



*Raised by  
Wolves*

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For my family, close and extended—  
the best pack a girl could ask for.



In Loving Memory of  
Annie Mae Barnes,  
An incredible woman  
I never got the chance to know.



*Raised by  
Wolves*



# CHAPTER ONE



“BRONWYN ALESSIA ST. VINCENT CLARE!”

Four names, five words, one pissed-off werewolf. The math in this particular equation never came out in my favor.

“Callum,” I said, feigning surprise at his sudden appearance in my workshop. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. On a human, the same motion would have conveyed sharp irritation, but on Callum’s face, the expression was mild, until and unless you looked for the power behind the gaze and caught a glint of the wolf staring back.

Growing up the way I did, you learn a few things, so I knew the dangers involved in standing my ground and the ones that came with letting it go. My right hip twinged just above the band of my low-rise jeans, and my fingers played along the edges of the scar that lived there. The Mark tied me to Callum and the rest of the pack, and it served as an ever-present reminder that they were bound to protect me as one of their own. It also drove me into a hierarchy I’d never subscribed to.

That and the whisper of the rest of the pack at the gates of my mind—closed for business, thank you very much—spurred me into choosing the lesser of two evils in my interaction with the aforementioned pissed-off werewolf.

Calmly, I brought my eyes to Callum's. The power coming off him made it an effort, even for me. After a few precious seconds of meeting his gaze, I flicked my eyes to the side. Protocol would have had me looking down, but I was about as far from submissive as you could get. I also wasn't a Were, and Callum wasn't *my* alpha, so despite the constant pull of the pack at my psyche, there was nothing in *Emily Post's Guide to Werewolf Etiquette* to say that I absolutely had to submit.

Callum responded to my subtle, pointed defiance with a roll of his amber-colored eyes, but he had the good grace to abstain from pressing me into the wall or down to my knees the way he might have if not for that pesky humanity of mine. Instead, he brought one suntanned hand up to his jaw and ran it roughly over the five o'clock shadow on his chin in a way that made me think he was mentally counting to ten. The action—and the frustration that drove it—reminded me that even if he wasn't my alpha, Callum *was* my legal guardian, the executor of my estate, and the closest thing I had to a brother, uncle, or mentor, all rolled into one. Despite my best efforts as a small child to convince Callum that he was not (and I quote) *the boss of me*, he technically was. As alpha, he took pack business seriously, and had I not had four names of my own to choose

from, I could have easily gone by “P.B.”—Pack Business of the first and highest order.

The Mark on my hip wasn't just for show.

“Bryn.” Callum's voice, even-toned with not even a hint of a growl, brought me back to the present. I was somewhat relieved that the situation had been downgraded in his mind from meriting all four names to just one. Better still that he stuck with Bryn, which I vastly preferred to *Bronwyn*.

“Bryn.” Slightly sharper this time, but mostly exasperated, Callum's voice forced me to focus.

“Sorry,” I said. “Mind bunnies.”

Callum nodded curtly and waited for me to address the reason for his presence in my workshop. This was supposed to be my sanctuary, a tiny slice of pack territory that belonged to only me, myself, and I. It wasn't much more than a stand-alone garage turned second-rate art studio, but I didn't much appreciate the invasion, or the way Callum kept his eyes on mine, confident that I'd eventually tell him exactly what he wanted to know. Experience told me that he was probably right. Callum could outwait anyone, and though he was only a few inches taller than me, and the muscles in his granite jaw were relaxed, the power behind his eyes was always palpable in his stare.

“I really don't know why you're here,” I told him, selecting my words carefully. Most Weres could smell a lie, and Callum, the alpha of alphas in our corner of the world, would have

known immediately if I'd offered up an excuse that wasn't technically true. Luckily for me, I *didn't* know precisely what it was that I'd done to merit a visit from our pack's leader. There were any number of possibilities, none of which I wanted to openly admit to on the off chance that there was something I'd done that he hadn't found out about yet.

"You have no idea why I might want to talk to you?" Callum asked, his voice never losing its calm, cool tone.

That was a trickier question to answer without crossing the border from half-truths into lies, but I'd had years of practice. This I could handle. "I really don't have an idea why you'd want to talk to me."

Technically, I didn't have *an* idea; I had several.

Callum measured my response. I wasn't stupid enough to believe that he bought what he was hearing (and smelling), but I knew him well enough to hope that he might not want to play this game all afternoon. He was the one who'd taught me to play it in the first place, but at the moment, he really didn't seem to be in the mood for a "surviving pack life" tutorial on obfuscation.

With a much-aggravated sigh, Callum opted out of forcing me to speak, and instead, he itemized my transgressions for me. "Motorcycle. Algebra. Curfew." Callum never used four words where one would do—unless, of course, he was calling me by my full name, a trick that he must have picked up from watching television, since he'd been born in a time and place

where middle names weren't standard fare. The rest of our pack took their cue from him. Of all of us, I was the only one with a middle name, let alone two . . .

"Bryn."

"Right," I said, valiantly fighting the mind bunnies, which had a vicious tendency to multiply at inconvenient times. "I let a boy from town give me a ride on his motorcycle, my algebra teacher's a sadistic imbecile, and I'm a bad, bad girl who doesn't believe in curfews. Can I go now?"

For a split second, I thought I'd pushed him too far. I imagined his wolf instincts overtaking his human ones, changing Callum into something harder and primal. Unless he actually Shifted, he'd keep his human appearance, but I knew better than anyone that smooth skin, sandy hair, and slightly upturned lips meant nothing. Wolves in sheepskin had nothing on werewolves masquerading as men; shape-shifters were dangerous when their beasts were loose on the inside but contained on the surface. As wolves, they were hunters. In human form, they could be deadly.

*Come out, come out, wherever you are, little one. No sense hiding from the Big Bad Wolf. I'll always find you in the end. . . .*

I clamped down on the flicker of anxiety, snuffing it out. I was well acquainted with the dangers associated with strolling down that path on memory lane. I also knew from years and years of experience that Callum never lost control; his wolf would never harm a human. In any form, Callum would

have died before hurting me. Instead, he took my sass and responded to it just as he always had—with a warning look and the air of someone who was trying very, very hard not to laugh.

Slightly abashed because I'd maligned him with misplaced anxiety (*not* fear), I took Callum's silent chastisement and didn't push back at him.

"Motorcycle." Callum issued the word as a statement rather than a question, but I felt compelled to answer anyway. That's the way it was with Callum—once you stopped pushing back, once you submitted, you'd find yourself acting in line with his will. He would have had the same effect on any other human, whether they knew what he was or not. The Mark on my flesh, and the bond between us, let me recognize the compulsion for what it was, but I didn't fight it.

"A kid from school offered me a ride on his motorcycle," I said, by way of explanation. "I took it." I chose not to mention the fact that I'd nearly died of shock at the invitation. The kids in town didn't mix with those of us who lived in the woods, and I wasn't generally the kind of girl who drew attention from the male of the species. Any species. "There is a slight chance that the guy in question didn't want me driving aforementioned 'cycle, but I might have ended up with the keys anyway. I guess I'm faster than he is."

"I didn't train you to move so that you could steal motorcycles," Callum said sternly.

*No, I wanted to say, you trained me so that I could run away from fights I couldn't win—the kind where my opponents had fur and claws and very few weaknesses.*

Out loud, I opted for, “I gave the bike back. And Jeff barely even minded.” I did, however, doubt that Jeff would be inviting me to homecoming anytime soon.

“Are you interested in this boy?” Callum asked, his brow furrowing. Despite the fact that he did a good impression of an overprotective big brother, I'd lived under his rule long enough to realize that his concern wasn't just for me or my heart.

“I have no interest in provoking interspecies aggression,” I said, using the politically correct phrase for incidents involving young, stupid werewolves and young, stupid human males. “And, believe me, if I did, it wouldn't be for a guy who wouldn't let me drive.”

I spent enough time resisting testosterone-driven dominance maneuvers in my day-to-day life. The last thing I needed was a human boyfriend who wanted me to play the simpering miss.

Callum stiffened slightly at the idea of my dating anyone, even in the abstract. Werewolves tend to be very protective of their females, and even though I wasn't anyone's actual daughter or sister or—God forbid—mate, Callum had ceremonially dug his claws into me when I was four years old. While that had no effect whatsoever on my humanity, by Pack

Law, it made me his. As a result, Callum's wolves owed me their protection, and as far as they were concerned, that made me theirs, too. If werewolves had been into using "property of" stickers, I would have been mummified in them.

I just loved the idea of being owned.

"I don't like the idea of you on a motorcycle, Bryn. You could get hurt."

I didn't dignify that particular concern with a response.

"I'm asking you not to do such a thing again, Bryn," Callum said, choosing his words carefully, making it clear that this was not an order but a request. Lot of good that did me—Callum's "requests" didn't leave much room for noncompliance. If I refused to give him my word, there was a good chance that he would turn the request into an order, and as the leader of our pack and one of the highest-ranked dominant wolves on the continent, Callum's orders were very close to law. Disobeying an official edict from the alpha meant incurring the wrath of the entire pack—some of whom refrained from sending me to my just rewards only because Callum had likewise forbidden them from killing me.

Framing my orders as requests let Callum keep the pack out of it, and that left him free to deal with me on his own terms, which was sometimes a good thing and sometimes not.

"Bryn?"

"Your request has been noted," I said, my lips twisting

inadvertently into an easy grin. “I don’t anticipate there being any motorcycles in my future.”

I was pushing him again, but I couldn’t help it. You didn’t get to be alpha of the largest pack in North America by winning popularity contests, and Callum was so dominant that the day I stopped pushing back would be the day that I was a member of his pack first and myself second.

To Callum’s credit and my relief, he didn’t push for a firmer promise—probably because there were still two major items left on his Bryn Agenda.

“Your algebra grade is lower than it could be. Education is important, and I’d not have you slacking off, sadistic teacher or no.” His voice took on that odd, old-fashioned lilt he sometimes adopted, a mere remnant of the accent he’d had before coming to this country.

“Right. Algebra.” With the spring semester a month under way, I was getting a solid B-plus, but it could have easily been an A, and Callum had all kinds of lofty ideas about the importance of my living up to my potential. It was impressively modern of him, considering that he predated Women’s Lib by a couple of centuries—at least.

“Did you tell Ali on me?” I asked. When the pack had adopted me, Callum had Marked a second human as well. Alison Clare had come to Ark Valley in search of her sister, who’d left their human family behind when she’d married into the pack. No one had counted on twenty-one-year-old Ali

tracking her sister to Ark Valley and unraveling secrets best kept in the woods. Any other alpha would have killed Ali the moment she saw her brother-in-law Shift. Callum had given her a choice.

And then once she'd chosen, he'd given her me.

At present, Ali was thirty-two, 100 percent human, recently married to one of the pack's males, and my foster mother. Adopted mother. Whatever. Putting a label on Ali's role in my life was somewhat difficult. I used her last name and had lived in her house for almost as long as I could remember. Despite the fact that she'd been practically a kid herself when Callum had initiated her into our world, Ali was the one who'd hugged and scolded and raised me from a pup (figuratively speaking, of course). Callum was my guardian on paper, but it was Ali who fed and clothed me, Ali who'd set up this studio so that I could have a place that was purely mine, away from the constant pull of the pack, and Ali who would ground me quicker than Callum could say my full name if she thought for a single second that I deserved it.

"Ali has her own concerns at the moment," Callum said, and I saw the faint ghost of worry on his otherwise unreadable face. Ali was eight months pregnant with her first child. Werewolf births were notoriously difficult, and many human women didn't survive.

Ali's sister hadn't.

I was not willing to consider the possibility that the same thing might happen to Ali. Ali was strong. She'd make it, and the baby would, too, and then he'd outlive her by, oh, say a thousand years.

Darn werewolves and their ridiculously long life spans.

"Was that it?" I asked Callum, hoping he'd get the message loud and clear that I wasn't going to spend a second worrying about Ali, who would be just fine-fine-fine.

"You on a schedule here, Bryn?"

I gave an exasperated huff. "No." I hoped he'd smell the half-lie for what it was. Just before he'd interrupted me, I'd been working on a new piece, and I was anxious to get back to it. Found art was all about the process, and His Royal Highness, the Werewolf King (and Grand Poobah of Pains in the Butt) was seriously disrupting mine.

"You broke curfew last night," Callum said sharply. The first two complaints had been mere warm-ups for this one. His features tightened, his brows drawing together in a *V*.

"If my curfew wasn't at dusk, I wouldn't have to break it." I felt as strongly about this issue as Callum did. Nighttime came depressingly early in winter, and I had no intention of being home each day by five.

"There is unease in the pack, Bronwyn. I would have you safe from it."

I was *Bronwyn* again, a surefire sign that he was dangerously close to issuing either an edict or a threat. Possibly both.

“If I cannot trust you to be home before nightfall, I will be forced to take further measures to ensure your safety.” Callum’s words were unquestionably set in stone, and the hardness of his tone told me that he meant business. In my experience, Callum’s definition of “further measures” was disturbingly broad and ranged from taking me over his knee (when I was eight) to posting a guard outside my bedroom window. Right now, I wasn’t at all worried about the former, which I’d long outgrown. The latter, however...

“Until I can be assured of your cooperation in this matter, I’ve assigned a team to keep an eye on you.”

I scowled at Callum. “You have *got* to be kidding me.” There was nothing in the world worse than werewolf bodyguards.

“Bryn, m’dear, you know I never kid.” Callum’s brown eyes sparkled with just a hint of lupine mischief, which told me that (a) he was, in fact, serious about the guards, and (b) my moral outrage amused him, because in his mind, I’d knowingly brought this on myself.

“You suck,” I grumbled.

He put two fingers under my chin and held my face so that my eyes met his. “And you are the most disobedient child I’ve ever had the displeasure of meeting.” His words were laced with unspoken warmth, an affection that—in his human form, at least—he showed only to me. Still holding my chin, he rubbed his cheek once against mine and then tousled my

hair, actions I both hated and loved since they simultaneously marked me as a child and as his.

“Be home by dusk, Bryn,” he told me, before taking his leave. “Trouble’s afoot.”

I harrumphed. I was a human who had been quite literally raised by wolves. In my world, trouble was *always* afoot.

# CHAPTER TWO



AFTER CALLUM LEFT ME ALONE IN THE STUDIO, I SET about pretending he'd never been there at all. This was my space, and if growing up in the pack had taught me anything, it was the importance of marking your territory. Since I had no compulsion whatsoever toward scent-marking, the best I could manage was refusing to acknowledge the fact that my sanctuary had been violated at all. Turning my discerning gaze to my work in progress, I evaluated the day's efforts thus far. At present, the sculpture resembled nothing so much as a papier-mâché fire hydrant. I'd meant for it to be an oak tree, but *c'est la vie*. I was more concerned with my materials than the outcome per se. Chess-club flyers, notes passed in class, failed tests, and midterm papers—this was my medium. I was always happiest elbow-deep in things that other people had thrown away.

“Dusk in ten minutes, Bryn.”

The words were issued from directly behind my left shoulder, and the only thing that kept me from making a sound somewhere in the “eep!” family was years of experience with

frustratingly stealthy werewolves. Despite my own training and the bond I shared with the rest of the pack, if Weres wanted to sneak up on me, they could. Even in human form, werewolves were stronger, faster, and more capable of masking their presence than us non-supernatural types. The most I could do was attempt to hide my surprise when they caught me off guard. Today, I was certainly getting plenty of practice at that. First Callum, and now this.

I whirled on the intruder. "I don't care when dusk is," I said. As my best friend, Devon was morally obligated to listen to me whine, and if he was going to keep me from working on "The Tree (or possibly Fire Hydrant) of Knowledge," I was going to take full advantage of that obligation. "Nobody else has a five p.m. curfew."

Devon didn't bother to expend energy by disputing my words or acknowledging my whine in any way. He just leaned back against the door of my garage-turned-studio and waited for my ranting to subside.

"Besides," I continued, hoping to engender some level of sympathy, "Callum's put me on surveillance. I'm sure my babysitter will be showing up any minute to escort me home, whether I like it or not."

Fact of life: pretty much everyone I knew was stronger, faster, and less disturbed by the idea of throwing a girl over his shoulder and hauling her to a given destination than anyone had a right to be.

A slightly more satisfying fact of life: I didn't have to make it easy for them. I'd doubtlessly lose any fight I started, but it was the principle of the matter. That, and annoying werewolves was a good way to dispel pent-up frustration—if and only if they were bound to keep you safe and couldn't raise claw or canine against you.

*Teeth ripping into flesh. Skin tearing like Velcro.*

Glancing out the window in a show of calm, I wondered why my “escort” wasn't here already. Like Devon had said, it was almost dark, and Callum's wolves were nothing if not punctual. It was at that exact moment that I noticed the faint grin on Devon's face.

“You're my escort?”

Devon shrugged. “The Big Guy tells you to do something, you do it, even if it means babysitting a bratty little human girl who calls playing with glue *art*.”

I reached over and smacked him.

Devon just smiled back at me. He was my best friend. My partner in crime. He was most certainly not my keeper. I was going to kill Callum for this. He knew that in my current frame of mind, I would have fought anyone else, but I couldn't fight with Devon, and Devon couldn't disobey Callum.

Insert four-letter word here.

“Have I mentioned that I really hate werewolves?”

“A time or two, I believe,” Devon said. For no reason other than the fact that he could, he adopted a ridiculously affected

British accent. “Come along now, luv. Be a dear and walk with your old pal Devon, yeah?”

My best friend, the drama geek. If I didn’t go with him now, there was a high probability that he’d keep switching accents until I caved. A werewolf channeling the Swedish Chef was not a pretty thing—and I had absolutely no desire to see it again.

“Fine.” I sighed melodramatically. Two could play Dev’s game, and if he was going to put his drama chops to use, I had every right to channel my inner diva. “If we must, we must, yeah?”

My own British accent was, in a word, horrid.

To his credit, Devon didn’t wince. Instead, he adopted an austere look. “Indeed.” He managed to maintain his serious expression for about two seconds before the two of us started cracking up. He linked his arm through mine and gently steered me out the door. We locked up and then headed down the trail toward town.

“Do you have any idea what’s got Callum’s panties in a twist?” I asked as we walked.

“It’s a miracle he let you live past childhood, darling. I can’t imagine anyone else talking about our esteemed leader’s underpants.”

Although his words were entirely true, I couldn’t help but notice that they weren’t an answer. “Don’t evade the question, Dev. Callum said he’d put an entire team on me. I’m guessing

that means more than just you and that you got the short straw tonight because—”

“Because Callum knew you’d be defenseless against my ample charms?” Devon suggested winningly. Of our generation in the pack, Dev was the largest, the strongest, and the most likely to turn alpha himself one day, but being Devon, he preferred to think his true power lay in other domains.

I rolled my eyes. “Because Callum knows we’re friends,” I corrected. Werewolves had heightened senses, and a person would have had to be deaf, dumb, blind, and just plain stupid to miss out on the connection that Devon and I shared. There were only a few other juvenile wolves in our pack, and with Devon’s sense of flare (he was, I was certain, the world’s only metrosexual werewolf), he’d never really fit in among the other pups. Then Callum had brought me home, Marked me, and given me to Ali. Most of the pack had ignored the tiny, shell-shocked human, but Devon claimed he’d loved me from the moment he’d seen me, shivering in Callum’s arms, blood-spattered and wild-eyed. The two of us quickly became inseparable. It was to Devon that I’d said my first words once I started talking again, and with Devon that I’d mastered the fine art of mischief. He was *Devon*.

And now, Callum had placed me in his charge.

“I hate this,” I said.

“I’m sure you do, Bronwyn Alessia St. Vincent Clare, but I’d not have you endangering yourself on my watch.”

It took me a second to realize that Devon was channeling Callum. The impression was a hilariously good one, and it reminded me that even when he obeyed orders, Devon was not just another member of the pack.

“Your stubbornness is also your folly,” Devon continued. He even had Callum’s facial expressions—or lack thereof—down pat.

“Fine. You win. I’m laughing. Happy now?”

Devon grinned, Callum’s quirks instantaneously melting off his heart-shaped face. “I’m ecstatic.”

“The point is—” I tried to bite back my giggles, but that stubbornness/folly line was so spot-on that I was having trouble recovering. “The point, Devon I-wish-you-had-a-middle-name Macalister, is that if Callum’s got an entire team watching me—including your fine wolfy self—then there’s something going on. I want to know what it is.”

“Leave it alone, Bryn.” Devon’s voice was soft and uncharacteristically serious. He knew something, he knew that I knew that he knew something, and he still wasn’t telling. Ten-to-one odds, that meant that (a) Callum had forbidden him from telling me, and (b) Devon agreed that it was in my best interest not to know.

“Devon!”

“Bronwyn.”

I really needed to come up with a better retort than “you suck.”

The two of us walked in silence for a bit, until the trail veered off to the right. Ark Valley was about 90 percent woods, and the forest was protected by the town by-laws—not surprising given that the town was one of a dozen or so in a five-state area founded by Callum’s pack, way back when. Every couple of decades, the pack moved, rotating through our territory just when the older wolves’ agelessness began pushing the line from “incredible genetics” to “unnatural.” We’d been in Ark Valley for as long as I could remember, and the townspeople hadn’t gotten suspicious yet—at least about the aging thing.

“Your castle awaits,” Devon said, gesturing to Ali’s house.

“Not going to walk me to the door?” I asked, pretending to be shocked at his lack of gallantry.

“Of course I am. Many would think that a bonny lass such as yerself wouldst be able to stay out of trouble for a distance of fifteen feet, but I know better.”

“Did you just use the words *yerself* and *wouldst* in the same sentence? You can’t be a pirate and a courtier at the same time, Dev. It just isn’t done.”

In a gesture below the dignity of the average werewolf, he stuck his tongue out at me. Still, he walked me all the way to the front door, depositing me on the porch and waiting for me to open the door and walk across the threshold. I dug out my keys, unlocked the steel door, and stepped inside, just as dusk fell.

“Good boy, Devon,” I taunted. “You got me home before dark. If you can sit, shake, and roll over, too, I’m sure Callum will give you a doggie treat.”

“Forget Callum and his so-called panties,” Devon said, finally taking his tongue back into his mouth so that he could speak. “It’s a miracle that *I* let you live past childhood.”

I snorted. On any other girl, it would have been a perfectly normal, if indelicate, sound to make. On me, it sounded more animalistic. More wolfish, even though I wasn’t a Were. Hazard of being raised by a pack. For the most part, with a little effort and a lot of resolve, I could keep them out of my head, but they still snuck their way into my mannerisms. I’d never be one of them the way Devon was one of them. I’d never Shift to another form, and I’d never have a wolf sharing my body and stalking through the corners of my mind. But I’d never be like other girls, either.

I shook my head to clear it of thoughts—another gesture that wasn’t as human as I was—and I realized when I zoned back in that Devon had already taken his leave. He’d made it to the trail and a good ways down it in a matter of seconds, not bothering to mask his inhuman speed. Nobody but Weres came as far into the forest as Ali’s house. Nobody but Ali and me.

“Close the door and hang up your jacket,” Ali called the orders to me from the kitchen. She had an uncanny sense for knowing what was happening in her house even if she

couldn't see it. Before she'd bellowed, I'd been microseconds away from dumping my coat on the floor.

I followed her orders to a T and then walked into the kitchen, following the sound of Ali's voice and the scent of cooking food. I had a good nose—a matter of necessity in the pack, human or not—but I couldn't quite parse what I was smelling into its component parts. “Marinara sauce,” I mused out loud. “Peanut butter. Onions. And...”

“Oreos,” Ali declared, popping one into her mouth. “You want?” she asked after she'd gulped hers down.

I took the proffered Oreo and surveyed the rest of the kitchen. “Cravings?” I asked.

Ali shrugged hopelessly.

“Where's the steak?”

It didn't matter what Ali was craving, there was always meat involved. The baby had turned her into a carnivore, and Ali, who couldn't stomach even the sight of a rare steak eight months ago, ate them daily now. Such was the price of a Were pregnancy. That, and the fact that instead of kicking, like normal babies, Ali's son Shifted forms. A couple of months ago, I'd joked about selling tickets to watch her stomach during the full moon. Now, with the baby's birth closer all the time, it really wasn't funny anymore.

“I'm going to be fine,” Ali said, reaching up to rub my shoulder with one hand.

“You always do that. It's like you can read my mind.” I meant

it as a complaint, but it came out nostalgic, like part of me was preparing to look back fondly on that habit when she was gone.

“I’m going to be fine,” Ali said again. “You know me, Bryn. Have I ever backed down from a fight?”

Never. Before Callum had thrust me into her care, she hadn’t even been a part of the pack. She’d only just found out that werewolves were real and that more often than not, they took human women as their mates. For an orphaned kid she’d never even met, Ali had abandoned her own life and risen to the challenge. She’d taken Callum’s Mark and mastered it, insulating herself—and me—from most of what it entailed. There wasn’t a Were within a hundred-mile radius that she hadn’t stood up to on my behalf, Callum included. I thought that was why he’d given me to her, instead of to one of the other Weres. He’d made her Pack so that she could take care of me, knowing that she’d be unaffected by dominance hierarchies, knowing that she wouldn’t put up with someone giving me crap just because they were dominant enough to think that they could.

“You’re going to be fine,” I said, repeating Ali’s words. I believed it. I really did. I just forgot that I did sometimes. I’d seen too many women die in childbirth. Female werewolves were extremely rare, and human bodies weren’t meant to carry werewolf pups.

“Where’s Casey?” I asked, changing the topic of conversation and hoping that my thoughts would follow suit. “It’s not like him to miss a meal.” Ali’s husband was an eater. And for

the past eight months, he'd been quite the hoverer as well. Food plus Ali meant that he should be here, and even though I hadn't quite gotten used to the fact that it wasn't just me and Ali anymore—or the idea that when I slept, there was an adult Were sleeping down the hall—Casey's absence struck me as fundamentally strange.

"Casey's eating out tonight," Ali said. "Here, taste this."

I was so caught up in trying to figure out why Casey was "eating out" and what Ali wasn't telling me that I almost took the bite she offered me. At the last second, I came to my senses and realized that whatever concoction Ali's cravings had led her to create, I really, truly didn't want any part of it.

"Your loss," she said, spooning the goop, which definitely contained both the peanut butter and the marinara sauce I'd smelled, into her mouth. She followed it with an Oreo.

"I'm going to throw up," I said, gagging—and not just for show.

"It's all part of my master plan," Ali replied. "Cravings are just the pregnant woman's excuse for making everyone around her as nauseated as she is."

"You're evil, Ali."

She smiled and serenely took another bite. "I know."

I took refuge in the refrigerator and nosed around until I found something edible. Popping the container into the microwave, I turned my attention back to Ali, who was very good at distracting me—just not quite good enough.

“Your husband’s not home for dinner, even though he hasn’t gone more than ten feet away from you since you hit seven months. Callum decided to start enforcing my curfew and assigned an entire team to keep an eye on me. You’re making pregnancy jokes to distract me from asking questions.” I ticked the observations off on my fingers as I spoke out loud. “Something’s going on.”

“If I asked you to please, as a personal favor to me, stay out of it, would you?” Ali asked.

I busied myself by checking on my microwavable mac and cheese and didn’t reply.

“Didn’t think so,” Ali sighed. “What if I told you that I was tired and cranky and very pregnant, and that I needed you to do this for me, because I can’t take the extra stress right now?”

Now that was a low blow, and Ali knew it. I didn’t want to be worried about her, and she didn’t want me worrying about her. “You’re going to be fine,” I said, trying to respond the way I would have if I really wasn’t concerned at all. “And telling me to stay away just makes me want to know more. It’s obviously pack business, and there must be some danger involved, otherwise Callum wouldn’t be pulling his ‘trouble’s afoot’ routine. But it can’t be too dangerous, because Casey’s involved, and Callum would never risk him this close to your due date.”

Ali didn’t say a word. I tried to read her face, but she had an ability matched only by Callum’s to hide her emotions completely.

“Do you really need me to leave this alone?” I asked softly. I couldn’t risk hurting her, even if we both wanted to pretend that there was nothing—and could be nothing—wrong.

“Yeah, Bryn, I think I do.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll leave it alone—for now. But I’m not going to like it, and once that kid is born, and you’re fine, I’m getting a tattoo, piercing my belly button, and eloping to Mexico with someone you’ve never met.”

She laughed and then stuck another Oreo in my mouth. As I was chewing, she tweaked my hair. “Bryn, Callum’s got you under surveillance. You wouldn’t make it a foot into a tattoo shop before someone yanked you back out.”

“You never know,” I replied. “Tonight, my guard was Devon, and I happen to know for a fact that he thinks tasteful body art is quite the thing.”

Ali responded to my retort with one of her own, and we went back and forth for so long that it didn’t occur to me until much later that she had assumed that my security team would still be in place by the time the baby was born. And that really made me wonder, because our pack had a tendency to take care of trouble very quickly. Threats were eliminated the instant they were identified. Callum ran a tight ship, and I couldn’t imagine what kind of pack business would necessitate my being inside by dusk every night for a month or more.

Despite my promise to Ali, I couldn’t stop thinking about it,

and by the end of the week, I'd come to the realization that the weirdest part of all of this wasn't that something had everyone on edge. It was the fact that nobody would tell me what *it* was. The pack didn't just want me safe. They wanted to keep me in the dark.

And ever since the night the Big Bad Wolf had come knocking at my parents' door, I hadn't been overly fond of the dark. Not metaphorically. Not actually. I liked seeing what was laid out in front me. And if Callum and Ali and Devon thought they could keep me blindfolded indefinitely, they were wrong.