



To Love a Wolf (Apex: Moonbound)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: After breaking up with a toxic boyfriend, college junior Lucy Campbell is ready to move forward with school and life and without the need to date anybody. But fellow design student Jeremy is easy to be with, attractive, and fun. Above all he listens, something she prizes like never before after her previous relationship. She's pretty sure she's falling in love with him.\

For Jeremy Freeman, it's always a risk to tell a human what he is; many of them regard his kind with suspicion and prejudice. But he's absolutely sure from the bottom of his wolf heart that he's met his true mate.

Lucy knows two things about wolves. She knows they change form during the full moon, and she knows not to call them "werewolves." She's also pretty sure she's never met a wolf before.

She's about to find out she's been dating one.

To Love a Wolf is a prequel novella set eight years before the first book of the Apex: Moonbound series.

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One

“New season, new comforter.”

Lucy lugged her newly laundered bedding up both flights of breezeway stairs and juggled her key ring until her apartment key found her palm. Blessed air conditioning hit her as she stepped inside. First day back at class, third night spent here, and already her soul had nudged her that certain possessions must go. The bed was a focal point of the studio, set against the wall farthest from the door. She needed her bed to be cute and comforting...and new. Maybe that was immature, but she did.

She'd stripped the old bedding and left it in a heap before darting out to the closest cheapest department store, then to the laundromat. Back home she dove into the task of making her bed, dancing around it to tug and tuck sheets, bouncing pillows up and down until they slid into pillowcases. At last, the comforter. She smoothed out the wrinkles and pictured herself smoothing wrinkles from her life too.

She had a lot to be thankful for. A studio apartment thanks to her parents. Survival of her sophomore year. A new season as a single woman. And a new white comforter patterned in oversized, splashy pink circles.

She flopped onto the bed, creating new wrinkles, then sprang back up and crossed the studio to her work area, which amounted to a desk and chair set close to the window. She'd painted both dusty-rose and chosen her new comforter to match. She snatched up a pad of sticky notes and her favorite purple gel pen and got to work.

First the bathroom mirror. Lucy penned, Welcome to singleness! Let's rock it! and

stuck it to one side of the mirror.

On the fridge, reinforced with a magnet, she left a second sticky note. Your worth depends on nobody's opinion .

Her studio couldn't fit a dresser, so the closet was at capacity for clothes and shoes. Harder to find a spot for a note in here. She taped one to the end of the rack of hangers. It waved freely when the AC vent overhead kicked on. This was perhaps the most important note of all. I pledge on my own sacred honor that I will never again 1. date a jerk 2. date a vampire

Lucy stared at this note a long time. One year ago she'd been sure of so many things. She was smart and capable. She knew her worth. She recognized crap when someone threw it at her and she didn't stand for it. These days that last one wasn't as clear, though she'd rediscovered the others.

Maybe the last item on the list wasn't entirely fair. Not every vampire was a jerk, after all. But she couldn't imagine finding one of them attractive ever again. She couldn't imagine kissing him and not thinking of Liam. Watching him pour a glass from the stock in his fridge, sip it through a straw...and not thinking of Liam.

So no, she wasn't unfair to include it on her list.

Graphic Communication, her one evening class this semester, started in twenty minutes. She'd have to admire her cute new bed later. She drove to campus and fast-walked past the assembly hall to her classroom. Not the first or last to arrive. Perfect. She claimed a desk at the back of the room.

From her book bag she pulled a brand-new plum-purple notebook. She'd chosen to dash out for new bedding rather than decorate it, and this wasn't something to be rushed, so for now the cover remained plain. More students trickled in, taking seats,

and Lucy watched them.

Tonya Beeler claimed the desk to her right and swiveled in the chair to point her knees in Lucy's direction. "How's the apartment?"

"So far, so good."

She couldn't explain how satisfying it was to have her own place, not without sounding as if she were escaping Jodi. It wasn't that. Jodi had been a fine roommate. But she didn't want to explain the real reason, either.

Directly in front of her, another desk was claimed, this time by a pair of mammoth shoulders and a head of curly brown hair. Good grief, the guy was enormous, barely fit into the chair. Six-foot-five, or close to it. Her mouth was open. She shut it.

Tonya tilted her head and smirked at Lucy. Lucy flipped open her notebook and scribbled a purple note; the guy was too close for whispering between her and Tonya. I'm not drooling. He's just really big.

Tonya snatched up a black ballpoint from her backpack and tugged Lucy's notebook over to her desk for a reply. Cute hair too.

Lucy shrugged. She'd decided on singleness. Cuteness did not factor into her world right now. Period.

Tonya wasn't wrong though.

At the front of the room, Ms. Adamski began class with a friendly wave of recognition to her class of upper-level design majors. It was great to have her again. Awesome, low-key, clear about her expectations for quizzes and exams. A few of the seniors referred to her study tips as coddling, but Lucy appreciated the heck out of

her.

As a first class, it was appropriately boring. Syllabus rundown, followed by a free-write response to a quote about (surprise, surprise) visual communication. Lucy did her best while glancing up a few times for no purpose—that is, for the purpose of watching the guy in front of her bent over his paper. Which was dumb, really. She couldn't see his hand move over the page, couldn't see his face at all, yet the breadth of those shoulders somehow compelled her to keep glancing up.

At the end of class she abandoned Tonya mid-sentence and managed to beat him to the front. She turned in her essay and turned to face the room, to face him .

Wow.

She stood not six feet in front of him, at eye level with his neck. He held one page in his hand, neat printed writing on both sides. Lucy's gaze rose to his. Blue eyes, deep as a well, dark as sapphires.

“Hi,” she said stupidly.

“Hi,” he said.

He stepped to one side, and his long reach allowed him to set his sheet of paper on Ms. Adamski's desk without moving closer to it. Then he took an additional step back and met Lucy's eyes again.

“I'm Jeremy Freeman,” he said.

She was too stupid to tell him her name, but the blame wasn't hers. His eyes were to blame, and oh my, his smile was too.

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Two

He had smelled her behind him, strong soothing lavender, but he smelled everyone all the time. That her scent was more pleasant than average didn't register much while he tried to focus on Ms. Adamski's obligatory syllabus explanations—tried and mostly failed to take notes, his pencil instead sketching a cool logo that had just popped into his head for a bar and grill that didn't actually exist. Then the girl had rushed around him to relinquish her paper first, and her swinging braid swished across his arm. Now he noticed. First that scent of hers. Second the braid, soft and...lavender. As a human, she didn't know how she smelled to wolves, not unless one of his kind had told her. Her chosen hair color was a coincidence.

A distracting coincidence.

So he'd blurted his name and now she was blinking and mute, and for a moment he wondered if the shielding of his gaze had slipped somehow. For an adult wolf, even a young adult, shielding ought to be unconscious. Even when that wolf all but collided with a lavender-haired, lavender-scented...

Mine.

His breath caught in his throat. That was...weird.

She is mine.

Okay, wait...

She. Is. Mine.

“Um, I’m Lucy, um, Campbell. Lucy Campbell. Hi.”

“Hi,” he said, not for the first time. But adrenaline flooded his body along with a surge of something else, something he’d never felt before and could not name. Something connected to the howl inside him that insisted Lucy Campbell...

...is mine.

A glad growl rose in his chest, and he had to swallow hard, burn his throat with the unvoiced feelings brimming over in his wolf heart. His hand trembled once as he bent to pick up his book bag. He had to break eye contact with her until he knew he could control this, and he couldn’t know that until he knew what this was.

“Design major?” she said.

He straightened, cast his gaze around the room at anyone but Lucy. The other students were gone or going. Right, it was past seven.

“Yeah,” he said. “You too, I guess.”

“Interior. I want interior decorating, but I also wanted to experience college, so I’m getting an associate’s even though I don’t technically need one to be residentially hirable as a decorator.”

The cascade of words drew his eyes to hers again. The frames of her glasses were dark purple, complementary to her lighter hair. Her eyes were gray, keen as she studied him. Smart woman. And wow, gorgeous, tall and curvy. Tall enough not to make him feel like a giant. Curvy enough for him to...

He hefted his bag onto one shoulder and turned away. Had to. His brain was aware of every soft line of her as if he had touched her, run his hands down her hourglass outline.

Whoa. That's what this was.

The howling triumph in his head rose until the remaining students and Ms. Adamski ought to be able to hear it. My mate! Lucy Campbell, my mate!

"Hey, sorry," she was saying behind him. "I overshare sometimes."

"It's okay." He headed outside to breathe, to chill, to stop in its tracks the desire to scoop her into his arms and hold her close, inhale the scent of her, and...

Stop. Stop it. Calm down. It was intense right now. All things wolf were intense at twenty-one, though he'd been leveling out lately, finally, as Patrick had promised him. Maybe the discovery of his mate was enough to heighten his wolf instincts all over again. In any case he could not carry Lucy around the campus grounds howling with joy. Humans would know his true nature. Oh, and probably call the cops. Worse, if she were a reasonable woman, Lucy would freak out.

But how could he let her walk away without knowing who she was to him?

No. Worst idea ever.

On his heels came her signature scent, the soft sound of her footsteps on the grass. "Is something wrong?"

"No."

He turned to face her. Her mouth was pursed in a frown, but she didn't walk away.

She waited for him to explain his apparent escape from the classroom and from her.

“Sorry,” he said. “That was rude.”

She shrugged, but her eyes were sharp.

“Let’s start over.” He smiled, hoped he didn’t look tense. “Nice to meet you, Lucy.”

“You too, Jeremy.” She cocked her head. “How tall are you?”

The tension left his shoulders for real as he grinned. “You could try to be original.”

“What?”

“If you want to get to know me. Strangers in the grocery store ask me that one.”

“Well, at this moment, you and I are strangers.”

Ouch. Accurate. He knew that. Only his wolf instincts didn’t. “Fair enough. I’m six-five.” And a half, but whatever.

“Wow.”

He smirked. “How tall are you?”

“Five-eight.”

She said it as if her taller-than-average height were somehow preordained just for them. Did she know? No. Her DNA was one-hundred-percent human, unlike his eighty-six percent. She didn’t know the wolves who lived outside town. She didn’t belong to the pack.

“Do you want to get coffee?” Lucy said.

He blinked. “You just said you don’t know me.”

“And I don’t love that fact, and I’d like to fix it.”

“Okay,” he said. “The little indie café in town.”

“Right. Never a chain when there’s an alternative.”

“Right.”

She shifted her book bag strap from one shoulder to the other. She studied a long moment with those steady eyes, no shyness, simple open interest in him. “Why are you saying yes? I might be a psycho with a dozen exes.”

“Because I don’t know you,” Jeremy said, “and I’d like to fix that.”

And protect you with my life. Claim you for my mate. Build a life together. Maybe someday make pups with you.

He nearly growled. He needed to talk to Patrick. Really really needed to.

“I’ll meet you over there,” Lucy said.

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Three

A few of her friends would balk at the idea of asking a guy out, but Lucy never had. If she wanted to know a guy better, she threw out a low-key invitation. Though coffee had been her idea, Jeremy paid for her dirty chai latte. He ordered an iced Americano and laughed when she grimaced at it.

“Isn’t that just literally espresso and water?”

“Yep,” he said. “I don’t wreck it with sweet stuff.”

“What a sad life you lead,” Lucy said, and he laughed again. “So hey, if we have the same major, how have we never met before?”

His hesitation was brief, covered with a shrug. “This is my first semester on campus. I’ve been studying remotely.”

“Oh? Are you commuting now?”

He nodded.

“Long drive?”

“About half an hour. I’m in Harmony Ridge.”

She refrained from clapping her hands. He lived in the most adorable small town in all Tennessee. Not that Lucy had visited every small town in the state, but she didn’t

have to. Harmony Ridge was her favorite.

“My grandparents live there,” she said. “You must know them, Charlie and Jenny Campbell.”

“Oh yeah, I think my mom and dad go to church with them.”

To his credit he did not turn the question back on her. She’d met him less than an hour ago; she wasn’t about to tell him where she lived, not even the town. Nerves threatened as quiet settled, as Jeremy sipped his Americano and let her sip her latte.

When he looked up, the blue depth of his eyes caught her all over again. “So, interior decorating, huh? Have a specialty?”

“Two, actually. Color and texture.”

At his invitation she launched into a detailed description of her passions. He nodded, asked real questions, convinced her with that honest gaze of his that she actually wasn’t boring him. Then she grilled him back about commercial web design, which mattered to him the way a beautiful, inviting, space-savvy living room or bedroom mattered to her.

“We kind of want to do the same thing,” Jeremy said. “Except you want to design physical spaces and I want to design virtual spaces.”

She loved that.

No, wait. She liked that.

They never stopped talking. And it was just the nicest thing... they talked.

She didn't spend the night listening to a list of his talents and accomplishments and opinions. But he wasn't evasive about himself either. If she asked a question, he answered it.

"Only child," he said when she asked about siblings.

"Oh, me too. How about your folks?"

"We're amicable."

She cocked her head. "That's an interesting word."

"Yeah, it's complicated. One thing I'd rather not get into tonight."

"Very fair."

"You sound like a native, or in other words you sound like me." His mouth curved. His very appealing mouth. "Have you lived anywhere else or traveled much?"

Lucy blinked herself away from a two-second fantasy about tasting his lips. "Some school field trips, including D.C. It's great to see other places, but only for like a week. Then I'm ready for home sweet home, and that's always going to be Tennessee."

His smile grew.

"Are you agreeing?"

"You bet," he said. "Tennessee is home."

Beginning but not ending with her lavender-dyed hair, Lucy avoided looking the part,

yet her heart would always sing the song of the country girl. She smiled back.

He sipped his appalling watered-down espresso with relish, then said, “Favorite film?”

“Ooh, you take movies seriously.”

He laughed. “Because I said film ? Yeah, okay, guilty. I like the technical side of it. That stuff in Film Appreciation about flicker fusion and persistence of vision—I think it’s super cool.”

“I retained it just long enough for the exam.”

“But you have a favorite, right?”

She stretched her legs under the table, swirled her straw, considered and finally shrugged. “I guess not. You do, though, so go ahead.”

“Definitely Inception .”

“Haven’t seen it.”

He shook his head in mock dismay, then ended the topic. A minute later, discussing favorite bands, she understood. He would’ve delved deeper into movies if she’d been interested. He’d moved on for her, and most astonishing of all...he didn’t seem to mind. Lucy bit her lip against tears, and he paused mid-sentence as though she’d given away the momentousness of this realization. She found some generic comment to restart the conversation, and he didn’t push her. That was nice too.

Goals, dreams, childhoods. By the time the coffee shop closed and they migrated to the parking lot, settled on a bench in the cool September night, they’d been talking

for hours and probed well past usual first-date icebreakers. Yet even when he asked her favorite movie, Jeremy was making more than small talk. It wasn't something she could put into words. It was something in those lovely eyes, in the serious twist of his mouth while he listened to her, in the clasp of his broad hands on the table and now on his knees as they sat on the bench under the floodlight.

She told a funny story from the D.C. field trip to give him a taste of her eighth-grade shenanigans. He spoke of the guys he'd grown up with—Ezra, Trevor, Malachi, and Aaron—with such detail and brotherly affection, Lucy wanted to meet them all. Okay, maybe partly to verify their existence. A result of dating someone who fabricated closeness with others because he wouldn't get far with people if they caught on that his deepest love was himself.

“Okay,” Jeremy finally said, “here’s one for you, future interior decorator. Favorite colors. You’ve got to have a couple of those.”

“You mean combinations? Coral and chocolate. Mint and lavender. Goldenrod and rust.”

Jeremy blinked. “Whoa. I guess I was expecting, like, orange and brown . Not coral and chocolate .”

“Coral is not orange. And you did ask.”

“I did.”

Her own words caught up with her in a rush. On their spontaneous first date, Jeremy had asked a question Liam never had in eighteen months. She wrapped her arms around herself and wrestled stupid tears.

“Hey,” Jeremy said quietly. “Whatever I keep tripping on, it’s over, isn’t it?”

She gave a little laugh. “Good and over. Over for good.”

“Well,” he said. “Good.”

Then he leaned down and kissed her.

It was somehow both thorough and careful. It was over before she could respond. But oh, his lips were a little rough against hers, teasing as they drew away, tasting of mint while he smelled of sage and something gamey she couldn't identify but that sent delicious heat all through her. All that from a kiss that was already over. Lucy gave a little squeak.

“Was that okay?” he whispered in her ear. His smirk was audible.

In answer Lucy tipped her head up, grasped the back of his neck, and pulled his lips down to hers. This kiss was...more thorough. It lasted. And oh, he was a tease. Lucy pushed her fingers into his hair, and he cupped her head with one warm hand.

So stupid that they eventually had to breathe.

“That...was also okay,” she said.

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Four

Jeremy parked his truck in the gravel driveway beside Patrick's, already aware of several things. One, his guardian was awake. Two, he wasn't awake by coincidence, watching a film or reading in his chair. No, he was pacing the kitchen floor with a heavy tread. Like every wolf, Patrick's usual tread was unnaturally light.

So Jeremy was in for it.

He shut off his truck and hopped out. Halfway up the porch steps, he said, "Sorry, but I've got to talk to you about—"

Patrick's growl cut him off. He was still growling, low and reproofing, as he let himself out the front door. From their bedrooms, the quiet breathing and peaceful scents of Nicole and fourteen-year-old Nathan indicated deep sleep. Once outside, Patrick's growl rose in volume. He gripped Jeremy's shoulder and propelled him back down the steps to stand in the yard, a safe distance from the house. Now he could yell if he felt like it. Great.

"Patrick, please, I've got to talk to you."

"It's three in the morning, Jeremy."

Jeremy tried not to clench his jaw. "I know, but I—"

"I was about to drive to campus and track your scent."

He rolled his eyes.

A snarl rose in Patrick's throat. "No, you don't. I know at your age you want to test a few boundaries, but you can't just not come home. You can't ignore my texts for six hours."

"Texts?" Oh, crap.

"Stay out late if you want to, but not without a word. That's not acceptable."

Patrick shoved his hands through his hair, bright ginger with a few glints of silver. He drew a shaky breath, and the smoky odor of his anger gave way to a sharp tang. Fear.

"You thought I was in trouble." Jeremy shook his head. Would he ever convince Patrick he was no longer a pup? "I'm an apex. I'm strong and fast and my senses are freaking awesome. How am I going to get in trouble on a college campus?"

"No tempting vices there anymore? Times really have changed."

Jeremy shook his head as his throat began to burn with the howl he couldn't voice in Lucy's company. His body knew he was home, was safe, and with that knowledge his wolf voice rose in him, nearly forced its way out to wake Nicole and Nathan, because if he released it, he'd howl straight up at the stars. Fifty acres away, his buddy Aaron and Aaron's guardian George would hear him. Instead he shook his head, swallowed hard, choked on the voice that fought not to be silenced.

"Jeremy?"

Right. Focus. What everyone was always telling him. One thing at a time, another admonition he'd heard too often. "We can't get intoxicated. We can't get high. You're worked up for no reason, and it's not fair, and anyway I've got to—"

“You can be in the company of humans under the influence when the police show up. You can be handcuffed as the most threatening person there, simply based on your height and build. That’s what I’m worked up about, Jeremy.”

“Okay, I know, I know all that already, and I’m sorry, but please, I’ve got to talk to you .”

Patrick’s glare cooled. Jeremy must be smelling desperate by now. “What is it, pup?”

He pressed a hand to his chest where his wolf’s heart pounded, overflowed with an intensity of feeling that almost scared him. “I found her tonight. I found my mate.”

Patrick took a step toward him. Reached out and set both hands on his shoulders, studied him. Then he grabbed Jeremy in a powerful hug.

“It’s true. You have found her. That’s the change in your scent, isn’t it?”

A growling chuckle escaped his chest. “I don’t know, is it? Is that how it works?”

“You bet. You were with her tonight? Is that why you’re late?”

“We went for coffee, and then the coffee shop closed, and we talked in the parking lot for like...uh...” Whoa, had it really been that long? Their first date, a total of more than six hours?

“What’s her name?”

“Lucy Campbell. She’s into interior decorating. She’s got purple-dyed hair. She’s really smart, Patrick. And beautiful. We sort of bumped into each other—I mean, her hair sort of bumped into me—and I knew her. Like this loudspeaker blaring in my head that Lucy’s mine, my mate.”

Patrick was nodding. “Exactly how it happens.”

“There was a blaring loudspeaker in your head when you met Nicole?”

“Sure enough.”

“What do I do about it? I can’t just tell her. How did you tell Nicole she was yours, and you were a wolf?”

“Well, first of all...” Patrick set both hands on his shoulders again, studied him hard. “How far did things go tonight?”

He shuffled his feet, ducked his head. “We kissed.”

“And?”

Jeremy’s head came up. “And nothing. I just met her.”

Relief filled Patrick’s voice, his scent. “Good. That was wise of you.”

Not a word people often applied to him. He smiled, squared his shoulders, let himself settle inside. “It feels important for her to know soon, what I am. Otherwise I think it would be like lying to her.”

Patrick nodded. “I told Nicole before things got too serious between us. I had to know she was okay with dating a wolf.”

If he had chosen honesty, then Jeremy would too. He sighed, and his shoulders caved a little.

“I know it’s hard,” Patrick said. “A wolf knows so quickly she’s the one.”

Understatement was one of Patrick's hobbies. So quick, the brush of Lucy's hair, the knowledge that he'd found her though he hadn't been looking. But fate didn't need a wolf to look. Fate brought her at the right time, made sure he couldn't miss her.

"When can I tell her?"

Patrick clapped him on the shoulder, drew him in for a final embrace. "You'll know when the time's right. I'm proud of you, Jeremy."

Words his guardian said sometimes when Jeremy stuck with a task and accomplished it, or sometimes when he wasn't sure at all what he'd done to make Patrick proud. Every time his chest swelled with the warmth Patrick put into the words.

A smirk found his mouth. "Proud even though I ignored your texts for six hours?"

Patrick rumbled a low growl that held little correction now. "Don't do that again."

"Okay."

In a mutual decision they headed for the porch steps, softly re-entered the house. The door shut with a little click. Wolves didn't bother with locks.

Before he headed for his room, he wanted to put one last thing into words. He said, "It feels like a line drawn in my head. Yesterday I didn't know if fate had a mate for me or not, or when I would meet her."

"And today you know." Patrick smiled.

"Yeah. Today I know."

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Five

T exts all day every day. Evening chats over coffee until the café closed. Walks around campus, her fingers entwined with his. Jeremy always felt warm as a fever.

He treated her to a few dinners at the mall food court one town over. He wanted to take her somewhere fancy, but for the moment Lucy said no to that. He was a twenty-one-year-old student who worked part-time behind the counter of a gas station. That he was broke went without saying, though the age of his pickup truck came out and said it. Food court tacos made for a satisfying meal as long as he was eating them too, his big hands able to hold a shell together with ease, his eyes sparkling blue when he teased her and deep blue when he listened.

Five weeks passed like five days. On Thursdays they both finished their last class by 4:00, and soon it was habit to walk over to the science building and wait for him to exit his Earth Science elective. Why the man was so into identifying rocks and knowing how they were formed, Lucy couldn't figure out. She'd asked if he collected rocks as a kid or something.

“Nah, I just saw it on the class list and thought it looked cool.”

She paced the sidewalk a few minutes, then stood still when his class poured out the propped-open door. No Jeremy. Weird.

One of the last to leave was her old roommate, and she hurried over. “Hey, Jodi, was Jeremy in class?”

“Nope,” Jodi said with a shrug. “Whenever you see him, let him know there was a pop quiz. First time he’s ditched.”

That felt...off. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Did you hear about the excitement earlier?”

“Um, no?”

“Oh. I was hoping you could fill in the details for me.... I guess somebody got cut on some broken glass in A and P. Had to get stitches. No clue who or how. I mean, what glass? How did it break?”

“Sorry, I couldn’t tell you.” And didn’t really care right now. The mystery she wanted solved was where her maybe-boyfriend had skipped off to. She pulled out her phone to text him.

Before she could, Jodi said, “How’ve you been at your new place?”

“Really good.”

“I’m glad.” Her smile warmed her eyes, sincere in a way a lot of Lucy’s female classmates hadn’t been when they wished her well on her departure from the dorm.

A deep breath filled Lucy, and then words poured out. “It wasn’t you. You were a great roommate. I just needed somewhere new, somewhere Liam hadn’t ever been. I should’ve told you this months ago, and instead every time I run into you I’ve just been trying to look fine and be fine, and...and I’m sorry.”

Jodi walked right up and hugged her. Lucy dropped her book bag and returned the hug.

“That guy took you for granted, Luce,” Jodi said. “I’m glad you dumped his entitled butt. I miss you like crazy, but I get it.”

They stepped apart. Lucy blinked away a few tears. “You knew why I moved out?”

“Well.” Jodi shrugged. “I wasn’t totally sure. I knew he was the main problem. Vampires, right? Thinking they’re too gorgeous for us mortals. But I always wanted to ask if I’d maybe done something to make it all worse, like...if maybe I was the last straw.”

“You didn’t do anything. Not anything. Look, will you come over to my new place? We could make pizzas and catch up.”

They made a date for that coming Wednesday, then hugged again.

“Thanks for not being mad,” Lucy said.

“I was never mad. A little sad, but I’m not anymore. And I can’t wait to see your very own studio apartment.”

“All thanks to the parents.” She gave a little laugh. “Couldn’t manage it alone right now.”

“I hear that.”

Jodi nodded at Lucy’s phone, dormant in her hand for the last several minutes, and grinned. “I guess you’re itching to find out why Jeremy ditched. Go ahead. I’ll see you Wednesday if not before. And hey, I want all the details on this guy while we fix dinner.”

“For sure.” A blush seeped into her cheeks. “He’s...well, he’s sort of great.”

“He must be. Remember when we were packing up your design stuff—your portfolio and your pencils and everything—and you were like, ‘men are so overrated’?”

“Um, I might have been a little unfair, broad-brushing every single male on the planet.”

“You might have.” Jodi cocked an eyebrow as though it were equally possible Lucy hadn’t been unfair at all.

Lucy laughed. “Jeremy’s not overrated. Details to come.”

As Jodi strolled away a few minutes later, Lucy began typing a text message.

Hey, you weren’t in class. Anything wrong?

A distant blast of a French horn. That was Jeremy’s text notification, unique and unmistakable. He’d been here and dropped his phone? Where was it? How had he not noticed? She headed in the direction she thought it had come from, around the back of the science building. She tapped out another message.

Testing.

The sound came again. Nearer, maybe. And then there was another sound. A gulping, whimpering sound, and then...a sort-of canine whine. Lucy scanned the back of the science building, the ground at the base of the building, and texted the same word again as she headed toward the inclined sidewalk. The notification sound was close now. As was that strange faint whining.

He sat against a tree wearing a yellow T-shirt and jeans, his arms around his knees, about thirty feet from the walkway. His head was bowed, but those hulking shoulders made him easily distinguished from any other male on campus. Lucy’s pulse sped up.

She sprinted to him and dropped to her knees in front of him.

“Jeremy? What happened? Are you hurt? Are you sick?”

Another little whine came...from him. She set her hand on his arm, and he looked up at her, his eyes glassy.

“Lucy,” he whispered.

“Hey, I’m here. Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

“I can’t get—get away from the—the scent, it’s so—so much—so much blood.”

The choppy echo in his speech sent her adrenaline up another notch. Must be a panic attack. She drew a deep breath and smelled nothing but sweet blossoms in the flower beds across the way. And him, gamey with notes of sage and sweat.

“I don’t smell blood.” She rubbed his arm, took his hand in hers.

“I can’t—I can’t—I can’t get away from it—and no peppermint.”

“Um, what?” She shook her head. “Never mind. Let’s stand up and walk away from the science building, in case somehow you’re actually smelling blood from when somebody got cut earlier.”

“Got—got cut?”

He turned gray. She’d said the wrong thing. Shoot, if he passed out, she’d have to leave him to get help. She had to calm him somehow.

She scooted closer and wrapped him in her arms. “Can we stand up and go for a

walk? Can you do that?”

“Is the person—is okay—that got cut?”

“Yes. Completely. Just a little scratch. Come on, babe.”

She helped him up, no small feat of balance and lifting with her legs. Jeremy Freeman was a colossus of solid muscle. He shuddered as he leaned on her. Once they were upright, she took a portion of his weight. She shepherded him to the sidewalk, then set out toward the assembly hall and the campus commuter lot.

The farther they shuffled from the science building, the deeper his breaths became. At last he stopped walking, blinked a few times, and stepped back from her support.

“I’m okay,” he said.

A long sigh left her. Now that he no longer trembled, her own knees weakened. She sat down in the grass next to the walkway, and he joined her.

“You okay?” he said.

“Yeah, just...I was worried for you.”

“Sorry you saw that.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “Wow, this sucks. No one was supposed to see it, much less...”

“Much less me?”

His words were like a pin poking her chest. Maybe the closeness she felt budding between them was all in her head. Maybe Jeremy was one of those serial daters who kept a girl no longer than one semester. That’s not how they felt together, not at all,

and she wasn't usually so far off at reading people....

He was nodding though.

"Oh," she said. "Well...why? Because we're just casual?"

Two candles snuffed in his eyes. He looked down. "I guess so."

"So we're casual?"

A glance up as his brows crinkled together. "You just said we are."

"I said it because that's what I thought you were trying to say."

"Wait, what?"

She couldn't have both conversations at the same time, and he'd just come out of some kind of phobic something. That had to take precedence. "You said you needed to get away from the scent of blood."

Jeremy covered his face. "I can't believe you saw that."

Right. Back to where they'd started. "So you're afraid of blood? Like a fear of heights or water?"

"Why don't we just...pretend you didn't see it."

"What? Absolutely not."

He gave a long loud sigh and kept his hands over his face for a minute. Then he lowered them and met her eyes. His mouth was pressed into a grimace.

“Okay...um...yeah. Like a fear of heights. Except blood. The sight of it and the scent of it.”

“You must have an unbelievable sense of smell.”

“I do.”

She mulled as she studied him. Despite his height and build and typically unfazed attitude, he wasn't invincible. She knew that, of course, but he made it easy to forget. He did seem okay now, though, only tired.

“What did you mean about peppermint?”

“Oh...um...one of the things that helps is smearing diluted peppermint oil under my nose. To overpower the other scent.”

That made sense. But wow, his sense of smell must be several levels beyond unbelievable . Something familiar, forgotten tugged at her brain. Something she might know but couldn't catch at the moment. It must have shaken her more than she knew, seeing her brawny blue-eyed maybe-boyfriend frozen in panic, hearing him whine like a puppy.

Weird. She almost had hold of the nebulous knowledge in her head. Then it slipped away again.

Never mind. This moment mattered more—Jeremy breathing easily now, standing and helping her up.

“Thanks, Lucy.”

“I didn't do much, but I'm glad I found you.”

“Me too, I guess.” He shook his head. Maybe not so glad. “Dinner?”

She checked her phone. Not five yet, but she could eat early. “Sure.”

He bumped her arm with his. “I’m fine now, really.”

“Okay.” But were they fine? Were they casual? Were they anything?

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Six

He followed her to the mall, parked beside her, got out, but this felt wrong. She'd just taken care of him, put up with his stupid freak-out and never once teased him or rolled her eyes at him. Now to buy her a taco in thanks? No.

"Let me take you out," he said as Lucy shut her car door.

She gestured toward the food court. "Isn't that what we're doing?"

"No, I mean for real. Let's go somewhere like..." Shoot, like where? "What's your favorite?"

"Mexican." She shrugged. "Tacos are close enough."

"Not today, they're not. Let me take you out for real Mexican food."

Lucy shifted from one foot to the other, but then she smiled. "There's a really great place over by the fabric store. It's tiny, but it's always packed."

"Let's go there. Want me to drive us?"

She climbed into his truck without hesitation, and her trust made him want to express his hope and happiness in a deep chest rumble that he held back. What would it be like to use his wolf voice in her company? If only he could. They didn't talk much on the way there, but the quiet was simple and restful, welcome after his earlier panic. He savored her scent here, in his own truck, one of his most personal spaces.

They'd beat the dinner rush, but Lucy was right; most booths and tables were full. They were seated in a corner booth, and Lucy ordered without looking at the menu.

"Can I please get the tamale plate, one beef one chicken, guacamole on the side, and a Coke?"

He'd planned to order two of whatever she chose, but now that sounded dull. He pointed to an interesting menu photo. "Whatever that is, please. Oh, and a Coke."

"That's our fiesta plate," the server said, her eyebrows gathering with a hint of caution. "So...that's two tacos, two quesadillas, one tamale and one enchilada, plus a small beef-and-cheese nacho."

Now that was more like it. Plenty of food and plenty of variety. He handed her his menu. "Awesome. Thanks."

After the server stepped away looking concerned, Lucy giggled. "You really are a bottomless pit."

"Yep."

"Then again, let's see if you can eat it all."

"You like fried ice cream?"

Lucy gave a blissful eye roll. "Is grass green?"

"Bet I can eat it all and have room for dessert."

"If you say so." Her smile faded, and she reached across the table, palm up.

Jeremy set his hand in hers. What...?

“Hey,” she said quietly, “we’re not eating fancy because you think you owe me or anything. Right?”

His hand squeezed hers before he could control the reflex.

Lucy nodded, squeezed back. “Okay, so...whatever your dating experiences have told you in the past...that’s not how I work. I’m really glad I found you today, so I could help. And I don’t think you’re weird or anything. A lot of people have a fear of something, Jeremy. It’s not a big deal.”

“Do you?”

She shrugged. “I don’t have one of the common ones, like you do.”

He made a scoffing sound instead of the growl he wanted to let out. “Common?”

“Sure. Tons of people faint at the sight of blood, or a needle, or whatever. At least you didn’t faint.”

His hand still gripped hers. He relaxed as much as he could, sat back in his seat, and sighed. “Let’s change the subject.”

Lucy’s pink-glossed lips pressed together, and she looked into his face as though searching for some explanation. At last she nodded, squeezed his hand again, and let it go. Then the food came, and they feasted. Jeremy polished off the entire fiesta platter, and Lucy savored her tamales with cute little groans of happiness. While they waited for their fried ice cream, her easy posture faded, and her scent gained a somber note.

“So I’m just going to come out and ask,” she said. “It’s probably too early for this, but the other topic we opened before? I’ll keep thinking about it until we finish it.”

Yes, yes, yes. His wolf heart surged with every feeling he buried day after day. Feelings for his mate. The need to claim her at the top of his lungs, to introduce her to his pack, to tell her everything, everything. He had quit shielding his nature from her on their third date, and when their eyes met for real that first time, she didn’t react with even a hint of adrenaline. Only a wolf’s mate could look him in the eyes without first being acclimated to his full gaze. That was one lesson from Patrick he hadn’t missed. Jeremy had never doubted she was his, but the confirmation brought on such giddiness he’d almost given himself away.

He knew she wanted him, knew she enjoyed their time together, knew that somehow every give-and-take conversation between them shrank the wound that someone—no doubt an idiot who had failed to appreciate the beauty and worth of Lucy—had left deep inside her. The scent of her moods clued him in on things he’d never catch otherwise. One more perk of being a wolf.

But she might not want what he wanted. Not yet anyway. So he had to let her steer the topic. He couldn’t howl at the sky for her. He had to give her room to be honest.

She was waiting for him to speak next. That wouldn’t work. She had to say it first.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“Um...well, you said it sucked that I saw what happened to you, and I asked—well, said, but I was asking really—if we were casual. And you didn’t answer.”

He swallowed hard. “What do you want us to be?”

“That’s not fair, Jeremy. I asked first.”

Shoot. What was he supposed to do? What would Patrick say to Nicole?

No. He couldn't be anyone but himself right now—flaws and all, Jeremy Freeman, Lucy's wolf. The burst of resolve popped in his chest like a firecracker, and he held her gaze, promised himself to honor the vulnerability she risked in pressing the question.

He cleared his throat. "I don't think of us that way."

"What way?" Stress spiked in her scent, submerged lavender in an unpleasant tang.

Right. Too vague. Try again. "Casual. I don't think of us as casual."

She blinked, and lavender mingled now with bright hope. She smiled, only one corner of her mouth lifting. "You don't?"

"No."

"Oh, wow." The smile grew. "I don't either."

"You don't?"

"No."

"Oh," he said. "Wow."

At the same moment they both began to laugh. Just then their server brought a bowl of fried ice cream and set it between them, and they each grabbed a spoon and began a race to see which of them could consume more spoonfuls. Jeremy competed at a half-hearted pace, just to be fair. Lucy did not.

She claimed the last bite, and mischief sparkled in her eyes. “I win.”

“I concede.”

Her giggle was one of the cutest sounds he’d ever heard. “So, um, how far do we want to go with the labels thing? I mean, like, are we dating?”

“Yes,” he said.

She grinned. “Are we boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“Yes.”

“I agree.”

Jeremy set both hands flat on the table as unplanned words burst out of him. “And if we’re dating, then you should know I’m a wolf.”

The grin froze, faded from her eyes. Confusion filtered into her scent as her brows drew together. She sat back in the booth, but the shift seemed unconscious. Or he hoped it was.

“Yeah,” he said when the silence between them started to hurt.

She still smelled confused. Not scared, not repulsed, so...that was good. Her silence wasn’t, though.

Maybe she wasn’t familiar with the pack’s preferred term. He gritted his teeth against the stupid word humans had coined for his kind, but he would use it if he had to.

“Lucy, I mean I’m a lupine.”

Now she blinked, and her lips parted. “That’s what I thought you meant. I’ve never heard anyone use wolf before, just lupine .”

“Then you don’t know any other wolves.”

“No. I don’t.”

Without her scent, he’d be entirely clueless right now. Based on her body language, her withdrawn expression, she might be about to bolt screaming or to break up with him calmly. But nothing in her scent hinted at either. She was...intrigued. Incredible, but she was.

“Lupines are extra hot,” she said as if it were the most scientific fact in the world.

A smirk pulled his mouth. “Yeah?”

“No, no.” She rolled her eyes. “I mean your body temperature. You always feel like you have a fever, and I thought it was weird but I never thought to ask you about it.”

“Oh. Right.”

She reached across the table, and her thumb traced his knuckles as she said, “I don’t know about lupines in general, but my boyfriend is also ...extra hot.”

He seized her hand before she could pull away and laced their fingers together. Ridiculous to have this conversation in public. Ridiculous to sit across a table from her at a time like this. A low rumble filled his chest, muted for her ears only. She jolted up in the booth and stared at him, mouth open.

She whispered, “Did you just growl?”

He nodded.

“And when you were scared of the blood, you made a sound like a hurt little dog.”

Well, crap on that. “No, I didn’t.”

“You did. I should’ve figured it out for myself. I know lupines make—um, noises?—like dogs or wolves. I read it somewhere, probably in sociology.”

Every time, that word stung like a pellet from a gun. He couldn’t help flinching at it. Lucy didn’t seem to notice. Maybe he shouldn’t say anything. Maybe his reaction was stupid, but since he was thirteen, a newly changed pup newly arrived among the community who had accepted him as pack, Jeremy had been raised to call himself what he truly was. No politically correct euphemism for his very identity.

The server brought their check, waited while Jeremy fished out his debit card, and disappeared with it. Jeremy kept the conversation paused until she returned his card with a polite but harried, “Thanks for coming in; have a great night.”

When she was gone, he picked the thread of discussion back up. Any of his pack would be impressed that he remembered precisely where they had paused this topic, but really, the topic was too important to forget his place.

“If you don’t mind,” he said to Lucy, trusting her to remember too since forgetfulness in conversation wasn’t a thing with her, “we call ourselves wolves.”

“Oh, is—is the other a dirty word or something? It’s in textbooks. Should it not be?”

“It’s not dirty. It’s made up, and it’s a confinement. Or that’s what the older wolves say.”

Again her voice fell to a whisper, and she leaned closer over the table. “But the W-word is dirty. Right?”

He shrugged. He knew the word was technically derogatory, but if Patrick had ever given him a language lesson as to why, he’d zoned out of it. He and his buddies tasted the slur on their tongues sometimes, a rebellion of sorts.

Aaron tossed it around as a joke, said no human could call him a werewolf but he’d call himself what he wanted.

Ezra and Trevor did the same, but less often and never in their mom’s presence. To this day, Ezra twenty-one years old and Trevor nineteen, both those wolves respected their mom’s hatred for the word.

Malachi didn’t use the word. Ever. No doubt he had his reasons. Malachi had reasons for everything he said and did, but Jeremy had never felt right asking him about this one.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to use it,” Jeremy said. “Because you’re not a wolf. I think it’s dirty if you use it.”

Lucy crinkled her nose. “Weird. Okay. So you’re not a lupine. You’re a wolf.”

“Right.”

“You said ‘the older wolves.’ So you live in a pack, but...not with your folks? Because you said y’all are just ‘amicable.’”

Her memory for his word choice was something else. “My folks are human. They live in town. We get along pretty well now, but it was kind of tough for a while. I’m first generation, no wolves in the family going way back, the gene’s recessive, blah blah

blah, so they weren't prepared for...well, for their son to go live with strangers when he was thirteen."

"Oh, you were just little. Away from home."

"My pack is home." He hoped Lucy wouldn't question that one. It was hard to explain to humans, including Dad and Mom. At least they no longer felt it as a hurtful slight.

Fortunately, instead of digging into the more serious topic, Lucy said, "Body temperature, wolf sounds—I'm trying to remember if there've been any other clues I missed. Oh! Gosh! Your super sense of smell!"

"Yeah. All my senses are stronger than yours."

"I thought in wolf form you're supposed to be...like, feral. How can you be bloodthirsty and scared of blood at the same time?"

He grimaced, ducked his head, fiddled with his napkin as his chest pinched. If only he never had to talk about this again. With anybody. Ever.

The vinyl seat across from him squeaked as Lucy got up and rounded the booth to slide in beside him. She took his hand, laced her fingers through his as he'd done a minute ago. She leaned her head on his shoulder, spoke with a softness he hadn't heard before.

"It's okay, Jeremy. I'm not judging, I promise you."

He squeezed her hand. "Freaking out over blood is...not a normal wolf thing. It's purely a Jeremy thing."

“And that’s okay, babe.”

Was it? Maybe it was. “Not when I’m a wolf, though. Nobody knows why, but under the full moon I can hunt with my pack and I don’t mind it at all.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Hunt with your pack?”

“Not people,” he said. “It’s not like what you’ve heard on social media and places. We’re not bloodthirsty then, just...uh, wild, I guess. There’s an instinct to hunt and an instinct to protect our territory.”

Slowly she nodded. Then, of all things, Lucy cuddled up next to him, rested her head on his shoulder, and said, “Wow.”

He wrapped an arm around her. He sat there, still and quiet, for a lot longer than his normal attention span. Wow didn’t begin to cover it.

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Seven

Homemade pizza night with Jodi reminded Lucy how much she'd missed her roommate and friend. One more example of the fact she wasn't always the best at noticing what she felt until after she was finished with the feeling. They caught up on girl gossip around campus, bemoaned the upcoming reading list for American Lit 2, and fangirled over the most recent episode of their favorite regency-era romance show.

Lucy could hardly believe they hadn't discussed Jeremy yet. Maybe Jodi didn't really want to hear all about a guy. If not, Lucy didn't want to be one of those obnoxious girls who could talk about nothing else. Still, she would have gushed about him without thinking the minute she walked in the door if not for...

...his secret, which she hadn't known last time she talked to Jodi.

Could she discuss her boyfriend without mentioning he was more than human?

Pizza consumed and a pan of box-mix brownies in the oven, Jodi took hold of Lucy's arm and hauled her into the den. She set her down in one of the recliners with dramatic gusto, and Lucy laughed.

Jodi pulled up an ottoman and sat across from her. "Okay, I'm done waiting for you to bring him up. Tell me what's going on, whatever it is."

"I was starting to think you didn't really want to hear about him," Lucy said.

Jodi rolled her eyes. “I was starting to think you broke up in the last two days and I shouldn’t ask.”

“Um, no, definitely not.” She grinned. This would be easy. She’d just pretend she didn’t know she was dating a wolf. “I guess I don’t need to point out his hotness.”

“Cuteness anyway.”

Lucy mock-glared at her. Hotness was the better word, but Jodi tended to go for blonds.

Her friend laughed. “I’m messing with you. But I want to know all the other reasons you’re into him.”

“Well, he’s hilarious and so much fun. He’ll make a plan if he needs to, but he loves being spontaneous. His mind’s going a mile a minute all the time. I think sometimes focus is hard for him, but when we’re together I can tell he’s really trying not to go off on too many rabbit trails, especially when it’s something important to me. I just love being with him, Jo. And he wants to know about me. He asks questions about me and listens all the way through to the end of my answer without ever interrupting me one time.”

Jodi’s smile grew bittersweet. “I’m sorry that’s a big deal.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wanting to know you, listening without interrupting. Those things are sort of baseline decency, you know?”

“They don’t feel like it.” Lucy gave herself a moment to ponder. “But you’re right. At one time they did.”

“Good for Jeremy, bringing your standards back up.” Jodi winked.

When the brownies were cut into unreasonably large squares and topped with mint chip ice cream, Lucy and Jodi took their plates to the dining room. Lucy nudged aside a few stapled papers left out on the table.

“How goes the proofreading business?” she said. On principle Jodi wouldn’t write papers from scratch or even correct another student’s sentence structure, but for an affordable fee she corrected typos and punctuation.

“It’s been great the last few weeks. I’m almost done with those.” Jodi pointed to the stack.

Lucy glanced at the paper on top, then stared.

SOC 203, Ms. Worth An Introduction to Social Dynamics in Lupine Communities by
Katharine Gregoire

“Interesting subject,” she said.

“It is ,” Jodi said. “I thought I’d be bored to death, but I really liked that one. And it really makes you think. How they sort of... walk among us , you know? According to Kate’s paper, lupines make up possibly five percent of the world population. There are more lupines in the world than vampires, which is just mind-blowing, because how often do we even hear about their existence? But vampires show up in the news and stuff, in Hollywood, openly at college...” Jodi shook her head. “If you know a hundred people, you might know five lupines.”

Lucy nodded as she flipped past the title page. She had to read this paper. Every word of it.

“I bet there are one or two lupines on our own campus.” Jodi leaned toward her as if to read along. “And we have no idea who they are. That’s wild to me.”

Definitely not commenting on that . Lucy scanned the table of contents. I. Introduction II. Demographical statistics and typical psychological profile of the individual III. Social attachment IV. Possessive behavior V. Aggressive behavior VI. Community hierarchy VII. Mate bond: fact or myth? VIII. Conclusion

Wait...what? Mate bond? Lucy itched to flip to the final section, but she should read the whole thing. Good thing she was a speed-reader.

“Distracted much?” Jodi waved a hand between Lucy’s face and the pages in her hand. “We were discussing your boyfriend.”

“Sorry, but now you’ve got me intrigued and I have to read this for myself.”

“Or I could summarize.” Jodi shrugged.

“It’s twenty double-spaced pages; I can read it faster than you can summarize it. Just give me a minute.”

“Oh, fine. You read and I’ll eat. Your ice cream’s melting, though.”

Lucy took a few bites while she scanned and flipped pages. As she read, her scalp prickled. This...this wasn’t her wolf. Not at all. She’d heard the stereotypes all her life, of course—angry lupines, low-IQ lupines—but she’d been raised to ignore them.

The way Kate had written about Jeremy, about wolf packs...this was documented. There were actual studies that said lupines—wolves—were subjected to the will of the strongest in their pack and called him Alpha . Actual studies that said wolves were more likely to commit violence. Based on this paper, wolves were...kind of

scary.

But none of this was Jeremy. Lucy shook her head as she flipped another page and reached the last section of the paper. VII. Mate bond: fact or myth?

She kept her hand steady. If the paper started shaking, Jodi would notice. The author was not able to find any primary sources on the topic of lupine “mates.” It’s hard to know if this is something to be taken seriously or not. The theory or rumor is that a lupine will mate only once in his lifetime and that his connection to her is very intense and possessing. She might be human or lupine. If she doesn’t want to be pursued, she is likely to be at risk because of the behaviors discussed in the previous sections of this paper. Unfortunately the author could not find confirmation of this theory but will continue to investigate.

Lucy forced herself to finish reading, to set the paper on the table beside her plate of cooling brownie and melting ice cream.

“Wow, you took that very seriously,” Jodi said.

“Well, it’s...I mean, isn’t it sort of...inflammatory?”

Jodi’s brow furrowed as she forked a bite of dessert. “It’s not flattering, but Kate has a bibliography page. She didn’t make anything up.”

“No, I know, I just...I don’t know.”

She wanted to take the paper with her and thrust it into Jeremy’s face and demand an explanation. She scanned the works-cited page. Four sources. She fetched her phone and took a picture. She’d look them up later.

“Wow,” Jodi said.

“Never mind.” If she tried to talk about this, she might say too much. She might say, I’m dating a lupine. A wolf. But if he thinks I’m his one-and-only mate, he sure hasn’t mentioned it.

The taco shop had become one of their favorite haunts, but two days after her catchup night with Jodi, Lucy sat in a vinyl booth across from Jeremy and stared down at her shrimp tacos without a hint of appetite. Jeremy’s earth science class had prompted him to use his scant monthly disposable income on a rock tumbler—the amateur version, purchased from the science aisle of a big-box toy department. Few things could be more endearing than his excitement as he showed her the little pouch of smooth, shiny, worthless stones he’d brought into the restaurant with him.

She liked this guy so much.

But she couldn’t ignore what she’d learned this week.

Well, maybe she could. Suppose she pushed him away with her questions? She didn’t want to hurt him. She didn’t want him to break up with her.

“Lucy?”

“Sorry.”

Jeremy squinted at her, his signature curious face. “You’re not usually one to zone out.”

“I, um, just have something on my mind, and I’m trying to decide...if we need to talk about it, or if I need to think on it more first, or...”

“Well, now you have to tell me.” He gave her a crooked smile.

Lucy took a few bites of taco and felt calmer. His smile was reassuring. She thought over their relationship so far, new though it was. Never before had she felt the need to walk on eggshells with him or keep a secret for the sake of staying with him. In fact, without noticing, she'd started to trust him. Really trust him. She would trust him now too. But she'd also choose careful words and do her best not to offend him.

"I sort of stumbled into some information this week about you. About wolves, I mean."

Jeremy's eyebrows arched. "What kind of information?"

Shoot. There was no polite way to ask. Lucy set aside her taco and wiped her fingers on her napkin. She cleared her throat, but the words still came out squeaky. "I read about this thing called a mate bond?"

Jeremy froze. Blinkered. Sighed. "Crap."

"Why?" Suddenly she did need to know the truth. "Because it's a myth or—or because it's not?"

"I, um, well, where did you read about it?"

"First tell me if it's a myth."

He shoved one hand through his curls. "It's not a myth."

Now she was the frozen one. Not until this moment did she realize...she'd been counting on Kate's paper to be nonsense from front to back. If the part Kate had acknowledged as most dubious were actually real ...

"What about violence and aggression and—and—obedience to a dictator alpha wolf?"

Is all that true too?”

“What ?” Jeremy yelped. “Where did you get all this?”

“From a sociology paper for Ms. Worth’s class. Jodi Naylor was proofreading it. I was at her house making pizza and brownies and catching up, and I saw the paper and read it and...”

For some reason this seemed to calm him. He drew a long breath, let it out, and nodded. Then he deepened his voice. “Ladies and gentlemen, it’s part two of Ask Me Anything, Wolf Edition.” He pointed at her as if he were the game show host and she the contestant. “Ms. Campbell, you’re up.”

She allowed herself to smile, to give him his game if this made it easier to tell her. But she wouldn’t be letting him off the hook with her questions. “Well, Mr. Freeman, I just asked you several questions. Could we start with those?”

“Sure,” he said, sobering for a moment. “Well, first—I promise none of the wolves in my pack are violent. People throw memes out into the world all day long, but that doesn’t make a stereotype true.”

“This was an actual news source, supposedly an actual psych study.”

He flinched. “Well. That doesn’t make it true either.”

He couldn’t prove it to her while they sat here eating tacos. He couldn’t prove it to her at all really, not for every wolf or even for the majority of wolves. But he could prove himself a good, safe guy who told the truth. So far he had. Lucy nodded.

“I believe you,” she said.

He sighed, then smiled. “Next? Um, if you don’t mind repeating them.”

“What’s with the dictator alpha thing?”

“Well, every pack is led by an alpha, but it’s not a dictatorship. He only makes decisions that affect the entire pack. Otherwise we live our lives how we want.”

Tacos finished, she wiped her hands again, then used one to prop her chin. “So...he’s like a township supervisor or mayor or something?”

“Uh, no?” Jeremy’s lips pressed together for a moment in thought. Then he shrugged. “I don’t know what he’s like. Our alpha’s name is William, and he’s held the position for...I think fourteen years. He’s still in his fifties, so we’ll have him for a while yet.”

“It’s a lifetime appointment?”

“Yeah.”

“So like the Supreme Court.”

“What? No.” He gave a chuckle that held the barest hint of good-natured growl. “And not like a monarch either. And he can’t legislate us. But, like, if there were an emergency, we wouldn’t take a vote. William would weigh all the factors and decide.”

“What sort of things has he decided in the past?”

“Well, here’s an example for you. When I was a pup and started changing under the moon, my parents found out about the alpha directory and called William because this pack was the closest to our home. He vetted my folks to make sure they weren’t scamming or anything. Then he considered the size of our pack, the resources and

living space we have, stuff like that. And he determined it would be okay for me to join as long as someone was willing to take me in. He didn't force Patrick and Nicole; he asked them, and they said they'd love to. So they had legal guardianship of me for five years until I turned eighteen."

"So he's kind of...the pack's executive officer."

Jeremy threw up his hands in mock surrender. "Sure. If you really need an analogy, sure."

"Okay, last question."

For a long moment, their gazes held. Then Jeremy looked down at his hands in his lap.

"So...about wolves recognizing their mates...that one is true." He looked up. "And I know what your next question's going to be, and yeah, I recognized you when I met you."

She gave a soft gasp before she could stop herself.

"I didn't tell you because I couldn't figure out how to make it sound...fair to you. Non-creepy. I get that to humans it sounds super weird. And like the girl doesn't have a choice. But you do, Lucy. You can stay with me or break up with me or whatever you want."

"But if fate chooses your mate, if fate chose me, how is that a choice?"

Jeremy shrugged. "Why'd we get coffee that first time? Because you had to, or because you wanted to?"

“I wanted to,” she said.

“And why did we keep going out? Did you want to or not?”

“Well, yeah, I did. Of course I did, or I wouldn’t have.”

“See, there you go. How it is for me doesn’t change how it is for you.”

“That’s...sorry, but that’s just too bizarre.”

She shook her head. This was going to take some processing. Some journaling with her purple gel pen. She stared down at the tabletop for a long minute. When she looked up, Jeremy sat with his head down and his shoulders hunched. Compared to his usual squared shoulders and confident grin, right now he looked almost small.

“Hey,” she said.

He looked up, and his eyes held more emotion than she’d ever seen from him, even when he’d been so scared and stammering over the scent of blood. Right now he looked just as panicked, but he also looked hurt, and Lucy’s heart responded with a painful squeeze.

“Do you think I’m breaking up with you?” Lucy said.

His bottom lip wobbled. “You’re...not?”

“I’m weirded out right now, but I’m not going anywhere.”

“Really? For real?”

“Yes, for real, silly boy.” She rolled her eyes, and the squeezing of her heart eased as

he slowly grinned. “I don’t know if I believe I’m your mate, but I am your girlfriend. And I have one last question for you, Mr. Freeman.”

“Ask the wolf anything, Ms. Campbell.” His grin just kept growing.

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Eight

“Can you howl? Like actually howl?”

Jeremy couldn't stop grinning. His mate had accepted his answers. He hadn't messed this up beyond repair, as he'd been so sure he would. “I'll demonstrate if you want. Not here, obviously.”

A minute after they'd finished dessert and paid the bill, a server hurried past their booth, her scent thick with overwhelm and stress. Jeremy glanced toward the front of the restaurant. The line was out the door, dinner rush in full swing.

“We should head out,” he said.

“Oh, okay.” She slid out of the booth and stood with obvious reluctance, but then an excited light found her eyes. She leaned close and whispered. “Will you howl for me outside?”

How she made such a request sound sensual, he had no idea, but suddenly he wanted to sweep her into his arms and kiss her breathless. He tugged her hand and grinned. “Let's go for a drive.”

Out on the road he rolled down the windows, and her hair escaped her braid to blow around her face. She laughed. “What're you doing?”

“I don't want to hurt your ears.”

But there was too much traffic here. He didn't want strangers to hear his wolf voice. Only Lucy. He turned onto a wide dirt road and drove about half a mile, until the houses had grown far apart, buffered by open fields. Then he pulled to the side and parked.

"Ready?" He grinned.

Lucy nodded.

First he gave a glad growl, loud and long. Lucy gasped. Then she launched herself across the center seat of the truck and kissed him. The steering wheel kept her from landing in his lap. His chest rumbled frustration at the confined surroundings, but they made do. The kiss lasted and deepened until they both had to break off and breathe.

"You really don't mind that I'm a wolf." He still could hardly trust it.

"Of course not," she said. "As for the other thing, I'll probably have more questions later, but for today I'm all asked out."

Maybe this was how it worked for a wolf and his mate, but hadn't Patrick said Nicole was cautious when he told her? Hadn't Ezra and Trevor's dad said the same of their mom in the stories Jeremy had heard since he was a pup? Well, Lucy wasn't either of those women. She was Lucy. She was his mate and no one else's.

"You know that thing we kept bumping into a few weeks ago?" Lucy said. "The thing that's over for good?"

He nodded. Her eyes grew serious, but her scent remained bright and hopeful, lavender the highest note.

“That thing was a jerk I dated. We broke up in the spring because he was awful, and I finally saw it.”

“Okay,” he said when she paused.

“Well, just so happens he’s a vampire. I guess maybe some women wouldn’t want to date another apex-class guy, but…” She shrugged. “I’m cool with it. Unless the guy’s a jerk, but that has nothing to do with being an apex. As you have more than proven.”

Jeremy tried to follow all her words, but a fuse shorted out in his head at one specific word. He shook his head. A low rumble rose in his chest. One of those—people, right, vampires were people too—had dated Lucy. Had hurt Lucy. No wonder she’d been ready to believe the stereotypes about wolves.

“O…kay,” she said quietly. “Um, I should’ve asked this first, but is there an actual rivalry between y’all? Vampires and wolves?”

“No,” he snapped.

“Right.”

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. He wanted to grasp again the happiness of a minute ago. A car crawled down the road, missing washed-out dips, and the driver glanced into the truck cab as he passed them. Far out in one of the fields, a tractor rolled along, its engine deep and rumbling like a mechanical version of Jeremy’s wolf voice. Birds chirped, and insects rasped. Beside him Lucy’s breathing was nearly silent, soft and calming. He took her hand, rubbed circles on her palm with his thumb.

“I guess maybe a little,” he said at last.

“Uh-huh.”

She gave him a tolerant smirk, and the protective drive inside him began to subside. He squeezed her hand. “I wish you hadn’t got hurt by anybody. It’s not just that he’s a...” Nope, not going to say it. Not going to taste the word in his mouth.

“Yeah, me too. But I’m better, Jeremy. I’m getting better every day, every month that goes by. And—and really, forget about him. He’s not worth it. This is our time. And you’re going to howl now.” She leaned close again and murmured in his ear. “Just for me, because you’re my boyfriend and an extra hot wolf.”

Yes. He was hers, and she was his. Jeremy threw back his head and released all the happy certainty that filled him to bursting. His howl reverberated—across the fields, up into the sky, out toward the mountains. He was a wolf, and he had found the mate chosen for him, and in the years to come they would build a life alongside his pack. He looked forward to all of it, saw it clearly. When Lucy laughed and her scent brimmed with delight at his wolf voice, at what he was, Jeremy howled a second time just for the joy of it. But there was something he had to do, something he’d put off too long without understanding why.

It was time to tell his friends.

The guys might not believe him. Jeremy wasn’t sure he’d believe one of them if they claimed to have found their life mate.

Then again, they were no longer pups. He, Ezra, and Aaron were twenty-one this year, Malachi twenty-two. At nineteen, Trevor was the baby of their pack-within-the-pack. Aw, man, Trevor wouldn’t let him live this down—not that he’d found Lucy, but that he’d waited six weeks to tell them. It wasn’t like him to guard a secret through multiple weekend cookouts with the pack and hangouts with his buddies. Jeremy had always been the outburst-first-think-later type. But Lucy was different. Lucy was...well. Lucy was his mate.

The seventh Wednesday since he'd met Lucy, Jeremy still had no intention to tell his friends about her. Until that evening after dinner. Instead of gathering the gang, he loped over to George's place. Across the broad yard that was more of a field, his way was spangled with lightning bugs and accompanied by katydids. He waved to George and Aaron, who were of course doing something in George's precious garden. The old wolf waved back.

"He smells amped up," Aaron said to George as if Jeremy's wolf hearing didn't pick up every word.

"Go find out why and report back." George rumbled a laugh in his creaky wolf voice.

Aaron patted his guardian's shoulder, then loped up to Jeremy with a grin. "Well?"

Jeremy rolled his eyes, which did nothing to hide his self-consciousness, since Aaron and George could smell it too. "Let's run."

It was all the invitation a wolf needed. Jeremy broke into a dash, and Aaron kept pace at his side. His friend's gaminess was the scent of every wolf, calming and blended with Aaron's signature of pine. Jeremy ran toward the foothills that backed pack land, then kept going until the ground grew steep. By then he and Aaron were twenty acres from the nearest wolf cabin. They slowed their pace and halted under a copse of oak trees just beginning to turn orange and red. Aaron followed Jeremy to an elder oak with a broad trunk, and they sat shoulder to shoulder, their bodies angled slightly away from one another to rest against the trunk.

"Okay," Aaron said. "You smell stupidly happy, so tell me what's up."

"I met my mate, Aaron." The words came easily now that he'd decided to talk about it.

Beside him, Aaron pivoted to stare. “You did? Really? You’re sure?”

“Oh yeah. There’s no question about it when you meet her. You just know. Your wolf heart knows. Your whole body knows.”

Aaron studied him for a long moment, then nodded. “I believe it. The way you smell right now... You’re more excited than I’ve ever smelled you before. But you’re also more settled.”

“Exactly!” Jeremy leaped to his feet and spread his arms wide under the canopy of oak branches. “It’s like the excitement’s bigger than my whole body, and I’m constantly holding it in so I don’t break out howling. And it’s like I know myself now, this big piece of myself that was a question mark before. Would I be a bachelor wolf like George, like William? Would I be a mated wolf like Patrick, a dad someday to a pup like Nathan? And now here she is, and all those questions just disappeared.”

“Well, tell me about her,” Aaron said.

Jeremy told his friend how he’d met Lucy, what sort of woman his mate was—levelheaded, persistent, sure of her own heart and mind, willing to tackle tough questions and listen to his answers. He didn’t tell Aaron about Lucy’s willingness to stick beside him when his blood phobia reared its stupid head. That was not only embarrassing but also felt private between him and his mate.

“I can’t believe she accepted it all,” Aaron said when Jeremy had told all he could think to tell.

“Well, like I said, she had some pointed questions. But yeah. She didn’t break up with me. For a minute I thought she might.”

Aaron winced and looked away.

“What?” Jeremy said.

“What if she does break up with you, man?” A tang of worry rose in Aaron’s scent.

“Why would she?” Jeremy shrugged. “Seems like we already got past the worst of it. I can’t possibly do anything more off-putting than announce she’s my life mate.” He grinned.

Aaron didn’t grin back.

Oh. Of course. Jeremy should’ve expected this. Aaron wasn’t always a worrier, but when he was, he really committed to the role. Jeremy sat on the ground again and bumped his friend’s shoulder.

“I’m not Trevor.”

“Obviously.”

“Of all of us, who else would get deathly ill over a breakup? Nobody but Trevor could pull that off with a straight face.”

“So if Lucy breaks up with you, you’ll—what, catch a cold instead?”

Jeremy fidgeted. He needed to assuage Aaron’s worry, but he didn’t want to talk about this either. His wolf heart gave a pitiful whine inside him at the very thought of Lucy leaving. Now that he’d met her, he could almost understand the severity of Trevor’s reaction to breaking up with his long-time girlfriend Kelsey last year. The poor wolf had been feverish and miserable for more than a week. But he’d recovered just fine, so Jeremy would too. If it came to that. Which it wouldn’t.

“Okay, look,” he said. “Let’s say you’re right and any wolf whose mate breaks up

with him gets lovesick for a minute. Do you seriously think the chance to love Lucy isn't worth the chance of losing her? Because I'm telling you right now, Aaron, it's worth it to me. She's worth it. I don't even have to think about it, man. I know she is."

Aaron swallowed hard and stared down at his broad hands. He rubbed his left knuckles with his right thumb. Finally he looked up. "You still smell the same, even talking about this. Excited and settled."

"Yep."

"Guess I can't argue with that." Slowly a grin took over his face, and the concern faded, allowing his pine scent toward the forefront again. "Wow, Jeremy. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"So have you told Trevor and Ezra and Mal, and I'm the last to know?"

"Nope. You're the first."

Aaron's eyebrows shot up. Then he grinned again. "Let's go. I want to see their faces."

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Jeremy paced around the house with a two-year-old twin under each arm. Tori and Gigi giggled and kicked their legs, but Jeremy kept pacing as if he'd forgotten he carried them. It was part of the game their girls loved, but at the moment Lucy was pretty sure he wasn't playing, instead carting the twins around out of an experienced father's reflex and habit.

"He's got to be the most clueless wolf in the pack." Jeremy shook his head.

"I'm sure he'll figure it out," Lucy said, "now that you've hit him over the head with it."

"Somebody had to, with Cassius all non-committal, not wanting to be pushy."

"Or he'd figure it out for himself at some point," Lucy said, "if she really is his true mate."

"She is." Jeremy wrinkled his nose. "Wolf senses don't lie."

He set down the squirming girls, who immediately put their arms up to be held again with a chorus of "Fly! Fly!" Lucy watched while her wolf tossed first one girl then the other into the air while they squealed and giggled.

"Again!" Gigi shouted when Tori toddled off to join four-year-old Callie, who was standing every Barbie doll in the house along the brick fireplace, the "stage" for their "concert."

Jeremy gave Gigi a final ceiling-ward toss, then held up his hands. "That's it for now,

Gigi-bug. Want to go play Barbies?”

Gigi’s face puckered up. “No.”

“Well, then feel free to play whatever else you want.”

“Want to play flyin’.”

“Whatever else you want besides Barbies and flying.”

With another scrunched-up scowl, Gigi joined her sisters.

On the couch next to Lucy, Zane was sticking close. He’d been a brave six-year-old today, needing a major bandage for a fairly major cut on his hand and exulting in the future scar he’d get as well as the grape sucker he was allowed to eat between meals. But now that the excitement was over and their company had gone home, Zane had cuddled up to Lucy.

Jeremy sank down on the other side of the couch, and Zane gave a little bounce and grin.

“I’m the middle of the sandwich, and you’re the bread.” He pointed at Jeremy and Lucy.

“What sort of sandwich is it? Are we a tuna melt?” Jeremy ruffled Zane’s hair.

Zane laughed. “I’m not tuna-fish.”

“Are you...grilled cheese?” Now Jeremy poked Zane’s shoulder.

“No, Dad. Come on, keep guessing.”

“I know what. You’re peanut butter and jelly.”

“I’m not peanut butter and jelly. Obviously .” Then he perked up. “But you and Mom could be, because your hair is brown like peanut butter, and Mom’s hair is burgundy, which is sort of purple like jelly.”

“Very astute,” Lucy said with a little nudge to his other shoulder. “Did you know my hair used to be purple?”

Their firstborn pup’s eyes widened. “No.”

“When I met your dad, it was.”

“Huh,” Zane said. Then he shrugged. “Three guesses, you’re out. Our sandwich is a B.L.T.”

“Of course it is. I totally dropped the ball on that one.” Jeremy draped his arm over the back of the couch.

“Hey, Dad, who’s the most clueless wolf in the pack?”

With a hint of panic, Jeremy’s deep-blue eyes met hers over Zane’s head. Lucy shrugged. He’d gotten himself into this one.

Jeremy sighed. “Nobody’s clueless, pup. I was frustrated when I said that.”

“Who were you frustrated with though?”

“Aaron.”

Zane’s eyes grew wide. “Aaron’s not clueless, Dad.” He lifted his bandaged hand. “Look. He couldn’t save me from bleeding if he was clueless.”

“You’re right, Zane. I’m sorry I used that word. Aaron’s a smart wolf and the best medic our pack could ask for.”

“You shouldn’t be frustrated with him. Because he saved me.”

“I’m not frustrated anymore.”

“Okay. Good. I’m going to go play cowboys and wagon trains now.” Zane boosted himself off the couch and started for his room, then turned back and threw his arms around Lucy. “Then if I want, can I come sit on the couch again, like a sandwich?”

“You sure can.” Lucy kissed the top of his head. “You were a really strong pup today when Aaron needed you to be still. I know it hurt a lot.”

“It did,” Zane said.

“Sometimes after something hurts a lot, it helps me to sit with somebody.”

“Me too.” He scampered off, and he seemed more relaxed now than before he’d asked the question.

Jeremy shook his head. “I’m glad one of us is an expert at giving him words for stuff.”

“Well, I’m glad one of us is an expert at rough-housing his energy out.”

He smiled. His smile hadn’t changed since the day he turned in his essay ahead of her, then turned to meet her eyes for the first time. The lavender-haired version of herself who couldn’t stop staring at that smile and fumbled her own name could never have predicted the life she had now, but she wouldn’t trade a single minute.

Jeremy leaned in and kissed her, long and sweet and, after eight years, still a little

teasing. When they ended the kiss, his grin spread wide.

“Remember that graphic design class we both just happened to take?”

“You know what, I do remember that.”

He rumbled a low laugh. “Fate sure knew what it was doing.”

“Funny,” Lucy said, leaning in for another kiss, “I was just thinking the same thing.”

Want to know why Jeremy calls Aaron “clueless”? Just read *To Protect a Wolf* , the first book in the series!