



Hungry Like the Wolf

A Wolf Songs story

Violet Summers

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Dedication

Sierra: I'd like to thank S.A.M. who provided more inspiration than you'll ever know-forever. To Queen Tina, best friend, this one's for you. Thanks to as always Terri, world's greatest editor.

* * * *

VJ: To Sierra, because you are the most accepting person I know, and you love me the way I am—issues and all. And because you proved to me that Duran Duran is even hotter the second time around.

Chapter One

Nigel Rhodes sat down at his usual table in Claire's Coffee House with a resigned sigh. The place had been his home for the past month and a half. One of the waitresses gave him a wave and a sly smile. He nodded back to her and opened his *Time Magazine*.

The girl set a cup of coffee in front of him and he thanked her without looking up as he continued to read. He hated being here, but as one of the Pack's Enforcers he was left no choice. Especially considering his father was Alpha. Nigel was at the mercy of his father's whims.

"Hello, Nigel. Right on time, I see." Claire Andrews' slightly husky voice broke into his thoughts.

"Hello, Claire." Again he didn't bother to look up. He knew she was there; her scent was all over the small shop. Cinnamon and apples, just like his favorite muffin. He groaned inwardly when he heard the chair scrape across the floor indicating she'd decided to sit down.

"Aren't you getting tired of babysitting me?"

"You have no idea," he muttered. When she remained expectantly silent, he elaborated. "Thomas wants you guarded. My Alpha commands and I obey." He was as sick of the question as he was of sitting on his ass day after day in her café. But she posed it to him every single day, and every single day he gave her the same answer.

"I'm a big girl, Nigel. I think I can manage to keep myself out of trouble."

He ignored her sarcastic tone.

"I'm sure you're right, Luv, but *you're* the one who agreed to participate in the Mating Run. All prospective mates are being guarded." *Here we go*, he thought. Same argument, different day.

"I'm a witch, Nigel."

Nigel closed the magazine, finally looking up at her. She wrinkled her pert little nose at him.

"Yes, but you're a *human* witch. Dad doesn't want any of the boys nosing around until the solstice, and if someone decided to make a play, you don't have the physical strength to fend him off." He hid his smile as she crossed her arms beneath her very ample chest and huffed at him. That chest had played front and center in more than one fantasy when he was alone and horny. The idea of sliding his cock between her large breasts made him come so hard, it drove him nearly to his knees, relieving some of the stress that had been building in him over the past month.

"If I'd known the Pack was going to insist on dogging my every step, I wouldn't have consented to the Run." He quirked his eyebrow; she was in rare form this evening. "Yes, the pun was intended."

"You could always get out of it, Claire. All you have to do is go and find a man to rub all over you. Trust me, no wolf looking for a mate will want the stink of another man on his female."

"I thought of that," she sighed, "but then my family would be pissed. One Andrews' woman in every generation is expected to be in the Run. You know that. This generation I drew the lucky short straw."

Exasperated with her familiar grumblings, and the lust that seemed to flare out of control every time he caught a hint of her sweet scent, Nigel lost his patience.

“Claire, what the hell do you want me to do about it? You entered the Run of your own free will. Either commit yourself to it or break the contract, just stop whining about it.” Six weeks of sexual frustration boiled over. “It’s not like I’m having any fun here, either. My childhood goal was never to be a babysitter when I grew up.”

“You’re an ass, Nigel Rhodes.” Claire shoved her chair back forcefully. “No more free muffins for you.”

Nigel watched her stalk away, feeling like that cartoon wolf with his tongue unrolling in pure lust. Her ass, like her chest, was round and ample and he enjoyed the way it swayed when she was all in a huff. It made him hot, and relieved some of the boredom of being in the coffee shop. Of course, it also ramped up his sexual frustration to a whole new level.

He scanned the rest of the table and chairs. Snotty, elitist college kids crowded around, discussing politics and the rotten state of the country, not understanding they would become part of the problem as soon as they entered the working world.

He pretended to read his magazine as he watched Claire go about her work. His jeans tightened uncomfortably when she bent over to wipe a table, giving him and every other man in the place a nice view of her plump tits. Dammit, he came in here every day and left hard as stone every evening.

The truth was, Nigel wanted little Miss Claire Andrews. He wanted her in the worst way, and she was untouchable. He normally wasn’t attracted to human women; they tended to be too fragile for him. He was a rough lover, as most wolves were. Human women, with their exaggerated concerns about looking like the latest celebrity heiress, never had enough muscle or padding to take a man of his size or predilections. No, in general human women weren’t his cup of tea at all. He shivered. But Claire was different.

Her delicious curves could handle Nigel; he wouldn’t have any worries about damaging her if things got a little ... energetic. Hell, she could probably give him a run for his money.

It was her body type and her particular magical ability which had allowed her to join in the annual Mating Run. According to her grandfather, Claire was the only Andrews woman to possess the exact combination of physical and mental strength to handle mating with a wolf. Nigel knew that was a load of bullshit. While her family’s abilities were powerful and plenty, Claire lacked the more aggressive magic they believed necessary to strengthen the family. So they offered her as the latest sacrifice to a centuries-old pact. It annoyed the hell out of Nigel. In the Pack every wolf was valued for their own unique strengths. No Alpha would willingly compel one of his wolves to fulfill an ancient pact against his or her will.

Nigel sighed. Of course, the Alpha was more than willing to manipulate his own sons into fulfilling roles not of their choosing.

Wolf shifters were a prolific bunch, highly sexed and highly fertile, but the vast majority of young were males. As a result, there weren’t enough female wolves to keep the breed “pure.” So several generations ago Nigel’s ancestor, a strong and well-respected Alpha, had instituted the Mating Run. Each Solstice a lottery was held to determine which males would compete for the available female wolves.

The local Wiccan community had joined in, offering the promise of one woman each

generation to participate in the Run in return for support and protection.

This year wasn't his year. *Again*. That honor went to his older brother, Taylor, and Nigel obeyed Pack law, no matter how it burned like acid to imagine another wolf sinking into the fire that was Claire. *His* Claire.

*

Claire tried not to stare at Nigel as she put out fresh cookies in the display case. She'd cursed herself a thousand times over for allowing the Coven to pressure her into agreeing to participate in the Run. The Elders had conspired, her parents had pleaded, and her sisters had pointed out the positives. She was almost thirty, had no serious boyfriend and the wolves were a heady bunch of men. What she never expected was her lightning hot attraction to her personal bodyguard, nor did she imagine she would lie in bed at night dreaming about him mounting her and staking a claim.

She rubbed her arm discreetly along her hard nipples; they always ached whenever Nigel was in the vicinity. She was going to have to find a way to back out of the Hunt, because she couldn't possibly be mate to another wolf when she was in love with the one sitting in her shop.

Hellfire and damnation, but this was an impossible situation. Her first responsibility had to be to her family. At least that was the lecture her mother always gave her.

Her magic didn't strengthen the family or the Coven. No, Claire wasn't able to influence others like her sister Drew, call upon the weather like her sister Rio, or provide great healing like her sister Tamara. Hell, she couldn't even manage to do the simplest levitation spell.

She'd been blessed with the gift of food. She could conjure up the sweetest sugar, grow the best vegetables and bake like no one's business. More, with a little flex of her Will, Claire could imbue each of her creations with a charm to relax or calm someone. While they were always more than happy to enjoy the fruits of her labor, the Coven Elders didn't consider her talent to be of any importance, a fact they frequently reminded her of.

Claire had been reluctant when her mother approached her with the news that she'd been selected to participate in the Mating Run. When her sister Drew sympathetically pointed out that by doing the Run Claire could finally contribute something worthwhile to the Coven, Claire had been so hurt and offended she'd refused to even discuss the subject.

Finally, after months of argument, she was called before the Elders, who informed her that, because she was showing such poor judgment by refusing to participate in the Run, they felt compelled to call in her business loan on her café. It wasn't wise, they explained, to trust someone so irrational and emotional with such a great responsibility.

She'd been stunned speechless and had left the meeting room without a word. The horror and pain had come next. She couldn't believe her Coven, her very family, would stoop to blackmail to secure her cooperation. The threat went against everything she'd ever been taught about the responsibilities of the Coven to its members.

It wasn't until her father pulled her aside and explained to her that the Elders truly believed they were doing what was best for her as well as the entire group that Claire was able to begin putting the situation into perspective.

The Elders didn't believe her magical talent had any benefit for them, but they also didn't believe it provided any protection for her. By participating in the Run, she would

guarantee another generation of protection for the Coven, and a safe haven for herself.

She hated it, thought it was positively medieval, and she couldn't think of a way out of it.

The Coven was utterly practical, and in the end Claire forced herself to be practical, too. Thomas Rhoades, the Pack's Alpha, seemed more than happy to relieve the Coven of Claire's presence, and honestly, Claire didn't have much use for the Coven at this point. So she'd listed all the pro's, not the least of which was the fact that the wolves were all hotties, and signed the contract more or less of her own free will. Which led to her present quandary.

She'd never in a million years have guessed she'd fall for her bodyguard. Of course, Nigel hadn't given her even a hint that he saw her as anything more than an irritation. Besides, if she backed out now, she'd alienate the wolves, bring shame to her family, and endanger the generations-old agreement they had with the wolf Pack.

Stupid, archaic and unreasonable Pact. Claire shook her head at herself. She knew better than to fight it. Some traditions couldn't be broken, even in the twenty-first century, and this was one of those traditions. So she was left with only her fantasies of the six-foot-two wolf with shaggy brown hair, amber eyes and a killer English accent to keep her warm at night.

Chapter Two

Claire slammed her fist against the steering wheel and cursed her old Chevy in two different languages. The damn thing refused to start, and she was already late getting to her sister Tamara's birthday party. She pulled out her cell phone, punching in the number to the auto club, and cursed some more when the phone went dead after the first ring. She jumped out of her car, trying for a better signal before she realized that it needed to be charged. Her temper rose and she kicked the tire, letting out a string of swear words that would have made a trucker blush.

"Nice language, Luv." *Just great, Nigel the ass to the rescue.*

"I thought you left," she mumbled as she threw the useless phone through the open window of her car.

"Claire, I always follow you home."

"Great, next you'll tell me you sleep at my doorstep, too." She watched his carefully blank face with a sense of resigned horror.

"You're kidding me, right? Nigel, what the hell is wrong with your Pack that they would force you to do something like that? Don't you think it's a little excessive?"

He only shrugged his shoulders. "It is what it is."

Incredible. Claire was having serious second thoughts about joining the Pack. Not if they treated their own like personal slaves.

"Relax, luv. Someone takes over for me around midnight so I can get a little rest."

She didn't feel any better, in fact she felt worse. Now there were *two* people whose lives were on hold in order to babysit her.

"I'm sorry, Nigel." Claire closed her eyes, realizing how close to tears she was. She was feeling tired, frustrated and totally hemmed in. Worst of all, Nigel must hate her guts for disrupting his life in such a way.

"Hey, it's not a big deal."

Claire wasn't buying it. She'd be more than a little annoyed if she were in his place. He'd put his entire life on hold, and wasn't getting any benefit out of it. Unless you counted the free coffee and muffins he plowed through daily.

"This is so wrong. I've managed to look out for myself for more than twenty-nine years. I don't need a keeper. And it's beyond unfair to you or the others who don't even get to be in the Run."

"Well, Luv, we can't have the soon-to-be grooms putting the moves on you too early. The whole point of the lottery is for all the participants to have a level playing field. And you know how important it is for the actual mating to take place on the Solstice. No dipping in the honey pot before it's time." He moved closer to her. "Now let's have a look at the car."

*

After fiddling with the engine for more than an hour, Nigel gave up. The rusted piece of shit was beyond his meager abilities to resuscitate. And even if it weren't, she had no business driving around in the tin-can on wheels. *A bloody death trap.*

"You need a new car, Luv." He said closing the hood.

"I know, but I can't afford a new one. I have all my money tied up in the café."

“We both know your parents would be more than happy to take care of it, Claire.” Her face froze and she put her nose in the air.

“I won’t ask my parents to buy me a new vehicle.”

“Why ever the Hell not? It’s not like they don’t have the money.” Nigel knew for a fact that her family might not be wealthy, but the Coven had more than enough cash to go around. It was unacceptable that they would allow her to drive such a crappy car.

“I don’t want their money, Nigel. Being born into the Andrews family comes with enough strings attached. I don’t want to rely on them for anything.”

“I can’t understand why you won’t take their help.” Nigel followed her as she walked back to her store. He’d never challenged his place in the Pack, and it was a constant cause of confusion to him that Claire would resist her place in her family. But he admired the hell out of the fact she didn’t run to them for money. She worked hard, routinely putting in twelve-hour days at the shop.

“There’s nothing to understand. I prefer to be independent.”

Nigel laughed, a hardy laugh and from the frown Claire wore she wasn’t sharing his amusement.

“Luv, if you wanted independence, then why in the hell did you volunteer to be a wolf’s mate?” He shook his head with mock sadness. “Sweetheart, your independence will be thrown out the window the minute your male slides into you and stakes his claim.”

Her sharp intake of breath sent an electric shock down his spine as he realized what he’d said. In all their conversations nothing remotely resembling a sexual comment had ever passed between them.

Then her back stiffened and she rummaged through her purse for her keys.

“That’s different, Nigel. Of course marriage requires compromise. Anyway, I’m sure my mate will be reasonable about the things that are important to me.”

Nigel was stunned into silence. Did she actually believe that her future mate would allow her the kind of independence she seemed to cherish? He didn’t take Claire for a fool, Hell she was a witch for Christ’s sake. She was schooled in Pack lore and law.

“Claire, you need to break the contract,” Nigel warned her. There was no way a male would allow her the kind of freedom she wanted. It wasn’t in their nature. Their instincts were to protect and take care of their mate’s needs and desires. He had a sinking feeling it was going to be too much for Claire to handle. Hell, when her young came, he knew her mate would insist that she quit work entirely. She would be miserable.

“I can’t do that, Nigel. I made a promise. I won’t go back on my word.” She fumbled and dropped her keys. Nigel snatched them up, moving in on her like the predator that he was. She needed to really understand what the hell she was getting into. He knew the Coven was more or less forcing this decision upon her. They could be a cold group of women when it came to getting what they wanted. He knew she believed she didn’t have a choice, but he still felt the need to open her eyes to the reality of a Pack Mating.

“Claire, you aren’t getting it, Luv. No male will ever allow you the kind of freedom you now enjoy.” As he closed in on her he could feel her body temperature rise. Her delicious apples and cinnamon scent flooded Nigel’s senses, sending blood to his cock in an almost painful rush. His body was having an atomic reaction to her confusion and growing anger.

“No,” she responded, “*you’re* not getting it. I will do my duty by the contract, but I

will not be dictated to by any male. I've been made to feel like I was defective for too long now and finally I have some measure of worth to myself. I won't give it up."

He watched her chest rise and fall as she tried to grab her keys from his hand. He couldn't stand what she was doing to his body and his mind. He had to talk her out of doing the fucking Run. For both their sakes. This woman deserved more than what the Pack or her family would do for her. The Pack would treat her with respect, she would be celebrated and taken care of, but her freedom would be curtailed. Nigel hated the idea of her one pleasure being stripped from her.

He moved instinctively, without thought, pinning her against the door to her shop. His body pressed into hers, and he stifled a groan as hard muscle melded to soft flesh. He placed both hands on the door behind her, caging her between his body and the glass.

"Let me explain something to you, Luv. When a male claims you, you won't be given the opportunity to even get out of bed for a week. The mating heat will take over, and by the time you come up for air enough to even think about trying to resume your normal life it will be too late. Any worthy wolf would keep you so exhausted from fucking that you wouldn't have the energy to do anything other than eat and sleep until he had his young growing in your belly."

"I'm won't be a bitch in heat for anyone, Nigel." Fear kept her paralyzed, fear and desire. Both dripped off her like the finest French perfume, and Nigel was fascinated and enthralled by her reaction. She was seducing him with nothing more than her scent and her smart mouth, and she didn't even know it.

"You will be if your mate is worthy of you," he bit off, all his considerable willpower focused on not giving in, not driving into her meltingly soft body, breaking the law and defying his father, his Alpha.

Her scent spiked again, and he knew he'd pushed her to the breaking point. Her hand flew, and he caught it before she could make contact, turning her wrist over so he could press his lips to her palm. He let the tip of his tongue tickle the very center and stifled a groan. She tasted like fire and lust, and he was in big fucking trouble. He leaned forward, pressing his body full on against hers and ground his pelvis into her stomach.

"Claire, do have any idea how fucking dangerous it is to challenge a male? Goddammit woman, all I want to do is strip off your clothes and find out how wet your pussy is."

Her breath was harsh against his chest. For once she seemed to be speechless.

"This is bad, Claire. So bad. I want to bury myself inside of you, Luv, and make you come all over my cock, but you aren't mine to take."

"Oh Goddess, Nigel, please." Her cry was his undoing. He had to have a small taste, something to remember her by. In three days she would belong to another and he wouldn't be able to touch her ever again.

"Claire, Luv, let me touch you, just for a minute. Let me borrow a little of what I can never own." His mouth whispered over her cheek as he waited, prayed she would allow his touch.

"Yes." Her whimper urged him on. When her hands rose to flatten on his stomach he growled. "No. I can't keep any control if you touch me. Put your hands behind your back."

She did as he commanded, and Nigel fought to hold back; he was careful not to rub himself against her skin. His entire being ached to rub his scent all over her. Instead, he

slowly slid his hand down to the bottom of her skirt, lifting the front just enough to slide his hand underneath.

Her skin was so fucking soft as he let one finger travel from her knee to the inside of her thigh.

“Spread your legs for me, Luv.” His voice came out in a guttural rumble as she eased thighs apart.

He slipped one finger inside the elastic of her panties, encountering wet, slick flesh. As soft and sweet as a rose petal.

“Oh bloody Hell, Claire. I knew you would be this wet for me. Tell me, Claire I need to know. Do you touch yourself?” He imagined how she would look lying on her bed, her full thighs spread wide.

“Yes.” Her voice, barely a whisper, caressed his neck.

“What do you think about when you touch yourself, Luv?” Oh Christ, the vision of her mouth opening wide, lips red and wet, as her fingers dipped inside herself fogged his mind. Nigel knew what he wanted to hear. He had a healthy ego, but he *needed* to hear her say the words.

“You, Nigel. I think about you.” He smiled into her hair as she gave him what he wanted.

He slid one finger into her soaking entrance, moving in a shallow thrust.

“What do you think about, Claire? Do you imagine my fingers sliding in and out of your hot pussy?” She was biting her lip, her eyes closed. Nigel delved his finger in a little deeper.

“How about my mouth, Luv? Am I there licking your cream, sucking your clit until you explode for me?” She whimpered. Her vaginal walls grasped his finger. He pulled out, then added a second finger and began to work them in.

“I think about you too, Claire.” He pressed deeper into her, crooking his fingers until he felt the soft spongy area that tore a soft, desperate cry from her throat. “When I leave here, I go home and I’m so hard all I can do is imagine you.” His thumb grazed her clit. “Your pouty little mouth surrounding my dick. Your pussy hugging me tight, stroking me, making me so fucking crazy I want to die.” His thumb pressed harder to her tight bud.

“I have jacked off every night for the last six weeks, and you’re right there with me.” She moaned against his neck and started grinding herself on his hand.

“That’s it, Luv. Ride my hand.” Nigel’s cock surged against his zipper, demanding relief.

“I do it every night, pretending it’s your hand wrapped around my cock, and I come so hard, Luv. You make me come so fucking hard.”

His thumb moved faster over her distended bud while his fingers pumped her hard. Stretching her, just like he would if he was preparing her for his dick. He pushed her up harder against the door, his fingers caressing her, eliciting little moans from deep in her core. He’d never felt like this, this connection. The desire to fulfill her was overwhelming and all he wanted was to feel her orgasm rain down on him.

Nigel ground his teeth to keep from sinking his teeth into her shoulder.

“Mmmm, ride me, Claire. Ride my hand like you were riding my cock. Come on, Luv. I want you to give me your honey. I need it so that when I go home tonight, I can smell it on my skin, taste it on my tongue.”

She was so close, and it was driving Nigel insane. With every word he felt her get softer, wetter, and hotter around his fingers.

"I can't keep you Claire, but give me this memory."

"Nigel, yes... Oh Goddess, Nigel." Claire's cries filled his ears as her body clamped down like a vice on his pumping fingers, splashing them with her essence. Fuck, he knew she'd be like this, this passionate, this responsive to him. Hadn't it been what he'd been dreaming about? He thrust his fingers steadily while she rode out her orgasm. When she finally quieted, Nigel slowly slid his fingers free. He fisted his hand at his side and moved off of her.

He couldn't look her in the face, refused to see the passion flushing her cheeks and tempting him into finishing what he'd started. He'd already crossed the line tonight, touching her the way he had. One look in those hazel eyes and he'd say to hell with loyalty and duty and take what he wanted, stealing a vital mate from the Pack.

"Nigel?" Even her voice made him ache. What the fuck was he doing to himself? To both of them? To have the smallest taste of paradise and no more was a worse torture than never having touched her at all. Who was he kidding? He challenged her to defy her family, her coven and yet he wasn't able to do the same. He wasn't willing to stand up to his father, his Alpha and lay claim to this woman. He was a fucking coward and the knowledge made him sick to his stomach.

Placing her keys in her hands he stepped back in full retreat. He could feel her gaze like a laser beam, but he refused to meet her eyes. He found he couldn't breathe. His chest tightened painfully, his body ached and his inner wolf cried out in mourning; it was going to lose its mate.

"Get inside and lock the door, Claire."

When she didn't move he turned his back on her, growling, "Now!" He winced as he caught her desperate fumbling before the door finally opened and she rushed inside. When it banged shut behind her he stalked around to the back of the building and slammed into his truck. His chest heaved with the force it took to keep himself in the truck and not chase after her.

His animal instincts demanded that he go back and take what was his. The howls echoing in his head were tearing him apart. No, she wasn't *his*, she was meant for someone else. He slammed his fist on the dashboard as pain sliced through his chest.

Her scent clung to his clothes and he knew that, in spite of the care he'd taken, his scent would be all over her, too. He brought up his hand, inhaling. His fingers were still wet with her juices. He ripped open his jeans, pulling out his heavy cock, running wet fingers around his cockhead. He relived her every sigh, the way she felt clenching around his fingers and the way she said his name when she came. He stroked his shaft from root to tip, his eyes closed. His chest was pounding, his animal shoving adrenaline along every nerve ending. He wanted her so fucking badly. She was *his*.

Should have been his.

"Claire! *Fuck*," he shouted as his cock erupted and his semen spurted hotly onto his stomach. His fingers, still coated with her orgasm, slid along his own, mingling them. His head fell back against the seat, and he groaned. What the hell had he just done to them both? She didn't belong to him, never would. His reaction to her shocked the hell out of him. Nothing had ever felt so right. The moment he'd touched her he'd been a dead man, because once wasn't enough. He needed to touch her again. And again. For one moment

in his life he wanted to know what heaven was like. Needed to relish the body of the only woman who had ever rocked him to the core.

“Fuck,” Nigel shouted, stuffing his still-hard dick back into his pants. He had to talk to his father. There was no way in hell he was going to torture himself by staying here a minute longer than he had to. He couldn’t watch Claire mate with another male, bear his young, make a life for herself with someone other than him. He’d go stark raving mad. Nigel wasn’t Alpha, he could request to be moved, maybe up north with his uncle’s Pack. Maybe he’d go back to England. He hadn’t been back to his childhood home since their family had emigrated to Northern Michigan so his father could become Alpha when Nigel was eighteen. No, he seethed, England was a bad idea. Too far from the pack, too far from Claire. The truck’s engine started with an anguished roar. Yanking out his cell phone, he called James to come and relieve him.

*

Claire sat in a window booth staring as Nigel’s truck pulled around to the front and parked. She prayed her sister Tamara would be here soon to pick her up. Her stomach was tied up in knots

What the hell had she been thinking, letting Nigel touch her so intimately?

She was insane. It was the only reasonable explanation. Her pussy still burned with the memory of his talented fingers. Goddess, if he could do that to her with five minutes and his hand, imagine what he’d be able to do with other more potent parts of his anatomy and a whole night.

She let her forehead hit the wooden table in front of her. Closing her eyes, she shivered. The damn Mating Run loomed in her mind like a dark cloud.

Stupid tradition. For centuries powerful witch covens had entered one daughter per generation into the sacred run. Mated pairs of witch and wolf produced exceptional offspring. Some of the most powerful witches and Alphas throughout recorded history came from these unions.

Nigel’s engine revved and Claire looked up in time to see him pull away from the curb with a squeal as James’ Hummer pulled up behind him. The sight dragged a moan from her. She’d lusted after him from almost the moment he’d walked into the café, but she’d never, in a million years expected him to return the sentiment. Heck, she’d never even imagined that Nigel was attracted to human women; he never paid any of the women who frequented the shop any attention.

His lips were so smooth, his taste exotic. He smelled like pine and man and it drove her crazy. How the hell was she supposed to spend the rest of her life with another man when her heart and body so completely belonged to another?

She needed to talk to his father, tell the Alpha the truth of her feelings. Even if Nigel didn’t share them, she was pretty sure he liked her. And clearly he wanted her. No man could do that to a woman and not have some kind of feelings for her.

Nigel. She closed her eyes, picturing his tall, lanky frame. His amber eyes glowed with his lust. His firm lips had barely touched her skin, and she’d wanted his kiss. Wanted to taste his tongue deep in her mouth, to feel it on other, more tender, parts of her body.

Claire wasn’t a virgin by any stretch, but no lover ever made her body burn like he did. It wasn’t a slow kindling. No, Nigel’s touch was like gasoline on a fire. Her body begged for more, craved more of his skilled fingers.

She put her hands to her temples as a monster headache began to pound. It was painfully unfair to taste ecstasy at the hands of the man she loved, only to live with the knowledge that soon she would belong to another. She couldn't do it. Claire knew if she were to turn her back on her feelings for Nigel, to give herself to another, it would destroy her.

Tomorrow she'd go to Thomas Rhodes, and she would beg if she needed to. Thomas wasn't an evil man, nor was he deliberately cruel. He would understand, he *had to* understand, that she would make a terrible mate to any other wolf besides Nigel.

* * * *

Tamara picked her up, but Claire was quiet on the way to her parents home. She couldn't get Nigel off her mind.

"Claire-bear what's wrong? I can feel your sadness, it's surrounding you like a freaking fog." Tam's soulfully sweet voice pulled Claire from her thoughts.

Claire tried to smile at her very perceptive younger sister but made no attempt to explain herself. Tam could pick up on a lie the moment it left your lips, but Claire couldn't hide the mist in her eyes or the pain radiating around the vicinity of her heart.

"Oh, no, Claire. Who is it?" Tam reached over and squeezed Claire's hand softly.

"Nigel." She would not cry. There was nothing she could do to change her fate without Thomas' help. She wouldn't go against her Coven and over the last six weeks Nigel had proved with his every word and deed that he wouldn't go against his Pack. For the past month and half he proved in every word and deed that he followed pack law.

"Break the contract, Claire." Tam's normally peaceful aura erupted to the point that even Claire could feel the disruption.

"I can't, Tam. And even if I could, he won't go against his Pack."

"Yes, you both can!" Tamara insisted. "Claire, you're meant to be together. I can feel it. It's not right that you are going to be married to someone else." The car swerved and Claire grabbed the door handle.

"Sweetie, calm down or you're going to start an earthquake or something." Where Claire's magic was passive and calm, her youngest sister was one of the most powerful women born to the Coven in more than a hundred years. She possessed more than one magical talent, and while her strongest to date was healing, every week a new and more aggressive talent seemed to manifest in Tamara. But with her youth also came unpredictability as she was still learning to control her powers.

"You aren't effing Romeo and Juliet, and it's beyond wrong what the Coven is doing to you." Tamara kept the car in its own lane, but Claire noticed a rather strong wind bent the trees that lined the road toward their car.

"Tammy, it is what it is." Claire laughed a little at herself as she repeated Nigel's earlier words to her. "An Andrews woman must do the Run."

"Then let me take your place."

"What?" Claire laughed. "Tamara, the Elders aren't going to let you waste yourself in the Mating Run. You've got a much more important destiny in store." It was common knowledge that Tamara was expected to be the next High Priestess of the Coven.

"I know, and it effing sucks that our lives have been so neatly planned out for us by the Coven." Claire had never heard such disdain in her younger sister's voice before. As the anointed one, Tamara had always been given everything she wanted. To her sister's

credit, she never took more than anyone else received nor did she consider herself better than any other witch in the community. She carried no ego with her many gifts and was generous to the core. Claire felt a moment of shame that her sister would sacrifice her place in the Coven just to make Claire happy.

Claire wiped her eyes. "Thanks, sis, but I will handle this myself."

Tamara gazed at her with wide blue eyes. "What will you do?"

Claire sat back. "What I need to." Her meeting tomorrow with Thomas Rhoades would determine the course her life would take.

Chapter Three

“Gone?” Claire felt her stomach sink to her toes. “What do you mean *gone*?”

“He woke me obscenely early this morning and all but demanded to transfer his Pack. I gave him permission to go to my brother in St. Ignace.” The Alpha of the Northwest Pack gave Claire a penetrating look.

“Claire, has Nigel done something I should know about?” The concern in Thomas’ deep voice brought her back from her thoughts. Claire eyed the Pack leader, trying to discern whether or not Thomas was aware of what had transpired between her and Nigel the previous night.

“No. No, Mr. Rhodes. Nigel hasn’t done anything wrong. He just never mentioned he was going on vacation.”

“Oh no, dear. You misunderstand. Nigel isn’t on vacation. He’s gone to live with his uncle and the Northern Pack.”

Claire stiffened. “He’s not coming back?”

Thomas’ eyebrow shot up. “No. He’s left us permanently.” He cocked his head and his nostrils flared, reminding her that before anything else he was a wolf. A powerful wolf. “Would you care to explain to me why my son, my most powerful Enforcer, came to me at the crack of dawn desperate to leave his Pack? And why the woman he was guarding has come to me mere hours later requesting a meeting?” Thomas Rhodes was suddenly much less the kindly Pack leader and much more the intimidating Pack Alpha.

“There’s nothing to explain,” Claire said flatly. If Nigel was gone for good, there truly was nothing to explain. “I’m sorry I took up your time.”

“You’ll be Pack soon, Claire. Speaking with you isn’t an imposition.” He was still studying her with that curious, intent look.

She turned quickly to go. She needed to get out of here before Thomas realized what was going through her mind.

“Claire?” His deep voice froze her in her tracks, but she didn’t turn back to face him. She was afraid of what he might read in her expression.

“I’ll see you at the Run.”

Claire nodded without looking back and walked out the door. Once the door swung shut behind her she let herself pick up speed until she was running down the stairs and to her rental car. She managed to drive about two miles before her hands shook so badly that she was forced to move over to the shoulder of the road.

Nigel was gone; he’d left town like a thief in the night. Maybe what she thought she felt coming from him last night had been all in her head. They’d been forced together by circumstances rather than want. It was only natural that she’d felt attracted to him. He’d been her shadow for a month and a half.

A momentary lapse in judgment, that’s what last night had been. A blip on the radar. *Liar*, the voice in her head accused her. Maybe she *was* lying to herself, but she really had no choice. To admit she really truly did love this man would only lead to a deeper heartbreak. Nigel had made his choice and left town.

Claire had been ready to back out of the Mating Run, something no other female in her family had ever done, over a heavy petting session.

She took a deep breath, trying to clear the pictures of last night from her mind. Her new life would begin in two days; she needed to pull herself together and prepare to become a fitting mate for one of the wolves.

Chapter Four

Two Years Later

Claire wearily locked the door of the café. Her back and feet ached from another twelve hour day, and she could feel a headache brewing behind her left eye. She made her way over to Taylor's truck and gazed up the daunting distance from the ground to the driver's seat. Two years and she still hadn't mastered gracefully climbing into the big four-by-four.

"Hello, Claire." She froze, certain her ears were playing tricks on her. Exhaustion induced auditory hallucinations. But no, that unmistakable tingle was working its way up her spine. The tingle she'd only felt under the molten amber eyes of one man.

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she turned to face him, struggling to keep her face neutral.

"Nigel, what are you doing back in town?" It was a reasonable question. He'd only returned once in two years, to attend Taylor's funeral. The minute his older brother was buried Nigel had left town again.

"My father has asked me to come home. He wants me to fulfill Pack Law where you are concerned."

"Oh, *really*. And which Pack Law has to do with me?" Claire didn't want him to answer. She didn't want to know. She was too tired to deal with Pack politics at the moment.

"Your protection," he answered, stepping closer. *Too close*. His deep voice shivered through her, heating things long cold and dead. Dammit, it wasn't fair. She'd just begun to get her life back together after Taylor's death at the hands of a drunk driver. Why did Nigel have to come back now? And why did he have to smell so damn good?

"I assure you, Nigel, I don't need your protection now anymore than I did two years ago. I already mated; I have no need for a bodyguard." Throwing her purse into the front seat, she placed her foot on the step up. Nigel's hand gripped her below the elbow stopping her from climbing into the cab.

"You misunderstand me, Claire. As the second son it falls to me to take my brother's place and to care for his mate as my own."

Claire threw Nigel's hand off as a tide of pure, red rage bled over her vision and seeped into her voice.

"You couldn't get away from me fast enough two years ago." Was that a glint of guilt in his amber eyes? "I've been on my own for a year now. My mate is dead. I have no need of a replacement for him. Besides," she added, surprised at the sheer intensity of the bitterness in her voice. "I won't be an obligation for you to fulfill ever again."

Nigel stepped back from her and met her eyes somberly.

"Your mourning period is officially over. Other wolves will start sniffing around now. That's why I am here. I've come to take care of you, Claire."

Her anger boiled over.

"How *dare* you, Nigel Rhodes? You have no business here. I don't want you here. Leave me alone."

"I can't, Luv. It's the law."

"*Your* precious law."

"And yours as well, Claire. When you mated with Taylor you became Pack. You are bound by the same laws as I am."

Exasperated and tired, Claire snapped at him.

"I am not wolf, nor do I have a wolf mate. Nor do I ever plan to mate with a wolf again. Once was more than enough. So, Nigel, your law means nothing to me."

She cried out as Nigel's grip tightened and he pulled her into his arms.

"What did Taylor do to you?" he gritted between clenched teeth. His vehemence surprised her.

Claire shrugged out of grasp. "He did nothing to me, Nigel. He was a good man. I just wasn't what he wanted." There, she'd said it. Even though it wasn't her fault, there was no way Claire could ever have made Taylor truly happy. They'd mated for the good of the Pack, even become good friends over time. But there had never been, could never have been, anything more between them than that. Not when both of their hearts were already given elsewhere.

He'd treated her with nothing but respect and kindness, but there was no love there, no kindling of sexual attraction that kept most couples burning up the sheets. Claire and Taylor's mating had been a sham, one she'd entered into willingly at his request. While Claire made his life bearable, she'd never held the power to release him from his secret pain. And the fiction of their marriage had only proven that once again Claire was inadequate.

"No," she repeated sadly, "I wasn't what Taylor needed."

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"Don't be ridiculous, Claire. Taylor loved you. He told me often enough how wonderful you are, how happy you made him." Nigel wanted to choke on the words as he spoke them. Oh yes, Taylor had never failed to tell him how amazing Claire was. What a great mother she would make one day. How he loved waking to see her face every morning. It'd taken every bit of Nigel's willpower to keep from driving back from St. Ignace and punching his brother in the mouth on more than one occasion. He'd resented the hell out of Taylor, because his brother had what Nigel longed for: Claire. After his brother's death, Nigel had been so eaten up with guilt, and worse with lust, that he hadn't been able to face her.

Standing at his brother's grave, Nigel could only think of Claire, how he much wanted her. His need for her had been so great he hadn't been able to offer her the comfort she'd needed. He'd walked away from her again that day, hating himself even more with every step.

Nigel had kept his silence. For two years he kept his feelings buried deeply in the dark well of his heart. Even now, standing before the woman he'd never been able to get out of his mind, he wanted to run. She'd grown paler then he remembered; her porcelain skin translucent and fragile. The deep purple circles under her eyes betrayed just how tired she really was.

When his father called him three days ago with the request to come and take care of Claire, Nigel had been pissed. He was just starting to get himself and his wayward feelings under control. The very idea of being near her again threatened to tear down his carefully constructed walls.

“I’m sorry Claire.” His words burned like acid in his throat. “I’m sorry you lost your mate, and I’m sorry I wasn’t here to offer you comfort.”

The tears brimming her hazel eyes called to him, compelled Nigel to reach out, catching one on the tip of his finger. Her visible flinch hit him like a kick to the gut and stopped him from touching her further.

“I’m here now, Claire. For whatever you need, I am here for you.” The flicker of hope in her eyes heartened him, but her next, cautious words filled him with disquiet.

“At your father’s request, not because you want to be here.”

“Yes, my father called to tell me how you were doing.” The small light of hope in her eyes was extinguished with his answer.

“I don’t need your help, Nigel. I don’t want it.” She stepped back and up onto the step of the truck. Nigel didn’t try to stop her.

She needed time. Time to get used to him being around. He knew he could never take Taylor’s place, but he could be here for her. She may not admit it, but the dark bruises under her eyes told their own story about how much she really did need his help.

* * * *

The sound of her own screams woke Claire. It wasn’t so much a dream as a memory. Her last conversation with Taylor before his death. They’d had a heated argument, the first of their married life. It had ended with Claire in tears as Taylor slammed out of the house. Two hours later Claire had opened the door to a police chaplain bearing the news that Taylor had been killed by a drunk driver.

Scrubbing her hands over her damp face, Claire lay back against the mattress. A baleful glance at the alarm clock showed it was almost four a.m. She closed her eyes and tried willing herself back to sleep. Two years. It had been two years since she’d had a full night’s sleep. She was tired, bone deep tired, and wanted nothing more than to have a peaceful night’s sleep.

She gave up on trying and got out of bed, shuffling toward the shower. She was due at the café early to accept a shipment of special coffee blends from South America. She also had payroll to fill out and several interviews for new waitstaff. It had taken more than a year, but she had finally gathered the capital to afford help in the café.

While she’d been mated to Taylor, Claire had turned the day-to-day operations of the café over to her younger sister, Rio. She loved her baby sister, but Rio was a disaster when it came to running a business. She was also stubborn, because instead of coming to Claire for help, she’d nearly run the café into the ground.

It had taken a year and two business loans that were *not* from the Coven, coupled with untold hours of backbreaking work to even begin to repair the damage Rio had done, but the café was finally beginning to break even again.

Claire’s small amount of magic had been crippled when Nigel left her; Taylor’s death had almost depleted her completely. It had taken months of grieving before Claire’s inner spirit had begun to heal enough for her to begin the monumental task of reclaiming her magic. Eventually Mother Nature gave back what was taken so cruelly from her.

Rio promised to work for free for life, but Claire had turned down her sister’s offer and told her to go back to college and earn her degree. For a year Claire had worked from opening to closing, six days a week.

Her family offered to help, of course, but Claire wasn’t any more willing to take their

money now than she had been two years ago. The Coven Elders had even come to her offering their help. Claire had politely but firmly told them that she couldn't afford their help, and then offered them a batch of fresh, un-magicked muffins.

Taylor and Nigel's father offered to bail her out as well, but Claire couldn't bring herself to accept his help either.

Mr. Rhodes was a great man, as well as a great Alpha, and Claire loved him dearly. But every time she saw the man she was filled with tremendous guilt over the way she'd failed his son. Besides, it was her mess to clean up, and it was important to her that she be the one to do it.

Thomas respected her wishes, though it seemed every wolf in the surrounding area made it to the café at least once or twice a week. The increased business helped her to dig out of the financial hole Rio had left her in, and she was proud enough of her business that it didn't feel like accepting charity. She'd always be grateful to Thomas for the business he'd sent her way, and for the many kindnesses he'd shown her, both during her marriage and after Taylor's death.

The hot water helped to wash away the remnants of her bad dream, and Claire stepped from the shower and made her way to the kitchen, wrapping herself in a silky green robe as she went. Working quickly, she filled the tea kettle and put the water on to boil.

"Damn, woman, do you always rise this early?"

Claire spun, flattening herself against the counter and letting out a shriek that rattled the windows.

Nigel stood in the kitchen doorway, dressed only in a pair of faded jeans. Claire's eyes zeroed in the top button, which was left undone. Her mouth went dry, then began to water as she took in his bare torso. She'd never seen Nigel without his shirt on, and the sight of him sleep tousled and bare chested and *standing in her kitchen* stole her breath.

"Stop it, Claire," Nigel growled at her, the deep rumble of his voice bringing her back to reality.

"Nigel, what the Hell are you doing in my house?" She quickly turned her head and rummaged through a drawer for the tea diffuser ball.

"I told you, Luv, I'm here to take care of you." His matter-of-fact tone made her bristle.

"And I told you, I don't need your help. Get out of my house, Nigel."

"This isn't actually your house, Claire. It's my family's home. When Taylor died all his property reverted back to the Pack, you know this."

Slamming the drawer, Claire turned back to Nigel.

"Fine. I'll move. Give me a week, and I'll be out of here."

Nigel sighed, crossing his arms. "Don't be silly, Claire. No one wants you to leave. You know our ways, you knew them before you volunteered to join the Pack. It's too late now to get all pissy about the rules."

Claire saw red. She was sick and tired of all the Pack's *rules*.

"Nigel, all I want is a normal, peaceful life. Is that too much to ask for?" She stalked closer to him and he seemed to shrink away from her. "I want to be left alone. Why is it that you were allowed to go away and not be bothered, but *I* am having all this help flung at me?"

"I wasn't mated to anyone, Claire."

“*Neither am I, anymore,*” she screamed, and then felt a flash of guilty pleasure as Nigel’s amber eyes widened. “Taylor is gone, and all I want is to live in peace. Please Nigel, give me this.”

*

God but she was beautiful. Nigel closed his hands into tight fists. The urge to reach out and touch her skin was overwhelming.

“Claire, I’m not your enemy. I never have been.”

“No, Nigel, you’re not. You’re nothing to me. And I’m nothing to you. You proved that when you took off without so much as a good-bye.”

Damn, Nigel didn’t want to have this conversation yet. He wanted to wait awhile. Let her get used to his presence before he moved things forward. But the wounded, vulnerable look in her eyes wouldn’t be denied.

“You know why I left, Claire.”

“Actually, Nigel, I don’t. All I know is that we had that little petting session, and you disappeared the next day like a coward.”

Nigel’s cock hardened as her anger grew. Her face flushed pink and her warm, cinnamon apple scent rose to fill the space between them. He gripped the counter top to keep from pushing her to the floor and taking her like a rabid animal. There was no Mating Run looming over them now, nothing to keep him from completing what they’d started two years ago.

“Maybe I was a coward, Claire, I don’t know. But I do know I was a desperate man. I couldn’t have you, and I couldn’t stay and watch you and your new mate paw each other. The fact you mated with Taylor just made it worse. I couldn’t watch my brother with my woman, Luv. I wasn’t nearly noble enough for that.”

The memory of that night, the thought of Taylor in her bed stirred up a jealous rage he’d hoped never to feel again. His dick pounded in his jeans, demanding release, and every instinct he possessed, both as a wolf and as a man, demanded he take her, mark her so no other male would ever dare approach what was his.

“You didn’t even kiss me.” The words were spoken so softly he wasn’t sure he’d even heard them.

“What?”

“That night. You never even kissed me.”

Nigel’s well-honed restraint broke. It was her turn to shrink back as he stalked forward, pinning her between him and the counter.

“Claire, if I had kissed you, you never would have made it to the Run. It would have caused more trouble than it...” Too late he heard himself and trailed off.

“Finish it, Nigel. It would have caused more trouble *than it was worth*, right?” He raked his eyes over her face. Her warm hazel eyes crackled with anger. Her lips were so fucking lush.

“Yes, Claire. It would have caused a world of trouble for us both. We live by the Law, it’s what keeps us humane. I’m not Alpha, and I don’t want to be Alpha. It wasn’t my turn to Run, so you were forbidden to me. I did what I had to in order to keep the Law and my honor, as well as your own. Why can’t you understand that?”

“You’re right Nigel,” the look in her eyes turned bleak and the hectic color faded from her cheeks. Suddenly she looked as pale and tired as she had when he’d first seen her yesterday. “Stupid me. I forgot about the *Law* you all hold so near and dear to your

hearts. Never mind who it hurts as long as the *Law* is followed.”

Nigel wanted to erase the hurt that was so clear in her eyes. He knew she understood why the Law was so important. Humans may not, but she had been part of a Coven whose own Laws were almost as strict as his. They both had been paralyzed by what was expected of them. What he had was the law, the only thing that kept the Pack civilized, kept the wolves from becoming feral.

He slid his hand along her jaw; his breath hitched when her eyes closed and she leaned into his caress.

“Do you think it was easy to walk away, Claire? To know another would claim you? To discover it was *my brother*?” Old anger rose within him as he wrapped his hand around the back of her neck, stroking his thumb over the soft skin of her throat. “Can you conceive of what it was like to spend two fucking years jacking off to the image of my brother’s mate?”

Claire’s eyes snapped open. “Don’t bring Taylor into this.”

“Your right,” he growled. “Taylor’s been gone for a year. This is about us.”

His mouth slammed down on hers. He groaned at the contact. Her lips were as soft as he’d dreamed they be, softer even. He pushed his tongue deeply between her lips, tasting the inner recesses of her mouth. She was sweeter than honey. Nigel’s hand gripped her neck, his mouth releasing hers to drag in a deep breath.

Her pink, swollen mouth called to him; her eyes were wide and he wasn’t sure if it was from fear or need. He slowed the pace, nipping at her lower lip, licking after each bite. Dammit, he’d waited two years for this moment and if he didn’t get himself under control, it would be over before it started.

He pulled back and looked at her, felt himself fall into the depths of her passion-filled eyes. Had he always been such a fucking sap, or had the fact he’d not had sex in two years finally gone to his head? Was pure lust making him feel things that would vanish like a ghost three months, or even three weeks down the road? It was a question he’d asked himself often over the two long years of his exile, and the answer was the same every time. What he felt for Claire wasn’t a fly-by-night thing. It wasn’t temporary. It wouldn’t end once he was balls-deep in her. In fact, Nigel was very much afraid that the feeling would only grow and intensify with every new touch.

Chapter Five

Home.

The word popped into Claire's mind the moment Nigel's lips took hers. A mouth had never fit so perfectly to hers. His taste was intoxicating, leaving her feeling weak and in need of more. She placed her hands against his hard chest, her nails curling, scraping his flesh.

When he pulled away, dragging in a long, ragged breath, she leaned forward, licking a path from his neck to his shoulder, rubbing her lips back and forth against powerful muscle. He still smelled like pine and musk and all the things that made her breasts ache and her pussy throb.

"Yes, Claire. Touch me, Luv." His voice was barely above a whisper when her fingertips passed over his flat, male nipples. When she lightly dragged her nails over the nubby points, his hiss told her all she needed to know. Leaning down slightly, she ran the tip of her tongue along the hard center, circling it before capturing it between her teeth. She nipped and licked, alternately sucking it into her mouth and blowing cool air against it.

"Enough," he growled, grabbing the back of her head and pulling her hair, gently forcing her head up. Claire watched as Nigel's head descended slowly, his eyes never leaving hers as his lips caressed hers. Slower this time, softer. Claire couldn't hold back the moan that escaped her; his touch was magic.

He fumbled with the belt of her robe, pushing the silky fabric from her shoulders to pool at her feet. She didn't even think to protest. She was entranced by his slow seduction of her mouth. He had yet to touch her below the neck and the lust and anticipation was killing her second by second.

Unable to stand his gentle ministrations for one second longer, Claire grabbed his hips and pulled him to her. The rigid outline of his cock through his jeans dug into her hip and they both gasped. Her hands skimmed up his ribcage and she opened her mouth, sliding her tongue along his, savoring his heat. One minute she was in control, running her hands over smooth skin, her tongue dancing along his. The next, Nigel's fingers dug into her hips and he hoisted her onto the counter, moving lightning fast between her thighs.

"Fuck. You drive me mad, woman," he whispered against her mouth. "I can't wait another minute, Claire. Not another fucking second."

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Nigel was a thorough lover, the kind who took his time ensuring the pleasure of his partner. Not this time. Two bloody years he'd been in hell, waiting, dreaming of loving Claire. With unsteady hands he opened the fly on his jeans, hastily shoving them to his feet. With one hand on each of her knees, he spread her wide for his view.

She was ripe and juicy and so ready for him. He gave a gentle push to the middle of her chest and Claire leaned back, exposing more of her delicious pussy to his gaze. He was going to taste her, thoroughly, but later. Now he needed to finally, *finally* be inside her.

He moved his cockhead to her heated entrance, rubbing the crown along her slit,

tapping her tight little clit. His pre-cum coated the head, mixing with her arousal.

“Watch, Luv,” he demanded. “Watch me take you like we’ve both dreamed of.” He gritted his teeth when he slid in the first inch. The pleasure was indescribable, silken heat, and she was so fucking tight. Sweat broke out all over his body as he reined himself in. He was going to savor this first penetration. Lovely, lovely Claire. *His Claire*. Because after this, she would belong to no other male. Whether she admitted it or not, Nigel was mating with her, vowing—even if in silence—that she would be his forever.

Nigel pushed in slowly, enjoying the friction of her tight walls against his hard dick as he forged in inch by excruciating inch. He stopped only when he was fully seated within her. He grabbed her thighs, pulling them up and she automatically wrapped them around his waist, cradling him inside her.

He pulled back and thrust, the pleasure so exquisite his legs shook. He kept his thrusts shallow and measured, intent on dragging out the pleasure of this first time. As their rhythm increased her sweet sighs turned into mews and cries, each one vibrating down his spine.

He let his head hang down, resting his forehead against hers. Their breaths came quicker, mingled as he picked up the pace. His fingers digging hard into her hips, he tilted her slightly up as he made circles with his hips, searching for her greatest pleasures, learning how she liked him to move in her.

She lunged forward, straightening up and wrapping her arms and legs around his back as he rode her. One of his hands pressed against her ass, dragging her tighter against him, as her legs anchored him in the cradle of her hips.

She was close, so close. He could feel it in the tension of her limbs, hear it in the ragged cries that he drank down like wine. Her body arched, and his name poured from her lips as her inner muscles clenched almost painfully on his dick.

It was too much. Nigel grunted, groaned and felt himself free-fall into orgasm. His lips found her shoulder, licking over the satiny skin, then locking down and biting hard as his balls tightened and he shot his seed deep in her convulsing passage. His orgasm set her off again and her pussy contracted harder, wringing every single drop of cum he had out of him.

His head fell forward, resting in the hollow where her shoulder met her neck. They panted together, breaths mingling as they searched for much needed oxygen. Nigel closed his eyes, drinking her in, her scent, the taste of her on his tongue, the satin of her skin beneath his fingers. He felt alive. For the first time since he’d walked away from her outside her café on that fateful night, he was alive with emotions that had him terrified, exhilarated, and anxious all at once.

He’d walked away from happiness two years ago, sacrificed his needs for Pack law, and for family. He couldn’t do it again. His nobility and self-sacrifice stopped here and now. He just had to convince Claire.

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Claire held back a whimper when Nigel finally slid his cock free of her still pulsing sheath. Even softened it was formidable, dragging over super-sensitive tissues and rasping over rioting nerve endings.

She felt his eyes on her, but she couldn’t look at him. She was too close to tears. Instead she ducked her head and hopped off the counter, heading silently for the bathroom. She started to shut the door, but Nigel was there.

His eyes glowed that strange amber color that was so hypnotizing, and Claire held up her hand begging him not to come any further.

“Please, Nigel.” It was all she could manage to say. Her throat was raw, her body singing, her emotions teetering on the edge of collapse.

Nigel must have understood, because he made no further move to enter the bathroom. Claire closed the door and locked it. She was moving almost on autopilot when she started the shower, adjusting the water as hot as her sensitized skin could take. Stepping beneath the spray she finally allowed herself to sag and let the tears fall.

Two years of dreaming, of wondering what it would feel like to have Nigel Rhodes make love to her. Never in her fantasies had she imagined it would be on a countertop in the early morning hours. The place didn’t really matter, though. The combination of her and Nigel would have been just as explosive in the cab of his truck, or on satin sheets by candlelight. Chemistry didn’t depend on location. So it wasn’t the intensity of the sex that had Claire sobbing in the shower, but the emotions bubbling to the surface that caught her completely by surprise.

Everything about what she and Nigel just shared was pure magic. There were no adequate words to describe it. Her joy was tempered, though, by the memories of Taylor. It broke her heart to know he’d never been able to experience such a joining, that his position within the Pack had made it impossible to be with the one he truly loved. Claire cried for her dead mate, not because she felt she’d betrayed his memory, or because she wished she was still with him, but because his own happiness had been denied. She cried for the dreams Taylor never dared speak to anyone but her, knowing dreams were all he’d ever have. As first born, his destiny had been written in stone. He was to be Alpha, and the Alpha belonged to the Pack.

Each time Nigel quoted Pack Law she cringed. Pack Law had crippled a good man and denied him true happiness. It had also thrown her and Nigel together to fall in love, or at least in lust, and then decreed they must live apart. She resented Pack Law more now than ever before. When she’d mated with Taylor she no longer was bound by the rules of the coven and for the first time in her life she was living truly free.

She loved Nigel, but she wouldn’t fall back under Pack Law for him. She wouldn’t deny her identity to become nothing but his mate. She wouldn’t give up her café because the Pack said she shouldn’t work outside the home. She wouldn’t become a good little bitch in heat to satisfy Pack Law, even for the one wolf who owned her heart.

* * * *

Nigel paced the living room restlessly, muttering a steady stream of profanity. He could hear Claire crying, could all but feel her anguish, but he was helpless to do one bloody-damn thing about it. It was eating him up inside that she was in pain and wouldn’t let him comfort her. Was she crying for her dead mate? *Christ*, was she feeling guilty over what they’d just shared? In his arrogance, Nigel had never even considered that Claire might still long for Taylor.

His stomach knotted up at the thought of Claire pining away for his dead brother, quickly followed by guilt. He was a selfish bastard. Walking back into her life after so long and fucking her the first moment he got her alone, and then being bloody jealous of his dead brother.

If he was any kind of hero he would walk out the door right now. Nigel knew he was

as likely to do that as he was to stop breathing. For once the Law was on his side, and he had no intention of letting the opportunity go. As Taylor's brother, the Law obligated him to take care of Claire. And he intended to care for *all* her needs. She might still love his brother, but her body burned for Nigel, and he wasn't above using that to win her love.

Taylor had known Nigel's feelings for Claire. Hell, his big brother had even confronted him about them the night he'd packed up to leave.

"You're running away, then? I can smell her all over you, Nies." Taylor's observations were unwelcome and, Nigel thought, completely pointless.

"I don't have a fucking choice, Taylor. She's in the Run. I can't have her."

"You're a fucking coward, Nigel." Taylor's normal laid back persona disappeared, showing a hint of the forceful personality that made him Alpha. "You've wanted her for months and now that you've had a taste of her, you're leaving." Taylor shook his head and looked pityingly at Nigel. "Fight for her, Nies. Go to Dad and tell him she is yours."

"I can't do that to Dad, Taylor. If I asked him to ignore the Law it would cast a shadow on the entire family. As the next Alpha, you should know this better than anyone."

"Fuck the Law, Nigel. The Law won't share your dreams and love you. If you don't claim her now, you'll be more sorry than you can imagine."

Nigel stopped packing long enough to really study his brother. A profound sadness seemed to radiate from Taylor. Something indefinable, but so real Nigel could feel it fill the room.

"Where's this coming from Tay?" He'd never heard his brother speak so passionately about anything, certainly not about breaking the Law.

"I just don't want you to live a life denied the other half of your heart, Nies. You deserve better than that." Taylor's eyes held some other, deeper message, but it was one Nigel hadn't the will to figure out.

"Just make sure she is mated well, Taylor. She deserves a strong mate, but one that will value her as she is."

"The only way to do that, baby brother, is to mate her myself."

Nigel felt sick at the idea of Claire in his brother's bed, carrying his brother's child.

"Well that's the first honest reaction I've gotten from you," Taylor murmured dryly as Nigel visibly flinched at the mental images.

Nigel turned his back on his brother, closing his duffel bag and slinging it across his back.

"If it's you, then you better do right by her, Taylor. So help me God, you better take care of her."

Taylor stood in the doorway, blocking Nigel's exit. He reached out and grabbed Nigel's shoulder.

"Don't do this, Nies. Don't fucking throw away your chance at happiness. Dammit Nigel, not everyone gets to have what you're walking away from. The Pack will survive. You might not. You love her, Nigel. I can smell it all over you. You fucking love her."

Nigel had closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He'd survive because he had to. That's why he needed to be far, far from here by the Solstice. He shoved Taylor hard enough to send him crashing into the wall at the end of the hallway, then stalked up to his brother, grabbing his shirt front.

"You don't know what I feel, Taylor. You can't. You just make sure that, whoever

she's mated to, you take care of her." Nigel let go of his brother and took off out the door before Taylor could stop him.

That was the last time he'd seen his brother alive.

* * * *

Claire took off for the coffee house as soon as Nigel stepped into her shower, unable to face the inevitable conversation. She wasn't surprised when he showed up an hour later, *Time* and *Newsweek* in hand, settling in at the table she still thought of as his.

She didn't bother trying to kick him out, but she didn't pay him any attention, either. At least not obviously. Instead, she spent the day reliving their morning escapade. The memory of his amber eyes, his tightly muscled chest, and his thick thighs played havoc with her concentration all day long.

Her cry in the shower had been therapeutic. It allowed her to fully grieve for herself and for Taylor, something she hadn't done, even during her mourning period. She'd never cried for what Taylor had been denied, and she felt she owed it to him as his friend.

She was going to tell Nigel the truth about his brother. Taylor would have wanted that. He'd always regretted their last conversation, their fight over her. Claire would honor Taylor's memory and try to relieve any guilt Nigel felt over his last words to his brother.

She was on her way over to him with one of his favorite apple muffins when the door opened. James and Colby, two Pack Enforcers, entered and made a beeline to Nigel. James bent down to speak softly and urgently in his ear. Nigel swore and stood, stalking over to Claire.

"I've been summoned, Luv, but I'll be by the house tonight." He bent over and planted a scorching kiss on Claire's lips, leaving no one in the café to wonder why he'd been there in the first place. He might as well have peed in a circle around her, she thought with more humor than irritation. Even as he left, Claire's lips tingled, her body ached and she knew she was in big trouble.

She spent the rest of the afternoon and the evening rush in a daze, her mind flipping over the possibilities of what could become of her and Nigel. She wanted him, wanted him even more now than she had two years before. Her body ached with the need to be close to him. Her heart ached with the need to open to his.

She had panicked after their lovemaking that morning. Now, with time and space to think, Claire knew that a relationship with Nigel would be completely different from her life with Taylor. Nigel wasn't going to be Alpha, so she wouldn't have to assume the role of the Alpha's mate. She wouldn't have to subjugate herself to an archaic way of thinking. She could be with the man she loved without losing herself because she wouldn't be a part of the ruling couple.

Chapter Six

"No way in Hell, Dad." Nigel stood before his father, his hands planted on his hips. "I didn't come home for a new job title. I came home for Claire."

Thomas smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "It doesn't matter *why* you're here, son. What matters is that you are. When Taylor died you became my successor."

"I'm not Alpha. I don't have the stomach for it. Let Chris or James take the job. I don't want it." Nigel paced the floor, as was his habit when he was agitated. "I hate all the damn politics, the infighting. Thanks for the offer, Dad, but I'll pass."

Thomas sat back, his mouth curved in a serene smile that drove Nigel crazy. His father always looked like he had a secret just waiting to come out.

"Nigel, you worry too much. Things are not the way they were thirty years ago. The Pack has moved into the new century. The infighting rarely ever results in a challenge; the others have discovered they enjoy a peaceful life more than tearing one another apart over trivial matters."

Crossing his arms, Nigel repeated. "I don't want it."

Thomas' fist slammed down in the desk. "Dammit, Nigel, enough already. What are you so afraid of?"

"Nothing! I'm not afraid of anything."

"Okay, then. You don't want the responsibility, is that it?" When Nigel remained silent Thomas sighed. "Sometimes you have to sacrifice your desires for the greater good. I'm getting older. I want to hand over the reins to my son. That is you."

"Sacrifice my desires?" Nigel heard the bitterness in his voice and couldn't care that his father heard it, too. "Dad, I have sacrificed more than you will ever know for the good of the Pack." His anger was growing by the second, his tone coming dangerously close to disrespect toward his father and insubordination toward his Alpha.

"Son, I *do* know. I also know that you weren't the only one to suffer for the Pack. Taylor sacrificed as well. Now it's time for you to honor your brother, correct my mistakes, and take your place as Alpha."

"*Taylor?*" Nigel hadn't heard a word beyond the ludicrous idea that Taylor had suffered. "What on earth did Taylor sacrifice? He had Claire. *My* Claire. So tell me, what did he give up, Dad, and why the hell are you trying to force me into a position that will make the rest of my life one long, bloody sacrifice?"

His father suddenly looked very tired, and much closer to his seventy years than he normally appeared.

"Because you were meant to be Alpha, not Taylor. Because he was first born, I spent his entire life trying to force him to be something he wasn't. And, just like you, he used the Law as his excuse not to tell me what he really wanted until it was too late."

"Dad, what the hell are you talking about?" Nigel dropped into the chair in front of his father, feeling like he was missing crucial pieces of the puzzle and wanting to understand what his father was trying to tell him.

"Son, you were meant to be the head of this family. Taylor knew it and accepted it, but in my pride, I chose to ignore it. I made a terrible decision, Nigel. One that hurt both my sons, and one I may never forgive myself for. Let me atone for that mistake by giving

you your rightful inheritance. Take your place as Alpha, according to the Law and according to what's right."

"I think you need to explain to me exactly what you mean, Dad." Nigel let his gaze bore into his father's tired eyes.

"That story's not mine to tell, son. Talk to Claire. Then search your heart. I know you'll do what is right."

* * * *

Golden light glowing from the windows greeted Claire when she returned home that night. The sound of Duran Duran flowed from the stereo, leading her into the bedroom. Her heart began to pound when she entered the room, which had been turned into an oasis of soothing sensuality, bathed in the light of dozens of candles that were scattered over every flat surface in the room.

The feelings Nigel awakened in her terrified her down to her soul. She wasn't one to easily panic; Claire prided herself on being level headed. Nigel had smashed that self-perception to smithereens with one kiss. But she'd spent the day considering the situation, and now she felt ready to face her fears.

Strong hands cupped her shoulders, and Claire leaned back into Nigel's hard body. His lips grazed the base of her neck where it met her spine. The sultry melody of the song *Come Undone* filled the air, and Nigel's hand moved to her hip, guiding her into a sensuous sway. Claire closed her eyes and breathed him in, his scent filling her head, his touch arousing her senses. They were doing nothing more than swaying to the music, and she was already primed and ready for him.

She couldn't stand not being able to touch him. She turned in his arms and let her hands land on the solid wall of his chest. Her fingers curled into the soft fabric of his shirt, and she whimpered as his cheek brushed hers. The subtle scrape of his day's growth of beard abraded her delicate skin and she reveled in the heat it left behind.

Firm lips ghosted up along her jaw line. His tongue traced the shell of her ear, the tip dipping inside.

"I missed you, Luv," the deep rumble of his voice trembled through her body, making her even softer for him. Even wetter.

Her smile was instant, but she didn't even try to speak. The moment was too perfect and her stumbling would only screw things up.

Instead she touched her mouth to the base of his neck. He murmured his enjoyment, and she opened wide and sucked at his skin, marking him like a teenager making out at the movies. She gripped the bottom of his shirt and he pulled back long enough to remove it. As soon as the material was free Claire wound her arms tightly around his back, holding on for dear life as he moved in for a kiss.

What a kiss it was. It began sweet and oh-so tender, but quickly ignited into a desperate melding of mouths and tongues. Time and again they broke apart, struggling for breath, only to attack again with renewed hunger.

Claire had always thought the term being kissed breathless was a pretty exaggeration. Now she knew better. Nigel stole her breath, giving her his own in return. The intimacy was almost painful, and Claire finally had to pull away. Nigel gave her space, while still holding her close. He cupped her face in his hands, his amber eyes glowing down at her with such seething emotion that her knees shook.

In that moment, Claire wanted to give him everything. Holding his gaze she knelt before him, fumbling with his leather belt. His eyes blazed when she finally managed to unbutton his fly, and her mouth began to water in anticipation.

*

Nigel stood frozen as he gazed into her pretty face. He ran his hand down the silky strands of her hair, wallowing in the pleasure of watching her eyes slide closed in enjoyment. Breathless, he watched her, waiting motionlessly for her next move, when every dominant instinct he had was howling at him to bend her over and mount her.

He knew she was enjoying his torment by the little smile that tilted her rosy lips, and by the way she drew out each movement, taking things painfully slowly. Peeking up at him through her lashes, she hooked her thumbs into the waistband of his jeans and pulled them slowly down his legs, shifting back just enough for him to kick them aside.

Still watching him, she leaned in to touch the perfect pink bow of her lips to the smooth skin of his hip. Nigel jumped at the contact; it was pure sin the way her tongue felt licking over his flesh. The electricity she induced was killer. She was his *mate*. His mind knew it, his heart knew it, and his body certainly fucking knew it.

“Touch me, Claire.” Was that his voice so close to begging? He didn’t really care. All he cared about was how soon he would feel her mouth on him. She didn’t disappoint as her hands pushed his boxer briefs down and his shaft sprang free. She gave a little hum of approval as she looked at him; her tongue darted out to slick moisture along her bottom lip, and he felt his own mouth go dry.

“Please, Luv. I need you.” He’d beg if that was what it took. Pride and control meant nothing as her hazel eyes darkened and connected once again with his... She opened her mouth and took him in.

His growl of reaction was louder than he meant, but it didn’t deter his woman. She just smiled and took his hard flesh deeper into her sweet mouth. Just when he thought his eyes might be beginning to uncross, she reached one small, strong hand between his legs to cup his balls, letting the tip of her forefinger venture back to test the satiny ridge directly behind them.

“Oh, fuck, Claire.” Her hands were diabolical and, damn but her mouth was like heaven. She moved slowly back and forth over his hungry cock, sucking hard on the upstroke and swirling her tongue along the ropy veins on the down stroke. His cockhead was weeping with pre-cum, and she lapped at it like it was the sweetest cream. Nigel’s hands combed through her hair, tugging and urging her to take him in more deeply, more fully.

“Open up, Luv, take me all the way in.” His demand seemed to give her the little push she needed and she opened her mouth, relaxed her jaw, and took him to the root. He began a slow pumping motion between sweet, plump lips. Her mouth was so hot and wet and she swallowed at the end of each stroke, letting her throat caress the head of his cock until Nigel was perilously close to losing it before he’d even had a chance to taste her. He closed his eyes, concentrating on each and every motion of her tongue, testing his control so he could feel one more stroke. When her bottom lip rubbed lusciously underneath his heavy crown, Nigel shouted and pulled her off of him.

*

Nigel yanked her up by the arms, holding her with bruising force. His smile was feral as he backed her up until her calves hit the back of the bed.

“Take off your clothes, Claire.” She raised her eyebrow and he continued, “I don’t trust myself not to shred them. Take. Off. Your. Clothes.” His eyes burned into hers. “Now.”

Claire never stripped so fast in her life. She felt a moment of uncertainty when she stood naked before him and he just studied her, still as a statue.

“Lie back on the bed and spread your pretty thighs for me, Luv.” Claire smiled; she recognized that rumbling tone to his voice. Nigel was hanging on by a thread and it gave her a heady sense of control. She moved slowly to the bed, sliding back to sit near the center. Bringing up one leg, then the other, she moved her feet wide apart, letting her knees fall away. The devil in her dared her to play this dangerous game. Her finger slid around her nipple, rubbing the nub until it was tight and needing a harder touch.

She placed both hands on her rounded tummy, moving them southward until she reached the top of her mons.

Her eyes sparked when Nigel reached down and gripped his cock. She watched in fascination as his hand wrapped tightly around his shaft, then moved up and down the thick length. The action made her wet and her knees shake.

She’d known Nigel would be a fantastic lover. What she’d never guessed was exactly how sensual he was. He gloried in his sexuality, enjoying his body in a way most humans were too self-conscious to do. His inhibition inspired her own.

She let her fingers slide further down, running along her slit, coating them with her slick arousal. His eyes narrowed; she smiled and circled her clit gently with two fingers. The sensation caused her hips to surge, and Nigel’s body jerked in response to the show she was giving him.

Emboldened, she moved her other hand to her pussy, sliding two fingers to her entrance and then thrusting them deeply inside.

“Fuck, Claire! Yes!” His words burst forth in a gratifying, guttural groan. “Show me how you fuck yourself, Luv.”

Claire closed her eyes, letting her hands take over. She teased her body, bringing herself to the brink of orgasm only to back down at the last possible second. She tortured them both with slow, shallow thrusts. Her breasts thrust forward, tipped with hard, pink nipples. Her pussy was on fire, her body writhing as her eyes met his again.

He snarled, pulling his lip back and looking like the wolf he was. He fell hard to his knees before her and grabbed her hand, pulling her fingers from her pussy. Bringing them to his mouth, he sucked them slowly, thoroughly, one at a time.

When each drop of cream had been licked away, he dropped her hand and leaned in, inhaling her scent. When his tongue finally made contact with her aching pussy, the intensity of the sensation ripped a scream from her throat. Her hand automatically buried in his hair, dragging him closer as her hips surged to meet him. He moaned against her in response, and his mouth began to work faster, licking in and out of her, fucking her with his tongue. He teased her endlessly, pulling his tongue from her pussy and gliding it up to circle her clit, only to slide back down and rim her ass. She’d never been touched so thoroughly, so completely.

“Nigel, please. I need you.” She could barely recognize the ragged sound of her own voice.

“You have me, Luv.” The words vibrated against her labia, sending little shocks of pleasure rocketing the length of her body.

“Inside of me,” she begged. “I need to feel you inside of me.”

He gave a rough laugh, but ignored her sobbing pleas, instead drawing her clit hard between his lips and sucking until her thighs clenched with the force of her orgasm. She screamed his name as her belly tightened and her cream bathed his tongue.

*

Nigel drew away from the heaven between her thighs, though he could have stayed there for hours, lapping at her juice, taking such intimate kisses over and over again. Taking his cock in hand, he pressed the head to her entrance, wedging through the tight muscles guarding her sheath. Clenching his teeth against the nearly overwhelming urge to rut, he braced his hands under her shoulders and slid home.

He felt her all around him, clutching him so deeply he could feel his balls pressed up against the satin cushion of her ass. She hooked her legs around his back, and he stayed still, watching the emotions skitter across her flushed face. She whispered his name, and her muscles rippled the length of his cock, that was all he needed to let go. He thrust deeply, surging in and out, trying like hell to crawl in as far as he could go, needing to be a part of her. His mouth branded her shoulders, her face, and her lips. He couldn't get enough of her, the way she fit his body, her soft skin welcoming him in.

“How does it feel?” Her whispered question brought a smile to his face.

He thrust forward slowly. “It feels wet.” He pulled back and pushed forward again. “It feels so warm.” Nigel was unable to stop himself, the words tumbled out with no filter. “It feels like all I ever dreamed of. Claire, it feels like love.”

He didn't give her a chance to respond. Instead he kissed her, a slow claiming of her intoxicating mouth. He coaxed her mouth to open wider as their kisses deepened.

Drawing back, he slowly pulled out, smiling a little at her cry of denial. He wrapped his hand around one ample hip, flipping her over to so that she was on all fours. He rubbed himself between her plump ass cheeks and waited. She had to know what he was waiting for. He was poised to take her as a wolf took his mate. He only wanted her permission to do it.

He'd leave the decision up to her, though his animal was howling at the delay. Nigel would not force this upon her. It had to be Claire's decision. She had to consciously accept her place as his mate, and his place in her life. She had to want this as much as he did.

When she lowered her head to the pillow and lifted her ass, moving her legs further apart, Nigel threw his head back, letting out a howl that shook the windows. He thrust hard, slamming full length into her creamy heat in one long thrust. Her pussy tightened around his cock, swallowing him and holding him deep within her. Nigel leaned over her, raining kisses over the mark he'd left on her earlier. He felt his canines elongating, getting ready to stake claim on her once and for all.

“This is your chance to back out, Claire. I can give you this one chance to tell me to leave, but know this: If I take you tonight, if I lay claim to you, you are mine forever. Do you understand I am saying, Luv?”

Claire surprised him when she turned her head, her eyes penetrating straight through to his heart. “Damn you, Nigel. How much longer do I need to wait for you?”

It was all the answer he needed, and he clamped down on her shoulder; long, sharp wolf's teeth breaking the skin. Her scream of ecstasy was music to his soul, joining his howl of triumph as his thrusts became furious and he rutted her in the age-old tradition of

a wolf claiming his mate.

His cock grew, thickened and Claire tightened her inner walls, making him work for each thrust. The sensation was one of pure bliss. He reached around with one hand and found her clit, rubbing it until her moans vibrated against his chest.

His growls turned into groans, rising in harmony with her pleased cries. She met him thrust for thrust, until they were both slick, bathed in sweat.

Nigel pounded harder into her, and her soft body welcomed his almost punishing movements, just like he'd imagined she would do when he used to dream about fucking her. His finger rubbed and circled the sensitive bud of her clit until she screamed, a long keening sound that pushed him over the edge. He shot his seed deep in her womb, his mouth locking over his mark on her shoulder, biting even deeper as he pumped still more cum into her convulsing womb.

*

Claire fell to her side, her body throbbing with a delicious ache. She closed her eyes, just taking in the sounds of Nigel's harsh breath at her back, the smell of sex that floated around them. His scent was all over her, would remain a part of her always, she knew, now that she bore his mark.

He moved in behind her, his arms wrapping tightly around her. His sleek body lay flush with hers in the silence. Claire sighed, savoring the tranquility of the moment. Silence was okay. Silence was good. No words were necessary after the claiming they'd just shared.

She relaxed into his strong embrace. Closing her eyes she sank further into him and for the first time in her life she wasn't restless, she felt a strange peace steal over her. Nigel's even breathing told her that he'd dozed. Claire gently kissed the arm thrown across her chest and let the sound of his slow, even breaths lull her to sleep.

Chapter Seven

Nigel awoke to the smell of coffee, the delicious aroma luring him from sleep. He shifted his head on the pillow, inhaling deeply. Claire and sex slid through his heightened senses, and his dick stirred. He rolled onto his back and laughed, flinging his arms out to the sides. Four times he'd taken her last night, and apparently he was ready for a fifth.

There had been no slow and easy lovemaking; all four times had been wild and heated. He wondered if the desperation for her would ever fade. It was almost as if, having been denied for two years, the wolf within was greedy and afraid of losing his mate again. Shaking his head, Nigel stretched and rose from the bed. Not bothering with any clothes, he walked into the kitchen, leaning against the door jamb to watch her, much like he had yesterday morning.

He decided he loved the sight of her moving around the kitchen. The way her ass moved beneath her long t-shirt was poetry in motion. He cock roared to life as his mouth watered.

"Hold on there, big boy." Claire's voice brought his eyes from her ass to her face. She turned to him. "You have to let me have my coffee first."

He smiled and cocked an eyebrow as she threw her hands up and backed away. Bad, bad Claire. She knew retreating from a wolf invited a chase. She thrust a large mug toward him.

"Try this. It's an Italian blend I'm thinking of carrying at the café." Nigel relented and took the coffee. "Of course I'm trying to add a few more of my own ingredients to strengthen the blend." He was having a hard time concentrating on her words when all he wanted was to be back inside her where he belonged, but he could back off for the moment. And the coffee did smell pretty damn good.

Claire moved around the small table and sat down, "So what was so important that your Dad sent the boys to come and get you yesterday?"

Nigel figured he needed to follow. The last thing he wanted to do was discuss Pack politics and the Law, but she was bound and determined to have the conversation, and he knew deep down that she deserved to have her mind set at ease.

"He wants me to take over the Pack. Seems to think that I was meant for the job all along." Nigel shook his head skeptically and took a sip of the excellent coffee. He wasn't any more convinced about all the Alpha shit today than he'd been last night.

"Congratulations." Her tone was slightly acidic and nowhere near sincere.

"I'm not doing it, Claire. I don't want to be head of the *family*." He watched the tension ease from her body. "But there *are* things we need to talk about, Luv."

She nodded soberly.

"We need to talk about Taylor." Her face clouded over, but before Nigel could make a move to finally, *finally* comfort her, the phone rang.

Claire smiled apologetically and answered it. After a brief conversation she hung up.

"Jose burned his hand on the oven. Rio is taking him to the hospital, so I have to get there." She stood and leaned in, kissing him deeply. "We'll talk tonight, Nigel. I promise."

* * * *

Nigel loped through the thick forest, his strong limbs carrying him over fallen trees and under dense brush. He'd been in wolf form for most of the morning, savoring the simple, straightforward existence of the beast. No thought was necessary. He lived on instinct.

Instinct led him to the small private cemetery located in the middle of the Pack's vast property. He stopped at the edge of the tree line, troubled. Lifting his muzzle he tasted sorrow in the air, so deep and profound it was a living thing surrounding him. The scent was so strong Nigel whimpered, shaking his head and trying to shed the despair that seeped through his fur. Unable to stand it another second, he threw his head back and howled. Long, wretched howls that were soon joined in harmony by another, two wolf songs forming a chorus of sadness and longing.

When the song faded, Nigel moved cautiously from the edge of the trees and into the meadow that held the dead. His eyes narrowed as he spotted the wolf lying on his brother's grave. The white timber wolf lay on his belly, muzzle resting on the cold granite that held Taylor's name.

He willed the transformation over himself as he stalked toward the other wolf. By the time he'd reached Taylor's grave, it was a man on his knees facing him.

Nigel didn't say a word as he took in the sight of James LeCroix, Pack Enforcer and friend, looking up at him with such anguish his eyes were like bleeding wounds. He didn't try to hide his sorrow, and like the dawn clearing away the remnants of night Nigel finally understood just what sacrifice his brother had made for the good of the Pack.

"Did he cheat on Claire?" he spoke slowly, evenly, not trusting himself to do more than that.

James' head had drooped, but he looked up with a trace of fire in his eyes at Nigel's words. "Taylor was an honorable and faithful mate to Claire."

"Did she know about you? About you and Taylor?" Bile burned his throat as he asked the questions.

"He would not have mated her otherwise. When you left, Taylor went to Claire and told her everything. She knew what we meant to each other."

"Then why in the Hell did he mate her?" Acid coated his stomach and his anger began to boil over. Anger at Taylor for trapping Claire in a loveless mating. Anger at Claire for agreeing to it. Most of all, anger at himself for leaving and trapping them all in a situation where there could be no winners.

"Goddammit, why the Hell didn't Taylor tell someone who he really loved? And why would Claire go along with a mating that was a sham?"

James stood up, facing Nigel, his face a mirror reflection of Nigel's wrath.

"Why? You really have to ask *why*, Nigel? He did it for the same reason you left. For the same reason you didn't claim Claire for your own. He did it for *the Pack. The Law*. The Alpha has to produce an heir. That was something I couldn't fucking give him." James' eyes were tormented. "You want to condemn Taylor, but you're no better."

The accusation stung, but Nigel refused to be diverted.

"Yeah, I gave up Claire to uphold the Law. Maybe that makes me a coward. But I never pretended to be someone I wasn't. Taylor was Alpha, he had the power to change things."

James crossed his arms over his wide chest.

“Really.” His eyes plainly stated that he thought Nigel had a lot to learn. “I can just see it now: ‘Hey, Dad, guess what? I’m gay! So sorry I won’t be producing the next heir to the throne, but hey, what do you think of calla lilies for my commitment ceremony, and how do you feel about adoption?’” James smiled pityingly. “Yeah, Nigel, that would have gone over real well.”

Put like that, it did sound ridiculous, but Taylor had been a natural diplomat. If anyone could have changed the Law he could have. There was no official position on gay wolves. Same-sex mated pairs were treated the same as any other couple. The only wolf whose mating was constrained by rules was the Alpha, and only then because of his responsibility to provide strong heirs for the Pack.

“Fine then. He couldn’t tell our father. So why the fuck didn’t he tell *me*?”

“Why would he, Nigel? You were in a less rigid position, but you refused to fight for the woman you loved. Why the hell would he expect you to support him when he told you he didn’t want to marry a woman at all?”

James’ handsome face was marked with bitterness. “Neither of you had the guts to try and change things. You believed what you were doing what was best for everyone. For the Pack. For Claire. Well, so did Taylor. You can’t put this on his shoulders alone. You stand right next to him where blame is concerned.”

Nigel scrubbed his hands over his face, then dragged his fingers through his hair. A deep sense of shame filled him. For two years he’d held such animosity for his big brother because Taylor had everything in this world Nigel didn’t. The truth was, Taylor felt every bit the same pain he did. They were both denied their true mates by an outdated custom meant to hold the Pack together. Instead it was tearing the Pack apart, keeping people from creating lasting bonds with the ones they loved.

Nigel gave a weary sigh. His father had said that the Pack was ready to move into the twenty-first century. He’d even hinted that it was time for changes in the Pack, time for someone—presumably Nigel—to shake things up.

Nigel just wondered if he were up for the task. It would be a long, uphill battle against traditions and prejudices that had held firm for centuries. But perhaps, with Claire by his side...

Oh, God. Claire. She’d given herself to him completely, based on his assertion that he had no desire to be Alpha. She believed she’d mated herself to a common wolf, the Alpha’s son, but no more than an Enforcer. Nigel cringed as he felt all the trust he’d gained from her crumble to dust.

He faced James, his heart squeezing at the anguished hope in the younger man’s eyes. Reaching out, he clasped James’ forearm.

“Damn, man. I’m so fucking sorry.” He looked beyond James, dropping his eyes to Taylor’s grave. “Blind obedience to the Law has cost too much from too many.”

James returned his grip. “I hope this means you’re ready to shake things up.”

Nigel gave a razor-edged smile. “I’m going to do my bloody best.”

He released the other man, allowing him privacy to grieve. Changing back into wolf form, he set out for Claire’s cafe. He and Thomas were going to have a long overdue talk, but first Nigel had to prepare his woman.

*

Thomas Rhodes and Colby Simmons had taken up residence at one of her tables just after the lunch rush. Claire cast a curious glance at her former father-in-law and his

Enforcer. The men didn't look ready to leave any time soon.

She shook off the vague uneasiness their presence stirred up in her. Nigel was hers now, not the Pack's. She didn't have to stress out just because his father came to visit. Nigel said he had no intention of taking Taylor's place as Second to Thomas, and she believed him.

Feeling confident and comforted, Claire headed toward the men, coffee pot held up inquiringly. Before she could verbalize the offer, though, the little bell above the door jingled cheerfully, and she *felt* Nigel enter the café. She shivered as his presence washed over her, and turned a spontaneous, joyful smile in his direction.

He returned her smile, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. Claire felt her confidence start to crumble.

"You look like a man who needs coffee," she commented, determinedly upbeat.

He quickly crossed the dining area and caught her against his body, imprinting his hardness against her softness.

"I'm a man who needs to feel his mate," he corrected, bending to brand her with a kiss that curled her toes in her sensible sneakers.

"What's wrong, Nigel?" she asked when he finally let her up for air. Rio, back from delivering Jose from the hospital to his apartment, swooped by and grabbed the coffee pot with a grin.

"Nothing's wrong, Luv." His golden eyes were sober, but calm. "Things are just a bit more complicated than I'd expected."

Claire felt a lump form in her stomach. The wonderful life she'd dared to imagine sharing with Nigel was taking on jagged edges.

"Complicated how?"

"Yeah, Son. Complicated how?"

Claire had been so focused on Nigel she hadn't noticed Thomas' approach. Nigel apparently had, because he didn't flinch at his father's hearty question.

"Can this wait, Dad?" Nigel's eyes didn't leave Claire's. What she saw there was a deep core of strength she'd only guessed existed. He looked like a man who'd found his mission in life, and the thought of what that mission might be terrified her.

"Now, Nigel," his father answered, ignoring the charged atmosphere as Nigel still held Claire in his arms. "We've been waiting two years for this sort of complication. Don't you think you've kept us waiting long enough?"

"Fuck." Nigel muttered the word quietly enough that, had the room not been full of wolf shifters, no one but Claire would have heard it. As it was, Colby snorted out a laugh, which he quickly converted into a fairly believable cough when Nigel pinned him with a pointed glare.

"Fine, then." Nigel stepped back, but didn't release Claire entirely. He kept her hands gripped in his own almost as if he needed her to anchor him.

"Claire Marie Andrews Rhodes, I love you with all that I am. I've been dead inside without you, and I never want to go back to that existence."

As declarations went, Claire thought, it was pretty stellar. Unfortunately, he wasn't done.

"I've learned today that I'm not the only one who walked through life dead inside. We, both of us, have been hostages to the Pack, imprisoned by the Law, Claire." His eyes glowed deep amber, bathing her with almost enough warmth to melt the block of ice

forming around her heart. “But we weren’t the only ones.” Nigel raised his head to address the entire café, which was filled, Claire belatedly realized, with wolves.

*

Nigel took heart at the look in Claire’s eyes when he declared his love. What he was about to do would devastate her, he had no doubt. Claire had been deeply hurt by the Pack, and to add insult to injury, they didn’t even realize it. He could only pray their love was strong enough that she would truly listen to what he had to say. That she would believe in him, trust his word that things for them would be different than her life with Taylor.

“Two years ago I walked away from this woman because according to the Law, she was forbidden to me. Two years ago my brother, your Alpha’s successor, participated in the Mating Run because according to the Law, it was what he must do. The Law states your Alpha must produce an heir. If Taylor had followed his heart, he could not have done that. So instead of living a fulfilled life with the man he loved,” Nigel paused for the inevitable gasps and murmurs, Claire’s included. He could almost hear the questions in her head: How had he found out? Who had told him?

“Instead of living a life with the man he loved, Taylor tried to salvage a tragic situation, mating with Claire, being her friend even though their hearts were both given elsewhere.” Showing his first hint of insecurity, Nigel let his gaze flicker uncertainly to hers.

“Yes,” she whispered shakily. “Even then you held my heart.”

“If either Taylor or I had possessed the courage to stand for what we wanted two years ago, my brother might be alive today, and our Pack would be that much stronger. But we did not. Now it falls to me to correct the mistakes of two years ago.” He shot his father a speaking glance. “To atone for the mistakes of thirty-five years ago.”

He fell silent, and an expectant hush filled the café. Thomas stepped forward, standing in front of Nigel to address him in formal tones.

“Nigel Nicholas Rhodes, will you accept position as Second to the Alpha?”

“I will.”

“Will you guard and guide the Pack as father, spouse and leader?”

“I will.”

“Will you put the welfare of the Pack above your own?”

Nigel could feel Claire’s indrawn breath. He only hoped she remembered that *she* was Pack. By making this vow, he was pledging to put her happiness and well-being above his own forever.

“I will.”

Nigel knew, from her stifled sob, that Claire had only vaguely grasped the significance of what he’d just promised. Tears trembling on her lashes, she jerked free of his hold. With a sinking heart, he watched her back warily away from him as though he’d become a monster before her very eyes.

The Pack erupted in cheers, the joyful noise all but obscuring Claire’s whispered words. Nigel, his eyes glued to her face, heard.

Chapter Eight

"No." Claire didn't realize she'd said the word aloud until she saw the pain flare in Nigel's eyes.

"Claire, Luv," he took a step toward her, hand outstretched, but she pulled quickly away.

"No." Her voice was stronger now, and the tableau she and Nigel presented was beginning to penetrate the boisterous celebration surrounding them.

"I do love you Nigel, but I will not do this. Not again."

"Now, Claire," Thomas moved to her side, putting an affectionate arm around her. Claire jerked from his grasp.

"I gave up my life for the Pack once without complaint," she began, only to have Thomas interrupt.

"Of course you did, my dear. And you were a wonderful mate to Taylor, just as you'll be a wonderful mate to Nigel." Nigel's flinch at his father's words would have been humorous if he hadn't just ripped her heart out.

"I won't do it again." She said the words flatly into the now-silent room. "I was miserable for the year Taylor and I were together, and I've been beaten nearly to death during this last year trying to reclaim my life. I will not live that way again." Turning to face Nigel was the hardest thing she'd ever done. "Not even for you, Nigel. I love you, but if I were to give up my life for you the way the Law demands, that love would wither and die until there was nothing left but bitterness."

"Claire," Nigel took her hand, holding tight when she would have pulled away. "It won't be like that. Not for us."

"I wish I could believe you." Her voice had grown steady as her emotions had gone numb.

"Then *believe* me, Luv. I want the woman you are, not some shifter version of a Stepford Wife."

"How can I believe you when you just pledged to put the Pack before yourself. Again."

"You *are* Pack, Claire, I..." she cut him off unceremoniously.

"I am not! I will never again be ruled by your Pack, by your Law." She jerked again at her hand, but Nigel had her in an iron grip.

"Now, dear," Thomas interrupted again. She loved the man, really she did, but if he continued to speak to her in that gentle, condescending voice, she might just have to karate chop him in the throat. "Clearly you're upset. Distraught, even. Just listen to Nigel, dear. He'll take care of everything."

That was the last straw.

"Just listen to Nigel?" Years associated with the Rhodes men, two of them in close contact had allowed Claire to perfect her upper-crust British accent. "He'll take care of everything? Goddess of us all, haven't either of you listened to a word I've said? I don't *want* him to take care of everything. Hell, I don't want him to take care of anything." She finally managed to jerk her hand free, and wasted no time heading for the door.

"Enjoy your new role as head of the family, Nigel," the ice was thawing and rage

was taking its place. Rage, and hurt. "I hope the Pack will make you very happy." She stepped out into the insultingly beautiful sunlight but Nigel's voice, a dark rumble momentarily stopped her.

"You know better than to run from a wolf, Claire. It's an invitation to us to chase, capture and keep our prey."

Claire turned her head, "Fuck you Nigel." And made her escape.

* * * *

Nigel didn't follow right away; he gave Claire a ten-minute head start before jumping into his truck and going after her. He took his time going to her home, his grin wide as he imagined the row they were about to have.

God he loved when she was pissed, the way her face lit up and her hazel eyes went dark. She was a fitting mate for him, the Enforcer turned Second to the Alpha. He sobered for a moment when he remembered the real hurt in her eyes when she'd realized he was going to step in as his father's heir after all. He had quite a battle on his hands, he knew, but Claire was worth it.

As he climbed out of his truck he heard a loud crash from inside the house.

"Oh, Hell." Suddenly certain she was hurt, Nigel ran from his vehicle and burst through the front door. "Shit!" He barely ducked in time to avoid the porcelain vase aimed square at his head.

"Bloody Hell, woman!" he yelled as another glass projectile flew at his head. "Would ya stop it? You're gonna hurt somebody!"

Claire paused, her arm cocked back, a ceramic pitcher poised for launch. "Good! I hope I knock the hell out of you. How could you do this, Nigel? You promised me, you bastard!"

"Claire if you would leave off the hysterics for a moment, we could talk about this." Nigel was trying like Hell to be reasonable, trying not to give into his basic need to take her to the floor and mount her. The wolf was howling, insisting that if he just take her down and fuck her unconscious, he could mark her until she couldn't even think of arguing.

"Hysterics? You arrogant *prick*! First you tie my heart in knots and then *leave* me. Then you pop back into my life just expecting me to roll over and show you my belly like some submissive... puppy! Then, even knowing how I feel about it, after you *promised me*, you agreed to become your father's Second." She threw the pitcher at his feet.

Nigel felt the growl boiling out of his chest. Submissive puppy? Fuck no. If anything she was his fucking bitch. His mate. He pounced on her before she had the chance to grab another breakable object and wrapped his arms around her, trapping her arms at her sides. She thrashed wildly and tried to kick him in the shin. Nigel swept her feet out from under her and they both tumbled to the floor.

*

Claire landed on her back, the breath knocked out of her as Nigel landed on top of her. She couldn't believe he took her to the floor like that. The rat bastard. While she was momentarily dazed from the impact with the floor, Nigel grabbed both of her wrists and pinned them above her head. His breath was hot against her cheek, sending chills down her spine.

"Quit being so stubborn, Luv, and listen to me." Dammit, the little growl in his voice

when he was all worked up gave her the shivers. Claire fought to keep hold of her anger in the face of the fierce arousal that burned through her at his touch.

"There's nothing to say, Nigel. You're taking over for your father. The Goddess-blessed Pack and its archaic Law will always come first with you. You abandoned me two years ago, and when you take your place as *head of the family* you'll be gone again." She hissed.

"I left because I had to, Claire. And it's not like you came running up north to find me." Was that hurt she detected in his voice?

"Maybe not, but I did go to your father the next day." His eyes clouded over at her words. "That's right, Nigel. I went to tell Thomas I couldn't participate in the Run when I was in love with you. But before I could open my mouth, he told me you'd left." His stunned expression just added fuel to the fire of her rage. "You ran away, Nigel, like I was nothing more than a quick pop-off against a wall. What was I supposed to do, beg you to love me back?"

"Oh, God, Claire I didn't know." Claire closed her eyes. She couldn't bear to look into his handsome face. It hurt too much.

"Claire, we can make this work." She shook her head; she wasn't about to become a shadow of herself again, even for the man she loved.

"Listen to me, please." It was the *please* that had Claire opening her eyes and looking at him.

"Claire, Luv, I agreed to my father's proposal so that I could change things. *Really* change things." Claire gave an unladylike snort and Nigel hurried on.

"The Pack can't go on as it is. I see that now. That 'archaic law' ruined Taylor's life, and James' and very nearly ruined ours as well. As Alpha, I can make it so that never happens again. And that starts with my mate. I don't expect my mate to be a Stepford Wife. You can have your own life, the café. I love the woman you are too much to try to change you. As long as you don't put yourself in danger, Luv, you're free to live your life. Just as long as you live that life with me."

Claire's eyes widened. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She wanted to, but Nigel and Taylor had quoted the *Law* to her so often that she didn't think it was possible to change things, even if Nigel really wanted to.

"I've talked to my father about it, and he agrees. It's time to bring the Pack into the twenty-first century. But I can't do this without you, Claire. I need my mate to stand beside me. I don't ever want another wolf to be forced to be something they're not in the name of the Law. No one should ever be denied the love that Taylor was. That we almost were."

Warm tears gathered in Claire's eyes. She was finally beginning to believe Nigel really did want to change things. He didn't expect her to give up her café. He didn't expect her to give up her life to be his mate. He wanted a partner, not a possession. Her heart swelled with love as the dam burst. Her tears overflowed.

"Is that a yes, Luv?" Nigel asked, a flame of hope flaring in his eyes. Claire couldn't find any words. All she could manage to do was nod. His smile bloomed like sunrise and he fell upon her, his mouth crushing down on hers while his hands found the button on her jeans and yanked it off. It hit the floor with a clatter, and Claire went wild.

*

She shoved her hands under his shirt, clawing his chest and he dropped his head,

snarling into the soft skin below her jaw.

"Careful, Luv," he whispered before his mouth moved down to her neck. He nipped her, and she dug her nails into his shoulders, feral in her passion. Growling, he grabbed the front of her t-shirt and ripped it in two. He would replace her clothes later, right now he need to feel her naked skin on his. Her jeans were next. He jerked open the zip and wasted no time shoving them over her hips and toward her feet.

Propping himself on his forearm, his hand wrapped tight around both her wrists, he raised up enough to view the prize he'd uncovered. She was so fucking gorgeous he groaned. All cream and pink perfection. His lips slid down to capture one dusky nipple. He sucked lightly and she moaned, arching into his mouth.

"Goddess, yes, Nigel," she moaned, her harsh breaths ruffling his hair. "More. Please, I need more of you."

Nigel slipped his free hand between their bodies, diving into her panties. This time *he* moaned as he encountered her slick flesh. Pushing two impatient fingers along her slit he teased her, sliding from her clit to rim her quivering entrance. She thrashed in his hold, trying to deepen the contact, and he sucked her other nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the tender morsel, giving it the same treatment as the first one. The more she bucked up, the softer the caresses became until she was begging him for more.

"Dammit, Nigel," she gritted from between clenched teeth. She was adorably ferocious in her hunger. If he hadn't been on the brink of madness himself, he might have laughed. "Fuck me already! I can't wait any longer." Her scent rose in the air and Nigel inhaled deeply, letting it fill his lungs with apples and cinnamon.

He drew his fingers free from her pussy. The tiny, strong muscles clamped down as if reluctant to let him go. Releasing her wrists, he ripped his jeans open. As he yanked the zipper down, Claire's hands were there, guiding his cock free of his boxer briefs and jeans.

Moving quickly he worked her jeans further down so she could wriggle her right leg free. Jeans hanging around her left ankle, she wrapped her free leg around his hip, lifting up so the angle was perfect for him to plunge straight into her molten heat.

"Yesss," she purred as he sank balls-deep. "Deeper," she moaned. "I need more." Her greedy little hands crawled up the back of his shirt, sliding around until her nails dragged down his chest in a frenzy as he thrust into her.

"You are my mate, Claire. Now and forever." Each word was punctuated with a thrust, each deeper, harder than the last. "Tell me, Luv. Tell me that you are mine forever." He ground his hips against hers and lifted his torso so he could gaze down into her lovely face.

"I am your mate, Nigel. Forever." She arched into him, hips surging against his. Her nails dug into his back. "I'm yours, Nigel. As long as you don't get all macho on me."

He threw back his head and laughed because even in the middle of fucking she was still defiant. And Nigel wouldn't have it any other way.

"Ahhh, Luv," he rasped against her neck. "I will try not to be such a macho man." He slowed his thrusts down to the point he was barely moving stirring in her. "It will be hard, though."

Her brows furrowed "Nigel, Goddess, don't *stop*. What are you doing?"

"I'm being 'not macho'. My macho instincts are to fuck you into oblivion, but I'm practicing restraint. Why," he made a small circle with his hips. "Is something wrong?"

“Okay,” she thrust her hips toward his, trying for a harder contact. “Maybe we need to re-think the macho thing.” She was close to whining.

“Is this too macho for you?” he asked and slammed into her hard, drawing a scream from her.

“No,” she panted. “Not too macho.” Her breath was a ragged sob.

“How about this, Luv? Still think I’m too macho a man?” He pounded into her three more times, hips jack-hammering. Her sheath clamped down on his cock as he began to withdraw aching slowly. She gave a strangled scream and banged her fists against his back.

“Okay, okay, I get it Nigel. I want you to be very macho when you’re inside of me, dammit.” She hitched her leg higher up on his back.

The motion squeezed him even tighter inside her, and all at once Nigel was through teasing. Pulling back, he grasped her hips firmly and slammed home. He pounded into her body and she begged for more.

Her soft skin cushioned his every movement. She was made to fit him, inside and out. Each thrust took them higher. Each swivel of his hips wound the spring tighter until finally she exploded, her pussy tightening and convulsing around his dick.

“I love you, Claire,” he whispered. Her sheath rippled the length of his dick, and she screamed her pleasure.

“Nigel, I love you!” Her words, coupled with the feel of her gripping his cock, flung him over the edge and into oblivion.

Nigel threw back his head and howled, feeling his seed blaze from his balls, up the length of his cock to flood her willing, clasp pussy.

“I love you, mate,” he rasped, filling her with his love and his seed and his hope for the future. “Love you,” he whispered as he fell to the floor beside her, gathering her close to his heart.

She turned into his body and wrapped her arms around his neck, cuddling his head into the crook of her neck.

“Love you, too, mate.” His heart soared as she called him her mate for the first time.

Epilogue

Nigel crouched before Taylor's grave, talking to his brother. It had been too long since his last visit, but life had become so full it was hard to find the time. He placed the framed picture he held on the grave, propping it against the head stone. The picture showed a happy family: himself, his mate, and their beautiful baby daughter. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he continued speaking to his brother.

"I'm doing it, Tays. I am changing things, changing the Pack for the better. Because of Claire, and because of you." He chuckled aloud. "Of course some of the Elders threw fits for awhile." He shook his head ruefully. "Okay, maybe for more than a while. But our Claire took care of that neatly enough. By the time she was done bribing them with apple muffins and sweet talk, they were too fat and happy to protest much more." Nigel smiled, thinking of the conversation he'd had with his father just that morning.

"There's still a long way for us to go, brother, but we'll get there."

From behind him the sweet sound of his daughter's cooing "wake up" noises caused his smile to bloom.

"I'm sorry, Tays. Sorry for being blind to your needs, sorry for running off like the coward I was and leaving you to look after my woman. But I promise you, I will spend my life making sure no one ever has to go through what you did. Not as long as I am Alpha." Nigel stepped back from Taylor's grave, his heart full and his head clear.

He turned and walked over to Claire, who was holding their daughter. He leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to his baby girl's wispy hair, then moved higher to kiss his mate.

She leaned into him, looking up at him with concern in her eyes.

"Are you okay?"

He smiled and wrapped his arms around her. In moments like this, holding Claire and their daughter, Nigel knew he held the world. He leaned down and kissed her again.

"Yeah, Luv. I'm very okay."

The End

About the Author:

Violet Summers is a married mother of three beautiful children, including one set of twins, one rambunctious puppy, and one husband, except when she's a single mom of one spoiled teenaged God-child and three spoiled kitties. Both of Violet's personalities are very busy!

No, Violet has not suffered a psychotic break yet (though she may after dealing with creating web pages and MySpace accounts). Violet is actually the writing team of Sierra Summers and Violet Johnson.

Both women read voraciously, and in a multitude of genres. Sierra classifies them as "readers, as opposed to readers of romance. This means when we write, we're as concerned with the story as we are with the sex." That said, Sierra has been known to

boycott books where the characters haven't "done the deed," by page 125.

Sierra and VeeJay live in Southeast Michigan, and the spice of the Metro-Detroit area often flavors their work. "Why look for a more glamorous setting," VeeJay asks, "when we've got the beautiful, re-vitalized Downtown area to draw from?"

Violet Summers writes in a variety of genres, from contemporary to paranormal; from soft BDSM to fantasy. The two things all her stories have in common is their deep emotional and their scorching erotic love scenes.

Sierra and VeeJay love to hear from their readers. You can contact them at VioletSummers@yahoo.com

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