

Trial by Fire

A RAISED BY WOLVES NOVEL

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For Daddy, from his not-quite-human girl.



CHAPTER ONE



“NO MORE SCHOOL, NO MORE BOOKS, NO MORE teachers’ dirty looks . . .”

For a two-hundred-twenty-pound werewolf, Devon Macalister had a wicked falsetto. Leaning back in his chair with casual grace, he shot a mischievous look around our lunch table. “Everyone sing along!”

As the leader of our little group—not to mention the alpha of Devon’s pack and his best friend since kindergarten—the responsibility for shutting down his boy-band tendencies fell to me. “It’s Thanksgiving break, Dev, not summer vacation, and technically, it hasn’t even started yet.”

My words fell on deaf ears. The smile on Devon’s face widened, making him look—to my eyes, at least—more puppy than wolf. To my left, Lake, whose history with Devon’s flare for the dramatic stretched back almost as far as mine did, rolled her eyes, but her lips parted in a grin every bit as irrepressible and lupine as Devon’s.

A wave of energy—pure, undiluted, and animalistic—

vibrated through my own body, and I closed my eyes for one second... two.

Three.

In control of the impulse to leap out of my chair and run for the woods, I glanced across the table at the last member of our little quartet. Maddy was sitting perfectly still, blinking her gray eyes owlishly, a soft smile on her lips. Images—of the night sky, of running—leapt from her mind to mine through our pack-bond, as natural as words falling off lips.

The impending full moon might have been giving the rest of our table werewolf ADD, but Maddy was perfectly Zen—much more relaxed than she normally would have been when all eyes were on the four of us.

Despite our continued efforts to blend in, the buzz of power in the air and the unspoken promise that within hours, my friends would shed their human skin were palpable. I recognized the feeling for what it was, but our very human—and easily fascinated—classmates had no idea. To them, the four of us were mysterious and magnetic and just a bit unreal—even me.

In the past nine months, my life had changed in more ways than I could count, but one of the most striking was the fact that at my new high school, I wasn't an outsider, ignored and avoided by humans who had no idea why people like Devon and Lake—and to a lesser extent me—felt off. Instead, the other students at Weston High had developed a strange

fascination with us. They didn't approach. They didn't try to penetrate our tight-knit group, but they watched and they whispered, and whenever Devon—*Devon!*—met their eyes, the girls sighed and fluttered their eyelashes in some kind of human mating ritual that I probably wouldn't have completely understood even if I'd grown up like a normal girl.

Given that I'd been raised as the only human child in the largest werewolf pack in North America, the batting of eyelashes was every bit as foreign to me as running through the woods, surrounded by bodies and warmth and the feeling of *home*, would have been to anyone else. Some days, I felt like I knew more about being a werewolf than I would ever know about being a teenage girl.

It was getting easier and easier to forget that I was human.
Soon. Soon. Soon.

The bond that tied me to the rest of the pack vibrated with the inevitability of the coming moon, and even though I knew better than to encourage Devon, I couldn't help the way my own lips tilted up at the corners. The only things that stood between the four of us and Thanksgiving break were a couple of hours and a quiz on Shakespeare.

The only thing standing between us and delicious, feral freedom was the setting of the sun.

And the only thing that stood between me and Chase—*my* Chase—was a distance I could feel the boy in question closing mile by mile, heartbeat by heartbeat, second by second.

“Bronwyn, please, you’re making me blush.” Dev—who could read me like a book, with or without whatever I was projecting through the pack-bond—adopted a scandalized tone and brought a hand to his chest, like he was seconds away from demanding smelling salts and going faint. But I sensed his wolf stirring beneath the surface and knew that it was hard for Devon on a day like today to be reminded that I wasn’t his to protect in the same way anymore.

That I was alpha.

That Chase and I were . . . whatever Chase and I were.

“Fine,” I said, flicking a French fry in Devon’s general direction. “Have it your way. No more school, no more books . . .”

Dev made an attempt at harmonizing with me, but given my complete lack of vocal chops, it did not go well, and a horrified silence descended over our entire table.

After several seconds, Devon regarded the rest of us with mock solemnity. “We shall never speak of this moment again.”

“In your dreams, Broadway boy.” Shaking out her long blonde hair—a motion laden with excess adrenaline—Lake stood and stretched her mile-long legs. If the girls in school were all secretly pining for Devon, the boys were absolutely smitten with Lake. Clearly, they’d never met the business end of her shotgun or had their butts whipped at pool.

Soon. Soon. Soon.

Across the table, Maddy sighed, and Devon bumped her shoulder with his, a comforting gesture meant to communicate

that he understood. Soon, our entire pack would be gathered in the woods. Soon, the Weres would Shift and I would let their power flow through me, until I forgot I was human and the difference between four legs and two virtually disappeared.

Soon—but not soon enough.

“So,” I said, my voice low and soothing, intent on keeping my pack-mates focused, however briefly, on the here and now. “*Hamlet*. What do I need to know?”

“New girl.”

I balked at Lake’s answer. “I was thinking more along the lines of Guildencrantz and Frankenstein.”

“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,” Devon corrected absent-mindedly as he followed Lake’s gaze to the double archway at the front of the cafeteria. I turned to look, too, and the rest of the student body took their cue from us, until everyone was eyeballing the girl who stood there.

She was small—the word *tiny* wouldn’t have been a misnomer—and her eyes seemed to take up a disproportionate amount of her face. Her skin was very pale, and she was dressed almost entirely in black, save for a pair of white leather gloves that covered her arms from the elbows down.

She looked like a porcelain doll, and she felt like a threat. Given that I could tell, even from a distance, that she wasn’t a Were, I had no idea why something inside me insisted I track her every move.

“The natives are getting kind of restless,” Devon commented

offhand. Weston wasn't a big school, and mid-semester transfers were practically unheard of, so White Leather Gloves was garnering more than her fair share of murmurs and stares.

Including mine.

"Mayhaps I should go play the white knight, divert the spotlight a little?"

Devon's suggestion was enough to make me switch my gaze from the new girl to him.

"No."

I wasn't sure who was more shocked by the sharpness with which that word exited my mouth—Devon or me. Our pack didn't *do* orders. Given the way I felt about people getting dictatorial with me, I wasn't prone to pulling rank on anyone else. Besides, Devon and I had spent so much time together growing up that even if he hadn't been my second-in-command, I still wouldn't have been able to force my will on him. The closest I could come to ordering him to do anything was threatening to decapitate him if he didn't stop singing *The Best of ABBA* at the top of his lungs, and even that was mostly futile.

With a lightly inquisitive noise, Devon caught my gaze and held it. "Something you'd like to share with the class there, Bryn?" he asked, arching one eyebrow to ridiculous heights while keeping the other perfectly in place.

I debated answering, but it was probably nothing—just that time of the month, with emotions running high and my

heart beating with the power of the impending full moon. Still, I hadn't spent my entire life growing up around people capable of snapping my neck like a Popsicle stick without learning to pay attention when my instincts put me on high alert.

If my gut said someone was a threat, I had to at least consider the possibility that it was true—even if the *someone* in question was five foot nothing and human down to the tips of her leather-clad fingers.

Instead of mentioning any of this to Devon and opening that can of worms, I threw another French fry in his general direction, and the tension between us melted away as he reached for his plate and armed himself. "You know, of course," he said, pitching his voice low, "that this means war."

I couldn't help glancing back toward the archway and the new girl who'd been standing there a moment before, but she was already gone.

Pack. Pack. Pack.

Protect. Protect. Protect.

I let the feeling wash over me, absorbed it, and then relegated it to the back of my head, with the promise of *soon, soon, soon* and the desire to *run*. At the moment, I had more immediate concerns—like my retention of *Hamlet* definitely leaving something to be desired and the incoming French fry flying directly at my face.



That night, I was the first one to arrive at the clearing. We hadn't had a fresh snowfall since the second week in November, but this time of year, the layer of white on the ground never fully melted away, and I breathed in the smell of cedar and snow. I was wearing wool mittens and my second-heaviest winter coat, and for a moment, I closed my eyes and imagined, as I always did just before the Shift, what it would be like to shed my clothes, my skin, and my ability to think as a human.

There had been a time in my life when the last thing I wanted was the collective werewolf psyche taking up even a tiny corner of my brain, but a lot had changed since then.

Different pack.

Different forest.

Different me.

Without opening my eyes, my hands found their way to the bottom of my puffy jacket, and I pulled it upward, exposing the T-shirt I wore underneath. My fingers tugged at the end of the shirt, and my bare skin stung under the onslaught of winter-cold air.

Opening my eyes, I traced the pattern rising over the band of my jeans: three parallel marks, scars I would carry for the rest of my life. For most of my childhood, the Mark had been a visible symbol to the pack that had raised me that I was one of their own, that anyone who messed with me messed with the werewolf who'd dug his fingers into my flesh hard enough to leave scars.

Callum.

He was the alpha of alphas, the Were who'd saved my life when I was four years old and spent the next decade plus grooming me for a future I'd never even imagined. No matter how many months passed, every time my pack assembled, every time I lost myself and ran as one of them, I thought of the first time, of Callum and his wolves and knowing that for once in my life, I belonged.

Every time I heard the word *alpha* beckoning to me from my pack's minds, I thought of the man who'd once been mine—and then I thought of the other alphas, none of whom would have been particularly distraught if I went to sleep one night and never woke up.

Ah, werewolf politics. My favorite.

Bryn.

The moment I heard Chase's voice, soft and unassuming, in my mind, every other thought vanished. It was always this way with the two of us, and the anticipation of seeing him, touching him, taking in his scent was almost as powerful as the feeling that washed over my body the moment he emerged from the forest, clothed in shorts and a T-shirt that didn't quite fit.

Chase had been a werewolf for less than a year. Ironically, that made him seem far less human than Weres who'd been born that way or the members of our pack who'd been Changed as kids. The difference was visible in the way he moved, the tilt of his head. For as long as I'd known him, he'd been in flux,

defined by the wolf inside as much as the boy he'd been before the attack.

Now, slowly, things I'd felt in his memories and dreams, quirks he'd shown only in flashes seemed to be fighting their way back to the surface. Each time he came home from patrolling our territory as my eyes and ears, I saw a little bit more of his human side.

Each time, he was a little more *Chase*.

"Hey, you." Chase smiled, more with one side of his mouth than the other.

"Hey," I echoed, a smile tugging at my own lips. "How's tricks?"

I took those words leaving my mouth as a sign that I'd been hanging around Devon for way, way too long, but Chase didn't so much as blink.

"Same old, same old." He was quiet, this boy I was getting to know piece by piece—thoughtful, observant, and restrained, even as the power in his stride betrayed the wolf inside. "How's school going?"

"Same old, same old."

"There's no such thing as 'same old, same old' with you," Chase said wryly. "You're *Bryn*."

Given my track record, he kind of had a point there, but I wasn't about to admit it out loud.

With that same half smile, he leaned toward me, hesitant, but inhumanly graceful. I answered the question in his eyes,

reached for the back of his head, brought his lips down to mine.

Soon. Soon. Soon.

I could feel his heart beating, feel his mind and thoughts blending with my own as the two of us stood there, bathed in moonlight and feeling its effects like a drug.

Whoever Chase was, he was mine.

“Ahem.”

I’d known before I kissed Chase that we’d be interrupted. There was no such thing as a secret in a wolf pack—let alone privacy. But I’d been foolishly optimistic and hoped that the interrupter would be Lake or Maddy or one of the younger kids.

Instead, as Chase and I pulled away from each other, we were confronted with the oldest member of our pack, a gruff, weatherworn man who didn’t look a day over thirty-five. Based on the way his lips were twitching, I concluded that the man in question was torn between smiling and scowling.

“Hey, Mr. Mitchell,” I said, hoping to push him toward the smiling end of the spectrum. A guarded look settled over Chase’s eyes, but he echoed my greeting, and Lake’s dad gave us a long, measuring stare in return.

“I suspect the earth would keep rotating round the sun even if the two of you called me Mitch.”

In the time I’d been living on the Mitchells’ land, Mitch and I had had this conversation more than once, but I wasn’t really the type to give in once I dug my heels in about something.

“So noted, Mr. Mitchell.”

The smile finally won out over his scowl, but it lasted only a second or two before Mitch eyed the space (or lack thereof) between my body and Chase’s. “Last I heard, Ali was on her way here with the twins,” he said, which I took as a not-so-subtle hint that Chase and I should give each other some breathing room. Chase must have interpreted it the same way, because he stepped back—away from me and away from Mitch, who delivered the rest of his update with a nod. “Lake and Maddy are rounding up the troops, and I believe Devon said something about making an entrance.”

I was fairly certain that I was the only alpha in the history of the world to have a second-in-command who appreciated the impact of arriving fashionably late. Then again, I was also the only alpha with as many females in her pack as males and more toddlers and tweens than grown men.

Besides, it wasn’t like the whole *human* thing was status quo.

“Brynn!” The unmistakable sound of a very small person bellowing ripped me from my thoughts, and I smiled. There was nothing quite like hearing my name yelled at the top of a three-year-old’s lungs—unless it was having the aforementioned three-year-old barrel into me full blast and throw her arms around my legs like she was afraid that if she let go, I’d disappear off the face of the earth forever.

“Hello, Lily,” I said wryly. The kid acted like she hadn’t

seen me in a lifetime or two, even though it had only been an hour, if that.

Moon! Happy! Fun!

With the older wolves, I had to go looking for thoughts, unless someone was using the pack-bond to actively send them my way, but with Lily, everything was right there on the surface, bubbling up the way only the strongest emotions did in adults.

Alpha-alpha-alpha! Bryn-Bryn-Bryn!

The two words—*alpha* and *Bryn*—blended together in her mind. As the youngest of the kids I'd saved from the werewolf equivalent of a psychopath, Lily was one of the only ones who couldn't remember the time before our pack, or the things that the Rabid had done to her, to all of them.

In Lily's mind, *Bryn* meant *alpha*, and *alpha* meant *Bryn*. It was as simple as that.

“Can we Change yet?” Lily asked. “Can we, can we, can we?”

Not yet, Lily, I answered silently, and she stilled, mesmerized by a power I'd never asked to hold over anyone.

“Lily, I told you to wait.” The voice that issued that statement was aggrieved, and the look on its owner's face was one I recognized all too well from my own childhood.

Come to think of it, it was a look I recognized all too well from about a week ago, two tops.

“Hey, Ali,” I said, glad that Chase and I had heeded Mitch's warning and put a little space between my body and his.

“Hey, baby,” Ali replied, a twin on each hip. “Everyone’s been fed, but I make no guarantees about their state of mind.”

For most of my life, it had been just Ali and me, but she’d taken to managing an entire brood with the same efficiency with which she’d once transformed herself from a twenty-year-old college student into my protector within Callum’s pack. Ali was human, but the words *force of nature* still applied, and I would infinitely rather have tangled with an irritated werewolf than Ali in mama bear mode.

“Now?” Lily asked, right on cue with Ali’s disclaimer about the younger werewolves’ state of mind. “Now-now-now?”

“Shhhh,” I said, and Lily closed her mouth and laid her head against my knee.

“You know, Bryn,” Ali said thoughtfully, “if Lily minded me half as well as she minds you, I wouldn’t be considering renaming her Bryn Two.”

“Ha-ha,” I retorted. “Very funny.”

Ali smiled. “I try.” She looked toward Mitch, and without saying a word, he walked over and took Katie and Alex from her arms. Not even a year old, Ali’s babies already looked more like toddlers, and in identical motions, their hands found their way almost immediately to Mitch’s beard.

He smiled. “I’ve got them,” he told Ali, and she nodded before kissing the twins and turning to walk back out of the woods. Ali never stayed to run with the pack.

As far as I knew, she never had.

Now, Bryn? Now?

Lily refrained from asking the question out loud, but I heard it through the pack-bond all the same, and this time, the answer—*soon, soon, soon*—seemed to come from outside my body, from instincts I couldn't have explained to the human world. Lily seemed to feel it, too, and a keening, whimpering sound built in the back of her throat. I ran a hand gently over her bright red hair and she began rocking back and forth on her feet. Within moments, the others had arrived, filling the clearing, and the effect was magnified a hundred times.

Our pack was small—twenty-two total, only eighteen there that night—but the air was electric, and as their thoughts swirled with my own, the connection between us became a living, breathing thing. I felt them, all of them: Lake and Maddy, Lily and the twins, Chase. From the youngest to the oldest, from those who thirsted for a hunt to those who wanted nothing more in life than to run ...

They were mine.

Devon slid in beside me, and the moment I felt the brush of his arm against mine, I knew.

It was time.

In other packs, this was formal. There were petitions and ceremonies and marks carved into flesh, but here and now, I didn't have words, and they didn't need them.

Now. Now. Now.

I couldn't deny the Change any more than they could. The

treetops scattered moonlight across our faces, and I inclined my head. That was all it took.

At any other time of the month, the sound of tearing fabric and crunching bones wasn't a pleasant one, but under the full moon, the effect was like the beating of a drum.

Run. Run. Run.

All around me, they could taste it. They could feel it. Furred bodies pushed at each other to get closer to me, to touch me, to sniff me, to be with me, and the roar from their minds was overwhelming.

Alpha. Alpha. Alpha.

I forgot about Chase, about Devon, about each and every one of them as anything other than my brothers, my sisters, my people, my pack.

Mine.

This was what I'd been born for. This was all that I wanted and all that I was, and as one overwhelming, unstoppable, incredible force, we ran.