

Alpha

By
Rachel Vincent,

Chapter 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.”