

THE GATHERING

By Kelley Armstrong

Prologue

Serena stood on the rock ledge twenty feet above the lake, belting out the Titanic song in a voice that brought tears to the eyes of everyone who heard it. Everyone except me.

“For God’s sake, Seri,” I said. “There’s no one around to hear you. Stop performing and dive already.”

Serena stuck out her tongue and shifted closer to the edge, toes wrapping around it. She bounced there, blond ponytail bobbing, cheeks puffing. Then she dove. It was, as usual, an Olympic-worthy effort, and she sliced into the water so smoothly that barely a ripple disrupted the glassy surface.

I walked out to the edge as she came back up, sleek as a seal.

“Your turn, Maya!” she yelled.

I flipped her the finger. She laughed and dove again.

Serena was the swimmer—captain of the championship school team. It’s not my thing, really. This was the part I liked, just sitting on the rock ledge, bare feet dangling, basking in the morning sun, smelling the tang of fall air, drinking in the perfect view, the crystal clear lake, the distant snow-capped mountains, the endless evergreen trees. I watched Serena swim to the middle of the lake. I squinted over at the path, looking for a familiar blond head. Daniel was supposed to join us.

Daniel and I had been friends since the summer I’d moved to Salmon Creek. Then, last year, there’d been a school dance where the girls were supposed to invite the guys, and Serena thought we should draw straws to see who asked Daniel. I liked Daniel, but not the way Serena did. I’d fixed the game so she’d win. They’d been together ever since.

As Serena swam back, I stood and stripped to my bra and panties, clothing dropping into the bushes below.

“Ooh la la,” she called. “Check out the new undies set. Did some amazing friend finally take pity and buy you grownup stuff?”

“Yes, and she’d better be right about them not going see-through when they get wet. Otherwise, when her boyfriend shows up, he’s going to see a lot more of me than she’d like.”

Serena laughed. “They’ll be fine. White is your color. Shows off your tan.”

I shook my head and plaited my long, black hair. I didn’t have a tan—not one caused by the sun anyway. I was Native. Navajo maybe, though I’d been adopted as a baby and my mother hadn’t been around to fill in any background forms.

I climbed the rocks, stopping at one overhanging the lake.

As I balanced on the edge, Serena called, “Hey, those low riders show off your birthmark. Did you ask your parents about getting that tattoo?”

My fingers dropped to the mark on my hip. It looked like a faded paw print, and I wanted to get it tattooed, so it’d show up better.

“Mom says maybe when I’m sixteen. Dad says maybe when I’m sixty.”

“He’ll come around.” She flipped onto her back and floated. “He always does. You should do it for your sixteenth birthday next year. We’ll get your mom to take us into Vancouver, make a weekend of it. I’ll get one, too. I want a nightingale, right over my boob, so when I get up on stage in my sexy dress, cut down to—”

She flailed suddenly. “Maya!”

She went under. Just disappeared. Like a hook had dragged her down.

I jumped into the water. I hit it wrong. Pain smacked me so hard I gasped. Water filled my mouth and my nose.

I swam out in a frantic dog paddle. I could see the rings where Serena had gone under. They seemed to get farther away with every clumsy stroke I took.

Finally, I was there. I treaded water and looked around.

“Serena?”

No answer.

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

I dove. When I went under, panic hit, like it always did, my gut telling me this was wrong, dangerous, get above water or I’d drown.

The normally clear water was brown, churned-up dirt swirling through it. I lifted my hand and kept lifting it until my fingers hit my nose. Still I couldn’t see them.

I shot up from the water.

“Help!” I shouted. “Someone! Please!”

I dove again, flailing, praying my hand or foot would brush Serena.

She’s been under too long.

No, she hadn’t. Serena could hold her breath forever. Last year, we’d timed her at a swim meet and she’d stayed under for five minutes before the coach ran over and made her stop.

I couldn’t hold mine even for a minute. I bobbed up again, gasping.

“Maya!”

I followed the shout to a figure on the shore. The sun glinted off the wet rocks and I blinked. Then I glimpsed blond wavy hair and a flash of tanned skin as Daniel yanked off his shirt.

“It’s Serena,” I shouted. “She went und—”

My kicking leg caught on something. I pulled away, but it tightened around my ankle. I went under, screaming. Water filled my mouth as it closed over my head.

I fought, kicking and twisting, trying to grab at whatever had me. My fingers brushed something soft, and my brain screamed “Serena!” I forgot my fight and tried to grab her, but I kept going under, deep and deeper until my feet hit the bottom. Then, whatever was wrapped around my ankle fell away.

I started shooting up through the murky water. But as soon as my feet left the lake bottom, I couldn’t tell where the surface was anymore. Everything was dark. My lungs burned. My head throbbed. I kept fighting my way up. Oh God, let it be *up*.

Finally I broke through the surface. I felt the sunlight and the slap of cool air, only to go back down again, gulping water. I pushed up and crashed through, but I couldn’t stay afloat, couldn’t seem to remember how to tread water. My body ached. Staying above the surface was such a struggle it was almost a relief when the water closed over my head, peaceful silence enveloping me.

I knew this was what drowning felt like from every lesson my parents had drilled into my head before letting me near the lake. Yet I had to struggle not to give in, had to force my arms and legs to keep churning water, just get my head back above—

Arms grabbed me. They seemed to be pulling me under and I struggled against them.

“Maya!” Daniel shouted. “It’s me.”

I didn’t care. I needed to stay above the water. Needed him to let go of me, leave me be, let me breathe. He gripped me tighter, one strong arm wrapped around me as he swam.

As my panic cleared, I remembered Serena. I shouted for Daniel to let me go, that I could make it to shore, just go back for Serena, please go back for Serena. But he didn’t listen, thought I was still panicking and just kept hauling me along until, finally, he heaved me onto a rock.

“Serena,” I gasped. “Get Serena.”

He hoisted himself up and scanned the shore and I realized he hadn't heard me before.

Oh God, he hadn't heard me.

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

His eyes widened. He twisted and dove back in. I huddled there, coughing and sputtering and squinting as he swam out. I watched him dive and come back up. Dive and come back up. Dive and come back up . . .

One

They dragged the lake that afternoon and found Serena's body. Her death was ruled an accidental drowning. No one knew how it happened, only that a healthy teenage girl, former captain of the swim team, had drowned. An undertow. A cramp. A freak panic attack. There were plenty of guesses, but no answers.

By the following fall, all that was left of Serena was a monument in the school yard. The town moved on. I didn't. Something had happened in that lake, something I couldn't explain. But I would. One day, I would.

Two

I stood under the cottonwood and glared up at the three-legged bobcat.

“I’m not getting you down. You’re stuck until I get back from school. Maybe that’ll teach you a lesson.”

Fitz twisted to lick his flank.

“Not even listening to me, are you? Why do I bother?”

“Same question I ask myself every day,” said a voice behind me. “It’s good training for parenthood.”

Dad walked down the porch steps. He was dressed in khakis and his Smokey the Bear hat.

“Ooh, big day in town for our park warden,” I said. “They’re even making you wear the uniform. Mrs. Morris will be happy. She thinks you look hot in it.”

Dad turned as red as his hair.

From inside the house, Mom’s laugh floated out. “Leave your father alone, Maya.”

“It’s true. Nicole heard her saying she loves a guy in uniform, and if Dad ever gets tired of you, her front door is open.” I glanced over at him. “But you have to wear the hat.”

Dad made unhealthy choking noises.

Mom only laughed again. “Thanks for the warning. Now get moving. You know what happens if you’re late. Daniel won’t stop. You have to catch him.”

“Which would be a much bigger threat if the roads were better or his truck was faster.”

A cold nose brushed my hand.

“Even Kenjii knows you’re running late,” Mom called. “Now move it.”

I waved toward her studio, then headed out. When I reached the end of the drive, I turned around.

“Dad? Can you—?”

“Check on the fledglings because you overslept again?”

“Um, right. Sorry.” I turned to walk backward. “Oh, and we’re going to Vancouver tomorrow for my big birthday tattoo, right?”

He shook his head and walked away.

“Oh, sure, walk away from the conversation,” I said. “How come I get in trouble when I do that?”

“You aren’t getting a tattoo tomorrow, Maya,” Mom said from her studio. “We’ll discuss it later. Now move your butt.”

Dad disappeared into the shed, where I keep wounded and orphaned animals he finds on the park grounds. I fix them up if I can or pass them on to a rehab facility if I can’t. They aren’t pets. Fitz is the only exception and I wouldn’t really call him a pet, just a former patient who sticks around for free food and protection from predators with all four of their limbs.

My only “pet” is Kenjii, a ten-year-old German shepherd that my parents bought when we moved to Salmon Creek and they decided a hundred-pound companion canine might be a wise idea for a girl who liked to roam forests filled with bears, cougars, and other critters that might mistake her for a nice light snack.

Would things have been different if I’d had Kenjii with me at the lake? Serena and I always left her behind because if we goofed off, she thought we were drowning and tried to pull us to safety. She might have saved Serena. I think about that a lot. I think about all of it a lot, everything I could have done differently, and six months of therapy hasn’t convinced me I’m wrong when I say I could have saved Serena.

Not the way I wanted to start my day, so I pushed the thoughts aside as we walked. It was a gorgeous fall morning, unusually dry for Vancouver Island. Massive hemlocks and cedars lined the rutted trail that passed for a road. Wind had the sun dancing through swaying branches, and Kenjii tore along the path, pouncing on sunspots. The cool, sharp breeze

helped chase away the last bits of sleep and helped clear my brain, too, perking it up with the scent of cedar and rich, dew-damp earth.

It was a quiet morning. It always is. No commuter traffic out here. We're the only family living in the park. It's a privately owned one. The whole town is on private land.

The St. Cloud Corporation bought the land a few years before I was born, and decided it was the perfect place for a research facility, so they built a town for their employees. Less than two hundred people live in Salmon Creek. Almost all of them get their paychecks from the St. Clouds. They live in houses owned by the St. Clouds. Their kids go to a private school owned by the St. Clouds. Weird, I know, but I'm not complaining, because surrounding the town is a thousand acres of the most beautiful wilderness you've ever seen, and that's where I call home.

When I was five, the St. Clouds lost their park warden and they went headhunting. They found my dad, who was a park ranger in Oregon at the time. My mom's Canadian though, from the Haida Nation in British Columbia. For her, it meant coming home. For Dad, it meant the job opportunity of a lifetime. For me, it meant growing up in the most amazing place on earth.

Living out here does have its challenges, though. Including transportation. Dad used to have to drive me to school every day, but now that Daniel has a truck, he picks me up at the park gates—he doesn't dare drive inside the park any more than necessary or the rust holding his pickup together is liable to shake loose.

The park is open to the public but, well, let's just say that although the St. Cloud company likes to give the appearance of being good corporate neighbors it doesn't exactly roll out the welcome mat to tourists. We get only the hardiest of campers and hikers, and this time of year—early October—it's a rare park visitor who isn't a local. So, when I heard a

woman screaming, my first thought was “Hmm, it’s a little late for mating season.” I heard a lot of those screams in the spring, when the cougars started hooking up.

Kenjii’s ears swiveled forward. She didn’t look terribly concerned, though, which should suggest it wasn’t a cougar. But with Kenjii, I couldn’t be sure. My parents bought me a big dog to protect me from the local big cats . . . and she had to be the only canine on the island that didn’t really mind them. Bears, wolves, badgers, bobcats, and even foxes send her into guard dog mode. But not cougars.

So as I carefully approached the gates and saw a huge tawny cat stretched out on a thick pine-tree branch, I wasn’t particularly surprised. I can’t say the same for the woman clinging to the branch over the cat. She was the one screaming. The cat—a ragged-eared old tom I called Marv—was just staring at her, like he couldn’t believe anyone would be dumb enough to climb a tree to escape a cat.

There’s nothing in this forest as gorgeous as a cougar—a sleek, muscular cat nearly twice the size of Kenjii with tawny fur, a white underbelly, a face edged in black, and light brown eyes with round pupils. They’re one of the most elusive big cats, too. But the woman screaming on the branch really wasn’t appreciating the moment.

Marv pulled back his lips and snarled, flashing canines as long as my fingers, which only made the woman shriek louder. I stepped into the clearing, staying well out of Marv’s pouncing range, waved my arms and shouted. Kenjii chimed in, her deep bark echoing through the forest.

The woman stopped screaming. Marv looked over at me and chirped, saying hello.

“Yeah, I’m talking to you, old guy,” I said. “Shoo! Scat! Get out of here!”

He gave me a look like I’d offended him and turned away. I shouted and waved some more, staying behind Kenjii. I’m not afraid of cougars, but I am suitably respectful of their ability to end my existence with one well-placed chomp.

As I yelled and Kenjii barked, another sound joined it—the rumble of a badly tuned motor. A honk. A welcoming shout out the window. Then a curse as Daniel saw why I wasn't waiting outside the gates to meet him. The brakes squeaked. The door slammed. Sneakers pounded the hard earth.

It was then that Marv decided it was time to go. Daniel has that effect on people. He's only about five ten, but he's been the provincial wrestling champion twice and it shows. Marv hopped to the ground, mustered his dignity and slid into the undergrowth.

Daniel shook his head as he watched the cat's tail disappear. "Haven't I told you not to play with the big kitties, Maya?"

"It was Marv."

"Again? What's that, the third time this month? I think he likes you."

"What can I say? I'm serious catnip."

The woman lowered herself to the ground. I got a better look at her now, enough to know I'd never seen her before. Early twenties maybe. Asian. Dressed in the kind of "rugged outdoor gear" you buy at the malls in Vancouver and really shouldn't wear anywhere wilder than that.

She stared at us. "The cat. It just . . . left."

"Um, yeah," I said. "Most times, they do. That's a male, meaning he doesn't have any cubs to protect. Plus there's plenty of food around. I'd still suggest you return the favor and steer clear."

I walked to the front gate, opened the pamphlet box, took out one on "Predator Safety" and handed it to her. Then I pulled my cell phone from my backpack.

"I've gotta call this in," I said. "My dad's the warden. All cougar encounters—"

The woman backed away. "I don't have time."

"That cat's been hanging around. It's a problem. You need to report—"

“I will. Later.”

She grabbed her gear and headed for the road.

“Walk in the middle,” I called. “Cats don’t like the open areas.”

She jogged off. Daniel hadn’t said a word to her, which was weird. Normally he’d be the first person giving her warnings and making sure she was safe. But he just stood there, staring after her, a strange look on his face.

“Yep, she’s kinda cute,” I said. “That’d be a whole different type of cougar but I say ‘go for it.’”

Now I got a look. Then he turned back to the woman, watching her, frowning.

“You know her?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. Just . . . something’s wrong with her.”

“Um, yeah. She climbed a tree to escape a cat. Suffering from a serious case of stupid.”

“No kidding.” He gave one last look her way, then waved me to the truck. “Just do me a favor, okay? If you see her again, be careful.”

I didn’t ask what he meant. Daniel does that sometimes—he meets someone and just decides he doesn’t like him. Like last winter, when Dr. Davidoff and his team flew in from the States for their annual visit, and Daniel just decided he really didn’t like a new guy Dr. Davidoff brought. Wouldn’t have anything to do with him.

Mom says that’s part of growing up in such a small town. You don’t trust strangers. But I say it’s just Daniel. Everyone has his quirks, and this is Daniel’s. Most times, though, he’s right. So when he says steer clear, I do.