

LBRIS

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CATHERINE
COWLES



PENGUIN BOOKS



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.

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.

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."

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.

“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.”

“Loooooooooove 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.

“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

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.

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.*"

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.

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

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.

"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 knooooow, 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.

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."

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.

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.*

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