

Chapter One

I was running through the forest. Running on all fours, huge tawny paws touching down so lightly they seemed to skim the ground. Yet somehow my pursuers were catching. The pounding of their boots was so close I swore my tail switched against as I ran.

I couldn't keep this up. Cougars are sprinters, not distance runners. I had to get into the brush, up a tree, someplace, anyplace where I could hunker down, invisible, until they passed and then—

A dart hit my shoulder. I reared back, snarling, clawing—

“Maya!”

Hands gripped my front legs. No, not legs. Arms. I saw hands wrapped around my wrists, a familiar face in front of mine—wavy blond hair in need of a brush, blue eyes underscored with dark circles, wide mouth tight with worry and exhaustion.

“Daniel . . .?”

He released my wrists.

Corey's voice sounded to my left, “Um, guys? Causing a bit of a scene here.”

I looked around to see strangers staring. A man in a button down shirt was making his way over, gaze fixed on us. Behind him was a counter stacked with books. In front of me was a computer, while Corey was seated at another beside me.

A library. We were in a library.

The man walked over. “Is there a problem here?” He was looking at me and I wasn't sure why, until he shot a glare at Daniel and I realized how it must have looked, him holding my wrists as I struggled.

“No,” I said. “We were just . . . goofing around.”

Not the right thing to say in a library. Even Corey—the king of goofing around—wincing.

“I'm sorry,” Daniel said. “It won't happen again.”

As he spoke, he held the librarian's gaze and kept his voice low, calm. Using his powers of persuasion. With Daniel, it really is a power. I don't think the librarian needed it, though. He seemed content to leave us be. But the incident had caught the attention of people around us and under the circumstances, we really couldn't afford to make ourselves memorable. So we left. Quickly.

“Well,” Corey said as we tramped down the front steps. “It's not the first time we've had to leave a library. But it is the first time I wasn't responsible.”

“I was having a vision,” I said. “I can't control those.”

“Uh, no, Maya. Unless you snore during your visions, you were asleep.”

“I don’t snore.” I looked at Daniel. “Tell him I don’t snore.”

Daniel feigned great interest in the fountain. Corey didn’t ask how Daniel would know if I snored. Daniel and I had been best friends since kindergarten. Though our parents had decided sleepovers required separate rooms years ago, we’d spent the last few days sleeping side-by-side as we trekked through the wilds of Vancouver Island. Not a voluntary hiking trip, either. A helicopter crash had stranded us with Corey and three other friends. That helicopter had been supposedly rescuing us from a forest fire that threatened our town, but it’d actually been kidnapping us. Now, less than a week later, we were in the city of Vancouver, only the three of us left, the others captured by the people we were still fleeing.

“You were exhausted,” Daniel finally said. “Corey and I slept on the ferry. You didn’t. I would have let you keep sleeping . . . but the snoring *was* getting kinda loud.”

I aimed a kick at him. He grabbed my foot and held it, making me dance and curse. A passing security guard shot us a warning look.

“Holy hell,” Corey said. “It’s a sad day when I’m the responsible one. Speaking of responsibility, I’m going to take the reins of leadership and suggest food. It’s nearly eight. Maya, use that cat nose and lead us to dinner.”

Yes, my dream hadn’t been pure fantasy. I was a shape-shifter. I’d discovered my secret identity about a week ago. Not surprisingly, it marked the point where life went to hell—for all of us.

I wasn’t the only supernatural kid in our tiny town. In fact, Salmon Creek seemed to have been built as a petri dish to resurrect extinct supernatural types. Project Phoenix. I was a skin-walker, like Rafe and Annie, a brother and sister who’d come to Salmon Creek looking for answers. Daniel was a benandanti—a demon-hunter. As for Corey, we were pretty sure he had powers, too, but we didn’t know what they were yet.

And as for the people chasing us, it was two groups actually. The St. Clouds—who’d founded our town and Project Phoenix—and the Nasts, a rival supernatural corporation that thought we seemed like valuable commodities. Our friends were now divided between the groups, and we were on the run, trying to find someone to help us get our friends back. We wanted something else back, too: our parents. They’d been told we’d died in that helicopter crash. I’d been trying very hard not to think about that, what they were going through. I just kept telling myself it would all be fixed soon. It had to be.

We ate dinner in a chain restaurant. It wasn't one we knew, and we'd stood inside the door for five minutes, going over the menu, feeling like country mice in the city. That's nothing new. We grew up in a town of two hundred people. Put us in a metropolitan of two million, and it didn't matter if we were private-school educated and wearing the same labels as every other kid—we still felt like hicks.

“This is what we need, guys,” Daniel said after we ordered. “A huge city where we can just blend in and lie low for a few days.”

“I know,” Corey said. “But I feel . . .” He looked around at the other tables and scowled. “It's the St. Cloud's fault. All those years of stranger danger classes, teaching us that no one outside Salmon Creek can be trusted. They did that on purpose.”

“I know,” I murmured.

“Teaching us to be afraid of the outside world so we'd never leave, when the real danger wasn't out here at all. It was right there. With everyone who was supposed to be looking out for us. Everyone we were taught to trust. Our teachers. Our doctors. Even some of our own parents might have been in on it. Hell, I'm not even sure my mom wasn't . . .”

He trailed off. I didn't rush to tell him I'm sure she hadn't been a willing participant. We'd already been through this. There were no guarantees.

In Corey's face, bitter and angry, I could find no trace of the guy I'd grown up with, the one who was always grinning, always up to something, never thinking any farther ahead than the next party.

I cleared my throat. “So, what did you guys find out while I was sleeping on the job?”

We'd gone to the library to research a name that Rafe's mother had given him to contact as a last resort. This seemed like a last resort. We had no idea if this guy could—or would—help us, but it was our only shot.

“Cyril Mitchell is an unusual enough name. I narrowed it down to the most likely guy—the others were too young. I have a phone number, but that's it.” Daniel unfolded two notes from his pocket. Scrap paper from the library. He ran his finger down his notes and let out a deep breath. If Corey looked bitter, Daniel looked defeated, and it was just as painful to see.

“It's okay,” I said. “We call the number. We talk to whoever answers. That's all we can do.”

One of the toughest parts about making that call was picking a pay-phone. Not only are they rare these days, but we wanted one a fair distance from where we'd spend the night. Sure, the

risk that someone was tapping this guy's phone—or that he was working for the people chasing us—was slight. But right now we only trusted were each other.

We caught the SkyTrain and found a pay-phone. Then I prepared to call the man we hoped was Mitchell.

While Rafe had been captured the first time, he'd found information about another experiment: Project Genesis. The kids who'd been guinea pigs in that one had supposedly escaped, along with their parents. Rafe was sure Mitchell would know more. If we could find those subjects, maybe they could help us.

I pumped five dollars in coins into the pay-phone and dialed.

When a woman answered, I asked to speak to Cyril Mitchell.

"Sorry, wrong number," she said.

I read her back the number I'd dialed.

"That's right, but there's no one named Cyril here."

Before she could hang up, I said, "I really need to get in touch with Mr. Mitchell and this is the only number I have."

"I'm sorry. I can't help you."

My mind whirred, trying to think of something else to say before she hung up. But she didn't hang up. She stayed on the line. As if she was waiting.

"Do you know any way to get in touch with Mr. Mitchell?" I asked finally.

"No."

So why aren't you hanging up?

If Mitchell knew about Project Genesis and Project Phoenix, both top-secret supernatural experiments, maybe he was on the run, too. Maybe this woman was waiting for something—a name, a code word.

But if he's on the run, why would Daniel be able to find his number so easily?

Maybe it wasn't the right Cyril Mitchell. Or maybe it was and she could tell I was young and I was scared, and didn't want to hang up on me.

I took deep breaths and clenched the receiver.

This was our only lead. Our *only* lead. I couldn't let it slip away.

"I'm going to leave a message," I said. "Just in case." I chose my words carefully. "My name is Maya Delaney. I'm a Phoenix from Salmon Creek, British Columbia."

I paused. It took at least three seconds for her to say, "I'm sorry, but you really do have the wrong number." Which told me she'd listening, maybe even writing it down.

“Just take the message. Please. Maya Delaney. Phoenix. Salmon Creek. He can contact me at . . .” I read off the e-mail account Corey had set up at the library. “Do you need me to repeat any of that?”

A long pause. Then, “He can’t help you, Maya.”

My heart thudded. This *was* Mitchell’s number. “Can I speak to him? Please?”

“Not without a—” She stopped herself. “He died six months ago. I’m his daughter.”

I took a deep breath. Tried not to panic. “Okay. Can you help? Or can you give us the name of someone who can? Please?”

“No.” A pause. “I’m sorry.”

She hung up.

Chapter Two

We spent an hour trying to call back. We even used different pay-phones. She wasn't answering and she'd turned off the voice-mail.

We took refuge in a half-constructed low-rise condo building. There were plenty of them around. Vancouver had been booming a few years ago, insanely priced condos popping up everywhere, eyes fixed on the Olympics. Then the economic crisis hit and developers fled.

We hadn't said much since our last attempt to call Mitchell's daughter. There was nothing to say except "What now?" and no one dared ask that. When the silence got too heavy, I snuck off to the highest level with a solid floor—seven floors up. I perched on the edge, letting my legs hang over as I stared toward the distant ocean. Toward my island.

I ran my fingers over the worn leather bracelet on my wrist, over the cat's eye stone. Rafe's bracelet, the one he'd given me

A few minutes later, I heard footsteps. I didn't turn. I knew it was Daniel.

He didn't come over, and I didn't turn, in case he was just checking on me. I heard him settle behind me. Then silence, broken only by the soft sound of his breathing.

"You going to stay back there?"

His sneakers scuffed the floor as he rose. "I didn't want to disturb you."

I held my hand up behind me, and his fingers closed around mine. I clasped his hand, feeling the heat of it chase away the October chill. He sat beside me, his legs dangling, too.

"We need to find these other subjects," I said. "Project Genesis."

"I know but . . . At the library, I searched on all kinds of words from those pages Rafe gave us. There's nothing. It's a dead end."

Silence thudded down again. I stared out at the city and tried to rouse myself. We had to move. We had to do something. The thoughts would skitter through my brain, only to be swallowed by a yawning black pit. Move where? Do what? Our only lead was gone and I felt lost. Too beat down to even look up for a spot of light.

"I think we should go to Skidegate and try to contact your grandma," Daniel said.

I looked at him. I wanted to shout for joy and throw my arms around his neck and thank him for giving me exactly what I wanted—contact with my family. But I only had to look at him, his eyes anxious, his face drawn, holding himself still as he awaited my response, and I knew this wasn't about choosing the right path. It was about making me happy. Or making one of us happy. Lifting the dark cloud for one so we could all breathe a little easier. He knew I wanted this more than anything. So he was giving it to me, caution be damned.

“I . . . don’t think that would be safe,” I said slowly.

“We could make it safe. We’d go over to the Queen Charlotte islands and make contact with one of her friends, ask them to take her a note. She’s a smart lady. If she knows what’s going on, she’ll find a way to meet us without being followed.”

“You’ve thought this through.”

“I’ve gone over all the options. There’s my brothers, but they’re too far away and I’m not sure how much help they’d be.” His two older brothers were at university in Toronto and Montreal—clear across the country. “Corey’s grandparents are in Alberta, but he said they wouldn’t understand—they’d call his mom right away.”

We couldn’t let that happen—if our parents found out we were alive—and we weren’t there to warn them—they’d confront the Cabals, not knowing how dangerous they were.

Daniel continued, “I’ve never met Corey’s grandparents anyway. I’ve met your grandma. So has Corey. He’s good with it.”

I looked out over the city.

“It’s not like we have a lot of choice, Maya,” Daniel murmured. “Either we sit here waiting for divine intervention or we take a risk.”

“It’s not a short trip,” I said. “We’d need to take the train to Prince Rupert and the ferry over. We wouldn’t have much money left.”

“We wouldn’t need it once we made contact. Before we get on that train, we need to make sure she’s there. Call again tomorrow and see if she answers—don’t say anything, just confirm she’s home. I don’t know if she would be—she thinks you’re dead, and the funerals . . .”

He trailed off. By now our parents might have buried us. Buried empty caskets, our remains lost at sea. We tried not to think about that, and sat there for a little longer, staring into the night.

“I know you’re worried about Rafe,” Daniel said at last. “You haven’t said anything, but you must be.”

I nodded. “He double-crossed the St. Clouds to protect us. I’m afraid they’ll punish him. Not just him, though, I’m worried about everyone. Sam, Hayley, Kenjii, Nicole.”

Did he notice I said my dog’s name before Nicole’s? I hadn’t meant to, but the truth was that I wasn’t at all worried about Nicole. She’d killed my best friend, because Serena was dating Daniel. He didn’t know that. Worse, at the time of Serena’s death, he’d been ready to break up with her and if he’d just done it a little sooner, she’d still be alive. I hadn’t told him

because I didn't want to put that kind of burden on him. So I had to pretend I was still concerned about Nicole, too.

"It's not just worry," I said. "I feel responsible. Like they're waiting for us to rescue them and we have no idea how to do that."

He put his arm around my waist and pulled me, so I could lean against him. "We'll do our best."

I closed my eyes and tried to block the mechanical roar of the city and imagine my forest instead, the sigh of wind through redwoods, the buzz of thrush and the whistle of marmots, the soft drip of rain. It took a while, but soon I was able to hear them, and when I did, exhaustion took over and I drifted off to sleep.

There was still no answer at my grandmother's place. She volunteered at the Heritage Center, most recently in project management. She was Haida, like my mom. Mom wasn't really active in the Native community, but Grandma was. I help her out with festivals and such, but I always feel a little out of place. I'm adopted and I am Native, but Navajo not Haida. I don't know much about that part of my heritage, except that it doesn't usually come with the ability to shape-shift into a wild cat. I'm just special. Unfortunately.

There was a really good chance, then, that I knew the woman who answered the phone at the heritage center, but not well enough to recognize her voice. And, thankfully, she didn't recognize mine.

"Hi," I said. "My name is Joy. I know this is going to sound weird, but I'm trying to get in touch with Maya Delaney's parents."

A sharp intake of breath on the other end.

"I know what happened," I said. "My mom saw it in the paper. We have a cottage near Salmon Creek, so I'd met most of the kids who died, and I wanted to let Maya's parents know how sorry I am about everything. But no one's answering the number I have. I remember she said her grandma worked at the heritage center in Skidegate, so I'm sorry to bother you, but this was the only thing I could think of."

"I'm afraid I can't help either," the woman said. "Her parents are in Vancouver for the funeral."

"Vancouver?" I thought I'd misheard and she'd said Victoria.

"Maya's grandmother was hoping it would be on the island, but the people who ran the town are in charge and I guess . . ." She trailed off. "I know they took the parents to Vancouver after the crash. Maybe they think going back to the island would be too much of a

reminder. It's all such a horrible tragedy. I think everyone's just relieved someone else is handling the arrangements."

Yes, I was sure the St. Clouds were happy to make the arrangements. Get the families to Vancouver—farther from us—after the crash. Hold the service there so it would be smaller. Get this charade over with as fast as possible, then whisk them off to parts unknown.

"Have they had the funeral already?" I asked. "I was kind of hoping to go."

"It's the day after tomorrow. You should be able to find details in the Victoria newspaper. Maya's grandmother has a cell phone, but she's spending the day on Galiano at a friend's cabin. A retreat before the funeral. She'll be out of touch while she's there."

We'd spent time at my grandma's friend's place on Galiano. I could get us there, and it was a lot closer than Skidegate.

Chapter Three

Galiano is the largest of the Gulf Islands, between the mainland and Vancouver Island. It was an hour ferry ride, after catching a coach bus down to the terminal in Tsawwassen. From the ferry stop, we had a five kilometer hike to the cabin, which was about as remote as you could get on the island.

By the time we arrived, it was after five. The cottage was a tiny artist's studio on a small windswept bluff overlooking the strait. There was an empty cabin about fifty meters away, and that's where we took refuge, hunkering down in its shadow to watch the studio and wait for my grandmother to come out.

Her car was in the drive, and a thin line of smoke rose from the wood stove chimney, so I knew she was there. I expected her to come out at any moment. It's a tiny studio and Grandma hates being cooped up inside as much as I do. When we came here for weekends, I'd wake to find her already gone—walking the beach or gathering berries or just sitting on the deck, drinking tea and enjoying the morning. Yet today, despite the rare break of fall sunshine, the doors never opened.

"She's not coming out," I said.

This was stupid. Foolish. We should have stayed in Vancouver.

And done what?

That's the question wasn't it? And done what? Hide forever? Give up dreams of a reunion with our families and reconcile ourselves to a life on the streets? None of us suggested that. We'd sooner take our chances with the St. Clouds and the Nasts. Corey and I would never give up the hope of being with our families again. Daniel would—his father was an abusive alcoholic, his mother long gone—but he still wanted to return to some semblance of a normal life.

Corey scanned the quiet road. "There's no one around. Maya, why don't you go knock on the door. It's not like anyone's going to be watching the place."

"Are you sure?" Daniel said.

Corey shifted. "Look, I know we need to be careful but"—he waved a hand around—"we're in the middle of nowhere. It's the cottage of her grandmother's friend. How would we even know she was here? No one's going to expect this."

"You're sure of that? Sure enough to bet Maya's freedom on it?"

Corey swore under his breath. "I didn't mean it like that."

“I know,” I said. “You’re right. We need to take a chance. But it’s almost seven now. It’ll be dark soon. Once it is, I can get to the cabin, get her attention and get her to let me in.”

Daniel shook his head. “If she sees you through a window, she might react loud enough for anyone watching to overhear. I should—”

“I’ll do it,” Corey said. “First, she knows me the least, so she’ll have the least reaction to seeing me alive. Second, I’m the guy you can most afford to lose.”

“We can’t afford to lose anyone,” I said.

“Let’s not go through this again, okay? I don’t need you guys to make me feel important. You and Daniel got us this far and you’re the ones most likely to get us out. From now on, if someone needs to take a risk, it’s me. Always me.”

We finally agreed that it would be him *this time*. It was true that Daniel and I had done most of the planning so far. We’d all grown up together in a very small school, where Daniel and I were the class leaders, not because we were awesomely perfect, but because we tended to take charge naturally and the others were happy to kick back and let us shoulder that responsibility. In a crisis, they’d done the same.

Yet everyone played their part in this ordeal. Often, that role had been the sacrificial lamb. Hayley, Sam and Rafe had all let themselves be captured so the rest of us could escape. And with every sacrifice they made, the pressure to honor it by saving them grew greater, and I felt less worthy of it.

So we waited for dark. And as we waited, I became more and more anxious. It was already driving me crazy, being this close to my grandmother, with her in there grieving for me. I kept thinking Corey was right, we were being overly paranoid and maybe, in that paranoia, losing our best chance. Maybe it wasn’t just paranoia, either. Maybe we’d become cowards. Unwilling to take a risk if it meant we might be captured, too.

“I need to move,” I said finally, as dusk fell.

We were sitting against the neighboring cottage, the long grass hiding us. Nobody had spoken in almost an hour and when I did, they both jumped.

“I just want to take a walk.” I glanced down at my trembling hands and clenched them into fists. “I’ll be careful.”

Daniel looked at me, his head tilted, eyes dark, like he wanted to do something or say something. “Okay,” he said finally. Then, voice lowered another notch, “It’ll all be over soon.”

You'll see her soon is what he meant. I nodded and said I wouldn't be long, then crawled through the long grass to a stand of forest. Only when I was deep enough in did I rise and begin to walk.

Being in the forest only reminded me of my forest, which reminded me of my parents and our lives there and made me wonder whether we'd ever be able to go back. Almost certainly we wouldn't go back. Salmon Creek was lost to us. My forest was lost to me.

And it was only then that I truly understood what I'd had. A damned near perfect life. Days spent tramping through the wilderness with my dog, with Daniel, endless idyllic days when we had nothing more to worry about than planning the next school fundraiser. Even that was hardly stressful—we'd put on an event and the town would open its wallets. The St. Clouds would make a huge donation, and everyone would tell us what an amazing job we'd done. Now I wondered if we could have slapped together a bake sale with tables full of stale Rice Krispie squares and gotten the same results.

The scientists had wanted us to grow up healthy and confident. Most of all, though, they wanted us to be happy, so that when we discovered the truth, we'd be okay with it.

Would we have been okay with it? No. We'd never have forgiven them for the lie. But could we have reconciled ourselves to a life as research subjects and future Cabal employees? I should say no. Emphatically no. Yet I can see a future where that might have happened. If they'd raised us knowing what had been done to us and why. And if they'd given us a choice. Accept what we're offering or you're free to leave.

I grieved for the loss of my old life, and I worried about my parents and my friends and I couldn't even walk it off because the patch of forest was so narrow. So I had to circle, which started to feel like pacing, and only made me all the more anxious. When my palms began to itch, I rubbed them against my jeans, still pacing, until the faint rubbing sound turned into a harsh rasp. I looked down to see the skin on my palms thickening, roughening. Hair had sprouted on the back of my hands. My cheeks itched, too, and when I reached up, I knew what I'd feel—the planes of my face changing, more hair sprouting. I barely had time to think “I'm shifting” when my knees gave way, like someone kicked them from behind. I fell to all fours, heaving, the air suddenly too thin, my chest too tight.

Not now. Please not now.

I closed my eyes, fingers digging into the dry earth, willing the transformation to stop. Pain ripped through me and I gritted my teeth against a scream.

This hadn't happened before. It never hurt before.

Because you didn't fight it before.

But I had to stop it. I should be able to stop it.

Only I couldn't, and the harder I tried the more it hurt, the pain so strong I nearly passed out. If I did, then I'd finish the transformation in my sleep, as I had before. Either I let it happen or I passed out and it happened in spite of me. Either way, it *was* happening.

I pulled off my clothing. I'd barely thrown it aside before I crashed to the ground and everything went dark. A moment later, I woke up. There was that usual split second of "where am I? what am I?" grogginess before I remembered and leaped to all fours.

I peered around. It was nearly dark now, but my night vision was excellent. I took a moment to adjust to the other changes—four legs, whiskers, a tail. It all makes movement a little odd at first, even the whiskers, ping-pong as they brushed the long grass.

Sliding through that grass was a lot easier when I didn't need to crawl. And safer when I blended with the golden stalks. I reached the edge near the neighboring cabin, poked my head through and let out a soft growl.

Corey peeked out first. He saw me and jumped back. Then Daniel appeared, hand on Corey's shoulder, murmuring, "It's Maya."

"I knew that," Corey whispered, looking abashed. "But why is she . . .?"

"I'm guessing she didn't have a choice."

Daniel crawled over to me. As he did, I instinctively retreated. He'd never seen me in cat form—I'd only shifted twice so far. While I'd been around humans both times and hadn't felt any monstrous desire to devour them, I still scrambled away when Daniel approached.

But his scent filled my nostrils and I didn't smell a threat or—worse—dinner. I smelled Daniel, a scent I still didn't quite comprehend when I was in human form, but now it felt like a warm wave washing over me, relaxing me, telling me everything was all right, Daniel was here.

Even when I backed away, he kept crawling forward, as if I wasn't a hundred-and-twenty pound big cat with two-inch claws and fangs.

"You okay?" he whispered.

I tried to say yes. It came out as a soft *chrr-up*, like my bobcat, Fitz, makes when he sees me.

Daniel smiled. "That sounds like yes, so I'm guessing you can understand me."

Another chirp.

"You've got some good camouflage there," he said. "A good nose. Good ears. And a good escape vehicle if you're spotted."

I realized what he was thinking. That I could scout the cabin before we sent Corey over. I chirped and tried motioning with my head that I'd circle the studio. I was sure there was no way he'd understand me, but he nodded.

“So you're okay with that? You'll take a look around before Corey goes in?”

I bobbed my head. He reached over to pat me, then stopped himself with a chagrined smile.

“Sorry, I probably shouldn't do that. But it's the only chance I'll get to pet a cougar.”

I leaned against his hand and he buried his fingers in my fur, then he took a long look at me.

“It's pretty damned amazing,” he murmured,

It was. Whatever else the Edison Group had done to us, this was amazing. We sat there for a minute. Just sat together, me leaning against him, feeling the warmth of his hand, listening to his breathing, slowly calming me down until I was relaxed enough to pull back and jerk my muzzle toward the cabin, telling Daniel I was ready. He gave me one last pat and returned to Corey.

Chapter Four

I set out through the long grass. The wind was coming from the north, which was behind me. I couldn't pick up any traces of human scent on the breeze. That meant there wasn't anyone outdoors for at least a kilometer. No one directly upwind, that is. To the north-east or north-west? Possibly. So I covered a swath from the road to the water. A very faint scent came when I approached the beach—the smell of people mixed with that of burning wood. Someone with a bonfire up the beach. No one lurking nearby watching the studio—at least not in that direction.

I wanted to cross the road to check over there, but it was a paved, meaning my tawny fur would shine like a beacon against the black. I paced along the edge, in the grass, thinking. Then I heard a car. I'd been too preoccupied to notice it until it zoomed around a curve, less than a hundred meters away. I dove deeper into the long brown grass.

The car slowed. I plastered myself against the ground, ears flat against my head, tail curled behind me. I could see the driver. Just a gray-haired guy scanning the roadside.

What if he'd spotted me? Were there cougars on Galiano? Even if there were, seeing one would be a big deal. Vancouver Island had more cougars than anyplace else in Canada, yet people lived their entire lives there and never spotted one of the elusive cats.

If this guy saw me and told someone, it could get back to the St. Clouds or the Nasts. They'd know I'd come to see my grandmother and even if I left now, they'd presume I'd made contact and they'd question her. At the very *least*, they'd question her. At worst? I started to shake.

It took a moment for me to realize the car had moved on. It had never even come to a full stop, just a mildly curious driver who'd noticed a movement by the roadside. I chuffed in relief, my flanks vibrating with the sound as I lowered my muzzle to my paws.

I had to be more careful. Damn it, I had to be a lot more careful.

When I'd composed myself, I decided I wasn't crossing that road. Instead, I would circle behind the studio to check the other side. The least exposed route was right along the top of the beach embankment, a narrow strip of long grass.

Again, I screwed up. I completely forgotten that there was a path with steps leading from the patio to the beach. Every cottage had one. Luckily, this open strip was barely a meter wide, and I'd only be exposed for a few seconds as I crossed.

I glanced out at the water. No sign of boat. I peered at the studio. The whole back side was glass, for the artist. A light shone within and the glare of it against the window made it impossible to see inside. Still, there didn't seem to be anyone there.

As I crouched to scamper across, a scent wafted past. On that made my legs freeze. My grandmother's scent, drifting from an open window. I glanced over and inhaled, feeling my sides shake.

So close. God, she was so close. All I had to do was—

No. Absolutely not. If this worked out, she'd know soon enough.

I took another step. A gasp. I turned and saw a figure silhouetted against the open patio door. It squealed open, and the sound jolted me back to life. I dove into the long grass on the other side.

"Maya!"

My grandmother's voice. I froze again.

Her feet thumped as she ran across the tiny lawn.

"Maya!"

No. This wasn't possible. I was imagining things. There was no way she could know—

I remembered the story she used to tell me when I was little. To explain my paw-print birthmark and the fact that my birth mother abandoned me on the hospital steps.

She said my real mother was a cougar who'd had a late summer litter. She'd been an old cat and knew the signs that it would be a long, hard winter and her cubs wouldn't all survive. So she'd begged the sky god for mercy and he turned her smallest cub into a human girl and told the cat to take her into the city. She'd left me at the hospital, but before she went, she'd pressed her paw to my hip, leaving me a mark to remember her by.

Had my grandmother known the truth? That I was a skin-walker? Was I wrong to think my parents hadn't been aware of the experiments?

My gut clenched. I turned to see her standing in the path, her hands to her mouth, her gaze locked on the dark patch of my birthmark.

"Maya."

She dropped to her knees. I slowly walked to her. When I was close enough, she reached out and grabbed me around the neck, pulling me to her.

"It is you, isn't it?" she whispered. Then she hiccuped a laugh. "I guess, if I'm hugging a cougar and it isn't ripping out my throat, that answers my question."

She hugged me again.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You must be so angry and so confused. Are the others with you? Daniel and the rest?”

I let out a chirp.

She squeezed me again. “As horrible as this must be, at least you have each other.” She clutched my face between her hands. “If there’s any way for you to visit your parents, please, please do that. Your mother might not believe in the spirit world, but when she sees you, she’ll recognize her child. She’ll know you took the form of the cougar to come and say good-bye.”

Good-bye? Spirit world?

She didn’t know I was a skin-walker. She thought the birthmark meant I had a link to the big cats and that my spirit had taken their form to return one last time. It was like seeing a ghost.

I pulled back and shook my head.

“You can’t go to them?” she said, her voice cracking, tears streaming down her face. “Do you want me to tell them I saw you?”

I shook my head again. Then I pulled from her grasp and started to run to the guys, to get them over here to explain.

“Maya!”

As she shouted, I caught a scent on the breeze. One I recognized. Moreno—a man who worked with Calvin Antone, my biological father.

Footsteps pounded so hard I could feel the vibration. I caught other scents. A Nast Cabal team with Moreno, approaching from the south.

“Maya!” Grandma shouted.

I wheeled, growling, hoping she’d see or hear the team, but she just kept running after me, calling my name.

A dart whizzed past. I ran faster. Then I heard a gasp behind me and saw my grandmother falling face-first to the ground, a dart lodged in her leg. I tore back to her.

Footsteps were pounding the earth from two directions. Daniel called for me, Corey shouting, too, telling me to stop, to come back.

Another dart zinged past, so close it cut right through the fur on my haunch. I reached my grandmother. She was out cold, in the grass. I grabbed her shirt in my teeth and yanked as hard as I could. The fabric gave way and I tumbled back, a chunk of cloth in my mouth.

Daniel grabbed me by the loose skin around my neck. “You can’t help her! Come on!”

When he heaved on me, I caught another glimpse of my grandmother, lying in the grass. Rage and fear coursed through me and the world turned blood-red. Daniel heaved again and I spun, snarling, jaws opening, fangs slashing for his arm. Then I saw him and swung to the side, biting air instead.

“Maya! Daniel!”

Another voice I knew. One that filled my gut with ice water. Antone.

“Daniel!” Corey shouted. “Leave her! She’ll be fine. Come on!”

Daniel’s grip on my ruff didn’t loosen. He whispered, “Please, Maya. Please.”

I looked back at my grandmother. Then up at Antone. Then at Moreno and two others running behind him, all armed with tranquilizer guns. And it was like when they’d shot Kenjii. When they’d shot Daniel. I’d watched them fall and there was nothing I could do. Not against so many.

I tore my gaze from my grandmother and ran. When another dart whizzed by, I veered to the side. Daniel shouted, then realized I wasn’t circling back—I was separating us, making us tougher to shoot.

We were already in the long grass. That made me nearly impossible to hit. I looked over at Daniel. A dart hit the a flap of his sweatshirt and lodged there. As he batted it out, I circled, racing behind him and bumping the back of his legs. He understood and bent over, running as low as he could, zigzagging, his dark shirt making him nearly invisible in the night.

“Corey!” He shouted. “Go!”

We made it to the neighboring cabin. That blocked us from sight—and gunfire—and we could hear our pursuers cursing as we slipped under the porch. They cursed even louder when they got around the cabin and didn’t find us there. As we hid under the porch, Daniel whipped a stone into the woods. Antone and Moreno took off, with Antone shouting for the others to go back for my grandmother.

Three days in the Vancouver Island wilderness hadn’t made Moreno any better at moving quietly through the woods. When he wasn’t thundering across hard earth or crashing through the undergrowth, he was cursing. As we waited there, listening and tracking them, I relaxed and as soon as I did, I lost consciousness.