on her feet. "We should probably head back to the house. You shouldn't over do it."

"Okay." Marin smiled at him, but the smile slipped from her face and she looked down at the ground.

"What is it, Marin?"

"I have an embarrassing question to ask you."

Cole lifted her chin so that she was looking into his eyes again. "You can ask me anything you want to."

"Would you ... would you stay with me tonight? As a wolf?"

Her question took him by surprise. "Like last night?"

Marin nodded. "I felt safer last night than I have in a long time. It probably sounds strange that I'm asking you to change into a wolf to sleep in the same bed with me, but I'm not sure I'm ready for that step with anyone in human form."

She blushed remembering that she had woken up to find a naked man in her bed instead of the wolf she had fallen asleep with. "Well, not intentionally anyway."

He caressed her cheek. "I'd be honored." The fact that she wanted him to stay with her gave him hope; knowing he made her feel safe thrilled him.

Taking her hand, he led her back to the house. When they reached the back door, Cole stopped. There was an unfamiliar scent in the air. Cracking the door open, he listened to the conversation his brother was having with an unexpected guest.

"Are you sure you haven't seen her?" the man asked Gabriel.

Gabriel looked at the picture of Marin, or rather what Marin had looked like before this man had terrorized her. "I'm sure. What makes you think she's in this area?"

"Poor thing was in an accident down the road a ways. I checked the area hospitals, but they said she wasn't there."

"And you think she's still in the area?" Gabriel asked the stranger.

"She had to have been badly hurt. I'm sure someone took her in, but so far everyone I've asked has said they haven't seen her."

"I wish I could help you, but I haven't seen her either. Maybe she wasn't hurt as bad as you think and she's already moved on."

The man nodded. "Could be. Well, thank you for looking at the picture."

After Gabriel had closed the front door, Cole quickly ushered Marin in through the back. They were going to have to alter her looks a little if Stefan didn't leave soon. Cole hated the thought since he found her attractive as she was... a little skinny at the moment, but attractive just the same.

"Was that Stefan?" Cole asked Gabriel.

"Yeah. Hopefully he won't come back though. Just to be safe, maybe Marin should stay inside and stay away from open windows. I don't want to take any chances with her safety."

"I agree," Cole said.

Marin was shaking. She pressed herself against Cole for support. Her legs felt like they would give out at any moment. The world started to tilt and she wondered if she was going to pass out. Even after being away from Stefan for the past week, she felt terrified.

Cole immediately put his arms around her and picked her up. "I think I should take her back to her room."

Gabriel nodded and they both headed upstairs. When they reached her bedroom, Cole laid Marin down on the bed and pulled her shoes off for her. He brushed her hair back from her face, but she didn't respond. She was staring up at the ceiling, but she didn't seem to really see anything. Was she in shock?

"Marin? Sweetheart, can you look at me please? You're scaring me."

Marin glanced at Cole, but didn't really see him. Stefan had found her. She wasn't safe here anymore. How long would it be before he came back looking for her again? And how many people would be hurt, or even killed, when he tried to take her back?

"Marin, do you want to change for bed?" Cole asked, hoping she would snap out of it.

Marin just stared at him. Cole looked at Gabriel for help. He was getting really worried about her. They had to make her feel safe. But how? Then he remembered her request.

"Hey Gabriel, I'll be back in just a minute. Will you sit with Marin until I get back?"

"Sure."

Gabriel sat on the bed beside her. It was like she was far away even though she was lying right by him. He could strangle Stefan for showing up here. She had been so vibrant and alive until a few minutes ago.

He heard clicking on the stairs and looked toward the door. Cole came trotting back in as a wolf. Since his wolf form had found Marin and had stayed by her last night, maybe this would work. She had seemed to respond well to him before.

Getting up from the bed, Gabriel pulled the covers over her. She just stared up at the ceiling without really seeing it. It was like she was lost in another world; her eyes were open but unseeing.

Cole jumped onto the bed and snuggled up next to Marin. He propped his head on his paws and watched her. Crawling further up the bed, he gently nudged her face with his cold wet nose. Marin blinked a few times and finally looked his way, really seeing him this time.

Fear had completely taken her over when she had heard Stefan's name. Cole's wet nose had brought her back to reality and she smiled her thanks. She wrapped

her arms around him and buried her face in his fur. In his wolf form, he smelled musky.

Letting go of Cole, she looked at Gabriel and saw the worry on his face. "I'm okay now."

"Are you sure? You gave us a scare," Gabriel said.

Marin nodded. "I'm sure. For a minute all of my feelings of fear came rushing to the surface, but I know that I'm safe here. Besides, I have a bodyguard with me," she said with a smile at Cole.

Gabriel grinned. "Yes, it appears you do."

Marin might not realize it yet, but she and Cole were meant to be together. It probably explained why his blood had healed her so quickly. For a moment, Gabriel flashed back to breakfast and remembered Cole telling Marin that he had known she was special. Was it possible that he had felt the pull to her? The pull that told Gabriel she was a mate for one of them? If so, what did that mean? Only the alpha should feel anything when one of their mates was present.

"I'm going to let you rest while I fill Michael in on what's going on. We'll make sure we keep the doors and windows locked and set the alarm. It means that none of us will be running out of here as wolves anytime soon, but your safety is much more important," Gabriel told her.

Marin frowned. "It isn't right for y'all to alter your lives just because you stumbled across me after my accident."

"Don't worry about it Marin. I told you, you're part of our pack and we're going to do whatever is necessary to protect you. Regardless of how you might feel, you're part of the family now."

Without thinking about what she was doing, Marin stroked Cole's fur on his neck. "If you're sure I'm not causing a lot of trouble..."

"You're not. And I think Stefan may have found way more trouble than he bargained for," Gabriel said.

Marin still looked uncertain, but she obviously couldn't argue with him. She settled back against the pillows and sighed. Since she was destined to be here, she might as well get used to losing arguments with the brothers. She had a feeling it would be happening rather frequently.

Gabriel looked from Cole to Marin. "Get some rest. Michael and I will take turns guarding the house tonight."

Gabriel stepped out into the hall, closed the bedroom door, and he headed upstairs to Michael's room. He started to knock on the door, but his brother had music blaring. Even with werewolf hearing Michael wouldn't be able to hear him through all of that!

Opening the door, he shouted, "Hey, Michael! Turn that down!"

Michael jumped and looked at Gabriel. "What's up," he asked as he turned down the volume on his stereo.

"Stefan came by looking for Marin. Cole turned into a wolf and is staying with her for the night," Gabriel said, getting right to the point.

"Whoa. So, we're patrolling the house tonight, then?"

Gabriel smiled at him. "Yep. I was thinking we'd do this in wolf form. After all, people train dogs to attack intruders all the time, and a dog can't go to jail."

Michael smiled back. "I like the way you think bro; want me to go first?"

"Be my guest. I'm going to attempt to sleep a little so I can open the garage tomorrow. If you start to get tired, wake me up."

Gabriel left and went to his room while Michael stripped out of his clothes and shifted into a red and white wolf. The blue eyes would make people think he was a really large husky if anyone saw him.

Gabriel headed across the hall to his room. He closed his bedroom door and went to lie down on the

bed. Closing his eyes, he tried to drown out all of the noises of the house and all of the thoughts bouncing around in his head. It wasn't long before he managed to fall asleep.

Chapter Four

On the second floor, Marin was facing Cole and was playing with the fur on his neck. Even though she knew he was really a six foot one well muscled man, she was comforted by the wolf lying beside her, who was watching her intently. She wondered what he was thinking. Did he think as a wolf would when he was like this? Or was he just the same Cole as any other time, but in a different body?

Marin sat up. Looking down at Cole she said, "I'm going to head into the bathroom and get ready for bed. I'll be right back."

She got up and walked into the bathroom. Turning on the light, Marin closed the door behind her and turned on the sink. She brushed her teeth and her hair. Her nightgown was on the floor. Removing her clothes, she slipped back into the nightgown. She washed the make-up from her face and used the facial moisturizer Cassie had bought her.

Marin turned out the light and opened the door. Cole was still lying on the bed. When she stepped into the bedroom, he looked up at her. She couldn't be sure, but she thought she saw his eyes widen slightly. Hopefully it was in a good way. It definitely answered her question about his thoughts being wolf thoughts or human thoughts.

The bedroom was a little chilly so she quickly walked over to the bed and climbed under the covers. She was still shivering and tried to get closer to Cole for warmth. Cole figured out what she was doing and stood up. Using his paws, he pulled the covers back a little and wiggled under them next to her. He popped his furry head out from under the covers and propped it on one of the pillows.

Marin smiled at him. She turned on her side and wrapped her arms around him. Pressing herself as close

to him as possible, she breathed in his scent and kissed him on his furry cheek. Cole was wonderful whether he was in human form or wolf form.

"Thank you," she whispered in his ear.

Cole rolled his eyes to look at her without moving his head. He would give anything to be in his human form and hold her in his arms, but he knew that in his wolf form he would be able to protect her better. If Stefan did manage to get into the house, he would *not* make it into Marin's room! Cole would kill him if he came anywhere near her.

Marin and Cole both drifted off to sleep. Both of them had troubled dreams about Stefan. Marin worried that Stefan would end up hurting one or all of the brothers and Cole was worried that Stefan would find a way to abduct Marin. In sleep, they clung to each other. Shortly after midnight, Cole shifted into his human form while he was sleeping. It hadn't been intentional, but neither he nor Marin noticed. It was getting to be a habit... a bad one.

Cole instinctively wrapped his arms around Marin and held her close. She wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face against his chest. Neither of them moved all night. With Cole's arms around her, Marin had peaceful dreams. It was the first night in a long time that she didn't have nightmares most of the night.

In the morning, Marin was the first to wake up. Her first reaction was to panic, until she opened her eyes and saw that Cole was with her. He was still sleeping soundly. Marin tried to wiggle away from him a little, but his arms tightened around her. She didn't really want to move away from him, but she thought it might be for the best.

Cole slowly swam back into consciousness after a really deep sleep. Realizing that he was wrapped around Marin made him open his eyes with a start.

When had he become human again? Even if it was unintentional, he still felt bad about shifting during the night.

He looked down at Marin and realized she was awake and watching him. "I'm sorry, Marin. I swear I didn't change back on purpose," he swore as he started to pull away from her.

Marin smiled at him. "It's okay, really. I slept better last night than I have in a really, really long time."

Cole smiled, relaxing a little. "Me too. I should probably change back into a wolf though."

"Why?"

Cole blushed. "Um. Wolves don't wear clothes..."

As the meaning of his words sank in, Marin's eyes widened and a blush starting creeping up her neck to stain her cheeks a bright pink. She hadn't thought about him being naked! Of course, now that it had been brought to her attention, she did seem to have something rather large and hard pressing against her leg. She put a small amount of space between her and Cole. Marin didn't want to be completely apart from him, but she was a little embarrassed over their situation.

Cole saw that he had made her uncomfortable and could have kicked himself. He should have just kept his mouth shut and shifted. He started to roll away from her, but she put her hand on his arm to stop him.

"Are you leaving?" Marin asked, afraid that she had upset him by pulling away.

He faced her again before responding. "No. I just thought I should put a little space between us, all things considered."

Marin hesitantly scooted closer to him. Cole held his breath waiting to see what she was up to... afraid that if he moved he would scare her away. She slowly pressed her body against his. She wrapped her arms around his waist and placed a kiss on his bare chest.

Cole slowly put his arms around her, not really sure if he should or not. She looked into his eyes and slid up his body until they were face to face. With her hands pressed against his chest, she timidly placed a kiss on his warm firm lips. She started to pull back, but Cole grabbed a handful of her hair and plunged his tongue between her lips. Marin wrapped her arms around his neck to pull him closer. Without realizing what she was doing, she pressed her hips against him. Her body wanted him even if her brain wasn't quite sure about it.

Cole rolled so that she was lying under him. He broke the kiss and looked down at her. Expecting to see fear and uncertainty, he was surprised to see only desire. He brushed her hair back from her face and trailed his finger down her cheek and her neck. Pausing at her collar bone, he gently rubbed it with his thumb.

Marin ran her hands up his arms and felt his muscles ripple under her fingertips. He was so strong and yet so gentle. Stefan hadn't been nearly as strong as Cole was, but just being in the same room with him had terrified her. He had degraded her and tortured her every day for a week or more. Yet, lying in this bed with Cole, knowing that he was naked and lying on top of her, she wasn't afraid or repulsed. If anything, she wanted him... wanted to feel his skin against hers, to know what it was like to have a man make love to her.

Looking into his eyes, she whispered, "Make love to me, Cole."

He almost stopped breathing he was so shocked by her request. "Marin, I..."

"Please." She looked at him beseechingly.

Cole gently kissed her. Raising his head, he looked into her eyes. She was so trusting with him. After everything she had been through, to know that she trusted him that much nearly broke his heart.

"Marin, I would love nothing more, but..."

Marin looked away. She hadn't counted on him rejecting her and it hurt more than she had thought. Blinking away the tears that had sprung to her eyes, she tried to scoot away from Cole.

"Oh, honey. Please don't cry! I meant it when I said that I wanted to make love to you."

Marin looked at him with tortured eyes, "Then why won't you?"

Cole brushed away a tear that had spilled over onto her cheek, "Because either of my brother's could decide to come up here at any moment. When I make love to you, I want to know that we aren't going to be interrupted; to know that I'll have as much time as I want to show you how special you are." He slowly caressed her cheek. "I want our first time together to be perfect for you."

Marin knew at that exact moment which brother she would choose, knew without a doubt that she was Cole's mate. While Gabriel was handsome and kind, he didn't make her feel the way Cole did. Only Cole could make her feel desirable when she was an emotional wreck and not at her physical best. Looking into his eyes, Marin could tell that he truly did care for her. It might not be an undying confession of love, but it was more than she could have hoped for.

"Please kiss me," she whispered.

Keeping most of his weight on his arms so he wouldn't crush her, Cole bent his head to hers and kissed her. He tried to hold back, knowing that he shouldn't lose control, but in the end he couldn't. The wolf inside of him wanted to claim Marin. What had started as a gentle kiss became something passionate and fiery. He wanted to devour her, to claim her as his own in every way.

Marin pulled him closer so that he was lying almost completely on top of her. Cole was trying to keep his weight off of her, but at the same time he wanted to

imprint the feel of her against his skin. She felt warm and soft under his hard muscled body.

Lifting his head, he looked into her passion glazed eyes. Cole knew that if he didn't leave he wouldn't be able to stop himself from taking her. Marin deserved better than what he was able to give her at that moment. She deserved scented candles, soft music and a perfect night of slow lovemaking. He wanted to be able to worship her body and show her just how much she meant to him.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said as he pressed one more kiss to her lips.

He rolled off her and before his feet had hit the floor he had shifted into a wolf. All Marin had seen was a bright flash of light and the wonderful man she'd been kissing was suddenly the furry wolf she'd fallen asleep with the night before. It was an amazing sight to behold.

The wolf ran to the door, but Gabriel had closed it all the way and he couldn't open it. Marin climbed out of bed and opened the door for him; Cole darted out the door and ran up the stairs to his room. Changing back into his human self, he threw on some jeans and a long sleeve black shirt.

Downstairs, the doorbell rang. Cole froze wondering who it could be. He ran down the stairs to the second floor. Pausing at Marin's door, he watched as Michael opened the door. On the other side, stood Stefan and two police officers. Cole had to suppress a growl. He ducked into Marin's room and cautioned her to stay quiet.

"Stefan is downstairs," he whispered to her.

Marin stood and walked over to Cole. With a shaking hand, she reached for him. Would Stefan never leave her alone? When would he give up his search and go back home? When would she be free to have a life again?

Cole pressed a kiss to her hand. "Why don't you get dressed?"

Marin nodded and got some clothes out of the dresser. She didn't even pay attention to what she was grabbing. When she got into the bathroom, she saw that she had grabbed jeans, a black shirt, black bra and matching black panties. At least she was color coordinated she thought with a grin.

Throwing everything on quickly, Marin brushed her teeth and washed her face. After brushing the tangles from her long hair, she pulled her make-up out. Not wanting to stay in the bathroom too long, she just put on some mascara, blush and lip gloss.

Cautiously opening the bathroom door, she peeked out at Cole. He had the bedroom door partially open and was listening to a conversation downstairs. Apparently he had heard her open the door because, without looking in her direction, he held his hand out to her. She softly padded over to him on bare feet and placed her hand in his.

Downstairs, Michael was speaking with Stefan and the police. Marin could only hear a little of their conversation, but Cole's exceptional werewolf hearing was picking up every word. His twin was doing a good job so far.

"Mr. Andrews..." Stefan said.

"Michael, please. Mr. Andrews makes me feel old," Michael replied with a grin, turning on the charm.

Stefan smiled, or at least Michael assumed it was supposed to be a smile. It reminded him of sharks before a feeding frenzy. It was suddenly clear that this man was never going to stop coming for Marin. Not unless they took care of him permanently.

"Very well, Michael. Would you please look at this photo of my girlfriend and tell me if you've seen her around here? Her car ran off the road not far from here and she's missing," Stefan said.

Michael took the photo from him. It was definitely Marin, but at the same time it didn't look quite like her. He had an idea. It was a dangerous gamble, but he had a feeling it was the only way to get rid of the man and the police.

"I don't know this particular woman, but she resembles my brother's fiancé," Michael said.

Upstairs, Cole stiffened. What was Michael doing?

"Your brother? Was that the man I met last night that said he'd never seen this woman," Stefan asked, not able to disguise his anger. He had obviously been lied to and the wretched woman had been here all along. After everything she had put him through, he was going to make sure that she paid, and so would her so-called protectors.

"I'm not sure which one you met, I have two." Looking at the photo again, he asked Stefan, "What did you say your girlfriend's name was?"

"Marisol," Stefan answered.

"Huh. Well, she does look a little like my twin's fiancé, but her name is Marin and they've been together for a while. Maybe they're related or something. Marin was adopted so she could have family out there she doesn't even know about," Michael replied smoothly, lying as if he did this kind of thing all the time.

Cole relaxed a little. He understood the game his brother was playing. It was dangerous, but he knew why Michael was doing it. Cole turned to Marin.

In a whisper so soft she almost couldn't hear him, he said, "Marin, my brother is a genius. I'm going to make a quick phone call and then we're going downstairs."

Marin froze. Downstairs? With Stefan?

Cole saw her terrified expression. "It's going to be okay, I promise. Do you trust me?"

She nodded that she did. Cole pulled out his phone and called Cassie's father. When Mr. Morgan answered the phone, Cole explained the situation. Within moments, Mr. Morgan had hung up and was on the phone with some paranormal friends at the FBI and CIA. They would have documentation to back up Michael's story within the hour. He quickly used his camera phone to snap a picture of Marin and sent it to Stan Morgan.

They only had one other problem to fix... a ring. Since Michael had told them that Cole and Marin were engaged, she would need an engagement ring. Quietly walking across the hall, he opened the door to what had once been their parents' room. They hadn't changed much in the room. His mother's jewelry box was still on the dresser. Opening it, he pulled out her ruby and diamond ring. It wasn't an engagement ring exactly, but it would work.

He walked back into Marin's room and softly closed the door. He took her left hand in his and placed the ring on her finger. She looked at him questioningly and with a little hope. It made him feel good to think she might want to make it a real engagement sometime soon.

"My brother told Stefan and the cops that I have a fiancé that looks like Marisol, which is what Stefan said your name was," Cole explained. "Honestly, I'm not sure how he got them involved. Since you're over 18 years old, they should have brushed him off."

"Are they going to believe us?" Marin asked, almost afraid to hope.

"I called Cassie's dad. He has paranormal friends in high places. It won't be long before he brings a purse to you with a wallet inside. If the cops ask to see your ID, tell them you forgot your purse at a friend's house. I'll call Stan Morgan and tell him we think your purse is at his house and give him a reason to bring it over. You'll

have an ID saying your name is Marin Thomas, a social security card and a credit card."

Marin was astonished. "They can do all of that in such a short amount of time?"

"Apparently the FBI and CIA can do just about anything," Cole responded wryly.

Marin fidgeted with the ring on her finger. It felt strange and yet her heart had soared when Cole had put it on her finger. She knew that it was only a pretend engagement, but she was going to pretend it was real. If she made herself believe it was true, she knew that she could pull off the lie better.

Downstairs Michael was still dealing with the cops and Stefan. So far they seemed to believe his story, but they were starting to ask a lot of questions. He wasn't surprised at all when the cops asked to speak to Marin.

"Sure, I'll see if she's home. Just give me a second," Michael replied.

Michael walked over to the foot of the stairs. "Hey Cole, is Marin up there?"

Cole had an idea. He stripped off his shirt, hoping his trick would buy them more time. Marin was watching him with interest and he smiled at her. Opening the door, he stuck his head and part of his upper body out in the hall.

"What'd you say Michael?"

Michael was trying not to grin at his brother, realizing he must have been listening to the conversation with the cops, "I asked if Marin is up there. Since you're in her room, I'm guessing she's home."

"Yeah, why?" Cole asked.

"Can you two come down for a minute?"

"Can't it wait? This isn't the best time," Cole responded.

Now Michael was grinning. "I'm afraid it can't wait. Throw something on and get down here."

Cole sighed loudly for effect. "Okay, just give us a minute."

Cole closed the door and looked at Marin. She was trying not to laugh. He put on his shirt and pulled her over to him. If they wanted the police and Stefan to believe they'd interrupted something important, he'd have to make her look mussed.

Lowering his head to hers, Cole kissed her hard. Marin jumped up and wrapped her legs around his waist. Cole grinned against her mouth. Grabbing her butt with one hand, he held her in place while he plunged his other hand through her hair. He pulled her closer to him and deepened the kiss.

"Are y'all coming down or what?" Michael called up the stairs.

Cole pulled back and looked at Marin. God she was beautiful! And so passionate! Her lips were swollen from his kisses and her hair looked like he'd been running his hands through it, just as he'd planned. It didn't hurt that he'd thoroughly enjoyed making her look that way. He winked at her and opened the door.

Marin tried to climb back down, but Cole grabbed her butt with both hands and held on to her. She looped her arms around his neck and looked up into his eyes. If this was how the next few days would play out in order to convince everyone their engagement was real, then she was looking forward to it. She just hoped her heart could handle it if Cole didn't want this to be the real deal.

Cole carefully carried her down the stairs. Before they reached the bottom, he started kissing her again. They might as well make this believable. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he turned toward the living room. Michael cleared his throat and Cole looked up.

"Sorry," Cole said insincerely.

"Hey, doesn't bother me any," Michael said. "I'm used to it."

Cole grinned at him. He looked over at their 'guests.' "I assume y'all are the reason we had to come down?"

One of the cops stopped grinning long enough to answer. "Yes, sir. Sorry to have bothered you, but this man has a missing girlfriend."

Stefan was looking at Marin. "Marisol! I'm so glad I found you!"

Marin tried not to give anything away. "Sir, I'm sorry to hear about your girlfriend, but my name isn't Marisol."

Cole put her down and she stood beside him. Marin put her right arm around his waist so her left hand could rest against his stomach, which of course put her 'engagement ring' in plain view. She was better at this than she had thought she'd be.

"But you *are* Marisol!" Stefan said angrily.

The cop closest to him put a restraining hand on his arm. "Sir, this woman clearly states she isn't your girlfriend."

"I don't care! It's her and I know it!" Stefan yelled.

The cops sighed. The one holding on to Stefan looked at them. "Ma'am, would you mind getting your ID so we can settle this and get this 'gentleman' out of your home?"

"Oh! I accidentally left my purse at a friend's house," Marin said with a worried look toward the officers.

Marin looked up at Cole. "Would you mind calling Stan Morgan and seeing if it's over there?"

He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and opened it. He quickly dialed Stan's number, putting their plan into action.

"Hey, Stan. Did Marin leave her purse at your house yesterday?" There was a pause before he continued speaking into the phone. "She did?"

Wonderful. She couldn't find it this morning and... well; you know how women are about their purses." He paused again. "Thanks, Stan. We'll see you shortly."

After hanging up the phone, he looked at the cops. "Our friend's dad is going to bring Marin's purse by. It will take him about fifteen or twenty minutes to get here though."

The cop nodded. "Mind if we sit down and wait?"

"Not at all," Cole responded.

Stefan sat on the couch with a cop on either side of him. Apparently they had already figured out that the man wasn't dealing with a full deck and had a nasty temper. Smart men. Michael sat in one of the chairs facing the couch and Cole took the other, pulling Marin into his lap. He loosely draped one arm around her waist, clearly staking his claim.

"So, you said your girlfriend was missing. What's she like," Cole asked.

Stefan looked at Marin with hostility. So far, they weren't fooling him. "She looks exactly like your girlfriend..."

"Fiancé," Cole corrected.

"Right, your fiancé. Marisol is elegant, composed, and poised. She's everything a lady should be," Stefan answered.

The way he said it made it clear that he thought Marin was anything but those things. Stefan was a pretty good liar himself. If this didn't work, the brothers were going to have to be very vigilant. It looked like Stefan was going to cause as much trouble as possible. Having the cops involved definitely complicated things, which was probably Stefan's plan. Cole still couldn't figure out how he'd gotten the cops involved.

One of the cops spoke up, "Ms. Thomas, do you live here?"

"Yes, sir."

He nodded as if he had expected that answer. "And do you have a car? I only noticed two vehicles in the driveway."

"I don't like to drive very often. Cole usually takes me where I need to go," Marin replied without missing a beat.

Cole smiled at her and looked at the cops. "I've tried talking her into a small car or SUV, but she just won't hear any of it. I even offered to buy it for her. If she keeps holding out, I'll have to get one for her as a wedding present. Even though one of my brothers is just about always around, I'd like for her to have her own transportation, mostly in case of an emergency."

The cop nodded. "It's a good idea. A woman should always have a car of her own."

Marin smiled at him. "I know. I'm just holding off as long as I can. Besides, the garage across the street belongs to the family so I can always go over there if I need a ride somewhere, or I can call my friend Cassie. My parents died in a car crash so cars tend to make me a little nervous."

The silent cop looked at them with interest at the mention of Cassie's name. "Cassandra Spencer?"

Knowing that Marin wouldn't know the answer, Cole spoke up. "Yeah. She and Matt are close friends of ours. It's Cassie's dad that's bringing Marin's purse."

"The Spencer's are fine people. Has she had that baby yet," the cop asked.

"No, she's due in another two months," Marin answered. She at least had remembered that much.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Michael got up to answer it. A minute later, Stan Morgan walked into the living room carrying a small black purse. He handed it to Marin.

"Here you go my dear. I'm afraid you left this yesterday after you and Cassie picked up the kids," Stan said.

Marin smiled at him. "Thank you for bringing it to me."

"Oh, it's no trouble. I've needed an oil change for the past week so I thought I'd see if Gabriel could work me in today."

The more inquisitive cop got up and walked over to Marin. "May I see your ID now, ma'am?"

Marin unzipped the purse and pulled out a black and purple contemporary looking wallet. She unsnapped it and tried to hide her surprise. There was a Georgia driver's license inside with her picture on it. It listed her name as Marin Thomas and the Victorian house was her address. She pulled it out and handed it to the officer.

"Here you are, sir."

The cop took it from her, examined it and handed it back to her. "Thank you, ma'am. Sorry for all the trouble."

Marin smiled. "It's okay. I know he must be worried about his girlfriend. I hope you're able to find her."

Michael walked the cops and Stefan to the door. Stefan looked at Marin one last time, but this time there wasn't quite so much animosity in his face. After they left, Marin sagged against Cole in relief. It was finally over! Hopefully their ruse had fooled Stefan and he would leave her alone.

Stan Morgan sat on the couch. "Well, young lady. I haven't had to throw something together that fast in a while, but I'm glad it worked."

Marin smiled at him. "I can never thank you enough for what you've done."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad I was able to help. Now, I really do need an oil change, so I'm going to head across the street. Y'all have a nice day."

Stan got up and let himself out. Michael was standing in the doorway grinning at them like a Cheshire cat. Marin wasn't sure if it was because he

was happy they had fooled Stefan or if he knew something was going on between her and Cole.

"Okay brother. Spit it out. Something has you grinning like an idiot," Cole said to his twin.

Michael nodded. "Nothing. Just happy is all."

"About what? I haven't seen you grin like that since bought the Corvette in the driveway," Cole told him.

"Maybe I'm happy that one of us has finally found his mate," Michael replied.

Before Cole could correct him, Marin placed her fingers over his mouth. He looked at her in surprise. Had she really picked him? Already? He removed her hand from his mouth.

"Is that true, Marin?"

Marin gave him a shy smile and nodded her head. "Yes, it's true."

Cole pulled her head down for a kiss. "You have no idea how happy that makes me."

Marin smiled. "Hopefully as happy as it makes me."

Cole fingered the ring she was wearing. "I'm happy that you want to be my mate, but I think we should get to know each other a little better before making this engagement real."

Marin looked disappointed. She started to take the ring off, but Cole stopped her.

"Even if we aren't making it real just yet, I'd like you to keep wearing the ring. If for no other reason than Stefan could be lurking around here still," Cole told her. "Besides, I'm hoping you won't change your mind and will still want to marry me when all of this is behind us."

Marin sighed and pressed herself closer to him. "Will he ever leave me alone?"

"Yes. I'll make sure of it. But for now, let's go fill Gabriel in on what happened."

Marin got up and walked to the door with Cole. She took his hand and they walked across the street together. Gabriel was changing the oil on Stan's car

when they got there. He saw them and quickly came over.

"Everything okay," Gabriel asked.

"Everything's fine. We just wanted to fill you in on what happened so our stories will be straight," Cole said.

"Stan mentioned something about bringing a purse to Marin," Gabriel told them.

"He had an ID created for her. It says her name is Marin Thomas and her address is the same as ours. We also told them that we're engaged," Cole said.

Gabriel glanced at the ring on Marin's hand. "And is it a real engagement?"

Marin decided to speak up. "No, but I'd like for it to be. Cole thinks we should wait a little while." She paused, "I hope you don't mind that I'm wearing your mother's ring. It was the best we could do on short notice."

Gabriel smiled at her. "Of course I don't mind."

"We just wanted to tell you what was up. We won't keep you from your work," Cole said.

Gabriel nodded and went back to working on Stan's car. Cole took Marin by the hand and they walked back over the house. Michael was in the living room watching TV. He didn't even glance their way when they walked past him to head upstairs. Cole stepped into Marin's room and shut the door behind them.

He looked around the room a minute and then down at Marin. "Would you like to redecorate your room?"

"My room?"

Cole smiled. "This is your room. You can do whatever you want with it."

"But..."

"You don't want this one?" Cole asked, misunderstanding her hesitation. "We have two others you can choose from if you don't like it."

Marin shook her head no. "It isn't that. I just thought that..."

Cole waited for her to finish her sentence. "You thought what?"

"It's just that, even if we're just pretending, everyone else thinks we're engaged. I had thought that we would be sharing a room. I feel safer when you're with me. Plus, you're always down here guarding me. Wouldn't it be easier if we shared the same room?"

Cole smiled down at her and briefly kissed her. "I would like nothing more than to share a room with you."

Marin looked around her and looked back up at him. "Can I see your room?"

Cole took her by the hand and they headed up to the third floor. Cole's room was the first door at the top of the stairs. Michael's room was next to his and Gabriel's was across the hall. Pushing open his bedroom door, Cole ushered her inside.

Marin stepped in and looked around her. The walls were a slate blue, the floor was a dark hardwood and there was a charcoal gray area rug at the foot of the bed. The bed itself was huge; massive king size four poster. There was a matching five drawer chest and dresser. In the corner was a black leather chair.

She looked up at him. "I love it."

Cole looked at her in surprise. "There's nothing you would change?"

"Well, maybe one or two things," Marin answered truthfully.

"What's that," Cole asked, expecting to hear about paint colors and bed linens. His room was rather masculine after all.

"I'd drape the bed in a pretty gray silk material, a little lighter than the rug to make it look a little softer... and I'd add a better lock to the door."

Cole burst out laughing. "A better lock huh?"

Marin smiled at him. "That way we don't have to worry about your brothers deciding to barge in if we have another morning like this one."

"I think we can manage that. Want to make a trip to the fabric store and hardware store," Cole asked her, brushing his fingers across her cheek. He couldn't seem to stop touching her.

"Just let me brush my hair real quick and throw on some shoes."

"I'll meet you down in the living room in a few minutes."

Marin headed back down the stairs and Cole went into his bathroom. He ran a brush through his hair and splashed a little cologne on. Before he went downstairs, he pulled his cell phone out and called his boss. It was a good thing he had a lot of time saved up. He was definitely going to owe the man a major explanation when he returned to work.

Bounding down the stairs, Cole found Marin in the living room with Michael. They were sprawled side by side on the couch watching TV. If he hadn't known better, he would have sworn that they had done this every day of their lives. Marin and Michael seemed completely at ease with each other; it was almost like they were brother and sister. If he had his way, they eventually would be.

"Ready?" he asked Marin.

She looked up and smiled. Climbing off the couch she took his hand and they headed for the door. Cole looked over his shoulder at Michael, who hadn't even looked up from the TV.

"We're going to run some errands. Need anything while we're out," Cole asked him.

Michael glanced up. "No, I'm going to do the grocery shopping in a few minutes. Y'all have fun."

Chapter Five

Cole and Marin walked over to his large black truck and he opened the passenger door for her. The last time she had been in his truck she had been unconscious and lying on the backseat. He tried not to think of seeing her like that... lying on the ground, bleeding.

Cole walked around to the driver's side and climbed in. He started up the truck and backed down the driveway. Ashton Grove was a small town so it didn't take long to get to the hardware store. Cole parked in front of the store and turned off the truck.

"I figured we should get that lock first," he told her with a grin.

She smiled back at him. Unfastening her seat belt, she leaned across the seat and kissed him on the cheek. Cole turned toward her and pulled her across the seat toward him. Wrapping his arms around her, he bent his head and kissed her on the lips. Marin practically melted into him and gave herself up to the kiss. They both forgot they were in public until there was a tap on the window.

Started, Cole turned to look out his window. Cassie was standing on the other side grinning from ear to ear. He groaned and opened the door to his truck.

"Hi, Cass," Cole said as he stepped out of the truck. He reached in to help Marin get out and stand beside him.

"Hi Cole, Marin. Nice to see you both."

"Cass, you're going to have to stop grinning like that. You're going to blow our cover if you keep it up," Cole told her.

They proceeded to tell her about their faux engagement, living arrangements, and everything that had happened that morning. Well, minus the part where they woke up in each other's arms and Cole

being completely naked at the time. They told her everything from the point where Stefan showed up with the police to redoing a few things in Cole's room... well, their room now.

"Wow, y'all are having an interesting week, that's for sure," Cassie said.

Marin leaned her head on Cole's arm. "The sad part is that it's been the best week of my life."

Cole put his arm around her and hugged her to him. He looked at Cassie, not quite sure what to say. That the week she was almost killed in a car accident, found out werewolves existed, and had to hide from her captor was the best week of her life spoke volumes about what her life had been like thus far. Cassie looked at Cole and then took Marin's hand.

"Come on. Let's go shopping. Cole can go in the hardware store by himself. There's a salon a few doors down. I have an appointment to get my hair and nails done. Would you join me?" Cassie asked her.

Marin looked at her uncertainly, "Oh, I don't know..."

Cole rubbed her arm. "I think you might enjoy it, honey. Why don't you go with her?"

Marin looked up at him. "But..."

Cole realized what the problem was. Marin didn't have any money and she felt strange asking for some. He pulled his wallet out and gave her eighty dollars. She didn't want to take it though.

"Honey, please take it and go have some fun with Cassie."

Marin felt her face heat up in embarrassment. "Cole, I don't feel right taking money from you."

Cole cupped her face in his hand and briefly kissed her on the lips. He whispered in her ear, "I want to take care of you. Will you please let me do that and take the money? If you want to pay your own way, we'll figure something out later."

Marin looked into his eyes and realized that he was speaking the truth. He really did want to take care of her. She smiled and kissed him on the cheek. Taking the money from him, she put it in her purse and turned toward Cassie.

"Looks like I'm joining you at the salon," she told Cassie.

Cassie smiled and took her hand. "Let's go. Cole can keep himself occupied for an hour or two."

Cole raised his eyebrows, "An hour or two?"

"An hour for hair and an hour for nails. We have the whole salon to ourselves. It's the only way that I can get my nails done while I'm pregnant. If it's full, the chemicals are way too strong; so Matt rents out the salon for the morning when I want to get my nails done and have my hair trimmed."

Cole shook his head. Matt would probably have bought the whole salon for her if she had asked him to. That man would do anything for Cassie, which was exactly how Cole felt about Marin. He would give her the moon if he could.

He leaned down and kissed Marin one last time. "Don't let her talk you into doing anything you don't want to."

Marin smiled at him. "I won't."

The women walked down the sidewalk hand in hand and Cole entered the hardware store. It was probably for the best that Marin wasn't with him. He didn't want to frighten her when he asked for various locks to bulk up the security at the house, as well as motion activated lights for the perimeter of the house. Stefan may have left with the cops earlier, but Cole would bet money that the man would be back. It probably wouldn't be a bad idea to call their alarm company as well, just to let them know what was going on.

While Cole was shopping, Cassie was talking Marin into a manicure and pedicure. The women chatted while they had their nails and toes done. Marin hadn't ever had a manicure or pedicure before and found that she really enjoyed the experience. When their nails were dry, it was time for their hair.

Cassie was just getting her ends trimmed and having some layers put in. Marin pulled her long hair over her shoulder and looked at it. She didn't really want to get rid of the length, especially since Cole seemed to like it. The stylist talked her into a trim, layers and some highlights. When she walked out of the salon, her hair was about two inches shorter with lots of long layers and long wispy bangs. It was highlighted with various shades of blonde and brown. Looking at her reflection, Marin almost didn't recognize herself.

"What do you want to do next?" Cassie asked.

Thinking about Stefan and the fact that he was looking for her, she knew that she needed to change herself a little more. If he had been thinking clearly that morning, he would have mentioned her tattoos. Marin didn't have enough money for cover-up art, but maybe Cassie would loan it to her.

"Do you know of any tattoo shops in town," Marin asked.

Cassie was surprised. She hadn't expected that question. "Tattoo shop?"

"I was thinking that my new hair makes me look a little different, but if Stefan gets smart and comes back he'll ask to see my tattoos as proof of who I am."

"I hadn't thought of that," Cassie said. "I think there's one around the corner."

The women walked around the corner and sure enough there was a tattoo shop. Cassie had never been to a tattoo place before. Everything was a lot cleaner than she had thought it would be. It was almost like

being in a doctor's office, except the work areas were open where you could watch the artists at work. Marin was looking at the art on the walls when the artist approached them.

"May I help you?" Dylan asked Marin.

"I was wondering if you could do some cover-up work for me. I have a dragon on my arm and one on my lower back that I need to cover."

"May I ask why you want to cover them?" Dylan asked her. He had no problem doing the work, but he always wanted to make sure the customer knew what they were getting into. Once it was covered, there was no turning back.

Marin looked at the floor. "It's kind of complicated."

Deciding it would be better to be honest with the man, Cassie walked over to them. "My friend has a man looking for her, a rather unpleasant man. The tattoos are the only way he has of recognizing her right now. If he finds her, she could die." Cassie pulled out her platinum credit card and handed it to him, "The cost doesn't matter if you can help her."

Dylan looked at the credit card and looked at Cassie. "You must be Matt Spencer's wife."

Cassie looked at him in wonder, "How did you know that?"

"I've wanted to build a new studio for a while, hopefully in the next year. Your husband is the architect I hired for the job. Everyone around here says your husband does excellent work," he replied. "Besides, the platinum card kind of gave you away. Not too many people around here have one of those, and you're the only Spencer's in town."

"So you'll help us," Cassie asked.

Dylan nodded. "You bet. Now let's see those dragons."

Marin lifted the back of her shirt so he could see the larger one. Then she lifted her sleeve so he could check

out her armband. He ran his fingers over both tattoos and studied them a minute.

Nodding his head he said, "We can definitely cover those, but it might be best if we just use solid black. Looks like you're used to color, are you going to be okay with black ink?"

"I think so. Do you think you could cover them with wolves," Marin asked.

Dylan looked at her strangely. He noted the ring on her left hand and looked at Cassie. Not many people in town knew about the Andrews family, but Dylan did. His father had been friends with Mrs. Andrews. Dylan and the brothers had been friends since birth.

"That ring wouldn't by any chance belong to one of the Andrews' brothers would it?"

Marin looked at the diamond and ruby ring her finger. "Cole gave it to me."

"Does Cole know you want to cover your dragons with black wolves?" Dylan asked her. He knew that Cole turned into a black and silver wolf, but Gabriel was a solid black wolf. If Cole gave her the ring, how would he feel about his fiancé wearing solid black wolves on her body? Dylan didn't want to be on the wrong side of Cole's anger, especially over something permanent like a tattoo on the man's finance.

"No, I haven't mentioned it to him. Why?" Marin asked him with a puzzled look.

Dylan sighed. "I'm assuming you know all about the brothers," he asked with a significant look. Marin nodded.

"I know about them as well. Cole is black and silver, but Gabriel turns into a solid black wolf," Dylan said, hoping his words would sink in.

Comprehension dawned in Marin's eyes. "Is there a way to make them look black and silver like Cole?"

Looking at her dragons again, Dylan thought he might be able to pull it off. It would be tricky since the dragons were so vibrant, but do-able.

"I might be able to do it. Do you want to do this now?" he asked.

"Yes, the sooner the better. If Stefan comes back ..." Marin let the sentence trail off. She looked up into Dylan's eyes. He was a little shorter than Cole and had blonde hair and blue eyes. He seemed like a nice guy. If Cole trusted him with his secret, then she could trust him with hers.

Pulling her shirt higher in back, she showed him the faint marks that were still visible from the lashing she had received. Cole's blood had healed her, but she would probably have faint scars for the rest of her life. The wounds had gone untreated for several days and had probably been infected at some point.

"This is one of the nicer things Stefan did to me. If he finds me, I don't know that I'll survive this time. The last time I escaped I wanted to die."

Dylan went over to the cabinet on the wall and pulled out a small black mid-drift top. It would cover the important parts of her while giving him complete access to her arm and her lower back.

Handing it to her, he said, "Put this on. The bathroom's down the hall."

While Marin changed, Cassie handed Dylan her credit card. He shook his head and pushed her hand away.

"You don't have to pay me. Cole has helped me through a lot over the years. This is the least I can do. Besides, she'll be a walking billboard for my new studio," Dylan said with a grin.

Cassie smiled in return. "I really don't mind paying you."

Behind them, the bell over the door jingled. Cassie turned in time to see Cole walking through the door or

maybe stomping would be a better word. He had a rather dark look on his face.

"Where's Marin," he asked in a low voice.

"She's in the back changing her shirt," Cassie responded.

"Why did you bring her to a tattoo shop," he all but growled.

"Because she asked. She's worried that if Stefan comes back he'll use her dragon tattoos as proof that she's his 'girlfriend' and the cops will make her go back with him," Cassie said.

Cole's shoulders sagged. "I hadn't thought of that."

Dylan was looking at him oddly. "What's with the sour look over her getting a tattoo anyway?"

"I was worried that she was going to do something drastic. She's terrified that Stefan will come back for her and I didn't want her to do anything she'd regret later," Cole responded.

"She showed me her scars. She also asked if I could use black and silver wolves to cover up the dragons," Dylan told him slyly. He wanted to see Cole's expression when he realized his fiancé was going to put his wolf form on her body, permanently.

Cole looked stunned. "She did?"

Dylan grinned at him. "That woman is definitely in love with you."

Before Cole could respond, Marin came back down the hall with the black top on. She was surprised to see Cole.

Cole walked over to her and pulled her into his arms for a hug. "You changed your hair," he said, stating the obvious. For some reason, she had the ability to tie his tongue in knots and make him say stupid things.

Marin reached for the slightly shorter, lighter colored strands. "You don't like it?"

"I think it looks wonderful," he told her with a smile.

"Did they tell you why I'm here?" she asked.

"Something about black and silver wolves to cover your dragons."

"You don't mind," she asked hesitantly.

"No, honey. I'm honored that you would want a wolf tattoo. I just wish that I had thought to cover your tattoos sooner," Cole told her. "And I wish that you could wear more clothing," he said, eyeing the top that barely covered her breasts. If he didn't know better, he would think Dylan picked out a skimpy top on purpose. It wouldn't be the first time his friend had tried to irritate him; especially where women were concerned.

Marin squeezed his hand and walked over to Dylan. "Where do you want me?"

Dylan motioned to a chair in the first cubicle. "Have a seat. Do you care if I embellish a little to both of them? Maybe do something small on your other arm?"

Cole leaned on the half wall. "Is that necessary?"

Dylan looked at his long term friend. "You don't think he'll find it odd that she has tattoos in the exact same place as the woman he's looking for?"

Cole nodded. "If it's okay with Marin, I don't care. She can have whatever she wants. Cost doesn't matter."

Dylan gave him a wry look, "Especially since I'm not charging her anything."

"Since when do you do pro bono work," Cole asked, his jealousy instantly spiking. It was bad enough that Dylan would be touching her, but paying for the work had made it more bearable, more like a business transaction.

"Since men shouldn't treat women like shit and get away with it! Besides, she'll be a good advertisement for future business," he answered. He knew his friend was just jealous, but it still irritated him. Cole should know that he would never touch a woman that belonged to a friend of his. Okay, so he may have given

him a hard time over the years, but surely Cole knew that had only been in jest.

Dylan stopped talking and got everything set up. Typically he would draw something out; let the customer look it over for a day or two; scan it into the computer to print out a template; then he would stick the template on the customer and get to work. It was very rare for someone to completely trust him with their artwork and not need a template. He looked at Marin's back as if it were a canvas. Everything else was blocked out.

After getting the image burned into his brain, Dylan got to work. In black, he outlined a large wolf, curled up with its nose hidden in a large bushy tail. As he filled in the color, he left some sections blank to be filled in with a light gray. The wolf's eyes were open and watching, as if daring you to mess with his woman. Once the black shading was done, he filled in the blank areas with a light gray. Finally, the wolf's eyes were a dark slate gray like Cole's.

Dylan added a tribal half moon with some tribal stars scattered above the wolf. Knowing that Marin was used to color, he outlined the moon and stars in black but filled in the areas with a pale yellow. It wasn't the purple, blue or green she was accustomed to, but it was better than plain black. He wiped the design with a paper towel. Using a clean cloth, he gently cleansed the area with warm water and covered the fresh design with A&D ointment. The design had taken him over an hour. It was getting close to lunch so he knew she had to be starving.

"Hey Cole, why don't you order some pizzas? It's going to take at least another hour and a half, maybe two hours to finish up. I bet Marin is starving by now," Dylan said to him.

Cole pushed away from the wall and pulled out his phone. Being a bachelor, he had Papa John's and Pizza

Hut both on speed dial. He knew that Pizza Hut was just two blocks away so he called them. Knowing that Dylan liked supreme, like him, and Cassie preferred pepperoni, he ordered two of each. He figured Marin would like at least one of those, if not both.

Dylan had already started on the cover-up for Marin's right arm. He started with a black tribal band, which covered most of the dragon. He overlaid wolves into the design. This time he left them solid black. He didn't think Cole would mind. Adding the same tribal stars, but much smaller ones, he finished off the design. The whole thing had taken about forty-five minutes and the pizza had arrived.

"Okay, Marin. Why don't we take a break and eat some lunch," Dylan asked.

Marin smiled at him. "That sounds wonderful."

Dylan wiped off the armband with warm water and covered it with the ointment before letting her up. He wanted to make sure it didn't get infected. People didn't realize how critical it was to keep a fresh tattoo clean and moisturized.

Dylan and Cole pulled a folding table out from the backroom and pulled over some of the folding chairs from the waiting area. Cassie flipped the shop sign to 'closed' and joined them. Marin filled her plate with both kinds of pizza and quickly finished off two slices. She was starting on her third when Cassie was finishing her first piece.

"I feel like a pig," Marin said to no one in particular.

"You're far from a pig. Eat as much as you want," Cole told her.

Marin smiled and continued to eat. She had finished off four slices by the time she was full. Dylan had eaten almost twice that much and was already back in his seat waiting for her. Wiping her mouth and her hands, she headed back into his work area.

Wanting to keep with the wolf theme without having to actually use a wolf, he created a tribal moon, sun and stars design that wrapped part way around her upper left arm. This design was much easier since he wasn't trying to cover anything so it only took him half an hour. When he was finished, Marin was sporting three new tattoos... all of them Dylan originals. Once the final one was cleaned and had ointment on it, Dylan helped Marin up from the stool.

"You're all done. Some of the best work I've ever done I do believe," he smiled at her.

Cole looked at the three new designs. Dylan had outdone himself this time. The wolf on her back was especially great. It looked just like his wolf form... even down to the eyes. It was incredible.

Dylan saw his friend admiring his work. "Don't suppose I can convince you to get anything done, can I?"

"I'll come back later. Can't have my fiancé tattooed and have virgin skin myself," Cole responded.

Dylan smiled at him. Looking at Marin, he shook her hand. "It was a pleasure to meet you Marin. I've been trying to talk this guy into a tattoo for years. When he's ready, you make sure he comes by here."

Marin smiled in return. "I will. You do wonderful work. I really love all three pieces."

Marin went into the back to change back into her long sleeve black shirt. She put the borrowed shirt in the hamper and headed back to the waiting area. Her skin burned a little where the three new tattoos were, but it was well worth it.

Everyone said their goodbyes and Cassie, Cole and Marin left the shop. Once they were outside, Cassie hugged them both and headed back to her car. She had to go and pick up the kids and figure out dinner before Matt got home. Cole walked Marin to his truck.

Helping her up into the truck, he placed a kiss on her lips before closing the door. He walked around to the driver's side and climbed in. Starting the truck, he backed out of the parking space and headed back to the Victorian. The drive was quiet, but he noticed Marin grimacing every now and then.

"Honey, are you okay," he asked her.

"I'm fine. The tattoos just burn a little is all. It usually goes away in a day or two," she said. She hadn't missed the fact that he had been calling her honey and sweetheart a lot since that morning, and she loved every minute of it.

Cole didn't want her to be in pain any longer than she had to. "Do you want a little of my blood to heal the tattoos faster?"

Marin looked at him. "You would do that for something so small?"

"I don't like to see you hurting. Besides, won't it look odd if Stefan comes back and your tattoos are fresh," Cole asked.

"True. I hadn't thought of that."

When they got back to the Victorian, Cole helped Marin out of the truck. They walked up to the door hand in hand. Opening the door, he sat his sack of door and window locks on the entry floor. The house was quiet so he figured his brothers were both still out.

"You know, you never did make it to the fabric store. I guess the bed will have to be without a canopy for the time being," Cole told her.

Changing the topic she asked, "When do you have to go back to work?"

"Monday. That still leaves us two days together though," Cole responded.

Marin sighed. She wasn't sure what she would do all alone in the house. It had been nice having one or all three brothers around the past few days. Even though

Gabriel and Michael would just be across the street at the garage, it was going to be lonely in the house by herself.

"I won't know what to do with myself on Monday. All three of you will be at work and I'll be here by myself," Marin said.

Cole hadn't thought of that. "Actually, you mentioned that you wanted to have some cash of your own. I was going to talk to Gabriel and Michael about letting you do some filing and light office work for them. It could just be part time if you wanted to spend some time with Cassie during the week."

"That could be fun. I wish you could work from home once or twice a week. I'm going to miss you while you're at work," Marin said.

Cole grinned and pulled her into his arms. "I'm going to miss you too. Since my brothers probably won't be home for at least two or three more hours, want to go upstairs with me?"

Marin giggled. Giggled! She hadn't giggled in almost five years! Who knew she still had it in her? Being around Cole was definitely good for her. She almost felt normal again. Jumping up, she wrapped her legs around his waist. His hands automatically grabbed her to keep her from falling.

He walked up the stairs with her. He playfully threw her on his bed and kissed her. "Do you want me to heal your tattoos first?"

Marin nodded. If she took his blood now, then by dinner she would probably be healed. It was a miracle how his blood could heal her. Cole left the room to get a clean syringe. When he came back, he withdrew a small amount of blood from his arm and injected it into Marin's. She winced when he stuck the needle in her, but it was over with quickly. He disposed of the syringe and needle.

"All done," he said to Marin.

She smiled at him and held her arms out. "Come here."

He gladly climbed onto the bed with her. Lying back, he pulled her down on top of him. She was so beautiful! Marin kissed him tentatively at first and then more passionately. Cole wrapped one arm around her waist and grabbed a handful of her hair with the other.

Marin pushed up Cole's shirt, running her hands over his chest. His body was so incredible. She wanted to run her hands over every inch of him. Sitting up, she drew her shirt over her head. She knew she was still too skinny, but Cole didn't seem to mind. He traced the edge of her bra running his finger lightly over her breast. Being a DD had its benefits. Cole seemed to be especially appreciative of them.

Marin scooted down his legs until she was standing at the foot of the bed. She removed her boots and socks and slipped out of her jeans. Standing before him in nothing but her bra and panties, she felt exposed. No one had seen her like this except Stefan and his friends. No one had ever seen her like this voluntarily. As far as she was concerned, Cole was her first. He was the first man she had chosen to be with.

Cole stripped out of his clothes except for his boxer briefs. Marin climbed back onto the bed and lay down next to him. He gently ran his hand down her side to her hip. Pushing her onto her back, he leaned over her and claimed her lips in a searing kiss. Marin moaned into his mouth and wrapped her arms around him.

Cole pulled back and looked into her eyes. "You're so beautiful."

Marin smiled shyly and pulled him back down for another kiss. While they kissed, Cole's hand drifted up her abdomen and softly cupped her breast. Marin arched into him wanting more. She had never felt so alive in her life. Cole pressed his erection against her.

On instinct, Marin raised her hips to meet his. It was almost Cole's undoing.

Lifting his head to look down at her, he asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"More sure than I've ever been of anything," Marin responded softly.

Cole smiled down at her. She was one incredible woman. It amazed him that she had chosen to be with him. He lowered his head and trailed kisses across her chin, down her throat and across each breast. His hands on her stomach were feather soft as they skimmed down to her waist.

Cole took his time kissing and caressing her. He wanted to learn every inch of her body, wanted to memorize every curve. He slid further down her body and pressed gentle kisses against her stomach. His fingers caressed the edge of her panties, teasing not only her but him as well.

Downstairs a door slammed. Cole groaned, lifting his head he looked toward his bedroom door. Footsteps on the stairs told him that either Michael or Gabriel had called it a day already. He sighed and looked up at Marin.

"I think we're going to have to wait until tonight, honey. Sounds like one of my brothers are already home."

Marin sighed. She reached down and ran her fingers across his jaw. What was it going to take to get his brothers out of the house? She finally found a man she wanted to be with and they couldn't seem to get very far.

"I'll put my clothes back on," she said in resignation.

Cole kissed her before she got up. "I'm sorry sweetheart. I didn't realize how difficult it would be to for us to be alone in a house with two other men in residence."

Marin looked at him from under her eyelashes as she slipped her jeans on. "You haven't ever had a woman up here before?"

Cole grinned at her. "Nope. You're the first."

"But you've..." Marin let the sentence trail off, too embarrassed to finish it.

"Yes, I've been with women before. I actually had a steady girlfriend for about a year. That's been a long time ago though. I've had a few casual relationships since then, but no one really caught my interest," Cole told her. He didn't want to tell her that he had been interested in Cassie before she had married Matt. He was worried it might ruin the friendship the two women seemed to be forming.

Marin looked at the floor. "You know, when I declared myself as your mate, I never thought about how it would change your life. For all I know, you didn't want a mate."

Cole came off the bed quick as lightning and stood in front of her. Pulling her into his arms, he lifted her head with his hand. "Honey, I may not have been actively looking for a mate, but the second I saw you I wanted you in my life. Never doubt for a moment that I'm happy you chose to be with me."

A single tear slid down Marin's face. She reached up and cupped his face with her hand. Standing on her tiptoes, she pulled his head down for a kiss. She knew that it was way too early for confessions, but she knew without a doubt that she loved him. It just wasn't the right time to tell him yet. It was crazy for her to be so certain she loved him when it had only been a few days, but she knew they were meant to be together and it had nothing to do with Gabriel's ability to sense she was part of their pack.

Ending the kiss, Marin smiled up at him. She bent down and grabbed her shirt off the floor and pulled it

over her head. Cole brushed her hair back over her shoulders and gently caressed her cheek. Grabbing her hands, he tugged her into his arms for another quick kiss. He felt like he couldn't get enough of her.

Cole heard his brother head back down the stairs and out the front door. Judging by the footsteps, it was Michael; he had a slightly heavier step than Gabriel. Cole grinned at Marin and pushed her back down onto the bed. She opened her arms to him, beckoning him to join her.

An hour later, Cole had Marin undressed except for her panties. He was still in his boxers, but not for much longer. Cole had his left arm around Marin and his right hand was palming her large breasts while he kissed her. Taking things slow was about to kill him, but he wanted everything to be perfect for her. Technically, this was her first time.

He started to pull down her panties, when he suddenly stilled. Marin looked at him curiously. Why was he stopping now?

"What's wrong Cole?"

He gave her a tortured look. "I just realized that I don't have protection."

"Oh," Marin said, wide-eyed. She hadn't thought of that.

Cole groaned and pressed his forehead against hers. Even though she had been raped, he wasn't worried about catching anything since his blood would have cured that too. He was worried about getting her pregnant.

He lifted his head and looked down at her. "We'll have to stop until I can go to the drugstore. I don't want to take a chance on getting you pregnant."

Marin was touched by his thoughtfulness. "Cole, there are much worse things than having your baby. Don't you realize that would be a gift?"

Marin suddenly had a horrible thought. What if the past week or so with Stefan had resulted in a baby? Her period should have hit around the time Stefan took her.

Her thoughts must have shown on her face. Cole gently rubbed her cheek with his thumb. "What is it Marin?"

"What ... what if I'm already pregnant?" The terrified look in her eyes was almost his undoing. He couldn't stand for her to look so scared. The thought of that bastard getting her pregnant had also acted like ice water, instantly cooling his passion.

"Do you think you could be?"

"I don't know. I'm not usually late, but I never started this month. It could just have been the stress of my week with Stefan, but... what if it isn't stress?"

"Do you want to find out?" Cole felt like his heart was going to beat right out of his chest. He hadn't even thought of the possibility that Stefan could have gotten her pregnant.

Marin slowly nodded her head yes. Part of her didn't want to know, but at the same time she would rather know than find out later she was pregnant and be uncertain over who the baby belonged to. Cole deserved better than that.

"Then we can go to my company after dinner. We have a twenty-four hour lab that can run the test for you. We'll get the results while we're there." He paused to judge her reaction. "Would that make you feel better?"

"Yes, but won't you get in trouble for using the lab for personal reasons?"

He smiled at her. "No, I won't get into trouble. It's one of the perks of the job... free lab work whenever we want it, or in this case whenever we need it."

Cole kissed her again. Instead of kissing her with the intent of making love, he kissed her to *show* her he loved her. The kiss was gentle and full of love and hope.

It was a startling realization for him, but he knew without a doubt that he loved her. It didn't seem possible after such a short time.

Neither of them heard the front door, but they heard slow footsteps coming up the stairs. The footsteps echoed down the hall past Cole's room and he heard Michael's door open and close. Downstairs the front door slammed. Apparently both of his brothers were home this time and didn't appear to be leaving anytime soon.

Marin got up and dressed. While she was sorry they hadn't made love, she was glad she wouldn't to have wonder if any future pregnancies were a result of being raped or a result of being with Cole. He hadn't said that he loved her, but it was obvious he cared for her and that would be enough for now. Hopefully he would come to love her eventually.

Not bothering with her socks or shoes, she headed for the bedroom door.

"Hey! Wait a minute," Cole said as he scrambled into his jeans and shirt.

Marin laughed at him. When he was dressed, she opened the door and they went downstairs. Gabriel was at the bottom of the stairs going through the plastic sack Cole had left near the door. He looked up when he heard them coming down the stairs.

"What's all this," Gabriel asked indicating the sack.

"I thought we should beef up the security around here. We picked up some locks at the hardware store for the windows and doors," Cole responded.

Gabriel did a double take of Marin. She was gorgeous! She'd done something to her hair and it looked like she'd had her nails done too.

"Looks like you ran into Cassie today. Your hair looks nice," he told her.

"Thanks," she replied with a smile.

Gabriel took the sack with him into the kitchen, with Cole and Marin trailing after him. It was already dark outside. Funny how they hadn't noticed that when they had been upstairs in Cole's room. Then again, they did have other things on their minds at the time.

Cole pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and sat down. He held his hand out to Marin and she went and sat on his lap. Even though they couldn't seem to get anywhere in the bedroom, he liked touching her. Even the simplest touch, just holding her hand or having her sit in his lap, made him happy. He hadn't felt this content in a really long time.

Marin snuggled into him and rested her head against his shoulder. She was so tiny that her head almost fit under his chin when she was in his lap. When she stood next to him, her head didn't even reach his shoulder. Being petite had never bothered her before, but it made it difficult to steal kisses from Cole. She'd have to invest in several pairs of high heels.

Gabriel sat all of the new locks out on the counter. He counted all of the ones out for the first floor and pushed them aside then he made a group for the second floor and another for the third floor. When he realized he had an extra door lock left over, he looked at Cole inquisitively.

"What's this one for?" Gabriel asked his little brother.

Cole cleared his throat, slightly embarrassed. "That one is for my bedroom door."

Gabriel glanced at Marin and back at Cole. "Shouldn't you have gotten one for her door too?"

Cole actually blushed a little this time. "Actually, her room is my room. Or rather my room is her room."

Gabriel looked at Marin. "And you're okay with that?"

"It was sort of my idea. I figured it would be better if Cole were with me in case Stefan snuck in during the

night. That's more his style than showing up during the day or coming through the front door."

Cole saw an opening in the conversation. "Speaking of days... Marin is afraid she might be bored on Monday when we all go to work. So she can have some money for her outings with Cassie, I was thinking she might be able to do some filing or other office work for you and Michael at the garage."

Gabriel knew that Cole made plenty of money to give Marin if she wanted to go shopping. He figured that it had to be more than just that. She shouldn't be home by herself though, not with Stefan still lurking around.

"I think we can work something out. How does forty dollars per day sound? You don't have to come in until you're ready and you can take off whenever you want," Gabriel told her.

"That sounds like a better deal for me than for you," Marin replied.

"If you want to set exact office hours, we can do that. I just thought you might want a little more freedom," Gabriel responded.

Marin smiled at him. "Thanks. Can I give you a schedule by Sunday night?"

"Sure. Now, let's see what Michael bought at the store today."

Gabriel turned around and rummaged through the pantry and cabinets. After a few minutes of searching, he turned back around completely exasperated. Looking at Cole and Marin he asked, "Does Chinese delivery sound okay? Apparently Michael forgot the grocery shopping with his overly busy day."

Cole looked concerned. It wasn't like Michael to say he was going somewhere and then completely forget about it. "That's really odd behavior for Michael."

Gabriel nodded, "Yes it is."

Marin got up. "I'll go check on him. Maybe he isn't feeling well or something."

Before either Cole or Gabriel could say anything to her, she ran upstairs and went to Michael's room. She knocked on the door, but there was no response. She knew he hadn't left since coming up here so she opened the door.

Michael was lying on his bed saturated in blood. Marin screamed and ran over to him. Feeling for a pulse, she relaxed when she realized he was still alive. His pulse was faint, but she could feel it. Cole and Gabriel came charging up the stairs after hearing her scream. They were both shocked when they saw Michael.

It looked like he had been sliced to ribbons. Why hadn't he said anything when he came in? Werewolves might be stronger than the average human, but they could still be hurt or even killed. However, the silver bullet theory was just a myth. They could be killed the same way as any other person, it was just a lot harder to get the drop on them thanks to their extra sensitive hearing and sharper eyesight. They also healed faster than humans did and were a lot stronger.

While Cole was tearing Michael's shirt for a better look at the wounds, Gabriel tried to talk to him.

"Michael, can you hear me?" Gabriel asked his brother.

There wasn't a response. Cole had Michael's shirt off and was looking over the cuts. Marin got up and went into the bathroom for a warm wet rag. She handed it to Cole so he could cleanse the area. There was so much blood that it was hard to figure out what they were looking at. Once Michael's chest and abdomen were clean, Cole was able to concentrate on the damage.

Michael had three long cuts from chest to stomach and a few smaller ones down his sides. Whoever had

done this had used a very sharp blade. Who could have gotten the drop on him though? Or did Michael know his attacker? Since he was unconscious, it was going to be hard to get answers.

"Maybe we should call the police? If someone did this to Michael, who's to say they won't come here looking for him," Marin asked softly.

Cole looked at Gabriel. "She has a point. It might be a good idea to file a report."

"We don't know what happened. What if Michael is the one who started it," Gabriel asked.

"That doesn't sound like Michael to me. If you don't want to call the police, we won't. But I have to say that with Stefan lurking around here and Michael in no shape to help us keep the house safe, I would feel better if we got the police involved," Cole told his brother.

Gabriel sighed. He knew that Cole had a point, but it was his job to protect his pack. He couldn't very well call the cops not knowing if Michael was in trouble. If he had started it or killed his attacker, then he could be facing probation or jail time. Getting the cops involved in that instance, would not be a good idea. It wouldn't be the first time Michael's temper had gotten away from him.

Michael started to stir on the bed. He groaned and reached for his sliced stomach. Cole stopped him by grabbing his hands. The blood flow was slowing down. If Michael grabbed at his lacerations now, he could end up bleeding again. Judging by the bed, he had already lost a good bit of blood.

Michael opened his eyes a little. "Stefan..." he whispered.

Marin stiffened at the foot of the bed. Cole glanced at Gabriel and then back down at his twin.

"What about Stefan?" Cole asked.

"Wanted Marin... told him no... attacked me," Michael whispered brokenly.

"Stefan did this?" Gabriel asked wanting to make sure he had heard correctly.

Michael nodded yes.

"I'm calling the cops. We're going to take you to the hospital and they can meet us there. See if you can stay conscious long enough to tell them that. They need to know that he's after Marin and what he's capable of," Gabriel told Michael.

Michael nodded yes again. He was fighting not to pass out again. He knew that Marin's life might depend on it and she had become an important part of his life. He not only hadn't seen his twin this happy in a really long time, but he was also looking forward to having a little sister and possibly becoming an uncle.

Gabriel called the cops and explained what happened. When he hung up the phone he asked Cole to go start his truck. Marin went downstairs with Cole. She wasn't sure what to do. She wanted to help, but she wasn't strong enough to do much so she waited inside the house.

Cole started his truck and ran back into the house. Marin was standing uncertainly at the foot of the stairs. He stopped briefly to press a quick kiss to her lips. While she waited at the foot of the stairs, he ran back up to Michael's room. It took both brothers to carry Michael down to the truck. One of them could have lifted him easily, but they wanted to keep him as comfortable as possible. Marin followed them out of the house, making sure the door was locked.

Gabriel climbed into the back of the truck with Michael, while Marin sat up front with Cole. Putting on his hazard lights, Cole backed out of the driveway and floored it. The hospital was on the other side of town and it normally took twenty minutes to get there...

worried that they didn't have twenty minutes, Cole made it in ten.

At the hospital, Marin hopped out and ran inside the emergency room door. She told the nurse at the triage desk that they needed a wheel chair for her brother. She explained that he had been attacked and was badly cut. The nurse had two orderlies go out to the truck to assist with getting Michael inside.

Once he was in the ER and the doctors had taken over, Cole and Marin went to sit in the waiting area. Gabriel was at the triage desk completing the paper work for Michael. As the oldest, he kept a copy of their insurance cards, driver's license, etc. ... anything that could be needed in an emergency situation. Right now, he was glad he had all of the documentation he needed in order for the hospital to treat Michael.

Marin curled up next to Cole and rested her head on his chest. Gabriel came over and sat across from them. All three of them were worried not only about Michael, but about Stefan. If what Michael had said was true, then Stefan was not only after Marin but he was willing to do anything to get her back. Cole had never been so terrified in his life!

Marin glanced toward the door and saw two police officers heading their way. They were the same officers that had been at the house earlier. At least they would be familiar with the situation so they wouldn't have to tell their tale all over again.

"Mr. Andrews, Ms. Thomas." The police officers nodded at them.

The three of them murmured a hello to the officers.

The first officer, Officer Redding, asked, "Do you know what happened to your brother?"

Gabriel answered, "Before he passed out again, he mentioned that the man from this morning attacked him. He apparently saw Michael and demanded that Marin be delivered to him. The poor man is delusional

and thinks she's his girlfriend. When Michael refused, the man attacked him with a knife."

The second officer, Officer Gould, was taking notes. Officer Redding asked a few other routine questions, which Gabriel answered. Then he requested to see Michael. Gabriel walked with the officers to the triage station. Michael was in a recovery room, but he wasn't awake. It seemed they would have to wait.

Marin looked up at Cole. "He's never going to stop coming after me, is he?"

Cole looked down at her worried face and cupped her cheek in his hand. "I promise that I won't let anything happen to you."

"But look at what he did to Michael! I can't bear the thought of that happening to you!"

"How do you think I feel? What do you think he'd do to you if he ever got his hands on you? Do you think I can bear the thought of you being at that maniac's mercy?" Cole asked her vehemently.

"What are we going to do?" Marin whispered.

Cole kissed her temple. "I'm not sure. All I know is that I will defend you with my life."

"That's what I'm afraid of. I'd rather just go back to him and know that you're safe."

"No, Marin! I won't let that happen! Don't you understand?"

Marin leaned back to look into his eyes. "Understand what, Cole?"

Cole opened his mouth to answer, but before he could tell her that he loved her Gabriel walked back over to them.

"The officers are going to wait in Michael's room. When he wakes up, they'll get his statement," Gabriel said as he sat down across from them.

"Did the nurse say how long Michael would be here," Cole asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "They weren't sure, but he'll probably have to stay for about forty-eight hours. Just one of the cuts took over twenty stitches."

"Poor Michael," Marin whispered. "This is my fault."

Cole hugged her. "No, honey. It isn't your fault."

"But it is! If you hadn't found me, then Stefan wouldn't have hurt Michael."

Cole hated that she was blaming herself. "The day we found you was the best day of my life, because it brought us together. Michael knew that if he refused to hand you over to Stefan that he could be hurt. He made the choice to protect you because you're part of our family, part of the pack."

Marin snuggled into him. "I just feel so horrible about all of this. If you're blood has healing properties for me, how come Michael was able to be hurt that badly? Why couldn't he heal himself?"

"I'm not sure how to explain it. We can be killed just like anyone else, but our senses are heightened so it's usually hard to surprise us. We *do* heal faster than most people, but as deep as Michael's lacerations were he needed medical attention to start the healing process," Cole responded.

"But wouldn't he have heard Stefan approaching then? Or been able to move out of the way?" Marin asked.

"He should have been able to. I don't know what happened, but hopefully we'll find out when he's better. In the meantime, we just need to make sure that you're safe and protected at all times," Cole told her.

He was due back at work in two days. If the issue with Stefan hadn't been resolved by then, maybe he could find a way to take her to work with him. He knew that Dave would give him more time off if he asked for it, but he had a project he needed to finish before taking a lengthy vacation. While Gabriel had offered

Marin a job at the garage, he would still feel better with her by his side. It wasn't that he didn't trust his brother to guard Marin, but he would be a nervous wreck all day worrying about her.

Gabriel watched Cole and Marin. It was obvious that they belonged together. Cole seemed more alive than he had been in a long time and Marin seemed to be happy as well. Hopefully they would get a happy ending, but first Stefan would have to be stopped. Until Michael woke up and gave them more details, they were flying blind.

Cole wanted to take Marin home, but he knew the hospital was a safer place at the moment. The house wouldn't be nearly as safe with just the two of them in residence. At some point, they would have to sleep, eat, shower and change clothes. The garage would also have to be closed for a few days and they needed to let the customers know their vehicles wouldn't be ready on time. It was amazing how much havoc one man could create.

The threesome sat patiently, waiting on news about Michael. Once the officers had spoken to him, they would be able to visit for a few minutes. It also meant that Michael could tell them how Stefan had gotten the drop on him. It was very uncommon for a werewolf to be taken down by a mere human. Usually, they had at least a little werewolf blood in their family line. And who knows, maybe vampires, fairies, and other 'make believe' creatures really did exist. If werewolves and ghosts existed, it was very likely that the others did as well. The brothers had already heard rumors of other shapeshifters living in communities throughout the south.

Chapter Six

Tired of feeling useless, Cole decided to take Marin by his office. He stood and took her hand. Facing Gabriel he said, "We're going to head over to my work for a minute. Call me if anything changes?"

Gabriel looked at him questioningly, but he nodded yes, he would call if there was a change in Michael's condition. If he wondered why Cole was leaving when their brother's condition was uncertain, he didn't ask. He knew Cole well enough to know there was probably a good reason for his actions.

Cole took Marin to Sabin Bio-Med. Swiping his ID badge, he opened the door to the lobby. Leading her across the marble floor of the lobby, Cole walked to the elevators and pressed the button for the floor where the labs were located. As they exited the elevator, he noticed two lab techs that he worked with on a regular basis. One of them, Rob, had worked with him for the past four years.

As they approached his work space, Rob looked up. He smiled when he saw it was Cole. "Hey man! Everything okay? I noticed you haven't been at work lately."

"Everything's fine. I just needed some time off for some family stuff."

Rob looked Marin over, clearly wondering who she was. Cole put his arm around her possessively. The wolf in him wanted to make sure everyone knew that she belonged to him.

"This is Marin, my fiancé," Cole told him.

Rob's eyebrows went up. "Fiancé? I didn't realize you had been seeing anyone."

"We just got engaged this week. Listen; can you do me a huge favor? We were hoping to have some blood work done."

Rob nodded, "Sure. I was just doing some research, but I'd love to take a break from it. What kind of test did you have in mind?"

Cole wasn't sure how to explain things to Rob. He didn't want the man to think that Marin slept around. He glanced at Marin before answering, "Marin has had a migraine today. Before she takes anything for it, she just wanted to make sure she wasn't pregnant."

Rob was clearly curious, but refrained from asking questions. "Not a problem. Let me grab a syringe and I'll be right back."

After Rob left, Marin turned to face Cole. "I wish you hadn't lied to him."

"I somehow didn't think you wanted me to tell him the truth. I was trying to protect you." He took a breath. "In hindsight, that was a horrible lie. It wasn't very believable."

Marin smiled at him. "I know you want to protect me, and I appreciate it, but you have to work with him every day. You need to be able to maintain each other's trust."

"Do you want to tell him what's really going on?"

Marin thought about it a minute. "While it's embarrassing for me, I would feel better if you didn't have to lie to him."

Cole nodded. "I'll give him a revised edition when he gets back."

Rob came back over to them, syringe in hand. "Ready to give some blood?" he asked Marin.

Marin glanced at Cole and nudged him in the ribs with her elbow. Cole sighed and looked at Rob. "I might not have been completely honest with you on the reason for the test."

Rob looked at him expectantly. He wasn't stupid and had figured there was another reason behind the test. The woman was clearly in love with Cole so he doubted that she had cheated on him with someone.

Then again, he hadn't heard any mention of her so maybe she had recently ended a relationship with someone.

"Marin was abducted a few weeks ago. I took off this week because we just found her. She managed to escape from the guy who had taken her, but..."

Rob looked at her with sympathy and understanding. He could only imagine what she, and Cole, had been through. She seemed to be pretty tough though so hopefully it would all work out in the end. "I understand. You don't have to explain further."

Marin held out her right arm and rolled up her sleeve. She winced as the needle went in. As many times as she had been poked with needles in the past few days, you'd think she would be immune to the pain by now. Evidently you never got used to being stuck by needles. It briefly made her wonder how her brother had done it on a daily basis. He had been addicted to heroin, but had been smart enough to inject it into his ankles so she wouldn't see the track marks.

A week ago, she was kicking herself for not noticing her brother was in trouble. Now, in a sense, she was glad for it. While her time with Stefan would haunt her for a long time, it had brought her to Cole. If her brother hadn't become addicted to drugs and traded her to resolve his debt, then she would never have ended up in Ashton Grove. She would never have met Cole and she would never have known love. Maybe she would sit down sometime soon and write a letter to her brother, forgiving him for his part in her abduction.

Rob withdrew a small amount of blood and removed the needle from her arm. "Just give me a few minutes and I'll have your results for you." He looked at Cole, "Why don't you show her your work area while you wait?"

"Can you?" Marin asked turning to Cole, anxious to see where he spent his days.

"Sure. I'm a few floors up," he responded with a grin. He was pleased that she wanted to see where he worked. It was nice to have someone to share things with.

They walked over to the elevator and went up to Cole's floor. When the elevator doors opened, Cole was surprised to see that Dave, his boss, was still in the office. Their floor was rather large. It was mostly covered with cubicles, but the few biologists on the floor had enclosed offices. Dave's office was between Cole's and another co-worker's.

"Want to meet my boss?" he asked her.

Looking around in curiosity, she spotted the man Cole called his boss. "I'd like that."

When they approached Dave's office, Cole knocked on the glass door. Looking surprised, Dave motioned for them to enter. Not only had he not expected Cole until the next morning, but he certainly hadn't expected to see him with a woman. To his knowledge, Cole hadn't dated anyone the entire time he'd worked at Sabin. Then again, while Cole had been a dedicated employee, he'd also been on the reserved side when it came to his personal life.

"Cole, I didn't expect to see you until Monday. Is everything okay?" Dave glanced between Cole and Marin, obviously curious.

"Everything is fine. I know I said that I would explain everything Monday, but if you have some time I could get it out of the way now."

Dave indicated the two chairs across from his desk, "Have a seat. I'm assuming it has something to do with this beautiful young woman," he said with a smile.

Cole smiled. "It does, but not all of it is pleasant."

Cole recapped the story he had told Rob in the lab, leaving out some of the more unsettling details. "I was so happy to have her back that I asked her to marry me."

"Congratulations," Dave told them with a smile.

Cole had really surprised him this time. He had always known that Cole was a unique man, but the understanding he showed to his fiancé was truly remarkable. Most men wouldn't know how to act if their girlfriend or wife had been abducted and raped. He liked to think that if that had ever happened to his wife he would have reacted the way Cole did.

Cole took a breath. "Thanks, but there's more. The guy who took her is looking for her. He tracked her to our house and attacked Michael. We came here from the hospital. It looks like he will recover just fine, but the guy did a number on him with a knife."

Dave looked concerned. "I'm really sorry to hear that, Cole. Is there anything I can do?"

Cole glanced at Marin. "Now that you mention it, would it be okay if I brought Marin with me for a few days? It would just be until Michael is released from the hospital... I don't feel comfortable leaving her alone right now."

"I can certainly understand that. I don't see any reason why she couldn't hang out in your office or in the lounge area. Our floor is secure so you wouldn't have to worry about anyone unauthorized getting in."

Cole released a breath he hadn't even realized he had been holding. "You don't know what this means to me."

Dave smiled at Marin. "I'm very happy to meet you, Marin. It's nice to see this guy settling down. You're welcome here anytime."

Marin smiled back. "Thank you. I promise to stay out of the way and not disturb his work."

Dave laughed. "Trust me; you'll end up disturbing him anyway. I know I would be distracted if my wife decided to come to work with me. It will be nice having a fresh face around here." Pausing for a moment, he

asked, "I don't suppose you're looking for work are you?"

Marin looked at him in surprise. "Actually, I am, but I don't have a degree..."

Dave waved his hand. "Don't worry about that. It isn't much mind you, but we do have a part-time opening on this floor. We need someone to take messages for the five biologists we house up here, one of which is Cole, and do some filing and light office work. Do you think you might be interested?"

Marin hesitated a moment, remembering that Gabriel had told her she could work at the family garage. He was probably counting on her help now.

Sensing her hesitation, Cole said, "If you want to work up here, it is fine with me. I'd like having you around."

Marin smiled at him. Turning to look at Dave, she said, "Yes, definitely."

"Great," Dave said with a smile. "Why don't we schedule an interview for Monday after lunch since you'll be here anyway? Will that work for you?"

"Whatever time is convenient for you will work for me."

Dave pulled out his calendar. "I'll put you down for two o'clock. We dress rather informal around here so something similar to what you're wearing will be fine. The few women we have up here usually wear either jeans or khaki pants."

"I look forward to seeing you again on Monday," Marin told him.

Cole stood, "We had better head back to the hospital. I just wanted to stop by the lab a minute and show Marin where I worked."

Dave and Marin both stood as well. He shook Marin's hand, "It was nice meeting you. You both drive safely and I'll see you Monday."

He watched the couple walk out of his office. She seemed like a sweet, quiet young woman. Cole had done well for himself. They were obviously in love with each other. He had noticed that the entire time they were in his office they were either touching or looking at each other. Hopefully they would get their happy ending.

Cole took Marin's hand as they walked back to the elevators. Once the elevator doors closed, Cole turned to face Marin. "Well, it looks like we solved two problems. I don't have to worry about you being alone at home and you have the job you were wanting."

Marin smiled at him. "I'm so excited! Of course, I don't have the job yet ..."

Cole kissed her hand. "Maybe not formally, but I know Dave will hire you."

The elevator doors opened to the lab and they stepped out. Rob waved when he saw them. Since he was smiling and didn't seem nervous, Cole figured he had good news for them.

"I have your test results. The test was negative... you're not pregnant," he said to Marin.

She sagged against Cole in relief. "I'm so glad to hear that."

Cole shook Rob's hand. "Thanks for handling that for us. We'll see you Monday."

"No problem. Have a good weekend!" Rob was glad he had been able to give them such good news. They had been through enough already without having a permanent reminder of the ordeal.

Cole and Marin walked back to the elevator and headed back down to the lobby. When they got outside, Cole pulled Marin into his arms and kissed her.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. I just felt like kissing you."

She smiled at him as he opened the truck door for her. "Feel free to kiss me anytime you want."

He smiled at her and closed the door before walking around to the driver's side. He was looking forward to kissing her every day for the rest of their lives. Just thinking about it put a smile on his face.

Opening his door, he slid into the seat and started the truck. "Let's head back to the hospital and check on Michael. Maybe he's awake."



At the hospital, the police officers had just left Michael's room. He had been able to clearly identify Stefan as his attacker. They were going to get a warrant for his arrest and put out an APB. Michael was also assured that not only would his room be guarded by an officer, but the house would be under constant surveillance as well. The local police wouldn't rest until Stefan was apprehended. Michael briefly thought that it was a pity they couldn't call in the FBI, but that would require Marin recanting her story and filing an abduction report. He knew that Cole would be crushed so he wasn't going to mention it.

After the officers left, Marin, Gabriel and Cole went in to visit Michael. He was very pale from the loss of blood, but thankfully they hadn't had to give him a transfusion. Michael had refused to wear a gown so the sutures were in the open for them to see. Seeing them made Marin feel even worse, but she was thankful that he was okay.

"How are you feeling," she asked him quietly.

Michael held his hand out to her. "I'm fine. Stop worrying about me." She walked closer to the bed and placed her hand in his.

Marin gave him a wan smile. "I can't help but worry about you."

"I'll be fine, Marin. You're the one I'm worried about. Promise me that you won't stay at the house by yourself. The cops are going to watch the place, but I

don't trust them to be vigilant," Michael told her. After going up against Stefan, he didn't know how the fragile looking woman in front of him had ever survived a week at the man's mercy. She truly had an inner strength that would rival that of any man, or any werewolf for that matter.

"I promise," she replied.

Michael looked at Gabriel. "Are you going to work on Monday?"

"If you're home by then, I'll go in for a little while so we don't get too far behind. If you're still in the hospital, I'll probably close the shop for the day," Gabriel said.

"You don't have to close the shop for me. I'll be fine up here. I don't need a babysitter," Michael told him, slightly disgruntled. He was thirty years old and his brother still treated him like a kid at times.

"Maybe I'll open the garage for a little while tomorrow, but I'll have to see. Just because the cops are up here doesn't mean they're watching you. Stefan could decide that you're the key to getting Marin," Gabriel told him, the worry for his brother evident on his face. He had never been very emotional, but seeing Michael lying in the hospital was tearing him up. He should have been there to protect him. Not only as a member of the pack, but because he was his baby brother.

Michael sighed. "I don't know why I bother even trying to argue with you. It's like arguing with a brick wall."

Gabriel chuckled. "And yet you keep trying."

Marin's stomach growled and she blushed. "Sorry about that."

Michael looked at her and his brothers. "Have y'all not eaten the entire time you've been here?" While he was touched at their concern, he couldn't believe either of them had been stupid enough to not feed Marin. As

it was, she looked like she would blow over in a stiff wind.

"We wanted to make sure you were okay first," Cole said, speaking for the first time.

"The cafeteria probably sucks, but it should be open. Y'all should go get something to eat," Michael told them.

"Dinner after ten at night?" Cole asked with a raised eyebrow.

Michael shrugged, wincing when it pulled his sutures. "Hey, you have to eat. Who cares what time it is?"

Gabriel headed for the door. "I'll go see what hours the cafeteria is open. Be right back."

Marin was looking at Michael's stitches. "Do they still hurt?"

"It's not so bad. They pull a little when I move, but the nurse gave me some pain killers so they don't hurt too much," he told her.

Marin smiled. "I'm glad it doesn't hurt. I can never thank you enough for what you did. You could have just told Stefan where I was and let him take me."

Michael shook his head. "No, I couldn't. You're part of our family and we take care of our own."

Marin bent and kissed him on the cheek. She'd had a brother who'd practically sold her into modern day slavery. The thought that Michael was willing to risk his life for her brought tears to her eyes. She was a very lucky woman to have fallen into such a wonderful family.

Cole stepped closer to the bed. He should probably wait until Gabriel returned before asking any questions about the attack, but he had to know how Stefan had been able to injure Michael so badly. Not to mention that he was having a little bit of trouble watching Marin and Michel together. He knew it was ridiculous to feel

this way, that they only had sibling like feelings toward each other. He could only hope that it wouldn't be so bad once he could actually mate with Marin. Cole knew that his first time with her would be different from anything he had ever experienced before. Hopefully his inner wolf would settle down a bit afterwards.

"I know you probably don't want to talk about it right now, but I need to know how Stefan was able to do so much damage," Cole asked his brother.

Michael sighed. "Honestly, I'm not really sure. He asked me about Marin and threatened me with a knife. I was prepared for the attack, but he managed to get the upper hand."

Cole looked at his brother worriedly, "No one has ever gotten the upper hand with you before. Do you think he's part werewolf?"

Michael looked down, a little embarrassed. "Actually, I was a little distracted... and a little cocky."

"What else is new? You're always cocky, but what had you so distracted that he was able to get close enough to slice with you a knife," Cole asked Michael.

"I ran into Kari. I hadn't planned on telling you, but I figure she'll be around soon enough anyway," he replied.

Cole could tell that Michael was leaving something out. "What else?"

Michael cleared his throat. "I, um... I sort of ran into April, too."

Cole was stunned. April was his ex-girlfriend. They had dated for about a year, but that had been six or seven years ago. They had broken up because she had moved away. She had asked Cole to go with her, but he had stayed in Ashton Grove with his pack. He hadn't seen her since.

"April was in town?" Cole asked quietly.

Michael continued to look down at his lap. "Yeah. She asked about you."

Cole looked at Michael. "What did you tell her?"

"That you were doing great and were engaged. She didn't seem to like that answer. I think she came by to see if y'all could pick up where you left off," Michael responded.

Marin decided she had been quiet long enough. "Who are Kari and April?" Part of her was afraid of what his answer would be, but she felt that she needed to know. If these were women that he had loved or had been dating, it was important for her to know now instead of later. She had already lost her heart to Cole and she wouldn't give him up without a fight.

"April is my ex-girlfriend. We broke up about six years ago and I haven't seen her since. She decided to leave Ashton Grove and I wanted to stay," Cole told her, giving her the short version. "Kari is another story. We met about five years ago. She made it clear that she was interested in me, but I told her she wasn't my type. She wouldn't take no for an answer and still appears every once in a while and tries to make a pass at me."

"Do you still have feelings for April?" Marin asked in a small voice. It didn't seem fair that this should happen after she fell in love with Cole, when her life was finally starting to look up. Her heart felt as if it were breaking. She knew that she couldn't walk away from him, but if he was in love with another woman it would certainly complicate things.

Cole took her hands in his and turned her to face him. "No, I don't. I did for a while, but I haven't even thought about her in a long time."

Marin gave him a hesitant smile. Looking in his eyes, she saw that he spoke the truth. "I'm glad that you don't love her. I don't know what I would have done if you still loved her and wanted to be with her." She paused. She didn't want to tell him that she loved him... it was way too early for that. But what could she

tell him? "I've come to care for you already. I wouldn't want to lose you to another woman."

They turned to face Michael and saw that he had fallen asleep. Or at least he looked like he was asleep. Cole wouldn't put it past his brother to play possum in order to get them out of the room.

Gabriel opened the door and stuck his head inside. "The cafeteria is open until eleven at night. We should go if we're planning to eat here."

Cole and Marin followed him out, leaving Michael to rest. With any luck, he would be discharged in a day or two.



The food at the cafeteria had been passable. It was definitely not something to write home about, but it wasn't going to kill them. After they'd had their fill, they had returned to the waiting room. No one was anxious to go home this late... not with Stefan on the loose.

Marin yawned. "Sorry, it's been a long day."

Cole put his arm around her. "You don't have to be sorry." As he contemplated the hard chairs in the waiting room, he realized that Marin would have a rough time sleeping in one of them. "Do you want to go the house?"

"What about Stefan?" Marin asked with a frown. After seeing how much harm he could do to a werewolf, Marin wasn't sure she wanted to leave the safety of the hospital. Surely he wasn't crazy enough to try anything with so many witnesses around... it would be suicidal. Especially since the cops were watching over Michael.

Cole, also thinking about witnesses but in a different context, looked at Gabriel. "Feel up to adding all of those locks to the house tonight? I don't know about you, but I'd prefer sleeping in my bed tonight instead of the hard hospital chairs."

Gabriel thought about it a minute. He knew Cole wanted to go home for a reason other than the hard chairs. "Let's go home. Michael has two officers watching him in addition to the hospital staff."

Cole felt a slight tremble run through Marin. He knew she was scared, but if it came down to a war it would be best if they were on their own turf. Two men changing into wolves might be a little hard to explain to everyone in the hospital.

Chapter Seven

When they pulled into the driveway, they noticed a police car across the street with two officers inside. There was also an officer posted at their front door. Obviously the officers at the hospital hadn't been lying when they said the house would be protected.

As Gabriel approached the door, he said, "Evening Officer."

"Good evening, Mr. Andrews. I'm Officer Halbert and my partner, Officer Denton, is watching the back door. There will be at least two of us outside of the house all evening to ensure that no one will bother you tonight."

Gabriel smiled at him. "That's good to hear. I think we're going to add a few locks to the lower level just to be safe. We also have an alarm system we can set before heading to bed."

Officer Halbert nodded. "That sounds like an excellent plan. You can never have too much security these days."

Gabriel unlocked the door. Before he could step into the house, Officer Halbert stopped him.

"Mr. Andrews, I'd feel a lot better if you'd me walk through the house first."

Gabriel stepped back. "I'd appreciate that. I'm sure that Marin would feel better if someone checked things out before she went inside."

Officer Halbert stepped into the house. He meticulously went through all three floors, making sure he looked in every closet, every shower and under every bed. Once he was sure the house was clear, he went back to the front door.

"Everything looks clear, Mr. Andrews. If you need anything tonight, just give a shout and one of us will come running."

"Thank you," Gabriel said, as he ushered Cole and Marin into the house. Closing the front door, Gabriel turned the lock on the knob and also locked the deadbolt.

Cole put his arms around Marin. "Do you want to go up to bed or stay down here with us?"

"I'm really tired, but I'd feel safer staying with you," she replied, stifling a yawn.

Cole brushed a kiss across her forehead. "We'll be as quick as we can, but I want to put some extra locks on the windows and doors down here tonight. I think we'll all sleep better with the added security."

Marin nodded and followed them into the kitchen. Even with the new locks and the security system, she wasn't sure that she felt safe. She knew that Cole would never let anyone hurt her, but what if Stefan attacked them in their sleep? Even a werewolf would have a hard time winning that fight. For all of their sakes, she hoped that Stefan stayed away tonight. Maybe the police detail outside would scare him off.



An hour later, Gabriel and Cole had secured the downstairs windows and doors. Cole looked over at Marin and saw that she had fallen asleep on the couch. Walking over to her, he gently lifted her into his arms.

Turning to Gabriel he asked, "Are you ready to head upstairs?"

Gabriel looked around the room one last time. Everything appeared to be secure. "Yeah, let's call it a night. I don't think we can do anything else right now."

As Cole headed up the stairs with Marin, Gabriel turned on the alarm. Once he was sure the downstairs was locked up tight, he followed Cole upstairs. When Cole reached the third floor, he nudged his bedroom door open and carried Marin inside. Behind him, he heard Gabriel close the door for him. Trying not to

wake her, Cole laid Marin on the bed. He carefully removed her shoes, socks and jeans. Pulling the covers over her, he made sure she was sleeping peacefully before heading into the bathroom.

Closing the bathroom door behind him, Cole flipped on the light. He brushed his teeth and took a quick shower. He had hoped that the hot water would relax him, but he kept thinking about Marin. Even though she hadn't said anything on the way home, he knew that she was scared. Until Stefan was either caught or dead, he would continue to haunt her. Cole was personally hoping for the dead option.

After getting out of the shower, he dried off and wrapped the towel around his waist. He turned out the lights and quietly walked back into the bedroom. Marin was still sleeping soundly and had curled up on her side.

Cole walked over to his dresser and pulled out a pair of pajama pants. He normally slept in the nude, but since he was sharing his bed tonight he thought the pants would be a good idea. Granted, it wouldn't be the first time Marin woke up to find him naked in her bed, but the other two times had been unintentional.

Pulling back the covers, he climbed into bed beside Marin. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. Breathing in her scent, he closed his eyes and slept a deep and dreamless sleep. Neither of them woke until morning.



The sun was shining brightly through the bedroom window the next day. Marin slowly opened her eyes. She could hear the birds chirping outside and wondered what time it was. As she stretched, she felt an arm tighten around her waist. Smiling, she turned to look at Cole.

Even in sleep he was the most handsome man she had ever seen. Wrapping her arms around him, she

buried her face against his chest. She would never grow tired of waking up in his arms. Never had she felt as safe or as cherished as she did right now.

Cole became aware of Marin the moment she had touched him. He couldn't think of anything more pleasant than waking up with her in his bed, pressed against him. Opening his eyes, he looked at the amazing woman lying next to him. He ran his fingers through her long hair, loving the silky feel of it.

Marin looked up to find Cole watching her. "Good morning."

He smiled down at her. "Good morning. I take it you slept well?"

"Very well. Did you bring me up to the bedroom?"

"You fell asleep on the couch last night so I carried you up when we were finished with the locks. It seemed a shame to wake you. After the stress from yesterday, I knew you needed some rest."

Marin looked down at her partially clothed body. "You weren't brave enough to put me in my nightgown?"

Cole grinned at her. "I wasn't sure how you would feel about me undressing you while you were asleep."

"As long as it's you and no one else, I'm fine with it," Marin said with a slight blush. After all, he'd already seen just about all of her.

Cole brushed his fingers across her cheek. She was so beautiful that he could hardly believe that she was his. Technically, she wasn't officially his, but he hoped to make their engagement a real one sometime soon. He couldn't wait to put a ring on her finger permanently, claiming her as his own for all to see.

Marin rolled to her back and looked up at the ceiling. "Can I ask you something?"

He raised himself up on one arm and looked down at her. "Of course you can."

Marin looked at him, dreading his answer. "I can't help thinking about the lab work I had done last night and it's not that I'm not grateful it turned out to be negative, but..." Marin stopped mid-sentence, unsure how to continue. For that matter, she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to hear the answer to her question.

"But what honey? Just ask."

"What if it had been positive," she asked in a near whisper.

Cole chose his words carefully, not sure what answer she was hoping to hear. "I would have supported whatever decision you made."

"You mean if I had decided to keep the baby, you would have been okay with that?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I would have raised him or her as my own, but I'm not sure I wouldn't have seen Stefan's face every time I looked at the child. I know it wouldn't be his, or her, fault and I promise that I would have loved them, but I have to admit that it would have been hard." Cole visibly swallowed. "Every time I think of what that man did to you, it tears me up inside. Having to see his child every day would have been a constant reminder. I can honestly say that I'm glad the test was negative."

Marin nodded. "I'm not sure what I would have done either. I always told myself that if I found out I was pregnant before I was married that I would keep the baby no matter what, but I didn't take into account the way I would feel about that child if it had been a result of being raped. I don't think that's something most women think about."

Cole brushed her bangs away from her face. "May I ask what brought on this train of thought?"

"I guess I was just wondering what it would be like to have a baby... your baby. And then I started thinking about last night. I'm sorry. I've ruined our morning, haven't I," she asked with a slight frown on her face.

"No, you haven't ruined our morning. You can always talk to me, no matter what it's about. You know that, don't you?"

She smiled at him. "Yeah, I know that." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "You know, you didn't flinch when I said that I was thinking about what it would be like to have a baby with you."

"Maybe because I've also thought about what it would be like to have one with you... not that I'm rushing you! It's just that, for as long as I can remember I've wanted to settle down and start a family. I had started to think that my mate was never going to come along and then suddenly, there you were. The moment I saw you in the woods I knew that you were mine."

"You did?" Marin asked, clearly surprised.

"I don't know how to explain it. When we got you back to the house, Gabriel told me that you were a mate for one of us. My first instinct was to growl at him and claim you for myself, but then I settled down and tried to be reasonable. He said that when you woke up you would be allowed to choose who you wanted to be with, and that if you wanted to leave, you would be allowed to leave."

"I'm glad I didn't leave, but it's nice to hear that I would have had a choice."

He smiled at her. "I'm glad too. I don't think I would have made it without you. Just thinking of you with either of my brothers was enough to make me want to move out. I don't think I could have handled seeing you with either of them."

Marin looked contemplative. "I have to be honest. When I first woke up and Gabriel was the only one around, I had wondered what it would be like to be with someone like him. He was so nice to me and quite honestly, I've never had a man treat me so well."

Cole wasn't entirely sure he wanted to hear this. He started to say something, but he decided to let her

finish. She apparently felt that she needed to tell him this... even if it was torturing him.

"I know that you heard about my brief stay with Stefan when I was talking with Gabriel. There's actually a lot I didn't say. I'm not sure I can put it all into words, but I want you to know what happened." She paused, not sure how to phrase it. "The time that I escaped and he tied me to the table... it didn't stop there. He had three friends with him at the time. Not only did he rape me, but he let them rape me too. When they were finished, they just left me there. I had managed to loosen the ropes a bit by struggling, not that it had done me any good. After I had regained my strength, I managed to wriggle out of the ropes. I found some clothes and managed to escape again."

Cole sat quietly, listening to her. He felt physically ill just thinking about what she had been through. He only hoped that there would come a point when she could forget about that horrible week, a time when it would just be a distant memory.

Marin continued her story. "When I thought you were just a wolf, it was Gabriel that I thought of as my savior. I thought that I had finally found a good man, one that I could trust. I have to admit that I wanted to know what it would be like to kiss him or to have him make love to me." She took a breath to steady her nerves. "But then I woke up and found myself kissing you that morning. At first I was terrified, but then I looked into your eyes and regardless of what form you had taken I recognized you. Well, obviously I didn't realize right away that you were the wolf, but I think some part of me recognized you as my other half. Later, when it hit me that you were the wolf, I realized that you had stayed by my side night and day." She smiled at him. "I had thought that Gabriel was the hero, but it turned out that you were. You're the one who truly saved me."

"Is that why you want to be with me? Because I'm the one who saved you?" Cole asked quietly, almost afraid of her answer. Would it matter to him? He wasn't sure... but he realized that he needed to know why she was with him. He had already lost his heart to her and he hoped that maybe someday she would come to love him too.

"No. I'm with you because..." Marin let the sentence trail off. She had been about to say that it was because she loved him, but what if he didn't return her affections? Would she scare him? Would she ruin her chances at making their engagement the real thing?

"Because?" Cole prompted.

She took a deep breath to settle her nerves. "Because I love you."

Cole couldn't hide his surprise. He hadn't expected that to be her answer. Apparently she thought his expression meant he wasn't pleased with her declaration because she asked, "You think it's too soon don't you? For me to have fallen in love with you, I mean?"

"No, I was just a little surprised is all. I'm not sure what I expected your answer to be, but that wasn't it."

Well, he seemed to be taking it well, Marin thought. Then again, he hadn't exactly professed his undying love for her, but hopefully that would come in time. Maybe he at least felt something for her other than animal magnetism.

"Cole, do you care for me? Even a little?"

His expression softened. "I care for you more than a little. I love you."

"You do?" she asked, her eyes full of surprise and wonder.

He grinned at her. "Yeah, I do. I had wanted to tell you last night, but I thought it was too soon. I didn't want to frighten you away."

"You could never frighten me away, no matter what you said or did. I'll always love you. I know we've only known each other a few days, but I know that without you my life would be incomplete."

Cole leaned down and kissed her. Wrapping her arms around his neck, Marin pulled him closer. Ending the kiss, Cole looked into her eyes.

"Marin, will you marry me? I want us to have a real engagement."

Smiling at him, she answered, "I would love nothing more than to be your wife. Yes, I'll marry you."

Cole couldn't believe how lucky he was. "Think we should shower and get dressed? I'm sure Gabriel is up and we can share the good news."

Marin gave him a naughty look. "Together?"

Pretending to misunderstand her question, he said, "Well, of course we'll tell him together. I wasn't going to make you stay up here."

Marin playfully smacked him in the arm. "You know that isn't what I meant!"

Cole chuckled at her. "If you want to shower with me, I certainly won't stop you."

Marin jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom. Cole decided to give her a few minutes so he stretched and thought about their future. While he loved his brothers and didn't mind being nearby, he wanted Marin to himself. Once this thing with Stefan was behind them, he'd talk to Marin about buying their own house.

Stretching, he climbed out of bed and walked to the bathroom. He could hear the shower running as he turned the knob. Nothing could have prepared him for the sight of Marin standing naked under the spray of the shower. It was the first time he had ever enjoyed having a shower that was surrounded by glass. He wasn't sure what Marin was expecting to happen, but he hoped that he could hold himself together enough

not to take her against the shower wall. He wanted their first time together to be in his nice big bed, preferably when his brothers weren't at home.

After making sure they had two clean towels handy, he opened the shower door. Marin had her eyes closed and was letting the water run through her hair and down her back. Cole took a minute to just enjoy the view.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked, as he stepped into the shower.

Marin smiled at him. "I was wondering what was taking you so long."

"I've actually been in here a few minutes."

"Oh? What were up to then?"

Cole grinned at her. "I was enjoying the wonderful sight of you in the shower... well, that and getting some towels out for us."

Marin pressed her body against his and brought his head down for a kiss. It was the first time that she had all of him at her mercy. She ran her fingers through his hair and down his back, pulling him closer to her. She loved the feel of her skin against his.

Cole pulled back before things got too carried away. "Marin, I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I think we should wait."

"Wait for what?"

"I want our first time together to be in the bed; preferably when we have the house to ourselves."

Marin eyed him as if he were a bug under a microscope. She wasn't sure if she should be happy that he was trying to make their first time together special, or if she should be upset that he didn't want her right here and now. Deciding to go with the first option, she sighed.

"You're right. Doesn't mean I have to like it though," she mumbled.

Cole smiled at her. "If it's any consolation, this isn't exactly easy for me."

"Well, that does make it a little better." She smiled at him. "Do I still get to wash you?"

"Uh... if that's what you want." His mouth suddenly went dry at the thought of her hands gliding over his skin, washing every inch of him.

Marin smiled at him. Oh it's what she wanted all right! If she couldn't have him, the least she could do is make sure he thought about her all day. Okay, if she was completely honest with herself, she just couldn't wait to get her hands on him.

Grabbing the soap, she lathered up her hands and started soaping him down. Starting with his neck, she gently rubbed the soap into his skin. Her hands glided over his firm shoulders and down his thick, muscular arms. She lathered her hands again before reaching for his hard, sculpted chest and abs. His chest was smooth and tan, making her skin look like snow next to his. Just feeling his hot skin under her hands was enough to make her want him. Before she could continue her exploration, there was a knock on the bathroom door.

"What is it," Cole yelled, both relieved and perturbed at the same time. He was fighting an inner war. While he didn't want to get too carried away right now, he also didn't want her to stop.

On the other side of the door, Gabriel was trying not laugh at the frustration he could hear in his brother's voice. "Are y'all about done in there? I need to talk to you."

Cole inwardly groaned. His brother had horrible timing. "Can't it wait?"

"No. The hospital just called with an update. I wanted to sit down with you and Marin and discuss some stuff that needs to be taken care of today."

Cole sighed. "Okay. We'll be out in a minute."

Looking down at Marin, he gave her a grin. "It looks like we'll have to continue this another time."

She smiled back at him. "You can count on it. You can go ahead and finish washing. I'll finish up in here while you're getting dressed and meet you downstairs in the kitchen."

He bent down and quickly brushed a kiss across her lips. "Swap places with me and I'll get out of here."

Marin scooted around Cole and let him stand under the water. He quickly finished washing and shampooed his hair. Once he was rinsed, he climbed out of the shower and started toweling off. Marin closed the shower door and started washing her hair. By the time she was finished with her shower, Cole had already walked downstairs.

She took her time getting the tangles out of her hair and put on a little make-up. Walking into the bedroom, she grabbed the first outfit she saw and got dressed. Deciding to let her hair dry naturally to save time, she headed downstairs. At the bottom of the staircase, she could hear Cole and Gabriel talking in the kitchen.

When she walked into the brightly lit kitchen, Cole and Gabriel both stopped talking and looked up. They were seated across from each other at the table, each with a coffee cup in front of them. She walked over to the refrigerator and poured herself a glass of orange juice before joining them.

"What did I miss," she asked Gabriel.

"Not much. I was just telling Cole that Michael may get to come home either this afternoon or tomorrow morning."

Marin smiled. "That's great news!"

Gabriel nodded. "Yes it is, but I'll need to be at the hospital most of the day in case they decide to release him today."

"Is there anything Cole and I can do to help? Or do you want us to come with you?"

He smiled at her. "You're getting ahead of me. I was hoping the two of you would do the grocery shopping since it was never done yesterday. I imagine that Michael will need some first aid supplies for his sutures as well."

Cole had finished his coffee and decided to join the conversation. "We should be able to get everything we need at Wal-Mart or that new Super Target. It makes more sense to just go to one place instead of two."

Gabriel nodded. "I found the grocery money in the kitchen drawer this morning so you can use that for the food. I'm not sure if there's enough cash in there to cover the other stuff or not."

"Don't worry about it. If we don't have enough, I can cover the rest. Just go sit with Michael and bring him home if they'll let you."

Gabriel stood up and took his cup to the sink. "I think I'll go ahead and drive over to the hospital. I'm going to take Michael's car. I was going to borrow your truck, but you might need the room for the groceries."

"If you want to drive the truck, I'm sure we can get everything in the Corvette."

Gabriel shook his head. "No, you go ahead and use the truck. Besides, I don't get a chance to drive Michael's car very often. You know how picky he is about his 'baby'."

Cole smiled. "True. Okay, well enjoy the drive to the hospital. Just don't enjoy it enough that you get a speeding ticket."

Gabriel laughed and headed for the door. After he heard the front door close, Cole got up and took his cup to the sink. He was glad that his twin was doing well enough to come home. It had shaken him to see Michael in such bad shape. Turning around, he leaned against the counter and watched Marin. She was slowly

sipping on her juice and looking out the kitchen window. She was so beautiful that she took his breath away.

"Do you want some breakfast before we go grocery shopping? I'm sure I could scrounge up something," he told her.

Shaken from her reverie, Marin looked over at him. "No, I'm okay."

Her stomach chose that moment to betray her and grumble. Cole laughed.

"So I hear." Smiling at her, he said, "Why don't we swing through a Starbucks drive-thru window and grab some coffee and a muffin."

"Make it a frappuccino and you have yourself a deal!"

"A frappuccino it is then. Grab your purse and we'll head out."

Marin put her glass in the sink and went to get her purse. She could get used to mornings like this one. First she had gotten to wake up next to the man she loved. Then she had gotten to shower with him, even if that didn't go as far as she had hoped, she thought, smiling to herself. Now they were doing more couple type stuff... getting some breakfast and going grocery shopping. All of this was new to her and she loved every minute of it!

After she had her purse, she met Cole at the front door. Making sure the house was secure, he ushered her to the truck and opened the door for her. As she settled into the seat, he leaned in for a quick kiss before closing the door.

Cole slid into the driver's seat, buckled his seat belt, and started up the truck. As he carefully backed out of the driveway, he nodded to the on-duty officer that was watching the house. It was nice to see that the cops hadn't abandoned their post. Hopefully they would be enough of a deterrent to keep Stefan away.

The drive to Wal-Mart was quiet. They were both lost in their own thoughts. They had stopped at Starbucks briefly and had eaten their muffins and drank their drinks in the car. As they pulled into the Wal-Mart parking lot, Cole remembered why he hated going there to shop. The only empty parking space looked like it was a mile from the door. This was definitely *not* the place to shop on the weekends, especially in a small town.

Making short work of their shopping list, they managed to get in and out of the store in less than hour. For Cole, that was a record. It usually took him closer to two hours to find everything he needed, wade through a long check-out line, and then remember where he had parked. Having Marin with him had made the time fly.

As they were loading the sacks into the backseat of the truck, Cole heard his name from an isle or two over. Looking up, he saw Kari heading his way. Swearing under his breath, he glanced over at Marin.

"Brace yourself," he warned her.

She gave him a puzzled look before noting the Barbie-like blonde walking their way. "Who's that?"

"That would be Kari. I knew my luck couldn't hold out forever." He had a disgusted look on his face. "We were bound to run into her sooner or later. After all, Ashton Grove isn't exactly a big city with hundreds of thousands of people."

Marin had just finished putting her sacks in the truck and had closed the door when Kari sauntered over to Cole. Marin's hands twitched with the urge to smack the woman.

Putting her hand on his arm, Kari leaned in close to him. "Have you missed me Cole? I thought about you every day while I was gone."

Trying to untangle himself from the piranha, he said, "Hi, Kari. Did you have a nice vacation?"

Kari pouted. "It would have been better if you had been with me."

Wanting desperately to run away, Cole looked around for Marin. "Kari, I've told you before that I'm not interested in you that way." Why couldn't the blasted woman take a hint?

"But Cole, we'd be so good together! You know we would."

Marin decided she'd heard enough. Marching around the front of the truck, she walked up to Cole and put her arm through his. "Who's your friend, honey?"

Smiling down at her gratefully, Cole said, "This is Kari. She's a friend of Cassie's."

Kari narrowed her eyes at the woman that was hanging on Cole's arm. What the hell was going on? He hadn't seriously dated anyone since their trip to Whispering Lake, not since Cassie had chosen Matt over him. What had he been up to while she was gone?

Marin smiled at Kari. "Hi. It's nice to meet you."

Kari sneered at her. "I'd say the same, but you haven't introduced yourself yet."

Marin giggled. "Sorry about that! I'm Marin. Cole's fiancé."

Kari sucked in a breath. Cole had a fiancé? "Must have been a quick engagement." Kari looked pointedly at Marin's stomach, figuring that Cole must have gotten the woman pregnant to ask her to marry him so soon. Why else would he have chosen the mousy woman over her?

Marin didn't miss the look. Neither did Cole if the muscles she felt flexing under her hand were any indication. She batted her eyes at Cole and smiled up at him. "Well, what can I say... it was love at first sight."

Cole smiled back at her. She was handling Kari very well. "Yes, it was," he murmured.

Kari was seething. "Well, I certainly hope you'll be happy together. I have to run. Maybe we'll see each other again soon."

From her tone, the couple could tell that she wished no such thing. It was apparent to them both that Kari was jealous and angry. Maybe she would finally get the hint and leave Cole alone. You would think that after five years of telling someone no, they would realize you weren't interested in them.

After Kari had walked off, Cole relaxed. "That was a brilliant performance."

Marin smiled at him. "Why thank you. Except, I wasn't acting when I said it was love at first sight."

He smiled down at her. "I know. I wasn't either."

They kissed briefly before getting in the truck to drive back home. The drive seemed to go by quickly and before long they were pulling into the driveway. The first thing Cole noticed, was the partially open front door, which he distinctly remembered locking. As he glanced around, he noticed the empty police car across the street. This didn't bode well.

"Stay here and lock the doors. Don't open them for anyone but me! Not even the police."

Marin nodded that she understood. She was terrified, but at the same time she hoped that Stefan had broken into the house so that the cops could catch him and haul him off to jail. It would be nice to stop wondering when he would pop up. But then, if that had happened, where were the police? Better yet, why wasn't the alarm going off?

Cole cautiously entered the house. He saw one cop passed out on the living room floor and heard a commotion in the kitchen. Glancing around the doorway, he saw the second officer struggling with Stefan. Before Cole could decide what to do, Stefan broke free from the officer, knocking him to the floor, and came rushing Cole's way.

As Stefan barreled through the kitchen doorway, Cole grabbed a handful of his shirt. Spinning around, Stefan swung at Cole, clipping his jaw. Cole's head snapped back from the impact, but he still held a firm grip on Stefan's shirt. Compared to a punch from Michael or Gabriel, it was like being hit by a fly.

Pulling back his fist, Cole punched Stefan in the nose. The satisfying crunch told him that he had managed to break the man's nose. It was the least he deserved for all that he had put Marin through. If the police weren't involved, he would have shifted and ripped the man's throat out. The wolf inside of him desperately wanted to avenge Marin in the most savage way possible.

Stefan bared his teeth at Cole and lunged for his throat with outstretched arms. Wrapping his hands around Cole's neck, Stefan started to squeeze as hard as he could. Cole had no choice but to let go of Stefan in order to pry his fingers loose. He knew it was a mistake the moment he let go.

Breaking loose, Stefan started for the front door. Before he could escape, Cole grabbed him by the arm and swum him into the banister at the bottom of the staircase. As Stefan came running forward again, Cole sunk a punch into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Taking advantage of the situation, Cole punched Stefan in the face hard enough to knock him out.

As Stefan slumped to the floor, the officer came huffing and puffing from the kitchen. "Thanks, man. He might not be a big man, but he's pretty tough! Knocked my partner out cold and managed to knock the wind out of me."

Cole nodded. "I saw him on my way in. In a way, I'm glad he broke in. Otherwise, we might not have ever caught him." Cole paused. "Or worse, he would have caught Marin when she was alone. I hate to think about what would have happened to her."

Flipping Stefan over and making sure that the man's wrists were firmly gripped in his hands, Cole held him in place while the officer got out his cuffs. As the second one locked into place, Stefan started coming around. The officer helped the groggy man to his feet and read him the Miranda Rights. Once Stefan was securely cuffed and Mirandized, Cole backed off and helped escort the trash out of his house. Making sure that Stefan was securely locked in the police car, he went back into the house to check on the other police officer.

Bending down, he checked the officer's pulse. It was slow and steady. Thankfully the man was just unconscious. He'd probably have one hell of a headache when he got up, but he should be no worse for wear.

While the arresting officer called for an ambulance and back-up, Cole went out to the truck to check on Marin. She was sitting in the front seat with her face buried in her hands. Cole wasn't sure if it was from fear or relief that it was finally over. He gently tapped on the window to get her attention.

Startled, Marin jumped. Seeing that it was Cole standing beside her window, she opened the door and threw herself into his arms. "I was so scared when you went in there!"

Wrapping his arms around her, he said, "I'm sorry honey. I had to make sure that everything was okay."

She nodded that she understood. "Is it really over now?" She looked over at the police car. "They're really going to take him away?"

"Yes, it's over. They arrested Stefan for breaking and entering, along with assault with a deadly weapon, attempted kidnapping, and assaulting a police officer. He won't be getting out of jail for a long time."

Marin sagged against him. "Thank goodness!"

"Let's get the groceries inside before the cold stuff ruins and then we can call Gabriel with the good news."

It will be nice for things to get back to normal around here.”

Marin pulled herself out of his arms and started grabbing grocery bags out of the truck with shaking hands. While they were unloading the truck, the ambulance arrived and took the unconscious officer to the hospital. The second police car finally arrived and hauled Stefan off to jail so that the arresting officer could ride to the hospital and check on his partner. Once everyone was gone and the groceries were put away, Marin and Cole collapsed on the couch.

Cole pulled out his cell phone and called Gabriel. Of course, his brother didn’t answer since the hospital had probably told him to turn off his cell phone. Cole left a message, briefly explaining what had happened and let him know it was safe to come home. When he was finished, he ended the call and sat his phone on the coffee table.

Beside him, Marin was trembling. While she was grateful that she no longer had to worry about that horrid man coming after her, she was still shaken from their recent experience. When Cole had rushed into the house, she had been worried he wouldn’t come back out. Stefan might have been a fairly small man, but he was ruthless. Marin had no doubts that Cole was strong and could hold his own, but he also played fairly and that would have been a big disadvantage when he faced off against Stefan. It’s how Michael had gotten injured and Marin wasn’t sure she would be able to stand the sight of Cole in a hospital bed.

Leaning into him, she rested her head against his shoulder. It seemed almost impossible. After all these years, she was finally going to have a life and a family again. Just knowing that she was going to spend the rest of her life with Cole, was enough to wipe away all of the bad memories. She owed it to him and their

future family to move on with her life and put the past behind her.

Chapter Eight

At the hospital, Gabriel was waiting outside of Michael's room. The nurses had walked into the room a few minutes before in order to get Michael ready for the trip home. His doctor had signed off on the release forms and declared him fit enough to sleep in his own bed, with restrictions of course. Michael wouldn't like being confined to a bed in his own home anymore than he liked being in the hospital, but hopefully he wouldn't over-do it and rip his stitches out.

While he was waiting, Gabriel decided to go down to the waiting room so he could check his voicemail. It was odd that Cole and Marin hadn't arrived by now. As he cleared the 'No Cell Phones Allowed' section, he turned his phone on. He had two missed calls from clients and one from Cole's cell phone. Quickly going through the voicemail messages, he was stunned when he listened to Cole's. He replayed it two times just to make sure he had heard correctly.

As he was closing his phone, a nurse tapped him on the arm. "Excuse me, Mr. Andrews. Your brother is ready to go home."

Gabriel turned and saw Michael being wheeled in to the waiting room by a cute blonde nurse. True to form, his baby brother was flirting shamelessly too. Rolling his eyes, he walked over to Michael. At this rate, Michael would be fifty and still flirting like a twenty year old.

"Okay, Romeo. It's time to head home."

Michael smiled at the nurse and thanked her for her assistance. Glaring at his brother he said, "Well, let's go. They won't let me walk out of here so I guess that means you're pushing me."

Gabriel chuckled. "Sounds like a typical day then."

Michael would have loved to punch his brother in the arm, but he knew it would pull out some of the

sutures. While he didn't mind the assistance of the cute nurses, he really didn't want to stay in the hospital any longer than he had to. Grumbling under his breath, he allowed Gabriel to wheel him out to the car. Besides, he had already been turned down by the cute blonde when he'd asked her out. There really wasn't a point in staying if he couldn't at least get a date out of it.

"Where are Cole and Marin anyway," he asked, as he noticed his own car parked outside instead of Cole's truck.

"Apparently they were too busy arresting Stefan to meet us up."

"They were doing what," Michael asked, sure he hadn't heard correctly.

"Cole left me a message. It seems that when they arrived home, Stefan had cut the alarm system and broken into the house. He managed to knock one of the officers out and temporarily stunned the second one. Cole wrestled with Stefan and knocked him unconscious." Gabriel looked down at his brother. "At least, that's the cliff's notes version Cole gave me. I'm sure it's more entailed than that."

"Man, I go to the hospital and all kinds of fun things happen at home!" Michael shook his head. Leave it to his twin to be the hero of the day. At least he would be able to rest at home without looking over his shoulder all day. He was in no shape to be fighting battles right now.

"I somehow don't think Marin would agree with that. Cole didn't say much about her, but I'm sure she's pretty shaken."

Michael nodded. He could imagine how she had felt when Cole ran into the house. She had to have been terrified. Now that Stefan was out of the picture, maybe things would fall into place with Marin and Cole. He was happy for his twin brother. For as long as he could remember, all that Cole had ever wanted was to

find his mate and have a family. Hopefully he was going to get his wish. Anyone with eyes could see the two were madly in love with each other. It proved that love at first sight really did exist and gave Michael hope that there was someone out there as perfect for him as Marin was for Cole... not that he wanted to find his mate any time soon. An image briefly flashed in his mind of a woman he had dated a few times. Michael shook his head, clearing her image from his thoughts.

It took Gabriel only a moment to get Michael in the car and return the wheelchair to the ER lobby. Getting into the driver's seat, he fastened his seatbelt and drove home. Michael was quiet on the way to the house. Gabriel wasn't sure if he was thinking about Cole and Marin or if he was still drifting on pain medication.

Looking over at Michael, Gabriel said, "I'll pick up your prescription after I take you home."

"It's no rush. I'm hoping I won't have to use it." He hated the disoriented feeling the pain medication gave him, most werewolves did. Michael liked being in complete control of himself. He noticed that he was more sluggish when he took the medication.

Gabriel could understand. Werewolves used all of their senses all of the time. When you mixed in pain medication, it meant feeling completely disoriented and vulnerable. It wasn't a feeling that most humans enjoyed, but it was debilitating to a werewolf. All of the brothers had avoided pain medication when at all possible.

Arriving at the house, Gabriel pulled into the driveway and turned off the car. By the time he got around to the passenger side of the vehicle, Michael had already opened the door and was trying to lift himself out of the car. Reaching in, Gabriel grabbed both of Michael's arms and gently heaved him out of the car.

Giving his big brother a disgruntled look, Michael said, "I could have gotten out on my own you know."

"Yeah, I could see that. The wincing you did every time you moved was particularly convincing."

He gave his older brother a dirty look. "Oh, shut up."

Gabriel grinned as his brother walked, rather slowly, past him and into the house. Closing the door behind him, he watched Michael head into the living room. Cole was on the sofa holding Marin.

Looking up, Cole saw that his brothers were home. Michael seemed a little pale, but considering how many stitches it had taken to sew him back up he seemed to be doing well. Scooting over, he and Marin made room for Michael to join them.

"How are you feeling," Marin asked her future brother-in-law.

"I'm okay. I've definitely been better, but I'm going to make it. It will be nice to sleep in my own bed though."

Marin relaxed. She had been worried about Michael, but he really did seem much better. She glanced at Cole. "Can we tell them now?"

Smiling at his fiancé, Cole nodded. While he wouldn't have minded letting his brother get a little more settled, he knew that Marin was anxious to share their news. His brothers may have assumed that she was going to officially be one of them, but it would be nice to hear the actual words.

With a huge smile, Marin said, "Cole asked me to marry him. Our engagement is official now."

Both of his brothers broke into big smiles and congratulated them. Cole could tell that they weren't surprised by the news, but hearing the happiness in Marin's voice warmed his heart. She had to be the most special woman on earth.

Starting to feel exhausted, Michael excused himself and went up to his room. Gabriel was right on his heels making sure that he didn't tumble down the stairs. Wanting some alone time with Marin, Cole stayed behind. He had never realized before how crowded the Victorian was. Or maybe it had just never bothered him when there wasn't a woman, *his* woman, in the house.

Marin leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"What was that for," he asked in surprise.

"Because... I love you."

He smiled at her. "I love you, too." He brushed her bangs back from her face. "Is there anything you'd like to do this afternoon? I'm sure that Gabriel will be keeping a close eye on Michael for the rest of the day."

"Well, I wouldn't mind doing a little sightseeing."

Cole chuckled. "Honey, you did that when we went to the hospital and to the store. I think we've covered just about every square inch of Ashton Grove in the past two days. There isn't much to it."

She looked a little disappointed. "Oh. Well, maybe we could go to lunch and do a little shopping?"

"Shopping? Isn't that what we did this morning?"

She shook her head at him. "No, that was grocery shopping. I mean real shopping."

"I'm glad to see you're no longer afraid to spend my money."

A hurt look flashed through her eyes. He could have kicked himself for being so careless with his words. It was obvious that she had taken his statement seriously, even though he had only meant it as a jest.

"I didn't think about that when I suggested it," she replied.

Cole sighed. He was going to have to be careful around her for a little while. It was going to take some time to un-do the damage that her brother and Stefan had inflicted. "I'm sorry honey. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I really am glad that you don't mind

spending my money. As far as I'm concerned, it's *our* money. I plan on marrying you and part of that is taking care of you, both physically and monetarily."

"But it isn't right that you should have to pay for everything."

He smiled at her. "Have you forgotten your interview tomorrow? You'll have your own money soon enough. Until then, why don't we buy you a few more outfits for you to wear to work along with whatever else you wanted to get today?"

"You really don't mind?"

"No, honey. I like being able to do things for you, even if it's something small like taking you shopping."

Marin's smile could have lit up the darkest day. It didn't take much to make her happy and Cole was glad to see her smiling. If he had any say in the matter, she would be doing a lot more of it in the near future. He hadn't told her yet, but while they had waited on Gabriel and Michael to come home Cole had sent a message to Matt, asking if he currently had any property for sell that had a decent size yard and was near the woods or the larger park in town.

Matt always had some real-estate that he was looking to rent or sell. Having millions of dollars gave him plenty of room to buy up property cheap and then renovate it and make a profit. Apparently Cole's message had arrived at a good time as Matt had several properties that might work for a werewolf looking to start a new family. They had an appointment later in the week to meet Matt and go over the available properties.

"Why are you looking at me like that," Marin asked, having caught him staring at her.

Cole shrugged. "I just like looking at you. There's nothing wrong with admiring the most beautiful woman on earth."

Marin playfully smacked him on the arm. "Stop it. I'm glad that you find me attractive, but I think that's taking it a bit far."

His expression grew serious. "Not to me it isn't."

Smiling, she leaned into him. Her life was pretty close to perfect right at that moment. She was engaged to a wonderful man who seemed to truly love her. Okay, so he turned a little furry every now and then, but that wasn't so bad. She'd found that she enjoyed having Cole around in both his human form and his wolf form.

Cole bent his head and gently kissed her on the lips. "Let me run upstairs for a minute and talk to Gabriel. When I get back down, we'll go to lunch. While I'm upstairs, why don't you pull out the yellow pages and find a restaurant you want to go to."

"Okay. I'm afraid I won't be familiar with many of them, unless it's a nationwide chain."

"That's okay. If something looks interesting, I'll let you know if it's any good and what type of food they serve. It won't take you long to get acclimated to Ashton Grove."

Giving her another quick kiss, he jogged up the stairs to the third floor. Gabriel was in Michael's room arguing with him. From the sound of things, Michael was being obstinate as usual.

"Is the patient giving you trouble," Cole asked Gabriel as he walked into the room.

His twin shot him a dark look. "I'm not giving him trouble. He's just being unreasonable!"

Gabriel threw his hands up in the air. "Fine, be pigheaded. If you don't rest, you'll end up back in the hospital. You're white as a ghost and if you keep moving around you're going to tear open your sutures."

Cole raised an eyebrow at his older brother. "White as a ghost? Cassie might have something to say about your phrasing."

Gabriel sighed. "You know what I mean."

Cole grinned. "How about a compromise? What if Michael lies still and watches TV or reads a magazine? Would that be restful enough?"

"I guess that would work. I still say he needs more sleep, but I guess he's old enough to know when he needs to sleep." Gabriel realized he sounded like a mother hen, but he was worried about his brother. If Michael tried to over-do it, he could set back his recovery by a week or more.

Michael was still glaring at Gabriel, but he seemed a little less aggravated. "I would hope that by the age of thirty I would know when I needed to sleep. I have no problem with lying in this bed for another day or two."

Gabriel started to open his mouth, but thought better of it and decided to keep quiet. The nurse had told Michael he needed to stay in bed for about a week to give the stitches time to heal. If the fool wanted to rush around before that and rip himself open again, then that was his business.

Cole was trying not to laugh as he watched the silent battle going on between his brothers. Clearing his throat, he said, "I actually came up to let you know that we're going to step out for a bit. I thought I'd take Marin to lunch and maybe do some shopping."

"More shopping," Gabriel asked.

Cole nodded. "Dave offered her an interview for a part-time job at Sabin on my floor. I thought she might need a few more things to wear to work."

Gabriel smiled. "That's good. Not that I would have minded her help across the street, but I think she would be better suited to a company and not a garage."

"She doesn't have the job yet, but I'm confident that she'll get the position. It's only part-time so she'll either work four days a week or work shorter hours all five days. Either way, she'll still have some free time to hang out with Cassie and make some new friends."

"Don't keep her waiting. Y'all go have fun. I'll stay here and argue with this stubborn mule some more," he said, indicating Michael.

Cole ducked out as the arguing began again. There were some things that would never change no matter how old they were. Gabriel, as both the eldest and the alpha, was always going to boss them around. Cole didn't usually mind it that much because he knew that his brother just looking out for him, but he could certainly understand why it upset Michael so much. Cole had always been the more laid back of the twins.

While Cole had paid his way through college and started a savings account, Michael had gone out drinking and carousing every week. There were times that Cole despaired of his brother ever growing up. He hoped the day would come when Michael would find whatever he was searching for. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that something inside of Michael was unsettled. The wolf was always a little closer to the surface for Michael than it was with Cole or Gabriel.

As he entered the living room, he found Marin flipping through the yellow pages. "Find anything that sounds good?"

She looked up, surprised. "I didn't even hear you come down the stairs."

Cole grinned at her. "One of the many benefits of being a werewolf."

Returning his smile, she said, "Well, I only recognize a few places, but I noticed that there was a Chili's in the mall. Would that be okay?"

"That sounds fine. Why don't you grab your purse and we'll get going."

Marin went to the kitchen to get her purse from the table. She quickly rejoined Cole in the front entry and they walked out to the truck hand in hand. Within minutes, they had reached the mall.

Chapter Nine

After lunch, Cole led Marin out into the mall. With Ashton Grove being a small town, you wouldn't expect much from the mall. Walking over to the mall directory, she browsed through the list of main department stores along with the listing for women's apparel and shoes. Marin was pleasantly surprised to see they had a Rich's, Macy's, and Sears, along with a handful of shops specializing in women's clothing.

Grabbing Cole's hand, she headed for Sears first. When he saw their destination, he quipped, "Looking for tools?"

Marin gave him a funny look. "No, clothes. That's why we're on the clothing floor."

Cole shook his head. "While I don't begrudge anyone who wishes to buy their clothing at Sears, I was hoping to spoil you a little today."

Marin tilted her head to the side. "Spoil me?"

"I had thought to get you a nice outfit from Macy's and maybe a few work outfits from some of the other stores in the mall."

"Oh! Well, that sounds lovely, but there really isn't anything wrong with getting my work clothes here."

"If this is where you want to shop, then by all means lead the way."

Marin flashed him a smile. She hauled him through the children's section and marched into the women's department like a woman with a mission. Quickly dismissing the casual section filled with jeans and workout clothes, she threaded her way to the petites section.

Dave might have said that she could wear khaki pants or jeans, but she wanted a few nice things to wear too. She grabbed a nice pair of black slacks and a leopard print skirt. Flipping through some sweaters, she

selected a royal blue one with a black contemporary print to go with the pants and a chocolate angora to go with the skirt.

Turning to face Cole, she asked, "Will these do?"

"You will be the best dressed woman there," he replied with a smile.

Little did he realize that wasn't quite the answer she was hoping for. If she dressed better than the other women, they might begin to resent her. That definitely wouldn't make for a friendly work environment. Maybe she *should* look at the khaki pants.

Putting the pants and sweater back, but not quite able to let go of the skirt outfit, she turned toward the rack of khaki slacks. Finding a soft pair in her size she went in search of a top to go with them.

Cole watched her curiously. "Did you not want to be the best dressed woman at work?"

"Not exactly, although I appreciate the compliment." At his odd look, she continued, "You see, if I dress better than the women who already work there, then they might wonder how or why I got the job. They might feel that I think I'm better than them, which is definitely a laugh."

"I can understand your reasoning, but I don't want to hear you put yourself down. You are every bit as good as the other people who work with me. For that matter, you're probably better than they are." Before Marin could protest, Cole placed a finger over her lips. "Not another word."

She sighed. "Okay. I won't talk badly about myself anymore."

Cole kissed her cheek and gave her a gentle nudge toward a rack of long-sleeve knit tops. She quickly selected a lavender shirt to go with the khaki slacks and headed into the dressing room. After she tried both of the outfits on, she went back to Cole and took his hand.

"Did they fit," he asked.

She smiled at him. "Perfectly. I don't remember the last time I enjoyed shopping so much."

"Good. Let's go check out."

As they neared the counter, the sales lady asked, "Can I interest you in a Sears card today?"

Marin started to say no, but Cole answered first. "Actually, I have a card. But you might be able to help me with something else. Is it possible to have my fiancé added to my account? Maybe even get her a card of her own?"

"Of course," the sales woman replied with a smile.

Marin began to protest, but Cole gave her a look that brooked no argument. She sighed, realizing that he was once again trying to take care of her. After caring for herself and her younger brother for so long, it was hard to let someone else take over.

Once Marin was set up as a user on Cole's Sears account, they walked off towards the escalator. Marin looked at him questioningly.

"I thought you might like to select some new sheets and stuff for the bed. You know, to make it more your own."

"I'd like that. I love what you have on the bed already, but it never hurts to have another set."

Cole led her down the escalator and into the bedding department. It didn't take her long to find a slate gray comforter with sprigs of tiny purple flowers embroidered on it. It even had a matching slate bed-skirt and purple sheets. Without even looking at the price, he carried it to the register and paid for their purchase.

After picking up the sacks, he asked, "Where to next sweetheart?"

"Well, I could use some shoes to go with my new skirt outfit. And maybe a pair of earrings?"

With a thoughtful look, he replied, "I'll tell you what. Why don't you head over to the shoe store? If

you don't mind, I think I'd like to pick the earrings out for you."

"I'd like that. Just don't go overboard!"

He just smiled at her and she knew without a doubt that he would pick out an expensive pair of earrings. "Meet me in the shoe store? I was thinking of going to Nine West."

"I'll see you over there in a few minutes."

As Marin walked to Nine West, Cole headed to Gordon's Jewelers. Not only was he going to buy her some earrings, he was also going to get her a necklace to go with them. After careful selection, he chose a pair of one carat diamond studs with a matching pendant.

When he reached Nine West, Marin was still trying on shoes. "Can't decide on which pair to get?"

She looked up, startled. "I'm going to have to put a bell on you! You keep sneaking up on me."

He laughed. "Sorry about that. I promise to make more noise next time."

"I just can't decide if I want the four inch heels or the two inch ones."

"Why don't you get the pair that would be most comfortable?"

She looked at him like he was crazy. "Women don't choose their shoes by comfort level."

"No?"

She shook her head. "No. We choose them by which pair makes our legs look sexier," she said with a grin.

"Then you can pick any pair in the store because your legs are sexy regardless of what shoes you wear."

After a few more minutes debating over the shoes, she selected a pair and walked up to the register. She still felt a little odd when Cole paid for her shoes. Even if they were going to get married, she still wished she had some money of her own. It was a good thing she

was getting a job. Hopefully it would give her a sense of independence again.



A few hours later, their arms were laden with purchases. They trudged out to the truck and stashed everything in the backseat. Exhausted, they both collapsed into the front seats. If someone had told Cole that shopping was more tiring than a trip to the gym, he would have laughed at them... that is, before his shopping trip with Marin.

When they arrived back home, Marin went to check on Michael while Cole unloaded the truck. She was anxious to see how he was doing. Arriving at the third floor, she gently pushed Michael's door open. Looking inside, she saw that he was sleeping peacefully. Quietly walking into the room, she turned off the TV and placed the remote on the bed beside him. In sleep he looked a lot like Cole. She brushed the hair back from his forehead and brushed a kiss against his cool skin.

"What are you doing," Cole asked from the doorway.

Startled, she whirled toward the sound of his voice. "I was just making sure he was settled." She walked over to him and ran her hands up his chest.

"Making sure he's settled? And does that include kissing him?"

Marin suppressed a grin as she realized that he was jealous. "It was only a sisterly kiss on the forehead. It's not like I kissed him on the lips."

Cole looked down and saw the mirth in her eyes. Damn her, she was playing with him! He wondered if she had known from the first that he was jealous. No matter how much he tried to control it, the feeling kept resurfacing. Every time he saw her look at another man, touch another man, or even smile at them, he felt eaten alive with jealousy. It wasn't that he didn't trust

her; he just wanted every man on earth to know she was his.

He sighed. "I can't help being jealous of you. I try not to, but it's like my inner wolf has a mind of its own."

"I understand Cole. You have nothing to worry about though. There isn't another man out there who could ever measure up to you."

Pulling her into his arms, he hugged her tight. He only hoped that once they were married, once they had mated, that he would be able to control himself better around her. If not, he would eventually drive her away with his jealousy. That was the last thing he wanted to do. Life without her would be meaningless.

"I love you, Marin. I hope that you will always remember that," he told her quietly.

She smiled up at him. "Of course I will. Will you always remember that I love you?"

"You know I will." He brushed her bangs back from face and leaned down to kiss her.

Across the room, Michael cleared his throat. "I hate to interrupt such a touching scene, but the two of you make it really hard for anyone to sleep around here."

Marin turned to smile at him. "Sorry Michael. I'm afraid it's my fault. When we got home, I came straight up to check on you. I should have left you alone when I realized you were sleeping."

Michael yawned. "It's okay. You're forgiven."

Cole walked to his brother's side. "We'll let you get some rest. Is there anything you need before we go downstairs?"

"Some sort of Gabriel repellent would be nice, but I don't think it's been invented yet."

Cole chuckled at his twin. "I know he's driving you crazy, but you know it's only because he's worried about you. He wouldn't be a good brother if he weren't."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. It would just be nice if he would stop seeing me as the family screw up," Michael grumbled.

Cole pondered his brother a minute. "I didn't realize it bothered you so much. In fact, there are times when you seem to enjoy pushing him to that conclusion."

Michael sighed. "I think I started doing that so he wouldn't suspect that it got to me. I wish that I could do something right, something that would make him proud. I even screwed up when I tried to protect Marin and ended up getting hospitalized."

"Hey! None of that nonsense! You were distracted. It could happen to any of us!"

"Maybe."

Marin, having watched the conversation in silence, walked over and sat on the edge of Michael's bed. She took his hand in hers and leaned down to kiss his cheek. "I don't think you're a screw up. You're brave, kind-hearted, think of others before yourself, and you obviously care about your family. I don't see a screw up in front of me. I see a very courageous, caring man. You like to live life a little on the edge, but I suspect that it's more of a smoke screen than anything else. For whatever reason, you don't want us to see the man you truly are."

Michael visibly swallowed. Marin had seen all of that? She'd only been here a few days! He glanced at Cole to see his twin's reaction and noticed that his brother was watching him intently. "I don't know what you're talking about," he mumbled.

Marin smiled. "Maybe not, but one day you're going to find the woman who can get past your rough exterior to find the prince hiding inside. And you know what?"

"What," he asked, not entirely sure he wanted to hear her answer.

"I hope I'm there to see her knock you on your ass!"

Michael's jaw dropped in shock. "I can't believe you just said that!"

Marin laughed. "Well, it's true. Some woman is going to come along and knock you flat. You'll never know what hit you, but it will end up being the best thing in the world for you."

Cole decided he'd better separate his future wife and his brother before she decided to impart any more wisdom to his rather stunned twin. "Come along sweetheart. I think you've spread enough sunshine in Michael's world for the day."

Marin took his hand and let him lead her from the room. She knew that she had shocked Michael, but she felt that he needed to know what he was truly worth. Even though Gabriel might say things as a jest, it was obvious that Michael took everything to heart. She really was looking forward to the day that a woman walked into his life. From the conversations she'd overheard since arriving at the Victorian home, she gathered that Michael was something of a ladies' man going from woman to woman without investing any emotions into a relationship. She wondered if it was something he'd fallen into or if it stemmed from something deeper, maybe an old hurt or rejection.

Cole could see the wheels turning in Marin's head. She obviously read his brother very well. On the one hand, he was glad she was fitting right into the family. On the other, he would prefer that she only know *him* that well. There went his jealous beast again! Maybe it was time to tell her about the house hunting.

"I was thinking about taking off a little early on Wednesday."

Marin looked at him quizzically. "So soon after going back to work?"

"I actually have something special planned for us. Of course, I probably should have talked to you before I set up the appointment, but I guess I wasn't thinking."

"What appointment?"

"I spoke to Matt. He has some property that he's selling, several properties actually. I've arranged for us to view a few of them."

Marin stopped in mid-step. "Property? As in a house?"

Cole nodded. "I just figured that with us getting married... well; obviously children will follow at some point. I just thought that the Victorian would get a little crowded."

Marin was speechless. "You want us to look at a house? To buy? To move into after we're married?"

Cole tugged on his ear. "I'm having a little trouble deciphering your questions and your tone. Does this mean that you're happy about it or offended in some way?"

Marin giggled and threw her arms around him. "I'm happy! Deliriously happy!"

Wrapping his arms around her, he hugged her tight. "Good. I want you to always be happy."

"How could I not be? I have the love of the best man in the world."

"I don't think I'd go that far, but I definitely love you."

Marin smiled and kissed him. "Let's go see if Gabriel needs any help with dinner."

Chapter Ten

The next morning, Cole and Marin woke up early to the annoying sound of the alarm clock. Knowing that it would take Marin longer to get ready, Cole let her have the bathroom first. When he heard the shower start, he rolled out of bed and walked over to the closet. After rummaging around for a bit, he selected a pair of khaki pants and a blue button down shirt.

As he opened the bathroom door, Marin turned off the shower and stepped out. If she was startled by his presence, it didn't show. She merely smiled at him as she grabbed her towel and started drying herself off. The only sign belying her nerves was the slight trembling of her hands. Cole wasn't sure if she was nervous over sharing a bathroom with him or about her interview. Considering their shower yesterday, he figured it was probably the interview making her nervous.

Walking over to the shower, he brushed a quick kiss across her cheek before turning the water back on. He quickly stripped off his pajama pants and climbed under the warm spray. Making quick work of his shower, he was back out and dried off before Marin had even finished her hair and make-up.

Glancing at him in the mirror she asked, "Am I moving too slow? I wasn't sure what time we needed to leave."

"No, you're fine. We don't have to leave for at least another thirty to forty-five minutes."

After putting the finishing touches on her make-up, she quickly brushed out her hair. It would be slightly wild later, but she decided to let it dry naturally. Having naturally wavy or curly hair was both a blessing and a curse at times.

Following Cole into the bedroom, she stepped into the closet to select her clothes for the day. She noted

the slacks and shirt that he had laid out for himself. Deciding to take her cue from him, she selected her new pants outfit and her ankle boots. Once they were both fully clothed, they walked down to the kitchen for a quick bite to eat.

When they entered the kitchen, the first thing Cole noticed was the note on the counter. He picked it up and skimmed over it. Gabriel had woken up early and was already at the garage, but would check on Michael throughout the day. Glancing toward the stove, he saw that Gabriel had indeed been busy, as there was a plate of freshly made cinnamon rolls.

Grabbing two plates from the cabinet by the sink, Cole placed two cinnamon rolls on each one. After he deposited the plates on the table, he poured a glass of orange juice for both of them. As he joined Marin at the table, he noted her far off expression.

"Anything wrong," he asked.

Startled from her wool-gathering, Marin responded, "No. I was just lost in thought I guess."

"I have to admit, I'm glad that you're going to work with me today... even though Stefan is out of the picture."

Marin smiled at him. "I had wondered if you would still want me hanging around you so much now that we know it's safe for me to be alone."

"Why wouldn't I want to be around you?"

Marin shrugged. "I don't know. Just foolish thoughts... I'm happy to be going with you today."

They finished eating in silence and drove to Sabin Bio-Med in Cole's truck. On the way there, Marin still looked deep in thought. Cole wondered what she could be thinking about, but obviously asking her didn't do any good. She'd been acting a little strange ever since he had mentioned house-hunting to her. Could she be anxious over buying a house? Or was it something more? Was she, perhaps, rethinking their engagement

now that she could go where ever she wanted and do whatever she wanted without fear hanging over her head?

Not realizing the distress she was causing Cole, Marin was lost in her own little world. This was the first morning of the rest of her life. It was the first time that she knew things would be okay. Cole was a good man and she loved him dearly. While she was a little nervous over her job interview, she was also excited that she would be spending the day with Cole. Okay, so maybe not necessarily *with* Cole, but at least she would get to see him throughout the day and have lunch with him.

Cole pulled into the parking garage at Sabin and heard Marin sigh. Okay, enough was enough. Obviously *something* was bothering her and they were *not* leaving the car until she told him what it was!

As he parked the truck, he turned to face her. "Out with it."

"Excuse me? Out with what?"

"You've been in a weird mood since last night. All morning long you've looked deep in thought, but when I asked about it you said it was nothing. Then on the way here you had the same look. Obviously something is bothering you."

Marin wasn't quite sure what to say. "Nothing is bothering me. Actually, I was thinking about how great my life has turned out. I have the love of a wonderful man who wants to marry me. What could possibly be wrong?"

Cole relaxed. "So you aren't thinking of calling off the wedding then?"

Marin was shocked. Was that what he had been thinking? "No! Of course not!"

"I'm sorry. I guess I was just a little worried that you might feel differently about staying here now that Stefan is gone."

"No, Cole. I want to stay here with you. My life is here now." She gently ran her fingers down his cheek. "Don't you know that my life would be empty without you?"

He leaned in and kissed her. "I love you."

"I love you, too."



The rest of the day flew by. Marin had, of course, aced her interview and had started work immediately... well, after the onslaught of what felt like hundreds of documents that were required by Human Resources. She had spent the first part of the morning familiarizing herself with the company, office locations, and so on. While she hadn't had a chance to meet many people, the Human Resources department had assigned a 'guide' to her for her first day. So far, the woman was borderline rude. Marin didn't realize that her guide, Amy, had been infatuated with Cole for some time. Had she known this, she might not have been quite so quick to judge her rude behavior.

As it neared the lunch hour, Marin decided to extract herself from Amy. "Thank you for all of your help this morning. If you don't mind, I think I'm going to see if Cole is ready for lunch yet. I don't know about you, but I'm starved!"

Amy eyed the petite woman standing next to her. "I'll walk up with you, just in case you get turned around."

As they rode the elevator up to Cole's, and now Marin's, floor, neither woman spoke to the other. It was as if they had an unspoken agreement to not like each other. Marin wouldn't have had a problem with Amy if the woman had just been a little nicer to her.

Cole was standing near Marin's desk talking to another co-worker when he heard the elevator doors open. He was happy to see Marin as she walked toward

him. Unfortunately, he noticed that Amy was with her. He stifled a groan and decided to just be as nice as possible to the woman. She had made a nuisance out of herself for the past year or two. Cole had told her time and again that he wasn't interested, but she wouldn't take no for an answer. In that respect, she reminded him of Kari. Both of them were relentless in their pursuit. Being a natural predator, the role of prey didn't sit well with Cole... and that's exactly how the women made him feel.

"Hi, Cole," Amy said, as the two women approached him.

"Hi, Amy. It's nice of you to show Marin around today."

Amy glanced at Marin and back at Cole. "Well, you know I like to help out where and when I can."

Cole had to refrain from rolling his eyes. Looking at Marin he asked, "Are you ready for lunch, sweetheart?"

She smiled at him. "Yes, just let me grab my purse."

Walking around Cole and Amy, Marin went to her desk and pulled her purse out of her desk drawer. Behind her, she could hear the two of them making small talk. She detected the strain in Cole's voice and realized that he really didn't want to talk Amy. It made her smile inwardly, glad that he didn't like the woman's presence anymore than she did.

Stepping back over to Cole's side, Marin looped her arm through his. "I'm ready if you are."

Looking at Amy he said, "I'll have her back in an hour."

"I don't think we really have any more training to do today. She can just work at her desk when she gets back." Turning on her heel, Amy stomped back over to the elevator.

Deciding to let Amy go down by herself, Cole waited a moment before walking to the elevator. The last thing he wanted was to be boxed in with the crazy woman.

Besides, he'd missed Marin this morning and was looking forward to some quality time with her... even if it was just for an hour.

As they climbed into Cole's truck, he paused and looked at Marin. "I didn't think to ask what you wanted to eat for lunch. Do you have a preference?"

"Not really. I don't know which restaurants are near-by and which ones we have time for. Why don't you pick?"

Thinking about it for a moment, he decided to take her out for Chinese food. There was a small family owned place around the corner from Sabin. The best part was that it wasn't usually busy during lunch; they did most of their business at night so it made it an ideal location for a quick bite to eat.

After being seated, they perused the menu, deciding on what to eat. Everything looked good and Marin had a hard time selecting something. Finally she decided on sweet and sour chicken with fried rice. She'd found that it was rather hard to screw up sweet and sour chicken. No matter which Chinese place she ordered from, it tasted the same. Cole ended up ordering the orange chicken with fried rice and a side of egg rolls for them to share. It didn't take long before their order was ready.

A half hour later, they were finished with lunch and heading back to Sabin. Marin sighed. She was full and happy at the moment. Her day was even brighter when she remembered that she was free of Amy for the day.

"Cole, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, ask me anything you want."

Marin pursed her lips, thinking of how to word her question. "Amy was rather rude to me for most of the morning. I was just wondering if there had been anything between the two of you."

Cole glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. It appeared that his sweet, docile Marin was jealous.

Maybe his little kitten had claws after all. He grinned and answered her question, "No, there has never been anything between me and Amy, although, she wanted there to be... I told her I wasn't interested."

Marin pondered that for a moment. It was ridiculous for her to feel jealous of the woman. After all, Cole had just confirmed that he had never dated her. However, the fact that the woman wanted Cole made her jealous and angry. Marin hadn't felt angry in a long time. For that matter, she hadn't felt much of anything since her parents died. Cole was the first person she'd truly felt love for since that time and this was the first time she could remember being well and truly angry.

Noting her silence, Cole asked, "Everything okay? You got quiet on me."

"I'm fine. Just thinking is all..."

"Hmm. Well, it's been my experience that a woman that deep in thought is usually thinking something dangerous. Care to share?"

"I don't like the fact that Amy likes you, but apparently there are a lot of women out there who want to be with you... not that I can blame them! It's just... you're mine, but that doesn't seem to stop them from wanting you."

Cole shook his head. "Now you know how I feel."

Marin looked at him perplexed, "How you feel?"

"Every time a man so much as looks at you, I want to rip his eyes out. Do you have any idea how many men take notice of you? All you have to do is walk into a room and half the men stop to look your way."

Marin blushed. "Now you're just being ridiculous."

"No, I'm not. I've tried really hard not to be jealous, but it's been an up-hill battle... and quite frankly, it's one I feel like I'm losing."

Before Marin could respond, they were pulling back into the Sabin parking garage. Apparently their

conversation would have to be put on hold until after work. Marin wondered if Cole was only jealous over her or if this was something that had always been a problem for him. While it was flattering that he would find her so beautiful that he thought all men wanted to be with her, it could also be a problem if it got out of hand.

The two of them walked back into the building in silence. As they entered the elevator, Cole reached over and took her hand. Marin smiled and leaned into him a little. The elevator doors slid shut and Cole leaned down to brush a quick kiss across her lips.

"I'm sorry that I get jealous so easily. Honestly, I've never had this happen before. You're the first woman I've ever felt jealous over... and I know that I don't have a reason to feel that way."

She reached up and placed her hand on his cheek. "It's okay. Maybe you won't feel that way after we're married."

"I'm hoping that will be the case. One way or another, I'm going to get a grip on this. I refuse to let my feelings run my life... especially unfounded feelings."

The elevator doors slid open and they both stepped out. They had barely taken a step when Cole noticed their boss, Dave, motioning for them to come to his office. According to Cole's watch, they had been gone exactly one hour so he knew they hadn't been out too long.

"It looks like Dave wants to speak to us. Better not keep him waiting," Cole placed his hand at the small of Marin's back and guided her toward Dave's office.

When they entered Dave's office, he closed the door behind them. Sighing deeply, he motioned for Cole and Marin to have a seat.

Perplexed, Cole asked, "Is something wrong, Dave?"

"I'm not sure how to tell you this... the police called while you were out to lunch."

Beside him, Cole felt Marin tense. Considering that Dave looked rather stressed and upset, Cole figured the man had received bad news. He reached over and took Marin's hand, hoping to give her strength for whatever news they were about to receive.

"This morning there was a fight at the jail. At the time, the guards didn't think much of it, but apparently it was a smoke screen. While the guards and warden were trying to break up the fight, Stefan managed to escape."

Cole softly cursed under his breath. Pulling Marin closer to him, he wrapped his arms around her. "What did they say? How long has he been out?"

Dave shrugged. "The fight happened around nine o'clock this morning. They didn't realize that Stefan was missing until almost eleven. According to the police chief, they have the entire force out looking for him."

Glancing out his office windows, Dave noticed they were drawing the attention of everyone on their floor. He quickly got up and drew the blinds closed. "I've already contacted the front desk and told them that no one is to go beyond the lobby without proper identification. Even couriers are being stopped at the desk."

Cole nodded. "Thanks, that's good to hear. At least we won't have to worry about him entering our building."

Marin looked at Cole. "What about your brothers? He might go after them."

Dave quickly reassured her, "The police called the house and garage first. One of your brothers gave them your work number. When you didn't answer the phone, the police called back and asked to speak to your boss... me."

"I assume they are going to post someone outside of this building, the house, and my brothers' garage?"

"I'm honestly not sure. They did mention sending someone to watch the house, but they didn't really give me a lot of details. I guess they figured they would just give me enough to warn you and Marin not to leave the building unaware that Stefan could be lurking nearby."

All three of them jumped when someone knocked on the door. Dave answered it, surprised to find Cole's older brother on the other side.

Gabriel stepped into the room with a wolf in tow. If at all possible, the wolf was even larger than Gabriel was when he turned furry. It was solid white and had piercing blue eyes.

Closing the door behind him, Gabriel looked down at the wolf before addressing the people in the room. He wasn't sure how he was going to explain this one, especially with Cole's boss standing with them. It was hard enough to explain to his brothers!

"A cousin of ours, Colin, decided to help out in our time of need. He's loaning us his, uh, dog for extra protection. Apparently word spread to our family in California that we were in need of reinforcements, so to speak, and they sent Colin out to check on us." The moment the words left his mouth Gabriel knew they sounded lame.

Cole looked at him with a raised eyebrow and a ton of questions. To his knowledge, they didn't have any cousins, or any other family for that matter... much less the kind that turned furry. He wished his brother could speak plainly so he'd know exactly what was going on.

"Well, that's awfully nice of *cousin* Colin," Cole said, with a pointed look at the wolf.

Marin wasn't sure what was going on, but she could feel the tension in Cole. It was obvious to her that the wolf *was* their cousin. Why did that seem to bother Cole though?

Dave could feel the tension in the room and decided it was an excellent time for a coffee break. This

was, after all, family business. "Why don't I let y'all have a few moments to yourselves and I'll just run and get some coffee?"

"You don't have to do that Dave! We can always go to my office," Cole responded.

Dave waved him off, "No, really. Have a seat and take as much time as you need. I need a break anyway."

As Dave left the office and closed the door, Cole and Gabriel both looked at Colin. They couldn't take a chance on Dave coming back in and finding a naked man in his office, so Colin would have to remain in wolf form for now.

"So... where did you say *cousin* Colin was from again?"

Gabriel sighed. "Apparently Mom had a sister she never mentioned. Our Aunt Martha was the black sheep of the family and moved to California when she was sixteen. The family wrote her off and never spoke of her again." Glancing at Colin, he continued, "Colin is her son. He also has a twin, Connor."

That startled Cole for a moment. "Is his brother here too?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No, Connor was still at home, in Los Angeles, when Colin started heading our way."

Cole was still confused. "How did he know we were in trouble? Not even the Atlanta pack knows what we've been through lately."

This was the part that made Gabriel really uncomfortable. "Um, well ... Colin and Connor have other special cousins on their dad's side. It seems that one of these cousins is psychic to some extent. She dreamt of our problems here and notified Colin and Connor, who immediately confronted their parents about having cousins they knew nothing about."

"So it wasn't one sided then... their mom didn't tell them just like ours didn't tell us."

"Right."

During the conversation, Colin had moved closer to Marin. He could tell she was Cole's mate just from her scent, which meant she was the one in the most danger. Wanting to make sure Cole understood he wasn't making a move on Marin, he looked at his cousin before rolling over in submission. After all, he *was* in their territory.

Cole nodded and Colin proceeded toward Marin until he was touching her side. While he had never met her or his cousins prior to this, family was still family. He would protect her with his last breath if it came down to that. He was still furious with his parents for keeping his mother's family a secret.

Before they could discuss anything else, Dave returned to the office. "Hey guys, I hope I'm not interrupting."

"No, you're fine," Cole assured him.

"I decided to stop by the security office to get clearance for the dog," Dave said, as he showed them a clearance badge on a lanyard so it would fit over the Colin's furry head.

Colin didn't look too thrilled with the idea of having something around his neck, but he let Marin slip the badge over his head. If it allowed him to stay by her side, it was worth it. A "guard dog" wasn't much good if he wasn't allowed in the building.

Gabriel said his goodbyes so he could go back home to check on Michael. Until his little brother healed from his last encounter with Stefan, he was a sitting duck.

After Gabriel left, Cole and Marin stood. "We'd better get back to work."

"You know, if you wanted to cut out early, I'd understand," Dave responded.

Cole shook his head. "This is probably the safest place for us right now."

"Okay, well, if you change your mind the offer still stands."

Cole and Marin left Dave's office with Colin trailing behind them in his wolf form. Walking Marin to her desk, Cole kissed her cheek and gave her hand a final squeeze. "Everything will be fine."

Marin gave him a wan smile. "I know. Between you, your brothers, and your cousin keeping an eye on me no one will be able to touch me. That doesn't stop me from worrying about all of y'all though."

Cole smiled at her before focusing his attention on Colin. "Take care of her. She means the world to me."

Colin lifted his head in acknowledgement and scooted closer to Marin. He would be her constant shadow today, and every day until Stefan was back behind bars, or dead. Not having a mate himself, he envied Cole. From what he had gathered, Cole was the only one of the three brothers who had found his mate. It made him feel a little better that he and Connor hadn't found theirs yet.

Marin sat at her desk and started going through the files she had inherited. She figured there was no time like the present to familiarize herself with her desk and its contents, at least until she was needed. She felt Colin bump against her leg and smiled. It was nice to have a protector so close by; she just wished that her protector was Cole. Then again, the work place might frown on one of their biologists running around on four legs.

Colin followed Marin around the office for the remainder of the day. Being in wolf form wasn't so bad. It allowed him to get an accurate impression of Cole's coworkers. People tended to act natural around animals instead of putting on a front like they did around other people.

Before they knew it, it was four o'clock and time for Marin to leave. Since she had ridden in with Cole, she had to wait for him to get off work. Walking over to his office, Marin knocked lightly on the glass door. Cole motioned for them to enter.

"Time for you to get off work already?"

Marin nodded. "I know you still have to work for another hour. Maybe I could wait in the break room with Colin?"

"That sounds fine. I should be finished before too long."

Marin smiled and closed the door. Heading back to her desk, she grabbed her purse and turned off her computer. Scratching Colin behind the ear, she walked to the break room. It was the first time she'd been in the break room and she was pleasantly surprised. The room was rather large. One side had clusters of tables and chairs with a refrigerator and microwave against the wall; the other side had two small couches with a flat panel TV mounted on the wall.

Marin walked over to the couches and picked up the remote. Sitting down, she began flipping through channels, finally stopping on an old *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* rerun. She hadn't seen the show in ages; it was nice to kick back and relax for a change. Colin curled up next to her, his head resting on his paws.

The hour passed quickly. As the show was ending, Cole stepped into the break room. Spotting Marin and Colin near the TV, he walked over to them. "You two ready to go home?"

Startled, Marin glanced up at Cole. "I didn't hear you come in. Is it time to go already?"

Cole nodded. Looking at Colin he said, "I'm afraid you'll have to ride in the backseat as you are; no changing until we're home."

Colin sighed and hopped down off the couch. He didn't mind being a wolf, but he was ready to be human

again. Thankfully it was a short ride back to the Victorian.



At the house, Michael was in his room resting. Since the police were watching the house and the garage, he'd convinced Gabriel to work a little while longer. It was nice having his big brother watch out for him, but Gabriel's hovering was a bit much to take. Michael knew that Gabriel meant well, but he was starting to go crazy from the constant mothering.

Downstairs the door opened and the alarm went off. Michael tensed, unsure if someone was breaking in or if one of his brothers was home. The alarm was disabled and he heard two sets of footsteps on the stairs, followed by the clicking sound of nails. It could only mean that Cole was home with Marin and Colin in tow.

Michael relaxed and settled back against the pillows. Hopefully his twin would leave him in peace. Being in a full house wasn't easy. It hasn't felt quite as crowded when it had just been the three brothers in residence. Now they had added Marin and Colin to the mix. Michael was glad their small family was expanding, and they certainly had enough room for everyone, but it was hard to have a moment to yourself when five adults resided in the same house.

Michael closed his eyes and thought back to the past week, before Marin had joined them. He'd had a few dates with a pretty red head named Chloe. He'd actually been in bed with her when his brothers were rescuing Marin. Chloe had been amazing! Even smaller than Marin, Chloe had barely reached his chest in height. She wasn't as skinny as Marin though. Chloe had lush curves that were soft to snuggle up to. Holding her and making love to her had been a new experience, which was the reason Michael had decided not to see

her again. When sex wasn't just sex, it was time to run for the door.

There was a soft knock at the door and Marin peeked in at him. "Are you feeling okay? Do you need anything?"

Michael smiled. "I'm fine. Gabriel made sure I had everything I needed before he went back to work."

"Okay. I just wanted to check on you before I went downstairs."

After Marin left, closing the door behind her, Michael sighed. Being stuck in the bed truly sucked! For one thing, his family was going to coddle him to death; for another, he wanted to out of the house and enjoy a night out on the town. The sooner he hooked up with another woman, the sooner he could put Chloe out of his mind.

Ashton Grove might not be large, but it did have a few small clubs. There was one in particular Michael had always enjoyed going to, The Moonlight Escape. It was on the edge of town and usually had the hottest women.

Once again, Michael found his thoughts drifting to Chloe. Closing his eyes, he decided that sleep was the best thing for him. At the very least, it would allow him to escape into the dream world for a while.



Downstairs, Marin was watching TV in the living room while Cole and Colin talked in the kitchen. Gabriel would be home shortly and they would be able to come up with a plan. They had already learned the hard way that cops were not a deterrent for Stefan.

"If we set the alarm and patrol the house, we should be safe for the night," Colin said.

Cole looked doubtful. While it had kept Stefan away previously, the man had been in the house now.

He would be familiar not only with the layout, but also with the strengths and weaknesses of the Victorian.

"I would take Marin away for a few days, but Stefan would probably just follow us." Cole ran his hands through his hair in frustration. All he wanted to do was protect Marin. Was that really asking too much?

"You're right, he probably would." Colin got a gleam in his eye. "But what if we in turn followed Stefan?"

"You mean, use Marin as bait to draw him out?"

Colin could tell Cole wasn't happy with his idea. "It could work. Gabriel and I could track him and attack when he least expected it."

Cole shook his head. "And what if you lost him? I'm not willing to take that risk. This is her life we're talking about!"

"I realize that, but we have to do *something*. We can't just sit here, waiting for him to pick us off one at a time."

Cole knew his cousin was right, but there had to be a plan that wouldn't put Marin in additional danger... they just hadn't thought of it yet.

Across the table, Colin became very still and had a far off look in his eye. It only lasted a moment; then he was focusing on Cole again.

"What just happened? Where did you go," Cole asked.

"Connor is on his way."

Cole was curious over the matter-of-fact way his cousin made the statement. "How do you know that?"

"Connor and I share a psychic bond. I know he's on his way because I can sense him."

"Can you communicate with him from this distance?"

Colin grinned. "Only by phone. Mostly we just sense when one of us is upset, happy, or nearby if we're separated. Don't you and Michael have that?"

Cole shook his head. "Not that strong; we sense things, but it's never that strong."

Colin had thought the bond he shared with Connor was common amongst twins, but apparently that wasn't the case. Maybe they'd inherited from their father's family, which was blessed with psychic abilities.

Just then Gabriel stepped into the kitchen. "What are you two up to?"

Cole gave his brother an innocent look, "When have you ever known me to be up to something?"

Gabriel had to give him that one. Michael had always been the trouble maker. Cole had always been laid back and a little on the reserved side. Even his childhood pranks had been mild compared to his twin's.

"Fair enough. So, what are you discussing?"

"We were actually waiting on you so we can come up with a plan for tonight. The alarm didn't stop Stefan the other day, so I don't want to rely solely on that," Cole replied.

Gabriel nodded. That had also been on his mind today. "I'm also concerned, not only that the alarm isn't enough, but I'm afraid the police won't be much of a deterrent either."

Colin had a thought. "What if Cole and Marin act like nothing is out of the ordinary and go through their usual evening routine? Same goes for Michael since he's laid up for right now." Colin paused to make sure he had their attention. "Meanwhile, you and I can shift and patrol the house. Everyone already knows that you've been loaned a 'dog' for the time being."

"That could work. One of us could take the downstairs while the other takes the third floor where everyone else will be sleeping," Gabriel responded.

Before Colin could say anything else, the doorbell rang. Gabriel and Cole shot each other questioning looks, but Colin knew exactly who was at the door.

"That would be Connor," he told them.

Colin got up and walked to the front door. Turning the knob, he opened the door to see his twin standing on the other side. While they had similar facial features and build, the resemblance stopped there. Connor looked like trouble waiting to happen; he had straight brown hair that brushed the top of his shoulders and dark green eyes. Dressed in ripped jeans, a white tee, black boots, and a black leather jacket, he looked every inch the bad boy that mommas always warned their daughters about.

"Hey man, thought you'd never get here," Colin said as he opened the door wider and motioned for his brother to enter.

Connor stepped inside and looked around while his brother closed and locked the door. The house was larger than he had thought it would be. It was a good thing he had followed his brother to Georgia.

"Come into the kitchen. We were just making arrangements for tonight," Colin told him.

Connor followed Colin into the kitchen. He grabbed the first empty seat he came to and sat down.

Colin quickly made introductions. "You'll meet Michael a little later; he's the one that was injured. You passed Marin in the living room on your way in."

Connor assessed his brother and cousins. "I don't know what Colin has told you about our family, but one of our psychic cousins said you would need my help to defeat Stefan."

When no one responded, Connor continued, "A few hours after Colin left, this same cousin came to me. She told me that my destiny was here, that I would play an important role in the events that are about to transpire."

"It's good to have you with us. Having an extra pair of hands, or paws, is certainly welcome," Cole said. He was grateful for his new found cousins, especially if they could help him protect Marin.

"Well, now that we have an extra body, one of us can watch the second floor as well," Gabriel said.

Cole looked up to find Marin standing in the doorway. He got up and walked over to her. "Is everything okay, sweetheart?"

Marin nodded. "I'm fine. I just thought I'd start making dinner. It's already after six o'clock and I'm sure you're all hungry."

"You don't have to do that. Why don't you go upstairs and soak in the tub for a bit?"

"Actually," Gabriel said, "why don't you go up with her? I think the three of us can handle everything down here. I can handle dinner and y'all can get our guests settled in for the night."

"Don't go to any trouble on our account! Just point us in the right direction and we'll fend for ourselves," Colin said, with his brother nodding in agreement.

"The second floor has three empty bedrooms. All of them should have clean sheets on the beds and clean towels in the bathrooms," Gabriel told them.

Connors eyebrows both went up. "How many bedrooms do you have in this place?"

"Six. The third floor was originally the attic, but it was converted several years ago. Now we have three bedrooms on both the second and third floors, each with a private bath," Gabriel answered.

Connor whistled. "That's impressive. This place looked huge from the outside, but I didn't realize just how big it was."

Connor and Colin both stood up. "We'll go and get our things put away. After that, we'll give you a hand in the kitchen. Mom made sure we learned early how to fend for ourselves; I think she was afraid none of us would ever marry and would starve to death."

Gabriel chuckled. While his cousins left to get their belongings, he turned and walked over to the pantry to make plans for dinner. Cole and Marin walked upstairs.

"Why don't you start the water for your bath while I check on Michael," Cole said.

"Okay." Marin gave him a quick hug before stepping into their bedroom.

Cole cautiously opened Michael's door. Peering inside, he saw that his brother was asleep. Not wanting to disturb him, Cole quickly closed the door.

When Cole entered his room, he heard the water running in the bathroom. Since Marin was still getting acclimated, he decided to see if she needed anything.

Opening the bathroom door, he found her undressed and pulling a clean towel out from under the sink. His breath caught in his throat. It still amazed him that the magnificent woman in front of him was his mate.

Clearing his throat, he asked, "Do you need anything?"

Startled, Marin spun to face him. "You scared me! If you keep sneaking up on me, I'll have to put a bell around your neck."

Cole laughed. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"I think I found everything." Giving him a coy look, she asked, "Care to join me?"

Smiling, Cole shook his head. "That's probably not the best idea with four other werewolves in the house; keen sense of hearing, remember?"

Marin sighed. "When did you say that appointment was to look at the house?"

"It was set for Wednesday, but with this being your first week at Sabin I asked Matt to move it to the weekend."

"If this mess with Stefan is cleared up before then, do you think we could go after work one night?"

Cole nodded. "I'm sure that can be arranged; or you could always go look at some with Cassie on Friday when you're off work."

“Okay. I’ll try to be patient,” Marin said, a resigned look on her face.

Cole brushed a kiss across her forehead before leaving the bathroom. If he had stayed a moment longer, he may not have been able to resist her. Cole decided to stretch out on the bed and read a book while he waited on Marin. He would go downstairs to help Gabriel with dinner, but he didn’t want to leave Marin. Besides, the cousins had offered to help; surely it didn’t take *four* men to make dinner.

Chapter Eleven

The next morning Cole and Marin woke to the sound of the alarm clock beeping. The night had passed without incident and it was time to begin a new day. Cole briefly tightened his arms around Marin before releasing her and rolling out of bed.

Marin wasn't ready to leave the comfort of the bed, but she knew it was time to ready for work. Tossing back the covers, she slowly stretched and got out of bed.

Following Cole into the bathroom, she started to get ready. While Cole turned on the shower, Marin brushed her teeth and her hair. Allowing him to shower first, she went back into the bedroom to select her clothes. Deciding to wear her other new outfit, Marin laid everything out on the bed before returning to the bathroom.

Cole was stepping out of the shower as Marin opened the bathroom door. As she watched the water drip down his torso, she stepped closer. Before Cole could dry off, Marin leaned in close; her tongue darted out to catch a drop of water as it slid over his nipple.

Cole groaned and grabbed a handful of Marin's hair, not sure if wanted to pull her closer or push her away. "If you don't stop that, we won't make it to work until noon."

Marin grinned, pleased with his reaction. Placing a kiss on his chest, she said, "If it weren't my first week at Sabin, I think I'd take you up on that offer."

Cole shook his head at her. "You're going to be the death of me."

Marin immediately sobered, "Let's hope not."

"Aw, honey, you know I didn't it that way. We'll find Stefan. I promise! Between the pack and the cops, there is no way that man is escaping this city."

Marin looked at him with troubled eyes. "As long as he doesn't find us first; otherwise, things could get ugly. Look at what he did to Michael!"

Cole wrapped the towel around his waist and pulled Marin into his arms. "Why don't we just take things one day at a time? Right now, we'll finish getting ready for work and head downstairs to see what the plan is for today. As for Michael, you heard what he said... he was distracted. If he had been focused when Stefan attacked, then I'm sure it would have ended differently."

Marin nodded. "I need to take a shower before I can get dressed. I'll meet you downstairs."

Cole gave her an incredulous look. "You don't honestly think I'm going to leave you up here alone do you? I said we'd take care of Stefan, but that doesn't mean I'm leaving you alone between now and then."

Marin looked exasperated. "Michael is right next door. Don't you think that between the five werewolves running around here with super hearing that someone would hear Stefan enter the house? I think I'm fairly safe taking a shower without a babysitter."

Cole had to hide his grin. One of these days he'd have to tell her how much it turned him on when she acted tough. "Humor me, please? I'll feel better waiting for you up here."

"Fine. I'll be as quick as I can."

Turning from him, Marin stripped off her nightgown and panties and stepped into the shower. Since Cole had left the water running, it had cooled down a bit. Marin didn't mind; maybe it would soothe her anger. It wasn't like her to lose her temper, but she was tired of being scared and tired of being protected all the time.

Quickly washing and rinsing, Marin turned off the water. When she stepped out of the shower, she noticed Cole had left. Drying off, she wrapped the

towel around her body before detangling her hair. Once that task was finished, she opened the bathroom door and stepped into the chilly bedroom. It didn't surprise her to see Cole sitting in the chair in the corner of the room. Having already laid out her clothes, it didn't take her long to get dressed.

"Give me just another minute to dry my hair and put on some make-up, then I'll be ready to go downstairs," she told him.

"Take your time. We don't have to be at work for almost another hour."

Without responding, Marin turned and walked back into the bathroom. Closing the door behind her, Marin leaned against it and sighed. She honestly wasn't mad at Cole for wanting to protect her, if anything it made her love him even more. Truth be told, she was mad at Stefan for screwing up her new life. Why couldn't the bastard have just stayed in jail where he belonged?"

Pushing away from the door, Marin walked over to the sink. She picked up her brush and hair dryer and began the tedious task of drying and styling her hair. Once that was finished, she applied a light layout of make-up to her face. Looking at her reflection, Marin was pleased with what she saw. Somehow she'd replaced the scared woman of a few days ago, with a more confident one.

Honestly, she was still scared to death, but she hoped she was hiding it well. Cole worried about her enough as it was. Not to mention that she could do without the pitying looks at work. Maybe if she acted like things were normal, they might actually feel that way.

Marin opened the bathroom door and stepped back into the bedroom. Cole had been watching for her and he stood as she walked over to him.

"I'm sorry I'm so crabby this morning. I guess I'm just a little on edge," she told him.

Cole smiled at her. "Its okay honey, we're all on edge. The only difference is that you don't turn furry when your fangs show."

Marin laughed. "You have a point." She looked at him from under her eyelashes. "Speaking of furry, I haven't seen my favorite wolf lately."

"Is that a subtle hint for me to shift later?"

"Maybe. I don't want you to do anything you don't want to, but I do kind of miss your furry self."

Cole brushed his fingers across her cheek. "I think the wolf can manage to make an appearance tonight. Right now though, I think we'd better go downstairs and check on the others."

Cole didn't tell her, but it pleased him to no end that Marin loved Cole the wolf and Cole the man equally.



Downstairs, Gabriel, Colin, and Connor were gathered around the kitchen table. Cole joined them while Marin crossed the kitchen to the refrigerator. Glancing at the clock, she saw that there was enough time for a simple breakfast.

Marin pulled out two dozen eggs, a package of bacon, and two cans of biscuits from the refrigerator. Pulling out the baking sheets, bacon press, and skillet that she would need, Marin began preparing breakfast. She put the biscuits in the oven first, placed the bacon in the microwave, and began scrambling the eggs. As she was cooking, she caught snippets of conversation going on at the table. From what she gathered, Colin would be trailing her in wolf form today. Connor would keep watch outside of Sabin while Marin and Cole were at work. Gabriel was going to open the garage and would rely on the police to keep an eye on the house, and therefore keep an eye on Michael.

Marin finished cooking and set everything on the table in bowls. Rummaging through the cabinets, she found a pitcher and filled it with orange juice. Once the table was completely set, she joined the guys for breakfast.

"You didn't have to fix us breakfast," Colin told her.

Marin smiled. "I know, but I wanted to. Since we all need to eat, it just made sense to eat here instead of on the run."

As they ate, Marin asked Colin and Connor about their plans. "Are you only staying until Stefan is caught? Or do you plan on staying in Ashton Grove longer?"

Colin and Connor glanced at each other. "Well, we were thinking of settling into the area."

Truth be told, their psychic cousin had pretty much told them that their futures were in Ashton Grove. When they had left home, they both knew it was for the last time. Once they were settled, they'd have to send for the rest of their belongings, but for now they had enough to get by.

"We would enjoy having more family around," Cole told them. He had missed having a big family. Granted, between his brothers and his parents he hadn't exactly been alone, but he envied people that had large families with lots of aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Gabriel would also be happy to have them join their pack, but it wasn't as simple as just picking up and moving. "You're more than welcome to stay with us during your transition. If you'll tell me who your alpha is, I'll give him a call and get clearance for you to remain in Ashton Grove as part of our pack."

Colin suddenly found something very interesting on the table and dropped his gaze. He knew this moment would come, but he had hoped it would be later, after Stefan had been dealt with. Things could possibly get ugly in a few moments.

Connor looked Gabriel straight in the eye. "I'm the alpha at home."

Gabriel was a little surprised. It was typically unheard of for an alpha to leave their pack. Even stranger was that Connor hadn't mentioned his alpha status when he had arrived. Protocol said they should contact the alpha of the area they will be visiting prior to arriving.

"How do you propose that we handle having two alphas and therefore two packs in the same town? Especially a small town like Ashton Grove?"

Connor shrugged. "I hadn't really thought about it. I was told that I was needed, so here I am. Honestly, I'm not the territorial type so I don't think we'll have a problem. If we need to join our pack with yours, that's fine with me."

Connor had never been the type of alpha to lord his status over the others in the pack. He made sure they toed the line and followed the rules, but other than that he let them lead their own lives.

Gabriel mulled the information over. If he remembered correctly, Matt had recently bought a small town just outside of Ashton Grove. He mentally shook his head over the fact that their family friend could literally purchase an entire town. It was mind boggling. Most of the town had emptied out when the jobs started to fall through. Quite possibly, he and Matt could come up with a scheme to get the town back on its feet and it would allow Connor and Colin to have their own territory in order to remain a separate pack. At the same time, they would still be close enough for family visits.

"I may have a solution, but we can discuss it later. Right now, it's best if we just concentrate on catching Stefan. I think things will begin to fall in place after that," Gabriel responded.

Cole and Marin finished eating and carried their plates to the sink. They rinsed their dishes and put them in the dishwasher.

"It's time for us to go to work," Cole informed his brother and cousins.

Colin quickly finished shoveling food into his mouth and took his plate to the sink. "Give me a sec and I'll be ready," he said, as he darted out of the room and up the stairs.

As Colin was shifting into his wolf form, Marin and Cole gathered their things. Cole opened the front door and turned to Marin, "Why don't you wait here a minute? It's a little cool outside today and I'd like to warm up the truck before we leave."

Marin smiled at his thoughtfulness. "I guess it's about time for me to get a winter coat."

"Hmm. It looks like we'll be doing some more shopping this weekend."

"I'd much rather we do a different type of shopping," she replied, thinking of their discussion to begin house hunting. Marin was anxious for them to have a place of their own.

Cole grinned, happy that she wanted to move out of the Victorian. While he had called it home his entire life, it was time to move on and start his own family. "I'm sure we can squeeze in a few houses as well as the mall." He kissed her quickly. "Wait here while I start the truck."

The front door had barely closed behind Cole when Marin felt Colin brush up against her leg. She looked down at the wolf and smiled. Considering that she wasn't really part of the family yet, Colin was being a good sport. She knew he preferred being in human form, whereas Cole seemed content in both of his skins.



It wasn't long before the trio arrived at Sabin. Connor had declined a ride, preferring to make his way to the building on foot. He had hoped that he would cross Stefan's scent on the way there and be able to track the man before a surprise attack could be launched against the family, or worse, Marin. Unfortunately, he didn't pick up on the scent until he had almost reached the building.

Shifting into his wolf form, Connor prowled around the building. He was about to give up when he located Stefan's scent, it was leading him into the parking garage. Slipping past the attendance unnoticed, Connor continued to follow the trail. He growled in frustration when the trail ended at the door on the second level.

How had Stefan managed to get inside? The door required a personnel key card for entry into the building. Had he somehow convinced, or forced, someone to let him in the building?

Dashing back outside, Connor quickly located his clothes. After he had shifted and gotten dressed, he walked into the lobby at Sabin and headed straight for the security desk.

"Excuse me. I'm here to see my cousin, Cole Andrews. Could you please let him know I'm downstairs?"

"Sure," the guard responded. "And your name?"

"Connor."

The guard placed the call. When he hung up, he informed Connor that his cousin would meet him outside of the elevator upstairs.

Connor nodded and walked over to the elevators. Entering the first one he came to, he pressed the number for Cole's floor. When the elevator doors slid open, his cousin was pacing nervously in front of the elevator.

"Since you had planned on tracking Stefan outside, I'm guessing your presence in the building isn't a good thing," Cole told him.

Connor shook his head. "No, I'm afraid it isn't. I tracked him to the parking garage. The trail died outside of the door on the second floor."

Cole froze. "He's in the building?"

"It seems so. I have no idea how he managed it as the door didn't look like it had been forced open." Connor watched his cousin's worried face. "Is Colin still with Marin?"

"Yeah," Cole responded, shaken and worried.

"Good. He can protect her while we track Stefan down. This building isn't all that large. Between the two of us and the security guards, we should be able to find him in no time. I don't think it will be hard to find his trail from the inside of that door."

"We should go notify my boss and the security office. Maybe Dave can help keep an eye on Marin."

"Let's go to your office to start making the calls. Gabriel should be notified as well."

Cole led Connor to his office. Along the way, he motioned for Marin and Colin to join them. It would be best if they told her immediately so she could keep her eyes open for Stefan and be prepared for a possible attack. If they were lucky, all of this would be over within the next hour or two.

After the last person had entered the office, Cole closed the door. "Now that we're all here, I'm going to let Connor tell you what he discovered."

Connor didn't want to scare Marin, but he knew that she would be better off knowing that danger was in the building. "I located Stefan's scent outside and followed it into the parking garage. I had hoped to corner him down there, but the trail ran out at the door on the second floor of the parking garage."

Marin's eyes widened slightly and she absently stroked Colin's fur. Cole had to clench his hands into fists to keep from reaching out to her; not only to give comfort, but to stop her from petting his cousin.

"So, he's in the building," Marin asked.

Connor nodded. "Yes."

Marin looked at Cole, frightened and yet comforted by his presence. She knew that he wouldn't let any harm come to her.

"Connor had an idea. We're going to call the security office and set up a manhunt in the building, with all exits blocked. Connor and I are going to go back to that door on the second floor and see if we can track Stefan. Between the two of us and the security personnel, we should be able to find him rather quickly," Cole said.

"Shouldn't you call Gabriel? Maybe he could come help too," Marin replied.

"That's also on the agenda. You and Colin can either stay here, in the lounge, or continue about your day. He'll keep an eye on you and protect you if necessary." Cole paused to look at his furry cousin, making sure his words sunk in. Colin was to protect Marin with his life if need be.

"I wouldn't mind the lounge, but it's a little isolated. Do you think we'll be okay in there?"

Cole rubbed his chin. "I hadn't thought about it being isolated, but I'll let Dave know what's going on. He can check on you periodically until Stefan is found."

Marin nodded and reached for the door. "I think I'll go ahead and walk over there now. The sooner I'm out of the way, the sooner you can find Stefan."

Cole stepped closer to her and kissed her briefly, aware of their co-workers watching curiously outside of his office. "Be safe and I'll come and get you shortly."

Marin and Colin left and walked over to the lounge. Cole picked up the phone and started making all of the

calls while Connor located Dave to fill him in. He wanted to find Stefan's trail as soon as possible, the longer all of this took the colder the trail would be.

Finally finished assembling the cavalry, Cole went in search of Connor. He found him near the lounge talking to Dave.

"I'll be sure to keep an eye on her. I'm sure the dog can protect her well enough, but I want her to know that someone is watching out for her," Dave told Connor.

As Cole stepped up to them, he said, "Thanks Dave. I really appreciate your help and I know Marin does too."

Connor and Cole made their way down to the second floor. Locating the door to the garage, Cole and Connor both sniffed the air. Stefan's scent was faint, but it was still there. Slowly they made their way down the hall and to the stairwell. The man had been smart and hadn't taken the elevator knowing that cameras would be hidden inside. Quickly climbing the stairs, Cole froze when he realized the scent stopped at the door to his floor. Stefan was a lot closer to Marin than he had hoped.

Opening the door, the two cousins followed the trail, winding around desks and down hallways. They finally meandered back to the work area near Marin's desk and past Cole's office. Dread filled Cole as he realized the trail was leading them to the lounge.

The men crept silently and cautiously toward the lounge area. They could hear Colin growling. Cole cursed under his breath when he heard Marin whimper.

Connor put a restraining hand on Cole when it looked like his cousin was about to charge into the room. Any hasty moves could get Marin, and possibly his brother, killed. "Easy cousin," he whispered.

Cole slowly crept around the corner. He could see the door to the lounge, but didn't see Stefan. "They

must be closer to the couches," Cole whispered. "I can't see them."

Sensing a presence behind them, Connor turned to see Gabriel fast approaching. He put his finger to his mouth in the universal sign to be quiet; then pointed toward the lounge. When Gabriel was close enough, he whispered, "Stefan has Marin in there."

Gabriel's eyes turned dark. As the alpha of Marin's pack, it infuriated him that someone would dare to harm her. He growled low in his throat. While Marin may not be officially mated to his brother yet, she was family regardless.

"What's the plan," he asked Cole and Connor.

Cole looked both furious and tormented. "I'm not sure. I'm worried that if we go in there, he's going to hurt her even worse. But if we don't, he might kill her."

"Don't do anything yet. The police are outside as well as in the building. Between them and the security guards, I'm sure we can get her out of there in one piece. Give me just a minute and I'll be back," Gabriel told them.

He quickly walked off in the direction of the elevators. He stopped and spoke briefly to the security guard positioned outside the first elevator. "The fugitive everyone is looking for is in the lounge. He has a hostage, but we don't know the details yet. Can you radio the police and see if they have any snipers handy? Maybe they can get a clear shot through one of the windows."

"Yes, sir. I'll get right on it," the guard said before reaching for his radio.

While the guard took care of that chore, Gabriel walked back over to his brother and cousin. He knew that if something didn't happen soon, there would be no way to keep Cole from going in after Marin; and he really couldn't blame him.

"We're going to see if a sniper can get a look inside the room. That should give us an idea of what's going on," Gabriel whispered to them.

Cole growled, "I'm *not* waiting on the police to determine what the situation is!"

Before either Gabriel or Connor could grab him, he stomped into the lounge to confront Stefan. As he entered, he saw Colin a few feet away, growling and baring his teeth at Stefan.

Stefan was using Marin as a shield and had a knife to her throat. There was a tiny rivulet of blood running down her neck where she had been nicked. Cole saw red his fury was so great.

"You should have stayed in jail where you belong," Cole growled at him.

Stefan smirked. "Now why would I do that when my lovely little plaything is out here? You knew that I would come for her... and don't even try to give me the lie that she's your fiancé and has never seen me before."

"Whether she's seen you before or not is irrelevant, but she *is* my fiancée and by touching her you've signed your death warrant."

Stefan's smile turned even colder. "In case you haven't noticed, I hold all the cards. Unless of course you want me to end her life here and now," Stefan asked as he pressed the knife even closer to her throat.

A savage growl ripped through Cole and before he even had time to think, he lunged at Stefan, shifting into his wolf form in mid air. The change took Stefan by surprise and he lowered his guard just long enough for Cole to latch onto him. Marin was knocked to the floor, out of harm's way, as Cole ripped into Stefan.

Hearing the exchange, Gabriel and Connor rushed into the room. Both men quickly took in the situation and were thankful the blinds had been drawn closed.

Otherwise, Cole was going to have a lot of explaining to do when the local authorities came upstairs.

Before Gabriel could pull Cole from Stefan, his brother made one final lunge, snapping his jaws down on Stefan's throat. Once he knew the man was dead, Cole backed off.

Now that the rage had subsided, he was afraid to look at Marin, afraid that she would see him as a monster, or worse, a murderer. Truly, that's what he was at that moment, but he had done it to save her life; and he would do the exact same thing all over again if faced with the same situation. Her life was more precious to him than anything else.

Shifting back to his human form, Cole quickly dressed. Walking over to the sink, he washed his face, neck and hands, removing all traces of blood from him. He felt a small hand tentatively touch his back and he stiffened.

"Cole?"

He didn't want to face her, *couldn't* face her knowing what he had done. He wasn't sure he would survive the horrified look on her face. Taking a breath, he slowly turned.

"Why won't you look at me," she asked him.

Cole looked at her as she had requested. He was surprised to see love shining from her eyes and not hatred or fear. "I was afraid of what I would see if I looked at you, afraid of what *you* would see when you looked at me."

"Why would I be afraid to look at you? You're the man I love and you just saved my life."

Cole's eyes roamed her face, afraid that her response was too good to be true. "You aren't afraid of me now? You don't hate me for taking a man's life?"

Marin shook her head. "I could never hate you."

Cole pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her hair. He briefly noticed Colin prowling around

Stefan's body, curious he watched his cousin. To his amazement, Colin was making his paws and muzzle red with Stefan's blood. His cousin was trying to protect him.

From the other room Cole heard shouts. The police and guards began filing into the room one after the other until the little lounge couldn't hold any more people.

"What happened here," the officer in charged asked.

Gabriel cleared his throat before answering, "The fugitive grabbed Marin and held a knife to her throat. The guard dog we'd provided for her saved her life by attacking the man. I'm afraid he's dead though... I wasn't able to pull the dog off in time."

The officer nodded. "We'll need a more detailed statement later. Right now, let's get this young woman some medical attention and get the criminalists in here so the coroner can bag that body."

Marin was ushered out of the lounge by the paramedics. Cole went with her, afraid to leave her side for a moment. Once her wounds were doctored, Cole led her to his office.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, Cole. I know you're worried about me, but I really am fine."

Cole eyed her anxiously. As calm as she appeared, he figured she had to be in shock. "I can't help it. Loving you means I get to worry about you. You just had a man hold a knife to your throat. How can you be so calm?"

Marin smiled at him. "Because I knew that you would come and save me. I never doubted for a minute that you would find a way to rescue me."

"I'm glad you had so much faith in me, more than I even had in myself," he grumbled.

A police officer knocked on the office door. Cole let him in, "Can we help you officer?"

"I need to ask Ms. Thomas a few questions."

"Can't it wait? Hasn't she been through enough already?"

"I'm sorry sir, but the sooner we take her statement the sooner you can go home."

Cole sighed and looked at Marin. "Do you feel up to talking to him?"

"It's fine Cole. I just want this day to end. If we can go home after I talk to him, then I'll talk to him."

Cole sat beside her and held her hand. The officer questioned her for almost thirty minutes, sometimes asking the same question more than once. When the officer was finished, he left to question the other Sabin employees who had come into contact with Stefan.

"Are you ready to go home," Cole asked her.

Marin nodded and leaned into him, weary from the whole ordeal. She was glad that it was over, for good this time, but she felt as if all the strength and energy had been drained from her, leaving an empty shell.

"Wait here a minute while I get the others," he told her.

Cole left Marin in his office and went in search of Gabriel, Connor, and Colin. He found them in a corner, talking amongst themselves.

"Are the three of you ready to go? They just finished talking to Marin and she wants to go home."

"The talked to us too," Connor said.

Cole's brow furrowed as he frowned. "Why did they talk to everyone but me?"

"We told them you entered the room after Stefan was dead," his brother replied.

"Wasn't that taking a big chance since they talked to Marin too?"

His brother shrugged. "Connor seems to have a special gift like his cousins, he was able to project the

idea to Marin in hopes that she wouldn't bring up your involvement."

"What about Colin? We aren't going to have any problems keeping him out of doggy hail are we?"

Connor shook his head. "I took care of that too. I would imagine that the case will be wrapped up within a few hours."

"Wow, I'm impressed. That's definitely a useful skill to have," Cole replied.

"Let's get Marin and go home. Connor and Colin will have to ride with you since I rode my Harley," Gabriel told Cole.

"That's fine. I just want to get Marin out of here as soon as possible," he replied.



A few hours later, Marin was bathed and resting in bed. Cole had insisted that she soak in the tub while he showered and changed. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the events of that morning. She hadn't lied to Cole when she told him that she knew he would rescue her, but it was still frightening to remember the feel of the knife cutting into her throat.

Marin got out of bed and opened the bedroom door. Walking to the edge of the stairs, she called out for Cole. She barely had time to blink before she heard his footsteps on the stairs below.

"What is it, sweetheart," he asked as he reached the top of the stairs.

"I keep seeing his face when I close my eyes. Would you hold me for a few minutes?"

"Honey, I'll hold you all night if you'd like me to."

Marin leaned into Cole, wanting to be close to him. If they had their own house, she'd have asked Cole to make love to her, to erase all of her bad memories and give her new ones.

Cole gently lifted her into his arms. He carried her over to the bed and laid her down. Walking around to his side of the bed, he climbed in beside her and pulled her into his arms.

Marin burrowed into Cole. "Do you think Dave would let us take a few days off?"

Cole rubbed her back, trying to comfort her. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind if we took the rest of the week off."

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Dave. Their conversation was brief. Dave had consented for them to take the rest of the week off and told Cole to take care of Marin. Cole hadn't doubted the outcome of the phone call.

"What did he say," Marin asked as Cole hung up the phone.

"He said we could take the week off and he hoped you were doing okay."

"I'm fine now that you're here with me."

Cole played with the ends of her hair. "Would you like to look at some houses tomorrow?"

Marin's eyes brightened as she lifted her head to look at him. "Could we?"

"I'll call Matt in the morning, but I don't think it will be a problem."

Marin smiled and snuggled closer to Cole. The thought of having her own home lifted her spirits and made her look forward to tomorrow.

Chapter Twelve

Morning came swiftly. Since Cole and Marin didn't have to go to work, the alarm had been turned off the night before. Cole woke before Marin did and gently slid out of bed, careful to not wake her.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, he decided to check on his twin. As he opened the door, he glanced back at the bed to assure himself that Marin was still asleep. Closing the door quietly, he went next door to Michael's room.

Cole cautiously peeked around the edge of the door, not wanting to disturb his brother if he were still asleep. Michael was sitting up in bed flipping through a magazine.

"I didn't get a chance to share the news with you last night, but I'm assuming that Gabriel came to talk to you," Cole said as he stepped into the room.

Michael put the magazine down. "Yeah, he stopped by when he got home. I'm glad that the bastard is dead."

Cole nodded. "That makes two of us. I just wish that Marin hadn't had to witness it."

"She's pretty tough. I think she can handle it."

Cole smiled. He had a feeling that Marin was tougher than he gave her credit for. He had started to see a sassy side emerging over the past few days and was looking forward to what the future would bring.

"Or did you mean that you wish she hadn't seen *you* kill Stefan?"

"Maybe a little bit of both," Cole said quietly. "I'm going to see if Matt can meet us a little later. Gabriel doesn't know, but Marin and I plan on moving out soon. Matt has some properties he's going to show us this week."

Michael whistled. "He's going to be surprised when you tell him! We've all lived in this house since we were born... I mean, I realize we can't all live here forever, but it's going to be odd not having you around all the time."

Cole rolled his eyes. "I'm sure you'll manage. Especially since Gabriel is letting Colin and Connor stay with us for a bit."

"I haven't had a chance to talk to them much, but I think that's going to change today," Michael said as he got out of bed.

"Don't you think it's too soon for you to go gallivanting around the house? What about your stitches?"

Michael grinned. "Take a look for yourself. They seem to be healed."

Cole moved closer to his brother. Looking at the angry red lines that covered Michael's torso, Cole was shocked by what he saw. The wounds had indeed healed and the stitches had already dissolved.

"Now *that's* impressive! I thought it would take a few more days before you healed this much," Cole said.

Michael shrugged. "The stitches dissolved overnight. When I went to bed last night, the wounds had mostly closed, but they hadn't healed this well. I've honestly never seen, or experienced, anything like it before."

"Neither have I, but I'm glad you're better," Cole responded.

"I think I'll take a shower and put some clean clothes on. Maybe I'll grab a bite to eat and walk over to the garage."

"I don't think you've healed enough to start working on cars again," Cole told him.

"Maybe not, but I can at least take care of the paperwork. It's the least I can do since Gabriel has had to work solo for the past few days."

Cole was impressed with the maturity and thoughtfulness that his twin was showing. It wasn't like Michael to think of others. Normally Michael only thought about three things: himself, women, and sex; although there were times that sex probably came first. Maybe there was hope for Michael after all.

"I'll let you take your shower. Maybe I'll head downstairs and start breakfast. If we're up, it won't be long before everyone else is too," Cole said.

Michael hadn't missed the look on his twin's face. He knew the family thought of him as the screw up. One day they would realize they were way off base, but until that time came, he would leave them to their delusions.

"I'll be down in a few minutes," Michael replied.

Cole left the room and headed downstairs. Pausing on the second floor, he noticed that the bedroom doors were still closed and there were no sounds from within the rooms. Apparently his cousins were still sleeping. Descending the last of the stairs, he heard the phone ringing in the kitchen.

"Hello," Cole said as he picked up the phone.

"Cole? It's Matt."

"Hey Matt. I was going to call you this morning," Cole replied.

Matt chuckled. "I guess I saved you the trouble. Listen, I'm calling because Cassie was worried about Marin. She saw on the news that Stefan was killed at Sabin yesterday. When she tried to call Marin at work, she was informed that Marin wasn't there today. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything is fine. Yesterday was so traumatizing that Dave gave both of us the week off. I think it will do Marin some good to have some quiet time."

"I'm glad to hear that it's finally over." Matt paused, "Since you have some time off, would the two

of you like to look at some houses today? If it's too soon, just say so, but I thought Marin might like to get out of the house for a bit."

"You must have read my mind. I promised Marin last night that I would check with you this morning about looking at a few houses."

"I have an appointment in a few minutes, but I'm free after that. Want to meet in about an hour? I can either come pick you up or you can meet me at the first house. Just let me know which would be best for the two of you."

"Why don't we meet you at the first house? I need to take Marin shopping this afternoon for a winter coat so it would be easiest if we had our own vehicle."

"That sounds good. Do you have a pen and paper?"

Cole rummaged through a kitchen drawer. "Yeah, I've got one. Go ahead."

"The address is 255 Cherry Hill Road. It's a small house, but I thought Marin might like the neighborhood."

"I know that area. I think you're right, she'll like it. We'll meet you there around ten o'clock?"

"That sounds fine. I'll bring over some photos of the other houses I have available right now and their locations. We can decide which ones to look at when we meet at the first house."

"We'll see you then," Cole said, hanging up the phone.

The Cherry Hill area was a pretty upscale neighborhood. Even the house was small it probably cost a good bit. Thankfully, Cole had a decent sized down payment saved up. He hadn't thought to discuss price with Matt when he'd enlisted his help in finding a house. Then again, knowing Matt, he would give him a great deal on any house that Marin chose. It was a wonder that he and Cassie weren't destitute considering the amount of money they gave away to

charities and the many times they had helped their friends and family.

Cole dug through the pantry, but didn't see anything that looked overly appetizing. Maybe it would be better to just take Marin out for breakfast. He glanced at the clock. It was only eight thirty. If he woke her up now, they would have plenty of time to eat before meeting Matt.

Taking the stairs two at a time, Cole ran up to the third floor. When he opened the door, he noticed the bed was empty. Closing the door behind him, he decided to stretch out on the bed and wait for Marin. He could hear the shower running in the bathroom and knew that she had already started getting ready.



A few hours later, Marin and Cole had looked at three different houses in three different neighborhoods. Two of the houses had been on coves that backed up to parks or wooded areas. Marin knew those would be ideal locations for a werewolf, but she really loved the house on Cherry Hill. She was torn on which house to choose.

"What do you think? Did you have a favorite," she asked Cole.

"Honey, I'm buying the house for you. As long as you're in it, I'm happy. I honestly don't care which one you choose."

Matt knew that Marin liked the house on Cherry Hill. Was it the price holding her back?

"If it's the price, that's negotiable," Matt told her.

"It isn't that... it's just that two of the houses are near the woods or a park. The Cherry Hill house is in the middle of the block and backs up to another house."

Cole knew that Marin was only thinking of him, but if the Cherry Hill house was her favorite, then he was fine with it. "Honey, I don't care what the house backs

up to. Just pick the one you like. Or if you don't like these, Matt has some others we can see another day."

Marin shook her head. "It's not just you."

"Then what," Cole asked.

"What about our children? Won't any sons be like you?"

Cole grinned; he loved the thought of having children with her. "Yes, but I can teach them to control their shifting."

"They shouldn't have to. We need a house like the Victorian, where they can be free to shift whenever they want."

Cole sighed. He could tell that this house hunting business was going to be tougher than he had first thought.

Matt remembered one other property he owned. He hadn't brought it up because it was fairly isolated with only a few other houses occupying the same block. He had thought that Marin would prefer being near her neighbors, but he hadn't taken the whole werewolf angle into account.

"I do have one other place that might interest you," he told them.

"Where," Cole asked.

"It's over off Willow and Pecan."

Cole's eyebrows both went up. The houses in that area were close to the size of the Victorian, which meant they were big money homes. "How big of a house are we talking? Last time I checked, those were close to the size of mansions."

"It's the smallest house on the block," Matt replied diplomatically.

"Uh-huh. What's the square footage," Cole asked.

Matt cleared his throat. "It's about twenty-eight hundred square feet, which puts it at least a thousand square feet smaller than the Victorian."

"I don't need a house that big," Marin told them.

"It's in the middle of Willow. The neighbors on either side are a ways down. The house may not be huge, but it sits on five acres."

Cole whistled. "That's a good chunk of land for being in the city limits."

Matt nodded. "I actually got the house really cheap because it needed some work. I've already had the electrical and plumbing updated, but it needs to be painted inside and out and will either need the floors refinished or will need carpeting."

Cole suddenly knew which house Matt was talking about. "Wait a minute! You're talking about the old Prescott house, aren't you?"

"Yes, but Cassie assures me that the tales weren't true."

"What tales," Marin asked. So far the house sounded perfect.

Cole looked at her. "The house has been empty for over half of my life. The Prescott family lived there for three generations. The last family that lived there was murdered by the elder Prescott. It was rumored that the place was haunted."

Marin was shocked that Matt would mention the house considering its past. How could she possibly live in a house where a whole family had been murdered?

"Cassie went through the house. It isn't haunted. I can't change the fact that people died in it, but I can promise you that there are no ghosts present," Matt told them.

Cole felt a little uneasy about it. "What do you think, honey?"

"I don't know. Until I knew a family had died there, it sounded perfect."

"Why don't I show the house to you? If you get any bad vibes or hate the place on sight, I'll find you something else," Matt suggested. It wasn't that he was

trying to pawn the house off on them. He really did think it would be the best fit for the couple.

"Okay," Marin agreed.

The three of them drove over to the Prescott house. When they pulled up to the curb, Marin was in awe. The house was a two story frame home with lots of windows facing the street. Even though the paint was chipped and peeling, the wide front porch still looked inviting. The land was only fifteen yards or so deep, leaving most of the acreage on either side of the home. But even though the yard wasn't deep, there was a heavy line of trees at the back of the property, separating it from whatever was behind.

Marin got out of the car and slowly walked up to the front door. Matt and Cole were already there with the door open. Cautiously walking inside, Marin looked around.

In front of her was a wide staircase leading to the second floor. To her right was a large living room with wood floors and a fireplace. On her left was a dining room. She assumed the door on the back wall led to the kitchen and the door under the stairs probably was either a small bathroom or a storage closet.

The paint on the walls was dingy and cobwebs hung from the ceiling. Marin walked toward to the door on the back wall. Pushing it open, her breath caught in her throat. The kitchen wasn't very deep, but it ran the whole length of the house. There was a small built-in desk with a hutch in the corner, tons of cabinets, and a large window over the sink. A set of French doors led out to the backyard.

Marin walked over to the French doors and looked into the backyard. A small section had been fenced off, probably as a play area for the children. The grass and weeds were growing wildly and the fence needed a new coat of paint.

In a daze, Marin wandered around the first floor. Coming back to the staircase, she started climbing up to the second floor. The wooden planks of the stairs creaked under her feet with each step she took. Reaching the top of the stairs, she opened the door on her immediate right.

It opened with a groan, showing her the perfect playroom. The room was large and had high ceilings. On the far wall, there was a huge picture window that took up almost the entire wall. Marin walked over to the window and looked out. She had a beautiful view of the side yard. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine having a little garden down there, complete with a park bench or two.

Walking back out into the hall, Marin continued down the hall, opening one door after another. She counted four bedrooms in addition to the playroom. There was a bathroom half way down the hall and the master bedroom had its own bathroom. Each of the bedrooms had at least one window and decent sized closet. The master had a hidden door in one of the closets that led to the attic. Marin wasn't brave enough to confront an attic full of spiders today.

Making her way back downstairs, she met Cole and Matt in the living room. It was rather odd, instead of feeling as if the house were evil or haunted, she felt as if it were calling out to her... as if it were telling her that it belonged to her.

"Well, what do you think, honey," Cole asked as she walked over to him.

"As strange as it may sound, I think it may be perfect for us."

Cole was surprised. "It doesn't bother you? The history, I mean."

Marin shook her head. "It may sound odd, but I get the feeling that the house wants us here. I think it

wants new, happy memories; a happy family and the sounds of children to fill it again.”

Cole looked at Marin. Could she possibly have some sort of psychic ability? He had heard of people that could sense things about houses, as if the homes themselves were speaking to them. Could this house be such a place?

Turning to look at Matt, he asked, “How much do you want for this place and how soon can we close?”

Matt smiled. He knew this would be right house for them. “When I told you I bought the place dirt cheap, I wasn’t kidding. Most of the houses on this block go for about three-hundred-fifty thousand up to six-hundred thousand dollars.”

Cole visibly gulped. He wanted Marin to have her dream home, but he knew he couldn’t afford that by a long shot.

Noting Cole’s anxious look, Matt decided to let the poor man off the hook. “I paid twenty-five thousand for the place and put another twenty-five into the plumbing and electrically.”

Cole was stunned. “I guess dying in a house really lowers its value.”

“Well, that combined with the story of the ghosts, the fact that the wiring wasn’t up to code and neither was the plumbing, along with a few other things. I still need to have the heating and air units replaced, but the guy is supposed to come out this afternoon to do that.”

“So what are you asking for the house? I’m sure you could get that two-fifty you mentioned, but I honestly just can’t pay that much.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to. As far as I’m concerned, you and your brothers are family. I’ll sell it to you for one-hundred thousand and you can close on it Friday if you’d like.”

“I feel like I’m robbing you blind at that price,” Cole told him.

Matt shook his head. "No you aren't. Besides, it takes a special person to buy this house. Not just anyone will come in here and claim the place... although, in this case, it seems the place has claimed you."

"Do you mind if I start on some of the painting and repairs before closing?"

"Not at all. In fact, if you need some help, I know an out of work carpenter that has some free time this week."

"Give him my number. I'll want him to refinish the wood work around the house, including the floors, and replace the tile in the bathrooms and kitchen. Tell him to give me a list of supplies he'll need and then we can negotiate a price for his services."

"I'll get right on it. Here, take the spare key so you can come and go as you please. Maybe the house will be ready for you to move in before Monday, but I wouldn't hold my breath."

Matt left the couple alone to wander through their new home and make plans. He couldn't wait to tell Cassie which house Cole and Marin had chosen.



Several hours later, Cole had informed his family that he would be moving out within a week. They had taken the news pretty well. On the way back to the Victorian, they had chosen some paint colors for their new home. Marin was so excited that Cole expected she would remain on cloud nine for the rest of the day. There was only one thing he could think of that would make her even happier... setting a wedding date.

Once he had her secluded from the others, he decided to broach the subject. "Marin, there's actually something else I wanted to mention. I made one other phone call today while you were otherwise occupied."

"Oh? You already bought me a house; what else could you have possibly been up to?"

"A wedding?"

Marin's eyes went wide. "A A... a wedding?"

"Mmm-hmm. I called in the cavalry earlier to start making some arrangements."

"What kind of arrangements?"

"A minister, flowers, church... you know, regular wedding type arrangements."

Marin's eyes started to tear. "You really do want to marry me, don't you?"

"Of course I do. Why would you think otherwise?"

Marin shrugged. "I don't know. I guess, with everything that's happened, I may have wondered once or twice if you really loved me or if you just felt sorry for me."

Cole pulled her into his arms. "Marin, I love you more than life. How could you for one minute think I didn't?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm just afraid that this is all too good to be true."

Cole brushed her hair back from her face. "I really and truly love you and I really and truly want to marry you. I know it's really last minute, but I was thinking that maybe Thursday would be a good day?"

"Thursday?!"

"I know, it's the day after tomorrow, but I would really love to be married before we move into our new house. I can't explain why it's important to me because honestly I'm not sure I know myself, but it just is."

"But ... I don't have a dress yet."

"We can get one in the morning if you'd like... or even tonight. I could take you to a bridal store and then we could get some dinner. I'll leave it up to you."

Marin was feeling a bit overwhelmed. She wanted to marry Cole more than anything else, but he was moving things along rather quickly. First a house and

now a marriage, before she knew it, she'd be pregnant. Absently, she rubbed her stomach, maybe the pregnant part wasn't so bad... maybe all of it wasn't so bad.

"Okay... a dress and dinner it is," she told him.

Cole smiled and led her to the front door. "Be sure to put on your new coat."

Marin grabbed her coat and slipped it on before grabbing her purse. Tucking her hand in Cole's, they walked out to the truck.

It didn't take long to reach "Ever After," the town's only bridal store. As they walked in, the chime over the door sounded, alerting the sales associate that someone had entered the store.

"May I help you," the tall slender woman asked as she approached the couple.

Cole gave her his best smile, "Yes. My fiancé needs a wedding dress."

The woman looked Marin up and down, clearing not understanding why a man like Cole was with someone like her. "I'm sure we have something that would fit her."

Marin wasn't sure if she should feel offended or not. She knew that Cole was quite the catch, but she wasn't sure she liked all of the female attention he drew.

"I think I'd like to just look around a moment," she said, inserting herself into the conversation.

The sales woman arched a brow, but didn't say a word. She merely gestured for Marin to help herself.

Cole followed Marin through the small shop. While Marin flipped through one rack, he looked through another. He paused when he saw a beautiful off-white gown with long lacy sleeves. The dress itself was off-white satin with the same lace over-laid. There were tiny seed pearls scattered across the hem.

"Marin, I think I may have found something," he told her, pulling the dress from the rack.

Marin turned to see what Cole had found. The dress in his hands was breathtaking. It was the most elegant wedding gown she'd seen. Most of the dresses she had found were either plain or so fancy they were almost gaudy.

"It's perfect, Cole."

Taking the dress from him, she carefully carried it to the fitting room. Inside, she undressed and gingerly stepped into the beautiful gown. It fit her like a glove. Looking at her reflection, tears came to her eyes. She wished that her parents could see her now.

Thinking of her family made her remember her brother. What was he doing now? What would happen if she contacted him? Would he want to be here for her wedding? Was he still doing drugs?

Sighing, Marin took the dress off and hung it back on the hanger. Dressing quickly, she went in search of Cole.

"It's absolutely perfect," she told him.

He smiled. "I figured it might be."

They walked over to the sales woman to check out. She rang up their purchase and told Cole the amount. Marin was a little stunned at the figure she mentioned, but Cole didn't seem surprised. She watched as he pulled out a credit card and paid for the dress.

They left the store and Cole helped Marin into the truck. Walking around to the driver's side, he opened the back door and draped her dress across the seat. Then he opened his door and climbed into the truck.

"Now that we have the most important task taken care of, where would you like to eat?"

"I don't care. Why don't you surprise me?"

Cole grinned; he knew just the place to take her. He'd noticed that Marin didn't like it when he spent a lot of money on her. If they were going to get married, she'd just have to get used to it. After all, it was a man's prerogative to spoil his wife.

Chapter Thirteen

The morning of the wedding, Cassie arrived at eight o'clock sharp to kidnap Marin. Walking up to the Andrews' front door, Cassie didn't even bother knocking or ringing the bell. Opening the door, she stepped into the front entry. Hearing voices in the kitchen, Cassie closed the door and headed in that direction.

Sitting at the table were Colin and Connor. Marin was at the oven, pulling out a baking sheet of fluffy, golden biscuits.

"Marin, what are you doing? You're going to end up smelling like breakfast on your wedding day."

Marin turned to face Cassie. "Well, I just thought the guys might be hungry this morning. I don't think the scent of biscuits will stay with me all day."

Cassie eyed her doubtfully. "Let's hope not."

Marin arranged the biscuits on a plate and placed them on the kitchen table. Her stomach was tied in knots so eating one of the fluffy biscuits was out of the question. She wasn't sure why she was so anxious today. She loved Cole and knew he loved her.

"Are you ready to go to the salon," Cassie asked.

"Yeah, just let me grab my coat and purse."

Marin went to the living room to get her things. After putting on her coat, she grabbed her purse and met Cassie at the front door.

"Are you sure I'm not being too much trouble? I mean, shouldn't you be home resting or something," she asked Cassie.

Cassie rolled her eyes. "As if I'm going to sit at home and rest on your wedding day! Besides, I've been looking forward to the day that someone would catch one of the Andrews brothers. I wouldn't miss this day for anything."

Marin smiled and followed Cassie out the front door. "Well, I'm happy to be of service. Although, I'm

honestly surprised that none of the brothers have gotten married before now. It's not as if they're ugly."

Cassie laughed. "No, but they are extremely picky. None of them will marry a woman who isn't their mate."

Marin shook her head in wonder. It still amazed her that she was destined to be with Cole. He was the most amazing man she had ever met; always putting her needs before his, always wanting to please her. Marin couldn't have possibly asked for a better husband.

When they arrived at the salon, Cassie had front door parking. As usual, Matt had rented out the salon for the occasion so his pregnant wife wouldn't be around a lot of harmful fumes. Locking up the car, Cassie and Marin walked up to the shop and knocked on the door.

Seeing the two women outside, the shop owner opened the door for them. "Welcome ladies! I trust you're having a good morning?"

Marin smiled at the man. "The best. Thank you for squeezing me in on such short notice."

"It's not a problem," he assured her. "I have the best stylists here to assist the two of you this morning. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask."

They both thanked the owner and took their seats in the stylists' chairs. Having recently had their hair colored and cut, they were only there to be styled and have their nails done.

An hour later, Marin felt pampered and excited about her wedding. Her dress was stored at Cassie's house so Cole wouldn't see her before the wedding. The poor man had even slept in another bedroom last night.

"Before we go to my house, do you want to drive by the church where the ceremony will be held? We can make sure the flowers arrived."

"That sounds good," Marin responded.

The church was near Cassie's house and they arrived in no time. Outside, there was a sign announcing Marin and Cole's marriage at ten o'clock. A red carpet had been rolled out down the front steps.

The women parked and walked inside the church to make sure everything was in order. The first thing Marin noticed was the scent of gardenias... they were everywhere! Every flower arrangement contained at least a few gardenias. Marin had never told Cole how much she enjoyed their scent so she was pleasantly surprised.

Glancing around the empty church, the women decided that everything looked in order. Marin knew that her wedding was going to be beautiful; she just wished that her family could be there to see it.

"We should probably go to my house so you can get your dress. We need to be back at the church in twenty minutes for you to start getting dressed," Cassie said, as they walked down the front steps.

"Do we have enough time to go to your house and get back?"

"I live just a few blocks away. We can make it back in enough time. No worries, it's your wedding day."

Marin smiled. "Yes, it is. I can honestly say I didn't think this day would ever arrive."

"You never thought you would get married," Cassie asked her.

Marin shook her head. "I didn't date all that often and never really had a steady boyfriend. When my parents died and I had to take care of my brother, I just assumed that I would have time for a social life after he started college."

"Wow, that's a long time to put your life on hold."

Marin hadn't really thought about it at the time, but Cassie was right... it was a long time to put her life on hold. She was very lucky to have Cole and have a second chance at a real life.

They arrived moments later at Cassie's house. It was a beautiful two story on a quaint street. It didn't take them long to get everything they needed and start heading back to the church.

When they pulled into the church parking lot, Marin and Cassie gathered their items and trudged up the steps. The front doors of the church were already open in preparation of the guests arriving.

Marin thought it was a shame for the church to be decorated so beautifully when there wouldn't be very many guests. Cassie and Matt would be attending, as would Cole's brothers and cousins, and Dylan. Marin hadn't known of anyone else to invite.

Cassie and Marin went into one of the side rooms to prepare for the wedding. It didn't take long to get Marin into her dress and shoes. She made a radiant bride.



The wedding passed in a blur. It seemed to Marin as if she had barely walked down the aisle before she and Cole were being pronounced husband and wife. Husband... just the thought of Cole being her husband made Marin smile.

The wedding reception was small and was held at the Victorian. Marin looked across the living room to her new husband. He still had on his tuxedo and looked very dashing. Marin still wore her wedding dress. Every now and then she would see a flash out of the corner of her eye as Cassie or one of the other guests snapped a picture. Cassie had come up with the idea of planting disposable cameras around the house for the guests to use. It would be a good way for Marin to set up a wedding album without having to pay for a professional photographer.

Cassie had ordered a beautiful three layer white cake with pineapple filling for the bride's cake and a

German chocolate cake for the groom's cake. Both were absolutely delicious, which Marin could attest to after having eaten a slice of each.

Cassie approached Marin. "Have the two of you discussed a honeymoon?"

"Um, well... since we're closing on the house tomorrow, we thought we would put it on hold for right now. I'd really like to get moved in before Monday if possible."

Cassie smiled. "I think that can be arranged," she said, as she held out a key to Marin.

"What's this?"

"That is a key to a cabin not far from here. Matt bought one up in the mountains a while back. Unfortunately, we don't get a chance to get away from the kids very often so we haven't used it in a while."

"But..."

"No, buts. I had Matt go up early this morning to make sure you would have everything you need. You can stay just one night or the whole weekend, it's up to you."

"I don't know what to say Cassie. You and Matt have been wonderful to me."

Cassie hugged her. "You're like the sister I never had. I just want you to be happy."

Marin blinked back tears. "I am happy; happier than I've ever been."

"Good. Now, why don't you go share the happy news with your groom? I bet he'd like to get out of here about now."

"Why do you say that?"

Cassie grinned. "Haven't you seen the looks he's been throwing your way? I'm surprised we haven't had to put out a fire already."

Marin laughed. "You're so bad."

Cassie hugged her one last time. "Go on. Go tell Cole the good news and then go pack a bag."

Marin made her way through their guests until she was standing by Cole's side. Tapping him on the arm, she leaned close to whisper in his ear, "Cassie and Matt have a surprise for us."

"Really?"

Marin showed him the key. "It appears we get a honeymoon after all."

"Where does that key go exactly?"

"To a cabin in the mountains. Cassie said that Matt went up there this morning to make sure it was stocked. We can stay the night or they said we can have it for the whole weekend."

Cole sought Cassie out across the room. Spotting her and her husband heading for the front door, he caught the wicked grin on Cassie's face. He would have to remember to thank her later.

"Well, why don't we head upstairs and get some things together? I remember when Matt bought that place and it's a two hour drive away."

"I guess we should get started then."

They made their excuses to their family and guests before walking upstairs. Marin and Cole quickly changed clothes and put a bag together. While Marin visited with her new brothers-in-law and cousins, Cole put their things in the truck.

They made their farewells and started on the journey into the mountains. As they passed by the site of Marin's accident, she shivered.

"Are you okay," Cole asked.

"I'm fine. That accident feels like it was a lifetime ago."

Cole nodded. "Yes, it does."

Marin hesitated. "Cole... what do you think happened to my brother?"

Cole had hoped she wouldn't ask that question. Over the past two days he had done a lot of digging online. The one gift he had hoped to give Marin was

having her brother attend their wedding. Unfortunately, it seemed that her brother had died of an over-dose a few days after Marin had been sold to Stefan.

Marin watched the emotions run across Cole's face. He obviously knew something and didn't want to tell her. Bracing herself, she asked, "Do you know what happened to him?"

Cole sighed. "Yeah, I do. I was hoping you wouldn't ask about him for a little while longer."

"Why?"

"I didn't want to ruin your wedding day. It's supposed to be the most important day of a woman's life, or so I've been told."

"Something happened to him, didn't it?"

Cole nodded. "Yeah, I'm afraid so. I didn't want to tell you this honey, but your brother died of an overdose while you were at Stefan's."

Marin could feel the tears gathering in her throat. She had known that her brother was heading down that path when he had confessed he had a drug problem. It was sad to think that he had died so young.

"Honey, are you okay? I didn't want to give you bad news tonight, but I didn't want to lie to you either."

"I appreciate your honesty. It isn't your fault that my brother was stupid and got involved in drugs. I only wish that there had been a way to save him. After all, if it weren't for him, we would have never met."

Cole reached over and took her hand in his. "And I will always be grateful to him for that... you're the best thing that ever happened to me."

Marin gave him a watery smile. "I feel the same about you."

Chapter Fourteen

Cole pulled up in front of the cabin. It was larger than Marin had expected, with a wall of windows overlooking a small lake. The scenery was breathtaking.

Cole turned off the truck and pulled Marin closer to him. "Why don't you wait here while I go open the door?"

"Okay," she said, leaning over to kiss him.

Cole jumped out of the truck, grabbed their bag, and headed for the front door. The night air was cool as it ruffled his hair. Walking up the few steps to the cabin door, he sat the bag down while he opened the door.

Thankfully Matt had turned the heat on when he had been up here earlier in the day. The cabin was toasty and clean. Cole flipped on the light and sat the bag down on the floor. Turning, he went back outside to get Marin.

Opening the door of the truck, he helped her out. Marin started to walk toward the cabin, but Cole swooped her up in his arms.

"What are you doing," she squealed at him.

"What's it look like? I'm carrying my bride across the threshold."

"I thought you were only supposed to do that when we entered our new house?"

"Nope, I have it on good authority that it's appropriate when you're about to spend your first official married night together, regardless of where you're staying."

Marin smiled and looped her arms around his neck. Nuzzling his neck, she let him carry her up the steps of the cabin and into the cozy warmth inside.

Cole put Marin down and she looked around. The living room was small and held only a sofa and chair. A fireplace dominated one wall. The opposite wall faced the lake and was a sea of large windows.

A kitchen was to their left and there were two doors off the kitchen. Marin assumed they led to the bedroom and bathroom. In the other corner of the back wall was a narrow staircase. The ceilings were easily nine feet tall with rustic beams. It was a really pretty place.

Cole pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Marin melted into him and threw her arms around his neck. She could kiss him for the rest of her life and never tire of it.

Lifting her into his arms, Cole carried Marin to the downstairs bedroom. Pushing the door open with his foot, he crossed the small room to the king size bed against the far wall. Sitting Marin on the bed, Cole followed her, pushing her down onto the mattress.

"I thought this night would never arrive," she told him.

"What night is that? Our wedding night?"

"That's part of it. It seems like I've been waiting forever for you to make love to me."

Cole smiled down at her. "It feels that way to me, too."

Cole ran his hands up her arms and cupped her face. Leaning down, he gently claimed her lips in a kiss.

Marin ran her fingers through Cole's hair, pulling him closer. She wanted to feel every inch of his body pressed against hers. Skimming her hands across his shoulders and down his chest, she reached for the buttons on his shirt.

Cole grinned as he felt her unbuttoning his shirt. Breaking the kiss, he gave her a heated look. "Are we in a hurry?"

"No, not exactly; I just want to feel your skin against mine. I don't want to have any barriers between us."

Cole raised an eyebrow. "None what so ever? Not even a condom?"

A faint blush stained Marin's cheeks. She shook her head no.

Cole's eyes roamed over her face. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

Cole reached out and grabbed the hem of her shirt. He pushed the shirt up over her stomach, over her breasts, and finally pulled it free of her body. She still wore the strapless cream colored bra she had put on under her wedding dress. Her breasts were practically spilling out of the top of the skimpy thing.

Cole pulled the material down, exposing her nipples. Leaning down, he grazed her nipples with his teeth, until both of them peaked.

Marin sucked in a breath. Heat instantly pooled between her legs. She felt Cole's hand slide down her belly to the snap on her jeans. He popped the snap open and slowly slid the zipper down.

Marin started to sit up in order to remove her jeans, but Cole pushed her back down. "I didn't tell you to get up yet."

Marin stayed down, wondering what he was up to. She thought she was going to die when his hand slid inside her jeans, over the satin of her panties, to tease her already engorged nub.

Cole could feel how wet she was through the thin satin material. He had planned on teasing her a great deal before consummating their marriage, but he had a feeling he was teasing himself even more.

With his heightened senses, he was able to smell her arousal. Growling low in his throat, he continued to tease her with his fingers as he claimed her lips in a rough kiss.

Marin writhed on the bed under him, wanting more. Her hips bucked against his hand, trying to pull him closer.

Cole removed his hand from her jeans only to plunge his hands under the satin of her panties. Marin gasped against his mouth and tried to pull him closer.

His fingers delved into the curls at the junction of her thighs until he felt her moist heat. She was so wet and ready for him. Flicking her swollen clit with his thumb, he plunged a finger deep inside of her. When he slid his finger back out, Marin whimpered.

Cole wanted her like he had never wanted anyone before, but he was going to make this night as special for her as possible. He slid his finger inside of her again, curling it slightly as he pulled back out, stroking her g-spot.

Marin thought she was going to die from the pleasure Cole was giving her. "Cole, please..."

"Please, what?"

Marin wet her lips with her tongue. "More... I want more."

Cole smiled and did as she asked. He added a second finger as he slid inside of her again, pumping her with his fingers, faster and faster. She was so close to climax, he could feel it building within her. Using his other hand, he pushed her bra down even further, exposing her soft, full breasts. Her nipples were still erect from his earlier teasing and he claimed one with his mouth, slightly grazing her with his teeth as his finger continued their rhythm, in and out. His thumb still made lazy circles against her clit. Marin was so wet that she was dripping.

When she thought she couldn't take another moment more, pleasure burst through her. She cried out, arching against Cole.

He watched her with dilated eyes, fighting the urge to take her. When her muscles loosened their hold on his fingers, he slid his hand out of her panties.

Standing, he quickly divested himself of his clothing. Leaning over Marin, he reached under her to unclasp

her bra. Dropping the satin garment on the floor, he reached for her jeans. Sliding them down her legs, the joined her bra on the floor.

Cole stood looking down at her. The only clothes she had left were her panties. Marin was truly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Reaching for the small scrap of satin, he slowly slid them off her hips, down her legs, and dropped them on the floor.

Joining her on the bed, he kissed her and fondled her breasts. Marin slipped one hand into his hair while her other hand slid down his torso and grasped his hard shaft.

Cole groaned and thrust into her hand. She was obviously trying to kill him. Breaking the kiss, he turned his attention to her breasts while his hand delved between her legs again.

His finger barely grazed her and Marin almost came up off the bed. She was still sensitive from her previous climax, but it was apparent that Cole was planning on giving her another one.

Marin slid her hand up and down the hard, smooth skin she held. She felt Cole suck in a breath before he backed away from her. His fingers were still sliding in and out of her, but he trailed kisses down her body until his tongue joined his hand in her torture. He laved her clit with his tongue as his fingers thrust in and out of her.

She had never felt anything like this before. Marin grabbed the bed covers in her hands and bit her lip to keep from crying out. As Cole sucked and licked her sensitive nub, Marin began lifting her hips, meeting the strokes of his fingers. She cried out her release as she climaxed.

Cole trailed kisses up her body until he reached her lips. "I would love nothing more than to bury myself to the hilt inside of you right now."

"Then why don't you," she asked.

"Roll over."

Marin wasn't sure what he was up to, but she trusted him so she rolled over. Cole reached out and grabbed her hips, putting her on her hands and knees. Before she could ask what he was doing, he slowly slid into her, inch by slow inch.

"Oh! Oh my... Oh Cole, that feels so wonderful."

Cole slid all the way into her, his hands sliding up her stomach to cup her full breasts. Pulling her up against his chest, he nipped her neck. Thrusting in and out of her, he pinched and teased her nipples.

Marin wasn't sure what she was feeling anymore. Cole was the first man she'd ever made love to, but her body seemed to know what to do. The sensation of him sliding in and out of her was causing pleasure to ripple through her body. She felt so close to her release... sliding her hands over his as they played her nipples, she left one hand over his as her other hand traveled down her stomach.

Reaching between her legs, she felt Cole as he slid in and out of her. Pinching and playing with her clit as Cole thrust in and out of her, Marin started panting. A fine sheen of sweat covered her body. Cole began thrusting harder and faster; knowing that she was playing with herself while he was inside of her was almost his undoing. Using his free hand, he grabbed her hip and thrust into her as hard as he could; finding his release as she cried out her own.

They collapsed to the bed. Cole was still buried inside of her and was wrapped around her body. Marin moaned and pushed back against him, her body clenching down on him.

Cole growled, loving the feel of her. "If you don't stop that, we'll be doing this again before you're ready."

"Who said I'm not ready," she asked as she reached between her legs, wanting to feel him joined with her.

Cole felt himself growing hard again. Pulling out of her, he flipped Marin over on her back. "I want to see you this time."

Marin smiled and reached for him, pulling him down for a kiss. Cole trailed gentle kisses down her neck and across each breast. Marin arched against him, loving the feel of his mouth on her skin.

Cole was just as hard now as he had been before they made love. The tip of him teased her wet opening. Marin whimpered and lifted her hips, trying to pull him inside.

Reaching between her legs, he teased her with his fingers. She was so incredibly hot and wet. Grasping her hips in his hands, he thrust into her hard and fast. Marin met him thrust for thrust. She felt as if her body were on fire.

Grabbing her hips to hold her still, Cole thrust into her harder and harder. Slamming into her as far as he could, he could feel her body stretching to accommodate him. Marin was mindless with pleasure, so close to her release that she wanted to cry.

"Touch yourself," Cole whispered hoarsely.

Marin looked at him with passion glazed eyes. Obeying his command, she reached between her legs and rubbed her clit. Gently squeezing it as he thrust into her, her climax broke over her like a tidal wave.

Feeling her walls clench against him, Cole thrust into her one last time, shouting his release as he buried himself inside of her.

Afterwards, they lay in each other's arms.

"I love you," he whispered to her.

Marin smiled in the dark. "I love you too."

Marin snuggled closer to Cole and sighed. If someone had told her a few weeks ago that would be blissfully married, she would have laughed at them. Today had truly been the best day of her life.

Moonlight Protector

After feeling alone for so long, Marin finally had a real family. She had a loving husband, two brothers, two cousins, and some of the best friends she could have asked for. By tomorrow, she would have a house of her own and she had a job she enjoyed.

Life could not possibly be better.

Epilogue

Two months later, Marin was waiting in the doctor's office. She'd been really sick the past few days and figured she had the flu. As she waited, she flipped through a magazine.

The door to the waiting room opened and a nurse stepped out. "Mrs. Andrews? Marin Andrews?"

Marin looked up. "I'm Marin Andrews."

The nurse smiled. "The doctor is ready to see you now. Could you come with me please?"

Marin got up and followed the nurse into the back of the office. The nurse walked down a small hallway and opened the second door they came to. "If you'll wait in here, the doctor will be with you in a minute."

Marin patiently waited on the doctor. It was only a few minutes before an older balding man stepped into the room.

"Mrs. Andrews, I'm Dr. Thornton. What can I do for you today?"

"I've been really sick the past few days. I thought I might have a touch of the flu that's been going around lately."

"Well, let's take a look at you."

Dr. Thornton checked her throat, ears, and nose. He took her temperature and her blood pressure. "Everything seems to be normal."

"Then why am I getting sick every day?"

The doctor looked thoughtful. "Are you sick all day long?"

"Well, no. It's mostly in the mornings. By noon it seems to go away."

Dr. Thornton smiled at her. "Mrs. Andrews, have you thought of the possibility that you might be pregnant?"

Marin became very still and placed a hand on her flat stomach. "Pregnant?"

"It's a possibility. Let's do a pregnancy test just to be sure though."

The doctor stepped into the hall and called for the nurse. As the perky woman walked in, she said, "Let's get you over to the restroom."

Marin followed the nurse down the hall to the restroom. When she got there, the nurse opened a cabinet and handed her a cup.

"When you're finished, just place it inside the door on the wall," the nurse said, pointing to a small door in the middle of the wall.

Marin followed the nurse's instructions and placed the cup inside the door when she was finished. Washing her hands, she left the restroom and walked back down the hall to the room.

It seemed like it took forever for the doctor to come back in. As he walked in, he smiled at Marin. "Well, Mrs. Andrews, it seems that congratulations are in order."

"I'm pregnant?"

"Yes ma'am, you are. I'm going to leave a prescription for some prenatal vitamins at the front desk. You'll need to take one a day for the duration of your pregnancy. Do you have an OB-GYN?"

Marin shook her head. "No, I've only lived here a few months."

"Well, if you need any recommendations, I'd be happy to give you a list."

"Thank you, but a friend of mine recently had a baby. I think I'll use her doctor."

Dr. Thornton nodded. "If you have any questions between now and your OB visit, just give us a call."

"Thank you, Dr. Thornton."

Marin gathered her things and headed for the check out area. It only took a minute for a nurse to bring her prescription to her. She paid her bill and walked out to her car.

Normally she would have been at work on a Friday, but she had taken off of work most of the week due to feeling so sick. She quickly headed to Sabin so she could share her news with Cole.

Parking her new Honda civic in the parking garage, she walked to the third level door. Marin swiped her badge and opened the door. She glanced at the stairs, but decided the elevator might be a better idea.

It felt like the elevator took forever to arrive. Marin was finally inside and on her way up to Cole's office. As the elevator doors opened, she waved to her friends and co-workers. When she reached Cole's office, she knocked on the door.

Cole looked up in surprise. He hadn't expected to see Marin until he arrived home. She had been miserable that morning and had called in sick.

Opening the office door, he pulled her into his arms. "Is everything okay?"

Marin smiled up at him. "Everything is perfect."

Cole's brow furrowed in confusion, "But you were so sick this morning... didn't you have a doctor's appointment today?"

Marin smiled and nodded. "Yes, I did and he gave me some wonderful news."

"You aren't sick?"

"Nope, I'm not sick. I'm pregnant."

Cole was sure he hadn't heard her correctly. "You're what?"

"I'm pregnant. We're going to have a baby."

Cole was speechless. He looked at Marin's flat stomach and gently placed his hand there. It didn't seem possible that there was a baby growing inside.

"We're going to have a baby," he asked in a near whisper, completely in awe.

"Yes. Are you okay with that?"

"I'm more than okay with that!"

Cole smiled and picked up her for a big hug. Giving her a kiss, he spun her around.

Marin laughed and held on tight. "Easy, I may not have the flu, but you can still make me sick."

He immediately put her down. "I'm sorry, I was just excited."

"Why don't you ask Dave for the rest of the day off? I think we need to go tell Gabriel and Michael that they are about to be Uncles."

Cole pulled her back into his arms. "Or I could take the rest of the day off to make love to my beautiful wife and the mother of my child."

Marin smiled. "That works too."

After a brief conversation with Dave, Cole and Marin drove home. Cole spent the rest of the afternoon worshipping the woman of his dreams.

The small life growing inside of Marin made their lives complete. It was all that either of them had ever hoped for. All of their dreams had come true.

Moonlight Protector

Moonlight Hero

Ashton Grove Werewolves, Book 2

Written by Jessica Coulter Smith

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FIRST EDITION

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Chapter One

Kiera ran on silent feet through the darkened alley. It probably would have been easier to escape if she had shifted into her animal form, but then she would have been stuck without clothes later. That would have been a little hard to explain to the average human.

Running for all she was worth, she could sense the vampire's presence not far behind her. Going into that bar was the dumbest thing she had ever done! Why had she allowed the girls to talk her into it? Shaking her head, she continued to the end of the alley. Hopefully she would live to see another day.

When she reached the corner, she looked around. There wasn't much nearby except an old Victorian home and an auto repair shop. Noticing the lights were on in the auto shop, she hurried across the street. Reaching for the door, she glanced over her shoulder and gasped. The vampire was standing on the corner under the street lamp. To a passerby he would seem harmless, but Kiera knew better, knew him for the predator he was. She was trembling as she watched the vampire; she knew he could smell her fear but was helpless to do anything about it.

Pushing the door open, Kiera rushed inside. As soon as she closed the door, she turned the lock. The logical part of her brain was calling her an idiot for thinking a lock would keep out a vampire, but her self-preservation skills were kicking in. That small piece of metal made her feel a little bit safer, even if her safety was nothing more than an illusion.

Across the room, Gabriel heard the door close and lock. As he slid out from under the Mustang he

had been working on, he noticed the disheveled woman warily watching the street through the glass door. He got up and walked slowly toward her. Taking in her creamy complexion, petite stature and long ebony hair, his body immediately responded to her. She was definitely something to look at, curved in all the right places.

“May I help you?” he asked.

Kiera gasped and spun toward the deep voice. Momentarily startled, she regained her composure, trying to keep her expression as neutral as possible. “Is it alright if I stay here for a minute?”

Gabriel casually looked her over, appreciating the way her black dress clung to her curves. “Everything okay?”

Kiera glanced back outside. The vampire was still on the corner, watching her every move. She knew that he was waiting for her to leave. It wasn’t fair to involve this stranger in her problems, but she didn’t have much of a choice if she wanted to live. And she *definitely* wanted to live!

Looking back at Gabriel, she said, “That man across the street has been following me. I’m a little nervous about going back outside.”

Gabriel looked through the glass door. Sure enough, a tall blond man was standing on the corner, watching them. An inner voice was screaming at him that the man was a vampire and to be wary. Gabriel shook his head, clearing the ridiculous thought from his mind. Vampires? He was starting to lose it. Granted, being an alpha werewolf made him believe in the impossible, but he had yet to see proof that vampires existed.

Gently taking her arm, he pulled her away from the door. “You’re safe here. You can stay as long as you need to.”

Kiera gave him a shaky smile. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate that."

"Since I'm offering sanctuary, mind telling me how that guy ended up following you?" If he was getting pulled into a domestic dispute, now was the time to find out. The last thing he needed was an angry husband coming after him.

Kiera sighed, realizing she could only tell him half of the truth. If she said that a vampire was following her, she had no doubt she would be dragged off to the loony bin. Granted, that would be the perfect ending to her not so perfect day, but she would prefer to not land herself in a padded cell.

"The short version is that he tried to pick me up in a bar. I told him that I wasn't interested, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. When I left, he followed me. He kind of gave me the creeps so I ran."

Something seemed a little off with her story. If she had been running, why wasn't she winded? Not that he wouldn't have enjoyed watching her run in that skin tight dress and heels; it definitely would have been a sight to behold, especially with her being so top heavy. He almost grinned at the image his mind was creating.

Giving himself a mental shake, he asked, "How did you end up here at my garage? There isn't a bar for at least three or four miles."

Kiera hoped the shock didn't show on her face. Had she really run that far? "I guess I got lost. I was just trying to get away from him and didn't really pay attention to where I was going."

She knew her excuse sounded feeble, but she couldn't very well tell him she was a werefox, giving her more agility and stamina than your

average human. There were some things that humans just weren't prepared to hear. The fact that "make believe" creatures really existed ranked high on that list.

Gabriel looked skeptical. There had to be more to her story than that, but obviously she wasn't going to share the full tale. "What's your name?"

"Kiera."

"I'm Gabriel."

Kiera smiled. "It's nice to meet you. I just wish it was under better circumstances."

"Do you need to use the phone to call someone? It doesn't look like that guy is leaving anytime soon," Gabriel said, glancing out the door.

"Oh." Kiera followed his gaze. Sure enough, the vampire was still watching from across the street. "Um, I don't really have anyone to call."

Gabriel arched an eyebrow, but didn't say anything. Just what kind of trouble was she in? She didn't look more than twenty-one or so. A deep primal instinct arose, making him want to comfort her and protect her. The wolf in him responded to her soft feminine scent while the man responded to her lush curves. She didn't even reach his shoulder, which told him that she was under five-foot two since he was a little over six-feet tall. She wasn't bone thin like a lot of woman he'd met, but she wasn't fat either. Her elfin shaped face held full rosy lips and beautiful green eyes that were almost almond shaped. They reminded him of cat eyes.

Kiera noticed the appraisal. "I don't want to keep you from your work. Please don't feel like you have to keep me company."

Gabriel grunted, noting the obvious dismissal. Evidently mechanics weren't good enough for her.

He should have known that a woman as pretty and as well dressed as this one was would have an attitude. Paper pushers were probably more her style; wealthy paper pushers.

“Guess I can finish up this job while you wait to see if your admirer goes away.”

Walking away from her, he slowly climbed back under the Mustang. It was difficult to concentrate on his work, but he managed. There was something about her that wasn't entirely human. He knew she wasn't a werewolf, but she was definitely something special. His alpha instincts told him that she was a mate for his pack. Since Cole was already married, that meant that she belonged to either him or Michael. Just thinking of Michael being with her made him grind his teeth.

Kiera watched Gabriel effortlessly slide under the car. She started feeling light headed and realized that she had been holding her breath. He was the most gorgeous guy she had ever seen! Easily over six-feet tall, he had medium length black hair, piercing blue eyes, and was well muscled. It had been difficult to not throw herself into his arms. If he had stood by her much longer, she wouldn't have been able to keep her hands to herself. She hoped that he hadn't noticed the effect he had on her. Her animal instincts were going to get her into trouble one of these days.

As she glanced back out the door, she realized that the vampire was crossing the street. Startled, she instinctively started backing toward Gabriel. It wasn't fair to ask for his protection, but she had never been so terrified in her life. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something about the mechanic made her feel safe and protected.

Hearing her footsteps drawing near, Gabriel slid out from under the car and looked up at her. "What's wrong Kiera?"

"He's coming over. I know that I have no right to ask this, but please help me." As she looked down at him, her eyes were wide with fear. Her heart had doubled its rhythm and felt as it would burst from her chest.

Gabriel stood up and drew her close to him. She trembled against his body. He absently stroked her back, trying to sooth her. His extra sensitive hearing told him that the guy was almost to the door. Thinking fast, he came up with a plan; one that she probably wouldn't like, but he was going to enjoy every minute of it.

"Kiera, I'm going to ask you to trust me. Just go with whatever story I have to come up with in order to get that guy out of here. Do you think you can do that? Even if it means being ... *close* to me?"

Kiera looked up into his bright blue eyes and knew without a doubt that she could trust him. "Okay."

The vampire jerked the door open, tearing the lock apart as the door was torn loose. While Gabriel tried to process that small fact, he bent his head to Kiera's and kissed her. He had only planned on a short kiss, more for show than anything else, but when Kiera responded to him he pulled her roughly against his chest and deepened the kiss. Every primal instinct in him was yelling for him to claim her as his mate. Her scent surrounded him and he lost himself in the pleasure of her soft body and warm lips.

The vampire stepped into the shop and cleared his throat, attempting to act human. Apparently he didn't realize how ridiculous that was after tearing

open a locked door. Gabriel pulled away from Kiera, but kept her pulled firmly against his body. As he looked the intruder over, taking in the deathly pale skin and nearly black eyes, he realized that his first assessment hadn't been far off. It seemed that vampires really did exist.

"I'm sorry, may I help you?" he asked the vampire, trying to sound nonchalant, as if a vampire ripping his door apart was an everyday occurrence.

"I was looking for my girlfriend. I'm afraid I was a little surprised to see her kissing someone else," the vampire replied smoothly.

Gabriel looked down at Kiera with a questioning look. "Something you haven't told me sweetheart?"

"No," Kiera said in a husky voice, still reeling from his kiss. Hearing him call her sweetheart, even if it was for pretend, made her tingle all the way to her toes. What was wrong with her? He was a stranger and here she was ready to jump his bones! She was starting to feel like a horny teenager. Just the same, she felt safe standing in his arms. Her traitorous body probably wouldn't move even if she wanted it to.

Gabriel looked back at the vampire, "I'm afraid you must be mistaken."

The vampire wasn't happy with the way things were turning out. Why had the stupid woman run in here? Could the two of them really be together? Or was it just chance and they were acting for his benefit? He refused to let his prey slip through his fingers. It wasn't often that his kind found those of fairy descent. Their blood was intoxicating.

"I don't think so," the vampire replied with a low growl.

Gabriel could tell the vampire wasn't going to back down. His body tensed, ready for a fight. Swiftly, he maneuvered Kiera behind him to shield her from the vampire. He knew it was only a matter of time before the confrontation went to the next level. He wouldn't be able to forgive himself if something happened to her.

"What makes you so sure she's your girlfriend?" Gabriel asked, not entirely sure it was smart to taunt a vampire. "Obviously *she* doesn't think she is, not with the way she was kissing me."

The vampire smiled, showing the tips of his fangs. Now that Gabriel had stepped in front of Kiera he could smell the wolf scent on him. He hadn't seen a werewolf in a hundred years. Too bad they weren't extinct as he had thought, however, that could be easily remedied.

"I think I would recognize my own girlfriend. Besides, you've never laid eyes on her before tonight. Admit it wolf!"

Gabriel was surprised that the vampire recognized what he was, but he refused to react. "I have no idea what you're talking about. We've been together for a while now. Matter of fact, we even live together."

The vampire narrowed his eyes, "Why would a wolf associate with a fox?"

A fox? Did he mean that Kiera could shapeshift into a fox? That would explain a few things. A little stunned, Gabriel managed to keep his expression neutral and his voice steady.

"Maybe because the wolf recognized her as his mate regardless of what she could turn into," Gabriel replied.

The vampire laughed. “Yeah, right. Like an alpha wolf would lower his standards to that of a fox.”

Kiera stiffened behind Gabriel. He was an alpha werewolf? Would he still protect her? In her hometown in Tennessee, the wolves did *not* associate with any other shapeshifters. They considered themselves above everyone else, superior in all ways. More than once Kiera had been the brunt of their cruel jokes. She pressed herself closer to him, hoping he wouldn’t hand her over. Gabriel was all that stood between her and death, of that she had no doubt.

Gabriel growled low in his throat. “There are no standards to lower. She is my mate and as such my equal.”

The smile slipped from the vampire’s face. This was proving much more difficult than he had imagined. If it weren’t for the fairy blood he smelled running through her veins, he would have given up long ago. Fairy blood was very rare and something he couldn’t pass up. The magic in their blood lasted for at least a year and made the vampire invincible, even against stakes through the heart or decapitation. This was quite literally a game of life and death...his life or death to be exact. The little werefox was of no consequence.

“If she’s your mate, why was she at a club alone? The true mate of an alpha wouldn’t seek the companionship of other males! It’s obvious that you haven’t claimed her.”

Kiera decided it was time to speak up. “I wasn’t looking for men. I went with some friends to keep them company. I was trying to leave when you approached me.”

Gabriel held her back. She had spunk, but he was afraid it would get her killed. Having never met a shifter that wasn't a wolf, he wasn't sure how quick she was or how strong. Even though he didn't really know her, his wolf's instinct to protect his mate was strong... and Gabriel had no doubt that she was his.

"Kiera is my mate in every sense of the word. To doubt me would be a deadly mistake Vampire."

The vampire smiled. "What makes you think a single wolf is going to stop me?"

Gabriel felt Kiera stiffen behind him. He wasn't sure if it was from fear of the vampire or fear that a pack of wolves could come bursting through the door at any moment.

Keeping his gaze calm, he asked, "What makes you think you'd only have to deal with me? In case you've forgotten, the fact that I'm the alpha means I have a pack."

The vampire looked at him uncertainly. One werewolf wouldn't be a problem, but a pack of them would be a different story. Maybe he could still trick the wolf into handing over his prey. He still wasn't convinced the woman was really the wolf's mate. If she wasn't, there was no way the man would bind her to him permanently.

"I'll make a deal with you."

"What kind of deal?" Gabriel asked, knowing the vampire had to be up to something. Why would the bloodsucker give up his meal so easily?

"Since you claim she's your mate, you shouldn't have any problem binding her to you in a more official way... say, through marriage?"

The vampire had certainly shocked him with that one. It was his experience that women tended to prefer courtship before a marriage, but if it saved

her life then maybe Kiera would be up for it. Knowing she was his mate was answer enough for him. The vampire was actually doing him a favor by requesting the marriage.

Kiera cautiously walked to Gabriel's side. She knew that if they were married, he would be giving up his chance to find his true mate. Werewolves mated for life. It didn't matter if it was a human marriage or a pack mating ritual; the end result was still the same. She couldn't ask that of him and she was prepared to turn herself over to the vampire, even knowing that it meant she would die.

As if sensing her thoughts, he gently brushed his fingers across her cheek. "What do you say sweetheart? Think you can handle a wedding ceremony?"

Kiera forgot to breathe. He was going to do it! He was really going to give up his future happiness in order to protect her. Never had she met a werewolf like him. But she couldn't allow him to do it. Marrying him, denying him a mate, it would be too cruel. He seemed like a genuinely nice guy and deserved better.

"I ..."

Sensing her hesitation, Gabriel stopped her words with a soft kiss. He gently moved his lips across hers. When he pulled back, he could see the desire in her eyes and knew he had won. He had to fight back a smile of victory. While the vampire was their enemy, part of him wanted to thank the leech. Although, just because Kiera was married to him by law, it didn't mean they would have a real marriage. He would probably still have some work ahead of him to truly make her his mate. Regardless, he knew it would be well worth it in the end.

“Yes,” she whispered, still dizzy from his kiss.

He smiled and pulled her to him. Being a shifter, she was aware that this would bind them together forever. Unlike humans, there would be no divorce. He was glad that she hadn’t turned him down, for both of their sakes.

He gave the vampire and insolent look. “Satisfied?”

The vampire was furious. Damn the both of them! How dare they try to thwart him on this? There was no way the wolf had seen her before today. If they had truly been mated, the wolf’s scent would have been on the woman. The smell of an alpha werewolf was very distinct; it wasn’t something a vampire would miss.

“Not entirely. You have one day to arrange the ceremony. I’ll find you tomorrow evening to witness the event myself,” the vampire told them. He wanted to make sure they were stuck with each other if he couldn’t drain her. And honestly, did the idiot think that marrying the werefox would guarantee her safety? This was only a minor delay. In the end, he would drain the woman dry. What were a few days or weeks to someone with eternal life?

Gabriel was a little surprised by both the timeline and the vampire’s response. Trying to buy Kiera more time, he said, “You know it’s hard for a woman to choose her wedding dress in just one day.”

The vampire sneered, “What do I care? She could wear a burlap sack or nothing at all; as long as you’re married it doesn’t matter.” He gave them an evil grin, “And should you fail to get married tomorrow night, she becomes mine to do with as I please. At first I had just thought of draining her,

but maybe I could have a little fun first. And don't even think of trying to hide her; I'll find her one way or another."

Gabriel clenched his fists to keep from attacking the bloodsucker. "You'll never touch her," he growled.

In the blink of an eye, the vampire disappeared. Beside him, Gabriel felt Kiera tremble. They may have saved her life, but now she would lose everything familiar to her. He couldn't have been happier with their predicament, but he was worried that he might lose his mate. True, she would be bound to him, but would she be happy about it?

"I'm sorry that it came to this. For all I know, you have a husband and kids at home; not that you look old enough for that." He looked thoughtful. "How old are you anyway? I'm not going to end up in jail, will I?"

Kiera laughed; the sound coming out shaky and uncertain. "I'm twenty-eight and no, there's no one at home. I never knew my mother and my father passed away a few years ago. I'm the only werewolf in the area at home."

Gabriel released a breath he didn't realize he had been holding. "What about friends? Anyone you need to get in touch with? Or explain things to?"

Kiera slowly shook her head. "I came with a group of shapeshifters, but they aren't really friends. They tolerate me and feel sorry for me. Being the only one of my kind has made me a rather solitary person I guess."

Gabriel wanted to pull her into his arms to comfort her, but he wasn't sure how she would react. "You said you came in with them. Came in from where?"

“West Tennessee. I live in a rural shifter community there.”

Gabriel nodded. It made sense that a large number of shapeshifters would inhabit a town of their own. It made things easier when the moon was full for one thing. Gabriel and his brothers weren't controlled by the moon, but he had heard of some werewolves who were. “We'll have to go and get your things after the ceremony.”

Kiera wasn't sure how to respond. She had never met anyone, much less a werewolf, like Gabriel before. He was definitely a pleasant surprise.

Dropping her eyes to the floor, she said, “I'm sorry for all of this.”

Gabriel tipped her chin up so he could see her eyes. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“But now you've lost your chance to find your real mate!” Her eyes suddenly widened. “You weren't already with someone were you?”

“No. I've been casually dating someone off and on, but nothing serious.”

Kiera looked at him doubtfully. He was so good looking and so nice that she had a hard time imagining him having a lack of options. Women were surely falling over themselves for a date with him. “You don't seem very upset about being stuck with me.”

Gabriel smiled at her. “At the risk of you running from me in terror, I'm going to share something with you. I wasn't lying to that leech when I said that you were my mate. I recognized you by your scent when you came into the shop.” He let his gaze wander from the top of her head to her toes and back again. “Not to mention that you're beautiful.”

Kiera stared at him, completely dumbfounded. “But... how is it possible for me to be your mate? I’m just a werefox! If you’re the alpha, don’t you have to mate with another werewolf? Your line won’t be pure if you’re mated to me.”

Gabriel burst out laughing. “Pure line? Who have you been talking to?”

Kiera looked at him doubtfully. “The werewolves that run the Memphis territory. They practically own my town.”

That sobered him immediately. “What exactly did they say to you?”

“That wolves didn’t mix with other creatures. They said they wouldn’t have me if I were the last shapeshifter on earth.”

Gabriel could tell there was more. “What else Kiera? If we’re going to make this work, you need to be completely honest with me.”

Kiera looked at the floor in embarrassment. “Please don’t make me tell you. It’s too humiliating.”

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her to him. She felt so soft and feminine. She also felt fragile and he had to remember not to squeeze too hard. Foxes were timid by nature, but she had stood up to the vampire. There was certainly more to her than met the eye.

What had the wolves told her that was so horrible? Or was it more something they had done than what was said? The thought of anyone harming her made him furious.

“Kiera, even though we’re getting married tomorrow, I won’t expect anything from you. After all, we’re strangers to each other still. You can take as much time as you need.”

She froze in his arms and cautiously looked up at him. The pain in her eyes nearly took his breath away.

“You don’t want me?” she asked in a hushed voice. The wolves at home might not want anything to do with her, but it hurt that her mate might not want her either. She had thought she had finally found someone who could accept her for who she was, someone who could come to love her one day regardless of what she shifted into.

“Sweetheart, I want you so bad that holding you like this is torture. But I don’t want you to feel obligated to do something you don’t want to do or aren’t ready to do. We have plenty of time to get to know one another first. This isn’t something I want to rush you into. The wedding can’t be helped, but the rest I *do* have some control over.”

Her hormones were kicking into over-drive again. Just the thought of consummating their marriage was enough to turn her on. A light blush stained her cheeks. “What if I don’t want to wait?”

“I just thought that since you obviously had a rough time with the wolves at home that you might not want to be intimate with a werewolf; at least, not until that wolf has a chance to gain your trust,” he said with a grin.

Kiera placed her hand on his cheek. “That’s very sweet of you, but you already gained my trust. You saved my life tonight. Besides, if I’m truly your mate as you claim, then we’re destined to be together. It won’t matter if we start our life together immediately, in a month, or in a year. Either way, we’re going to be married to each other and living under the same roof. Why prolong the inevitable?”

Gabriel had to bite his tongue. How had he become so fortunate? Not only was his mate drop

dead gorgeous, but she was sensible too. He wasn't sure if it was so much him saving her, or her saving him. "Of course I saved you! It's not like I was going to let that vampire run off with you."

"What if I hadn't been your mate?"

"I still wouldn't have let him have you," Gabriel responded without pause.

Kiera pursed her lips in thought. "Would you have told him that I was your mate if in fact I hadn't been? Would you still have married me just to protect me from him?"

Gabriel paused. "I'm not sure. I know I would have done what I could to save you, but I don't know if I would have announced you were my mate and gone through with a wedding. I would like to think that I would have done anything necessary to save your life regardless of who you were." Gabriel frowned. Maybe he wasn't as honorable as he had once thought himself to be.

Kiera smiled. "And that is why I trust you. You are *nothing* like the wolves back home! Their alpha can't compare to you. He is a mean, lecherous fool who thinks he's better than everyone else and that the rest of us should be grateful he allows us to live. You could never be like that."

Gabriel kissed her. "I can't imagine anyone being foolish enough to think you weren't good enough for them."

She blushed in response and buried her face against his shirt. A thought dawned on her. The group she had arrived with had surely left the bar by now. That meant she was completely alone and didn't have a change of clothes with her. They had planned on checking into the hotel later tonight.

"Gabriel, would you mind doing me another favor?"

“Anything.”

“The other shapeshifters I came with were going to check into a hotel tonight. My bag is still in their car. Could you drive me to the hotel? It’s the Mayfair on Park.”

Gabriel ran a hand down her arm. “Do you want to stay with your friends tonight? Or would you like to stay at my place?”

Kiera hesitated. She hadn’t expected that question from him. While they were getting married tomorrow, thanks to the vampire’s rather odd demands, it still shocked her that he would want to spend time with her. Her thoughts were in a whirlwind, leaving her confused and uncertain.

“Where do you live?” she asked.

Gabriel nodded his head toward the house across the street. “I share the Victorian across the street with my brother, Michael. My other brother, Cole, used to live there too, but he recently got married and moved out. I have two cousins that stayed with us for a little while as well, but they moved out last week.”

Kiera remembered seeing the house during her mad dash to the repair shop. “Your brother won’t mind me being there?”

What she really wanted to ask was how his brother would react to finding out she shifted into a fox. Gabriel may not be worried about her status in his pack, but she was. She didn’t want to discredit him or make him look like a fool in front of the others. He deserved better than that.

“No, he won’t mind at all. Why don’t we walk across the street and you can meet him while I clean up a bit? Then I can take you by the hotel to get your things. You can pick any room in the house you want. We have plenty to spare.”

Blushing furiously she decided to bite the bullet. She wasn't sure if it was just surging hormones controlling her or if it was her animal instincts. "Even yours?"

Gabriel froze. "If that's where you want to be, but you don't have to. I meant it when I said that you didn't have to do anything you didn't want to, that you could have as much time as you needed."

"I was hoping that maybe you could just hold me tonight. I can't explain it, but I feel so safe when I'm with you. Most of my life I've been picked on and ridiculed by werewolves, but having your arms around me makes me feel protected." Kiera blushed, why had she just admitted that to him? He may be her mate, but she had just met the man!

"I'm glad to hear that. I would be honored to hold you tonight," he said. While he meant every word, he knew that it was going to be an agonizingly long night. Just thinking of Kiera's soft curves pressed against him made him grow hard. The next twenty-four hours were going to be interesting.

Kiera smiled up at him and laced her fingers with his. "Might as well get the introduction to your brother out of the way."

Gabriel grinned at her. "He's going to love you. You really don't have anything to worry about."

"When do I get to meet your pack?"

Gabriel stopped. He had forgotten to mention that to her. "Actually, my pack consists of just me and my brothers. We have two cousins who live one town over, but that's it. There aren't any other shapeshifters in this area."

Kiera didn't know what to think about that. "Just the three of you? What about your cousins, are they part of your pack?"

"No, they have their own pack. Well, if two wolves can make a pack. Is that going to be a problem? I know you're used to an area full of shapeshifters..."

"No! It's actually wonderful!"

Gabriel smiled at her and tugged her toward the door. He stopped and surveyed the damage for a minute. He realized that the door was beyond destroyed. For the sake of his customer's cars, he had to find a way to lock up tonight. Looking around, he spotted an old metal door lying at the edge of the parking lot.

"Wait here just a minute. I need to cover up the doorway so people won't break in tonight."

He walked over to the door and hoisted it onto his shoulder. It probably weighed a few hundred pounds, but to a werewolf that was nothing. When he was beside Kiera again, he asked her to step back. He sat the door down and covered the doorway the best he could. The metal door was a little larger than the glass one had been, but a regular human wouldn't be able to budge it during the night.

He dusted his hands off and took her hand again. "There. A temporary fix until I can stop by the hardware store tomorrow."

They walked across the street and stopped in the yard of the Victorian. Up close, Kiera could see the fresh paint on the gingerbread trim. The shutters were a beautiful dark blue-green and the trim and front door had accents in the same color family. It was a beautiful home.

"Your home is lovely," she told Gabriel.

“Thanks. Cole helped me repaint it last week. Personally, I think he was just trying to get away from Marin’s ‘honey-do’ list. The house they bought needed some remodeling so he’s kept pretty busy when he isn’t at work.”

“Does he work at the garage with you?”

Gabriel shook his head, “Not anymore. Cole has a degree in biology and works for Sabin Bio-Med. Michael works at the garage with me though. He’s only been back at work for a week or two after being injured.”

“I hope it wasn’t anything too serious.”

He looked thoughtful as if trying to decide what to say or if he should say anything. “If you’re going to be part of the family, you might as well know. Marin was abducted by a really deranged man. When he tracked her to our house, he ended up attacking Michael. We weren’t sure if Michael would make it that night, but thankfully he’s okay. He healed pretty quick, but I made him rest a few weeks before he came back to work.”

Kiera looked at him with wide eyes. “You certainly have an interesting family.”

Gabriel grinned. “That I do. Sure you want to join this crazy lot?”

Kiera smiled back. “Yes, I’m sure.”

She wouldn’t admit it, but being part of a crazy family was better than having no family at all. The last thing she wanted was his pity so she refrained from speaking her thoughts out loud. She only hoped her emotions didn’t show on her face.

They walked up the front steps and through the door. When Kiera stepped into the entry, she looked around. Everything was neat and tidy. The wallpaper was a little out-dated, but it still looked

nice. The hardwood floors gleamed as if they had just been shined that morning.

Gabriel pulled her toward the stairs. "Come on, Michael and I sleep on the third floor."

When they got to the third floor landing, they heard Michael yell through his door, "It's about time you got home bro! I was starting to think a car had fallen on you."

Gabriel shook his head and pushed Michael's door open. His brother was sprawled across his queen size bed flipping through a magazine. Michael glanced their way and quickly sat up, stuffing the magazine behind him.

"I didn't realize you had company. Sorry about that," Michael said with a sheepish grin.

Gabriel looked down at Kiera. "Actually, she isn't company."

Michael looked perplexed. "If she isn't company, then what is she exactly?"

Gabriel cleared his throat. "My mate."

Michael just about fell off the bed. "Whoa. That's ... wow, that's great!"

He pushed to his feet and rushed over to Kiera. He enveloped her in a big bear hug. "Welcome to the family!"

Kiera looked at him hesitantly. "Would you still welcome me if you knew that I could shapeshift too?"

Michael stepped back and raised his eyebrows. "You're a werewolf too?"

Kiera shook her head. "No, I'm a werefox actually."

"Sweet! I've never met anyone before who could shift into anything other than a wolf. That's awesome!"

“You really don’t mind that I don’t turn into a wolf?” she asked him.

Michael looked at her uncertainly, “Why would I?” He looked at Gabriel. “Am I missing something here?”

Gabriel sighed. “The town she lives in apparently is run by werewolves who think they’re better than the other shapeshifters. She doesn’t feel like she’s good enough to be with me and was worried that you and Cole wouldn’t accept her as my mate. I told her that she didn’t have anything to worry about.”

Michael shook his head. He had never heard anything so ridiculous before.

“Good thing the Atlanta pack isn’t like that. I don’t think I could stand to visit them if they were,” Michael replied.

Kiera was amazed that Michael was so ready to accept her, not only as the mate to his pack master, but also as his sister-in-law. It was mind boggling.

“Michael, would you keep Kiera company for a minute? I’m going to jump in the shower so I can run her by her hotel.”

“No problem, but why is she staying in a hotel when we have so much space here?”

Gabriel smiled. Leave it to Michael to get right to the point. “She just needs to get her things.” He turned to leave, but stopped. “Um, there’s actually something else we’ll need to discuss.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “Something more significant than you finding your mate?”

“It’s more in the ‘how’ really...”

Kiera looked at Gabriel. “I can tell him while you shower if you’d like.”

Gabriel walked over and kissed her on the cheek. "That would be great. I'll be back in a minute."

While Gabriel showered and changed, Kiera told Michael about the vampire following her and how she had taken shelter in the garage. She stumbled over her words a little when she got to the whole wedding part. Michael look stunned, but didn't say a word. When she was finished with her story, she looked at him expectantly. Would he still welcome her after finding out that she could have gotten Gabriel killed?

"Wow, that's some story. So y'all are getting married tomorrow? Is that even possible? I mean, can you get a marriage license the same day as the ceremony?"

Kiera hadn't thought of that. "I ... I don't know. If we can't, then I guess ... I guess I'll have to go with the vampire."

"No," bellowed Gabriel from the doorway. "You *will not* go with him!"

"Chill bro. Why don't you take Kiera to her hotel and I'll call Matt and Cassie and see if they can lend a hand? You know that he gets things done quickly around this town," Michael told him.

Gabriel visibly relaxed. "You're right. See what he can do and we'll be back shortly."

Kiera followed Gabriel down the stairs. When they reached the bottom, she placed her hand on his arm. "Who are Matt and Cassie?"

"Friends of ours. Matt is a millionaire who used to be a ghost and Cassie is his witchy wife."

"I'm sorry; did you just say he was a ghost?" Kiera was certain she had misheard him.

"Used to be. It's a long story."

Kiera just nodded numbly, not really sure what to say to that. She took a moment to admire Gabriel's clean clothes. Not that he hadn't looked wonderful in his grease stained white tee and tight holy jeans, but he looked absolutely mouthwatering when he was cleaned up. He had on a black short sleeve shirt and dark jeans with black motorcycle style boots. He looked like the bad boy momma's always warned their little girls about. Good thing Kiera's mom hadn't been around to warn her off of bad boys, she thought with a grin.

Gabriel ran his fingers through her hair. "Let's go get your stuff so we can get you settled for the night. I have a feeling that tomorrow will be a busy day."

When he got to the driveway, he froze. He hadn't thought about what they would drive. Gabriel only had a Harley and he couldn't picture her riding on it in heels and a dress. Turning he walked back into the house and grabbed Michael's keys to the Corvette. Looked like he was going to have to go car shopping...

"I wasn't thinking. We'll have to take Michael's car."

Kiera looked at him questioningly, "Why?"

Gabriel pointed to the Harley further down the drive, "Because that's mine. Looks like I need to do a little car shopping this week."

"Actually, when you take me home for the rest of my things, we'll have another vehicle. I have a Toyota Highlander."

Gabriel smiled at her. "I think I'll ask Cole to ride with us to your place. He has a large truck and we can load it up and only have to make one trip. Then you and I can ride back in your car."

Kiera was smiling as she climbed into the Vette. She had gone from being on the dinner menu tonight to having a family again. Things were definitely looking up. She only hoped that the Memphis area werewolves wouldn't cause problems for Cole and Gabriel when they took her home. No, when they took her to get her things. Her home was here now, in Ashton Grove, she corrected herself.

Things were happening so quickly that Kiera's head was spinning. Had anyone else told her they had met the man of their dreams and were getting married twenty four hours later, she would have told them they were insane! People just didn't do that. Or at least normal people didn't. In a way, shapeshifters had it easy. Each of them had a destined mate; one person in the entire world who was meant for them and only them. It took away a lot of the guess work that went into human relationships.

As they pulled into the hotel parking lot, Kiera spotted the Mercedes she and her friends had arrived in. She pointed it out to Gabriel and he parked nearby. They walked over to the hotel room door and knocked. Suzey, a blonde werelion, answered the door. Her eyes immediately dismissed Kiera, but she was openly drooling over Gabriel. Kiera felt the prick of jealousy, but tried not to show it.

"Hi, Suzey. I just need to get my things out of the car. Could you have Sierra unlock it for me?" she asked.

Suzey tore her gaze away from Gabriel and looked at Kiera, "You aren't staying with us?"

Gabriel had had enough of the woman's insolent behavior. She had ignored Kiera as if she weren't

even there; then the blasted woman had practically undressed him with her eyes. Had she been a wolf, he would have expected to see her tongue hanging out! Bringing himself to his full height, he stared the woman down. "No, she won't be."

Suzey gasped. She lightly sniffed the air and her eyes widened in shock. "You're an alpha wolf!"

Gabriel gave her a lazy grin. "Last time I checked. I believe Kiera asked for her things. Are you going to help her or do I need to break into the vehicle to retrieve them?"

Suzey jerked back as if she'd been slapped. She wasn't used to being treated callously by men, especially gorgeous, powerful men. Looking over her shoulder, she yelled for Sierra.

It turned out that Sierra was a red head who had the body of a cheerleader. She might have been attractive if she hadn't had such a crappy attitude. Gabriel wasn't impressed with her, although she seemed highly impressed with herself. The sooner he was able to get away from these crazy women, the better. All he wanted was to go home and spend a quiet evening with Kiera.

Sierra pushed her way around Suzey and practically glued herself to the front of Gabriel. "What's a big strong alpha like you doing with a timid little fox? Wouldn't you prefer a real woman in your bed?"

Gabriel smiled at her. "Yes, I would very much like to have a real woman in my bed. And if you'd be so kind as to get her things, then maybe that will happen sometime tonight."

Kiera tried not to laugh at the expressions on Sierra's and Suzey's faces. It was priceless! She could tell they were trying really hard to figure out what on earth Gabriel would want with her.

Especially since Sierra was a werewolf. She had practically every wolf in Tennessee panting after her and here Gabriel was telling her that he preferred a werefox.

Sierra was fuming, but she went to the Mercedes and pulled out Kiera's bag. Walking back over to the couple, she tossed the bag on the ground. "Here. Don't expect us to wait around for you. You'll have to find your own way home."

Gabriel picked up the bag. "She's already home."

Looking down at Kiera, he pulled her closer and claimed her lips in a possessive kiss. Slipping his tongue between her lips, he glided his tongue along hers, enjoying the taste of her. When she moaned and leaned into him further, he broke the kiss and smiled down at her. Taking her hand, they walked back to the Vette, leaving the two shapeshifters staring after them in open-mouthed shock. He opened the passenger door for her and stowed her bag in the trunk before climbing into the driver's seat. Without a backward glance, he drove out of the parking lot and headed back to the Victorian. He was pretty sure that both women were still staring after them, trying to process what had just happened. If he weren't so damn mad at them, he would have laughed. It seemed completely unbelievable to them that he would prefer Kiera over them.

When they got home, Gabriel carried Kiera's bag to his room and placed it on the floor at the foot of the bed. In the morning, he'd have to do something about re-arranging his clothes so she'd have some space in the dresser. There was plenty of room in the closet so that would work for now. Being a jeans and tee shirt kind of guy, he didn't

have much use for the closet. There were only a few nice things in there for emergencies.

"I'm afraid I don't have any empty drawers in the dresser right now, but I'll take care of that in the morning. There should be empty hangers in the closet though," he told her.

"Thank you. I'll probably just leave my stuff in the bag for tonight."

Gabriel walked over and opened a door. "Here's the bathroom if you want to freshen up or anything. I'm going to talk with Michael for a minute. Do you have everything you need?"

Kiera nodded her head. "Yes, thank you."

Gabriel gave her a brief smile before closing the bedroom door behind him. Kiera walked over to the bathroom and peered inside. There was a large garden tub with jets and a large walk-in shower that could have easily held four or five people. It was by far the biggest bathroom she'd ever seen.

Grabbing her nightgown and toiletries, she headed into the bathroom and decided a soak in the tub would be nice. As the tub filled with hot steamy water, she pulled her hair into a twist and put a clip in it. As long and thick as her hair was, it would take forever for it to dry so washing it this late at night was out of the question. She rummaged through the cabinets and closet until she found a washcloth and towel before climbing into the tub. Sinking into the water up to her neck, she closed her eyes and let the hot water sooth away the stress of the day.



Gabriel had been in Michael's room longer than he had planned. It had taken at least half an hour to go over the plans that Matt and Cassie had been

able to throw together. How they managed to set an appointment for a marriage license, procure a minister, arrange for a florist and caterer, and set an appointment at a bridal boutique when it was almost midnight was beyond Gabriel. Money apparently really did move mountains. He hoped that even with such short notice Kiera could still have the wedding of her dreams. He was going to owe Matt and Cassie big time!

When he got back to his bedroom, he noticed that the bathroom door was open a little bit and Kiera was nowhere in sight. He crept to the bathroom door and peeked in. She was lying in the tub with her head tipped back and her eyes closed. It looked like she had fallen asleep.

From across the room, all Gabriel could see were her naked shoulders and arms. He knew that if he went any closer he would see a lot more, but he was afraid she would react badly; he wasn't certain that he could control himself if he saw her naked right now.

Inspiration struck and he shifted into a wolf. He was still large enough to see over the edge of the tub, but it was somehow different when he was in his animal form. He nudged her arm with his cold wet nose. She murmured something in her sleep, but didn't wake up. He edged a little closer and licked her cheek.

Kiera slowly opened her eyes. Turning her head, she saw a large black wolf standing next to the tub. Her first reaction was to shriek. Once her heart settled down, she remembered that she wasn't at home. Hesitantly she reached for the wolf.

"Gabriel?"

The wolf nodded his head yes.

Kiera smiled at him. “You make a beautiful wolf. I’m sorry I fell asleep; the water just felt so relaxing I couldn’t help myself.”

Gabriel nudged her towel closer to her and padded out of the bathroom. He shifted back into his human form and threw on some pajama pants. He didn’t wear them very often, but he kept a pair on hand in case of an emergency. He figured that tonight was definitely an emergency. If he held Kiera against his naked body, they would be doing a lot more than sleeping. The woman lit him on fire.

He had just picked up his dirty clothes when Kiera came out of the bathroom in a long white nightgown. It had thin straps and a hint of lace at the bottom. She looked like an angel and somehow managed to look sexy as hell at the same time. She had that innocent and yet naughty look to her.

Gabriel started to turn down the covers. Turning to face her he asked, “What side of the bed do you normally sleep on?”

“Oh, um, the left.”

Gabriel walked around to the other side of the bed and turned down the covers. He held his hand out to her and she slowly walked over to him. She was so tired that she looked like she would collapse at any moment. Gabriel picked her up and gently laid her down on the soft mattress. He had a large king size bed with a hand-carved wooden headboard. Kiera was so petite that he would have to get some steps for her to use; or buy a different bed.

Once she was tucked in, Gabriel walked around to the other side and climbed under the covers. In her sleep, Kiera moved closer to him until she was pressed against his side. Gabriel sighed and drew

her into his arms. It was going to be a very, very long night.

Author Bio

When she isn't writing, Jessica spends her time with her family and her pets. She lives in Tennessee with her husband, two children, and a small zoo of animals.

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