Chapter 1

At the eastern edge of Kalamazoo County, autumn woolly bear caterpillars hump across Queer Road to get to the fields and windbreaks of George Harland's rich river valley land. With their bellies full of dandelion greens and native plantains, these orange-and-black-banded woolly bears travel at about four feet per minute, in search of niches where they can spend the winter. Near the oldest barn in Greenland Township, many of them settle in and around a decaying stone foundation overgrown with poison ivy vines. It is land they have occupied for centuries, this tribe of caterpillars, since long before George Harland's great-great-great-grandfather bought it from the federal land office for a dollar and a quarter an acre.

More than a century and a half after that purchase, on October 9, 1999, David Retakker pedaled his rusting BMX bike south along Queer Road, with the Harland property on his right and the sun rising over Whitby's pig farm on his left. David, twelve years old, hungry, and wheezy from asthma, didn't mind the pig stink, but he couldn't understand why all the caterpillars wanted to cross the road. There must be millions of them, David thought, for already hundreds lay flattened or stunned or dead alongside, and more kept coming. He'd seen woolly bears before, but he couldn't remember if it had been spring or fall, and surely they were never as plentiful as this. David steered with one hand; the other he rested on his knee, with the index finger folded in a way that mimicked amputation at the lower knuckle, so he could pretend he had the same injury as George Harland.

Off to David's left, dozens of rust-colored Duroc hogs appeared no bigger than caterpillars as they snuffled in the grass and mud behind long, low whitewashed structures. David imagined them chopped into hams, bacon, and pork steaks, smoked and sizzling for breakfast in cast-iron pans. Beyond the soybean field on his right rose the tall trees surrounding the Harland house and outbuildings, and as David got closer, he made out Rachel Crane, standing in front of her produce tables with her arms crossed and her rifle hanging over her shoulder on a sling. Rachel was

seventeen, only five years older than David, but she was always looking out for him, which was okay. Still, she was staring so intently at the pavement that she didn't seem to notice his approach, and he told himself he might even sneak past. That would be a feat, he thought, to sneak right past her, first thing in the morning.

Rachel's roadside tables were set up in front of George's old two-story house, and just to the side was parked a utility wagon piled with dozens of pumpkins. The tables were heavy with winter squash, tomatoes, a few melons, bushel baskets of striped and spotted gourds, and on the ground sat five-gallon buckets of Brussels sprout spears. Hungry as he was, David could turn down Brussels sprouts; and the big, flesh-colored butternut squashes gave him the creeps, made him think of a pile of misshapen mutant bodies without eyes or mouths or limbs. Rachel's gardening enterprise didn't much appeal to David, because he wanted to work in fields of corn, oats, and soybeans the way George did. Those grains went into bread and breakfast cereal, food that could fill a person up.

As he got closer, he studied Rachel's black hair and her face, which appeared to glow orange in the light coming from the east. Whenever she was standing somewhere, you got the idea that she'd already been there a long time and it would take a lot to move her. He used to want to be just like Rachel, but a couple years ago she'd swelled dangerously, becoming thick with breasts and hips, and since then he'd tried to keep some distance between them. When she looked up from the road this morning, her dark eyes sent a jolt of electricity through him, and he jerked his handlebars and veered straight at her. Rachel jumped out of the way and David careened into the shallow ditch in front of the stacked cantaloupes. His bike tipped over sideways onto him.

"Are you okay?" Rachel said.

"I'm okay." David stood up and righted his bicycle.

"Well, you sure as hell don't know how to steer."

"I lost my balance."

"Well, then use both hands when you ride."

David checked his index finger, which was still not severed at the knuckle, and rolled his bike backward until he was beside her.

"Damn it," Rachel said, "you just backed up over that woolly bear."

"Huh?"

"What did that woolly bear ever do to you?"

"There's so many I can't help it," David said. "And besides, you kill lots of things."

Rachel threw up her arms and yelled, "What's the hurry? Next year you can all fly across the damn road."

"Huh?"

"I was talking to the woolly bears." Rachel adjusted her rifle strap. "I watched this woolly bear crawl all the way from the other side of the road, and then you came along and smashed it."

David looked down at the pavement to where Rachel pointed out a caterpillar flattened beside a dark smear of guts. To avoid feeling bad about it, David looked up, to the bright ceiling of sycamore leaves, each as big as a person's face, extending across the driveway to the edge of the pasture. David glanced up the driveway, tracing its path to the silos of corrugated tin, the big wooden stock barn, and beyond to the silver and red pole barns where George kept his tractors, balers, and combines. David didn't see George's truck.

Beside the driveway, just beyond the reach of the branches, stood a pony, a donkey, and a long-haired llama, side by side, pushing against the barbed wire in places where they'd already mashed the barbs down with their chests. David considered going over and petting the animals, but then he wondered if his bedroom clock at home might have been slow and if he might already be late. He'd woken up repeatedly during the night worrying about the time. And now George's truck was nowhere around; maybe George was already down there waiting for him.

"You don't know what time it is, do you?"

"Why are you in such a damn hurry?" Rachel said.

David knew Rachel worked hard to put swear words in most every sentence; she'd told him that plain talk, without swearing, was weak and invited argument. And he could see you had to keep in practice with swearing, even when you didn't feel like it.

"I'm helping George put a wagonload of straw in the barn," David said. "Didn't he tell you?"

"Maybe I don't hang on every damn word out of his mouth like some people."

"So how come you married him then?" David's raspy breathing was painful to hear this morning.

"If you don't know by now why I married him," she said, "then it's none of your damn business. You're not out of your medication again, are you?"

As David fumbled with the white plastic tube from his pocket, Rachel looked away and stacked some pumpkin gourds. Her neighbor Milton Taylor had been right about planting these -- at a dollar each, the rutabaga-sized pumpkins sold by the dozens -- but Rachel found herself annoyed at their smallness this morning. It seemed wrong to raise vegetables that didn't have a chance at growing to normal size. And besides, you couldn't eat them. She'd gutted one and cooked it, just to see, and she found the paltry bit of meat gritty and flavorless.

After David put his inhaler away, Rachel said, "Your ma didn't get any food for breakfast, did she?"

He shrugged.

"No wonder you're running off the road," Rachel said. "Do you want an apple?"

"I guess I'd take an apple."

Rachel went to the far end of her tables and tipped up an empty bushel basket. "The damn deer chewed through my chicken wire. Let me get some apples from the barn."

"I don't want to be late for meeting George."

"Fine, then get the hell out of here."

Neither of them moved or said anything until David shrugged again. Some nights when David slipped out of his house on P Road, he trekked the half-mile shortcut trail over here, and tried to sneak up on Rachel in her garden. He liked to study her from as close as he could, to try to understand why George couldn't live without her, and it was a lot easier to look at her when she wasn't looking back. Sitting in the dark she seemed muscular like Martini the pony, but she could also move as stealthily as Gray Cat. The way she shot practically everything that came into her garden, she was no one to complain about other people killing anything. David would creep as quietly as he could those nights, but a hundred feet away she'd hear his footsteps, his noisy breathing, or his stomach rumbling, and she'd yell, "David, what the hell are you doing out here?" and he'd yell back, "Nothing," and come out of hiding. Then she'd make him sit still while she waited for an animal or whispered a story about the Indian she called Corn Girl or explained how a skunk would roll a woolly bear on the ground until all its bristles came out before eating it. Other people said Rachel didn't talk much, but she made David listen to advice about growing tomatoes and skinning muskrats and saving money in coffee cans to buy land, even though David had no interest in tomatoes or muskrats. He didn't even want to own land; he just wanted to drive tractors and combines and pull hay balers and cultivators across George's hundreds of acres.

"What happened to the window?" David pointed at the broken pane in the lower left corner of the big window facing the road. He wore a long-sleeved T-shirt, but Rachel thought he probably should have a jacket on, too.

Rachel said, "George's stupid-ass nephew threw a pumpkin at the house in the middle of the night."

"How do you know it was Todd?"

"I heard his hooligan voice."

"Are you going to track him down and shoot him?" David figured it must feel great to launch a pumpkin through the air like a missile and to hear the crash that meant you'd struck your target.

"No, I'm not going to shoot him. I don't shoot people."

"You shot at me."

She stared at him. The memory of almost killing David three years ago could still make Rachel stop breathing. "You know that was an accident. I thought you were a coyote." Even in the dark, though, she should have seen those bright eyes, that freckled face. "I can't believe you keep bringing that up."

David said, "Maybe you'll get mad and think Todd's a coyote."

"First of all, I don't shoot coyotes anymore," Rachel said. "They eat the woodchucks that eat my garden. And anyways, Todd looks more like a giant rat than a coyote."

David shrugged again. Actually he was glad Rachel had tried to shoot him, because she'd been nice to him ever since. She wasn't nice to anybody else as far as David could tell, not even George. Even now, six weeks after she'd married George, Rachel didn't seem to realize how lucky she was that she'd get to live here with George forever.

"Now, why don't you wait one goddamn minute and I'll get you some apples out of the barn."

"I've got to go." David jumped on his bike and pedaled south. This was the first time George had ever asked him to stack hay in the barn, and David needed to do everything right. George's nephew Todd had been working for him over the summer, but he'd become unreliable, not showing up when he said he would, and often doing a lousy job if George wasn't watching him. George'd had a talk with Todd yesterday, which was maybe why that window ended up busted. David stood up on his pedals.

The donkey, the llama, and Martini the spotted pony all stamped their feet and followed the bicycle along the fence line, then returned to the pasture corner to watch Rachel, in anticipation of getting oats.

"Damn stupid kid." Rachel fought the desire to shout something after him about being careful or coming back to eat later. Even though David's mother, Sally, didn't pay George any rent to live in that house over on P Road, she couldn't be bothered to feed her kid. Rachel thought that woman seriously needed her ass kicked.

Some of the people in Greenland Township figured Rachel herself had had it tough growing up. She didn't see it that way. While her own mother might have been eccentric, while she might have lost her mind in the end, she'd at least taught Rachel how to feed herself. Until Margo Crane disappeared three years ago, the woman had wrenched a living out of the local farmland by hunting and trapping, and she'd taught her daughter plenty about getting by. Rachel had lived much of her seventeen years out-of-doors, which was why she knew so much about the wild creatures of this place, for instance that these woolly bear caterpillars were the larvae of the dusty white Isabella moths and that they would not spin cocoons to protect themselves during the winter but would instead curl beneath stacked firewood or patches of bark or decaying wooden rowboats to await the winter. Their bodies were somehow able to endure the freeze, and in spring, they survived the thaw. And only after all that miraculous survival did a woolly bear build its cocoon and begin its transformation.

Crazy hermit mother aside, even just growing up with a face like Rachel's might seem to some like tough luck. Such a face might have been too much for a more self-conscious girl to bear, but Rachel refused to take it as a hardship. Most folks would not say she was ugly, exactly, but nobody would honestly call her pretty; the mystery of her face was that while no individual aspect was freakish, the striking sum of her features demanded a person stop and stare, and then, after dragging his eyes away, look back for confirmation. And despite all that looking, the looker would probably be at a loss to describe the face to anyone later. Technically speaking, Rachel's was a broad face with big cheekbones and a small chin, giving, straight on, the illusion of being round, and although her skin was not pale, the illusion of roundness fed into a suggestion of whiteness, especially in contrast to her long, dark hair, which she remembered to brush about once every three days. As with the bald faces of certain cattle breeds, as with the china-doll visage of the white-breasted nuthatch, when you got close, Rachel's face seemed to spill and stretch over its edges, continuing into her neck and hairline. Her close-set eyes were always a little bloodshot, and though she didn't much like talking, she never

hesitated to make the kind of steady eye contact people found disconcerting. Other kids had been confused by her gaze, but Rachel had dropped out of school a year and a half ago, and the only kid she cared anything about now was David.

Rachel watched David's puny figure grow smaller and finally disappear behind roadside walnut trees. She would swear David had scarcely grown in the three years she'd known him. She focused on another woolly bear, a scrappy one, more orange than black, which had ventured out at a good pace from Elaine Shore's asphalt driveway across the road. Rachel told herself that this fast little guy was destined to make it, but when a pickup truck belonging to one of the Whitbys rattled toward her from the north she just had to stop looking. Damn those caterpillars, Rachel thought as she arranged a bushel basket with every variety of gourd showing, damn them for not having a sense of self-preservation. Damn them for their tiny brains, their subservience to nature. Damn their broken bodies strewn about like overripe mulberries. The caterpillars were stupid like a lot of people around here, picking up and leaving without even realizing where they were to start with. Rachel knew exactly where she was, and she planned to stay and occupy George Harland's acres -- more land than she could see from any one place on that land -- for as long as she lived and breathed. She didn't know about David, but when she died, she intended to be buried right here in this dark, rich soil.