

Prologue

Serena stood on the rock ledge twenty feet above the lake, singing in a voice known to bring tears to the eyes of everyone who heard it. Everyone except me.

“For God’s sake, Seri,” I said, “just dive already.”

Serena stuck out her tongue and shifted closer to the edge, toes wrapping around it. She bounced there, blond ponytail bobbing, cheeks puffing. Then she dove. It was, as usual, an effort worthy of the Olympics, and she sliced into the water so smoothly that barely a ripple pinged across the glassy surface.

She popped back up, sleek as a seal. “Your turn, Maya!”

I flipped her the finger. She laughed and dove again.

Serena was the swimmer—captain of the school team. It’s not my thing, really. This was the part I liked, just sitting on the rock ledge, bare feet dangling. I basked in the morning sun, drinking in the rich late summer air and the perfect view of the crystal clear lake, the distant snow-capped mountains, the endless evergreens.

As Serena swam to the middle of the lake, I squinted over at the path, looking for a familiar blonde head. Daniel was supposed to join us.

Daniel and I had been friends since I’d moved to Salmon Creek when I was five. Then, last year, there’d been a school dance where the girls were supposed to invite the guys, and Serena

thought we should draw straws to see who asked Daniel. I liked him, but not the way Serena did, so I'd fixed the game so she'd win. They'd been together ever since.

As Serena swam back toward me, I stripped to my bra and panties, dropping my clothes into the bushes below.

"Ooh-la-la," she called. "Check out the new undies. Did some amazing friend finally take pity and buy you grownup stuff?"

"Yes, and she'd better be right about them not going see-through when they get wet. Otherwise her boyfriend is going to see a lot more of me than she'd like."

Serena laughed. "They'll be fine. White's your color. Shows off your tan."

I shook my head at her and plaited my long black hair. I don't have a tan. I'm Native. Navajo, maybe, though I'd been adopted as a baby and my mother hadn't been around to fill in any background forms.

I climbed farther up the rocks, and stopped at one overhanging the lake.

As I balanced there, Serena called, "Hey, those low riders show off your birthmark. Did you ask your parents about getting that tattoo?"

My fingers dropped to the mark on my hip. It looked like a faded paw-print, and I wanted to get it tattooed so it would show up better.

"Mom says maybe when I'm sixteen. Dad says when I'm sixty."

"He'll come around." She flipped onto her back and floated. "He always does. You should do it for your sixteenth birthday next year. We'll get your mom to take us over to Vancouver, make a weekend of it. I'll get one, too. I want a nightingale, right over my boob, so when I get up on stage in my sexy dress, cut down to—"

She flailed suddenly. "Maya!"

She went under. Disappeared completely, like a hook had dragged her down.

I jumped into the water, and I hit it wrong. Pain smacked me so hard I gasped. Water filled my mouth and my nose.

I swam out in a frantic dog paddle. I could see the rings where Serena had gone under. They seemed to get farther away with every clumsy stroke I took.

I treaded water, looking around. “Serena?”

No answer.

“If this is a prank to get me in the lake, it worked,” I said, my voice quavering.

When she didn’t reply, I dove. As I went under, panic hit, like it always did--my gut telling me this was wrong, dangerous, get above the surface or I’d drown.

The normally clear lake was brown, churned up dirt swirling through it, and I couldn’t see.

I shot up from the water.

“Help!” I shouted. “Someone! Please!”

I dove again, blind and flailing, praying my hand or foot would brush Serena.

She’s been under too long.

No, she hadn’t. Serena could hold her breath forever. Last year, we’d timed her at a swim meet and she’d stayed under for five minutes before the coach ran over and made her stop.

I couldn’t hold my breath even for a minute. I bobbed up again, gasping.

“Maya!”

I followed the shout to the shore. The sun glinted off the wet rocks and I blinked. Then I glimpsed blond wavy hair and a flash of tanned skin as Daniel yanked off his shirt.

“It’s Serena,” I shouted. “She went und—”

My kicking leg caught on something. I tried to pull, but it tightened around my ankle. I went under, screaming. Water filled my mouth as it closed over my head.

I fought, kicking and twisting, trying to grab at whatever had me. My fingers brushed something soft, and my brain screamed “Serena!” I tried to grab her, but I was dragged deeper and deeper until my feet hit the bottom. Then, whatever was wrapped around my ankle fell away.

I pushed up through the murky water. But as soon as my feet left the lake bottom, I couldn’t tell where the surface was anymore. Everything was dark. My lungs burned. My head throbbed. I kept fighting my way up. Oh God, let it be *up*.

Finally I broke through. I felt the sunlight and the slap of cool air, only to go back down again. I pushed up, but couldn’t stay afloat, couldn’t seem to remember how to tread water. My whole body ached. Staying above was such a struggle, it was almost a relief when the water closed over my head again, peaceful silence enveloping me.

I had to struggle not to give in, had to force my arms and legs to keep churning, get my head back above—

Arms grabbed me. They seemed to be pulling me under and I struggled against them.

“Maya!” Daniel shouted. “It’s me.”

I didn’t care. I needed him to let go of me, leave me be, let me breathe. He gripped me tighter, wrapping one arm around me as he swam.

I told Daniel to let me go, that I could make it to shore, just find Serena, please find Serena. He thought I was still panicking and kept hauling me along until, finally, he heaved me onto the rocks.

“Serena,” I gasped. “Get Serena.”

He hoisted himself up and scanned the shore and I realized he hadn't understood. Oh God, he hadn't heard me.

"Serena!" I yelled. "She went under. I was trying to find her."

His eyes widened. He twisted and plunged into the lake. I huddled there on a rock, coughing, as he swam out. I watched him dive and come back up. Dive and come back up. Dive and come back up . . .

They dragged the lake that afternoon and found Serena's body. Her death was ruled an accidental drowning. A healthy teenage girl, captain of the swim team, had drowned. No one knew how it happened. An undertow. A cramp. A freak panic attack. There were plenty of guesses but no answers.

Soon all that was left of Serena was a monument in the schoolyard. The town moved on. I didn't. Something had happened in that lake, something I couldn't explain. But I would. One day, I would.

One

I stood under the tree and glared up at the three-legged bobcat.

“I’m not getting you down. You’re stuck until I get back from school. Maybe that’ll teach you a lesson.”

Fitz twisted to lick his flank.

“Not even listening to me, are you? Why do I bother?”

“Same question I ask myself every day,” said a voice behind me. “It’s good training for parenthood.”

Dad walked down the porch steps. He was dressed in khakis and his Smokey the Bear hat.

“Ooh, big day in town for our park warden,” I said. “They’re even making you wear the uniform. Hayley’s mom will be happy. She thinks you look hot in it.”

Dad turned as red as his hair.

Mom’s laugh floated out from her studio. “Maya Delaney. Leave your father alone.”

“It’s true. Nicole heard her saying she loves a guy in uniform, and if Dad ever gets tired of you, her front door is open. But you have to wear the hat.”

Dad made unhealthy choking noises.

Mom only laughed again. “Thanks for the warning. Now get moving. You know what happens if you’re late. Daniel won’t wait. You have to catch him.”

“Which would be a bigger threat if the roads were better or his truck was faster.”

A cold nose brushed my hand.

“Even Kenjii knows you’re running late,” Mom called. “Now move it.”

I waved toward the window of her studio at the front of the house. When I reached the end of the drive, I turned around.

“Dad? Can you—?”

“—check on the fledglings because you overslept again?”

“Um, right. Sorry.” I walked backwards. “Oh, and we’re going across to Vancouver this weekend for my sixteenth-birthday tattoo, right?”

He shook his head and strode toward the shed.

“Oh, sure, walk away from the conversation,” I said. “How come I get in trouble when I do that?”

“You aren’t getting a tattoo tomorrow, Maya,” Mom called. “We’ll discuss it later. Now move your butt.”

Dad disappeared into the shed where I keep the wounded and orphaned animals he finds on the park grounds. I fix them up and release them if I can or pass them onto a wildlife center if I can’t. They aren’t pets. Fitz is the only exception, a former patient who sticks around for free food and protection from predators with all four of their limbs.

My only pet is Kenjii, a German Shepherd that my parents bought when we moved to Salmon Creek and they decided a hundred-pound canine companion was a wise idea for a girl who liked to roam forests filled with bears, cougars and other critters that might mistake her for a nice light snack.

Would things have been different if I'd had Kenjii with me at the lake last year? Serena and I always left her behind, because if we goofed around, she thought we were drowning and tried to pull us to safety. Kenjii might have saved Serena.

I think about that a lot. I think about all of it a lot. Six months of therapy hadn't convinced me I'm wrong when I say I could have saved Serena.

It wasn't the way I wanted to start my day, so I pushed the thoughts aside as we walked. It was a gorgeous fall morning, unusually dry for this part of Vancouver Island. Massive hemlocks and cedars lined the rutted trail that passed for a road. Wind had the sun dancing through swaying branches, and Kenjii tore along the path, pouncing on spots of sunlight like a puppy. The sharp breeze helped chase away the last bits of sleep, perking up my brain with the scent of cedar and rich, dew-damp earth.

It was a quiet morning, as usual. No commuter traffic out here. We're the only family living in the park. It's privately owned. The whole town is.

The St. Cloud Corporation bought the land a few years before I was born, and decided it was the perfect place for a top-secret research facility. They built the town of Salmon Creek for their employees.

Less than two hundred people live here. They get their paychecks from the St. Cloud family. They live in houses owned by the St. Clouds. Their kids go to a private school owned by the St. Clouds. Weird, I know, but I'm not complaining, because surrounding the town is a thousand acres of the most beautiful wilderness you've ever seen, and that's where I call home.

When I was five, the St. Clouds lost their park warden and they went headhunting. They found my dad, who was a ranger in Oregon. My mom's Canadian, though, from the Haida

Nation. For her, the job meant coming home. For Dad, it meant the opportunity of a lifetime. For me, it meant growing up in the most amazing place on earth.

Living out here does have its challenges, though. Including transportation. Dad used to drive me to school every day, but now that Daniel has a truck, he picks me up at the park gates—he doesn't dare drive the rutted park roads any more than necessary or the rust holding his pickup together is liable to shake loose.

Technically, the park is open to the public, but that's only because it was a condition of sale. Let's just say that the St. Cloud Corporation doesn't exactly roll out the welcoming mat to tourists. The park provides minimal services. Same goes for the town itself. The St. Clouds weren't able to buy every cottage and campground between the town sites and existing communities, so we do get "summer people"—campers and cottagers needing basic supplies like groceries and gas who come to Salmon Creek to get them.

At this time of year, though, it's a rare park visitor who isn't a local. So when I heard a woman screaming, my first thought was that a female cougar had ventured into the park, hoping to get lucky.

Kenjii's ears swiveled forward. She didn't look terribly concerned, which should suggest it wasn't a cougar. My parents bought me a big dog to protect me from the local big cats, but Kenjii had to be the only canine on the island that didn't really mind them. Bears, wolves, badgers and foxes send her into guard dog mode. But not cats.

So, when I spotted a cougar stretched out on a thick pine tree branch near the park gates, I wasn't surprised. I can't say the same for the woman clinging to the branch above the cat. She was the one screaming. The cougar—a ragged-ear old tom I called Marv—just stared at her, like he couldn't believe anyone would be dumb enough to climb a tree to escape a cat.

There's nothing in this forest as gorgeous as a cougar—a sleek, muscular creature nearly twice the size of Kenjii with tawny fur, a black-edged face, and light brown eyes with round pupils. They're one of the most elusive animals in the forest, too. But the woman screaming on the branch really wasn't appreciating the moment.

Marv pulled back his lips and snarled, flashing fangs as long as my fingers, which made the woman shriek louder. I stepped into the clearing--staying well out of Marv's pouncing range--waved my arms and shouted. Kenjii chimed in, her deep bark echoing through the forest.

The woman stopped screaming. Marv looked over at me and chirped.

“Yeah, I'm talking to you, old guy,” I said. “Shoo! Scat! Get out of here!”

He looked at me like I'd offended him. I shouted and waved some more, staying behind Kenjii. I'm not afraid of cougars, but I am suitably respectful of their ability to end my existence with one well-placed chomp.

As I yelled and Kenjii barked, another sound joined it—the rumble of a badly tuned motor. Then, a honk. A welcoming shout out a rolled-down window. Then a curse as Daniel saw why I wasn't waiting outside the gates. The brakes squeaked. The door slammed. Sneakers pounded the hard earth.

It was then that Marv decided it was time to go. Daniel has that effect on people, too. He's only about five-ten, but he's been the island wrestling champion twice and it shows. Marv hopped to the ground, mustered his dignity and slid into the undergrowth.

Daniel shook his head as he watched the cat's black-tipped tail disappear. “Haven't I told you not to play with the big kitties, Maya?”

“It was Marv.”

“Again? What's that, the third time this month? I think he likes you.”

“What can I say? I’m serious catnip.”

The woman lowered herself to the ground. She was maybe in her early twenties. Asian. Dressed in the kind of “rugged outdoor gear” you can buy at malls in Vancouver and really shouldn’t wear any place wilder than that.

She stared at us. “The cat. It just . . . left.”

“Um, yeah,” I said. “Most times, they do. That’s a male, meaning he doesn’t have any cubs to protect. Plus there’s plenty of food around. I’d still suggest you return the favor and steer clear of the park today.”

I walked to the front gate, opened the pamphlet box, took out the one on “Predator Safety” and handed it to her. Then I pulled my cell phone from my backpack.

“I’ve gotta call this in,” I said. “My dad’s the warden. All cougar encounters—”

The woman backed away from me. “I don’t have time.”

“That cat’s been hanging around. It’s a problem. You need to report—”

“I will. Later.”

She headed for the road and continued toward town.

“Walk in the middle,” I called after her. “Cats don’t like open areas.”

She jogged off. Daniel hadn’t said a word, which was weird. Normally he’d be the first person giving warnings and making sure she was safe. But he just stood there, staring after her, a strange look on his face.

“Yep, she’s kinda cute,” I said. “That’d be a whole different type of cougar, but I say *go for it.*”

Now I got a look. Then he turned to stare after the woman, frowning.

“You know her?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. Just . . . Something’s wrong with her.”

“Um, yeah. She climbed a tree to escape a cat. She’s suffering from a serious case of stupid.”

“No kidding.” He gave her one last look, then waved me to the truck. “Just do me a favor, okay? If you see her again, be careful.”

I didn’t ask what he meant. Daniel does that sometimes—he meets people and just decides he doesn’t like them. Last winter, when Dr. Davidoff and his team flew in from the States for their annual visit, Daniel decided he *really* didn’t like a new guy Dr. Davidoff brought, and wouldn’t have anything to do with him.

Mom says that’s part of growing up in such a small town. You don’t trust strangers. But I say it’s just Daniel. Everyone has his quirks, and this is Daniel’s. Most times, though, he’s right. So when he says steer clear, I do.

He opened the passenger door for me.

“Such a gentleman,” I said.

“No, it’s sticking, and I don’t want you whaling on it again and—” He stopped and peered off down the road.

I followed his gaze. The road was empty.

“Where’d she—? Damn it!” I tossed my bag in, then strode back along the truck. “If she went back in the woods, after getting treed by a cat—”

Daniel caught my arm. “Don’t.”

I looked up at him. He stared down the road, his face rigid, gaze distant, fingers tightening around my arm.

“Um, Daniel? Ouch.”

“Huh?” He noticed what he was doing and let go. “Sorry. Call your dad and tell him. If she went back into the forest, that’s her problem. We’re late already.”

Two

I called my dad on the way to school and told him about the hiker and Marv. Like Daniel said, this was the third time I'd seen the old cat in the past month. For me, that was only a little odd. I saw cougars more than anyone else we knew. Maybe they sensed I was interested in them. Always had been. Of all the animals in the forest, they were my favorite.

But a cougar that isn't afraid to get up close and personal with a human is worrisome. Treeing that hiker proved Marv wasn't only taking an interest in *me*. So I told Dad and he, in turn, had to notify the police chief and the mayor. When I was called to the office after first period, I wasn't surprised to hear that all three of them were there, looking for a full report.

The meeting room wasn't far from my class. Nothing is far in our school. It's a single story divided in two wings—classrooms at one end, common rooms at the other, the principal's office and meeting room in the middle. There are sixty-eight kids at Salmon Creek School. And that's not just high school—it's every grade from kindergarten to twelve.

Having less than seventy kids means you know everyone by name. It also means every teacher—all five of them—know you by name, and your parents by name, and your pets, too.

There are more kids in the upper grades than the lower ones. That's because when the St. Cloud's built their facility, they hired staff with young families, and those kids are all teenagers now. I'm in the biggest class—the grade eleven/twelve split.

The St. Clouds give us the best of everything. That's how they lured employees into a community in the middle of nowhere—promise the best education possible for their kids. Our classroom desks are all built to accommodate laptops, which are replaced every two years. Our auditorium has theater-style seating. Our cafeteria has a chef and fabric napkins. We have a gym, but no pool or skating rink, only because the St. Clouds put those in the community center a five minute walk away.

It all sounds very posh. It's not really. When I say Salmon Creek is in the middle of nowhere, I mean it. We're an hour's drive from the nearest city, and half of that is on empty back roads through uninhabited forest. Since we're living so isolated, we don't feel special the way private school kids might. We aren't here because we get amazing grades or our parents are rich; the extras were just normal. By the time we reach the upper grades, we don't even take advantage of the cafeteria chef anymore—we bring our lunches and grab a picnic table outside.

I had to pass through the principal's office to get to the conference room. I waved at the secretary—Ms. Morales. Dad was waiting by the door, and ushered me inside. Mayor Tillson was at the espresso machine. He's my friend Nicole's dad. His wife works the research facility. So does Police Chief Carling's husband. If you didn't know which was the police chief and which was the mayor, you'd probably guess wrong. Chief Carling was a tiny blonde, a few inches shorter than me, dressed in slacks and a silk blouse. The mayor was a foot taller and twice as heavy, with a bulldog face. He wore jeans and a plaid shirt that strained around his waist.

When I finished telling them everything that happened that morning, Chief Carling said, "Your dad says this isn't the first encounter you've had with this particular cat."

“The park is his territory. He’s shown up more often lately, though. Getting old and bold, I guess. He hasn’t made any threatening moves. I think he’s just curious.”

“Which is not—” Dad began.

“—the point, I know,” I said. “The problem is that if we relocate him, another cat will move in. A younger and potentially more dangerous one. The best thing to do would be to have Dr. Hajek tranq him a couple of times, teach him that humans aren’t fun to hang out with.”

Mayor Tillson smiled. “The girl knows her cougars, Rick. Do you remember when you caught her throwing sticks for one?”

The mayor retold the story, as if everyone in the room hadn’t heard it a million times. It’d been just after we moved to the park. Mom had come out back to find me playing fetch with a young cougar—probably Marv.

“ . . . and Maya says ‘Don’t worry, mom. He’s got blood on his fur so he just ate. He isn’t hungry.’”

Chief Carling laughed, then said I was right—Marv had to be taught that humans and cougars couldn’t be friends. “And the best way to do that would be to take Maya along. Make sure he gets the connection between her and the tranquilizer dart. With luck, that’ll solve the problem. I agree that he doesn’t seem to be a danger, but I don’t like this sudden interest.”

“Neither do I,” Dad said.

“All right then. We won’t keep you any longer, Maya.” Mayor Tillson rose. “I hear you have gym next. Wouldn’t want to miss that.” He paused, voice lowering a notch. “I hope we’re going to see you on the track team again this spring.”

“You will.”

“That’s our girl. We need our champ.”

He waved at the wall of trophies. Not all mine, obviously. But there were a lot, considering the size of our school. As in academics though, in sports we get the best of everything. Top equipment. Great coaches, plus expert trainers flown in a few times a year.

We can't field a team for football or hockey, so the school concentrates on track, swimming, wrestling and boxing. In kindergarten we're encouraged to join at least one. I disliked the water, and hated hitting anyone, but when it came to running, jumping and climbing, I was in my element. I'd taken last year off the track team, though. I just didn't have the heart for it after Serena died.

As I walked back through the principal's office, I nearly tripped over a guy with his chair pulled over to the door, eavesdropping.

Rafael—Rafe—Martinez. Salmon Creek's newest student. Actually, our only new student in three years. Rich parents in surrounding towns tried to get their kids into our school, but they were always turned down. Rafe wasn't a rich kid. He lived with his older sister in a nearby cabin they'd inherited from a distant relative. I guess the board figured it was the right thing to do, letting him attend our school free of charge rather than spend hours on a bus every day.

Rafe told everyone he was from Texas. That was bull. I'd dated a summer guy from Texas and Rafe's drawl was all wrong. His last name suggested he was Latino, and he kind of looked it, but his high cheekbones and amber eyes said "Native" to me. He was about Daniel's height, lean, with black hair that hung just past the collar of his leather jacket. Worn blue jeans and low motorcycle boots completed the image. American Teen Rebel.

It was a look we didn't see a lot at our school, and the other girls loved it. Not that Rafe needed the added cachet. Considering we'd had the same guys on our class since kindergarten,

Rafe's novelty factor alone would have had girls tripping over themselves. He was the hottest ticket in town. And he knew it.

When I bumped into him, I said a polite, "Hey," and tried to get past.

"Hey, yourself."

He grinned and, in spite of myself, I felt a little flip in my stomach. Rafe wasn't gorgeous, but he had a sexy, crooked smile and eyes that looked at a girl like she was the first one he'd ever seen. When he stood close, I swore I could feel heat radiating off him. And Rafe always stood close.

As I backed up, he hooked a thumb toward the conference room. "Barnes in there?" he asked, meaning the principal.

I shook my head. "Haven't seen him. Ms. Morales was around, though."

"Yeah, I talked to her. She says I need to talk to Barnes. Late once too often this week."

That grin sparked again, like being late for school earned him a place in the bad boy hall of fame.

"No worries," I said. "You didn't miss much."

He fell into step beside me, so close his knuckles brushed mine. "I hear you had yourself a close encounter of the wild kind."

"Um-hmm."

"Morales said you've seen more mountain lions than anyone around here. Says they practically hang out on your doorstep hoping for a saucer of milk and a scratch behind the ears."

By mountain lion, he meant cougar—that was an American term.

"I live in the park," I said. "I'm going to see a lot of wild animals."

“Still, mountain lions . . . Never seen one myself.” He slid a sidelong look my way. “Think you could fix that?”

Like hell, I thought, but just kept walking.

“Never been in your park either,” he said. “What do you say I come over tonight? We can take a walk, look for big cats, watch the stars come out . . .”

I laughed. “Do lines like that *ever* work?”

He only smiled. “Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

Actually I could. Rafe didn’t just flirt—he charmed girls right up to the point where they fell for him, then he changed his mind. I’d called him a player with attention deficit disorder. That made Daniel laugh. I didn’t think it was so funny.

Would I think better of the guy if he followed through and scored with every girl he could? No, but he seemed like a cat toying with a mouse—no plans to make a meal of it, just batting it around a while, leaving it wounded and dazed, then sauntering away.

He’d taken a run at me shortly after he arrived. When I turned him down twice, he’d seemed to take the hint and had backed off. Had that only been a temporary reprieve? I hoped not.

“Maya?” a soft voice called.

I glanced over to see Nicole Tillson, the mayor’s daughter, at her locker. She looked from me to Rafe, concern darkening her blue eyes. I mouthed “Save me,” and her pixie face lit up in a grin.

She scampered over. “Oh, thank god I found you. Did you read that chapter for history? I was halfway through when Hayley called and I never got back—” Her eyes widened as if she’d

just noticed Rafe there. “Oh, hey, Rafe. Do you mind if I steal Maya’s brain for a minute? I seriously need it.”

She tugged my arm, pulling me away before he could answer. “Okay, so the first part was on World War II, right? I got as far as . . .”

She continued babbling for another minute, then glanced over her shoulder. “Okay, he’s gone.”

“Thank you.”

“Anytime. I know you don’t like him so—” She glanced up at me. “You don’t, right? I mean, I guess not, or you wouldn’t have asked me to save you, but if you do . . .”

“No. Hayley can have him.”

“Good. So did you bring your lunch today? If you didn’t I was thinking maybe we could all pop over to the Blender. My treat. Mom finally paid me for that extra work I did at the clinic.”

We stopped at her locker so she could get the book she’d come for. I had to help her with that. I’m only five foot five, but Nicole’s at least four inches shorter and the guys like to stick her books up where she can’t reach them.

Nicole was on the swim team and in the choir, so she’d been more Serena’s friend than mine. That changed after Serena died. We’d kind of taken on each other as replacement pals. It wasn’t a great fit—we didn’t really have that much in common—but it filled a gap.

Three

I don't mind school. I'd like it a lot better if it wasn't indoors. Being inside just seems to sap my energy. It's gotten worse the last couple of years. I go home and I crash.

That worries my parents, but the doctors say it's a combination of hormones and my metabolism—I'm used to being outside and active, and being a teen only makes it worse. They gave me some vitamins, but I still need a nap most days.

When the school day ends, I get outside as fast as I can. Today I was waylaid by Ms. Morales, who wanted a first-hand account of my cougar encounter. When I finally escaped, I spotted Nicole with Daniel on the other side of the playground. He had an eighth-grader pinned to the grass, arm twisted behind his back.

"Bully!" I shouted.

Daniel glanced over and grinned. Then he let the kid—Travis Carling—go, and got down on all fours so Travis could try the move on him. As Daniel gave instructions, Travis's brother Corey made suggestions that had everyone within earshot laughing.

Corey was Chief Carling's son. Dark-haired, over six feet tall, big and burly, he was the school's second-best wrestler and boxer after Daniel. Also Daniel's best guy buddy. I could only imagine what he was suggesting Travis do to Daniel while he had him pinned. It was

drawing a crowd, though. Corey always did. He was one of those guys who can talk to anyone—and talk his way out of trouble, which in Corey’s case is a necessary survival skill.

Corey doesn’t practice that skill much outside of Salmon Creek, though. That thing my mom said about small town folks being uncomfortable with outsiders? It may not apply to Daniel, but it does to Corey. He’s a Salmon Creek boy all the way. Born here, plans to get a job here and will probably never leave here.

If you had to pick the most popular guy at our school, it’d be a tossup between Daniel and Corey. Daniel’s the guy everyone wants on his team—the steady, responsible leader. Corey’s the guy everyone wants to party with.

As I headed toward them, I felt someone watching me. Rafe. When I looked over, he sauntered my way, grinning like I’d been the one caught staring.

Nicole said something to Corey, who looked my way. Daniel was on his feet now, coming to meet me. He veered in Rafe’s direction, gaze on me, like he didn’t see Rafe there. He cut right in front of him, so close that Rafe had to stop short. Daniel pretended not to notice.

As Rafe stopped, Charlie Russo appeared behind him and walked past, shouldering Rafe aside with a smirk, then switched to a genuine smile as she said something to Daniel. Charlie is our second newest student. Her parents died two years ago, and she’d come to live with the Tillsons, who were her second cousins or something like that. If there was any resemblance between Charlie and Nicole, though, I couldn’t see it.

Charlie is an inch taller than me, kind of stocky, with dark hair and wide-set blue eyes. She has freckles, too, and the only time I’ve seen her wear makeup is when Corey teased that her freckles were “cute” and she tried to cover them up.

When she first arrived in Salmon Creek, we'd all tried to make her feel welcome. Serena and I tried harder than anyone, because we thought she was cool, in a smart-mouth, big-city way. But Charlie wielded her outsider status like a shield, so we'd given up.

I still liked her, though. She was different. She was interesting. And we got along fine, though it'd become clear that "getting along" was the best I could hope for. The only person at our school she really liked was Daniel. It wasn't a crush, though. She didn't even seem interested in him as a guy, only as a potential friend. Daniel was nice to her, but he already had his quota of female friends.

The student she liked least these days was Rafe. He'd made one half-hearted move toward her and I have no idea what she said or done, but he'd steered clear ever since.

"Texas boy taking another run at you?" Daniel said as Rafe veered away and continued past me.

"It'll pass."

"Want me to talk to him?"

I gave him a look. If there's one problem with having the toughest guy at school as my best friend, this is it. Daniel has a protective streak a mile wide. Sometimes, when a summer guy is bugging me, it'd be great to have Daniel barrel in and handle it for me. But what does that say about me? Nothing I want to say.

"You want us to take care of the guy?" Corey said in a gangster voice as he walked up to us with Nicole. "We could do that. Lots of places to hide a body around here. Deep caves, deep ravines, deep lakes—" He stopped short, then bounced over and smacked me between the shoulder-blades. "So, how's the almost-birthday girl? Getting ready for her big party? Sweet Sixteen and never been—"

Daniel cut him off with a sputtering laugh. “Believe me, Maya’s definitely been kissed.”

Corey gave a devilish grin. “Oh, I wasn’t going to say *kissed*.”

Nicole blushed furiously, and I laughed.

Across the playground, Rafe had been waylaid by Hayley Morris, another member of our swim team and singing group. Like Serena and Nicole, she was petite and blond—we used to joke that this was a requirement for joining. Hayley was not a friend. She was, however, Rafe’s number one admirer. She was also the first of his not-quite-conquests and the only one who hadn’t taken the hint when he moved on.

She’d planted herself in front of him. He eased back more politely than I would have expected, just shifting until she was out of his personal space. She got right back into it. He moved back. She moved forward. It was an oddly formal little dance, and I was watching it when Daniel said, “Maya?”

“Hmm?”

“Ready to go?”

“Anytime you are.”

“Can I get a lift to the community center?” Nicole asked. “I want to squeeze in some swim practice before Ms. Martin comes by for my singing lesson.”

Corey frowned. “That’s a lot of practice, Nic. Are you sure you’ll have time to do your homework?”

“Of course I will. I do homework right after—” She caught his expression and blushed as she realized he was teasing her.

“At least she *does* her homework,” I said.

“Unlike someone I could name,” Daniel said. “Who’ll get his ass kicked in Victoria next month if he doesn’t show up for practice.” He turned to Nicole. “Sure, I’ll give you a lift. You ready, Maya?”

“Doesn’t look like Maya needs a ride today,” Corey said.

I followed his gaze to see my dad barreling down on me, scowling in a way that really didn’t suit him at all.

Daniel mouthed. “Call me,” and headed for his truck, Nicole trailing.

“In the car,” Dad said, pointing to the park Jeep at the curb. “Now.”

“What did I—?”

“I said *now*, Maya.”

He strode off, leaving me tagging along like I was five, every kid still in the schoolyard watching. Mom was in the passenger seat. She rolled down the window, smiling, then saw my expression.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“No idea,” I said. “He won’t tell me.”

She slid the seat forward for me to squeeze in the back. “Rick, what—?”

She laughed, then I saw Dad’s grin as he slid into the driver’s seat.

“Payback for this morning,” he said. “You embarrass me; I embarrass you.”

“Oh, that’s mature,” I said.

“Keeps me young.”

“So, did you bump into Mrs. Morris today? I hear Mr. Morris was away at a conference.” I waggled my brows at him in the rearview mirror.

“Enough, you two,” Mom said.

“What’s with the ride?” I said. “You missed me so much you couldn’t wait for me to get home?”

“Don’t answer that, Rick.” Mom looked back at me as Dad pulled away from the curb. “We need to pick up some things in the city, and we thought we’d go out for dinner.”

By “city,” she did not mean Vancouver. When I tell online friends that I live on Vancouver Island, they start asking questions about the city of Vancouver. I guess it makes sense that it would be on the island with the same name. It’s not. It’s across the strait, and while it’s barely thirty-five kilometers away, the water flowing in between means we only cross for special occasions.

The city we were heading to was Nanaimo, on the eastern coast of the island. With just under a hundred thousand people, it was hardly a major urban center, but on an island almost five hundred kilometers miles long, with a population of under a million—half of them living in Victoria at the southern tip—you take what you can get.

“I get to pick the restaurant, right? Since Saturday is my birthday and apparently we aren’t going to Vancouver to get my tattoo. Not that I’m bitter about that or—” I stopped as I glimpsed a familiar face out the window. “Hey, there’s that hiker from this morning. Did you ever catch up with her?”

“No, and I really do need her to file a report. Hold on.”

Dad pulled over to the curb as a group of kids passed. He peered out the window. “Where’d she go?”

“Right there, behind Travis Carling.”

Dad opened the door and got out. The kids went by . . . and there was no one else there. I rolled down the window.

“She was right there.” I pointed. “In front of the library.”

The library was part of the community center, which took up most of the block, meaning there was no way the woman had ducked around it. Dad walked over and tried the library doors, but they were locked—it was only open three days a week.

“I think it’s time for a drug test,” Dad said as he came back to the car.

“I’m serious. I saw her.”

“Maya’s right,” Mom said. “I noticed her before the kids went by. I don’t know where she went, but she *was* there.”

“She doesn’t want to tattle on the cute kitty,” I said. “Don’t worry. Just hand her the papers while she’s cornered again by two-hundred pounds of *snarling* kitty and she’ll change her mind.”