

≡ 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 sidekick kind of voice. “you’d think the officials at the bor-

der 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 American 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."

≡ CHAPTER TWO ≡

JACKSON PAGE PICKED UP the Gibson ES-175 gingerly, as if it might be trip-wired to some explosive device. He examined the pickups, the toggle switch, the controls. It wasn't even plugged in, but you couldn't be too careful. No, it was okay. Still in tune—well, close enough for rock 'n' roll. Right. And that was the problem.

“I am regressing,” he said to no one. And then he listened to see if no one had any suggestions.

He closed his eyes to try to hear the music in his head. *Simple*. He had already laid down a bunch of tracks, knew the overall shape of the thing, the musical through line, but there was something missing in the final movement. Ha! Movement—as if it were a symphony. Maybe he should say there was something missing in the final stages, as if it were a disease.

The big old guitar was still new to him. He'd found it in a secondhand store in Toronto. The ES-175 was a workhorse in the jazz world, the kind of guitar someone like Pat Metheny played, not some twenty-two-year-old with concert-hall pretensions. Then again, what was he doing playing around with electric guitars at all?

He swiveled his chair westward and tilted the top of the Gibson toward the window of the loft. He watched the daylight glint off the sunburst finish. The light also picked up the dust. He grabbed some polish and a rag from his worktable and set to cleaning the guitar, lovingly, until the lacquer finish gleamed. Just because he was screwing up didn't mean the instruments should suffer.

Simple had started out spare and clean. And serious. He'd been listening to Arvo Pärt and Toru Takemitsu. To Hildegard von Bingen, for Christ's sake! He wanted an unadorned, almost mystical sound, off the top, with lots of space around every note. He'd always known that the piece was going to get weird and dissonant, that "simple" was not easy—that was the point. He just hadn't known *how* weird or dissonant *everything* was going to get. Then yesterday he'd lost it—strapped on the guitar, plugged it into the stomp box, and pretended he was Travis Stever of Coheed and Cambria. As if. He was no rock star. His garage-band days with Snye were far behind him.

Snye had packed the coffeehouse at Ladybank Collegiate, rocked the legion hall, warmed up for Hammerhead

in the city. Their musical influences were ancient: King Crimson; Yes; Procul Harum; Emerson, Lake and Palmer. Big gaudy stuff. Jay had written all the band's tunes and was the only one who had stayed with music. Got himself a degree and now was taking a year off, courtesy of Mom, to consolidate, to write. Next year—graduate school. Next fall.

So what was *Simple*?

It was *supposed* to be a tone poem, not some emo-punk piece of shit. But right now, emo-punk shit seemed about all he could channel. He had to get serious back. He closed his eyes again. Listened. It was in there somewhere.

He let the quiet build up around him. He started playing the riff he'd recorded yesterday but at half the tempo. He played it sweet. It was an inversion of the first motif, and when you didn't distort the crap out of it, you could hear that.

He plugged the guitar into the amp. Switched it on. There were chorus dials on the Roland: he kept the rate low, cranked the depth up to six. There was that nice flangey sound. He added some reverb. Nice and wet. Pressed the distortion pedal for some crunch.

Right. Rock on, dude. What was he doing?

He dumped it all. Dumped the crunch, dumped the reverb. Everything. He closed his eyes and played the riff over and over, pure and simple, letting it worm into his ear and down into his bones. It was comforting and sad. A

teen ballad. He was Linus, and the ES-175 was his electric blanket. A year out of the University of British Columbia and he was backsliding, big-time.

He clamped his hand over the strings, damping the sound. He cocked his head and listened: nothing but the amplifier's throaty hum. He leaned forward, turned the Roland off, and placed the Gibson on its stand beside the baby-blue Stratocaster and the old yellow Martin acoustic. Then he groaned a great long emo-punk-shit groan.

"I am losing my mind," he said.

But what he was really afraid of was that he was losing his sense of what it was he did. They'd crucify him at Indiana. The Jacobs School of Music was right up there with Juilliard and Eastman, for Christ's sake. He had gotten in on great marks and a crazy-good letter of recommendation from Gabriel Zouave, the composer in residence his last year at UBC. Zouave was the one who had recommended Indiana and advised Jay to include the composition *Gunk* in his application, scored for bass clarinet, button accordion, tabla, and street sounds. The people at Indiana had called the piece "cheeky and brave." His lighter side, now missing and presumed dead. Because serious didn't have to be dead serious, right? But it had to be more than jacking off. And here he was playing three-chord riffs on the guitar.

He crossed the loft to the dormer window that looked out over the ragged garden sloping gently down to the snye. He leaned on the sill, and his flash drive, on a string

around his neck, tapped against the glass. His kayak was down there in the undergrowth by the stream. You couldn't see it from any approach, as far as he could tell.

There was a row of fist-size stones along the window-sill. He picked one up and rolled it around in his hands. It was blue-green, shot through with cream, and smoothed almost perfectly round by the sea. It was warm from sitting in the sun all day. He held it up to his cheek. Closed his eyes again. Which was when he heard the car.