

# *Moonlight Guardian*

**Ashton Grove Werewolves, Book 3**

Written by Jessica Coulter Smith

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## **Dedication**

I would like to say a special thank you to my husband for putting up with me; thanks to Mom and Dennis for being supportive; thank you to my friends for encouraging me to go on even when I get frustrated; and thank you to my editors, you guys rock!

## Chapter One

Chloe sighed as she trudged up the walkway toward her apartment. It wasn't much, but it was all she had left at the moment. She had lost her job about two months ago. Last week the bank had sent someone to repossess her car. So far, her job hunting was going nowhere. She only had enough money left in her account for another week's worth of groceries. She was behind a month in her rent and had no idea how she was going to pay it.

As she approached the building, she noticed a pile of bags, furniture, and other items out on the sidewalk. Upon closer inspection, she realized that it was *her* clothing, furniture and miscellaneous items, or at least what was left of them. It looked as if they had been ransacked already.

Tired, hungry and feeling at a loss, she walked up to the manager's door and knocked. Mr. Marsalis answered almost immediately.

"Ah, Ms. Stevens. I'm afraid the lock has been changed on your door and your items have been removed from the premises. Your rent is now two months past due."

"Two months? But..."

"Yes indeed. As of this morning, you are officially two months past due. I'm sure you'll recall that the lease agreement you signed stated that if you should become two months behind you would be evicted."

Chloe sighed. She did remember, but she thought she had another day or two before it was due. Not that it would have mattered. Without a job she didn't have a way to pay the rent regardless of when it was due.

She weakly nodded her head.

“Yes, Mr. Marsalis. I do remember. I’m sorry for all of the trouble, but I lost my job and haven’t been able to find another.”

Mr. Marsalis gave her a pitying look. He hadn’t wanted to evict the petite redhead, but rules were rules. If he let her stay after being two months behind, he would have to do the same for everyone else.

“I really am sorry, dear. If you find a job and need a place to stay, I’ll be happy to rent to you again, but until then I’m afraid my hands are tied. I may manage the property, but I don’t own it.”

“I understand,” she replied.

Chloe turned and left the building, dejected and uncertain of what she should do. Absently she rubbed her rounding stomach. She had no one to turn to; her family had been killed years ago in an earthquake in California. She had been sent to Georgia afterward to live with some distant relatives.

Picking up a sack, she put a few items of clothing in it from the sidewalk before walking away. There was no point in staring at the items that had once made up her life; she couldn’t carry it all and even if she could she had nowhere to take it. It was best to not think about it. If she thought about it too long, she knew she’d end up crying. Stupid pregnancy hormones!

Walking aimlessly, she pondered her fate. Where on earth could a broke, jobless, homeless pregnant woman go in such a small town? Her stomach rumbled and she remembered that she had missed lunch. While she didn’t have much money left, she did have enough in her purse to get a late lunch at a fast food place.

She spotted a hamburger place and quickly walked inside. After ordering her food, she chose a table with a window. Chloe gazed out of the window at the beautiful September evening as she nibbled on her food. Unfortunately, her troubles were weighing heavy on her and she couldn’t enjoy her meal or the view.

It was becoming clearer and clearer that she only had one option left. She had to find Michael.



During her meal, Chloe came to a decision. She would use what little money she had to get a hotel room for the night. She’d try one more time in the morning to get a job – any job! If she still didn’t have a way

to support herself or her baby, she would look for Michael. One more day couldn't hurt anything.

Leaving the restaurant, she walked the four blocks to a small motel on Radcliff. It wasn't a four star hotel by any means, but it had a bed and a bathroom. That's all she required for the moment.

Stepping into the cool interior of the motel office, she rang the bell on the desk.

A portly man in a Hawaiian print shirt stepped out of the back office.

"May I help you?"

Chloe nodded. "I'd like a room please."

"And how long will you be staying?"

"Just one night I think."

The man noticed the sack she held in her hand and her bedraggled appearance. "Are you okay?"

She gave him a watery smile, tears springing to her eyes. "I'll be fine. I just need a place to stay for the night."

He only had a handful of guests staying in the motel at the moment. Business had been slow for a few months. Feeling in a generous mood, he made her an offer. "I tell you what. I just started a special today. Buy one night and get two free."

Chloe knew there was no way he was offering two free nights for the price of one. She opened her mouth to protest, but he stopped her.

"Look, I can see you're tired and need a place to stay for a bit. Most of my rooms are empty right now so it won't hurt my business if you stay longer than one night."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"Now, I believe your total is thirty-five dollars. Will that be cash, check, or charge?"

"Cash," she said, digging into her purse for her wallet. Pulling out the money, she noted that she had just enough left for a few inexpensive meals.

Paying the man, she accepted her room key.

"You're in room 104."

"Thank you," she said, before turning and walking out of the office.

Following the path from the office door, she passed several rooms before coming to 104. Putting her key in the lock, she opened the door.

The inside wasn't as bad as she had feared it would be. The floral bedspread was a little faded from age, but the room was clean.

The queen size bed beckoned to her. Kicking off her shoes, she decided to lie down and rest for a bit. Within moments, she was asleep.



Chloe didn't wake up until the next morning. She was starving, but knew she needed to stretch her money. Instead of going to breakfast, she picked up a newspaper and scoured the classifieds, hoping against hope she would find a job.

She noticed two possibilities, both of which were nearby. Grabbing her purse and her room key, she set out on foot. The closest one wasn't her favorite, but any money was better than no money. At this point, she was ready to take a job cleaning houses if it meant she'd have money for a place to sleep and food to eat.

Stopping in front of the store, she took a breath and went inside. It was a small boutique specializing in upscale women's clothing. Not the type of place Chloe was used to being in, but surely that wouldn't be an issue for a simple sales clerk position.

As she made her way to the back of the store, she noticed the women in the store. Most were polished and obviously came from money. The only sales clerk she saw on the floor was dressed in a black skirt suit. Was that the required type of clothing for their sales people?

Chloe approached the checkout counter and noticed the woman behind the counter also wore a suit. Obviously this wasn't the right place for her. Without even stopping, she made a u-turn and headed for the door. There was no sense in wasting their time or hers.

Once she was back out on the sidewalk, she sighed and looked at the next potential job on her list. A floral shop needed a receptionist. Chloe had no doubt she was qualified to answer a phone and a floral shop should be a fairly casual place to work. At least, she hoped that was the case.

After walking several blocks, Chloe stopped in front of Ackman's Flower Shop. When she opened the door, a bell jingled overhead. Stepping into the store, the scent of flowers hit Chloe, making her sneeze. She loved flowers, but the scent was over-powering. Before she could take another step, she sneezed two more times and her eyes began to water.



Backing out of the store, Chloe stood once more on the sidewalk. How could she answer their phones if she couldn't even stand in the shop?

Her stomach growled and reminded her she hadn't eaten yet. Giving in, she walked over to the McDonald's on the corner. If she kept eating out, she'd be completely broke by the morning.

As she ate her food, she stared thoughtfully out the window. It seemed she was out of options. While she may have another two nights at the motel, she didn't have enough money for meals. Whether she liked it or not, she would have to find Michael. If she and her baby were going to survive, he was her only hope.



After her meal, Chloe slowly trudged along the sidewalk. She remembered that Michael worked at his family's garage and that he had mentioned living across the street. She knew where Andrews Auto Repair was located, which meant his home had to be the large Victorian across from it. Unfortunately for her, both were still several blocks away. She hated to spend money she didn't have, but it was apparent a bus was in order; walking was out of the question.

Stopping at the nearest bus stop, she sat on the bench and waited. Before too long, the bus she needed stopped and she got in. Dropping her money into the machine by the door, she took the first vacant seat she came across.

Two blocks from the Victorian, the bus let her out. She slowly made her way along the sidewalk, deep in thought.

What would she say to Michael? Hi, remember me? The woman you knocked up? No, she obviously couldn't say that. Not if she wanted his help. And honestly, what did she expect him to do? It's not like he could make a job miraculously appear for her. She wasn't sure what she expected or what she wanted. Chloe only knew that she was completely out of options.

Standing in front of the large house, she gazed up at it in wonder. It was pretty intimidating up close. She had never been inside of a house this large before. For all she knew, he'd slam the door in her face and she wouldn't get a chance to go inside one now either.

Taking a deep breath, she walked up the steps and knocked on the door. She was surprised when a beautiful woman with black hair

opened the door. Was this why Michael hadn't been around? Had he not only moved on, but allowed a woman to move in?

Kiera watched the small redhead in curiosity. "May I help you with something?"

Chloe clutched her short-sleeve cardigan a little tighter around her, feeling insecure wasn't something she was accustomed to and she didn't like it.

"I was hoping that Michael might be at home," she murmured, her voice low and husky with unshed tears. Her hormones were working over-time. She hated being so emotional all the time. Just the thought that Michael had replaced her so quickly hurt more than she cared to admit.

"Michael? I'm afraid he doesn't live here anymore," Kiera told her.

Chloe's breath caught in her throat. He'd moved? Now what she going to do? She had no way to find him and she had nowhere else to go. On the plus side, that meant he hadn't replaced her with the raven haired beauty standing before her.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you," she said in a near whisper and started backing away from the door.

"Wait. Why don't you come in for a minute?"

Chloe shook her head. "I've disturbed you enough for one night, but thank you."

A large man walked up behind the woman. Chloe could tell he was related to Michael. She remembered him mentioning two brothers. If she had to guess, Chloe would say that she was currently facing the oldest brother.

"What's going on?" Gabriel asked, putting his arms around his wife.

Kiera tipped her head back to look up at him. "This young woman was just looking for Michael. I told her that he doesn't live here anymore."

"No, he doesn't. Would you like to come in for a minute? Maybe have some tea or coffee?" Gabriel asked, wondering who the woman was, and more importantly who she was to Michael. The alpha recognized that she was part of their pack. Maybe she was Michael's mate? The idea intrigued him, but as much as their pack had expanded lately, she could be anyone's mate. She was definitely destined to be

part of the pack, but Gabriel couldn't be certain who she belonged to, not yet anyway.

Chloe let go of her cardigan long enough to hold up a hand. "No, really... I should be going."

Gabriel's eyes widened in shock as he took in the gentle swelling of Chloe's stomach. "Are you pregnant?"

Chloe blushed. "Um, yeah, I am... only about five months though."

Gabriel did a quick mental calculation and came up with the answer for Chloe's visit. It was very likely that his baby brother was going to be a father, and probably didn't know anything about it.

"I think you need to come in for a few minutes," Gabriel told her, his tone brooking no argument.

Chloe sighed and hesitantly stepped into the front entry. She looked around at her surroundings. The walls had been freshly painted and everything gleamed. It was just as beautiful as she'd thought it would be.

Kiera motioned toward the living room. "Why don't you have a seat? I'll keep you company while Gabriel makes us some tea."

Chloe nodded and walked over to the sofa. As she sank into the comfy cushions, a sigh escaped her before she could stop it. Getting off of her feet felt heavenly; the sofa being extra cushy just made it that much better.

Gabriel took his cue from his wife and went to the kitchen, where he placed a discreet phone call. Quickly making two cups of tea, he carried them back into the living room. From what he could see, his wife was doing most of the talking.

"I was just asking Chloe where she was staying," Kiera said as Gabriel walked into the living room.

Chloe's blush had deepened until her whole face was bright red. She was staring intently at something on the floor, trying to hide behind a curtain of hair. It was obvious to the couple that she was ashamed of where she lived.

"I was staying in an apartment over on Walnut Road," she murmured in response, hoping that would be the end of it.

"Was? You mean you aren't now?" Kiera asked.

Chloe really didn't want to answer the question. She hadn't realized just how uncomfortable it would be coming here and having to answer

a barrage of questions. Was it too late to leave and figure out something else? She gave a furtive glance toward the front door, wishing it were closer and that she were faster. She had a feeling that Michael's brother wouldn't let her leave yet. It was obvious he suspected that Michael was the father of her child.

"Chloe?" Kiera prompted, still waiting on her question to be answered.

Chloe cleared her throat. "I was evicted yesterday."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Kiera said, placing a sympathetic hand on her arm.

Before Chloe could respond, the front door opened and closed.



"Hey bro, you said you wanted to see me?" Michael said as he walked into the living room.

The moment he saw Chloe, he stopped dead in his tracks. What was going on? Why was she here? He looked to Gabriel with a ton of questions in his eyes.

"Kiera, I think that Michael and Chloe need to talk for a minute. Why don't we go into the kitchen?" Gabriel said, holding his hand out to his wife.

Kiera climbed to her feet and gave Chloe one last look, wishing that she could help in some way. The poor woman looked terrified.

When his brother and sister-in-law had filed out of the room, Michael looked at Chloe with a raised eyebrow.

"I take it you were looking for me?"

Why had she talked herself into this? She wasn't ready to confront him, wasn't sure what to say or do. She stared at the floor, wishing it would open up and swallow her.

"Chloe?" Michael took a step toward her. What was going on? He didn't remember her being so shy. Why wouldn't she look at him?

She glanced up at him. Her mouth went dry. He was every bit as gorgeous as he had been the night she'd met him. His tall, muscular form was every bit as delicious as she had remembered. His blue eyes contrasted nicely with his inky black hair; his strong, full lips made liquid heat pool between her legs. For whatever reason, Chloe seemed to lose the ability to think when Michael was around, which was obvious since she was pregnant. The man was sinfully handsome, of that there was

no doubt. It was also obvious that she still desired him as much as she had five months ago. This was definitely a mistake! Finding Michael was more dangerous than she had thought.

"I shouldn't have come here," she told him, pushing herself to her feet.

Before she could reach the door, Michael reached out and gently took her arm.

"Wait, you had to come here for some reason. Just tell me what you wanted, Chloe."

She shook her head. "No, this was a mistake."

Pulling her arm free, she tried to walk out the door again, only to be stopped – again.

"What was a mistake, Chloe?"

Shaking her head, she tried to go around him.

Michael put his arm out, effectively blocking her path. In the process, her cardigan was pushed aside, revealing her stomach.

Grabbing the edges of the material, Chloe tried to cover the small bump. She wasn't quite fast enough if the shocked expression on Michael's face was anything to go by. She sighed, resigned to her fate.

"You're pregnant?" he asked, unable to believe his eyes.

"Yes, five months."

His eyes darted to hers. "Are you sure it's mine?"

Anger filled her, eyes flashing she pushed past his arm and out the front door. She was down the steps and part way down the sidewalk before Michael even registered what had just happened.



Chloe was fuming! How dare he ask if the baby was his? As if she slept around all the time! The nerve of the man! He's the one who walked out on her, who quit calling and coming by. What right did he have to question *her*?

She had just reached the bus stop and sat down when a Corvette pulled up to the curb. Leaving the car running, Michael got out and walked over to her.

Hunkering down in front of her, he tried to catch her attention. Chloe was looking everywhere but at him. "Chloe, would you look at me?"

She stubbornly stared at the ground.

"Chloe, what do you want me to say? I'm sorry okay. You kind of blindsided me."

She had to grudgingly admit that he was right on that point. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

"Why didn't you?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure I had planned on ever telling you. You left and stopped calling. I figured you had gotten what you wanted from me and had moved on."

Michael's heart cracked a little at her admission. It wasn't entirely true, but it was close enough. In all honesty, he had run as fast and as far as he could – not because he didn't care, but because he *did*. He had a strict rule that women were for fun only. Once things started to get serious, it was time to get out. Chloe had been the only woman he'd actually been tempted to stay with, which scared the hell out of him.

"I'm sorry I didn't call. I ended up getting attacked by some crazy guy who was after my sister-in-law; then my other brother got married a few weeks later," Michael said by way of explanation.

Her eyes widened in shock. "Attacked? What do you mean attacked?"

"It was nothing. I was laid up for a week or two, but I'm fine now."

Chloe scooted closer to the edge of the bench. "So you were attacked shortly after our last night together?"

Thinking he was getting through to her, he smiled. "Yes, I was. Otherwise, I would have called you."

"And you were stuck in bed during your recovery?" she asked.

He nodded. "For at least two weeks."

Chloe set her jaw. "And you couldn't work a phone in all that time? Or in the months since then?"

Too late, Michael realized his mistake. "Well, I..."

"Just admit it Michael! You weren't going to call me. I was nothing more than a fling to you, which is why I didn't bother telling you about the baby. You didn't want me so why should I think you'd want your child?" she snapped angrily.

Michael lost his temper. "If you didn't think I wanted you or the baby, why did you come looking for me now?"

Tears blurred Chloe's vision. "I wouldn't have, but I didn't have any other options."

"What are you talking about?"

"I lost my job, lost my car, and yesterday I was evicted from my apartment. The few things I have left fit in a plastic sack," she said.

Michael sighed, his anger draining away at her admission. He gathered her hand in his and gave it a slight tug. "Well, come on."

She looked up at him, a tear having slipped down her cheek. "What? Where are we going?"

"To my place. You can't sit on this bench all night."

She shook her head. "No, I shouldn't have come looking for you. I should have just figured it out on my own. This is my problem, not yours."

"In case you missed it, Chloe, the baby you're carrying is mine. That makes your welfare my problem just as much as it is yours," he growled. Damn but the woman was independent!

"Okay, but just for tonight," she relented grudgingly.

Michael rubbed his jaw. "And you're miraculously going to have a job and a place to live in the morning?"

"Well, no."

He nodded. "Then I think it's safe to say you'll be staying with me for longer than just tonight."

Chloe knew she'd lost this round. One way or another, she was going to find a job! Staying in Michael's house wasn't going to be easy. He might have been able to forget about her, but she hadn't been able to forget him. She'd thought of him every waking moment since the last time she'd seen him.

Michael stood and held his hand out to her. Helping her stand, he put an arm around her waist, which she promptly shrugged off.

"Michael, maybe we need to get something straight."

He didn't think he liked where this was going. "What is it Chloe?"

"We aren't going to pick up where we left off. I'm not sleeping with you."

"I didn't expect you to, Chloe." Although he had *hoped* she would. Having her under his roof and not in his bed was going to drive him crazy.

"So what's with the arm around my waist?"

"I just thought you might be tired. I was only helping you to the car," he answered.

Some of the anger left her, visibly relaxing her posture. "Oh. Sorry, I thought you were trying to make a move on me."

Michael's lips twitched as he fought a grin. "Honey, if I made a move on you, you'd know it."

A blush stained her cheeks. "I remember," she murmured.

Michael opened the car door and Chloe climbed inside. Once she was buckled, he closed the door and walked around to the driver's side. Shaking his head, he climbed into the car. It was going to be a long night, of that he had no doubt. He had a feeling his life would never be the same.



## Chapter Two

A short time later, after having retrieved Chloe's possessions from her motel room, Michael pulled up in front of his home. It wasn't big and fancy like the Victorian, but it was his. Matt had sold it to him right after Kiera and Gabriel had gotten married. The three bedroom one bath brick home backed up to a large park, which made it ideal for a werewolf. There was a large privacy fence around the backyard as well, with gates in both the front and the back.

Chloe was surprised when she saw Michael's house. After the Victorian, she had figured he lived in a large house. The small brick home in front of her looked cozy, like a family home. That's the last thing she needed to be thinking, she mentally chastised herself. She and Michael were *not* going to be a family!

Getting out of the car, she carried her sack up to the front porch. She surveyed the area while Michael unlocked the front door and pushed it open.

"After you," he said, motioning for her to enter.

Chloe stepped into the house and was pleasantly surprised. The living room was fairly small with hardwood floors and tan walls. The furniture was simple, but seemed to suit the room perfectly. Through the living room, she could see the eat-in kitchen.

"The bedrooms are through here," Michael said as he headed for a small hallway off to the left.

"I don't have any furniture in the first bedroom. The second one doesn't have much either," he said, passing both rooms.

"I'm sure it will be fine."

He pushed open a third door. "Actually, I'm giving you my room."

Chloe looked at him in surprise. "You can't do that."

"I think I just did."

"But... it isn't fair for you to give up your room," she insisted.

"Chloe, would you just take the room? The bed is bigger and more comfortable. You're carrying my child, just let me do this one small thing," he said in desperation.

Chloe opened her mouth to argue, but the stubborn set of Michael's jaw told her it would be futile to argue. She gave a slight nod, "Okay, I'll take the room, but only because you insist."

Michael walked into the room and cleaned out a dresser drawer for her, "You can put your things in here."

She eyed her small sack, the drawer, and finally looked at Michael. "I somehow don't think my worldly possessions will take up enough space to warrant having a whole drawer to myself."

Michael's throat constricted. He knew she was only being flip to hide her pain. He couldn't imagine how she had felt seeing her stuff out on the street, knowing she didn't have a place to live any longer. "Just take the damn drawer, Chloe. We'll discuss your belongings, or lack thereof, in the morning."

Chloe nodded and emptied her sack into the drawer. She'd only managed to snag two changes of clothes, some clean bras and panties, and one or two knick knacks that had been special to her.

Michael noticed she didn't have a nightgown in the drawer and pulled out an extra-large tee for her to sleep in; tossing it on the bed he turned to face her, "Do you need anything else tonight?"

Chloe shook her head. "I'm fine."

Michael turned to go, but her voice stopped him.

"Michael, I just wanted to say thank you. You didn't have to let me sleep here tonight."

"Yes I did, Chloe, but you're welcome just the same."

Michael left, closing the door behind him, leaving Chloe to her thoughts.

She sank onto the edge of the bed and looked around the room. It wasn't overly large, but it was big enough to hold the queen size bed, dresser, and nightstand. There weren't any decorations, pictures, or much of anything making the room Michael's. Without the personal touches, the room didn't look lived in; more like it was a resting place.

Knowing Michael and his proclivity for sleeping around, it probably was just a resting place.

Chloe picked up the t-shirt and held it to her face, breathing in Michael's scent. Closing her eyes, she remembered their brief time together. Before she could stop it, a tear slid down her cheek. She had thought that Michael was different, that they had something special together. Instead, he had turned out to be like every other guy she'd dated, only after her body and not her heart. Well, whether he had wanted it or not, Chloe had given her heart to Michael. She just hoped he didn't realize it while she was staying here. He'd already broken it once and Chloe wasn't sure it could take too much abuse. Loving Michael was dangerous.

Sliding off the edge of the bed, she walked into the hall and into the bathroom. A shower was just the thing before turning in for the night. While it was still early, she'd had a long day and hadn't managed to get in a nap. Her ever changing body required more sleep than she had been getting and she could barely hold her eyes open.



In the living room, Michael sank onto the sofa. Burying his hands in his hair, he tried to absorb the fact that he was going to be a father. He hadn't planned on settling down anytime soon. While he had known that Chloe was special, he hadn't been ready to face a forever kind of relationship, so of course he'd bailed on her. Looking back, he wished that he had called her at least once. Maybe he would have known about the baby, known that she needed him.

He heard the water turn on and looked down the hall. Clenching his fists, he forced himself to remain where he was. Knowing that Chloe was getting in the shower, he wanted nothing more than to go to her. Her body had been beautiful the last time he'd seen it; petite with just the right amount of curves. Now it was growing with his child and he wanted to share in the marvel, but knew that she would freak out if he were to walk in there right now. Chloe needed time, a lot of time, before he could be a part of her life. And Michael realized that he wanted precisely that; not just to be part of her life, but to be part of her world.

Was it too late? Had he screwed up? Well, obviously he had screwed up, but was it something he could fix?

Leaning back against the sofa cushions, he dropped his head back and closed his eyes. He'd call Cassie and see if she had any maternity clothes that might fit Chloe until he could take her shopping. Maybe it would be the peace offering he needed to crack the hard shell Chloe had built around herself, effectively blocking him from her heart.

## Chapter Three

### *The Next Day*

Chloe woke with a start. Looking around the room, everything was unfamiliar to her. As she pushed herself into a sitting position, she remembered where she was – Michael’s house.

Pushing the covers aside, she got out of bed and walked over to the dresser. Opening her drawer, she pulled out one of her remaining clean outfits. Quickly putting on the knit top and jeans, she went into the bathroom to brush her hair and teeth.

Chloe took a breath, steeling her nerves; she was uncertain of what she would find when she opened the door and walked down the hall. Reaching for the knob, she hesitantly turned it, pulling the door open one inch at a time.

As she peered into the hallway, she realized the house seemed quiet – a little too quiet. With a frown marring her brow, she crept into the hall. Both of the other bedroom doors were closed so she wasn’t sure if Michael was asleep or not. Venturing down the hall, she stepped into the living room. No sign of Michael.

Just as she started to relax, she heard a key in the lock of the front door. Shoulders tense, she faced the door and waited. When the door opened, she saw Michael and her breath caught in her throat. His dark hair was windblown; his blue t-shirt clung to his muscular chest and upper arms. Chloe let her eyes travel down his denim clad legs to the worn black boots on his feet. Her eyes snapped back to his face just as he stepped into the house.

"I thought you were at work," she said, hoping her voice didn't give away her thoughts.

Michael looked at her over the top of his sunglasses. "I have the day off."

Chloe noticed the paper shopping bag in his hand. "You went shopping awfully early."

"Actually, I went to see some friends. Cassie was cleaning some stuff out for a garage sale and thought you might be able to use these," he said, handing the bag to her. It was at least part of the truth. Cassie really was preparing for a garage sale, but the maternity clothes hadn't been part of it.

Chloe took the bag from him and peered inside. She bit her lip when she saw the clothes. Tears clogged her throat. Why was he being so nice to her? He was making it really hard to stay mad at him.

"Thank you," she said huskily.

Michael noticed that her eyes looked a little teary. "Are you okay, Chloe?"

She fought back her tears, wishing he hadn't seen her tear up. "I'm fine. It's just pregnancy hormones."

Michael looked at her, skeptical. He knew from his experience with Cassie and Marin that women did tend to act strangely when they were pregnant, but he wondered if it were something more.

He motioned toward the sofa, "Chloe, sit with me a minute?"

She eyed him, not sure if she should accept or escape to her room. *Michael's room*, she corrected herself. Sitting on the edge of the cushion, she watched as he sat beside her.

Michael turned toward Chloe and reached for her hand. He could tell she wanted to jerk it out of his grasp, but he held tight.

"Chloe, if we're going to be staying together, even for a short time, I think we need to talk. I'm sorry for the way I acted, the way I disappeared."

Chloe shook her head. "You don't owe me an explanation, Michael. You told me before that you weren't looking for a serious relationship. I just didn't listen."

Michael swallowed, wishing he could take her pain away. "Chloe, I may not have been looking for a permanent relationship, but if I were going to have one, it would be with you."

Chloe turned her face away. "Why are you doing this to me, Michael?"

"Doing what?"

She took a breath to steel her nerves before facing him again. "Why are you saying these things? If you feel guilty, you shouldn't."

"It isn't that. Please, Chloe, just listen to me."

Chloe shook her head. "I don't know if I should."

Michael gently reached up and caressed her cheek. "If I could go back and change everything, I would have called you the next morning. I would have been by your side this whole time."

"Then why didn't you? Why did you leave and not call?" Chloe asked her voice breaking as she fought to hold back her tears.

"Because I was afraid," he admitted.

"Afraid? What on earth do you have to be afraid of?" she asked, incredulous.

"Of you, of the way you make me feel. Before I met you, I had always been happy with one-night stands. It's all I had wanted. But then I met you and I couldn't seem to get enough of you."

"Michael..." she interrupted.

"Shh. Let me finish. Chloe, I didn't call you because I was terrified of how you made me feel, of the things you made me want. For the first time in my life, I actually wanted a steady girlfriend. I wanted you," he said.

Chloe swallowed and looked down at her feet. She didn't know what to say, or what to think. He was telling her that he wanted her, but hadn't mentioned love. Was it too much to ask for love in a relationship? Or should she think about the baby?

"Say something, Chloe," he implored.

"I don't know what to say, Michael."

"Say that you can forgive me, that you can give me another chance," he answered.

Chloe shook her head and stood. "I don't know that I can give you another chance, Michael. But, if it helps, I do forgive you."

"Chloe..."

She held up her hand. "No, please don't say anything else. I need some time to myself."

Michael nodded. "There's a gate in the backyard that leads to a park, if you'd like to go for a walk."

"Thank you," she said, heading for the back door, trying to hang on to her dignity. If she stayed another moment, she knew she would throw herself into his arms.

Michael stayed on the couch and hung his head. He had royally screwed up and he knew it. Chloe was his mate, his life, and now he had no hopes of ever winning her back. She could barely stand to be in the same room with him. How could he ever convince her to marry him?

Deciding he would do whatever it took to win Chloe back Michael surged to his feet and went in search of his mate. He would say or do whatever he had to, including grovel.

He grimaced realizing the bad ass of the Andrews brothers had been whipped by a tiny red headed female. His brothers would never let him hear the end of it. The wild, hard, womanizing Michael Andrews had finally met his match.



## Chapter Four

Chloe escaped through the back door and into the yard. Walking briskly toward the back fence, she opened the gate and stepped into the park. Breathing in the morning air, she tried to steady her nerves.

Everything Michael had said had meant more to her than she would ever let him know. If only he had figured it out *before* he had stopped calling her. Now it was too late, the damage had been done.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she started down the path. As she walked through the wooded park, she thought about her life over the past five months.

Within a few weeks of Michael leaving her, Chloe had found out she was pregnant. She had been terrified, but knew that she would keep the baby. She had continued on with her life just as she always had; she got up and went to work, kept her apartment clean, and did her grocery shopping. Then she had lost her job. She hadn't been too worried. She had money in savings and felt sure she would have a job in no time.

Unfortunately, she had missed two car payments and the bank had come and repossessed her car. But she had kept her chin up. She still had enough money in savings to keep her apartment for another month. All she had to do was find a job; except she hadn't found a job and had lost her apartment and all of her possessions.

Feeling as if she couldn't sink any lower, she had sought out Michael, in hopes of... well, she honestly didn't know what she had hoped for. She certainly hadn't counted on moving in with him.

Could her life possibly get more complicated? Living with Michael wasn't easy, but she had known it wouldn't be. She'd only been in his house for one night and already she felt the need to escape. Being in

the same room with him was hard. She had trusted him and he had broken her heart. And yet, she still desired him. If he had put his arms around her, she would have been lost, unable to say no to him.

Spotting a park bench, Chloe sat down.

She wasn't sure what she wanted from Michael. Maybe if she figured that out, she could find some peace. What she really wanted she knew she couldn't have – his heart and his love. Being with Michael was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. She had felt as if she belonged with him, had felt as if he was "the one." Then he had proved himself to be like every other jerk she had dated. Well, maybe not as much of a jerk as Atwood had been. The man had pretty much told her he was just using her for sex. She'd dumped him the next day.

Chloe heard a rustling noise to her right and turned toward the sound, thinking it was just a squirrel or bird. Instead, she saw Michael walking toward her.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

Chloe shrugged. Part of her wanted to scream no and the other part wanted to say yes. She hated feeling conflicted. Most of all, she hated that she wanted him. By all rights she should hate his guts and never want to see him or speak to him again. Instead she found herself wanting to make love to him like she had five months ago.

"Chloe, I want to ask a favor of you."

"What kind of favor?" she asked.

"I want you to give me another chance. I know that I can be a good father and that I can be someone you could depend on. Please give me the chance to prove that to you," he implored.

She shook her head. "I can't just forget what happened, Michael. We already discussed this at the house."

"I'm not asking you to forget. I'm simply asking if we can try to move on from that point and try to rebuild whatever relationship we had," he said. "I know I screwed up and I'm sorry."

"You said you left because you wanted to stay," she reminded him, a perplexed look on her face.

Michael rubbed the back of his neck. "I know it sounds crazy, but it's the truth. I felt myself being drawn to you, wanting to be with you all the time. I did the first thing that came to mind, I ran. It wasn't the best decision I've ever made, but I can't change it either."

Chloe eyed him thoughtfully. “If I give you another chance, you have to start from square one.”

Michael’s heart kicked in his chest. Was she really going to give him another shot? “I don’t mind starting over.”

She chewed on her lip, a nervous habit, and then nodded. “Okay, you can have another chance. But the first time you screw up again, it’s over.”

“I won’t screw up this time,” he promised.

Chloe rubbed her stomach. “Could we possibly start over by getting some breakfast?”

Michael laughed and held his hand out to her. “Breakfast sounds good.”



Once they were seated at the Waffle House, Michael tried to think of ways to help Chloe with her other problem – a job. Kiera was already helping out at the garage so they didn’t need anyone to assist with office work. Marin worked with Cole at Sabin Bio-Med. So what did that leave for Chloe?

Michael picked up his menu, but immediately put it back down when his phone rang.

“Hello,” he answered, recognizing Matt Spencer’s cell phone number on the display.

“Michael, I need help,” Matt replied.

“What’s up? Everything okay with Cassie and the kids?” Michael asked, immediately concerned. Matt never asked for help.

“No, it’s nothing like that. Cass and the kids are great. I actually need help with the house rentals,” he answered.

“What about them?” Michael asked.

“I guess I have my fingers in too many pies these days. I have six rental homes and about a dozen more for lease or sale.” Matt blew out a breath. “I don’t have time to keep up with it all. I’m opening a small office on Apple Wood Drive and need someone to man the desk.”

Michael perked up, thinking he may have just found the solution to Chloe’s problem. “What are the days and hours?”

“Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from ten o’clock to two o’clock. Cassie wants to help on Fridays and Saturdays. I’m going to close the

office on Sundays and Mondays,” Matt responded. “Do you know of anyone that might want the job? It pays ten dollars an hour.”

Michael rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “I may know of someone as at least a temporary fix. Give me an hour and I’ll call you back.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Michael!” Matt said before hanging up.

Michael put his phone back in his pocket. Chloe was perusing the menu, but he knew she was curious about his phone call.

“That was a friend of mine. It seems he’s opening a real estate or property management office. I’m honestly not sure which or what the difference really is, but the point is that he needs someone four hours a day three days a week,” Michael said.

Chloe perked up. “Really?”

“It only pays ten dollars an hour and won’t have benefits, but it would give you a way to start saving money,” he answered.

Chloe bit her lip.

Michael could tell she was interested, but was holding back. “What’s wrong, Chloe? If you aren’t interested, that’s fine. I’ll just tell Matt that my lead didn’t work out.”

“It isn’t that I’m not interested. It’s just... I need insurance, especially with the baby on the way,” Chloe answered.

Michael finally saw his opening, a way to convince Chloe to marry him. “You know, I have health insurance through work. Gabriel and I picked up a health plan right after he and Kiera got married. If you married me, you’d be covered too.”

Chloe choked on her water. “Excuse me? Did you just ask me to marry you?”

“Yeah, I guess I did,” Michael replied, aware that the proposal was a bit lacking, but hoping she would take him up on the offer.

“What happened to taking it slow? To starting over?” she asked, panicked. Marriage to Michael... she wasn’t sure she could handle it, wasn’t sure it was what she wanted.

“I still want to do all of that, but... Well, I just thought it might solve your insurance problem and allow you to take the job. Working part-time probably isn’t such a bad idea while you’re pregnant,” he replied.

“I don’t know if anyone has ever received a marriage proposal for health insurance before,” she commented.

Michael had the grace to blush. "I told you before that I had feelings for you and was drawn to you. It wasn't just because of the insurance."

Chloe tilted her head and observed him. He looked like he meant what he said, but could she trust him? What would happen if he decided he didn't want a wife and baby? What if he wanted his old life back? More importantly, could she live without love? Could she make a marriage work just based off lust and an unplanned pregnancy?

"I'll think about it," she finally responded.

"You will?" he asked hope filling his voice and showing clearly on his face.

Chloe gave him a small smile. "Yeah, I'll think about it. I'm not making any promises though!"

"I wouldn't expect you to," he replied with a smile of his own.

His happiness was immediately cast into shadow when he realized that he had another, larger obstacle to overcome. Chloe had no idea that he was a werewolf and he wasn't sure how, or if, he should tell her. His brothers had been lucky and their wives had gladly accepted them as they were, but he had a hard time picturing Chloe accepting the fact that werewolves existed.

## Chapter Five

Later that afternoon, Michael's house was under siege. His two sisters-in-law and Cassie showed up with Cole and Matt in tow. Gabriel probably would have joined them if he hadn't been working. It seemed that everyone was curious about the woman living in Michael's house.

Cassie had brought a few more maternity outfits and Kiera and Marin had brought food. The women immediately headed for the kitchen, herding Chloe along with them.

Michael looked at Cole and Matt, "Why exactly did all of you decide to converge on the house at once?"

"We just wanted to welcome the newest member of the pack," Cole said.

"Shh! Are you out of your mind?" Michael asked in a harsh whisper.

"You didn't tell her?" Cole asked in surprise.

"Of course not! What am I supposed to say? How am I supposed to tell her that the baby she carries could very well turn furry when it gets older?" Michael demanded.

Cole shrugged. "She's your mate. She'll accept you."

Michael shook his head. "I'm not so sure about that. She's pissed at me and I have to toe the line right now or I'll lose her for sure. At this rate, she may never marry me."

"But she moved in," Cole stated.

"She didn't really have a choice. She lost her apartment so I offered her a place to stay," Michael said.

That stumped Cole for a minute. "So she's just staying here? She didn't really move in?"

"Right. At least for now... I convinced her to give me another chance so I'm hoping I can make it permanent," Michael answered. "And I asked her to marry me."

"What did she say?" Cole asked, surprised his twin had asked the question so early.

"That she'd think about it. I don't think I've ever screwed up this bad before," Michael admitted.

Matt gave him a pointed look and he remembered the time he'd been under the influence of a spell and had attacked Cassie.

"Okay, so other than the incident at Whispering Lake I haven't ever screwed up this badly," Michael amended. He knew that Matt and his brothers would never let him live that moment down.



In the kitchen, Marin, Cassie, and Kiera had backed Chloe into a corner. The women were relentless.

"So why didn't you tell Michael about the baby?" Marin asked.

"He didn't seem interested," Chloe replied stiffly.

"You didn't think he'd want to know he was going to be a father?" Kiera asked.

"He only seemed interested in sleeping with me. When he left without calling, I thought that pretty much summed up his feelings for me."

"And since he'd behaved so callously toward *you*, you thought he wouldn't want your child, either?" Cassie prompted gently.

Chloe shook her head. "I didn't think he wanted anything to do with me. If he didn't want me, why would he want a baby? I'd been warned he was a one night stand type of guy."

"And a leopard can't change his spots?" Kiera asked.

Chloe shrugged. "He says he wants to."

"And you don't believe him?" Marin pressed.

"I don't know what to believe. Part of me wants to believe him, but if he truly felt anything for me he would have called."

The women backed off a little and looked at one another. They had to wonder if she wasn't a little bit right. Why hadn't Michael called Chloe? Why had he just walked away like he had countless other times?

"You're wondering the same thing, aren't you?" Chloe asked. "You know he never stays with one woman."

"A man can change," Kiera pointed out.

"Yes, he can." Chloe looked at each of them. "But did he change because he found out I'm pregnant? Or did he change because he has feelings for me?"

Marin chewed on her lip and looked at the other women. "Can't we find out?"

"How are we supposed to do that?" Chloe wondered.

"I'm sure we can figure something out. Until then, what are you going to do?" Marin asked.

Chloe shrugged. "I'm not sure. He's asked me for another chance. I told him he could have it, but that he'd have to start over. He seemed excited, but I still don't know if it will last."

"Only time will tell. Do you have feelings for him?" Cassie asked.

Chloe blushed. "Does it really matter? If he doesn't feel the same, I won't stay with him. When it comes down to it, I'll do whatever is best for the baby."

"You don't think having his or her father around will be what's best?" Marin asked.

"I think watching their mother suffer in a loveless marriage wouldn't be the best thing. I'd still make sure the child got to see Michael as often as possible, but I won't stay if he doesn't love me."

Kiera looked at the women standing around the small kitchen and came to a decision. Her husband had already told her that Chloe was part of their pack. If she didn't belong with Michael, then she certainly belonged with one of their single males. Maybe Michael just needed a little prodding.

"I think what you need most right now is a support system," Kiera said.

"A support system?" Chloe asked.

"We have a large family, both blood related and extended like Cassie and Matt. When I get back to the house I'm going to start making arrangements for everyone to come over this Saturday night. I think it will be good for you to meet everyone."

Chloe smiled. "That would be nice. I don't really have any friends around here. I had some co-workers, but we never really did anything outside of work."

"Are you not from around here?" Cassie asked.



Chloe shook her head. "I'm originally from California, but I moved here a while back. I just never really clicked with anyone I guess."

"Several of our friends in the area are from California. Maybe you'll make new friends this Saturday," Kiera said with a smile.

## Chapter Six

"Kiera, have you lost your mind?"

"Just hear me out, Gabriel."

He crossed his arms and stared at her.

"Michael cares for Chloe that much is obvious. But does he love her? You said yourself that she's part of our pack. If she isn't Michael's mate, then she has to belong to someone."

"Go on."

"The party Saturday night would give her a chance to meet everyone. It would also give you a chance to see how she interacts with the other single males. If she connects with one in particular, then it's possible she isn't meant for Michael."

"You do realize that it would be rather awkward for my brother to have fathered a child with another werewolf's mate, don't you?"

Kiera sighed. "I know, but there's nothing we can do about that. Besides, Chloe is lonely."

"Doesn't she have friends and family around here?"

"She said she never made any friends. I'm guessing she's alone. If she had anyone to turn to, don't you think she'd have gone to someone for help other than Michael? She felt like he abandoned her. She knows about his past record with women yet she went to him for help anyway."

"You're right. If she'd had any other options, she wouldn't have come here that day."

"So you're okay with the party?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Kiera smiled. "Not really."

"I didn't think so."

"I'll call Collin and Connor to get the ball rolling. They can help spread the word. Between the three of us, we should be able to reach everyone in the pack by the end of tomorrow."

"And just what are we doing for food?" Gabriel asked.

"I thought we could grill a bunch of steaks, hamburger meat, and hot dogs. Everyone else can bring something like chips, drinks, or other side items."

"It seems you've thought of everything."

"Either Chloe will find her true mate, or your brother will stop dragging his feet. Something good will come of the party. Besides, everyone needs to meet our new addition."

Gabriel nodded. "I take it you like her."

"She seems a little skittish. He hasn't told her what he is."

"You mean she doesn't know we're werewolves?"

Kiera shook her head.

"Are you telling me that my idiotic brother has moved his pregnant girlfriend into his house and he hasn't told her anything about who he really is?"

"That's what I'm telling you."

"Then he doesn't think she's his mate."

"You can't say that for sure," Kiera said.

"I can't? You don't think he would have told her?"

"I told you she seems skittish. Maybe he's afraid of how she will react."

"I guess I'll have to give him the benefit of the doubt for now, but I'll have to talk to him. Soon."

"Go easy on him, Gabriel."

"He needs to have some sense knocked into him."

"He needs his brother to be understanding," Kiera countered.

"I'll try your approach, but if you don't get anywhere then I make no promises."

Kiera sighed. "I guess I'll take what I can get."

"I know he stands by the pack when we need him, but he has to grow up. It's time for him to take responsibility."

"If you're talking about the baby, I think he's trying."

"Kiera, this is Michael we're talking about. If he were really trying, he would have succeeded by now. Do you really think Chloe would have said no to him if he had meant it when he proposed to her?"

Kiera shrugged.

"My guess is that my baby brother bungled the whole thing."

"You're probably right."

"Do you really think anyone in the pack would take her as their mate knowing she's carrying Michael's baby?"

Kiera studied him a moment. "Would you have taken *me* as *your* mate if I had been pregnant with someone else's baby?"

"You know I would have!"

"Then I think you just answered your own question. We owe it to Chloe and to the pack to show her all of her options."

"Kiera, she doesn't know she's part of a werewolf pack."

"I know, but that doesn't mean she can't see her options."

"You better make sure you mention that when you're inviting everyone. If someone makes a slip, it could end badly for all of us."

"Gabriel, I'm not an idiot."

He chuckled. "I know you aren't. It's the guys I'm worried about."

"Consider them all warned."



An hour later, Ramsey sat at the kitchen table across from Kiera sipping a cup of coffee. He'd been intrigued by her phone call to say the least. A new female in the pack didn't happen often enough.

"So tell me more about Chloe," he said, setting his cup down on the table.

"I don't really know her. I've only met her once."

"But she's definitely part of our pack?"

Kiera nodded. "Gabriel knew it the moment he saw her. She came here looking for Michael."

Ramsey snorted. "Figures. Is there a female in the city he hasn't slept with?"

Kiera fought back a grin. She loved her brother-in-law, but Ramsey had a point. "I'm afraid it's more complicated than that."

"What do you mean?"

"She's pregnant. She came here that day to find him and tell him."

Ramsey sat back in his seat. "So why have the pack get together? It's obvious she and Michael are together."

Kiera shook her head. "Not exactly. She's staying with him, but only because she doesn't have another option right now."

"Kiera, I get the feeling there's a lot you aren't telling me. Aren't friends supposed to tell each other things?"

"It's not my story to tell. Besides, I only know what Michael has mentioned to his brothers."

"Which is?" Ramsey prompted.

"She lost her job a few months ago. After that, she lost her car and her apartment. She came home one day and found her stuff out on the curb." Kiera paused. "Chloe only sought Michael out as a last resort. I get the feeling she never would have told him about the baby otherwise."

"Well, it's a good thing she did if she's part of the pack," Ramsey said.

"Don't forget that you can't mention anything about the pack on Saturday. She's completely human and doesn't know the supernatural exists."

"Michael hasn't told her she could be carrying a werewolf?" Ramsey asked with some surprise.

"If you hadn't seen a woman since the night you got her pregnant and five months later she showed up on your doorstep, would *you* tell her?"

"Good point. I guess she needs some time to adjust to everything."

"I get the feeling she's alone. I mean *really* alone. No family, no friends. She mentioned only having coworkers and not friends. It's kind of sad."

"Well, she has a huge family now, whether she wants it or not."

"I just hope that things go well on Saturday."

Ramsey studied her a moment. "Kiera, I know you well enough by now to know you have an ulterior motive for all of this. Why don't you just tell me what it is you hope to accomplish."

"I just want Chloe to meet everyone. Is that a crime?"

"Kiera..."

"And maybe I want her to see that there are other eligible bachelors in the area other than Michael. He may be the father of her child, and

for all I know he could be her mate, but she needs someone to support her emotionally right now and Michael just isn't that person. He can't even support himself emotionally."

"Are you sure you aren't just trying to make Michael jealous?"

"Well, that wouldn't be a bad thing either."

"Kiera..."

Kiera sighed. "Ramsey, I want whatever would be best for Chloe. Really, that's all I want. If Michael is what's best for her, then I hope she ends up with Michael. If someone else in the pack is better for her, then I hope she finds that person Saturday."

Ramsey laughed. "I think you're asking a bit too much. It takes time to find a mate. Just because you gather everyone in one spot on Saturday doesn't mean she's going to find the right guy."

"Maybe not. But maybe she'll at least find one that will treat her right." Kiera watched him from under her lashes. "You know you're intrigued."

Ramsey grew quiet. "If she's with Michael, it won't matter how intrigued I am."

"I have a feeling you're going to be *very* intrigued."

Ramsey grumbled under his breath and took another sip of his coffee.

## Chapter Seven

*A few days later*

Chloe sat at the kitchen table looking over the want ads. She still hadn't found a job and her prospects were no better today than they had been weeks ago. She hated the fact that she couldn't pull her own weight. Michael hadn't complained or said anything, but it didn't feel right to rely on him for everything.

"Still looking for a job?" Michael asked as he walked into the room.

"Yeah, but I don't know why I bother. I think they keep listing the same jobs every week."

"Matt still needs someone at his office if you've changed your mind."

Chloe sighed. "Do you think he'd take me on temporarily? Maybe on a trial basis to see if it's a good fit for both of us?"

Michael grinned, knowing he'd just won a small battle. "I'm sure he would."

"Then go ahead and make the call. Any job is better than no job. I hate that you keep paying for everything."

"Chloe, even if you have a job, I don't expect you to pay for stuff around here. I want you save your money."

"I want to pitch in."

"And you do. You wash the dishes, clean the house, and help with the grocery shopping. You've been doing all of the tasks I can't stand ever since you moved in."

"Michael, that isn't what I meant and you know it."

"You might not be helping in a monetary way, but you've been helping in other ways, Chloe. I don't expect you to pay for stuff. I don't *want* you to pay for stuff."

“Is that some of your macho crap?”

He grinned. “Maybe it’s something like that. Or maybe I just want to help take care of you and our baby.”

“I guess I can’t argue with you for now, but once I start making some money I plan on contributing in some way or another.”

“When you get your first check, we’ll talk about it. Until then, stop worrying so much.”

Chloe nodded and folded the newspaper shut. It was a small relief to not have to job hunt any longer. Working part-time would keep her mind occupied and give her some spending money. It wouldn’t solve her larger problems, but it would be a good start.

“When you talk to Matt, find out what the dress code will be,” Chloe said as she glanced down at her jeans and knit top. Cassie had given her a lot of maternity clothes, but only a handful were considered business casual.

“I will. I’ll call him on my way in to work. What do you plan on doing today?”

“Actually, I thought I might ride with you and walk over to Kiera’s. The party is in a few days and I’m sure she could use some extra help.”

“Get your stuff together. I’m leaving in about ten minutes.”

Chloe nodded and stood. “I just need to grab my purse from the bedroom.”

“I’ll meet you in the car,” Michael said, heading for the front door with his cell phone in hand.



At the garage, Chloe got out of the Corvette and closed the door. She rubbed her aching lower back and stretched her muscles. While Michael’s car was sleek and beautiful, it was killing her ever changing body.

“I’ll meet you back over here when it’s time to go home,” she said as she walked around the back of the car.

“I can come across the street and pick you up,” he offered.

“Okay. If Kiera and I go anywhere for party decorations or anything, I’ll call and let you know.”

Michael nodded and watched her cross the street. He walked into the garage and was greeted by the curious eyes of Hunter and Ramsey.



"I take it that's Chloe?" Hunter asked with a jerk of his chin in Chloe's direction.

"Yeah, that's Chloe," Michael answered with a grin.

"Kiera didn't mention she was pregnant," Hunter said.

Michael shrugged. "Maybe she didn't want anyone to form a bad opinion of Chloe before they met her."

"I take it the baby is yours."

Michael crossed his arms. "She rode here with me, didn't she?"

Hunter grinned. "That isn't saying much. Lots of women have ridden around in that car."

Michael ground his back teeth and held back a growl. He knew he had it coming, but he didn't want anyone thinking badly of Chloe. He also didn't want them thinking she was free game.

"She's staying with me right now," Michael answered, hoping to put the matter to rest.

"So she's your mate?" Hunter asked.

Michael shrugged, getting uncomfortable with the conversation. He'd be willing to bet money Chloe was his mate, but he wasn't about to admit it to Hunter.

"Don't we have some work to do? Or is Gabriel paying you to run your mouth these days?" Michael asked.

Ramsey had watched the two spar in silence and was about to comment when his cell phone chirped with an incoming text message.

*Kiera needs your help today. Can you work tomorrow instead?*

"Well, it seems the two of you will be working with Gabriel alone today," Ramsey said as he tucked his phone back into his pocket.

Hunter rolled his eyes. "Guess that means you're playing chauffeur again."

Ramsey grinned. "Something like that. Gabriel just sent a text and asked if I would help Kiera today."

Michael tensed. If Ramsey was helping Kiera, that meant he would be around Chloe all day too. He wasn't sure he liked that idea.

"What's Kiera doing that requires your help?" Michael asked.

"I don't know, but when the alpha asks me to swap my days off I do it," he answered.

Michael bit back a curse as he watched the other werewolf lope across the street.

"Not happy that Ramsey will be spending the day with Kiera and Chloe?" Hunter asked with a knowing look in his eye.

"Fuck off," Michael growled.

Hunter laughed and walked over to the Charger he would be working on for the morning. "I'll take that as a yes."

Michael tried to focus on his work, but his mind and his eyes kept straying across the street. He hadn't missed the way Ramsey had quietly assessed Chloe when she'd gotten out of the car. Hunter may have commented on her pregnant state, but it hadn't seemed to faze Ramsey at all.



Chloe waddled up the front steps of the Victorian and rang the bell. A moment later, Kiera answered the door.

"Chloe, you didn't have to ring the bell," Kiera said with a smile.

"I didn't feel right just walking in," she said as she slipped past Kiera and walked into the entry hall.

"Don't be silly. You're practically family."

"Oh, not really. I mean, I know I'm carrying Michael's baby, but we aren't... I mean..."

Kiera reached out and laid a hand on Chloe's arm. "It's okay, Chloe. I understand. Regardless of what happens, or doesn't happen, between you and Michael, I still consider you part of the family."

Chloe blushed and nodded. She wasn't sure what to say. For that matter, she wasn't sure what to think. Belonging was a new concept.

"Now, come into the kitchen and I'll make a cup of tea. Gabriel should be finishing his coffee before he heads over to the garage," Kiera said, tugging Chloe toward the kitchen.

"Tea sounds lovely."

Kiera smiled at her husband as she pulled Chloe into the kitchen. "We have company this morning."

Gabriel smiled at them. "So I see. Good morning, Chloe."

"Good morning," she murmured. Michael's older brother still made her feel a little nervous. He'd never given her a reason to feel that way, she just did.

"So what do you two ladies have planned for today?"

"I just thought I'd stop by and help Kiera set up for the party this weekend. I thought a second set of hands might come in handy," Chloe said.

"And you were very right," Kiera said.

"Will you be out shopping?" Gabriel asked.

"Well, we do need some decorations, another punch bowl or two, maybe a few things from the grocery store," Kiera answered.

"I have some things to do at the garage, but I can see if Ramsey will swap his days off. If you need help, that is."

"Are you sure you can spare him?" Kiera asked.

Gabriel nodded. "Let me send him a message and see if he's up for escorting the two of you around town today."

He pulled out his cell phone and sent a message to Ramsey.

"If I know Ramsey, he'll be over in a minute. He hasn't been able to deny you anything so far," Gabriel said with a smile.

Kiera returned his smile. "There are times I wonder if you're jealous."

"If I didn't know how much you adore me, I might be."

Kiera walked over to her husband and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "And I do adore you."

Gabriel kissed Kiera's cheek. "I better get to work."

## Chapter Eight

Ramsey walked up the front steps of the Victorian as Gabriel came out of the front door.

“Morning, Ramsey.”

“Morning, Gabriel. I thought I’d take you up on your offer and work tomorrow.”

“That will be fine. I believe the women have a full day planned.”

Ramsey chuckled. “Since when has Kiera done anything less? She always plans a full day.”

“That she does,” Gabriel answered with a smile. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Ramsey entered the house and closed the door behind him.

“Kiera?” he called out.

“I’m in the kitchen,” she answered.

Ramsey followed her voice and stopped in his tracks in the kitchen doorway. The petite redhead stood at the counter beside Kiera. The woman was even more stunning up close.

“Ramsey, this is Chloe. Chloe, this Ramsey. He’s a close friend of the family and works with Gabriel and Michael at the garage,” Kiera said by way of introduction.

Ramsey knew from his previous conversation with Kiera that Chloe didn’t know they were werewolves. It bothered him that he had to hide part of himself from her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Chloe,” he said with a smile.

Chloe blushed and stammered a response. Gorgeous men always made her nervous. She shifted so that her hair hid her face to save her from further embarrassment.

"Ramsey is going to escort us around town today," Kiera said with a smile.

Chloe's blush deepened. "That's awfully nice of you."

"I help out when I'm needed," he answered, fighting a grin.

His eyes flicked over to Kiera who was smiling as well. It was obvious to both of them that Chloe was at least a little bit attracted to Ramsey since she was blushing and stammering. Hopefully she'd feel more comfortable around him by the end of the day.

"I thought we'd stop by the party store on Fifth Street first," Kiera said, glancing down at a list she had on the counter. "After that maybe the mall?"

Ramsey groaned. "Taking you to the mall never ends well for me."

"Surely you aren't afraid of a few shopping bags?" Kiera asked with a grin.

"A few no. The few hundred you come out with? Definitely."

Chloe watched the easy banter with envy. She wished she had a relationship like that. They were just friends, but she didn't even have a friendship like theirs. She felt like an outsider more than ever at that moment.

"I'll be right back," she murmured, swiftly exiting the kitchen. Once she was in the entry, she stopped unsure of where she was going. She was unfamiliar with the house and didn't know where she could escape to.

"Are you okay, Chloe?" Ramsey asked from behind her.

Chloe gasped and whirled to face him, her hand at her throat.

"I'm sorry," he said with a grin. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"I was just looking for the restroom."

He nodded to the left. "It's over there."

She nodded and headed in the direction he'd indicated.

Ramsey watched her walk off. He could feel her loneliness as if it was his own and the ache nearly killed him. Regardless of whether or not Chloe was his mate, he was going to make sure she smiled and laughed. He wanted her to feel like she belonged, to feel like she had family and friends who cared about her.

"Everything okay?" Kiera asked as she stepped into the entry.

He glanced down at her. "Everything's fine."

“Why do I get the feeling there’s more to it than that? You look rather serious.”

“Just had a revelation of sorts I guess.”

“Oh?” Kiera asked with an arched brow. “And what’s that?”

“She’s lonely. I mean *really* lonely. I could feel it like it was my own.”

Kiera studied him a moment. “What do you plan on doing about it?”

Ramsey glanced down the hall. “I plan on making sure she’s never lonely again.”

Kiera smiled. “I had a feeling you’d say that.”

Ramsey narrowed his eyes at the alpha’s mate. “Why do I get the feeling I’ve been set up?”

Kiera shrugged. “I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You planned today, didn’t you? The moment you saw Chloe you decided to ask me over.”

“Maybe.”

Ramsey sighed. “Let’s hope this doesn’t blow up in your face, Kiera.”

“How could it?”

“What if she’s in love with Michael? Ever think of that? She is carrying his child.”

Kiera chewed on her lip a moment. “I think she wants to be loved so badly that she’d love anyone who loved her first.”

“For your sake, I hope you’re right. If not, you’re only setting her up for a rough road. Besides, Michael seemed a little territorial at the garage when Hunter was asking questions about Chloe.”

Kiera snorted. “Then I guess he should have stepped up to the plate a little sooner. She’s been staying under his roof. What’s he waiting for?”

“It’s not always easy for men to tell women how they feel.”

“Well, if he doesn’t, he has no one to blame but himself.”

As the bathroom opened the two fell silent.



Chloe left the bathroom and found Ramsey and Kiera waiting for her in the entry hall.

“Are we ready to go?” she asked.

“Since I’m not sure what all we’ll need, I figured we’d ride in Ramsey’s car,” Kiera told her.

Chloe nodded. "Just let me grab my purse from the kitchen."

She quickly ducked into the kitchen and grabbed her purse off the kitchen counter. Returning to the entry hall, she smiled at Kiera and Ramsey.

"I'm ready if you two are."

Ramsey opened the door and ushered the ladies outside.

"Which car is yours?" Chloe asked eyeing the vehicles across the street at the garage.

"The big black SUV," he answered.

Chloe easily spotted the vehicle. She'd never seen anything so large in her life. She glanced at Kiera and back at the monster vehicle. She figured if Kiera could get in the big behemoth, then so could she.

They walked across the street. Kiera stopped at the rear passenger door, making it clear she intended for Chloe to ride up front.

"Don't you want to ride up front?" Chloe asked.

Kiera smiled. "You're much further along than I am. You should ride up front."

Chloe looked at her in surprise. "I didn't realize you were pregnant. Congratulations!"

"Thank you," Kiera answered. "I'm not very far along so I'm not showing yet."

Before Chloe could argue further over the seating arrangements, Ramsey opened the door for her. Accepting the hand Ramsey offered and using the step, she managed to get into the vehicle easily enough. Once she was seated comfortably, Ramsey closed the door and she buckled herself in.

Chloe could see Michael in the garage and waved at him. Instead of waving back, he glowered at her. She bit her lip and leaned back into the seat.

Ramsey climbed into the driver's seat and closed his door. Noticing Chloe's anxious expression, he asked, "Everything okay, Chloe?"

She looked over at him before glancing back at Michael. "I think Michael's mad at me."

"Why would he be mad at you?" Kiera asked from the backseat.

"I don't know, but I waved and he just glared at me," Chloe answered, fighting back tears.

Ramsey reached into the backseat and pulled a tissue out of a box. Wordlessly, he handed it to Chloe.

"Thanks," she said softly. "I seem to cry a lot these days."

"Because of Michael?" he asked.

"Because of anything. I think its pregnancy hormones."

Ramsey glanced at Kiera. He wasn't convinced Chloe's tears were simply due to her pregnancy. Judging by the expression on Kiera's face, she wasn't buying it either.

"Are you sure you want to go with us, Chloe?" he asked.

She glanced toward the garage. Michael was still staring at her, his brow furrowed in anger.

Ramsey followed her gaze. His eyes narrowed and he fought back a growl. Reaching for the door handle, he decided to confront Michael. A small hand on his arm stopped him.

"Please don't," Chloe said softly.

"He has no right to be angry with you."

"It doesn't matter. He's helping me right now. If it weren't for Michael, I'd have nowhere else to go," she responded.

Ramsey's eyes travelled down to her stomach. "If it weren't for Michael, you wouldn't be in this predicament right now."

"It's not his fault I lost my job. Whether I'm pregnant or not, I'd still be without a place to live."

"There are other options, Chloe. You don't have to stay with Michael."

Chloe sighed. "I stayed in a hotel for a night, but I don't have enough money to do that all the time. I have a job now, but it's just part time. Maybe after I've saved some money things will be different."

Ramsey glanced at Kiera. She was watching their exchange with interest, but was keeping quiet.

"Chloe, I know we just met, but I may have a solution to your problem," he said, focusing his attention back on the beautiful woman beside him.

"I'm not leaving Michael's house just to move in with you if that's what you're thinking," Chloe mumbled.

Ramsey chuckled. "I wouldn't mind that in the slightest, but that wasn't my suggestion."

"Oh," she answered, her cheeks suffused with color.



“My house has a small apartment over the garage. It isn’t much, just a studio apartment. I’d rent it to you cheap if you’d like a place to stay until you get back on your feet.”

Chloe had to admit her interest was piqued. “You’re serious? You’d rent it to me?”

“I’d let you stay there for free, but I get the feeling you wouldn’t take me up on my offer.”

She smiled. “You’d be right. But if you wouldn’t mind waiting on the first payment until I receive my first paycheck, I would definitely be interested.”

“How about we call the first month a ‘move-in special’ and you start paying next month?”

Chloe glanced in Michael’s direction again. He was no longer staring at her, but she would swear she could still feel his anger. Maybe being away from him for a while wouldn’t be such a bad thing.

“If you’re sure it isn’t an inconvenience, I’ll take you up on your offer, Ramsey.”

Ramsey smiled at her, feeling as if he’d just won a major battle. “Now that we have that settled, let’s go shopping.”

He pulled out of the parking lot and headed for the party store, feeling lighter and happier than he had in a while. Chloe might only be staying in the apartment over his garage, but she would still be close by. It was a step in the right direction.

## Chapter Nine

Ramsey pulled into Michael's driveway later that night to pick up Chloe. As he walked up to the front door, he heard raised voices inside of the house. Deciding to forgo knocking, he pushed the door open. The scene before him was enough to spark his anger.

"Michael, I'm going and that's final," Chloe said, jerking her arm free from Michael's grasp.

"You didn't think this was something we should discuss? In case you've forgotten, you're carrying my baby," Michael yelled.

"You mean the baby you didn't even know about until recently? Whether or not I'm carrying your baby doesn't give you the right to dictate where I live, Michael."

"And whose fault is it that I didn't know about the baby?" he roared back.

"Yours! If you had called me, you would have known I was pregnant."

Michael took a step closer to her and growled. "You're not leaving and moving in with *him*."

"I will move in with whomever I damn well please!"

Chloe gasped and grabbed her stomach. Her face paled as she dropped to her knees on the floor.

"Chloe!" Ramsey rushed to her side, shoving Michael out of the way.

"Ramsey, something's wrong," she whimpered.

"Hang on to me," Ramsey said, lifting her into his arms.

"Chloe, what's wrong?" Michael asked, sticking close by.

"Michael, I think you've done enough right now," Ramsey said.

"Ramsey, I have every right to go with her if you're taking her to the hospital. Whether you like it or not, that's my baby she's carrying," Michael responded.

"Fine. Get in the back," Ramsey said tersely.

Gently setting Chloe down in the front seat, Ramsey buckled her in. "Are you comfortable enough?"

"I'm okay," she murmured. "Just get me to the hospital."

Ramsey closed her door and hurried around to the driver's side. Starting the SUV, he backed out of the driveway and rushed Chloe to the hospital. When they arrived, he stopped outside of the ER entrance.

"Wait here while I get a wheelchair for you," Ramsey said, hopping out of the vehicle. He rushed inside and told a nurse that he had a pregnant woman in need of medical attention. When he returned to the SUV, the nurse was following behind him with a wheelchair.

"Chloe, Nurse Evans is going to take you inside while I park," Ramsey said as he helped her out of the SUV.

"Don't leave me," she pleaded.

"I'm not leaving," he assured her. "I'll be inside in just a minute."

"I'll go in with you," Michael said, stepping out of the SUV.

Chloe glared at him. "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be here now."

"Chloe, I'm going in with you whether you like it or not," Michael said.

The nurse cleared her throat. "Actually, Mr. Andrews, you aren't. If the patient doesn't want you to go in with her, then you won't."

For the first time, Michael looked the nurse over. He groaned when he realized he had dated her. Or more accurately, he had slept with her. "Jasmine, stay out of it."

"Jasmine?" Chloe asked, her eyes flicking between Michael and the nurse.

"Mr. Andrews and I are acquainted. If you don't want him to go in with you, I can make sure he doesn't go in. It's the least I can do," the nurse responded.

Ramsey, having watched the exchange in silence, merely shook his head. "I promise I'll be inside in just a minute, Chloe. Go inside with Nurse Evans and I'll be right there."

"Preferably without Michael," Chloe muttered.

“Dammit Chloe! That’s my baby and I should be in there with you,” Michael responded.

The nurse eyed the trio with interest, but didn’t say anything.

Chloe looked up at Ramsey. “Hurry back.”

He nodded and quickly climbed into the SUV. Pulling out the ER area, he went in search of a parking space. While he was gone, the nurse wheeled Chloe into the waiting area.

“We have some papers you’ll need to complete before we can get you checked in. I just need to see your driver’s license and insurance card,” Nurse Evans said.

“I don’t know if my purse made it here or not,” Chloe said, looking to see if Michael had followed them in against her wishes.

“I think I saw it,” Michael said as he walked over to them, “not that it will help you much when it comes to insurance.”

“You don’t have insurance?” Nurse Evans asked.

“No,” Chloe responded quietly.

“That could pose a problem. You’ll have to pay five hundred dollars up front. I’m afraid it’s a hospital policy,” Nurse Evans replied.

Chloe paled. She didn’t have five dollars, much less five hundred.



Ramsey was about to lock the SUV when he realized Chloe’s purse was in the backseat. He grabbed it and closed the door. Locking the vehicle, he walked through the parking lot to the ER entrance.

When he stepped through the ER doors, he heard Chloe and the nurse talking. He was surprised Michael didn’t offer to pay for Chloe’s hospital visit, knowing she didn’t have insurance. The man was ready to claim the child as his own, but apparently wasn’t ready to take on all of the responsibilities that went along with it.

Walking over to the group, Ramsey placed a hand on Chloe’s shoulder and laid her purse in her lap. “Sorry that took so long. I wasn’t sure I was going to find a parking space.”

“It’s okay. I think it may have been a false alarm anyway,” she said, forcing her voice to be steady.

“Why don’t we make sure?” Ramsey said, reaching for his wallet. He pulled out a credit card and handed it to the nurse. “Will this work?”

Nurse Evans smiled and nodded. "Just as soon as she gets the paperwork completed and I get a copy of her driver's license, I can run the payment through."

Chloe accepted the clipboard that was handed to her and began filling out the forms. When she was finished, she handed the clipboard back to the nurse, along with her driver's license.

"I'll be right back," the nurse said with a smile.

Chloe turned to Ramsey the moment the nurse left. "I don't feel right letting you pay for my hospital visit."

Ramsey shrugged. "I'll feel better knowing you were checked out by a doctor. It's a small price to pay for my peace of mind."

"I'll repay you when I'm able," Chloe said.

Ramsey shook his head. "You don't have to."

Chloe tilted her head and looked up at Ramsey. "I may not have to, but I want to. I start a new job tomorrow and while it's only part-time I'll find a way to save up the money."

"Chloe, I'd rather you save the money and buy something for the baby. You're going to need furniture, clothes, diapers... there's going to be a lot to buy over the next few months."

Chloe visibly swallowed. It wasn't the first time she'd thought of all of the things money could buy that her baby would need, all of the things she *couldn't* buy because she didn't have any money. She wasn't sure how she was going to overcome that particular hurdle, but she would find a way. She had no choice in the matter if she wanted to provide for her baby.

Chloe's look told Ramsey all he needed to know – she didn't have anything. He'd known that things were bad, but Kiera hadn't told him quite everything. The studio apartment was sparsely furnished. It made him wish he'd taken the time to pick up a few extras. She was going to need towels, bed linens, pots and pans. He didn't know Matt and Cassie quite as well as the Andrews brothers did, but he'd gotten to know them well enough – or so he hoped.

"I'll be right back. I'm just going to step outside and make a quick call," he told Chloe.

She nodded and watched him walk off.

When Ramsey had cleared the entrance to the ER, he pulled out his cell phone and called Cassie. He quickly explained the situation and told her where the spare key was hidden.

"I hate to ask this huge favor, but she's been through so much and I want the place to be as comfortable as possible for her. Plus I don't think she has any money at all," Ramsey said.

"It's okay, I understand. Our garage sale didn't go as well as planned so I have plenty of stuff lying around. I'll gather up a box or two and head over there. Hopefully I'll be gone before you guys show up. That way she'll think it was already set up that way," Cassie responded.

"I owe you, Cassie."

She laughed into the phone. "No, you don't. It's nice to help the woman who may end up taming Michael Andrews." When she heard nothing but silence on the other end of the line, she wondered if she'd said something wrong. "Ramsey, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I was just hoping maybe she wasn't meant for Michael."

"Oh... Oh! Oh, Ramsey, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you liked Chloe. I thought she was just staying in the apartment so she could feel independent," Cassie said.

"She is, sort of. At least, that's the spin I placed on it to get her over there. But when I went to pick her up tonight she was arguing with Michael."

"Maybe it's a good thing she's moving out then. It sounds like they could use some time apart."

"Listen, Cassie, I appreciate the help tonight, but I need to get back to Chloe. I don't want them to take her back while I'm out here on the phone."

"Sure thing, Ramsey. Go be with Chloe and don't worry about a thing. The apartment will be ready for her when y'all get home tonight."

Ramsey disconnected the call and headed back into the ER. Chloe and Michael were still waiting where he'd left them. They seemed to be in yet another heated discussion. He was starting to wonder if the two of them should be left alone.



"Michael, I don't care what you think. As soon as they tell me I can go home, I'm getting my things and I'm going to my new apartment," Chloe said, her jaw set at a stubborn angle.

"Chloe, you just met Ramsey today. You're just going to move in with a stranger?"

"I'm *not* moving in with anyone! I'm renting an apartment from him," she snapped.

Michael snorted. "Yeah, over the garage. It's what, two yards from the house, if even that? You might as well just move into his house."

Chloe had never been so furious in her life. A flush was creeping across her face and it wasn't from embarrassment, it was pure rage. She wanted to shake Michael, slap him, and shake him some more.

"You don't get a say in what I do or what I don't do," she said. "How many times do I have to remind you of that?"

"Do I need to remind *you* of the fact that you'd be on the street right now if it weren't for me?" Michael growled.

Chloe gasped. "How dare you! You don't have the right to speak to me that way!"

"I have every right!"

"How do you figure that? Do you see a ring on my finger? Because I don't recall being married to you," she replied.

"I asked!"

"Ha! You asked for the sake of me having insurance when the baby is born. You don't want a wife. Hell, you didn't even want a baby! If you did, you wouldn't have asked if it was yours when I showed up at the Victorian that day."

Chloe groaned and grabbed her stomach as pain shot through her. She frantically looked around the waiting room. Spotting Ramsey, she held her hand out to him.

He quickly walked over to her. "I didn't want to interrupt another fight, but maybe I should have."

"It hurts," she whimpered.

"Do you want me to go get the nurse?" Ramsey asked, rubbing her hand, hoping to give her at least a little comfort.

"No, please stay."

He nodded and hunkered down beside her wheelchair. "I'll stay right here."

"I'll go get the nurse," Michael muttered.

When they were alone, Ramsey looked Chloe over. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine."

"What started the argument?" Ramsey asked.

"This time or at the house?"

"Both," he answered.

"At the house I told him I was moving out. First he was just really quiet and still. Then I told him I was renting an apartment from you and he flew into a rage."

Ramsey reached out and tipped her chin up. "I saw him grab your arm. He didn't do anything else, did he?"

Chloe shook her head. "I've never seen him angry before."

"Not many people have. From what I've gathered, none of the Andrews brothers would harm a woman. I don't think he would have done anything other than yell at you," Ramsey told her.

"I'm not so sure."

"Why did you start arguing here?" he asked.

"He made a snide remark when you left to make your call."

When she didn't elaborate, Ramsey asked, "What remark?"

"He said I shouldn't worry, that my boyfriend would return in a minute," she mumbled, a blush creeping across her face.

"And that bothered you?"

Chloe shrugged. "I told him you weren't my boyfriend and reminded him I was renting an apartment from you. It set him off again."

"If I had known that renting the apartment to you would have caused you so much trouble, I wouldn't have mentioned it."

"Don't say that! I'm glad you did. I need a place of my own, a place for me and the baby. Michael needs to understand that whether or not he's the father of this child, he doesn't own me and he isn't my keeper. I make my own decisions and run my own life."

Ramsey nodded, a slight smile tugging at his lips. "You're definitely one head-strong, independent woman."

Chloe nibbled on her lip. "Is that a bad thing?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. You're going to need those traits to raise a baby on your own; unless you decide to accept Michael's proposal."

She winced. "You heard that part?"

He nodded. "How do you know he didn't ask because he loves you?"

Chloe rolled her eyes. "He knew the nurse because she was one of his conquests. There isn't a woman in this town that he hasn't slept



with or tried to sleep with that's under the age of forty. I'm not sure he's capable of loving one woman."

"And if he was? Do you love him?"

"I'm not sure what I feel for him. I feel something, but I don't know if that's just because of the baby or if it's because of me."

Ramsey nodded. It wasn't the answer he wanted, but it would suffice for the time being. If he got to spend enough time with Chloe, maybe she would come to care for him... maybe even love him.

## Chapter Ten

*An hour later*

Chloe was tucked into a hospital bed with a monitor strapped across her stomach. It was connected to a machine that was keeping track of her baby's heartbeat and stress level. Her fight with Michael had aggravated the baby, but the nurse thought she would be able to go home shortly.

Ramsey had his long frame stretched out in a recliner beside the bed. His head was tipped back and his eyes were closed. Chloe wasn't sure if he was asleep or just resting. Regardless, she took the time to study him. He had long eyelashes that brushed the tops of his cheek bones when his eyes were closed. His brown hair was thick and unruly. She knew that if his eyes were open they would be a beautiful shade of green. All in all, he was pleasant to look at. He had a strong chin and a roman nose. His lips were full and chiseled, but looked kissable. Chloe blushed at the thought.

Her thoughts strayed to Michael. He had left once she was settled into a room and it had been determined that their argument had distressed the baby. The nursing staff had mentioned that it might be best if he were scarce. Chloe wasn't sure if that was purely for her benefit, or for theirs. It seemed that all of the nurses assigned to her had been with Michael at some time or another.

Chloe wasn't sure how she felt about Michael's past. She had always known what he was like, but it was different when it was constantly being thrown in your face. The women had been nice to her thus far,

but she had noticed at least one jealous look at her stomach. It was obvious they thought she had gotten pregnant on purpose, in hopes of trapping Michael. Little did they realize it was the last thing on her mind and if she could do things differently... well she probably wouldn't change a thing. She was attached to the baby now and was looking forward to its birth.

She still worried about being able to care for her baby. Looking at the monitors, she watched the blip of the baby's heartbeat. There was a life growing inside of her, a life that she and Michael had created.

Glancing back at Ramsey, she wondered why he was here, staying by her side. They hardly knew one another and yet he'd paid for her hospital care and had held her hand through the whole ordeal. They weren't dating, he wasn't the father of her child, and yet he was here. She'd never met anyone quite like him before and she wasn't sure what to think of him. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't at least a little bit attracted to him. The man was sinfully delicious and exceedingly kind. He'd taken care of her, put her needs before his own even though he didn't have to. That was rare in a man these days, at least from what she'd seen of men. Her dating experience may not be vast, but she'd heard enough horror dating stories to know that a good man was definitely hard to find.

Stifling a yawn, she closed her eyes for a moment. It had been a long day. Between her shopping spree with Kiera for the weekend party and her argument with Michael, she was wiped out. Just as she was drifting to sleep, she heard a noise and felt the bed dip under a large weight.

Opening her eyes, she found herself nose to nose with a large wolf and did the only rational thing she could think of – she screamed.

Ramsey jolted awake, ready for battle at the sound of Chloe's scream. When he saw a werewolf on her bed, he growled. The wolf turned to look at him. At once he recognized Lucas, a fairly new pack member.

"Get down off the bed," Ramsey demanded. He might not be the alpha, but he did hold rank over the new member.

The wolf leapt off the bed and sat beside him.

Ramsey eyed the beast with curiosity. Why was he here and why in this form? Was something going on?

"Do you know this... um... dog?" Chloe asked with a shaky voice.

“Yeah, he belongs to a friend of mine. I’m not sure what he’s doing here though.”

“Oh. I’m sorry I screamed. It just isn’t every day that I wake up to find a large wolf staring me down.”

The wolf in question snorted and rolled his eyes. Using his muzzle, he nudged Ramsey out into the hall.

“It seems I’ll be back in a moment,” Ramsey said with humor.

“I’ll be right here,” Chloe said dryly.

She eyed the door as Ramsey and the wolf exited, curious as to why the nursing staff hadn’t come barreling through the door at her blood curdling scream. Maybe it was the middle of a shift change?

Sighing, she relaxed back against her pillow. Ramsey said he knew the beast that had startled her awake. Obviously everything was okay. She had nothing to worry about except the little one growing inside of her. She watched the monitor. The baby’s heartbeat still seemed steady. The wolf apparently hadn’t startled her little bundle of joy as much as it had her.

Rubbing her stomach, she closed her eyes and tried to relax again. A nap was definitely in order.



Out in the hall, Ramsey glared at the wolf at his feet.

“Lucas, what in the hell are you doing here?”

The wolf tipped his head, indicating that Ramsey should follow him. When they reached an empty room, the men went inside and locked the door. Lucas shifted back to his human form and stretched.

“I didn’t mean to scare her, Ramsey. I just wanted a closer look.”

“Well, you scared the shit out of her,” Ramsey said, his arms folding across his chest.

“Sorry about that,” Lucas said as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“So why are you here and why in that form?” Ramsey asked.

“Gabriel sent me. He heard that Chloe was moving in with you and he wanted me to do some recon.”

Ramsey was surprised. “Why didn’t the alpha just call? I would have answered any questions he had.”

“I know you would have. He mostly wanted to know if Michael was here or if he’d been here.”

“So you were in wolf form so you could track Michael’s scent?”

Lucas nodded. "So why did he leave?"

"The nurses asked him to. His presence was upsetting Chloe and the baby," Ramsey answered. "I guess I better call Gabriel."

"What's going on, Ramsey?"

"Chloe is really independent. She needed some space so I offered to rent her the apartment over my garage. Michael lost it and they were arguing when I stopped by to pick up Chloe. It distressed the baby and here we are."

Lucas cocked his head to the side. "I get the feeling there's more to it than that."

"Maybe a little, but that's the condensed version."

"Well, I'll let you call Gabriel. Do you want me to change back and go sit with Chloe while you make your call?"

Ramsey contemplated the idea for a minute. "Yeah, I better walk back with you though. She wasn't too pleased with you the first time around."

Lucas grimaced, but refrained from commenting. Shifting back into his wolf form, he followed Ramsey back down the hall to Chloe's room. The redhead was sound asleep in her hospital bed, her hand protectively resting on her swollen belly.

Lucas quietly padded into the room and lay down beside the bed on the floor. He rested his head on his paws and watched Ramsey ease out of the room.



Back in the hall, Ramsey noticed the "no cell phones" signs posted on the walls. Stopping by the nurses' station, he asked, "Is there some place where I can make a call on my cell phone?"

The blonde nurse behind the desk smiled. "Sure, just go through the double doors at the end of the hall and take a right. Go straight down the hall and you'll come to a hospital exit. You can make your call out there."

"Thanks," he replied before quickly heading in the direction she had indicated. The quicker he made his call, the quicker he could return to Chloe's side.

Once he was outside of the hospital, he turned his phone on and called Gabriel. The last thing he wanted, or needed, was the alpha to be angry with him. He answered on the third ring.

"Gabriel, its Ramsey."

"I take it Lucas found you," Gabriel said.

"Yeah. First off, I'm guessing you knew we were here because of Cassie."

Gabriel chuckled. "She called Kiera."

"I figured she would. Did she explain why we were here?"

"No. But if Chloe is at the hospital, don't you think Michael should be the one there with her? And why is she moving in with you when she's carrying his baby?" Gabriel asked, getting right to the point.

"It's complicated. How much do you know about Chloe?" Ramsey asked.

"Not much. She seemed really distressed when she showed up on our doorstep looking for Michael. I figured she hadn't told him about the baby, but now that he knows I'm just waiting on him to pop the question."

Ramsey cleared his throat. "He did. She turned him down."

Gabriel was quiet on the other end. "Why?"

"It seems that Michael offered her marriage in order for her to have insurance for the baby's delivery and for her and the baby to have a place to live."

Gabriel groaned. "He's an idiot."

"I can't argue that one. I know he's your brother, but it gets worse."

"How much worse?" Gabriel asked quietly, afraid of the answer. Thoughts of Whispering Lake flitted through his mind. Michael had surely learned his lesson. He'd been under the influence of a spell at the time. Surely he wouldn't hurt a woman on purpose.

"They were arguing when I stopped by to pick up Chloe tonight."

Gabriel swore under his breath. "Did he hurt her?"

Ramsey stilled. "Is that something we need to worry about?"

"Did. He. Hurt. Her."

"He grabbed her arm. Other than that, it seemed he was content with yelling at her. It distressed her and the baby. She grabbed her stomach and hit the floor. I was coming through the front door about the time all of this was going on and I grabbed her and rushed her to the hospital. Michael insisted on riding along."

"What else happened?" Gabriel asked.

"He started arguing with her again at the hospital. She had more pains. They have her hooked up to monitors; one is strapped across her stomach to keep an eye on the baby. It didn't help that he'd slept with every nurse that was on duty tonight."

Gabriel groaned. "He's made a mess that I can't clean up this time. He's on his own."

"Gabriel, I'm not leaving Chloe here by herself. Besides, I may have to stick around to sign something when they release her."

"Why would you have to sign something?" Gabriel asked.

"She doesn't have insurance. The nurse wouldn't admit her without a deposit. I gave them my credit card," Ramsey answered, uncomfortable with the alpha knowing the financial particulars.

"Where was Michael when all of this was happening?"

"Arguing with Chloe that he was the baby's father and that I had no right to be here," Ramsey grumbled.

"But he didn't offer to pay?"

"No," Ramsey answered.

"I'll take care of Michael. Stay with Chloe and see that she gets to her new apartment safely." Gabriel paused. "And Ramsey?"

"Yes?" Ramsey visibly swallowed. He hoped the alpha wasn't angry with him. He had never felt like he truly belonged to a pack until he'd found the Ashton Grove pack. He'd hate to be asked to leave.

"Thank you for stepping in and taking care of Chloe. I had assumed that she was Michael's mate because she was carrying his child. But maybe I was wrong," Gabriel said before disconnecting the call.

Ramsey stared at his phone dumbfounded. Turning off the device, he slipped it back into his pocket and walked back to Chloe's room in a daze. Had the alpha just given him permission to pursue Chloe? He had planned on seeing as much of her as possible anyway, but with the alpha's permission... it was like having a father's permission to marry his daughter.

When he reached Chloe's room, he noticed the door was open. Peering inside, he saw that she was once again surrounded by nurses.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, stepping into the room.

"Everything is fine," the blonde nurse assured him. "We're actually going to release her."

Ramsey visibly relaxed. "Good. When I saw all of you in here..."

The nurse smiled. She left the side of Chloe's bed and walked over to Ramsey. "We know that Michael Andrews is the father of her child, but we've also noticed that you haven't left her side for a moment."

He nodded. "I'm ah... a... ah, friend."

"I have a feeling you're more than that. I'm going to give you a list of care instructions for her. She's okay to go home, but she needs to be monitored closely and needs to avoid stressful situations."

He nodded, unable to say anything. The nurses had noticed the way he looked at Chloe? Was it really that obvious?

"Which means she needs to avoid Michael as much as possible," the nurse said with a significant look.

"I can't keep them apart. He's the father of her baby."

The nurse shrugged. "He may have planted the seed, but from what I've seen you're already more of a father to the baby than he could ever be. Maybe you can convince her of that, too."

She wasn't telling him anything he hadn't already thought of, but it still didn't set well with Ramsey. He believed a child had every right to know who its father was. He didn't have a right to keep the baby and Michael apart. If he had to keep Chloe and Michael apart for medical reasons, he would do so.

"Just give me the list of what she needs to do, and I'll make sure she follows it," Ramsey assured the nurse.

"Are there any stairs where she lives?" the nurse asked.

"Yeah, she lives in a garage apartment."

"Well, she needs to be extra careful climbing the stairs. Closer to time for the baby to be born, she may need to move."

Ramsey nodded. He'd move to the garage apartment if he needed to in order to make sure Chloe and the baby were safe. She could have the main house, if he could only convince her to take it.

"Once the doctor signs her discharge papers, she'll be free to go."

"Chloe doesn't have insurance. I paid a deposit when we arrived, but I'd imagine it didn't quite cover the whole bill," Ramsey said.

"The hospital will probably just send you a bill, unless you want us to put the whole thing on your credit card?"

"If you could send me a bill, that would be great. I don't know how much the total will be and it might put me over my limit," he said.



“I’ll be sure to notate that on the chart so the billing department will know to invoice you,” the nurse answered.

“I appreciate it.”

## Chapter Eleven

*A few hours later*

Ramsey pulled down the drive to his house. It wasn't as large as most in the neighborhood, but it was a decent size. A Cape Cod style with a porch across the front, it boasted four bedrooms and two and a half baths. The three car garage had been added later with the studio apartment over it.

A mechanic typically wouldn't have been able to afford a house such as this one, but it had fallen into disrepair and Ramsey had gotten a deal on it. Every time he arrived home, Ramsey sat in his SUV and eyed the house appreciatively. He had repainted the outside himself, put on a new roof, replaced rotten wood, and replaced broken windows. He'd also landscaped the outside. The inside had needed just as much work, if not more.

"This is your home?" Chloe asked her eyes wide in wonder.

"It didn't look like this when I bought it," he answered, his cheeks flushed. He didn't want her thinking he was richer than he really was.

"It's beautiful."

"Thanks. It was falling down around my ears when I first bought it, but a lot of hard work later this is what I get to look at every day."

Chloe smiled at him. "It was definitely worth the effort."

"The apartment is just over here," he said, tipping his head toward the garage.

Getting out of the SUV, he reached into the backseat and pulled out Chloe's bags of clothes. He sat them at the foot of the stairs then walked around to help her out of the vehicle.

"I know you don't like a lot of help, but the nurse said you had to be careful with stairs. I'll help you up and then I'll come back down for your things," he told her.

Chloe sighed. "So much for independence."

"You still have your own space, Chloe. You just need some help getting to and from it. Promise me you won't go running up and down these stairs on your own."

She nodded. "I can't promise that I won't go up and down them without your help, but I promise I'll be extra careful. I don't want anything to happen to the baby."

"I guess that's all I can ask for," Ramsey responded with a grin.

Once they reached the top of the stairs, Ramsey pulled a key out from under a plant pot. "This is your key. Ashton Grove is pretty safe so there's only one lock on the door. If you want another one added, I'll be happy to put a dead bolt on the door."

"I'm sure it's fine, Ramsey."

He nodded and unlocked the door. "Ready to see your place?"

She smiled and nodded.

"Hopefully it won't disappoint you. I haven't had a chance to do much over here yet."

He pushed the door open and ushered her inside. He almost didn't recognize the place. The scent of fresh paint assailed his nostrils. His eyes roamed around the room, taking in the fairly new furniture and decorative throw rugs. It seemed that Cassie had done more than bring over some pots and pans.

"It's wonderful," Chloe said as she gazed at the sage walls, taupe loveseat and matching chair, burgundy throw pillows, and matching throw rug that made up the living room. Her eyes wandered to the kitchen painted the same lovely shade with taupe leaves stenciled on the wall around the stove and on the off-white cabinets. Tears gathered in her eyes.

Ramsey cleared his throat. "The bedroom's through here," he said motioning toward the screen behind the loveseat.

They stepped around the rice paper and mahogany screen. A full-size bed was pushed up against a wall, a small mahogany nightstand sat beside it with a bronzed lamp burning on top. The bed was turned down, the bedspread a neutral taupe with burgundy flowers blooming across the background with sage leaves a tad darker than the walls of the bedroom. A dresser dominated the far wall.

Chloe eyed the door in the corner questioningly.

"That's the bathroom through there. It's small, but it's functional," Ramsey said.

Chloe walked over to the door and opened it. There was a small shower stall with a sliding door, a pedestal sink, and a toilet. The mirror over the sink was a decorative gold oval; in the corner stood a small corner cabinet for toiletries.

"So will it work?" Ramsey asked.

"It's perfect, Ramsey."

"I, ah, didn't realize the paint smell was going to be so strong. It's probably not good for the baby," he murmured.

"I thought you said you hadn't done much in here."

Ramsey blushed. "I didn't. I asked Cassie to drop off a few things. She apparently thought this place needed some sprucing up before you moved in. I can't ask you to sleep in paint fumes tonight."

"I'll be fine, Ramsey."

He shook his head. "You should sleep in the main house tonight. I'll sleep out here."

"I'm not evicting you from your house."

"I'm not going to ask you to share a house with me either," he responded.

"Your house is much bigger than Michael's and I was sharing a house with him."

Ramsey eyed her stomach. "You're also having a baby with him."

Chloe wrapped her arms protectively around her stomach. "That remains to be seen."

He sighed. "What do you want to do, Chloe?"

"I don't think it would be a problem for us to sleep in the same house for just one night, Ramsey. Besides, your house is big enough for me to get lost in."

His lips twitched in a grin.

"Of course, I don't want to stay there if you don't want me to."

"Chloe, I don't mind you staying in my house. But all of my guest rooms are upstairs."

She spread her arms. "So is my apartment."

"Promise me you won't come downstairs in the morning without some help?"

She set her jaw.

"Chloe, if you don't promise me, I'm going to make you sleep in the master bedroom downstairs."

She knew he would, too. Sighing she nodded her agreement. "Can you bring my things up first though? I want to go ahead and get my clothes situated. I'll just take over what I'll need in the morning."

"I'll be right back then."

Chloe used her time alone to survey her surroundings. Her apartment had been nice, but nothing like this. She knew Ramsey was charging her such a small amount just to be nice. He was a true gentleman.

Walking into the kitchen, she opened the cupboards and peered inside. She found a matching set of dishes and glasses, silverware, and a few pots and pans. A cookie sheet and broiler pan were in the drawer under the stove. A vase on the counter held some cooking utensils.

She walked back into the living area just as Ramsey came through the door with her things.

"Where do you want these?" he asked lifting the sacks.

"In the bedroom is fine. It will just take me a minute to put them away."

He nodded and stepped behind the screen to place the bags on the bed. "I'll just wait in the living room for you."

"I'll be right there," she said with a smile.

Folding her clothes, she carefully placed them in the dresser. She kept a knit dress out and some clean underwear for the next day. Leaving her toiletries in the sack, she walked back into the living room.

"I'm ready if you are."

Ramsey held his hand out to her.

With her small hand engulfed in his larger one, they exited her tiny apartment and locked the door. Slowly descending the stairs, Ramsey led her over to his house.

"I should warn you that I haven't had time to clean the house lately," he said as he pushed the door open.

"Does this mean there will be dirty laundry piled everywhere, empty pizza boxes and beer bottles scattered about, and the fridge will be empty?" she teased.

He laughed. "Not quite that bad."

Chloe followed him into the side entrance of the house and stepped into a small laundry area.

"Actually, I need to give you a key to the house. You can use the laundry room anytime you need to," Ramsey said, indicating the washer and dryer. "Your apartment doesn't have cable or internet so you're welcome to use mine if you want."

"I don't want to encroach on your privacy. Besides, your girlfriend probably won't like the fact that I'm staying here as it is," she said, decided to test the waters.

Ramsey gave her an odd look. "I don't have a girlfriend, and you're welcome over here anytime you want, Chloe."

She nodded and followed him into a spacious kitchen. Through an archway, she saw a living area with hardwood floors and leather couches. A flat panel TV hung on one wall, a fireplace took up the opposite wall. Chloe felt extremely out of place.

"Do you want to see the guest rooms? You'll have your pick."

"I think I'd just like to sit for a minute if that's okay?"

Ramsey nodded. "You don't have to go upstairs before you're ready, Chloe." He glanced at his watch. "In fact, it's past dinner time. Are you hungry?"

"I hadn't thought of it before now, but I *should* eat something. I'm not all that hungry, but I know I need to eat for the baby's sake."

"Do you feel up to going out?" Ramsey asked.

"Oh, I couldn't!"

Ramsey held up a hand. "My treat, Chloe. You've been through a lot today. You deserve a good meal at a nice restaurant."

She glanced down at her rumpled jeans and top. "I'm not exactly dressed for a night out."

"Then how about a good meal at a casual place?" he amended. "There's a great steak place not too far from here, if you're up for it that is."

Chloe groaned. "A steak and potato sounds heavenly."

He grinned. "Then that's settled. Grab your purse and let's go."

Chloe smiled and picked up her purse. She followed him out to the Hummer and climbed into the passenger seat. As she eyed the house and the vehicle, she looked at Ramsey with new eyes.

"Is there something I need to know about you?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" Ramsey asked.

"Nice car, nice house. How do you afford it on a mechanic's salary?"

He grinned. "I invested well at my last job. Plus my family left me some money. I'm not broke if that's what you mean."

Chloe blushed. "I didn't mean to pry."

"It's okay, Chloe."

"No, I shouldn't have stuck my nose in where it didn't belong."

"Chloe, it's fine. Really."

Chloe stared out her window and watched the scenery go by. It didn't take long for them to reach the restaurant. For a Wednesday night, the place was rather packed. It took Ramsey a moment to park.

"It's time like this that I wish I had a smaller vehicle," he muttered.

Chloe laughed. "Yeah, but you're so tall you probably wouldn't be very comfortable in something small."

He grinned at her. "True enough. Every now and then Kiera convinces me to ride around in her SUV, but it's quite a bit smaller than mine. It makes me feel claustrophobic."

"I don't see how Michael drives the Corvette all the time. I had a hard time getting in and out of it the other day."

"He didn't mention getting another car?" Ramsey asked as he helped Chloe out of the SUV.

She shook her head. "Why would he?"

"Well, with a baby on the way, he's going to need something with a backseat. That is, if he's serious about wanting to be part of the baby's life."

Chloe studied him for a moment. "I didn't think about it, but you're right. He never once commented on my struggles getting in and out of his car. He doesn't let anyone else drive it and he never mentioned trading it in on something the baby could ride in."

"I'm sorry, Chloe. I shouldn't have mentioned it. It's not my place," Ramsey said.

She shook her head. "Ramsey, you've been kinder to me than anyone has in a long time. Don't feel like you have to hide anything from me."

He laughed. "I'm afraid I need to keep one or two of my secrets."

She smiled. "I guess we all need to keep a few things close to our hearts."

"What about you and Michael? Did you share a lot of things?" Ramsey asked. He knew she didn't know they were werewolves. But were there things Michael didn't know about her?

"Not really. He told me he was a mechanic and where he worked. At the time he was living at the Victorian with his two brothers. Other than that, I didn't really know anything about him. Still don't."

Ramsey opened the restaurant door and ushered her inside. He told the hostess they needed a table for two in a non-smoking area. Once they were seated and had ordered their drinks and food, he continued his conversation with Chloe.

"What about you? Is there anything Michael doesn't know about you?"

"A lot actually. I was an orphan when I moved here and I've never had a lot of friends in the area."

"Why did you stay if you didn't have friends here?" Ramsey asked.

"I'm not sure. I just felt like I was supposed to be here," she said, her brow furrowed.

"I get those feelings sometimes, too. It's part of why I'm still here. Gabriel asked for my help not too long ago and I decided to stick around." He looked at her over the rim of his glass. "I'm glad I did."

Chloe blushed. "Me, too."

"So other than your independent streak, is there anything else I should know?" Ramsey asked.

"I'm stubborn. I have a temper. And I won't tolerate a guy losing his temper with me and becoming physically violent."

Ramsey studied her a minute. "When I came to pick you up tonight, I saw you jerk your arm away from Michael. Is that all he did?"

Chloe nodded. "He mostly just yelled. Other than grabbing my arm, he wasn't physical with his anger."

"If he was, you'd tell me?"

Chloe chewed on her lip. "Is there something I need to know?"



"I'm not sure. Gabriel called while you were in the hospital. Some of the comments he made have made me wonder about Michael and his temper. I've seen Gabriel angry enough to tear a man apart because he dared to lay a hand on a woman in anger. But I wonder if Michael follows the same code."

"Do you think he would have hurt me last night?" she asked softly.

Ramsey sighed. "I've worked with him for a few months now. I'd like to say he wouldn't have, but I'm not so sure. I'm not sure I know the real Michael, and that worries me."

"I know I don't have any right to ask, but could I ride with you to work tomorrow? Kiera offered to take me to work in the morning," Chloe said, deciding to change the subject.

"Of course you can. Do you need me to pick you up afterwards?"

She shook her head. "Kiera said she would be in the area and would pick me up. I thought I'd visit with her until you got off work, if that's okay."

Ramsey reached across the table and took Chloe's hand. "It's fine, Chloe. You're not a burden, if that's what you're thinking."

"I'm just not used to relying on other people."

"Chloe, you have a lot on your shoulders right now. Let someone help you carry the load. I don't mind helping you and neither does Kiera. We wouldn't offer if we didn't want to help."

She nodded. Tears clogged her throat and she stared down at the table. She wasn't sure how she had been lucky enough to find Kiera and Ramsey, but she was glad that she had. They had both become very dear to her in a very short amount of time.

"I didn't mean to make you cry," Ramsey said.

"It isn't you. It's my stupid pregnancy hormones. I cry at the drop of a hat."

"Honey, you can blame your hormones all you want, but I don't think all of your tears are to blame on hormones. You've cried at least three times in the past twenty-four hours. Sometimes you just need to cry to let things out, and that's okay."

"Why are you so understanding? Why are you so nice to me?"

"Is that a bad thing?" Ramsey wondered.

She shook her head. "It's a wonderful thing. It makes me want things I can't have, though. It makes me lose my focus, and that isn't a good thing right now."

"What do you want that you can't have?" he asked.

"Someone like you," she whispered.

"Chloe, any guy would be lucky to have a woman like you in his life. Why do you think you can't have a decent guy in your life?"

"Because I've never found one. Before Michael, I dated a guy that told me he was only using me for sex. I dumped him right after that, but I felt so used. Then I found Michael and he swept me off my feet. We were only together a week and then he vanished." She took a sip of her drink. "After that I started hearing rumors about the infamous Michael Andrews and his one night stands. I felt like such an idiot."

"So because two men who like to use women just happen to find you, you've decided you aren't worth loving?" he asked.

"Why would anyone want me now?" she said indicating her swollen belly. "What man would want to take on someone else's child?"

Ramsey swallowed. The anguish on her face was just about his undoing. "I would," he answered quietly.

Chloe stared at him across the table and saw the sincerity in his eyes. "You've done so much for me already. I could never take advantage of you like that."

"It wouldn't be taking advantage of me if I wanted to be with you."

Chloe dropped her eyes to the table. Before she could answer, she heard a commotion across the restaurant. Looking up, she spotted Michael with a blonde woman on his arm.

Ramsey followed her gaze and cursed under his breath. "I'm sorry, Chloe. I swear I didn't know he would be here."

She shook her head. "It's okay, Ramsey."

She watched as Michael laughed and flirted with the blonde. Unable to tear her eyes away, she watched him kiss the woman and run his hands over her lithe body. Chloe's heart wrenched painfully.

Looking away, she fiddled with the silverware on the table.

Ramsey reached across and took her hands in his. "Do you want to leave? We can cancel our order and go somewhere else."

She looked up into his eyes and shook her head. "No, I want to stay."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Chloe nodded.

"Well, well... what do we have here?" a booming voice said across the restaurant.

Chloe cringed, but Ramsey held tight to her hands, giving her strength. She steeled her nerves and looked up as Michael and his date approached their table.

"Hi Michael."

"Don't the two of you look cozy?" Michael said, his eyes locking on their entwined hands.

"Aren't you going to introduce us to your date?" Ramsey asked.

Michael relaxed his posture and curved an arm around the blonde's waist. "This is Jenny. Jenny this is Chloe and Ramsey."

"Hi Jenny," Chloe said quietly. Her eyes skimmed over the pretty blonde as jealousy ate into her.

Ramsey squeezed Chloe's fingers, knowing how hard it must be for her to see Michael with someone else. She might profess to want someone else in her life, but it still had to hurt.

"It's nice to meet you, Jenny," Ramsey said.

"So what are you the two of you doing out?" Michael asked.

"Chloe was released from the hospital and I thought she might enjoy a quiet dinner," Ramsey said his eyes boring through Michael.

"Oh, I hope it wasn't anything serious," Jenny said.

"I just had a pregnancy scare," Chloe said. "But everything's fine as long as I stay out of stressful situations."

Ramsey fought a grin. *Score one for Chloe*, he thought. "I have a list of instructions from the nurses that I intend to follow to make sure both she and the baby are fine."

"Well, congratulations," Jenny said with a smile.

Michael glowered at the two of them. "Come on, Jenny. We should go back to our table."

After Michael and Jenny walked away, Ramsey smiled at Chloe. "You did well."

"I wanted to crawl under the table and hide."

"But you didn't. You faced him and his latest conquest."

Chloe smiled at him. "I couldn't have done it without you. Knowing you were here with me gave me strength."

"I wouldn't have left you alone to face him. Besides, if he started stressing you out too much, I would have had to ask him to leave. Doctor's order after all," he replied.

"Still, thank you for being here. You could have gotten up and left." She blushed. "And you didn't have to hold my hand."

Ramsey squeezed her fingers. "I liked holding your hand."

A waitress interrupted them with their plates. As they ate their dinner, they discussed their childhoods and their lives in Ashton Grove. Chloe talked a little more about her bad dating experience with Davis Atwood and then with Michael.

"What about before Davis?" Ramsey asked as he ate the last few bites of his steak.

Chloe shook her head. "There was one guy in high school, but that's it."

"Just one?" Ramsey asked in disbelief.

"I thought he was special. He was my first. We'd talked about going to college together and getting married once we had jobs. Our senior year he dumped me for the head cheerleader."

"You're right. Idiots tend to find you," Ramsey said.

"What about you?" Chloe asked. "Why aren't you married?"

Ramsey paused. How did you tell someone who didn't believe in the supernatural that you had to wait on a potential mate to come along? "I've dated, but just never found the right woman. Don't get me wrong, the women I dated were wonderful, but they weren't the right one for me."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "I didn't feel it here," he said, holding a hand over his chest.

Chloe nodded. "Did they know that?"

"Yeah, I made sure I told them. Sometimes we parted company immediately, other times they still wanted to date and hang out."

"At least you gave them a choice." Chloe pushed her plate aside. "If I eat another bite, I'll explode."

"Are you sure? You don't want dessert?" Ramsey asked.

She shook her head. "I wish I could, but I think I'd just make myself sick."

“Then I’ll ask for the check and we’ll head home. You’re going to need your rest if you’re going to start work tomorrow.”

“I’m getting a little nervous about tomorrow. What if I mess up? I can’t afford to lose this job before it even starts,” Chloe said.

“I’m sure you’re going to do fine, Chloe. You’re worrying over nothing,” Ramsey assured her.

“I hope so,” she sighed.

“Let’s get you home so you can rest. Just take things one day at a time. That’s the best anyone can do,” Ramsey said.

Chloe smiled and nodded.

## Chapter Twelve

The next morning, Chloe was showered and dressed in record time. She was nervous and excited about her new job. Over-riding everything was her anxiety over seeing Michael this morning. She stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Applying a light moisturizer, she put on some mascara and a little lipstick. Braiding her wet hair, she decided she was as primed as she was going to get for the day.

Chloe started to walk down the stairs, but she paused on the top step. She had promised Ramsey she wouldn't go downstairs by herself.

"Ramsey?" she called down the stairs.

He stepped into view and looked up at her. "Ready to come down?"

"Yes."

He jogged up the steps two at a time. When he reached her, he wrapped an arm around her waist. "Watch your step. These stairs are on the small side."

Chloe hid a smile, but did as he said. Holding onto the rail, she slowly walked down the stairs, allowing Ramsey to support her. When they reached the bottom, she smiled up at him. "Thank you."

"I'm afraid I don't have much in the kitchen for breakfast," he said.

"That's okay. Kiera said she was going to make something before she took me to work."

He nodded. "In that case, are you ready to go?"

"I'm ready when you are."

"You look nice this morning," he said as his eyes roved over her knit dress.

"Thank you," she murmured. "It's one of the dresses Cassie gave me. I wasn't sure what to wear for my first day at work."

"I'm sure what you're wearing is more than fine."

Chloe smiled. "I hope so."

"My keys are in the kitchen. We can go through the side door," Ramsey said.

Chloe followed him through the house and out to the SUV. On the way to the Victorian, she fidgeted with her purse strap. She had no doubt that she could do the job she'd been hired for, but she was anxious just the same.

"You're going to do fine today, Chloe."

Startled, she glanced over at Ramsey.

He grinned at her. "You look nervous."

"I guess I am. I know I can answer a phone and make files, but I always get a little anxious when I start a new job."

When Ramsey pulled into the parking lot of the garage, Chloe gave him a puzzled look.

"I thought I'd walk you over if that's okay?" he said, noting her expression.

She cast a quick glance in the direction of the garage. The bays were closed, except for the first one. The mechanics were gathered at the back of a car talking.

"If you're worried about Michael, don't be," Ramsey said. "He's not going to bother you this morning."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Because I'm not going to let him."

"Ramsey, why are you so nice to me?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Maybe I'm hoping you'll realize what a great catch I am," he joked.

She smiled. "I already figured that out."

"Ready to go over and see Kiera?" he asked.

She looked over at the mechanics one more time before nodding. She reached for the door handle, but Ramsey stopped her.

"Wait right there. I'm not about to let you fall out of the car and hurt the baby," he said as he opened his door.

He walked around the SUV, ignoring the looks from his friends and coworkers, and opened Chloe's door. Helping her out of the SUV, he

placed a hand at the small of her back and escorted her across the street. Once he made sure she was safely tucked away inside the Victorian, he crossed back over to the garage.

He ignored Michael's sullen look and joined the group in the first bay. "What's everyone up to this morning?"

"Apparently not as much as you," Hunter said with a smile.

Ramsey shook his head. "She's renting my garage apartment and needed a ride. Don't read anything into it."

Hunter craned his head to look across the street. "So she's available?"

Ramsey looked at Michael, but didn't say anything.

"Did the fact that she's carrying my child slip past the both of you?" Michael snapped.

Ramsey calmly looked at Michael without saying a word. He wanted to knock the other werewolf into his place, but wasn't sure how Gabriel would react.

Hunter looked taken aback. He looked between Ramsey and Michael. "Maybe the person who missed that fact was her."

Michael growled and lunged at Hunter, knocking him to the ground. Pinning him to the ground by his throat, Michael said, "You don't know what you're talking about. Chloe's mine. I don't care where she's staying, she belongs with *me*."

Ramsey laid a hand on Michael's shoulder. "Ease up, man. Chloe doesn't belong to anyone but herself."

"At least one of you seems to understand that," a feminine voice said from the doorway.

All three men looked toward the open bay door. Both Kiera and Chloe stood silhouetted in the morning light.

Kiera stepped forward before continuing, "Why do you feel the need to own us? Gabriel understands that he belongs to me as much as I belong to him. It's a partnership. You have to give as much as you take, Michael."

Michael released Hunter and stood up. He took in Chloe's stricken expression and took a step toward her. When she hastily retreated a step, he froze. Too late, he realized he was turning into the monster his father had been. Or at least, in Chloe's eyes he was no better.



He took a step back, giving her some space, and hung his head in shame. He knew better than to act on his animal instinct alone, yet where Chloe was concerned he had trouble listening to his human side. He only hoped it hadn't done irreparable damage.

"I'm sorry, Chloe. I didn't mean to frighten you," he murmured.

"I don't belong to you, Michael," she said quietly. "Ramsey's right. I don't belong to anyone but myself."

Michael nodded his head. "I know that. Somewhere inside I know that, but there's a part of me that doesn't want to settle for that answer... a part of me that wants you to belong to me."

"I told you before, Michael, a baby doesn't give you the right to lay claim to me. I'll make sure you're a part of the baby's life, but right now I need to prove to myself that I'm able to stand on my own two feet."

"I understand that, Chloe, but I still want to help," Michael said.

"Then you don't understand. I need to do this, Michael. I need to try and stand on my own two feet, at least as much as I can. I know that Ramsey could rent the apartment for a lot more than he's charging me, but at least it gives me a little independence right now. This is what I need."

Michael ground his teeth together. If he heard one more word about how understanding Ramsey was, how kind Ramsey was, how this or that Ramsey was, he was afraid he might puke. It was obvious that Chloe was becoming attached to the other werewolf. If Michael didn't get his act together soon, he'd lose the mother of his child. He just wasn't quite sure how to do it.

"Then I guess I better let you get to your job before you lose the only employment you have," he said.

Chloe didn't answer. She merely turned around and walked away.

Michael was aware of every eye in the garage on him, but he ignored them all. The only one who was hard to ignore was Ramsey. The man got under his skin like no one else. Catching the other werewolf's gaze, he finally snapped.

"What?" he barked.

Ramsey shrugged. "Nothing. Just wondering if you always dig your holes this deep."

"What's it to you? I'd think you would be rejoicing about now. I'm making your job easier on you."

Ramsey grinned. "Very true, however, I want Chloe to make the choice that's best for her and the baby. If I thought that choice was you, I'd gladly step aside."

Michael shook his head and slid under the car he was working on. There were some people he would just never understand. Apparently Ramsey was going to be one of them.



Kiera drove Chloe to the real estate office Matt had opened. She could tell that something was bothering her new friend, but she didn't want to pry too much.

"Chloe, I know it's none of my business, but if you ever want to talk I want you know I'm here to listen."

Chloe glanced at Kiera, startled. "Am I that transparent?"

Kiera shrugged. "I can just tell something's on your mind."

"Michael just infuriates me."

Kiera laughed. "He does that to a lot of women I would imagine."

"He seems really hung up on the fact that I'm renting an apartment from Ramsey."

Kiera glanced at Chloe. "Is that all?"

"He thinks I'm doing more than renting an apartment from Ramsey."

"Ah," Kiera said with a grin. "So, he's jealous."

Chloe's hands fidgeted in her lap. "His temper today in the garage... I've only seen him lose his temper one other time. Does he do that often?"

"Michael?" Kiera asked softly.

Chloe nodded.

"I don't know. I've heard that he can have a wicked temper, but Gabriel swears that he and his brothers would never raise a hand to a woman."

"And Gabriel hasn't?"

Kiera shook her head. "He may shout every now and then, but I know he'd never hurt me."

"I wish I could be as certain of Michael. The night Ramsey came to pick me up Michael and I had been arguing. He grabbed my arm when I walked past him. He didn't leave any marks on my arm, but it was hard enough that it worried me," Chloe said. "And now today at the garage... he scares me, Kiera."

"And yet you're attracted to him?" Kiera asked.

"Yes," Chloe whispered. "But I don't want to be."

"If you could choose who to be attracted to, who would you choose?"

Chloe looked out the window. "Ramsey. He's been so kind to me. He never raises his voice to me, he's gentle with me. I get the feeling he'd be a good father and a good husband."

"So what are you waiting for?" Kiera asked.

Chloe looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"If you think Ramsey would be so perfect for you and your baby, what are you waiting for?"

"You mean I should flirt with him?" Chloe asked.

"I mean that if you think Ramsey could make you happy, then you should do whatever it takes to make sure *he* knows that."

"I'm not very good at flirting. All of my past boyfriends have made the first move. I'm more of the wall flower type," Chloe said.

"Then it's about time we released your inner vixen," Kiera said with a smile. At Chloe's horrified expression she laughed. "Don't worry. I was a wall flower too. But the attention of a hot guy can do wonders for you. Trust me on this one."

"I'm not too sure about this, Kiera. Besides, I'm pregnant. Why on earth would Ramsey want me? He'd not only be taking on me, but he'd be stuck with Michael's baby too."

Kiera reached over and squeezed Chloe's hand. "Honey, trust me. Ramsey won't mind one bit. He's the kind of man that will love that baby regardless of who the father is."

Chloe smiled at her. "Do you really think he might be interested in me?"

Kiera laughed. "Trust me, he's interested. You show him the slightest bit of attention and he'll be at your beck and call."

Chloe chewed on her lip. "But what about Michael?"

"Don't worry about Michael. If he gets out of hand, his brother will take care of him. You just worry about you and the baby."

Chloe nodded. As Kiera pulled into a parking space in front of the real estate office, a flock of butterflies erupted in Chloe's stomach. She'd never been so nervous in her life.

"I'll come back and pick you up when you get off work," Kiera said as Chloe got out of the SUV.

"If I get fired before then, I'll call you," Chloe said.

Kiera shook her head. "You're going to be fine."

Chloe sighed and nodded her head.



Later that afternoon, Kiera picked Chloe up from work.

"So, how was your first day?"

Chloe smiled. "It was actually a lot of fun. Matt was great!"

"See, I told you!"

"He even said that I could show some houses after the baby's born," Chloe said. "He said I'm a natural."

Kiera smiled at Chloe's enthusiasm. "It seems you've found a new career."

"It was a lot of fun, but a little bit tiring. I'll be glad to go home and take a nap."

"Do you want me to take you home? Ramsey probably won't be finished for another few hours."

"I think I'd rather wait for Ramsey. I promised him I wouldn't go up and down the stairs by myself," Chloe said.

"Well, if you're tired, you're welcome to take a nap in one of the guest rooms," Kiera offered.

"Thanks. How are things coming along for the party?"

Kiera smiled. "Everything should be ready in time."

"I'm looking forward to meeting everyone," Chloe said.

Kiera was certain that everyone was anxious to meet Chloe too, but for different reasons. If Ramsey or Michael didn't claim Chloe by Saturday, she'd find herself being courted by every single male in the pack.

As Kiera pulled in the driveway of the Victorian, she glanced across the street at the garage. All three bays were open. It looked like the guys were staying busy.

"Are you hungry?" Kiera asked as she got out of the vehicle.

"Always," Chloe said with a smile.

"Let's go see what's in the kitchen. Maybe we can make something to take over to the guys too."

"Kiera, are you trying to help me along with Ramsey?"

Kiera smiled. "Maybe a little."

Chloe laughed. "Well, I could certainly use the help."



An hour later, Kiera and Chloe had baked a few dozen cookies, finger sandwiches, and had set out a few two-liters of soda.

Kiera had made a plate just for Gabriel and Chloe had done the same for Ramsey. Loading everything into a large box, Kiera and Chloe called the garage and asked if Hunter would come over and help them with something.

A moment later the doorbell rang. Kiera hurried to the door and let Hunter in.

"We have a surprise for you," she said with a smile.

"I thought you needed help with something," Hunter replied.

"We do. We need you to carry this box across the street," Chloe said, inclining her head toward the large box on the counter.

Hunter sniffed the air. "Are those cookies I smell?"

"Mm-hmm. And the sooner you help us, the sooner you can eat some," Kiera said.

That was all the urging Hunter needed. He grabbed the box and with long strides headed for the door.

Kiera and Chloe were on his heels, scurrying after him, each with a plate in their hands. Kiera pulled the door shut behind her, not bothering to lock it.

As they entered the garage, every eye focused on them.

"We thought you might be hungry," Kiera said. "Snacks will be in the office."

Hunter proceeded through the bays to the office area and placed the box on the counter. Stepping back, he let Kiera pull everything out of the box.

"Did I hear someone say snacks?" Ramsey asked as he stepped into the office.

"I brought this for you," Chloe said softly as she handed him a plate.

Ramsey was surprised, but he accepted the plate. "Thank you, Chloe."

She nodded and blushed. Stepping over to Kiera's side, she helped unload the box. Once everything was set out, she grabbed a plate and

selected a sandwich and some cookies for herself. Even though there were several empty seats, she decided to sit beside Ramsey.

"Did you enjoy work today?" Ramsey asked as Chloe settled into the seat next to him.

She smiled. "Very much. I think I may have found my calling."

"I'm glad. I know you were nervous earlier."

She nodded. "I was, but Matt was great. He spent the first hour just getting to know me and helping me calm down."

Ramsey smiled. "That sounds like Matt."

"I just didn't expect to be so tired afterwards."

Ramsey's smile slipped from his face. "Chloe, you don't need to over-do it. You know what the nurse said."

She placed a hand on his arm. "I'm fine, Ramsey. I just need a nap is all."

"Promise me that you'll get some rest. I don't want you to work too hard."

Chloe rolled her eyes. "I doubt that working a few hours a day is working too hard. I'll be fine."

Ramsey reached out and gently took her chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing her to look at him. "I'm serious, Chloe. The nurse said you needed to be careful. If I thought for one minute that you were working simply to pay rent, I'd refuse to accept your payments."

"I'm not working just to pay rent. I have other responsibilities too," she said softly.

He caressed her cheek briefly. "Just promise that you'll be careful."

"I promise."

He nodded. "That's all I can ask."

"I think I'll walk back over to the house with Kiera and take a nap until you're ready to go home."

"I'll come over and pick you up when it's time to go."

"Okay," Chloe said, smiling as she stood and brushed the crumbs from her dress.

Dropping her plate in the trash, she followed Kiera from the garage and across to the Victorian, completely oblivious to the murderous look on Michael's face as she passed by.

## Chapter Thirteen

### *Saturday*

Chloe stretched as she woke and took in the beautiful morning. The day of the party had finally arrived and she couldn't have been more excited. She'd spent the last few days getting to know Ramsey. She wouldn't say they were dating exactly, but things were definitely progressing nicely.

Pushing back the covers, she struggled to sit up. Her stomach seemed to grow almost daily. The baby was getting bigger and bigger and was becoming more and more active. Pushing to her feet, she selected a three-quarter sleeve white muslin dress with an aqua cardigan and matching ballet flats. Even though the party wasn't until later in the day, she was spending the morning with Ramsey.

Chloe laid her outfit out on the bed and walked into the small bathroom. Turning on the shower, she brushed her teeth and untangled her hair. When the water was the right temperature, she undressed and stepped under the warm spray. The small shower seemed to be shrinking with her ever growing stomach, but she enjoyed her morning showers just the same.

When she was finished, she dried off and moisturized her skin. She had already noticed faint stretch marks along her hips and the undersides of her breasts. Chloe knew that no amount of lotion would stop the small vein like marks from marring her skin, but she hoped the lotion would add the elasticity her skin needed for the changes her body was going through.

Toweling her hair dry, she combed it free of tangles. Walking into the bedroom, she slipped on her clothes and shoes. Putting on the silver hoop earrings Kiera had given her the day before, she went back into the bathroom to put on her make-up.

Chloe usually just put on mascara and lipstick, but today she decided to go all out. She put on a little blush, eye shadow, and eyeliner. Adding her customary mascara and lipstick, she pulled her damp hair back in a decorative clip and looked at her reflection in the mirror. The woman staring back at her was glowing. Chloe couldn't believe she was looking at her own reflection.

She stepped into the bedroom and picked up her purse and cell phone. Flipping the phone open, she dialed Ramsey's number, but she paused before hitting send. It was hard to surprise him if he knew she was coming over. It wouldn't hurt just this one time to not call, would it? She cleared the number and closed the phone. Making a decision, she grabbed her key and headed out of the apartment.

Locking the door behind her, she held onto the railing and carefully descended the stairs. When she reached the bottom without incident, she heaved a sigh of relief. If anything had happened, she would have never heard the end of it from Ramsey.

Ramsey had always said she was welcome in his house anytime, but she felt strange walking in uninvited. What if he had company? She stood outside of the kitchen door uncertain. Coming to a decision, she used the key he had given her and went inside.

"Ramsey?" she called out as she closed the door behind her.

The house was quiet, a little *too* quiet. His monstrous SUV was still in the driveway so she knew he was home. She only hoped he was home alone. He hadn't been seeing anyone that she knew of, but that didn't mean he hadn't been taking anyone to his bed.

Chloe swallowed down her uneasiness and continued through the house. Room after room was quiet. When she came to a closed door, she knew it was his bedroom. Glancing at the clock on the hall wall she saw that it was nine o'clock. Surely he was awake.

"Ramsey?" she called through the door.

Pressing her hands and cheek to the door, she tried to listen for any sounds within. The room sounded as quiet as the rest of the house.



Turning the knob, she quietly pushed the door open a crack and peeked inside.

A large bed dominated the middle of the room. Ramsey was still asleep, buried under a mountain of covers. Chloe's breath caught in her throat. He looked so peaceful. She slowly backed out of the room, not wanting to disturb him.

"What time is it?" Ramsey asked in a husky voice, eyes still shut.

Chloe gasped. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to wake you."

Ramsey rolled over and opened his eyes. His sleepy half-lidded gaze took in her neatly coiffed hair and nice outfit. If the blush staining her cheeks was any indication, she'd dressed up for him.

"If you'll give me a few minutes to shower and dress, I'll take you out for breakfast."

"I didn't realize you were still sleeping," Chloe said quietly. "I wouldn't have come over so early if I had realized..."

"Speaking of that, how exactly did you get down the stairs?"

She fidgeted and looked down at her feet. "I was really careful."

Ramsey groaned. "You're going to be the death of me."

"I'll just wait in the kitchen," she said, backing out of the room.

"Chloe, come here."

Chloe hesitantly stepped further into the room. She walked to the edge of the bed and stopped, unsure what he wanted her to do.

Ramsey pushed himself into a sitting position, the covers dropping to his waist. Reaching out, he pulled her down onto the bed. "I know you probably think I'm a tyrant, Chloe, but I worry about you. If you had fallen, I wouldn't have known."

She tried to respond, but the feel of her hand in Ramsey's was robbing her of her thoughts. The sight of his bare chest wasn't helping much either.

"Chloe?"

"Hmm?"

Ramsey tipped her chin up and looked into her eyes. "Do you understand why I worry? I know we haven't known each other very long, but I care what happens to you."

"You do?"

He caressed her jaw. Deciding to throw caution to the wind, he pulled her closer and brushed his lips against hers. He had only meant

for it to be a quick kiss, but when he heard Chloe whimper and felt her lips open under his he was lost. Pulling her into his arms, he deepened the kiss. The feel of her tongue sliding against his, the taste of her was driving him wild. He felt his inner wolf surging to the surface and had to tamp the beast back down. When he felt Chloe melt against him, he knew he had to put a stop to things before it was too late.

Breaking the kiss, he said, "Chloe, we should stop."

Chloe tried to mask the hurt she felt and she merely nodded.

Ramsey caressed her cheek. "I meant that we needed to stop because I don't want things to go further until you're sure you want to be with me, and only with me."

She looked at him uncertainly. "I don't understand."

"I want you, Chloe. But if we're together, then I want the whole package... you, the baby... I want us to be a family."

Chloe stared at him in wide-eyed wonder. "But we've only known each other for a week."

"I know which is why I said we needed to stop. I know it's too soon. I wasn't stopping because I don't want you, Chloe. I'm stopping because I want you too much."

Chloe looked at him in confusion. "What if I hadn't wanted you to stop?"

Ramsey groaned. "Chloe, you aren't making this easy."

"Ramsey, the last man to kiss me was Michael, and we know how that ended," she said with a pointed look at her stomach. "I lied to myself and let myself believe that he was different. Every guy I've ever dated was a jerk. Is it so wrong of me to want to know what it's like to be held by someone who actually cares?" she finished quietly.

Ramsey pulled her into his arms and held her against his chest. "Michael isn't always a jerk, Chloe. If you want to give him a chance, he can be a good guy."

She shook her head. "I'm not going to take any chances with this baby. He has a horrible temper, Ramsey."

"You're going to meet a lot of people tonight, Chloe. A lot of them are good guys. Single guys. If you still think I'm your guy after tonight, then we'll talk."

She lifted her head from his chest and smiled. "You mean it?"

"About the guys or the talk?"

“The talk.”

He nodded. “Now get out of here so I can shower and dress, then we’ll go feed you and the baby.”

Chloe leaned down and kissed him once more before getting off the bed. She sashayed out of the room and closed the door behind her, leaving Ramsey shaking his head. He’d never seen her in this light before and he wasn’t sure if he could handle her or not. A slow grin spread across his face. But he was certain that he was going to enjoy finding out.

## Chapter Fourteen

Later that night, Ramsey ushered Chloe into the backyard of the Victorian. Paper lanterns hung overhead, candles decorated table tops, and jasmine bloomed around the yard.

"Everything looks so romantic," Chloe said as she took everything in.

"Kiera definitely outdid herself," Ramsey agreed.

Over half of the pack was already present. Several of the single males openly leered at Chloe, pregnant stomach and all. Ramey held back a growl and wrapped an arm around her waist, holding her close to his side. When she smiled up at him, he leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to her lips.

"What was that for?" Chloe asked.

"I couldn't help myself," he answered. "You looked too beautiful in the moonlight and candlelight."

"I know you said you wanted me to wait until tonight was over to make a decision, but would you mind if I stayed by your side tonight?"

Ramsey smiled at her. "I'd like that, but I doubt that Kiera will let you."

"I take it she'll make me mingle and will introduce me to everyone here tonight?"

"Of course," he said.

Chloe sighed. "I guess it could be worse."

No sooner had the words left Chloe's mouth than a loud noise came from across the yard. She looked over and saw Michael heading their

way, a woman on each arm. Her stomach knotted and she clutched Ramsey's arm.

"Ramsey, I can't do this tonight. I can't deal with him."

"Come on let's go sit by Kiera and Gabriel."

She nodded and let him guide her over to a table. After she was seated, she saw that Michael was once again heading her way. She tensed waiting for the confrontation she knew was coming.

"Well, if it isn't the mother of my child," Michael said.

The women with Michael looked her over and then dismissed her. Chloe could feel a blush creeping up her neck. "What do you want Michael?"

"I can't come by and say hi?"

"You know the doctor said it was best if you stayed away from me," she answered.

He smiled. "I seem to remember a time when you didn't want me to stay away. Matter of fact, it wasn't that long ago that we talked about starting over."

"That was before the new and improved you."

"So you're just going to jump into bed with the first guy that comes along?"

Chloe gasped. "What I do or don't do is no concern of yours! Besides, you aren't exactly one to talk! You've slept with almost every woman in the city. Before too long, you'll have to branch out to the surrounding areas or change your policy of visiting the same bed more than once," she snapped.

Beside her, Kiera clapped. "Well said, Chloe."

"Stay out of it, Kiera," Michael growled at his sister-in-law.

"Remember your place," Gabriel said, standing beside his wife.

"Well now, bro, not all of us have been lucky enough to find our mate and have her realize who she is... or what we are. Maybe if mine had recognized me, I wouldn't be the way I am now."

"Enough!" Gabriel barked. "I think it's time for you to leave."

"Afraid I'll let the secret out? She'll have to learn it sooner or later."

"Michael, one more word and it will be the last you're able to utter for a week."

Michael smirked and walked away.

Chloe looked at Gabriel and then at Ramsey. "What's going on?"

Ramsey looked to the alpha, not sure what to say. He couldn't tell the pack's secret without permission, but Michael had a point – Chloe did need to know.

"There's a family secret you'll need to know if you decide to stick around, but it isn't something you need to worry about right now. Tonight was supposed to be a celebration. Leave it to Michael to ruin it," Gabriel muttered.

"He's only ruined it if we let him," Chloe said, even though talk of secrets had left her feeling rattled.

Ramsey reached out and took her hand. "Chloe's right. We can stop the party now and let Michael win, or we can continue where we left off."

Gabriel nodded. "Ramsey's right. I say we continue with the party."

Several of the pack members came over to be introduced to Chloe. Some of the bolder single males asked her to dance, but she declined them all. When one in particular didn't seem inclined to take no for an answer, she leaned closer to Ramsey.

"I believe she said no, James," Ramsey said in a calm voice, his arm going around Chloe.

"The last time I checked she might be pregnant, but she wasn't claimed by anyone," James said.

Gabriel decided to intervene. He knew Ramsey would fight for Chloe, but he didn't want it to come to that. "Back down James. You were warned before you came here tonight."

James glanced at the alpha and inclined his head briefly before backing away. He melted into the crowd and disappeared from sight as quickly as he had arrived.

Chloe trembled next to Ramsey. What had she gotten herself into? First Michael and now James. Tempers seemed to run hot around the Andrews family. "What's wrong with him?" she asked.

Ramsey shook his head. "James has a tendency to think he's god's gift to women."

"Like Michael?" she asked.

"Something like that."

"Lucky me. It seems I'm still attracting the same type of guys I always have," she said with a frown.

"Not quite," Ramsey said with a grin.

"Well, except for you," Chloe amended. "You seem to be an anomaly in my dating sphere though."

"So, this is a date?" he asked quietly.

Chloe felt a blush stain her cheeks. "I'd like for it to be."

He laced his fingers with hers. "Then it's a date."

Another commotion broke out across the yard. This time a couple was heading their way. The man couldn't be any other but Michael's and Gabriel's other brother, Cole, and his wife.

"Cole, Marin, I'd like you to meet, Chloe. Chloe, this is my brother Cole and his wife, Marin," Gabriel said when they had reached the table.

Chloe stood with some assistance from Ramsey. "It's nice to meet both of you. I've heard a little about you from Michael."

Cole looked around. "Where is he anyway? I can't imagine my brother letting you out of his sight for a second," he said with a grin.

Chloe looked at Gabriel uneasily. As the eldest of the sibling she hoped he would jump in and save her. How did she tell Cole that his twin wasn't acting in a very favorable way toward her right now?

"I think you two need to have a seat," Gabriel said.

Cole gave him a perplexed look, but sat down just the same.

"What's going on?" Cole asked.

"Michael hasn't been acting like himself lately. The doctor has recommended that he and Chloe spend very little time together," Gabriel said.

Both of Cole's eyebrows shot up, but he remained quiet and let his brother talk.

"He spends most of his time yelling at Chloe and even grabbed her arm. Hunter made a comment about getting to know Chloe the other day and Michael pinned him by the throat. And tonight he showed up with two women and tried to start a fight with her, knowing that she could lose the baby if she didn't stay calm," Gabriel said.

Cole shook his head. It was obvious to him that his brother was in self-destruct mode. He just didn't know why. "I'm sorry he's been such an ass to you Chloe. I promise that isn't the Michael we know. If you think it would help, I'd be happy to talk to him."

Chloe looked at Ramsey and back at Cole. "If you think you can get through to him, I would appreciate it. Just the thought of seeing him is enough to give me an anxiety attack these days. I've told him that he

can spend as much time with the baby as he wants, but if he continues to act like this I'm not sure I'll be able to be around him at all."

Cole didn't miss the look, or the hand holding between Chloe and Ramsey. It seemed that Michael was going to miss out on his mate if he didn't get his act together - and soon! He loved his twin, but there were times Michael needed a swift kick in the rear. This appeared to be one of those times.

"I'll see what I can do," he promised.



After the party, Ramsey drove Chloe back to the house. She stared out of the window into the starry night. The moon hung full and heavy in the night sky. Chloe felt its hypnotic pull, as if it were calling to her. She wanted to close her eyes and bask in its beauty.

"What are you looking at?" Ramsey asked quietly.

"The moon. It looks so beautiful tonight."

He grinned, pleased with her response. It seemed fitting that a werewolf's mate would be as drawn to the moon as a wolf was. "It is beautiful."

"Do you ever feel like it's calling to you?"

"All the time," he said softly.

"I'd love to have a garden one day; a beautiful garden full of scented flowers, especially ones that bloom at night."

"What else would you have in your garden?" he asked.

"A hammock to lie in so I could enjoy the moonlit nights and a swing to enjoy the sunny days."

"Sounds like you have it all planned out."

"I'd also like to have one of those wooden play sets built for the baby. Well, when the baby is big enough to play on one," she said with a smile.

Ramsey pulled into the driveway and turned off the engine. "Can I show you something?"

"Of course."

He got out and walked around to the passenger side. Helping Chloe out of the SUV, he held her hand and walked her around to the backyard. When they came to a white picket fence, he pushed open a gate that hung on squeaky hinges. The yard was barren, no grass grew,



and no plants were anywhere to be seen. It was merely a large dirt patch with a rickety old swing.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“At the moment it’s dead. But I think it used to be a garden, much like the one you just described.”

She turned to look at him. “What are you saying Ramsey?”

“If I bought the plants, do you think you could do something with this place? Make it like you described?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had a place to plant anything.” She turned to survey the area. If she closed her eyes she could see her vision come to life. Could she do it?

“I figure you can’t do any worse than I would. I’m more of a handyman. I can replace wood and paint and stuff, but when it comes to flowers and such I’m pretty much a failure. I just thought you might be able to add some color and make it feel homey back here.”

Chloe stepped closer and looped her arm through his. “I’d be happy to give it a try. I’m not sure what I can plant during this time of year, but maybe we can get at least something in the ground.”

He nodded. “We can go to the nursery tomorrow and you can tell them what you want the place to look like. Maybe they can deliver something tomorrow afternoon.”

Chloe smiled up at him.

With the moonlight dancing in her eyes and shining in her hair, he was lost. Pulling her closer, he cradled her face in his hands and bent his head to hers. His lips gently brushed against hers. He inhaled her scent and felt her arms go around his waist. With her rounded stomach pressed against him, and her soft lips opening under his, Ramsey lost himself in Chloe.

His tongue slid into her mouth, tasting her, delving into her warmth. His fingers burrowed into her hair, dislodging her clip, neither of them paying attention as it clattered to the ground. Ramsey wanted her fiercely. He wanted to spread her under the moonlight and watch the silvery rays dance across her skin as he claimed her.

Trailing his fingers down the column of her throat, he sought the fullness of her breast. When his thumb flicked across the hardened nipple, Chloe whimpered and pressed against him, wanting more.

Ramsey's cock strained against his jeans. He wanted desperately to be inside of her, but knew it was too soon.

His hand slid down the swell of her stomach to her thighs. Grabbing her dress, he lifted the hem and slid his hand underneath. His fingers skimmed the soft skin of her thigh and came to rest on her hip. When Chloe moved against him, pressing against his cock, he grinned against her lips.

Running his fingers along the top of her panties, he felt her straining against him. Slipping his hand inside of her panties, his fingers delved into the curls at the junction of her thighs. Parting her lips, he felt her dampness and groaned into her mouth. She was so wet and ready for him. Her clit was swollen and heavy. When he grazed it with his thumb, she gasped and jerked against him, taking one of his fingers part-way inside of her.

Ramsey groaned and buried his face into her neck. "Sweetheart, you are so sweet and so wet."

"Ramsey, I..."

"Shhh. Just come for me, sweetheart."

Ramsey continued to rub her clit with his thumb as he stroked in and out of her with his finger, driving her to a frenzy. When Chloe cried out her release, he felt her juices on his hand and gently nipped her on the neck. He wanted to bury himself in her and claim her right then and there, but he held back.

Breathing heavy, he set her away from him and straightened her dress. "I'd better walk you up to your apartment."

"But..."

He shook his head. "I'm not going to take advantage of you, Chloe."

"Ramsey, I..."

"Chloe, I said..."

Chloe grabbed a handful of his shirt and pulled him to her. Going up on tiptoe she kissed him hard, silencing whatever he was going to say. If he was going to have second thoughts, she didn't want to hear them. She'd just had one of the best evenings of her life and she wasn't about to let him ruin it.

"You can't give me an amazing orgasm like that and then send me home, Ramsey. Didn't we decide earlier this was a date?"

"There's a difference in a date and you ending up in my bed."

“And didn’t we say that if this ended up as a date that we would be dating each other? I believe we had a discussion along those lines this morning.”

“We did, and we also said it was too soon for this step,” he reminded her.

“What’s going to happen? It’s not like you can knock me up,” she quipped.

He chuckled. “I may not be able to get your pregnant, but I can decide I want to keep you.”

Chloe caressed his cheek. “Would that be so horrible?”

“Not to me. But you heard Cole tonight. He’s going to talk to Michael. What if he changes? What if he becomes the type of man you can depend on?”

Chloe shook her head. “I can’t plan my life, or my baby’s, on a bunch of what if’s. What I know is that you make me feel like a desirable woman, you seem to care about me, to care about what happens to this baby, and I want to be with you.”

“I guess I can live with that for now.”

“What exactly does that mean?” she wondered.

“It means that if you want to stay the night with me, I won’t stop you. But it also means if you change your mind, I won’t stop you from leaving... not today, tomorrow, or a week from now.”

“In other words, I’m still my own woman.”

He nodded. “You still belong to you and no one else.”

“What if I want to at least belong to you a little bit?”

Ramsey shook his head. “If I claim you Chloe, it’s going to be for good. It’s one thing to say we’re dating, but it’s another to say you’re mine. I don’t think you’re ready for that just yet.”

She studied him a minute, unsure of what to say or think. He seemed to be so complex at times. “I guess I can accept that.”

Moving back into his arms, she pulled his head down for another kiss. For at least one night, she wanted to feel special. She wanted to be loved, cherished... and she had a feeling that being in Ramsey’s bed would show her exactly what that felt like.



In the bedroom, Chloe felt a sudden case of shyness. She hadn’t been naked in front of a man since her time with Michael. No one had

seen her naked, pregnant body except doctors. She hoped Ramsey wouldn't be disappointed.

She kicked off her shoes and slipped out of her cardigan. When it came time to take off her dress, she hesitated. Ramsey was watching her with a heated expression. She could see the desire in his eyes and it warmed her from the inside out.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured as he moved closer.

Pulling her into his arms, he buried his hands in her hair. "Your hair feels like the softest silk," he said as he rubbed the strands between his fingers.

He trailed his fingers along her jaw and across her bottom lip, watching as her nipples hardened through her dress. Gently running his fingers down to her shoulders, he slipped the straps of her dress down her arms. He reached behind her and slid the zipper of her dress down slowly, giving her time to change her mind.

Ramsey watched the rise and fall of her breasts with her rapid breathing. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips as he slid the dress down her arms, exposing first her breasts and then her stomach. She looked like a goddess standing before him.

Reaching for her white hipster panties, he slid them down her legs and let them pool at her feet. When she stood naked before him, he sucked in a breath. He'd never seen a more glorious sight!

"The word beautiful doesn't do you justice," he said in a husky voice.

Chloe blushed and coyly looked at him from under her eyelashes. She stepped closer and reached for the hem of his shirt. Tugging it free of his jeans, she lifted it over his head and let it drop to the floor. With his chest bare, she couldn't contain herself. She allowed her fingers to skim the surface of his warm, firm skin. His nipples hardened under her fingertips as she glided over them, causing Chloe to grin.

Her hands drifted down to his pants. She unfastened his jeans and pushed them down his legs, surprised to discover he didn't wear anything underneath.

Ramsey quickly stepped out of his shoes and jeans. Standing before Chloe naked, he allowed her to explore his body at her leisure. Her butterfly soft touch was driving him crazy.

Chloe hesitantly reached out and grasped his cock in her hand, gliding her hand along its velvety smoothness. She'd felt him outside in

the garden and known he would be large, but she hadn't realized how large. Now she worried that he might not fit.

Backing toward the bed, Ramsey pulled Chloe down on top of him. "Why don't we try things this way? That way you're in control and can stop if you get uncomfortable?" he suggested.

She smiled. "It's like you read my mind. I was worrying that you might not fit."

He chuckled. "Oh, I'll fit sweetheart. I just don't want to hurt you right now," he said as he gently cupped her stomach with his large hand.

Chloe covered his hand with her smaller one. The intimate gesture almost made her cry. Leaning down, she kissed him gently, tracing his lower lip with her tongue. When he cupped her breasts, she moaned into his mouth and moved against his cock, feeling its head slip inside of her. Sitting up, she slid down the length of him, slowly taking the length of him inside of her.

"You feel so good, Ramsey," she whispered.

"You feel good, too, honey."

She slowly moved her hips, keeping a steady rhythm, feeling him slide in and out of her body. Feeling her orgasm building, she braced her hands on his chest and thrust harder against him, again and again. As she slid down the length of him over and over, her clit grazed against him, pushing her over the brink. Crying out as her orgasm spiraled through her she continued thrusting against Ramsey until she felt warmth spread inside of her as he found his release.

Chloe fell limply across Ramsey's chest, unable to move. Panting for breath, she stayed joined with him. She knew he probably wanted to go clean up, but she was just too exhausted to move.

"That was beyond amazing," he murmured.

A smile curved her lips and she kissed his chest. "I would have to agree."

He wrapped his arms around her and stroked her hair. "Did you want to go rinse off in the shower before getting some sleep?"

She nodded sleepily against his chest.

He helped her into a sitting position. The movement was enough to reawaken his cock, but he did his best to ignore it.

Chloe looked at him with wide eyes. "Again?"

He chuckled. "Sorry, sweetheart. It's been a while. I promise to behave though."

Chloe eyed him like she wasn't quite sure she believed him, but she stood up and followed him to the bathroom.

After they showered, they fell into bed. Chloe curled up on her side and Ramsey wrapped his body around her, pulling her into his arms. Chloe fell asleep smiling.

## Chapter Fifteen

The next week passed in a blur. Ramsey and Chloe were inseparable, a fact that wasn't lost on Michael. He noticed every touch, hug, and every kiss. He knew that if he didn't do something soon, he would lose her for sure. He just didn't know what to do.

Cole had called and talked to him. He knew his behavior had driven Chloe away. Now he had to fix the mess he had created. If he'd just allowed her to be herself, to be independent, then none of this would have happened. But no, instead he'd had to play the alpha male and he'd pushed her away.

He had no doubt that she was sleeping with Ramsey. The werewolf's scent was all over her. Michael's gut churned at the thought. He had no one to blame but himself and he knew it, but it hurt just the same.

There was only one thing he could do. Cole had won Marin by playing the part of the hero. Granted, a psychotic killer had been after her. And Gabriel had won Kiera by saving her from a vampire. So all he had to do was save Chloe; except he didn't have anything to save her from – yet.

If he could just get Ramsey to go away for a little while, then maybe he'd have a chance. It wasn't going to be easy, but maybe he could come up with something. There was no way Ramsey would leave Chloe unattended. He'd leave a wolf on duty. All Michael had to do was make sure *he* was the wolf on duty.



Chloe couldn't have been happier. She'd pretty much moved into Ramsey's house. They spent every night making love and then lying in one another's arms. It was what she'd always dreamed of.

She was in the kitchen cooking when the phone rang. Thinking it was Kiera, she smiled and answered, "Hello."

There was a pause on the line. "Is Ramsey there?" a female voice asked.

"Yes, may I tell him whose calling?" Chloe asked.

"Sabrina from Colorado," came the clipped response.

"Just a minute."

Chloe held the phone to her chest as she went in search of Ramsey. She found in him the spare room putting a cradle together that he'd purchased earlier that day.

"Ramsey, there's a Sabrina from Colorado on the phone for you," she said in the calmest voice she could muster.

He frowned, but took the phone from her.

"Sabrina? What do you want?" He paused to hear her response. "That's not possible right now."

Another pause.

"Yes, it has to do with the woman who answered the phone."

Ramsey held the phone away from his ear as Sabrina screeched at him on the other end.

"There's no reason for name calling, Sabrina. I told you when I left Colorado things were over between us. I thought you understood then that we were just dating. I'm sorry you felt it was more, but I've moved on in more ways than one."

More screeching caused Ramsey to hang up the phone with a pained expression. He looked at Chloe apologetically. "I'm sorry about that."

"Ex-girlfriend?" she asked hoping she didn't sound as jealous as she felt.

"Yeah. Apparently things weren't as clear between us as I had thought they were."

She nodded. "Well, I'll just go finish dinner."

Ramsey gently took her arm when she turned to go. "Chloe, wait."

"It's okay, Ramsey. You don't owe me an explanation or anything. You had a life before you came here, before meeting me. I had one before you."



He nodded. "I know, but you've shared more of your life with me than I have with you. Sabrina caught you off guard and I'm sorry for that." He paused and looked at her thoughtfully. "She's called a few times over the past month or two. This is the first time she's actually caught me at home though."

"You haven't spoken to her since you moved here?" Chloe asked.

"Not until now."

Chloe grinned. "I get the feeling she wasn't happy that I answered the phone."

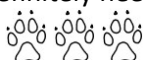
"Probably not."

"I didn't mean to sound like a jealous girlfriend," she said quietly.

"Sweetheart, you have nothing to be jealous of. Sabrina is firmly in my past," Ramsey said as he pulled her into his arms.

"If you start something, we'll never eat dinner," she murmured right before he kissed her.

He lifted his head and grinned at her. "Then I guess I better not start anything. You and the baby definitely need to eat."



The next morning the phone rang and Chloe answered it again. Once more it was Sabrina asking to speak to Ramsey. Chloe hesitated. She knew Ramsey didn't want to talk to Sabrina, but didn't feel she had the right to hang up on the woman.

"I'll look for him Sabrina. I think he's in the shower."

"What? The two of you don't shower together?" the woman asked snidely.

Chloe's temper got the best of her and she responded without thinking. "Sometimes we do, but my pregnant stomach gets in the way these days."

Dead silence followed her response. Part of her was sorry she'd given the impression the baby was Ramsey's, and the other part of her felt triumphant. She carried the phone into the bedroom and found Ramsey toweling his hair dry in the bedroom, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans.

"Sabrina is on the phone for you," she said as she handed the phone to him.

Ramsey took the phone and pulled her close. "Thanks, sweetheart," he said before giving her a lingering kiss.

"Ramsey... your call," she murmured against his lips.

"Right," he said with a sigh.

Chloe left him to his conversation and went to gather her things for work. She was enjoying her job, but she hated that she still needed a ride to and from work. It would be a while before she could afford a car, but she'd found herself browsing through the classifieds on more than one occasion looking at used cars.

She looked up when she saw Ramsey leaning against the doorway. He had a strained look on his face, which she figured didn't bode well.

"I need to talk to you for a minute," he said as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"If this is about my comment to Sabrina, I'm sorry."

His brow furrowed. "What comment?"

Chloe inwardly winced, wishing she had kept her mouth shut. "It was nothing."

He pushed away from the door and walked over to her. "I get the feeling it was more than nothing. What did you say to her, Chloe?"

She blushed and looked everywhere but at Ramsey. "When she called I mentioned you were in the shower. She made a snide remark about me not being in there with you." Chloe paused, not wanting to continue.

"What did you tell her?"

She cleared her throat. "That we did shower together, but it was getting difficult now that my stomach was getting so big."

Ramsey's lips twitched and then he roared with laughter. "No wonder she was in a jealous snit when I got on the phone."

"If you didn't want to talk to me about that, what *did* you want to talk to me about?" she asked.

Ramsey's laughter died and he quietly pulled her into his arms. He rubbed her back as he thought of what to tell her. Since she didn't know about werewolves, explaining that the pack alpha of Colorado was requesting his presence was going to be difficult.

"Some friends in Colorado need my help for a few days. Sabrina was just their unfortunate choice of spokesperson for the phone call."

"So you're leaving?" she asked quietly.

"Tomorrow. I'll be gone through the weekend at the latest."

Chloe nodded. She didn't mind being on her own, but she wasn't sure how she was going to get to and from work.

"I'm going to ask a friend if I can borrow his wolf dog while I'm gone."

Chloe looked at him quizzically.

"For you. I don't want to leave you completely alone. You can use the Hummer while I'm gone of course, and I'd prefer that you stay here and not move back into the apartment. I don't want to take any chances on you being hurt while I'm away."

"Ramsey, I'll be fine. I don't need a guardian while you're gone."

"This isn't a debate, Chloe. You'll be guarded while I'm gone, you'll use the Hummer, and you'll stay in the house."

She bristled under his authoritative tone. "You don't own me, Ramsey. I'll do as I damn well please!"

He sighed, knowing he had chosen the wrong tactic with her. "I know I don't, sweetheart. I just want to make sure you're safe and taken care of while I'm gone. I know you don't have your own transportation and I don't want you climbing stairs while I'm gone. Is that such a bad thing?"

She chewed on her lip thoughtfully. "I guess not," she conceded.

"I'll be leaving early in the morning. I'll make sure your watch dog is in place before I leave."

Chloe buried her face against his chest. "Are you sure you have to go?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. They called and asked for my help. I couldn't say no."

She nodded, but couldn't respond past the tears clogging her throat. She'd gotten so used to him being around that a few days would seem like an eternity. The house would feel empty without him.

"I know you have to work, but I'm going to take the day off so I can get some things in order. Do you want to go to breakfast before I drop you off?" he asked.

"Will Gabriel let you take so much time off on such short notice?" she asked.

"He's pretty understanding."

"Then I'd love to go to breakfast."

## Chapter Sixteen

The next morning Chloe woke to find herself alone in bed. Rolling over, she buried her face in Ramsey's pillow and inhaled his scent. Loneliness washed over her and tears dampened her cheeks. She sobbed into the pillow until a noise startled her. She looked over the edge of the bed and spotted a red and white wolf dog with blue eyes.

She sniffled and wiped the tears from her eyes. "You must be the watch dog Ramsey borrowed."

The dog in question snorted, as if he didn't agree.

"I bet you think I'm a silly woman, crying into a pillow."

The dog leaned forward and licked her hand in comfort.

"I should get up and start getting ready for work. There's no sense lying in bed feeling sorry for myself all day. Not if I want to keep my job anyway," she said to the dog.

Chloe climbed out of bed, pulled some clothes out the dresser, and walked into the bathroom. She took a long shower, taking her time in the bathroom. When she walked back into the bedroom wrapped in a towel, she would have sworn she saw the dog's eyes widen. She shook her head at her folly and let the towel fall to the floor. She struggled to get into her clothes and finished getting ready for work.

"I'm guessing Ramsey left something for you to eat in the kitchen. Shall we go see?" she asked the dog.

The dog cocked his head to the side and watched her. When she walked out of the room, he followed on her heels. Chloe searched the kitchen for both food and a note, but found neither.

She looked at the dog perplexed. "What am I supposed to feed you? I can't very well give fix you bacon and eggs."

Apparently the dog disagreed since he nudged her toward the refrigerator.

Chloe laughed and opened the refrigerator, playing along. "You're pretty smart if you understood that."

Taking out the ingredients she needed to fix breakfast, she talked to the dog as she cooked. She had to admit it was nice having the dog around. The house was a little less lonely.

As she sat down to eat, she hand fed the dog pieces of bacon.

"Ramsey said it was an emergency or he wouldn't have left."

The dog made a rumbling noise like he didn't agree.

"I just don't understand why that woman had to start calling. It seems the emergency didn't pop up until she called." Chloe eyed the dog for his reaction to the whole thing. "You don't think he lied to me, do you? He said he didn't really care about her."

The dog gave her that *you have to be kidding* look.

Chloe sighed. "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Ramsey is just like the others."

The dog coked his head to the side and gave her a questioning look.

"All of my boyfriends haven't been anything to write home about." She rubbed her belly. "The father of my baby seems to have a temper and can't keep his hands off anything in a skirt."

The dog dropped his eyes to the floor and his ears drooped.

"The guy I dated before that just used me for sex. And now Ramsey... I don't know what to make of Ramsey. I thought I'd found a winner."

Chloe shrugged her shoulders. "I guess maybe there really aren't any winners out there after all. I really do have only myself to rely on. Come on, I need to get to work. I don't think Matt will mind if I take you with me today."

The dog gave her a look that Chloe would have sworn was a grin.

"Besides," she said, "I'm feeling a little vindictive. Let's see how much dog hair we can get in Ramsey's car."

The dog made a noise oddly like a laugh and trotted after her.



When Chloe arrived at work, to say her boss was shocked to see the large wolf dog at her heels was an understatement.

"I know I should have called you to see if it was okay to bring him, but I didn't want to leave him home alone," Chloe explained.

"Uh, Chloe, where exactly did you get that, um, dog?" Matt asked.

The dog in question gave him an innocent look.

"Ramsey had to go out of town unexpectedly and said he was leaving a guard dog to watch over me. When I woke up, the dog was beside the bed."

Matt eyed the dog doubtfully. "I somehow doubt Ramsey left that dog to watch over you."

The dog growled a warning at Matt.

Chloe beamed at the dog. "See, he's a good watch dog."

Matt mumbled something under his breath. "He can stay, but I don't like it and neither will Ramsey, I assure you." He glared at the dog. "You bite so much as one customer and I'll let Gabriel deal with you."

Chloe looked at Matt like he'd lost his mind, but she didn't say anything, merely sat at her desk and waited for him to leave to go on his rounds. Once she had the office to herself, she looked down at the dog.

"I think he's not getting enough sleep these days. I hear their smallest one is teething and is getting up at all hours."

The dog smiled at her.

Chloe busied herself with filing and browsed the internet when she wasn't answering the phone or helping customers. Her short day flew by and before long it was time to go. Gathering her things, she headed for the door, the dog right on her heels.

As she locked up the office, she felt the prick of something sharp at her side.

"Don't make a sound and don't move," a deep voice said in her ear.

Chloe froze. "What do you want?" she asked shakily.

"Hand me your wallet."

At her feet, the dog positioned himself between her and the attacker and growled.

"Shh," Chloe said. "Here, here's my wallet," she said, reaching into her purse.

"Get the damn dog away from me or I'll kill it," her attacker said.

"He's just trying to protect me. He doesn't know any better," she said.

The dog squeezed himself further between Chloe and the man, forcing the man to back up a step. When the knife was no longer pressed against Chloe's side, the dog lunged at the man, knocking him to the ground.

The knife clattered across the sidewalk. Man and dog fought on the concrete; the man cursing and beating against the slavering beast on top of him, the dog growling and snapping.

Chloe reached into her purse with shaking hands and pulled out her cell phone. She quickly dialed 9-1-1 and told the operator what was happening. Within minutes, police sirens could be heard in the distance. Her heart was pounding against her ribs and tears streamed down her face. At that moment, she wished more than anything that Ramsey were with her.

When the police arrived, the dog immediately backed off and allowed the officers to take over. After Chloe answered their questions, she and her guard dog were allowed to leave. But once she was in the SUV, she found that her hands were shaking too badly to drive. She sat in the driver's seat and cried. The dog nudged her and licked her cheek, trying to give her comfort. She threw her arms around his warm furry neck and hugged him.

"Thank you! If you hadn't been with me today, I don't know what would have happened," she cried against his fur.

When she felt more in control of herself, she started the monstrous vehicle and pulled out of the parking space. Driving aimlessly, she found herself in front of the Victorian. The dog gave her a quizzical look.

"I don't know what I'm doing here. I guess I just don't want to be alone right now."

Chloe wiped the tears from her eyes and got out of the SUV. She made her way up to the front door and rang the bell. When Kiera answered, Chloe started crying again. She poured out the whole story – about Ramsey leaving, finding her guard dog, almost being robbed, and missing Ramsey.

Kiera looked down at the dog and raised an eyebrow, but she refrained from outing him. Instead, she let Chloe and her guardian in the house. Once her guests were settled, she called the garage and told her husband what was going on. It didn't take long for Gabriel to join them.

"You're welcome to stay here until Ramsey returns," Kiera offered.

"That's sweet of you Kiera, but I like being at the house. It feels a little empty right now, but the bed smells like him."

The dog made a grumbling noise.

"Hush," Gabriel said.

The dog groaned and lay down on the floor at Chloe's feet, turning his head away from Gabriel.

Kiera grinned. "I take it you miss him."

Chloe sighed. "I do. He said it was an emergency and I want to believe him, but..."

"Why wouldn't you believe him?" Gabriel asked.

"A woman started calling from Colorado about a week ago. Her name is Sabrina. She's the one that called the day Ramsey said he needed to go to Colorado."

Kiera looked at Gabriel and then down at the dog before looking back at her husband. "You need to tell her and you need to tell her now."

"Need to tell me what?" Chloe asked. "Does this have to do with that family secret Michael mentioned?"

The dog's head popped up and he looked from Chloe to Gabriel and back again.

"Yeah," Gabriel said with a sigh. "It does and it's time you knew about it."

Kiera reached over and took Chloe's hand. "What he's going to tell you is going to sound impossible. In fact, you're going to think we're completely insane. But it's true... all of it. I need you to keep an open mind."

"How open?" Chloe asked uneasily.

"About as wide open as the ocean," Kiera replied.

Chloe nodded.

Gabriel rubbed the back of his neck. "Our family, and all of the guys you met at the party that night, has a secret. You've probably heard fairy tales of werewolves and shapeshifters growing up."

"Yeah, who hasn't?" Chloe wondered.

"Well, they're more than just fairy tales. The stories are based off reality to some extent."



Chloe looked from Gabriel to Kiera waiting to see if she was the brunt of a joke. When she realized they were serious, she remembered Kiera's words about keeping her mind open. Surely they didn't expect her to believe they were werewolves?

"So you're telling me you're werewolves?" she asked.

"I am, but Kiera's not. Only the males can be werewolves."

"Uh-huh."

"And the dog at your feet isn't a dog.... It's the father of your baby," Gabriel said.

Chloe jumped out of her chair and backed against the kitchen counter, eyeing the dog with huge eyes. "Michael?" she squeaked.

The dog grinned at her and winked.

She gasped and blushed. Once the realization that her guard dog was Michael truly sank her, her embarrassment turned to fury. "You son-of-a-bitch! I changed clothes in front of you! I hand fed you! You – you – you...."

She lunged at the dog, but he scooted out of the way with his tail tucked between his legs and his ears drooped to the sides. Before she could lunge again, he ran out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Chloe was hot on his heels. He had barely cleared the guest bedroom when he shifted in a blinding flash of light.

Chloe gasped at the sight, the realization that werewolves truly existed sinking in. The last think she remembered was hearing Michael call her name as the room faded to black.

## Chapter Seventeen

Michael leaned over the bed, his brow furrowed. "Maybe we should take her to the hospital."

Gabriel pulled him back. "Or maybe you could just give her some breathing room. She's had quite a shock."

"Maybe we should call Ramsey," Kiera said.

Michael gave her a dark look.

"I know you don't like it, but regardless she's staying with him. You heard her in the kitchen. It's obvious they're sleeping together," Kiera said.

"I posed as her guard dog so I could get close to her again. Now that you've ruined any chance I had of doing that, you owe me. We don't call Ramsey," Michael said.

Gabriel crossed his arms. "Last time I checked, I'm the alpha and I make the decisions. If Chloe doesn't wake up and has to go to the hospital, we're definitely calling Ramsey. And if she wakes up and *wants* to call Ramsey, she most certainly may."

Michael grumbled under his breath as Kiera walked past him and out of the room.

"You know, you've harped on me most of my life about settling down or at least dating someone. I finally find my mate and now you're helping her settle down with someone else," he complained.

"How do you know she's *your* mate and not Ramsey's?" Gabriel asked.

"She's carrying my baby," Michael pointed out.

"And if you were half as careless with everyone else as you were with Chloe, half the women in this city would be carrying your baby," Gabriel replied. "You'll have to do better than that."

Michael had the grace to blush. "I got carried away with Chloe. It's the only time I lost my head and didn't use protection. I think that alone should prove she's my mate."

Gabriel sighed. "Michael, I would love to believe she's your mate, but Ramsey obviously cares for her. I have to also do what's right for the two of them."

"What about her comments about Ramsey leaving for Colorado?" Michael asked.

"The alpha called and asked if Ramsey could come out there to help him with something. I gave my permission. It was just rotten luck that he had Sabrina call and ask him to come out," Gabriel said. "And the real guard that he left for Chloe?"

"I told Lucas that Ramsey had changed his mind."

Gabriel shook his head. "You know Ramsey is going to tear you apart when he gets back."

Michael puffed his chest out. "He can try."

Gabriel snorted. "As protective as he is of Chloe, I have a feeling he'll do a lot more than try. Especially if he finds out you saw her naked. I can't believe you did that Michael!"

He shrugged. "Not like I haven't seen her without clothes before."

Gabriel balled his hands into fists and counted to ten. There were times he truly wanted to knock his baby brother on his ass. "Do you *have* to act like Dad?"

Michael stiffened. "I'm *nothing* like Dad! If I were, she'd be black and blue and she'd still be in my damn house."

"She might not be black and blue, but you're starting to lose your temper more and more. I heard about you grabbing her arm the night she went to the hospital. Can you say one hundred percent for sure that you won't hurt her? Can you guarantee that she's safe with you?" Gabriel asked.

Michael looked away, unable to stand the questions his brother asked. Even worse, he hated that he wasn't sure of the answers. "I don't want to hurt Chloe."

"I know you don't, Michael, but can you promise that you won't?"

He shook his head. "I just get so jealous of her. I want her to myself. Just the smell of another wolf on her drives me crazy."

"I've felt the same thing with Kiera, but I fought against it. You have to fight the urge Michael. You can't be like Dad, not if you want a life. I can't let you have a mate if I can't be sure of their safety."

"I'd give my life for her," he whispered as he looked over at Chloe.

He walked over to the bed and gently caressed her cheek. "I'd give anything to have her in my life, to be a father to my child. I want her to be my wife, Gabriel." He looked at his brother with tears shimmering in his eyes, "I want the life you and Kiera have, the life Cole and Marin have. I'm tired of being the family screw up. I want the peace you have, the happiness. Is that so wrong? Is it so wrong to want to be with the woman I love?"

"Have you told her that you love her?" Gabriel asked quietly.

Michael shook his head. "What good would it do now? It's too late."

"It's never too late. If you love her, you need to tell her. Don't make her decisions for her, Michael. Tell her how you feel and then let her decide what she wants to do. She may still choose Ramsey over you, and there's nothing you can do about that. But at least you'll know that she made the decision knowing how you feel."

"How's that supposed to be better?" Michael asked.

Gabriel shrugged. "It isn't going to feel good either way."

"Why can't you force her to be with me?"

"Is that really what you want? To know that she's with you because it was a decree? Or do you want her to be with you because she *chose* you?"

Michael sighed. "I want her to choose me, but that's not going to happen."

"I guess you'll just have to wait and see."

"When does Ramsey get back?" Michael asked as he looked down at Chloe.

"The day after tomorrow."

"She still needs a guard while he's gone."

Gabriel laughed. "And you think she's going to let you stay with her?"

Michael shrugged. "She doesn't have too many options right now."

"She might decide to take Kiera up on her offer. Unless you think she won't be protected enough in my house?" Gabriel asked.

Michael snorted. "As long as vampires aren't involved I think she'll be fine."

Gabriel winced, but nodded. "If she isn't awake by dinner, we'll take her to the hospital. For now, I think it's best if we let her get some rest."

They walked out of the room pulling the door closed behind them, trying to be quiet. Chloe had had a very traumatic day, between her near robbery and her discovery that werewolves existed. Neither of the brothers expected her to wake up anytime soon.



Chloe woke up two hours later in a strange room. At first she was scared, but then she remembered she was in the Victorian. She started to shake when she remembered the man with the knife outside of her office and her rescue by her guard dog, which she now knew had really been Michael. He'd saved her life!

Chloe lay back against the pillows and stared up at the ceiling. Werewolves! They really existed. Magic was real. Things she had only dreamt of had a place in reality. She was still having trouble wrapping her mind around it.

She remembered chasing Michael up the stairs after she'd realized he had seen her getting ready for work. Then she'd seen a flash of light and he'd been standing before her in his human form – naked! She blushed at the memory. Some things hadn't changed. The man was just as yummy now as he had been the night she'd gotten pregnant.

Groaning, she rolled to her side and buried her face in the pillow. What was wrong with her? She was laying her thinking naughty thoughts about Michael while Ramsey was in Colorado. He'd only been gone for one day and she was already being mentally unfaithful to him.

She sighed and sat up. Might as well face the music... or rather the wolves. Struggling to her feet, she walked to the door and slowly opened it. She bit her lip when she saw the stairs. She couldn't believe she'd run up the stairs without a thought for her safety. If Ramsey had been here, he'd have scolded her for sure.

She held onto the banister and carefully walked down one step at a time. When she reached the bottom, she followed the voices to the kitchen. Gabriel, Michael and Kiera were gathered around the kitchen table. The guys stood when she entered the room.

"We were worried about you," Kiera said with a smile. "Are you feeling any better?"

"A little," she said quietly. Sitting down at the table, she gave them a tentative smile. "I'm sorry for scaring you earlier."

"We're the ones who should apologize to you," Gabriel said.

"No," Michael said quietly. "I'm the one who should apologize, for a lot of things."

Gabriel nodded to Kiera and they left Michael and Chloe alone.

"Michael, what do you have to apologize for, other than tricking me today?"

"I've done a lot of things wrong since meeting you, Chloe. I knew you were special when I first met you. I should have stayed away, but I couldn't resist."

Chloe listened patiently.

"I tried to forget you after our short time together, but I couldn't. You haunted my dreams, and my days. When I saw you in the living room, I was stunned. Then I noticed you were pregnant. It was like being punched in the gut. Here'd I'd been thinking of you night and day and you'd kept something so important from me. It hurt – a lot."

Chloe opened her mouth to respond, but Michael held up a hand to stop her.

"Let me finish. I've reacted badly and I'm sorry. I let my baser instincts take over on several occasions and that was wrong of me. If I could take it back, I would. I'd give anything to have you back at home with me, Chloe."

"What are you trying to say, Michael?"

"I'm trying to say that I want to be a father to our child. I want to be there for you. I want to be the guy you rely on, the one you come home to. Can you give me another chance?"

"Well now, isn't this touching?" drawled a voice from the doorway.

Chloe jumped up from the table. "Ramsey! You're back!"

"Maybe I should have stayed a little longer, given the two of you some more time together."

Chloe hesitated. "Ramsey, I..."

"I was only gone for a day, Chloe."

"You don't understand."

He shook his head and pushed away from the doorway. Turning his back to her, he walked out of the house.

Chloe reached behind her blindly and sank into her chair. Stunned, she felt numb. "What just happened?"

"I can't say I'm sorry for that," Michael said. "Maybe now you'll have no choice but to give me another shot."

Chloe didn't say anything. She got up and walked out the door, hoping to see Ramsey. She knew Michael wanted another chance, but right now she needed to talk to Ramsey.

His SUV was still parked in the driveway. Unless he shapeshifted and ran home, there was a good chance he was across the street. Chloe walked across to the garage and hoped she was right.

When she stepped into the first bay, Hunter slid out from under a car.

"Is Ramsey here?" she asked.

He looked her over from head to toe, trying to decide if he was going to answer. "I think he's in the office."

Chloe nodded her thanks and made her way to the office. Ramsey sat behind the desk with his head tipped back and his eyes closed. His face looked strained. His jaw was tense and Chloe knew he was clenching his teeth.

"You're going to give yourself a headache," she said quietly.

"What do you want, Chloe?"

"I wanted to explain what you heard a minute ago."

"I think it pretty much explained itself," he replied.

She shook her head. "After everything I've been through today, I think I've earned the right to be heard."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I woke up to an empty bed. I burrowed into your side of bed because it still smelled like you and I cried because I didn't know when I would see you again. All I knew was that some woman you'd dated had called and you'd left for an emergency in another state."

She reached for a chair and sat down. "I found my guard dog lying beside my bed, which it turns out wasn't really a guard dog. When I left work today I was held at knife point, but my guardian managed to tackle the man until the police arrived."

Ramsey came around the desk and knelt at her feet. "Are you okay? You weren't injured?"

"No, I wasn't injured. Although, I did run up the stairs at Kiera's when I found out my guard dog was really Michael, who it turns out is a werewolf."

"So you know."

She nodded.

"And you're okay with it?"

"As okay as I can be. It isn't every day that you discover make-believe creatures aren't so make believe after all. Although, it might take me a while to get over the fact that I changed my clothes in front of Michael this morning."

Ramsey's jaw clenched. "Michael is *not* the wolf I left to watch over you."

"I figured he probably wouldn't have been. I'm guessing he ran the other one off somehow. But that brings me to the conversation you heard when you got back."

Ramsey started to stand, but Chloe put a hand on his shoulder.

"Michael was apologizing for all of things he's done over the past few weeks. He was asking me for another chance. But you didn't stick around to hear my answer."

"What was your answer?"

"I didn't give him one since I had to come find you."

He looked at her intently. "What answer would you have given him?"

"That he's already had a second chance. I'm not sure he deserves a third one."

"He's the father of your child, Chloe. If you wanted to give him another chance, I would understand."

Chloe looked away. "Do you know what it was like waking up without you this morning?"

Ramsey sighed. "Chloe, I have to go back to Colorado tomorrow."

She looked at him to see if he was serious. "But why? You just got back!"

"I came back because one of their psychics said there was trouble here at home. I'm guessing that would be the ordeal you went through today. But the issue they wanted my help with isn't over yet. I have to go back for a few days."



"Then take me with you."

He shook his head. "I can't."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I have to pose as the mate to one of their women."

Chloe paled. She pushed at his shoulders and stood. Backing away from him, she turned and walked out of the room. He'd had the audacity to be angry with her for listening to Michael and yet he'd been pretending to be mated to someone? She might have just learned about werewolves, but she knew enough about wolves to know that being mated was serious.

She heard Ramsey call her name, but she kept walking until she reached the Victorian. Running inside, she grabbed her purse and keys. Hurrying back outside, she jumped into the SUV and sped out of the driveway. She saw Ramsey standing in the middle of the street in her rearview mirror, but she didn't care.

When she reached the house, she gathered her things and moved everything back into the garage apartment. It was obvious to her now that Ramsey didn't care for her half as much as she cared for him. If he did, he wouldn't have been able to even pretend to be with someone else. It was best if she was on her own after all.



The next morning, Chloe went through her regular routine of getting ready and going to work. When she arrived at the office, Matt was waiting by her desk.

"Why didn't you call me yesterday?"

"I didn't think about it. The police took my statement and arrested the guy."

Matt shook his head. "It isn't safe for you to be here by yourself."

"But you hired me so you wouldn't have to be in the office all the time," she said.

"I'm not allowing either you or Cassie to be here alone. I'm hiring a security guard for this whole shopping strip. You could have been seriously injured or killed, Chloe."

She nodded. "Thankfully I had Michael the werewolf around."

Matt crossed his arms. "So they finally told you."

Chloe sighed. "Yeah. I didn't take it too well and passed out, but at least I know the big family secret now."

“Are you going to give him another chance?”

“Technically he had another chance. He’s had two. I’m not sure I’m ready to give him a third one.”

“Does that have anything to do with Ramsey?” Matt asked.

Chloe looked at her computer screen while she checked her emails. “That’s not a good name to mention around me right now. Actually, I’m taking a break from men. I’ve decided that the good ones are taken and the rest are scum.”

Matt chuckled. “Ramsey and Michael are both good guys, Chloe.”

“Yeah well, Michael seems to have issues with his temper getting out of control and Ramsey is off pretending to be someone’s mate in Colorado. I’m not feeling very forgiving toward either of them.”

Matt turned serious. “He’s pretending to be someone’s mate?”

“So he says. Of course, a woman kept calling the house from Colorado before he left to help with their emergency. She’s probably the one he’s been mated to for the emergency,” Chloe said bitterly.

“Did y’all talk about it last night?”

Chloe shook her head. “I left him at the garage and I moved my stuff back into the apartment last night. I don’t even know if he went home and I don’t really care right now. I’m too damn angry.”

“Chloe, you do realize that you’re part of their pack now, right?”

She stopped scanning her emails and looked at him. “What?”

“You’re part of their pack – the Ashton Grove pack. Which means you’re going to have to choose a mate, and soon. Gabriel probably hasn’t pushed the issue because things were going so well between you and Ramsey, but if you’ve moved back out he’s either going to tell you to pick someone soon...”

When Matt trailed off, Chloe got nervous. “Or?”

“Or he’s going to find someone for you. Especially since you’re pregnant. It’s going to be important to make sure you and your baby are taken care of. He might choose Michael or Ramsey, or he may choose someone else entirely. If Michael isn’t the wolf that was chose to guard you, he might select your true guardian.”

Chloe didn’t like any of those options, but if she had to pick she’d prefer to choose her own mate. The question was, who would she pick? Michael had already struck out twice, Ramsey was off doing heaven only knew what, and she didn’t know anyone else. She was screwed.

## Chapter Eighteen

Chloe decided to bite the bullet and confront Gabriel. When her shift was over at work, she drove over to the garage. She didn't recognize the mechanic on duty, but he was kind enough to tell her the alpha was working in the back.

"Gabriel, can we talk?" she asked as she stepped into the office.

"Is everything okay, Chloe?"

"No, not really. Ramsey is off playing mate to someone else, Michael is his usual charming self, and I've just been informed that I'm part of your pack. Now what in the hell is going on?"

Gabriel groaned and closed his eyes. "I take it I have Matt and his big mouth to thank for this one."

"Yep, now start talking please. I need answers."

"Yes, you're part of the pack. There are certain women throughout the world who are destined to be mates to werewolves. You happen to be one of them."

"So what does that mean exactly?" she asked.

"Since you're with Ramsey right now, nothing. Just let things progress naturally."

She bit her lip. "I kind of moved back into the apartment."

He narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

Chloe threw her hands up in the air and started pacing in the small space. "What was I supposed to do? He starts getting calls from some woman, runs off to help said woman, then informs me he's pretending to be someone's mate. How would *you* react?"

Gabriel grunted. "Good point."

"So I packed my stuff and moved back into the apartment last night."

"What did he say when he came home and found out you'd left the house?" Gabriel asked.

Chloe stopped her pacing, a pained look on her face. "He came home?" she whispered.

"You didn't know?"

She shook her head. "I just figured he'd gone straight back to Colorado when he didn't react." She sank into a chair. "I guess that answered my question of whether or not he really did care about me."

"You might be jumping to conclusions, Chloe."

She shook her head. "No, he would have at least said something. He didn't even acknowledge that I was gone."

Gabriel sighed. "What do you want to do? You're six months pregnant and you need a mate."

"I don't care," she said softly. "It doesn't matter anymore."

Gabriel saw the pain in her eyes and knew her heart was breaking. He knew of only one solution that might help, but she'd hate him for it. The only way to heal a broken heart was with love, and the only person he knew of that loved Chloe was Michael.

"You may not like my decision," he warned her.

"I'll do whatever you want," she answered quietly. "The man I love would rather pretend to have a mate than be mated to me."

Gabriel's heart was breaking for her. He hoped he was doing the right thing. Ramsey would have to deal with the consequences of his actions when he returned.

"So be it. I'll have Kiera and Cassie plan the wedding. I think it would best if you were married before Ramsey returned. You can't live on his property after he gets back from Colorado."

Chloe nodded numbly, only half listening.

"Not even curious as to who the groom is?" Gabriel asked.

She shrugged. "I guess."

"It's the father of your baby."

Chloe sucked in a breath and stared at Gabriel wide-eyed. He wanted her to marry Michael?

"Is that a problem?" he asked.

"What about his temper?" she asked, her eyes dropping to the floor. "I would be lying if I said he didn't scare me."

"Chloe, I promise he won't hurt you or the baby. Believe it or not, Michael cares a great deal about you. I think he'll make a good husband for you and a good father for the baby."

She nodded. "If that's what you think is best. When will the wedding be?"

"Friday. I'm expecting Ramsey back on Saturday."

"How do you know Michael will agree to this?" she asked.

"Has he not been trying to get back together with you?" Gabriel asked her.

"Yes, but the only time he mentioned marriage it was only for convenience. I don't think he'd really thought it through."

"Trust me, he'll agree."

Chloe hesitated.

"What else, Chloe?"

"I don't know much about the rules about being someone's mate."

"It's pretty much the same as being married. Why?" he asked.

"I guess part of why I've been hesitant with Michael is that I'm worried I won't be enough. He's never dated anyone seriously. How can I trust he'll keep his wedding vows? And does he even have to?" she asked quietly, embarrassed to have voiced her fear aloud.

Gabriel walked around the desk and put his arm around Chloe. "He'll have to keep his wedding vows, and even more important, he'll *want* to keep them. As his mate, you'll be the most essential thing to him."

Chloe nodded. "That's good to know," she said with a small smile. "There's really only one thing I ever truly wanted – to be loved."

Gabriel gave her a brotherly squeeze. "You'll be loved, honey. You'll gain a husband, two sisters, and two brothers. You'll have so much love, and so much family that you'll want to run screaming some days."

Chloe laughed. "That will be a nice change."

"Now, why don't you go home and start packing your stuff. I'll go tell Kiera the news. Tomorrow the two of you can meet with Cassie to get a wedding dress and get everything set up."

"Can a wedding be done in two days?"

"With Matt and Cassie behind it, it can be done in twenty-four hours. Trust me you can still have the wedding of your dreams."

Chloe nodded. "Then I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"If you need help packing, just let Lucas know. He's the mechanic you passed on your way in. I don't want you lifting anything heavy and hurting yourself or the baby."

"I promise I'll be careful."



Thursday afternoon Chloe felt like she was ready to drop. She had found an elegant wedding dress. She hadn't even known they made maternity wedding gowns, yet Cassie had helped her find one. Afterwards, they'd ordered a cake and were now walking through the aisles at the florist's shop.

"I don't know much about flowers," Chloe admitted.

"Is there a particular kind you like?" Cassie asked.

"Roses smell nice, but other than that I don't know."

"What about carrying some pink roses?" Kiera asked.

"Or pink and white?" Cassie offered.

"Why don't the two of you find something and just surprise me? If I don't get off my feet soon, I think I might hit the floor," Chloe said as she rubbed her stomach.

"There's a bench right outside of the store," Cassie said.

Chloe nodded. "I'll be outside then."

She left her two friends discussing flowers and went in search of the bench. When she stepped outside, she saw it just to the right of the store. Sitting down, she sighed in relief. Her feet and her back were killing her.

A shadow loomed in front of her and Chloe looked up. She was surprised to see Michael.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Looking for you."

Her face looked pale and strained. "Is everything okay?"

"Can I sit down for a minute?" he asked, indicating the bench.

"Of course."

"Look Chloe, I know what happened yesterday. And I know that Gabriel chose me because I'm the baby's father, but I wanted you to know that if there's someone else in the pack you'd rather be mated to I'd understand."

"Michael, I..."

“Ramsey should be back in a few days. I’m sure we could wait for him to come home.”

Chloe ground her teeth together when she felt tears spring to her eyes. She hated crying in front of Michael. “No, we can’t wait for Ramsey.”

Michael noticed the unshed tears. “What’s wrong, Chloe?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. But I won’t be waiting on Ramsey to come home. I moved out. I went to Gabriel yesterday and told him to pick a mate for me. He chose you.”

Michael didn’t know what had happened, but he knew Chloe wouldn’t have moved out without a reason. He wanted to comfort her, but wasn’t sure she would let him. “I’m sorry, Chloe. And I’m sorry you’re stuck with me. If you’d like, I can talk to Gabriel. It’s not too late for him to select a different mate for you.”

She shook her head. “It’s fine Michael. You wanted another chance and now you have it.”

“Chloe, I promise to take care of you and the baby.”

Before Chloe could respond, Cassie and Kiera came bustling out of the flower shop. The two were grinning from ear to ear when they saw Michael sitting with Chloe.

“Well, look, the groom decided to show up,” Kiera teased.

“I just thought I’d check on Chloe,” he said, standing.

“What? Leaving already? We thought we’d grab a late lunch. Surely you’re going to join us,” Cassie said.

Michael shook his head. “I have a stop to make and then I’m going to head to work. Gabriel called and said he’s short-handed today.”

“Better not keep him waiting then. I don’t want a grumpy alpha on my hands later,” Kiera said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Michael told Chloe.

She nodded and gave him a hesitant smile. She wanted to be happy about her upcoming wedding day, but truthfully she was far too nervous. There was a time in the very recent past that she had dreamt of a life with Michael. Now that her dream was within her grasp, she wasn’t sure that’s what she wanted. Too many things had happened since then.

## Chapter Nineteen

Friday morning came all too soon. Chloe lay in bed crying. She was scared of what her future was going to bring, and she was heartbroken over what it wouldn't hold – Ramsey. She'd promised herself she wouldn't think of him anymore, but she couldn't help herself. Wrapping her robe tightly around her body to ward off the chill of the October morning air, she decided to go over to the main house one last time. She wanted to leave him a note and at least explain why she had left.

Grabbing her keys, she carefully made her way down the stairs. She walked across the driveway and entered through the kitchen door. Once inside the warm house, she pulled out a notepad and pen from the kitchen drawer and sat down at the counter to write her note.

*Ramsey,*

*I feel that I at least owe you an explanation. I can't begin to tell you how much it hurt when you said you were pretending to be someone's mate. I would have given anything to be your mate, to be the one person who meant everything to you. Yet, you left me here to play make-believe with someone else. I know you say it was an emergency, but you left with no further explanation. What was I supposed to think, especially after all of Sabrina's calls?*

*I was hurt and angry so I moved my things back over to the apartment. Part of me was hoping you would come over and talk to me... that obviously didn't happen. I just figured you hadn't bothered to come home. But I went to see Gabriel the next*



*morning. When I found out you'd been home and hadn't come to see me, hadn't left me a note or anything, I felt like I'd been ripped in two and I went numb all at the same time. That's when I made my decision.*

*Maybe someday you can forgive me. It seemed like the best way. You're free now to find your mate, or run off to where ever you want whenever you want. I told Gabriel to choose a mate for me. By the time you read this, I'll already be married. I was rather stunned when he chose Michael – but perhaps I shouldn't have been. I'm scared. But I made a choice and now I have to live with the consequences of that choice.*

*I love you, Ramsey. I only wish that you had loved me in return. I'm leaving your key with this letter. I'll leave the apartment keys with Kiera once I move out my things.*

*Thank you for everything.*

*Love,*

*Chloe*

She read the letter and re-read it. Satisfied that she'd said all she had to say, she folded the paper and sat the key on top. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she walked back over to the side door. Locking the knob, she closed the door behind her for the last time.

Back in her apartment, she got ready to face the day – her biggest day ever. Cassie and Kiera were going to help her with her wedding dress and style her hair, but she still wanted to shower and do as much as she could at home.

When she was dressed and ready to go, she packed a small overnight bag. Cassie had said she and Matt had a surprise for her and she'd need a nightgown and two changes of clothes.

Chloe started to leave when she realized she didn't have a way to get to Kiera's. Opening her purse, she pulled out her cell phone and called Gabriel. He made her promise to stay put until someone arrived.



At the Victorian, everything was in order. The cake had been delivered, the flowers were in vases, and the dress was hanging up in the spare room. The only thing missing were the bride and groom.

Chloe arrived first, thanks to Lucas. The young werewolf was only too happy to help. If he seemed confused as to why she was marrying Michael instead of Ramsey, he didn't say anything.

As she walked into the front entry of the Victorian, butterflies fluttered through her stomach. She couldn't remember being more nervous. Kiera and Cassie greeted her with smiles. Even Marin, Cole's wife, was present. She hadn't had a chance to get to know her future sister-in-law, but the woman seemed pleasant enough.

As the three women bustled her up the stairs and into the spare room, Chloe quelled the urge to run. Her eyes settled on her wedding gown and tears sprang to her eyes. It was a beautiful gown. She only wished that she were wearing it on a happier occasion. Weddings were supposed to be happy, memorable times. For Chloe, it was simply an event that had to occur.

"Are you okay?" Kiera asked softly, placing a comforting hand on her arm.

Chloe nodded. "I will be."

"Are you sure about this? It isn't too late to change your mind."

"Yes it is," Chloe replied.

Kiera hugged her. "If you're sure you want to go through with this, then I'll stand behind you one hundred percent. I just don't want you to have any regrets."

"I'm sure, Kiera. And thank you... your friendship has meant a lot to me. It's been a long time since I've had someone in my life I could count on."

"Well, let's get you ready for your wedding," Kiera said with a smile. She nodded for Cassie and Marin to come over and join them.

The women helped her into her dress, an off-white raw silk gown with a long skirt that fell to her ankles. It had a lavender velvet sash that tied under the bust and embroidered lavender flowers along the hem. Chloe had fallen in love with it the moment she'd laid eyes on it.

She pulled on knee highs and a pair of low lavender heels. Next, the ladies helped her with make-up and hair. Her long red locks were piled

on top of her head in a knot with tendrils hanging around her face in curls and a few strands curling down her back.

"Michael is going to fall in love with you if he isn't already," Cassie said with a smile.

"I'm not naïve enough to ask for his love," Chloe said quietly. "I'll be satisfied if he's faithful."

The women looked at one another, but didn't say anything. They knew the only way Michael would ever be faithful to a woman was if he loved her.

"We'll come and get you in a few minutes," Kiera said as she ushered the women out of the room.

Chloe smiled her thanks before she turned back to the mirror. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. The woman standing before her looked like a bride should, but she didn't feel like a bride should.



In the hall, Cassie gave Kiera and Marin a worried look. "I never dabble with love spells, but I think I'm willing to try this one time."

Kiera gave her a reassuring smile. "I don't think it will come to that."

"I don't know, Kiera. I know Michael was hung up on her back when he saved me, but look at how many women he's gone through since then," Marin added.

Cassie gave them a worried look. "I'm not going to stand by and watch him make her miserable. Besides," she said with a sheepish look, "I already interfered a bit."

"What did you do, Cassie?" Kiera asked.

"More like what did Matt do," Cassie said.

"Spill it," Kiera said.

"Matt and I decided to buy them a honeymoon package. He used the power of the ring to enchant the place last night," Cassie mumbled.

"Cassie!" Kiera exclaimed. "I can't believe the two of you did that. You know that Gabriel is going to be furious when he finds out."

"Except that he won't find out," Marin said. "You saw the look on Chloe's face. She's not expecting much from this marriage. If what Matt and Cassie did can change that, I say let them try."

"But it's wrong!" Kiera reminded them.

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't," Marin said.

"I wouldn't have interfered, but I couldn't stand to see her so miserable. She looks like a lamb about to be slaughtered," Cassie said. "I know Michael isn't a bad guy, but he isn't exactly helping the situation either."

Kiera sighed. "You aren't wrong there." She shook her head. "I guess you two are right. In this one instance, I won't tell Gabriel."

Cassie and Marin threw their arms around her and squealed in delight.

"Thanks, Kiera! You won't regret it!" Cassie said. "Well, at least I hope you won't. For all I know, the spell won't work."

"Let's hope it does. That poor woman deserves a little happiness. I had hopes that Ramsey would be able to give that to her," Kiera said.

"I think he did," Marin said. "At least, for a little while... I don't know what happened to change that, but she did seem happy at the party."

Kiera nodded. "When Ramsey left for Colorado she found out he was pretending to be mated to someone."

Marin gasped, her eyes wide in shock. "But that's.... that's..."

"Unheard of, I know," Kiera said. "I have no idea why he agreed to do it. All I know is that Chloe found out and she was beyond hurt. So she moved her things back out of the house. Next thing I knew, she'd asked Gabriel to find a mate for her."

"That poor thing," Marin murmured. "She really has had it rough. I can't imagine what I would have done without Cole. He's so wonderful to me."

Kiera nodded. "Same for me with Gabriel. I wanted him the minute I saw him. And I guess Chloe wanted Michael when she first saw him, too, but then he turned his usual charming self and ran out on her. He has some major bridges to mend."

"Maybe they can work things out. Since she's carrying his baby, maybe they really are destined to be together," Cassie said.

"We can only hope," Kiera murmured.

She only hoped that Ramsey stayed away until the wedding was over. If he showed up in the middle of the ceremony, all hell was going to break loose. She had no doubt that he cared for Chloe. What he was up to in Colorado, she had no clue. If he'd had any sense, he would have talked to Chloe more about what was going on instead of keeping her in the dark. Now he was going to pay for his folly.



Chloe walked down the make-shift aisle in the backyard toward her groom – her mate. When she reached his side, she placed a shaky hand in his and gave him a hesitant smile. Focusing her attention on the minister, she tried to clear her mind. She pushed aside every doubt that had wormed its way inside ever since she’d agreed to marry Michael.

Before she knew it, she was saying “I do.” When the minister told Michael he could kiss his bride, she lifted her eyes to his. She was surprised to see him looking down at her with desire in his eyes.

He gently cupped her face in his hands and lowered his lips to hers. When she felt his lips against hers, she was surprised to feel the spark of desire she’d felt the first time he’d kissed her. As if acting of their own accord, her lips opened under his, inviting him to have a deeper taste.

They broke apart as the crowd cheered the new Mr. and Mrs. Michael Andrews. Chloe blushed and cast her eyes down, not quite able to look Michael in the eye. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know what he was thinking or feeling after the kiss.

Arm in arm, they greeted their guests.

## Chapter Twenty

Michael walked up behind his wife and wrapped an arm around her waist. "Are you ready for your surprise?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Surprise?"

He nodded. "I wanted to get you something."

"But I didn't get anything for you," she said, feeling embarrassed.

He gently rubbed her stomach, "Yes you did."

"That isn't exactly something I got you."

He grinned. "Maybe not, but it's a nice present just the same. Come on, I want you to see your present."

Taking her hand, he led her around to the front of the house. When they were standing in the front yard, Chloe looked around in confusion.

"What exactly am I looking for?" she asked.

Michael pointed to the end of the driveway. "The gray hatchback."

Chloe gasped when she saw a new four door hatchback parked at the very end of the driveway. She'd looked at a similar car before she'd lost her job. "Michael, I don't know what to say."

"Just tell me you like it. If you don't, the guy said we could bring it back and you could get something else."

She shook her head. "I don't want to take it back. It's perfect."

"I know you were having trouble getting in and out of my car and I figured you needed something of your own to drive," he said.

She wrapped her arms around him and looked up at him. "It's a wonderful present. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I thought we could drive it to our other present if you'd like."

"You mean our present from Matt and Cassie?" she asked.

"Yeah. I heard we had a honeymoon package from them," he said softly. "Listen, Chloe, if you don't want to go..."

She placed her fingers over his lips. "I think we should go. If we're going to make this work, we need to have a real marriage Michael."

He held her hand and kissed her fingertips. "I didn't want you to feel pressured."

"I don't feel pressured. Honestly, I don't know what I feel." She paused. "Mostly, I've just felt numb. I won't lie to you. Ramsey hurt me. You hurt me. I've wanted to dig a hole and hide in it for a century or so until the pain went away, but that won't solve anything."

Michael wrapped his arms around her and held her close. He wished he could undo all of the pain he had caused her, but he knew that wasn't possible.

"I know you want to make a fresh start, but that isn't possible. All I can promise is that I'll be faithful to you. I'll be the best wife I know to be," Chloe said. "I know I'll make mistakes along the way. I just hope you can be patient with me."

Michael gently brushed a curl away from her cheek. "Chloe, you don't have anything to worry about. Just be yourself. That's all I can ask of you."

She smiled at him and hesitantly caressed his cheek. Going up on tiptoe, she lightly brushed her lips against his. It was the first time she'd kissed him voluntarily in a long while. The moment their lips touched, Chloe felt the same spark she'd felt when Michael kissed her during the ceremony. Leaning into him, she traced his lower lip with her tongue, wanting to taste him.

Michael pulled back and looked down at her with passion blazing in his eyes. "If you don't stop, you'll get more than you bargained for."

"Michael, I..."

He shook his head. "I want you too much right now, Chloe."

She blushed and felt oddly pleased. "I should go and change if we're going to use Matt and Cassie's gift tonight."

Michael nodded. "Did you want to drive your new car?"

"I want to take the new car, but I think you better drive us there. I'm feeling a little tired and should probably take a nap."

Michael brushed the backs of his fingers against her cheek. "Are you sure you're up for a car ride? We can tell Matt and Cassie that we'd rather take a rain check."

"I'll be fine. I'm in my third trimester now."

He gave her an odd look.

"It means I need more sleep. I usually get a nap in twice a day. All of the excitement today has worn me out."

"Well, go change and I'll meet you at the car."



An hour later, Michael and Chloe were on the road to Maple Falls, Georgia. Matt and Cassie had heard of the small town from a Wiccan friend of theirs and had rented a house for them. It was on the other side of Atlanta not too far from the Alabama state line.

Michael wasn't too crazy about Chloe riding so far while she was pregnant, but she was adamant about going. He had his suspicions about her reasons for going, but he kept them to himself.

It was after dark when they arrived in the quaint town. The house they rented was outside of the city limits at the edge of a large plantation property. It had been built by the current owner for special guests.

As Michael pulled down the driveway, he admired the gingerbread trim on the cottage. He knew Chloe was going to fall in love with the place when she saw it. He glanced over at his sleeping passenger. She'd fallen asleep as soon as they'd left Ashton Grove and had slept through the whole trip.

A couple stood on the porch. Michael got out of the car to greet them.

"You must be Michael," the man said, extending his hand in greeting.

"Yeah, I'm Michael Andrews. My wife, Chloe, is sleeping."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Jesse and this is my wife, Lissa. We own the plantation house up on the hill," he said with a nod toward the large home dominating the hilltop.

"It was nice of you to rent the cottage to us on such short notice."

Jesse grinned. "Well, it seems Matt and I share something in common, other than our bewitching wives."

"Oh?" Michael asked with both eyebrows raised, sensing something paranormal afoot.



"Lissa here brought me back from the dead just like your friend Cassie brought Matt back."

Michael rocked back on his heels. He'd never heard of anyone else coming back before. Two ghosts becoming human again? What were the odds?

"I can see I've shocked you. I'm afraid mine wasn't as simple as a ring," Jesse said with a grin. "But Lissa was one determined woman."

Lissa smiled at up her husband. "Come on, honey. Give him the keys. I'm sure he's anxious to get his wife settled in for the night. They've had a long drive."

Michael nodded. "I'm afraid she's slept the whole way here. Between the wedding and the baby she's pretty worn out."

"Baby?" Lissa and Jesse both asked in unison.

Michael blushed. Apparently Cassie and Matt hadn't told their friends *everything*. "My wife is six months pregnant."

Lissa grinned. "That's wonderful news. Congratulations!"

"Thanks," Michael replied with a grin.

"The refrigerator and pantry should be fairly well stocked, but if you need anything the nearest store is about half an hour away. Just let us know and we can give you directions. Our number is by the phone," Lissa said.

Michael nodded. "Thanks again. I think getting away from Ashton Grove for a day or two will do Chloe some good."

"Well, we'll leave you two alone," Jesse said, steering his wife toward their house.

Michael watched the couple until they disappeared into the darkness. He opened the cottage and turned on the lights. Everything was neat and tidy. A soft glow spilled under the door in the back room. He pushed the door open and discovered the bedroom bathed in candle light.

Shaking his head, he grinned at the romantic gesture. If the kiss he and Chloe had shared was any indication, he might actually get a chance to share a romantic night or two with her. But he wasn't going to hold his breath.

Walking back out to the car, he unloaded their overnight bags before waking her. He wanted everything to be situated before he disturbed

her. Knowing how stubborn she was, she would probably insist on carrying her bag into the house.

Kneeling on her side of the car, he gently shook her awake. "Chloe, we're here."

She murmured in her sleep, but didn't budge.

Michael tried again, but Chloe still didn't wake.

Sighing, he unbuckled her seatbelt and lifted her into his arms. Pushing the door shut with his hip, he locked the car and carried her into the house. As he stepped onto the porch, she woke and looked up into his eyes.

"Where are we?" she murmured sleepily.

"We're in Maple Falls," he answered quietly. "I tried to wake you, but you were out cold."

Chloe realized she was being carried and came completely awake. "I'm sorry. You can put me down."

Michael wanted to argue, but knew better. He gently sat her on her feet and let her walk into the cottage on her own. He watched as she looked at her surroundings, enjoying the expressions that flitted across her face. It was obvious she loved the cottage.

"It's wonderful," she murmured as she gingerly ran her hand across an afghan thrown across the back of the sofa. "I always wanted a house like this."

"Think you can settle for a three bedroom one bath in Ashton Grove?" Michael asked.

"Oh, I didn't mean..." Chloe trailed off. She hadn't meant to insult Michael's house.

He shook his head. "I know you didn't."

"I just always liked houses like this one. I always wondered what it would like to grow up in a house with gingerbread trim, handmade afghans... you know, homes that felt like homes."

"I had a home that had all of that but the homey feel," Michael said. "Mom did her best, but Dad kind of wrecked the homey part."

"I'm sorry," Chloe said. She walked over and wrapped her arms around him. "You don't talk about your dad that much."

"Not much to say. He felt the best way to express himself was with alcohol and his fists."

"Oh Michael...." Chloe laid her head on his chest. She wished she could take away the pain of his childhood. She couldn't imagine what it must have been like to grow up like that.

He shrugged. "It's over."

She looked up at him, not quite sure what to say. She could only think of one way to take away his pain, and hers. "Make love to me."

He stared down at her sure he hadn't heard her correctly. "What?"

"Make love to me."

"Chloe, you don't have to..."

"I know I don't. Michael, whether you like it or not, you're my husband now."

He stiffened. "I realize that."

"I'm sorry if the idea of being intimate with me while I'm so large is repulsive, but..."

He covered her mouth with his, parting her lips with his tongue. As his tongue glided against hers, he wrapped an arm around her waist to pull her tight against his body. With a growl, he pulled back.

"Do you honestly think I find you the least bit repulsive?"

"No," she whispered.

"Then why would you say something so stupid?"

"You seemed reluctant to be with me."

"I didn't want you to jump into bed with me because you felt obligated to, Chloe."

"I don't feel obligated to, Michael," she replied. She looked up into his eyes. How could she tell him that she wanted to forget Ramsey and that she wanted to remember *him*? "I want to start my life with you. I want us to be husband and wife. I want... I want *you*," she finished quietly.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She nodded.

Lifting her into his arms, he carried her into the candle lit bedroom and laid her gently on the bed. Kicking the door shut behind him, he slowly removed his clothes. As she watched him, he could see the hungry look in her eyes and it turned him on even more.

When he stood before her completely naked, he let her look her fill. "Do you see what you do to me?" he asked.

Chloe nodded as her eyes devoured him.

Michael walked toward her. Kneeling at her feet, he removed her shoes. Sliding his hands up her legs, he parted her thighs and pulled her closer. He bunched her skirt up around her thighs climbed onto the bed with her. He pressed his throbbing cock against her panties.

“Do you feel how much I want you?” he whispered against her ear.

She nodded, desire making it impossible for her to speak.

“Do you want me just as much?” he asked.

“Yes,” she whispered, pulling him closer for a kiss.

Tunneling her fingers through his hair, she kissed him, savoring the taste of him. Lifting her hips, she thrust against him, wishing there were no barriers between them.

Michael reached between them and cupped her breasts. He didn’t remember them being quite so large and he wanted to feel them against his skin. Pulling her top down, he nearly growled in frustration when her bra was still in the way. Slipping his hands under her top, he unclasped her bra in back, and pushed the offending object out of the way.

Cupping her breasts, he groaned in satisfaction. He thrust against Chloe, wishing he were buried inside of her. When she lifted her hips to meet him, he nearly lost control.

Reaching between their bodies, he pushed her panties aside, allowing his cock to slide against her wet folds. Using his thumb, he spread her lips so he could slide between them and rub against her clit.

Chloe whimpered into his mouth and arched against him. Michael could tell she was close to her release and he wanted to please her more than anything. He slid back and forth against her slick clit faster and faster until Chloe cried out. When she bucked against him, she tilted her hips and took him all the way inside of her. Feeling her convulse around his cock was enough to make him come inside of her on the spot.



“That wasn’t quite how I had planned on doing that,” Michael said.

Chloe grinned against his shoulder. “What exactly did you have planned?”

“Well, assuming you wanted to do anything at all, I had planned on both of us being completely naked for one thing.”

“Hmmm. Well, *you* were completely naked. Does that count?”

He grinned. "I guess I got it half right."

"I guess that means you'll have to try again."

He lifted up on an elbow and looked down at her. "Again? Aren't you tired?"

"If you'll remember, I had a nap. I'm perfectly well rested."

He grinned. "Then I guess we'd better get you out of these clothes."

Chloe grinned and pulled her top over her head and dropped it on the floor. "That's one piece. What's next?"

Michael pulled her bra off and tossed it on the floor with her shirt. "That definitely had to go."

Chloe bit her lip and studied his face a moment.

"What?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Something," he said.

"It's just... this is the first time you've seen me without clothes since I've been pregnant. Well, as a human anyway."

He kissed her tenderly and caressed her pregnant stomach. "You're beautiful, even more beautiful than the day I met you."

Chloe smiled and kissed him back, her fears forgotten.

## Chapter Twenty-One

### *Back in Ashton Grove*

Ramsey arrived home feeling tired and haggard. He was glad he'd been able to help the Colorado pack, but he was happy to be home. The psychic warned him that things had changed. He was a little worried about her cryptic message, but first he wanted to shower and get things settled with Chloe. He knew she was mad at him. It hadn't escaped his notice that she'd moved back into the apartment the last time he'd been home. He'd be lying if he said it hadn't hurt, but he hadn't wanted to deal with it at the time.

Dropping his bag on the kitchen floor, he headed straight for the bedroom. Stripping off his clothes, he climbed in the shower. The hot spray washed away the nightmare of the past few days. Sabrina had been all over him while he was in Colorado, regardless of how many times he'd told her "no." He'd thought of walking away and just coming home, but he'd given his word that he would help so he'd stuck it out. The alpha had been appreciative and had paid him well for his trouble.

Getting out of the shower, Ramsey dried off and pulled on a pair of jeans. He dried his hair and went to the kitchen for a quick bite to eat. He only hoped Chloe had kept the refrigerator stocked.

When he flipped on the kitchen light, the first thing he noticed was the folded piece of paper with the key on top. He picked up the key and a feeling of dread settled in the pit of his stomach. He recognized it as the key he'd given Chloe to his house. Opening the letter, he read it – twice.

With shaking hands, he sat the letter down on the counter. She'd left. She'd not only left, but she'd asked to be mated to someone else. Ramsey stared blankly at the counter. He'd rushed home, anxious to

see Chloe and mend his relationship with her. She'd thought he didn't want her? That he didn't love her?

He pushed away from the counter and paced the kitchen. The note said she was already married. It was too late, he'd already lost her. Or was it? Everyone thought he was coming home tomorrow.

Rushing to the bedroom, he quickly finished dressing and grabbed his wallet and keys. Hurrying out the door, he jumped in the Hummer and drove over to the Victorian. If there was still time to stop the wedding, Kiera and Gabriel would know.



Ramsey stormed up the walkway of the Victorian, ready for battle. Wedding decorations were still scattered around the yard. He was too late. He banged on the front door, making it rattle on its hinges.

Kiera opened the door with wide eyes. "Ramsey, you're home early."

"Where is she?" he growled, slamming the front door behind him.

Kiera gulped and scurried backwards into the kitchen. She'd never seen Ramsey so upset before. "She?" she asked, deciding to buy some time by playing dumb.

"You know very well who I'm looking for, Kiera."

"She's married now, Ramsey. There's no point starting any trouble."

"Dammit, Kiera! You knew how I felt about her!"

Kiera winced. "I know. I tried to talk her out of it."

Ramsey sighed and sank into a kitchen chair. "Why did she do it?"

"She thought you didn't want her."

"Why? Why would she think that?"

Kiera shrugged. "You went off to play at being someone's mate."

"I told her the Colorado pack asked for my help."

"Yeah, but when she moved out to the apartment, you didn't exactly go after her either. You just left again without one word."

Ramsey hung his head. "I was going to go talk to her when I came back tonight. It's why I came home early."

"I'm sorry, Ramsey," she said softly. "I truly am. I tried to get her to wait, but she said if you had cared for her at all you wouldn't have left the way you did. She said you would prefer to pretend to be someone else's mate than to be her mate for real, or something along those lines."

He nodded. "So she's married to Michael?"

"They were married this afternoon."

"Did she move out already?"

"No. They went on their honeymoon right after the wedding."

Ramsey winced. The thought of Chloe and Michael together was too painful. "I can't think about that right now."

"You're not going to have a choice, Ramsey. You're going to see them together."

"I know. I'm just not ready to deal with it right now. Maybe I'll take some time off and ... I don't know, travel or something."

Kiera placed a comforting hand on his arm. "I wish there was something I could do."

"Undo the past twenty-four hours," he said quietly.

"I wish I could," she said. "If it's any consolation, I think he'll treat her well."

Ramsey gave a harsh bark of laughter. "Have you already forgotten their fight? The nurse's orders that Michael was to stay away from her? His iron grip on her arm?" He ground his teeth together. "I swear Kiera, if he harms one hair on her head I'll tear him to pieces."

"You'll have to get in line," Gabriel said from the doorway. "But I don't think it will ever come to that."

Ramsey looked up at the alpha. "Why did you do it? When she asked you to choose a mate for her, why did you choose Michael?"

"Because he loves her."

"So do I," Ramsey said, anguish written across his face.

Gabriel nodded. "I see that now. I'm sorry, Ramsey. She asked me to make a decision."

"I don't know if I can stay and see her with Michael, not right now."

Gabriel watched the other werewolf thoughtfully. "I may actually have an assignment for you."

"What is it?"

"There's a young woman in Mississippi who wants to move here. She was raised by werewolves and her family has recently passed away. She's petitioned me to join our pack."

"And you want me to go get her?" Ramsey asked.



Gabriel nodded. "She's going to have her things moved here professionally at a later date, but she'll need someone to pick her up. That should get you out of town for a little bit."

Ramsey sighed. "I don't think forty-eight hours will be long enough."

"So leave now and help her pack. She won't be ready to move here for another month or two. I can call and see if she has space to let you stay with her. Then you can bring her here when she's ready to move."

Ramsey eyed the alpha. "Why do I get the feeling there's more?"

Gabriel shrugged. "She's gotten some threatening messages from the local pack. One of their youngsters wants to marry her. He's been pressuring her to be his mate."

"So since I just finished pretending to be someone's mate, you figured I could do it again?"

"Actually, I thought a mate might take your mind off Chloe."

"What?" Ramsey asked in surprise.

"I'd like you to consider being mated to her."

"I've never even seen her!"

"Just consider it Ramsey," Gabriel said.

Ramsey sighed and nodded. "I'll leave in the morning."

"I'll call and tell her to expect you."

"What's her name?"

"Luna. Luna Delgado."

Ramsey grinned. "Well, at least she has an appropriate name for a werewolf's mate."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### *Maple Falls, Georgia*

The next morning, Chloe woke to find herself wrapped in Michael's arms. For a moment she puzzled over the fact that she was suddenly so happy to be married to him, but she shoved the thought aside.

Snuggling into his embrace, she smiled. She should be exhausted after making love most of the night, but she felt rejuvenated.

"Good morning," Michael said.

"Morning," she replied with a smile.

"What did you want to do today? We can stay in the cottage or we can explore the town."

Chloe gave him a naughty grin and reached under the covers. "Why don't we stay in?"

Michael chuckled. "Honey, if we stay in, I don't think you'll be able to walk by tomorrow."

Chloe laughed. "Good point. I guess we could go sight-seeing."

"I'll just call our host and hostess for some recommendations. Why don't you start the shower and I'll join you in a few minutes."

"Be quick," Chloe said before she kissed him and scurried out of the bed.

Michael smiled as he watched her sashay into the bathroom. He was glad to see Chloe getting back to her old self. He knew a lot of her personality changes were due to the pregnancy, but he preferred her being sassy to being a watering pot.

Walking into the kitchen, he picked up the phone and called Jesse and Lissa. They told him about a little café in town and few quaint stores along the main strip. Lissa gushed about a baby store that

carried handmade items so Michael added it to the list of places to see. Hanging up the phone, he went to join Chloe in the shower.

The ringing of a cell phone stopped him before he reached the bathroom. When he saw Gabriel's number, he stopped and answered the phone.

"Hello."

"Michael, how's everything going?"

"Good," he said with a grin.

"That's good." Gabriel paused. "Ramsey came home early."

Michael glanced toward the bathroom. "And?"

"He was livid. He came over to the house in a rage. If the two of you had still been here, I think he would have stopped the wedding."

Michael sat on the edge of the bed. "Is he on his way here?"

"No. I sent him on an errand."

"What kind of errand makes a man forget the woman he loves?" Michael asked with a snort.

"The kind that involves him finding a mate."

"You're mating him to someone?"

"Maybe. I think he should mate with the newest addition to our pack. A woman from Mississippi petitioned to join us now that her family is gone. I've sent him to help her pack and sell her house," Gabriel said.

"That seems a little beneath him."

"She's in trouble. He seems to like a damsel in distress."

"What kind of trouble?" Michael asked.

"The local pack is causing problems. One of their pack members wants to mate with the woman, but she's not interested. I'm hoping that by planting the idea in Ramsey's head that he'll step up and claim her when things turn ugly."

Michael sighed. "It's times like these that I know why you're the alpha."

"Because I'm smarter and better looking?"

"No. Because you're more devious than the rest of us. I gotta go, Chloe's waiting on me."

"Stay out of trouble down there."

"I will. We'll see you tomorrow."

Michael hung up the phone and stared at it dumbfounded. He wasn't sure what to tell Chloe. She'd have to find out sooner or later. Setting the phone down on the nightstand, he went to join her in the shower. Later was definitely the best option.



During the half hour drive into Maple Falls, Chloe talked non-stop. It was the most animated Michael had seen her in a while.

"You know, when we get back to Ashton Grove we should be able to find out whether or not we're having a boy or a girl," she said with a smile.

"Do you want to know? You don't want to be surprised?" he asked.

"I want to decorate the nursery."

"Guess that means I'll be painting the spare room."

"On the plus side, you said it didn't have any furniture in it. At least you won't have to move anything out before you move the baby furniture in."

He grinned. "You have a point there."

"We should probably come up with a name pretty soon."

"You didn't have any picked out already?" he asked in surprise.

She shook her head. "I was a little preoccupied I guess. I figured there was plenty of time, but now the baby will be here in a little over three months."

"I always liked the name Morgan for a boy," Michael said.

"Morgan is nice," Chloe said. "What about Madison for a girl?"

Michael smiled. "Like M's?"

She grinned. "There's nothing wrong with a name that starts with M."

"What if I wanted the names to start with a C?" he asked.

"You're the one who picked a boy's name that started with an M," she pointed out.

"True."

As they drove down Main Street, Chloe looked at the picturesque shops. "It's a rather charming town."

"Here's the spot," Michael said as he pulled into a parking spot in front of a yellow café with a red door.

"Oh, Michael, I love it."

"It was recommended by our host and hostess. After lunch, I thought we'd browse through some of the shops. Lissa mentioned a baby store around the corner that carries handmade stuff. She thought you might like to go there."

"Oh, could we?" Chloe asked, her eyes lit up with excitement.

Michael smiled, happy to see her so animated.

"Of course. We can go there first if you'd like."

Chloe smiled and nodded.

"Wait right there," Michael said as he turned the car off and got out. He quickly walked around to the passenger side and opened her door. Helping her out of the car, he pulled her into his arms for a quick kiss.

Michael escorted her into the café. The hostess seated them by a window and handed them their menus. After their waitress had taken their orders, Chloe tried to fill the silence with conversation.

"Did you always want to be a mechanic?" she asked.

"Not exactly. I just kind of fell into it. Dad owned the garage and we all worked there during high school. Cole's the only one who went to college after we graduated. Gabriel and I stayed on to work the garage."

"You never thought of going to college?"

Michael studied Chloe. Was she thinking a mechanic wasn't good enough to be a father to her baby? Or was she just curious? "I wasn't very good with school work. I'm better at working with my hands. Besides, Gabriel and I own the business together so we split the profits fifty-fifty."

"I wish I had gone to college," Chloe said. "If I had, maybe I could have gotten a better job."

"What about the job you have with Matt?"

She smiled. "I enjoy working with him. He said that after the baby's born he might let me show some houses. I think I'll like real estate. I might work on getting my license if he'll let me."

Michael returned her smile. "I'm glad you're enjoying your work. Matt's a good guy. You won't have to worry about being fired or laid off. He's been dealing in real estate in one form or another pretty much since he moved to Ashton Grove."

"That's good to know." She paused, not quite sure how to phrase her next question. "What about the rest of the family?"

"You mean the extended family?"

She nodded.

"Most of them showed up when Cole found Marin. I told you a little of her story. When the guy who held her captive showed up in Ashton Grove, our cousins came in town. They decided to stick around after the guy was caught."

"And the others?" she asked.

"The others were mostly reinforcements when Kiera came into the picture. She was literally chased into the garage. Gabriel saved her, but we needed back-up to make sure she stayed safe. Most of the guys stuck around instead of going back to their hometowns."

Chloe's thoughts drifted to Ramsey. She guessed his hometown had been in Colorado, which meant he was close to Kiera because he had helped the pack save her. "Kiera and Ramsey seem close," she said quietly, deciding it was better to just get the conversation out of the way.

Michael tensed. "They are. When Gabriel wasn't around, Ramsey was usually her assigned bodyguard. If she needed more than one, Hunter helped out."

"I guess that means he'll be around a lot."

"What exactly are you asking, Chloe?"

Chloe sighed. "I'm not ready to see him," she said quietly. "We're just starting our life together and I ..."

"You what?"

Chloe reached across the table and held her hand out to him. When he didn't take it, she slowly pulled her hand back. Fighting back tears, she said, "I want a chance for us to have a real marriage, a chance for us to get to know one another again. I don't want Ramsey hanging over our heads all the time."

"Then you should be delighted to hear he won't be there," he said matter-of-factly.

Chloe wanted to ask why, but she merely nodded.

Their food arrived and they ate in silence. Chloe started to say something a few times, but she couldn't find the right words. She had known her questions would upset Michael, but they had to discuss Ramsey at some point.

"Michael, you can't ignore me forever."

"I'm not ignoring you."

"I'm sorry if I made you angry."

He heaved a sighed and sat his fork down. "Chloe, I'm not angry with you. I'm upset with myself. I should have known that you cared so much about Ramsey. I should have insisted that Gabriel marry the two of you."

Chloe stared at him, stunned. "After everything we shared last night, how can you say that?"

"It's obvious. It was only a matter of time before his name came up. I'm just surprised you didn't say something before now."

Chloe shook her head. Pushing back her chair, she got up and walked out of the café. If Michael thought so little of her, she didn't want to be near him. That he could think she would make love to him all night and then pine after another man the next day was unthinkable. She just didn't want to face Ramsey because it was going to be awkward, she simply wanted more time. Why couldn't he understand that?

She'd walked around the corner before she realized she was crying. Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she took in her surroundings. The baby store Michael had mentioned was two stores ahead. Walking to the store, she looked in the window. The tiny outfits and baby blankets brought fresh tears to her eyes. She pressed a hand to her stomach and felt the baby move.

A hand on her shoulder startled her.

"Easy, it's just me," Michael said.

"You scared me," she said quietly.

"I'm sorry, and I'm sorry for what I said in the café."

She didn't say anything, just stared at the window display.

"What do you want me to say, Chloe?"

"That you're an idiot."

Michael grinned. "You're right. I'm an idiot. I have a beautiful wife, a baby on the way, and I'm acting like a jealous ass."

Chloe turned to face him. "You don't have anything to be jealous about, Michael."

"When I think about the time you spent with him..."

She put her fingers over his mouth. "It's in the past. I won't lie, I had feelings for Ramsey, but I left them at his house where they belong. I

went into this marriage with an open mind and an open heart. I only hope you can do the same.”

Michael kissed her fingers and hugged her. He wanted to tell her he loved her, but doubted she would believe him. “Do you want to go in the baby store?”

“Can we?”

“We can do whatever you want to do today, Chloe. We don’t have to go back to Ashton Grove until the morning.”

She smiled and pulled him into the store.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

Later that day Chloe and Michael were cuddled on the couch together watching a movie. A storm had moved through the area and lightning lit up the sky outside.

"I'm sorry we had to call it a day a little early," Michael said.

"It's okay. I was getting tired anyway," she said as she rubbed her stomach.

"Are you sure you're okay? You've been rubbing your stomach a lot today."

"I'm fine. The baby's just been moving a lot more today than usual. It's a little uncomfortable at times."

Michael kissed her forehead. "As long as you're sure you're okay."

She nodded and snuggled closer to him.

"We should probably get up early tomorrow so we'll be home by lunch."

Chloe groaned. "What if the storm hasn't passed?"

"Then I guess we'll see how your new car does in the rain."

"Do we really have to go back so soon?"

"I'm afraid so, honey." He rubbed her back. "I told you Ramsey won't be there."

"I know. It was just nice to get away for a little while."

"Maybe we can take another vacation after the baby's born. I don't like being away from home while you're pregnant. It makes me nervous."

She smiled at him. "Remind me to set a doctor's appointment when we get back. You can go with me if you'd like. They'll do an ultrasound and we can see the baby."

"That reminds me, I still need to add you to the insurance at work."

"I guess I better wait until after you do that."

Michael shook his head. "No, you go ahead and see the doctor. I'll pay for the visit if the insurance isn't taken care of yet."

Chloe winced and rubbed her stomach again.

"What's wrong?"

"The little one seems more active than ever. I think that must have been a foot in my ribs or something."

"Maybe you should lie down."

"Michael, I'm fine..."

"Chloe, I don't want to take any chances."

She sighed, but gave in. Letting him help her to her feet, she followed him into the bedroom. She changed into her nightgown and climbed into bed. When Michael got into bed, she moved closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Michael?"

"Hmm?"

"I know you married me because Gabriel told you to, but do you think we have a chance? I mean a chance at a normal marriage?"

Michael pulled her into his arms. "Of course we do. Regardless of the circumstances of our marriage, I care about you Chloe."

It wasn't love, but it was something. Chloe decided that caring was better than nothing. "I care about you too, Michael."

When he didn't say anything, she decided to be brave. "Michael, do you think you could ever love me? I don't mean right now, but maybe someday?"

"Yeah, I think I could definitely love you, Chloe," he said softly.

"Good," she replied. *Because I think I love you,* she thought to herself. Chloe lay quietly in Michael's arms. She listened to his even breathing until she fell asleep.



The next morning, Michael loaded the car while he waited on Chloe. The sky was still dark from the storm, but thankfully the rain had stopped. He shoved his hands in his pockets and wandered around the yard. What was taking her so long?

He was about to go back inside and get her when she slowly walked out onto the porch, his cell phone in her hand and a dark look on her face.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I think we need to talk."

"About what?"

"I know our marriage was rushed, but maybe you could change your voicemail greeting to something along the lines of 'Hi, this is Michael. I'm married now so if you're a single female looking for some fun, go look for it somewhere else.'"

Michael winced.

"You left your phone on the bed. When it rang, I answered without thinking."

"Honey, I..."

Chloe held up a hand. "I won't be making that mistake again. I made that mistake at Ramsey's and it caused all sorts of problems. You'd think I would have learned my lesson, but apparently not." She stomped down the stairs and handed the phone to him. "Sarah said to call her. Apparently you missed your date."

Michael grabbed her hand and pulled her close. "Chloe, I'm sorry. Things happened so fast that I didn't think to call and cancel."

"So you did have a date this weekend."

"Yeah, I did."

Chloe turned her head to look out over the rolling hills, hoping Michael wouldn't notice the tears burning her eyes. She should have known. He'd flaunted women under her nose when she'd been staying with Ramsey, even when she'd just been renting an apartment from him.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you, Chloe. I'm sorry that I'm a jerk."

"You are who you are, Michael. I knew that going into this relationship."

"I promised to be faithful to you and I will be."

She looked at him as a tear slipped down her cheek. "Please don't make me promises you won't be able to keep."

He wiped the tear from her cheek. "Honey, please don't cry. I can't stand it when you cry."

"I can't help it. It's my stupid hormones."

"It's more than that, Chloe. I've upset you. I didn't mean to."

She shook her head. "You can't help who you are, Michael."

"I don't want to be that person anymore, Chloe. I told Gabriel that the day we told you who we are. I told him that I wanted to be a father to our child and that I wanted to be there for you. And I promise you that I *will* be faithful to you. When I said that I would honor and cherish you during our wedding vows, I meant it."

Chloe buried her face against Michael's chest and wrapped her arms around his waist. She wanted to believe him more than anything. He was telling her exactly what she wanted to hear, but she was scared. Her heart had already been damaged. She wasn't sure how much more it could take.

Michael tipped her head back and brushed his lips against hers. "Chloe, I meant what I said. I'm going to be there for you and the baby. I'll do whatever it takes to prove that to you."

Chloe reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. "Starting with calling Sarah?"

He grinned at her. "Starting with calling Sarah."

With his arm wrapped around his wife, he called Sarah and apologized for not cancelling their date. He told her he was married and wouldn't be calling her anymore. Sarah screeched and ranted and raved at him. When he finished the call, he slid the phone back into his pocket and hugged Chloe.

"You know there's going to be a lot more of those," he said.

"I know, but it was a good start."

"Come on, if we don't get on the road soon, it will be late when we get back home."



It was just after lunch when Chloe and Michael arrived home. Michael drove straight to his house without thinking. When he pulled into the drive, he realized Chloe only had her small bag she'd taken on the trip.

"We still need to get your things from the apartment."

"I can go and pick up a few things to get me through the night. I'm not up to moving today," Chloe said.

"Are you sure? I don't mind."

She smiled and kissed his cheek. "I'm sure. Besides, it will give me a chance to drive my car."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

Chloe hesitated. Michael had said Ramsey wouldn't be around. She should be fine going to the apartment by herself. "I think I'll be okay. I'll just pack an outfit or two and come right back."

Michael looked like he wanted to argue, but he nodded. "I'll be here when you get back."

She smiled and kissed him and got out of the car. "Let me put my things away and I'll just use this bag."

Michael got their bags out of the car and carried them to the bedroom. He tried to convince Chloe to let him go with her one more time, but she was being stubborn.

"Michael, you said Ramsey wouldn't be there."

"He won't. Gabriel said he was sending him out of town for a little bit."

"Then why are you so worried?"

He shrugged. "I just don't like the idea of you going over there alone."

"I'm a big girl. I think I can handle picking up a few things and coming back home."

Michael grinned.

"What?" She put her hands on her hips. "I swear if that grin is a crack about my weight..."

He shook his head. "I'm grinning because you called my house home."

"Oh," she said, her hands dropping to her sides. "Well, that's what it is, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it was just nice to hear you call it that."

She smiled and walked over to him. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she kissed him. "I'll be back shortly."

"Be careful."

"I will."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Chloe pulled into the driveway at Ramsey's and immediately spotted his Hummer. Her breath caught in her throat and she wished that she hadn't made Michael stay at home. She felt like a fool.

Getting out of the car, she grabbed her bag and headed straight for her apartment. She climbed the stairs carefully, stealing furtive glances at Ramsey's house from the corner of her eye. It looked dark. She hoped he had left his SUV in the driveway and taken a plane to where ever the alpha had sent him.

Unlocking her door, she pushed it opened and stepped into the dark apartment. She felt along the wall for the switch and flipped on the light. A screech tore from her throat when she realized someone was in her apartment.

"Ramsey, you scared me half to death!"

He took a step toward her and stopped. "I'm sorry, Chloe. I know I'm not supposed to be here, but I had to see you one last time."

"Why?"

"I had to make sure you were okay."

Chloe stepped into the apartment and closed the door. "Why wouldn't I be okay?"

Ramsey drank her in, his eyes travelling from the top of her head to the tips of her toes before resting on her eyes again. "I know Michael has a temper. I just wanted to make sure he hadn't hurt you."

"He's been a perfect gentleman."

Ramsey nodded and looked away.

"Is that all?" she asked quietly.

"It tore me apart when I got your letter. I went to Gabriel's hoping to get there in time."

"In time for what?"

"In time to stop you. I wanted to stop the wedding."

Chloe walked over to the couch and sat down. "You were going to stop the wedding?"

He looked down at her and clenched his fists at his side. He wanted to reach out and touch her, to hold her. He wanted to kiss her again, to feel her skin against his.

"I wanted to tell you that you were wrong, that I did care about you – do care about you. But I didn't get there in time. You'd already married Michael and left."

"I'm sorry, Ramsey. You hurt me when you left for Colorado. I didn't want to think or feel."

He nodded. "I know that now. If I could go back and change things, I would."

Chloe didn't know what to say.

"Are you happy?" he asked.

"I think so. I don't really know yet. He says he cares about me."

"That's good." Ramsey reached out and gently ran his fingers through her hair. "I hope he takes good care of you, Chloe."



Michael was flipping through the TV channels when his phone rang. Seeing it was his brother he answered.

"Hey Gabriel, what's up?"

"Are you back in town yet?"

"Yeah, we got back about thirty minutes ago. Chloe just went to get her things from her apartment."

"By herself?"

Michael went on alert at the strain in his brother's voice. "Why?"

"I got a call from Luna. It seems Ramsey hasn't shown up in Mississippi yet."

"Shit. I'm on my way to Chloe's now."

Michael hung up the phone and grabbed his keys. Running out of the door, he jumped in his Corvette and sped out of the driveway. He glanced at his cell phone ever few minutes hoping Chloe would call. When he neared Ramsey's house, he saw both the Hummer and Chloe's new hatchback in the driveway. Parking behind his wife's car, he jumped out and ran up the stairs to the apartment.

Opening the door, he saw Ramsey run his fingers through Chloe's hair. Michael saw red and a growl rumbled through him.

"Get your hands off of my wife!"

Chloe gasped and turned toward the door. "Michael!"

She stood and took a step toward him.

"Stay where you are Chloe," Michael said. "This is between me and Ramsey."

"But you don't understand..."

"I think I understand plenty. He had his hands on you."

"Michael, please stop."

Michael stalked further into the room eyeing the man behind his wife. He should have listened to his instincts and come with her. If he had, she would have been safe.

"Chloe, I think you need to go downstairs," Michael said.

She shook her head and stepped closer to him. "You aren't listening to me."

Ramsey decided to intervene before Michael did something that would hurt Chloe. "I just wanted to tell her bye, Michael, and that I hope she has a happy marriage."

"Sure you did," Michael said. "I heard you showed up at the Victorian to stop the wedding."

Ramsey nodded. "I did. Wouldn't you have done the same thing?"

"Maybe," Michael relented.

"I won't lie. I love her. Which is why I'm going to do as Gabriel asked and go to Mississippi," Ramsey said. "I can see how much she cares about you."

Michael looked like he'd been punched in the gut. "You love her?"

"Yeah," Ramsey said quietly as he looked over at Chloe. "Which is why I'm going to do what's best and leave. She belongs with you."

"How do you know she belongs with me?" Michael asked.

"Because she's in love with you."

Michael looked from Ramsey to Chloe. She looked scared and pale. He felt like a monster for being the one to put that look on her face. Slowly he walked over to her. Cupping her cheek, he asked, "Is that true? Do you love me?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Why didn't you say something before?"



"I was afraid to."

"Chloe, you don't have to be afraid of me. I would never hurt you."

"You already have," she said quietly, thinking of the times he'd broken her heart.

Michael wrapped her in his arms and held her close. "I'm so sorry, honey. I didn't know."

Ramsey cleared his throat. "I'm going to leave you two alone," he said as he headed for the door.

"Wait Ramsey," Michael said.

Ramsey stopped.

"I think Chloe would like to say goodbye if you're leaving for Mississippi on your assignment."

Letting his wife go, he watched as she walked over to Ramsey and gave him a hug and told him goodbye. It hurt, but he knew now that she wasn't going to leave him.



After Ramsey left, Chloe turned to face Michael. "Thank you for letting me say goodbye."

"I'm sorry I came barging in here like a jealous ass," he said with a sheepish grin.

"You thought you were protecting me."

"It still doesn't excuse my behavior. I scared you and that's unforgiveable."

Chloe wrapped her arms around him. "I'm a little tougher when I'm not pregnant. You'll find me harder to scare after the baby's born."

He grinned. "Oh yeah?"

"Definitely."

"So back to this whole you love me bit. When exactly did you know you loved me?"

Chloe bit her lip. "I think I started falling for you when you got me pregnant."

Michael raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

"But then you stopped calling and I became so furious with you that I pushed my feelings aside. Then I started to care for you again when I moved in with you."

"But then you moved in with Ramsey," Michael pointed out.

“Actually I moved in to this apartment. You pushed me into dating Ramsey when you acted like an ass and showed up at that restaurant with that woman and then showed up at the party with two more women. You kept dragging women under my nose.”

Michael had the grace to look chagrined.

“I went to our wedding feeling rejected by Ramsey and feeling like I was just settling for whatever life had thrown my way. But after I said my wedding vows something changed. When you kissed me, I felt something... a spark for lack of a better word. And it reminded me of what I felt for you that first night we met.”

“I felt it too,” Michael murmured.

“Then we went on our honeymoon and I was determined to make this a real marriage. Making love with you was just like that first time. I felt it all the way from my head to my toes and I knew that I was still in love with you.”

Michael bent his head to hers and kissed her.

“I love you,” he murmured against her lips.

“What?” she asked in wide-eyed amazement.

He grinned. “I said I love you.”

She stared at him in shock.

“I’ve loved you since before our wedding. I was just too scared to tell you.”

Chloe threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Michael laughed. “So, should we go tell Gabriel that he made the right choice?”

Chloe grinned. “Nah. Let him wait and figure it out later.”

Laughing Michael carried her to the bedroom. “I guess before we move your things out we should make love in your bed at least once.”

“I’d like that,” she said as he laid her down on the bed.

Smiling, she pulled her husband down on the bed beside her and kissed him.

## Epilogue

### *February*

Chloe stood beside the baby bed and stared at the bundle wrapped snugly inside. Morgan was only a few weeks old, but he was already the most important thing in her life. She was amazed at how much she could love someone she'd only known for such a short amount of time.

"Honey, you're going to wake him up," Michael said from the nursery room doorway.

She turned and smiled at him. "I can't help it. He's just so tiny and so perfect."

He smiled. "Of course he's perfect. He's yours."

Chloe quietly walked out of the nursery and pulled the door closed. She wrapped her arms around Michael and kissed him.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For our son. And for not giving up on me."

He caressed her cheek. "How could I give up on the only woman I've ever loved? You're the other half of my soul, Chloe. You're the only woman I ever wanted to settle down with."

She smiled. "Yeah and it scared you half to death."

"That it did."

She glanced at the door. "How many more weeks did the doctor say we had to wait?"

He bent and nipped her on the neck. "You still have a few more."

She sighed. "Maybe by Christmas we can try for a little girl."

Michael chuckled in her ear. "I get the feeling we're going to need a bigger house."

"Well, I happen to know a good realtor."

Michael smiled at her. "Speaking of that, Matt called while you were daydreaming in our son's room again."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were otherwise occupied."

"What did he say?"

"He wants to know if you'd like to show a house next week."

Chloe squealed in excitement. "But I don't go back to work for another month."

"Kiera already offered to watch the baby whenever you wanted some time to yourself," he reminded her.

"Do you think she'd mind?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "Just call her. I'm sure she'd be delighted to watch her nephew."

Chloe squeezed Michael and kissed him. "I don't think my life could be more perfect."

He smiled down at her. "I love you, Chloe."

Smiling she kissed him again. "And I love you. More than I ever thought possible," she said softly.

# *Moonlight Champion*

**Ashton Grove Werewolves, Book 4**

**Sneak Peek**

**UNEDITED/UNPROOFED**

**COMING SPRING 2010**

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## Prologue

Aislinn sat in her favorite chair reading a book. She'd always had a thing for paranormal romances and was reading about a werewolf in a town called Ashton Grove, Georgia. The hero was everything she'd ever dreamed of in a man. As she turned the pages, she lost herself inside a world where the women always found the men of their dreams, princes among men. It was such a far cry from her life that it was almost funny. At twenty-three, she was married to the worst possible man. Hugh Winston had been charming, funny, and a gentleman while they were dating. It had been no small wonder that Aislinn had accepted his proposal nearly a year later. If only she could turn back the clock! At the very least, she was thankful she had kept her name when she had married him. In retrospect, she was surprised that Hugh hadn't pitched a fit when she'd told him she was keeping her maiden name.

Hugh and Aislinn had been married for nearly a year now. The first month hadn't been too bad, but after that... well after that Hugh had changed. She'd often heard women say they married one man and ended up with another. No truer words had ever been spoken! A little over a month into their marriage Aislinn noticed that Hugh was drinking more and more. The more he drank the louder and more obnoxious he became. It didn't long before he started hitting her.

Aislinn remembered the first time as if it were yesterday. She had been ironing his shirt when he had suddenly backhanded her across the face, yelling at her for using the wrong type of starch. The blow had been strong enough to knock her to her knees. She had apologized profusely, having no idea what had set her husband off in such a manner. However, the next day he found something else to complain about and hit her again. Now he didn't need a reason.

As Aislinn fell into her book, she wondered why she hadn't been given a fairy tale ending. Sure, she was young and could always divorce her husband, except he'd made sure that she had nothing and nowhere to go. She supposed she could call a women's shelter, but just the

thought of doing something like that made her shiver. Was it really too much to ask for a knight in shining armor to come riding up her driveway, knock her husband upside his head, and carry her off into the sunset?

Hearing a car in the driveway, she quickly put her book down. Running to the kitchen, she checked on dinner. The roast still had another fifteen minutes before it was finished. What was she going to do? If dinner wasn't on the table when Hugh walked in, she knew there would be hell to pay. Never mind that he was home half an hour early it would still be her fault somehow.

Opening the fridge, she spotted his favorite brand of beer in the back. Grabbing the bottle, she popped the top and placed it on the table beside his comfy chair in the living room. Maybe she could placate him while the roast finished cooking. Rushing, she quickly set the table. Aislinn was just placing the silverware on the table when Hugh walked in the door.

"Something smells good," he said, putting down his briefcase and taking off his suit coat.

Aislinn popped her head out of the kitchen. "I'm making a roast with potatoes and carrots. I made your favorite salad on the side," she said with a smile.

He grunted. "It isn't ready yet?"

"Almost; I put your favorite beer by your chair. I thought you might like to change clothes and relax for a minute while I put the finishing touches on dinner."

Hugh stormed into the kitchen, "You're full of shit and you know it! You're just trying to butter me up because you screwed up and didn't have dinner ready on time!"

Aislinn backed toward the other kitchen door, ready to flee if she needed to. "No, Hugh, I honestly thought you might like to change and relax! Really! Besides, you're home a little earlier than usual."

Hugh roared in anger and lunged for her. “So this is my fault? I’m early you say! It’s never *your* fault, is it Aislinn?”

Aislinn took off for the bedroom, but she didn’t make it in quite enough time. She felt Hugh grab a handful of her long hair and pull as hard as he could; pulling her off her feet, dangling her like a rag doll. When he released her, he backhanded her across the face, knocking her to hands and knees.

“I’m tired of your lies and deceit, Aislinn. No more!”

Hugh kicked her in the ribs, sufficiently knocking the air right out of her lungs. Aislinn curled into a fetal position, gasping for air and trying to see through the haze of her tears. She felt the blows fall one after the other to her arms and legs. She had her face covered as best she could, but knew she would have one bruise for sure.

Just when she thought he was finished, she felt Hugh’s hand grab her by the throat. He hauled her to feet and slapped her. Grabbing her throat once more, he lifted her into the air and threw her across the room. Aislinn flew the four or five feet to the bedroom wall. As she was flying through the air, she made a wish; she wished that her fairy tale ending could come true and that she could find her knight in shining armor. Aislinn hit the wall with a sickening thud and her thoughts were no more. As her unconscious body fell to the ground, it suddenly vanished into thin air.



## Chapter One

### *Early March*

Connor was happy to be inside his home. He'd spent a long day outside and was ready to unwind. His cousins had offered to let him work at their auto shop, but he preferred being outside. He figured it was his wolf side that pushed him into working in the great outdoors. When a local construction company started going belly up, he had bought them out. Not wanting anyone to accuse him of being lazy, he often worked right alongside his men, and woman. He had one female construction worker who worked as hard as the rest, but she also worked hard at trying to get the boss into bed.

Connor never asked anyone to do a task that he himself was not prepared to tackle, so he often found himself working shoulder to shoulder with his employees. It didn't bother him to get a little dirty and sweaty thanks to the southern heat and humidity. It could be back breaking work at times, but it was always rewarding.

He looked around his spacious living room and wondered why he'd his family talk him into buying the monstrous place. He'd been living one town over, but apparently that wasn't close enough for his cousins; they had insisted that he move to Ashton Grove to be closer to the pack. Now he had a spacious four bedroom home all to himself. His brother, Colin, had also bought a home nearby.

Grabbing a beer out of the fridge, he sat down and turned on the TV. Just as he was bringing the beer up to his mouth for a drink, a bright light flashed and a woman materialized in his lap. Startled, Connor almost dropped both the beer and the woman. He quickly grabbed the woman and set his beer down on the table. He briefly wondered what in the hell was going on. Being a werewolf, he wasn't immune to the unknown, but having a woman literally drop into his lap was a first.

Seeing that she was unconscious, he lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. Laying her down on his large bed, he

turned on the light to get a better look at her. Her long brown hair was tangled, but her face ... someone had damaged her beautiful face. He swore under his breath at the large blue bruise blossoming on her cheek. Her face was swollen and he would almost guarantee that she would have a black eye in the morning. He wanted to check her for further damage, but was afraid to. Picking up the phone, he called Gabriel.

On the third ring, the joint-alpha picked up the phone. "Hello."

"Gabriel, I need your help," Connor said, a death grip on the phone as he looked worriedly at the woman on the bed.

"What is it Connor? Are you okay?" Gabriel asked sensing the tension in his cousin's voice.

"No, I'm fine. But I do need some help. Do you think Kiera feels up to coming over? Or should I call Marin?" he asked.

"Connor, why do you need one of the women to come over tonight?" Gabriel asked, knowing that something was missing from the conversation.

"My mate just materialized in a flash of light. She's been hurt though and I don't know how bad it is," Connor explained, knowing he sounded ridiculous.

"Appeared? Is she a fairy?" Gabriel asked.

"No, she seems human. I think someone did a number on her though. Her face is blue on one side and swollen. I'm worried that she might have sustained other injuries."

Gabriel growled; the one thing he hated most was violence against women. "We're all coming over. We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

When Gabriel hung up the phone, Connor got a cool cloth to wipe the woman's face. He tried to make her as comfortable as possible while he waited on reinforcements. He was afraid to move her too much in case she had serious injuries he couldn't see.

The woman on the bed whimpered, a frown creasing her brow. Connor hunkered down beside the bed so his height wouldn't frighten her if she should awake.

"Shh, it's okay. You're safe now," he murmured to her.

Aislinn heard the soothing voice and felt a calm settle over her. She fought to open her eyes, but they weren't cooperating. Had someone come to help her? The last thing she remembered was hitting the wall after Hugh had thrown her. Was she dead? Had she made it to heaven? The voice speaking to her was deep and soothing; it could easily belong to an angel.

Slowly opening her eyes, she tried to focus on her surroundings. Nothing looked familiar. Her gaze came to rest upon the man kneeling beside the bed. He was broad shouldered with a strong handsome face, set with green eyes and full, strong lips. His chin had a slight cleft in it, which would have made her sigh if she weren't in so much pain. His brown hair brushed the tops of his shoulders, giving him a bad boy look.

"Where am I?" she asked in a whisper, her throat still sore from Hugh's iron grip.

"You're in my home in Ashton Grove," Connor answered.

Her eyes widened and she tried to move, only to wince in pain. Ashton Grove? Had he just said Ashton Grove? But it didn't exist! It was merely part of the book she had been reading... lying back against the pillow, she realized that she must either be dead or dreaming. Maybe this was her version of heaven. Her brow furrowed. If this were heaven, wouldn't the pain have stopped?

"Are you okay?" Connor asked, instantly feeling stupid, of course she wasn't okay.

"Did you say Ashton Grove?" she asked quietly.

"Yes. If you aren't from here, where are you from?" he asked.

"Mobile, Alabama," she whispered.

Connor cocked his head and looked at her carefully. "Do you know how you came to be here? Do you remember what happened before you woke up just now?"

She swallowed painfully. "My husband came home from work and flew into a rage. He chased me through the house."

"You're married?" Connor asked in surprise. How could his mate be married? It felt as if his chest were caught in a vice being squeezed tight.

"Yes, for a year now. He did this to me," she said, a tear slipping down her battered cheek.

Connor swallowed down his rage. He slowly reached out a hand and gently stroked her hair. "He won't hurt you anymore. You're safe now."

Aislinn gave him a wan smile and her eyes started drifting closed again. This was definitely the nicest dream she'd ever had. If it meant the nice man beside her would stick around, she wouldn't mind staying in her dream world forever.

## About the Author

Jessica Coulter Smith was born in Tennessee, but travelled all over starting at the age of ten. Having lived in Georgia, California, Texas, and Louisiana, she has once again made her home in Tennessee... for now. A wife and mother, she often finds herself chasing small children around the house. An avid animal lover, she has two cats, two dogs, a bird, and a horse.

Her first book, *Whispering Lake*, was first published by Hearts on Fire in 2008, and was re-released by Wild Horse Press in 2009 as an extended edition. However, this wasn't the first attempt Jessica made at writing. *Vicus Luna* is an adaptation of a YA book she started in junior high. In addition, she has received several awards for poetry and has five published poems in various anthologies, the first of which was published when she was sixteen.

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