

Prologue

As Tom watched the moonlight reflect off the ice-covered lake, he had a reflection of his own: the world really needed more snow.

Sure, people paid lip service to the threat of global warming, tsking and tutting and pointing at the glaciers receding right over in Kenai Fjords. But in their hearts, they weren't convinced that a warmer climate was such a bad thing, especially at this time of year, late March, with harsh months of Alaskan winter behind them, and weeks more to go.

But Tom liked snow. God's Ajax, he called it. Divine cleansing powder. When spring thaw came, this lake and field would be one big swamp, nothing but mud and mosquitoes and the decaying corpses of every beast that hadn't survived the winter. For these few months, though, it was as pristine a wilderness as any poet might imagine.

A field of unbroken white glittered under a half-moon. The air was so crisp it was like sucking breath mints, and the night so silent Tom could hear mice tunneling under the drifts and the howling of wolves ten miles off.

Tom liked wolves even more than he liked snow. Beautiful, proud creatures. Perfect hunters, gliding through the night, silent as ghosts.

The first animal he'd ever trapped had been a wolf cub. He still remembered it, lying in a halo of blood on the newly fallen snow, lips drawn back in a final snarl of defiance, its leg half-chewed off as it had tried to escape. Even as a boy, Tom had respected that defiance, that will to survive. When his dad had said the pelt was too damaged to sell, Tom had asked his mother to make him mitts out of it.

He still had those mitts. He'd planned to pass them on to his son but . . . well, forty-six wasn't too old yet, but there just weren't enough women to go around up here. Anchorage wasn't as bad as Fairbanks, but when you were a trapper with an eighth-grade education, living in a cabin thirty miles from town, you'd better look like Brad Pitt if you hoped to get yourself a wife.

Another wolf pack's song joined the first, and as Tom listened, he wondered whether one of those was *his* pack, the one that used to run in this field. For twenty years, he'd been able to count on pelts from them. Not many—he didn't trap wolves anymore, only shot them, being careful to target the old and sick, like a proper scavenger should.

He'd hear them when he came to empty his traps, their howls so close he'd grip his rifle a little tighter. They never bothered him, though—just let him go about his business.

He'd see their tracks, crisscrossing through the snow, and he'd find their kills picked clean to the last bone. Now and then, he'd even catch a glimpse of them, silently slipping through the trees. Once, on a winter's night just like this, he'd watched them playing out on the ice, even the old ones tumbling and sliding like puppies.

But then, a few months back they'd left this little valley.

Now, those distant wolf howls stopped, and when they did, Tom realized how quiet it was. Unnaturally quiet. Folks talked about the silence of the Alaskan wilderness, yet anyone who

spent any time there knew it was anything but silent, with the constant rush of wind and running water, the scampering of feet over and under the snow, the call of predators and the cries of prey. Right now, though, Tom could swear even the wind had stopped.

And if you've been out here long enough, you know this too—that true silence means only one thing: trouble.

Tom lowered his pack to the ground and lifted his rifle, gripping it with both hands like a Samurai with his sword. Not that Tom fooled himself into thinking a gun made him a warrior. Out here he was just another predator, and a pitiful one at that.

When a shadow rippled between the trees, he held perfectly still and tracked it by pivoting slowly, his rifle rising a few more inches.

The two worst mistakes you could make in the forest were complacency and panic. As hard as he looked, though, he caught only a glimpse of a big shape, hunched onto all fours. Then it was gone.

A bear? They rarely bothered with humans outside of cub season. And when they took off, they made a helluva racket, especially when they just came out of hibernation. Tom hadn't heard a thing.

The hair on his neck rose as old stories and legends crept through his mind. There were parts of this forest you couldn't pay some of the Inuit elders to hunt in. This was Ijiraat territory, they'd say, the hunting grounds of shape-shifters who took the form of wolf and bear, and protected their land against all comers. Tales for children, Tom told himself. Old men trying to frighten the young.

He took a step, his boots crunching in the snow. A shape moved in the trees, closer now and Tom brought his rifle all the way to his shoulder, gloved finger to the trigger.

Clouds slid over the moon and the forest went black. A twig cracked to his left and Tom swore he felt hot breath on the back of his neck. When he spun, nothing was there.

He took one hand off of the rifle and fumbled in his pocket for the flashlight. It caught in the folds and when he wrenched, it flew out and sailed into the surrounding darkness.

The brush crackled to his right now. He spun again, finger still on the trigger, and this time he saw a faint shape. He was about to fire when he thought of Danny Royce. Another trapper, Danny had been spooked by shadows in this same valley just last summer and he'd fired his gun, only to find that he'd shot some kid, a wild-haired teen, probably a hiker or camper. Danny had buried the body and no one ever found it, but Danny hadn't been the same since—not sleeping, drinking too much and talking too much, blabbing his story to Tom like a sinner at confession, swearing the boy's ghost was stalking him. Tom knew the only thing stalking Danny Royce was guilt, but still, the story kept him from pulling the trigger.

The shape had vanished. Tom held his breath, scanning the woods for any change in the shadows. Then he saw it, at least twenty feet away now, a huge shape between two trees. The cloud cover thinned enough for the moon to glimmer through and he could see the shape too pale for a bear.

Tom hunkered down as slowly as he could, and with his free hand, began feeling around for the flashlight with his free hand. He allowed himself one glance at the ground and saw it there, dark against the snow. He scooped it up. His finger found the switch. The click sounded harsh against the silence. Nothing happened. He whacked the flashlight against his thigh and tried again. Nothing.

Something landed on his back, hitting him so hard that at first he thought he'd been shot. He lost his grip on the rifle. A blast of hot breath seared his neck, and a weight on his back pinned him to the snow.

As the thing on his back flipped him over, the flashlight flew from his hand, bounced off a tree and flicked on, just as fangs tore into his throat. Tom caught a glimpse of yellow fur and glittering blue eyes, and his last thought was *That's not one of my wolves.*

Message

You can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped. And you really can't help someone who runs the moment you get within shouting distance, making a beeline for the nearest train, plane or bus terminal, destination anywhere, as long as it takes him hundreds of miles from you.

As I chased Reese Williams through the streets of Pittsburgh—the third city in two days—I had to admit I was starting to take this rejection personally. I don't usually have this problem with guys. Sure, at five foot ten, I'm a little taller than some like in a woman. My build is a little more athletic than most like. I don't always put as much care into my appearance as I should, usually forgoing makeup, tying my hair back with an elastic, and favoring jeans and T-shirts. But because I'm a blue-eyed blonde, men usually decide they can overlook my deficiencies and not run screaming the other way.

Sure, if they found out I was a werewolf, I could understand a little screaming and running. But Reese had no such excuse. He was a werewolf himself, and considering I'm the only known female of our species, when guys like him meet me, they're usually the ones doing the chasing . . . at least until they realize that's not such a good idea if they'd like to keep all their body parts intact.

I'd lost Reese when he'd cut through a throng of rowdy Penguins fans heading off to a game. I'd tried following him through the drunken mob, but the Pack frowns on me cold-cocking humans for grabbing my ass, so after enduring a few unimaginative sexual suggestions, I retreated and waited for them to move on.

By then Reese's trail was overlaid and interwoven with a score of human ones. And the air here already stunk, the city core entering construction season, the stink of machinery and diesel almost overwhelming the smell of the Ohio River a half-mile over. There was no way I was picking up Reese's trail at this intersection. Not without changing into a wolf in downtown Pittsburgh . . . another thing the Pack frowns on.

When I caught up with him two blocks later, he was being sucked in by the glow of a Starbucks sign, presumably hoping for a populated place to rest. When he saw that all the seats inside were empty, he veered across the road.

Reese ran into one of those office-drone oases typical of big cities, where they carve out a store-size chunk of land and add interlocking brick, foliage and random pieces of art in hopes of convincing workers to relax there, enjoy the scenery, listen to the symphony of squealing tires and blaring horns, and imbibe a little smog with their lattes.

After a dozen strides, Reese was through the tiny park and veering again, this time to a sidewalk beside the lot. Headlights appeared, blinding me, then dipped down into an underground lot. Reese grabbed the barrier and vaulted into the lane. I raced over to see the automatic door below closing behind a van . . . with Reese running, hunched over, right behind it.

I did a vault of my own, and ran down the incline, reaching the bottom, then dropping and rolling under the door just as it was about to close. I leapt to my feet and darted thought the

dimly lit garage, hiding behind the nearest post. I strained to hear footsteps. For almost a minute, the van engine rumbled on the far side of the garage. It quit with a shudder and a gasp. A door desperate for oil squeaked open, then slammed shut.

Hunched over, I hopped between the sparse parked cars. Ahead I could hear the van driver's heavy steps thudding as he walked the other way.

A door creaked and a distant rectangle of light appeared. The door hadn't even clicked shut when Reese darted out from his hiding space, his boots slapping the asphalt as he ran.

I kicked into high gear, no longer bothering to hide, but he was too close to the stairwell. I was almost at the closed door when it flew open again, and I narrowly missed barreling into a middle-aged man.

"Sorry," I said as I tried to brush past him. "I was just—"

"Running for the exit because you're afraid to walk through an underground lot at night?"

"Uh, yes."

"There are plenty of lots aboveground, miss. Much safer. Here, let me walk you up to your floor."

It was obvious there were only two ways I was getting past this guy—let him play the gentleman or shove him out of the way. Clay would have done the latter—no question—and thrown in a snarl for good measure. But I haven't overcome my Canadian upbringing, which forbade being rude to anyone who hadn't done anything to deserve it.

So I let the guy escort me up the stairs, and thanked him at the top.

"I'm not saying you shouldn't park underground . . ." he began.

"I understa—"

“Hell, it’s your right to park wherever you want. What you *shouldn’t* do is need to be afraid. This will help.”

He held out a paper-thin white rectangle, making me think they really had done a lot with personal alarms since I’d last seen one. But it was a business card.

“My wife runs Taser parties.”

“Taser . . .?”

“You know, like Tupperware parties. A bunch of women get together, have a good time, share some potluck and get a demonstration of the latest in personal security devices.”

I searched his face for some sign that he was joking. He wasn’t. I thanked him again and hurried out of the stairwell.

Reese’s trail led out the front door. As I went after him, I realized I was still holding the card, which featured a cute little red Taser that I’m sure fit into a purse and accessorized very nicely, for women who carried purses or accessorized.

From Tupperware parties to lingerie parties to Taser parties. I shook my head and stuffed the card into my pocket. Right now, I actually wouldn’t mind a Taser. It might be the only way to stop Reese. Of course, I’d need to get close enough to use it, which wasn’t looking very likely.

Three blocks later, I finally caught up with Reese on a rooftop. He’d climbed up the fire escape, probably thinking I wouldn’t follow.

When I swung over the top, he broke into a run, heading for the opposite side, boots sliding on the gravel. When I realized he wasn't going to veer at the last second, I threw on the brakes, gravel crunching as I skidded to a stop.

"Okay," I called. "I'm not coming any closer. I just want to talk to you."

He was close enough to the edge to make my heart race. He slowly pivoted to face me.

Reese Williams, twenty years old, and recently emigrated from Australia. With broad shoulders, sun-streaked wavy blond hair and the remnants of a tan, he looked like the kind of kid who should be leading tour groups into the outback, all smiles and corny jokes. Only he wasn't joking or smiling now.

"My name is Elena—" I began.

"I know who you are," he said. "But where is *he*?"

"Not here obviously." I gestured around me. "In two days, you haven't caught a whiff of any werewolf except me, which should be a sure sign that he's not around."

"So you're alone?" The sarcasm in his voice made that a statement. I was the only female werewolf. *Obviously* I needed protection, which must be why I'd taken refuge with the Pack and, for a mate, had chosen the Alpha's second-in-command—the baddest, craziest werewolf around.

"He's teaching," I said. "At Georgia State University this week."

His glower said he didn't appreciate my joke. I wasn't kidding—that bad and crazy werewolf also had a Ph.D. in anthropology and was currently lecturing at a symposium on cult worship in ancient Egypt. But there was no way Reese would believe that.

"Fine," I said. "You think he's been lurking in the shadows, out of sight and downwind for two days. Unobtrusive is one word that's never been applied to Clay but, sure, let's go with that

theory. Unless he's learned to fly, though, the only way up is that ladder behind me, so you're going to see him coming. Now, let's take a minute and chat. The reason I've been chasing you for two days is that I want to talk to you about—"

"South Carolina."

"Right."

"I didn't kill those humans."

"I know."

He allowed himself two seconds of surprise, and in those two seconds, he looked like a kid on his first day away at college—lonely, confused and hoping he'd found someone to help. Then his face hardened again. He might be no older than a college student, but he wasn't that naïve or that optimistic, not anymore.

I hurried on. "You emigrated last year, and hooked up with a couple of morons named Liam Malloy and Ramon Santos. They promised to show you the ropes of werewolf life in America. Then the half-eaten bodies started showing up—"

"I didn't do it."

"No, they did, and they're blaming you for it. We know—"

He inched back toward the edge.

"Don't—" I began. "Just stop there. Better yet, take a step toward me."

"Am I making you nervous?"

I met his gaze. "Yes."

"A jumper would be a real mess to clean up, wouldn't it? Better to calm me down and get me into a nice stretch of forest for easy burial."

“That’s not—” An exasperated sigh hissed through my teeth. “Fine. You’re convinced I’m going to kill you. The only question, then, is—”

He stepped back . . . and plummeted.

I lunged so fast I nearly did a face-plant in the gravel, scrabbling to get to the edge, heart in my throat, cursing myself for being so careless, so flippant—

Then I saw the second roof, two stories below, and Reese running across it.

Clay would have taken a dramatic flying leap. I felt the urge, but reminded myself I was the mother of two and would turn forty in a few months. Even if I had the body of a bionic thirty-year-old, I had responsibilities to my family, to my Alpha and, most important right now, to this dumbass kid who’d get killed if I broke my ankle and couldn’t warn him about Liam and Ramon.

So I crouched on the edge, checked my trajectory and jumped carefully. I landed on my feet and took off after Reese. I was barely on the second rooftop before he was off it. It was a three-story drop this time, which was a bit much even for a twenty-year-old werewolf. The thump of a hard landing and a gasp of pain confirmed that.

I picked up speed, hoping I’d see him huddled below, hurt and unable to run. But the pavement was empty, as was the parking lot beyond. I caught a flash of movement in a recessed doorway, where he crouched, hidden in the shadows, waiting to ambush me. Good thing I *hadn’t* pulled a Clay and charged headlong after my prey.

I walked to the adjoining edge, lowered myself over, then dropped. Twin shocks of pain blasted through my legs as I hit the asphalt. I was going to pay for that in the morning. For now, I rubbed it out, then snuck to the corner of the building.

The wind shifted and I caught a whiff of Reese, his scent heavy with fear. It wasn’t me he should be afraid of, though, but his old traveling buddies.

Liam and Ramon had killed three humans in South Carolina and set up Reese to take the fall. Now they were hoping to find and kill him before I got his side of the story.

How was I so sure of this?

Because they'd done it before. Five years ago they'd befriended a twenty-three-year-old immigrant werewolf named Yuli Etxeberria. When evidence of man-killing pointed to Etxeberria, Clay had wanted to swoop in and grab him. I'd held back. I'd been suspicious, but not suspicious enough. Liam killed Etxeberria and mailed us his hand, as if expecting a commendation for taking care of this "man eater."

That wouldn't happen this time. I strode down the grassy strip between the building and the parking lot, as if I was scanning that lot, giving Reese the perfect ambush target.

When I reached the recessed doorway, I dove. Reese's shadow passed over me, pouncing and catching only air. I leapt up, grabbed the back of his jacket and threw him onto the grass.

He landed with a thud. He tried to roll out of it and bounce up swinging, but a twenty-year-old with a werewolf's strength and agility is like a twenty-year-old behind the wheel of a Lamborghini—all that power but not enough experience using it—and he fumbled the bounce back to his feet.

I tossed him face-first onto the grass again. This time he stayed where he landed.

"Where did we leave off?" I said. "Right. Liam and Ramon and their plot to end your existence."

"Kill me?" He slowly rose. "Why would they—?"

He charged, hoping to catch me off guard. I stepped aside and he smacked into the wall, then wheeled fast and came at me again. Again, I stepped aside, this time grabbing him and pitching him through the air.

As he hit the ground, he let out a stream of profanity.

I shook my head. “If I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn’t be throwing you on the *grass*, would I?”

“Right, you’re here to help me, after getting tipped off that I’m a man-eater. Do you really expect me to—”

He tried the dash-in-midsentence trick again, making a break for the alley. I tore after him. As I caught the back of his jacket, he spun and hit me with an upper cut that sent me sailing off my feet.

But I kept my grip on his coat, and we both went down. I tried to scramble up, but he pinned me. It was then that his wolf brain kicked in. His pupils dilated, his breathing quickened, his erection pressed into my thigh, his wolf side telling him this wasn’t a fight—it was foreplay, and damn, I smelled good.

He froze as the still-human part of his brain warned him that what the wolf wanted was a very bad idea. But his nostrils still flared, drinking in my scent.

I knew which side would win, and that’s when things always got ugly.

So while he fought his inner battle, I heaved him off me.

“That’s why I don’t do hand-to-hand combat with mutts,” I said.

He nodded as he got to his feet, rubbing his face briskly with his sleeve, gaze down, cheeks flaming. He pinched his nose and shook his head, trying to clear my scent.

It took a smart kid to back off that fast. And Reese *was* smart—that was the problem. If he’d been a dumb lunk who’d keep trying to hump my leg, then he’d have believed me when I said I was here to rescue him. Instead, he saw all the ways it could be a trick.

“Liam and Ramon *are* after you,” I said. “You haven’t noticed because they aren’t nearly as good at tracking as I am. Give them a few weeks to catch up and—”

He charged, trying the dash-while-your-opponent-is-in-midspeech tactic. Again, I sidestepped. Only this time, he hooked the back of my knee. I stumbled, but came up swinging. Unfortunately, he was already ten feet away, running for the road.

I took off after him.

Flight

I lost him. The condensed version is that Reese Williams possessed an admirable blend of intelligence and humility, and I was accustomed to dealing with mutts who'd sooner cut off their balls than run from a woman.

Reese did exactly what I'd have done if pursued through a city core by a more experienced werewolf. He ran for the nearest populated place—a busy restaurant. While I waited at the back door, he must have darted out the front and swiped someone's cab. By the time I realized he was gone, it was too late to follow.

Now, an hour later, I was in a cab of my own, getting out at the Pittsburgh International Airport.

What led me here wasn't good old-fashioned legwork. Ever since the werewolves rejoined the supernatural council, our mutt tracking has gone high tech. We now have Paige Winterbourne, genius computer hacker, at our disposal.

We knew Reese had been using stolen credit cards, alternating between at least three. Paige had identified two and was tracking transactions.

I didn't even get a chance to tell her I'd lost him before she was calling to say he'd used a credit card at the airport. As for *where* he was going, that proved more problematic. Paige had access to all the major airline computers, but this was a small one she hadn't ever needed to crack. So I was back to leg and nose work.

"You're booked on a flight to Miami," Jeremy said as I got out of the cab, cell phone to my ear. "That will get you through security. But from the sounds of it, you've delivered your message. If he's refusing to listen, I'm not sure what you plan to do about that."

"I want to tell him what happened to Yuli Etxeberria. If that doesn't work, I'll hog-tie him and haul his ass someplace safe until he smartens up."

Silence as I walked through the doors. It lasted so long that, with anyone else, I'd have wondered if the line disconnected.

"You don't need to keep chasing him, Elena."

"Just one more day. The kids are okay, aren't they?"

"Yes, they're fine. Clay called an hour ago. His last meeting was canceled, so he can help with Reese."

"Great. He can catch up with me tomorrow, after he stops in there and sees the kids."

"While I'm sure he'd love to see them, right now he wants to get to you. As soon as you figure out where you're going, he'll meet up with you."

I didn't argue. It'd been two weeks since I'd seen Clay—longer than we'd been apart in years. I was so accustomed to having him around, that for two weeks I'd been unbalanced and off-kilter. And when it came to hunting Reese without my partner, I'd definitely been off my game.

"Etxeberria wasn't your fault, Elena," Jeremy said.

Ah, right to the crux of the matter, as usual.

“One more day,” I said. “Just give me—”

“I’ll give you all the time you need. You know that. Then once you’re done, take an extra night with Clay before you come back.”

We hadn’t intended to be apart so long. For Clay, even separate day trips were too much. That’s the wolf in him, wanting his mate nearby at all times. Most werewolves inherit the genes and don’t transform until their late teens, but Clay was bitten as a child, and that makes him more wolf than human.

Our separation had begun with a work trip for me that lasted longer than expected. In the meantime, Clay had left for Atlanta. I was supposed to stop overnight at home, then follow. Only that night, our darling three-year-old twins thought I’d gone out back for a “walk in the forest” and decided to follow . . . by jumping out a second-floor window.

While adult werewolves have super-human strength and reflexes, and could easily make that leap, we don’t get those secondary powers until puberty. As for whether those rules apply to the offspring of two werewolves, let’s just say we’re starting to think they don’t. The kids escaped with minor injuries: a twisted ankle for Logan and a sprained wrist for Kate, which meant no Atlanta trip for me.

Thus the two-week separation, now, thankfully, almost at an end.

Some airports are perfect for losing a tail. Take Minneapolis. With its endless corridors of shops and restaurants it rivals the nearby Mall of the Americas as a hellhole for the directionally challenged. Pittsburgh was not one of those airports.

By the time I entered the terminal, Reese had checked in and headed for his gate, but there wasn't far for him to go. I picked up my ticket and got my boarding pass. Two sets of escalators deposited travelers in a tiny pre-security square, bounded by a few shops. Reese's trail headed straight for the security checkpoint.

Once I was inside and off yet another escalator, it got trickier. I was in a rotunda of shops and restaurants with four arms leading to boarding gates. Still, the tidy layout meant there were a limited number of places for him to go. Even if I couldn't find his trail, I just needed to check all four halls and—

“Paging Chris Parker. Chris Parker, please report to gate C56.”

I smiled. Parker was one of the aliases Reese was using.

When I got to the gate, though, the waiting area was empty, the plane already loaded. Reese was at the counter, showing his boarding pass and ID to the attendant. She was taking a good look at them and he was struggling to stay calm, shifting and glancing around.

I shouldered my way through a throng checking the departure screens, then broke into a fast walk. The attendant was saying something to Reese. Questioning his fake ID? It looked a little off, didn't it? Better hold him for another minute, get someone to come and check it . . .

With a smile, she handed back his ID and boarding pass. Reese started down the long hall to his plane. I picked up my pace, but by the time I neared the desk, he was gone.

Gone *where?*

I glanced at the screen behind the attendant. It seemed to be stuck on the flight number and departure time, so I asked where the plane was headed.

“Anchorage.” She blinded me with a smile. “Anchorage, Alaska.”