



IMMATED

GINA COLE

MATED



CURSE KIN SERIES

GINA COLE

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FOREWORD

Niall Cael had been spellbound and cursed centuries ago. Torn between craving blood and needing a mate for monsters within him, he is forever alone and despised. His entire family had torn apart by hatred and pain, bringing an end to the world they once knew, scrambling to hang onto this new one... until he met Holly.

Holly Baines could not believe the awkward way the handsome man was coming onto her, in the middle of a crowd of runners. There was something about him that was different, instantly setting her blood afire and her allergies wild. The attraction was intense, but so were the sneezing and the hives!

When a known threat resurfaces, will it destroy everything they have built together and the tenuous mated blood-bond between them?

INTRODUCTION

1046 AD

Once there was a good and just leader that ruled Scotland and the various tribes. Eochaid, was a laird (or proprietor) that was treasured and loved by his people. Stories were woven that Eochaid was the most handsome, most fair in the land. His properties were coveted far and wide for an alliance of any kind. What the tales didn't reveal is that the king had married his soulmate long ago and had a large family who loved him. When Fiona, his beloved bride, had passed away in childbirth, there was an outbreak of war to reunite the tribes once again with the eligible, rich king who was now a widower.

The oldest son and heir to the throne was named Niall.

The stories would go on to call him Niall of the Nine – claiming he had nine hostages. The nine weren't hostages, they were his siblings: Conn, Fiacha, Brion, Loegaire, Maine, Fergus, Aisling, and Nath. All had formed a pact to keep their family together from any that would seek to do them harm.

Family was the core of their very beliefs.

But stories and forgotten history have a way of being warped and modified over the years so people could understand and wrap their minds around what *actually* happened. The horrors and curses that befell the Cael family were terrible to behold and it started with a simple phrase.

I do.

The truth of the matter, what truly occurred, was that Eochaid was a descendant of the Ulster King and dabbled in

magic, creating a coveted land that prospered and grew. The temptation of blending two powerful families together with a timid, beautiful woman was too good of an opportunity to pass up for King Eochaid. A young, widowed queen was brought forth to bring peace, and rumored to be just as gentle as his recently deceased wife.

Cairene was a Saxon and much younger than the king, who was already in his prime and twice her age. When she found that her betrothed already had a family and they looked upon her as a threat, a replacement of their own precious mother... Cairene felt that she'd been betrayed and misled. She was still mourning her own beloved husband who'd been killed, and the thought of being surrounded by family that hated her was more than she could bear.

She would never have her own family, a dynasty to pass down to her own children, nor her husband. Everything would go to Eochaid's eldest sons – not her own. Those memories and dreams Cairene had of creating a kingdom her son would rule someday were long gone, along with any hope in her heart.

The despondent Queen sold her soul and laid a heavy curse on the Cael lineage.

No one is for sure what happened between the king and his new queen, only that their union was a bitter and angry one. King Eochaid fell sick and died within a week of Cairene's arrival and their quick marriage. Some claimed it was a broken heart, others said it was poison, and some labeled it as witchcraft.

The king's beloved children, Niall and his siblings, were struck down one-by-one as they mourned their father's passing. Each of them was cursed horribly, forced to feast on those around them for sustenance. This powerful curse would separate the children, tearing their family asunder, and force them to walk the world alone... just as the betrayed Queen Cairene would until she passed.

Death would not claim them as it had their father.

The siblings didn't fade away like the king had, but instead, they had become immortal. They were forced to exist in a world that hated them, feared them, with absolutely no hope in sight. Not only had Cairene cursed their family lineage?

If the siblings came close to each other, their powers were weakened significantly, leaving them vulnerable to weapons and other spells. They would forever be separated, forced to be as alone as Cairene felt. Together, they could still perish or be injured, forcing them apart as their own clansman hunted them down with pitchforks and swords in fear.

Fighting against what was happening to them at Cairene's hand, two of the older boys stood tall before the others in an effort to protect the younger children. An example was made out of them, Niall and Conn, before the others scattered in the night to search for cover from their new, nightmarish lives.

This is Niall's story.

For those that love what comes after
“It was a dark and stormy night...”



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NIALL

Modern day...

Nashville, Tennessee

“EXCUSE ME, IS THIS CORRAL B?”

Niall felt a strange pull wrenching from somewhere deep inside of him. A soft, female voice was heard from nearby lingering somewhere behind him.

He knew it... and could feel her presence.

Yanking out his headphone from his ear, annoyed, someone tapped on his shoulder... again. Didn't people realize that running was a solitary sport? He was currently trying to keep from falling flat on his face as he stretched his legs one at a time, pulling his foot up to his butt-cheek in order to prepare for the mini-marathon.

He was in a bad mood.

It probably wasn't the smartest time of the year to enter a race, but he'd be damned if he would pass up this chance to burn off some energy. Running in the cold temps of January and February was so much easier than July or August. At least all he had to worry about in the winter was frostbite – oh and the urge to mate.

Maybe he could keep his hands to himself? That would be the easiest solution – the rest wasn't. Summer meant he would

sweat buckets. Sweating meant scents, but also a wicked sunburn and cramping from exertion.

He'd need blood.

Niall was a freak of nature with one heck of a pissed-off, wicked stepmother.

Queen Cairene had sold her soul and laid a heavy curse on the Cael Family - a nastygram of extraordinary proportions, and she had signed the card with a flair for himself and his brother, Conn. She'd destroyed his family in one fell swoop and exacted revenge on the ones that stood up for themselves.

Niall was the oldest and had sworn to protect his family. It had been a different time, a different place – but the emotions would remain the same forever. As Cairene had condemned them all to hunt for blood, she'd cursed him and Conn two-fold.

Niall was a vampire that turned into a werewolf.

The legends were real, but the mythos – not so much. Sure, he turned into a hairy freak that liked it doggy-style, but that is about where things drew the line. He loved roasted garlic, wore a silver chain around his neck just for shits and giggles – and his family still mailed him Puppy Chow or chew toys for his birthday.

His younger brother, Conn, had been struck down as well but in a different fashion. When Niall had first made the change, he'd expected Conn to do the same, since they had both jumped in front of the younger children to protect them from her. Niall had gazed upon his brother in horror as his own body contorted painfully and his muscles ached - but Conn had apparently borne the brunt of the curse.

Conn faded away into almost nothingness, disappearing before his very eyes.

Niall had howled in pain, thinking his brother had died like his father... only to feel a brush of wind against his face. He knew now that was the only way Conn could reach out and communicate when he turned into an apparition.

When his brother reappeared, he was crazed with bloodlust because the vampire's hunger had still been there, yet he could not feed in his spectral form. So, every month when the full moon came, Niall's brother starved and nearly lost his mind. Frenzied feeding brought about waves of 'murders in the city' combined with feelings of remorse and hatred for Conn – and himself...yet as immortals?

They couldn't die, just suffer, since 1066 A.D.

The rest of his family had scattered, running from Cairene's wrath, and found a way to survive- to grow stronger. The further apart the siblings were, the more resistant they became to magic and witchcraft, and some of his siblings had even developed powers of their own in time.

“Just never mind then...”

Niall heard the disappointment and disgust in the woman's voice and almost laughed as she walked around him and moving farther into the crowd of runners.

“Your bib says ‘C’ and your face is telling me to get the heck outta here. Enjoy your race, buddy.”

Blinking, Niall took a second to glance down at the blonde as she drifted past him. He smelled coffee and something else, as he stared at the thick braid plaited tightly on her head. A large pink rubber band at the bottom of her long braid swung like a pendulum as he watched fascinated. She glided through the crowd towards the other corral of runners - away from him.

Her hot pink spandex pants hugged her form and stuck out brightly from several others in sweatpants or gym shorts. It didn't matter that it was forty degrees out here in the early morning air – he suddenly felt a rush of heat as his breath escaped from his body. Following her trail, he was entranced as she moved up further and further to the starting line. He hadn't even seen her face, but couldn't shake the desire to watch her.

“Sir, you'll have to start in corral ‘C’ – this is ‘A’ and you have to qualify for this group.” The volunteer helping to work

the race and guide the runners was watching... and actually dared to lay a hand on his Under-Armor pullover.

Niall glared at the man, causing him to snatch the offending hand back.

“My woman is up here,” Niall blurted out, not questioning or hesitating why those words had spilled from his lips. He wasn’t about to lose sight of his hot pink goddess, and nearly snapped his teeth at the man.

“She’s apparently much faster than you are. Get to the back, sir.”

“Find someone else to bother,” Niall said firmly, his eyes focused on the man, and he knew the moment the mind control worked. *Perks of being a blood-sucker for long enough*, he mused.

The guard’s face went slack as he backed away, turned around and walked off. Not ten steps away, he stopped, shook his head and continued on, addressing another runner in the wrong corral. Niall turned to see if he could see those delectable pink shorts nearby and groaned in frustration.

She was gone and the crowd started to move forward as the race began.

Putting his earbud back in, Niall started to run. He crossed the start line and smiled with excitement. As a runner, he got joy from competing against himself. Today was a little different; he was chasing the proverbial fox.

The woman had a gorgeous svelte body that made his mouth water as she moved. He could only imagine what she would look like running. That tight body - would the curves on her bounce? Would she flex and move, showing off her definition? If he caught her, would she smile or talk with him, since he’d missed his chance to say hello?

His heart was racing, but not with anticipation; but with demand as he tried to get closer to the front. If she had been in corral ‘A’, that meant she could finish the 13.1 miles in under two hours. He had finished his last one in two hours and forty minutes. It’s not that he couldn’t run faster than that, but while

he liked to track his time against other races that he had done in the past? He wanted to enjoy the feeling of the run as well. This race felt like he was doggedly tracking her down, and the pun was not lost on him!

Racing was something he grew to enjoy over the centuries. As a boy, he remembered running through the moors to the next village. He'd been fast and trustworthy, something that had come in handy over and over again during the French and Indian War or the Revolutionary War. Someone had always needed a way to pass information and Niall could run far without stopping. When he found that people raced for fun or medals – he continued the sport. That was one thing that being immortal gave him: time to learn and savor what made him happy, since he couldn't share it with his family.

That was the beauty of this century.

It used to be they would send letters or packages to each other, but with the development of the telephone, his family had grown closer than they had ever been in the last several centuries. He'd never forget how he cried when he heard Conn's voice for the first time as he cradled the bell-shaped telephone handset to his ear. Both grown men were blubbering like children after so many years of being alone. Niall had backed Bell Telephone financially as fast as he could wire funds to the man. The sheer gift of communication had been a miracle - or so he had thought - until he was able to FaceTime his brothers and sisters.

He'd laughed when he saw his baby sister's bright red hair for the first time. Apparently Loegaire was enjoying modern times as well. She'd bleached her ruddy brown hair and colored it a vibrant, fire engine red with orange highlights, making it look like she was a phoenix from fairytales. She admitted that she played with pink, green, blues and purples since she was free to do so. He made it a point to FaceTime each family member every Sunday so they could stay in constant communication. They would text photos to each other and each time his phone dinged?

It was a celebration of life and family.

Something Cairene could never take away from them ever again.

Glancing up ahead, he saw the hot pink pants stopped on the side of the road. As she bent over to tie her shoelace that had come undone, Niall did something he'd never done before... he tripped. Not just an ungraceful fall or a stumble. He face-planted into the asphalt, giving himself a bloody lip and nose.

“Geez buddy – are you okay? You want some ice for that?” an older woman handing out water and Gatorade at one of the water stations yelled aloud. The fall had actually knocked his earbud out as he yanked the cord out by mistake clumsily. His phone had skittered several feet away from him and he hoped someone didn't step on it in their rush to go around him.

Getting to his feet, he picked a piece of gravel painfully out of his kneecap. Licking his lips and pinching his nose, he glanced up, expecting to see a flattened iPhone, but instead saw that his pink princess had picked it up.

“I hate that when it happens to me,” she said bluntly, extending her hand that held the phone. “I do treadmill work in the wintertime ‘cause I swear the ice gets me every year- at least a couple of times.”

As she looked up at him from under her lashes; he saw her eyes were a pewter color that had him fascinated. Maybe silver did actually make werewolves weak, ‘cause he felt like his knees were jelly right now and it had nothing to do with the fall.

“Well this is a first for me,” he said with a smile and saw her wince. He could imagine the horror of his bloodied smile and quickly ran his tongue over his teeth to make sure his fangs weren't extended.

“How about a drink,” she said politely with a wink. “I'll buy this time and someday you can get me back.” Pertly, she picked up two Gatorades and handed him one, clinking the plastic cup against his. “Drink up and don't quit. There's only three miles left.”

“That’s it?” he asked in surprise, glancing down at his watch. The timer showed that he was pacing for under two hours easily.

“Yep. I gotta go if I am going to place, and I want my bling,” she said, referring to her finisher’s medal with a wide grin that made him swallow hard. “The medals are gorgeous this year. See ya’ at the finish line. Oh, and get those teeth checked to make sure you didn’t knock something loose—you’ve got a nice smile.”

With that, she turned away to sneeze delicately and then took off. It took him a sheer minute standing there to realize that she’d left him behind and he didn’t even know her name.

“Shit!” he hollered aloud and spiked his plastic cup of Gatorade.

Niall launched himself forward, eager to see her again and get her name. He didn’t even care about his race time anymore – he just wanted to see the blonde goddess’ smile again and was simply fascinated with her dark grey eyes.

HOLLY

“HOLLY, you dolt! You just *had* to stop for the gorgeous hottie in the tight running shorts, didn’t you?” she muttered under her breath as she ignored the stitch in her side.

She’d been running at a steady pace, constantly aware of the sexy man she’d seen lined up before the starting line. For some reason, she’d felt compelled to try and strike up a conversation – failing miserably.

“Hey buddy, what’s your corral? How lame was that come on?” she mocked aloud to herself, making a face, as she ran. She was a loner and trying to engage someone in a conversation felt...well, forced and awkward.

She was an aggressive runner, indulging in her alpha personality and pushing herself. A true road warrior. Running required only two things: herself and her Adidas. She didn’t have to wait on anyone, schedule anything, or fit it in to her schedule. She ran when she wanted to and felt good about it.

Being a dentist, she didn’t really have to develop a relationship. They were only in her chair long enough for her to examine the teeth or do some work. Her hygienist did most of the dirty work and Holly swooped in to save the day, so to speak.

When Holly would enter the room, it was with a single goal in mind – finish the job. She’d say a quick hello, ask if

anything had been bothering the patient, and then they had to lay back with instruments in their mouths, preventing any more discussion. She would sit them up, make a bit of small talk that always ended with a *'See you in six months. Bye.'*

Relationships, communication, and stepping outside of her natural boundaries were challenging to say the least – which was why she surprised herself in trying to talk with the tall man.

He was beautiful and stood almost a foot higher than the people surrounding him. He was broad shouldered, which surprised her that a man his size could run so fast. She was barely five foot tall and willowy, making it easy to race, as she seemed to be quick-footed and nimble.

Stopping to tie her shoelace, Holly intended to take off running again in order to beat last year's personal record, but when she heard the commotion nearby, she glanced over to see the big guy go down like a ton of bricks.

She hesitated, seeing him shake his head, and saw his iPhone was still intact but near where she stood. A large group of runners was coming up fast and she was afraid it would get smashed.

She scooped it up and met his eyes, feeling her world turn upside down. It was practically sinful to have eyes like his. Her grey eyes were passed down through her family on her mother's side – but this man's eyes looked like molten copper - warm, decadent, with a mix of reddish and brown hues.

... And then he smiled.

His poor split lip had bled into his mouth, as well as his bloodied nose where he'd hit the asphalt. The dentist in her practically high-fived him as she got a glimpse of his teeth. Except for the blood, his teeth were beautiful. Large, bright white incisors, canines, bicuspid, and his wide smile allowed her to see the edge of his premolars. She saw no silver, no discoloration and no staining. The man obviously didn't smoke, drink or had an amazing dentist on staff that bleached his teeth whenever he wanted. It seemed like a shame to have one of those beauties end up chipped, discolored or loose.

And she'd commented on it, like a dork.

Crossing the finish line, Holly hit the stop button on her watch to keep herself from slapping her forehead. She obediently ducked her head and received her finisher's medal. Everyone who crossed the line got one and she had a rack at her condo to display them. Closing her eyes, she thought of that beautiful man's smile for a moment as she walked, shaking off the lactic acid buildup in the muscles of her legs.

Can you put the dentist away for a bit and let the woman come out and play, she mused, feeling like a huge idiot. Only a dentist could be happy at looking in a person's mouth...and this man's grin gave her body all sorts of jollies. She wondered if he flossed or used a Waterpik. *Yes, yes and even more yes's* was glaringly obvious – as well as the fact that she was obsessed with oral cleanliness. In fact, that had kept her from dating for several years now.

Mouths were just.... gross.

Achoo! she sneezed.

“Bless you!”

Holly heard behind her as she was walking over to the tables laden with all sorts of health foods. Bagels, pitas, apples, bananas, snack bars and peanut butter serving-size cups were piled up heavily, as well as large tubs of chocolate milk bottles, protein drinks and bottled water. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that her handsome fellow had somehow managed to not only finish the race, but had actually caught up to her.

“Great job finishing.”

“You are right, the medals are nice this year.”

“You've run this before?”

“Every chance I get. I'm Niall Cael,” he said politely, extending his hand. “May I buy you a drink? Ladies choice,” he teased with a grin.

Holly gave a little snort and laughed indelicately as she was embarrassed by the attention and delighted by his humor.

She saw his smile curl up at the edges and she quickly covered her mouth to keep herself from snorting again like a piggy.

“Sorry, I tend to giggle weird when I am nervous. Holly Baines.”

“I don’t want to make you nervous.”

“Well, you certainly do, Mr. Cael.”

“I was serious. I appreciated you saving my phone and want to return the offer. Chocolate milk, or are you a banana-protein-drink-kind-a-gal?”

“Those things are awful.”

“Chocolate it is then. Perfect, a girl after my own heart. Tell me you like a little apple with your milk?”

“And a peanut butter cup.”

“Oh man, the ideal woman!” he exclaimed happily, picking up two of each for them off the table. Holly watched him load up his arms as they walked down the line to where people were taking their seats and recovering. Several were taking photos, patting themselves on the back, and calling their friends.

“They are gonna hurt later,” he whispered leaning down to her.

Holly nodded knowingly as she saw several women sitting on the curb.

“I did that once and could barely straighten my legs.”

“Want to go for a little stroll and work off the lactic acid?”

“I don’t know if it will dissipate like that,” she teased and looked up shyly. “But since you’ve got all the snacks in your arms and I’m a hungry girl? I guess the answer is ‘yes’.”

“Good thing there is no rusty old van out here with a sign on the side that says ‘Candy’ - or I might have competition.”

“Does that mean you are a threat?”

“Never to you, but I am pretty sweet,” he winked flirtatiously, causing Holly to giggle again nervously. She’d

never had such easy banter with such a good-looking man, much less had him focus solely on her.

“Let’s stay in this general area in case you really are the bad guy.”

“The big bad wolf goes after little red riding hood?”

“Pink is technically a pale shade of red,” she countered, and realized how true her words were. There was something about the man that attracted her, yet made her slightly uneasy.

“Touché, sweet Holly,” he said with a grin, tapping his bottle of chocolate milk against hers in a silent toast.

HOLLY

HOLLY WASN'T stupid or naïve.

Men didn't flock to her unless they wanted one thing: sex – and that wasn't happening anytime soon. When she let the real side of her personality out, they tended to run faster than she ever could. She didn't play around, nor did she waste her time. Life was too short and frankly, she had enough confidence to refuse to settle for something less. She was perfectly happy filling her time with things that satisfied her – and most men she'd met couldn't handle that.

Time to test the waters, she thought sadly as she looked her companion for the moment.

Niall Cael on first glance was everything she would want as a piece of eye-candy on her arm. He was tall, fit, breathtakingly beautiful in a haunting way and looked at her like he knew what she looked like under all her clothes – and she had on plenty.

Holly ran her races in layers - her leggings, tank top, sports bra (because my goodness – the boobs got in the way!) and a loose insulated running jacket. It was her favorite jacket with zippered pockets and the sleeves were extra-long with thumbholes to keep her hands warm but allow her to flip songs on her iPhone if she needed to.

Yep, those warm brown eyes had streaks of what looked to be red in them, giving them a rusty shade. His eyes looked like they could pierce anything...and Holly did a double take.

“Did you just sniff me?” she barked out in shock, stepping back from him and very nearly spitting out the large sip of chocolate milk she’d taken.

The man had the nerve to look chagrined, confirming her suspicions.

Why on earth would he have done that?

“Ya’ know, *cupcake*” Holly smarted off, “We both ran thirteen miles and neither of us smells particularly good right about now. In fact, you smell like a wet mutt,” she blurted and realized that it was true. She did smell a wet dog nearby. “Ahhhhhchoo,” she sneezed loudly and grabbed a napkin from his hand.

“Do you have pets or something? I’m highly allergic to animals, especially dogs.”

Niall’s mouth dropped open as he actually paled visibly.

Meh, too bad, she thought.

He must be one of those animal lovers that would pick his dog over her any day. That was okay, she’d once had a cat she loved but when her kitty passed, Holly didn’t get another one, and happily gave up her allergy shots.

“You are allergic... to dogs?” he said painfully with a tight, forced smile. “No, I have no pets. Must be something in the air or someone nearby, I guess? I adore dogs, don’t you?”

“Frankly, no. I’m not a pet person anymore. I used to like them, but now I can’t think of one without imagining the smell from a litter box, chewed up shoes, or some torn up furniture.”

“What about the happiness that a loving... dog... could bring? You know?” he said encouragingly. His voice was taking on a strangled tone, like he was really having a hard time with her words. “A playmate, someone to go on runs with you, or cuddle with on the couch?”

“Look,” she laughed nervously. “Not everyone is an animal lover and its okay. I mean, don’t take this the wrong way – but we just met. You like dogs, that’s great for you. I don’t because I break out in hives and sneeze. In fact, I appreciate the milk and the company, but that sneeze was my cue. Maybe I’ll see you again at another race, Mr. Cael. If there is a dog in the area that is setting off my allergies? I need to go. It’s only a matter of time before the hives flare up and I’ve no desire to be drugged on Benadryl or stick myself with a needle tonight.”

“I understand,” he nodded and his rust-colored eyes looked crushed, lonely. She didn’t want to get into something where the fella was clingy or possessive and even though he was decidedly yummy looking with a nice set of chompers, her warning bells were going off in her mind. “Do you want to have dinner sometime?”

“I think maybe I will pass but thank you again for the chocolate milk and the offer. Goodbye Niall and good job on the race. You ran a great pace,” she said smoothly, backing away and taking two of the silver thermal blankets a woman nearby was handing out. She handed Niall one and shook out hers, throwing it around her shoulders in a protective manner.

Glancing back over her shoulder as she turned, she saw him watching her and felt a guttural wrenching in her heart.

God, he was beautiful... and she was a hard-headed idiot.

NIALL

HOLLY BAINES WAS allergic to dogs.

Lightning could strike him down at any time now because the irony was not lost on him. He knew that Cairene, his step-mother, had won yet again.

How could the only woman he'd shown true interest in turn out to be allergic to dogs? Sure, he'd fooled around over the years but no one – *no one* had ever set off the instincts in him like Holly did.

He'd actually sniffed the air around her and had gotten caught. Her scent was everywhere, wrapping around him and clenching at his heart. She smelled of sweat, musk and something else he couldn't pinpoint, but it made his randy body primed for anything. He'd been having a difficult time in focusing on her words until his whole world slammed into a brick wall at her statement.

"Dogs make me sneeze and I break out in hives."

Oh. my. God. he thought, horrified. He wouldn't have to worry about revealing he was a vampire because he'd never be able to get close enough without her itching or sneezing.

Werewolves qualified as a type of dog.

He'd discovered brutal fact back in the 1300's when he'd developed a bad case of fleas and couldn't shake them. Oh everyone thought it was hysterical that he could now shampoo

himself at home for treatment, according to his family. They loved teasing him, but he was very self-conscious about it. When Holly claimed he smelled like a wet-dog? He'd felt his cheeks flush in embarrassment. He didn't know what to say or do.

Wolves, he found, would come into heat early in the year. A male alpha wolf would mate with a female alpha of the pack – and they mated for life. It wasn't so back a century or two ago when he could scratch the itch at a brothel, but now it involved chit-chatting or dating, something he wasn't good at... until today.

Today it had been easy to engage Holly in a conversation, and she looked like she was starting to respond for a moment... until she sneezed.

Her guard went up and she backed away immediately, breaking the connection between them on her end. There was no distancing himself on his end - he was entranced. Niall knew deep in his soul that he'd met his alpha today, his mate.

... And she was allergic to him.

Watching Holly walk off into the crowd of runners was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. The loyal hound in him itched to run over to her side, yet the man knew that his female would need space. If she was frightened of him, she'd bolt or fight back.

He wanted her to respond to him, to want him, with the ferocity that he desired her with just a single look.

HOLLY

SOMETHING WASN'T right and Holly knew it deep down inside. As she walked away from where she'd left Niall Cael standing, she felt a sense of despair and foreboding. Was he some weirdo or stalker? She glanced over her shoulder and saw the painful look, nearly stopping in her tracks.

Instead, she put one foot right in front of the other and carried on towards her car that was parked several blocks away. The crowd was dissipating and if he was some freak, she would need to get away as fast as possible. In her mind, she saw his warm expression as he looked at her but that *feeling* – she just couldn't shake it.

Looking around, Holly grimaced. Her legs were aching and her car was nowhere to be seen. She'd done this before at a race, and she recognized the panicked feeling.

She'd misplaced her car again.

Putting both hands over her face, she covered it in horror and fatigue. She was tired, wanted a hot bath and some sleepy-time to recover. She did not want to walk all over town again hunting for her car. Last time it had taken her two hours to finally find her car and she swore she would never, ever do something so stupid again.

... Yet here she was.

Find the firehouse, she thought. Her car was parked directly facing a firehouse. There had to be one nearby and she just had to find it. She could have dropped a pin on the map on her phone but... “Ohhhh no, I will remember and don’t need technology,” she muttered under her breath angrily.

Stupid car, stupid race, stupid Holly, she grimaced.

“Is something wrong?”

She heard from behind her and let out a horrified yelp of fear.

Niall had walked up behind her at the crosswalk. She saw his curious, hurt eyes watching her and couldn’t get past the freakiness in her mind that he was following her.

She’d shank him with her key if she had to get away! she thought mentally, and carefully pulled her keys out of her fanny-pack clipped around her stomach. She put the key down between her pointer and middle finger, ready for anything.

“You don’t quit, do you?” Holly asked, backing away from him.

Niall quickly reached out and grabbed her arm, yanking her away from the curb - tossing her to the side, against the building, like she weighed nothing. She caught her balance easily, panicking... and stabbed at his arm once with her key, drawing blood.

He looked at her and stepped back, putting his forearm up to his mouth.

“I get it, you’re afraid,” he said softly.

Holly stared at him... and then the busy street.

He’d pulled her back from traffic when she’d tried to back away from him. She could have fallen off the curb and been struck by a vehicle, but he’d stopped her... and she’d attacked him irrationally.

“I would just like a chance to get to know you.”

“Miss, do you need help?” a police officer on horseback that patrolled the streets was riding up nearby. He must have

seen the whole debacle just now and thought she was in danger.

Was she? she mused silently and shook her head no.

“Where’s the fire station?” she blurted out to the policeman, staring at Niall and not moving her eyes away from him as he moved his arm away from his mouth. She could see the slight hint of red on his lips and wondered if it was from where he’d fallen or where she’d broken the skin with her key.

Either way, it needed doctoring or a Band-Aid.

“Holly, its two blocks up the road in that direction. I can wait here if you want or walk you. I’m parked there,” Niall offered politely, not moving.

“Miss, I repeat – do you need help? Is this guy bothering you?” the officer said firmly and Holly couldn’t move. She didn’t know what to do. What if her car wasn’t up that way and he was trying to lead her away to some dark alley? Who was she kidding? It was barely one in the afternoon.

“Is the fire station that way?” she asked the policeman, finally tearing her eyes away from Niall’s hard ones. She wanted to confirm what he was saying and part of her hoped it was actually true. Maybe in her next race she’d get a can of mace instead if Niall was lying.

“Yes, two blocks up and on the right. You can’t miss it. Do you want me to accompany you?” the officer offered and she looked back at Niall where he was standing.

People were walking around them and crossing at the crosswalk, yet the two of them were frozen like statues, unmoving. She felt awful thinking that she’d hurt the man that was trying to help her.

“No, thank you. I will be fine,” Holly admitted firmly and saw Niall give a slight nod in silent confirmation. As the horse walked off and the light changed color indicating that they would have to wait a few minutes for the next signal, Holly pointed at his arm. “Are you okay? I panicked.”

“I understand, but I couldn’t let you fall.”

“Thank you.”

“I meant what I said - I’d like to get to know you,” he began quietly as a few people joined them at the light. “Will you allow me to walk you to your car? I’ll tell you anything you want to know about me and then you can decide if dinner would be such a bad idea.”

“No sniffing me,” she countered.

“You do smell awesome,” he whispered with a grin.

“Whack-job statements like that will get you in trouble. Why do you think I said ‘no’ to dinner?”

“Fine, you stink,” he laughed softly and then held out his hand, indicating she should cross the street first. “After you...?”

“Do you always try to pick up girls at races?” she asked suddenly, looking over at him as they crossed the street.

“No. I’ve never wanted to before.”

“And you do now? Why?”

“Just do,” he said with a shrug and a secretive smile that had her wary again.

“Achooo!” she sneezed and looked at him harshly. “Seriously, do you have a dog?”

“Holly, I *am* a dog,” he said with a wicked grin that crinkled his eyes as he looked at her. She glared at him and rolled her eyes.

“All men are dogs,” she retorted, seeing his grin.

“Not all of us, but I definitely am.”

“Probably a big ‘ol horn-dog. You’re one weird man, sniffing at girls, and picking up women you barely know,” she muttered for his ears alone and heard him chuckle.

Holly glanced up as they crossed the street again and saw her words didn’t bother him. Most guys were immediately dissuaded if she put up any front or told them her opinions.

They wanted a soft sweet insipid woman that would simply say ‘yes dear’ or ‘of course’.

Stepping into the gravel parking lot, she saw that several cars had already left and her maroon Mazda was off by itself. *Inspid* was not her style and Niall wasn’t intimidated in the slightest; if anything, his eyes were blazing with desire as she met his gaze.

“Meet me for coffee or dinner, please?” he asked softly as they got closer to her car.

“You don’t quit, do you?”

“You have no idea how persistent I can be and how much I am holding back because I don’t want to scare you,” he said sadly and the heat in his eyes confirmed it. Holly felt a bolt of desire course through her, causing her to close her eyes and shiver slightly.

“Don’t do that, you are driving me nuts,” he said.

“Do what?”

“Your breath catches and that incredible smell from before just turned even sweeter,” he whispered, lifting her braid off her shoulder. He leaned in ever so slightly and smiled shyly. “You smell like absolute heaven to a very lonely man.”

“And on that note? It’s time to go...”she quipped nervously, staring at his smile, fascinated by his weird comments and how it made her heart race. “I’ve got to... gotta... AHHHCHHOOO!” she sneezed and stared at him horrified. “Maybe I am allergic to *you*?”

“Give me a chance... Give us a chance,” he amended. He leaned in and gently kissed her cheek, just by her ear. Holly heard his breath quiver and when he pulled back, he ran his hand down his face nervously, rubbing his cheek as he looked at her shyly. “I don’t have any business cards on me, and spandex makes it a bit difficult to carry – but look me up and call me. Please?”

Opening her car door, she saw Niall backed away to give her room. She got in, quickly shut the door and locked it as if to keep the boogeyman at bay. Starting up her car, she turned

on the heated seats to allow her thigh muscles to relax a bit after the run. Watching out the window as she pulled forward, she saw Niall get into a vintage car off in the distance.

As she'd seen his rugged appearance, she figured he'd get into a truck or flashy BMW. Instead he got into a restored muscle car – a Ford Torino. Smiling, she gave a slight wave and shook her head.

Niall Cael was not at all what she expected nor did he fit any mold. The man was different - good looking, a complete gentleman, and with a flair for vintage things apparently. Perhaps he worked on cars for a living or hung onto it from his father, a nostalgic item?

Perhaps she was just a bit curious and would google the man...

Maybe.

NIALL

NIALL SAT BACK at his desk, aggravated.

It had been two weeks since he'd seen the lovely woman and the scent of her still filled his mind. All she had to do was look him up and she'd see he was well-off. He was actually filthy rich from smart decisions made over the years. He'd kept his name boldly and tacked on a Roman Numeral at the end afterwards to throw anyone off the track, said it was a familial name that was passed on through the generations. Just like his home, business, and his bank account.

Presently he was claiming to be the thirteenth in the family, or at least since records were written down and transcribed easily. Newspaper and books had changed his lifestyle, just like internet would as well. It was only a matter of time before he would be forced to address the fact that he wasn't aging. He very rarely worked in his high-rise offices, preferring to work from his home office, but something in him hoped that she would look him up, call, or email him.

Hearing his cell phone, he punched the button in aggravation and saw it was a FaceTime from his brother. There was something about Brion that gave him a 'feeling' about something. They used to call it '*The Sight*' or '*Devil's Magic*'. Brion always seemed to know when something was wrong or if one of them needed a pick-me-up.

“What are you pouting about now?”

“Thanks. Gee, I’m glad you called to interrupt my day.”

“You haven’t worked...actually worked...in over two hundred years, ya’ old fart.”

“I’m going to let you get away with that since I am technically older than you by five years and in all actuality? You are an old fart, too.”

“True...true...,” Brion said glibly, smiling at the screen. “So really, what’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me,” he reminded Niall with a wink. “I’m the human lie detector. So really - what gives?” Niall looked at his brother and for the first time saw the fatigue on his face and lines under his eyes.

“Are you eating enough?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You look like shit for a vamp. Did you get someone with a disease or anemia?”

“Look, I’m just not resting well.”

“Something wrong?”

“Nightmares,” Brion admitted and glanced away from the camera. “I keep hearing someone crying and a few nights ago - she was screaming. I can’t seem to shake it and it’s the same dream over and over again until last night.”

“What happened?”

“I didn’t dream at all and I’m really freaked out about it,” he admitted and Niall saw the devastation in his brothers’ eyes that he was trying to hide. “But enough about me. What about you? Time for another flea collar?”

“Har-di-har-har. The last seven you sent me are still in the package. I promise you, the joke never gets old,” Niall said sarcastically. “And besides, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Again?” Brion said sarcastically. “Jeezy-peets you’re thinking with your dick again, aren’t you?”

“Look - just because I don’t have a horrible receding hairline like the rest of you doesn’t mean you have to be hateful. Maybe if you got laid more often you’d realize what you are missing when you have something warm under you.” Niall knew the joke hit home when his brother slapped a baseball cap on his head. He didn’t have a receding hairline, but the fact that he was self-conscious about it was ammunition enough.

“I know I’m going to regret this, but inquiring minds want to know... doggy style? Wait! Don’t answer, ‘cause I will just want to scratch my eyes out. Are you in heat again, buddy?”

“Male wolves don’t go into heat. It’s called mating season... and yes, but this time it’s different.”

“You’re gay?”

“What? No. I swear I could kick your... Brion, I think I met *HER*.”

“Cairene?” his brother yelped nervously.

“No, my mate. I think I met a *mate* for me,” Niall whispered quietly, putting his hands behind his head and staring up at the ceiling. “She was beautiful and so graceful when she moved. There was something about her and when she got close – I could smell her and it did something to me. I can’t explain it, I just know... and I think she felt it too.”

“You are so screwed,” his brother blurted out, laughing hysterically.

“Were you just listening to me? That’s the problem - I’m not. Holly is fighting the attraction and quite literally stabbed me in the arm with her key to get away. She’s scared of me, and I don’t know how to get past that.”

“You need to reach her on her level and let her be in control. Use your doggy instincts and go to her belly up,” he snickered, trying to keep a straight face.

Niall stuck up his middle finger at the phone screen.

“You aren’t funny.”

“No, I’m actually thinking I’m brilliant. I mean, if she’s your mate - that would make her compatible with you. Don’t male dogs let the females become the aggressor during mating season?”

“I don’t know ‘cause I have never mated or bonded with anyone in over a thousand years. This is emotional, not just physical, so I’m kinda lost.”

“Don’t look at me, mutt. I’m in the dark too,” Brion shrugged and then looked away from the camera again. Niall could see the sadness in his brother’s face and knew there was more to the dreams. “I’m glad you are somewhat okay though and I hope it works out for you so you aren’t alone anymore. Do a little research on your girl and wolves. See if there is anything that can help you and then try applying a bit of it to yourself.”

“Oh, there’s another problem,” Niall said quickly.

“What’s that?”

“She’s allergic to dogs,” he muttered angrily under his breath. Brion’s hysterical laughter echoed in the office and he’d heard enough. “I gotta go. Bye,” Niall snapped angrily and hung up on his brother.

It wasn’t funny in the slightest.



IT TOOK Niall several hours of searching to finally find information on Holly Baines and two weeks to get up the nerve to pursue the information he’d discovered. Apparently, her name was of Scottish ancestry and spelled differently from how it sounded. When he realized her name was Scottish, he practically howled in delight, barely restraining the urge to let loose a yell.

He’d become desperate at trying to find her as his whole world had begun to center around finding Holly. He’d stopped

started to wonder if she'd lied about her name until he misspelled it in the search bar of Google.

He was cantankerous, short tempered and avoiding everyone.

Everything was about finding out more about Holly. He'd searched her online and found old posts on a blog. She was an avid and prolific writer in her profession putting out several papers about oral cleanliness and dental hygiene. He thought it was comical that she was a well-known dentist in the area and the thought of showing her his canines gave the vampire in him a hard-on immediately.

Niall had to do something because he couldn't think, he couldn't sleep, and he couldn't feed. He missed her smell and the presence she had in that brief time he'd known her. He had it bad for his pink princess, but today all his searching, wishing, and hoping would finally come to an end.

He hadn't put two-and-two together from the race until he saw she was a dentist. Her words came back to him and he found himself smiling. Holly thought he had a pretty smile and had mentioned getting his teeth checked when he'd tripped, splitting his lip... because of her career. That would be all the excuse that he would need to get seen by the lovely little dentist that had him completely fascinated.

His cleaning was at 4 PM today.

Pulling into the parking lot, he glanced up at the office and smiled. His little Holly seemed to be very well-off and proud of her office. Clean, contemporary lines with soft under-lighting made the office feel immaculate but welcoming. There were several photos on the wall of before and after bleached teeth, invisible teeth aligners and the variety of results it produced. He grinned as he thought of what his picture would look like. Perhaps he'd ask her to put it up at Halloween... as a joke.

“Mr. Cael, we'll need you to fill out these forms – front and back. I need your driver's license and proof of insurance card as well. Dr. Baines has another patient but we have a hygienist that is available to clean your...”

“No, I’ll wait for Dr. Baines,” Niall said smoothly. “I’m in no rush. She can take as long as she needs.” He nearly laughed as his hearing picked up a soft curse word from the back of the office as the receptionist’s eyes widened, wincing.

“My apologies,” she said immediately and he brushed it off, plucking a pen out of the cupholder.

Holly knew he was there... and was avoiding him.

He listened intently and heard some whispers from the back, garnering some strange looks from the ladies at the front desk. He just smiled widely at them. He finished filling out the forms and walked up to the counter. As he handed the clipboard to the receptionist, he smiled ever so sweetly and slid a box to her on the counter.

“Could you give this to Dr. Baines for me? Just let her know that I’ll be waiting for her, whenever she is ready to see me.”

“Of course,” she replied confused.

She picked up the box of Benadryl and walked it around the corner only to hear a loud, feminine laugh that made his body surge with happiness. His girl got the joke.

He was glad he thought of the icebreaker and hoped it helped alleviate some of the tension that the appointment might have caused her. When last he saw her, she thought she was saying goodbye.

Not in the slightest... she’d only peaked his interest.

“Mr. Cael?”

Niall sprang to his feet immediately and resisted the urge to smile. Gosh, she looked phenomenal. She had on a pretty pink blouse with the collar jutting out over her white lab coat. His Holly liked the color pink and it looked terrific on her. He filed that away in his mind to send her some pink roses. Holly held open the door politely that led back to the dental offices.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered silently.

“I need my teeth checked. I have it on good authority that I need a professional opinion after a fall that I had... plus it’s

time for a cleaning.”

“Who did your last cleaning?”

“It’s been a while,” he shrugged. *Like about forty years*, he thought. The last cleaning he’d had resulted in him nicking the dentist and an incisor reacted.

Yeah, that was not a good day in the slightest. Turns out the doctor was taking prescription pain pills and he was able to convince him that it was a hallucination. Niall had tasted the strange chemical taste within that single droplet and glad the man hadn’t continued with trying to do anything to him.

Niall took a seat in the large chair and looked at Holly expectantly. She stared at him blankly and shook her head, causing him to smile knowingly.

“Are you having any problems?”

“Not with my teeth,” he said honestly.

“Let’s get a few X-rays and then we’ll start.”

“Sounds good.”

He heard the whine of the machine once she’d placed the cartridge in his mouth. He opened his mouth again complacently and bit down as she instructed on the other side for the other X-ray. Moments later, she clicked on a file on the desktop and turned her head quizzically glancing at him.

“Smile for me,” she ordered clinically. Niall grinned knowing exactly what she was looking at. His large incisors. He glanced at the photos on the screen and sure enough, each incisor was elongated up into his jaw, making them slightly longer than each tooth beside it.

“Is something wrong?” he asked innocently.

“Not at all,” she quickly brushed him off. “Let’s lie you back and see what everything looks like. By the way, thank you for the Benadryl.”

Niall felt his heart hammer happily as she leaned him back in the chair, putting him downwards, almost in her lap where

she sat on the roll around stool. “Do you want some glasses to put on your eyes as I turn the lamp on?”

“Yes please,” he said politely.

The light didn't bother him like the movies portrayed, but the glasses would give him ample opportunity to study her. Holly placed them on his head and flipped on the light. Grabbing a small mirror, she instructed him to say ‘ah’.

She peered in his mouth and ran her finger lightly on the outside of his gums, causing him to moan with delight. She jerked her hands away from his mouth immediately.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No. I'm sorry, please go ahead.”

“You made a... noise,” she stammered, blushing and looking away. Niall grinned at her reaction and almost groaned again in happiness.

“It's been a while since my last cleaning and I forgot how much I enjoyed having clean teeth,” he said innocently. Holly let out her breath and nodded in agreement.

“That is what got me into the dental field. There is nothing better than the way your teeth feel then after you've flossed. Now, lie quietly and let me do my inspection.”

Niall opened his mouth again and closed his eyes behind the dark glasses. He'd wanted to look at Holly and watch her as she worked, but instead he lay there savoring the sweet sensation of her finger on his gums and lips. He pretended she was caressing him and breathed in deep her sweet perfume.

This time he did sigh happily and didn't bother to try and hide it. Her chuckle of laughter under her breath surprised him and gave him goosebumps.

“Are you cold?”

“No.”

“I think everything looks okay and solid. I don't see any loose teeth or discolorations. Your gums look excellent and no

cavities. Do you want cinnamon, orange, cherry or peppermint?”

“Excuse me?”

“What flavor fluoride do you want me to use?”

“Oh... uh, cherry.”

“That is my favorite too. Cherry fluoride and cinnamon rope floss are my go-to’s. I tell all my clients to try to avoid the wax floss because it doesn’t clean as deeply and can cut the gums. Do you use a Waterpik?”

“A what?”

“Your teeth are gorgeous,” she admitted with a smile. “Do you use a Waterpik and if so, what brand?”

“No, should I?”

“They are nice but I don’t think you’re having any problems flossing so I’d skip the expense of one.” She grabbed the small cup of fluoride and pulled back the lid. Smearing some on the head of the polisher, she smiled. “Ready?”

Niall nodded, captivated. She was in her element and approachable, something that made him want to reach out. He jerked back for a moment just as she was fixing to polish his teeth. Holly backed away quizzically, holding up the polisher.

“Do you want a different flavor after all?” she asked, confused. Niall reached with his foot to slide the door almost closed and could see the warning look in her eyes. “What are you doing, Mr. Cael?”

“I wanted to ask you a question and didn’t want the whole office listening,” he began softly, laying there looking up at Holly. The wolf was bearing his stomach to his woman, his mate. “Was there something wrong or something I did that made you refuse to go to dinner with me?” he whispered, trying to keep his voice down.

“We barely know each other.”

“How else will I ever get to know you if I can’t talk with you or see you?”

“Is this why you made the appointment?”

“That and it was long overdue,” he admitted plainly.

“How’d you know I was a dentist?”

“Why didn’t you look me up when I mentioned it?”

“I did,” she whispered after several moments and glanced away, her pulse a feather at the base of her throat beckoning him.

“Holly, I didn’t mean to alarm you or scare you,” he began and swallowed his pride. “I really like you and am really attracted to you. If not dinner, then a movie or something else – just please, give me a chance.”

Niall found himself sitting up on his elbows earnestly as he looked at her. He could see her eyes darting around and her mind working as she looked at him and then at the door. There was intense desire in her expression that made his body respond and he was fighting the urge to yank her into the chair with everything in him. He could smell the responsive scent of her body and see the soft flush to her cheeks. She was irresistible and his willpower was fading quickly.

“I’ll be good and stop,” he whispered, laying back and opening his mouth, trying to distract her and himself. She hesitated for a moment and slowly began to clean his teeth. The whirring was like a white noise soothing him as he lay there. He laced his fingers on his chest and tried to keep from breathing her scent any more than he had to.

Focus on the cherry fluoride and that smell, he reminded himself frequently.

Once she finished, she squirted some water in his mouth and ran the suction tube carefully. Grabbing the floss, she began moving through his mouth with precision until she got to his canines. Carefully, she slid the floss and let out a curious ‘*huh?*’ under her breath but never commented or said a word. He knew from experience that the floss went deep under his gums easily but nothing would indicate that they would descend... unless they simply did, and that didn’t happen unless there was blood present.

As she reached the final tooth, he felt a loss deep inside his soul knowing that his appointment was nearly over and she'd not said a word. Suddenly, he felt velvet lips touch his ever so briefly causing him to gasp as his eyes flew open. The surge of protective desire was nearly overwhelming and he unlaced his fingers to clench at the arms of the seat in order to keep from moving. It was a sweet, tender, shy kiss that didn't last nearly long enough.

Holly's breath was coming out in shallow pants, as her face was flushed and her pupils dilated. She was reacting to him and it was the most spectacular thing he'd ever seen. Just the thought of her actually responding to him as strongly as he felt was stunning, leaving a flood of desire washing through his veins.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that but I... uh... I like cinnamon floss," she said faintly as an apology, looking at him nervously as if she expected him to be upset or push for more.

"Does that mean you'll have dinner with me?"

"No," she said with a mysterious smile that drove him wild. "I was testing a theory."

"Care to share it?"

"I wanted to see if you smelled as good as you claimed that I did, you weird man," she laughed softly. "If you want to date a girl, you shouldn't go about it like you did the other day."

"If you aren't interested in dating a guy, you shouldn't kiss him."

"Touché," she said arching a delicate eyebrow, using his own words against him.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow."

"I don't think so," she scoffed.

"Then next week?"

"We aren't dating."

"Call it what you want, I don't care."

“I can call it harassment, if you keep this up.”

“I can claim sexual assault,” he retorted.

“Oh, you wish!” she stammered in surprise.

“Yeah, princess... I kinda do,” he murmured.

“Your cleaning is over, Mr. Cael,” she said in a controlled tone that brooked no argument. His alpha mate was dictating their courtship and he would do as she said, but return to pursue her again.

“Yes ma’am,” he said with a wicked grin, running his tongue over his teeth. “Mmmm delicious.” He knew it was obnoxious and saw the reaction he wanted in her. Holly’s face flushed beet red, all the way down her neck and into her blouse as her body tightened perceptibly. He wanted to kiss her again and tug on that sweet bottom lip as he pulled her against him, but it would have to wait.

She had to perceive that she was in control.

... And he was more than willing to let her steer the wheel.

HOLLY

HOLLY PULLED at the purple satiny dress that she'd been fitted for, grimacing as she looked in the mirror. If this was her friend's idea of a beautiful wedding, then so be it. She didn't want to think about the poofed sleeves, flounces, or the fact that she was wearing a dress that looked like something out of a cartoon. Right now, she'd qualify for the '*Ugly Stepsister Award*'... and briefly wondered if that was the look that was wanted.

Vanessa Stafford had always preferred sleek, gorgeous clothing. She could grace a fashion magazine once she ditched her glasses and lab coat. This puffy monstrosity was not normal for her friend, but in looking around? She saw several others wearing garish garments, similar in fashion... and hesitated.

This was not Vanessa's doing... at all.

"Vanessa, I'm so happy for you," Holly repeated again, for the twentieth time after practicing in the mirror when she spied this purple monstrosity on her body. Maybe if she kept saying it, she'd eventually feel it.

Today didn't feel like a wedding, it felt like a funeral. Vanessa looked downright miserable, like someone had just crushed her spirit. She was standing there in a poofy dress as well that looked like sequins had been on clearance when it was made. Every time Vanessa moved, there was an audible

swish and clicking sound as the satin and sequins hit each other.

“This is atrocious,” Vanessa whispered under her breath, horrified. “Help me, Holly.”

Holly jerked her head up and met her frightened eyes.

Several other women were chit-chatting together and ignoring the two of them completely. Vanessa’s upcoming mother-in-law was walking over with makeup and a can of hairspray tucked under her arm for a final touch-up before the ceremony was to start. Vanessa was supposed to marry her father’s partner and Holly had thought it was for love. She knew now that something was seriously wrong.

“Ladies, I can’t wait to see this... this all begin, but Van and I have known each other for years and we need a second alone. Meet-cha at the altar?” Holly exclaimed gleefully and plastered a smile across her face, grabbing Vanessa’s hand emphatically. As they filed out of the room and the door closed behind the last woman, Holly turned to look at Vanessa’s pale face.

“Are you alright?”

“No,” she whispered horrified. “This isn’t me at all. I mean, I have known Russ since a child and we grew up together. Once he started working for Daddy, it was always assumed that our families would be together. We started dating and it just seemed normal – like this was supposed to be, you know?”

“So, what happened?”

“Holly, there was this guy at my bachelor party...”

“I knew I should have gone!” Holly yelled, slapping her forehead in remorse. “Don’t chase down the rabbit, okay? It just leaves a big stupid regretful mess.”

“That’s me,” Vanessa wailed, her eyes tearing up and looking at her in stunned shock. “What am I supposed to do?”

“What happened?”

“Holly, I had sex with him - in the bathroom of a bar of all places,” she admitted horrified. “I can’t stop thinking about it and seeing him in my mind.”

“Oh my gosh... *you did?* You can’t? Van, you can’t go... you aren’t supposed to... you are marrying Russ in less than ten minutes!” she blurted out in a panicked whisper. “You didn’t tell him, did you?”

“No! Of course not! How could I tell Russ that I slept with someone else and don’t want him anymore?”

“Seriously? You are thinking of trashing your whole life for this mysterious guy? What’s his name? What does he do for a living?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, her face flushing with shame. “It didn’t matter at the time. I mean, I just saw him and my heart kinda stopped. Then we were... uh... we were... um... well, yeah.”

“Don’t tell me,” Holly interrupted. “You slept with some no name vagrant and now you want to throw away everything?”

“He wasn’t a vagrant. He was wearing a gorgeous suit and I thought he was the stripper, you know? I mean, things were so hot, so kinky, and I loved it” she admitted, blushing hotly covering her face with her hands. “What is wrong with me?”

“Well he certainly stripped, now didn’t he?” she barked out bluntly.

“Oh gosh, Holly, even you’d have put money in that G-string...” Van laughed sadly at the memory, “but he wasn’t wearing any. I’ve never felt like that before and... I know Russ isn’t it for me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“My duty to my family...and I feel like I’m dying inside, like something is tearing apart within me at the thought of anyone else even touching me. I’m not sure I can do this.”

“You look like it too,” she blurted. “Van, if you aren’t sure about this – you owe it to Russ to actually try to be happy. If

you can't or don't want to try, it's not fair to him. He's been good to you and deserves a chance at least."

"I know. I'm going to try."

"You do what is right for both of you – no matter how hard it is."

Holly stood there watching the emotions on Vanessa's face and felt a rush of anger for the man who'd casually slept with her friend at an obvious weak moment. Vanessa had always put up a brave front but lacked self-confidence. He'd used that to his advantage, taking what wasn't his.

"What do you want to do?"

"I'm going to marry Russ," she said with a nod and looked at Holly pleadingly. "Don't tell anyone, please"

"You know I won't."

"I know – and thank you."

"That's what friends are here for."

"You are my best friend and I'm so glad I ever met you."

"Me too."

"You ready, Mrs. Stallings?"

"That sounds so wrong," Vanessa admitted, wincing.

"Get used to it sweetie," Holly said with a knowing smile. "Russ will never go with you using your name over his."

Holly linked arms with Vanessa and walked towards the door. She could feel the bride's arm trembling as she bravely faced her future. Opening it, she stepped out into the sunlight and knew that if she was in Vanessa's shoes, she'd feel like a sacrificial lamb going to the altar. She wanted something encompassing in her life and knew she couldn't make the same decision as Vanessa – she'd never settle for less than fireworks.

Walking slowly up the aisle, Holly could only imagine what was going through Vanessa's mind in this moment. She knew deep inside, she could not have done the same... but

then again, she'd really never felt such an urge like Van had mentioned - unless you counted that kiss a week ago.

She'd thought of it repeatedly and how bad she'd felt avoiding the man. Thankfully her team was able to brush him off repeatedly as he'd shown up at her office.

"Holly was here, she went home sick."

"You just missed her, she left for the day."

"She called in and someone's been watching her patients for her."

"She's busy and said tomorrow."

Holly knew she was going to have to face Niall sooner or later. Facing him would mean addressing that kiss between them. She'd given in to a moment's desire and knew the moment she'd seen his expression that she'd made a mistake. He wouldn't give up or let go. She knew that now. She'd actually been watching over her shoulder and avoided being out in town. Her running had been on the treadmill at home and Amazon had delivered her groceries.

"I now pronounce you man and wife, you may kiss the bride!"

Holly watched horrified as Vanessa kissed Russ as enthusiastically as someone who was licking a toilet seat would be. It was painful to watch and obvious to anyone with two eyes. What was she going to do? Her friend's new husband would be wanting to get it on tonight, and she couldn't even imagine what that would be like.

Blankly she followed them down the aisle and headed straight for the bar to get a drink in the reception hall. She never ever hardly imbibed but today was different. Today she needed to relax and forget things.

"Jack, straight up please," Holly ordered softly and looked sideways at the bride and groom taking their positions at the table. She was so glad the photos were already done and maybe this afternoon could become a thing of the past quickly.

“Make that two, sir,” Holly heard from behind her and her heart flipped wildly in her chest.

How was Niall here?

Putting on a brave face, she glanced over at him in surprise. Gosh, he looked beautiful in a suit. The black against his hair and skin made him look practically debonair, like James Bond or some GQ cover model.

“Are you avoiding me?”

“Maybe,” she answered honestly, accepting the small shot glass and holding it up in salute. “I might be and you aren’t taking the hint either. What are you even doing here? Are you following me?”

“I own part of the company,” Niall shrugged easily. “I’m here as a favor and paying the open bar’s tab as a gift to the happy couple.”

“Then I will take two more,” she quipped easily at the bartender and muttered under her breath. “Happy couple? Ha.”

“Not so much I gather?” he said quickly, nodding and holding up two fingers. The bartender quickly lined up four shot glasses and poured Jack Daniels in them, spilling it slightly on the wooden top. Niall tapped the surface of the lengthy bartop and put several bills in the tip jar, taking the bottle as he gathered up the glasses precariously. “Let’s go somewhere we can talk?”

“I don’t think that’s a great idea,” she admitted, watching him.

“Jack does,” he teased, wiggling his eyebrows.

Holly smiled grimly and found herself following him away from the pathetic display of affection between the bride and groom. She couldn’t watch that anymore without yelling out how wrong this all was. Whatever had happened with Vanessa, she wasn’t attracted to Russ any longer... and it was painfully obvious.

Exiting the reception area, they walked down the hallway of the building and Holly saw Niall try a few doors before

finally opening one. The small office had several chairs stacked up, file cabinets and other office equipment on shelves nearby. Nothing fancy, just a small storage area. Setting down the shot glasses and bottle, he pulled free two chairs and set them down.

Holly quickly took a seat and backed it away from him as he cracked the mini blinds. Streams of light poured in the room, and she was kinda glad he didn't flip on the overhead light. It gave it a more secluded, private atmosphere – like they were hiding away from the world. Dust danced on the beams of light and she found herself staring at them numbly.

“What’s wrong?”

“That,” she said bluntly, tossing her thumb over her shoulder. “Was all wrong.”

“I noticed.”

“Wasn’t that painful to watch?”

“They aren’t right for each other,” he agreed, handing her a shot glass. “Russ is a fairly nice guy and I’ve met him a few times but anyone with eyes can see that she’s not interested. I actually feel sorry for the guy.”

“Why? Cause he’s not taking ‘no’ for an answer either?”

“Very funny Holly,” he said wryly, clinking his glass against hers. “I thought perhaps we could talk for a bit and figure some of this out?”

“There is nothing to figure out.”

“Holly, I’m not giving up and that kiss...”

“Sheesh... I made a mistake doing that,” she said irritated and tossed back her drink, holding the glass out. “You are annoying, irritating and I’m not cool with some guy bullying me around or sniffing me weirdly. So, thanks for the booze... but I’m not interested.”

“You *are* interested,” he began firmly, refilling her glass. “I’m all of those things and more. I’m not going to let you push me away because you are worried or scared. I can be patient.”

“Patient for what?”

“For this,” he countered, leaning forward. His hand circled her neck and pulled her towards him. Holly found herself leaning forward and not even fighting it, the shot glass spilling in her lap unheeded. Niall’s lips found hers and she felt herself melting against him just like before at her office.

There was something primal in their kiss that lit a fire inside of her and made her body itch with desire. She shut her eyes and blamed it on the alcohol mentally as she felt his hands roaming her back, pulling her into the chair he was sitting on. The strength in his arms were incredible and she barely noticed the movement until she was sitting there, straddling the arms of the office chair.

Leaning back, Holly felt the zipper of her horrid dress slowly slide down, freeing her torso as her breasts touched the cool air in the dimly lit room. It felt seedy, taboo...and absolutely fantastic! His hot mouth tore away from hers as he licked down the slope of one of her breasts, causing her to arch heavily against him as he gently bit at her nipple, tearing a moan from her throat of its own accord.

Her body felt like it was on fire at Niall’s touch.

His hands were climbing up her legs as he feasted on her body, moving from one creamy globe to the other. She felt her panties get pulled aside and just as she began to protest at the intimate act, his finger slid through her folds, touching her.

Holly’s breath escaped her as her body moved of its own accord, helpless and in desperation to reach a crest that she didn’t even know was there. Her favorite vibrator barely did half the job that his urgent touch was doing. His lips were everywhere, licking, tasting, and nuzzling her... as if he couldn’t get enough either.

She heard him breathe softly in her ear, speaking words she didn’t understand, just before she felt a warmth against her neck. Caught up in the ecstasy of the moment, she arched against the momentary pinch and the feel of his lips on her throat.

Such pleasure, warmth...*and itching?*

“Wait,” she breathed, pulling back from him. She felt his fingers caress her very core and shivered in pleasure. “Wait Niall, I can’t,” she repeated- pushing at his shoulders and struggling to extract herself from his arms. His breath was ragged, and she felt him lick her throat, leaving a burning itch in the same spot.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I lost control and couldn’t help myself.”

“I’m sorry, she repeated and looked down at her exposed arms as she jerked her dress up. “Oh my gosh, I am breaking out in hives!” she squawked. “Seriously, do you have any animals at home?”

“Holly, we need to talk,” he said painfully.

“This was your version of us talking,” she smarted off and pulled herself off the chair, reaching behind her and righting her panties. “Oh, my goodness, no wonder Vanessa was bothered about marrying Russ if she felt like that... nevermind. I’d be upset too,” she muttered.

“What are you talking about?” Niall stopped and looked alarmed. It was as if his body seized and something snapped him to attention. He looked... distracted. “I need to go. Now.”

“Really dude? You get all handsy... and then ditch me?”

“Holly, I can explain but I need to go. *We* need to go.”

“Why?”

“I can feel it. One of my family is here.”

“Don’t you want to see them?”

“I can’t,” he said sadly, her heart feeling a pull at the fierce longing in his face. “It’s part of what we should talk about.”

“No offense, but I need to get away from you... and this place. I need some Benadryl fast or a steroid. I’m itching like crazy.”

“Allow me,” he offered, pulling a package of Benadryl from the pocket of his jacket. She gratefully took a few pills

and swallowed them without the benefit of water in desperation. He was watching her and there was a look of remorse on his face.

“You didn’t do this,” she started and then stopped, presenting her back to him as he quickly zipped her back up. “Unless you have an animal at home, you didn’t do this to me. It’s normal and just annoying.”

“Holly,” he started and then looked up again. “I need to go. Come with me and let’s talk somewhere that won’t end up with clothing coming off.

“I think that’s the best suggestion you’ve had in a while.”

HOLLY

HOLLY WALKED out of the wedding reception quickly, ignoring the looks they were receiving as she knew her body was flaring up badly. Her eyes felt puffy, she had massive welts on her arms and could only imagine how bad her face looked. Niall opened the car door for her and looked at her apologetically. She shook her head in frustration.

Why was the Benadryl not working yet?

“I think I’m going to need something stronger, can you take me by the immediate care center?” she asked, scratching badly at her arms and chest. “I can get a steroid shot to get rid of this so I can think clearly.” Holly didn’t say a word about him speeding down the road; she was actually grateful and poured out of the muscle car in a purple satiny mess.

The splotches on her arms were the size of someone’s hands and upraised in huge welts. Glancing up in the waiting room mirror, she saw that her face was covered and her mouth was swollen. She’d even scratched herself so much her neck was bleeding. She must look horrifying and yet?

Niall was still there.

The woman at the desk immediately grabbed a nurse to whisk Holly into a room with the clipboard. Niall followed, and surprisingly the nurse allowed him to. Usually they asked family members to wait outside in the reception area. He

politely turned his back as Holly was quickly changed into a paper gown and given a sheet to cover herself.

She was just ready for some relief and frankly didn't care who was there at the time. It took everything she had not to yank the needle from the nurse as she injected the steroid into her arm. Minutes ticked by and Holly was still itching, but not in the severity that she was earlier. She'd wanted to tear her skin off moments ago, and had the fingernail scratches to prove it.

"Feeling any better?" the nurse asked.

"Yes, much. It's finally fading."

"You could start up your allergy shots again, Holly, if things have gotten this bad for you."

"I'd prefer not to, and it's not guaranteed to keep from having a reaction."

"No, but it could keep it mild"

"Maybe you should," Niall interrupted quickly, gathering the two women's attentive glares. Holly couldn't believe he'd had the nerve to speak up and comment on it.

"I'd prefer not to get poked all the time if I could just stay away from the irritant. So far- that would be you!"

"Avoidance is the easiest way to handle an allergy," the woman shrugged easily, looking non-plussed and scribbling something on the clipboard she held in her hands.

"Nurse, could you excuse us a moment?" Niall said firmly, staring at the other woman as she did an about face, looking completely unaware of her surroundings. Holly gaped as the nurse immediately backed out of the room.

"What just happened?" She was shocked at how complacent the feisty woman was – usually that particular nurse was a spitfire and sassed patients all the time about how they needed to take care of themselves. It was part of the reason she avoided this clinic – and had stopped her shots. Avoidance *did* work... at the clinic and with animals. She felt much better avoiding that woman's berating comments once a

week and didn't relish the idea of doing her routine of injections again.

As the door shut closed, she glared at Niall.

"I don't need allergy shots," she started, and got quiet as he sat down hard in the chair nearby. There was something about his face that stopped her in her tracks. He looked... devastated. "What?"

"Holly, remember after the race how you asked if I had a dog?"

"You do, don't you?"

"It's actually worse than that," he muttered, raking his fingers through his hair. He pulled the tin tray off the roll-around cart, scattering the wrappers and needle from her injection onto the counter nearby. Holding up the surface of the tray to Holly, she glanced at her reflection.

"Yep, I'm all puffy and red. Gee, thanks for showing me again... wait," she stopped mid remark and stared at her neck. There were two small punctures just below her ear, puffed up and red with a rash around it. "What are you showing me?"

"Holly, I don't know how to say this without you thinking I'm insane or making you scream in fright. I got so caught up in the moment, that I bit you. I'm cursed, Holly."

"No, I think I am. I mean, look at my arms and face."

"I was condemned a long time ago to be alone. My whole family was, which was why I had to leave the wedding. I could feel the presence of one of my siblings nearby and when they are close, I'm weak and vulnerable."

"Okay, so you're no Hercules then? So what? They aren't nearby now."

"No."

"So that means you are super strong?"

"I'm immortal, not strong."

"You're on crack," Holly said flatly, glancing at the tray he held. "Next you'll be telling me you're a vampire and did this

on purpose.” Holly pointed at her neck. The bite-mark was evident on her, but where were his teeth? “Smile, right now.” His strained smile showed no elongated teeth, but she did see a hint of redness like he’d been drinking a Slurpee.

Holly... the Slurpee.

She eyed him apprehensively and looked at the tray again in disbelief. Did the handsome guy actually bite her? How had she not felt anything? Being in his arms was incredible and so hot, her body had burned with passion, but was that the allergy or for real?

“It was actually an accident – I got carried away and yes. I am a vampire but was also cursed with lycanthropy. I’m a werewolf that feeds on blood. I truly am a dog and the reason you are flaring up.”

Looking up at Niall, she saw that he truly believed this.

This was crazy, complete Looney Tunes, and yet? Everything he said made complete sense, except for the fact that he was claiming to be a mythological creature that drank blood and howled at the moon. She didn’t know what was worse, the fact that the first man she was truly attracted to was insane... or that what he said was true and she was allergic to him. Touching him or kissing him would result in this each and every time.

Laughing to herself, she shook her head. Maybe they’d slipped her some awesome drugs with the steroid shot, or she’d gotten a bad batch. She was losing her mind? And if she didn’t shut up, repeated what he was claiming or professing... well, they’d lock her away.

“Look, I’m feeling better and just want to go home. I don’t want to be anybody’s Scooby-snack or doggie treat – I just think I need some sleep and time alone for the drugs I am obviously on... to wear off. Let’s get the nurse in here and get me out.”

“Can I take you somewhere for dinner?”

“In your terms: I’ll take a doggie bag. I seriously need to be alone, so I can get the swelling to go down and think.”

“I’ll drive you home.”

“Actually, I’ll take an Uber. No offense.”

Niall’s shoulders dropped as he nodded and backed out of the room. She heard him talking with the nurse and then suddenly his warm, caring voice was gone, leaving a strange vacuum sensation within her. Could the fantastical story he’d told her be true? If it was...what happened? How did he get like this and could they make it work? The door opened slightly as the nurse peered in.

“Feeling better already?”

“Yes, the swelling has gone down quite a bit. Thank you,” she agreed. “Did my... did Niall head out?”

“Yes ma’am, he said you could take the car. He left the keys with the front desk and said you could take your time getting ready. I have a few Medrol dose packs for you in case you flare up again like this.”

“Thank you – and I need to schedule the allergy shots again, please,” Holly said softly. She had no idea if what he said was true, but she wasn’t going to let another flare-up stop her from finding out more about the man that held her captivated.

NIALL

NIALL LEFT the immediate care clinic in emotional chaos.

He was keenly aware of the disbelief and the horrified awareness in Holly's reaction. She was stunned and pushing him away again. He couldn't blame her. This was all his fault and due to his lack of control. He'd wanted to have a few drinks with her and sweet talk her into a date or perhaps even a relationship. Everything in him wanted to get to know her better; he craved her scent and had thought about her repeatedly since the race and his teeth cleaning. There was a scent she gave off, a pheromone that was sweeter than any perfume he'd ever smelled.

When they'd been talking, he'd leaned forward to kiss her... and everything had unraveled in him. He'd pulled her bodily to him and blissfully - she'd responded. Every move he made, she'd melted against him. He'd been in heaven tasting her sweet pert breasts. When he'd dared to touch her most sensitive spot, she'd arched her neck in the throes of passion.

Niall couldn't resist.

He had bit her tenderly, lovingly, savoring this moment deep within his soul. His teeth had slid out of his gums of their own accord. No blood had been needed to draw them out - no hunger - just Holly's essence.

The first taste of her sweet blood had been heaven and he thought his heart would burst. If there had been any doubt before? It was wiped clean the moment his tongue had sampled her blood, wanting more. No other had ever tasted so sweet or made him feel so intensely alive, full of wanton needs and carnal desires. His fingers had been wet with her juices and the urge to taste her, to imagine what it would be like to have her eyes on him as he licked his fingers nearly made him lose control.

It was never like this!

Feeding had always been perfunctory. A grotesque meal preparation that had to be done. He'd freeze his victims, wipe their thoughts and finish quickly, gulping down his meal like a child eating Brussel sprouts for the first time.

Not with Holly – he wanted to savor her, drawing out his meal and this moment as long as possible. Her blood was like sampling a fine wine or the best slice of dessert ever created. The smell of the first bite made you moan in lust and desire. The actual taste made you relish the fact that your taste buds felt alive and you'd never had anything quite like it before... and the second bite made you understand that this dessert was decadent and incredible.

When he'd pulled back from Holly's throat, he'd felt a keen sense of loss and almost grabbed her to pull her back to him. Her scent was still on him and he could imagine the taste of her, making his gut clench in desire and loss.

His woman was in there and afraid of him. He wanted to disappear and run away from the memory of her expression. Niall did something that he'd not done in a long time: he changed.

His body contorted, as he struggled to morph into a wolf. Because his stepmother had condemned him to both nightmarish creatures, he was stuck between the worlds. He wasn't fully vampire, having to hide from the sun, nor was he fully wolfen.

It was painful and hard to change form physically.

Staring at his hands in the darkness, his fingers elongated and his palms stretched. Each of his arms snapped and popped as his elbows and bones adjusted to the new form. He bit back a scream as his shoulders widened and his back arched. As his legs began to fold, he dropped to all fours and waited for the finished product.

He accepted the pain and relished it. His mind took the back seat as instinct flared hotly within him. The wolf took control, and the human within him was willing to let go.

Niall wanted to run from the sadness and fear in her eyes...and forget.

HOLLY

HOLLY WAS GATHERING her things at the clinic and finally back in the horrendous satin bridesmaid dress. She felt lost and struggling with the revelations from Niall. Part of her wanted to admit the fact that he was a nut-job and she'd hit it off with a real winner... yet, another part of her sensed that he was telling the truth. He believed what he was saying. Her body knew before she did that something was wrong, making her itch and sneeze.

Her body *also* recognized him.

She'd never felt such joy and wanton desire in someone's arms. The moment he'd kissed her, she'd come undone and had given herself to him. He could have made love to her there in that storage closet and it would have felt like a honeymoon. If he was a wolf, she was his bitch in heat.

So why was she hiding from him?

Why would she tell him to leave?

Holly heard the faint howl outside as she left the building. A hot tear slipped from her eyes as she somehow knew it was him and he was hurting. How did she reach out to him? Pat her leg... offer doggie treats? What would having a relationship with him be like? Should she invest in scarves to cover her neck and increase her intake of iron tablets for her anemia? Flea collars? Would she be expected to give him a flea dip?

... And how crazy did that make her for even thinking of all of this?

This was why she needed time.

She needed to process what accepting his words as truth would do to her life, and what denying him would do to her soul. She already knew deep inside that she wanted more of what she had briefly experienced in that storage closet... to the fullest extent possible. Standing there beside Niall's car, she shut her eyes and took a deep breath of the night air.

Change was coming, it was just a matter of deciding what she would choose. He'd been polite enough to leave the car for her and while no one else questioned that he'd left the keys, she'd known deep in her heart that he'd left the car because he had an alternate means to get home. Problem was, she didn't know how.

Did he turn into a bat and fly away? His howl had given away his choice, but if he was a wolf...could there be more transformations she was unaware of? Did that make Batman real? What about mirrors and garlic? Did he crave Alpo... or Purina?

This is insane and you are cray-cray, Holly...

At that thought, she hurriedly got in the car and slammed the door shut. She pushed the knob down, locking the door, and glanced up to see a massive shaggy animal slink back into the bushes. Was that Niall, and was he dangerous like this?

For a moment she knew she should be terrified... but somehow wasn't. She was curious, fascinated. Starting the car, it roared to life with the throaty sound the carburetor made and that made her miss him that much more.

Niall was like the car... powerful and brought a surge of excitement within her.

Driving herself home, she flew into the front door and threw the locks. It was almost comical how she tiptoed around the house turning off the lights and making sure the blinds were closed. She had never been paranoid before, but now she

was definitely hiding from Niall. She wasn't scared, but just wanted to distance herself.

Running a bath, she thought back about the entire afternoon and evening – replaying everything in her head. The look in his eyes, the feel of his lips, and even the keen sense of disappointment in his face when she brushed him off. The attraction was certainly there, but so was the allergic reaction.

Settling down in the warm water, she added some Epsom salt and shut her eyes. Poor Vanessa, if she had found a passion like that with someone... how could she settle for good 'ol Russ? He was so... normal.

Niall was anything but that.

There was something about him that made her aware of him in a way she'd never expected. She'd been out with guys, but none of them drew her like a compass needle to a magnet. Niall was a perfect gentleman in so many ways, but in others she could see the depths of passion in his eyes – and it was only for her. The thought of him directly focusing that desire made her toes curl. If she was willing to take emotion out of the equation- she was clinically fascinated with him.

How old was Niall if his story was true? What was it like to be a whatever he was?

... A vamp-dog?

Bloodsucking beast?

A mutt with a terrific butt?

A fang she almost banged?

She groaned at the pathetic line of thought her mind was travelling down and turned on the dentist once again. How did his teeth work? Did she feel his incisors descend and how did they retract? Did he file them, and why didn't it hurt when he bit her?

Would she turn into a vampire?

Holly started to jerk upwards only to slip against the slope of the tub, sliding herself down into the water and coming up

sputtering. Wiping her eyes, she held her hands in front of her searching for anything different in appearance.

Did she crave a rare steak, a chew toy... a good scratch behind her ears?

This time, she did laugh out loud, breaking the silence in her house. She was fascinated and had not truly been so intrigued or felt so alive in such a long time. She wanted to know more about the man, and it would involve a long discussion in a safe place. Being alone would be a terrible idea because she also craved relief for the sensations that he'd uncovered inside of her... and they hadn't finished savoring together.

NIALL

“CONN, I have truly messed up badly and I need your help,” Niall admitted, calling his brother on FaceTime once he got home. He had a hard run, went through the pain of the transformation, and got a cold shower. Nothing was helping. He had Holly on the brain and needed a fix like an addict. He could breathe her scent, tasted her sweetness, and it was etched in his mind, taunting him.

“Screwed the pooch, ol’ buddy?” Conn’s jovial deep voice came through the phone speakers, almost drawing a smile from Niall. His brother’s quick wit and sarcastic sense of humor had always been both a blessing and a curse.

Growing up, Conn had a way of making a bad situation fade away by a few well-timed punchlines...but he had also ended up with a few punches, too.

“Har-de-har-har, very funny. I come to you for help, and this is what I get?” Niall asked.

“You know, I should pencil this on the calendar, so I know just how many times I have bailed you out over the years and how many times you’ve helped me... and Niall, how many times has that been?”

“None, you jackass. You always manage to talk yourself out of most everything.”

“Exactly. A skill you’d think you’d have learned by now?”

“Enough. Are you going to help me or not?”

“Tell me what’s wrong,” Conn said obligingly. There was a smirk on his beloved brother’s face that made Niall leery. His brother was quite the prankster and used to enjoy putting all sorts of bugs and rodents in cupboards, bedlinens, and closets as a child.

“There’s this girl...”

... And Conn’s peal of laughter immediately shut Niall off. He didn’t say a word for several minutes. As his brother wiped tears from his eyes, he hid a smile behind his hand and cleared his throat, waving at the screen, attempting to look concerned.

“Please continue?”

“Are you finished?”

“Yes, unless you tell me she looks like...” his brother started laughing again and slapping his leg.

Niall watched him on the small screen. Part of Niall was envious of the ease in which Conn found humor in everything. He enjoyed seeing his brother laugh and it brought back nostalgia for days long ago. Time had passed and so much had been missed out on. He’d willingly be the butt of his jokes if he got to see his closest brother like this...it eased the embarrassment that he felt in confiding he was having girl problems.

“... unless she looks like *Lassie* or *Poochie*?” Conn roared hysterically and then got the hiccups. Niall himself grinned at the quick comeback. “Can we kennel you two together and just get it over with?”

“I wish it was that simple,” Niall muttered as his brother continued chuckling before calming himself.

“Sorry, please go ahead. I’m done,” Conn said politely and grinned. “Is she kinky? Does she wear a flea collar for you?”

“I’d like you to meet her,” Niall retorted. “You can see for yourself.”

“Oh, this I have got to see!”

“Be nice to her,” he warned.

“I’m always nice to the ladies,” Conn said graciously.

“Not THAT nice. This is *my* lady we are talking about here.”

“I’ll be *extra* nice to her...”

“Conn...?” Niall said warningly, his eyebrows shooting together, glaring at his brother’s smiling face.

Conn had always been good-looking... and combined with the charisma that he oozed towards the fairer sex? He’d never lacked for attention. He could charm the ladies; problem was that he never stuck around long enough – literally.

He’d mistakenly killed a woman after he had reappeared from his spectral form and it had nearly destroyed him mentally. Now, he’d play with the women and enjoy himself, but the moment it was time?

He’d use that to end the relationship...*every single time*... and distance himself as much as possible to prevent the horrific guilt that came with reappearing – and their death.

“Fine. She’s off limits, I get it.”

“Good. Now, I want you to get your teeth cleaned.”

“Excuse me?”

“She’s a dentist – just go, okay?”

“You do realize the humor in that, right?”

“The whole thing is comical beyond belief,” Niall muttered under his breath and looked away from the phone.

“Why do you say that?”

“She’s allergic to dogs,” Niall began and Conn’s laughter sounded almost exactly like his other brother, as he heard the laughter once again echoing in his ears. Temperament and patience had never been Niall’s strong suit- combine that with the strong urge that Holly had left racing through his body?

Yeah, he had an attitude.

“Just go see her and tell her I’m a great guy. Call me when you’ve finished. Bye,” Niall snapped angrily and hung up on his other brother, just like he’d hung up on Brion weeks ago. Holly having an allergic reaction to him when he got close would never, *ever*, be funny.

HOLLY

HOLLY HEARD her office staff whispering among themselves instead of working. She broke up the group, but not long afterwards the phone rang repeatedly from the receptionist desk. Getting up to check, she did a double-take at the sight ahead of her. Sure enough, the four girls were all hovering around a man sitting in the small waiting room and offering him water, a TV remote and laughing with him.

The man was beautiful in sort of a polished GQ-esque style. He was dressed in a starched dress shirt, as well as khaki pants and what looked to be argyle socks. He should have been at the country club or anywhere else but her office. Just when she was rushing the girls back to their workstations, she glanced over her shoulder and saw him wave his fingers playfully in a silent greeting.

Okay.

Not cool.

It wasn't professional, but Holly couldn't help rolling her eyes in dismay as she shut the door separating the waiting area and the procedure rooms. His sharp bark of laughter echoed against the plain walls, making her realize what she'd done. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. Pulling the patient's chart, she groaned in frustration.

No wonder the man had looked a bit familiar.

Connall Cael – Niall’s relative.

They had the same dark hair and intense eyes, but this man didn’t have the same appearance. He seemed softer, which sounded odd to her, but he lacked the wildness that lingered in Niall. This man was polished – he could step into any boardroom in a suit and fit right in.

“Mr. Cael?” Holly said flatly, opening the door once again, and had to fight the urge to shake her receptionist as she sighed happily and watched the man get to his feet. The woman was obviously infatuated and Holly felt a twinge of pity for her. This man never even noticed her. “What can I help you with today?”

“Dentist, huh?” he chuckled, muttering in a low voice that had her simmering as he walked past her. She could smell his cologne and noticed that he didn’t have the same rugged earthy scent Niall did. He was also almost as tall as Niall. Holly shook her head at the comparisons and put her game face on.

“Yes, I’m a dentist. Isn’t that why you scheduled an appointment, Mr. Cael?” she countered politely.

There was an air of tension in the small room she entered as she walked in first and indicated he should have a seat. Instead, he stood there for several moments watching her, making her skin crawl.

“It says here you need a cleaning?” she asked, flipping through the chart. “How long has it been? Any issues?”

“It’s been a while and yeah... I could use a good cleaning. I’m a dirty, dirty boy. Call me Conn, please.” He took a seat and smiled at her, patting the roll around stool beside the chair. Holly backed away from him and stared at him hard.

“Do I need to ask you to leave?” She said bluntly, arching an eyebrow at the stupid pickup line he was tossing out. The man was good-looking and obviously got his way whenever he wanted, but he wouldn’t be successful today.

As if by magic, she saw his face split with a smile as he relaxed, sitting back in the chair. He went from stalker-mode

to church-boy in two seconds flat, leaving her stunned.

“Good,” Conn said plainly, lacing his fingers on his chest. “I’m Niall’s brother and you must be the lovely Miss Holly that he’s so hung up on. It’s nice to meet you and sorry about the intro.”

“What is going on? Did he send you here to... to... hit on me?” she said aghast, her temper rising. “You can just take your hormones and douchebag-ways outta here. I’m not interested in the slightest, Mr. Cael! Get out, now!”

Instead of him leaving or being insulted, he got to his feet, straddling the large chair designed to lay back the patient, and gave a slight bow. “I’m sorry but I had to meet you. You’re the very first person Niall’s been crazy about in... well... forever,” Conn said with a knowing, sardonic grin that lifted the side of his sculpted lip.

Any other woman would be fascinated, but not her. There was something missing to Conn. He didn’t ring her bell or push her buttons, unless it was her temper.

“How do you...? Are you...?” she breathed in shock as she realized that if Niall was what he claimed - then so was Conn.

Both were... *different*.

“Are you a threat to me? Am I in danger?” she asked, her hand fluttering to the scarf around her throat. The pinprick holes were still there, but had faded significantly. His eyes softened perceptibly, and he shook his head.

“No, if anything you are the safest creature in the world. My brother would do anything to protect you, trust me,” Conn admitted, taking a seat once again. “It has been a long time though between cleanings and he recommended I see you.”

Holly slowly walked to the chair and put it backwards quickly. It would take him a moment to sit up and make a move, hopefully giving her enough time to put space between herself and him- if he was lying. She draped a cloth around his neck and instructed him to relax in a flat voice.

“Aren’t you curious at why my brother recommended I come in?”

“No,” she snapped and quickly apologized. “Right now, I feel like a buffet for you people.” Conn laughed in shock and surprise at her words.

“You’re a quick one, aren’t you? Good, you’ll keep him on his toes,” he admitted and opened his mouth dutifully at her wry, deadpan look. Holly inspected his teeth and noticed that neither Niall nor Conn had fangs evident.

As if Conn read her mind, she watched in shock as one canine elongated ever so slightly, causing her to gasp and jerk back her hands in alarm.

“Watch it, buddy!” she whispered hotly, slapping him on the shoulder. She knew the staff was close by and probably sniffing around outside of the door. “You bite me, don’t think I won’t stab you with something!”

“I thought you’d think it was cool or something,” he said sheepishly. “You mean Niall hasn’t shown you how they work?”

“We haven’t really talked about that,” she admitted. “I just found out and well... it’s personal.”

“You were scared?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“My brother is my business, and he definitely admires you.”

“I like him too, but he’s just... intense,” she breathed quietly. “I shouldn’t even be telling you this but it’s like I’m talking to my mom or something.”

“Ouch, that really hurts a guy’s ego,” he winced.

“Do that tooth thing again, this time slowly and I want to watch - from a distance,” she ordered bluntly and picked up her stainless-steel scale remover. It was a sharp instrument, with a vicious curved hook at the bottom. “Go ahead. I’m ready.”

“I’m not,” he said cautiously, looking at the tool she was holding. “I’ll show you – but you don’t have to threaten me.”

“It’s not a threat. I’m protecting myself.”

“From me?”

“Are you like... are you another vampire that is a wolf? How come I’m not sneezing around you?”

“I heard you were allergic to dogs,” Conn admitted with a knowing smile. “I’m sorry, but that is beyond hysterical. That would be like someone being scared of... well, never mind the metaphor, ‘cause Fiacha passes out,” he finished quickly, completely losing her in whatever he was saying.

Who passes out? Is Fiacha another family member?

“Put up, or shut up, Conn” Holly said darkly. “I have another patient coming in and if I knew this was an interview... I would have booked more time.” Surprisingly enough, she watched as Conn obligingly opened his mouth and a long canine tooth descended.

“Stay there! Just like that!” she ordered and began to inspect it. To the dentist in her, it was fascinating.

The tooth was beautiful in its supreme simplicity. It never sharpened or got massively pointy like in the movies, and there were tiny ridges on the underside that she’d not seen before that almost looked serrated. No wonder it was able to pierce the skin. She was surprised that he didn’t have issues cutting his tongue on the tooth.

Just as she was running a mirror along the underside, it began to retract.

“Wait! I’m not done yet,” Holly blurted out and felt her face flush.

“Someone’s coming,” Conn admitted. “I can hear them just around the corner.” Looking up, Holly saw that indeed Bridget, her receptionist had filled her empty cup with hot tea and was standing at the door with an endearing smile on her face. Nodding, she pointed at the small desk in the corner and fought a smile as there was no response from Conn.

Bridget set down the cup, turned, and left quickly, hanging her head.

“You didn’t need a cleaning, did you?” Holly asked softly, her eyes staring at him. She was trying to get a read on him, but Conn looked like he was enjoying the simple fact that he knew something she didn’t. He looked smug and a bit sheepish at being caught.

“No, but Niall really wants to talk to you again - to answer any questions you have and explain things to you.”

“What if I don’t want to know?”

“That’s up to you,” Conn said with a shrug. There was something in his eyes that struck her. He looked sad, like he had a secret or knew something he hadn’t shared.

“Is Niall okay?”

“Yes, he is, but I just know what it’s like to lose someone or have them be afraid of what could be. I don’t want to see my brother have to go through what I am dealing with now. It hurts in a way I’d never imagined.”

“Did you lose someone? Can you talk to her about it?” Holly asked, suddenly sympathetic for the man. His laughing eyes and smiling face were suddenly barren, hiding a raw pain that made him seem vulnerable.

“Give Niall a chance,” Conn said softly, glancing up at her. “He’s a good man that has gotten a raw deal. Ask him your questions, talk to him. I’m pretty sure he would tell you anything you wanted to know – I know I would tell Daphne, if I could get close to her again... but she’s gone. My time passed and I’m lost without her.”

“I’m so sorry Conn,” she breathed, feeling the pain emanating from him. He’d lost someone very close to him and she couldn’t imagine how it must feel.

“Don’t be, just take happiness where you can... and the rest will fall into place.”



HOLLY STARED at her phone and Niall's car outside of her office. It was late in the afternoon and the girls had left - well, all but Bridget. She was balancing the books for the day and finishing filling claims. The woman was meticulous and kept everything so organized.

Meeting Conn had been so much more than she had expected. He was nice, polite, and cared for his brother a lot. He wouldn't answer questions she had- recommending she talk with Niall about it. Sometimes when he smiled, she could see the resemblance to Niall. He was suave, yet something was missing. While she understood the attraction women had to him and Bridget's obvious fascination?

Holly was not interested in the least.

Conn had given her Niall's phone number and urged her to reach out, promising that she wouldn't regret anything... except the unknown. His words haunted her as she heard them in her mind, over and over again.

"Regret is a horrible thing to live with and something that takes forever to shake," Conn said ruefully. "Sometimes I crave an ordinary world, a regular life, but then I wouldn't have the memories that I do cherish." She could understand that, and the truth of his words really hit home for her.

She would never know until she reached out and gave Niall a chance – regardless of how things ended up. Sighing heavily, she finally texted Niall.

A text wouldn't make her sneeze or break out in hives and perhaps they could talk with a little distance between them. He had a tendency to be ultra-close to her, immediately sending up a mental perimeter warning as he invaded her personal space. She could breathe his scent and while it was incredibly sexy that he seemed to want to be so close, it also flared her up.

Hearing a ding, she saw Niall had already replied and felt her lips turn up in a smile.

Forgive me for making you break out?

It wasn't deliberate.

Never will be either.

No, but it does happen when you are around...

Holly felt a pang of regret as several minutes passed and Niall didn't respond. She found herself staring at the screen, hoping for those dots to appear to show he was texting and there was nothing.

"Dr. Baines?" Bridget's voice startled Holly, causing her to glance up in surprise. "I'm almost finished and I forgot to tell you - you had a delivery today and I put it on your desk."

"You did?"

"Yes, ma'am. I knew you were busy and then that really cute guy came in. I lost my train of thought and meant to tell you when I brought you your tea," Bridget said sheepishly. "I hope you weren't upset, but he was really something, wasn't he?"

"He was nice, but I think he is hung up on someone," Holly said absently and saw the tiny blond receptionist's face fall like someone had kicked her puppy. "But Bridget, maybe if the timing is right you'll see him again and be the one to pick him back up? It's funny how things end up working out, isn't it?"

"It is!" she said happily. "Goodnight, Dr. Baines, see you tomorrow."

"See you then," Holly said with a smile and followed Bridget to the front door of the office, unlocked it, and let her out for the evening.

Holly locked it up behind her and sighed. Niall still hadn't texted back a response and she didn't want to be the first one to reach out. In her mind, it showed weakness and she didn't

want to ever be perceived as a weak woman who had to have a man. Walking down the hallway of small rooms, she came to her office and opened the door. Flipping on the light, she did a double-take.

A massive bouquet of soft pink roses was sitting on the middle of her desk in a crystal vase. There had to be two dozen present because it was full of buds as well as full blooms. The heady sweet scent made her smile as she walked over to pluck the card from the plastic pick. Opening it, she felt something in her give just a bit.

Dinner tonight my pink princess?

I'll bring the Benadryl.

~ Niall

The man just didn't give up, and part of her was extremely glad for it. Instead of apologizing for what she had said, Holly took a photo of the flowers and sent it. He immediately responded and while it irritated her that she'd been waiting for him to say something, she also understood that he didn't want to budge either.

Perhaps they were more alike than she realized.

I hope you like them?

7 PM – pick me up at the office.

Holly grinned as she watched those three dots appear, disappear, then reappear several times. She wondered what he was doing or thinking. Was he glad or as excited as she felt? He answered simply with an abrupt confirmation, as she glanced up at the clock.

She didn't have long to wait since it was almost five o'clock now. She had time to finish her notes, change into a different blouse and freshen up. That was the nice thing about having her own office, she could mold it around what she needed. Holly kept a spare blouse, running shorts, sneakers and some toiletries in a cabinet so she could go for a run

whenever she felt like it. She had about two hours to do this, come up with a list of questions that she had, and gather up her courage.



LOOKING UP FROM HER NOTECARD, Holly heard the knock on the glass door and fought the urge to run and answer it. Instead, she slowly got to her feet and tried her best to look composed. This was her first date in a long time... and with a bloodsucking dog.

... Literally.

I have no idea what to call him other than odd, extraordinary and sexy, she thought as she saw him standing there in slacks and a dress shirt.

His brother, Conn, had been wearing a very similar outfit, but this made her want to peel it off of Niall like a banana. She didn't think the wanton feelings and desire would be so strong but it felt almost like a sucker punch, getting stronger and stronger each time she saw him. She felt like she was being drawn in like a magnet slowly creeping across a surface towards another magnet. Is this how Niall felt? Did he feel the same?

"Good evening," he drawled out with dramatic flair, reminding her of Dracula from the old movies on television. He cracked a lop-sided smile and handed her a small box. It was wrapped with pink paper and a large bow atop of it.

"What's this?"

"Just a little something," Niall replied softly, his eyes raking over her face. "I want you to enjoy yourself and hope you don't itch all night." Holly tore off the paper and saw the box of Benadryl.

"I think I need to buy stock in the company," she teased shyly, seeing the earnest look in his eyes. "I actually started my allergy shots back up, and I'm still on a steroid pack right

now, so I might be okay for you to kiss me goodnight without sneezing.”

“What about me kissing you goodnight and good morning?” he asked huskily, taking a step towards her. Holly stood her ground even though her legs felt like Jell-O. She looked him straight in the eye, undaunted. She could smell his cologne and felt almost an electricity between them that made her nerve endings tingle with attraction.

“We’ll have to see, won’t we? Tonight’s date is on my terms and I have some things I want to talk about,” she began. His nostrils flared as his eyes heated; she saw him take a deep breath and knew she was playing with fire. Leaning forward towards him, she whispered softly, her lips almost touching his.

“First question, I want to see your teeth again... so come inside and take a seat.”

Holly saw Niall start in surprise as he was in the process of leaning towards her to span the slight distance between them. She knew he wanted to kiss her, and it was cruel of her to toy with him. The intense attraction was incredible, making her heart beat even faster. Stepping back, she held open the office door and gestured for him to come into the office.

Holly didn’t say a word, but did wonder if he was watching her as she moved. She was certainly watching him for subtle signs and knew he probably was as well. *Two opponents circling each other, waiting to strike*, she mused. Guiding him into the first examination room, she pointed at the chair silently.

Niall obediently took a seat and Holly leaned it back. There was something very sensual about him being on his back, vulnerable to her. She smiled to herself thinking about a puppy wanting its belly rubbed. This was certainly no puppy and if she rubbed his bare belly? ... Oh, how the sparks would fly!

“Open, please.” Holly peered in his mouth and frowned. Nothing was happening. “Can you make your tooth come out

and play for a few? I'd like to see if your teeth look just like Conn's?"

"Did he bite you?" he growled possessively, his eyes flashing with intensity.

"Down boy," Holly muttered, backing away from him quickly. "I was cleaning his teeth today and one incisor dropped down. He didn't bite me and if he would have? He would have regretted it."

"In more ways than one," Niall said under his breath and lay back in the chair once again. "I can only seem to get mine to descend if I taste blood or if I'm turned on."

"What? Conn wasn't, was he?"

"He had better not have been and he better not have bit you!"

"Why? Would you be jealous?"

"Hell yes - no one bites my woman but..." Niall got silent quickly.

"No one but you?" She finished his sentence in a flat tone, her eyebrow raised ironically. "Now if you are done asserting your claim for the moment, lay back again. I know it's stupid and nerdy but I'm really fascinated about how your teeth work." Opening his mouth again, Holly quickly jabbed her pointer finger with one of the instruments on the tray drawing a tiny droplet of blood. "Anything?"

"It has to touch my tooth, Holly."

"Oh," she rubbed her fingertip on the enamel and saw both incisors descend as he gave a little gasp of pleasure. "Seriously? That felt good putting blood on your tooth? Freaky," she chuckled and grabbed a mirror, leaning in for a better look. Sure enough, the teeth looked nearly the same, but his had a slight aggressive curl to the shape of the tooth.

"Can I get an imprint?"

"What? No?" he blurted out, looking at her curiously. "Why?"

“This has my mind all in a tizzy right now. I want to look at them and maybe make a mold for science?”

“Absolutely not,” he stammered and she smiled softly as she saw he was actually blushing. “I mean, I like that you are fascinated with my teeth and all – but there is more to me than just that.”

“I know there is, but we have to start somewhere... right? How did you get those? Do you turn into a wolf at the drop of a hat or only on a full moon? If I am allergic to you, what bothers you? Garlic? Silver? Crosses? High pitched whistles?”

“How about we talk over dinner and then if you want to peek at my teeth again - you can,” he offered. “I may be a vampire, but I do love a good steak and I’m a bit hungry.” He wagged his eyebrows at her enticingly, indicating she could be the meal... and felt her face pale. “I’m teasing you, Holly.”

“Oh, I guess I didn’t know.”

“I’m a normal guy with regular wants and needs. Right now, I need a glass of wine, dinner, and a beautiful companion for a few hours. Does that sound okay with you?”

“Yes, let me get my purse.” Holly slipped out of the room for a moment and practically ran back to her office. Her heart was pounding at the thought of being Niall’s dinner. He meant it innocently and was teasing her, but her mind went instantly to the gutter.

“Holly?”

“I’m ready,” she blurted out and prayed that he didn’t have a magical skill like mind control or telepathy like in the movies. Smoothing her shirt and slacks, she laid her hand on her stomach nervously. Perhaps a glass of wine and something to eat would soothe her anxiety.

They drove to a steakhouse on the other side of town and Holly interrogated him the entire drive over. It was nice that they were alone in the car and didn’t need to worry about being interrupted when she listened to him tell her about his past. Her eyes actually teared up as she listened to him tell her all about the horrors of that day long ago.

She couldn't imagine what it was like to be struck down by his new stepmother who practiced witchcraft. He said it was painful and didn't know what all was involved with changing someone into a vampire, but Niall didn't stop talking as he relived that nightmarish day.

He and his brother tried to protect the younger children, but were targeted a second time. As the others screamed in pain, writhing... Niall had shifted for the first time. He described it as a hot tearing sensation by a rush of instinct and power. He felt lost inside, like watching a movie through a window. Conn would fade away for days on end and return with a horrific hunger that created havoc and slaughter in the towns.

"He didn't seem like the type to want to hurt anyone," she whispered, shocked, as she thought about the laughing man with the bright eyes. He'd been so kind once he realized that she wasn't interested in him.

"The stories of Jack the Ripper? That was Conn. He had reappeared after being starved for a week. That was one of the few times that we were together over the centuries, risking the chance of being weakened to the point of death. I had to be there for my brother... and he's had to learn to live with the anguish of what he's done mindlessly lost in his hunger. I don't think I will ever forget his tears."

"Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry, Niall."

"Don't be," he said simply. "We have all come to realize that the world hates and fears what we are. Because of the curse, none of us have been close until modern electronics brought us together again. It was hard enough being scattered to the wind, but it's just as hard seeing family and knowing you can never hug them again without fear of losing your immortality."

"And you are sure that you would be weakened?"

"Positive," he nodded. "We all had doubts and I ended up getting stabbed by a beggar in the streets of London back in 1188. I still have the scar to prove it."

“Seriously?”

“Hurt like a bugger, too. It was infected and I thought it would never heal – and it wouldn’t until I made Conn leave my side. He was trying to nurse me through it, and it was only getting worse. He left, put some distance between us and I fed on a...” Niall got quiet and glanced at her pointedly. “I fed. Next thing I knew I was better and alone again. Now, shall we head inside?”

“Oh!” Holly blurted out in surprise. “I didn’t realize we’d arrived. Yes, let’s get a table.”

“Time flies when you are having fun,” he reminded her.

“I guess you could say that,” she said with a soft laugh.

Niall was a perfect gentleman during dinner. They shared a bottle of wine that he asked the waiter to leave on the table for them, refilling their glasses easily as they ate and talked. It was so easy to talk with him and he was so engaging. She felt so relaxed and was enjoying herself so much, that she didn’t even realize she was touching his leg with her foot until he suddenly froze.

“Oh, sorry!”

“It’s okay, it’s just... well, I like it.”

“I didn’t realize I’d kicked off my shoes under the table,” she said softly, embarrassed, and covered her mouth to smother a laugh. “The wine must be getting to me.”

“It might be the company too,” he suggested with a tender smile. “I’m grateful we did this. I am having a fantastic time.”

“Me too.”

“I’m glad.”

They finished their food and decided to head back to her office so she could indulge in her curiosity once more. Holly had to admit she was fascinated with the whole thing. Vampire with those teeth... and then part wolf? When she asked him about changing into a dog, he blushed and said he hardly ever made a full change since it was so painful for him. It was more like he got really hairy just about everywhere.

His eyes sparkled with intimacy as her eyes had dropped immediately to his lap in the car and she burst out laughing. Wine or not, she wanted to know as much as possible about the man. Jangling the keys in the lock, she opened the office and they walked inside.

Holly locked the door and turned around to see that Niall was gone.

“Where’d you go?”

“I’m a good patient,” he chuckled from one of the back rooms.

Walking down the dim hallway, her breath caught at the intimacy of being there in the office alone in the dark. The switch was at the end of the hallway and she’d already passed it. Seeing the fluorescent light flicker on in a room, she smiled. *So that is where he was!* she thought playfully.

Niall was already in the chair and in the process of laying it backwards as he sat awkwardly, holding the pedal down with his foot. “Just don’t lean me back too far, I’m stuffed,” he said with a grin and patted his stomach.

“Then I am safe from you using me like a doggy treat?”

“Sure, we’ll say that,” he teased lightly and opened his mouth obligingly.

Holly plopped down on the stool and spun it around playfully before sitting still. She grabbed a mirror and leaned over him, peering in his mouth. Without warning, his fangs began to descend and she practically cooed in delight... and stopped.

“There’s no blood,” she blurted out, looking at Niall. It took her a split second before she realized it wasn’t the blood causing them to descend. It was her. He’d said blood or desire would cause them to make ready for feeding. “Are you...” she whispered, watching him.

“Do you even have to ask? You’re here and close to me,” he admitted softly. “Fascinating thing, did you know when a wolf meets his mate, the female alpha initiates the mating?”

“I don’t think we are anywhere close to being mates, or boyfriend and girlfriend – are we?” Holly asked. “I mean, shouldn’t you mate with another of your kind? I’m normal.”

“You are amazing, and I can’t explain how attracted I am to you. From the very first time I met you, something in me responded.”

“I can’t be your... mate,” she said quietly; her eyes held his as he slowly leaned up on one arm from where he was laying. “I’m too... too...” she breathed, and then suddenly leaned forward to kiss him. She could feel his sharp teeth and expected to cut herself or poke her lip. Instead, she found herself opening up to him and slowly meeting his tongue in a heated kiss.

When it came to Niall, the urge was far more overwhelming. She didn’t know who started first, but suddenly buttons were popping off and clothing was flying everywhere.

Holly was standing there in her bra and slacks as he lay back in the chair, slowly unzipping her pants. She pushed the pedal to sit him upwards. His words echoed in her mind. The female alpha initiates the mating - is that what she was doing? Or just indulging in an incredible lust-filled fantasy of her own?

She swung a bare leg over the chair and saw him smile slightly in approval, his teeth bared. His hands touched her skin, making her body feel like it was on fire but in a sensual way, not an allergic reaction. This is what she’d been craving since that stolen moment at Vanessa’s wedding reception.

His lips teased their way across the edge of her lacy bra, skimming the skin, and then pulling down the cup to ravage the delicate pink bud that was hidden.

Holly gasped with exquisite desire as it shot through her body, firing every nerve ending. A deep moan was ripped from her throat as he repeated the motion with her other breast and yanked her bra downwards to bare her chest completely to him. At the sensation, she knew that there was no going back.

If there was an earthquake it wouldn't have bothered her; she was still going to have Niall tonight.

The fire in her blood wouldn't allow her to move from him until she was sated. Reaching for his pants, she practically whimpered in delight as she saw what awaited her. He was built as fiercely as her mind could have ever imagined. His shaft stood proudly, taunting her with unspoken pleasure. She was about to move her leg in order to remove her panties, but Niall tore the seam, pulling them from her body. Surprised, she saw his eyes were practically glowing in intensity and instead of being afraid?

She felt something primal within her kick into high-gear.

Growling, she advanced ever so slightly towards him, presenting her breast almost at his mouth as she felt the tip of him at her moist entrance. She'd had sex once before, but nothing compared to the feelings coursing through her. She wanted to savor it, relish it and enjoy their joining, but instead she gave in to instinct.

Holly thrust her body downwards against his as he surged upwards in unison. The invasion of his member plundered her, stretching her to the hilt as he fit deeply inside. She couldn't speak, only moan and move – and for Niall it seemed to be the same.

He was cradling her, moving himself in and out of her body in a rhythmic pattern, drawing a combined gasp and moan from them with each thrust. She felt such fire, such intensity building in her body, like a rubber band stretched too far, and knew she was going to explode soon.

“Holly,” he ground out harshly, his face strained as she rode him. His fingers dug into her hips, guiding each movement, causing them to climb higher and higher.

Everything about this moment was more than she bargained for. She could feel him rubbing a delicious spot inside of her, causing her legs to shake at the intensity, while her eyes drank in everything. The line of coarse hair that disappeared where her body met his, a faint scar on his side, a bead of sweat that rolled off his muscled abdomen that was

clenching and tensing with each thrust. This was hotter than anything she could have ever imagined.

“Holly, I didn’t know... I need to...”

“Do it,” she ordered mindlessly, feeling her head spin as she clung to his shoulders, grinding herself against him. The walls of her body were clenching him, causing that sweet friction between them to feel even better as she focused solely on recreating that feeling over and over again.

She could feel his sac tightening against her behind every time her body met his and she rolled her hips in desperate need... and knew he was close as well. The feeling of his strong body against hers was incredible.

“Do it,” she repeated from somewhere deep within her, not sure what she was asking for, and gasped as Niall leaned forward, changing the angle of his cock within her, putting even more friction against her clit and G-spot.

“Oh mercy,” she seized, feeling the longest and most intense orgasm unfurl within her body the moment his teeth pierced her breast.

That feeling alone sent shockwaves through her as her body spasmed in ecstasy. His grip on her tightened as he began to pump mindlessly into her in a movement as old as time.

“Niall!” Holly screamed blindly, hanging onto his shoulders, as another wave of passion rolled over her again and again. Her legs were not working any longer and neither was her mind, everything centered on where the two of them were joined. She felt like she was soaring and had left her body behind, but he was there... with her, fighting for this almost as violently as she was, relishing in the animalistic instincts between them.

They were one.

She heard his roar of pleasure as he flooded her body with his essence and jerked his mouth from her breast. Fascinated, she looked down to see her blood on his teeth and instead of being disgusted- she felt possessed and satisfied – and thoroughly fucked.

His eyes were locked with hers as he held her hips firmly in place, his body deep inside of hers, neither moving. Licking his lips, she saw a glimmer of fear in his face that he expected her to be sickened by the obvious differences between them.

Nothing could be further from the truth right now.

Instead of speaking or saying anything, Holly leaned forward and kissed him. She was deliberately ignoring the metallic tang on his tongue, savoring the feeling of their lips meeting with a tenderness that surprised her.

Both were silently fearful of the other, in different ways.

She needed to grasp at something she didn't understand, feeling the urge to solidify whatever this was... because she knew it was there. It wasn't something you could see, taste, or explain easily, but there was absolutely no doubt in her mind now what Niall had meant when he said 'mated'.

She knew *exactly* what he meant even if she couldn't put it into words. There was a look in his eyes, an awareness in her body, a possession between each of them, knowing he'd claimed her... and she was claiming him. It should terrify her and probably would once she had two brain cells to rub together, but for now?

Holly just wanted to savor and exist in the numb, contented, blissful pleasure that was currently buried deep within her body – her mate.

HOLLY

Did you give me parvo, rabies, or something else?

HOLLY TEXTED Niall angrily from the bathroom floor of her apartment. It had been a beautiful evening with Niall and they'd made love one more time, this time enjoying each other in a leisurely pace before parting. There was no expectation and no commitments made, it was simply scratching a wonderful, deep 'itch' that both of them needed... until she got home.

Expecting to start itching or sneezing, Holly hurriedly took a shower once she got home and immediately put her clothing in the washer. As she stood under the hot water, her stomach gave a painful lurch. Thinking it was indigestion, she rinsed her hair with the intention of getting out of the shower and taking some Pepto-Bismol. Instead, as she bent over to turn off the water she felt nausea. Wringing her hair out and reaching for the towel bar, the entire room went sideways causing her to flop down painfully onto the bath mat on the tile floor.

"What is wrong with me?" she asked aloud and groaned as her phone dinged in response to receiving a text message. She would look in a few minutes once her dinner finally came up and the nausea subsided. Moments later, Holly realized that she would never, ever eat ranch dressing ever again.

Reaching up from the floor, she grasped her plastic cup that held her toothbrush and awkwardly filled it with water. Rinsing her mouth, she spit weakly into the toilet and flushed it. Shivering, she reached up for the towel and pulled it down from the bar, covering herself like it was a tiny blanket.

Her phone dinged again and then moments later rang.

Holly stared at it wistfully as she lay there weakly on the floor. She felt like she was burning up with fever. Shutting her eyes sleepily, she nodded off. Sometime later, she heard her phone ringing again and reached for it. Her arm stretched in front of her and seemed almost as if it was someone else's. Her fingertip caught the phone edge and nearly flipped it into the toilet, but she managed to catch it awkwardly.

How long had she been asleep?

She saw that she had eighteen text messages and twelve missed calls from Niall and several others from another number. Pushing redial, she called Niall first.

“Holly!” his panicked voice yelped in the phone as she held it away from her aching head. “I’ve been trying to reach you for over an hour – Are you okay? Where are you?”

“I’m at home,” she breathed and looked around her bathroom. “I’m at home, sick.”

“Are you sick or is it your allergies?”

“My allergies make me itch, this is different.”

“Different how, princess? Where are you?”

“I’m at home. Don’t you listen?”

“What’s your address? I don’t know where you live, remember?” he growled in frustration causing her to smile weakly. “How is this different?”

“I’m really dizzy and nauseated. My stomach burns right now. I wasn’t joking about the rabies or parvo, mutt-for-brains. Did you make me sick?”

“Holly, I don’t know. I’ve never stuck around long enough or been with a woman who’s allergic to dogs.”

“Lady... meet Tramp,” she muttered and closed her eyes, putting her hand over her eyes as she held the phone to her ear. “I’m at 1110 Main. The second floor with the large flowerpot by the front door. Just don’t freak out or anything. I think I could use some chicken noodle soup and help getting off the floor into bed.”

“You’re on the FLOOR?” he roared in shock. Holly dropped the phone from the drumming in her ears at his outraged voice. She could hear him barking orders and his voice was hurting her head.

“You can’t be yelling at me like this, Niall. It hurts,” she retorted fiercely and covered her ears with her hands. She ignored the phone as she began to shiver fiercely and the nausea came again. Grabbing the toilet bowl, she pulled herself upwards and vomited again. She didn’t care if he heard her, she just wanted it to stop.

Holly rinsed her mouth again and lay back onto the bathmat, exhausted.

A loud bang woke her up from where she’d fallen asleep again. She lay there on her back, the towel over her and saw Niall’s fierce, worried expression as he found her on the floor. He scooped her up tenderly and carried her out of the room. Her head lolled back in exhaustion as he walked down the hallway to her bedroom.

“Get some rest, I’m going to fix the door and I will be back in a few moments,” he told her and she closed her eyes in fatigue. He carefully laid her down and covered her up with the comforter, feeling her forehead.

Hours later, Holly opened her eyes and instantly became alarmed as she heard someone talking in her house. At first she thought it was a break-in or the television, but then she remembered her being sick and Niall barging in. It was his voice she heard and another man’s.

“I don’t know if I made her sick or what, but honestly? I’m concerned.”

“None of us knew how to get by or survive with this at first. You can’t beat yourself up, brother.” The man’s voice she didn’t recognize on speakerphone. There was a faint lilt or accent to his voice and he sounded... envious?

“You go with your instinct and listen to what your body tells you. We were all abandoned, Niall, and having to learn. None of us have been able to communicate until the last few decades and we’ve all struggled in different ways. If it’s meant to be, you’ll find a way. Until then, listen to your instinct and shut off your brain.”

“I did and this is what happened,” Niall whispered, his voice devastated. “Do you know what it did to me to see her passed out naked on the bathroom floor? I’ve never felt such... loss.”

“You didn’t miss us when we had to all split up?”

“That was different. I *did* miss you all, every single day, but this felt like my soul was being ripped from my chest. I can’t explain it,” Niall stopped for a moment. “I think I hear her waking up. Let me call you back later, Maine. I don’t want Holly to hear me talking about us to someone else. My princess is a prickly little thing and I want to keep her happy.”

“I hope I get to meet your ‘princess’ someday,” the man answered.

“Me too, little brother. Me too - I’m glad you called.”

“Stay in touch, old man.”

“You too, Maine.”

Holly stood there silently watching Niall as he cradled the phone to his chest almost as if he was hugging it. The man he was speaking with was another brother of his, the one he’d mentioned the day before when they’d been talking in the car. Maine was the middle child and used to get upset that he was ‘living in his brother’s shadow’.

When things had gone sideways with Cairene, Niall and Conn had tried to protect the younger children. She could tell by the way Niall spoke of him, he had a soft spot for Maine and regretted not being able to do more for him. Holly

suspected he carried a large amount of guilt on his broad shoulders.

He had just begun the young boy's training and when they'd parted, Maine had been unarmed and untrained – just like Fergus, Loegaire, Aisling and Nath. The girls put themselves in households immediately as scullery maids to have protection, but Fergus and Maine had been abandoned. Fergus had been accepted into a hall as a jester... but no one wanted the boy soldier with no skills. Maine had been well and truly on his own to fend for himself.

Holly stood there, not wanting to disturb him and held her robe around her tightly. She didn't know what time it was, but saw it was late since the sun wasn't peeking through the mini-blinds.

“How are you feeling?”

“I'm fine,” she blurted out right away in a singsong voice. She was weak and tired... to be brutally honest. She could have slept for at least a few more hours but she'd heard him and wanted some water. “Are you okay?”

“I should be asking you that.”

“You know, you did the best you could in a horrific situation. I don't think he blames you for anything and you have a chance to rekindle a bond with him,” Holly said softly, seeing Niall's shoulders tense up.

“I blame myself,” he admitted and looked at her over his shoulder. “Just like it's my fault you are sick. I seem to always be messing up things when I involve myself in people's lives.”

“Oh geez,” she groaned. “Look Eeyore, that's a load of crap and you know it. You can't be responsible for everyone and everything. I was wrong to accuse you of giving me parvo – even if it was funny - 'cause I think I just got a touch of food poisoning.”

“That doesn't make you pass out,” he argued flatly.

“No, but being anemic, having kinky sex with a vampire and enjoying his bite could make things a whole lot worse, couldn't it? Now, I'd like something to drink and some

protein.” Holly strode past him, struggling to look strong while her head was swimming in dizziness. She yelped as Niall scooped her up from behind and deposited her on the couch. “Hey!”

“You should have told me you were anemic,” he chastised. “I’m here and can help take care of you if you’d only point me in the right direction. Now, rest and I will fix you something to eat.”

Pulling the lap quilt across her, she watched as he muddled around in the kitchen. Finally, he returned with a plate of scrambled eggs, a slice of toast, orange juice and two iron tablets. His warm eyes watched her as he sat down towards the end of the couch, pulling her feet into his lap and rubbing them.

“Eat up, princess and then it’s back to bed,” he ordered gently.

“You are tickling me,” she said with a shy smile. No one had ever rubbed her feet before willingly unless she was paying for a pedicure or massage. Runners did not have very pretty feet due to calluses, blisters and thankfully Holly had all her toenails. None had blackened or fallen off like some people had happen to them.

“I’ll stop,” he agreed but didn’t let her feet go. Instead, he just held them instead of rubbing them. She sighed happily at the feeling of his warm hands on the arches. There was absolutely nothing romantic about her being sick or him sitting on the couch, but somehow it seemed perfect. It was just the simplicity of them being together and having each other nearby.

“Don’t you have to work tomorrow?” she asked in the stillness of the silence. The only sound heard was her fork moving across the stoneware plate as she ate.

“I do, but I can go in late. It’s barely 2 AM and you need to get some rest, too.”

“You could stay here and just hold me,” she invited with a whisper, looking away from him. She felt his hands tighten

momentarily on her foot just before he released it. Her cheeks flushed as she second guessed herself. They'd had a beautiful moment the other night, but perhaps she'd read it all wrong. She was certain she looked awful from sleep and had rings under her eyes. This was not made-up pretty Holly... this was rough, downtrodden, the real version of herself.

"I'd love that," she heard him say softly. She glanced up to see him watching her with a soft smile on his face.

"No biting and no fooling around. Just some good ol' fashioned cuddling and sleep."

"Sounds utterly perfect."

"Good," she nodded. "I think I'm finished with this. Thank you for making it." Niall patted her leg, stood up and got the plate. He returned just as she stood up and wrapped his arm around her waist.

"C'mon princess," he uttered thickly.

Feeling suddenly shy at the thought of laying down with the man, she ignored the blush and simply looked away from him. She crawled in bed and pulled the comforter up around her, still wearing her thin robe as a nightgown. She felt the bed give as he sat down on the edge of it for a moment and then laid down, pulling her against him.

"Dream of me," he breathed tenderly and kissed her cheek. She didn't want to analyze how perfectly normal a thing it was for a couple - even an abnormal couple like themselves.

She should be alarmed that after one date he was here spending the night with her, even though she'd asked him to. There was something about him that drew her to him like a moth to a flame and she didn't want to refer to it as them being 'mated' like Niall had claimed. It was just two friends comforting each other.

Riiiiight, she thought.

"Goodnight Holly."

"Goodnight."

HOLLY

HOLLY FELT TREMENDOUSLY BETTER the next morning and Niall was gone by the time she awoke so there was no awkwardness about sleeping next to each other. Although, Niall wasn't the type of guy she'd chew her own arm off to get away from. She could imagine how sexy he was early in the morning with that husky voice that gave her goosebumps. No, she'd have probably helped herself to a little bit of fun.

She got ready for work and saw that the front door had splintered near the lock from where he'd entered. Frowning, she realized that she'd need to get a new door for her place. Calling the office for the complex where she rented her condo, she told them that the door had 'gave way' at the lock and she was hopeful they could get a new door installed and bill her for it. She was surprised to hear that a man had called earlier to take care of it and the maintenance man would be up this afternoon to install the door.

"Good morning," a woman said politely standing next to a black Lexus. "I couldn't help but overhear that something happened to your front door, too?"

"Oh yes," Holly stammered embarrassed. How do you explain that your boyfriend-who-isn't-your-boyfriend, kicked in the door? "The wood was splintered."

"Mine too," she said with a smile. "I'm Karen Scott. I just moved in to the complex and a little bothered that someone

could have damaged my door. You didn't see anything, did you?"

"Oh no, this is a pretty safe area. I wouldn't worry about it, Karen."

"Then what happened to your door?"

"Uh... the wood gave. I mentioned that already."

"So, you did, silly me. Well, have a memorable day, Holly," she said with a smile before getting into her vehicle. The woman put on large sunglasses and raised her hand in acknowledgement before pulling her car out of the parking spot.

"What a weird woman," she muttered, shaking her head.

Holly was almost at work playing back the last day in her mind and nearly rear-ended the car in front of her when she realized that she didn't give Karen her name. How had she known? Maybe she had told her without realizing it or she overheard her on the phone with the front office? That had to be it, because Karen struck up a conversation right after she hung up.

Her day seemed to fly by with patient after patient arriving. Holly had been quite busy all morning and was surprised to see Bridget come running into the examination room while Holly was finishing up a temporary crown she'd just fitted on a client.

"You have someone in your office," she whispered happily, clapping her hands giddily.

"Who?"

"He's been here before," Bridget said, tilting her head to the side. "I can't remember his name but he's a big dude with a menacing frown."

"Is he upset?"

"He looked that way when he came in for his cleaning."

"No, he didn't... never mind. I will be there momentarily," Holly instructed and then smiled brightly at the elderly man in

her chair. “How does that feel Mr. Hampton? Bite down a few times and let’s see what you think.” It was actually about twenty minutes before Holly was freed up because she had to file down the crown a few times before the patient was satisfied with how the crown fit. Walking quickly back to her office, she opened the door and sighed happily before she saw Niall’s face.

He did not look pleased at all.

“Are you okay?” she blurted out, concerned. Looking at him, she saw that he was pacing like a caged tiger and she felt the tension rolling off of him. This was not his normal, carefree, happy self... something was bothering him.

“Yes. No. I need you to do me a favor,” he snapped and ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Don’t argue about this one, Holly.”

“Well, tell me what it is first.”

“No, I’m serious.”

“Me too. What is wrong?”

“It wasn’t that bad yesterday, but it’s like its surging and pulsing right now.”

“What is?”

“Me. The magic. The vampire. The wolf,” he snarled and immediately apologized. “I’m sorry I just am not myself right now and I need you to give me a little space.”

“Space won’t be a problem when you are talking like that,” she retorted.

“I know. I’m being an ass, but I feel it building and its usually pretty bad on a full moon. Conn is gone right now, and I can’t help him. He’s been gone for a few days, and I know he’s suffering again. I...I can feel it and I need to get away from you right now.” Niall growled and surged forward faster than she could blink.

He pinned her against the wall of her office and slammed the office door shut beside her. Holly let out a yelp and pinched her eyes shut for the briefest moment. Niall buried his

face in her hair and breathed heavily, letting out a deep, satisfied sigh.

“Are you okay?”

“No. Holly, stay away from me for a few days.”

“I can help you through it.”

“I won’t put you in danger.”

“I don’t think you’ll hurt me,” she whispered, looking up at his reddish-brown eyes that looked ragged and raw. Her hand slowly touched his cheek, and he flinched as he caught his breath. “If you need space, you have it,” she offered, “but if you need someone to be there for you? I can return the favor like you were there for me.”

“This is different.”

Holly could see the stubbornness in his face. Niall would not budge, even though he was looming over her right now. There was something so crazy erotic about him in this frenzied state. She sneezed immediately and then smiled apologetically, shrugging her shoulders.

“Do what you need to and I’ll be waiting when you are ready,” she said softly.

Niall jerked his head in a nod and took another deep breath of her before he stormed out of her office. He was different and she knew he was going through something she’d never understand right now. His shoulders were wider and she could have sworn that his hair had grown overnight. He was changing and his words echoed through her mind.

My stepmother had condemned me to both nightmarish creatures that villages nearby feared, I was stuck between the worlds. I wasn’t fully vampire, having to hide from the sun... nor was I fully a wolf. It was painful and hard to change form physically, but it was worse to fight it.

Niall was fighting it.

Holly texted him, offering to bring him dinner or kibble – and asking him not to fight the change. It was several hours before he responded, texting her simply an address. She was

surprised and leery to be alone with him but another part of her wanted, no *needed*, to comfort him in his time of need. She replied that she would be there later after the office closed.

Leaving the office, she stopped at the store to get several things just in case. She didn't know what to expect or what to do, but there were certain things the body needed after being worked hard or strained. She bought water, Gatorade, a few protein bars she preferred, a large steak, Bio-freeze to ease any cramping muscles, bananas, and peanut butter.

The moon was high and clear in the sky when she pulled into the driveway of his home. It looked like a Spanish-style villa complete with a fountain in the front courtyard. It was breathtaking and she could smell the gardenia flowers on the night air. Ringing the doorbell, she waited patiently. After several minutes, she knocked. Her phone buzzed immediately.

Go away

“Nope. Open the door,” Holly ordered, this time banging on the carved scrollwork of the wooden door. Just as she was getting ready to knock again, Niall jerked the door wide open causing her to step back in alarm.

Niall was a big man from the very beginning but she could have sworn he grew a few inches in height since earlier in the day. He was breathing heavily and looked like he was in desperate need of a haircut and a shave.

“I told you to stay away from me.”

“And I told you I would be here to help you through it,” she snapped angrily. “Now, you need to quit fighting things and give into it. I don't want you hurting, and I am here to help with recovery.”

“Holly, go away,” he bit out as she ducked under his arm to walk into the house. She immediately sneezed and this surprised her as she'd been taking the shots now for a few weeks. She'd also taken two Benadryl to be on the safe side too. “See? You can't be near me like this and I'm afraid.”

“Of what? Biting me?” she said with a wicked grin, looking over her shoulder as she unloaded the things from the store onto the tiled kitchen counter. “I’m not scared of you. I think I like the real you... when you drop your guard and be yourself.”

“You have no idea what you are asking for,” he ground out, clenching the door frame. His fingernails leaving imprints in the wood. His chest was heaving with exertion and his body tight with restraint. Holly felt a rush of desire flood her body as she realized that he was out of his mind with raging lust right now and she could only imagine the pleasure that he’d give her... if he gave in to the base urges within him.

“I think I do,” Holly admitted, unbuttoning her shirt. “I know exactly what I am wanting and just what you are going to give me.”

Niall snatched her up bodily and carried her into the bedroom. He ripped her pantyhose off of her and jerked her skirt upwards. She laughed thickly in desire and that stopped him for a moment, his eyes curious.

“Keep going and make it good for me,” she ordered with a knowing smile, reaching for his pants.

It was less than a minute before they were both naked and he was touching all over her body. One of his large hands was splayed across her stomach as he devoured her pussy, licking and tasting her. Niall was uncontrollable as he rushed to make her come, before obviously savoring the taste, smell and touch of her. He sucked at her clit, before laving his tongue along the folds of her body... and as she came again, she screamed with delight making him growl with fierce pride. She felt him bite the inside of her thigh as he gently sucked there for a moment before yanking back his head.

“No,” he growled and stopped touching her.

“Yes,” she demanded, pushing him against the bed and dropping to her knees.

Holly wasn’t done with him yet, by any means! His body was ripe for loving as his shaft pulsed with desire, a bead of

moisture on the tip beckoned her. She immediately took him into her mouth, tasting the saltiness of his body. Niall snapped the post off the bedframe where he clutched it in his hand, watching her in obvious desire. She choked out a giggle, his shaft bobbing in her mouth in reaction, causing him to jerk away.

“Come back here,” she teased. “I’m laughing ‘cause you broke the bed like it was a toothpick, not at your dick. Geez, sensitive much?”

“No man likes a girl laughing during a blowjob.”

“Well this girl happens to like giving her man one,” she retorted with a smile. “Now, where was I?”

Holly licked the shaft and stroked it several times before Niall picked her up off the floor. His eyes were glowing in the darkness, beckoning something in her. He leaned over and kissed her tenderly, completely different from the lustful pawing and ragged groping earlier. This wasn’t the vampire or the wolf...

This was the man, loving his woman.

“You are such an amazing being,” he whispered softly.

“It’s because you make me feel that way,” she replied, “I can keep going, if you’d like?” Niall shook his head with a bittersweet smile. He turned her around, her back to him and kicked her legs apart. Holly felt her body pulse with anticipation of him and felt a keen disappointment as his fingers touched her instead of his member.

“Be patient, princess,” he whispered against her neck, “Just feel.”

Holly felt every slick stroke of his fingers, drawing her body tightly towards ecstasy. He was relentless, touching and sliding as his free hand cupped her breasts, pinching her gently to draw out soft mewling cries from her. She could feel his body moving against her of its own volition in a mimicry of their lovemaking. Reaching back, she grasped his cock and moaned as she felt it swell in size even further.

“I want this,” she begged mindlessly and cried out as he parted her body even more in preparation. His heated body disappeared for just a moment before she felt him pressing into her slowly, pushing inch by inch. “More, please.”

Niall released her breasts and moved his hand from her core, taking a firm hold of both of her shoulders. In one swift thrust, he took her fully - holding her heated body tightly as he repeatedly shoved himself into her heat. Instinct took over as she tried to move against him, but he held her still, pinned in place. He was in control and dominating his woman, his female... his mate.

Her arm reached up to curl around his neck, pulling his head down towards her unknowingly. There was no thought, no planning, nothing other than basic need drawn from desire. This time, Niall didn't ask permission – he took. His teeth delved deep into her throat as his body possessed hers.

She felt a fiery sting for just the briefest moment before her body flooded with heat and the level of her need doubled. His thrusts became slower, more drawn out and focused as he released his left arm cradled her against him. His right hand smoothed its way down her body and began to work the button hidden within the folds of her pussy that were swollen with desire, aching to be touched.

It was only seconds before Holly came again, this time pushing hard against Niall in order to take more of him within her. His mouth released her neck as he yanked himself from her. A bitter emptiness filled her as the loss.

Niall turned her around and smiled knowingly at her.

“I want more, too,” he growled huskily, grabbing her thigh and wrapped her leg around his waist, burying himself in her once again. This time, he watched her – his eyes holding hers as they made love. His hands lovingly cupped her bottom, moving her in a pattern that drew gasps from the both of them. He leaned down and bit at her breasts gently, suckling, as he loved her slowly. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders and she felt herself clenching around him, desperate for release.

“Niall,” she whispered, tenderly. “Love me however you need to.”

He released her neck and stared at her, his body rocking against her. He kissed her desperately, as if suddenly afraid. He reached up to the wall behind him, a collection of ancient knives and swords, plucking one from the wall. Holly stared at him suddenly wary until she saw him nick his shoulder. A droplet of blood formed and then rolled down his chest.

She saw the want in his eyes... and the fear.

He needed this but was afraid to ask. Instead, he began to move faster in her body, reaching between them to rub her clit until she was mindless with need. As he thrust into her, she felt him grab her shoulders as he pounded desperately – gone was the tender lover and the aggressor was back. She could feel his hands shaking as his lips locked onto hers. He broke the kiss and licked her shoulder in a silent plea. Her body was spasming and she was so close.

Cradling his head to her, she slowly licked his skin feeling him shiver with delight. This brought the nerve endings to a whole ‘nother level and she had an inkling of what biting him would do to her. Instinctively, she gently nipped at his neck until all of a sudden her body recognized what it wanted. She wanted to taste him like he’d tasted her.

His lips clamped onto where he’d pierced and began to suck, drawing him into her mouth. She felt and heard Niall’s gasp of pleasure and felt him do the same to her, tasting each other. The feeling of the bond between them cementing into place as her body exploded around him was nothing less than a miracle as he poured himself into her. It should have disgusted her, stopped her in her tracks – but instead, she’d craved it and wanted it.



“YOU KNOW... I like this side of you, Wildman,” Holly teased, running her fingers through his chest hair softly as they lay

there satiated in bed together.

Niall did seem to have more hair on his body and a rugged, elemental look about him, but instead of being alarmed – she was fascinated. Every inch of her body was sore and strained from the sex-capades between them. They'd had sex on the floor, beside the bed, her examination chair in her office... everywhere it seemed possible. The man was insatiable when they touched, and she craved it. Niall was her tall glass of water on a hot day.

“You're tickling me,” Niall told her huskily and held her hand tight against his chest. “Just keep it still and rest.”

“You sure are bossy. Did you know that?”

“I prefer ‘obstinately persuasive’.”

Laughing, Holly lightly hit him with a pillow and yelped as he grabbed her, rolling her underneath his body. Her giggle caught in her chest as he stared at her intensely, before leaning down to kiss her. His lips touched hers lightly, drawing a soft sigh from her soul.

“I like the sounds you make,” he breathed, nudging her with his nose. “There is something magical about you.” Niall's voice was tender and his eyes alit with an emotion that made her swallow hard as she lay there looking up at him.

“For instance, there is this sweet, puffy, little grunt you make when you are really excited and you are fixing to cum. It's like a badger sniffing around in the bushes or a pig rooting around for food,” he barely kept a straight face as she yelped in horrified embarrassment and tried to buck him off of her.

“GET OFF OF ME!” she screamed with a mighty shove that freed her from him. “Oh my God, you are perfectly horrid! HORRID! You know that?” she snarled, tossing back the covers and flying out of the bed.

She barely made it into the bathroom nearby, locking the door behind her. She heard him banging on the door and laughing hysterically on the other side of it. She was mortified and stared at the door in embarrassment.

“You *dog*,” she snarled. You don’t tell a lady that after you’ve made love! You are lucky I don’t neuter you right now for that remark!”

“Aww, princess... it’s adorable,” his voice called out.

“The battle is on if you want to play dirty like that,” she crowed at the door that stood between them. A second round of hysterical laughter came from the other side of the door and she found herself chuckling in merriment. She liked that he could be so playful, but she could dish it out as well as take it.

“To the victor goes the spoils,” Niall taunted, from suddenly right next to her, making her leap into the air and nearly slip on the marble floor.

“You scared me to death!” she yelped. “How did you get in here?”

“It’s a bathroom suite with a laundry room, walk-in closet and access door on the other side,” he said calmly with an upturned grin. “Now were you really upset about me teasing you?”

“Yes, that was a perfectly wretched thing to say,” she muttered, feeling her face blush again as she felt suddenly self-conscious. He was beautiful like a model, and she was... well, plain. The fact that he was teasing her about the sounds she made during sex was mortifying, because she hadn’t even realized it was happening. “I am going to be so worried now that I’m snorting around...”

“Holly, princess... I was teasing you,” he pleaded tenderly, pulling her into his arms. “You actually make little gasps and hold your breath. Sometimes I wonder if I need to remind you to breathe. It makes me feel like a god to know that I am pleasing my girl so thoroughly. Don’t stop... ever.”

“Then don’t comment on it,” she pouted, lacing her arms around his ribcage and laying her head on his chest.

“I won’t,” he promised. “Come back to bed and rest with me?”

Nodding, Holly followed him into the bedroom and sank into the warm satiny bedsheets they’d just been lying in, as he

joined her. Niall wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her tight against him.

“This is the first time in over a thousand years that I have felt such peace in my soul. Giving in to the beasts in me was pleasurable and something I’ve not known could exist,” he explained in the stillness of the evening. There was something in his voice that struck her; the sheer overwhelming realization that his life didn’t have to be terrible or painful brought tears to her eyes. “Thank you for this, Holly.”

She nodded stiffly, unsure if her voice would betray her inner turmoil. He’d been so wonderful with her and seemed like such a truly genuine good person. How could anyone deliberately harm him and destroy his family? As if he understood her silence, he silently kissed her bare shoulder and sighed happily before laying his head down beside hers.



THE NEXT FEW days were a blur between work, allergy shots, Benadryl and a very pink, runny nose for Holly. Being with Niall all the time was wreaking havoc on her body in more ways than one. The intimacy between them was fantastic and the more she got to know the man? The more she realized that she was falling for him.

He always seemed to go out of his way to surprise her, leaving little things here and there knowing that she would find them.

She’d found cinnamon dental floss in her car’s cup-holder one afternoon with a cherry flavored condom that made her grin. He’d remembered and wanted to let her know that he’d paid attention to what she said. Another day, a package arrived with pink conversation hearts inside along with a pink crystal candy dish for her desk.

It was absurdly precious since it was May and Valentine’s Day had been long ago. Last night, he’d surprised her with a

bouquet of Goo, a runner's gel to keep up energy levels... and a pair of hot pink sneakers.

She texted him all afternoon about taking her favorite mutt out to the park for a run. When Niall arrived in some shorts that made her eyes nearly pop out of her skull, he grinned happily and playfully lolled his tongue in a mocking fashion. Holly busted out laughing, revealing she had a pair of neon pink Halloween vampire teeth in her mouth that very nearly fell out.

That was what she liked about their relationship. It was weird, playful, and one of a kind. She'd wondered what it was about him that put her at ease so easily. He was as normal as the next guy... yet obviously not. If she felt anxious, she simply had to reach out to him. He was a lodestone, drawing her near and creating an attraction that was undeniable. She had her life, he had his - but somehow, they were finding time to make each other feel special... and to Holly?

That felt like a gift.

"What are you up to tomorrow?" Niall asked over dinner. He'd grilled steaks and made baked potatoes as a surprise, claiming she needed to bulk up on her iron intake. It was like he was telling her she needed more greens in her diet. Last night, he'd drunk from her as they made love slowly to the point that he was profusely apologizing for making her light-headed again.

Without a thought, he'd bitten his wrist and held it up to her mouth, making her drink. This was something they'd not ever done, and it seemed to do the trick. She wasn't dizzy today, just a bit out of breath and light-headed if she stood up too fast.

"You know how *weird* this all is... right?"

"Incredible and weird," he affirmed with a smile that lit her heart on fire. He had a gorgeous little smirk that made her toes curl. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling better. I think you worry too much sometimes."

“How can I not? I have no restraint when it comes to you.”

“I know the feeling.”

“Holly, you have got to tell me ‘no’ sometimes.”

“Nahhhh,” she said flatly with a smile. “I have got quite the collection of scarves lately and feel like quite the fashionista,” she teased, only to see his expression fall. “What’s wrong?”

“I shouldn’t be feeding from you.”

“I don’t want you drinking from anyone else since we only do it in bed!” she said possessively.

“I don’t want anyone else, but I’m afraid I’m going to hurt you”

“Niall, I know deep inside that you would never harm me.”

“Not deliberately, but last night was incredible and I didn’t want to stop,” he whispered. “Holly, I could hear your heart skip a beat and for a moment I didn’t know what to do. I can’t lose you by being careless.”

“And you can’t burn my steak,” she said pointedly. He quickly grabbed it with a set of tongs and put it on the plate for her. Setting it down in front of her, she sliced into her potato and put a few toppings on it in the silence growing between them.

“Look Niall,” she began, unsure how to address things between them. “This has been strangely wonderful and odd at the same time, but I’m a big girl. I never questioned you not wearing a condom, because I can take care of myself and use birth control – which brings up a question: Can you even have a single kid... or do you have litters?”

His mouth dropped open in shock. It apparently hadn’t even crossed his mind either, but if they were going to discuss health issues? This was a biggie in her book. They’d been sleeping together for a few weeks now and developing a routine together. If he was concerned about harming her, there was more than one way to do that now. She cared for the big fella and didn’t want to be hurt by him.

“Oh wow, this is awkward,” Holly muttered, taking a big bite of a roll and looking away from his stunned expression. “I mean, someday I might want kids but not right now – you know? Just like the allergy shots that get a little annoying... but it’s all worth it right now.”

“Holly, I don’t know. I... uh... I’ve never gotten a woman pregnant that I know of and I don’t know if I can,” his voice was harsh and his expression torn. Niall looked like he’d just had someone steal his wallet from him... and truth be told, someone *had* stolen something precious from him, but it happened long ago - and he was just now realizing it.

Cairene had taken his life and twisted it into something warped, reviled and hated – but now, she’d taken his future as well. If Niall couldn’t have children someday... if he even wanted them with anyone he would end up in a relationship with, he was robbed of that moment which equated to his stepmother hurting him all over again. It was a wound that wasn’t healing, but simply festering with time... a very, very long time.

“Look, it’s nothing and we need to focus on the now. Like right now, I plan on eating this amazing dinner you made and soaking in a bubble bath with you. You wash my back and I’ll wash yours?” Holly said cheerfully, trying to break the tension in the air. “Eat up, Niall – please?”

It was already out there though, things that could not be unsaid or undone. Holly could read it all over his face. He was alone yet again and would stay that way unless she could accept him like he was and ignore the looks they would receive as she aged – and he didn’t. There would be no children, no PTA meetings, and no families gathered at Christmas. She would have to enjoy being with him... for now.

And for a good man that had lost his family once before?

His world was crashing down around him... again.

HOLLY

THINGS HAD SEEMED strained between Holly and Niall.

The passion and intimacy had always been there with the flip of a switch, but things had not been the same since they'd touched on what a future would mean between them. It was a natural progression for a couple that seemed to be inseparable – or at least she thought so. She could feel how Niall had pulled back from her, creating a silent rift that seemed to be as big as the Grand Canyon.

There was no chit-chat or playfulness in bed; it was more like scratching an itch. A function between them. Holly was feeling stronger and stronger each day – realizing that Niall had stopped taking her blood during intercourse. He was distancing himself from her... and she knew it.

Even this morning, Niall didn't wait for her to go for a run. They'd been getting up early and getting a jog in together to get the day started. It was their time to be alone, chat, and feel the peace that sunrise over the landscape could bring. Mists, shadows, some rabbits in the brush, and just them. There was something so calming and soothing in having that moment – and now it was gone.

Whatever was wrong needed to be discussed because Holly refused to be someone's snack, bedroom toy, and pin cushion... all in one. If she was willing to get shots three times a week and take Benadryl all the freakin' time in order to keep

from sneezing at inappropriate moments – then Niall would have to step up to the plate as well.

Each side of a relationship had to put in a little work and effort... it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. Oh yes, they would be talking this evening about whatever was stuck up his ass making him cranky and distant.

Nothing was going right today.

First Niall, now her favorite coffee mug handle snapped right off, leaving a large ceramic hole in the side that made it look like a java-waterfall was emanating from her hand where she held it.

Looking at the schedule, she saw that it was going to be a light day and an early finish this afternoon unless there was an emergency. *Good*, she thought, *I could use a break*.

Grabbing the next patient file, she smiled.

“Karen Scott?” Holly called out in the waiting area and saw her new neighbor get to her feet. The woman was gorgeous. Tall, svelte, and everything she wished she was. Her expensive clothing fit her like a glove and her pumps made Karen that much taller, to where she seemed to be looking down on Holly as she walked past her to the examination room.

“First door on your left, right in here, Karen. You can put your purse on the hook,” Holly invited with a smile. She saw her patient hesitate before hanging her purse and taking a seat.

“Do you have animals in here?” Karen asked sharply, looking at Holly with a piercing stare. Holly felt her jaw drop in shock and then her face flooded with embarrassment. This was the examination room that she and Niall had first made love in. She'd scrubbed it down with bleach the next day, claiming that she'd spilled something in the room.

“Animals?” Holly strangled out and cleared her throat. “We don't keep animals in the office.”

“I should say not. They aren't clean whatsoever,” Karen agreed and settled back in the examination chair. Holly started

to lay it back and the woman sat up again, stopping her in her tracks.

“It smells like dog in here and it’s quite strong. Maybe it’s your perfume?”

“You think my perfume smells like dog?”

“Wet dog,” she nodded with a bland face. “It’s quite pungent.”

“Oh,” Holly said in shock and stood up quickly to leave the room. “Just a moment.” She walked quickly into the hallway, her heart thumping nervously. There was something about the woman that put her on edge. The way she stared at her, like she could read her mind, was quite unnerving.

“Am I going to sit here all day while you freshen up?”

Holly heard the woman’s voice and saw Bridget’s face peer around the corner in amazement. Bridget’s red lips formed a perfect O as she looked at her employer in surprise and disbelief.

“No, Mrs. Scott...” Holly began and was immediately interrupted.

“It’s Miss Scott. I don’t need some woman telling me what to do all the time and trying to control me. Now, I thought this office had excellent google reviews, but this place stinks and it’s quite offending.”

“Miss Scott, I assure you that the office is quite clean...”

“It reeks. I don’t know how you can’t smell it? It’s so heavy in the air it’s smothering. I won’t be having my dental work done here if this is the type of facility you run.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” Karen said, exiting the examination room in a huff and snatching up her purse. “I don’t know how I can be the first to say something and you two floozies are sitting there looking at me in surprise. Maybe you should check the vents or something because it’s absolutely terrible!”

“Floozies...” Holly stammered, looking at Bridget and back at Karen. “I think you’ll need to leave.”

“Did you not hear me? I am going,” she enunciated. “You can expect a bill for wasting my time.”

“Are you for real? Am I on Candid Camera?”

“You bill me for your services and time? Then I will do the same. You’ve wasted thirty minutes of my day waiting on you to decide to usher me back and then this! A complete waste of my precious time, my gas and my missed appointments. Yes, you’ll be getting a bill. Don’t look so shocked and play stupid, it doesn’t behoove you.”

With that, Karen did an about face and strode out of the office just as elegantly as she walked into it. That was about the only thing appealing to her was her appearance. When she opened her mouth, the truth came out – and when she shared her feelings... it was mortifying at how crass, abrasive and down-right rude she could really be.

“What in the world was all of THAT?” Bridget exclaimed in a horrified whisper.

“Biyaaaatch...” someone else muttered, drawling out the offensive word.

“She said it stunk in here,” Holly muttered. “She implied that *I* stink. I don’t smell, do I? I mean, you’d tell me if I did-right?”

“Oh my gosh, yes. It’s like an unspoken girl code of honor-you know? If we smell, have something on our face, or on the back of our pants when it’s that time of the month – we help each other out. I have never noticed you to smell badly, Dr. Baines. You are usually really considerate of your clients and avoid wearing heavy perfume.”

“But do I stink?” Holly said, thrusting out her wrist nervously.

“No,” Bridget disagreed, immediately sniffing her hand. “That’s actually pretty nice perfume. What is it?”

“I don’t know, it was a pink bottle on the counter,” she replied absently. “Does the examination room smell? Come with me and see.” The two women walked back to the front room and looked at each other. It smelled like bleach and Lysol. Nothing foul or ‘off’ in the air.

“Maybe she was nuts?” Bridget offered with a shrug.

“Her perception is her own reality. If she thought it smelled then it did to her, but I can’t help that. I’m just really concerned someone else is going to complain about it.”

“Dr. Baines, the office is kept really clean. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

Problem was, Holly did worry about losing a patient - and her reputation at the office.

The woman’s comments hit too close to home, and she wondered if Karen could smell something she didn’t... kind of like her sneezing or her allergies. I mean, if something in the air could set her off, perhaps something in the air smelled foul to her? And at that moment, Holly had a horrific thought: what if Karen had seen them?

She shook her head at the idea of it. There was no way the woman had known what happened there weeks ago, plus it wasn’t like it was really noticeable. Niall got shaggy like he needed a good haircut and shave. It wasn’t like he turned into a dog – per se - or so she thought until she’d seen that wolf at the doctor’s office. He’d never said a thing and she didn’t confirm it.

“Was that the last patient, Bridget?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I think I’m going to head out. It’s been a long day. Why don’t we close up early this afternoon and take a break?” Both women smiled at each other knowingly. Seeing the tempers flare this afternoon had surprised and taken a toll on the all of them.



HOLLY WAS SITTING at home on her couch, alone in the darkness with a glass of wine. It had been a long day and she didn't feel like starting round two with Niall. Round one with Karen had been quite enough for her. The woman had completely gotten under her skin and then left a scathing review on Google for her office. She'd gotten the email alerting her and had been shocked.

*Disgusting and shocking lack of protocol exhibited
by incompetent girl pretending to be a professional.
What a joke of what looked-to-be a legitimate practice.*

Office reeked.

No apologies made.

A complete waste of my day!

- Cairene Scott

Taking another sip of the sweet wine, Holly let it roll over her tongue as the words ran through her mind over and over again. She'd been stunned at the verbal backlash – and at the creative way the woman spelled her name. She would have never guessed and assumed it had been Karen as it was printed out on the patient file. Why had it never been corrected? That was odd of Bridget to miss that detail and she would speak with her about it tomorrow.

A loud knock at her door made Holly jump in her skin. She was antsy knowing that Cairene lived in her complex. The woman was Fruit-Loops and seemed to switch personalities with the blink of an eye. One moment she was waving and nice, the next she was practically rabid. Peering through the peephole, she saw Niall standing there with flowers.

“Yes?” Holly asked bluntly, opening the door, and saw him flinch.

“I guess I deserve that.”

“Well, showing up after you have been pulling back from me and only coming around when you want something tends to make a girl grumpy,” Holly said, holding the door open to allow him inside. “I’ve had a rough afternoon, so keep it mellow - okay?”

“What happened? Rough filling?”

“If you must know, I had a rough client that ended up insulting Bridget and I before storming out. She’s now blabbing it to the world about how terrible my office is.”

“You’re kidding? You have a really nice place.”

“Well she is telling everyone that I am incompetent and my office ‘reeked’ - was the term she used.”

“What?” he scoffed with a half-smile and looked at Holly for confirmation. She saw his smile fade and the surprise in his eyes. “You aren’t kidding?”

“No - not at all,” Holly thrust her phone at him. “You read and I will put these in water.” He handed her the bouquet of brightly colored tulips and took her phone. Holly watched his frown grow even more fierce as he read the tiny screen. “And on top of it all, the most irritating part is that the woman is my neighbor. Can you believe that?”

“WHAT?” Niall bit out sharply, looking at Holly with true concern in his eyes.

“I’ll be fine, she’s just...”

“Holly, I think it’s my step-mother, but I need to see her to be sure. I mean, I wouldn’t think she would still be alive, but if I am? She could be, too. Cairene is too convenient a name... and Scott? As in ‘*Scotland*’ - where we are from? If that is her, we are in danger.”

“I doubt it is,” Holly countered and then saw the truth on his face. “I didn’t do anything and I will just steer clear of her.”

“I didn’t do anything to her either except refuse to call her ‘mother’ when my own was buried on the hill not far from my

home. When we wouldn't welcome her, she did this to me – to all of us,” Niall seethed angrily and Holly backed away from the rage in his eyes.

His eerie eyes were practically glowing with raw intensity, his fists clenched at his sides angrily. He slammed the phone down on the counter and ran his fingers through his hair, as if he was distraught and couldn't focus.

“Niall,” Holly began softly, laying her hand on the back of his shoulder in an effort to calm him. He started to shrug her off and stopped, sighing heavily as if he had lost a battle within himself.

“I can't let her harm you and I don't trust her - *if it's her,*” he whispered harshly; a slight shiver shook his frame as she wrapped an arm around his middle in a slight hug. The man irked her but there was something in her that needed to comfort him.

“And it might not be. I will be fine, and you are panicking over nothing,” she reassured him. Taking his hand in hers, she needed the comfort and closeness that came with simply being near him. “Niall, come sit with me and relax for a bit. I need to unwind and frankly, you do too.”

HOLLY

“I WON’T TAKE NO for an answer, Holly,” Niall had said in a horrified hushed whisper as he’d spotted Cairene getting into her car the next morning as Holly was getting ready to walk out the front door. Niall had stayed the night, not sleeping a wink as he kept watch over her. The fact that her huge boyfriend was afraid - his fear made her feel even more frightened.

At his insistence, Holly had called Bridget on her cell phone and explained that there was a family emergency, and she would be out for several days. All her appointments would need to be rescheduled and she would tell Bridget more when she could. Holly could hear the curiosity in the young woman’s voice and thankfully she didn’t press the subject.

Niall made a beeline to Holly’s bedroom and yanked a suitcase out of the closet, putting it on the bed and grabbing her clothing off the hangers. Holly walked in and slapped his hands away.

“I can do this without ripping things,” she chided hotly. “You are getting your way, let me at least bring the clothing I want to wear for wherever we are going. Where *are* we going anyhow?”

“I have a small cottage on the border of Canada that is very secluded. There is no getting off or on the island without someone knowing about it.”

“I can’t go to Canada,” Holly stammered in shock and confusion.

“You aren’t, you are going to an area called Thousand Islands. We don’t have to enter Canada unless you want to.”

“It’s not that, I don’t think my passport is current and my office... my patients,” she stammered in shock and surprise. “It’s also November. Won’t it be cold?”

“Probably, but the house is heated. We’ll be fine.”

Holly discovered that Niall would not take no for an answer, and they were on a plane not long after she finished packing. He’d arranged for a private plane from his home while he was tossing his things into a suitcase. The plane was to land at a Canadian airport nearby and while she felt flattered to be whisked away, her mind raced.

How in the world was his stepmother alive after all this time? Was she truly a witch? What was she doing in Tennessee? Was she hunting Niall – or her?

It was late in the afternoon before they finally reached their destination: a cottage on a tiny island only accessible by boat. It was breathtaking and private. The quaint red tin roof and white clapperboard house practically looked like it was floating, surrounded by trees.

As they travelled by boat closer and closer, she saw the rock footings and then the tiny dock on the north side of the island. Crystalline blue waters shimmered in several shades, colored by the light and the darkness of the depths. It was stunning and awe-inspiring, like nothing she’d ever seen before. There were no signs, no lights, and no markings on the cottage, not like some of the others on the other islands. They’d even passed a small castle on one island.

Niall had money and he could do anything but instead, he bucked the stereotypes that came with being rich. He could drive fancy cars, live in a fancy house, but instead of all that? He acted normal... well, as normal as he could be.

Tying up the rope lines, Niall pulled the boat close to the dock and got out. He held out his hand and took their bags,

then Holly's hand. It felt almost like a couple on a honeymoon instead of them hiding away from danger. Feeling her cheeks flush hotly, she looked away and moved to pick up her bag, only to have him carry it to the small house without a word. Jiggling the keys for a moment, he opened the front door and then circled around the porch to the electrical box on the exterior of the house.

"We shut it off when no one is here," he explained simply with a shrug, flipping the main breaker. Holly heard the whine of the house coming alive as the lights inside came on and the refrigerator began to hum. He smiled gently to her and nodded. "Go ahead in and look around. I need to get a few things from the boat and will be right there behind you."

Holly walked inside and was instantly taken aback by how simple and homey the small place was. A large river-rock fireplace sat in the corner and the wall nearby was covered with wood stacked neatly. The entry way wall was lined with photos from every era of a variety of people. Holly gasped as she saw Niall standing in one of the photos that looked like a Civil War daguerreotype in a domed frame.

Several other photos showed individual women, some men and all had similar features. His family. A small smile escaped as she saw his brother, Conn, whom she'd met, in a photo where he looked to be on safari in the 1920's. The arrogant, macho grin was the same one he'd given her when she'd turned down his advances. An envelope was pinned to a corkboard and Holly pulled it off, reading it.

*Thought I'd let you know that I was kind enough to
refill the wood supply and even though you all are a
bunch of old farts?*

You still have to do chores.

*It's the right thing to do and I would never leave
you to be cold on a winter's night like you left me!*

*That's right, I came in October and we had a frost -
but noooooo! You couldn't be bothered to fill the wood.*

I guess it's no different than when you put a toad in my bedding back home.

I love you all and miss you terribly...

Aisling

“Is that from Aisling or Maine? They have been switching around the rotation and I can't keep track. I texted everyone to let them know of Cairene and that I was heading up here with you.”

“Aisling was here last month. She refilled the wood,” Holly explained.

“You mean someone left it empty?”

“Apparently,” she confirmed.

“She's got a feisty temper, too. Was she mad?”

“No, but she did chastise all of you and called you an old fart,” Holly saw Niall's face split with a warm, loving grin. “Show me which one is Aisling?” she asked suddenly, pointing at the photos, and listened enraptured as they stood there for the longest time as he explained and introduced his family. Each photo held a memory and gave him a tether to his family. She could see just how important it was to Niall as his eyes watered a bit, touching one of the frames gently. “Conn and I are the closest, but I try to keep in touch with all of them.”

“It sounds like that all of you are doing the best you can to be a family and remain very close to each other.”

“It's hard, but yes.”

“Why don't you show me the rest of the house and let's unpack,” she invited, lacing her fingers with his. The main room was a combination of kitchen and living room. There was a large bedroom on the back of the cottage and a small bathroom that opened to the bedroom and the living room. Winters could be quite cold here, but the house was small and cozy so the fireplace and generators could keep it heated.

Walking through the house, she saw several bags on one of the yellow, dated kitchen counters.

“What’s that?”

“Groceries,” he commented, looking surprised that she’d asked. “We’ll get hungry sooner or later.”

“Oh,” Holly laughed in surprise. “I didn’t realize you’d brought some in.”

“When I called for the plane, I called the boat dock and asked them to load me up. They’ve been working with us all for years and know to prepare a few staples for us. We try to stay away from town since we aren’t aging; it makes it easier and less explanations.”

“Must be nice not to age,” Holly muttered under her breath and saw Niall frown.

“Not really,” he said flatly. “Everything passes you by, people and friends you make- you have to leave behind and it hurts when they are gone. You are frozen in time, suffering repeated losses through the years. I won’t age, Holly, and it will kill me to watch you wither away.”

“Is that why you’ve been pushing me away?” she asked knowingly.

“I don’t know what it’s going to do to me when you grow old and...” Niall grew quiet and turned away. Holly watched him swallow several times and felt tears spring to her eyes. She walked over and immediately hugged him, laying her head on his chest and listening to his heartbeat.

“I will never be ready to say goodbye,” he breathed in her hair, kissing the top of her head.

“Then don’t,” she countered. “Don’t push me away because you are afraid. Let’s enjoy this time together and figure it all out. If Cairene cursed you, maybe she could do it to me or may...” Holly yelped as Niall’s fingers dug painfully in her upper arms when he yanked her away from him.

“Don’t you say that! Don’t you even think it! You don’t know what horrors I’ve had to go through or how much it

hurts,” he said tightly and released her. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I get it but don’t you think it hurts me too? I hate seeing you grow distant or looking at me like I am going to break any moment.”

“You are so fragile, so precious to me...”

“And you are too,” she interrupted hotly. “Don’t lessen what I feel for you or brush it aside. We are in this together. Got it, big guy?”

He stood there, looking at her... a smile touching his lips tenderly.

“Now, since we are here together and this feels like a honeymoon? Let’s put away the groceries and see how comfortable that bed is,” Holly said suggestively, pulling him towards the kitchen.

“I think the food can wait,” Niall picked her up instead and headed towards the bedroom with a tender look in his rust-colored eyes. He whispered, “It does feel like a honeymoon, doesn’t it?”

“Not yet, but it will soon,” she said huskily, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him tenderly.



“IS THERE no way to break the curse?” Holly asked, tracing her fingers across Niall’s chest and stomach. “I mean, can the stepmother-from-hell make you normal or make me like you?” He lay his hand atop of hers and held it still. She heard his breath catch in the silence of the bedroom.

“When I changed, it hurt so badly, and I don’t want you in pain like that,” he whispered aloud. “I don’t know if Cairene can undo what she has done and frankly, I don’t trust her with your life or mine.”

“But if you had a chance to be close to your family again...?”

“I *am* close to them - from a distance.”

“But if you could hug them and hang out with them,” Holly was interrupted by Niall and his voice had a slight edge to it. She knew she was pressing an uncomfortable subject for him and one that could be for her as well.

“There is a lot I don’t know about what Cairene can do or what she did to me. We had no one to teach us, help us, and frankly I won’t jeopardize your life or your safety, Holly. Don’t ask me to. I barely can get by knowing that I could hurt you unintentionally by drinking too much of your blood or losing control during a transformation. What if me touching you gives you some disease and the sneezing was the first indication? There is no rulebook on what to do. All myths, lies, and legends all start with a bit of truth... something I won’t put on you or jeopardize your safety.”

“But...”

“Holly, can you be happy with me for who I am? Can you accept that I will be here for as long as I can be?” he asked painfully. “Right now, I know I can’t watch you die from old age but maybe fifty-five years from now, perhaps I can’t leave your side and will be strong enough to hold your hand as you fade away. I can’t face being alone again now or in the future. I can’t answer, but I only know deep inside that I need you here now... and can’t let you go.”

“I love you too,” she whispered in the darkness and felt his arms tighten around her tenderly. He kissed her forehead and whispered for her to rest, that he would protect her with his very life. Holly shut her eyes and listened to his heartbeat, knowing that each thud was another silent affirmation that he loved her.



EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Holly made a pot of coffee and padded around the house silently looking around. Each photo,

each memory, made her remember what it was like for her to grow up in a loving home.

She hated that Niall didn't have those moments or that they were so long ago that he'd shut himself away from it... from even feeling again. She could understand him being worried or concerned. She could barely fathom what it was like to have everything he'd known or loved taken away in the blink of an eye.

Sipping on her coffee, Holly wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and stepped out the front door of the cottage. She could see why they had this place. The solitude and peace were almost overwhelming in its perfection. There was a faint fog kissing the turquoise waters that lapped at the island and she could see other dark smudges, islands, in the distance.

It was glorious in its majesty and simplicity.

A single bird call in the distance and a splash carried on the air as she stood there looking at the coastline off in the distance as the fog moved on and off the water like drapes brushing the floor. She almost giggled aloud as she pictured what she would say or do if Loch Ness popped up out of the water.

It was no more ridiculous than a vampire/werewolf half-breed – was it?

“Help me” she heard softly in the air and heard faint splashing nearby. Had someone fallen? The voice sounded like a young boy or girl and as Holly reached the front door to get Niall, she heard it again.

“Help...” just moments before it faded away or was cut off.

Instead of opening the front door, she did an about face and ran down the dock. Yanking off the rope from the post where it was anchored, she quickly stepped inside and heard the splashing intensify.

It was coming from one of the islands nearby.

Awkwardly taking up the paddles, she began to maneuver the boat as if it was like moving in a dream. The more she

paddled, the slower the boat seemed to move. The fog seemed to be getting thicker and colder as she propelled the boat sluggishly through the water.

Holly heard the voice again and went to yell but couldn't. No sound was coming out of her mouth. She was so very cold and scared now. Something was seriously wrong, and she couldn't put her finger on it.

... But the terror was there – and building.

NIALL

NIALL ROLLED over to hear his phone going off annoyingly next to the bed. He'd had such a deep and contented sleep, something he didn't get very often, and attributed it to Holly. Smelling the coffee, he smiled lazily with his eyes shut and answering the phone unceremoniously. He didn't care who it was, he was in heaven, and nothing could shatter it right now.

“Where's Holly?”

Nothing... except those words.

Niall heard Brion's terrified voice through the phone as he repeated over again.

“Where's Holly? Is she with you?”

“She's here, I can smell the coffee and we're on the island. There's no place...” Niall's voice drifted off as he got up out of bed and saw the cottage was empty. Opening the front door, he saw the blanket and her coffee cup on the dock.

The old boat was missing?

“Where is she?”

“The boats gone,” Niall said blankly, staring horrified at the idea of her being alone in the cold morning air or something happening to her. And then he saw it - Holly's bright blonde hair floating in the water off in the distance.

“HOLLY!” he roared and dropped his phone, racing to the end of the pier and diving into the frigid waters. His arms pumped through the water as he dragged his body to hers quickly. Turning her over, he saw her lips were bluish and her skin was pale.

“Holly, baby... open your eyes, sweetheart,” he crooned and saw there was no response. He could feel her pulse at her throat, but it was faint and matched her breath. Wrapping his arm under her chest, he dragged her back through the water to the cabin and pulled her into the house. By this time Niall was shivering against the temperatures and knew she had to be frozen.

“Wake up, baby,” he whispered, rubbing her skin briskly with a towel. “I need you to wake up sweetheart. You can’t leave me here alone,” he pleaded and getting angry at the lack of response.

“Holly Baines, no more playing around,” he growled, feeling himself losing control as his temper flared, just to keep from panicking as fear clutched at his soul. He’d just found her and was losing her? No! He was a selfish bastard and wouldn’t let the perfect woman for him slip through his fingers.

“Wake up!”

Niall stared at his hands that held her limp shoulders as her pale face lolled limply. Her pulse was slowing down even more, and he could hear her heart stumble as it struggled to pump. She was beyond hypothermic. How long had she been in the water?

The sight of her so unresponsive broke his heart and he let out a terrible roar of anger. His hands, wrists and forearms were getting thicker with muscles and hair as he felt the transformation come upon him. He was nearly out of his mind with fear and desperation. She lay there in the bed with heavy shadows under her eyes and his heart hammered with the knowledge that he might never see that laughing smile again.

His fists clenched as he arched his back against the pain. It wasn’t time for him to become a wolf, but he couldn’t fight it.

The thought of losing her was crippling. No more shy glances, no tender touches or morning runs together. There would be no savoring the exquisite taste of her or the way it felt when he took her. She was his perfect mate and he hungered for her unlike any other.

“Don’t leave me,” Niall breathed tearfully, closing his eyes against the truth and tore open his wrist instinctively, putting it against her mouth. He was terrified that he was possibly killing the only woman he’d ever loved in a thousand years. “I don’t know if this will do anything for you or make things worse, but I’m lost without you. If you go, I will find a way to be with you always. Do you hear me, Holly? If you leave me... I’m going to follow you somehow.”

Niall lay down beside her still form and simply let his essence drip into her, each droplet a silent prayer that she would awaken. He hoped that his body would warm hers enough and combined with the blood, she’d return as good as new – but nothing was happening.

“I love you,” he breathed as a tear streaked down his face.

HOLLY

HER SKIN WAS ON FIRE.

That had to be it.

Holly had been so cold one moment and now felt like she was burning from the inside out. Maybe she was having another allergic reaction to whatever pet dander that came from her favorite doggie, Niall. She'd been on allergy shots for quite a while, but this felt more intense than a reaction... it felt...

“Arghhhhh!” Holly groaned as her body bucked of its own accord, trying to fight the severe heat in her. She saw Niall’s horrified gaze turn into one of broken joy and then fearful yet again.

“What? What is wrong? Am I swelling or something?”

“You’re alive,” he breathed.

“Of course, I am, sasquatch... and you’re one hairy beast! Did you give me rabies?”

“No,” he replied and looked like he wanted to cry and laugh at the same time. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I am on fire everywhere,” she retorted and then screamed as something in her gave a horrible wrench inside her torso. Holly patted her stomach to make sure nothing was

going to burst out of her chest cavity like a horror movie.
“What is wrong with me?”

“I found you in the water, unconscious. I don’t know how long you were out there. What happened? Why’d you swim out there?”

“I didn’t! It’s November, remember? I took the boat when I heard the girl crying out... oh my God! Did someone help her?”

“There was no one else in the water.”

“You wouldn’t have seen her because of the fog.”

“There was no fog when I found you - and no one else.”

“I could hear her screaming help me and I couldn’t get to her,” she said horrified, with a distant look in her eyes. “The more I tried to paddle the boat, the slower it moved and it was cold... so cold and dark. I tried to call out to her but nothing...”

“Were you dreaming? Was it your voice you heard?”

“No,” she argued and then stopped, feeling heat building in her body again. “I don’t know, maybe? It was like a dream where you are running and not moving – like nothing is happening, but you know in the back of your mind... that it is happening? It’s doing so without you, around you, and...”

Holly stopped and looked at him in shock and horror. “It *was* my voice from when I was a little girl but how...” she began and moaned. Her head spun as the wave of heat and pain washed over her. “I need to lay down before I pass out. What’s wrong with me?”

“I think I gave you too much blood. I’m so sorry, Holly.”

“Like a transfusion where I get blood from someone and ... OHHH!” she screamed as her body contorted painfully, and then violently emptied her stomach on the floor beside the bed. “I am so sorry,” she breathed heavily with her eyes shut pitifully.

“It’s me who should be apologizing to you,” Niall said. “I never wanted you to feel this pain or go through the change.”

“Change? Will it make me like you?”

“I think so.”

“And we can be together forever?”

Holly’s body spasmed again yanking her off the bed as she ran into the wall uncaringly trying to fight the pain that she was in. Crying out, she looked at Niall for help silently and saw he had reddish tears streaming from his eyes. Her strong man was crying because of what she was going through.

“I’m fine.” she bit out between gasps and opened her mouth in shock as she felt her incisors painfully descend for the first time. “Gimmie a mirror!” she ordered awkwardly as it came out sounding like she’d said *thimmy de miwar!*

Fascinated, she took the mirror from Niall and saw his remorseful smile as he knelt beside her. He wiped a tear from his face and caressed her hair as she giggled and touched her own teeth. She felt the surges and flashes of heat in her body but her mind was utterly distracted by the pleasurable feelings she got in having her tooth touched.

“Dis is preddy kinky,” she admitted and laughed with Niall. She had such a slurring lisp with her new teeth, and it made what she said barely decipherable. “I hab teefies!”

“It does have its ups and downs; unfortunately this is still the beginning stages of the change. I will be right here with you as your body adapts to its new needs. We’ll do this together.”

“Always?”

“Forever, my love,” he swore, kissing her forehead as she felt a wave of pain wash over her again.

For Holly, the pain lasted almost seven hours as her body contorted and tried desperately to fight what was happening to it. Her muscles were tearing down at the very fibers, or so it felt, as she felt herself healing rapidly. A wave of hunger would hit her, followed by a bout of nausea, and then another overwhelming bout of pain.

That was her whole world that day – and Niall.

He stayed with her the entire time, putting cool washcloths on her head when he could get close to her. Other times she was out of her mind with terror and her body wracked with pain, lashing out at anything or anyone that got near. When the crest finally passed and the waves came less and less, she could feel herself blossoming and healing into a new being.

A new Holly.

A woman that hungered.

Her teeth sprang painfully, grazing her lip as she suddenly smelled Niall's blood nearby. Was this what it was like for him? Is that why he'd hit on her at the race, because of the overwhelming need that came with breathing in the scent?

"Niall," she said, feeling like a gangly teenager waiting for her first kiss. "I think I need to bite you or someone. I'm hungry and baby...you smell like the best Big Mac in the universe to me."

"I guess it's better than a wet dog," he chuckled, "Come here baby and let's do this together. Now, the first time it's overwhelming. You are hungry, thirsty, and drinking from the right person can be very... uh... stimulating."

"You mean it turns you on."

"Yes."

"Do you get that with other women?"

"No, it always felt perfunctory – just like a chore... until I met you. With you, feeding is phenomenal. Now, you want to smell the neck and you can tell where the blood is."

Holly leaned forward and breathed deep, whimpering aloud at the recognition that slammed into her. That had to be the sweetest scent she'd ever had the chance to smell. There was no describing the rich, decadent, urge that she felt.

"Now, to know where to lay your teeth – use your tongue like a guide and I promise, you'll know."

She felt Niall's erection against her stomach and knew he was as turned on by this as she was. Following his instructions, she started to trace his skin with her tongue and

jerked her head back as she hit a spot that felt like licking a nine-volt battery.

It was sharp, almost too intense, but the idea of putting her teeth there made her nails curl painfully into his shoulders as she made a noise in her throat.

Leaning forward again, this time instead of jerking back from the sensation – Holly leaned forward into it and let her instincts take control.

Her teeth sank into his neck, and she felt Niall’s hands tear her leggings from her body. He slid himself into her in one smooth move, her body drenched and ready for him.

As he began to move, she felt his own teeth at her neck. Their bodies rocked in mutual pleasure as they collapsed on the bed feeding their hunger and desires together.



“YOU HAVE dog breath in the morning,” Holly whispered, holding back a laugh as she stared at him resting next to her with his eyes closed. His face was peaceful, and she knew how he must be feeling. She felt like everything was finally right for once and whatever happened in the future?

They would figure it out together.

“You’ll have to teach me all the vampire tricks, wait – dogs do tricks. I’m not a werewolf like you, am I?”

“Are you analyzing of off this now?” he said in mock disdain, cracking open one eyelid and watching her.

Shamelessly, Holly nodded at his grumpy visage.

“Of course, I am. I’m trying to decide if I need to start buying a variety of dog collars and shampoo. Do we need flea dips?”

“*We*,” he stressed. “Need nothing but each other. *You*, on the other hand need to drink blood at least once a day or when

the urge comes on you. I would be happy to take care of any urges you happen to feel too.”

“You know,” she hesitated for a moment and looked at Niall, who arched an eyebrow, silently waiting for her to continue. “I haven’t gotten an allergy shot in three days and I’m long overdue. With as bad as my allergies are, I should be at least feeling a tickle or sneezing. Do you think that maybe since I’ve been exposed so much to you that maybe it’s gotten better or perhaps it was the blood you gave me?”

Holly did feel amazing.

It was like every ache or sore spot was magically gone and in its place was a fulfillment that she’d never dreamed of. She’d been healthy before, but this was miraculous.

“Oh, I know! Maybe we need a dog run in the back yard, but I absolutely refuse to pick up after you in the grass,” Holly said straight-faced and then broke down laughing at Niall’s horrified expression.

“I assure you that this half-breed is completely potty-trained and the only thing you have to worry about is putting up with me for another thousand years or more. If you want to wear dog collars and get all kinky like that... I’m up for trying anything once. It’s not my thing but hey...” Niall shrugged and she saw the glint of humor in his eyes just before it faded away, brushing a lock of pale hair off of her forehead as he stared at her.

“You don’t regret what happened?” he asked softly.

Holly adored the gentle way he was with her and how playful he could be at times. They were a good fit together and she couldn’t picture a better person to spend eternity with than the man she loved and cherished.

“Never,” Holly said vehemently. “I wonder about that weird dream or whatever it was. I don’t feel like I am going insane, but I definitely heard something... but it was my voice. It was strange, surreal and existential – but as long as I am with you? I don’t care how this all happened. It was almost like it was a magical push to help me along, you know?”

“That is what I am afraid of,” Niall said tightly.

“Niall, I didn’t see anyone else or feel anything odd like goosebumps, etc. It was all so... so... weird?” she finished lamely, shrugging. “If I had seen Karen, Cairene, or whatever she is calling herself – I would have never left you alone.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“And I would never put you in harm’s way.”

“Then we’ll stick together and watch each other’s backs, agreed?”

“I love you,” they said tenderly at the same time and Holly smiled before settling back down in Niall’s arms. They spent the rest of the afternoon together making love, feeding and talking of Holly’s new existence. He took a polaroid of the two of them and pinned it to the corkboard, scrawling the date at the bottom. Holly watched Niall as he hung it among the family photos from over the years and smiled at her.

“You are one of us now,” Holly heard him say firmly and her heart did a somersault at the possessive tone in his voice. She knew he would never give her up and always protect her. That was their love, and it was blessedly eternal.

EPILOGUE

Six months later...

“ALRIGHTY, MRS. DECKER,” Holly smiled, sitting up the older woman in the chair. “Everything is looking fantastic, and I’m really pleased the Sensodyne is helping your teeth. Keep up the good work.”

“Thank you, dearie,” the lady said easily as Bridget walked in, handing her another folder. “Your next patient is your favorite one...”

“Niall is stopping by for his cleaning and then we are trying the new steakhouse on the other side of town,” she volunteered, smiling at Bridget’s happy composure. The woman was practically glowing and always seemed to be humming now.

“The big one with the dance floor?”

“That’s the one,” she smiled, getting to her feet. “I promised to try to learn how to do the two-step, if he rode the mechanical bull. Is he wearing jeans?”

“Yes.”

“Welp, I guess I’m line dancing tonight,” Holly grimaced and smiled as Bridget laughed easily.

“I’ll lock the door behind me since he’s your last patient tonight.”

“Thanks, Bridget. You are the best.”

As the two women walked out to the front of the office, she saw Niall's figure standing there by the door, waiting patiently, holding a bouquet of red roses. As Mrs. Decker made her way slowly to the door, he held it open... and plucked a rose from the collection, handing the old lady one, before winking at Holly over the the woman's fluffy gray hair.

Holly's whole soul sighed in awareness... he was such a good person.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Decker," Bridget called out happily – and grabbed her purse. "And good night to you both," impishly plucking a single rose from the bouquet for herself, before darting out the doorway behind Mrs. Decker.

"Well, it *was* a dozen," Niall laughed easily and handed the bouquet to Holly.

"It's fine," she chuckled, lifting up slightly on her toes to kiss him. "Thank you, honey."

"Can you believe we've been dating almost eight months?"

"Wait until you are saying eighty years or eight hundred years..."

"I can't wait," he smiled tenderly, kissing her once more as she took his hand, leading him back to the chair that was waiting for him – only to have him tug her further down the hallway.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm inspired," he murmured, shutting her office door behind him as she turned and leaned back, perching on the side of her desk, watching him.

"Inspired, huh?"

"Very," he breathed, stepping close and sliding her lab coat from her shoulders, before unfastening the top button of her blouse. "See, the first time I saw you? I could not keep my eyes off that hot pink butt... and just seeing this pink?" his voice trailed off as she gazed up at him in awareness.

He was in for a surprise, she thought silently. She'd worn this hot pink dress shirt and black skirt for a reason... and heard his groan of awareness.

“Oh babe,” he choked out, meeting her eyes. “You know I love you in pink.”

“I know,” she whispered softly, feeling that instinctive awareness flare between them. “It’s a nasty little set too. Pink lace bra that opens in the front...”

“I am buying stock in Victoria’s Secret tomorrow,” he said mindlessly as he continued unbuttoning her shirt, admiring the view openly and swallowing as his eyes focused immediately on the clasp.

“But that’s not all,” she teased, reaching for his pants.

“There’s more?”

“So much more...” she promised, turning away from him and leaning over the desk in a silent hint. Feeling his warm hands on her thighs, she felt him slide her skirt upwards, revealing the pink matching panties that had a small charm dangling just over the cleft of her buttocks where he loved to kiss.

“Fuck yeah,” he hissed under his breath. “It’s my freakin birthday! I’m gonna make that charm bounce off that pretty little ass and...”

“It’s your birthday?!” she immediately yelped in surprise, moving to look at him – only for him to turn her back around aggressively.

“Nuh-uh,” he ground out, noisily jerking his belt off and she heard the rustle of his clothing in awareness. “It’s just an expression,” he uttered, his voice breaking, as he caressed her cheeks, admiring the thong on her. “You just stay right here and...”

She felt his tongue trace the back of her thigh, shivering in awareness.

“Ohhh Niall...” she breathed aloud, only to feel him immediately standing at her back, pressing himself into her

warmth.

“Was... gonna lick you,” he choked out, brokenly. “Can’t... too much.”

His cock slid home as he shoved her against the desk, grunted, and then reached down to angle her hips so his hand could slip between them, holding the fabric of the delicate panties to the side. His movements were erratic – and she loved making him lose control.

“Rip them off,” she commanded softly.

“Hell no,” he growled. “I’m already going way too fast for me. I was going to taste you, bury myself in you, and make you scream... but the sight of those... oh dammit, Holly,” he bit out, making a small keening sound in his throat as he pressed into her again, trembling with desire. “We’re not done if I cum, honey. We are never going to be done...”

She felt him shiver as warmth filled her body, his fingers digging into her hips to hold her still as he tried to catch his breath, holding her close.

“I think you like the panties,” she whispered, closing her eyes and leaning back against his shoulder.

“I love them,” he confessed, “... and you?! I thought you were cleaning my teeth tonight and then we were going dancing at that new steakhouse? I had no idea you planned on cleaning my clock, too...”

“We are going to the steakhouse,” she laughed throatily.

“Nahhh,” he chuckled intimately. “We’re not done, remember?”

Her breath caught as she felt him move again slowly, deep within her, as he kissed her neck. His hand slid upwards, gliding against her stomach, before slipping beneath the cup of her bra... caressing her skin. He twirled her nipple slightly, giving her a soft pinch that sent shockwaves through her body.

“We’re going to play here for a little while,” he said thickly, moving against her. “Then I think we’ll skip the dancing... and we can feast on each other at home.”

“Niall...” she began and felt an urgency take control of him. He was everywhere at once, one hand squeezing her nipple tenderly, while the other was stroking her cleft underneath the panties that drove him nuts. His body was pushing into her, almost desperately, as if he wanted to be closer than what was possible.

“Crap, that little charm scratching against my pelvis is the hottest thing,” he uttered, licking her neck as she laughed wickedly, recognizing the catch in his breath. As his teeth grazed against her skin, she felt him release her breast... before their pattern changed.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered in a haze.

“Hang on...”

“Niall...”

“Hang on, babe,” he urged.

She heard him rifling around, his belt clanking on the ground as he kicked his pants to the side, before resuming his ministrations.

“If there’s a God, he must think I’m really something...” he muttered absently, causing her to chuckle at the strangeness of his statement. “Weird things bouncing through my mind as I’m screwing my mate, but damn, Holly,” he cursed emotionally. “You are enough to make me believe in second chances, fate, forever, and the ultimate happily-ever-after like they talk about in fairytales.”

“Aww,” she whispered and pulled away from him, turning around, before putting her ass onto the edge of the desk as Niall grabbed her legs, wrapping them around his waist without any hesitation... and sinking home. “I love you.”

“I love you too... and...”

“What’s with all the distractions?” she laughed, grinning at him. “You got your thrills, and I’m still waiting for mine.” He bellowed out a laugh and shook his head, beaming at her as he gently spanked her cheek where she was perched.

“You’re going to get yours, have no worries, babe,” he promised, grinning at her with so much love in his eyes. “I’m trying to do something special and while this isn’t the position that I thought I would be in? Meh, fuck it... it’s my favorite,” he shrugged – and began moving in earnest, causing her eyes to close at the sensations buffering against her.

... As something cold touched her hand.

Holly started to jerk her hand back, the feelings and moments interrupted once more – only to feel Niall’s hand take hers as he slid a ring on her finger. Silently, she looked up at him, stunned and saw his bashful smile as he gazed at her, his movements slowing as he brought her hand to his lips, kissing the ring.

“I intended to get down on one knee,” he teased, his eyes dancing. “But I really like this version so much more. Will you marry me and make this official on paper... not just in our hearts?”

“Yes,” she whispered, not looking away from him, feeling overcome with emotion and realizing that he not only wanted her for his mate physically, but his wife for the whole world to see. Her lips worked for a moment, as she sniffled, wiping her eyes, and staring at his tender expression... before blurting out finally. “Do you have any other distractions?”

“Nope,” he grinned. “Back to business... *wife.*”

AFTERWORD

I hope you enjoyed Niall and Holly's delightful story. I adore having a chance for characters to find their happily-ever-after while still having the 'Big Bad' looming over them, threatening from a distance.

The bits of humor, the quips, the fun moments helped break up something that I didn't want to be intense or scary... but rather an indulgent, wild, mental getaway.

Don't worry – Cairene will have her moment as the stories for the siblings begin to unfold.

Please take a moment to leave a review as I read them all and treasure each word.

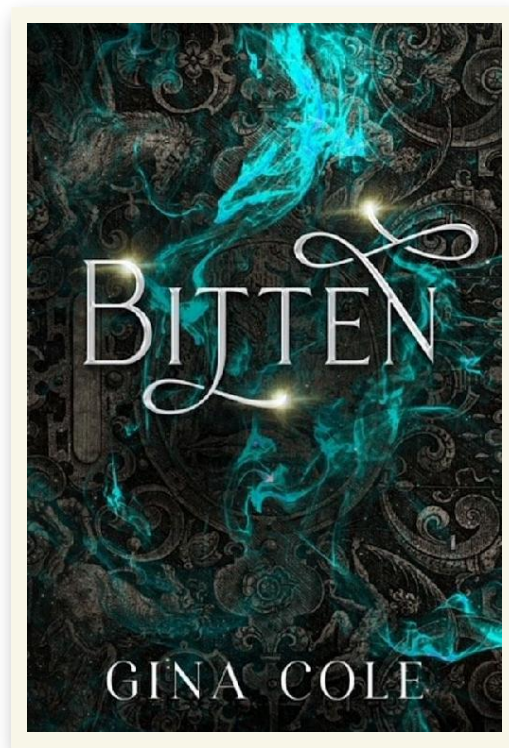
If you are interested in keeping up with other books coming soon or updates - please join my newsletter:

[More about Cairene... and my newsletter!](#)

Daydreaming & Caffeinating,

Gina

BITTEN



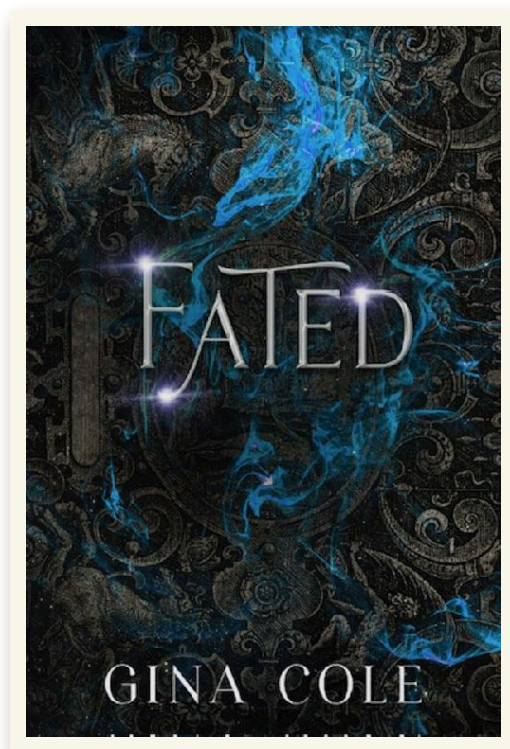
[Get Bitten...](#)

Daphne Gentry is an up-and-coming history professor with a passion for defending the underdog. When she hosts a lecture on historical inaccuracies, a blond beefcake in the back row of the auditorium begins arguing with her – claiming that the notorious Jack the Ripper was actually a vampire.

Connall Cael despised his ability to hunt and kill those around him, draining them dry. Centuries ago, the lonely man had awoken to discover that he was the infamous killer, taking decades to cope with his guilt. Today, hearing Conn's history being recounted by some dark-haired seductress so simply, was infuriating and alarming... especially the desire awakening within him for Daphne.

When secrets are revealed, is it enough to build a bond of trust between them? Or will his bloodlust destroy any chance of happiness... and Daphne?

FATED



Fated

Vanessa Stafford had a life any woman would wish for... wealthy, pampered, and marrying her father's protégé. Everything had always been planned for her, but sometimes plans go off the rails! No one could have ever imagined that the obedient female would break every rule in the handbook for a single stolen moment of bliss.

Fiacha Cael spotted the exquisite being sitting at the bar before him and did a double-take. They were both surrounded by people but alone... so different, yet so alike. He was mourning the loss of his friend and she looked like her entire world was crashing down around her, driving an instinctive need to comfort her in a way neither anticipated.

Both had their own personal demons, but could it be more than either expected? And how exactly do you help a vampire that *faints* at the sight of blood?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gina Cole dabbles in a fantasy world that whisks you away from the daily doldrums of reality with steamy contemporary, dark fantasy romances, and her Timeless Brides series is more like a crash course in life, somewhere in the past, with a Hunka-hunka burning love.

Ya' know... *different, wild, and fun.*

Each book written is sure to be an adventure designed to bring laughter and love to your heart!



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