

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 tang of fall 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 Daniel, 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 set. 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 is 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'd 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 frantically. “Serena?”

No answer.

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

I dove. When I went under, panic hit, like it always did, my gut telling me this was wrong, dangerous, to get above the water 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 deep 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 the surface. I felt the sunlight and the slap of cool air, only to go back down again, gulping water. I pushed up, but couldn’t stay afloat, couldn’t seem to remember how to tread water. My whole body ached. Staying above the surface was such a struggle, it was almost a relief when the water closed over my head again, peaceful silence enveloping me.

I knew this was what drowning felt like. I had to struggle not to give in, had to force my arms and legs to keep churning water, just 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 strong arm around me as he swam.

As my panic cleared, I remembered Serena. I shouted for 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 just kept hauling me along until, finally, he heaved me onto shore.

“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, my throat burning. "She went under. I was trying to find her. I couldn't—"

His eyes widened. He twisted and dove back in. 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. “Leave your father alone, Maya.”

“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 headed 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 rehab facility 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 sunspots 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. Clouds. 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 company 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 huge tawny cat 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, not slitted like most cats. 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 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.”