

PREY

By

Rachel Vincent

Marc changed lanes, and I watched in the side view mirror as Vic followed his lead.

“How’s Kaci? Still refusing to Shift?”

“Yeah. I’m starting to really worry about her. She’s tired all the time, and listless, and she only perks up when I let her watch me spar. She seems to think if she learns to defend herself in human form, she’ll never have to Shift again.”

“What’s the doc say?”

I sighed. “He says that if she doesn’t give in to her feline form soon, her body will start shutting down a little at a time, until she’s too weak to move. Refusing to Shift will eventually kill her. And by ‘eventually,’ he means soon.”

“Damn.” Marc looked surprised for a moment, then concern dragged his mouth into a deep frown. “So what are you going to do?”

I shrugged, scowling out the window at the ice-glazed power lines running along the highway. “I don’t know. But I’m not going to let her waste away. She’s fought too hard for survival to give up now. Especially over something as simple as this.”

Unfortunately, Shifting wasn’t simple for her. The last time she’d been in cat form, she’d killed four people, including her own mother and sister. But that kid was strong. And stubborn enough to make sure nothing like that ever happened again, even if she had to kill herself to prevent it.

The rest of the Pride was counting on my strength and stubbornness to override hers. In the beginning, I'd thought it would work. But after nine weeks with no success, I wasn't so sure.

"Dr. Carver said to call him if she hasn't done it by this time next week. He's going to try to force her Shift." With an intravenous cocktail of adrenaline and a couple of other drugs.

Marc's head swiveled to face me, brows high in surprise. "Into cat form? Is that possible?"

"In theory, it shouldn't be much different than forcing someone into human form." Which we had to do occasionally, in order to question uncooperative strays, or stop them from shredding anyone who came near. "But in practice...well, no one's ever tried it. I hate to experiment on a child, but she's really leaving us no choice."

"Have you told her?"

"Yeah." I rubbed my forehead, fighting off frustration. I hadn't seen Marc in months, and I wanted these few hours together to pass pleasantly. "But she doesn't think we'll do it. She says she'd rather be tired for the rest of her life than risk hurting someone in cat form."

"Yeah, but would she rather be dead?"

I closed my eyes and let my head fall against the headrest. "Honestly, I think she would. She's horrified by what happened last time, and we still can't get her to talk about it. But I'm hoping that if I can—"

My eyes flew open as Marc's car jerked beneath us and started to sputter.

"What's that?" I sat straight in my seat, staring out the windshield at nothing but darkness, broken by two overlapping cones of light from the headlights.

He didn't answer, but his hands tightened around the already misshapen wheel—a casualty of many past temper fits—and his frown deepened.

The car sputtered again, then began to shake like it was trying to die. Steam rolled out from beneath the hood, white as snow against the cold, black night.

Marc veered slowly onto the right shoulder, glancing back and forth between the windshield and the rearview mirror. I twisted to watch as Vic came to a stop behind us. We got out, crunching on a layer of ice, and Vic joined us at the front of the car, where Marc pulled a penlight from his pocket and popped the hood. He shined the light at parts I didn't recognize, grunting in frustration. Then he knelt and shimmied under the car, in spite of the frigid concrete at his back.

Seconds later he emerged, scowling. "My radiator hose is slashed."

"Son of a bitch!" Vic muttered, as Ethan stepped out of the SUV, followed by Manx, clutching the bundled baby to her chest. "You can't drive long like that. No more than ten, fifteen miles. Had to happen at the gas station."

Marc nodded in agreement, then his eyes met mine, his face lit unevenly by the headlights. "We'll pile into Vic's SUV with everyone else, and I'll have mine towed."

Obviously, that wasn't how I'd intended our reunion to go, but it could have been much worse, especially considering that some asshole had sabotaged Marc's car. What if they'd cut the brake line instead?

Pissed now, I jerked open the passenger side door and leaned in to grab the sodas Marc had bought at the Conoco. And that's when I saw them. Two pinpoints of red light in the trees across the street. Those lights went out, then appeared again a second later.

Eyes. Cat eyes, reflecting the little available light. Someone was blinking, and whoever it was, he wasn't alone. Several more sets of eyes appeared in the trees, each pair at least ten feet from the next.

My stomach twisted in on itself, churning around my road-trip munchies in fear. We hadn't just been sabotaged. We'd been fucking ambushed.

Straightening slowly, I sniffed, wincing when the frigid air pierced my nose, throat, and lungs with a thousand microscopic shards of ice. Fortunately, one good whiff was enough.

Strays.

"Um...guys?" I hissed as the first dark form slunk out of the woods and into the moonlit night, uncommon confidence in each silent step.

"We see them," Marc whispered, and I glanced over the roof to find him backing slowly toward the trunk of his car.

"Three strays at your six o'clock, Faythe," Vic said, anger threading a cord of danger through his voice as he stared over my shoulder. "No, make that four."

At my back too? Damn it! "Five more straight ahead." I nodded at the trees across the street and stepped to the side so I could close the car door.

Gravel crunched on my left, and my brother spoke from his position near the passenger side of the Suburban. "This makes no sense. Strays are loners."

Yet several had united to fight us in Montana two months earlier. This new trend made me nervous. As did the cats creeping slowly toward us—from all directions. Each in cat form. At a glance I counted eleven of them now, and there were only five of us, even if Manx could fight holding a baby. Which she could not.

"Manx, get in the car with Des," Marc ordered. Manx climbed back through Vic's rear driver's side door without a word and shoved it closed.

Okay, make that *four* of us.

“Faythe?” Marc had his trunk open now, and he held something out to me. I inched toward him with my arm extended, sliding for a moment before I could steady myself on the thin layer of ice beneath my boots. Something long, cold, and hard hit my palm—a shovel, still caked with dried dirt.

I arched one brow at him in question, and he gave me a grim smile. “We don’t stand a chance unarmed.” And there was clearly no time to Shift. I shivered from the cold, but knew I’d soon be sweating from exertion.

Marc tossed a second shovel to Vic, who caught it one-handed, then he pulled a small ax from the trunk and wrapped both hands around the twelve-inch rubber grip. He hefted it briefly, as if considering, then handed it to Ethan, who’d come to a stop on his left.

“You ready for this?” Marc asked, pulling a crowbar from the trunk for himself before slamming it shut.

“Looking forward to it.” Ethan removed his ear phones from around his neck with his free hand. He wound them around his MP3 player and slid both into his front pocket, then gave the ax an experimental swing. “What, no samurai?” He swung the ax again, then shrugged, green eyes glinting in bleak humor. “I guess this’ll do.”

“Okay, let’s go.” Marc stalked toward the SUV and stopped at the driver’s side door. “Manx?” He tapped on the window, and her head appeared between the seats. “Don’t come out, no matter what.”

She nodded.

Marc checked to make sure the keys were still in the ignition—they were—then turned to me, his features severe in the harsh, reddish glare of his own taillights. “If this goes bad, get them out of here. Don’t look back, just drive straight to the ranch.” I started to protest, but he ignored

me. “I’m serious, Faythe. Get them back safely. I’ll haunt your ass till the day you die if you let something happen to that baby.”

I nodded, more alarmed by the tone of his voice than by the cats, the nearest of which was now only feet away, slinking across the near lane eight feet to my right. Two serpentine puffs of air floated from his nostrils with each breath. Moonlight shined on his glossy fur. Rage glinted in the reflective surface of his eyes.

Marc stepped closer to the hood and tossed his head, telling me to scoot toward the rear door. “Keep your backs to the vehicle and make them come to you.”

And that’s when the first cat pounced.

Copyright © 2009 by Rachel Vincent. All rights reserved.