

* pre-copyedits (i.e. not final so expect errors & typos!)

Max

“We’re being stalked,” Max whispers to his big brother. “I think it’s a bear.”

Carson scowls and waves for Max to be quiet.

“I’m serious,” Max whispers, loud enough to attract the attention of Kendra, leading the group hike.

“Everything okay back there, buddy?” Kendra calls over her shoulder.

“It’ll be better when you turn around and take us back to civilization,” Carson says. “This is even more boring than last week’s hike.”

Kendra raises her middle finger, and Max can’t suppress a smile. Mom says Kendra is a social worker, but Carson says that’s she’s too cool for that. Max thinks Mom’s right, though. They’ve mostly only had social workers who are, well, kinda boring. Kendra’s fun, and she knows how to handle thirteen-year-olds like Carson when they’re being jerks.

Carson might respect Kendra, but that doesn’t keep him from grumbling and kicking the dirt the moment she turns away. Max knows his brother doesn’t want to be here. Carson hates the forest. He’s scared of it, though he’d never admit that. Max wishes he’d admit it. He wishes Carson would admit all the things that scare him, because then Max could admit them, too.

Carson is scared that the bad men will find them here. Max shouldn’t call them “bad men.” That makes Carson roll his eyes. Max is ten, and “bad men” is little-kid talk, which was fine when they *were* little kids, and Mom and Dad explained about the bad men and why they had to play a hiding game. Witness protection—Max knows the proper words now.

Their parents saw something bad, and they'd done the right thing by telling the police. The "bad man" went to jail, only he had friends who were angry, and that meant witness protection.

Max didn't used to be afraid of these people. His family always had their "Captain America's shield," as Dad called witness protection. Then the shield broke. Now Dad is dead, and Mom is hurt, and they're hiding in the wilderness and Carson is so mad. Mad and scared, and being scared only makes him more mad.

These days, Carson hates everything. Mom calls it "a phase." She also says he has a reason to be angry, and he needs to "work through his trauma." Carson's seeing Mathias for that. Mathias is a psychiatrist and also the town butcher, just like Kendra is a social worker but also the town plumber and the hike leader. Max is doing therapy, too, only he talks to Isabel, who's a psychologist but also runs the town bar, which everyone calls the saloon, like in the Wild West, which is really cool.

To Max, everything about Haven's Rock is cool. It's like being at summer camp, except it's for grownups, and he and Carson are the only kids, and that's kinda awesome.

"Stupid hikes," Carson mutters, kicking his feet. "I don't know why you like them so much. There's nothing to see but trees."

Max could point out what Carson was missing. So many things that he'd run out of breath listing them. *Look at that orange mushroom—it's edible, but that one's old and will taste bitter. Over there is fox scat—it's pointy at the end and has fur in it. See that ground squirrel—when they hibernate, their bodies go below freezing.*

He could say all that. He *has* said all that and more, and Carson only grumbles that he's starting to sound like Sheriff Eric, which Max considers a compliment—the sheriff knows

everything about the forest—but he knows Carson doesn't mean it that way.

He also doesn't say that Carson could have stayed behind. Mom insists Carson come on the hikes to look after Max. She can't because of her bad leg, after she was shot by the men who killed their father.

Max is allowed to go on his own with Sheriff Eric or Detective Casey, but Mom thinks Kendra is “a bit young” to look after Max. Kendra is twenty-three, which is older than Max's last teacher, but he knows not to say that. Just like he knows not to speak to Carson until he has to.

If there's a predator stalking them, he has to say something.

“I really do think it's a bear,” Max whispers.

“Good. A bear attack might be the only thing that'll make this hike interesting.”

Max scowls at him.

“There's no bear, Max. Don't do this again. You embarrassed us enough the last time.”

Carson stalks a few feet ahead.

Max glances to the left. There's nothing there now, but he'd definitely heard an animal earlier. A big animal.

Ever since Max told Isabel he had nightmares about people sneaking up on him, Sheriff Eric has been teaching him to how to track sounds in the forest. One day, after a really bad nightmare, they'd sat in the woods all morning, listening for animals.

The crack of a twig. The rustle of undergrowth. A grouse, startled from its hiding place. And sometimes, there's no sound at all, which says there's a predator nearby.

Earlier, there'd been three noises. A crackle. A rustle. Another crackle. Each had come at least thirty seconds after the last, meaning the creature is following them.

Stalking them.

It's big, too. Sheriff Eric taught him how to guess the size of a creature by the size of the noise. This isn't a rabbit.

Arctic hare, he corrects. They have hares here, not rabbits. While hares usually have longer hind legs and ears, Arctic hares had shorter ones. Unlike rabbits, they live alone or in pairs, but when it gets really cold, they've been known to huddle with others for warmth. Right now—late summer back home and early fall here—the hares are starting to turn white for winter camouflage. There'd been a lot of them this year, which Sheriff Eric says means there'll be more lynx and fox—and maybe even wolves—next year because more food means more of their kits and cubs will survive.

Max hurries to catch up with Carson, wanting to tell him about Arctic hares, but the look on his brother's face warns him not to. He'll tell Mom instead. She likes to hear everything he's learning, even on the days when the pain is so bad she has to stay in bed. Sometimes, if he listens at the door, he hears her crying. He's never sure if it's because of the pain, though, or because Dad's gone.

Max keeps peeking to the side, trying to see what's stalking them. Three months ago, he'd have been so scared he'd have run and told Kendra right away. He knows better now. There are six of them on the hike. Kendra is up front, leading the way. Behind her is a man whose name Max doesn't know yet. He's new, and he's gawking around like he's never seen a tree before. Then there's Lynn, who came with her husband, but Max hears them fighting all the time. Next comes Carson and Max. Gunnar brings up the rear.

Kendra carries a gun. Gunnar does not, which funny, because of his name. But Gunnar *does*

have bear spray. So does Kendra. With one gun, two cans of bear spray and six people, they shouldn't need to worry about bears. Whatever is following them is just curious. Still, Max should tell Kendra. That's what Sheriff Eric would say. But the last time they were out for a walk, Max thought he saw a bear, and he thought it was following them, and he'd told Kendra . . . and there'd been no bear.

Carson had said Max was imagining things, but Kendra and Sheriff Eric and Detective Casey believed Max. Kendra and Sheriff Eric had searched for tracks or fur or broken branches. Detective Casey brought Storm to sniff around.

No one found any sign of a bear. They'd all been really nice about it—*better safe than sorry*—but Max had wanted to curl up in embarrassment. He'd felt like a little kid with everyone humoring him.

So now, even though Max should tell Kendra, he can't. Not without proof.

"Can you just listen?" Max whispers to Carson. "Tell me if you hear what I hear."

"I don't hear anything except you."

Max stops talking, in hopes Carson means that—"be quiet so I can listen." But Carson keeps walking with that look on his face, the one that says he doesn't want to see or hear anything.

"Just listen," Max says. "Please."

"I don't hear it."

"You're not listening."

"Would you stop this?" Carson hisses. "You're embarrassing yourself. Do you want Eric to stop giving you those lessons?"

"*Sheriff* Eric."

Carson rolls his dark eyes. “He’s not a real sheriff.”

“Yes, he is. He has a hat and a gun. Detective Casey says they used to have horses, in the other town. Just like a real sheriff.”

“You’re such a baby. If you keep this up, Mom’s going to decide those lessons with Eric are freaking you out. She might even decide you shouldn’t go into the forest if you can’t stop jumping at every noise.”

“I’m not jumping. I’m being aware of my surroundings.”

Another eye roll. “Now you even sound like him.”

“Hey, kid,” Gunnar calls. “Is your brother being an asshole again?”

“Yes,” Carson says.

“I wasn’t talking to you, asshole.”

Lynn looks back sharply, her eyes wide. “Did you just call Carson an—?” She mouths the word.

“Course not,” Gunnar says. “That would be wrong.”

As soon as Lynn turns away, Gunnar mouths “Asshole” to Carson, who flips him the bird. Gunnar only grins.

“Come back here, kid,” Gunnar says to Max. “Your brother needs a time out.”

“Finally,” Carson says, and walks on ahead.

Max slows to let Gunnar catch up. Gunnar is older than Kendra—he’d turned twenty-eight last month and the bakers made him a cake. So it should be okay if Max left Carlson behind when Gunnar’s there, right? Max tried saying that to his mom, but she wouldn’t listen. Like it didn’t matter how old Gunnar was, she still didn’t trust him with her son.

If she'd been really worried, she wouldn't have let Max near Gunnar. But when Gunnar is around Max, Mom watches him, the way she might watch a dog she didn't quite trust. The dog might seem friendly, but something about it put her on guard.

"You okay?" Gunnar asks when they fall in step together.

Max shrugs.

"Something up?"

Max is about to shrug again. Then he pauses and thinks.

Gunnar seems friendly. No, not *seems*. Max has met plenty of people who act that way but they aren't. Gunnar *is* friendly. But there's something else there, too.

Gunnar reminds Max of a stray cat that lived in their old neighborhood. A big ol' tom, Mom called it. It even kinda looked like Gunnar—shaggy yellow hair and lots of muscles. It was always prowling around, but it'd come out to see Max and even let him scratch its ears. Max knew it wasn't a pet, but it also wasn't dangerous. At least, not to him.

Should he lie to Gunnar and say nothing's wrong?

No, he really needs to tell someone, and he trusts Gunnar to know what to do with it.

"I heard something in the forest," he whispers. "An animal. I wanted Carson to listen for it, but he thinks I'm imagining things, like the last time."

"No one said you were imagining it the last time, kid. They just didn't find whatever you saw. Tell me what I'm listening for."

"Anything. A rustle of leaves. A crack of a twig. I've heard both. A few times."

"Which side?"

Max jerks his chin left.

“Okay, let’s take a listen.”

Gunnar doesn’t seem like the type to humor kids, but he must be. Still, would Max rather Gunnar made fun of him for worrying, like Carson did? Or brushed him off, like grownups sometimes did, acting like every fear was just a monster under the bed?

It doesn’t matter. Max has told an adult, like he’s supposed to, and Gunnar isn’t making a big deal out of it, which Kendra might have. If Gunnar doesn’t hear anything—

“Kid?” Gunnar leans sideways toward him. “Keep looking straight ahead.”

“Okay . . .”

“When I count to three, fall back a couple of steps. Just a couple. Then look over your left shoulder. There’s a dried-up stream over there.”

“I know.”

“Look on the other side of it. I think I see something big and brown.”

“Okay.”

“Count of three. Fall behind but only two steps. Stay close enough to run back to me.”

“Okay.”

Did Gunnar really see something? He might not seem the type to humor a kid, but he is the type to humor himself. Play along with Max because he’s bored.

Does Max trust Gunnar not to make fun of him? That’s the big question, because amusing yourself by playing along is something bullies do.

Does Gunnar seem like a bully? Max isn’t sure, but there’s no audience here to amuse That’s what bullies do. They play along, and then you fall for it, and everyone laughs.

That’s one good thing about being in a town of grownups. No one’s going to laugh if Gunnar

plays a mean joke on a ten-year-old.

“Kid?” Gunnar says. “You with me?”

Max nods. “Count of three. Fall back two steps. Look over my left shoulder, across the creek.”

“You got it. Now, three . . . two . . . one.”

As Max falls behind, he gets a granola bar out of his left pocket, acting like it’s stuck and that’s why he’s slowing down. Then the bar pops out, and he looks over his left shoulder. Way over it at first, like he’s just realized he’s at the back of his group. His gaze swivels forward, slowly, just looking at the forest as he turns around.

Something moves, a blur of brown disappearing behind bushes.

Was that a bear?

It must have been. It was at least as tall as Gunnar. A bear on its hind legs.

Could it have been a tree stump? Or a bush?

Not unless stumps and bushes can move.

Whatever it was, it’s behind the bushes now, and when he peers, he can still see the top of its brown head above the branches.

“I’m not seeing things, right?” Gunnar says right beside him, making Max jump. “There’s something behind those bushes. Right—” Gunnar swears as the top of that brown head disappears.

“It dropped to all fours,” Max says. “They only stand up on two legs to look around or scare other predators.”

“By ‘they’ you means bears.”

Max nods.

“Couldn’t be a moose?” Gunnar asks. “No antlers, so maybe a doe?”

Max considers. Moose *are* as tall as a man. He calls up the mental image of what he’d just seen. A round furry head with what looked like ears.

Max shakes his head.

“Shit.” Gunnar takes a deep breath. “If it’s following us, we need to tell Kendra. Come on. Stay right beside me.”

Gunnar takes the bear spray from its holster and picks up speed. Max has to jog to keep up. He looks ahead and realizes they’ve fallen behind. The others are up around the bend, and they can’t see them. Max’s heart starts to pound.

They shouldn’t have fallen so far behind. That means they’re separated from the group. Just two of them, with no gun. If the bear is stalking them, and it realizes that two people have fallen back—one of them just a little kid . . .

Max glances left again and—

Something’s there.

Something’s right there.

“Gunnar?” That’s what Max tries to say, but the word won’t come out. There’s something in the woods right beside them, moving behind the thick bushes.

There’s a break in the bushes, and Max sees fur. Brown fur and then a massive paw with long, curving claws.

“Gunnar?”

It comes out as a squeak, and Gunnar doesn’t hear him, and there’s a bear, right there. A bear

moving fast, still on its hind legs.

That's not how it works. They can't move like that on two legs. But this one is, and it's right on the other side of the bushes and then the bushes drop low and the bear looks over and its eyes meet Max's and they aren't bear eyes at all.

They're human.

Casey

"Bigfoot," Anders whispers at my ear. "I can't believe we're searching for Bigfoot. This is so cool."

I glare at our deputy. Anders only grins back and waggles his brows.

"I'm joking," he says, his voice still low enough for only me to hear. "I wouldn't say that in front of anyone else. Poor kid's been through hell. If I were him, I'd be too damn scared to go into the forest at all. Hell, sometimes I *am* too damn scared, and I've been living out here for six years."

Looking at Will Anders, it'd be hard to believe anything could frighten him. He's over six feet tall and built like a quarterback. An army tattoo on his bicep speaks to an early career in the military police. But, yes, despite his years in Rockton, he's not entirely comfortable in the forest, as evidenced by the big Colt 45 at his hip. Dalton and I carry smaller guns and accept that we aren't likely to stop a grizzly. Anders hedges his bets in any way he can.

An hour ago, ten-year-old Max saw something on a hike. It seems to have been a grizzly. Max described a tall brown-furred creature, which is also what Gunnar saw. But Max swears

when the beast looked at him, it had human eyes. So, yes, that naturally leads to jokes about Bigfoot. Jokes that I know Anders would never make in front of other residents. Jokes that we need to make sure other residents don't start making themselves, in case Max overhears. He'd already admitted he'd been reluctant to report hearing something after a similar incident turned up nothing.

Max is a smart kid. He's also a kid suffering from PTSD. Being smart *and* traumatized means he's aware that he might be a little jumpy, and he doesn't want to be the boy who cried bear. But worrying about that led to a situation where a group of hikers had been stalked by a grizzly, and the only one who noticed had second-guessed himself until it was almost too late.

"Fuck."

I follow the curse to the guy standing off to my left. Sheriff Eric Dalton. My partner in . . . well, everything. Husband, colleague, best friend, co-founder of Haven's Rock, our tiny sanctuary town in the Yukon.

The curse makes me smile. He's been trying to cut back on profanity, particularly his affinity for every variation on that particular word. I'm mostly just amused by his efforts.

Dalton strides over with brown hairs pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

"Moose, right?" I say, half joking, half hoping.

He shakes his head. That curse told me what I needed to know. It's grizzly fur.

"Storm was right then," I say, patting our Newfoundland. She's our tracking dog, or that was the excuse Dalton used for buying me my dream-breed puppy. We *have* trained her in tracking, though, and her reaction earlier told me we weren't dealing with a moose. She smelled bear.

"Any prints?" Anders asks.

“Ground’s too dry. Found a couple of scuff marks, but all I can tell from them is that they’re big and they aren’t hoof prints. Got a few broken branches. Bit of trampled undergrowth. And this”—he lifts the fur—“four feet off the ground.”

“Shit.” Anders casts an anxious glance around. “That’s a problem, right? A grizzly stalking a group of six. It should know better.”

“We’re lucky Max noticed it,” I say.

“Yeah, it’s good he noticed, but I’m not sure they were in real danger. Bear was looking for an opportunity. Would it have attacked if Gunnar and Max fell behind for longer? Or was it just getting closer for a better look?” He shrugs. “Hard to say. The fact it fled is a good sign.”

“It’s still a concern,” I say.

“Hell, yeah. The question is how to play it. In Rockton, I’d have leaned in hard. Possible man-eating grizzly on the loose. No one takes a single step outside town until we’ve dealt with it. Scare the shit out of people.”

“But we have children in town now, children who’ve already been traumatized.”

“Yep, and I don’t know shit about dealing with that. We’re going to need to consult with the experts.”

“Isabel and Mathias.”

“Get their take on it. How do we properly convey the magnitude of danger while not giving the kids an extra helping of nightmare fuel.”

Anders looks around again. “And the magnitude of danger is?”

“High for anyone who wanders into the forest on their own. A healthy bear isn’t going to stalk a group of six humans. But we *are* heading into hibernation season.”

“It could be an old bear,” I say. “Old or sick. If it’s not fat enough to hibernate, it’ll get desperate.”

“Yep. We gotta find that bear and put it down.”

“And the part where Max says he saw human eyes?” Anders asks. “What do we make of that?”

“I don’t know,” Dalton says. “Gunnar saw a bear. Even Max says he saw a bear except for the eyes. I hate to say it, but I think Max just . . .” He shrugs. “Got spooked. Can’t blame him.”

“We should run that by Mathias and Isabel, too,” I say. “My Psych-101 interpretation would be that it was some kind of traumatic hallucination. All the boogeymen in that poor kid’s life have been human.”

“He sees the bear, gets spooked and flashes back to the shooting,” Anders says. “He thinks he sees human eyes. That makes sense.”

“Except for one thing,” I say. “It *wasn’t* just the eyes. He said the bear was moving fast on two legs.” I look at Dalton. “That’s not possible, right?”

Dalton tilts his head. “Bears rear up to look, sniff or intimidate. They can walk on their hind legs, but not well and not fast. I have seen one approach on two legs. It reared up and kept coming like that because it was facing off against a human. It moved at what I’d call walking speed, and it wasn’t far—maybe ten feet?”

“So, not normal behavior, but not impossible either, right?”

“Yep. I’d like to keep looking. Then we’ll head back to town and come up with a plan.”

Dalton found two more pieces of evidence. One was a very clear impression of a bear’s front

paw, in a softer section of the dried-up stream bed. The other was more fur caught high above ground level.

We have a grizzly less than a mile from Haven's Rock, and it's stalking our residents. That's a problem. A huge one. But our hidden, off-the-grid town is deep in the Yukon wilderness, hundreds of miles from the nearest community. Wildlife is going to be a concern, just as the environment itself can be, and if that's all we face up here, we'll count ourselves lucky.

Haven's Rock is our Rockton 2.0. The first version had been around since the fifties, when it'd been intended as a sanctuary for those fleeing political persecution. It morphed into a town for anyone in need, anyone who needed to escape something down south, get away for a few years, recalibrate and let the threat die down before they returned.

Obviously, one class of people who need to escape are criminals. Rockton wasn't for that. Not on paper anyway. Okay, fine, yes, they'd admit to letting in white-collar criminals who paid dearly for the privilege. That seemed fair. Those people had stolen money, so let them repay it by financing the residencies of real victims. Only the board in charge of Rockton hadn't stopped there. They'd let in violent criminals, and when things went wrong—whether with the criminals or the regular residents—they'd blocked every solution that might cut into their profits. A sanctuary for the persecuted became an investment for the rich.

When we pushed too hard for changes, they dismantled Rockton. So we build Haven's Rock. Yes, there's still an outside investor, but she's one of the earliest Rockton board members and the only one who'd been on our side. She doesn't need money—she's an elderly billionaire—so we trust her as much as we can trust anyone.

The only problem Émilie poses is that she's a little *too* invested in Haven's Rock, in an

ideological way. We'd planned to spend the first year with our own crew, acclimatizing to the new area and preparing the town for residents. But we'd put Émilie in charge of finding and vetting arrivals, and we discovered she's too damn good at it.

Building hadn't even finished before she had an urgent case—a couple and their teenage daughter. In the end, that fell through, but by then we'd agreed to admit a few others—since we were already opening early—and we couldn't change our minds. That was this past spring. We now have twenty-four residents, including Max's family.

Rockton didn't allow children or couples. We wanted to change that. We still believe in our decision, but we are quickly seeing how much easier it was when every newcomer was a lone adult, a stranger among strangers. Easier for *us*, that is. But they're the ones who matter, so we're the ones who need to adjust.

When we return after looking for the bear, we consult with Isabel about Max and Carson. Mathias is there, but Mathias being Mathias, his advice is less than stellar.

“Tell them whatever you like,” he says in his French-Canadian accent. “It will not matter. If the children wish to go into the forest, they will go into the forest. If they are traumatized by what they encounter there?” He shrugs. “It will teach them not to go back into the forest.”

I glare at him.

He throws up his hands. “You asked for my advice.”

“I asked for your professional opinion. As a psychiatrist. Not as a serial killer.”

He waggles a finger at me. “Nothing has been proven, and if I did kill anyone, they deserved it.”

Mathias's response may suggest that we're doing this “fresh start” thing all wrong. But if

you took our core staff and removed those who have committed murder, we wouldn't have enough people to run Haven's Rock. That includes me.

At eighteen, I took a gun to confront a guy whose actions had put me in a coma. I just wanted to scare him. He wasn't scared, and he blamed me for the beating that put me into that coma. So I pulled the trigger. While I hadn't gone to jail, I'd sentenced myself to a mental one for a very long time, unable to get past the guilt. I won't say I'm past it now, but I've come to terms with the mistake I made, and I hope what I've done with my life compensates in some way. That's what Rockton—and Haven's Rock—were really about for some of us. Not escaping our past but confronting it and doing better.

“Doing better” really isn't Mathias's thing. He was a criminal psychiatrist who killed criminals in creatively appropriate ways. He's not a textbook serial killer, driven to murder. He just doesn't mind killing when he thinks it's warranted. He's also a good psychiatrist and a really good butcher, so we let him join us in Haven's Rock. And because no one dared tell him no.

We also have a diagnosed sociopath in town. Twenty-one-year-old Sebastian, who murdered his parents at the age of eleven and spent the next seven years in jail. In jail and in therapy, which doesn't always work for sociopaths. Sebastian learned to accept his diagnosis and, under Mathias's mentorship, he might be the resident least likely to commit murder. Unless they really need murdering, and then he might be the most likely. Right now, though, he's back near Rockton with Mathias's dog, Raoul, and his girlfriend, Felicity. That's Sebastian's girlfriend, not the dog's.

I look from Mathias to Isabel, our former psychologist turned bar owner. We're having this meeting in the Roc—a reincarnation of our former bar, which now also serves as a coffee shop

during the day. It's late afternoon, and we closed the coffee shop early for this meeting, which consists of me, Dalton, Anders, Mathias, and Isabel.

Isabel taps her manicured nails on the wooden table. In this kind of town, no one should have be able to keep their nails like that. Isabel manages to maintain an aura of glamor even in hiking boots.

"Mathias has a point about the impossibility of keeping the boys out of the forest," she says. "Which doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Will? You should speak to their mother. Dana is most comfortable with you. We don't want to put them on house arrest. Particularly Carson, who might have no interest in the forest but will go there just because we forbid it." She glances at Mathias. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," Mathias says. "The boy is exceptionally angry. I want to teach him to throw knives."

I look at him.

"You do not think I am serious? He needs an outlet for his anger. I am struggling to convince his mother of that. She wants him to do nothing violent . . . and he only wants to do things that are violent. Knife-throwing is more cathartic than marksmanship or archery."

"So I should speak to Dana," Anders says. "About the bear thing, not the knives. Explain the danger and discuss ways to keep the boys inside the town limits without Carson rebelling. What if I suggested Carson join me on patrols?"

"*Non,*" Mathias says. "He will see through that and know you are humoring him. I will deal with Carson. Isabel will deal with Max. You will deal with the town patrols. Casey and Eric will deal with the bear."