

HUNT

A Shifters Short Story

By

Rachel Vincent

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Rachelyvincent.com

To my husband—my number one fan, my other half,
and my partner in this first independent project.

The forest was singing, and its song was all mine. The others, with their human ears, heard only the crackle of the campfire and their own voices. Huddled in down jackets and sleeping bags, they thought they owned the world by virtue of their ability to tame it, and that was an understandable mistake. But they'd never *really* seen the forest. Not like I saw it.

They couldn't feel it like I felt it either, poking at my paws with sticks and thorns. Blowing through my fur with the scents of pine, and ash, and warm, plump rodent. Winding through my soul, with the knowledge that I was but part of a whole, a single predator serving nature as surely as it served me.

Soon I'd have to go back to the campfire. To my friends' idea of "roughing it" with battery powered radios, canned food, and no-rinse bathing wipes, guaranteed to keep you fresh even days into a showerless camping trip. Soon I'd have to put on my human skin so I could be Abby Wade, normal college sophomore. I'd been hiding the feline half of my life for a year and a half, and my secret forest run was just a temporary reprieve from all things human.

Still, the next few moments were mine.

My paws snapped through twigs and sank into underbrush, pushing against the earth to propel me faster, higher. I was a streak of black against the night, darker than the forest, yet a part of it, as I hadn't been in weeks. Small animals fled ahead of my paws, scurrying through tangles of fallen leaves and branches. The scents of oak, birch, maple, and pine were familiar comforts, relaxing me even as they pushed me for more speed, greater distance. Thorns caught in my fur. Cold air burned in my nose and stroked the length of my body as I ran, like a caress from the universe itself.

I was welcome in the woods. I belonged there, as I'd never truly belonged anywhere else.

When I'd been gone as long as I could stay away without worrying the others, I slowed to a gradual stop, huffing from exertion. It was time for a snack, to replace the energy I'd burned during my shift.

My ears swiveled on my head, pinpointing the telltale sounds of prey. Werecats can't

track by scent, like a dog, so we hunt with our ears and our eyes. On my run, I'd smelled mice and a couple of weasels, both of which stay active in the winter, but I was holding out for a rabbit, or even a beaver. No use wasting a deer with only me there to feed on it.

Something scuttled through the underbrush several yards to the southeast, too fast and light to be raccoon. Probably a mouse or a rat. Too much effort for too little meat.

I slowed my breathing and listened harder. From the north came a soft, rapid swooshy heartbeat, but no movement. Whatever it was, it knew I was close and hungry. I turned my head and sniffed toward the north—I could pinpoint prey with my ears, but could only ID it with my nose, which told me I was hunting rabbit. *Perfect*. Its fur wouldn't be white yet—not in mid-October—but my feline eyes would have no trouble distinguishing it from its surroundings.

I pounced. The rabbit sprang from the underbrush and landed three feet away. I caught a glimpse of brown and white fur, then it was off again, racing through the woods and vaulting over low shrubs and fallen logs.

I ran after it at half speed, reluctant to end the chase too soon—who knew when I'd have another chance to hunt? But seconds later, a scream shattered the cold, quiet night with a sharp echo of pain and terror.

A sudden spike of fear froze me where I stood. I knew that scream—that voice. Robyn. My roommate of more than three years, and for the next three nights, my tent-mate.

No!

I turned and raced through the woods toward the campsite, my lungs burning, my heart trying to beat its way through my sternum. I had no plan, no thought beyond simply getting there, and only the vaguest understanding that if I burst into the camp in cat form, I'd scare her far worse than whatever had made her scream.

But I'd only gone a few yards when a second scream split the night again, followed by two deeper, masculine shouts of fear and pain.

I pushed myself harder, my brain racing through the possibilities. *Bear?* There'd been no growling or roaring, and I hadn't smelled anything even slightly ursine. Besides, black bears typically shy away from humans. As do bruins, though to my knowledge, no one had ever spotted a bear Shifter in the heart of the Appalachian Territory.

So what the hell was happening?

I flew through the forest, retracing my own path with no thought for the living buffet

scurrying all around me. The screaming continued, and I heard terror from Robyn and Dani, but sheer agony from their boyfriends. I'd seen a friend murdered once, which was how I knew exactly what I was hearing in that moment—my friends were being slaughtered.

My clothes hung on branches ahead, but I raced past them. The screaming was louder now, but there were fewer voices. Dani's boyfriend Mitch had gone silent. I was too late to help him, and before I'd gone another few yards, Olsen's screaming ended in a horrible, inarticulate gurgle.

My lungs burned and my legs ached—werecats are sprinters, not long-distance runners—but I pushed forward, demanding more from my body than I'd ever had reason to expect from it.

This *couldn't* be real. Werecat strays were always slugging it out in territorial disputes and dominance challenges, but the most dangerous thing I'd ever encountered in the human/college world was my Chemistry professor's hardline no-late-work policy.

Robyn's screams intensified with her boyfriend's silence, then suddenly stopped, and for a moment, my heart refused to beat. *Not Robyn*. I couldn't lose my roommate of more than a year and the best friend I had in the human world. The girl who left her toothpaste open on the bathroom counter and made me hot chocolate in the middle of the night, when nightmares woke me up.

Then in the sudden quiet, the forest produced a new voice, and my next steps were fueled by simultaneous terror and relief.

"...mouth shut, bitch, or I'll slice you wide open. Her too."

Robyn and Dani were alive—so far, anyway. But who the hell was with them?

I'd gone a few more steps when the smell of blood rolled across the forest floor like an olfactory fog, overwhelming my senses and shredding my heart. The sheer strength of the scent was horrifying, and the thought of how much Mitch and Olsen must have lost made me sick to my stomach.

I slowed as I approached the campsite and logic and caution finally overcame the terror that had propelled my dash through the woods. There was nothing I could do for the guys, and I'd be no good to the girls if I burst into the clearing and got shot by some psycho, backwoods hunter. So I snuck the last thirty feet or so, silent and virtually invisible in the dark, as only a werecat can be.

Flames flickered through a tangle of branches; the campfire still burned bright. Blinking,

I edged forward slowly, mostly hidden by a thick, fat bush. I saw Olsen first and had to swallow the traumatized whine sliding up from my throat. He lay on his back in the clearing, his shadow twitching on the ground with every lick of the orange flames. His blue eyes were open, his mouth slack. His coat was unzipped, his shirt completely drenched in blood, which now soaked into the ground beneath him.

He'd been gutted.

Mitch lay in the same position, a quarter of the way around the campfire, his face forever frozen in a grimace of agony. His stomach and chest had been sliced up the middle, but unlike Olsen's, Mitch's coat and shirt had been spread open, showcasing the full extent of the damage. So the girls would know the same thing could happen to them.

The wound was long, and deep, and straight. The weapon could only be a blade, wielded by a human hand. This was not shifter violence.

Nausea rolled over me for the first time ever, in cat form. I'd seen a lot of slaughtered deer in the seven years since my first shift, at age thirteen. I'd even brought down a couple myself. But these weren't deer. They were friends.

My vision blurred until I couldn't keep Mitch's body in focus, yet when I glanced away, visual clarity returned, as if my brain didn't want to interpret the images of carnage my eyes were sending.

I blinked and forced the slaughter back into focus. If I couldn't even look at the corpses, how could I hope to save Robyn and Dani?

Maybe I couldn't. I wasn't a cop. I wasn't even an enforcer. My summer training sessions with Faythe had included neither rescue missions nor hostage negotiation. But I had to try. I was all they had.

My roommate and her best friend knelt on the ground on the other side of the fire, and watching them through the flames sent chills through me. As if I were already seeing them die. They cried and huddled together, alternately staring at their butchered boyfriends and cringing up at their captors.

Three men stood with their backs to me, each dressed in hunter's camouflage. Two of them held hunting knives, still dripping blood onto the packed dirt. They were human, based on both their scent and their weapons, yet every bit as monstrous as the cruelest shifters I'd ever met.

One of them smelled vaguely familiar, though I couldn't quite place his scent.

I backed carefully away from the bush concealing me and began to circle the clearing slowly and silently. I'd have to be within pouncing distance before I made my move.

"Where is she?" the man in the middle demanded, and my heart actually skipped a beat. Did he mean me? Had they been watching us? Or had they simply seen five hiking packs and deduced an absence?

"Where's who?" Robyn said through chattering teeth, loyal to a fault. She would keep me out of this, even if it cost her last breath. But I couldn't let that happen. They were scared and defenseless against men with knives, and I remembered being scared and defenseless. I remembered way too well...

The man in the middle backhanded her, and Robyn fell over sideways, unable to right herself with her hands taped together in her lap. It took all of my self-control to hold in the growl itching at the back of my throat as I rounded the halfway point of the clearing. Drawing attention to myself before I was ready to fight would get us all killed. That was one of the first things Faythe had taught me.

The tallest of the men hauled Robyn upright by one arm as I continued to circle silently, aching inside while she cried. "We know Abby was with you," he said, and I froze mid-step. I recognized that voice. A few more feet, and my eyes confirmed what my ears already knew.

Steve... something. He'd transferred into my psych class a week into the semester and had sat in the chair behind me ever since, trying to make conversation while I nodded and pretended to be absorbed in my notes.

What the hell was going on? Had he followed us?

"Where'd she go?" the second man demanded, and I noticed as I edged along the clearing that the contents of both tents had been dumped in a pile about three feet from the campfire, including my sleeping bag and purse. Was this a robbery, or were they actually looking for me? Neither possibility made much sense—I hardly knew Steve and had never even met his accomplices, and how much cash could they possibly hope to score from a campsite?

The third man stepped forward, silently threatening Robyn and Dani with the knife when no one answered. My blood boiled, even as fear spiked my veins with a rush of adrenalin.

Tears poured down Robyn's cheeks, but Dani answered, staring at the blade now inches from her throat. "She went for a hike!"

“In the dark?” Steve crossed bulky arms over a bulkier chest, the tip of his knife tapping against the waist of his thick camo pants.

Dani shrugged, and I saw a spark of the stubborn defiance that made her fun to debate—and might soon get her killed. “She likes nature.”

“And she took a flashlight,” Robyn added, shaking violently, either from the cold or from shock. “Please, you can have anything you want. My purse is over there.” She nodded toward the pile of supplies. “Just take it and let us go.”

“Oh come on, this is a party!” Steve glanced at his friends with a look of anticipation that chilled my blood. “But we’re one girl shy. You have her number?” Robyn nodded slowly, and Steve glanced at the third man. “Tim, give her a call.”

I’d circled to within feet of my roommate by the time Tim—shorter and thicker than Steve—hauled Robyn to her feet. She whimpered when his hand slid into the front pocket of her jeans, and fresh tears rolled down her face. My claws curled into the underbrush, itching to rip through his flesh instead.

I watched Robyn and Tim, waiting for my opportunity to pounce, but in my head, I saw something else. Another man. Another place. A bruising grip on my own arm. A cruel, unwelcome hand, followed by pain, and screaming, and humiliation.

The bastard leered at Robyn until she closed her eyes, then he shoved her down again and slid one finger across the screen of her phone to wake it up. He was already scrolling through the contacts list by the time she hit the ground. Tim pressed a couple of buttons, then held the phone to his ear, and they all waited.

But I already knew what would happen, and sure enough, my phone rang from inside my purse on the edge of the pile of sleeping bags and hiking packs.

“Damn it!” Steve kicked my purse across the clearing without bothering to open it, as his dark-haired accomplice ended the call from Robyn’s phone.

I’d left my phone in my purse because my feline form suffered an obvious and bothersome lack of pockets.

“Fine,” Steve said at last, having resigned himself to the inconvenient conclusion. “She’ll come back—where else could she go?” He shrugged. “We’ll just start the party without her.”

No... I recognized that tone. That slimy, hungry grin. I knew what would happen next, if I didn’t stop it.

Tim dragged Robyn away from Dani and closer to me. Robyn screamed and kicked, trying to twist free, but none of it fazed him. He dropped her on the ground and her head hit a fallen tree branch. Robyn moaned, dazed, and I could practically see the fight drain out of her.

“Get off her!” Dani shouted, struggling to get to her feet without the use of her hands. Her cheeks were dry and scarlet, fury eclipsing her fear, at least for the moment. She would fight them. And that would get her killed.

The third man glanced at Steve, brows raised, silently asking for permission. He hadn’t said a word so far, but his clenched fists spoke volumes.

Steve nodded and tossed an openhanded gesture toward Dani. “She’s all yours, Billy. I’m holdin’ out for the little redhead.”

Me of course.

Wouldn’t he be surprised to see me sporting black fur and claws instead of my usual mass of curls? One hundred and four pounds was only a scrap of a woman, but added up to one hell of cat. Not that he’d ever know it was me.

Billy shoved Dani down, then kicked her in the ribs before she could roll away. My sharp, feline ears heard bones crack, and I cringed. Dani’s shout became a scream of pain, then he dropped on top of her, his huge, bloody hunting knife pressed into her throat. “One more sound, and I’ll cut your fucking head off.”

Silent tears rolled down Dani’s face, and each breath was a pained gasp. Her eyes closed and her head rolled to one side as he fumbled at the waistband of her jeans, and suddenly I couldn’t move.

Bars. Tears. Pain. Blood. Terror.

No, that was all over. All but the fear. It had been more than four years, yet the terror was suddenly back like a razor-tipped Boom-a-rang. My heart beat too hard. The whole world began to go gray beneath memories of my own helplessness and humiliation.

No! This can’t be happening... Not again. Not in the human world. Not while I cower in the bushes.

Run! the voice inside my head shouted, as each breath slipped from my throat faster than the last. *They’ll do the same thing to you if they find you. You can’t survive it again.*

But that was a lie told by the scared little girl still huddling in a dark corner of my mind. I’d grown up. I’d moved on. I’d learned to fight. True, my skills were unproven, but they were

real, and they were a game changer. Beyond all of that, I was in cat form. They'd never recognize the Abby they were looking for in my current configuration of flesh and bone—and fur.

I *could* survive this. I could *prevent* this. I could end those men.

“No!” Robyn screamed, trying to shove Tim off with her bound hands. “Don’t, please!”

That was all I could take.

I leapt out of the bushes, fury pulsing through my veins hotter than blood. A growl rumbled from my throat and rolled across the clearing. I slammed into Tim’s side, knocking him off Robyn and onto the ground. My front paws pinned him to the dirt.

Around me, everyone froze. For one long second, no one even breathed, and several hearts actually skipped beats. Then Robyn took a single, shaky breath and began edging away from us slowly, pushing herself with her feet because her hands were still tied. She was clearly as scared of me as she was of him, and terror had now driven comprehension from her eyes. For the moment at least, Robyn had checked out.

Beneath my front paws, Tim was sweating in spite of the cold, and his scent was part fear, part adrenaline. But not enough fear. I leaned closer, and the aggressive huff of breath from my nose blew his dark hair back. I sank my claws through his thick camo jacket and into flesh. He flinched and when his mouth dropped open in surprise, I saw blood staining his teeth.

I sniffed while he shook in terror beneath me. The blood was Robyn’s. The bastard had *bitten* her.

The entire world bled to red. I lunged, and the next few seconds were a series of unfocused, disconnected sensations. My teeth sank through something firm and warm. Tim jerked beneath me. I tossed my head, and flesh tore with a satisfying *ripping* sensation. Warm, fragrant blood sprayed my face, my shoulders. The form beneath me jerked one last time, then lay still.

Someone screamed.

I backed away from the body, cleaning my muzzle out of long-term hunting habit, and looked up to find Robyn huddled against the side of the nearest tent, shrieking uncontrollably. Her jacket lay on the ground to her left and she clutched the remains of her torn shirt to her chest, but the bloody bite mark on her right shoulder was exposed.

Without thinking, I stepped toward her, confused by my simultaneous human need to

comfort her and my feline inclination to first clean the fresh blood from my fur.

Robyn's screams rose into hoarse hysterics as I approached, so I stopped, physically shaking myself to clear my head. To fend off encroaching bloodlust and cling to my ill-fitting human logic. She was bitten, but otherwise unharmed. She'd be fine, physically.

I turned away from Robyn, forcing myself to ignore that small part of me that wanted to chase her, simply because she wanted to run. My roommate wasn't prey. But the men who'd hurt her were.

Steve stood where I'd left him, his back to the fire, his white-knuckled fist still clenching a bloody knife. He watched me carefully, steadily, blade held ready, and again I saw too little fear to suit me, and nowhere near enough shock. He'd have to be either foolish or insane to openly challenge a giant cat, and frankly, I was hoping he was both.

I growled, and for one surreal moment, I wondered if he could see the other me peeking through my greenish cat eyes. The human me, who'd once suffered what he and his friends had tried to deal out. That Abby couldn't fight back, but *this* Abby could. And would.

Steve's blood whooshed rapidly through his veins. His eyes were bright and glossy with exhilaration. His arm tensed. He raised the knife for a strike, but I saw it coming because he wore his intent like a badge of stupidity pinned right to his shirt.

I swatted the blade from his hand with my front paw, and my blow swung him around. He went down a foot from the campfire, but was up in an instant.

"Good kitty..." he whispered, his voice low and steady, both hands spread in a defensive posture as I growled. He glanced over my head, and a sudden scuffle at my back made my fur stand on end. I leapt to the side, but was too late to completely avoid the blow. Billy's huge knife slashed across my front right leg, several inches from my shoulder.

I hissed, and suddenly the blood-scent on the air had a new flavor. My flavor.

Dani scooted away from Billy. I took a step forward, trying to drive the men closer together, where I could see them both, but my injured leg half-collapsed beneath me. I couldn't walk on it. Not for long anyway.

Steve noticed the limp, and I could see him assessing his chances. He had a real shot at survival now, and he knew it. He backed slowly toward the tent and hauled Robyn up by one arm. She screamed again. I limped forward, hissing, but before I could pounce, he glanced behind me, at Billy.

“We can’t bring them both,” he said. “Do her.”

“No!” Dani shouted, and her shuffling grew frantic. She understood before I did.

I whirled to see him haul Dani up by one arm. She dug her heels into the dirt, trying to pull free. I stepped toward them, and my leg folded again. Billy shoved his knife into her stomach and dragged it through her flesh toward her sternum. Dani’s eyes went wide, and her mouth fell open. I roared in grief and outrage. He let go, and she collapsed onto the dirt, blood pouring from the gaping hole in her torso.

“Stay, kitty...” Steve said, slowly pulling Robyn toward the woods. Terrified and sobbing, Robyn glanced from me to Dani, then to Billy, whose bloody knife glinted in the firelight. But she didn’t fight his grip this time. She knew better.

Billy circled me slowly, leaving plenty of room between us. He held his knife ready, and though I growled the whole time, I didn’t pounce again. And he didn’t expect me to. A natural-born cat—they probably thought I was a melanistic jaguar—would never chase three healthy humans into the woods on an injured leg, when there were three fresh bodies to eat right there in the clearing. And there would soon be a fourth.

Dani was still breathing, but she wouldn’t be for long, and I couldn’t let her die alone. Especially since I couldn’t reasonably rescue Robyn. Not in cat form, when I couldn’t put weight on my injured front leg.

Steve backed into the trees, pulling a shocked and sobbing Robyn with him, her face streaked with tears, her shirt streaked with blood. Billy stepped slowly out of the clearing on his side of the fire, and moments later, I heard him clomping through the underbrush toward Steve and Robyn. Then they headed through the woods together.

The last thing I heard before their footsteps faded from even my sensitive cat hearing was Billy’s whispered question, and Steve’s even softer reply.

“So, we’re just giving up on Abby?”

“No way. We’ll regroup at the cabin.”

I huffed softly through my nose as I limped toward Dani. There was a cabin. And they were obviously expecting me—the human me, the only one they knew—to return to the camp site. But why would they expect a girl they assumed to be helpless to return to the scene of a blood bath? Did they think I hadn’t heard my friends screaming? Was human hearing really that bad?

Regardless, if they were planning to come back for me, the cabin must be close. I could track them. I could get Robyn back. But not until Dani was gone. And not until I'd made a phone call.

Triple homicide in a werecat territory, involving a werecat tabby, was definitely a notify-your-local Alpha situation.

Even mortally wounded, Dani tried to scoot away from me as I approached. She was dying, and she knew it—I could see mortality gleaming in her eyes, along with reflected flames from the campfire—but she wasn't eager to speed up the process by being eaten alive. And she had no reason to think I wouldn't do just that.

I dropped my head as I limped forward, whining softly, trying to look unthreatening. To show submissiveness and concern. But she didn't stop struggling until I dropped onto the cold ground beside her and laid my chin on her leg.

"Wha—?" But she lacked the strength to finish even that one word. Her heartbeat had already begun to slow, and her chest was rattling. I didn't want to leave her, but I couldn't afford to let Robyn get too far away. And I still had to make that call. So I licked the back of her left hand—still bound to its mate—then scooted away from her to begin my Shift. And for the first time in my life, it didn't matter that a human was about to witness the entire process.

My injured leg bent to spare it, I stood three feet from the fire, and its warmth was my only comfort in the face of grief, fear, and ever-deepening rage. The last time my life had been in danger, I'd been too scared to Shift, even for my own safety. Even with Faythe there to talk me through it.

Not this time. This time, the changes came almost too quickly to bear, my Shift fueled by an intense need to protect Robyn and avenge my other friends. To unleash justice on men so like the ones who'd brought a violent end to my adolescence, robbing me of peace and security for years afterward.

My muscles tensed, bunching and stretching as they took on new shapes. My joints popped in and out of their sockets as, in my memory, I screamed "No!" over and over, until the weight pinning me to the ground stole my breath.

My paws flexed uncontrollably, aching as they stretched and reformed. My claws retracted into the tips of my fingers as, in my brutal recollection, I clutched at my clothes, at the bars, at the edge of the bare mattress, desperate to make it stop. To hold myself together as long

as possible.

My muzzle began to shorten, my gums throbbing as my teeth broadened, the feline points smoothing into rounded human edges. My jaws ached, as they'd once ached from screaming, then from trying not to scream, desperate not to give him the satisfaction.

My flesh began to itch as my fur receded, and in my mind, my skin burned—scalding water from the shower. I'd scrubbed and scrubbed, but couldn't wash them off. Couldn't clean down to the real me. The me they'd killed in that basement, in the shadow of the bars I still saw sometimes when I closed my eyes.

When my Shift was over, I sat on my bare knees on the frigid ground, panting from exertion, crying over old ghosts. If I didn't hurry, it would happen to Robyn too. The men who took her may not have had bars and a basement, but they had knives, and they had no reason to let her live.

As soon as I could move again, I crawled over to Dani. Danielle Martin, with her big mouth and her kind eyes, who'd invited me to come on their couple's weekend. Who'd insisted I wouldn't be a fifth wheel. But Dani's kind eyes were open and empty now, staring into the woods. Her bound hands still lay over her stomach, as if she'd tried to hold the blood in until the last second. And I'd missed it. She'd died alone, and scared, and in pain.

Steve and Billy would pay for that. They would pay, and pay, and pay...

Tears ran down my face, scalding my frozen cheeks as I pushed myself to my feet and raced across the clearing. The fire was hot, but not hot enough to keep me warm in the nude, yet instead of dressing, I dropped to my knees beside the pile of brush my purse had landed in when Steve kicked it.

My teeth chattering, I pulled back the zipper and grabbed my phone, praying it hadn't broken. I pressed the home button, and the screen shined bright in the flickering firelight as I scrolled through the "favorites" menu for my Alpha's number. As I pressed call, I dropped to the ground next to the careless pile of our belongings. I'd just spotted my hiking pack beneath the portable charcoal grill when my call was answered.

"Abby? What's wrong?" Normally, his automatic assumption that something was wrong would have irritated me. But this time, he was right.

"Jace, I need help. Fast." My teeth chattered, and I sniffed back a choked sob. "How soon can you get here?"

Springs creaked as he stood, and I heard heavy footsteps as he paced. Jace had bulked up a bit since he'd taken over the Appalachian Territory. "Where are you? What happened?"

I hauled my pack from the pile and pulled back the flap, already digging for a change of clothes. "I went camping with some friends from school, and now they're dead. All except Robyn, my roommate."

A single beat of silence passed before he spoke. "Okay, first of all, are you safe where you are?" His voice was solid and steady, a vocal cornerstone for me to build on. Like most Alphas, Jace dealt with crises all day, every day. Unlike most Alphas, he was young enough that he still looked good doing it.

Damn good.

I would have given anything in that moment to be staring at Jace instead of at the bloody remains of a human friend.

"I'm fine for the moment, but I don't have much time." With the phone pinned between my ear and my shoulder, I stood and stepped into my underwear, my teeth chattering so hard I could hardly talk.

"Okay, start from the beginning. You went camping...?"

"Yeah. Just a sec." My shirt was next, and I had to set the phone on the ground to pull the material over my head. "We're in Cherokee National Forest, just south of the Tennessee border." I gave him the coordinates we'd used to find the campsite, forever grateful for GPS technology. "I went for a run by myself—the *private* kind—and when I got back, there were three men at our campsite, carrying big hunting knives."

"Damn it!" he swore, and I heard as much guilt as I heard anger and concern in his voice. The concern was for me. The anger was for whatever suicidal idiot had *dared* put a member of Jace Hammond's Pride in danger. A *female* member, at that; I was one of only three in the territory, and the only one who wasn't Jace's mother or sister. "I *knew* I should have sent someone with you to school."

"No, you shouldn't have. Things aren't like they used to be, Jace." He and Faythe had made sure of that. They'd brought a new youth and strength to the Alpha's council, and they were in the middle of negotiating with an allied group of strays who wanted official recognition by the council. "Besides, having me watched wouldn't have helped. Your enforcers wouldn't have recognized the danger." Because they would only have been monitoring the area for the

scent of an intruder—a cat *shifter* without authorization to be in our territory.

“The aggressors are human?” he asked.

That could be assumed, based on the fact that they carried weapons—no self-respecting werecat would need them—but a good Alpha assumed nothing.

“Yeah.” Humans’ movements weren’t restricted by werecat territorial lines, and humans were almost *never* a threat to shifters. Jace’s enforcers wouldn’t have identified the threat until it was already too late.

“And you were in cat form?” he continued.

“Yes, but they didn’t know it was me. And I spent most of the time hiding in the bushes.” Like a coward. “They’d already gutted Mitch and Olsen by the time I got there, but the girls were just tied up, at first.” The quiver in my voice triggered a near-silent exhalation from Jace.

“You sure you’re okay?” He knew what I’d been through more than four years before.

“Yes, but they killed Danielle, and Jace, they *took* Robyn. I have to get her back!”

“No,” he said, and I recognized that single syllable as an order. “I understand the protective impulse, but *you’re* the one I have to protect. I want you to stay where you are, and—”

“I’m not just going to abandon her!” I stood and shook out my insulated cargo pants, phone pinned to my shoulder again while I stepped into the fuzzy inner lining.

“You’re going to do exactly what I—”

“This doesn’t make any sense, Jace,” I said, and his growl at being interrupted normally would have frozen me where I stood. “I know one of the men who took her. He sits behind me in psych. He’s always been so friendly before, but now he’s *crazy*.”

I sank onto the cold ground and swallowed another sob, trying to speak slowly and clearly, and to give him just the facts. Anything else would only slow me down and put Robyn in more danger.

“Abby, are you okay?”

“No! They know I’m out here, somewhere. They were going to wait for me until I came out in cat form and scared them off. Not that they knew that was me.” I sucked in another deep breath. “I don’t know if they followed us from campus or what, but while they were waiting for me to come back to camp, they tried to...”

The words froze in my throat, the edges sharp, as if I’d swallowed glass. I coughed, then started over. “The girls were so scared. Robyn was screaming, and she couldn’t stop him. The

other one held his knife to Dani's throat. I couldn't just watch, and I couldn't leave them there..." My explanation trailed into fragile silence, but for the crackle of the fire.

"What did you do, Abby?" Jace still sounded calm, but now his voice held a dark note of dread.

"I killed the one who was on Robyn." My words all ran together, but Jace seemed to understand. "I just wanted to get him off her, so I pounced on him, and he smelled like her, and he'd bitten her, and everything just went red after that. But then Steve slashed my front leg, and the other one stabbed Dani. Then they took off into the woods." My tears were a mercy, smearing the carnage all around me. But they couldn't blur the overwhelming scent of blood. "I couldn't chase them. Not with my front leg sliced up and Dani dying."

"You shouldn't have shown yourself, Abby. You could have been killed." Jace's growl was a mixture of worry for me and rage on my behalf. "Just stay there. We're coming to get you, and once you're secure, we'll make an anonymous call to the cops."

I heard voices in the background, as other tomcats volunteered for the emergency mission. Save the damsel in distress—what every enforcer lives for.

Only I didn't have time to be rescued.

"I can't stay here, Jace. They're coming back for me. And I have to get Robyn back before they hurt her."

"No!" A car door slammed and Jace's engine roared to life. He was already on the go, no doubt with his three best enforcers. "Abby, do *not* chase the bad guys! That's an order!"

"They're gonna kill her!" And by the time they got around to that, she'd be begging for death.

"If you go after them, they'll kill you too."

"I can handle myself. I've been training with Faythe."

"Sounds like you picked up more than just her left hook," he muttered, and in the background, another tom chuckled. "Faythe's an Alpha, and before that, she was an enforcer. You're a poli-sci. major with three-summer's worth of self-defense lessons. Sit tight. We'll be there in an hour."

"She'll be dead by then!"

"But you *won't* be."

I hesitated. I honestly did, because disobeying an Alpha was serious shit, even if the

Alpha was young, and hot. But Robyn was the priority. “I’m sorry, Jace,” I whispered, digging through my pack again for an extra set of thick socks. “You can kick me out of the Pride if you want, but I have to help Robyn. I’ll see you in an hour.”

“Abby, no...!” he shouted, while his enforcers went apeshit in the background. I hung up the phone, put it on silent, then slid it into my pocket.

The phone buzzed as I pulled my socks on, then again while I dug Olsen’s pack from the pile. He had a hunting knife. I’d seen it. And in human form, I would need it.

I slid the knife into a loop on the right leg of my pants, then crossed the clearing and grabbed the insulated jacket they must have made Robyn take off before they’d tied her up. Her small, folding knife was in the right pocket, and the material was still warm from her body heat. I couldn’t believe how fast everything had happened.

Armed, dressed, and now fairly warm, I knelt next to Dani, trying to avoid looking at the guys. “I’m so sorry,” I whispered, as I unlaced her hiking boots. Mine were a quarter mile away, in the wrong direction. “I hate to leave you like this, but I have to help Robyn. I *swear* they’ll pay for what they did to you.”

Fortunately, she had small feet, so the boots were only half a size too big, and since I wore an extra pair of socks, I could hardly tell.

As ready as I was gonna get, I put on my hiking pack and stepped into the woods with only a single glance back. I felt a fleeting bolt of sympathy for whatever forensics team would soon show up at the scene of the crime. The analysts would be confused over Dani’s bare feet, the paw prints in the dirt, and the drops of blood from the cut on my arm, which would seem to be contaminated with feline DNA.

I headed in the direction from which I’d last heard Steve, Billy, and Robyn’s footsteps, mentally crossing my fingers that they would stick to that heading. My human form kept weight off my injured arm, but for that advantage—that necessity—I’d sacrificed most of my enhanced feline senses. My nose and ears were still more sensitive than a human’s, but they were nowhere near the advantage they would have been in cat form, and the flashlight I carried was no substitute for feline vision, a huge benefit in the dark.

After a quarter mile, I was freezing, exhausted from Shifting without eating, and reeling from the trauma of what I’d seen. Reality had finally hit me, and shock was like a cold blanket wrapped so tightly around me that I could hardly breathe, let alone think.

My arm throbbed with each beat of my heart, and by the time I'd gone half a mile, blood had soaked through both my shirt and Robyn's jacket. That one Shift hadn't been enough to completely close the wound, and moving my arm had kept the blood flowing. Frustrated, I turned the flashlight off and shoved it into the side pocket of my pack, then used my free hand to apply pressure to my cut. But then I couldn't see.

Damn it! How was I supposed to save Robyn when I couldn't even find her?

You're not cut out for this, Abby. Jace was right. You should just sit down and wait to be rescued. Again.

But if I did that, Robyn would die scared, alone, and in pain. Just like Dani. And I'd be the coward who'd given up on her.

You're not using your resources... a new voice in my head said, and I recognized it as Faythe's. *You're not human, and you're not helpless.*

I closed my eyes, and the memory came back in full. We'd been training in the barn, at night, with the lights off. I could hear her when she spoke, but the others had gone silent, and I couldn't see any of them. Because then, like now, I hadn't been using my resources. My senses.

The partial Shift. It was standard procedure now, for all enforcers patrolling in human form, and it was one of the first things Faythe had taught me.

I squeezed my eyes shut tighter and forced everything else from my mind. The cold, the dark, the pain in my arm. None of that mattered. *Robyn* mattered. Finding her. Saving her.

Avenging the others.

Pain shot through my right eye, followed by an answering spear through my left. The pressure was enormous, as if my eyeballs would pop right out of my head. But when the pain faded and I opened my eyes, I could see. The colors were muted, of course, as they always were when I took on my cat form, but the woods were clear, each tree crisply outlined by the little available moonlight.

I grinned over the small victory. *This is going to work.*

My ears were next, and they were a real bitch. Shifting them was more complicated, and the pain was like needles being jabbed through my eardrums and into my brain. But the difference was unbelievable. I hadn't realized how much I was missing in human form until I could suddenly hear like a cat.

Rodent heartbeats. Wind rustling branches far over my head and half a mile away. An

owl, halfway across the damn forest, swooping in on its prey with a rush of air unique to that particular wing formation and dive pattern.

And beneath all that, the steady, low-pitched hum of machinery. My pulse spiked. *A generator.*

Steve's cabin. It had to be.

I let go of my injured arm and took off through the woods, easily avoiding fallen logs and jutting branches now that I could see them. Cold air burned my lungs, but I barely felt it. I was buoyed by the hope blooming in my chest. I could save her. I could make up for failing to save Dani. And maybe in doing that, I could prove to myself for good that the cowering, helpless Abby of days past was gone. The men in the cage had killed her, but from her ashes, this new phoenix had been born, and she was ready to unleash justice on their brothers in crime.

Justice and pain.

Lots of pain.

Half a mile later, the cabin came into view, its generator growling now. The motor drowned out any sounds I might have been able to hear from inside the building, and the sound was almost too much for my pounding head to take, so I Shifted my ears back, squatting behind a shelter of tall, thick ferns. But I kept my cat eyes. Feline pupils would adjust to the light inside the cabin, once I got in.

The cabin was small—so why did they need such a big generator?—and I couldn't see any movement through the windows. After several minutes of watching and listening, I eased my pack off my shoulders and onto the ground, then ran hunched over to crouch beneath the uncovered front window, which painted a square of untamed forest floor with light from within.

When no one charged out of the cabin wielding a knife, I dared a careful glimpse through the glass—and nearly melted with relief.

Robyn lay on the floor against the back wall of what appeared to be a hunter's private retreat. She was bound with duct tape now, but still fully clothed. And she was completely alone, except for the half-dozen disembodied deer heads staring down at her from the rustic, paneled walls.

The trophies were grotesque, a horror only humans would find tasteful. Werecats didn't kill for sport. We hunted for food, and we didn't display the corpses of our prey like gruesome prizes.

Robyn didn't see me—her eyes were closed—and I couldn't hear anything over the growl of the generator, but there was only one door leading off the main room, and it was closed. Surely if Steve and Billy were still there, they'd have been watching their prisoner—or worse.

Maybe they'd already gone back to the campsite looking for me. They would never expect *me* to find *them*—or even to know who they were—and they'd know Robyn couldn't escape on her own.

I pulled Olsen's knife from the loop on my jeans, then crouch-walked to the front door. The knob didn't turn, but it was only secured with a twist lock. I turned it hard to the right, and the lock snapped, then the door creaked open several inches. I froze. The door was louder than I'd expected, even with the generator's constant grumbling. But when Robyn didn't wake up and no one stormed into the room, I took a deep breath and stepped into the cabin, then closed the door softly at my back so I could listen.

The noise from the generator was muted from inside the cabin, but it still drowned out both my heartbeat and Robyn's. My cat's pupils narrowed, adjusting quickly to the influx of light, but I still smelled her blood before my eyes pulled her into focus. She lay on the floor fifteen feet away, blood slowly oozing through a tear in her jeans from a small wound on her calf. She was unconscious, but with any luck, I could haul her out of human hearing range before she woke up, in case she started screaming. Werecat strength was the only advantage that translated fully into human form. Thank goodness.

Aware of each fleeting moment as it slipped into the past, I raced across the room toward Robyn—then landed hard on my rump when my feet slid out from under me.

What the hell?

Stunned, I sat on the floor, still gripping the knife in one hand. I was too surprised to think, my mouth open, trying to drag in the breath I'd lost. My empty hand curled in the carpet, and I froze.

The cabin wasn't carpeted; I'd slipped on a rug. A very familiar feeling rug, which had slid out from under my feet as I ran.

No...

I closed my mouth and drew in a deep breath through my nose.

Nonononono! The rug was fur. Smooth, soft, sold black fur.

Werecat fur.

I scrambled away from the gruesome accent piece until my back hit the wall. My hands shook, my knife clattering against the floor over and over again.

I didn't recognize the individual scent from the rug. If I had—if I'd known the tom who'd died to make that carpet—I might have lost it right then. I was still shaking in Dani's boots when the front door opened a second later, and Steve walked in carrying my hiking pack.

"Hello, Abby." He dropped my pack at his feet and closed the door, his knife glinting in the overhead light. His blade was much bigger than mine. "We've been waiting for you."

Waiting for me? Hadn't they been *searching* for me?

My fist clenched around the handle of my own knife, but I was no longer sure it would do any good. The truth tapped at the back of my mind like soft knock on a thick door, but I couldn't let it in. It didn't make sense. It wasn't possible.

The door on my left creaked open, and Billy stepped out of a dark stairwell leading beneath the cabin. With him came the scents of fresh blood, fur, and some harsh, acrid chemical. What the hell were they doing in that basement? Slaughtering more innocent college students? Or skinning animals to make macabre décor?

Had they *personally* killed and skinned the cat whose fur I'd slipped on?

Humans didn't know about shifters, and natural jaguars had never been native to Kentucky, so what did they think they'd caught? An escapee from an animal preserve?

"What do you want?" I asked, trying to keep them both in sight at once.

"For now? Just your company," Steve said, but his words had an oddly upbeat ring to them. His voice sounded...eager. Saturated with some dark, dangerous desire. "But soon, we're gonna need you to shift. That's what you call it, right?"

I stared at him, stunned. Surely I'd misunderstood. He *couldn't* know what I was.

Steve raised his knife, still stained with Dani's blood, and pointed to the far end of the room. My gaze tracked the motion reluctantly, and that's when I saw what hadn't been visible through the small front window.

I gasped, then choked on my next breath. I blinked, but the gruesome images didn't go away. They wouldn't even blur mercifully, as Mitch's body had beneath my traumatized gaze. Instead, they stared down at me through eyes too much like my own.

Four werecat heads were mounted in a row on the far wall, on identical wooden plaques. Their mouths were open, lips curled back as if they were hissing, but the pose was artificial.

Arranged post mortem. *I* could see that, even Steve and Billy couldn't.

Three of the cats were strangers. Strays, most likely—Jace would have told me if several Pride cats had gone missing. But the fourth, the last one on the right, was Leo Brown, one of Jace's enforcers. He'd disappeared during his vacation a couple of months before, and no one had found a single sign of him. Until now.

"I..." I closed my eyes, then forced my gaze back to Steve. "I don't know what you're talking about." Denial. It was instinct, if not exactly flawless logic.

"Oh?" Steve raised one brow, glancing at my blood-soaked sleeve, then back to my face. "How's your arm? Or would that be your front paw?"

That's when the truth became too much to deny. They knew what I was. They'd known all along. They'd followed me into the woods, *hunting* me, and my friends had become collateral damage.

Wood creaked on my left as Billy squatted next to me, unfazed by my knife. Or maybe he couldn't see it, held so close to my opposite thigh. "You're the first girl shifter we've ever found. Been watching you for weeks now."

"Psyc. 204?" I whispered, glancing up at Steve, who now leaned against the front door, blocking the exit.

He nodded. "A stroke of genius, right? That's also how I met your girl Robyn, and good ol' Mitch. When he mentioned you all were going camping, I was happy to suggest a good, private campsite. Not many people know about this place."

Which was why it had seemed perfect for my solitary run.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I couldn't push beyond the fact that *they knew*. That they'd lured me to their cabin to be butchered, stuffed, and mounted. And I'd fallen for it.

"You're hunters?"

"Technically, yes, but that's like describing a world-renowned chef as a short-order cook. We hunt the most dangerous species on the planet." One side of Steve's mouth turned up into a creepy grin. "You didn't really think no one knew your little secret, did you?"

Actually, I had. I'd always assumed that if anyone in the human world knew about us, *everyone* would know. But exposing our existence would have put an end to their private safari, and they were obviously unwilling to risk that.

Sick bastards.

“Damn, Steve, look at this!” Billy grabbed my chin, and I gasped as he turned my face toward the light. My fist tightened around the knife handle, but I was biding my time. I couldn’t afford to miss. “She’s got cat eyes. Never seen that before. Maybe we should just cut her head off and mount it like this.”

“Hmmm. Dramatic...” Steve ambled closer for a better look. I jerked my chin from Billy’s grasp, clenching . Waiting for the perfect moment. It would come.

Please let it come...

“Especially with all those pretty red curls,” he finished.

When Steve was close enough, I closed my eyes and sent up a silent prayer. Then I dropped from my heels onto my rump and shoved my left leg out, grunting as I swept both of his out from under him.

Steve shouted as he went down. Billy reached across me for Steve, trying to pull him out of the way. I swung my knife underhanded, as hard as I could. The blade slid into Billy’s stomach, pointed straight back toward his spine. Warm blood poured over my hand. I shoved the blade up, and the knife ripped through flesh toward his sternum.

Billy grunted, but never screamed. I pulled the knife free, and his eyes widened. He hunched over the gruesome gap I’d opened in his torso.

Steve scrambled backward and leapt to his feet as a spray of blood arced up his shirt and over his face.

Billy fell over. His skull smacked the floor and he blinked slowly, staring at nothing. His mouth opened and closed, and more blood leaked from the corner. Then his chest stopped moving.

Steve gripped his own knife tighter, his knuckles white from the pressure. And finally I stood, arms out at my sides, knife ready, feet planted for stability. Just like Faythe had taught me.

We faced off, circling slowly as my pulse raced and my heart pounded. I tried to draw him away from Robyn, who was still breathing shallowly. I could see the lump on the side of her head. She’d been bait for me, but now she was just a witness to his crimes, which meant Steve had no reason to keep her alive.

“You should probably know, guns are the most effective way to hunt a cat,” I said, wishing I could wipe blood from the slippery grip of my knife.

“Didn’t think we’d need them for a little girl. You’re more trophy than challenge.”

I circled toward the couch and a rickety-looking end table. “This ‘trophy’ is gonna spit on your corpse in about three minutes.”

“Yeah, I’m scared of a five-foot-nothin’ scrap of meat in borrowed boots.” He rolled his eyes, sidestepping me. “A couple of your fellow shifters talked our ears off before they died, hoping for a quick end to the pain, and they all agreed on one thing. Girl cats are rare, and they don’t fight.”

My gaze narrowed on him. “Your intel is outdated.”

“And your luck has run out. Billy practically fell on your knife, because he was still green. But this isn’t my first hunt. In a couple of days, your pretty little head’s gonna be mounted in a cabin in Mississippi, where the next shifter will get one fleeting glimpse of pointed pupils and red hair before we nail him up right next to you.”

Mississippi was free territory, crawling with strays, most of whom wouldn’t be missed. How many had Steve already killed? How many had talked before they died?

Edging to the right, I glared at him with all the force of my hatred and let my right foot snag the leg of the end table. I tripped and went down on my ass, hard, cursing to make it look real. My knife slid across the floor, just out of reach of my grasping fingers.

Steve dropped on top of me, blade ready. I shoved my right hand into my jacket pocket. He grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled my head back, exposing my throat. I faked a terrified whine as I pulled Robyn’s folding knife from the pocket of my borrowed jacket. Steve’s eyes widened. I pressed the button, and the blade popped out as I shoved it forward.

The three inches of steel slid between his ribs. Steve grunted. I twisted the knife as hard as I could. He screamed and dropped his weapon to clutch at mine.

I shoved him off and stood, Robyn’s knife sticky in my hand. He lay on the floor, blood pouring from his chest. More bubbled up into his mouth, and I knew I’d hit his lung. He gasped, struggling to breathe, and his eyes were already glazing over. “But girl cats don’t fight,” he wheezed, as his hands fell limp at his sides.

I arched both brows and pulled my phone from my pocket as his last breath rattled from his throat. “Welcome to the new world order.”

Jace got there twenty minutes later, armed with three enforcers and everything necessary to clean up my mess. Before I could even *try* to explain what the hell I'd been thinking and why he shouldn't ship me back to my father in handcuffs and a dunce cap, he shut me down entirely with an Alpha glare and a growl worthy of any tom who'd ever held the title.

"Okay, wait, I know you're mad," I said. "But Faythe taught me—"

"Stop and think before you finish that sentence," he said, his voice so deep and gravely I could feel it in my bones. His eyes flashed like bright blue flames, and my breath caught in my throat. "The most notorious rule-breaker in enforcer history *may* not be the source you want to quote right now."

My temper sparked and I found my tongue. "Faythe is who she is today *because* of who she was back then, and I can't think of a more respectable path than to follow in her footsteps. Just like *you* did, back when she was your Alpha."

Jace's pulse tripped and his eyes widened almost imperceptibly in surprise. For a moment, he looked unsure what to say. Then he pointed to a spot on the floor next to Robyn. "Sit still and stay out of the way. I'll deal with you when we're done with the cabin." Then he stomped off, mumbling under his breath about how I'd used the science of politics against him.

I wasn't exactly eager to mop up blood and dispose of corpses anyway, so I kept an eye on Robyn while the guys erased all evidence of both shifters and criminal activity from Steve's hunting retreat.

Robyn was still unconscious but breathing, and with any luck, she'd sleep through everything she shouldn't see. When the cabin was clean, I would "find" her and call the police, while Jace and his men watched from the treetops. Robyn would tell the cops what she remembered, but they would find no sign of the murderers or of their morbid hobby.

Jace and his men reclaimed all the cat trophies so our dead brothers could have a proper burial. And even if a forensics team found my blood at the campsite, they'd never piece together what had really happened. They'd think their samples were contaminated.

After about an hour, Jace knelt next to me on his way across the cabin, bulging trash bag in hand. "You okay, kiddo?" he asked, for the fourth time. Now that he'd had time to think, he seemed worried about my potentially fragile mental state.

"Yeah." Better than I'd expected, considering I'd killed three men and seen three friends

murdered.

“Good.” He nodded, but his blue-eyed scowl was dark and angry. “You ever disobey an order again, and I’ll send you straight back to your father. Understood?”

“Yes.” I held his gaze hoping he saw both remorse and fortitude in mine. “But you know I did the right thing. I did the same thing you would have done, in my position.”

His frown deepened. “I’m not *in* your position. *I* am an Alpha. You are a—”

“Do *not* call me a child,” I snapped. “I’m not a kid anymore, Jace.” Even if he couldn’t tell that from looking at me—not that he ever looked for long—I’d just written it all over the cabin in the blood of my enemies.

“I know. But you’re not an enforcer either. Yet.”

“Yet?” I blinked, sure I’d heard him wrong, and my heart thumped against my sternum.

He nodded, and his grin warmed me deep inside. “If human government doesn’t hold the same appeal after this, let me know. Pride politics are another beast entirely, but I’ll have a job waiting for you, if you want it.”

My brows arched. “For real?”

Jace nodded, eyeing me carefully. Almost admirably. “Faythe taught you well.” For a second, something painful passed over his expression. “But I can do better. If that’s something you’d be interested in, when you finish school.”

Would I be interested in training under the world’s hottest Alpha instead of moving back home to hang a worthless poli-sci degree in my childhood bedroom?

I smiled slowly. “I’m all yours.” My cheeks flamed when I realized how that sounded—accurate or not. “To train, I mean.”

He grinned and pulled me up by one hand. “Why do I suddenly feel like I’m in over my head?”

“I don’t know,” I murmured, as he knelt to pick up his trash bag.

Because I felt like I’d just then found my footing.



A Note From Rachel:

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading “Hunt!” I hope you’ve liked what you’ve seen of Abby and Jace, and if so, you’re in luck! What follows is a preview of the first Wildcats book, a spinoff of the original Shifters series, which launched my career.

The Wildcats books are paranormal romance novels set in the Shifters world. Each will be narrated by a new couple, beginning with Abby and Jace’s book, LION’S SHARE, which introduces a new concept—a Pride made up entirely of strays.

Readers ask me all the time for more books set in the Shifters world, and now that I have a great spinoff concept, I’m happy to oblige! I hope you have as much fun reading them as I’m having writing them!

If you liked “Hunt,” I hope you’ll consider reviewing it wherever you review books. And if you’d like to be updated about new releases, contests, and cover art, click [here](#) to sign up for my (hopefully monthly) mailing list.

Thanks again for reading!

Rachel Vincent

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SNEAK PEEK OF

LION'S SHARE

A WILDCATS NOVEL

BOOK ONE OF THE
SHIFTERS SPINOFF SERIES

By

RACHEL VINCENT

ONE

Abby

What they don't tell you about college, before you get there, is how much time you'll have to spend dodging your Alpha's calls in order to get any studying done.

Or was that just me?

My phone rang again as I unlocked my dorm room door, and again I pressed the ignore button, even though I was all done studying for the semester.

Force of habit.

But to be fair, I *did* feel a little guilty that time.

I exhaled with relief when the door closed at my back and warmth from my dorm room enveloped me. Three and a half years in Kentucky, and I still couldn't get used to the cold or the snow. Where I came from, winter was little more than a cool breeze around the first of the year, and even though Kentucky liked to think of itself as a southern state, no one actually hailing from the depth south could claim quite such a familiarity with the changing of the seasons.

In my part of South Carolina, we only had two: hot and slightly less hot.

I dropped my backpack on my unmade bed and took one resentful look at the bulging laundry hamper in the corner of the room, wondering if I actually *had* to wash my clothes before I packed them. Finals were finally over—I'd aced them, thank you very much—and the winter holiday didn't officially start until the next day, which meant I had one last night to spend celebrating the end of the semester.

That night was much too precious to be wasted on laundry. Or packing. Or...

"Abby!" My roommate, Robyn, pushed the door open with her elbow, carrying a steaming paper cup in each hand. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks were red. She looked happier than I'd seen her in two months.

Healthier, too. Her appetite had come back almost a month before, and her steady hands told me she'd just about put the trauma at the campground behind her.

"Thanks," I said as she handed me one of the cups. "Hot chocolate?"

Her smile rose higher on one side as she took a sip from her own. "*Irish* hot chocolate."

“Because it was made by leprechauns in a pint-sized sweatshop on the outskirts of Belfast?”

“Because it’s liberally spiked with Irish Crème. Gary’s Christmas present to the entire floor.”

Our RA was a pain in the ass nine months out of the year, but he was generous around the holidays. God bless him.

I took a sip and sank onto the edge of my bed with my feet tucked beneath me. “All done with exams?” I said, leaning across my nightstand to press the ratty old scarf farther into the crack in the windowsill. No matter how high we set the thermostat, the draft froze the tip of my nose all night, every night.

“Finally!” She sipped from her cup. “You?”

“As of twenty minutes ago. Seven semesters down, one to go.” In six months, I’d have a bachelor’s degree—only the second ever awarded to a female werecat. In the world. Ever. My brothers were proud. My parents were happy for me, but they were also ready for me to be finished with my education, so my “real” life could begin.

The life wherein I would move back home, marry a future Alpha, and have his shifter babies while he trained to take over our Pride from my father. That’s the way it had been for every tabby that had come before me. All but one, anyway.

My cousin Faythe—the world’s only female Alpha—had broken the mold. But that mostly just changed the way people saw *her*. Faythe was the exception. The tabby who could not be tamed. The rest of us were still expected to follow the rules, because the numbers hadn’t changed. There were still only a handful of female werecats capable of bearing children, and if *any* of us refused to do that, the strength of our species would be compromised.

We could literally go extinct.

No pressure.

I took a long, deep drink of my spiked hot chocolate, suddenly wishing I had an entire bottle of Irish Crème. Sans the crème.

I had taken Faythe’s advice, and I’d always been grateful to have it. Insisting on going to college had given me the opportunity to be myself—to *find* myself—before I had to become a wife or mother. But now my sojourn in the human world was almost over.

The clock was counting down toward zero-hour, and with every dreadful tick and

inevitably tock, I could feel fate's vise tighten.

"What's wrong?" Robyn frowned at me from across the room, where she scrolling through some game on her phone. "Your hot chocolate doesn't have enough whiskey?"

"The *world* doesn't have enough whiskey," I muttered, and her frown deepened. "Nothing's wrong. Just family crap." After what she'd suffered during our fall break camping trip, I wouldn't feel right burdening her with my problems.

Robyn only knew a little about my home-life—just the parts it was safe for me to tell her. She knew I had six highly protective older brothers and that my parents had very "traditional" expectations for me. She knew that I could handle myself in a fight, thanks to summers spent with my cousin Faythe. She knew I was still in touch with my high school boyfriend, Brian, but that I only answered about half of his calls, because neither of us knew what to say to each other over the phone.

She also knew that a good friend of my parents lived less than an hour from campus, and that he acted as my emergency contact and de facto guardian while I was at school.

What she *didn't* know were words like Alpha and enforcer. And Pride, at least in the shifter sense of the word.

"So, this is our last night on campus!" I drained the last of my spiked hot chocolate and tossed the cup into the trash, then turned to my closet, which was still more than half-full of unpacked clothes. "Last one dressed has to find us a designated driver."

Three minutes later, I zipped up my shortest skirt and was just stepping into my highest heeled boots when movement out the window drew my eye. A familiar black Pathfinder was pulling into a spot in the parking lot two floors below.

Nooooooooo.

I leaned over the nightstand for a better look, and even with my breath fogging up the glass, I recognized the tall, broad figure who stepped out of the car. "Son of a *bitch*!"

I *knew* I should have answered my phone!

"Done!" Robyn called, and from the corner of my eye, I saw her stand up in the middle of the room, fully dressed. "Get ready to sweet-talk Julie Cass, because she's the only teetotaler on this floor who has her own car."

When I didn't reply, Robin rounded the end of her bed and leaned over my nightstand to follow my gaze. "What are we looking a..." When her question faded into drooling nonsense, I

knew she'd spotted him. "Who is *that*, and why the hell haven't you called dibs?"

"That's Jace Hammond." I stood, trying to slow the automatic jump in my pulse. She wasn't wrong. He was *gorgeous*, in a totally untouchable kind of way.

"Wait, *that's* your dad's friend?" Robin said, and I could hear the surprise in her voice, even though she obviously couldn't tear her gaze from...whichever part of him she was ogling. "Shouldn't he be...old?"

"He's old enough. And he's not supposed to be here until tomorrow." My "guardian" had come to collect me a full fifteen hours early.

In the parking lot, Jace leaned against the side of his SUV and ran one hand through thick, wavy brown hair as pulled his phone from his pocket. A second later, mine rang, and for the fourth time in the past two hours, his name popped up on the screen. I answered the call and pressed the phone to my ear.

"You're early," I snapped, and Jace stood up straight to scan the side of the dorm building, surprised.

"How did you...?"

"Fourth from the left, third floor," I said, and when he found my window, Jace took off his sunglasses and grinned up at me. Even from two floors down, his eyes shined bright blue and his grin lit little fires deep in the pit of my stomach, as it had been doing since I was eight years old.

I stomped those tiny flames until they were nothing but embers keeping me warm. Jace smiled the same way at every woman who met his gaze. That grin meant nothing, and it would be dangerous for me to forget that.

Robyn had identified the problem without even knowing it. Alphas weren't supposed to be young and hot. They were supposed to be old and wise, like my father.

"I'll be up in a second." Jace's voice surged through me, stoking the flames I'd just trampled.

"No! I'll come down. Stay there." I hung up before he could argue, and Robyn looked at me as if I'd just threatened to cut off my own arm.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Looking for my coat." I eyed a suspicious lump beneath my comforter, but a quick poke revealed it to be my pillow.

“You know what I mean. If that guy promised my dad he’d look out for me, I’d sure as hell let him. He looks like he could take really good care of you.”

“Stop staring.” A quick search of my closet floor revealed a cardigan, four bras, and the hair clip I’d been looking for all month. It was the only one strong enough to hold all of my curls out of my face at once. “He’s compulsively unavailable.”

Her hopeful expression collapsed. “Wife?”

“Yeah, but not his own. His heart belongs to my cousin. My very *married* cousin.” And his body belonged to whatever human girl was warming his bed on any given week. I’d met at least a dozen of them, in what little time I’d spent at the lodge during holidays and long weekends.

He’d never failed to introduce me as “Kiddo.”

I saw no sign of my coat, but Robyn’s jacket was hanging over her desk chair. “Hey, can I borrow that?”

“Sure.” But she clearly had no idea what I was borrowing, because she was still staring at Jace. Not that I could blame her. I’d had a lifetime to practice not-drooling over him at every big get-together and I’d spent the past three-and-a-half years with him as my official Alpha, yet I was still tempted to stare.

“Be back in a sec,” I said on my way out the door, but Robyn never even glanced away from the window.

I flew down two flights of stairs and through the common room, and a burst of cold air hit me when I threw the door open. Shivering, I ran across the grass toward the parking lot in my boots, suddenly wishing I’d chosen lower heels. And pants.

Jace turned when he heard me coming, and a little thrill of satisfaction warmed me from the inside when his jaw actually fell open a little. But then he spoke, and that warmth died.

“What happened to the rest of your skirt?”

“I left it in the nineteenth century. Right next to your sexist perspective.”

“Ha!” His eyes flashed in amusement, and I caught my breath. “I’m probably the least sexist man you’ve ever met.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re merely *one* of the least sexy men I’ve ever met.”

He frowned down at me, even though I was in my highest heels. “That’s not what I...” Then his grin rebounded when he realized I was kidding. “Funny. Where’s your suitcase?”

“It’s fifteen hours in the future, where it’s supposed to be. Why are you so early?”

Jace’s smile faded and the Alpha peeked from behind bright blue eyes and full lips I’d known my entire life. “Change of plans. The council’s called an emergency meeting at the ranch.” The Lazy S, of course. In Texas, which was still the *de facto* council headquarters, even after the death of the previous council head, mostly because the Alphas were all accustomed to meeting there. “Our flight leaves in three hours.”

“I’m not on the council,” I pointed out, in as rational a tone as I could summon. “Ergo, I’m not needed at the ranch.”

“Your dad’s already there, and he wants to take you home for the holidays.”

“Well, I’m an adult, and I belong to *your* Pride, not his, so he doesn’t have the authority to order me home.” Even if he *was* the head of the council, a position formerly held by his brother-in-law, my late uncle Greg Sanders.

Jace’s frown deepened, and I resisted the urge to give in just so I could see him smile again. “Your father’s not ordering; he’s requesting. Nicely.”

“And I’m declining.” I crossed my arms over my chest to hold Robyn’s jacket closed. Also, to illustrate my determination. “Nicely.”

“Fine. Then *I’m* ordering you to go back upstairs and throw some necessities into a bag. Now.”

“Why? Are you scared to stand up to my dad?” I knew I’d stepped over the line when a growl rumbled from his throat and my knees tried to buckle beneath me, on instinct. Because my Alpha was angry, and my inner cat knew that was my fault.

Jace had grown into his position quickly, and as the youngest male Alpha in the world, he was also among the strongest. His leadership had been challenged three times in the four-and-a-half years since he’d taken over the Appalachian Territory, and none of the challengers had come close to beating him. There were only a handful of werecats in the world who could hold their own with him one-on-one, and I was not among those. Nor did I want to be.

He mirrored my stance with his arm crossed over his broad chest, and I could hear the warning before he even spoke. “Abigail Wade, if you’re not in the car in ten minutes, I’ll...”

“You’ll what? Drag me out by my hair? Wouldn’t be a first for me.”

That was a low blow, and I had no right to aim it at him, but the moment the words left my mouth, his anger crumpled beneath the weight of something much worse.

Sympathy.

I found pity and awkward compassion everywhere I turned in the werecat world because all my fellow Shifters could think about when they looked at me was what had happened to me the summer I turned seventeen, and how broken I must be because of it. Which was why I preferred the human world, where I was presumed strong until proven damaged.

“Sorry.” I bowed my head and stared at my boots. “I shouldn’t have—”

“No, you’re right.” He cleared his throat and I stared at his boots. “We all let you down when you were just a kid, and *I* let you down last October. You could have been killed out there in the woods, and I can’t let that happen again. So I’m *ordering* you to go get your things and come with me to the ranch. For your own safety.”

That was without a doubt the most overused phrase in any Alpha’s repertoire, and it sounded strange, coming from Jace. As if he didn’t really believe what he was saying. But further argument would do me no good, so I sucked in a deep breath and made myself meet his gaze. “Fine. Give me ten minutes.” Then I turned and walked back to the dorm without another glance at him.

What had happened to me—and to Robyn—on fall break wasn’t Jace’s fault. If I’d told him I was leaving campus, as I was technically obliged to do, he would have sent at least one of his enforcers to watch out for me, hidden in the trees in feline form. I’d kept him out of the loop because I didn’t want to be watched, and Jace had probably caught hell from the other council members for letting one of the country’s few and precious tabbies put herself in mortal danger.

But he must have taken full responsibility for what I’d done—as any good Alpha would—because no one had yelled at me for my lapse in judgment. Not even my parents, during our bi-monthly video chat.

I owed Jace, even beyond the normal respect due an Alpha from one of his pride members, and paying him back with insolence was unacceptable.

In our dorm room, Robyn finally turned away from the window to watch me throw clothes—both clean and dirty—into my big duffel. “You’re leaving? Now?”

“My dad wants me to come home for Christmas.” I threw my toothbrush, its charger, and a nearly empty tube of toothpaste into my toiletries bag, on top of the small, square box that had been there since my previous trip home. Then I scooped my makeup into the bag with one swipe of the counter. “Will you be okay here on your own?” Since she was staying on campus over the

holiday, we wouldn't have to pack up all our stuff and vacate the dorm room, a convenience I hadn't truly appreciated until that moment.

"Yeah. The nightmares are practically gone. I'm fine, Abby. Really."

I met her gaze in the mirror, trying to decide whether or not that was true. She had few physical scars from what went down in the woods over fall break, and those bastards hadn't gotten the chance to molest her. Still, she'd seen three of our friends slaughtered right in front of her, and most people weren't used to seeing violence or death, up close and personal.

More than anything in the world, I wished I wasn't either.

"Okay. Knowing my parents, I'll probably be gone for most of the winter break, but I can come back sooner if you need me. Call if you want to talk. Okay?"

"I promise." She smiled at me in the mirror. "Now go have Christmas with your family."
Christmas with my family.

My mother would hover over me and analyze everything I said for evidence that I hadn't recovered from that summer four years ago. My father would watch me out of the corner of his eye and not-so-subtly mention Brian, and how accomplished he'd become as an enforcer, looking for any sign that I was ready to settle down and turn my parents into grandparents.

My brothers would follow me into town so I couldn't get snatched off the street during any last-minute Christmas shopping, and they'd mentally dismember any guy who had the balls to even look my way, in spite of my large fraternal guard detail.

Going home for Christmas sounded about as much fun as Thanksgiving spent in prison.

On the bright side, there'd probably be ham.



"So, what's the big emergency?" I said as I threw my duffle onto the rear floorboard, then slid into the passenger's seat of Jace's SUV. His gaze landed on my thighs, where my short skirt had ridden up, and the sudden jump in his pulse was...gratifying.

He'd seen me naked—and I, him—a million times, but nudity means little to most shifters, because it's required for the transformation to and from feline form. Shifters are aroused by what they *don't* see. What they *almost* see. By the intent implied by flesh displayed behind or

beneath strategically placed panels of lace or silk. Flesh that is put on display, in private, for a specific intended audience.

Lingerie is big with shifters, for obvious reasons.

But Jace had never looked at me like that before. As if he wondered what my underwear looked like.

I laughed, and he flushed—I'd never seen an Alpha flush in anything other than anger. Then he looked straight out the windshield and made an obvious, concerted effort to slow his pulse.

"Jace?" I said, and he cleared his throat.

"Hmm?" He slammed the gearshift into reverse and made a production of looking into the rearview mirror as he backed out of the parking space.

"The emergency? Why are we going to the ranch?"

"Oh. Someone's killing humans, and the local news has picked up the story."

"Local?" Not good. "*How* local?"

"For us? Very. The victims have all been killed in our territory." Jace looked left, then right on his way out of the parking lot, and my stomach clenched as the details began to coalesce into something that almost made sense. "Right now, the cops think there's a wild animal on the loose, but if we don't find the rogue and take him out, they're going to start suspecting foul play. Or they're going to shoot one of our guys while they're out hunting this mythical black cougar, then they'll have biological proof that humans aren't the most dangerous thing out there. The council's in self-defense mode. They'll do whatever it takes to keep us from being outted."

"You're sure the killer's one of ours? Couldn't it be a thunderbird or a bruin?" Please *let it be a thunderbird or a bruin*. Bird- and bear-shifters could be every bit as vicious as werecats, and if it wasn't a cat, it wasn't our responsibility.

"Definitely a cat," Jace said, and I had to grab the door handle to keep from landing in his lap with he took a turn too hard. He still didn't drive like an Alpha. "But probably not ours."

"You think it's a stray," I said, as more of the pieces fell into place.

"We didn't get to examine the bodies—the cops got there first, and we don't have anyone on the inside—but we know for a fact that there are no natural wildcats in Appalachia." Or anywhere else heavily populated with shifters. Natural cats avoided us like the plague. "So it *better* be a stray," he continued. "Because if one of our own's gone rogue, we're all in big

trouble.”

But what he didn’t say aloud—what I could see etched into the brand new Alpha-lines on his otherwise youthful forehead—was that we couldn’t afford for it to be a stray either. Not when they were so close to voting on the resolution he and Faythe had cosponsored in the territorial council.

For the first time in U.S. history, the council was being asked to formally acknowledge a Pride made up entirely of strays who wished to carve out a territory of their own in one of the free zones. Faythe’s husband Marc—a stray adopted as a child by her father—had been acting as liaison to the potential new Pride, helping them get all their Ts crossed and Is dotted, in order to present themselves at the next meeting.

If the council discovered that the murderer was a stray, that resolution would never pass. The project Jace, Faythe, and Marc had hoped would bring lasting peace between strays and Pride cats would fail before it ever even had a chance.

“That’s why I have to go with you to the ranch,” I said, and Jace gave me a small nod. If there was a murderous stray loose in the Appalachian territory, my dad wouldn’t want me to stay at the lodge for the holidays. Even though Jace had probably tripled his security measures to protect his mother and sister.

Tabbies were too rare and too precious to risk, and having two of them of childbearing age in the same house would only strengthen the temptation for a stray who’d probably never even met a female of his own species.

“So, this is history repeating itself? The big strong tomcat has come to drag the helpless council chairman’s daughter home from school for her own good?”

“It was the right thing to do for Faythe, and it’s the right thing to do for you. But you’re *far* from helpless.” Jace’s voice rang with admiration that warmed me all over. “I know a few hunters rotting in shallow graves in the woods who could attest to that.” His pride in me became misplaced nostalgia, and alarms went off in my head. “Faythe taught you well.”

The warm smile he gave me would have felt wonderful—if it were meant for me. “Jace... I’m not Faythe.”

He laughed again, and those inner alarms began to fade. “Glad to hear it. Things never seem to work out in my favor, when she’s involved. *You*, however...” He aimed another blue-eyed glance at me, and I caught my breath “You’re my new lucky charm. Kiddo.”



Read the rest Abby and Jace's story in LION'S SHARE, coming in late 2014. If you'd like to be notified when future books in this series or other books by Rachel Vincent are released, sign up for her mailing list [here](#).

About the Author

Rachel Vincent is a former English teacher and an eager champion of the Oxford comma. She shares her home in Oklahoma with two cats, two teenagers, and her husband, who's been her # 1 fan from the start. Rachel is older than she looks and younger than she feels, and she remains convinced that writing about the things that scare her is the cheapest form of therapy—but social media is a close second.

Also By Rachel Vincent

Shifters

Stray

Rogue

Pride

Prey

Shift

Alpha

Unbound

Blood Bound

Shadow Bound

Oath Bound

Soul Screammers

My Soul To Take

My Soul To Save

My Soul To Keep

My Soul To Steal

If I Die

Before I Wake

With All My Soul

Coming Soon

Lion's Share

The Stars Never Rise

Menagerie

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