

## 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.