

PROLOGUE

1999

There were all kinds of ways the river could take someone.

That's where he needed to go.

The river would keep his secret.

He opened the El Camino on the back country road, speed vibrating the vehicle, making it tremble like the driver's hands. The metallic odor of blood filled the car. Jude was belted into the passenger seat. His head hung against his chest, blood pooling in his lap. Even now, sobering up, all those blind-rage shovel blows didn't seem real. Murderous fury no longer coursed through him. His skin prickled with the enormity of what he'd done. He remembered Jude just a boy pedaling across the pasture on his bicycle, and a tear slipped out of his eye. He hadn't wanted to end this in the river but wasn't about to turn himself in to the sheriff. He'd eaten dinner at Sheriff Jimerson's house and shaken the man's hand at football games. He'd rather face the river than a court of law and his loved ones.

The El Camino reached the levee under a moonless sky, just a spattering of stars winking through clouds after a week of heavy rains. He slowed the car for a ninety-degree turn and climbed the levee road, where he scanned the fast-moving river. Swollen from a series of storms, it looked big and hungry. He would have only a minute or two to get out of the car before the relentless current carried it to the bottom. Many of the river's victims were never found. He licked his lips, nerves getting the better of him, and could still taste the whiskey on his breath.

Rolling down his window, blood roaring through his ears, he whispered a prayer. Perhaps El Rio de los Sacramentos—the River of the Holy Sacrament—would have mercy on him.

Or perhaps not.

He fastened his seatbelt, hit the gas, and launched the El Camino off the levee road.

CHAPTER ONE

LANE

I cannot look at the river without seeing my mother's face. At first so lovely, but underneath a deceptive current. Kids never really know their parents. My mother seemed like a normal mom when I was little. She made me brush my teeth morning and night. Never missed a soccer game. Was more beautiful than my friends' moms and far younger, but that never really clicked in my mind. My mother taught English at the University of San Francisco, creative writing and poetry. Her poems lauded in the New York publishing world. They called her a brave new voice for her millennial generation, but fear controlled my mother's life. She was just good at masking it until the divorce.

Before that summer of my sixteenth year, San Francisco was our home, the place of my birth, the city fueling my teenage rebellion. My father was a psychiatrist from a long line of physicians with historic homes in Pacific Heights. Life was status quo until Armona came along. She was nineteen, a stunning Asian

girl from a wealthy Buddhist family. Her crazy boyfriend, a proclaimed Satanist, though he was mostly Midwestern tweaker, had murdered her Chinese parents because they tried to stop him from seeing Armona.

My father knows how to save people. Armona was on suicide watch when she became his patient. There was something all-consuming about her. The delicateness of her exotic beauty, the very real need to protect her life. Her meth head boyfriend had disappeared, maybe still in the city stalking Armona, or all the way back to the cradle of his birth, Chicago. Nobody really knew. It didn't take Armona long to consume my father. My parents' marriage unraveled pretty quickly after that. During their divorce, I discovered getting high helped. After a joint or a line of coke, I didn't care if my parents were imploding. I was stoned out of my mind the day my mother moved us to Berry Creek, trying to save me, she said.

I thought she was overreacting. I didn't have a drug problem. The adults in my life were the problem. Well, Armona was hardly an adult. Only four years older than me, it would have made more sense if she'd been my girlfriend instead of my father's. The whole thing messed me up. "You're an addict. You need help," my mother reminded me daily.

"I'm just having fun. I'm a teenager," I told her for the umpteenth time.

"What you feed only gets stronger. You have a tiger in your life that wants to eat you. And you keep feeding your habit." I hated how she turned everything back on me. Blaming drugs and my friends for her own misery.

“Then stop feeding your self-pity,” I said. “Dad has moved on with Armona. You need to get a life and let me live mine.”

I recall the drive to Berry Creek well, even though I was high. We followed a one-lane road that twisted along the Sacramento River. The waterway flowed over four hundred miles from the mountains to the sea. Under the moonlight, the river a silver strand as endless as the strand of deceit running through my mother’s life. She didn’t want to return to Berry Creek, to her secrets and her demons, but getting me off drugs had become her only focus.

Still, I could tell seeing the river jarred her. She kept looking out the window at the water shining in the darkness. The full moon, a giant strobe in the sky, beaming into our car like a spotlight. I’d never seen such a large, bright moon, reflecting on the river and my mom’s face.

“I know this river road better than the curve of my own white neck,” my mother said. “No guardrails to stop cars from plunging into the water. A scenic but deadly drive.” We passed the spot where Jude’s body was buried in that car in the river, but neither of us knew it that night.

The Sacramento River originates at the base of Mount Shasta, a snow-covered volcano in Northern California, and flows to San Francisco, emptying into the bay, then spilling out under the Golden Gate Bridge. The longest river in California. My mother had quit her university job and downgraded to teaching high school in her hometown because of me. She would begin her new teaching job on Monday, two weeks before school started, pushing our exodus from the city down to the wire.

She pretended not to hear what I said to her, looking out over the river, her voice turned wistful. “*Wherever the river flows there is life.* It’s from the Bible. My mother told me, not that Lorilee was a churchgoer. The bars along the river were Mama’s religion. She drowned in a river in Arkansas. So ironic. A river took her life.”

“You’ve never told me my grandma drowned in a river.”

“You never knew her. She died young.” My mother gripped the steering wheel. Ghostly in the moonlight spilling into the car. Long slender fingers like skeleton hands. My mother was becoming a ghost of herself. Returning to her shame. Her abusive childhood. I had no idea until it unfolded before my eyes my junior year of high school.

People in small towns never forget. Everybody reminds you of your past. If you don’t deal with your garbage when it happens, you deal with it later. You can pass brokenness onto your kids, too. Your children and grandchildren doomed to repeat the same mistakes you made when you were young. Locked into a lifestyle of dysfunction, generational curses my mother called it. I didn’t believe in generational curses until we came to Berry Creek.

“I am running through the river bottoms,” my mother said in her poet’s voice, like when she did readings at coffee houses. “There’s a spider web spun in the shadows between the sycamore trees. The web wraps around me until I about go crazy.” My mother was ruining my high. Dragging me into her bad energy. She was on edge. I’d seen it before. My mother breaking.

“Did you bring your pink pills?” That’s what I called her calm-down drugs. Dad had prescribed them after she flipped out over Armona and ended up in the hospital last year. Mom ignored me.

“Lorilee sat on the riverbank with her boyfriend, right over there.” She pointed to a spot down by the water as we drove past. “They dropped their fishing poles and came running when I screamed. They found me trying to get the web off, my hair tangled in a sycamore branch, and scolded me for scaring them.”

My mother wasn’t herself. She was detached, like she’s telling someone else’s tale. It unnerved me.

“I still have nightmares about that web. Lorilee and her boyfriend laughed at me. They told me a giant spider would drink my virgin blood. They returned to their fishing as the sun went down. My mother enjoyed taking her clothes off for men beside the river. She was a stunning woman, but emotionally sick, men were her medicine.”

“That’s messed up.” I decided to humor her, hoping she’d just stop. She was emotionally sick too. I wanted to put blinders on her so she couldn’t see the river. It was obviously a trigger for her. Dad insisted I do therapy as part of my drug rehab, so I knew about triggers. You see or hear or smell something that sets you off. PTSD. Anyone can have it. You don’t need to be a war vet to suffer from PTSD. We all are at war with something, my father says.

Mom kept talking. “We lived in a single-wide at the boat dock. Lorilee rented the trailer from the boat dock owner. Mr. Melvin had a German Shepherd, Crowdad. I loved that old dog. He would sleep on our front porch until my mother came home. No other kids lived at the boat dock. Crowdad was my only friend.”

She had nailed one of my triggers. “Tell me again why I can’t have a dog?”

My mother looked at me, her eyes lasers in the moonlight. I was lying down with my seat reclined all the way back. I wanted to sleep but the moon was too bright. "If you die, I will die too," she said when our eyes met.

"What does that have to do with me having a dog? I hope you have a shrink lined up in Berry Creek." I looked away. I didn't want to see her pain.

She laughed but not with humor. "Berry Creek doesn't even have a stoplight. There are no therapists. It's a backward place. I'm doing this for you, Lane."

"Ruining my life? Thanks."

"I'm saving you. You're a hot mess." She was going too fast, trying to escape the river road. "I'm praying Gus can straighten you out. If this doesn't work, you'll have to return to that rehab center. Your dad wants you there until you graduate clean and sober."

"I'm not going back to rehab. I don't need it. I need new parents."

"You don't want new parents. You want your fix. You're killing yourself..." She sucked in a breath and sighed before saying, "You're killing me."

"I'm not an addict. I'm just having fun."

"Really? Your dad thinks you have a problem."

"Dad's not a real doctor."

"He's a psychiatrist. Greg knows addiction when he sees it."

"He's banging a twenty-year-old. What does he know? He'll probably lose his medical license over Armona."

My mother clenched her jaw and stopped talking. It's what I wanted.

After the river road, we hit a stretch of farmland, plowed and pale under the moon, and then rolled down Gus's long dirt driveway, headlights illuminating fence posts and oak trees. Gus's white farmhouse was built before the turn of the century, an old Victorian with three stories and a real turret, stopping passersby with its fading grandeur. Gus owned thousands of acres in Sutter County and raised alfalfa, along with cattle and horses. A well-respected farmer until we got there, cracking open Pandora's box and spilling all my mother's secrets.



CHAPTER TWO

LANE, 2016

Gus stepped out the farmhouse's front door under the single-bulb porch light, letting the screen bang shut, his hair gone completely white, which surprised me. In pictures, Gus was a redhead like my mother. I'd never met him in person. It felt strange to be here, coming in the night like fugitives, and in a way, we were, escaping the demise of our life in the city. But I was still high enough to not really care that I suddenly had a grandpa.

My dad's dad had died when I was three years old. I was told he'd doted on me, teaching me to drink English tea in his study filled with medical books and classics where he read *The Jungle Book* and other Rudyard Kipling stories to me. I still had nightmares about cobras in the bathroom from *Rikki Tikki Tavi* even though I don't remember my Grandpa James.

Mom got out of the BMW. An old Chevy pickup was parked in the driveway, gleaming lime green, polished to a high shine illumined under the garage lights. Mom stopped and stared at the

pickup. The look on her face concerned me. Woodsmoke wafted in the air. It reminded me of the one and only camping trip I'd been on with a friend's family during fifth grade. That had been a great trip, but my parents never let me go again because I came home covered in poison oak.

"You're late." Gus didn't sound angry. He was smaller than I'd figured he'd be. My mother stood nearly eye to eye with him. Her boots had heels, but still, Gus wasn't very big. The way my mother spoke of him, I'd imagined a large man with beefy hands and a thick, sunburned neck. This wiry, white-haired guy wasn't much to speak of.

"I can't believe you still have the Hornet." Mom waved her hand toward the pickup.

"Thought you might want your old wheels back." Gus didn't hug Mom. She held back too. They were cautious with one another, the way white sharks circle surfers but rarely attack.

"The last time I drove a pickup it was this one." Mom turned from Gus to the '69 Chevy. I knew it had been Gus's before it was hers. She'd told me about the Green Hornet. It was also Gus's two-way radio handle. All the farmers had CB radio back in the day, my mother said, with colorful names like Sleeping Fox, Big Ramona's Man, and Billy Bob McGee. Gus was the Green Hornet.

When I was nine years old, she went to Betty's funeral. It was a secret getaway, and I hadn't known about it until I caught her crying. Back then I thought Betty was her mom, but instead of telling me about Betty, she told me the CB radio story. I knew all the superheroes. "Can we go see my grandpa, the Green Hornet?" I'd asked.

“Your grandpa lives too far away to go see him, that is why he’s on the radio.”

So lame she’d lied to a little kid. I thought Gus lived in Maine or something. It had taken less than three hours to get here. Gus was staring at my mother. “Why wouldn’t I keep your Hornet?” He smiled. “You look like your mama. Lorilee sure was a pretty thing.”

Did Gus know Lorilee was dead? I really didn’t care. I needed something to take the edge off this whole thing. Using the bathroom would be normal after a long drive. I popped open the BMW’s trunk and walked around to the rear of the vehicle to grab my bag.

Gus met me behind the car. “Men shake hands.” His voice came out gritty. He no longer smiled, narrowing his eyes on me.

Judging me.

I didn’t like it.

Mom hurried to my side.

Gus kept his hand outstretched.

I was hitting that low on the way down. Longing for a joint but knowing I’d have to pop a downer because I couldn’t hide the smell of weed around here. I didn’t want to but accepted Gus’s palm into mine.

“Squeeze hard.” Gus braced his legs, gripping my hand, giving it a solid shake.

I jerked my hand loose. “Dang, dude, lighten up.”

“This ain’t no dude ranch.” Gus got right in my face. “I’m your grandpa. Show some respect, boy.”

I widened my eyes but didn’t respond. Who was this guy?

“You need a cold shower?” Gus rasped when I didn’t answer him.

“Gus, give him some time. We just got here,” Mom said.

I spun my back on Gus and grabbed my duffel from the trunk.

“Let me carry that for you.” Gus shouldered in, reaching for my bag.

“I’m not your boy. Get your hands off my bag, old man.” I yanked it away from him.

“I’ll carry it.” Gus grabbed hold of the bag too.

With three thousand dollars’ worth of weed, coke, and pills buried beneath my underwear and socks, I wasn’t about to let go.

“Please, let’s just all get some sleep.” Mom put her hand on my shoulder, trying to calm me down. When I turned to her, Gus ripped the bag from my grasp.

“This is my land. My law. I’m gonna go through this bag tonight. I’ll return it to you in the mornin’, Lane.” He looked at Mom. “You can’t keep rescuing him. Don’t snatch him out of the fire. This needs to be burned out of Lane and it’s gonna hurt.”

Gus’s strength surprised me. “I want my toothbrush.” I reached for the duffel, something akin to desperation blooming in my chest.

He swung the bag away.

Mom tried to grab it, but Gus stepped out of her reach. “Maggie May, let me handle this.” His voice turned steely

“Give me my bag.” Gus had to be in his seventies. How hard could it be to just take the duffel from an old guy?

“You better step back, boy. I know what’s in this bag, and I’m going to take it from you for your own good.” Gus’s voice softened, like maybe he really cared. “Let me help you, Lane.”

“I don’t need your help.” I understood why my mother had never brought me here. This guy was a relic. He belonged in an old Western.

“Yes, you do. You’re gonna live clean on my ranch.” Gus turned and headed for the house, my bag swinging in his grip.

I lunged for it.

He turned and hit me so hard and fast, my knees buckled. I landed on my back, blood filling my mouth.

Mom screamed, splitting the night open.

Chickens roosting in a nearby oak tree burst into flight, clucking wildly. Dogs began barking somewhere in the darkness.

“Stop it! Please! Stop it!” Mom cried.

“Maggie May, go to the house,” Gus ordered. He put the bag down on the lawn and raised his fists.

“Have you lost your mind?” Mom knelt by my side trying to touch my split lip.

I sat up, holding my face. Blood trickled through my fingers. I shoved Mom’s hands away. “Leave me alone.”

I swore at Gus, calling him old man, crazy hick, and worse. I cussed him out good.

“Get up. Let’s get this over with.” Gus rolled his fists through the air. Fighting an invisible foe. Which he was. We all were that night.

“Get what over with? I’m not living here. Mom, take me back to Dad’s.” I got to my feet, holding my mouth, blood dripping from my hand and down my chin.

“You always run from your problems, boy? That’s not a good way to live.” Gus picked up my bag. “I’ll return this to you in the mornin’ if we’re finished here.”

“I won’t be here in the morning.” I headed for the BMW, ripping off my T-shirt before I got into the passenger seat, holding the shirt to my mouth so I didn’t bleed all over Mom’s car. I didn’t

close the passenger door because I hoped she would take my bag from Gus and give it back to me.

“Why did you do that? We came here for your help.” Mom’s voice broke. I could hear her crying.

Gus no longer looked small and old. I wondered if he concealed carried. He acted like a guy who’d own guns. He now owned my bag and my mother and me too. I just wanted to get the hell away from him.

“If you’re not going to do things my way, take that boy back to the city. I hope you don’t have to bury him there. If you’re here in the morning, I’ll fix you and Lane breakfast,” Gus said.

“If you don’t find drugs in that bag, we’re leaving first thing in the morning.” Mom raised her chin but sounded defeated. Tears ran down her face.

I dropped my head so I didn’t have to look at her crying and slept in the car that night, refusing to step foot in Gus’s house. The following morning, he opened the car door, waking me by dropping my bag on my lap. Of course, my stash was gone.



The first three days without drugs were brutal. Mom hovered over me. Gus put me to work. The Sacramento Valley was a hundred degrees, gruelingly different from the cool ocean air I’d always known. The heat felt like hell on earth that summer.

“Go outside,” Gus said. “You need to get high? Smell the alfalfa. You want to feel better? Ride a horse. The outside of a

horse is good for the inside of a man. That's free advice from Winston Churchill."

I didn't respond, so Gus carried on. "Around here, you'll work. Go to school. Get good grades. And be kind to your mama. That's what I expect of you. This evening after it cools off, I'll show you how to feed and groom the horses."

My mouth swollen and sore from Gus's fist, I nodded from a wooden rocker on the back porch. Gus had shown Mom the stash from my bag, and she refused to drive me back to San Francisco.

I sat in that rocker most of that first day, rocking and thinking and wanting to get high. I could call Dad. He'd come and get me, but I was afraid he'd put me back in rehab. That was the last place I wanted to go. I'd never been good enough for Dad and never knew why until we returned to Berry Creek. Eventually secrets are released. Like California's endangered chinook salmon, they return to the rivers of their birth. Soon I would behold the truth. The river would carry it to me. "Barn's burnt down, now I can see the moon," said Mizuta Masahide, a seventeenth-century Japanese poet and samurai.

This line came to me as I rocked on the porch that first day overlooking Gus's irrigated pastures, horses grazing out in the blazing sunshine, swishing their tails against the flies. The only life I'd ever known was burning down.

I was about to see the moon.