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**RACHEL VINCENT**

# ALPHA

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
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Available  
January 2011

**RACHEL VINCENT**

**ALPHA**



To everyone at MIRA Books whose unsung efforts behind the scenes helped make this, my debut series and first venture into publishing, the experience of a lifetime.

To all the friends I've made through my writing.

You've kept me sane—or at least convinced me that I'm not alone in my neuroses.

And finally, to all the Shifters readers who have stuck it out with Faythe and with me as we grew and learned. This has been an amazing journey, and I'm so thankful for everyone who traveled it with me. I'm not bowing out, but this is Faythe's last hurrah.

Thanks for helping me send her off in style....

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## One

“Are you sure about this?” Jace hesitated, one hand gripping a bare branch overhead, the other poised over his zipper. But I could see the truth. He wanted this as badly as I did.

“Absolutely.” I pushed my last button through the hole and let my shirt fall to the ground in a patch of mottled sunlight. My skin was already covered in goose bumps, as much from anticipation as from the February cold. “Now shut up and take off your pants.”

He shrugged and grinned. “You know I’m always up for some sweaty fun.” But the look in his eyes as his gaze roamed south of mine belied his casual zeal. Part bloodlust, part real lust, and all exhilaration—just like me.

“I’m not sure that’s quite how I’d describe this.” Not that I wasn’t looking forward to a little action. It had been *days*, and I was really starting to crave—

“What the hell is this?” Marc growled, an instant before he tore through the brush to my left. Sunlight burst into the woods with his intrusion, spotlighting my exposed bra and Jace’s...total nudity. *Damn, that boy’s fast!* Fury emanated from Marc like a deep, dark glow, emphasizing his strong, dark features. “You are *not* doing this without me.”

*Shit.* “Marc, this isn’t what you think, and we don’t have time to explain...” My eyes narrowed as his last few words finally sank in. “Wait...*what?*”

“I said, not...without...me.” His brow rose in silent challenge, and all words abandoned me.

I blinked, lost for a moment in the possibilities, then I shook my head to clear it. “But we’re not...” I waved one hand back and forth between me and Jace, unable to actually vocalize what he surely thought we were doing. “We’re going after Ryan. I caught a whiff of him on my run.”

“Vic told me.” Yet he was still clearly pissed, even knowing Jace and I hadn’t run off for a secret, midday tumble in the...underbrush.

“You didn’t tell my dad...?”

Marc had been talking war strategy with my father when I’d come in from my run, and I hadn’t told them where we were going because I didn’t want my dad to know about Ryan. Not when we could easily take care of the problem ourselves and spare him—and my mother—the additional tension.

He shook his head slowly, as if doubting his own decision. “Ryan’s the last thing he should have to deal with right now.”

“Yeah.” And I was really looking forward to the exercise, to burn off a little stress through good, clean exertion. As opposed to the other, sweatier kind, which we were all currently denying ourselves, to keep Marc and Jace from killing each other.

Whoever said two is better than one was either stupid or crazy. Or heartless.

“I’m coming with you, so get dressed. Now. You’re not Shifting.”

“Do *not* start ordering her around,” Jace growled, and dread pitched deep in my stomach, like nausea with a heartburn upgrade.

Marc snarled, and I saw the instant he lost control of his temper. He lunged for Jace. Jace leaped forward. I threw myself between them.

Both hard bodies slammed into me. Air exploded from my throat. My grunt of pain hardly carried any sound. For just an instant, I couldn’t move, crushed between them, confused by the collision of scents and hurting all over. My torso was one giant bruise—I wouldn’t have fared much better between two oncoming cars.

I’m not sure which of them moved first, but suddenly I was on the ground, staring up at two concerned, angry faces. “Damn it, Faythe, you’re going to get yourself killed,” Marc snapped.

I sucked in a painful breath, and my voice came out hoarse. “Evidently that’s what it takes to keep you two from killing each other.” Though truthfully, while Jace would eagerly defend himself, he had yet to actually attack Marc. The reverse could not be said.

I shoved them away and pushed myself to my feet, glaring at Marc as they both stood with me. “Look, I know this whole thing is my fault...”

“Not *just* yours.” Marc glowered at Jace over my shoulder.

“...and I know the timing could not have been worse. And I’m sorrier about both of those than I could possibly explain. But if I have to spend all my time and energy trying to keep the two of you apart, I really am going to get myself killed, and it’ll be your fault.”

Marc reeled like I’d punched him. But he recovered quickly, with a fresh dose of anger. “You reap what you sow, Faythe. And I’m still going with you.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and tried to ignore the fresh chill bumps. “I think you and Jace should stay away from each other until you’ve cooled off.”

“Why? So you two can top off your hunt with a little more...reaping and sowing?”

I closed my eyes, breathing through the acute ache in my chest, which had nothing to do with the midtom collision. Then I made myself look at him. “Do you honestly think I’d do that to you?”

“I think you already have.”

He was right, but the barb still stung. I hadn’t even come close to earning forgiveness yet, but this was not the time to try. Something always seemed to get in the way. “We’re going after Ryan. You’re welcome to join us, if you can control your temper.”

I’d never seen Marc as bitter or openly antagonistic as he’d been over the past week. His anger was getting in the way of his concentration, his sleeping pattern, and his job, but he couldn’t work around it because he couldn’t solve the problem—that was up to me—nor could he get away from it. Every time he turned around, Jace and I were there, our very presence reminding him of what had happened.

This wasn’t going to get any better until I made a decision, one way or another.

Marc’s dark brows dipped low and he stepped closer, so that I had to look up to meet his eyes. “I’m going—on my own terms.” He pulled his black T-shirt over his head, and my gaze caught involuntarily on his chest, sculpted by years of enforcer

training and scarred by the rogue who'd brought him into my life fifteen years before. I wanted to trace those scars with my fingers, but I wasn't sure I had the right to anymore. He'd barely touched me since he found out about me and Jace.

"You don't outrank me yet," he spat. "So put your shirt on—you're staying on two legs. And this time see if you can keep them together."

I actually staggered backward, floored by the depth of his anger. But not really surprised. I deserved the worst he had to dish out, and he deserved the outlet, especially considering that he couldn't vent where anyone else could hear him. But *damn*, the venom in his voice stung.

Jace growled and stepped forward, but I put a hand on his stomach to stop him.

I wanted to yell at Marc, to fight back, but that would only make the whole thing worse. So I swallowed my anger and stuck to the subject. "Hell, no. I'm faster on four legs." My private run had been cut short by the unauthorized scent in the woods, and I was dying for some exercise in cat form to help clear my head and fight off the bloodlust we'd all been battling for the past couple of weeks. Ever since Ethan died—my brother murdered on our own property.

Marc snatched my shirt from the ground and shoved it at me. "Unless you're planning to kill him, claws and canines won't do you any good this time."

He was right, so I groaned and shoved my arms through the sleeves, then turned my back on them both, already running toward the spot where I'd first caught Ryan's scent. "Catch up with me when you've Shifted."

I wasn't a leader. Not really. Not yet. But my father was training me to replace him as Alpha someday, and an Alpha had to be ready to ask questions and issue orders, both of which were hard to do in cat form.

Normally, an Alpha—even a trainee—wouldn't haul ass through the woods on her own while looking for a known trespasser. Especially in human form, and virtually defenseless against someone with claws and canines. However, this particular trespasser was more than merely known. He was reviled, scorned, and pitied. But he was not feared.

Also, he was my brother.

My pulse raced as I ran and each breath came faster than the last. I tried to exhale it all—to purge my body of the poison I'd been living and breathing since I'd started lying to Marc. That was all over. He knew that I'd slept with Jace—once, in the onslaught of grief for Ethan, while Marc was missing and presumed dead—but the truth had only made things worse. I could apologize, and I had many, many times, but I couldn't tell him it was over. I couldn't tell him I didn't love Jace. Not without lying to him again.

I hated myself for that, but it was a useless hatred. It changed nothing. I loved Marc, but I didn't deserve him. I loved Jace, but I couldn't give up Marc. And no matter what I decided, Marc had made it clear that he couldn't live with Jace anymore. Once the war was over, one of them would have to go. But I didn't want to lose either one.

Lost in my thoughts and ungainly in human form, I tripped over an exposed root and caught myself on a twisted branch, sparing only a moment to regain my balance. Then I was off again, my lungs burning from the cold.

A few steps later, two sleek, dark forms passed me so quickly I couldn't even

focus on them. But I could smell them. Marc and Jace, fully Shifted into cat form and embroiled in an impromptu race. Everything was a competition now, whether or not it involved me. Everything was tense, and dangerous, and painful. And I could practically taste Marc's frustration. He could probably have outrun Jace—except he didn't know where they were going. He hadn't been there when I told Jace where I'd smelled Ryan.

By the time I got there, they had him treed, a slim human form clinging to the branches overhead. Ryan was little more than a patchwork of shadows cast by the crisscross of branches, but I could swear I saw those shadows tremble.

Marc had wanted him dead all along for what he'd done to me. For giving me to South American tabby traffickers, who would have sold me to the highest bidder.

"Stand down," I said, and both toms obeyed. Even in his unprecedented state of rage, Marc wouldn't expose the dissent in our ranks to the enemy. And despite my mother's soft spot for her second-born, the rest of us definitely considered Ryan an enemy.

"Get down. Now," I ordered, and after a moment's hesitation, Ryan dropped to the ground in front of me, knees bent, arms spread for balance. I tried not to acknowledge the skill in his dismount. I attributed it to the frequency with which a coward like my black-sheep brother was probably treed.

"Faythe." Ryan nodded in tentative greeting, careful not to bow his head too low. He wasn't prepared to acknowledge my rank in the Pride. Not yet, anyway. Even though he was no longer a member.

The shadow of a bare branch fell across his face, and in my mind I saw steel bars. He'd shown up under a truce flag of sorts for Ethan's funeral, but there was too much else going on then—I'd hardly given him a second thought. But seeing him here, hiding in the shadows, brought it all back....

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't let them tear your arms off and watch you bleed out."

"Because Mom would smell my blood the next time she gets within half a mile of here."

I raised both brows, reluctantly impressed. I'd expected him to beg for his life, or at least appeal to our frayed familial bond. But he obviously knew that would do no good. And that even if I were willing to kill someone who posed no immediate threat, I wouldn't hurt our mother, even to punish him. She'd already buried one son, and I would not put her through a second funeral in less than a month.

"What the hell are you doing here? And keep in mind that Shifters can take a lot of pain without actually dying." I'd know.

Ryan had seen me beaten into a mass of blood, lumps, and purple bruises after fighting off the first of the psychotic rapists and murderers he'd helped kidnap me and two other tabbies, including our cousin Abby. All to protect his own ass. For him, that was always the bottom line. Ryan was a Grade-A coward. Just looking at him made me feel sick.

"I need to see her." Our mother, of course. His crutch, bank, security blanket, and the only member of our family he actually seemed to care about.

"I don't give a shit what you need," I spat, and Marc huffed in agreement.

"Fine. I get that and I don't blame you." Ryan nodded, always eager to placate, to

keep from getting his face pounded in. “But she needs to see me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why would she need to see you?”

“For the same reason she needs to see you. Because she’s our mother. Don’t you think she’s been through enough with Ethan?”

“Don’t.” I swallowed thickly and my hands curled into fists as Jace growled at my side. “You do *not* get to say his name. Ethan was everything you’re not. He fought for all of us, over and over. He *died* fighting for an innocent tabby. But you... You sold us out.” He dropped a gaze full of guilt, and that only made me angrier. “Look at me,” I demanded, my throat aching from holding back the things I wanted to shout at him. The accusations I’d been holding in for months. “Eye contact is the *least* you owe me.”

Ryan raised his head, and the misery I saw on his face did nothing to mollify my rage. He didn’t know misery. He knew nothing like the pain he’d caused.

“Abby was seventeen years old, and a virgin, and you let them rape her. Sara was getting married, and you let them rape her, then *kill* her. And you let them put their hands all over me. You let them try...”

He flinched, and I couldn’t finish. He knew what he’d let them try. And from the way he cringed, I’d say the memories hurt. *Good*. But they couldn’t hurt him like they hurt me.

“Don’t you dare tell me what Mom needs. She does not need *you*. None of us do.”

Ryan sighed and his gaze strengthened, like he was looking for something in my eyes. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but she forgave me, Faythe. Why can’t you?”

My fist flew before I knew it was going to. His nose crunched, then blood sprayed my shirt and neck. Ryan howled, but the sound ended in a gurgle. His hands flew to cover his face.

Marc purred and rubbed against my ankle. Ryan dropped to his knees, cradling his ruined nose.

“Mom wasn’t grabbed, and kicked, and punched, and humiliated,” I snapped. “She wasn’t thrown around a cage in a filthy basement. She wasn’t *touched*. She has the luxury of forgiveness because she doesn’t fail to fight them off in her nightmares. Did you know I dream about it, Ryan?” I dropped into a squat in front of him and pulled his head back by his hair until I saw his eyes, already surrounded by rapidly swelling, darkening flesh. “Did you know it happens all over again, every night I sleep alone? Every night I’m too tired to fight off the memories?” I swallowed a sob and forced the next words out. “I needed you then. You were supposed to protect me. But I don’t need you now.”

My fist slammed into his jaw, and his head hit the tree trunk. His eyes watered, but I couldn’t tell if they were tears of regret or pain. And I didn’t care.

One of the guys tugged me backward by the hem of my shirt, and I stood, the cold forgotten. “We were family.” I kicked, and my boot slammed into his thigh. “You were my big brother.”

Ryan’s tears fell. He was saying something, but I couldn’t hear him. Didn’t want to.

“Brothers are supposed to make sure things like that *never happen* to little sisters. It’s your *job*, whether you’re an enforcer or not. Ethan knew that. Why the hell didn’t

you?” I kicked again, and Ryan huddled against the base of the tree. He didn’t even try to defend himself. Like he wanted to be punished. Like being hit alleviated some of the guilt.

Marc tugged me again, and I stumbled backward, half-shocked to see the blood on my hand. I hadn’t realized I still carried that much rage.

Ryan looked up. He wiped blood and tears on the sleeve of his jacket and stood slowly. “I’m so sorry, Faythe. I know it’s never gonna be enough, but I am so, so sorry.”

*Yeah. Tell that to Sara and Abby.* “Get out.” My eyes burned, and I wanted to rub them. Or close them.

“Faythe...”

“Get out!” I shouted. “And if you come back, I swear I’ll wear your canines as earrings.”

“Please...” He tried one last time, swiping at the steady trickle of blood from his nose.

“Go!”

Finally Ryan ran. He looked back twice. And I only realized I was crying when I fell to my knees, and Jace licked the hot tears from my face with his warm, rough tongue. They curled around me, both of them sharing their warmth and their comfort, and I dug my fingers into their fur. And for several minutes, I could only cry.

I sat on the couch in the guesthouse, my fingers still numb from the cold, my face still red from crying.

Marc zipped his pants, and the metallic whisper was loud in the near silence, even from the kitchenette across the room. While Jace finished his Shift, Marc brought me a cold bottle of water; no doubt all the glasses were dirty. Half a minute later, Jace stood, nude from his Shift and in no rush to reach for his clothes.

Marc scowled and tossed him the jeans I’d picked up on our way out of the woods.

Jace watched me in concern as he pulled them on, and the look Marc shot him could have frozen lava. But Jace was unfazed. “I’ll get her fixed up. You go get her a clean shirt.”

“I am not leaving you alone with her. Here.” Where Jace and I had...*connected*. On the living room floor.

Jace rolled brilliant blue eyes. “Like I’m gonna hit on her while she’s upset.”

“If memory serves, that’s when she’s most...receptive,” Marc spat.

My temper flared and my hands curled into fists, but I kept my mouth shut. He’d survived being cuckolded—I could survive his anger.

Jace stomped into the kitchen and slammed his hands flat on the countertop, staring across the island at Marc. “You can take this out on me if you want, but leave her the hell alone.”

“You talk to me like that again, and I’ll take this out on your face,” Marc growled through clenched teeth.

“Go for it.” Jace stood straight and spread his arms, inviting the first blow. He wanted to fight, but he wouldn’t start it because he knew that would piss me off.

Marc was *trying* to piss me off. To hurt me like I'd hurt him.

And his tongue turned out to be just as sharp as mine.

"No." I should have been encouraged by the fact that I didn't have to raise my voice to stop them, but in that moment, I was kind of seeing the cup as half-empty. "Unless you want to tell my dad that I beat the snot out of you both, you better lay the hell off." I looked up from the bottle, cold and wet in my hand. "I can't go in there wearing Ryan's blood, and if I borrow a shirt from either one of you, someone's going to ask what happened to my own."

"Fine." Marc nodded toward the front door. "Jace, go get her a clean shirt. She has another one just like it." In fact, I had several button-down black blouses, useful for both work and play.

Jace shrugged. "And what should I say when someone sees me rooting through her drawers, or even just coming out of her room with a shirt?"

"Damn it," Marc swore. No one would question his presence in my room, or his possession of my shirt—in a good month, I lost a couple of articles of clothing in the line of duty, and at least one more to the force of nature that is Marc and his impatience. He slammed one fist into the countertop, then took off for the door without another glance at either of us.

When he was gone, Jace ran water in the sink, then sank onto the couch next to me with a steaming, damp rag. "Do you, um, want to take that off?" He was staring at my bloodstained shirt. "In the most platonic sense of...stripping."

"I shouldn't." Not until Marc was back. But I could hardly stand the scent of Ryan's blood on me. It reminded me of what I'd just done to him, and what he'd let happen to me. So I twisted away from Jace and unbuttoned my blouse.

He gave me space to move, but I felt his gaze on me like a palpable heat, and my heart beat faster.

My hand shook when I dropped the soiled cotton on the floor.

"Here, lean back," Jace whispered, and when I didn't move—when I couldn't, for fear of shattering my fragile self-control—he slid one strong hand behind my neck and cradled my skull, tilting my head back with gentle pressure.

He wiped the back of my jaw with the warm, wet rag, and his pulse whooshed faster with each movement. He closed his eyes, and my heartbeat spiked with panic. There was no platonic touching between me and Jace. Not anymore. And I'd already learned that an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of...Marc's fury and pain.

"I got it." I took the rag from him and perfunctorily cleaned my neck and chest, while he stared at the floor, obviously determined not to watch. To think about something else. When I was done, I dropped the rag on the end table and turned to lean against the couch arm, my legs folded beneath me to keep distance between us.

Jace frowned at me, his intense gaze searching mine. He'd found something else to focus on, and I could already tell I wouldn't like the change of subject. "Do you really dream about it? About being in that basement?"

I stared into my lap, where my fingers tried to twist one another into knots, until Jace's hand closed over them. "You think I'd make that up?"

"You never said anything. Does Marc know?"

I nodded. "How could he not?"

Jace inhaled deeply, and I heard his pulse speed up. "If sleeping alone makes it

worse...you don't have to sleep alone." I looked up with one brow raised, but he rushed on. "I'm not asking for anything. I'm just saying...I'm here."

My heart ached, like it was too full to fit in my chest, and I blinked to keep him from seeing that. "Yeah. Until Marc kills you."

"I'd like to see him try."

"I wouldn't."

Footsteps clomped up the stairs, and Jace moved a foot away on the couch. The door swung open and Marc took us both in. He scowled, but made no comment. We hadn't broken the rules—technically.

"Here." He tossed the clean shirt at me and I stood to put it on. "You better hurry. Angela just turned into the driveway."

## Two

I jogged across the backyard toward the main house, Marc and Jace on my heels. We burst through the back door, and they passed me when I stopped in the guest bathroom to make sure my shirt was straight and there were no leaves in my hair. I had gotten all the blood off my neck, but I had to wash my hands to get Ryan's scent off my right fist, which was when I discovered I'd split two of my knuckles on his face. Crap.

None of my fellow cats would give it a second thought; they'd assume I'd assaulted the hanging bag without my gloves again. But Angela... She probably wouldn't know what to make of my split knuckles, not to mention the thin white line bisecting my left cheek. At least my sleeve covered the long, zigzag of new scar tissue on my left forearm—that was one less question to answer. Assuming she was bold enough to actually ask.

Her engine growled out front, and my pulse spiked almost painfully. Why was I so nervous? Well, truthfully, everyone was nervous. It isn't every day you meet your dead brother's pregnant girlfriend. A human girlfriend, at that. And she had no idea that we weren't completely human, so a good deal of the ambient tension had to do with hiding our little secret, so she didn't run screaming into the...broad daylight.

The rest of it had to do with the baby. Ethan's baby, whose existence we'd only discovered the day we buried my brother. A tiny piece of him we'd had no reason to hope for. The grandchild my parents never expected.

That baby was a genetic miracle, and we desperately wanted Angela to like us. To want to include us in her child's life.

Yet my own nerves went beyond that. They were a complex mix of jealousy, nostalgia, and relief over my near miss with a tragically mundane life.

Angela would be my first up-close look at anything resembling normalcy since I'd left grad school. The freedom I'd once fought for was now gone—choked out of existence by the iron grip of responsibility—and the life I'd once run from had reclaimed me. I'd made my own choices, and while I had undeniably moved past that escapist phase of my life, there was some tiny part of me that leaned toward panic at the knowledge that I couldn't go back now even if I wanted to.

I stared into the mirror, trying to see myself as she would see me. Tangled hair, scarred cheek, skinned knuckles. My face was too thin, my arms and shoulders too well-defined. And there was a hardness behind my eyes now, difficult to describe, but impossible to miss.

I'd seen and done things that would have put most women my age in a padded room. I'd fought for my life, my freedom, and my family. I'd been kidnapped, beaten, broken, clawed, and stabbed. I'd caught rogues, and killed killers, and I'd watched my brother die. It was hard to believe that less than a year ago, I'd been a student like Angela.

Minus the whole faulty-condom-turned-miracle thing.

My mother appeared in the bathroom doorway, nervously twisting her wedding ring as I tried to finger-comb my hair. “She’s here.”

“So I heard.” I turned away from my identity crisis and smiled, almost amused to see her so flustered. My mom hadn’t blinked an eye when she’d faced down a jungle stray in her own basement, but now she looked ready to lose her breakfast. “It’ll be fine,” I insisted, while doubt rang in my head, soft but insistent. There was no way we’d come off like the average American household. The Addams Family had a better shot.

What if Angela knew something was scary-different about us, and she took off with Ethan’s baby? What if she decided not to have it?

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this.” My mother straightened her freshly pressed blouse, and the high arch of her brows managed to convey both eagerness and dread. “I mean, obviously we should help her financially, but maybe we should...keep our distance. It’s not really a good time, with you all leaving tomorrow....”

After months of waiting, lobbying, and fighting on the sidelines, our big day had finally come. Marc, Jace, and I would accompany my father to a meeting of the full Territorial Council, ostensibly for the vote that could reinstate him as council chair—or put Jace’s megalomaniac stepfather, Calvin Malone, in power. But our real reason for going was to present hard-won evidence against Malone as a traitor to our species and hopefully put him out of the running. And completely out of power.

I shoved aside my own doubts and linked my arm through hers to keep her from twisting her own fingers off. “The timing is out of our hands,” I said, and she could only nod. “Let’s just try not to overwhelm her.”

I stepped into the hall, half tugging my mother, and rolled my eyes when I saw Brian, Parker, and Vic peering through the sidelight windows. “Guys. Come on. We’re trying *not* to overwhelm her.”

Brian shrugged, looking younger than ever, and Vic just frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. “You really think there’s any chance of that?”

“If you guys lay off the stares and turn on the charm, yeah.” Though privately I had my doubts. “Remember, you’re normal, nonfurry ranch hands and good friends of the family.” That was close enough to the truth to be believable—if the Lazy S had been a functioning ranch. And if ranch hands were trained to protect their Alpha, patrol their territory, and take down bad guys with badass paw-to-paw combat.

“Brian, go tell my dad she’s here,” I said, and he took off dutifully toward the office, which was virtually soundproof with the door closed, thanks to solid concrete walls.

“This is so weird.” Parker ran one hand through straight salt-and-pepper hair. “Ethan would have been a dad. I can’t picture it.”

“I can.” I steered him away from the door, hoping Angela wouldn’t smell the whiskey on his breath. At one o’clock in the afternoon.

My mother ducked into the living room to tweak an arrangement of snacks, and I squeezed in next to Vic to peek out the window. Our guest still sat in her car with the driver’s-side door open, digging in her purse for something. But I had the distinct impression that she was stalling.

I couldn’t decide who was more nervous—Angela or my mom. Or me.

“Scoot over,” Kaci said, and I turned to find the young tabby standing behind me, hazel eyes wide, long brown hair pulled into a thick wavy ponytail at the base of her neck. Kaci didn’t look nervous. She looked curious. And skeptical.

Ethan’s death had hit her very hard, and she now seemed both fascinated to meet his only remaining link to the world and ambivalent to the woman who’d known a very different side of him. “She looks...normal.”

Jace laughed. “You were expecting two heads?”

Kaci only frowned. “How come she’s just sitting in her car?”

Marc spoke up from the dining room doorway, making no attempt to look through the window. “I’m sure she’s nervous.”

And she hadn’t even met our brood yet. “Okay, why don’t you guys all go sit, so we don’t overwhelm her the moment she walks in the door.”

Marc’s frown mirrored Kaci’s, but he herded the thirteen-year-old tabby toward the living room and shot one last irritated glance at me and Jace before stepping through the doorway and out of sight. I’d been nominated for the welcoming committee because I was the only tabby near her age—at least, the only one with flawless English—and Jace got to play because he’d set up the meeting with Angela. He’d dated her twin for a few weeks, back when Ethan and Angela first started going out.

Yes, Jace and Ethan dated twins. Seriously.

Jace stepped closer to me in the deserted hallway, ostensibly to look through the window, and the warmth from his chest leached through the back of my shirt. “You ready?” he asked, but the question felt loaded, like Angela was the last thing on his mind.

Mom was right; the timing could *not* have been worse.

I sighed. “Not even kind of.”

He turned me by both shoulders and grinned down at me. “She won’t bite. And she’s probably the only person within a square mile who can swear to that right now.”

“That’s part of the problem.”

I opened the door, and Angela looked up when we stepped onto the porch. Then she took a deep breath and got out of the car.

*She’s so young*, I thought, taking in her slim form and freckled cheeks. But she was only a year younger than I was, and twenty-two really wasn’t that young to be a first-time mother. Even today, most tabbies already had a son or two by Angela’s age.

I smiled, and her mouth turned up in a nervous reflection of my own expression. Then she noticed the tom behind me, and her whole face brightened.

“Jace!” She sounded so familiar I had to fight a sharp jolt of jealousy, though I knew she and Jace had never been involved. But I was suddenly irritated by the realization that she knew more about some part of his life than I did. And even more about Ethan’s. “I wasn’t sure you’d be here.”

“Like I’d let you walk into the lion’s den all alone,” he teased, and that streak of jealousy in me grew stronger as her smile widened. Though Jace and Ethan had rarely ever sat at home on the weekends, I couldn’t remember ever actually seeing him interact with someone outside the sphere of our secret existence. He was...different. Relaxed and confident, showing no sign of the power struggle with Marc or the bloodlust we’d all been battling for weeks now.

I was amazed that he could turn all that off and set her at ease. And beneath my jealousy, I was grateful, because none of the rest of us knew Angela well enough to play Virgil, guiding her through the hell our world had become since Ethan's death.

"Don't worry, they're all eager to meet you," Jace said, and I followed him down the steps, hanging back when she hugged him, clinging to him like a life raft in a storm.

"Andrea still asks about you," she said, when he finally pulled away.

Jace stiffened, like he wanted to glance back at me, and pulled one hand through his hair. "How is she?"

"Fine. Surprised." She grinned and ran one hand over her flat stomach, and some vague tension in me eased. She was happy to be pregnant. She didn't resent Ethan's baby, and that made me like her, in spite of her familiar manner with Jace. "She's excited to be an aunt."

So was I.

I'd never expected to be related by blood to a child who wasn't mine. Few toms ever had children, and though Ethan was a great fighter, he wasn't a leader. He would never have been an Alpha, nor would he have settled in a childless human marriage like Michael. So if not for Angela and her baby, we would have nothing left of him but memories.

My eyes watered at the thought of a baby with Ethan's green eyes, and a shock of his black hair.

"Is that her?" Angela asked, and I glanced up, surprised.

"Yeah." Jace waved me forward, and I took the last two steps slowly. "Faythe, this is Angela Raymond. Angie, this is Faythe, Ethan's sister."

"It's so great to meet you." She threw her arms around my neck, and I stumbled back in surprise. But Angela was unfazed, so I patted her back awkwardly. "The guys talked about you all the time," she said, when she finally let go, and her blue-eyed gaze met mine frankly, after a brief, puzzled glance at my scarred left cheek. Obviously they hadn't mentioned that. "I feel like I already know you."

*Oh, I doubt that...*

But she was so wide-eyed—so earnest, in spite of her nerves—that it was impossible not to smile back at her. Not to like her.

Ethan had considered himself a player. He'd had no trouble lovin' 'n' leavin' girl after girl. Until Angela. And now, seeing her, hearing her, I understood why she'd outlasted the others, and I wondered if, given time, she might have actually won a place in his heart, instead of just his bed.

"Everyone's excited to meet you," Jace said, gesturing toward the front door.

"Everyone?" Her forehead furrowed and she looked at the house as if it might swallow her whole.

"Don't worry." Jace put one hand at her back to guide her forward. "Meeting them is the easy part." He glanced back at me and winked. "Remembering the names might be a bit of a challenge."

I closed Angela's car door, then followed them inside.

The house was silent, but for the whispered breaths and excited heartbeats coming from the living room, which Angela probably couldn't hear. Everyone was listening. Waiting. Eager for the first up-close glimpse.

This was unprecedented. We'd only recently learned that humans and werecats could sire children, and while strays were proof that that *had* happened—to be “infected,” a human must already carry a recessive gene donated by a werecat somewhere in the family tree—there were very few cases of toms actually claiming their illegitimate children. And all of those cases were very recent because, before, such pregnancies had been considered impossible.

Ethan's baby would be born human, and the difference between his blood and his mother's would be small enough to avoid detection in the basic newborn tests, as had been happening for decades with potential strays. So my nephew—the baby would almost certainly be a boy—would have no true place in our violent, complicated world until and unless he was one day scratched or bitten by a werecat. And infection was still a capital crime, even between blood relatives, a concept we as a species had only recently been forced to confront.

As Angela stepped through the front door into our house—our Pride's headquarters ever since my father became Alpha—I tried to imagine what we must look like to her. What we must *feel* like. Most humans lacked the appropriate mental compartment in which to file us. They would sense something different about us, but be unable to say what. We might scare her. We might fascinate her. We might never see her again.

That was my mother's worst fear.

Jace led her to the first room on the right, and Angela stopped cold in the doorway. Her smile froze, then faded into uncertainty as her focus skipped from face to face, none of which I could see from the hall.

We were a motley bunch at best—even compared to most other Prides—and we were a lot for a human to take in at once. Especially a newly pregnant college student, whose boyfriend had just died.

This was as hard for her as it was for us.

Sympathy for Angela flooded me, and I gave Jace a little shove. He raised one brow at me but moved over, and I edged past Angela into the living room to make the introductions. To represent my family and try to bridge the gap between worlds.

All the men had stood when we'd entered the room, and every last one of them stared straight at her. I sighed in frustration and rolled my eyes at several of them. *Way to look normal, guys.* I forced a laugh and turned back to her. “Did Ethan tell you we have a big extended family?”

She nodded hesitantly.

“I know it's kind of overwhelming, but everyone really wanted to meet you.” Though in retrospect, introducing her to the entire household at once seemed like an extraordinarily *bad* plan.

She nodded again, mute.

I led her to the right and we worked our way around the room. She shook hands, and I made brief introductions and explanations. My fellow enforcers were first. “Angela, this is Brian, Vic, and Marc. They work for my father.”

“On the ranch? Like Jace?” Her eyes lit up; she was pleased to have found some logic to cling to in the sea of confusion we'd tossed her into.

“Um, yeah.” They each shook her hand and welcomed her, but Marc eyed Jace as he followed us around the room.