

LONE WOLF

MY WOLF'S BANE 1.4 † THE PSEUDO DATE



VERONICA BLADE

Lone Wolf

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The Pseudo Date



As much as I wanted to avoid Autumn, I had to go along with Trevor's plan. Ruining his chance with Maya, the girl of his dreams, wasn't an option.

I pulled up in front of Autumn's house and killed the Jeep's engine. I imagined what she might be wearing. Maybe a dress that exposed her long, sexy legs. Butterflies battled in my stomach, but I ignored them. Autumn wasn't the kind of girl I wanted to associate with, much less pick up for a pseudo date, double date, or any other kind of date.

I glanced over my shoulder to the backseat where Trevor and Maya talked in hushed tones. "Guess I should get Autumn," I said, hoping one of them would rescue me. Instead of volunteering, they both offered me grateful smiles.

Resigned, I trudged to the front door and rang the bell. Maybe she'd change her mind and I'd be off the hook. Trevor could drop me off at home and I'd be free.

The door swung open and... wow. Autumn was pretty before, but now she was wicked hot. Her long, shiny black hair cascaded over her shoulders in loose curls and her skin practically glowed. And that dress. It clung to all her curves, showing way too much skin.

My worst nightmare.

This was *not* part of the deal. I mean, how could any guy resist her when she looked like *that*? I took a step back, knowing if I didn't say something soon, I'd look severely retarded. "We're... Y...You..."

Obviously, I should've kept my mouth shut. What had she been thinking wearing a dress that showed so much boob? Every guy would be drooling over her.

"Uh..." I blinked, trying to say something else. But my brain wasn't connecting properly to my lips. They moved, but no sound came out.

My veins pounded with the desire to lure her back inside and coax her out of that dress.

I needed to get it together. This was Autumn Rossi, the hottest girl at school — and the most stuck up. She may have been drop-dead beautiful, but I needed to remember what kind of person she was. "We should get going," I finally croaked.

One side of her mouth curved up. “Hi, Zack,” she purred, sounding sexier than ever.

I flinched. Without another word, I spun and headed to the curb. Once we reached the Jeep, I was careful not to touch her as I opened the passenger door for her.

“Thank you,” she said, then peeked inside to the back seat.

“Hey, Autumn,” Trevor said, waving.

Maya grinned. At least someone was happy about this fake double date.

“Shouldn’t one of them be in the front seat instead of me?” Autumn asked, still standing by the door.

Was sitting next to me so bad? Whatever. This wasn’t a real date and I didn’t like Autumn. Not even a little bit. I just needed her to get the hell into the car — the sooner we got started, the sooner I’d be dumping her back home.

My jaw tightening, I motioned toward the passenger seat. “They wanted to sit together.”

Autumn hesitated a split second, a pained look crossing her face before she climbed inside. I restrained myself from slamming her door closed before I rounded

the hood.

“You look hot,” Maya said to Autumn as I got behind the wheel.

“Thanks.” My *date* beamed.

“Yeah, you look really nice, Autumn,” Trevor chimed in.

I grunted and pretended to be absorbed in finding some decent music on the radio. Taking the hint, she swiveled in her seat to face Maya and Trevor.

Worst idea ever. In order for Autumn to see them, she twisted halfway around and her dress crept up to expose her thighs. I white-knuckled the steering wheel and strained to keep my eyes on the road. Luckily, I made it to the restaurant without wrecking my car and killing my friends. No thanks to Autumn and all that delicious-looking bare skin.

Once parked, I scrambled out of the car to get away from her and catch my breath.

The girls were off to the restroom the moment we walked into the waiting area. I steeled myself not to watch Autumn’s ass as she weaved through the crowd. Other guys stared at her, too. My fists clenched and I

resisted the urge to punch them.

“I’m sorry.” Trevor averted his gaze as the hostess showed us to our table. “I didn’t realize this would be so miserable for you.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I like hanging out with you and Maya.” I slid into the circular booth.

“Well, I appreciate you coming. If I’d manned up in the first place, you wouldn’t have been dragged into this.”

I shrugged. “I get it. You were trying to make it casual, less like a real date, so you wouldn’t scare Maya off. I think she would’ve been just as happy being alone with you though.”

“Maybe, but this takes the pressure off.” Trevor’s eyes lit up. “Maya’s great, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, she’s cool.” I smiled, wishing I could say the same for my date.

“What about you and Autumn?” he asked.

I almost choked on my own saliva but quickly recovered, clearing my throat. “She’s not my type.”

Trevor nodded as he studied me. “Smokin’ hot isn’t

your type?”

“Oh, she’s hot alright.” I forced a laugh. “More than that — she’s freaking beautiful. But, dude, she’s way too high maintenance. She’s...” I gave a mock shudder. “Scary.”

“Autumn?” Trevor frowned as he cocked his head. “She’s sweet. Maybe she’s only scary with *you*. Maybe she likes you but she’s trying to hide it, because you behave like such a dog around her.”

My eyes almost popped out of their sockets as my stomach muscles tightened. “You think she likes me?”

Trevor looked away just then and I followed his gaze to see the girls approaching. Damn, Autumn even walked nice. And the way those super high heels shaped her legs... I forced my tongue to stay in my mouth and tightened my lips so no drool escaped.

It was going to be a long night.

Just before they joined us at our table, Trevor and I scooted out of the booth. The girls slid in and met in the middle with Autumn next to me.

“We have friends from A to Z,” Trevor told Maya with a grin. “Get it? From A...” He wagged his index finger at

Autumn. "...to Z." He pointed to me.

Autumn and I couldn't be included in the same thought. She wouldn't be my type in a million years. And what was I even thinking? *No* girl was right for me — at least, not now. Maybe things would be different someday when I didn't have to worry about werewolf scouts and whether or not my mom would die today. Even then, I still wouldn't be interested in Autumn.

"The alphabet has things in the middle," I said. "With her and me, it's just A and Z. Nothing between us." I grabbed a menu. I knew what I wanted, but pretending to mull over what to eat would give me something to do other than look at Autumn's way-too-revealing neckline.

"Careful, Zack," she said. "If you're mean, people will think you like me." She mimicked my move with the menu. "What's good here?"

My eyes turned to slits. Had she somehow overheard my conversation with Trevor? Unless she was a werewolf with superhuman hearing, it wasn't possible over the din of the restaurant. But what if she had? What if she wasn't human?

I shook off the thought. Of course she was human. If

she were a werewolf or even something else, I'd have smelled it on her by now.

"They have some good vegetarian stuff," Trevor answered. "Cheese ravioli, tortellini, and veggie pizza."

"Autumn, you're a vegetarian?" I grimaced, wondering why anyone wouldn't want to eat meat.

"Yes. What's wrong with that?" she snapped.

Somehow, she'd gotten closer to me and our arms almost brushed. She was just near enough for me to feel the warmth of her body. My skin tingled and I shifted, trying not to be obvious about creating distance between us.

She scowled at me. "It's not illegal, you know."

No, it wasn't. And why was I even talking to her? "I think I'll have a double cheeseburger with bacon," I announced, directing the words to Trevor and Maya.

Autumn's brows relaxed, as though it didn't bother her in the least that I'd been thoroughly rude from the moment she'd climbed into my Jeep tonight.

"That's great. Hamburgers are high in protein," she chirped.

“Autumn, what’s the deal with Daniel and Gina?” Maya asked. “I thought I’d see them all kissy-kissy after Monday, but I haven’t.”

My eyes shot to Maya and narrowed. “Why would you think they’d hook up?”

“Because Daniel cheated on Autumn with *Gina*. I thought everyone knew that.” Maya glanced between us, then back to Autumn. “Did she return your stuff?”

What the hell? What stuff? Surely, not the same *stuff* I’d accused Autumn of bullying Gina about.

“Ooh. Could I borrow that black leather jacket?” Maya went on. “It’ll go great with some shoes I just bought.”

“Sure.” Autumn’s eyes remained trained on the menu, her shoulders perfectly still.

Good thing my eyes weren’t daggers or she’d be dead. Why the hell hadn’t Autumn told me what really happened? Instead, she’d let me falsely accuse her. Maybe she enjoyed watching me make an ass of myself.

A busboy came by and set a basket of hot bread on the table. “Your server will be right with you.”

“Thank you.” Trevor smiled.

“That was *Gina* with Daniel?” I snatched up a piece of bread and used a knife to stab the pat of butter. “And when I accused you of extortion, you were really asking for your *own* things back?” My fist clenched around the knife. I could’ve wrung her neck right then.

Autumn sat stiff and lifted her chin. “Yeah, right after she tried to pull my arm out of its socket. You have a knack for misreading my situations.”

I took a deep breath and struggled to level out my voice. “You should’ve told me.”

“I did, but you were too busy being a jackass.” She glared at me.

Yep, she’d nailed me. Why was that so sexy? I tried to hide the grin sneaking up on me, but failed. “I thought you were totally into jackasses. Daniel’s proof of that.”

She leveled me with a stink eye. “Well, at least you admit what you are,” she hissed.

“Okay, you guys.” Maya giggled nervously. “Let’s play nice, huh?”

A dark-haired girl not much older than us appeared at our table. “Are we ready to order?”

“I’ll have the cheese ravioli in the pink sauce,” Autumn blurted a split second later.

The rest of us ordered and the waitress bustled away. Trevor and Maya got lost in each other, talking about books and movies, which left Autumn and me on our own. Now that I no longer had a legit reason to hate my *date*, I had to be careful. I already knew I was ridiculously attracted to her. If she really was sweet like Trevor said, it would be far too easy to get lost in those pretty brown eyes. I could fall for her big-time.

I couldn’t allow myself to be distracted by anyone, much less a human. In just a matter of weeks, I’d be on the run. I didn’t need the heartbreak of getting emotionally invested. I was probably worried for nothing after how I’d behaved. She’d never like me. But what if she did? I couldn’t be responsible for hurting her when the time came for me to bail.

“What got you interested in cars?” she asked, breaking the silence.

I broke off a chunk of my bread and avoided her gaze. She deserved better than what I’d been dishing out, but that didn’t mean I’d allow us to get friendly. In an effort to discourage her, I kept my answer short. “Necessity.”

She nodded. “So it’s just a job?”

Damn, why couldn’t she pick a boring subject like algebra or ancient languages? Cars, I couldn’t resist. “I like seeing how things work and figuring out why they don’t.” I hesitated, struggling to keep my distance, but *really* wanting to know her as someone who wasn’t the mean-girl I’d thought her to be. “What was so interesting yesterday that you didn’t have time to research cars?”

“I saw a giant wolf last night when I went out for a walk. Actually, it was the second night in a row.” She twirled the handle of her fork between her thumb and middle finger. “So I researched wolves instead of cars. But I’ll do the car stuff in the morning and still be ready when you pick me up.”

The vinyl of the seat creaked as I shifted to face her. I was dying to know what she’d learned. “Hmm. What did you find out about the wolves?” If only she knew that her new wolf friend was me. For a brief moment, I entertained the fantasy of taking her to the woods with me, sharing my secret. But I couldn’t.

“Most wolves are usually under a hundred pounds, give or take, but they’ve been known to get twice that size.”

I nodded. Wait a minute... I wasn't the only werewolf in town. What if the next wolf she ran into wasn't me? "You shouldn't be out in the woods alone."

She froze. "I never said I was alone. And what makes you think I went into the woods?"

Sure, I'd acted like a Neanderthal in the past, but that was no excuse to insult my intelligence.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "You said *you* went for a walk and the forest is practically in your backyard. Where else would you see a wolf?"

She glared. "Can't you be nice for one evening?"

Actually, I could. But being any friendlier would open the door to... an image of her bottom lip against mine flashed before me. I shook it off and took a bite of the bread, then returned it to the small plate. Inhaling slowly, I sniffed the air. What was that?

Her eyes darkened and I thought she might clobber me. "You're smelling me again, Zack," she hissed.

"Yeah." I moved my nose closer to her and sucked in air again. "You smell unusual."

"Gee, thanks." She gave me a dirty look. "Good to know."

Okay, I didn't want her to fall for me — I couldn't handle that kind of a temptation. But I hadn't meant to piss her off either. "No, not in a bad way. You're a mixture of lavender and vanilla and a little bit earthy."

"Earthy?" She groaned. "Whatever. Just stop sniffing me, okay? It's weird."

"Autumn," Maya said, distracting the object of my lust. "There's a carnival next weekend. We should go."

"I'd love to." Autumn beamed.

"You're coming too, right, Zack?" Maya asked.

"Uh..." I glanced at Autumn, knowing by her wide eyes that she hadn't expected me to get invited, too. I came up with the only excuse I could think of. "Sure, if I'm not working that day."

Trevor waved it off. "You don't work on Sundays."

"I might be car shopping." My eyes flitted to Autumn again.

Trevor waved a hand. "Not at night."

Secretly, I was glad for being roped into spending more time with Autumn, even though I was fully aware it would only lead me to trouble.

“Maya told me about your mom,” Autumn said, interrupting the vivid images of the trouble I wouldn’t mind getting into with her. “How’s she doing?”

“Hanging in there.” My gaze dropped to the small bread plate in front of me as I thought of my mom. “I’m not seeing much of her these days.”

“We don’t have to shop over the weekend if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s fine. If I stay home too much and hover over her, she doesn’t like it. She wants me out living life, meeting girls.” I shook my head. “But if we could meet at Trevor’s place tomorrow, that’d help.”

“I’m so sorry about what you guys are going through,” she whispered. “What rotten luck.”

“She’s had *great* luck, actually. She wasn’t supposed to live past eighteen.” I toyed with the little bread plate. “But she went into remission and had me, kept me safe after my dad died, and made it to my eighteenth birthday. I’m lucky to have had so much extra time with her.”

Autumn blinked and cleared her throat. “So I’ll meet you at Trevor’s. What time is good for you?”

“About one o’clock?”

“I’ll be there.”

I was looking forward to it.

This was so bad.

The food arrived and, out of the corner of my eye, I watched Autumn shovel pasta in her mouth like she hadn’t eaten in a week. My burger rocked and after my second bite, I paid more attention to my meal than my *date*. Until I sensed the lack of motion beside me.

Autumn’s eyes were riveted to my burger.

“What?” I hurriedly swallowed. “Is it bothering you to see me eat an animal?”

“Not at all.”

She sat on the edge of the seat like she might lunge for my food any second.

“Do you want a bite?” I asked.

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes widened. “I’ve never eaten meat before.”

The poor girl was deprived. I shoved the burger at her — which might have been a mistake by the way she

chomped down on it. As she chewed, she closed her eyes, then moaned too quietly for Trevor and Maya to hear. Her enthusiasm for meat almost matched a werewolf's. But she definitely wasn't a werewolf.

Just when I thought she wasn't going to give it back, she started to return the burger to me. Before I had a chance to take it, she shoved another bite into her face.

I chuckled. "Should we order another one?"

Her cheeks flushed as she pushed what was left toward me. "Sorry."

I couldn't wipe the grin from my face. "You can eat that and I'll order my own. It's totally fine. I think you need it more than I do."

"No!" She swallowed and shook her head. "I don't know what came over me."

Yeah, about that. What was with her werewolf-size appetite for burgers? Maybe she wasn't a werewolf, but I'd bet anything she was something more than human.

† † †

After Trevor and I got home from dropping off the girls, I disappeared into my room where I could sneak out the window. I couldn't wait to be free and wild again.

Maybe I'd even run into Autumn. Damn, now that I knew how I'd misjudged her, I was starting to see everything amazing about her. But I couldn't allow myself to get hooked on her. I just couldn't.

Right outside my bedroom window, I morphed behind a bush, leaving a pile of clothes. I practically flew over fences until I reached the cover of the trees. Autumn's scent rushed me. Damn, she didn't belong there. Now, instead of running and working off my extra energy, I'd have to stay close and babysit her.

Which was exactly where I wanted to be.

Following her scent, I entered the clearing. She spotted me right away. "I'm not in danger with you, right?"

I sat, so I'd look less threatening, and swung my head side to side in answer to her question.

Absolutely brilliant. Why didn't I just hang a sign around my neck that said *I'm a werewolf*? Or, better yet, just morph into my human form right in front of her. Thankfully, she didn't seem to notice anything weird about my behavior. When she sat on a giant rock, I inched closer to her.

"So what's your story?" She waited a beat. Yeah, as

if I would answer. “I should get going. See you here tomorrow?”

Without thinking, I barked once. What an idiot. But she didn’t seem concerned that we were practically having a conversation.

When she stood up, I did too.

“Such a gentleman. You know who you remind me of?” She snickered and I cringed, knowing what was coming. “This new guy at school. Total douche. You’re not a jerk like him, but you’re both so pretty.” A smile lit up her eyes. “You should’ve seen his face when he saw me tonight. He actually stuttered.”

I groaned, which ended up sounding like a whimper. I dropped my head and attempted to cover my face.

Autumn laughed. “Goodnight, sweet wolf.”

The lilt of her laughter made me forget she’d just referred to me as sweet. As she sprinted out of the forest, I had an urge to follow her. But I didn’t and now that she was gone, so was my desire to be in the woods. I waited a beat so she wouldn’t see me head back toward my house.

As I crawled into bed a few minutes later, I couldn’t

purge the memory of her in that sexy dress. Oh, man, it was going to be so hard not to fall for this girl.

Except... I already had.