



SILVER KISS

NAOMI CLARK

an urban wolf novel

Silver Kiss Chapter One Sampler

This is Chapter One of Naomi Clark's novel SILVER KISS, Book One in the Urban Wolf series. To purchase the novel please visit QueeredFiction.com for your choice of retailers and formats.

One

“**I wish you were coming** with me tonight.” I tried not to sound whiny as I said it, but couldn’t quite manage. I glanced at Shannon over my shoulder while I fiddled with my earrings. She was sitting on the bed, laptop open. Her lips were pulled into the tight line that meant she was concentrating hard and she didn’t look up at me as she answered.

“No offence, Ayla, but I’m glad I’m not allowed,” she replied absently. “The whole thing just sounds...wolfish.”

I grimaced as I threaded the gleaming golden hoops through my ears. “It is wolfish. That’s the point.” And that was the problem. Lupercali was the biggest night in the werewolf calendar and humans were not allowed. No exceptions. Not even for partners. It was a tradition dating back to Roman times and whilst we wolves prided ourselves on fitting into modern society most of the time, Lupercali was different. *Sacred*.

I was dreading it.

I still couldn’t believe I’d moved back home at all, let alone agreed to be officially sworn back into the Pack. When I’d first walked away eight years ago, I’d vowed never to return. But *never* is a long time and people—even parents—can change. After the brutal murder of my cousin by anti-werewolf group Alpha Humans, I’d rethought my position on Pack and family. Luckily for me, Shannon agreed to move down south with me—not that I’d have come without her—and here we were.

In the three months that we’d been here, all my parents had talked about was Lupercali, how I’d be officially welcomed back into the Pack after so long as a lone wolf. Traditionally Lupercali was a ceremony for the cubs, the night that they

became adults in wolf lore. But it was also a ceremony for welcoming home strays like me, blooding and reaffirming us as part of the family.

And it wasn't that I didn't want that. It was just that... Well, I was a little bit scared. "It's going to be awful," I said, aware of that whining edge to my voice again and cringing internally at it. My wolf pawed at the insides of my mind, mentally echoing my whine. "The whole Pack will be there, watching me."

Shannon looked up now, locks of sandy hair falling from her loose ponytail to curl around her delicate face. "You'll be fine," she assured me. "From what you've said, it'll all be over in a few minutes and then you can just get rip-roaring drunk."

I stared down at the tangle of necklaces and earrings on the vanity. Most of it was Shannon's. She'd told me I needed to dress up tonight. Make the right impression. I glanced back at the mirror, wondering if Shannon's elegant gold jewelry really looked right with my lip piercing.

"I'm nervous," I confessed, pulling at the lip ring. "I mean Lupercali is so formal. I don't see why I have to do this massive ceremony just because I moved back home. It's not like I ever officially left the Pack in the first place. I was never made outcast or anything."

"It'll make your parents happy." Shannon was staring at her laptop screen again. I wasn't sure if she'd even heard me. I cleared my throat pointedly and her head jerked up, eyes wide with surprise. "Sorry," she sighed, setting the laptop aside and rising from the bed. She stood behind me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders, kissing my hair. "You're going to be fine. Like I said, it'll be all over before you know it and then you can just enjoy the party. And Vince and Joel will be there to support you."

I thought of Vince, my best friend, who'd determinedly kept me in his life despite the distance I'd put between myself and the city, the Pack and my family. I'd missed him. If only for having him back in my life, returning had been worth it.

"I suppose." I tipped my head back far enough for us to kiss, just a quick sweep of my lips against hers, but it was

enough to warm me up a little. “And you’ll be okay here alone?”

“I’ll be fine. I’ve got plenty to be getting on with.” She nodded to the laptop. “Got a meeting with my first client tomorrow.”

I smiled, that warm feeling growing. It had been a big step for Shannon to move here with me. She’d left behind a well-established PI business and starting afresh hadn’t been easy. She had a good reputation but no local contacts. Before the move she’d had friends on the police force and in local politics that were happy to slip her information about abusive spouses and tax cheats on the sly. Now she had to build all those relationships up all over again. She hadn’t complained, but I knew she’d been anxious.

“I love you,” I said, twisting on the stool so I could kiss her properly.

“I love you too,” she said. “Now get moving. You’ll be late.”

For the first few weeks that we’d been back here, Shannon and I had stayed in Vince and Joel’s guest room. Joel, an architect, had one of the bigger houses in Larkspur, a custom-built wolf estate. They’d been happy for us to take up residence indefinitely, but we’d been keen to get our own place. The move wouldn’t feel real until we did. Now we had a small two-up two-down on Foxglove, a slightly lower class estate, home to both humans and wolves. It wasn’t much, but it was ours. At least until we could afford something better, I told myself as I gave the front door a sharp kick to get it open. Vince, who’d been rapping on the door, leapt back as it swung open. It hadn’t taken either of us long to learn that routine.

“Oh, Ayla. I could build you a better house out of twigs and straw.” Joel leaned out of his car window, regarding the little house with sorrow, eyes gleaming in the light from the street lamp. His lips were curved in a rueful smile.

I straightened my shoulders. “There’s nothing wrong with this house.”

“Apart from the fact that it’s small, ugly, crammed in amongst countless identical houses—”

“Alright.” Vince cut his partner short, rolling his eyes at me. “Down boy.” He slung his arm round my shoulder and hugged me against him. I nuzzled into his leather jacket and inhaled deeply, comforted by the mix of leather, whisky and oak rolling off him. “You ready for this?” he asked me, guiding me to the car.

“Absolutely not.” I clambered in, silently cursing the clunky heels I had on. Where had this myth started that high heels make you walk more gracefully? I just stomped, convinced I was going to fall off them any minute.

“Relax,” Vince told me as he slid into the passenger seat. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

I nodded and stared up at the house as Joel pulled away. I could see the light from our bedroom glowing round the edge of the curtains and I pictured Shannon sat on the bed, diligently preparing for her meeting. Then I imagined Moreland Park bathed in icy moonlight and full of wolves from all over the city, all watching me lined up with the cubs, ready to be blooded and welcomed back to the Pack. My stomach churned. I fiddled with the hem of my dress, picking at specks of dust. *A dress, for God’s sake.* A red dress at that.

Vince and Joel chatted about Pack gossip as we drove, trying to draw me into the conversation about which cubs would be blooded and how much their parents had spent on their outfits. A total waste of money if you asked me, since by the end of the night the designer suits and couture dresses would be in shreds, scattered through the park. I dropped in a vague comment every now and then, but that was all the enthusiasm I could muster.

I stared at the bright full moon sailing above the clouds in the inky sky. The February moon was called Wolf Moon in some cultures. What better night for a ceremony like this, when young wolves were declared adults and hunted for the first time? Of course, wolf cubs were born with the ability to shift—my mum was fond of reminiscing how I’d been born wolf and hadn’t shifted to human until I was a week old—but to be deemed mature enough to hunt solo was a big deal.

I’d been blooded age ten, Vince alongside me, both of us

almost frenzied with excitement. I hadn't cared about people watching me back then; I'd been proud, desperate to shift shape and run off to hunt. Now all I could think was that something was bound to go wrong. I'd fall off my shoes, or throw up on someone, or pass out. Or all three.

I realized Joel was saying something to me and forced myself back into their conversation. "Sorry, what?"

"I said have you heard from the police yet?"

"Oh. No, it'll be another couple of weeks." I'd marked the date on my calendar, highlighted it and everything. I'd applied to join the police as a community support officer as soon as Shannon and I moved back here. After my Cousin Adam's murder and the involvement of two officers in the aftermath, I'd felt a need to redress the balance somehow. Make sure no more kids suffered like Adam had.

Once upon a time, the police fast-tracked werewolf applicants, eager to get the stronger, faster wolves on the force. It had only taken a few nasty accidents for people to realize that being stronger and faster than a human means nothing if you don't have the training and discipline to use those skills properly. Now wolves went through the exact same screening and training process as humans and fewer people got their bones accidentally crushed while being arrested.

"You're going to be great," Vince said, reaching back to pat my knee. "Officer Hammond. I can't wait."

I smiled and squeezed his fingers. "This doesn't give you an excuse for speeding, Vince. I'm not going to *lose* your tickets for you."

"Ticket, single," he stressed. "One ticket. And I was justified. I was—"

"We're here," Joel announced, turning into a wide gravel car park already full with cars. The rough wooden gates to Moreland Park loomed in the distance, surrounded by tangled hedges and slender birch trees. Moreland was the biggest park in the city, left to grow wild to give us wolves somewhere to truly run free. I opened my door and inhaled deeply, catching scents of game and greenery on the chill night air. It brought a rush of memories of my first Lupercali with it and the first

tingle of excitement crackled through me, burning away some of the nausea.

The gravel was rimed with frost and I skidded a little on my stupid heels until Vince linked arms with me. I clutched at him gratefully, my heart thudding with a cocktail of nerves and anticipation. I glanced around the car park as we picked our way to the gate and saw my parents' pearl-grey two-by-four parked a few feet away from Joel's crimson estate. *God.* The real root of my anxiety tonight was that I'd somehow embarrass my parents. Why it bothered me when I'd been an embarrassment to them for years I didn't know, but it did.

A few other groups were drifting to the gate; I saw young kids in sparkly dresses and freshly-pressed suits, giggling excitedly as they were ushered along by their parents. Vince and Joel called out greetings to wolves they recognized. I hadn't really been home long enough to reconnect with anyone, so I kept quiet and focused on staying upright. I would burn the shoes when I got home, I silently resolved. The pointed toes were already killing me and the dull ache in my feet made me itch to throw off my human shape and run as a wolf.

Soon, I promised myself and my wolf, glancing at the moon again. *Just a couple of hours and we're free.*

The Lupercali ceremony was held in the center of the park, a wide clearing ringed by ancient oak trees. By the time we arrived the clearing was crowded, every wolf in the city spread around the circle. Teenagers clustered in the shadows of the oak trees, too cool to sit with their families. Elder wolves had brought garden chairs with them and sat with blankets draped over their knees to ward off the winter cold. Young cubs chased each other in and out of the blackberry thickets, yelping and barking joyfully under parents' watchful eyes. Glasses clinked and people murmured and laughed. My heart swelled a little at it all. *Family.* I wished once more that Shannon had been able to come.

"Ayla!" My mum emerged from the crowd, dragging my dad behind her. She was wearing a tawny fake fur coat. I couldn't decide if that was ironic or just weird. Dad was in an immaculate dinner suit. I tugged nervously at my dress again;

suddenly glad I'd let Shannon talk me into buying it and wearing the gold jewelry. "Darling, we were wondering where you were!" Mum hugged me warmly, then released me to look me in the eyes. "Are you okay? Nervous? You don't need to be."

"I'm fine," I assured her, although of course they could both smell the acrid scent of my fear. "Just want to get on with it, that's all."

"You look beautiful," Mum said. "We're both so proud of you."

Dad nodded and gave me a gentle, buddy-thump on the arm. "Big night, baby," he said, flashing me a smile that showed entirely too many teeth. "Knock 'em dead."

He was as nervous as I was. It didn't settle my stomach one bit.

With my parents on one side and Vince and Joel on the other, I moved through the gathered throng towards the center of the clearing. A huge bonfire cracked and flared there, shooting sparks and orange-blue fingers of flame into the night. The clouds were clearing to show the moon in all her glory, surrounded by a faint sprinkling of stars. The scent of burning wood mingled with the rich aroma of cooking meat. That came from a barbecue a few feet from the main fire, where someone was cooking herby sausages and burgers.

When the ceremony kicked off, I'd be standing by the bonfire waiting for one of the Pack alphas to daub my head with sheep's blood, cut my palm, and declare me one of them. Then me and the cubs would run off into the forest while everyone else stayed here and ate and drank until they passed out. Like I said, it was a Roman thing.

I spent the time before the ceremony being dragged from one person to another by Mum and Dad. Even though I hadn't done much socializing since my return, a few Pack members recognized me from Adam's funeral. A few even remembered me from before I'd left home and I got the usual refrains of *I remember you when you were this high* and *you look just like your mother* from them. I bore it with gritted teeth and a tight smile, counting down to the start of the ceremony.

The only person I was glad to see was Gloriana, kitted out

in full drag queen regalia and gliding through the woods with perfect balance on her six-inch stilettos. Aside from being one of my few new friends in the city, Glory was the star act at Silks—the local werewolf gay bar—and not only dressed like a diva but unashamedly was one. Even Mum loved her.

“Sweetie, you look gorgeous!” she told me, catching my hands in hers. “Red is so your color. You should dye your hair, you know. A burnished copper, maybe. Black washes you out.”

I ran my hand over my dark spikes. “Black goes with everything though.”

She patted her own bright red beehive wig. “It’s a party, Ayla, not a funeral.” She drifted off to greet Joel before I could think of a witty retort.

Finally it was time. Someone at the center of the clearing blew a shrill whistle that cut through the low babble of the crowd and drew everyone’s attention to the bonfire. Eddie Hughes, one of the Pack alphas, stood before the bonfire, the flames throwing jagged shadows across his stern face. “Settle down, everyone!” he yelled. “Let’s try and show some decorum.”

A chorus of whoops and cheers answered him and he waved his hands to quiet everyone down again. “We all know why we’re here, so there’s no need for all the ancient poems and recitations,” he continued. A few people groaned, but most were relieved. There was a huge, turgid cycle of poetry associated with Lupercali that we were all forced to learn in Lupine Studies at school. Being forced to sit through it every Lupercali as well just seemed cruel and unusual.

“Now, let’s get everyone up here.” Eddie beckoned to the small group of kids hovering near the fire. “Don’t be afraid, this is an important night,” he told them as they joined him. I counted eight girls and six boys, all around ten or twelve years old. The girls wore pretty, floaty dresses sewn with sequins that looked way too thin for the frosty night. The boys wore suits and ties and looked embarrassed and uncomfortable. I wavered on my heels and sympathized. I wished I was up there with them so we could all be embarrassed together,

instead of having to wait until after they were done.

Once they were all lined up, Eddie gave a short speech about how important this night was and how proud they should be to be here tonight, about to become adults. The boys lost their unease as he spoke, their backs straightening, eyes flashing with excitement as the crowd parted. A female wolf I didn't know strode to the bonfire, a dead lamb in her arms. Its throat had been recently cut and the lamb still smelled warm, its blood perfuming the air. The scent of fresh meat stirred the wolf in me, as it did all of us, and electric currents of energy and power swept through the crowd.

The she-wolf took the lamb to the cubs and set it down on the grass in front of them. One of the girls whined, a sound of hunger that a few of the others immediately echoed. Eddie whispered something to them and they fell quiet, but the hunger still gleamed in their eyes, feral and keen. Behind me, people started panting and whining as their own hungers twisted inside them. My wolf growled and pawed at me, wanting freedom. I bit my lip and clamped her down, heart racing.

Eddie knelt to dip his fingers in the bleeding wound at the lamb's throat. Rich, coppery blood stained his hand as he rose to daub a moon shape on the first cub's forehead. "Who keeps company with wolves will learn how to howl," he intoned, his sonorous voice rising to drown out the whimpers and sharp yaps from the crowd. "For the strength of the Pack is the wolf and the strength of the wolf is the Pack. Always remember that as you hunt, remember it as you work and mate and live." He moved from one child to the next, smearing them with blood as he went.

Trembling howls pierced the night as few of the watchers let their wolves go. I breathed fast and shallow, reaching for Vince's hand and finding claws instead of fingers. He glanced at me and smiled, revealing gleaming canines. Soon the change would take him completely. Next to him, Joel held onto his human shape, in control as always, although his pupils were dilated with excitement. Glory wet her lips and shifted from foot to foot. The mix of fresh meat, hot blood and a mass of other wolves would soon overcome them both. I held on too,

as my wolf cried for freedom. I still had to get through my own part of the evening before I could let rip. By now my nerves were strung tight and I felt prickly and light-headed.

The cubs began howling too as Eddie reached the last of them. They threw their heads back and sang to the moon; thin, high voices joining the deeper, richer songs of the adults. Eddie gestured for silence and they promptly shut up, nerves returning as the second part of the ceremony began. They'd taken the lamb's blood—the offering of the Pack to them—now they had to offer something back.

Eddie produced a deceptively small knife with a carved rowan wood handle. Going back to the first cub, he took her hand. "This won't hurt," he lied to her as he drew the gleaming blade across her palm. I saw her bite her lip to smother a cry and closed my own hand into a fist in sympathy. He raised her hand so the blood ran down her wrist and arm. "Blood binds us to the Pack and Pack runs in our blood," he said. The howls rang out again, a few louder than others as Eddie moved down the line. To their credit, none of the cubs cried as he slit their palms. I had a feeling I might.

The smell of wolf blood mingled with the lamb's blood, a weird mix of predator and prey. My nerves jangled as Eddie cut the last cub and let his blood drip to the earth. Splashes of crimson dotted the frosty grass, shining dully in the moonlight. Countless generations of wolves had stood here and done this, their blood soaking into the ground and marking this place as theirs; their home, their territory. I could almost feel the earth vibrating with the power of it.

Eddie threw his arms out to the forest. "Blooded and declared adults, all of you," he announced. "The forest is yours tonight."

The cubs surrendered to their wolves, shredding their silky dresses and crisp shirts to fall into wolf shape. Another joyous chain of howls accompanied their change and within seconds they were racing into the icy shadows of the trees, yipping and yapping and snapping at each other playfully as they went, wounds forgotten. They'd passed through Lupercali.

Now it was my turn.

QUEEREDFICTION

www.queeredfiction.com

For more about us visit the QueererdFiction website and see what we have *coming out* and what is *out now*.



QUEEREDFICTION

out between the pages

