

Prologue

1998

This is what you shall do:
Love the earth and sun and the animals.

—Walt Whitman

Traverse City, Michigan

January 1998

The day I arrived in Traverse City I carried nothing except the clothes on my back. It was blizzard weather. My luggage was stranded in a Chicago snowstorm and it was unlikely we'd be reunited before 10 a.m. tomorrow. Cherry Capital was by far the smallest airport I'd ever seen. Back then it had the flavor of a Greyhound bus depot. Not the big bus terminals you find in a major city, but a remote outpost, the kind that smells of damp floor mats and 1950s suitcases hauled up from the basement.

The day before in Madison, Wisconsin, my college roommate had helped me choose an outfit for my first post-graduation interview. "You've got to look professional," Ellen said, matching skirt, top, and jacket, "with just a touch of nature." She pinned a metal lizard brooch on my lapel. Luckily, I'd decided to wear my interview jacket instead of packing it. I could feel the lump of the brooch through my coat and it gave me courage. Ellen was a PhD student immersed in international land conservation projects in East Africa. If I got this job, I'd be saving habitat right here at home. My home: the Midwest, the Heartland, the Great Lakes.

Well, not quite my home. The Midwest has many faces. Although I was born and raised a midwesterner, I knew no one in Michigan. I mispronounced Traverse City (forget its French roots; locals say, *Traverse*), I didn't like small towns, and I didn't know or care much about farms. My hometown was Columbus, Ohio, a city of a million; I was a

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university-town girl through and through. It was the wild places that brought me north: lakes, loons, and acres of forestland. I was out to save the world.

In my case, the first step in saving the world was a visit to the open-all-night Meijer store where, at 11 p.m., I bought a new set of interview clothes, down to shoes and stockings. A snowstorm stealing my clothes wouldn't stop me.

I'd grown up with a fierce love of wilderness side by side with a gnawing, growing fear about pollution and species extinction. For years I'd felt too young, too ignorant, and too unimportant to do anything about it. That wasn't true anymore. I was twenty-eight and armed with a master's degree in land resources. The job listing said, "Land Protection Specialist." The very title tantalized me.

A day later I was back in the bus stop-sized airport, staring at a row of colorful Cherry Festival posters hanging in frames along the back wall. The interview had been a success, and now I observed my surroundings with different eyes. If they hired me, would I like my new home? I stared at the watercolors of cherry blossoms. I'd have to get used to life in northern Michigan. People had been farming this land and raising cherries here for more than a hundred years. Each poster marked the years back in time: 1997 . . . 1996 . . . 1982 . . . 1970 . . .

Without my realizing it, my fate was edging closer to lives tucked away in Arcadia. I got the job and moved to northern Michigan during the course of the next month. But only over time did I learn Arcadia's story and understand its multiple storylines: of cherry farmers planting trees near the Great Lakes coast, of plants and animals eking out life on a massive sand dune, of generations of families loving a place called Baldy.

Arcadia's story began before I ever set foot in Michigan. A story I became part of, though not at first. The full story has its roots in the geologic past and in times before western settlement and statehood, but this particular story begins in 1969, the year I was born.