

≡ PROLOGUE ≡

WAYLIN PITNEY WAS GONE. His white panel truck was no longer parked on the brow of the hill behind the old drive shed. *Good*, thought Cramer. Now maybe things would get back to normal.

He squinted in the light reflecting off the creek. He steadied his canoe, rubbed the back of his hands, torn with new scratches. He was tired from a long paddle upstream but in no hurry to disembark. He looked up again, up the dying hill, already in late-afternoon shadow. There'd been a frost that morning; the day had grown sunny and warm, but it would grow cold again. His mother didn't like the cold. She'd have hung on to Waylin, pleaded with him not to go. It would take Cramer a day or two to bring her down.

There were cockleburs on the sleeves of Cramer's shirt. He pulled them off, one by one, and threw them onto the

water. He looked up again, half expecting the truck to still be there. Cramer had dreamed it away so many times, he didn't trust his eyes.

Waylin's "people" had come weeks ago, emptied the vehicle, left it high on its springs. Cramer had watched from his window. There'd been a moon out that night, and the side of the panel truck had shone like an empty movie screen. Two anonymous vans, four shadowy characters, with Waylin smoking, a beer in his hand, giving directions, laughing now and then, as box after box was transferred, money changed hands, and the vans rumbled off into the dark.

Waylin had stayed another week—longer than usual. Cramer had worried he might stay for good this time. But it wouldn't be good, no matter what his mother might like to think. Cramer let her believe what she needed to believe. That's the way you did it. Kept your thoughts to yourself, kept things steady. Kept the shaky boat from tipping.

The truck was gone. And Cramer was pleased but wary.

When Waylin came around, Mavis was happy—her sugar back from the mines, she liked to say. When Waylin came around, there was rock 'n' roll till all hours, cases of Molson Canadian piling up by the door, and that fool jacket of his hanging on the back of a chair. Red, white, and black, with the checkered-flag design and the Pennzoil logo on it as if he were some kind of race-car driver. When Waylin was around, he took over their old Taurus. Some race car.

Mavis would rub Cramer's shaved head and say things like, "Sonny boy, he thinks he can get you a job in the gold mines up there in Val-d'Or. What do you think of that?"

"Hell, yeah," Pitney would join in. "You'd do good in the mines." He'd look Cramer up and down out of the corner of his eye, with this sly smile, like he was checking out something he was planning to steal. "You been hitting the gym, kid? You pumping iron?"

Cramer had all the gym he needed in his bedroom. A bar fixed in his closet door frame, a bench, a few weights. Once, a couple years back, he'd taken a swing at Pitney. The man had grabbed his fist in midflight and whipped it behind his back so fast, Cramer lost his balance and fell over. Pitney hadn't stopped there. He'd pushed Cramer's arm up his back so high, Cramer had cried for mercy. He cried over and over before Pitney stopped. Yeah, Cramer had bulked up, big-time. And he was just dying for Pitney to try anything like that again. But he wasn't going down any mine shaft with him, all the same. He didn't trust the man. And besides, without Cramer looking after her, his mother would not survive. This was the only certainty he allowed himself. Men friends would come and go—there had been others before Waylin. But Cramer was steady as a rock.

Without Cramer, his mother would probably forget to eat. For sure she'd forget to sleep. She'd just paint all the time until her paints ran out. The thing was to keep her in paint and canvas. Keep the dream alive. Keep the Creativity

Pact with herself that she had signed and hung on the wall of her studio. It was something from the book *The Artist's Path*. "I am a creator. I am recovering my inner genius."

The recovery seemed to be taking a long, long time.

A breeze dimpled the water on Butchard's Creek, made the reeds by the bank quiver, bent the grasses on the hill. The canoe rocked gently under Cramer. He paddled into shore.

He stared up at the ramshackle cottage on the bluff, its yellow paint peeling, the roof sagging. His mother's studio window faced this way, the best view in the house. Now the window was full of sky and autumn clouds. He could not see her moving about inside.

He climbed from his canoe and hoisted her onto shore, lifting her by the thwarts and laying her carefully on the bank, his paddle tucked underneath. He took a deep breath and made his way up the hill on a path he had worn himself through the goldenrod and wild asters and spilling milkweed.

The screen door hung open.

He found Mavis on the floor of the studio slouched against a cabinet, her body limp, her left arm trailing on the floor, blood flowing from a deep and ragged cut across her palm.

"Framing a picture," she said. "Hand slipped. Honest. Honest."

Beside her on the floor lay wicked shards of glass, the edge of one of them glistening red as his canoe.

Cramer cleared the space around her with his foot and gripped her forearm to try to stanch the flow. Her face contorted in agony.

“Where’ve you been?” she whimpered. “Where’d you go to?”

He didn’t answer. Found an almost-clean rag on the counter amid her paint supplies.

She swore at him—called him heartless and a lot more—but he had a feeling the name-calling was meant for someone else. He went quietly about his business, made a bandage, pressing her thumb closed to hold it in place. He found another rag, tore it in two, and made a tourniquet.

“Can you stand?” he asked.

He helped her up. She was woozy, unsteady on her feet. He held her tight around the waist and elevated her injured left hand, resting it on his shoulder. She shook her head to get the blond-as-dead-daisies hair out of her face. She stared at him and managed a sad-eyed smile.

“My shining knight,” she said.

He lowered his mother into the passenger seat of the Taurus, praying that the car would start, praying Waylin had left some gas in the tank. Mavis slumped against the door, her face pressed against the glass.

The driveway was treacherously steep, and the fall rains had eroded a grand canyon down the center of it. Gingerly he pulled out onto the Upper Valentine, cringing as the front bumper scraped the surface of the road.

Mavis started to sob. Cramer put his foot to the floor. There would be no cops. Not out here. He'd long since stopped hoping someone else would be around when you needed them.

"You hide things," she said after a while, her voice weak and shaky. "You hide things on me."

Cramer gripped the wheel tightly. *You bet I do*, he thought, but didn't dare say it.

"Now you're mad at me," she said. And when he glanced her way, she was leaning back against the headrest, her eyes closed tightly, her cheeks wet with tears.

"Wasn't suppose to be like this," she said. He wasn't sure which *this* she was referring to.

The doctor in the ER had a round face, hair as short as a man's, and soft brown eyes. "Dr. Page," she said, introducing herself, when they were curtained off from the main room. She carefully undid the tourniquet, tossing Cramer a quick smile. "Is this your handiwork?"

He nodded.

"You should think about a career in medicine," she said.

"Lou" was the name on the doctor's badge. Dr. Lou Page. She cleaned up the site with surgical swabs, murmuring sympathetically as she doused the wound with antiseptic. Mavis swore under her breath. Over the doctor's shoulder, Cramer could see his mother's eyes smoldering with something more than pain.

He watched as the gaping wound was revealed in all

its horror. It stretched from the fleshy part of the thumb up toward her wrist.

"You've sliced a palmar tributary vein, Ms. Lee," said the doctor. "There might be nerve damage. Can you wiggle your thumb?"

Cramer stared at his mother's thumb as if he might be able to make it move by the strength of his mind. It twitched.

"Well, that's good, then." Dr. Lou sighed. "You were that close to nicking the deep radial. How did it happen?"

Mavis glowered. "I already told the nurse," she said, looking away. Her face was indignant. "An accident. Occupational hazard."

Dr. Lou did not reply. But when Cramer looked closely into her brown eyes, he saw the same question there he had asked himself.

"She's an artist," he blurted out. "She was cutting glass for a picture frame."

Dr. Page looked at him and smiled. "Well, your mother is very lucky," she said. And it felt to him as if she was saying how lucky Mavis was that he had come along when he did. How lucky Mavis was to have a son with skill at bandages and emergency situations.

"I'll have to stitch this up," said Dr. Page. She passed through the pale green curtain, and Cramer heard her calling for a nurse to prep his mother.

"Cow," muttered Mavis, cradling her wounded hand in the other like a broken-winged bird.

Cramer smoothed back the hair from his mother's brow. She shook him off. "Lucky it's your left hand," he said. And his mother cast him a fierce expression.

"Did you hear her?" she whispered. "Did you hear what she was saying?" Mavis stared a hole in the curtain. "She accused me of attempted suicide."

"She didn't say that, Mom."

"She insinuated it."

Cramer sat back in his chair, folded his hands in his lap. He looked down at the linoleum floor, suddenly tired—so tired. When he looked up again, his mother was still staring at the curtain, but there was a sly kind of smile on her dried lips.

"Did you see her necklace, Cramer?" she whispered.

"Necklace?"

Mavis propped herself up on her right elbow and gestured for him to come closer. He leaned over until his ear was level with her mouth. "That big mother of an emerald," she said. "As big as a fingernail?"

For a moment he wondered if maybe his mother was hallucinating. "What about it?"

"Shhh!" His mother's eyes grew wide with alarm. When no one came, she laid her head back on the pillow. And there was that smile again, sneaky. Scheming.

"Did you notice how the green of it was the same as my eyes?" Mavis opened her eyes wide, the better for him to see.

He nodded, just to keep the peace. His mother looked pleased with herself, and he was glad for that.

“You wear a gem like that with a gown, Cramer, not hospital scrubs.” She held her right hand to her breastbone as if she were holding a jewel between her fingers, feeling its sharp edges and cool greenness against her sallow skin.

Cramer stroked his mother’s shoulder like you might stroke a child who’d had a fight in the school yard and come home with a black eye.

“When you wear a gem like that, people stare. People take notice. Do you think she measures up to a necklace like that, Cramer? I mean seriously?”

Her voice was getting an edge to it that he recognized. He wondered if he could sweet-talk Dr. Lou into some kind of downers. Painkillers.

“Does it do anything for her with her how-now-brown-cow eyes?”

Cramer remembered only the kindness in the doctor’s eyes, but he shook his head, just to quiet his mother down. Then suddenly the fingers of her strong right hand grabbed him by the chin, steering him to look her in the eye.

“When she comes back, you take a good long look at that emerald,” she whispered. “You tell me if it isn’t the same color as my eyes. Like it was *made* for me. You hear me?”

He nodded. “Okay,” he said. “Sure.”

And he did. And as the nurse and doctor concentrated on their work, he nodded to his mother to let her know he had done what she’d asked.

Her eyes gleamed back at him, the winner of some victory in her head. Then as they left the ER together, Mavis all stitched up and a little container of painkillers tucked in Cramer's pocket, she leaned on him and whispered into his ear, her breath hot and heavy.

"I should have that necklace, honey," she said. Then she kissed him on the cheek. "You get it for me, okay?"

❧ PART ONE ❧

✎ Cramer listens. They're up there. Just above the darkness. Mimi is nearer; Jackson is a little way off. Her voice is clearer, though Cramer can't always tell what she's saying. Then Jackson comes near, too, and they don't say anything now, but Cramer can feel them hovering above him, just hanging there. It's as if they're waiting for him to say something, as if they could actually see him. Then they go away and he's alone again, and he tries to put things back together, tries to think how it all happened. There are so many beginnings, so he chooses just one: the summer day he first saw Mimi. The day she arrived at the house on the snye.

≡ CHAPTER ONE ≡

MIMI MISSED HER TURN and screeched to a stop.

“Shit!”

She checked the map on the seat beside her, backed up, and squinted through her own dust at the signpost.

Uppe V lenti e Rd.

“Close enough.”

A deep-throated bark seized her attention. A gargantuan dog was tearing toward her from the dilapidated house on the corner.

“Shit!”

The animal bounced up and down at her door, brindle and with far too many yellow teeth. She threw the Mini Cooper into reverse again and slewed to the left, almost hitting the ugly mutt.

“Take that, Hellhound!”

Then she thrust the stick shift forward and left the paved road, sending out a rooster tail of gravel.

Undaunted, the dog stayed on her tail—stayed with her for a hundred yards or so—then finally fell behind, his territory no longer in danger.

Mimi took a deep breath and patted the leather-upholstered steering wheel. “Ms. Cooper, we are now *officially* not in Kansas,” she said. And the Mini’s horn beeped twice in reply.

The little car was red with a black top, and Mimi had red shades and black hair. She wore a red T-back sports bra and black low-rise capris, as if the car were an accessory. Well, it was small, after all. Like Mimi—small and powerful.

Gripping the wheel tightly in her left hand, she picked up her digital camcorder from the passenger seat and held it at arm’s length, aimed at her face.

“News update,” she said. “This is Mimi Shapiro reporting from Nowhere!” She swiveled the wine-red JVC HDD around to take in the countryside: the empty dirt road stretching out before her, the overgrown borders and broken-down fences, the unkempt and empty fields, the desolate forest beyond them.

“Not a Starbucks in sight,” she said, returning the camcorder to her face. “What do you think, Chet? Have we actually entered the Land that Time Forgot?”

“Well, Mimi,” she replied in a low and amiable TV side-kick kind of voice, “you’d think the officials at the border

might have warned us about this, wouldn't you? 'Welcome to Canada. Sorry we're out right now.'"

She put the camcorder down in order to negotiate a long S turn, and there up ahead—just to prove her wrong—two huge mud-stained trucks were pulled over onto the shoulder, nose to nose. Farmer One leaned on the driver's side door of Farmer Two. With both hands on the wheel, Mimi swerved around them, glad to be driving such a small and responsive vehicle. Both men wore ball caps, which they tipped as she flew by. They took her *all* in with their shaded eyes, and she wished she hadn't taken her shirt off back at the rest stop on 401.

"Oh, Ms. Cooper," she muttered. "What have we gotten ourselves into?"

She had left New York City yesterday morning and stayed overnight just outside Albany. Then bright and early this morning—way earlier than she was used to—she had set her compass due north, and here she was, though with every passing mile she wondered if maybe Marc had been lying to her. He was hardly the world's most reliable father.

"Almost there," she told herself, to calm her misgivings.

She glanced into her rearview mirror, half expecting Clem and Jed to be on her tail. She imagined them hopping into their trucks to follow the half-naked girl in the toy car. Yee-haw! But the road was empty behind her. She crested a hill. There was a house ahead, though it was hard to tell if anyone still lived in it.

She whooshed by the driveway, where an old woman with an even older dog was collecting the mail from her mailbox. The woman glanced Mimi's way, clutching a letter to her flat chest, glaring at the girl as she flew by. She was wearing a ball cap, too.

"Got to get me one of those," said Mimi.

The road was climbing now. On her right she caught the odd glimpse through the trees of a river—the Eden, she hoped, though it wasn't as impressive as Marc had led her to believe. She wouldn't put it past him to turn a creek into a river. She wouldn't put anything past him.

Lost Creek. She had seen a piece in the Tate Modern by the Irish artist Kathy Prendergast. It was called *Lost* and it was a map of the United States, but the places marked were all lost places: Lost Valley, Lost Hills, Lost Swamp, Lost Creek. All these lost places. She wondered if Prendergast had done a map of the lost places of Canada. She could use it about now. Or GPS.

A magical place, Marc had said. It wasn't the kind of word he used very often. A place to get your thoughts together.

Just then her cell phone started playing "Bohemian Rhapsody." She found it under the map, looked at the number, and threw the cell phone down. It stopped after a while but then started up a few minutes later.

"Fuck off, Lazar Cosic!" she shouted. "What part of 'leave me alone' don't you understand?"

Then she pulled the map out from under the cell

phone and laid it on top. Ontario was a big province—seven times bigger than the Empire State. Surely you could escape someone in a place this large? She pressed a little harder on the accelerator.

Now the road began a lazy decline, and soon she was in the bowl of a wooded valley. Towering maples made a tunnel of the road ahead, though she could see late-afternoon sunlight glinting through the canopy, tinting the leaves with gold as if she had traveled right through summer into fall. She shuddered at the thought. Shuddered at the coolness of this leafy tunnel. She tried to reach her shirt on the backseat but swerved dangerously and gave up. There wasn't a lot of road to work with. Then she was out in the open again, and there was a flurry of tilting and rusted-out mailboxes. And then nothing . . .

In all fairness, Marc had described much of this, but he had never really gotten across the isolation of the place. But that's what she had wanted, wasn't it?

She slowed down and picked up the tiny camcorder again. "Note to self," she said, glancing sideways at the camcorder's beady eye. "Listen to Dorothy next time you think you need to go off and find your heart's desire."

And then she saw it.

"Yes!" she shouted, putting down the camcorder and pounding the ceiling with her fist. "Woo-hoo!" Ms. Cooper beeped her approval.

She brought the car to a stop beside a long driveway, over which a sign read PARADISE.

A new definition of the word, she thought, for at the end of a long dirt driveway, through a field of waist-high grass, stood a handful of fall-down buildings, one of which she supposed must be the farmhouse, though she couldn't tell which one. But it didn't matter, because Paradise was just a marker, not her final destination.

From under the camcorder, iPod, cell phone, Doritos bags, sandwich wrappers, mints, and maps, she found the e-mail from her father. She skipped down to the mention of this sign, highlighted in yellow.

"The letters are two feet high, cleverly constructed out of lengths of cedar sapling cut just so to make the curves of the P, the R, the D, and the S. The driveway to McAdam's Snye will be your next turn on the right."