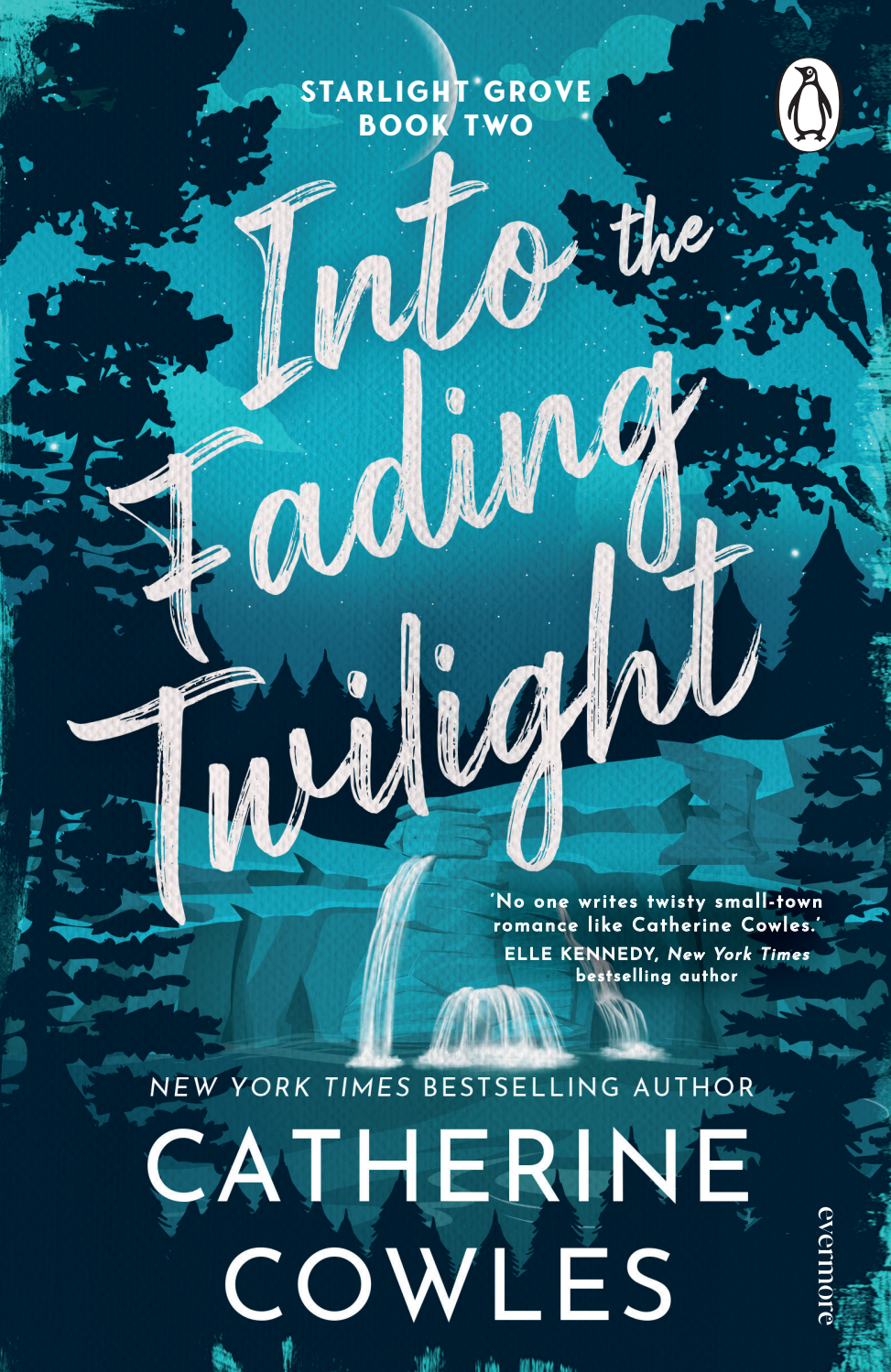
STARLIGHT GROVE
BOOK TWO

Into the Fading Twilight

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Sometimes you just need a hug. This book is for everyone looking for comfort, solace, peace, healing: may you find it in both likely and unlikely places—and consider this my hug to you in book form.

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PROLOGUE

Nova

Everything hurt. So much that I couldn't identify all the places the pain had made a home in me. And maybe that was for the best. The agony had become more of a dull ache because it was so ever-present.

My stomach cramped as if to call me a liar. Hunger. I could still feel that. But the food the man had left me was long gone now. Days ago. And the water . . . *Did I drink the last of that?*

I thought I had, but it was too much effort to roll over and see. Some part of me knew I needed to fight. To harness that spirit within me—the one that had carried me through the days and nights of fear and torture. But it felt like a ghost now.

I rolled to my back on the forest floor, the chain clanging with the movement—the same chain I'd carried with me for countless days and nights. They hadn't started out immeasurable, though. At first, I'd been meticulous about marking the moments, never losing sight of the time that had been stolen from me.

I'd memorized the tally of each dusk and dawn by the slivers of light around my prison door, the count branded on my bones. But I'd stopped at some point. I thought it was at three hundred and

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twelve—the number that had beaten me. Maybe because it was so close to a year, and that fact had been too difficult to bear.

We'd passed the year mark now, for sure. And my captor bringing me out to the woods and leaving me chained to a tree wasn't exactly a good sign.

He'd left me before, but it was always in the underground cell. It was a hell of a mindfuck when you started wishing for the person who'd stolen everything from you to appear again—when the master of your pain was who you hoped to see.

Then he'd show up, and I'd swallow those words whole. His torment wasn't always physical, though he did like to use his fists. But where he really shined was in the emotional. Letting me know all the ways everyone had moved on without me. My friends. My family—not that they'd ever cared.

His manipulations were his true weapons—the kind of manipulations that made you want to give up.

I squeezed my eyes closed, trying to force the memories from my mind. I thought about my best friend, Brae, and her son, who was like a nephew to me. I tried to imagine Owen a year older now. What teeth had he lost? What color were his new glasses?

I held the last images I had of them in my mind as my eyelids fluttered open. The light hurt after all my time in the dark, but I stared up through the tree branches. Little particles of light twinkled and danced in the twilight like they were floating on air.

Or were those snowflakes? Was it snowing?

My mind struggled to process that. It didn't seem right. I was hot. My skin felt like it had been fried and burned. But those looked like snowflakes. All around. Like I was in a snow globe.

A sound pierced my ears, and I tried to lift my head but couldn't quite make it happen. Everything was too heavy, which was probably a good thing. I didn't want to see the man again. I didn't want to hear his cruel words or feel his fingers tightening around my neck as he squeezed.

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A twig snapped. I heard footsteps.

Maybe it was a bear. Part of me hoped it was, that this would all be over.

Snowflake lights danced around me. *Beautiful.* It would be a beautiful way to go.

A curse sounded, and the footsteps quickened. And then a face filled my vision. Not the man. Someone else.

This was a man, too. But breathtaking. He didn't have hate in his dark-hazel eyes, even as they sparked with anger. His dark hair looked as if he'd run his fingers through it countless times. And his skin was the kind of golden color that spoke of many hours spent outdoors.

"Nova?"

The single word was deep. Gruff. Ragged.

And it was also my name. How long had it been since I'd heard it? The man didn't call me by my name. Maybe because he didn't consider me human.

But *this* man? He said my name. Said *Nova.* He knew who I was.

Another few curses slid from his mouth, but they somehow managed to be beautiful. Breathtaking, just like the man.

A backpack slid from his shoulders, and he pulled something from it. A device. He hit some buttons on it, then pressed it to his ear. A phone. But it had a long antenna, as if it were from the nineties or something.

A second later, he was barking orders. "I've got an injured female. Late twenties."

He pressed two fingers into the side of my neck. I wanted to thrash. *Not my neck.* But the pain didn't come. Just gentle pressure.

"Pulse is slow. She's critical." That dark-hazel gaze roamed over and past me. "Bring bolt cutters. She's chained to a goddamned tree."

He listed off a series of numbers, and my eyes started to flutter again. The snow that I knew *wasn't* snow danced now, and it really was stunning.

"Nova!"

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My name was a command, a demand for my presence.

My eyelids flipped open, and I took in the beauty above me.

"You stay with me, okay? Don't go to sleep. Help's on the way. You just stay with me."

Everything was heavy now. It was all too much. "Let go."

It was the first time I'd heard my voice in months. And the lack of use rang through in the two syllables. Like a door rusted closed now forced to open.

"What?" His voice was quieter. Softer.

"Let . . . me . . . go." It was what I needed. To finally be released. To go with the snowflakes. They would carry me away, and I would finally feel peace.

A hand slid through mine. "Nova. You're going to live, okay? You're alive. You're breathing. And you're going to fight for that. You've got so much to live for."

But I didn't feel that. I didn't feel it one bit. All I felt was pain. It was stronger now. And I couldn't bear it anymore.

He squeezed my hand. "Brae's been looking for you. She never gave up. Never stopped."

My best friend's name. The promise of her. The one person who'd stuck by me through thick and thin. It sparked something deep inside me.

The kind man gripped my hand even harder. "You're alive. You're breathing. Just keep breathing, Nova. Keep breathing."

Something about the desperation in his voice, the pleading there, made me want to fight. But it was too little too late. I was too far gone.

I slid under, but the snowflakes met me there. And they carried me, just like I knew they would.

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CHAPTER ONE

Nova

FOUR MONTHS LATER

The wind lifted my hair, swirling the dark-brown strands in front of my face as I stared out at the water below. Soon, it would be too cold for anyone to consider this endeavor sane. Who was I kidding? People *already* thought that ship had sailed when it came to me.

I'd heard the muttered *"crazy."* Or the tsking and *"Poor dear. She'll never be the same."*

They weren't wrong. I *wouldn't* be the same. But I was okay with that.

I eased out of my sneakers, tossed them down the cliff to the lakeshore below, and slipped out of my shorts and tee. I'd leave those up here. With my luck, they'd land in the water if I dropped them.

Taking a step forward, I inhaled deeply, the straps of my swimsuit cutting into my shoulders. The scents of pine and lake water swirled as I placed my palm directly over my heart, not opening my eyes. The steady beat against my hand was just another reassurance I desperately needed.

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Blood roared in my ears, and it felt like my muscles might tear

free of the skin encasing them. Everything was so loud: the voices, the concerns, the whispered worries.

"You're alive," I croaked. "You're breathing."

And then, I jumped.

I didn't look. My body had already memorized exactly what it needed to do: Hurl myself out over the rocks and wait for the miracle.

The wind whipped against my body, colder now that we were in late September. And then it hit. Pain and sheer pleasure all at once. The water smacked against my skin—the kind of slap that assured me I was most definitely alive.

The shock hit me like a freight train, but I welcomed it. I let my body go down, down, down, without trying to swim for the surface. Instead, I tipped my head back and stared up.

The water was a dark, blueish-green haze. The sun sparkled through the surface, and I watched it all—the way it felt like I'd watched so much during my *coming back,* being on the outside looking in. But unlike all those other moments, this was the one place the world went quiet.

My lungs burned, but I held on for one more moment, needing more of the silence. My chest raged, ribs squeezing painfully, and I finally kicked for the surface. It was harder. Everything was. I'd lost too much muscle and bone density while in captivity. But I'd gained fight. And I knew how to use it.

I broke the surface, sucking air into my lungs. It was pain and relief all at once, and I knew in that moment that I was still here. There was no doubt in my mind—no waking from a nightmare, wondering if I was dead or still locked away. I was alive, and I was breathing.

I took in a few more lungsful of air and then flipped to my back, floating. The sun was so bright that I had to shut my eyes. Something about the lack of light and vitamin D while I'd been locked away had injured my eyes. The doctor told me they'd likely heal with time, but for now, sunglasses were my best friend.

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Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. They could hide the things my eyes revealed.

I floated for a few more minutes until the cold seeped into my bones. I never let it fully set in. That brought snippets of memory: shivering on the thin mattress on the floor, the stale air.

I shoved those memories back down to where I'd locked them away.

There'd been nothing but sweet relief when I woke in the hospital, unable to remember the details of my capture or confinement. But the numbness hadn't lasted. I was starting to get brief snatches of things.

But based on the little information I had about my time in captivity, there was no way to know if they were truly my memories or something my imagination had conjured up. It was a hell of a thing, not being able to trust your own mind.

Flipping over to my stomach, I swam toward the shore. By the time I reached the beach, my muscles ached and my arms felt like they weighed a ton each. It didn't matter how hard I tried to ease myself back into working out or how diligently I followed the plan the nutritionist had laid out for me, the strength always seemed just out of reach.

"You're alive. You're breathing."

His voice—the one that always seemed to keep me going—echoed in my head. The voice of a man whose life had ended up inextricably linked to mine. Someone who had no idea that he drowned out the sound of my monsters.

I held on to those words. It was one thing my memory *hadn't* let go of during my seventy-two hours in a coma.

I could still hear those words as if Kol Archer were standing right next to me and making the command all over again.

Climbing out of the water, my skin pebbled as I headed up the beach. I didn't let the cold settle in as I slipped on my shoes. "You're alive."

I needed that reminder even more today.

I climbed the steep path to the top of the cliff in nothing but my bathing suit and sneakers. My limbs trembled with the effort, but I kept right on pushing. By the time I reached my clothes and the bike

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I'd snagged at a yard sale for fifteen bucks, my heart was hammering in my chest and my lungs ached.

Quickly drying off and pulling on my clothes, I reached for my sunglasses. Even with the sun not at its peak, I still did better with them on. Adjusting the frames, I jumped on my bike and headed for home.

Home.

That's what Brae wanted it to be. My best friend had worked so damn hard to make it that for me. A room painted a deep purple—one of my favorite colors. My old bedding, photos, and other belongings, my favorite candle.

But none of it . . . fit.

Or maybe *I* didn't fit. Because while a madman had kept me locked away, the rest of the world kept spinning.

Brae had started over here in Starlight Grove, and that had included falling in love. Dex Archer wasn't what I would've expected for my best friend, yet he was completely perfect for her. And I was over the moon that she and her son, Owen, had found the love they deserved.

Yet it made me feel like I was on the outside looking in. The third wheel—or technically fourth I guessed—throwing their routine into chaotic disarray. But I didn't know how to make it better.

I pulled my bike up to the three-bedroom cabin on Briarwood Lane. It was so incredibly different than the small house we'd rented several hours south of here, in Oakland, California. There were no honking horns or music drifting out of windows. No crowded streets with an array of shops for anything you might need.

But, God, it was beautiful here in Starlight Grove. The small town, a mere hour south of the Oregon border, held endless forests and meadows and a staggering mountain peak. The babbling sound of the meandering Clover Creek, which lay behind the cabin, was calming. And the air . . . I inhaled again, Kol's words echoing in my mind. *"You're breathing."*

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This air reminded me of that. No smog or trash. Just trees and freedom.

The screen door slapped against the frame, and my eyes flew open. I was thankful for my sunglasses because I knew I winced at the look on Brae's face as she stood on the front porch. Waiting. Worry creased her brow, but there was a hint of annoyance I could only place because we'd known each other for practically our entire lives.

From the preschool sandbox to now—and everything in between. When my family showed they were a complete waste of space, Brae made sure I was okay. She shared her lunch with me when my mom forgot to send one. She always invited me over after school so I had a safe place to do my homework. And she picked up the pieces every time my parents broke my damn heart.

So when she needed me, I hadn't even paused to think it through. The answer was always yes. I'd moved cross-country with her when she ended up pregnant at nineteen and the father proved he was a douche of epic proportions.

And we'd built Owen a beautiful home. I'd helped her with diaper changes and three-a.m. feedings. Had been there for his first steps and first words.

We were a family. But it suddenly felt like I no longer belonged.

"Hi," I said dumbly as I got off the bike and headed for the front path.

Brae's amber gaze swept over me, taking in my wet hair and damp clothes. "Swimming?"

That's all I'd told her about my sporadic disappearing acts: that I liked to go swimming. I knew it confused her because I'd never been one for the activity before, but she'd gone for it.

I nodded, forcing a smile. "Beautiful morning for it."

My so-called swimming trip had nothing to do with the sun or the morning and everything to do with the fact that I was starting a job after months of little contact with anyone but a handful of people. My nightmares and anxiety were raging like the creek after a thunderstorm.

Brae's mouth thinned into a tense line. "It's cold. I'm not sure it's good for you to be doing it so late in the year. There's a YMCA a couple of towns over. I could drive you and—"

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"That's okay," I said quickly. "I'm not cold."

The goose bumps on my skin said my words weren't exactly truthful.

"I just don't want you to get sick. You're still getting your strength back," Brae argued.

I tried not to recoil at her words, but it was as if she'd reached out and slapped me. I didn't need the reminder of how far I'd come, how far I still had to go, or how precarious the doctor warned me things could be for a while.

"I'm good," I ground out, sidestepping her and heading inside.

I hated myself for the frustration I felt, directed at the one person who *truly* loved me. The one who'd never given up on me.

When my parents and brother found out that I'd gone missing, they hadn't done anything. I'd learned later that they hadn't even bothered to leave Rhode Island to come out to California. They hadn't called for updates on my case. They hadn't even reached out when I turned up alive.

But they *had* taken $10,000 to do an interview on a prime-time news special.

The sound of Owen's happy voice drifted through the cabin. "More cookies in the batter, Dex!"

A low, rumbling laugh sounded. "Any more cookies and you're going to turn into the Cookie Monster."

Tipping my sunglasses to the top of my head, I made my way into the kitchen and toward those joyful sounds. Though I often felt like I was on the outside looking in, but it helped to know that the people I loved most had found happiness.

Owen beamed over at Dex from his spot atop a stool, where he was helping with some sort of cooking project. "I'm down with being a cookie monster."

Dex's gaze flicked to me from behind his tortoiseshell-framed glasses. It didn't stay long, but I knew he registered everything about me in those brief moments, from my wet hair to the dark circles under my eyes. "Morning, Nova."

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I forced a smile again and hated myself for it a little more. Dex

had been nothing but nice to me. *More* than nice. He'd been kind and understanding. He never got too close—always gave me a wide berth. He'd welcomed me into the house he shared with Brae without a thought. And he eased Brae as much as possible, given the situation.

It wasn't just him, either. It was his whole family. The Archer brothers and their great-uncle, Waylon, had pitched in more than was expected. One brother in particular.

Kol.

The second eldest of the bunch had been the one to find me that day. The one I'd learned had kept looking, even though every law enforcement officer thought I was dead. He'd kept searching because something hadn't sat right with him. *He'd* been the one to save me—in more ways than one.

"Morning," I finally forced out. My voice still sounded a bit rusty, as if I'd taken up smoking while being held captive.

Owen grinned at me. "Supernova. We're making cookies and cream strawberry pancakes. They're my favorite! Have you ever had them before?"

My smile came a little easier then, felt a little more *real*. It always did with Owen. Because he was the coolest kid around. "I haven't, but—"

"I've got a green smoothie and scrambled eggs for you," Brae hurried to say as she moved around me in the kitchen, careful not to come close to touching me.

No one ever touched me now.

My mouth pursed as I tried to hold back the words I wanted to spew. Instead, I simply said, "I think I'll do the pancakes." My gaze flicked to Dex. "If there's enough."

He shot me a grin, even if it was a little strained. "There's a mountain here. I'd love some help demolishing them."

"But the doctor said you should focus on nutrient-rich foods and nothing too heavy—o"

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"Hellion," Dex said softly, giving my best friend a gentle-yet-pointed look.

A muscle fluttered in Brae's cheek. "I just want her to follow the doctor's instructions and get back to full strength. A green smoothie and scrambled eggs are healthier options, and—"

"Strawberries are super healthy," Owen pointed out helpfully.

I'd made the mistake of letting Brae stay during my final doctor's visit at the rehabilitation center. She'd taken notes like she was about to be grilled on every piece of information. Now, she wouldn't let me bend a single guideline. So much so that I'd even taken to hiding my favorite wild berry Skittles in my bedroom.

"B," I said quietly. "I can handle my meals. And I don't think having pancakes is going to send me hurtling backward."

"But—"

"Pancake party, it is," Dex said, cutting Brae off again.

She sent him a look that had more guilt swirling inside me. The last thing I needed was the weight of knowing I was putting a strain on my best friend's relationship.

Owen started sing-chanting, "pancake party," over and over.

"I'm just gonna shower real quick." I turned and hustled out of the kitchen before Brae could ask if I needed help.

I knew she meant well, but the constant micromanaging was stifling. Some days, it felt like there wasn't a single moment when there wasn't eyes on me, no time when I didn't have to keep my guard up.

Except when I went flying. When the adrenaline poured through my system and the freezing-cold water reminded me that I could breathe. That I was alive. Just like Kol's words promised.

Slipping into my bedroom, I closed the door behind me and tried to settle. It didn't work. I could hear Dex's and Brae's muted words in the other room, feel the strain in them. The walls seemed like they were closing in on me. All the belongings that had once been mine but now felt like a stranger's were strangling me.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to let loose one so loud it would tear down the forest and break the sound barrier. But I didn't.

I swallowed it all down and just leaned against the door.

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A flash of something flared in my mind: hands around my

throat. Squeezing. Cutting off my air. Making dark spots dance in front of my vision.

"No one's even looking for you. You're so forgettable, they don't even care."

A wave of dizziness swept through me as I struggled to keep my balance. I couldn't breathe. Everything was too tight. Too close.

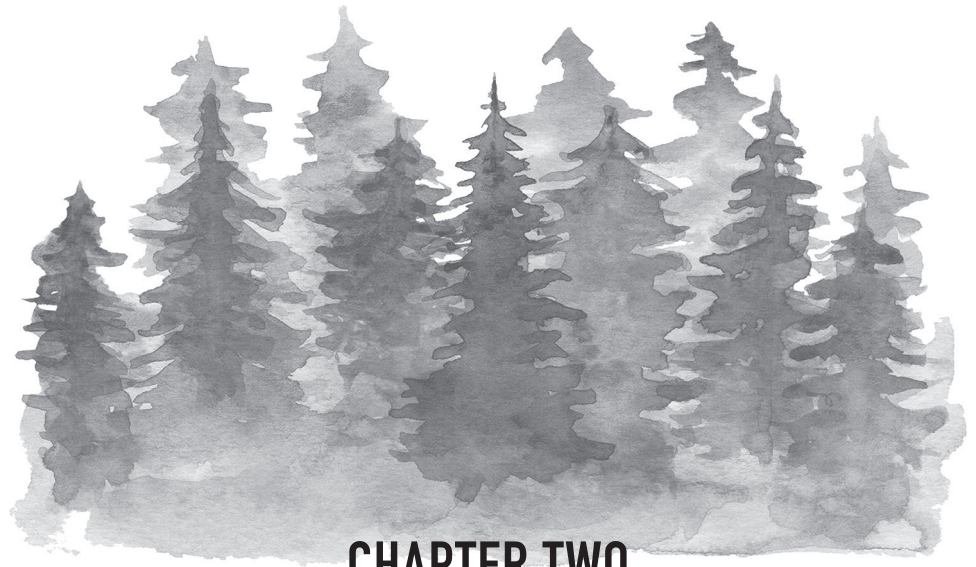
I tore at my clothes, but they stuck to my skin, the wet material feeling like suffocating cement. I clawed, nails raking over my flesh until the T-shirt slapped against the wood floor. I fitfully yanked at my bathing suit top. The straps and ties were too complicated for my brain to process, so I tore at it until something snapped and it fell to the floor.

My chest heaved, breaths coming in short pants as everything burned. "You're . . . breathing . . . you're . . . alive . . ."

But I didn't believe the words this time. They didn't feel true.

The only thing I could feel was those hands around my throat. I just didn't know if it was a nightmare or a memory. But maybe it didn't matter. Because some days, it felt like I was walking through a living nightmare anyway.

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CHAPTER TWO

Kol

"Are we ready to rock?" I asked, looking down at my daughter, who always kept me on my toes. Especially when it came to her attire.

Skylar hadn't disappointed this time. She wore a plastic tiara, complete with pink and purple gemstones, paired with tactical goggles, making her blond hair stick out in a haphazard array. She had a magenta feather boa over her camo shirt that read: *Don't Mess with Me, I've Got Uncles*. And she did. Four, to be exact. And any one of them would do anything to keep her from harm.

She'd completed the outfit with a purple tutu and combat boots. Equal parts princess and warrior. And 100 percent Skylar.

She lowered the goggles over her eyes. "Let's smash some stuff."

I swallowed back a chuckle. "I hate to break it to you, Little Princess, but we are past the smashing phase and into the rebuilding one."

"Aw, man," she complained.

This time, I couldn't hold back my laugh as I crouched to her level. "But look at all we've accomplished."

I scanned the garage attic, trying to see it through my girl's eyes.

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She'd helped me in fits and starts before getting bored and seeking entertainment with her besties: Tink, the mini-Highland cow, and Pepper, the goat. But I was damn proud of all we'd accomplished.

"It looks . . ." Skylar's nose scrunched. "Empty."

My mouth curved. "That means it's time to build it back up." And I had a specific vision in mind. Just in case.

Sky looked up at me with mischief in her eyes. "Do I get to use the big saw?"

I tried not to let my overprotective streak strangle my response. Letting out a breath, I studied my eight-year-old. "What are the rules?"

She instantly stood at attention. "Hands only where you say. Goggles on. Never use power tools with Uncle Mav."

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing at the last rule, even though it was probably the most important one, given my youngest brother's reckless nature. "All right, then. Let's do this."

I helped Skylar onto the stool where she could help me position the two-by-four. Her hands wouldn't be anywhere near the table saw blade, but she would still feel like she was a part of things. Empowering her with knowledge and skills that she could carry with her for the rest of her life was one of my favorite things.

"Let's chop it, Daddy!" she said gleefully.

Grinning, I started up the saw, and we began sliding the piece of wood across the table, perfectly in line with the mark I'd traced. The moment we made the cut, I flipped off the saw. Sky took one half, and I took the other.

Setting the piece on the floor, she flipped her boa over her shoulder. "Teamwork makes the dream work."

"Couldn't do it without you."

She beamed up at me. "That's because I'm the best helper around."

"That, you are."

And she proved it by helping for the next hour until she got bored. "Can I go play ninja warrior with Tink and Pepper now? I put in a hard day's work."

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I coughed to cover my laugh. "A *real* long one, huh?"

She blew out a breath. "The longest."

"Go play. I'll have an ice-cold chocolate milk waiting for you when you're done."

"Better make it a double."

That had me groaning. Having an uncle who owned a bar had its downsides.

But Skylar was already grabbing her Nerf gun and running down the stairs.

I knew the sounds by heart: her footsteps on the staircase, when they hit the final landing, the back door to the deck slamming.

A peal of laughter lit the air then, a different sort of noise—the kind I always loved to hear. I straightened to peer out one of the back windows. My natural inclination was to check on my daughter, but her laughter always called to me. I never knew what I'd find.

Tink, the mini-Highland cow, let out a bellowed moo and raced in a circle. Sky dropped into a roll, letting a Nerf dart fly at the target across the yard. It hit the center of the bull's-eye.

The roll itself hadn't been careful. She'd hit the ground with enough force to jar her tiny form, making me wince. I crossed to the window and leaned out of it. "Careful, Little Princess. Precious cargo, remember?"

Sky flipped up her tactical goggles. "Gotta roll with the bumps to get where you're going."

My eyes narrowed. "Says who?"

"Grampa Way Way."

Of course he had. My great-uncle, Waylon, was many wonderful things. The kind of generous that meant giving a home to five brothers whose world had been ripped apart in the worst possible way. The sort of protective that meant putting any townsperson in their place without a second thought for sending one of us Archers a side-eye. The type of caring that meant making sure all of us had the kind of support we needed as we healed.

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Even to this day, his home, Twisted Oak Ranch, was a refuge for most of us. Orion, Maverick, and I all had homes here. And

Dex was in the process of building his with Brae. The only holdout was Wylder, who had an apartment over his bar. But Waylon had truly given us all a place where we could simply be, without fear or prying eyes.

He was also reckless with a side of being a character and a half. And I constantly had to make sure he wasn't getting my daughter involved in something that could result in broken bones or an arrest record.

"Grampa Way Way also had you combing the woods for Bigfoot tracks for three hours yesterday. Maybe he's not the best person to be taking advice from."

Sky grinned, exposing a missing tooth that was just starting to grow back, and made some sort of *Star Trek* sign. "The truth is out there."

"You sound like Uncle Mav," I shot back.

"You mean she sounds like a *genius*," a new voice cut in, and I turned to find my youngest brother, Maverick, filling the entryway to the garage attic. We were just about the same height, hovering around six foot four, but Mav's form was slightly leaner than mine. It came from his hours working on wildfires and house fires alike—all that gear weighing him down day after day.

"Uncle Mav!" Skylar shouted from below. "Come play target practice with me and Tink."

Mav grinned as he joined me at the window, eyeing the target. "Sweet shot, Little Princess. I'll be down in a minute."

Sky gave him a salute and headed into another roll that made my spine ache.

Maverick shook his head. "You know, she scares me a little."

"She should," I grumbled. Though I was grateful for it in many ways. My girl could protect herself. Being raised by six men with no feminine influence to speak of meant that Skylar was a commando with a glittery twist. The blend was uniquely her. But I couldn't help but fear that I wasn't giving her something she needed.

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It was just one of the many worries that kept me up at night. What would happen when she got her period or had her first crush?

Would she feel comfortable talking to me about that sort of thing? Would she resent me if she ever found out why her mother had really dropped her on my doorstep and refused to be a part of either of our lives?

"Earth to Kol . . . are you having some sort of stroke?"

I snapped back to the here and now at Mav's voice. "Sorry. Spaced."

One corner of Mav's mouth lifted as his dark-hazel eyes—the ones we all shared—sparked with mischief. "I really hope you don't space while holding power tools."

I scowled in his direction. "Only with your hand in the path of the saw."

Maverick shook said hand as if he'd hit it. "Sky must get her ruthlessness from you."

My gut twisted. That's what her mother would've said.

"It should serve as a good reminder not to mess with me."

"Who says I'm here to mess with you?" Mav asked, affronted.

"Your general presence at any given time."

Maverick was always on the lookout for trouble. It usually came in the form of some adrenaline-inducing sport. Everything from BASE jumping to free climbing to skydiving. He was on a mission to live life to its fullest. Some part of me knew it was because he'd come so close to losing it. But I shoved that thought down. Because if I thought about how close Mav had come to dying, how close *all* my brothers had, I'd be forced to think about how I'd failed them all.

"I was coming to check on my big bro. Wanted to see what he's been locking himself away with during the *rare* moments he's not working these days," Maverick challenged.

I couldn't help but wince. I'd been logging some seriously long hours as of late. Ever since that day—the day I'd found Nova.

The image haunted my waking hours and the few sleeping ones I managed to grab. Her emaciated form *chained* to a goddamn tree. Her pleading words: *"Let me go."* They were etched in my mind forever.

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And all of it together was the reason I was working those long

hours after Sky went to bed. The monster who'd tortured Nova might've been dispatched to hell where he belonged, but that wasn't enough for me. I needed *all* the answers, to know everyone Travis Moore had hurt. Killed. Whether there were more victims we had yet to find.

I was just grateful that my role as a Forest Service investigator allowed me to stay on the case. The truth was that the nearest California State Police office was an hour away, which made it hard to have boots on the ground. And our Juniper County Sheriff's Department was in disarray after one of their officers had turned out to be a serial killer and their sheriff had been involved with an illegal drug operation. I'd become the best—and really, the only—option for continuing the investigation.

I sent Mav a pointed look. "You know why those hours are long."

"I'm just giving you shit," he said quickly. "You got anything new?"

He wasn't quite as invested as I was. No one could be. Not when I was the one who'd found her. I was the one who'd held her hand as she slipped into unconsciousness. The one who'd filled her lungs with air when they stopped working. No one could feel the weight of this case as much as I did.

But my brothers were trying to help. In the ways they always did. Ways that skirted the legalities of the system but were necessary to help those who had disappeared and been forgotten.

It was our way of atoning for crimes that had never been ours. Our way of helping to balance out the atrocities our father committed.

We never talked about the *why*. But that didn't mean we didn't understand it. We'd each come to terms with our trauma in our own way, dealing however we could. But this was the one thing we did together: Looking for people who'd been lost. Trying to bring closure for them and their loved ones—something our father's victims never got until it was far too late.

"I'm looking at a new unsolved case." I leaned the two-by-four against the bare drywall. "Missing hiker. Twenty-six. Similar look to Nova."

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Just saying the words had fury flaring back to life inside me. I could see her in my mind—the Nova she was today. She'd slowly been putting on weight, looking healthier. Her dark, nearly black hair gleamed when the sun hit it now. Her silver-gray eyes had a spark in them, reminding me just how much of a fighter she was.

"Shit," Mav muttered.

"Swear jar," I warned.

He rolled his eyes. "Sky can't hear me. And I hate to break it to you, but I'm pretty sure she's heard the word *shit* before."

I glared at my brother. "Just because she's heard it before doesn't mean she needs to memorize it."

"Yeah, yeah." Mav waved me off. "Missing hiker. You upload the deets to our app?"

The app was something our computer-genius brother, Dex, had designed. It was a place where we could organize our case files—and house all the tips about those cases. We called the app and the shadow organization the Hourglass Network.

"Not yet. I need to verify she's a possible."

Maverick nodded. "And, in the meantime, you . . . what? Became Bob the Builder?"

That glare was back on my face. "I like building stuff."

He arched a brow. "I mean, you made a mean playhouse for the little princess, but this is kind of next-level."

My gaze swept across the space over the garage. I'd brought it down to the studs and was building it back up, complete with larger windows and a skylight. Things that would make it feel open and the opposite of confining.

"I needed a project. It helps me think," I said, defending myself. And that was true. I just didn't want to think too much about what my other reasons might be.

"What are you going to use it for? Sky moving out?"

Just the reminder that my girl would indeed do that one day had my stomach lurching. "Don't say that shit."

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Mav barked out a laugh. "Dude, I can't wait until her first date. You're gonna stalk that kid."

A scowl twisted my lips. "She's not dating until she's twenty-five, at least."

His laughter only intensified. "Good luck with that. Your girl is adorable and funny as fuck. She's gonna be asked on a million dates before you know it."

Nausea rolled through me. "Take that back."

Mav just shook his head. "Prepare now."

I shot forward, trying to trap him in a headlock, but Maverick dodged my arm. He wasn't as successful when it came to my fist, which hit him in the kidney.

"Oh shit! That hurt, asshole." Mav hit me with a hook to the ribs.

I grabbed for his tee, trying to pull it over his head so it would blind him. "Don't talk about my daughter dating."

Maverick snort-laughed as the T-shirt covered his eyes. He twisted, trying to escape the offending fabric. "Fine, fine. Jesus. That's your trigger. I get it."

It and so many other things, for so many reasons. But that was the case for all of us.

Mav pulled his shirt back down as he straightened. "I was just stopping by to see if you heard that Nova got a job."

I bristled, every part of me going on alert. Nova was on a long road to recovery. Two weeks in the hospital. Three in a rehabilitation unit that worked on physical and occupational therapies. And now, outpatient treatment. "It's only been four months."

Maverick shrugged. "Dex said she's been dying to get back to some sense of normalcy."

I understood that: needing to find routine again. But this seemed a little quick.

"Wylder hired her at the Boot," Mav went on.

That had ice sliding through my veins. Our eldest brother owned a bar and grill in town. It was mostly safe, but in the later evening hours, things could occasionally get dicey. The idea of Nova in the midst of that didn't exactly sit right with me.

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"When?" I growled.

Mav's lips twitched. "She starts today."

I was already moving. "Watch Sky."

"Where're you going?" Mav called, as I snatched up my keys and headed for the door.

When I didn't answer, he shouted after me, "Tell Supernova I said hi."

I just flipped him off. "Do not let my kid jump off the hayloft or ride in the pasture with no tack, understood?"

"Who me? I would never."

The hell he wouldn't. But it was a risk I was willing to take because something had created a bond between Nova and me that day. And now, I couldn't handle the idea of her being at risk. Not being okay. I needed to check for myself—even if that made me reckless. Because getting involved with a victim of a case in any personal capacity? It broke every rule in the book.

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CHAPTER THREE

Nova

I FELT EYES ON ME. AGAIN.

I ignored the sensation. Even though it was like nails on a chalkboard. I stayed focused on the wind drifting in through the open window as Brae made the turn onto Mountain View Way, the street that would lead us directly into downtown Starlight Grove.

The main drag through town was aptly named because the moment we turned onto the street, Mount Lupine came into view, popping up in the distance. Snow already dotted its craggy peak, and the bracketing forests made it seem even more imposing.

But there was something about its beauty. The largeness of it. It reminded me that there were forces out there so much bigger than me.

I relished the realization that those forces ruled the world. They weren't good or evil; they were simply *life*. And life went on. Just like my breath did.

I felt eyes on me again, those nails scraping down the chalkboard.

"How are you feeling?" Brae asked as the sensation abated and she turned her gaze back to the road.

"Good." The answer came automatically, with zero check-in

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as to how I was *actually* feeling. An easy lie. Or maybe not. Though compared to what I'd been through, I *was* good.

Brae was quiet for a moment—the kind of silence that made me realize a chasm had erupted between me and my best friend. The one who used to know me better than anyone. Now, it felt like no one knew me . . . not even myself.

"Your eyes?" Brae pressed.

My sunglasses were firmly in place at the moment, but they still allowed me to take in the town around me. There were about twenty or so shops and restaurants in the downtown area. Starlight Grove was an old mining town that had made the switch to ranches when the gold dried up, but it still kept some of that Old-West aesthetic.

There was a mix of that western vibe, with aged brick buildings and ones that had an antique farmhouse feel. But all of it carried a clear sense of pride in the décor. Flowerpots and baskets. Some fall designs with leaves and pumpkins. Plenty of advertisements for town events.

The bookstore had a sign for an upcoming book club meeting. Several tourist shops advertised the homecoming football game. The bakery told folks that their s'mores pie was back.

"We should hit up the bakery after work," I said.

Brae's brow furrowed at my abrupt change of subject. "The bakery?"

"It says they have s'mores pie. I'm down for that."

Her mouth pursed, lines of disapproval etching themselves there. "Maybe."

Brae had transitioned from best friend to mother somewhere along the line, and I missed the hell out of my bestie. We'd worked summers at the same bar and grill in Rhode Island and had a blast. I wasn't sure I'd be able to say the same about working with her at the Boot. But I had to try.

"Or we could do boysenberry milkshakes at the Grove Griddle." There was a hint of desperation in my tone that had nothing to do with wanting to visit the town diner and everything to do with missing my partner in crime.

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Brae made a humming noise as she pulled into a parking lot behind the Boot. The building itself was a stunner. It was made of aged wood so dark that it was almost black, but that only made the flowers potted in water troughs pop all the more. And the swinging doors on the front made it look like an honest-to-goodness saloon.

Brae swung into an empty parking spot but didn't turn off the engine. I braced as she turned to face me. She reached out as if she was going to place a hand on my forearm, and my breath caught in my lungs. I wasn't sure if I wanted her to touch me or if I was terrified by the idea of it. But it didn't matter because as quickly as she reached out, she snatched her hand back.

It hurt.

Even knowing *why* she'd retreated, it still felt like a dagger to the ribs. Dex had let it slip that I'd screamed bloody murder when Brae tried to hug me in the hospital and hadn't stopped until they sedated me.

I had no memory of the incident. Not even a flicker. That time was spotty at best. And I wasn't sure what was the truth and what was my imagination. Just like my time in captivity.

Now, no one touched me.

It only added to the tally of how long it had been since I had felt any sort physical kindness: A pat on the back. Fingers woven through mine. A hug.

I missed it.

But I was too scared to ask for it all the same. Because what if I freaked out again? That would seriously hinder my *I'm totally fine and don't need to be sent back to therapy* story.

"Nova?"

I jolted in my seat. "Sorry. Space cadet city."

Brae frowned. I swore she'd donned that expression more in the four months I'd been back than during the rest of her life combined. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

The doubt etched into her face hurt just as much as her pulling back from the touch, but I just battled it with a smile. "Why wouldn't I be?"

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Brae only stared back at me.

The blank stare hurt, too. More evidence of the distance between us.

Shoving open the SUV's door, I stepped into the sunlight. It still felt decently warm for late in September, but there was the slightest bite to the air that hadn't been there even a week ago. "Come on, these tips aren't going to earn themselves."

Brae hurried out of the vehicle. "You know I can cover you."

I hated the annoyance that flickered deep. Brae couldn't cover me. But Dex could. And that somehow made it worse, that this person who barely knew me had been paying my way. Pity money.

Heap it onto the pity job his eldest brother, Wylder, was giving me, and I owed the Archer brothers big-time. The family might've had a reputation around town, but they were all generous to a fault. One more generous than all the rest. The one who had given me hope when all of mine had vanished.

I turned to face my best friend, trying like hell to make her *see*. "I *want* to work. I'm ready. And if I have to sit in that house one more day twiddling my thumbs, I'm going to lose it."

"You don't sit in the house. You disappear and don't tell anyone where you're going."

There was an edge to Brae's words that hadn't been there since my return. But I understood. My disappearing acts had to be triggering. But sometimes, I needed to *breathe*. And I couldn't do that at the cabin, surrounded by people who were constantly wondering if I was okay.

She reeled in her reaction. "I'm sorry. I—"

"Don't apologize," I said quickly. "I get it."

But I didn't tell her that I wouldn't do it again. Because I knew I would. It was the only thing holding me together at the moment. Instead, I headed toward the back door with a *Staff Only* sign above it.

As I walked, I tugged on the sleeves of my blouse, making sure they covered my wrists—skin littered with scars. Marks left behind from shackles. At least, that's what the doctor had told me.

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They ringed my wrists and ankles, evidence of what had

happened to me. Proof that it hadn't been a nightmare. But it was just one more reason for people to wonder if I was okay. So I hid them the best I could.

My fingers closed around the door handle, and I pulled hard. My biceps struggled with the effort, but the door gave way, and I stepped inside, holding it for Brae. Her face was a careful mask now, but I did my best to ignore it. Instead, I followed her down the dimly lit hall, passing a stockroom, an office, and two bathrooms before stepping into the bar and grill's main room.

I wasn't sure if Wylder had had a hand in the décor or if he'd inherited the place as it was, but if he *had* been a part of it, he had a gift. The large space had booths lining three walls and tables in the middle, all of which were made from dark, warm wood similar to that on the outside of the building.

The walls were dotted with local signs and posters on two sides, most of which had a vintage feel to them. Another wall was covered in license plates from all over the country. I even saw Hawaii represented. And finally, there was the bar. It was a stop-you-in-your-tracks piece of woodworking, a true art form, made all the more striking by the beautiful array of bottles lining the shelves behind it.

Music filtered out through the speakers and into the mostly empty space, a blend of country and rock that fit the patrons I assumed would be there. It was my first time inside, so I couldn't be completely sure, but it fit with the locals I was starting to get to know.

"Nova." A deep voice greeted me.

I turned to see the eldest Archer brother striding across the space. Wylder didn't exactly fit his name. There was a quiet steadiness to him. He certainly wasn't shy, but he also didn't speak unless he had something he truly considered worth saying.

But that didn't mean he wasn't paying attention. I'd learned over dozens of family dinners, movie nights, and other occasions that Wylder's brain worked faster than the rest of ours. It made connections many of us missed. I'd be sitting around a dinner table with him not saying a word, and then he'd come out of left field with a zinger that said he'd been following the whole convo.

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I grinned at him as he approached. "Hi. Thanks for hiring me."

"You don't have to keep thanking me," he grumbled as he ran a hand through his rumpled, dark hair.

My lips twitched. "I like to thank people for the nice things they do."

"I needed another waitress," Wylder argued.

"It's still nice that you let me be that waitress," I shot back.

"Yeah, yeah," he mumbled.

My brow arched. "Not one for thank-yous?"

A hand slapped down on Wylder's shoulder as a man in his mid-thirties appeared at his side. "Hates thank-yous and praise of any sort. But I'm going to thank him anyway." The man turned to Wylder. "Thank you for hiring this absolute bombshell of a babe, boss. Especially since Brae got engaged to your brother and broke my damn heart."

"Aidan . . ." Wylder warned.

But I couldn't help but laugh.

"At least you're still hot and single." Aidan's blue-green eyes danced as he winked at Wylder and then turned to me. "Nova, I'm Aidan. Let me be your guide to the Boot. I will set you on the path to big tips with as little work as possible."

Brae let out a choked sound of amusement. "What he means is, if you flirt with every human that enters the premises, your tips will be huge. Or you'll end up with a beer dumped on your head."

Aidan shook his head. "Come on now, B. You know I never get a drink dumped on me. My skills are too good for that."

"I don't know," Wylder argued. "That elderly lady tossed her sweet tea on you when you flirted with her granddaughter."

"And don't forget the couple that came down from Portland. Wasn't his name James? He did not appreciate you asking for his husband's number," Brae added.

Aidan winced. "I might've miscalculated there. I thought they were brothers, not married. I'm still trying to get the grenadine out of that tee."

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I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing again. "It's nice to meet you, Aidan. I'll be sure to take no dating advice from you."

"Oh, you should definitely take dating advice from me. Like letting me take you out dancing on Friday night—"

"Aidan," Wylder clipped. "What's the rule?"

Aidan scowled at his boss. "No dating anyone employed by the Boot or you."

Wylder let out a huff. "Correct." His gaze flicked to me. "I lost too many good people because of their broken hearts."

Aidan sighed. "Too handsome for my own good."

"You and Maverick need your egos examined," Brae muttered.

"Ain't that the truth?" a new voice cut in. The woman who entered our huddle looked to be in her early sixties, with ruddy cheeks and a warm smile. Her dark hair was threaded through with silver, and the lines around her green eyes said that warm smile appeared often.

Brae grinned back at her. "Fiona, meet my best friend, Nova. Nova, this is Fiona, part-time cook, part-time waitress."

"All-the-time keeper of these fools," Fiona amended. "Nice to meet you. Call me Fiona or Fee. I answer to both."

"Lovely to meet you, Fiona."

I expected her to move forward and extend a hand for a shake, but she didn't. Neither had Aidan nor Wylder. And I knew then that warnings had been given. No touching.

Embarrassment washed over me, the emotion tinged with shame. Like every person here had seen my deepest, darkest secrets—things that even I didn't understand. I suddenly felt a little nauseous.

Keep it together.

I chanted the words over and over. Because if I lost it now, Brae would lock me up in the cabin for sure. There'd be no job, no outings, and she'd drive me back to that damned therapist, who looked at me like I was a science experiment.

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You're alive. You're breathing.

I held on to that refrain like a lifeline.

"Where's Cora?" Brae asked.

The vibe in the group shifted, the air going charged at the name.

It was enough to bring me back to the here and now. Because I'd been bracing for this, too. Meeting the woman.

Wylder's gaze shifted slightly. "She might be running a little late. I'm sure—"

"I'm here," a new voice interjected—a little too brightly. "Sorry I'm late. I spilled coffee on myself and had to change and put my shirt in to soak, but it might be too late for that one." She sucked in air as she came to a stop outside our huddle, her green eyes coming to me.

I didn't miss the way Wylder took in everything about the woman as if checking for invisible injuries.

"Hi," Cora greeted, but the single syllable was more of a squeak than anything.

"Hi," I parroted. It was all I could get out as I surveyed her. Cora was probably around my age of twenty-seven, give or take a year or two. Her light-brown hair was pulled back into a loose braid, and while she wore light makeup, I could see the dark circles peeking out.

Lack of sleep. Something I knew well. And then I saw it, the emotion brewing in her eyes. The thing she was trying so desperately to cover with that warm smile.

Guilt.

Because my captor, my tormentor—the man who'd kidnapped and killed at least eight people—had been the love of her life. The one who'd gotten off on watching the loved ones of those missing persons fall apart. Used his role as an investigator with the sheriff's department to insert himself into every investigation so he could watch it all up close and personal. A monster.

But as I looked at the woman opposite me, I realized something. I wasn't the only survivor of Travis's reign of terror. Cora was, too. And just like me, she was trying to pick up the pieces.

That eased something in me, but at the same time, it broke my heart. Still, it made my smile turn more genuine. Because I wanted to reassure her somehow. "It's really nice to meet you."

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Breath left Cora's lungs in a visible exhale. Relief. "You too."

Wylder watched the exchange. "Well, now that everyone has met, let's get this show on the road. Nova, you'll shadow Brae for the first couple of hours, and then you should be able to start taking tables on your own. I'll be behind the bar if anyone needs me."

"Aw, man," Aidan muttered. "I wanted Nova to shadow me."

"I want her to learn *good* work habits," Wylder shot back.

Aidan just shook his head. "Harsh, boss man. Harsh."

Cora chuckled, the sound a little rusty but like she was trying to find the light around her. I understood that, too.

I followed Brae to a cabinet behind the bar, where we stashed our belongings. As I secured my sunglasses case in my purse, I hoped my eyes would hold up okay. The bar wasn't overly bright, but I'd never gone more than a few hours without giving my eyes a break.

Because I was used to living in the dark. And I couldn't go even a few hours without a reminder of that.

Straightening, I steeled my spine and followed Brae to unlock the doors.

Today's crowd probably wouldn't be *that* huge—it was past the heart of tourist season in Starlight Grove. People mostly came to town for the outdoor activities: fishing, rafting, biking, rock climbing, hiking.

That's what had brought Brae and me here originally. A girls' weekend of eating, wine tasting, massages, and what was supposed to be a beautiful hike. One that had ended with Travis Moore kidnapping me.

I shook off the reminder and followed Brae around as she started her duties, getting a few folks seated and starting drink orders. After we dropped off two Cokes to a couple of tourists, we headed to a table of what looked like locals: two women who appeared to be in their eighties, assessing me with a single-minded focus.

"Good afternoon, ladies. How are you doing?" Brae greeted.

One of the women wore a shirt that read *Knitting So I Don't Stab Someone*. She set her menu down and grinned at Brae. "Just lovely now that things are cooler. How are you, dear?"

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"Just fine, Miss Patricia. This is my friend, Nova. She's shadowing me today to learn the ropes," Brae informed her.

The second woman's eyes narrowed on me—not in a mean way but in an assessing one. "Nova? Are you the girl that—?"

"Maisy," Patricia hissed.

Maisy let out a huff. "I'm just surprised she'd want to work *here*. That's all."

What the heck did that mean? She didn't think I'd want to work in a bar? I guessed it made sense. Maybe she thought I needed to work in a library or at an accounting office. Somewhere quiet, where I wouldn't startle. I'd have to get used to people making assumptions about my recovery.

Brae's mouth thinned into a hard line. "Can I get either of you something to drink while you're looking at the menu?"

Patricia's cheeks reddened, clearly embarrassed by her friend. "I'd love an Arnold Palmer. Thank you, Brae."

Maisy clearly gave zero fucks and simply tapped her fingers on the table as she stared at me. "I'll take a Coke. Glad you're okay, Nova. That must've been quite an ordeal—"

"All right, then," Brae cut in. "We'll get those right out to you."

I followed Brae toward the bar.

"This is exactly what I was afraid of," she mumbled. "People are going to hound you the second they find out who you are."

"Maybe I should come up with a fake name. I always thought I'd make a good Sharleen."

"It's not funny," Brae spat.

I shrugged. "People are curious. I get it. I probably would be, too. I know how to dodge folks if I need to."

"Good luck with Miss Maisy," Brae grumbled.

"I can handle her. Let me prove it." I moved to the waitstaff end of the bar and gave Wylder the ladies' drink orders. He filled them in a matter of seconds, and then I was off to the table.

"Here you go, ladies," I said, depositing their glasses. "Do you know what you'd like to order?"

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Maisy's gaze roamed over me. "How long have you been out of the hospital?"

She was bold, I'd give her that. "I can tell you one thing: The food here is a heck of a lot better than what they serve there. I especially recommend the bacon cheeseburger."

Patricia's lips twitched, knowing exactly what I was doing. "You know, that sounds perfect. I'll do the bacon cheeseburger, medium, and sweet potato fries."

"You got it. Miss Maisy?"

The second woman let out a huff of annoyance. "I'll do the chicken bacon ranch salad and curly fries."

"Coming right up," I said, taking their menus and heading to put in the order.

Brae watched me as I moved. I just had to hope that, with time, she'd trust that I could handle this—and that I wouldn't turn out to be a liar.



Everything hurt. It had only been three hours, and my entire body felt like I'd run a marathon. I was happy as hell that I'd opted for sneakers, but my feet still felt like they'd taken a pounding. My lower back. My arms. My head. My eyes. Everything throbbed.

But I wasn't even close to being done for the day, and I wasn't about to let anyone know I was dying.

Cora had been keeping her distance, but I didn't miss how her gaze flicked to me every so often. Checking in? Or maybe just wanting to know more about the woman her fiancé had held captive for over a year. But now, she finally crossed my way.

"Insoles."

My brows drew together. "What?"

"Insoles for your shoes. They save my back. I can show you the ones I order when we're done with our shift or things quiet down."

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Things had been surprisingly busy. But after an hour of working with Brae, I had been ready to go out on my own. And that was a relief and a half—just like this small act of kindness was.

"Thank you," I said, giving Cora a small smile. "You're a lifesaver."

Something flickered in her expression. Pain, I realized. I wanted to kick myself for my choice of words.

"Hey, babe," a voice called out.

I winced at the moniker. The table of three guys who were packing away some beers with their lunches was my least favorite table of the day.

"I'd better get that," I mumbled.

Cora nodded, turning back to her own table.

I straightened my shoulders and turned to the three guys who wore T-shirts for a landscaping company. The idea of them pounding beers and then operating heavy machinery didn't fill me with joy. But maybe they had a half day.

"What can I get you?" I asked the man who'd bellowed. They all had their food, and no one had an empty glass.

His gaze raked over me in a way that had me fighting a shiver. "I missed you, babe. You're leaving us hanging."

My back teeth ground together. "Well, here I am. Do you need a soda or a water?"

The man's friend snickered, not helping the situation.

"Shot of Jack," man number one demanded, leaning in closer. "Don't make me wait. I wouldn't want to miss you."

Miss you.

Those two words clanged around in my head, shaking something loose.

Hot breath on my face. Hands closing around my neck. Squeezing. "No one even misses you. They're not even looking. They don't care at all."

A wave of dizziness hit me, right along with the memory. Or was it something my imagination had conjured up? I had no idea. And that only made the disorientation worse.

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"Nova. Everything okay over here?" Wylder's deep voice cut into my spiral.