STARLIGHT GROVE
BOOK ONE

Across the Vanishing Sky

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Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

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Penguin
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First published 2026
001

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–911–74630–0

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
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Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

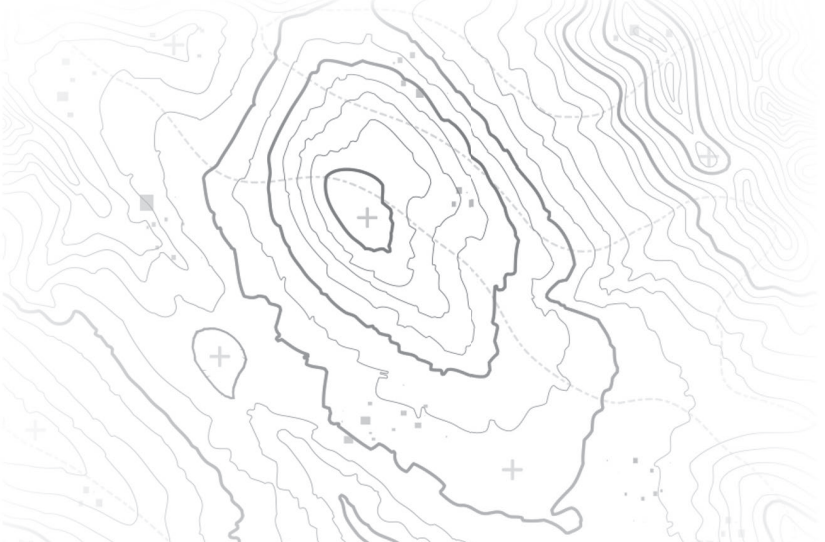
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For all those looking for belonging, for a true home.
Never give up hope. You might just find it in the
unlikeliest of places.

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PROLOGUE

Braedyn

ONE YEAR EARLIER

"If I get poison ivy on my hoo-ha, my revenge will be vast, Braedyn Winslow," Nova threatened as we rounded a curve in the trail with an especially thick patch of underbrush. "I'm talking putting your hand in warm water while you're sleeping, Sharpie-ing something distinctly inappropriate on your face, and possibly dyeing your hair purple. Peeing in the woods is not for me."

I couldn't help the soft laugh that escaped as I turned around to take stock of my best friend, who'd just returned to the trail from a mid-trek bathroom break. She'd committed to the hiking bit, seeking out secondhand finds at Goodwill that made her look like she conquered dozens of miles in the backcountry every weekend. Her dark hair was pulled into an artful knot atop her head, and her gray eyes had that tinge of silver that only came when her emotions were heightened.

Right now, I couldn't decide if Nova was more annoyed or amused. It only made my smile widen.

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Nova stopped mid-trail and pointed her colorful water bottle at me—the one she'd decorated with stickers that would've painted a

picture of who she was to a stranger: A girl with her hands in a meditative prayer position in front of her chest with the words *Namaste in bed* scrawled below. A little chicken nugget with sunglasses that said *Nugs not drugs*. A pink cooler that read *Don't hate me because I'm a little bit cooler*.

There were also more typical ones: one for both the yoga studio and coffeehouse she worked at in Oakland, a shooting star, a holographic butterfly… Each thing was a little piece of Nova's sparkly personality, as was the gold, heart-shaped locket dangling from her neck.

"I don't appreciate that smile," she bit out.

It only made the curve of my lips grow. "Don't worry, princess. I'm looking out for your delicate sensibilities."

Nova scowled in my direction. "We live in a city. We grew up in a beach suburb. How did you get to be so at one with the woods?"

She was right. Oakland was about as far from Starlight Grove as you could get. Not in distance—that was only about four hours—but everything else about them was night and day. Our home, about thirty minutes outside of San Francisco—at least when it wasn't rush hour—had a population of about half a million people. Starlight Grove, about an hour south of the Oregon border, had about one thousand.

It was one of the reasons I'd picked this spot for our girls' weekend—the weekend that was supposed to be a thank-you for everything Nova had done for me these past seven years. But on second thought, the hike up Three Creeks Canyon might not have been the best gratitude gift.

Just the thought of *seven years* had me wanting to pull my phone from my shorts pocket to see if I had an update from the Cub Scout leader in charge of the camping trip not more than an hour from here. I'd gotten one this morning before we left for our hike, letting me know everything was great. Owen had slept well and was super excited for their fishing expedition that day.

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But worry still niggled. This was his first time away from me for more than one night. What if he got sick or scared or—?

"Don't tell me you conned me into this so-called adventure because of your Bigfoot obsession," Nova grumbled and dropped her gaze to my shirt.

I knew exactly what she was looking at: the image of Bigfoot with a sunset sky behind him and the words *Believe in yourself, even when no one else does*.

I shook off my worries for Owen, picturing his blond hair in a shade so similar to my own. The slope of his nose with the smallest upturn was all me, too. Really the only thing that was his father were his eyes—green irises that felt like they could see right through you. But those eyes were the only thing Vincent had given our son.

"Earth to Braedyn," Nova singsonged.

"Sorry, I swore I heard a Bigfoot call," I teased.

Nova whirled around. "It's probably a goddamned bear. And if I get eaten—"

"You'll shave off my eyebrows and tattoo your vengeance across my forehead," I finished for her.

She turned back, hands on her hips. "I will haunt your ass."

I burst out laughing and pulled her into a hug. "I'm so glad because I'd be lost without you."

I held on a little longer than necessary, and my action had Nova hugging me tighter. More like a sister than a best friend, she always knew when I needed a little extra something. Knowing each other practically since birth had given us that—the kind of bond that didn't even need words.

Still, she gave me them. "What's going on?"

I gave her one last squeeze before releasing her. "I don't know. Owen's first big overnight trip…it has me remembering everything you've done along the way. You're the best friend a girl could ask for. That *anyone* could ask for."

Nova's face went soft as she squeezed my hand. "I didn't do that much."

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I made a face. "Supernova," I began, using the nickname my son had given her, "when my world exploded, you were the one who

picked up the pieces. You moved across the country with me. You were my birth coach—"

"Because Vincent the douche is the prick of the century."

She wasn't wrong there. Vincent had been what I thought was forever. Six years older, wealthy, charismatic—he'd used all three things to charm his way into my pants. But when I ended up pregnant at nineteen because he refused to wear a condom, he'd wanted nothing to do with our baby. Told me, *"Get rid of it or I'll get rid of you. I'm not marrying you just because you're trying to trap me."*

And I'd seen for the first time who he really was. I'd ended things then and there. Vincent had given me an NDA and an offer of half a million dollars to never reveal the father of my baby. I'd told him to go fuck himself as I ripped up the NDA and then kneed him in the balls as an extra parting gift. But I could never quite bring myself to hate him. Not when he'd given me the best gift I'd ever received.

Owen.

"You're a way better parent than he could ever be," I swore. Because Nova was. She was his auntie but more like a second mom than anything else.

"My Bubs is the dopest kid around, and I'm honored to be his cool aunt."

"The coolest."

I pulled out my phone, all this talk of Owen breaking the last of my reserve to keep from checking. Zero bars. *Damn.*

"Brae-Brae…" Nova said in a warning tone. "He's fine."

"I know, I just…"

"You just worry anyway because you're the best mom in the universe."

"I highly doubt that," I mumbled. At least one day a week, I felt like a complete failure. More than once, I'd cursed myself for not taking that half-a-million-dollar payout. But it had felt too much like someone stripping my voice from me. And if there was one thing to know about me, it was that I'd never be silenced.

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"Facts," Nova argued. "Never seen anyone work harder to give their kid everything."

But Nova did, too. She'd given up the life of a young twenty-something to help me raise my little miracle. And I never would've been able to do it without her.

"You make that possible," I whispered.

"Stop trying to make me feel my feelings," Nova muttered.

Her remark had a laugh breaking free of my throat. Nova might've been a yoga devotee, but she was out the second someone tried to make it about feelings. Maybe it was how she'd grown up. Neither of us had come from money, but as strict as my parents had been, they always made sure I had the things I needed. Nova had pretty much raised herself, and I knew there were things she didn't share about her childhood.

"I love you," I said with a grin.

Nova sent a mock-glare my way. "Yeah, yeah. You know I have those affectionate feelings toward you and the Bubs, even if I will never say the L-word."

"Looooooooove you to the moon and back, sister."

Nova flipped me off but then lifted her pinky to me. I hooked mine around hers, and then each of us kissed our closed fists, the friendship bracelets she'd made us touching. It was the oath we'd created in the third grade at the top of the jungle gym as we vowed to give Johnny Cooperson his comeuppance.

We'd succeeded. I'd distracted him while Nova poured salt in his water bottle. He hadn't picked on either of us again.

And our oath remained eighteen years later. We'd always have each other's backs.

We released our grip, and Nova swatted my ass. "Hurry up, lazy-bones. That massage you booked us later today is calling my name."

"Making note: Hikes, no. Massages, yes," I said, laughter in my voice.

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"And wine. Wine is a *big* yes."

"Good thing I booked us a winery tour tomorrow," I called as I

hurried down the path. We were only about twenty minutes from the trailhead now, if my guesstimate was correct.

"Thank the Bigfoot gods."

I chuckled as I caught sight of the breathtaking river below through the trees. The May sun sparkled on water that looked too clear to be real. Nothing like the water in the bay where we lived. And then I saw them—the stunning, little, peachy-pink wildflowers peeking out through the trees, leading down the steep bank to the river.

"Look." I grabbed Nova's arm without taking my eyes away. "Wildflowers."

"They're super pretty. Just like the twenty-five others we've seen along the way," Nova grumbled.

"I want to get a picture," I said, already slipping off the trail and into the underbrush.

Nova groaned. "You've taken at least two hundred already."

"Last ones. Promise," I called as I navigated around bushes and through trees, lifting my voice above the roar of the water.

"I'm in danger of getting hangry," Nova yelled, but I could barely make out her words over the thundering river.

I laughed as I pulled out my phone. No one wanted Nova hangry. It was not a pretty sight.

The roar of the water intensified as I moved farther down the embankment. The sound was deafening but in a beautiful way. It was one of the things I loved most about nature—the power of losing yourself in the sights and sounds, forgetting everything that weighed so heavily on you.

As I moved farther and farther away from the path, I saw an even more elaborate display of flowers closer to the riverbank. I stepped over fallen logs and around scrub brush, and then I was surrounded by blooms.

Crouching down low, I took shots of the little peach buds my city-girl self had no idea the name for. Then I took a more artistic shot where the river was in focus and the blooms were blurry in the foreground. That would be a framer for sure. Maybe I could get it printed

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on canvas and hang it in my bedroom—the bedroom that barely had space for my twin bed, a dresser, and a nightstand.

I straightened, but as I did, my foot hit a root. I stumbled back a step, then two, my arms windmilling. I barely managed to heave myself forward so I wouldn't fall straight into the river.

My heart hammered against my rib cage as my hands and knees hit the ground. Blood roared in my ears louder than the rushing of the river, and I pressed a palm to my chest. "Note to self: don't go down to the riverbank."

I swallowed, my hand shaking as I pulled it away from my chest. Far too close a call. I picked up my phone from where it had fallen. It was covered in dirt, but the screen was still intact. Relief swept through me as I started to make the climb back up to the path. I'd gone farther than I realized and winced, knowing Nova would be annoyed.

"You'll be glad to know that's my last picture for real," I yelled up toward the path.

There was no answer.

Ruh-roh. That meant the hangry had taken hold. When Nova was truly annoyed, she went silent, those gray eyes sparking silver. She told me that my amber ones flashed gold in a similar fashion. Silver and gold, a bonded pair, just like we were meant to be.

I scrambled up the side of the embankment. "I'm sorry. I'm hurrying. I nearly lost my life in the pursuit of wildflowers. I wonder if Bigfoot would've saved me. Right out of one of your monster romance novels—"

My words cut off as I reached the trail and found it empty. "Nova?" The only things that answered me were the wind swaying the branches and the river roaring behind me. I moved a few steps one way, peeking around a bend, and then went in the opposite direction. Nothing.

A scowl pulled at my mouth as realization dawned. "This isn't funny."

Still nothing.

I turned in a circle, looking for any sign of my friend. I was sure she was behind some tree or boulder, planning some elaborate scare as revenge for me keeping her from the snacks we had in the car.

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Starting down the path, I took a handful of steps and braced for Nova to leap from either side of the path. One time, she and Owen had scared me so badly by jumping out in monster masks at Halloween, I'd peed my pants. She was vicious.

"If you don't come out, I'm going to eat the Wild Berry Skittles I brought just for you." That should've done it. If Nova had a weakness, it was those damn Skittles.

When I hit step thirty, unease slid through me. "Nova," I yelled louder.

The only response was the water and the soft call of some bird.

My stomach twisted. Would she have gone back to the car because she was annoyed? I had the keys, so it wasn't like she could get in.

I turned around one more time, but there was no sign of her. Not the khaki shorts with their elaborate stitching, the purple tank with the flowers dotting the hem, not the matching purple bandana she'd tied in her hair as a headband. No gleam of the gold heart locket she always wore around her neck, the one I'd scrimped and saved to give her.

A tingle lit in my limbs, the kind that told me I wasn't breathing. I sucked in air, trying not to inhale or exhale too quickly. And then I picked up to a jog. My backpack bounced against my tailbone and shoulder blades as I ran along the trail. Not full-out. I could still scan the trees on both sides and the packed earth below my feet.

But there was nothing.

The twenty minutes I'd estimated it would take us to make it back to the trailhead only took me twelve. The six-or-so-vehicle parking area was empty except for the tiny sedan Nova and I shared. But I didn't see her anywhere.

Real panic set in. Like when Owen ran from me in the Super Target back in the Bay Area, thinking we were playing the best game known to man. I'd lost half my life in the handful of moments he was out of my sight.

When I found him, I'd burst into tears as I held him to me. A nice older lady had come over, rubbing my back, her dark skin crinkling as she gave me a kind smile. *"They'll give you five hundred heart attacks before they graduate, but you got this, Mama."*

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There was no kind lady here now. And there was no sign of my missing friend.

"Nova!" I yelled it as loud as I could this time, spinning in a circle and praying she would miraculously pop out from somewhere. "You're scaring me!"

And Nova wouldn't do that. Not for real. Not for more than a brief *boo!* or a jokey jump scare. Because she cared about me too much.

My circles slowed as hot tears pricked the corners of my eyes. I didn't know what to do. Go back and look on the trail? Stay here?

I pulled out my phone, wiping dirt from the screen. The second I took in the upper right corner, I cursed. Still no bars.

I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood.

Swallowing, I ordered myself to think, to make a plan. I'd take one more trip out on the trail. If I didn't see her, I'd drive back into town. I knew we weren't on federal land, so I guessed there wouldn't be a ranger station, but maybe there was something similar.

I was starting back toward the trail when a flicker of color caught my eye—the pink and teal hues of a familiar water bottle. It was speckled with dirt, as if it had rolled or been thrown. A glimmer of the holographic butterfly sticker shone through the dirt, sparkling in the sun.

Nova's water bottle.

A lump caught in my throat, making it hard to breathe. I still managed to scream. I screamed Nova's name until I was hoarse, but she never answered.

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CHAPTER ONE

Braedyn

ONE YEAR LATER

My heart gave a stutter step, the kind that made me wonder if I'd developed a heart condition in the three hundred and seventy-two days Nova had been missing. Not one sign or sighting beyond things that were wishful thinking. So maybe it was a heart condition.

A *broken* heart.

My fingers tightened around the steering wheel as I fought against worst-case scenarios and nightmares that took root in my mind. I would not let the what-ifs win.

The used SUV I'd emptied my savings for had seen better days, but it hugged the road like a dream as the worn sign came into view: *Welcome to Starlight Grove.* The wood was weathered, but you could still make out the stars carved into its grain at the top and the ornate trees along either side.

It was rustic and charming, like the town itself. But all I could feel were nerves. My stomach gave a jolting rumble as my gaze flicked to my wrist and the pink-purple-and-teal friendship bracelet Nova had made me during one of her crafty phases. I hadn't taken it off in the

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three hundred and seventy-two days she'd been missing, and it was starting to fray in places.

There were times when the bracelet felt like one of those hourglasses filled with sand—a marker of what was left. And time was running out. Those final grains swirling around and around, threatening to tell me I was out of options. And Nova was out of time.

"I'm not an idiot, right?" I whispered to no one. Not to Owen, who had his headphones on, glued to a show on his tablet. Not to my sweet, mischievous dog, Yeti, whose nose was pressed to the glass, dying to smell all the new scents.

Nova had always been the recipient of all my questions and doubts. The one I talked through every problem with. But now. . . I didn't have a single soul. Not really.

As the road curved again, I sucked in breath but for a whole new reason. Mount Lupine sprang up over the fields and forests like a beacon guiding us home—to our new home, anyway.

Starlight Grove might hold shadows, but it also gleamed with unending beauty. Every corner you turned, there was something new to discover. Sagebrush and tall grass-filled meadows. Ponderosa pine- and spruce-packed forests. Countless bending rivers and streams. And that mountain as a backdrop to it all.

Yeti shoved her head between the front seats and licked my cheek at the sound of my intake of air. I couldn't help the soft laugh that bubbled out of me. "You ready, girl?"

She barked as if to say, *You've had my furry butt locked in this car for four hours. What do you think*?

Owen brushed his headphones off, and I heard the faint sounds of that robot show he loved emanating from them. He shoved his glasses-clad face through the opening between the seats, too.

A more full-bodied laugh left me at the sight of the two of them in my rearview mirror. Owen and Yeti had become besties since I brought her home from the shelter a little over a year ago. A mix of Labrador, Saint Bernard, coonhound, and pit bull, she carried traits of all four. But most importantly, she had the nose of the first three, making her an excellent search dog and a pretty dang good guard dog to boot.

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"Are we here?" Owen asked, bouncing in his seat as much as his seat belt would allow.

"Just about. What do you think?"

My eight-year-old cocked his head to the side, examining the landscape in front of him. "It's big."

My mouth curved, and I held on to the way it felt. The lingering tendrils of warmth from the laugh he and Yeti had created. After Nova went missing, I'd had to fake every laugh and smile for months. For Owen. So he wouldn't know the truth of what had happened. So he'd believe the story that Nova had been forced to return home to help her family. That she'd try to come back.

But one day, Owen had been painting on his activity table and accidentally exploded the blue paint all over his face. His glasses had blocked the worst of it from getting into his eyes, but he'd looked like a blue burglar.

I'd laughed for real for the first time and knew then that you could find humor amid pain, and joy amid agony. And I'd vowed to hold on to every sprinkle I could get.

"Mountains tend to be big, kiddo."

"I *knooooooow*, bruh," Owen said in that voice that was eight going on eighteen. The *bruh* thing was new. I hadn't been *Mommy* in years, but I'd hoped to hold on to *Mom* for a little longer. Now, I was *bro* or *bruh* more often than not.

"All right, *bruh*." I reached back and tickled his neck, making him squeal in a tone that was still 100 percent little boy. And I clung to that, too.

Yeti let out another bark and licked Owen, sensing some sort of game being played.

"Gross, Yeti! You're a slobberfest."

I chuckled as I made the turn into downtown Starlight Grove. I braced, waiting for the memories to hit—the handful I had of Nova and me here. The Grove Griddle, the diner where we'd had some incredible French toast. Barrel & Branch, the wine bar where we'd sampled local creations. The adorable little B&B where we'd stayed.

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But because I'd braced, the memories didn't hit as hard. They liked to surprise—a sucker punch of grief when you least expected it.

"It looks like one of those old movies you love," Owen remarked, taking in the downtown.

It did look like a set from an old Western, with not a single stoplight in sight, so opposite from our life in Oakland. But I guessed you didn't need lights when you went from a population of almost half a million to just over a thousand.

The downtown area's aesthetic was rustic with endless character—the kind of thing stores in urban areas paid a whole lot of money to look like. Sort of shabby chic. Some stuck with the Old West vibe, others had brick facades and antique glass windows. Still more had an old-farmhouse feel.

Planters adorned just about every storefront, erupting with color. The bakery had a sign that read: *Order your Fourth of July pies!* in artsy script. An aged wood building, so dark it was almost black, read *The Boot* and looked like an honest-to-goodness saloon. I spotted the bookstore, craft shop, and plenty of little tourist shops before my GPS told me we'd arrived.

I snagged an empty parking spot and marveled at the fact that there were no meters to pay. At least I'd be saving money there—*and* on the rental I was about to pick up the keys for. But I was also jobless.

My gig as an office manager at a tiny accounting firm had been about as exciting as watching paint dry, but at least the paycheck had been steady and they'd allowed me to work only the hours Owen was in school. I wasn't sure I'd be as lucky here.

But the Starlight Grove school system had an excellent rating, despite the town's small size. The articles I'd read praised it for being highly supported by the community, with a low student-to-teacher ratio. It also had what looked like an amazing after-school program if I needed it.

We'd make it work. I gripped the wheel a little harder as if to cement that promise to myself.

Turning off the engine, I twisted around in my seat. "How about you pack up your backpack with your tablet, headphones, and water bottle? I'm not sure how long the paperwork will take."

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Owen groaned. "More sitting."

He had a point. "Looks like there's a park down the block. Why

don't we walk Yeti first and get out the wiggles. Then, after we get the keys, burgers and milkshakes?"

I didn't tell him we'd also have to get groceries. That could wait until my boy had been fed. Just like Nova, you didn't want to mess with him when he was hangry.

"Chocolate milkshakes?" Owen asked, hedging.

I gave him a comically exasperated expression. "Do I look like an idiot? Of course, chocolate."

Owen started doing a shimmy shake in his seat, singing some made-up song resembling the cha-cha tune. "Cho-co-late shake, yeah! Cho-co-late shake, yeah!"

Much to my amusement, Yeti started copying Owen's shaking movements. A laugh forced its way out of me, and I held on to the warm vibrations. "All right, dance king. Pack up your bag so it's ready."

As he started what I knew would be at least a ten-minute process, I reached for my phone. There were no text messages. No missed calls.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Nova and I never went anywhere without checking in with each other half a dozen times. But I didn't have that anymore.

Shoving all those feelings down, I toggled over to my photo-sharing app and waited for the interface to load. The moment it did, I tapped my profile.

SearchingForSunrise.

The account was dedicated to Yeti and me and followed our journey since I'd brought her home from the shelter. I'd had guidance from an amazing woman up in Cedar Ridge, Washington, who was involved in training dogs for search-and-rescue operations. When I told her why I wanted to train a search dog, Maddie had helped me for free. That was just the kind of generous soul she was.

It hadn't been easy, but the training had given me a place to focus all my angry, sad, hopeless energy. And so had getting plugged into the missing-persons community.

Until a loved one went missing, you had no idea just how many people *disappeared* every single year. Over six hundred thousand in the United States alone. And so often, people weren't searched for.

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I knew damn well I was the only one looking for Nova.

The sheriff's department headquartered in Starlight Grove had put in a mixed effort. There were officers I could tell truly *cared*, and others who were phoning it in at best. The sheriff himself wasn't exactly my favorite person.

It had taken begging and pleading for them to involve Juniper County Search and Rescue two days after Nova's disappearance, but with a rainstorm that week, they hadn't found a thing. Neither had the state police when they joined the investigation. And Sheriff Miller certainly hadn't been thrilled with how often I called to check on the case. But the nail in the coffin had been his call to me a few weeks ago.

"Nova's case is cold, and I'm reassigning the officers on it. You have to stop grasping at straws and wasting taxpayer dollars when they could be spent on cases where they might actually do some good. There's nothing left to find. It's time for you to move on."

Sheriff Miller thought Nova had slipped and fallen into the river or been attacked by a wild animal, possibly one of the cougars who roamed the woods. But I *knew* in my bones that wasn't true. Just like I knew Nova was out there somewhere, waiting for me to find her.

A couple of the officers had gone above and beyond, two of them continuing to keep the case on their desks, but there wasn't much they could do when the sheriff wanted them focused on cases with real leads.

I fought the scowl that wanted to rise, inhaling deeply. If you hadn't gone through losing someone this way, you'd never understand the brutal blow that was *"There's nothing left to find."* And I refused to believe it.

I clicked on the image I'd uploaded before we left that morning: a shot of Yeti in the redwoods after a search exercise. I never posted places I'd been until after I left, and I never showed my face on the feed—safety precautions I'd learned from getting involved in the missing-persons community.

The caption of the image read: *Yeti loves new adventures.*

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There were about ninety-eight comments. A few familiar names of people I knew from the missing world.

TheGamerGirl13: *Yeti is the goodest girl! All the bones for you!*

PDustan88: *What did you have her searching for this time? I tried the sock exercise yesterday and it took Bingo three tries but he got it and his peanut butter reward.*

DogLuverX8: *What kind of pupper? I'm in love with that face.*

That drooly face, I thought to myself. As I caught the next comment, my blood chilled.

V.Fabes911: *New adventures, huh? I wonder where…*

It wasn't threatening. Not exactly. But I still clicked the profile. Private. No profile photo. Just like always. Every time, it was a different incarnation of Vincent Faber's name. It was like he got some sick pleasure out of my knowing that, even though he hadn't wanted us, he was still keeping tabs.

I hit *block* and locked my phone. He didn't get to steal this from me like he'd stolen so many other things. I wouldn't make my profile private to keep him out because he didn't get to keep me from the community I'd built. He didn't get to win.

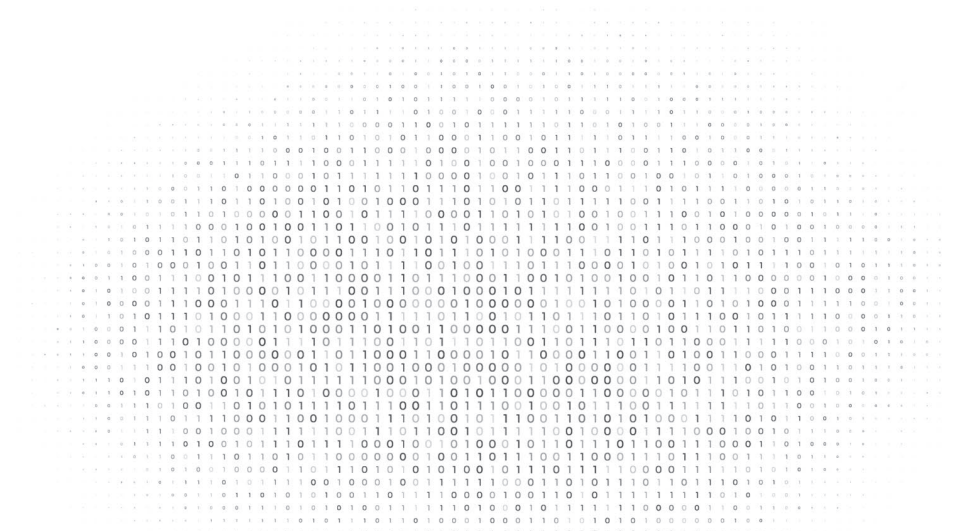
Vincent had been letting me know he'd been *watching* since the moment I left. Anonymous emails. Even texts until I changed my number. And now, this.

It wasn't exactly a shock. He'd always had a petulant side, the kind of personality that meant he just had to have the last word. When we started dating, I'd found it amusing, even adorable. But that was before I saw the other side of it.

I shoved all my anger and hurt down into the same cavern I kept my Nova emotions in. Locked away where they couldn't take over. Where they wouldn't affect me or Owen or the new life we were building. Because we were going to build something beautiful.

And I would find Nova. So she could share in the beauty with us.

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CHAPTER TWO

Dex

My SUV made the final turn into Starlight Grove as if on autopilot. Or maybe it was me who was. My hands moved with the kind of knowledge that came from years upon years of making the same turns, even after almost a decade away.

It wasn't that I never came back. I did. Made the visit at least three times a year. Sometimes more. Christmas. Anytime Great-Uncle Waylon had a follow-up scan after kicking cancer's ass. My niece Skylar's birthday as often as possible. And always Mom's birthday… or what would've been.

But there was always a cost. Coming back here, to a place where people knew exactly what my brothers and I had come from. Exactly *why* our great-uncle had taken us in.

The reactions varied: pity, disgust, fear. But there was *always* a reaction. I hadn't had to deal with it in DC—not in a city where I was practically invisible, just one of the many filing through the streets and metro stations. That anonymity had become a comforting blanket, and I'd just ripped it clean off by deciding to move back here.

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I eased my car to a stop as a woman I recognized stepped into the crosswalk. People never worried about cars coming to a stop for

them in Starlight Grove. There was blind trust around here, a belief that people would do the right thing.

Maisy Carmichael, one of the ladies who worked at the Yarn Barn, the local quilt and craft shop, slowed a fraction as her gaze met mine through my windshield. Her pale-green eyes widened, making the endless wrinkles on her face deepen.

Fear.

That was what those eyes held. It was as if she thought I'd gun the engine and run her down right then and there. Part of me didn't blame her. She knew whose blood ran through my veins. But another part of me *did* blame her—her and every other person who looked at my brothers and me with wary eyes.

Instead, I forced a smile I'd donned more times than I could count. The kind that said *I'm nothing like the monster who makes up half my DNA*. And then I waved. A little finger wave that was beyond ridiculous but made to tell her I was no one to fear.

Maisy sent me a tight smile and a nod, then scrambled the rest of the way across the street. I didn't think I'd seen the woman—who had to be deep into her eighties now—move that fast in years.

Guilt swamped me. I was an asshole. And that assholishness had been made worse by the fact that I'd just spent the past four days driving cross-country, sleeping in crappy motels, and drinking awful coffee, and I was pretty sure I'd pulled something in my back.

I wasn't sure how you could pull something in your back by doing nothing but sitting for forty-two-plus hours, but I'd managed it. Was this what it was like to get old? If it was, it sucked. And the fact that I was feeling the effects at thirty-one was concerning.

I waited until Maisy was deep onto the sidewalk before easing off the brake, but I couldn't stop my gaze from flicking over to her. A scowl twisted my lips when I saw a cell phone pressed to her ear, no doubt telling her sewing circle that all five Archer boys were back in Starlight Grove now.

As I forced my focus back onto the road, I had to slam on my brakes as a maroon SUV backed into the street, not a care in the world. I resisted the urge to lay on my horn. But the last thing I needed was

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Maisy telling the world I had a rage problem on top of all the rumors she was helping along.

I didn't—at least not that I ever let anyone see—because I did everything to combat it. I meditated. Had a gratitude practice. Did things to counterbalance all the evil my father had bled into the world.

The SUV kept right on backing up, and I realized it wasn't a fuck-you move; the woman likely couldn't see over the piles of suitcases and boxes in the back. I could only tell it was a woman by the flash of long, blond hair I saw as her head turned. Oblivious to me, she started down Mountain View Way on her way out of town, a dog shoving his or her massive head out the window.

"Tourists," I muttered. Always completely unaware of their surroundings unless stopping to take a selfie and bringing more crap with them than they'd ever need for a two-week vacation.

I cracked my neck and eased off the brake yet again. If I could make it to the ranch without getting into a wreck or biting someone's head off, it'd be a miracle. I needed a meal that didn't come from a vending machine or a fast-food drive-through, a cold beer, and a scalding-hot shower to scrub off the road. Not necessarily in that order.

But I still didn't let myself drive even three miles over the speed limit. Couldn't risk it. Not with my history. Not with my family's reputation.

Instead, I tried to take stock of all that had changed in downtown Starlight Grove since my last visit. My brother Wylder's bar, the Boot, looked damn good. He'd added some color in the form of flowers in water troughs out front, and they worked against the dark, almost-black stain of the wood building. Countless people were crowded into picnic tables around the diner, opting for the Grove Griddle's walk-up window in the deep May warmth. And the bookstore looked like it had gotten a facelift, too.

My brain stayed occupied until I reached the edge of town and could breathe a little more deeply. Luckily, my hands stayed on autopilot, taking me on the fifteen-minute drive out of town to the place that was more home than anything else I'd ever had. The estate I'd grown up on in Greenwich, Connecticut, sure as hell hadn't been home. I'd

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thought it was, but it had been a house of horrors. My apartment in DC had barely seen my face other than for me to grab fitful patches of sleep. And the only thing my college dorm room had been was the backdrop for my arrest by the FBI.

But Twisted Oak Ranch. That was home. The perfect fit for the misfit Archer brothers. And it all centered around the ramshackle house my great-uncle had built with his friends and added onto year after year. The house he'd been determined to build with a massive, living oak tree at the center of it.

The tree house. That was what my brothers and I called it. There was even a swing off one of the branches in the living room.

But it was more than the house itself. It was the land and all the things on it. Over a thousand acres with everything but what most people raised around here: cattle. Not Uncle Waylon. The only cows he had were those of the mini-Highland cow variety. He had alpacas, an extra shaggy breed of sheep, goats, and a small herd of yaks.

Even the land itself seemed to fit us. Rustic and wild, a little ragged around the edges. Fields and meadows punctuated by brambles and sagebrush, framed by endless forests with that staggering mountaintop in the distance.

Beauty and home.

My SUV slowed as I reached the gate, the rusted metal complete with Uncle Waylon's true love in the middle…a clock. And not just any clock. A Bigfoot clock.

A soft chuckle left my lips as I rolled down my window and punched in the gate code—the same one we'd had since we'd come here to live. It sure as hell wasn't secure to not change it in two decades, but every time I brought that up to Waylon, he said he'd never be able to remember a new one.

The gate swung open with a creak, and I eased my SUV over the familiar bumps of a cattle guard. Each vibration sent a spasm of pain through my back. *Damn.* I needed a soak in the hot springs on the property.

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I guided my vehicle around the bends in the bumpy-as-hell dirt road, cursing every divot and ridge. But finally, the tree house came

into view. Its sage-green siding almost matched the oak tree leaves that sprang out of the roof. How Waylon had managed to make that work without a leak of some sort was beyond me.

But then again, he had all sorts of mechanical tricks up his sleeve. And like a magician, he always refused to share his secrets.

Slowing to a stop, I cut the engine and climbed out of the SUV. I stretched and cracked my back, groaning with the movement.

"Uncle Dex!"

The two words had me searching out the source. Skylar ran at me full-out. Her blond hair flew behind her in a tangle of waves, the crown atop it sliding to one side. She wore a pink princess dress paired with cowboy boots covered in pink flowers and mud, and wielded a play sword.

I couldn't help the chuckle that left my lips as she launched herself into the air. I caught her with an *oomph* as pain flared in my back and my glasses nearly flew from my face. "Did you grow on me, Little Princess?"

"Duuuuuuh, I'm seven now," she shot back.

"Driving yet?"

Skylar sent me a sly smile. "Sometimes, on the tractor."

Oh Jesus. I bet Kol didn't have a clue about that one. My brother put the *over* in overprotective, especially when it came to his little girl.

"Damn it, she's fast," Maverick called on a wheeze as he ran around the side of the house.

I choked on a laugh as I took in the youngest of our bunch, adjusting my glasses. He wore a cowboy hat, a hot-pink feather boa, and held a shield and sword. Behind him charged a mini-Highland cow decked out in fairy wings.

"I thought hotshots were in better shape," I yelled back.

Mav flipped me off. "Smoke jumper now, you asshat."

"Swear jar!" Skylar chastised.

Mav scowled. "You're always getting me in trouble."

I arched a brow as I deposited Skylar back on her mud-caked boots. "Pretty sure you don't need my help in that department."

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Maverick did everything he could to live up to his name: reckless

to the bone and always searching for his next dose of adrenaline. Uncle Waylon blamed Maverick for his white hair.

Mav rolled his eyes. "The FBI really did make you boring as shit."

"Swear jar," Skylar singsonged again.

Without warning, I dove for my brother, trying to get him into a headlock and attempting a noogie at the same time.

Maverick instantly retaliated by thwacking me with his plastic sword as Skylar giggled.

"Shots fired on an unarmed man!" I accused.

An ear-splitting whistle pierced the air, which had Maverick and me releasing each other.

"Do I need to turn the hose on you two?"

I grimaced as I took in Uncle Waylon, clad in his favorite Carhartt overalls complete with a Bigfoot patch on the bib, work boots, and his worn ball cap that read *The truth is out there*.

Lucy, the sweetest Irish wolfhound known to man, ambled down the porch steps after him, making her way toward me.

"He started it," Mav complained.

I crouched low to give my old girl scratches. "There she is," I cooed.

"Mav," Waylon began, "you start shit nine times out of ten."

Skylar giggled. "Swear jar, Grampa Way Way."

She'd called him that from the moment she learned to talk. Because he was a grandfather to her in all the ways that mattered and the only grandparent she'd ever have.

A door slammed. "I ask you two to keep an eye on my daughter for two hours," Kol grumbled as he ambled away from his Forest Service truck.

Maverick clamped his hands over Skylar's ears. "Newsflash, buzzkill, she already knows more than a couple of four-letter words."

This was *not* the thing to say to Kol. You did not expose his daughter to anything that might harm her in any way, even if that was just a curse word.

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"Boy," Uncle Waylon warned in Mav's direction. "You wake up on the stupid side of the bed this morning?"

I pushed to my feet, dropping my hands from Lucy's scruff. "Pretty sure that's every morning."

Mav released Skylar to take a swipe at me that I dodged with a laugh, and I turned to Kol, pulling him into a back-slapping hug. "How the hell are you?"

"Language," Kol warned.

"Is *hell* really a bad word?" I asked.

"It's on the no-no list," Skylar helpfully informed me.

"Whoops," I muttered as I released Kol.

He clapped me on the shoulder. "It's good to have you back."

I took a second to really take Kol in. His dark scruff was thicker, edging on beard territory, and he was just as broad and tall as he'd always been, but it looked like he'd put on more muscle. With his job as an investigator for the Forest Service, he could resemble a lumberjack. But those hazel eyes, which leaned toward the dark side, were the same ones we all had—the ones we all hated. Because of what they reminded us of.

I shoved that thought down. "It's good to be back. Wylder and Orion around?"

"Wylder's at the bar like always," Maverick offered about our eldest brother.

"Orion?" I asked.

Mav and Kol shared a look, and my gut sank like a boulder in a lake. Orion hadn't been what I'd call *good* since the day our whole world imploded. But Orion's world had fractured more than the rest of ours because of the higher price he'd paid for our survival.

"He's been sticking to his place more than usual," Kol hedged.

All my brothers lived on ranch property except for me, while I'd been working for the FBI in their tech wing, what I lovingly referred to as *Hackers Anonymous*, and Wylder, who lived above his bar. But Orion's house, which he built with Waylon's help and moved into the second he turned eighteen, was as far from the rest of the residences as he could get.

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My jaw worked back and forth as worry set in. I'd be paying him

a visit before long. And his cantankerous ass *would* be talking to me, in whatever way Orion was willing to talk these days.

I cracked my neck. "I need to get over to the guest cabin, unload my stuff, and take the longest shower known to man."

Maverick eyed my back seat. "You mean unload your two duffel bags?"

"Hey," I shot back. "I also have three boxes."

"Let me guess," Mav continued. "Computer crap?"

I narrowed my eyes on my brother. "Do not demean Betty Lou."

"Who's Betty Lou?" Skylar piped up. "Did you get a kitty?"

Maverick snorted. "It's his nerdtastic computer."

"I'd watch your tone about Betty Lou, or I'll make sure you can't access a single bank account, social media profile, or email."

"Dexter," Uncle Waylon warned. "We have a deal."

"No hacking on your property," I grumbled.

"Speaking of this property," Kol interjected, "what guest cabin do you think you're staying in?"

I blinked back at my brother a few times. "The one and only guest cabin on the ranch."

Mav and Kol shared another look.

"What now?" I groaned.

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CHAPTER THREE

Dex

I stood in the open door of the guest cabin. That was as far as I could make it when every single inch of the small cabin was piled high with crap. Uncle Waylon wouldn't see the items as such, but I sure as hell did. Especially when it was between me and the shower I desperately needed.

Waylon scratched his thick beard. "I thought I cleaned this place out."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "You thought?"

"Well, I had it on a to-do list somewhere. I didn't see it, so I assumed I already did it."

"Pepper probably ate it," Maverick said, laughter in his voice.

I turned and scowled at him. "*You* probably fed it to that damn goat."

Mav held up both hands. "Whoa, grumpy much?"

"There are five hundred million clocks and clock parts between me and a hot shower, so yes, yes I am," I groused.

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"There's a buncha trail cams and Bigfoot calls in there, too," Waylon amended.

Of course there were. Clocks and Bigfoot, the true loves of Waylon's life.

Kol's lips twitched. "Take a drive by Blaze's. He might have a rental you can use."

"In the height of tourist season?" I challenged.

Kol just shrugged.

"You can stay in the main house with me," Waylon offered. "There's plenty of room."

There were also four dozen cuckoo clocks that went off every hour on the hour, all day and all night. I tried to fight the grimace rising to my mouth. "Thanks, Uncle Waylon, but I'll try Blaze first. It would be nice to have my own space while my place is getting built."

Waylon let out a huff. "Still don't know why you hired that fancy builder. Me, Blaze, and Zeke could've built it for you."

I was sure they could've—complete with eighty-seven clocks, thirteen secret passageways, twenty-two trapdoors, and a layout that made no sense to anyone but them. "You've got enough on your plate," I hedged.

Mav started laughing, and I sent a hard elbow back into his gut, which changed the laugh to a cough.

"All right. Well, I'm here if you need me," Waylon muttered.

I crossed to my great-uncle and pulled him into a hard hug. "You always are."

And it was true. When everything fell apart, not a single relative wanted to touch the Archer brothers with a ten-foot pole. No one but my dad's uncle, who might not have been a man of many words but was a man of swift action. He'd made us all rooms and set us up with school, sports if we wanted, and a local therapist. He'd given us a home.

Waylon thumped me on the back. "Love you."

"Love you, too," I said as I released him. "I'll be back after I see Blaze."

"Good luck," Kol said, lifting Skylar onto his hip.

"Bye, Uncle Dex," she said, waving. "When you come back, we can play dress-up war games."

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I let out a soft chuckle. Being raised by six men since her mom

had dropped her on Kol's doorstep as a baby, without him being aware of her existence, meant Skylar was the perfect blend of princess and commando.

"Can't wait, Little Princess," I called as I got into my SUV.

I made the drive back into town much faster than when I'd left it, almost breaking my three-miles-an-hour-over-the-speed-limit rule. But I was desperate. Downtown was more crowded now, and I eased off the brake and put on my blinker when I saw a station wagon with bikes on the back pull out.

But before I could snag the parking spot, a maroon SUV turned in from the opposite lane.

Seriously?

My back molars clamped down as I realized it was the same damn one as earlier. Half a dozen silent expletives left my lips as the dog shoved its head out the window, tongue lolling as if sticking it out at me.

Movement a block down caught my attention, and I bolted for the new space opening up. I slid in right on the heels of the sedan, not leaving anything to chance, and made my way to the brick building that housed Blaze's rental company.

I took the wooden stairs two at a time, praying that by some miracle, he'd have an opening. I'd take a cabin with an outhouse as long as I could set up my Wi-Fi.

The door was one of those wood-and-glass deals where the glass was rippled, so you couldn't see through. The lettering read *Amazin' Blazin' Rentals*. One corner of my mouth kicked up as I knocked.

There was a long pause and then an almost musical, "Come in."

I opened the door and stepped into the sun-filled office. The rays caught on suncatchers, crystals, and an endless array of house plants, including some with distinctly shaped leaves.

Blaze stared straight ahead, his head tilting to one side and then the other as he examined a pink crystal.

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"Blaze?" I asked cautiously.

His head slowly turned toward me, his long, gray hair tied back

in a braid by a rainbow bandana. "Dex. Heeeeey, Little Dude. Good to see you."

Blaze had gotten his nickname for his affinity for the recreational pursuit. But he looked a little more out of it than usual.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Totally." He grinned. "That friend of yours, Lolli, asked me to sample her new blend of the good stuff, but her homemade grows might be a little stronger than mine because I don't think you have pink hair in real life."

I tried not to laugh. Connecting him with one of my best friend's soon-to-be grandmothers might have been a mistake, given her penchant for brownies with a little something extra. "I do not have pink hair, but I am hoping you can perform a miracle."

"Talk to me, Little Dude."

Blaze had called my brothers and me *Little Dude* since we came to live with my great-uncle and continued to despite the fact that I was now six feet four and over two hundred pounds.

"Do you, by any chance in tourist hell, have a cabin I could rent? Even just for the summer?" I asked.

Blaze blinked a few times, moving slowly and then suddenly speeding up, jumping out of his chair and heading to a board of keys. "Miracles abound, Little Dude. Just gotta open your eyes to truly see them."

My lips twitched. "And to see the pink hair?"

Blaze grinned. "Pink's your color. A couple just canceled on one of the Creekside Cabins. They were gonna be here all summer."

Relief washed through me fast and fierce. I loved my family. Wanted to spend plenty of time with them. But I also needed my space—all of us Archer brothers did in our own ways.

I clapped Blaze on the shoulder. "You are my hero."

He sent me one of those lopsided grins. "I'm just happy as hell you're home. Waylon missed you."

Guilt pricked at me. Ever since I'd gotten arrested at twenty-one and was given an ultimatum by the FBI—come work for them or do the time for hacking into one of their servers—I hadn't been home

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much. My three-times-a-year trips had been shorter, and my stays distracted because my head was usually stuck in a case.

One for the FBI or one of the *others*—the ones my brothers and I worked in the quiet, anonymously trying to help where we could. I didn't need to be a profiler to understand why. We were doing penance for crimes that weren't ours.

"Little Dude?" Blaze pressed.

I blinked a few times, clearing away the ghosts—no, the demons. "I'm happy to be back, too."

"Good." Blaze's voice went a little dreamy again.

I shook my head and accepted the key. "How much do I owe you for first and last?"

He just waved me off. "I'll invoice you."

My brow about hit my hairline. "You using a computer now?"

"I got me one of those tablets. Granddaughter taught me."

Laughing, I shoved the key with the cabin number on the chain into my pocket. "Small miracles."

"They are *everywhere*, Little Dude."

I gave Blaze a wave as I headed out, moving down the stairs and into the sunshine. I started down the block toward my SUV, which was in a parking place much farther away, thanks to the spot-stealer.

Just as I hit the curb to step down, something hit me. Right on top of my head with a force that spoke of heat-seeking missiles or air-dropped bombs. It was a bomb, all right. As I felt the top of my head, my face screwed up in a scowl.

Bird poop.

More than half a dozen curses left my lips. But as a familiar face spotted me from down the block, a man who always looked at me and my brothers with wariness in his eyes, I shoved those curses down. Swallowed them like I did all the things I wanted to give voice to but didn't.

Instead, I climbed behind the wheel of my SUV, wiping away the worst of the bird crap with some fast-food napkins and water from the bottle in the cupholder. I ground my back molars the entire ten-minute drive to the cabins along Clover Creek. It wasn't until I saw

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that not another person was in sight near the three cabins along the winding water that I truly breathed.

But I still couldn't take in the beauty around me. All I could think about was a shower and some painkillers for the headache I was now rocking. I hauled the one duffel I'd need out of the back seat and started for the cabin's front door. They weren't fancy, but I knew Blaze had a crew that made sure they were clean. And he could handle any repairs.

Cabin Two was bigger than expected. Three bedrooms. Two baths. A living room and kitchen that flowed together. And a yard with an epic view of the creek, the fields, and the forest beyond.

But I only cared about the shower.

I went straight for the bathroom, dumping my bag; shucking my shoes, glasses, and clothes; and climbing into the spray. There were a couple mini-bottles of shampoo, and I washed my damn hair twice, rolling my neck under the stream and hoping it would unlock some of the knots.

Finally, the water started to turn lukewarm, and I forced myself to climb out of the antique-looking shower/tub combo. It sure as hell wasn't made for a man my size, but I made do.

A noise caught my attention as I rubbed the towel over my hair. Scraping. *Someone trying to pick a lock?*

Everything in me went on alert. I grabbed my glasses, shoving the frames onto my face as I glanced down at my open duffel and cursed. I wasn't usually this careless. I was always prepared because I knew better than anyone what could hide…in the day or dark, behind a warm smile or a sinister scowl.

It didn't matter that I hated guns—weapons of any kind, really. I'd become a master with all of them. But the small and varied arsenal I maintained was in a travel gun locker in the back of my goddamned SUV.

Hinges squeaked—the front door opening. There was no time to wait.

I wrapped the towel around my hips and stalked out of the bathroom and down the hall, only to come face-to-face with a woman whose golden-amber eyes had gone wide with shock.

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The expression appeared genuine, but I knew people could be good actors. The best.

Those wide doe eyes matched lips forming a perfect O of surprise. Her hair was pulled back into a high ponytail, and the long, wavy blond strands hung around her like some sort of teasing curtain. She wore cutoffs—the denim kind with threads that dangled and danced across tanned, toned thighs—and a tank top in a dusky pink that only heightened the sun-kissed quality of her skin.

And the shoes. They looked like they'd once been white high-top Chucks, but they'd been colored all over. And not by someone with a deft hand. I could just make out what appeared to be a cookie, a heart, and something that looked like a bear.

I took in every tempting, alluring inch of the woman—took in those facts and filed them away in less than ten seconds, knowing every single one of them could be a lie.

I let the scowl rise to my lips. "What the hell are you doing in my house?"

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CHAPTER FOUR

Braedyn

I hadn't been stunned silent many times in my life. When I accidentally broke a neighbor's window at age nine. When Vincent told me he didn't want anything to do with me or my child. When I finally held Owen in my arms. The first time I saw the Pacific Ocean.

And now.

This moment. As a man who looked like some cross between a professor and a biker with mountain-man height and shoulders prowled toward me.

I should've been scared. I told my brain as much. Said to reach for the pepper spray in my pocket. To call Yeti.

But I didn't. I was too busy ogling him.

It wasn't just his rugged beauty—though he had that in spades. It was something else. An energy that clung to him. The same kind infused into his skin by way of his tattoos. It wasn't as if he was covered from head to toe, but he had a healthy dose of ink.

Art that ghosted over his forearms and hands led to bare biceps and then gave way to a piece on his chest that stole my breath. I couldn't help but study the image that pulled taut over toned muscle.

A phoenix.

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My mouth went dry as the design on my own rib cage seemed to heat. The man's phoenix was surrounded by wisps of smoke and ash, and I swore the creature's eyes glowed as they burned into me.

"What the hell are you doing in my house?"

The barked words had me pulling back to the here and now, regaining some sense of sanity as I heard my little boy's laugh outside as he played with Yeti. Just because this man had a tattoo similar to mine didn't make him a friend.

But I wasn't the only one who heard the words spoken with an edge of anger. Yeti did, too. And she didn't appreciate them directed at her human.

As I pulled out the pepper spray, Yeti tore up the steps of the cabin and charged in front of me, letting loose a ferocious growl. She didn't attack the man, just stayed between him and me, but the surprise of it was enough to have him stumbling back a step—stumbling back and losing his towel.

The shock of the sequence of events was enough to have my jaw dropping right along with the terry cloth. And I suddenly didn't know where to look. I didn't want to take my eyes off him in case he made a move, but I couldn't look anywhere on his very toned body without flushing to the shade of a tomato.

The man swiped up the towel and covered himself as Yeti bared her teeth. He cursed, backing up another step as a new voice joined the chaos.

"Mom?" Owen asked.

Normally, I'd revel in the fact that my son had called me *Mom* instead of *bro* or *bruh*, but all I could think about was that this situation had just gotten so much worse.

"Why is there a shirtless dude in our new house?" he continued, completely unshaken.

I let out a strangled sound, clamped a hand over my son's eyes, and backed out of the doorway. "I'm not sure why there's a shirtless dude in our house." But it was better than the naked one from thirty seconds ago.

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The man let out a strangled sound as my dog growled low in her throat. "It's *my* house. Blaze rented it to me fifteen minutes ago."

Crap on a cracker.

When I picked up the keys, the landlord had seemed a little out of it. I really hoped he wasn't some scam artist. "He rented it to me two months ago, and I have a year's signed lease."

The man muttered another curse. "Can I move to get dressed and get my phone, or is your dog going to rip off an appendage I'm fond of?"

Owen giggled at that. "Yeti won't bite you. She's supes friendly."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," I hedged. "Better move quick or she could get hungry."

The man made a choking sound.

"*Viens ici*," I commanded Yeti. She slowly moved back to me.

The man tilted his head to the side. "French?"

I shrugged, not wanting to share my answers with him. "You'll want to get dressed."

I turned then, trusting Yeti to watch my back as I got Owen down the front steps and back toward the SUV. I nibbled on my lower lip, wondering if I should call the sheriff's department. I quickly dismissed that thought. The authorities in Starlight Grove already thought of me as a nuisance.

But I'd be a thorn in every single side if it meant they'd help me find Nova.

Owen tipped his head back. "That guy has glasses like me."

I brushed some blond strands away from his face as I tightened my grip on my pepper spray with my other hand. "He does."

Owen hated his glasses. Had hated them since some kids in his class were cruel about them. But he also always noticed when someone else wore them.

The screen door slammed against the frame, and I instantly braced. I whispered another command to Yeti, telling her to be on guard. She wouldn't make a move unless I asked, but she would also not let the man get anywhere near Owen and me. It was one of the things we'd worked on, along with the search-and-rescue training. And right now, I was damn glad I had.

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I lifted my gaze as I released my hold on Owen and shifted so I was another layer of protection. Even with as much as I'd been through, raising Owen as a single mom, I hadn't truly been suspicious of the world around me until Nova disappeared.

Everything changed in that single second. Afterward, I couldn't help but see everyone with an air of suspicion until they proved themselves trustworthy.

Now that the man was dressed, I could take in some other things about him. Sandy-brown hair that was drying with a wave to it. Dark-hazel eyes that held an edge to them, like a forest just before a storm. He was clad in jeans, a worn tee that read *The Boot*, and work boots. But it was the tortoiseshell glasses that had me curious. Everything about the man said he refused to be just one thing.

He was also clearly astute because he didn't miss how our little group aligned itself. The dog, then me, then my son. Something passed over those stormy eyes. *Pain?*

He stopped a good ten feet away, making sure we had plenty of space, and scrubbed a hand over his face. "Sorry about earlier. I just drove cross-country, found out I didn't have a place to stay, got shat on by a bird, and thought someone was breaking into my house."

A little tension bled out of me, and I eased my grip on the pepper spray. "Sounds like a no-good, very-bad day."

One corner of the man's mouth kicked up. "The absolute worst." Suddenly, his eyes narrowed on something behind me. "*You're* the worst. You're the one who stole my parking spot. You're the reason the damn bird pooped on me."

Owen giggled. "Harsh, Mom."

I glanced down at my son as he moved closer, before scowling at the man. "Excuse me, but I hardly think I control the sphincter muscles of our avian friends."

"Should've recognized the dog right off. He stuck his tongue out at me after you swiped the spot. Then I had no choice but to take the bird-poop spot."

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"You're not even making any sense. And *her* name is Yeti. And

she *is* capable of appendage ripping like you were afraid of, so I'd watch your tone."

The man moved as if to cover himself, wincing. "Adding insult to injury."

"You're the one who said I was the worst," I shot back.

"A bird *shat* on my head."

"Buck up, Buttercup. And if I'm the worst, you're the worstest."

His eyes narrowed on me at the word *buttercup*, clearly affronted.

"Sussy," Owen chimed in. "You both are."

"Sussy?" the man asked, brows pulling together.

I sighed. "Language of the youth."

"Prolly comes from suspect or suspicious. You can also say sus," Owen explained helpfully.

The man's mouth twitched in a movement so quick I wondered if I'd imagined it. "Understood. Well, I'm gonna call Blaze because he is the one who's actually sus."

I watched as he tapped something on the phone screen.

"Yeah. You rent the same cabin twice today, Blaze?"

I could hear muffled grumbling on the other end of the line.

The man pinched the bridge of his nose, shoving his glasses askew. "Yeah, it's a damn *oops*. I just scared the hell out of some woman and her kid. I was fu—" He eyed Owen. "I was freaking naked, Blaze."

Loud laughter boomed from the other side of the line.

He pulled the phone away from his ear and glared at it. "Not funny. I'm gonna report your stash of Lolli's brownies to the cops, then we'll see how much you're laughing." A pause. "Yeah, yeah, I know it's legal. I'm coming for the right key. Don't go anywhere."

He hung up without saying goodbye to the landlord.

I almost felt bad for Blaze if he had to come face-to-face with this cantankerous ass. He might be hot, but he was *grumpy* and slightly unhinged.

"Figure it out?" I asked hopefully.

The man shoved his phone into his pocket. "Gave me the wrong key. Looks like we're neighbors."

Oh shit.

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