



BIG WOLF
ON CAMPUS

Heart Throb
WOLF

AIDY AWARD
PIPER FOX

HEART THROB WOLF



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AIDY AWARD

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*For everyone who ever fell for a fictional character~ You
know you have.*

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In the end, we all become stories.

— MARGARET ATWOOD

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ROSIE



Oh no. No, no, no. They couldn't make me do it.

No way was I having a big book launch party at the Moon Bean.

“If you don't have your launch party here, your fired.” Selena slapped one of the one hundred paperback copies of my book she'd ordered down on the counter, making my cappuccino jump in its saucer.

“Once again, I don't work here.” We'd already had this conversation once when I didn't want to hit the publish button. I'd never intended to let anyone else read my werewolf firefighter romance novel, much less put it out into the world for someone to stumble upon. Someone like Nik.

Selena had won that round too, and not only had it ended up costing me a few hundred dollars to hire a good editor and to buy a book cover featuring a hot AF fireman holding a hose suggestively and sporting a wolf tattoo on his chest...I put my dirtiest fantasies about my best friend into eBook and print for all the world to read.

God, what had I been thinking?

I'd hoped liked hell no one would read it. Except my friend, and fellow romance addict/bookworm Hunter had Tiktokked about it. She'd shut down her book blog, but her TikTok had blown up after she'd admitted to reading and loving the naughty bits in romance novels. Now all she had to do was sneeze about a book and people, a lot of people, bought it.

“Don’t you?” Selena waved my book around, and I tried to grab it from her before anyone saw it. She was too fast for me and tossed it to Charlize in a horrible game of keep-away. “How many words of this book were written right over there in my cafe?”

Uh-oh. Here we go again. And of course, Selena was right. She owned the Moon Bean, which was my favorite coffee shop, book store, and writing spot all wrapped into one. I practically lived here. “All of them.”

Charlize, who also worked here, was a horrible friend because she started reading the book right there in front of me, to complete my feelings of mortification. She didn’t even look up when she said, “Dude, you’re not going to win. Also...what page do the sexy bits start on?”

“That’s right.” Selena crossed her arms and gave me the eyebrow of doom. “And since your shiny, new fans are clamoring for you to write the next book, where do you suppose you’ll write that?”

Great. I was crap when I tried to write at home. Netflix was the frenemy of all procrastinators like me. I could go try to find another coffee shop, but this one was right across from campus. Besides, it felt like a second home, but one filled with books and coffee. “Umm, same table?”

“Not if you don’t have your launch party here.” Selena grinned like the Cheshire Cat she was. “Besides, it’s too late, I already put it on the shop’s website. Be here Saturday night to sign books, You’ll get the profits from the sales split with me fifty-fifty.”

“Book launch party, did you say?” A pretty girl perusing the romance books on display raised an eyebrow and looked between me and Selena.

“Yes. For Rosemary Roman. Her debut book, *The Fireman’s Growl*, comes out this week and the Moon Bean is hosting her exclusive launch party. You can preorder your copy at the register.”

“I think I will.” The girl turned and walked straight over to the counter where Charley handed her a flyer and rung her up.

Damn it. She knew she had me. My scholarship covered my tuition, but didn't give me extra money for books. I'd cut my hours waitressing at the Wolves Den bar and grill next door down to just two nights a week to give me more time to write. I needed that two-hundred or so bucks the sales of the paperback would get me for next semester, because the royalties from the eBooks wouldn't hit my account until after school started.

“Fine. You win. I'll be here, you monster.” Selena had no idea what she was doing to me.

What if Nik found out?

I'd just have to make sure he didn't come. If I was really lucky, he'd have practice or even better a game, or a fire to go put out. I would totally consider becoming an arsonist just to keep him away from the Moon Bean.

My phone rang and of course, it was Nik. “Hey, what's up?”

“Hey, babe. I need a favor.”

He always called me that. It didn't mean anything. We were just friends. Had been ever since senior year of high school when I'd first moved to Rogue, and Nik had signed up for English tutoring with me. He'd been embarrassed at first, but once I figured out he was dyslexic and told him he wasn't stupid, we'd been best buds ever since. I was just one of the guys to him.

Except he didn't call any of the guys, babe.

I shook my head at myself, at how I got butterflies every time he said it.

“What do you need?” I didn't even squeak or sound out of breath.

“Dire Wolves have a bye this weekend.” I could practically hear the eyebrow waggle in his voice. He was planning something.

Crapballs. If he didn't have a game on Saturday, he and his team buddies might accidentally end up at the coffee shop. They always hung out at the Wolves Den bar and grill next door, and more often than not, he'd come over and try to get me to go drinking with them instead of sticking my nose in my computer.

"I got myself and the boys at the firehouse a side gig on Saturday. I'm bringing a couple guys from the team along too. Wanna come with? Be our talent manager or our bodyguard for the night, so the ladies keep their hands off the goods?"

Yes.

Not yes I could go, yes he wouldn't be able to come to the launch party. "Can't, sorry. I've got a... uh...a book thing I have to go to. You know, for school."

Oh God. I sounded so weird.

The line was silent for a second. "Why do you sound weird about it?"

Sigh. Busted. There was only one solution to this. "I'm not weird, you're weird."

Thank goodness we were best friends and I could say stuff like that to him, and he wouldn't even blink twice.

"Fine, but you're going to miss out. Some lady hired us to be at a party, in our fire gear, but with no shirts on."

Umm. Maybe I was changing my mind about not going with? "Uh-huh."

I definitely squeaked that time.

"She swore it's not like a stripper thing, she just wants us to hold some product she has for sale. I hope it's sex toys. She's even sending a limo to come get us, so we arrive in style at her party. Isn't that nuts? But you know how we get pawed at those kind of things."

Whoever this lady was, she wasn't nuts, she was smart. Nik and his crew at the firehouse were hot, seriously hot. I'd buy anything they were holding. "Sorry I can't be the

cockblocker for you. Wait, what do you call it when it's in reverse? No, forget I asked that, I don't want to know. Be sure to take lots of selfies and send them to me. I'm sure I'll be bored out of my mind at the book thing."

"You're still coming to the house on Sunday for the game though, right?" He didn't sound worried even a little.

Because of course I was. Nik knew how to make exactly two dishes, spaghetti—heavy on the meatballs—and steaks. He needed me to provide the game day goodies that weren't simply meat on a stick. That meant brownies. Yum. "My chocolatey, gooeyness and I will be there. You're sure you don't mind that I invited Charley and Hunter to our game day ritual?"

"Babe," I could practically see the shrug of his ridiculously huge shoulders as he chastised me with the pet name. Tortured me with it too. "Of course not. The more the merrier, especially when the more is my teammates' girlfriends. I already asked Eli and Ty if they wanted to come along too."

While I was looking forward to brownies, barbecue, and vegging in front of the TV on Sunday, I was going to be pile of nerves until then.

Saturday turned out to be the longest day of my life. Selena forbid me from coming into the Moon Bean until the start of the party. I was too antsy and decided to spend the hour beforehand at the bar next door at the Wolves' Den.

"Hunter warned me you were coming over. Here's your margarita, light on the tequila. She said she'd kill me if I let you get drunk before your big night." Ty slid a fancy margarita glass in front of me and shot me a smile.

I smiled, grateful Hunter had called ahead to her boyfriend to have this ready. He only tended bar on the nights the football team didn't have a game, since he was one of their star players. I inhaled the slushie green drink and pressed my palms to my temples to stave off the brain freeze. "I won't kill you either if you keep me supplied with those and enough chips with guac to calm my nerves."

“Oh, so you are the guest of honor tonight, huh?” That same girl who’d been at the coffeeshop the day before held up her ticket to tonight’s party. She’d emphasized the word ‘are’ like she’d questioned that she heard right yesterday.

“I guess I am.” Eek.

“So, do you write about your real life in your books?” Why did this girl sound more like a lit snob than a fan of romance?

Must just be my nerves. No way I was answering that truthfully. Like I was going to admit out loud that I’d written a book about me and my BFF falling in love. “Oh, uh, no such thing as werewolves, right? So I guess that’s a no.”

I snort-laughed and buried my face in my bowl of chips. until the alarm on my phone went off right at six, and I just about dropped it trying to turn the ringer off. Okay. Keep calm and carry on.

There probably weren’t even going to be very many people there. Who even went to a book launch for an unknown romance author, anyway?

I downed the rest of my second marg, got another brain freeze and spent the walk from the bar to the bookshop rubbing my tongue across the roof of my mouth, trying to warm my head back up. Which is ninety-percent of why I didn’t notice the four kazillion people in the book store, until I pushed in through the front door.

The whole room started clapping, and I forgot how to breathe. Were all these people seriously here for me?

Selena came over and wrapped her arm around my shoulder, “This way, Miss Author. You’re signing table awaits.”

Selena steered us through the crowd, and I caught a glimpse of our destination. My usual table in the cafe had been replaced by a long, rectangle table with an enormous stack of my books to one side, a sparkling tablecloth with a stylized version of my pen name on it, and a whole line of people waiting for an autograph. The pile of books I expected, the

sparkly table cloth was a nice touch. The winding line of people, I did not, and made me regret not ordering a third margarita.

The introvert in me reared up in revolt, but I beat her back down with an image of what I thought an famous author should look like. I squeezed my eyes shut and whispered to myself, “I can do this.”

Selena squeezed my hand and gently tugged me to the table. “Of course you can do this Rosie, don’t be foolish. Besides I got you an assistant to help you along. Now, let us launch this book.”

And I totally could have, totally would have. Until I saw him. My mouth fell open wide enough that flies could set up camp and roast marshmallows. I’d shut it, but the muscles in my face had gone numb. Or maybe they’d just gone dumb.

The completely unexpected, never-even-crossed-my-mind backdrop for the book launch came in the form of a very hot, totally ripped, and mostly naked fireman with a wolf tattoo on his chest holding my books in his hands like he was holding the .

Nik.

My best friend.

Right out of my dirtiest fantasies I’d put in the book. Brought to life right out of those pages and standing before me.

Holy crap.

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NIK



When the limo this rich lady who hired us to model products for the night pulled up in front of the Moon Bean coffee shop, I was damn sure it stopped short, and we were going to the Wolves' Den next door. Maybe for some kind of new alcohol launch or something. I'd seen sexy girls in short, skin-tight dresses with beer logos slapped across their chests give out t-shirts and shots, or whatever to boost sales and brand recognition. Any first-year marketing student knew that. Plus the Den was the stomping ground of every player on the Dire Wolves squad.

My athletic scholarship paid for school now, but I had contingency plan on top of contingency plan for after graduation. That's why I was double-majoring in Fire Science Technology and Business. I had no grand ideas of playing professional ball after school, and my pack needed someone to keep the Reserve open space where we roamed free in our wolf forms safe from fires.

Gear for football and books for a big course load were expensive. That's why I'd so readily agreed to be a piece of fiery hot man-meat tonight. My savings account never seemed to get more than a few hundred dollar in it. Couldn't pay for books, balls, or babes that way.

But Selena Troika, the mother of our alpha and former matriarch of my pack, came out herself to usher us into the bookshop side of the Moon Bean. It was packed too. Mostly with women who were all going gaga over some book with a shirtless firefighter on the cover.

I glanced at windows that were covered in six-foot tall posters of the cover. Jesus, it could have been me on that book.

“Hey man, you know who this Rosemary Roman chick is? Is she like famous or something?” One of the other guys from the firehouse that I’d corralled into this gig tonight picked up a book from the display and looked it over.

“I don’t know. Her name sounds kind of familiar though. She must be somebody to draw a crowd like this.” Besides the fact that Selena was paying us a thousand bucks to stand around with...I guess books, in our hands.

“Nik? Good, you’re here.” Selena Troika was a force to be reckoned with. While no one would say it, we all knew she’d been involved in the revolution against the Volkovs. I didn’t really understand what she was doing here running a little coffee shop and bookstore at the university.

But my mama always said trust your matriarch no matter what, so that’s what I was doing.

I raised my hand. “Present.”

She looked me up and down and with every inch, her smile got wider. “Yes, this is exactly what I was hoping for. You’ll be stationed at the signing table. Charlize will show the rest of you to your places.”

Charley was my best friend Eli’s girl. I waved at her, feeling kind of stupid standing there all oiled up and shirtless. But she was doing a damn good job of pretending she didn’t know me. Shit.

Had I done something to piss her off? While Eli wasn’t my alpha, he was the future alpha of the Chincoteague pack, and my parents would be really upset if I did something to harm the relationship with another local pack. Especially one with so many wolfresses they could arrange a marriage for me with.

I’d have to ask Eli, or better yet, Rosie if she knew what that was all about tomorrow at the barbecue.

Selena grabbed me by the suspenders and dragged me into the cafe portion of the bookstore where a long table and stacks

of books was all set up. “You stand right here and look like you came right out of those pages, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am. Will we get to meet this author?” Maybe I’d grab a copy of the book for Rosie. She loved to read. I was surprised she wasn’t here anyway. She spent pretty much most of her time sitting in the coffeeshop with her nose in her laptop. I guessed since the coffee shop was closed for the event, she’d made those other plans.

Maybe I shouldn’t get her the book though. I wouldn’t want her to think I was trying to tell her something by giving her a romance novel with a firefighter on the cover. How embarrassing would that be? She was my friend, totally just one of the guys. Sort of. None of the guys had a great rack or a luscious ass. Not that I was noticing. Nope. Not me. Hadn’t been noticing since high school.

“Hmm. She’ll be here soon. Maybe peruse the pages of her book while you wait.” She handed me one of the books and waggled her eyebrows all suggestive-like. What was she up to?

I flipped the book over to read the description on the back and see if there was a photo. No picture. But how totally weird that it was about a fireman who was a werewolf. I flipped the book over and saw that the model had a wolf tattoo that was eerily similar to mine on his chest, and a blue glow to his eyes.

Was Selena trying to tell me that a human had discovered our secret and it was somehow my fault? Charley was in on our secret since she was mating Eli. Was that why she was mad at me? What the hell?

I didn’t get a chance to read what the book was actually about because the whole room started clapping and Selena escorted someone through the crowd toward the table.

That someone was Rosie.

What the actual fuck? She’d said she had some book thing...oh. Oh. Holy shit. Rosie was Rosemary Roman. Holy shit.

Holy.

Shit.

Rosie wrote this romance novel.

About a firefighter... who was also a wolf shifter.

Did she know? I'd always been so damn careful around her, even if I'd wanted to tell her a million times.

For a hot second I thought she'd been weird about her other plans because she didn't want me to know she'd set this whole thing up. But then I looked at her, standing there with her mouth hanging open.

"Nik?" She looked like an adorable deer in the headlights. She definitely had no idea I would be here.

Besides that wasn't my Rosie. She was a wide-open book. She didn't keep secrets from me.

Except she hadn't told me she was an author.

I didn't know why that fucking bothered me so much. I needed to get over that right now, this was her big moment, and I'd be there for her no matter what. Just like she'd always been for me.

"Hey Rosie oops, I mean Rosemary Roman, author extraordinaire." I sounded like a Neanderthal who didn't know a novel from my ass. "I had no idea you wrote a book."

I held up the one in my hand and pointed to her name on the cover. "Grandma Roman would be proud."

The scared look on her face drained away and she smiled shyly, pulling her lips between her teeth to hide it like she always did. "Yeah? I hope so. That's why I picked it. You don't think it sounds dumb for a pen name?"

"Naw. It's perfect." We'd spent plenty of hours at her gran's kitchen table, them both trying to teach me how to read after I'd been told for years that I was just dumb. "If you'd have picked anything else, I'd be mad."

Selena pulled out the chair behind the table and waved Rosie over. "Ready, Miss Roman? Your fans await."

Rosie made a can-you-believe-this face, then plopped down behind the table and was immediately swamped with people who wanted her to sign their copy of her book. We didn't get to talk much for the next couple of hours. I watched as she smiled at each and every person who came up to her to get her autograph. She chatted with them all and listened to their funny bookworm stories, making each person feel special, seen.

She was born for this.

That was fucking hot.

Whoa. Where had that come from? I hadn't thought about her that way in years... okay days... fine at least ninety minutes. Rosie was so much more than a hot chick. She was my friend, and I'd never jeopardize that friendship to get my dick wet.

I'd learned to ignore my wolf when Rosie was around. Which wasn't always easy since she had the kind of curves that made me hard and always smelled like ripe peaches.

Not even my wolf could talk me into dicking around with her. Sure, I'd had my fair share of fantasies about her when we'd first met, and my wolf went all crazy trying to claim her. I tamped those ideas down real fast once she made it clear she was here to tutor me and nothing more. But she had done more. She'd believed in me when no one else had.

Now it was my turn to support her.

I handed book after book over to the people in line, took all of the comments about my fireman's pole, or hose and returned them with a smile. When they asked if I would growl for them I actually did it, and had at least a dozen phone number shoved into my pocket.

A girl with a real resting bitch face cut in line so she was next. The women she cut in front of deferred to her. Prey instinct. The cutter was a wolftress. There had been several other wolftresses, she-bears, and a few female felines here tonight too. There were plenty at Bay State U, but I didn't recognize this woman, even though she was around our age.

She glanced at me, then at Rosie, then the cover, and back to me. “So is this story about you?”

I politely deferred with a shrug. Rosie had paused to take a drink and almost spit out her water. “Oh, geez. Sorry. Who do you want me to make this out to?”

“Erika. No wait, just your signature is good.” Rosie signed and the wolfress took the book and sauntered away like we were beneath her.

What a bitch.

When there was just one copy left, I swiped it and hid it behind my back. “Sorry, ladies. It appears we’re all out.”

That statement was meant with boos and jeers and ahhs. Selena waved the rest of the people in line toward the cash register, promising them all vouchers which they could return for signed books as soon as the next shipment arrived.

That left me and Rosie alone together for the first time all night. She was absolutely fucking glowing, and I was sweating.

“Wow. I’m exhausted, my cheeks hurt from smiling, and I think I might have carpal tunnel.” She dropped her pen and shook out her hand.

“I hope you’ve got it in you to sign one more.” I showed her the secreted book and flipped it open to the front page. “Sign it, ‘To my sexy firefighter inspiration, Nik.’”

I thought she’d laugh, but she grabbed the book from me and picked up the pen, stuck her head down and signed the book. She didn’t even look up when she said, “You don’t have to buy the book. Really. I should give this copy to—”

“No way. This one is for sure mine.” I snagged it from her even though she kept a tight grip on it and stuck it down the back of my pants.

“Nik. Really. Don’t read that. It’s just, umm...you know, it’s for girls.” Cute, adorkable Rosie was turning fifty shades of pink in the face, and I wanted to lick my way up one side of her flushed throat and down the other.

Shit. Down boy.

“No way, babe. This is a major accomplishment. Of course I’m going to read it.”

The other guys came over to join me, each with a book of their own in their hands. Kirill, the Dire Wolves football team calendar model, had actual lipstick marks all over his chest. He’d begged me to come along even though he wasn’t even the least bit interested in firefighting. Dude loved getting man-handled at stuff like this.

“Don’t be trash talking romance novels and saying they’re just for girls. Where do you think I learned my highly attuned ladies-man skills. My mom had hundreds of these at home. I like the ones with dragons and wolves and stuff in them the best, so you know, you can’t go wrong with a firefighter wolf-shifter hero.” He winked at Rosie as he snapped the suspenders on his borrowed pants.

Kirill was officially uninvited to tomorrow’s game day barbecue.

“Oh my God. Selena gave you each a book? Kill me now.” Rosie laid her forehead on the table.

Selena sauntered over. I’m sure she felt like the cock of the walk for having such a packed store tonight. “Don’t you boys worry about Rosie. All authors think their books are horrible. Here’s your pay. The limo is waiting outside to take you all home or wherever you want to go. Now shoo. I’m closing up shop in a few minutes.”

I really wanted to stay and talk to Rosie about her book, but it seemed like she wanted to avoid the subject. I’d see her tomorrow. Maybe I’d even stay up late and read some of it. I wasn’t a fast reader, but I was sure I could get through a few chapters. “See ya later, Roses. Congrats again on the book.”

She didn’t even pick up her head, just waved half-heartedly. She was probably super tired.

We had the limo drop us back at the station so we could change out of our gear, and the other guys wanted to hit the

bars. “Next time, fellas. I’ve got ribs to marinate for tomorrow.”

“Is that a euphemism for read the sexy bits in this romance novel and jerk-off?” Kirill slapped me on the shoulder with his copy.

“Don’t be an asshole.” I grabbed the book from him. He didn’t deserve it. “This is Rosie’s work and you will respect it and her, or I will kick your fucking ass.”

“Whoa. Okay. Sorry. It’s not like she’s your girl or something.” Kirill snatched the book back from me, and took off running up the stairs.

She might not be my girl, but maybe she should be. I was all mixed up over this book I hadn’t even read yet. “See you guys tomorrow afternoon. Bring beer. Don’t bring Kirill.”

It only took me a few minutes to take care of the prep for having the guys and Rosie over tomorrow so I settled in on the couch with *The Fireman’s Growl*.

I read it straight through. Nothing like finding out exactly how your best friend feels about you by reading a hot as fuck sex scene in a book.

And her depictions of life as a wolf-shifter were eerily accurate.

Had I said holy shit earlier? Because I meant it now. I glanced at my phone. Two forty-three in the morning.

Fuck it. I was going over to Rosie’s.

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ROSIE



*B*y all rights I should have been exhausted after the signing and talking to all of those people, but I couldn't sleep. I might never sleep again. It was almost three o'clock in the morning, and I was pacing back and forth in my living room, surrounded by cold mugs of tea I kept making and then forgetting.

I never should have let Nik walk out of the Moon Bean with my book.

I really wanted to blame it all on Selena, but I was the one who wrote a romance novel about my best friend and then handed a signed a copy to him. My sexy firefighter inspiration. He had no idea.

This could go only one of two ways. Either he'd freak the fuck out and never talk to me again, because I was a weird, creepy, obsessed girl who'd written a dirty book about him or... Probably it was just that one outcome.

No way would hot, gorgeous, funny, kind, delicious Nik read my book and decide he'd always been in love with me too. I mean, have you seen him? He's like a thousand times hotter than the guy on the cover of my book and I'm, well, chubby is an understatement. I've never even had a boyfriend, much less one that wanted to do all the dirty things to me I'd written in my book.

The whole thing was a fantasy. One that I should have freaking kept in my dreams. Now the entire world, including

Nik, his firehouse buddies, and probably the majority of the football team, knew I was in love with my best friend.

Maybe no one wouldn't notice since I'd also turned him into a werewolf? Yeah, right. Making the story paranormal didn't hide a thing. Not to mention Nik's sexy wolf tattoo.

I might not be able to sleep now, but I could rest when I was dead. Because I was definitely going to die of embarrassment the second I saw Nik. Fine. I would just have to avoid him. For the rest of my life.

Except I didn't want to. He was my best friend in the whole world. I loved hanging out with him. And what if he did pick door number two? The scenario where he liked me back?

Stupid to get my hopes up. If nothing had happened in the last four years between us, nothing ever would.

"Rosie?" A loud, fast knock sounded at my door. "Rosie open up."

My stomach dropped right down to the floor and rolled away. My heart jumped rope in my throat. What was he doing here? It was three in the morning. "Nik?"

"Rosie, open this door right now, before I kick it down." Did he just growl?

I was so freaked out, I couldn't figure out if he was mad or excited or freaking out too.

"Umm, don't do that, I'll lose my deposit. Probably you should just come back tomorrow. Or better yet, I'll see you at the barbecue." I pressed my hand to the door and willed him to go away.

"I don't want to have this conversation through a door where the entire neighborhood can hear, but I will." He was already loud enough that the people next door were likely going to complain.

"Okay." I prided myself on having a brilliant vocabulary. Not today. Every word drained out of my brain when the panic came flooding in.

“Okay, what?” He jiggled the handle. “Okay, you’re going to open the door?”

“No.” I squeaked that at a pitch so high only dogs could hear the answer.

“Fine.” His voice got quieter and closer like he was leaning his head against the door. “I read the book, babe.”

Fuck. I was now down to one syllable swear words. Wait, I don’t think I said that one out loud.

“You named the firefighter Mick and the girl Thyme.”

I thought I was being all clever. Nik and Mick, Rosemary and Thyme. It was a stupid name. “It’s an interesting name.”

“They’re best friends who fall in love.” He stayed silent after that.

I knew deep in my heart if I didn’t say something right here, right now, it was over. He’d walk away feeling confused and betrayed. A thousand snarky replies stuttered through my mind, every single one of them designed to push him away, keep my heart safe from the rejection he was about to slap down on me.

That wasn’t fair to him or me. If ever I was going to take a risk on love, this was it.

I yanked my long sleep t-shirt down as far as it would go, and unlocked and opened the door. It looked like he’d run here. Nik’s hair was sticking up like he’d been running his hands through it, and his eyes had that gorgeous blue glow that flashed whenever he was riled up about something.

I peeked at his face to see if he was mad, or irritated, or upset. For the first time since we’d met, I couldn’t read him. He wasn’t giving me a single clue to how he felt about my book...about me. I bent my head, closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Then I slowly raised my face, swallowed hard and whispered, “I know, Nik. I wrote the book.”

“Is it about me, Rosie? About you and me?”

I’d never lie to Nik. I couldn’t. He was my best friend. There was no going back now.

“Yes.”

He stepped through the doorway, grabbed my face with the book still in his hand, and kissed me.

Nik.

Kissed.

Me.

I melted into him, lost all sense of time and space. There was only me and Nik, our lips, our tongues, and our hunger for each other.

I wanted to say it was the best, most sensual kiss in my entire life, but I had nothing to compare it to. I'd never been kissed. Ever. I guess that makes it the best still. I hoped I wasn't doing it really badly.

What if I was like slobbering on him too much. Gah. I broke my mouth from his, but then couldn't help taking just a little bit more and brushed my lips back and forth over his once, twice, three times.

“Rosie, my sweet Rose. Why didn't you ever say something?” He pushed his fingers into my hair and gave the strands a stiff little tug.

God, that sent tingles all along my scalp and I forgot what the question was for a second while I wondered if real-life Nik was as kinky as the wolf-shifter fireman Mick in my book. But that could wait. He had asked a question I couldn't leave unanswered.

“I didn't mean for you to find out this way.”

“You mean you didn't mean for me to find out at all, don't you?” He lowered his face to the crook of my neck and scraped his teeth across an insanely sensitive spot on my skin. “Don't deny it. I know you too well.”

“Busted?” I whimpered the single word. It was all I could get out. Was this the part where he gets mad? I'd prefer we went back to the kissing part instead.

“You’re worried that I won’t feel the same.” He growled those words into my ear, then lifted his face and looked so deep into my eyes he could probably see my whole soul.

Nik was the only one I would ever let see all of me. Emotionally, anyway. I nodded, or maybe I thought about nodding, because I don’t think my head moved.

“I thought so. I’m going to show you exactly how I feel about you, babe.” Nik shoved the book into my hands and then picked me up like a freaking princess, kicked my front door shut with one foot, and carried me down the hall toward my room.

“Oh God, put me down. You’ll hurt yourself. I’m too heavy.” I dropped the book and wrapped my arms around his neck, scared to death we were both going to end up on our asses.

“I will never drop you, Roses. You’re mine.” His words were filled with such sincerity that I knew he was talking about more than this single moment.

Nik went straight into my room, set me on the bed, and gave my shoulder a push. I fell back into the pillows, and he crawled over me like a panther. “You say stop and I will, but don’t say it because you’re scared of what I think about who and what you are. I want to be here, and I want to be with you. Got it?”

“Uh-huh. But umm, I’ve never—” He and I knew everything about each other, but there were some things a girl just didn’t talk about with her guy friends—even if he was the guy I shared everything else in the world. A girl just didn’t blather on to the guy she was in love with for the last four years that she was a virgin.

Except right now that little fact felt like the giant virgin elephant in the room.

“Shh. I know.” He kissed one of my temples. “Did you think I don’t know? We’re best friends. We tell each other everything. We always have.”

He kissed the other temple and then my jaw, and then my neck. I wanted his lips everywhere. I wanted my lips everywhere on him. He had me pinned down to the bed, which was—ahem—straight out of one of my fantasies, but I couldn't move to touch him. Mostly just my head. I tentatively pressed my lips to the spot right behind his ear that starred in more than one scene in my book.

He groaned and my panties got a whole lot damper. “But you haven't told me about any of your girlfriends.”

“That's because I haven't had any.” He said it so matter-of-factly that I almost missed the meaning. That and because he was swirling his tongue around the shell of my ear.

“What? I don't...” I was about to say that I didn't believe him. I hadn't ever seen him with a girl. He'd never talked about anyone with me. “You're... uh... in your sexual prime. You're the star of the football team, and you're a hot, sexy firefighter. You must have the ladies lined up at your door. I just assumed we didn't talk about that part of your life.”

Nik rolled to his side and let out a long huff of breath.

For a moment, I thought I'd blown it. I shouldn't have questioned him.

“Babe, I'm horny as fuck all the damn time. I jack-off like twenty-four seven.” He took my hand and placed it right on the fly of his jeans.

Holy crap on a cracker. That was no banana in his pocket, that was the whole damn banana tree.

“Feel how hard I am for you. Every inch of this is for you. I came twice while reading your book, and you know I was imagining you and me in those sex scenes. They were very... descriptive. But there hasn't been anyone since you moved to Rogue. Not since high school, not since I met you.”

“What? What do you mean since you met me?” My head was spinning in so many circles with so many what-ifs.

“I could tell you, but you know I'm not good with words. Let me show you how I feel.” He sat up and whipped off his shirt and I drank in every single one of those six-pack abs.

He reached for the edge of my t-shirt and gently lifted it about an inch and a half before I stopped staring at his perfectly honed body and realized he was about to see mine.

“Nik, stop. I... couldn't we just leave my clothes on? And we could turn off all the lights. You don't want to see my jiggy bits. Talk about a turn off.”

“Rosie, Rosie, Rosie.” He took both my wrists in one of his and shoved them up over my head. His eyes went from the stomach I was trying to hide, up to my chest where he lingered and licked his lips, up to my mouth. He flashed me a look filled with dirty promises and then kissed me so long and hard that I might have forgotten my name.

He broke that kiss by nipping at my lip. “Later we're going to have a long talk about the way you put yourself down. Right now, we're both getting naked, because I do want to see every single part of your body. I'm going to worship you from the tips of your toes to these fingers way up here, and when I'm done, I'm going to start all over again.”

I wanted that, oh how I wanted it. But I was having a really hard time believing he was into lumps and bumps where muscle tone and flat bellies were supposed to be.

“I recognize that look, Roses. It's the one that means you're feeling self conscious. Whose body do you think I was imagining when I was reading your book? Whose body do you think I stroked myself to? The last thing I want you to do is hide from me in the dark with your clothes on.”

This time when he yanked my shirt up, I let him. I had some serious body issues to get over, but I couldn't think of a better way to start than by letting someone I cared about show me exactly how much he loved my curves.

NIK



Fucking hell. Rosie had the greatest tits on the whole fucking planet. I was going to get lost in them for a hundred years, kissing and licking and fucking them. I'll admit having watched a little porn in my time, and it all starred women with big tits, and hips, and thighs. Just like Rosie's. I couldn't wait to come all over them. Make sure my scent was all over her and let every other shifter know she was mine.

That was for later. This first time for us together was going to be something special.

I'd let the animal out on our next go around. My wolf was howling inside about claiming her right here and now. But I still didn't know for sure if she understood what I truly was. I wasn't marking her until she was ready for that commitment.

She was the one for me, forever. But it was her right to make her own choice about whether she wanted to become a part of my world permanently. I shouldn't even make love to her until we talked about it. But I couldn't wait any longer. I had to have her.

Especially if I might lose her later.

My wolf wanted me to flip her over and take her from behind. I'd bet my favorite hose that Rosie had a wild side and would enjoy that as much as I would. She sure wrote like she did. But this first time, she needed gentle, loving, and reassuring from me.

It took way longer than I anticipated to get her naked because of her insecurities about her body. It would take time

for me to convince her that she was desirable. Society was the one that was fucked up. But the wonderful world of wolves loved a girl with meat on her bones.

“God, you’re so incredibly gorgeous.” I knew exactly how she was going to react to that. She never could take a compliment, much less one about how pretty she was. I’d given up on telling her because she usually reacted so badly. That was my mistake. I’d tell her everyday for the rest of my life.

The rest of our lives.

Yeah. I was thinking long term. My own parents made my future very clear. Mate with a nice wolftress from a neighboring pack, and do my duty to them and our pack. Even if the Wolf Tzar said we could now mate whoever we wanted instead of only other wolf-shifters, I still didn’t exactly believe in the whole fated mates thing.

Until I read Rosie’s book.

Because I wasn’t just in love with her. She was my one true mate. I just hadn’t let myself believe it before.

I could blame it on my parents, but if I was real honest with myself, I hadn’t wanted to screw up the best thing that ever happened to me. Being in her life was more important than anything else. Now that I knew she was in love with me too, it was as if the fire-hydrant had been opened up full and everything was gushing out.

“You don’t have to say that.” She looked away, hiding her face halfway into the pillow.

I grabbed her jaw and pulled her head back so she had to look at me. “I should have been telling you that all along. I know you don’t believe it, but I think you’re the most beautiful woman in the world. I’m going to keep telling you until you believe it too, even if it takes years.”

She gave me a shy smile that melted my heart because she didn’t hide it like she usually did. “Years?”

“Yeah. I’m thinking like the next fifty. Or a hundred.” I winked at her and began my quest to show her how I felt about

her and her body. I started with a quick hot kiss, pumping my tongue in and out of her mouth until she was groaning and panting for breath. “That was just to show you what I’m going to do to your pretty pussy next. Now you hold onto the headboard until I tell you what to do next.”

My wolf needed to dominate her, wanted to see her submit to me. I was running on pure instinct now, and maybe a little inspiration from the sex scenes in her book.

I didn’t give her a chance to protest. I pressed her knees open and my mouth watered with the sight of her panties glistening. Her sweet pussy was already wet for me. My cock fucking twitched wanting to get inside of her, and my wolf howled inside, ready to stake my claim on her body. Images of the wolf’s knot buried deep inside of her popped into my head.

Not yet. First I was going to make sure she was nice and relaxed and ready. I tugged her panties to the side with my teeth and gave her one long lick, getting my first taste of her. I almost came right then and there. Being between her thighs was beyond heaven. This was why Rosie always smelled like peaches to me—it was the scent of her emotions when she was aroused.

She was hot, for me. Right here, right now and that was a bigger turn on than anything else.

“Whoa. Oh God, Nik. Do that again.”

That’s my girl. “Put your fingers in my hair, let me know what you like as I do it.”

I remembered the scene in her book where she described the fireman wolf going down on Thyme and everything he did that drove her crazy. I swirled my tongue around her clit and slowly sunk one finger inside of her. She was so damn wet, and so tight. Rosie moaned my name and her fingers dug into my scalp. That was all the signal I needed to know she was getting off on this.

The thing was, I was getting off on this too. My dick was so damn hard I could feel the blood pulsing through it. My wolf was closer to the surface than ever.

I had every intention of getting Rosie off before I fucked her, but once I got my cock into her tight pussy, I wasn't going to last more than a few strokes. This first time, I needed her to be as close to coming as possible so we could come together.

I don't know why that was so damn important to me, but it was. I wanted the first time I made love to my sweet Rosie to be special. This was the moment when we'd look back and remember how connected we were. Because then perhaps she wouldn't freak out on me when I revealed my wolf to her.

I continued to lap at her clit and slid a second finger in to her hot, wet pussy, pumping my fingers in time with my licks. Rosie's ass came up off the mattress and her inner muscles clenched down on me. She was close and we'd only barely gotten going. She was just as worked up about being together as I was.

I gave her one long last lick, sucking her clit into my mouth and flicking my tongue over the tight little nub until her legs shook and the pitch of her moans grew higher and higher. I released her from my mouth and pulled my fingers from her body. Then, I swiped them up and over her clit, giving her one more jolt of pleasure before I pulled away entirely.

"Please, Nik, don't stop. Please." She'd squeezed her eyes tight and fisted her hands into the sheets the same way they'd been gripping my hair.

"Don't worry, babe. I'm not going anywhere. I want you to taste yourself on me." I licked her bottom lip and rubbed my jaw, wet with her juices across it.

She opened her eyes and her tongue darted out, licking up her own essence. So fucking hot. Her eyes went dark and sparkled with need. She would make a beautiful wolftress.

I had no way of knowing if she would become a shifter when I claimed her, but my alpha's mate had, and she'd been a human before they met. The blue glow of the Troika pack would be the prettiest thing I'd ever seen shining in her eyes.

"Good girl. I wanted you to see me do this." I licked the two fingers that had been inside of her up one side and down

the other. “You’re fucking delicious.”

Rosie gasped and sucked in the rest of her breath, in and out slowly with pretty, rounded lips that I was going to fuck soon. I wanted to take her every which way two people could fuck each other. My need to mark her body as mine and only mine grew stronger by the second.

It would kill me not to mark her tonight. But I wouldn’t do that to her until she could say yes to being my true mate.

“But why did you stop? I was so close.” Her whimper was so sexy and I loved it.

“Give me your hand.” I unwrapped her fingers from where they were twisted in the sheet and slid them between her thighs. “Keep yourself hot and wet for me while I get undressed too. But don’t come. I want to be inside of you when you do. That orgasm is mine.”

Her eyes went wide and she licked her lips. “Like this?”

Rosie’s fingers stroked into her plump pussy lips and her fingers were coated instantly. She swirled the wetness of her clit and God damn, if I didn’t get inside of her in the next two seconds, I was going to be coming on her belly. “Yes. Exactly like that. That’s is the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. I am definitely making you finger yourself for me all the time.”

I turned and sloughed my jeans off and onto the floor, and ripped my t-shirt over my head. That’s when I noticed the dildo and the packet of condoms on the floor next to her bed. Fuck. Had she been masturbating before I got here? Was she thinking about me when she did?

I grabbed the package and the dildo from the floor and held them up. Rosie said, “I touched myself after I wrote every one of the sex scenes in our book. That’s how I made myself come thinking about doing all those things I wrote with you.”

Holy Goddess. I had to grip the base of my cock hard so I didn’t come all over her right now. “Fuck yeah, you did. Don’t stop doing it now. I want those fingers right there while I fuck you. I want you coming so hard with my cock inside of you that you can’t see straight.”

She didn't know that we didn't need these condoms. Wolf shifters didn't get diseases like humans, and we certainly couldn't pass them on. And unless it was full moon and we wanted a baby, she couldn't get pregnant either. But I wanted my Rosie to feel safe with me. I ripped open one of the packets and rolled the condom on.

It split halfway up my cock. Rosie glanced down at the mess in my hand and she blinked. "Holy crap, Nik. That's, I mean, you're... holy crap. That's not going to even fit. God, you're so big."

I smiled like a loon as I very carefully tried again to put a condom on. It was too fucking small and it would probably break while I fucked her, but she didn't need to know that. I crawled back onto the bed and pushed my way between her thighs again. "It's going to fit just fine. I'll go as slow as I can, you just keep fingering your clit."

She swallowed hard but nodded. Her eyes fluttered shut and I took the opportunity to kiss her again. Her hand was going crazy between us, and she had to be close. "Open your eyes, Roses. I want to see your expression when I put my cock inside of you."

Her breathing shuddered but she did look back up at me. Her fingers slowed and I gripped my cock in my hand. Just like I guessed, the damn thing split. I kissed her and chucked the broken condom aside hoping she didn't notice. I didn't want her to think I was an ass, but I needed to get inside of her and satisfy us both really fucking soon.

I broke the kiss and slid my cock through her juices, getting it nice and wet before I pressed just the tip inside of her tight entrance. "That's it, good girl. Get yourself closer, babe. I'm not going to last long inside of you. I want you on the verge of coming."

"I'm there. I swear, much more and I'm not going to be able to keep from coming." That soft whimper I was coming to love was in her voice again.

"Good girl." I pushed in deeper and her pussy gripped me tighter than my own fist when I'd been jerking off earlier. This

was so beyond anything I'd ever felt in my entire life. I was barely halfway in and had to grit my teeth from pushing all the way to the root with one long thrust.

"More, Nik. I need more. Please."

Thank fuck. Inch by agonizing inch, I sunk into her body until she cried out. "Fuck, Rosie. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"No, no." She shook her head, but her fingers had stilled. "I, I just feel so full. Give me a second."

It was going to kill me to hold still. I already had sweat beading along my spine from the effort not to just take her fast and hard like my wolf wanted me to. I would take every second of torture for her, to make sure she was ready.

She took several long breaths and then her fingers moved between us again. "I'm ready. Fuck me, Nik."

Holy hell. This girl was everything I'd ever wanted and more. So much more. I moved my hips just enough that we both got a little of the friction we needed. She wasn't ready for me to really pump in and out of her body. Even that small movement sent fireworks off in my cock. I moved another inch and thrust back in, then again, and again.

Rosie moved her hips in time with mine and her fingers between her legs faster than that. "God. This feels so incredible perfect."

I couldn't hold back any longer, and I thrust deep and pulled out, pushing us both into a fast and hard rhythm. She closed her eyes and arched her back. Her throat was right there for me to bite, to mark, to make my claim on her.

I would if I didn't do something to stop myself. "Look at me, Rosie. Look at me when you come."

Her eyes shot open again, and I swear to god she was glowing from the inside out. I reached between us and stroked over her clit to drive her closer to the edge. Her pussy fluttered around me and she screamed out, "I love you, Nik."

Her body clenched hard as the orgasm took her body and I thrust as fast and as hard as I could into her. I felt the base of

my cock swelling, the wolf's knot grew and if I pushed into her, the wolf wouldn't be satisfied until I marked her too.

I couldn't do that to her. The wolf part of me needed to make Rosie my mate, right here, right now. My parents expected me to mate with a wolftress. They'd never accept my sweet Rose as my mate.

I pulled out, kissed her, and came harder and longer than I'd ever come before all over her pussy, thighs, and belly. The knot throbbed and ached and I grabbed it, stroking my fingers around it. My whole cock was so sensitive the slightest touch almost hurt.

I bet it wouldn't have if I'd been inside of her. But the knot would have locked us together, and I knew from somewhere instinctually deep that we'd be stuck that way, my cock inside of her, until I marked her, claimed her, and made her my mate.

The knot slowly receded and once again I could breathe. A different ache crept into my chest.

I loved her, but I couldn't have her. Not permanently.

Wolves mated wolves, or at least they still did in my family. We had to get as much loving in now before my parents found out and broke us apart forever.

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ROSIE



Nik and I made love twice more. Once at dawn and then again around noon when we woke up from the nap after our last bout, where we'd tried doggy-style and he told me all the dirty-naughty things he wanted to do to my ass and with my dildo.

I couldn't help but notice that he pulled out each time and came on me, instead of in me. I don't know why that felt so... wrong.

He apologized about the broken condom after our first round. I got that they were the wrong size and he'd tried to use them. I was have to going to invest in extra, extra, super-duper, quadruple XL size for him.

He even asked me if I was concerned, and if I wanted him to run out and get some better ones. He was a good guy and since we'd both been virgins—which still had me flabbergasted—I wasn't worried about diseases. We'd been a little too anxious to get going again and didn't talk about pregnancy though.

Honestly, that wasn't likely either. I had a long line of women in my family who battled infertility and PCOS. I was a miracle baby. My mom had made that very clear. She believed that was to blame for my eternal chubbiness.

Even after we decided we didn't need the condoms, Nik still pulled out when he came. I guess I couldn't blame him for not wanting to have babies. But the mean voices in my head said it had nothing to do with the fact that we were still in

school, too young, and not married. Every insecurity I had was screaming that he didn't want to be tied to a fat girl the rest of his life.

Fat girls were fine for fucking, but not for marrying. The whole world made that very clear to me. It hurt to think that Nik believed it.

Sigh. I was being ridiculous. He loved me.

Although, when I said I loved him, he hadn't said it back. Still, I knew we had a deeper connection, and maybe he just needed to come to terms with our new relationship before he could say it.

Grr. I was all up in my head, over-analyzing every little thing, picking myself and this brand new beautiful thing to pieces instead of enjoying what I had. I vowed to try harder not to do that and snuggled deeper into his arms.

We didn't wake up on Sunday morning until his phone started buzzing non-stop from his pants pocket, where they still lay on the floor. He groaned, rolled over, kissed me, and then fumbled around trying to find the damn thing on the floor.

“Lo?”

He listened for a second and then sat bolt upright on the bed. “Fuck man, sorry. We'll be there in a few minutes.”

“Oh no. The barbecue.” I swiped my hand down my face. We'd both forgotten about Nik's game day party at his house. “I can't go smelling like sex. Give me a few minutes to take a shower.”

“I love the way you smell like sex and me. But I'll agree to a shower... if we do it together.” He made sexy eyes at me and yanked me out of bed and into the tiny bathroom off my room.

We did not take only a few minutes. It took a full ten just to figure out we weren't going to be able to have shower sex in my little stall. Instead I dropped to my knees and gave him my first ever blow job. He insisted on coming on my chest which I didn't even think I'd find sexy at all, but watching him actually coming was incredible, and I couldn't wait to do it again.

After that we washed up, but that took another ten minutes because Nik insisted on making sure my pussy was incredibly well scrubbed.

He pulled his clothes on from the floor and I grabbed a dress and a cardigan from my closet.

“Don’t wear any panties. I want to know you’re naked under there all day.” Nik lifted the skirt of my dress and smacked my bottom. A day ago, I’d have been mortified if anyone touched my butt, or saw it, or even thought about it.

It was just so big, it was like round, and like out there. I mean... gross, look.

Except Nik didn’t think it was gross. I still didn’t love my jiggy bits. But if Nik did, that went a long way to me thinking that maybe, just maybe someday I might not think my body was so bad.

The panties stayed in my top drawer, which felt so incredibly naughty, and I loved it. We drove over to his place along with a bag of stuff from my kitchen so I could make the brownies at his house. I’d meant to make them this morning. But instead I made love.

When we got there, everyone was scattered in and outside. Waiting. The guys from the firehouse had broken in through his back door and already had the grill started, and his football teammates were passing around beers and sodas. We opened the door and received a round of applause when everyone spotted us.

“Nice of the host to show up, asshole,” one of the firefighters said.

“Yeah, sorry. I had a fire to put out.” He kissed me on the top of the head and gave me a squeeze.

Oh. Okay, I guess we were going to be right out in the open with our shiny new relationship. That made me feel almost instantly better. He wasn’t hiding the fact that we were together. I’d been a little worried.

We were subjected to a round of oohs and awws, and one “I fucking knew it,” from Kirill.

Before we could get ribbed any more, Charley and Hunter and a woman I'd never met dragged me off to the kitchen for girl talk.

"Girl," Hunter clapped and squealed, "This couldn't have worked out any better, right? Oh, sorry. This is my cousin Eva. She just gotten a job at the library. Don't worry, I told her all about your wolfy firefighter book and your, uh, wolfy football-playing firefighter."

Hunter leaned in and whispered, "But she doesn't know the boy's, umm, secret. So ixnay on the olfway talk."

What? Eva must not be into paranormal romance like Hunter and I were. I laughed and shook her hand. "Welcome to my crazy life, Eva."

"It's awfully romantic what you did, writing a whole romance novel just to tell the man you liked how you feel." She smiled at me and got a wistful look on her face.

"That's not exactly what I'd planned, but I guess it worked out that way." I glanced through the window to the back yard where Nik was definitely getting grilled by the guys.

"Yeah. Thanks to us and Selena," Charley said.

"Wait, what?" I played back all the events of the past couple of weeks and especially the last few days in my head. "You set this up so Nik would find out about my book? Is that why you guys sent me running off to the English department that one day?"

Charley and Hunter exchanged a weird look, but then Charley nodded and grinned. "Uh, yeah. Selena's been working on you for months. As soon as Hunter read that one sex scene over your shoulder and figured out who you were writing about, she told Selena. And that set this whole thing in motion. She's going to be so happy to hear you guys hooked up."

Eva frowned at us. "Who is this Selena? She sounds like a meddling—"

"Don't say it." Hunter held up her hand, stopping Eva's protest. She's the reason Charley and I found our guys too.

Just beware if she ever tries to fire you—you're about to meet or get together with the man of your dreams.”

“She can't fire me, I don't work for her.” Eva sounded so adorably uppity, like it was beyond possibility that anyone could meddle in her affairs.

All three of us laughed and exchanged knowing looks.

Nik walked into the kitchen and grabbed me around the waist. “Ladies, would you please excuse us. We have some brownies to make.”

Hunter winked at me and grabbed the other two, dragging them back outside.

“Is that code for something, you dirty wolf?” I giggled. I was decidedly not a giggler before last night. I guess happiness can do that to a girl.

Nik set me on the counter and placed himself between my legs. “Yes it is. Well, no. I really do want to make brownies with you. I love your brownies, and it's not game day without them. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Not brownies, I mean—fuck. I'm fucking this up.”

Aww. I hadn't seen Nik get flustered about asking me about anything since our very first tutoring session all those years ago. “You can ask me to make whatever you want. But it's hard for me to make anything while I'm sitting on your kitchen counter.”

“Yes, but it makes it easy for me to do this.” Nik ducked down, put my knees over his shoulder and his head beneath my dress.

I would have protested, but I forgot how to talk the second his tongue slid across my clit. Anything I was going to say turned into moans. I had to put my own hands over my mouth to keep from crying out when he pushed those naughty fingers into me.

“Oh, hey.” Someone's voice floated into the kitchen and back out again. “I hope you're not planning on making anything on that counter. Food and safety violations galore going on there.”

I didn't recognize the voice, but that could be due to the fact I was coming so hard I couldn't think straight. Nik popped back up, clearly pleased with himself from the self-satisfied grin on his face and kissed me, snaking his tongue in and out of my mouth just like he had down below.

"I couldn't stop thinking about how you weren't wearing any panties." He helped me back down off the counter and good thing too because I was a bit wobbly on my feet after that killer orgasm.

"I may never wear them around you ever again." Although, maybe when our friends were around.

"That's probably best. Hey, babe?"

"Yeah?" If he was going to ask me anything that required a real answer, I needed to find my mushy, gushy, sex-addled brain and pop it back into my head. I could hardly think at the moment.

"This is gonna sound weird, but how did you come up with the idea of shifters? For your book?"

Okay, that came out of nowhere. "Umm, it was Selena's idea actually. She piled me up with a bunch of other paranormal romance books, and said I should consider making my hero a werewolf."

"Selena?" He said her name like I was on crack.

"Yeah, why? Is it too weird? It's not like it's bestiality or anything."

"It's not weird. Well, I mean," Nik glanced out the window, and Eli gave him a thumbs up from over by the grill. What in the world was going on?

He rubbed the back of his neck, and I got this ache in my chest. Something bad was about to happen. Nik didn't act like this around me. But up until yesterday our relationship had been completely different.

He huffed like he was psyching himself up for a tough play or to run into a fire or something, he started again. "It's just that I—"

“Fire!” One of his firefighter buddies stood up and sniffed the air. Then pointed toward the front of the house. “Three, maybe four blocks away.”

Nik narrowed his eyes and sniffed the air too. Must be a firefighter thing. “Shit, babe. We gotta go check that out. Keep the girls and the football team entertained for me for a few minutes, will ya?”

“Yeah, sure. Go do what you gotta do. Be safe.”

I watched as Nik and the other firefighters bolted out the front of the house, and we all heard a car screech away. Charley, Hunter, and their boyfriends were still out back at the grill. Time to do my hostess duties. The brownies still weren’t made, so I grabbed a bag of pretzels and a container of chocolate hummus I’d brought over last week that none of the guys would even touch, and took it out to the yard.

“I’m sure they’ll be back in no time.” I laid the food out on the table and turned to find Charley and Hunter staring at me, or rather staring at my neck.

They looked at each other, then to their boyfriends, and shook their heads. Hunter took my hand and pulled me away to sit with her next to the unlit fire pit. She glanced over at Eva, who was occupied talking to Eli, and then patted my hand. “So, did he tell you?”

Uh. “Tell me what?”

NIK



*M*y wolf was torn in two—the pure animal wanted to run, run back to Rosie to mark her and make her mine.. But the part of me that was a pack member, pushed so hard against my skin that I could barely stop from shifting as the tires squealed and car skidded to a halt. Because it wasn't some random fire.

It was the fucking Moon Bean.

I jumped out of the car and didn't even think about what I was doing, going purely on instinct and training. Smoke billowed out the door as people fled the building, but I had the opposite game plan.

We had to get everyone out of the Moon Bean to safety. There wasn't anything I could do to stop the flames until the fire trucks arrived, but I sure as hell could make sure Selena wasn't in there.

Smoke stung my eyes and the power was out, but my wolf vision could see in much dimmer light. I scented the fear on the people left in the building. My crew was on point and we flashed some hand signs to each other indicating a search pattern.

The smoke was thicker as we made our way to the coffee bar. A barista crouched behind the counter with a tiny handheld fire extinguisher in her hand.

“Oh my god, help! I don't know what happened, one minute I was making an oat-milk flat white, and the next

minute the fire alarm went off and the whole place filled with smoke.”

“Hey,” I knelt down beside her and squeezed her arm gently, and carefully took the unused extinguisher from her hands. “You’re gonna be okay. Give me your apron.”

She scrambled out of her apron and I held it under the faucet, then crouched down to her level again. The scent of her fear burned my nostrils even more than the smoke. I didn’t recognize her, but then again, I only ever really came to the Moon Bean for one thing, Rosie.

I pushed the soaked apron back into her hands. “Hey, what’s your name?”

“M-M-Madison.”

“Okay, Madison, you’re doing great. Here’s what you are going to do. See my buddy behind me? He’s an off-duty firefighter. He’s going to get you out of here. Hold this over your mouth and breathe through it, so the smoke doesn’t make you cough. Can you do that for me?”

She wrapped the apron around her face. “L-like this?”

“That’s great. You got it, Madison. Now I’m going to check the rest of the coffee shop and make sure no one else is stuck in here. I’ll see you outside.” I looked over my shoulder and watched my buddy disappear with poor Madison. Two of us left. We pushed on, past the cafe side to the bookstore section, where the smoke was the thickest.

“Selena,” I shouted, catching her scent. “Selena Troika, it’s Nikita Grimm.”

Before she could reply, I spotted her huddled next to a shelf on the floor. “Nik you are here, thank the Goddess.”

I fell to my knees beside her as she looked up at me with Troika blue glowing eyes, her own wolf close to the surface. She was a little scuffed with soot and maybe even a bit singed around the edges, but no damage her wolf couldn’t heal quickly. “Can you stand?”

“Of course I can, don’t be ridiculous.” She batted my hand away and gave a curt nod over to where Rosie’s table signing table was still set up. “But I’m not sure about the young wolftress hiding over there. I’ve been trying to coax her to leave, she is the last one here. I smell no blood, but perhaps she is injured.”

“Maybe she is just scared, fire will do that to some.” Even wolf-shifters. We may be tough and heal faster and easier than humans, but we aren’t immortal.

Selena frowned and shook her head. “That one is not the scared type, *moy dorogoy*.”

The gleam of amber wolftress eyes flashed through the sooty air. No, definitely not the scared type. More the scary type. The girl hiding was none other than Resting Bitch Face from the signing.

“Is there anyone else left in the coffeeshop, Selena?” I couldn’t only rely on my senses, not in this much smoke.

“Madison was it, but I saw your friends help her out.”

I looped my arm beneath Selena’s and guided her over to my final firefighting compatriot along with the extinguisher. “Go now, I’ll get her out, whether she wants me to or not.”

Time to rescue Bitch Face. I crawled closer and could see her watching me through the smokey air. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, my wolf warning me of danger.

I crouched down and held out my hands, palms up, like you would approach a stray dog. Did her lips curl into a smile of sorts, or was it a trick of the smoke playing over her features? “Hey. I’m Nik.”

“Yes, Nikita. I know you.”

“That’s right. We met at the signing.” Not that I’d given her my full name. Weird. Something to worry about later when we weren’t in the middle of a fire trap. The books in this section could go up in flames at any moment. Heat was building behind me, and a bead of sweat rolled down my back. I needed to get this girl out of here. Fast.

“Are you injured?”

“I don’t believe so, no.” She sputtered out a mewling little cough.

Super fake. Ugh. What in the world was going on here?

“Okay, what’s your name?” If she was scared, I hoped using her name would keep her calm like it had with Madison.

“Erika.”

Now I was getting somewhere. “Good, Erika, we’re going to get you out of her, okay?”

She tipped her head to the side, studying me. “Okay.”

Great. I’d earned at least some of her trust. “I need you to stand up, but stay crouched down low like me. Okay?”

She reached out for me, but as if she had no strength. I had the distinct feeling she was feigning helplessness.

I stretched my open hands to her and lifted my eyebrows in a practiced encouraging gesture. Behind me, the bookcase collapsed, sending cinders and sparks dancing around my feet. Erika screamed loud enough to make me jump. No more screwing around. I grabbed both of her hands, pulling her up and out from under the table.

“You saved me,” she huffed out in a whoosh, before falling limp in my arms. Her head plopped down on my shoulder and her lips slid over my neck. It sent a shiver like cold needles down my spine. I shook her just a little, and she did a bobble-head routine, but her eyes stayed closed.

So, I did what I had to do. I picked her up and slung her over my shoulder in the classic fireman carry. I had no patience for games, not in a fire. It sure as shit felt like Erika Bitch Face the wolftress was toying with me. None of that mattered now. All I wanted to see was fresh air, clear sky, and Rosie.

I ran through the coffeeshop, dodging an over-turned chair and tables in the coffee shop. A second later I was through the front door and free. I jogged towards my crew and Selena, and

Erika let out a groan that grew louder the closer we got to my friends.

She squirmed and wriggled against me. “Niki, put me down.”

“You got it.” I dropped my hands to my sides and let her slide down, but her knees buckled like a boneless little rag doll. I caught her by the hips, before she tumbled to the ground, and Erika leaned in. That girl leaned in for all it was worth. She wrapped her arms around my neck, and pulled herself close until every inch of her touched every inch of me. Her head fell back and her eyes glowed up at me.

“You saved me, Niki,” she breathed the word out slowly and seductively, and followed them up with a slitty-eyed, half-opened smile. “I was so scared, and then you appeared like an answer to all of my prayers to the Goddess. Strong, fearless, and so powerful. It is like fate has tied us together. You are so —”

She kept staring up at me and talking, but her words were drowned out by the deafening honk and screeching siren of a fire truck as it stormed down the street. Before it came to a stop, the geared-up fire team went to work, pulling hoses, and getting briefed by my boys.

I itched to be over there, telling them what I saw, and lending a hand, but Erika was still attached to my neck. I reached up and tried to peel her away, but she hung tight like she didn’t want to ever let go.

“Niki, don’t you feel it? We are made for each other, destined for one another. I am promised to you, and you to me.”

“I’m not promised to anyone. If you’ll excuse me, I have a barbecue to get back to.” I would miss out on all the fire fun, but I needed to extricate myself from her immediately.

“Oh, but Niki... it is true. We are meant to be together. We are such powerful beings, and I could never mate with a lesser wolf. My parents spoke to yours. It is all settled. Together you and I will bring our packs closer together and make them great

again. I cannot wait for the next full moon, for our mating ritual.”

It’s all settled? Mating ritual? With her?

She closed her eyes, and pulled my head down, reaching up for a kiss.

A kiss that I would never give. There was no way. My parents had talked about me mating a wolftress because they didn’t believe in fated mates. They had always been anxious for me to make a good match. It was half the reason I came to Bay State University where there were other shifters in school.

They couldn’t have...they wouldn’t have... arranged a mating for me, would they? It had been pretty common practice until Max, the Troika alpha, and Galyna, a human woman, had started a revolution declaring that we didn’t have to mate other wolves. But I still thought I’d get to choose my own mate. How could they make a mating deal without even mentioning it to me?

I took a long step backward. “I need a minute here. I’ve got to call my parents.”

“Of course. You will want to tell them how we met so unexpectedly. This has all come together so magically, like kismet.”

The phone rang, and rang. “Please pick up. Please, please, please—”

“Hey sport.” My dad laughed into my ear, like he was the funniest guy on the planet while I was ready to puke.

“Hey dad. I need to ask you about... mating—”

“You met Erika? That’s great. We meant to introduce you to her and her parents after the game next weekend. She’s amazing, isn’t she? Such a pretty girl, and so smart. Both of you are so ambitious.”

I tried to interrupt, to stop this flood of enthusiasm from him. “Dad, I don’t know how to—”

“No need to thank me, Nik. We are so thrilled to have helped bring about such a prestigious match. Erika’s family is

part of the former Crescent pack.”

Uh, nobody called them that anymore. Once the Wolf Tzar and his mate defeated their alpha and took over, they became Serenity Bay. The Crescent’s old alpha was a one-blood. I got that same cold needles shooting down my spine feeling as before.

“I’m sure I don’t have to tell you, but they are a powerful pack. A union of a good Grimm pack son with a Crescent daughter will bring our pack back into the position we deserve.”

What the fuck was going on? My parents had pledged their fealty to Galyna Troika, when she killed the horrible Grimm alpha in an alpha challenge a few years ago. With Galyna being mated to Max Troika, our two packs were basically one. Few of us made the distinction between the two, except when it came to last names. So why was my dad talking about Grimms and Crescents now?

“Uh, yeah. Right. Okay, gotta run dad. See you next week.” I hit end before he could go on gushing about Erika or their plans for us and closed my eyes. They stung with smoke and disappointment.

Erika’s fingers snake through mine, and didn’t even try to shake her loose. What the hell was I going to do?

When I opened my eyes, Selena was staring at me from her place beside the firefighters. The fire chief was talking to her about the damage, said it started in the romance section. That was right beside where Rosie sat with her laptop every day, writing her book about me. About us.

The fire chief pitched his voice low, but my wolf’s enhanced hearing caught every word. “Off the record, Selena, at least until the fire investigator arrives and makes it official, I’d say you are looking at arson.”

Selena shifted her gaze back to me, then did one of those thousand yard stares. “Someone did this intentionally, then?”

“I’m afraid so, ma’am. But the good news is that the damage to the building is minimal. Mostly smoke. You should

be able to open again in no time.”

Selena allowed herself to be led away on the chief’s arm but not before giving me another pointed look. Or was she looking at Erika.

“Niki?” Erika pressed herself closer to me.

“Yeah?” My voice sounded dead. For the first time in my life, I wished I wasn’t a wolf shifter.

“I feel so shaky, so exhausted and overwhelmed. I don’t think I can drive. Will you take me home?”

“Hey, Nik,” Kirill shouted from where he was leaning against the car I came in with the guys. They were all exchanging fist bumps.

“Where the fuck did you come from Kirill?” I didn’t have any patients for his antics today.

“I was just pulling up to your house when I saw you take off with your fire buddies. I smelled the smoke too, and thought you might need a hand.” That was the least douchy thing Kirill had ever said. Maybe ever done, and I wanted to do was pick a fight with him, feel my fist connect with his solid jaw, have him hit me back until my outsides matched my wrecked insides.

“It’s under control.” I shrugged. It was the simmering coals of dread in my stomach that were burning out of control.

“Let’s go eat some ribs then man, I’m fucking starving. Who’s your new girlfriend, and does she have a hot sister for me?”

She wasn’t my fucking girlfriend. But I did have a duty to her, my parents, and my pack. Dammit. Fuck. Fucking dammit.

From where she was stuck to my arm like a day old pizza stain, a throaty, quiet laugh rolled out of Erika, “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend, Niki?”

I didn’t know what the hell to do here and I needed time to figure it out. I wasn’t going to be an asshat in the meantime.

“Uh, Kirill, this is Erika. Erika, Kirill, he’s plays for the Dire Wolves with me. He’s a Bay pack sea wolf.”

Kirill took her hand and kissed it like she was a princess. He was such a fucking cheesedick, but at least he was diverting a little of Erika’s laser-focused attention away from me.

Erika chuckled softly, “Yes, I can see he’s all wolf.”

Was she fucking flirting with him?

“Niki, sweetheart, I don’t want to take you away from your friends... don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” She stumbled over the word fine and her lower lip trembled. She looked like she was going to cry. I couldn’t keep up with her moods.

“No, I’ll take you home. I’m sure you’re exhausted.” Wait, where was her home? If she was Crescent come Serenity Bay she likely lived up in Cape Cod. Yes, I could drive her home, shift and run back, and work off all this worry. That would give me time to figure out what to do.

“Dude.” Kirill winked at her. “She’s probably on adrenaline burnout. She shouldn’t be alone. Probably just needs a triple margarita and some food.”

More tinkling laughter floated from Erika’s pouting face, and she squeezed my arm. “If it’s not too much trouble, I would love to go to the barbecue with you. I don’t really want to be alone. Not tonight.”

Leave it to Kirill make a painfully horrific situation worse. She held up her keys and jingled them lightly.

The nausea from before roiled in my gut. She wanted me to take her to my house? Where Rosie waited for me?

Shit. It wasn’t her fault I’d fallen in love while our parents arranged our futures. I took her keys and held her car door open as she floated down into the passenger seat. “I cannot thank you enough, Niki.”

“Sure, uh, don’t mention it.” The engine turned over, and I died a little with each turn of the tires. My only consolation is that Eli would probably still be there. There’s no way Charley

would leave Rosie at the barbecue alone. I sent a little prayer up to the Goddess that he, being the future alpha of his pack, would know something, anything about getting out of an arranged mating.

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ROSIE



*H*unter, Charley and I were in the kitchen rooting through Nik's kitchen for more snacks. Football players were bottomless pits, and I wouldn't let them eat all the meat before Nik and his firefighter buddies came back. I caught them exchanging glances for what feels like the bajillionth time that day. "Really, really? We're back to knowing looks?"

"Settle down." Charley popped up off her stool and steered me over to the third stool at the kitchen island. "Now sit."

"And stay this time. Don't make me duct tape you in place. I love you, but it's not that kind of love," Hunter threw her arm around my shoulders.

"Very funny. I'm beginning to question the love you two profess for me. Secrets don't make friends."

Charley opened her mouth like she was going to say something and Hunter slapped her hand over it. "No, Charley. You know it's not our story to tell. Nik would freak out if you try to talk for him."

"Oh my god, you are both totally impossible. You know that, don't you?" I scooted off the stool before either could stop me and headed over to the refrigerator. "If you refuse to divulge whatever this stupid secret is, then I'm making you both help me with another batch of brownies."

"I think three pans of them is more than even the football team can consume in one day." Charley pushed the eggs I'd set on the counter back towards me. "I seriously can't take

another round of stress-baking, Rosie. Just sit your ass down and drink margaritas with us, like a normal human woman.”

“If you love me like you said you do, you will start cracking those eggs.” I pushed them right back.

“He’s gonna be fine, Rosie. I promise.” Hunter slipped the measuring spoons out of my hand.

“You’re not going to let me bake, are you?” My answer was a group hug that made me feel equal parts shy and loved.

“Not a single batch. But I will happily make you a margarita while you tell us what’s going on in your head,” Charley answered.

I was worried about him being off at a fire, sure, but we all knew that’s not why I was a fidgety mess right now. “Everything just happened so fast. I can hardly believe he read my book, that he loves me, that we slept together. And that I am finally able to tell him that I—”

The door flew open with a bang, and Nik’s crew of fellow firefighters spilled into the crowded living room, filling the house full of male energy, high-fives, and celebratory whoops. My shoulders dropped about a foot as all the stress poured out of me in a huge, whooshing sigh.

They were back. Everything was okay.

Everyone in the backyard filed into the kitchen, and the small house filled with talk of my beloved Moon Bean, which was damaged, but going to be fine. I cringed when I heard them talk about hearing the fire chief’s arson theory. Who would want to burn a bookstore? Nazis were all I could come up with.

Kirill sauntered in last and closed the door behind him.

I rushed forward, “Wait. Kirill, where’s Nik?”

“Dude, he’s fine. He’s in another car, be here in a minute. Chill.”

A moment later, the door opened half-way, and I knew it was Nik. I could feel him. My face split in two, I smiled so wide. It was all I could do to stop myself from running to him,

jumping up to wrap myself around him, and slather his face with kisses. All of that was definitely happening when everyone went home.

Kirill turned and bellowed out, “Nik, my man. Dire Wolves forever, you fucking dick-swinging, chick-saving hero. Everybody give it up for Nik and Erika.”

Hanging off of Nik’s arm was a woman I didn’t want to recognize, but did.

My mouth gaped open like I was trying to catch a herring like a trained seal at the zoo. The girl from the launch party who didn’t want an inscription in her book, just my name. The girl who looked at me like you would look at dog poo stuck to your shoe. The hot girl with the tiny waist and big boobs, who looked like some Siberian ice princess lingerie model. That Erika?

“What is that bitch doing with her manicured talons digging into Nik?” Charley took the words right out of my mouth.

I want to shout at her, tell her to stop, but nothing comes out.

Nik floated his hands up then slowly dropped them, quieting everyone down, “Look, I didn’t do anything today that any of these guys didn’t do too.”

He gestured around to his friends, and everyone claps. Everyone except for me, because my arms were frozen, along with my lungs, and my heart.

“I’m no hero, seriously. But if I ever hear who torched the Moon Bean, I will rip them to fucking shreds.” His words brought another round of whoops and calls for retribution. I know it’s not right, but it warmed my heart that everyone wants to defend Selena and the Moon Bean. It sort of thawed me out, and I stepped closer to Nik.

My emotions were running through me like an iceberg on speed, and I was shaky and off balance. All I knew was that I needed to talk to Nik, touch him, hold him. I pushed my way through the crowd, but I stopped cold when Erika start to talk.

“It is not true at all, he is one hundred percent a hero today. I was so scared, afraid for my life. Then Nik appears through the smoke and fire. He picked me up and carried me to safety. This man saved my life today. He is my hero.”

I stood there watching dumbly as Erika stood up on her tiptoes, lifted one dainty foot up behind her, and wrapped her arms around Nik’s neck. She pulled him down and planted a kiss right on his lips, a kiss that she drew out until I had to take a breath for them. The crowd erupted in back-slapping, cat-calling applause.

Oh no she did not. “Excuse me, pardon me, let me through.” I rudely shouldered my way toward Nik. I tried pushing between two big Dire Wolf linesman, and got stuck. “Hey guys, you’re squishing me.”

“Rosie sandwich,” one of the players joked and then handed me through and right into Erika.

She did that duck thing with her lips that women do when applying lipstick. I hated every inch of her. I tilted my head and gave her a wide, toothy smile. “Hiyeee. So glad Nik was able to save you from the fire. Can I get through, please? Thanks so much.”

I moved, then Erika moved. I shifted to the side, and she shifted in front of me. Then she spun around and gave me her back. Oh, this hag was going down. I gave her a fierce poke to the shoulder, “Get out of my way. I need a minute with Nik. My boyfriend, Nik. Without you hanging all over him.”

Erika spun slowly on one of her pointy-toed, high-heeled boots. She narrowed her eyes, and I would’ve sworn they glowed red. She grabbed my shoulder and pushed me back through the crowd, right back to where I’d started. No one was paying any attention to us, they were all so rapt by Nik retelling the story. “Oh, you’re still here. How cute that you are concerned about Nik. But he is mine. We are engaged.”

“You... you’re what?” I stammered like an idiot. “He would never be with someone like you.”

“Someone like me? Someone who gets what she wants?” Erika unfolded her arms and sniffed me, like I literally smelled. “How little you know him. We are the same, Nik and me. So be a good girl and run along. Go write another book. Who knows? Maybe you will get lucky, and someone else will pity fuck you. Just like Nik did. Go.”

How did she— Her words and the fact that she knew Nik and were together last night, wasn't the real problem here. She growled, and opened her mouth in a feral-looking snarl. It wasn't just the sneer of a vicious, mean-girl. She had an honest to god mouth full of fangs, like I was stuck in one of Charley's horror films.

Erika's face transformed, her mouth stretched, elongated, and when she snapped out, “Run,” it was through a fur covered snout. She raised her hands as if to push me or maybe grab me. But instead of her shiny gel manicure, her nails were sharp claws.

All the blood drained from my extremities and I almost threw up on her.

The Erika monster laughed, then stopped abruptly. She was just a bitch-faced mean girl once more. Until she flashed those awful fangs at me, a string of spit connecting one terrible tooth top tooth to the bottom. So I did what she told me. I ran.

“Rosie?” It was Nik. Nik who I had loved forever. Who I thought loved me back, until two minutes ago. His footsteps pounded in my ears, and my lungs were on fire. I burst out into the now empty backyard before he caught up to me.

“Rosie, stop. Please stop.” He spun me around, catching me in his arms, pulled me against him, and kissed my head.

“Rosie...” he kissed in front of my ear.

“Rose...” he kissed down my neck.

“Roses...” he kissed that spot that shot heat through my body, and most desperately between my legs.

I closed my eyes and imagined being naked in his arms, saw his eyes staring into mine. “No. No. Don't ever call me that again.”

“Rosie, please. I...I love you.”

“You can’t do that. Not now. I’m way to freaked out for you to try to make everything better by saying those words. I need you to be one hundred percent honest with me, because I deserve the truth.”

He slowly took a deep breath. “Yes you do. You totally do.”

“So what is going on? Are you engaged to that awful girl? Is she even a girl? Her face... she threatened me... came at me with claws and fangs.”

Nik hung his head. He didn’t even need to tell me, not really. It was all true. He was marrying a monster. What did that make me?

He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. “Rosie... it’s complicated.”

“Well freaking un-complicate it for me.”

“I wanted to tell you. I was going to last night. Not about Erika, but well, this is gonna sound so crazy, but just listen. Erika is a shifter, a wolftress. She’s from a powerful pack, and our parents got together and decided we should align our packs... through mating... which is basically marriage.”

Erika was a wolf shifter, a werewolf. Was he making fun of me? No. This was no joke. Did that mean...? I took a step back, and a rush of every hair on my skin rose and fell.

“You’re one too, aren’t you? A wolf shifter?” This couldn’t be real. Werewolf boyfriends were only in books. Paranormal romance novels. Or horror stories.

He slowly nodded his head, but his eyes were locked on mine. He didn’t move, and I didn’t either. “Show me.”

“Rosie, I can’t. We aren’t even supposed to tell humans, much less let you see us shift.”

“I have known you for five years. We’ve done things together that I would never even consider doing with anyone else. I think if I want to see you as a freaking werewolf, you should show me. Right now.”

Nik didn't say a word, but a flurry of emotions I didn't, couldn't understand, flashed in his eyes. He pulled his shirt over his head. He undressed with evident frustration, kicking off his shoes and getting stuck as he stripped off his pants.

Never would I have thought naked Nik would make me miserable. I had to remind myself that I did nothing to create the misery. It was all Nik. And Erika, horrid awful Erika.

He stood naked. And glorious, because he was Nik. He held out a hand, a slow, tentative invitation to join him, and every tiny fiber of my heart screamed yes... but I shook my head no.

He exhaled and threw a look over his shoulder at the house. Then he turned back to me, seemingly satisfied that no one was watching, and closed his eyes. He rolled his head and pulled his shoulders back. My eyes traced over those ridiculously defined shoulders, the etched ripped abs, and of course, his thick cock.

Then it happened.

His skin split and fur pushed up, and like with Erika, Nik's mouth stretched and his even teeth grew into pointed, flesh-tearing fangs. His eyes, so full of sorrow, flashed and he dropped to all fours. Bones cracked, warping, reforming, and I gagged thinking of the pain he must be going through. But before I could blink, the wolf stood before me.

He was terrifyingly huge, wild and predatory.

I knew full well I should be scared. But he was marvelous. Better even than the werewolf in my book.

He took a silent step towards me, and stopped. His humongous wolf head cocked to the side. I nodded, and he padded to me, pushed his snout into my hair.

"Nik, are you really in there somewhere?"

He circled me, brushing along my backside. His fur felt glorious against my skin, soft and warm. He rested his huge head on my shoulder and I clung to him and filled his fur with tears.

His voice popped into my head. *Don't cry. I love you so much, Roses. You are everything.*

He shifted again into the man I loved, held me, stroked my hair, rocked me until there were no tears left.

I clung for a few moments more and then stepped out of his arms, "This is a lot. I need some time to process."

If I didn't put some actual space between us, I would give in. He'd lied, by omission, both about Erika, and about who he truly was.

The back door slid open and I heard Erika's voice. "Nik? Come back inside, this party is so boring without you."

Someday I would write her into a book, and give her wolf pox. By then, they would be married, or mated, or whatever.

"Rose." Nik grabbed for my hand, and I pulled back. I should have known better than to think he could or would ever be with me. Nik was a fire-fighting, football hero, wolf, god. And I was the girl who lived her life by watching or writing love stories for other people.

I turned and walked away because I had to. I needed some unconditional love and a warm cup of tea to chase away my cold reality. I pulled my phone out and ordered up an Uber to Grandma Roman's. She made everything better, always had and always would.

A half hour later, my face screwed up as I walked through the cozy living room to my nan's kitchen. I heard voices. Ugh. I wanted Grandma Roman all to myself.

"You have to find out who set that fire and why," nan said.

"First I have take care of that mess they made of my beautiful books. Then I will make them pay."

Selena... what was she doing here? My sweet Grandma Roman was friends with her? Selena who was my biggest supporter but also sort of scared the poop out of me? I peeked my head around the corner, "Hey, do you have another cup of tea in that pot for your favorite granddaughter?"

Grandma Roman popped up out of her chair and wrapped me up in the warmest hug. I sagged in her arms, and then the tears just started flowing non-stop.

“Oh my sweet girl, come and sit and tell me what’s wrong.” She held me at arms length and inspected me. “Who or what has made you so sad?”

She fussed over me and slid a plate of lemon cake over. “Selena said your book is selling like crazy. This should be a time for celebration, not tears.”

Grandma love is strong stuff, and just what I needed.

“If I may, I believe this is about a very handsome Dire Wolf firefighter by the name of Nik, is it not?”

I looked across the table at Selena. Her eyes sparkled over her tea cup, or more like glowed. Like Nik’s. “You’re one of them?”

Selena took a sip of her tea and nodded. “A wolf shifter, yes.”

Grandma Roman’s eyebrows raised, and she gave Selena the side-eye, but didn’t freak out or laugh or anything.

“Don’t look at me like that, Dotty. It is time for Rosie to hear it all. She has to choose whether she wants to grow into an interesting woman, or stay a girl who only writes things about other, pretend interesting women.”

Nan went over to the cupboard and came back to the table with a bottle of whiskey. She poured a healthy slug into each of our cups. “Here’s to interesting women.”

NIK



*M*y feet dug into the turf, and I was ready to run all-out. My knees bent, and I pushed off the ground with every muscle fiber in my legs. The leather made a satisfying slapping sound as the ball snapped into my hands. Another good catch. But then my body shut down, and I let go.

Not of the ball. I'm not an idiot. One foot landed and then the second. And I took one step back before stopping, then I just closed my eyes. Kirill did exactly what I wanted him to do. He hit me hard, knocked me off my feet and plowed me into the field.

Fuck, it hurt. My ribs screamed in protest, because this was the third time I just stood still and took the hit. I deserved the pain. Every single bit of it.

The coach blew his whistle so hard and long I was afraid his head might explode from the pressure, "What the holy hell are you doing out there? Do you think you're playing freeze tag, because the last time I checked, this was football. You catch the ball and you run—catch and run, catch and run. Someone go help Nik screw his head on right."

I ran to the bench with the rest of the offensive line. I grabbed my water bottle and sucked on it just to avoid talking to anyone. Kirill shoulder checked me from behind, making me spew water all over the bench.

"Looking good out there, fuckwit. At least, you're making me look good out there. Keep it up. But seriously, dude, you

gotta reserve a little energy for the field. Not that I can blame you. That Erika is beyond bang-able. So much more my speed than your last hookup.”

Before I could stop myself, my wolf reared up and I lunged, fangs and all. I wanted to plant my fist into Kirill’s stupid fucking mouth and tear out his shit-talking tongue. But Eli grabbed one arm, and Ty had the other.

“Down boy. Take a deep breath,” Eli said. “If you knock him out, he might lose one of his two remaining brain cells, and we need him for game this weekend.”

Kirill shrugged off Eli’s insult. “Jesus, Nik. I’m just giving you shit, because you suck so bad today. Trying to snap you out of your head and into practice.”

“What the fuck is going on? Talk.” Ty finally let go of my arm, but followed up with a less than friendly shove. He meant more than just the game today. The lot of them wanted to know what was up with Erika and Rosie.

I hadn’t told anyone that Rosie ran away from me. They all just thought she... well, I don’t know what they thought because I didn’t even tell anyone she left the party. But of course Charley and Hunter had noticed. I’m sure they gave Eli and Ty an earful.

If it were any other day, any other circumstance, I would have just told them all to fuck off and I’d figure it out on my own. Dudes didn’t talk about feelings. Although, we’d sure gotten an earful of them when Ty hooked up with Hunter. And come to think of it, Eli was all mushy gushy about Charley all the damn time. Maybe we did talk about our emotions with each other.

Huh.

Since I was frustrated and tired, not to mention completely destroyed by guilt, I wasn’t thinking straight and could seriously use their help. Well, maybe not Kirill’s, but he just sort of came with the package.

I plopped down on the bench and just let it all out. “On one hand, there’s Rosie. She’s lived deep in my heart, for years and

being with her is everything.”

She made me feel complete. Made my heart beat stronger.

“On the other hand, are my parents, my pack. Mating with Erika would create a powerful alliance between Grimm and Serenity.”

I felt trapped. Stuck between expectation and desire.

“Why didn’t you just say Rosie was your fated mate, you dumbass?” Kirill smacked me in the head. “I’ll take Erika off your hands.”

Kirill’s jackassery, rubbed me the wrong way mostly because he was irritatingly right. Rosie absolutely was my fate mate.

I answered like a complete dickhead, “Yeah, well I don’t even know if fated mates are even real. My parents had an arranged mating, and they have a great relationship. Wolves have clearly been doing just fine just mating and leaving fate out of it for freaking centuries.”

“Nah. You don’t believe that.” Kirill glared at me like he was the one being offended, “Try again, asshole.”

Eli nodded, although looking a little surprised that Kirill was so astute. “What he said.”

“Listen, I appreciate what you’re trying to do. But right now, I need to put my head down, wolf up and do what’s expected of me. I have a duty to my parents and the Grimm pack.” Even if that responsibility felt like hot rocks in my stomach and chest.

“Your duty?” Kirill threw his hands up in the air. “That’s the stupidest thing to ever come out of your mouth. Mating isn’t about duty. Especially when you have obviously found your one, true mate. Do you know what most wolves would give to have that. Fuck you, Nik.”

We all sat there silent for a solid minute. Kirill wanted to find his own fated mate? What kind of an alternate universe was I in right now?

Eli patted the huffing, hulking-out Kirill on the back and then stared down at me. “I used to be just like you, Nik. I felt all the pressure in the world bearing down on my shoulders to be the perfect future pack leader. I thought I had to do what everyone expected me to do too, but it was all in my head.”

Eli was the god-damned golden boy. I never would have thought he felt any kind of pressure.

“When fate brought me to Charley, I held on tight, because life without her would be like living in a world without color or flavor. Everything is better with her, literally everything in my life. My parents get that.”

“I totally agree, man.” Ty stepped up and clapped a big hand on my shoulder. “I’m an alpha now, with my own fated mate. I put everything on the line for her, even when I didn’t think I deserved her. Hunter doesn’t just make everything better. She makes me better.”

They were right. But Eli was destined to lead his pack, and now Ty was starting his own. I wasn’t an alpha and that meant trying to make the best decision for everyone.

“Nik, if you don’t just pull your head right out of your stupid fucking butt and chose your fated mate over some wolf pack socialite, then you’re a total dumbass. That’s it.” Kirill actually kicked dirt at me, like we were five.

“You’re right.” I threw my hands up, “I know you’re right. But to break off this engagement to Erika, I’m going to have to tell my parents that I am going to throw away an opportunity that they worked hard to put together.”

They’ll understand, man.” Eli folded his arms and nodded all sage-like.

“Maybe, but then I’m going to have to go see Galyna. As in Galyna Troika, as in the alpha of Grimm pack who literally tore the head off another wolf to claim the pack. And then we’ll have to go to Nikolai Troika. The fucking Wolf Tzar, because he’s her pack alpha. You think either of them are going to be falling-down happy to hear that I want to sever a highly desirable alliance between Grimm and Serenity Bay?”

Eli and Ty both winced. At least I was getting some sympathy instead of a load of shit.

“I don’t envy you. At all. But Niko Troika is a good Tzar, and he fought for his own fated mate. He’ll want you to as well.” Ty held out a hand, and when I took it, pulled me in for a half-hug-half-back pat.

“Go, get it done, numbnuts. Don’t fuck up your one chance at happiness.” Kirill shoved me toward the locker room, and I let him.

Because once again, he was fucking right. Rosie was my chance at real happiness. Nothing else mattered, not even duty to my pack or my parents.

I didn’t even change. I ran to my car and headed straight for Rogue. I spent the entire ride rehearsing my talking points in my head. These were words I didn’t want to fumble. By the time I opened the door to my parent’s house, I was a ball of stress all over again.

“Mom? Dad? I’m home.”

My dad stuck his head out of his den. He took one sniff of me and his spine stiffened like he had been struck by lightning. “Nik. What are you doing here? We’re not supposed to see you until this weekend, with the Crescents.”

Uh-oh. This wasn’t starting off great.

“Oh, honey. What a lovely surprise.” My mom walked into the hallway from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. She was probably making something big and juicy for dinner.

“Yeah, uh... well, hi. I’m sorry I interrupted your evening. But I need to talk with you.” I shuffled my feet and only looked at my mom. I could already smell the irritation pouring off my dad.

See? I knew they weren’t going to be happy.

“Come on into the kitchen. Dinner’s almost ready and there’s plenty for you too.” My mom waved the two of us in and grabbed another place setting for me. We sat down, and before I could launch into the speech I prepared, my mother

peered closely at me, then tilted her head. “Nikita, you don’t have to marry her.”

My jaw dropped. What the? How did she do that?

She grabbed my dad’s hand, and he scowled but squeezed hers back. They’d clearly already been talking about me and my future with Erika. Or rather my non-future with her. Dad didn’t look totally on board, but when my mom got going, there was no stopping her.

He stabbed a piece of the meat from the platter, and pointed at me with it. “No son, you don’t. I heard your trepidation on the phone. I’m not stupid. Why didn’t you say something then?”

I sat there just blinking at my parents for a second trying to keep up with these people who looked like my parents but reacted like aliens.

“Really, Nikita, you’ve never had a girlfriend, never talked about anyone. We waited forever to see if something would come of you and Rosie, but we finally just gave up on it. When Erika’s parents approached us, we thought we were helping.”

“Wait, wait.” I held up both of my hands and closed my eyes, “Erika’s parent’s approached you about the match?”

“Yes. They’re a strange lot, insist on calling themselves Crescents instead of Serenity.” My dad finally put his meat on his plate and then shoved a piece in his mouth.

My mom continued for him. “But they’re daughter seemed pretty, always smiling in the pictures they showed us of her. They’re very anxious for her to be mated. If you two aren’t right for each other, or if you’ve maybe met someone else, well, we just want you to be happy.”

“I can’t mate with Erika. I don’t love her. I love Rosie.”

My mom pumped her fist in the air, like she was watching me score a touchdown. “Yes, I knew it. I am so happy to hear you say that. Does she feel the same?”

“I don’t know.” Goddess, I’d fucked everything up. “I though she did. We sort of connected, okay we really connected.”

My dad scowled. “You should have told us you and Rosie had finally gotten around to getting in each other’s pants. Have you marked her and claimed her too?”

“Dad!”

“Well, We would never have pushed this arranged mating on you, but it was such a good match. It would have been a powerful alliance.”

My mom gave my dad a pinch, and he backtracked, “I just wanted you to quit fucking around if Rose didn’t have the same feelings for you as you’ve had for her since the beginning.”

Did everyone but me know the two of us had been in love for all these years? “You aren’t upset that she’s human?”

My dad made a face, but my mother waved a hand around, “That isn’t even a consideration. All that matters is that you have found your one, true love. Your fated mate. I am so happy I can’t stand it.”

“But I don’t see how I can back out of this arranged mating without creating some serious bad blood between our packs. Galyna is going to want to skin me alive.”

My father sat up straight. “We’ll go to Max and Galyna’s and sit down with them tonight. The sooner this is sorted out, the better.”

“We?”

“Yes. Your mother and I set this in motion. You will have to speak your heart to Galyna, alone. But we stand with you, Nik, always.”

Secretly their open support made me feel all warm inside. We went straight over and Galyna welcomed us graciously, but being a shrewd wolftress, she clearly sniffed out what was about to go down.

I took a deep breath. “I’m sorry to intrude on your evening, but I would appreciate speaking with you.”

I followed her down a long hall, and she led me into a set of massive double-doors. We sat, her on one side of a big desk with pictures of their kids decorating the surface.

Galyna steepled her hands and leaned forward, elbow on the desk, solely focused on me. “What brings you to my home, Nik?”

“Ma’am, I have to talk with you about the arrangements my parents made on my behalf to mate with Erika, uh, Crescent.”

Galyna raised an eyebrow in a way that let me know she’d caught the pass I’d thrown when I called Erika a Crescent versus a Serenity. “Then let’s talk.”

Here goes. “There’s nothing between us, and it seems like the mating of a wolf to his mate should be everything. I prepared a speech in my head, and it was so much better than this... But what comes down to is that I want to break off the arranged mating.”

She was silent for what felt like forever.

“If it’s alright with you, young man, I’d like my mate to join us.”

Shit. Okay. I nodded and Galyna called Max in. Please, please, please. If anyone should understand wanting to be with a fated mate, it should be these two, right?

Galyna filled Max in quickly and he sat on the edge of the desk, then deferred to his mate. She tipped her head. They’d definitely done some communicating with their own wolfspeak in their heads in between.

Galyna started, “Breaking an engagement is a serious step. Erika and members of her pack might harbor some deep resentment if you do this. Can you tell us why you want to break it off?”

“I don’t mean to cause so many problems, ma’am. It’s just that I... well, I believe that I have found my true fated mate.”

If anyone should understand, it would be these two. But they weren't relenting.

Max and Galyna shared a look, and then he spoke up for the first time. "Does this wolftress have a name? Does she belong to any pack we know?"

I swallowed hard and looked between the two of them. "She's human."

Just like Galyna had been. Max showed zero surprise. No emotion whatsoever. No one was reacting the way I anticipated. "Does this human have a name?"

"Rosie. Rosemary March. She's Mrs. Roman's granddaughter."

Galyna smiled and some of the worry melted away. "And are you absolutely certain that Rosie is your fated mate?"

"When I am with her, everything feels right. It feels like my heart is beating outside of my body, and there isn't room in my brain for anyone except Rosie. We're meant to be together."

Galyna and Max looked at each other and my alpha shook her head. Shit.

Did I blow it? Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck.

Blood rushing through my ears whoosh, whoosh, whooshed and I thought for a minute I was going to black out.

But then Galyna stood and crossed over to me. "Relax kiddo. Sorry for the third degree, but I'm afraid you and your parents have gotten caught up in some pack politics and I had to be sure of where you stood. Of course you and Rosie should be together. We'll take care of the, uh, Crescents."

Muffled laughter and the sound of glass clinking echoed at opposite end of the hall. "Come on, Nik. They're waiting for us."

As if some wizard, god, or Goddess had snapped their fingers, the entire world became sharp, I could see, hear, and

feel again. My heart beat a fast, steady rhythm in my chest and... oops, my cock went rock fucking hard.

Rosie was going to be mine. Shit. After I won her back. Right now she still hated me. But I would do it. I would woo her and wine and dine her, and show her exactly how much I loved her. I followed after Max and Galyna back to their kitchen, anxious to say our goodbyes and get back to campus.

I stopped in the doorway and took in the scene. Nikolai Troika, the fucking Wolf Tzar sat at the head of the table nearest me, with his mate Zara by his side. She gave me a bright smile and raised her wine glass to me. There was my mom and dad, who also had glasses of wine in their hands, and Selena, who was unexpectedly sitting at the other end of the table.

And then my mouth fell to the floor.

Because next to Selena was Rosie. My Rosie.

Rosie stood, her sweet lips curving up in a soft smile. I practically vaulted over the table to get to her. I had her in my arms and pressed a kiss to those sweet lips that was far too deep and far too long for present company. She kissed me back, and my wolf rippled through me with a suppressed howl.

My senses filled up with Rosie—the taste of her, the smell of her, the feel of her luscious curves. Nothing else existed, no one else mattered. Just Rosie.

Selena turned to Niko and said, “You see, it is just as I told you it would be. These two grow so brightly together that they outshine the sun. How do you not need sunglasses to look at them?”

ROSIE



“*Y*ou’re here.” Nik stared into my eyes like I was the moon and the stars and the entire solar system. A gaze that threatened to ignite a four alarm fire in my lady bits if he didn’t stop.

“Of course she is here, Nik. I thought it was best to have him around for the fall out regardless of which way you stood. Niko can get the arrangement part taken care of right here, right now.” Galyna Troika, our local librarian, who it turned out was a human who mated a wolf and took over a whole pack, patted my shoulder.

Nik was back to staring at me, his intensity and naked want made my cheeks so hot that I thought the blush would be permanent. Not to mention that my panties were ridiculously wet. Everyone at the table was a wolf shifter. Could they tell? They could probably all smell me.

God how embarrassing.

Nikolai, the Tzar or King or whatever of all the wolves, broke me out of that spiral when spoke aloud, “It is official. The arrangement is broken. I will speak with Erika’s parents tomorrow. I think perhaps we have several items to discuss.”

A smile split Nik’s handsome face in two, and his eyes glowed like mad at me. I should’ve felt like an outsider, because something decidedly wolfy just went down. But I didn’t feel left out, because I wasn’t. Besides being at Gran’s, this place I slipped a hand around Nik’s neck and pulled him in for a kiss, sweet and tender.

“Come on. I have a place I’d like to show you.” Nik pulled me from the house and we walked over to the Reserve, which of course I’d been to a hundred times before, but never after dark. That was against the law, and also creepy. No one went to the Reserve at night. But he led me down a path I hadn’t even known existed.

“The Reserve is really special to the pack. This is where we can roam free in our wolf forms.”

It was beautiful. The moon was waning but still full enough to light our path. When I looked up at him, he was lit up like a glowing lightning bug. Made my insides all squidgy. “So this place you’re taking me is a wolf-shifters only place? You won’t get in trouble for showing me?”

He laughed lightly and kissed the top of my head. “It is *the* wolf place. Just for us. No other shifters come here, and folklore keeps most humans from venturing very far beyond the picnic areas and walking paths. And no, I won’t get in trouble. You’re part of the family now.”

“No other shifters? As in there are shifters who aren’t wolves?” It squeaked out of me, and I was embarrassed by my reaction. Maybe I came from a long line of mouse shifters and just didn’t know it yet.

“Yeah. Dragons, bears, you know.”

I didn’t, but I nodded as if it was all normal and not super duper paranormal.

“You aren’t freaked out by all of this, Rosie? I should’ve told you.”

I squeezed his hand tight. “It’s a lot, but it isn’t too much. I promise. I’m weirdly totally okay with most of this.”

Nik shook his head. “Seriously? Isn’t this when you round up the villagers and chase us all out of town with pitchforks?”

That made me laugh, in a comfortable Rosie and Nik sort of way. I looped my arm through his. “You know, I think I sort of knew all along. Going to high school in Rogue, well, there has always been kind of weird stuff going on. It escalated

when I started at Bay State U. I mean, there is always strangeness going on around campus.”

Nik stiffened. “Like what?”

“Like college football players who make plays the pros can’t, and move faster than they should. Stupid fights at parties where guys are legitimately snarling at each other. Don’t get me started on the weird motorcycle gang that rolled into town last month. They were totally freaky, feral looking. But then Selena sent me across campus before anything exciting happened. Then no one would tell me what happened, but poof, no more strung out leather wearing thugs to be found in town.”

Nik stared at me with wide eyes. “You don’t miss a thing. Those guys were bad news. It was Ty’s dad. He was a lone wolf with a chip on his shoulder.”

“Poor Ty. That must be rough.”

“I was seriously worried about you. You were in real danger that day and I hated that I couldn’t say a thing.” He growled, and I’m not even sure he knew he was doing it. “I patrolled outside your house for weeks after all that went down, to make sure that they didn’t come back, and that you were safe.”

“I had no idea.” I thought back. “Well... that’s not entirely true. I maybe thought I saw a gigantic wolf... but I wrote it off to an over-active imagination, because I was in the middle of writing a werewolf romance book.”

“Really? I thought I was being so stealthy and sly.” Nik looked genuinely disappointed that I had caught him out.

I giggled at him. So freaking cute. “You definitely were. The stealthiest.”

“And the slyest?”

“For sure.”

Just then, we stepped into a hidden clearing, lit up by the moonlight. The trees formed a circle around the clearing and the moon shone overhead illuminating the leaves and trees and

flowers as if this were a fantastical painting. “Wow, this is beautiful.”

“It’s our sacred circle,” he pressed my hands together and warmed them between his. “It’s where we hold the Troika and Grimm pack mating rituals.”

“Like a fated-mate wedding? That’s so magical.” I immediately envisioned myself walking down an aisle in a flowing, flouncy sort of gauzy dress complete with boho flower crown. Nik would be waiting for me at the end, in a linen shirt, and—

“Uh, it’s not exactly like a wedding... it’s more like the wedding night.”

Somehow I didn’t think he meant a night wedding. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“Well, shifters like us don’t have fancy weddings, because we are more, uh, nature-oriented. So, our rituals are more around acts of nature. The sort of acts that only a couple engages in.” He looked up at the moon and back down at me, and his breathing had sped up and his eyes had gone glowy and dark. “Like when I say mating rituals, Rosie, I mean literally mating under the full moon with the pack bearing witness.”

“Witness as in watching? As in having sex in front of the whole pack?” Were wolf shifters kinksters?

“Yeah. That’s pretty much it. Except the full moon also gets all the other fated mates in the mood for their own mating rituals, so it isn’t like they very many are stand there just staring. There are lots of couples, umm, mating.”

Oh. My. God. I hadn’t even wanted Nik to see me when we had sex, and now I was supposed to expose every bit of me to a bunch of strangers in some kind of wolf shifter orgy? I squeezed my eyes shut and did some deep breathing. “In through the nose, out through the mouth.”

“Rose?”

I needed a sec to get my careening insecurities under control. That was the sort of negative thinking that kept me

from revealing my love for Nik in the first place, kept me alone and lonely. The sort of thoughts that would keep me from ever having my own happily ever after.

“Look. I have a way to go toward learning to accept that my body isn’t bad, just because the world around me tells me it is. You’re the first person who has ever said that I was anything but... well, fat, ugly, unlovable.”

“I get it, Roses. I really do. You’re the first person who told me that I wasn’t dumb, the first person to believe that I could actually graduate from high school and get into college. Doesn’t mean I don’t still get frustrated that my brain doesn’t work the same way other people’s brains do. I still feel stupid sometimes.”

“But you’re a good student. You’re going to graduate from Bay State with two degrees. Clearly you are smarter than the average bear, uh, wolf.”

“And you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.”

Yeah, but would he say that when I was old and fat? Then boom, it hit me so hard it made my heart do a back flip. He would, because he loved me... and deep in my heart, I knew the opinion of everyone else in the entire world didn’t matter. Only Nik’s. I’d like to say that my own opinion was the only one that mattered, but my thoughts were... broken, by society, by mean people on the internet, by media, by my own internalized fatphobia.

But when I was with Nik, I didn’t feel broken. Even when we were pretending we were just friends, he never made me feel like I was anything but wonderful, anything but his best friend. He made me feel like I belonged. And I wanted to belong to him forever.

I was still working on the liking myself part, but this last week went a long way to me seeing that I’d been looking at life through a lens of fear and doubt and negative self-talk. I made a mental note to thank Selena for helping me take those anti-rose colored glasses off.

“I’m going to choose to believe you instead of the stupid people in the world. If you think I’m beautiful, then I am beautiful.”

His eyes flicked from mine, down to my lips and back up. “Oh, I definitely think so.”

“Okay, then that’s settled. What do we do now? I’m not sure ready to have sex in front all of your pack. Is there like, a couple of steps that we could do before?”

“Yeah, it’s something you only do with your mate. It’s called marking, and it is the most powerfully sexy thing I can think of ever doing with you. I literally had to bite my tongue not to mark you the other night when we were together.”

“Powerfully sexy sounds really good.” I bit down on my lip to keep from laughing at my bold self.

Nik leaned in and kissed me, softly at first, but in seconds heat was blooming so full and fast. He lifted his head back just enough for me to be able to see his eyes. They were glowing the brightest blue. He slid his hands down over the small of my back, over my butt, to my thighs. And then he lifted me up.

“Ack, Nik, no.” I called out, completely freaked out that he was even trying to pick me up. “I’ll break you.”

“Shut up, Rose, and wrap your legs around me.” He started with the kissing again, tasting me, pressing his tongue against mine. No arguing if you can’t talk. I pulled my feet up and wrapped them around his waist.

He walked us over to the center of the sacred circle without missing a step like I was made of rainbows and bird song, and pushed my back against the tree. God, I’d read about this in romance novels and never ever imagined I’d get to live anything this hot in my life.

I looked up at him, my arms still wrapped tight about his neck. And then I looked again. “Nik. Nik, look. You’re glowing. We’re glowing.”

I reached toward the moon and danced my hand through the air. My skin was luminous and beautiful. It was like we were phosphorescent.

His eyes went all soft and sexy, making me gooey and warm in so many ways, “I’ve pictured you like this, so many times. Fuck, you’re gorgeous.”

Nik dropped a slow volley of kisses from the corner of my lip to the spot just below my jawline, making my breath hitch. He took his time, kissing and nipping at my neck until there was nothing else in the world except for Nik’s mouth on my body. He pressed his lips against my throat, and scraped his teeth across that spot that made me moan, “Right there, Rosemary. Right there. I will sink my teeth into you and mark you as mine. A mark that will last forever, tell everyone that you are off limits, that I claim you, forever, Rose. Forever.”

“Yes, Nik do it. I want it. I want you to mark me, forever. Right now.” Good thing I told him what I wanted then, because he ran his tongue over that spot, deliberately, taking such sweet, sweet time, I lost all ability to speak, to think, to move.

Nik rumbled a low, sexy growl, and sunk his teeth into the tender spot on my neck. I went from pleasantly floaty and wet to super hot tsunami. My pussy sent a shock wave through my body that made me cry out in pleasure and writhe against Nik like he was my personal stripper pole. He shifted against me, and I shamelessly rubbed my center over and over him, riding the best orgasm of my life out as Nik lapped at my neck like melted ice cream.

He chuckled all self-satisfied against my neck. “This helps your mark heal faster. I didn’t know marking would drive my gorgeous, sexy fated-mate into a screaming orgasm.”

“Nik. Nik. Nik.” I threaded my fingers through his hair and tugged just a little to get his attention. His eyes met mine and it felt like home. “Make love to me, Nik.”

“Anything you want, Roses, anything at all.”

Warm fingers traced up my thigh, as I tugged at Nik’s shirt. Just as his clever fingers found the edge of my panties, the sound of a branch snapping made Nik go motionless. He kissed my deliciously throbbing bite mark once more, then

gently disentangled our bodies, and straightened my clothes with an excessively pleased, proud smile lighting up his face.

“It’s Niko. He called us back to the house.”

“I heard a twig break. How do you know who it is? I didn’t hear a word.”

“The twig was just to get our attention, he used wolf speak, you know like when I talked to you in wolf form?”

Alphas can use it to talk to their packs, and fated mates to each other.

As I watched Nik, I realized that his mouth wasn’t moving. Nevertheless, I heard his voice, like a bell... in my brain. “Oh my god, I thought I imagined you talking in my head earlier. Like a stress induced hallucination. That is the coolest thing ever.”

I thought those three little words meant only for him and watched his eyes to see if he caught my thoughts.

He did and it took us a few more minutes to extricate ourselves from each other and head back to the house. We pushed in through the back door to the Troika’s and I blindly followed Nik back to the crowded-cozy kitchen table while I daydreamed about exactly what the two of us were going to do all night long.

The Wolf Tzar gave us a nod. “My apologies for interrupting your, uh discussion.”

Nik took my hand in his and brought it to his lips. “I’ve marked my mate. I know that I am supposed to put pack before self, but Erika and her parents can go fu— uh, away. Rosie is mine.”

“I applaud your conviction, Nikita. Your instincts about Erika were spot on. While you were walking through the Reserve, the fire chief called for Selena. Erika has been arrested.”

“Arrested?” Nik and I both said at the same time.

“She set the fire on purpose.” Selena spat the words out. “Her parents too are being detained by the Grimm county

sheriff as we speak. Turns out they're one bloods who've been hiding under the Serenity Bay banner. Pieces of trash."

I leaned over to Nik and whispered, "What's a one-blood?"

"I'll explain later, but it's bad."

Selena's eyes glowed and her nails went all wolfy. She was pissed and nobody wanted to get on Selena Troika's bad side. "Apparently Erika read Rosemary's book, told her parents about it, and they all devised a plan to start a fire at the Moon Bean to draw you away from Rosie, Nik and hurt me."

Although the news about Bitchy McBitchface was great, the mark on my throat throbbed with unfulfilled desire. I caught Nik's eye across the room, and poured every bit concentrated mind power into one thought, and beamed it at him, "*Take me to bed before my lady parts burst into flames.*"

"*My hose is yours to command. Let's go start a fire.*" Nik lips curved up into a promise of a wolfish grin. "Mom, dad, alphas, thank you for everything. If you'll excuse us, we have some place to be."

I didn't even care that they all gave us knowing looks and chuckles as we fled the room. All I cared about was me and Nik, in a bed, or even the backseat of a car. We had years of lost time to make up for.

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NIK



I didn't think the night could possibly deliver me any further surprises, but as I watched Rosie search through her handbag for the keys to her apartment, I realized that I was wrong. Because contrary to past experience, a woman scrambling to find something in a handbag was the hottest fucking sight I'd ever seen. Then again, it wasn't just any woman dumping an assortment of hair ties, old receipts, a kindle, her cell phone, and pens and paper on the ground. It was Rosie. My mate. My well-marked, fated mate.

Rosie looked up with flushed cheeks and a Cheshire cat smile. She jingled the keys in her raised hand. "Found them."

I reached out and put a hand on her luscious, curvy hips. "You need to get in that bedroom right this minute. You should know that if you refuse, I might suffer permanent damage, because I think all of the blood in my body is concentrated in the raging hard on I have for you. I legit might pass out."

"We can't have that. If we are being open here, I should tell you, that if you don't take me to bed, the mark you left on my neck might cause the rest of me to combust and burn up into a pile of ash."

I pulled her against me and ran my tongue gently over my mark.

"Mmm, do that some more."

"You know, Rosie," I gave her another lick, "I get it now."

"Keep licking. What do you get?"

“Why I never wanted to have sex with any other girl.”

“What are you talking about? And give me another lick.”

“I mean, I was ridiculously, painfully, obnoxiously turned on all the time... but never for a some randy ball bunny, or a cheerleader, or any wolftress. Just you, Roses, only for you. My wolf has always known that you were my one true mate, and it just felt wrong to even think about having sex with someone who wasn't my mate... who wasn't you. It's only ever been you, Rose. Now and forever.”

She pulled down on my collar, and softly glided her lips over mine, before she looked up at me with glassy eyes. “*Only you, Nik. Now and forever.*”

God, hearing her using wolfspeak in my head was so fucking hot. I picked her up with a growl and padded into her bedroom. “*I want to be inside you.*”

Rosie laughed and switched back to talking aloud, “As fun as it is to have you in my head, I want to hear you whisper it in my ear.”

I lowered her down on the bed, and slid up beside her, my free hand finding the soft skin of her thigh beneath her skirt. I leaned in close, my breath stirring the strand of hair tucked behind her ear, “I want to be inside you, Roses. More than I have ever wanted anything in my life. Say you want that too. Goddess above, I want to hear you say it.”

My fingers gently skimmed over her panties, already wet with her need, and I rubbed her clit through the thin layer of soft fabric. I wanted to make this moment, this night perfect, and satisfy my mate in every possible way. I continued to stroke her slowly, and kissed her neck, moving my fingers in time with my mouth, my tongue lapping over and over the mark I made.

“Tell me what you want.”

“I want you. But wait, I got something.”

Rosie rolled over, leaving me feeling cold and terrible, just to be without her warmth for a second. She rolled back by my side and pushed a flat cardboard package into my hands.

“G31, TheyFit condoms? Measure for Pleasure? Rose, what are these? It sounds like I could use them to invade a foreign country.”

Rosie snorted. “Uh, the world’s largest condoms.”

“Really?”

“Really. I did a Google search, and these are it, Nik. I noticed that the last ones didn’t do you justice. Now you can explore as much as you want without fear of making a little Nik junior.”

I swept my arms around her, and rolled her over on top of me, the better to peel her clothes off her. Running my hands under her dress over her sides, I worked at the clasp on her bra. “You are an amazing researcher but, we can go without them altogether.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew I had fucked up—Rosie turned as rigid as granite under my hands.

“Nik, I’m not ready for a child. I know that diseases aren’t an issue since we both just lost our v-cards together, but you do know that there are serious repercussions with unprotected sex, and relying on pulling out isn’t a smart birth control tactic.”

“I’m such an idiot. One of the benefits to being a wolf shifter is no human diseases, and I can’t get you pregnant except under certain circumstances. I am all for fulfilling your every desire, including using the missile condoms if that’s what you want.”

Rosie shook her head. “Seriously? Wolf shifter sex is like... I mean, you can’t... that means that I can just sit back and enjoy myself with zero stress?”

“Yeah, babe.” I chuckled at her excitement. “That’s exactly what it means.”

“Then why did you pull out our first time? Every time we did it, you pulled out and came on me instead of,” Rosie’s voice quivered, “instead of in me?”

“Aw, Roses, I’m sorry. I just couldn’t explain to you then,” I took her hand, and gently kissed each of her finger tips, “I was so afraid that you would freak out and never want to see me again.”

“Okay, so tell me now because I am freaking out, but I definitely want to see you again.”

Just thinking about my wolf’s knot and being inside of her had me on edge for her. Maybe that girls guide to dating shifters was a good idea. “The wolf part of me desperately wanted to mark you, claim you as my mate.”

She grinned like a loon. “You wanted to mark me that night?”

“Rosie, I’ve wanted to mark you since we first met.” I couldn’t resist scraping my teeth over the mark. It had fully bloomed into the tattoo like wolf and moon symbol of me on her soft skin. “When I fuck your sweet pussy, my cock gets a wolf’s knot so that the animal is satisfied you’re claimed too.”

“What’s a wolf’s knot?”

She’d been thrown in the deep end of shifter life, I hope this wasn’t the one thing that pushed her over the edge. “Okay so, just like in nature—”

“Ooooh. You and me baby aren’t nothin’ but mammals. Are we going to do it like they do on the Discovery Channel?”

Rosie cracked up, which made me crack up, which made any thoughts of worry about her drowning in the whole wolf thing float away.

“Okay, when wolf shifters are with their one true mate they want to claim, and not just anyone, we get this knot at the base of our cock when we come—”

“Oh.” Her eyes went all wide and she glanced down between my legs. “It’s seriously wolf-like.”

“Yes, so if we were to do it, right now, and I came inside of you, the wolf’s knot would keep us locked together, my cock in your sweet, sweet pussy, until the wolf was satisfied that you were claimed properly. I couldn’t exactly come inside of

you that first night, without explaining why my throbbing, aching cock was stuck fast in your body.”

“Oh my god, really?” Rosie snaked an inquisitive hand over my abs and circled my shaft with her fingers, making me almost come right there and then. She traced a light line down the backside of my hard-on,

“That makes me really happy Nik.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m really relieved. I was kind of focused on you pulling out, and I thought of so many reasons why you did it... and none of them were really good. I thought it was me.”

“Oh no, Rosie, I’m sorry. I probably should’ve just told you everything. I know it sounds stupid, but so much happened so fast, and it was amazing... a little overwhelming. We went from best friends to best lovers before I even knew what I was doing.”

“No regrets?”

“Are you kidding me right now? No regrets, Rose. Okay maybe one. I regret that it took me this long to get you in bed.”

She kissed my lips as her clever fingers stoked up and down my shaft. “I can’t wait to feel you inside of me. I love the idea of being locked together.”

I had Rosie out of her panties in less than a second, and rolled her over once more so I was on top. I stripped off my jeans before as she pulled my shirt over my head, and stretched out against her, going for as much naked skin on skin contact as I could manage. “Fuck, you feel so good, Rosie.”

I teased her a little before, I place the tip of my cock at her opening, and slowly press myself inside, feeling her tight, warm walls stretch to accommodate me. She groaned and I took both her hands in one of mine and stretched her arms out above her head, making her arch her back. I loved the way her soft, lush body, molded to mine, making us one.

“More Nik, I want it all, I want all of you inside of me.”

I gave her another inch, and another, and slipped my free hand between us. I was so fucking close to coming, but no way was that happening unless she was coming with me. I found her clit, as hard as my dick, and I move my fingers back and forth as I moved my cock in and out.

I pulled one of her hands between us, moving her fingers to take my place, “I want that more than I want anything, Rosie, but you feel too damn good. Show me how you liked to be touched so I can make you come with me.”

She nodded her head and rocked her hips against me, moving our hands together through her slick folds, caressing both her clit and my cock. “Fu-uck.”

I thrust deep and hard into her, and held myself in that hot, soft, magical place until Rosie’s cunt flutters with the beginning of her orgasm. “Tell me Rose. Tell me to fuck you until your mine.”

Her tongue slid across her bottom lip and she sucked in a harsh breath. “Yes, yes. I need you. Fuck me.”

That is all I needed to hear, that and her moan as I drove into her again and again until I wanted to explode, and I felt the wolf’s knot swell and grow. She ran her fingers across my slick shaft with each thrust and grazed them gently around the knot at the base. It was pure nirvana to have her touch it, and I was afraid that I would come if she touched me for much longer.

I pulled out and grabbed her hips. My wolf was totally taking over and I needed to fuck her fast and hard now. I needed to claim her. Without a word, Rosie shifted onto her belly. She turned her head to face me as she lifted her hips into the air, and wiggled her adorably delicious looking ass back and forth, “Discover channel. Now. I need you to take me like this, right the fuck now.”

My wolf nearly exploded, and I felt a rush and a tingle as my skin threatened to give way to the wolf.

I grabbed Rosie’s hips and thrust into her so deep, I didn’t know where I ended and she began. She groaned out my name

and I was lost.

“You’re mine, Rose. Mine.”

I reached my hand around, and stroked her hot clit until her cunt clenched around my cock. My wolf took over and I pressed her down against the mattress and fucked her hard, and deep, and fast. Rose squirmed against me, backing that sweet ass into my dick, and cunt tighten around me until I could hardly move. I flicked my fingers across her clit once, twice, and when she whimpered my name, I thrust my wolf’s knot fully inside her. Rosie flexed against me, and I squeezed my eyes closed as I saw stars.

“Say you’re mine, Rose March.” I spilled me seed into her body, my knot locked us together and we both shattered into a million pieces. “Say you’re mine.”

Rose gasped and tilting her hips higher, and I sunk my fingers into her hips, holding her tight. “Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours, Nik. Only yours.”

I lost all control and came again, erupting with the purest pleasure in the most intense orgasm I ever experienced. I was buried so deep into Rosie’s pussy with each pulse of my seed into her, the wolf’s knot went deeper, until I felt Rosie shudder and her second orgasm clenched me harder. I pulled her hips back, savoring the feel of her body squeezing my knot, riding out my orgasm and hers in a moment of shared, perfect pleasure.

We were locked together in bliss and I lowered myself on top of her, grazing my teeth over the mark on her throat, nipping at her neck making the little pussy flutters go on and on.

I wrapped her in my arms and shifted to my side, pulling her over with me, and spooning her tight and licking at the mark. “Are you okay, babe?”

“Oh, yes. It’s like every little part of me is filled with you.” She ground her ass against me, and I couldn’t stop the growl from rumbling up inside.

“You’re so fucking sexy, Roses. If you keep pressing up against me, we are going to be stuck together like this all night.”

“And that’s bad why?” She reached up and threaded her hands into my hair, pulling my lips down to her throat again. She loved me teasing her mark as much as I did. “You sent my body into a nuclear meltdown. The Chernobyl of orgasms.”

“That’s what I’m here for, Rosie. To make you glow like you are radioactive.” To prove it to her, I kissed and licked that spot until I felt her tighten around me again, and her breathing grew shallow. I took one of her full, luscious tits in my hand and rolled her nipple between my fingers pinching her lightly. I scraped my teeth against her throat, and she moaned out my name.

I shifted and reached lower, cupping her sweet pussy, tracing my finger around her clit. She arched her back, pushing the knot even deeper. I bit her again, and lapped my tongue over the fresh marks.

My cock twitched with pleasure and the knot pulsed in time with Roses’ movements as she ground against me. Still hard as a rock all over again, I thrust as much as I could. “Is this what you want, sweet Rose? Tell me what you want me to do.”

She moved her head to the side, “Bite me, Nik. Claim me. Make me yours again and again.”

I sunk my fangs into her, as the knot receded and I could once again I thrust deep, in and out. Her tight pussy grew even tighter, as she came again, clenching around cock over and over. I kept my mouth on her throat, scraping her soft skin with my teeth as I pounded her harder and faster. The orgasm ripped through me, and as I exploded, the knot grew again, locking us once more. “I’m yours, Rose. I love you. I am yours and you are mine, forever.”

“I’m yours, Nik. Forever. I love you... so much.”

Rosie stretched her arm around behind me and pulled me closer against her. She took my free hand in hers and hugged

me to her tightly. My eyes closed and I drifted in and out of sleep, listening to her heart beating in time with my own.

Never in my life had I felt so relaxed, so at peace, so... loved. "I think I've always loved you Roses, from day one. I think I was afraid I would do something and fuck it up, and lose you forever. I just didn't want to believe that we could be anything more than friends. Until I read your book. I should have made a move on your back in high school."

"Aw, Nik. Honestly, if you had made a move on me in high school, I probably would have run away screaming. And ruined everything. I didn't really like myself much back then. I'm not sure I would have believed you."

"You believe me now?"

"Absolutely. I will admit that when I ran away from you the night of the barbecue, I spun up all sorts of scenarios, came up with a million reasons why you wouldn't choose me. But then I thought it through, and I knew you loved me. I love you so very much, and it would be absolutely dumb of me to deny your love."

"You're my very favorite smart-girl bookworm. What do you say I help you outline the sex scenes for your next book?"

"I think it will be a bestseller. A very dirty bestseller, if I'm lucky."

I kissed her mark. There would be no doubt in anyone's mind that Rosie was taken. "I'm the lucky one."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It's always great to have writing friends to do projects with! Piper and Aidy would like to thank M. Guida, McKenzie Rogue, Michelle Ziegler, and Candice Bundy for being great friends and we're looking forward to more retreats and projects together with you!

Special thanks for help with this book goes to Shannon Archer. Without you, I never would have finished this book.

Readers - if you haven't checked out any of these authors, we think you'll love each and every one of them!

From Aidy:

I am so very grateful to my Patreon Book Dragons!

Shout out to my Official VIP Fans!

Thank you so much for all your undying devotion for me and the characters I write. You keep me writing (almost) every day.

Extra Hugs to you ~

- Jeanette M.
- Kerrie M.
- Frania G.
- Michele C.

And enormous thanks to my Official Biggest Fans Ever. You're the best book dragons a curvy girl author could ask for~

Hugs and Kisses and Signed Books for you from me!

- Helena E.
- Alida H.
- Daphine G.
- Marea H.
- Bridget M.

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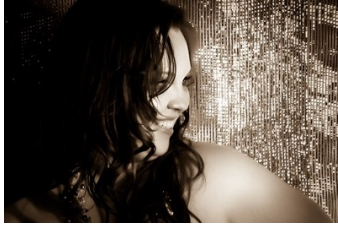
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ABOUT AIDY AWARD



Aidy Award is a curvy girl who kind of has a thing for stormtroopers. She's also the author of the popular Curvy Love series and the hot new Dragons Love Curves series.

She writes curvy girl erotic romance, about real love, and dirty fun, with happy ever afters because every woman deserves great sex and even better romance, no matter her size, shape, or what the scale says.

Read the delicious tales of hot heroes and curvy heroines come to life under the covers and between the pages of Aidy's books. Then let her know because she really does want to hear from her readers.

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Piper Fox writes short steamy paranormal romances for sassy, strong-willed women who love sexy alpha men, fated mates, and insta-love. When she's not writing... oh, who is she kidding, she's always writing or reading in her favorite genres - paranormal and sci-fi romance.

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