

Chapter One

I don't know who was more anxious—Daniel or Kenjii—but they weren't making this emergency helicopter evacuation any easier. I patted Kenjii and she shifted until her full hundred pounds of German Shepherd rested squarely on my feet. When I tried to wriggle away, she moved closer, pinning my legs. I sighed and glanced at Daniel. He was staring out the window, fingers drumming.

I twisted to look at the others. Daniel and I were in the first passenger row, behind the pilot and Mayor Tillson who was in the co-pilot's seat. Behind us were the mayor's daughter, Nicole, and his niece, Sam Russo, gazing out their respective windows. Hayley Morris and Corey Carling sat in the last row. Hayley was talking; Corey wasn't listening.

"We're going north." Daniel had to yell to Mayor Tillson to be heard over the helicopter noise. "We're supposed to be heading to Victoria, aren't we?"

When the mayor didn't respond, the pilot said, "Change of plans, son. Victoria's backed up with evacuees. We're taking you to Vancouver."

"Okay, so why are we heading *north*?"

We live on Vancouver Island, near Nanaimo, which is almost directly west across the Strait of Georgia from the city of Vancouver, British Columbia.

"Wind," the pilot said. "Same one that's driving that fire is forcing us to circle north. Don't worry. I'll have you there in an hour."

I looked at Daniel. His face was drawn with worry. I couldn't blame him, under the circumstances. We'd outrun a forest fire and outwitted a mysterious fake rescue team only to be whisked out of town before we had time to catch our breath.

I was worried, too, about a lot of things, but right now, mostly about Rafe Martinez, unconscious on the floor behind my seat. How much smoke had he inhaled? What was he going to do when he found out that his sister, Annie, was still missing?

I twisted the bracelet on my wrist. A cat's eye stone on a worn leather band. Rafe's. He'd want it back when he found out that I'd told them not to wake him up because he wouldn't leave without Annie. That would be the end of anything between us. But I could live with that. Better than I could live with myself if I'd let him die in that inferno.

“Are the other helicopters going to Vancouver, too?” Daniel asked. “The ones with our parents?”

“I believe so,” the pilot said. “Is that right, sir?”

When Mayor Tillson didn’t answer, the pilot glanced over. “Sir?”

He bent to see the mayor’s face and chuckled. “Seems someone doesn’t mind the racket this bird makes. He’s sound asleep. I’m sure he said the other helicopter was just a few minutes behind us.”

I leaned forward. The mayor was slumped in his seat, his face toward the window, at an angle that didn’t look comfortable at all. When I undid my seatbelt, the pilot glanced back.

“Whoa, none of that. This isn’t a 747. Belt on at all times. Maya, isn’t it?”

I scooted to the edge of my seat and touched the mayor’s arm. “Mr. Tillson?”

“Hey,” the pilot said, voice sharp. “If you want me to check on your parents, just say so. Your mayor has had one hell of a day with this fire, and you kids running off didn’t help. Let the man get some rest.”

Sure, the mayor must be exhausted, but with everything that happened, I doubted he could relax enough to fall asleep.

“Mr. Tillson?” I said, shaking him harder.

Daniel undid his belt. Sam did, too, getting up and walking forward, hunched, as she stepped over Rafe.

“Okay, that’s enough!” the pilot barked. “In your seats, belts on. Everyone!”

“Or what?” Sam said. “You’ll pull over and make us walk the rest of the way?” She shook the mayor’s shoulder. “Uncle Phil?”

Mayor Tillson’s head lolled. Nicole shrieked and fumbled with her belt. I pressed my hand to the mayor’s neck.

“Is he all right?” the pilot said, sounding concerned now.

“He’s breathing,” I said.

“Could it be a heart attack?” Sam asked.

Before I could answer, the pilot cursed and said, yes, that must be it, with the stress and all, and the mayor was, as he put it “a big guy.” He’d get a doctor on the helipad right away.

“Wh-what?” Nicole said, scrambling over Rafe. “Did he say heart attack?”

“If it is, we’ll get help,” I said as Corey pulled her back.

The pilot was on the radio to his dispatcher, filling him in between bouts of yelling at us to sit down.

I moved in front of the mayor to undo his jacket. When Sam tried to wedge up beside his chair, Daniel nudged her toward our seats. Anyone else, she'd have told him to go to hell, but she listened to Daniel.

"Maya can help," Nicole said when the pilot tried sending me back to my seat. "She knows first aid. She runs a hospital."

"For *animals*," Hayley said.

Corey told her to shut up, but she had a point. My dad was the local park ranger and I had a rehabilitation shed for nursing injured animals back to health. I did know first aid, though, and the basics of dealing with a heart attack victim. Step one: call a doctor. Kind of tough, under the circumstances. Step two: give the victim an aspirin. Wouldn't work while he was unconscious. But *why* was he unconscious? I remembered fainting as one of the signs, but not sustained lack of consciousness.

We had to get him to a doctor and, until then, I could only presume it was heart failure and perform CPR if he stopped breathing.

I unbuttoned the mayor's shirt. When Nicole inched forward, the pilot snapped at her, and Corey told him to go to hell, which really didn't help matters. I glanced at Daniel.

"Nicole?" he said. "I know you're worried, but he's okay. He's breathing and we're looking after him." He turned to the others. "Sit down, guys. Everything's under control."

It didn't matter that Daniel barely raised his voice and the pilot's shouting and the noise of the helicopter almost drowned him out. Everyone sat. Even Kenjii, who'd been anxiously nosing the mayor's hand.

"We need to get him lying down," I said. "If it's cardiac arrest, his heart may stop. I can't perform CPR while he's sitting."

"Then you aren't performing CPR," the pilot said. "There's no room. We'll be landing soon."

I laid my palm against the mayor's bare chest. I could feel his heart. Beating, but fluttery. Was that a sign of a heart attack? As I moved back, I saw a spot of blood on the shoulder of his shirt, where we'd peeled his jacket back. I remembered the mayor putting on his windbreaker before climbing into the helicopter.

“Get his jacket off,” I said.

As Daniel helped me get him out of it, the pilot yelled, “Whoa! Hold on! Get back in your seats. We’ll be landing in a few minutes.”

Fortunately, as long as he was flying the helicopter, all he could do was yell. And if there are teenagers who actually respond to adults shouting at them, I’ve never met one.

When we got the mayor’s jacket off, I checked his upper arm. There was a puncture wound. A dot, slightly swollen, crusted in dried blood.

“Injection?” I mouthed to Daniel.

He frowned and leaned to my ear. “Could be an insect . . . No, wait. Before we got on, the pilot clapped Mr. Tillson on the arm. I remember the mayor rubbing the spot, like it hurt.” He paused. “Like he’d been injected.”

Daniel slowly turned on the pilot. I grabbed his arm. Daniel glowered at the pilot and I could feel the rage pulsing off him. I squeezed his arm so tight it had to hurt, and only then did he drop his gaze.

“His heart’s beating fine,” I said to the pilot. “Just have someone waiting at the pad.”

I refastened the mayor’s seatbelt, then started moving back toward my seat. I don’t know exactly what happened next. My gaze was on Nicole, her face drawn with worry. I think the pilot grabbed for me. Or maybe he just reached out to get my attention.

Daniel yelled “No!”

That’s all he did. I’m sure of it. Daniel shouted and the pilot snapped forward. His head cracked against the instrument panel, and he crumpled in his seat.

“Wake him up!” Hayley shouted. “Someone wake him up!”

Daniel and I shook the pilot. The helicopter dropped a couple of feet and we stumbled. Corey ran over.

“Help me get him out!” he shouted to Daniel as he grabbed the front of the pilot’s jacket. “I can fly it.”

“Based on what?” Sam appeared at his side. “Video games?”

Corey scowled. “You got a better idea?”

“Yes.”

The boys pulled the pilot out of the way and dumped him in the narrow gap behind the front seats.

Sam slid into his spot, grabbed the throttle and the control stick, then planted her feet on both pedals. The helicopter stabilized and began to rise, but listed to one side.

“You have to get her level,” Corey said.

“No, really?”

He reached for the control stick. Sam swatted him aside.

“Do you know helicopters? Or just planes? Because they’re not the same.”

The helicopter leveled for a second, then started to spin.

“Sam doesn’t know what she’s doing,” Hayley said. “Stop her.”

“She’s keeping us in the air,” I said.

“Everyone else?” Daniel said. “Sit down and put on your belts. Now.”

Hayley and Nicole obeyed, but Corey hovered at the front, wedged between me and Sam.

I reached for the radio and put on the headset. It took some fiddling to get the radio on, but we had a short-wave at the park, so I had some idea how to operate it.

“SOS!” I said. “Helicopter out of Salmon Creek. Pilot unconscious. Repeat, helicopter pilot unconscious.”

I stopped transmitting and listened. Static.

“SOS!” I said. “Emergency situation. Helicopter over Vancouver Island. Pilot unconscious. Repeat, pilot *unconscious!*”

The helicopter dropped again.

Corey bent to look at the control panel. “You need to—”

“I’m working on it!” Sam snarled.

“Here, let me—”

I didn’t see what Corey did, but the helicopter pitched to the side, hard and sharp. Corey fell onto the mayor. Kenjii barked, claws scraping the floor as she slid onto the unconscious pilot.

Sam swore, her hands shaking as she reached for a lever. “Everyone sit down. Just sit down!”

The helicopter lurched again and her hand hit something. A crack and a rush of air. Nicole shrieked. This time, Hayley joined her.

“The door!” Corey said. “Holy hell. The door’s open!”

“Everyone hang on!” Daniel yelled. “Maya, grab Kenjii!”

I lunged for the dog's collar and, just then, I heard a gasp. Everyone was yelling and wind rushed through the half-open door and I shouldn't have heard anything. But I heard that gasp.

"Rafe!" I screamed. "Grab him!"

As I turned, I saw a blur of motion. Rafe, his eyes opening as he sailed across the floor of the helicopter. Out the open door.

Chapter Two

I didn't think. I shoved Kenjii into the safe nook between the front seats and scrambled toward the door as the helicopter jolted again, righting itself.

Daniel lunged for me and missed. Wind rushed in through the open door. I could barely breathe, barely see. Then I saw Rafe's hands gripping the bottom frame.

Rafe's hands *slipping* from the bottom of the door.

I dropped and grabbed his wrists just as he lost his grip. As he fell, I shot forward. I kicked, wildly trying to hook something with my legs. Then someone caught my foot and I stopped with a jolt.

I didn't need to look back to see who had me. The same person who'd had my back since we were five. Daniel.

"Corey, get over here!" he shouted.

The helicopter lurched, and I slid again, Daniel still holding my ankle. My hands were locked around Rafe's wrists, his around mine. Then Corey caught my other foot, and the helicopter leveled off.

I could hear them shouting inside. Their words came in fits and starts, sucked away by the wind roaring past my ears. And in those first few seconds of confusion, I didn't really even understand what had happened. I could hear the wind. Feel the wind. Taste it even. But it took a moment for me to crack my eyes open and realize I was hanging outside the helicopter.

Hanging outside the helicopter.

The earth bobbed and whirled below us, trees and rock and water spinning into a blur.

"Don't look down!" I thought it was Daniel, but then realized Rafe was staring up at me.

"I've got you!" I shouted.

He smiled, this weirdly calm smile. "I know."

"Just hold on!"

"I am."

"We'll get you down."

"It's okay, Maya."

His voice was as strangely calm as his smile. My heart was thudding so hard I could barely breathe, and he just kept smiling up at me, his gaze locked on mine. Calm washed through me, slowing my heart, as if I was feeling what he did, an oddly disconnected peacefulness.

“It’s okay,” Rafe said again. “They’ve got you.”

The helicopter spun, whipping us around. Pain shot through me as Rafe’s weight almost wrenched my shoulders out of their sockets. Corey lost his grip on my leg. I heard him shout and Daniel shout and the girls join in, and I kicked, trying to get my leg back up where someone could grab it.

The helicopter tilted again. I started to slide, Daniel sliding with me. And I knew we were going to fall. Rafe, me, Daniel, we were all going to fall.

“Hold on!” I shouted to Rafe.

“It’s okay,” he said, and I wasn’t even sure he spoke aloud, didn’t see his lips moving. “It’s okay.”

He let go.

I clawed the air, screaming.

I didn’t even see him drop. The helicopter banked and I caught only a blur of treetops spinning past and when I looked around, there was no Rafe. No sign of him at all.

Corey and Daniel dragged me back into the helicopter. Someone got the door closed. I don’t know who. I was crying and shaking so hard I couldn’t see, couldn’t hear, couldn’t think.

As I huddled on the floor, I felt Daniel behind me, his arms around me. Kenjii pushed onto my lap, and I buried my face in her fur, gripping handfuls and sobbing against her.

It took a moment before anything else penetrated, but when it did, I heard Sam and Corey arguing, Nicole crying, and I felt the helicopter jerk and shudder, and I remembered where I was and what was happening. I couldn’t break down now. No matter what had happened, I couldn’t break down now.

I pushed my dog away, patting her head, and staggered to my feet. Daniel rose with me, his hand still on my arm.

“Maya.”

“I’m . . .” *I’m what? Fine? Good? Okay? No. I’m not. I’m absolutely not.* I took a deep breath. “We need to land.”

My voice shook. My whole body shook. I could hardly breathe, it hurt so much. But I squeezed up to the front of the helicopter. Sam glanced over. She opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

“He might be okay,” Nicole said. “He might—”

“He’s not,” I said. “We all know he’s not.”

I couldn’t even hope Rafe had survived because that would mean I’d have to think about it—about him and what just happened and if I did, I’d curl up in a ball on the floor again.

I started toward Sam. I had to talk to her. Get her to land the helicopter. But I froze. Just . . . froze.

Daniel nudged past me. “We need to land this,” he said to Sam.

“That’s what—”

“That’s what you’ve been trying to do, I know.” His voice was calm, reassuring. “But we need to get her down, any way we can. Before anyone else gets hurt.”

She swallowed hard. Her hands trembled on the controls. Daniel crouched beside her, his hand on her shoulder.

“How much do you know about flying?”

“M-my dad had a friend who was a helicopter pilot. He showed me how. That was a couple of years ago. It’s not the same as his either. I’m really trying but—”

“I know you are. How do we get her down? We’re over the strait now. Does that help? Water?”

“I don’t think so. I need open ground. Just a small piece, but I can’t find any. It’s all trees and—”

“What about that island?”

Daniel pointed to one of the many small islands dotting the strait below us. It was partially bare, as if the owner had cleared it for building.

“I-I can try,” Sam said.

From most people, the hesitation would be expected. From Sam—the girl who was afraid of nothing—it meant our chances were slim. But what choice did we have? Nicole was trying to rouse her dad. Hayley was doing the same with the pilot. I took the headset and got on the radio again. No one was responding. So either we tried to land or we kept flying until Sam lost control and we plunged into the strait.

“You can do this, Sam,” Daniel said. “You know you can.”

He kept reassuring her as I worked on the radio. Why wasn’t anyone answering? The pilot had been talking to someone just before he collapsed.

Or had he? Even if he had, I realized it was probably whoever he worked for. Whoever told him to drug the mayor and fly us off course.

And who was that? Who *would* do that? The same people who’d chased us through the blazing woods?

“You’re doing great,” Daniel said as tree tops came into view. “Hell, I could jump out from here.”

“You might want to do that,” Sam said shakily.

“Tell you what,” Daniel said. “Take her lower, and if you don’t think you can set her down, everyone will jump. Everyone except me and you. Okay?”

She nodded.

“And it’s not like landing a plane, right?” he continued. “You just set her down, nice and--”

A yelp from Hayley cut him short. I wheeled to see the pilot shoving her aside as he started for us.

Hayley yelped, then said, “He burned me! Oh my God.”

I could actually smell burnt fabric, and there was a brown patch on her shirt. As the pilot lurched forward, I swore his eyes glowed.

“Hey!” Daniel said. “Hold on!”

The pilot yanked Sam out of the seat and slid in.

“Just put her down here,” Daniel said. “We lost—”

The pilot pulled up on the control stick and the helicopter started to climb. Too fast though, lurching sideways. The helicopter spun. A treetop passed the windshield. Nicole shrieked.

The helicopter dropped. The pilot swore and reached for something—

The tail hit the tree. Metal crunched as everyone went flying.

“Seatbelts!” Daniel shouted as the helicopter lurched.

I heard Corey yell, “Holy hell!” and looked back to see a hole in the tail end of the helicopter.

Daniel yanked me onto his lap, and managed to get the belt over both of us.

“Kenjii!”

She stumbled to me and I grabbed her with both arms, wrapping them around her as tight as I could.

I heard Nicole yell, “Dad!”

And then we hit.

Chapter Three

The helicopter landed nose down and tilted onto the side. My head cracked against Daniel's and I must have lost consciousness for a moment, because next thing I knew, water was flooding in.

The helicopter creaked as it teetered, and I knew we must be perched on an underwater ledge . . . over what could be a very deep body of water.

I twisted to tell Daniel, but he was already pushing me toward the other side, saying, "I know." Then, "Everyone! Get over there!"

I glanced back to see Nicole and Sam sitting there, just staring. Corey bent over Hayley, then picked her up. She lay like a rag doll in his arms.

"She's okay," he said. "Just unconscious."

"Dad!" Nicole shrieked.

I turned toward the front seat. The pilot was dead. He'd gone out the windshield, and was now draped over the crumpled nose of the helicopter. Tendrils of blood snaked through the water all around him.

Mayor Tillson still wore his seatbelt. But he was wedged in, the crushed dashboard pinning his big chest. Blood dribbled from his mouth.

I pressed my fingers to his neck. No pulse.

"He's—" I began.

"No, he's not!" Nicole shoved me so hard the helicopter rocked.

"Let's get him out of there." Daniel looked for Corey, who was still holding Hayley. "Sam? Give me a hand? Nic and Maya, stay over by the door with Kenjii and keep that side weighed down."

Sam and Daniel grabbed the mayor under his armpits and pulled, but he wasn't budging, and with every wrench, the helicopter rocked. Daniel bent to peer under the crushed cockpit, and Sam checked her uncle for a pulse. When Daniel came back up, shaking his head, she shook hers too, biting her lip and blinking hard.

Daniel turned to Nicole. "He's gone, Nic. There's nothing—"

"No, he's not!" she shouted. "You're only saying that because Maya did. You always listen to her."

Everyone stopped and stared. Sweet, quiet Nicole stood there, her face twisted with rage, hair coming loose from its ponytail, spiking around her face, her mascara running.

I moved up to Daniel and Sam and whispered, “She’s in shock. Let me see if I can get his legs free.”

“There’s no use,” Sam said. “He’s—”

My look shushed her. I squeezed in as far as I could to get a better look, but the slightest movement made the helicopter rock.

“You need to get off,” Daniel said as he crouched beside me.

“Of course she does,” Nicole said. “You’re always worried about Maya. Why? She doesn’t deserve—”

Sam spun on her. “Shut the hell up!”

Daniel and I stared at Nicole. It was Corey who murmured, “Nic didn’t mean it, guys. She just lost her dad.”

“And I just lost my uncle,” Sam said.

“Take Nicole out,” Daniel said. “Please. Before—”

The helicopter groaned again and began to tilt.

“Off!” Daniel shouted. “Everyone off!”

He grabbed the door handle. Sam and I helped, all three of us yanking until it finally opened. Water poured in, but it only came up to mid-calf. Land was a few meters away.

Corey went first, carrying Hayley. I followed. The helicopter jerked. I lost my footing and plunged backward into the icy water that filled the cockpit. Daniel grabbed my arm and Kenjii swam to me, taking my shirt in her teeth and hauling me until Sam could pull me out, Daniel right behind us.

The helicopter gave one final wail, metal scraping on rock, then rolled off the ridge into the deep water.

“Kenjii!” I shouted.

Sam and Corey had to hold me back as I fought and screamed for my dog. Daniel jumped in. He’d barely gone under when Kenjii surfaced. I ripped free from the others and waded to the edge as Daniel climbed back onto the ledge. Kenjii’s nails kept slipping on the underwater rocks, but with me pulling on her collar and Daniel pushing from behind, we managed to heave her up.

We waded through the knee-deep water toward the tiny island. As soon as I was on land, I let myself collapse and would have stayed there if Daniel hadn't caught me under the arms and propelled me to higher ground. I was about to drop on the grassy bank when Corey shouted, "It's Hayley! She's not breathing!"

I stumbled to where he crouched beside her.

"I was sure she was breathing before," he said. "I should have let you check. *Damn* it."

Hayley lay on her back in the long grass. Her skin was tinged blue.

Daniel steered Corey away as I ripped open Hayley's shirt and started chest compressions. He sat Corey down and told him to stay there, then returned, and took over the compressions while I breathed into her ice-cold lips.

On my third breath, I felt her chest move. On the fourth, she coughed. We got her sitting up and breathing.

"Wh-what happened?" she said, looking around. "Where's the helicopter?"

I told her. She just sat there, nodding, like it wasn't sinking in, but when I asked if she understood, she snapped that she wasn't stupid, and I backed off.

I kept backing off until I found a flat place to sit. Daniel slid in behind, arms around me, letting me lean back against him. Kenjii came over and put her head on my lap and I cried then. Just cried.

When I could finally speak, I twisted to face Daniel and said, "It's my fault Rafe fell."

"No, it isn't," he said fiercely. "He let go. I saw it. He made a choice and there was nothing you could do about that."

"I—"

"He did the right thing. If he held on, you'd have fallen, and maybe me, too. I know it doesn't make this any easier, but he did the right thing."

"That's not what I mean. He should never have been on that helicopter. If I'd let them wake him up, he'd have insisted on staying to find Annie."

Daniel shook his head. "They'd have put him on that helicopter whether he wanted to go or not."

"But he'd have been awake. He wouldn't have fallen—"

“If he resisted getting on, they’d have sedated him, just like they did with the mayor. You know he’d have resisted. Nothing would have changed.”

When I tried to look away, he caught my chin and turned me to face him.

“*Nothing*,” he said.

My eyes filled with tears again. “It doesn’t seem real. The fire. The people in the forest. The helicopter crash. Mayor Tillson. Rafe.” I looked up at him again. “It can’t be real. I’m asleep. It’s a nightmare. Tell me it is.”

He hugged me so tight my ribs protested. “I wish I could, Maya.”

His voice cracked and I hugged him back, as hard as I could.

Someone cleared his throat behind us. It was Corey. He crouched and said, in a low voice, “I know this is a bad time, guys. I’m really sorry. But the girls-- They’re freaked out and they need someone to tell them what to do and . . . that’s not me. They want one of you two. Daniel, I’ll stay here with Maya if you can talk to them.”

I wiped my sleeve over my eyes. “No. Sitting here isn’t going to help.” It just gave me a deep, dark pit to lose myself in when I really couldn’t afford to be lost.

We both got up and followed Corey.

Nicole and Hayley were huddled in the long grass, staring out at the island to the west.

Vancouver Island. Our island. Shrouded in fog.

The girls were shivering. Even Sam, leaning against a tree, twisting the bar in her ear, was trembling, though she kept giving herself an abrupt shake, as if annoyed by her weakness.

I had to give myself a shake, too—a mental one—as I took stock of our surroundings.

With the fog rolling in, I couldn’t tell how big our island was. But it had looked small from the air. The ground was rocky, with patches of long grass and scrubby trees.

The sky was overcast, so dark I thought night was coming until I checked my watch and realized it wasn’t even six.

Mom had been in Victoria when the forest fire broke out. Was Dad with her now? Were they both waiting for our helicopter to land? Planning what we’d have for dinner to take my mind off the forest fire?

Had Dad's helicopter gone to Victoria? Was it only our helicopter that had been diverted or . . .?

"Maya?" Daniel said.

Don't think about that. Can't think about that. We needed to get some place warm and dry before dark.

I whispered that to Daniel. He gestured for me to walk with him.

"We're going to scout the island," he told the others.

No one offered to come along. No one said a word. They just nodded, their gazes as empty as I felt.

"We need to tell them everything," Daniel whispered as we walked away. "Otherwise, they'll want to wait for rescue. Which we know we can't do."

"Because we don't know who'll come for us. Real rescuers or fake ones."

He nodded.

"I'll . . ." I struggled to get my brain in gear, but I felt like I was still out in the water, fighting to keep my head above and wishing I could just sink into peaceful oblivion. I rubbed my face. "Sorry. I'll talk to them."

"No, I will. You just need to back me up. Can you do that?"

I nodded.

Tell them what was going on. God, that sounded so easy. But where to start?

It began less than a week ago. No, that's not true. It began a year ago. When Serena died. My best friend. Daniel's girlfriend.

Serena drowned in a lake. It shouldn't have happened, not to the captain of the school team, swimming in a calm lake.

Then Mina Lee came to town. She called herself a reporter, but everyone figured she was a corporate spy. We live in Salmon Creek, a tiny town of two hundred people that was built and owned by the St. Cloud Corporation, so they could conduct drug research. Mina came to Salmon Creek pretending to be writing an article on the local teens—what it was like growing up in a tiny corporate town. She'd really wanted to talk to us—and she was especially curious about Serena's death,

Daniel and I began to think that she suspected the medical research was responsible for Serena's death.

A few days later we'd found Mina Lee's body in a cougar cache. Had she been killed by the big cats? Died of misadventure in the woods? Or murdered and dumped?

We broke into her cabin and found files on all the teens in our class. Only two were missing. Mine and Sam's. Sam had stolen hers. When confronted she said it was because she didn't want others knowing her parents had been murdered. But we'd started wondering if there was more to it, if she might have had something to do with those murders, something to do with Serena's death too.

Then there was the note Daniel had found in Mina's cabin. Four strange words on it, including Benandanti. Italian witch-hunters. A work we'd read the day before in a book Mina sent Daniel to, with a note on that page to contact her.

I'd recognized another word on that list. *Yee naaldlooshii*. Skin-walker. A few days before, I'd been called that by an old woman who said that's what the old woman said the birthmark meant. That I was a skin-walker. A shape-shifting witch. Crazy, huh? Except . . . I was. So were Rafe and Annie, who'd come to Salmon Creek looking for looking for the girl who'd been another subject in an experiment to resurrect the latent skin-walker genes.

So all that happens, and I'm trying to figure out how to tell Daniel I'm a skin-walker make sense of it when we're struck by a forest fire. Daniel, Rafe and I got caught in it. We'd seen a fire-and-rescue truck, and Daniel got a bad feeling—he gets them; I've learned to trust them. Turned out it wasn't fire-and-rescue. Who was it? I don't know, but they'd been after us and one man knew my name and had my eyes, and I was pretty sure I knew what that meant, but I refused to process it. Too much else waiting in the queue.

So how much should we tell the others? I trusted Daniel would know. Normally, we'd hash out together. But today, I needed him to take charge and he did that.

As we walked, Daniel and I did scout the island to be sure there wasn't any shelter. In order to get off it, we'd need to swim, which risked hypothermia. Not something we cared to do if there was an alternative. There wasn't. The island didn't have so much as a pile of rock big enough for us to hide behind.

So we returned and Daniel explained to the others what had happened in the woods, as we'd been fleeing the fire.

"It sounded like these people deliberately set the blaze," he said as he finished. "Maya and I thought they were trying to clear the town to get into the lab and steal the drug research. But if the pilot drugged the mayor, then that doesn't make sense. We were already leaving town."

"How do you know he was knocked out?" Sam asked.

"I saw the pilot grab the mayor's arm," Daniel said. "Right before we got on the helicopter. Mr. Tillson rubbed the place, like it hurt. Then Maya found the injection spot."

Nicole was sitting off to the side, her gaze averted, and when she spoke, her voice was low. "So you guys were chased through the forest by people you think set the fire . . . and you didn't tell anyone?"

"We told your dad, Nic," Daniel said. "He must have figured we were right, that they wanted the research."

"So what *were* they after?" Hayley asked. "Mr. Tillson?"

Daniel shook his head. "We think whoever set the fire either bought off the pilot or planted one of their own guys. I heard Mr. Tillson say that the first helicopter had already landed in Victoria. That means whoever is behind this wanted ours. In the evacuation plans, we're all supposed to be on that helicopter. Not Mr. Tillson specifically, though. Just an adult to chaperone us."

"So in sedating him, they were getting rid of our chaperone," I said. "They wanted one of us."

I thought of the list Daniel had found, with the word skin-walker on it, and I thought of the man in the woods, who'd called me by name. So I seemed to be the one they wanted. But when I glanced up, Sam looked like a cartoon character with a "Who me?" bubble over her head.

"It doesn't matter who or what was the target," I said. "We need to figure out what we're going to do now."

"Why do we need to do anything?" Hayley said. "They'll come looking for us."

"Um, yeah," Sam said. "That's Maya's point. The people who tried to kidnap us will come looking for us to finish the job."

"You don't know that."

“Sam’s right,” Daniel said. “The first people who come for us will likely be the kidnappers. It’d be safer to get to a phone and call our parents.”

Everyone looked around. The mainland was a dark blob on the eastern horizon. To the west was Vancouver Island. About a kilometer of water separated the two.

“Umm . . .” Corey began. “Not to question your judgment, buddy, but that’s a bit of a swim. The water’s damned cold. I bashed my knee good in the crash, and I’m not the only one who’s hurting. I get what you’re saying, but the pilot’s radio seemed to be out, so they won’t know where we are. If we light a fire, someone out boating might see us.”

“That’s a good idea,” Sam said. “Or it would be. If we had matches to light a fire. Or if anyone was actually out boating.”

“Why don’t we just find a place to hide?” Hayley said. “That way, when someone does come, we can see if it’s a real rescue or not.”

“How the hell are you going to tell the difference?” Sam said. “Ask them? And no one’s going to find the crash site. You know why? There *is* no crash site.”

She pointed out over the empty water. When the helicopter had dropped over the ledge, it had disappeared.

“And we don’t know that the radio equipment wasn’t working,” Daniel said. “Whoever wanted that helicopter may know exactly where it went down.”

That didn’t keep Corey and Hayley from arguing that we should stay put, and Nicole from quietly agreeing. Which only pissed off Sam all the more. To us, the danger was obvious. We should be in the water already, swimming for Vancouver Island. To the others, it was too much to believe, too much to take in. Easier to think this was all a tragic mistake and that a rescue team would find us at any moment.

Eventually, Daniel and I managed to persuade them that no one was going to come for us. There was no shelter on this island. For all we knew, there were cottages just past the shoreline.

Finally, they all agreed to swim for it.

Chapter Four

Swimming for the shore was not a simple matter. Daniel and I were soaked, but the others were dry from the knees up, and in October, they'd need that dry clothing. The problem was how to get it across.

We found some debris floating from the wreck. No backpacks, unfortunately, but Daniel rescued a piece of plastic. There was no elegant solution.

The others stripped to their undergarments, wrapped up their clothing as best they could and put it inside. Daniel made sure Corey put his headache medication in the pack, too. He got migraines. Bad ones. Unfortunately, all he had on him was a couple of tablets he carried loose in his pocket.

By the time we got to the water's edge, we were all shivering so hard I could hear teeth chattering.

A layer of marine fog covered the surface. As I stood there with my toes in the icy water, tendrils of fog slipped around my ankles and I remembered a line about fog coming in on little cat's feet.

Cats. Cougars. Skin-walkers. Rafe.

My stomach clenched and my toes clenched too. I closed my eyes and struggled to ground myself.

"Can you see the land?" Nicole whispered beside me.

I pointed. "See the treetops above the fog?"

She nodded, then rubbed down goose bumps on her arms. "About earlier. I-I don't know why I blew up like that."

"Your dad just died."

"I know . . ." She nudged a submerged rock. "I'm still sorry."

"It's okay."

"Are you sure we should do this?" Hayley called from a few feet away. "It's so cold. Is it safe?"

I looked over at her and Corey and Sam, standing along the shoreline, arms wrapped around themselves, their faces as gray as the fog. Fear and confusion on every face. Terror on Sam's, as she stared wide-eyed into the fog.

Daniel and I went first. Kenjii circled me as I eased into the water. When she realized I wasn't just taking a walk into the surf, she leapt in front of me, barking, ordering me to dry land. I continued on, up to my waist now. She snapped at my fingers and tried to herd me back to shore.

"Maybe there's something out there," Nicole called. "Didn't someone catch a great white shark a few years ago? And we have plenty of killer whales."

"Great whites don't come this far inland," I called back. "And I doubt this stretch of water is deep enough for orcas, but even if it is, they don't attack in the wild. You're only at risk if you're jumping into their aquarium tank."

"Kenjii just knows Maya doesn't like to swim," Daniel said. "Here, I'll take her—"

He reached for her collar. She growled and he pulled back.

"Or maybe not . . ."

Kenjii lowered her head and whined, as if in apology.

"She's scared and confused," I said. *Or rather we are, and she's sensing it.* "Just give me a sec to calm her down."

I petted her and told her it was okay. Once she'd relaxed, I told Daniel to go on ahead with her, so she couldn't see me. She glanced back a couple of times, but when I seemed to be staying put, she let Daniel take her for a swim.

Corey went in behind Hayley, herding her. She was on the swim team, so she should be fine, but she was still disoriented from her near-drowning experience. Sam went next, her chin up, expression unreadable. Daniel had asked Nicole—who was also on the swim team—to go last and help anyone who fell behind, namely me.

I'd estimated the strip of water to be about a kilometer. That's just over three thousand feet. Not a short distance. Not an incredibly long one, either, or so I kept telling myself as I paddled through the frigid water. It was half of the distance from my house to the park gates. One sixth the distance of the Run for the Mountain event I did in Nanaimo every year. One twentieth the distance of the Harbour City Half Marathon I'd run last fall.

Easy. Except for the fact that I loved to walk and run, and hated swimming. Part of my skin-walker heritage, I guess. When I get in water deeper than a bathtub, there's this part of my brain that screams at me to get out, and no amount of self-talk ever silences it.

But maybe this time that part of my brain realized, as a cougar would, that there was a difference between swimming for pleasure and swimming for survival. While I was cold and uncomfortable, I stayed relatively calm. Even managed something close to an actual breast stroke, which I'm sure made Nicole happy, stuck at my snail's pace as the others pulled away.

Every now and then I could make out Daniel's dark shape as he glanced back to check on us. No one said a word. Only the splash of hands and feet hitting water broke the eerie silence. I couldn't see how much farther we had to go. Couldn't see how far we'd come. Just fog everywhere, my friends dark blotches in the gray.

Sam was huffing off to the side. She liked to scrap, but she wasn't an athlete, and she sounded winded. I was about to veer her way when she stopped puffing as if she'd gotten her second wind. Or stopped swimming. I opened my mouth to call to Daniel to check on her.

Before I could speak, my foot brushed something. A fish I presumed, but then it wrapped around my ankle and yanked me down.

I didn't fight at first. Something had my foot. Something was pulling me under. Just like a year ago, when Serena drowned. For a second, I thought "That's it—I'm having a nightmare." Everything that had happened today—the fire, the crash, Rafe—was clearly just part of a bad dream. It had to be.

Then I began to choke and the survival instinct took over. I kicked. I flailed. But something kept dragging me under.

No, not something—*someone*.

When Serena drowned, I'd been so worried about her that I'd paid no attention to *what* had me. This time, I could feel warm fingers wrapped around my icy-cold ankle, and when I kicked, my toes brushed what was unmistakably hair.

I tried to grab whoever had me, but every time I moved, my attacker moved. I couldn't see anything. My eyes stung and my lungs ached. But I knew it was a person holding me down. Just a person. I could fight that.

Only I couldn't. I kicked and I writhed, but those fingers weren't letting me go and I couldn't breathe, and when nails dug into my ankle, I shrieked and my mouth and throat filled with more water, and I realized I was drowning.

Then the toes of my free foot touched rock. The bottom. I pushed myself down even as my brain screamed that I was going the wrong way. I bent in half and reached to feel, not fingers, but vegetation wrapped around my ankle. Seaweed. I ripped it off, then shot toward the surface.

After a few strokes, I wasn't sure I was still going up. All I could see was darkness. Then a scream sounded above me.

They were looking for me, yelling for me. I was going the right way. I was going to be fine, just fine. I put everything I had left into a few last strokes, propelling myself toward the surface, breaking through, then gasping for air too soon, water rushing in, choking me.

I went under again. I gave a tremendous kick, arms and legs flailing so hard that a cramp shot through my stomach and I screamed, swallowing more water.

I could hear Daniel shouting, then Corey. But no one was coming. Why wasn't anyone coming?

I broke the surface again, and this time managed to get a breath. Then I heard Nicole screaming for help—that something had her, was pulling *her* down.

A fresh cramp shot through me and I went under again.

My muscles pleaded for relief, but I managed to break the surface again.

"Maya!" Daniel yelled. "Where's Maya?"

Nicole screamed and I wanted to shout to Daniel to forget me, save her before she drowned like Serena. That's all I could think of. How he'd saved me when Serena drowned. I wouldn't let that happen again. I couldn't.

Nails scraped my arm and I panicked, then felt wet fur under my arm.

Kenjii. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and lay my face against her back, flutter-kicking as best I could. Daniel reached me then.

"Nicole," I said. "Get Nicole."

He hesitated. I pushed him toward Nicole, getting more and more frantic until Corey called that he and Hayley had Nicole and she was fine.

"Sam?" I croaked.

"Sam!" Daniel yelled. "Where are you?"

“She’s—” Corey started. “Here she is. She’s fine.”

Daniel made me get on his back and we headed to shore, Kenjii swimming beside us.

