



Frostbitten

Kelley Armstrong



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ALSO BY KELLEY ARMSTRONG

OTHERWORLD NOVELS

Bitten

Stolen

Dime Store Magic

Industrial Magic

Haunted

Broken

No Humans Involved

Personal Demon

Living with the Dead

Men of the Otherworld

NADIA STAFFORD NOVELS

Exit Strategy

Made to Be Broken



BANTAM BOOKS

*To Jeff, who still believes I can,
even on the days when I'm not so sure*

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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 drift 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-something 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 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 bears took out they made a helluva racket, especially when they had just come 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 Ijira 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 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, he began feeling around for the flashlight. He allowed himself one glance at the ground and saw it there, dark again.

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 pinned him to the snow.

As the thing flipped him over, the flashlight bounced off a tree and flicked on just where fangs tore into his throat. Tom caught a glimpse of light 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. 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 I'm a blue-eyed blonde, so men usually decide that 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 collecting 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 the sidewalk beside the lot. Headlights appeared, blinding me, then dipped down into a dark 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 through the

dimly lit garage, hiding behind the nearest post. Then 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 hopscotched 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 could get 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 understand—"

"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 Clay'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. "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 pounding 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 though I had the body of a bionic thirty-year-old, I had responsibilities to my family, to my Alpha and, most importantly, 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 I 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 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.

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, switching to 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 u

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 for 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 superhuman 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 America 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 presecurity 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 hallway.

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.”

MULTITASKING

“SO I’VE HIT the end of the line,” I said to Jeremy as I settled into a seat. “As badly as I want to warn this kid, I’m not flying to Alaska. Hopefully, Liam and Ramon feel the same way.”

“I’m sure they will.”

I expected to hear his usual deep timbre of reassurance. Instead, his words carried a note of hesitation.

“You think they’ll track him to Alaska?” I asked.

“No, I’m quite certain they won’t. However, a trip to Anchorage might not be a bad idea, you and Clay are up to it.”

“Whatever you need. What’s up in Alas—?” I stopped. “Those reports of wolf kills, right?”

One of my Pack responsibilities was tracking potential werewolf activity. Jeremy monitored newspapers and I took the Internet. This case had shown up in both.

Two men had presumably been killed by wolves outside Anchorage. That was newsworthy because, despite their reputation as dangerous beasts, wolves don’t kill people. In North America there have been no documented cases of healthy wild wolves killing humans in the last hundred years. So when it seemed to happen, people got nervous. And we got real nervous because the one thing far more common than wolf attacks was werewolf attacks.

Two reports weren’t enough for the Pack to investigate. And there were other recent reports of equally rare wolf activity—wolves attacking dogs and people spotting wolves near the city. If the wolves near Anchorage were getting bolder, then it stood to reason they might actually be responsible for these deaths.

But if I had another reason to go to Alaska...

“I can check it out while I hunt down Reese,” I said.

“I’ll reroute Clay there.” A pause. “There’s something else, too. Dennis was supposed to call me last week. He wanted to discuss something that seemed important.”

“And he didn’t?”

“No, and he’s not returning my calls either.”

Dennis Stillwell and his son, Joey, were former Pack werewolves who’d left for western Canada when Jeremy and his father’s battle for Alphahood had turned ugly. They’d later moved to Alaska. That was thirty years ago, before I joined the Pack, but Jeremy and Dennis had kept in touch, and this silence probably bothered Jeremy more than the wolf kills.

“I’m off to Alaska, then,” I said. “Should I call Clay and let him know?”

“I’ll do that, and I’ll book you a flight. You get something to eat. Try to relax.”

UNFORTUNATELY, THERE WASN’T a lot of demand for travel from Pittsburgh to Anchorage, and the flight Reese had taken was the only direct one for the next twenty-four hours. So I was transferring in Phoenix.

The flight and the brief layover gave me time to think—too much time. In the last week I'd been hit with two things that I really wanted to talk to Clay about. Things that weren't suitable for a phone conversation. Things that preyed on my mind every time I slowed down long enough to relax, which was likely another reason I kept chasing Reese when common sense told me to give up.

The first thing... well, that worried me, but it didn't have the same effect as the second. The second was the kicker, the one that had me avoiding quiet moments like this. It happened the day before I started chasing Reese. After the kids went to bed, Jeremy and I had been in the study, relaxing in front of the fire. He'd been reading a novel; I'd been reading my mail, which tended to pile up, untouched, for days.

Had I known who sent the letter, I'd have pitched it into the fire unread. But it had gone through my alma mater, so it had arrived in a University of Toronto envelope. I hadn't noticed the second envelope inside, distractedly ripping through both.

It was a letter from one of the men who'd fostered me as a child. I don't call him my foster father. That would give him a place in my life he didn't deserve.

I'd gone through a lot of homes after my parents died. I think when potential mothers saw me—the quiet girl with big, haunted eyes—they saw not a temporary placement, but a child they could rescue and make their own, and when I didn't open up to them, when I didn't become the perfect, sweet daughter they wanted, they gave me back.

Being blond and blue-eyed meant I also attracted attention of a less altruistic kind from a few foster "fathers" and "brothers." Most times it was no more than a peek in the bathroom or a hand that lingered too long on my leg. But sometimes it was worse, especially from the man who sent me the letter.

In it, he said he was going through therapy now for his *problem*. He was sorry for what he'd done to me and his therapist thought that as part of the healing process, he should let me know. Apologize and ask forgiveness.

I'd gotten up from the couch, walked to the fireplace and dropped the letter in. Jeremy had looked up from his book with a soft "Elena?" but I'd strode from the room before he could ask anything.

I wish I could say that was that. God, I wish I could say it. But it wasn't, and the only person I could have talked to wasn't there, so the letter—every damned word of it—festereed in my brain. Before I read it, I'd been off-kilter with Clay gone. Afterward, I seemed to stumble half blind through my days, ferociously fixated on whatever goal I was pursuing, but not making breakfast for the kids or chasing Reese, not daring to rest, knowing rest only brought back memories and fears and rage I thought long since vanquished.

Not vanquished, it seems. Just shoved into willful forgetfulness. And now it was back, and I couldn't forget, no matter how hard I tried.

I was just settling into the second plane, about to turn off my cell phone when it rang.

"Morning, darling," came a familiar southern drawl.

I straightened. "Hey, you. I hear we're going to Alaska."

"We are. Looking forward to it?"

“I’m not arguing the order, that’s for sure. Now we just need to get the business part of the trip out of the way, so we can take advantage of the locale. Miles and miles of unexplored wilderness. It’ll definitely make up for two weeks of short, crappy runs alone.”

“So that’s what you want me back for? A running partner?”

“Of course. What else?”

“I can think of a few things.” Clay’s drawl turned to a low growl that set me shivering. “You can work it into your busy run schedule.”

“I’m sure I can. Before the runs. After the runs. Any other time we get a spare minute...”

He laughed. “You *do* miss me.”

“I do.”

A moment of silence. “Just a sec. I think we had a bad connection. I could have sworn you admitted—”

“I miss you. Horribly. I can’t wait to see you.”

“They’re serving the booze already, aren’t they?”

“Ha-ha. Keep that up and I’ll never say it again.”

“The question is whether you’d say it if I was there.”

“No, because if you were here, I’d be in your lap, wondering how we could slip into the bathroom.”

“Tease,” he growled.

My head shot up. I could have sworn I heard that growl... and not just through my phone. I scoured the aisle, but there were only a few passengers still boarding, none of them Clay. Still, I scanned the first-class section. No familiar blond curls peeked over any of the seats.

“Elena?”

“Sorry.” I pushed back the stab of disappointment. “So when does your flight get in?”

“Around eight.”

“I’ll wait at the terminal for you, then.”

The attendants started making the preflight rounds. We said good-bye and I turned off my phone. As I settled into my seat, I fought off that lingering disappointment. It’d been so good to hear his voice that I’d even felt that slow wave of calm that comes whenever he enters the room, a deep instinct telling me I could relax now, that my mate was close.

As I tucked my bag under the seat, I caught that feeling again and picked up a scent as familiar as my own. I twisted to see Clay looming over the back of my seat.

“Can’t fool you, can I?” he said.

I grabbed him by the shirtfront, nearly yanking him over the seat as I pulled him into a kiss.

“I definitely need to go away more often,” he said as I let him go.

“Absolutely not, unless it’s a trip for two.”

“Agreed.”

He came around and took the seat beside mine. I should have wondered when Jeremy insisted on booking my flight, then said he could only get me into first class. Clay hates coacs—can't stand being that close to strangers.

"I believe I heard something about sitting on my lap—" he began.

I shot onto it and was kissing him before he finished the sentence. His eyes widened before he recovered enough to kiss me back.

To say I'm not one for public displays of affection is an understatement. But over the years I've come to care less about what strangers think, and Clay has made equal strides to care *more*... or at least learned to act as if he does. So I sat in his lap and kissed him, and he didn't snarl at the woman across the aisle when she started harrumphing and glowering, and all was good.

"Now, how about that bathroom trip," Clay said as I slid back into my seat.

I looked up at the first-class bathroom... past two flight attendants and six rows of passengers, all facing it.

"You know, it always looks so much easier in the movies."

He laughed and fastened his seat belt. "So this was a good surprise, I take it?"

"A great one."

He blinked, genuinely surprised, and I felt a prickle of guilt. Clay and I had our issues—huge ones that had kept us apart for ten years. I'd grown so accustomed to holding him in my arm's length that even now, I suppose in some ways I still did. I was quick to say a casual "miss you" on the phone, but never a heartfelt "Hey, I really, really miss you."

He knew I'd really missed him. It just threw him to hear the words. Another thing I needed to work on.

As the plane lifted off, I brought Clay up to date on the possible wolf kills. Yes, our fellow passengers could hear us, but no one eavesdrops on a conversation like that and thinks, "Christ my God, they're talking about werewolves!"

There had been two deaths so far. Both had been men out alone traipsing through the Alaskan wilderness at night, which seems to be natural selection at work, as much as African tourists who decide to camp beside watering holes.

The first victim had been a New Age Vancouverite on a spirit quest, fasting in a teepee. The second was an ex-con stealing from traps. Really, could you blame the wolves for thinking these two would make a nice late-winter feast?

The authorities were blaming a single man-eating wolf. At the site of both killings, they found the tracks of a huge canine. Werewolves change into very large wolves, retaining their body mass. And outside the Pack, most are loners.

Still, that didn't mean it *was* a werewolf. It just bore looking into, as long as we were going to Alaska for other reasons.

By the time I finished my explanation, dinner was served. Given the hour, most passengers stuck to drinks and peanuts, but no werewolf turned down food, however strange the timing. While we ate, Clay talked about the symposium. Then I gave him another update—this one

on Reese Williams.

Again, our conversation might sound odd to anyone listening, but as long as we didn't mention the W word, they'd fluff off my talk of fights and chases as a movie plot discussion. Most people were asleep anyway, as was I after dinner and a glass of wine.

While I napped, Clay read the Alaskan tourism information I'd downloaded earlier. Surrounded by strangers, he couldn't relax his guard enough to shut his eyes.

When I woke, I looked down to see city lights below.

"Still night?" I said, yawning. "What time—?" I checked my watch. "It's past six. Where's the sun?"

"It's past *five* local time, and it's Alaska, darling."

"Shit. That's right. Duh. So when can we expect to see the sun?"

"It'll start rising around eight-thirty, but won't get over those mountains for a while. A earlier daylight saving time doesn't do them any favors here."

"No kidding."

I could make out the city below, nestled in a valley, surrounded on three sides by snow-capped mountains and the fourth by the ocean. Beyond those lights of civilization? Miles of wilderness.

I smiled. "Uncharted territory."

"The best kind." Clay shifted closer, hand resting on my thigh as he looked out the window. "Still too dark to get to work, checking out those kills or looking for Dennis. We have to find other things to do."

"We could go to the hotel and get some sleep..."

He snorted.

"Sex or a run?" I asked.

"Do I have to pick one?"

I grinned. "Never."

PLAYTIME

ONCE IN THE terminal, naturally we had to check for Reese, in case his flight had been delayed or he'd decided to hang out here rather than pay for an extra night's hotel room. We went in search of all the secluded, tucked-away places he could hide. Unfortunately, post-9/11 these places are increasingly hard to come by in airports.

"Goddamn it," Clay muttered after our third possibility proved to be staffed by a security camera. "Where the hell is a mutt supposed to hole up around here?"

Before he stormed down the car-rental hall, I caught his arm and pointed to a sign warning of construction ahead.

"About time," he grumbled.

He hurdled over the barrier, pushed back the tarp and disappeared. I waited for any indication that the coast wasn't clear—screams, shouts, foul language—then followed. When I caught up, Clay stood beside a pile of drywall, his head tilted, nose lifted, trying to catch the sound or smell of workers.

I turned down a side passage. It was short, ending at a locked door. I was considering the wisdom of snapping the lock when Clay strode up behind. He caught me around the hip, flipping me around, mouth going to mine.

He kissed me hard. Lips crushing. Hands grabbing. Fingers digging in. The smell of his hair filling my nostrils, thick and heady as hashish smoke. Brain spinning. Body screaming. Hands pulling his shirt up. Fingers gripping his sides. Skin to skin, touching, stroking, making the connection I'd missed so much.

A growl vibrated up from his chest, coming out in a long, low moan. Fingers in my hair. Winding. Pulling. Kissing harder. Teeth scraping. Tongue tasting.

His hands dropped to my waist. Button flicking. Zipper whirring. The chill blast of air against hot skin. The rough rasp of jeans shoved down. Warm fingers moving under my panties. Tugging. Fabric catching, pulling, stretching. A growl. A rip. A laugh.

Hands on my thighs, pushing them apart, as if I needed the encouragement. Back against the wall. Wriggling. Straddling. Legs over hips. Come on, come on! Then...

Oh, God, yes. God, I missed you. God, I love you. Yes, please, yes...

Clay pressed me against the wall, nuzzling my neck as I shuddered and gasped.

"Speed record?" he asked.

"For us? Probably not."

He chuckled and kept kissing my neck, inhaling deeply, telling me how good I smelled, how much he'd missed me, how much he loved me, until the distant clang of a door had us jumping apart.

"No sign of Reese here," I said as I pulled my jeans back on.

"You can tell Jeremy we checked every nook and cranny. Now time for that run."

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