ONE

Goddamned freezing cold. Luke Findley's breath hangs in the air, nearly a solid thing shaped like a frozen wasp's nest, wrung of all its oxygen. His hands are heavy on the steering wheel; he is groggy, having woken just in time to make the drive to the hospital for the night shift. The snow-covered fields to either side of the road are ghostly sweeps of blue in the moonlight, the blue of lips about to go numb from hypothermia. The snow is so deep it covers all traces of the stumps of stalks and brambles that normally choke the fields, and gives the land a deceptively calm appearance. He often wonders why his neighbors remain in this northernmost corner of Maine. It's lonely and frigid, a tough place to farm. Winter reigns half the year, snow piles to the windowsills, and a serious biting cold whips over the empty potato fields.

Occasionally, someone does freeze solid, and because Luke is one of the few doctors in the area, he's seen a number of them. A drunk (and there is no shortage of them in St. Andrew) falls asleep against a snowbank and by morning has become a human Popsicle. A boy, skating on the Allagash River, plunges through a weak spot in the ice. Sometimes the body is discovered halfway to Canada, at the junction where the Allagash meets up with the St. John. A hunter goes snow blind and can't make his way out of the great north woods, his body found sitting with its back against a stump, shotgun lying uselessly across his lap.

That weren't no accident, Joe Duchesne, the sheriff, told Luke in disgust when the hunter's body was brought to the hospital. *Old Ollie Ostergaard, he wanted to die. That's just his way of committing suicide*. But Luke suspects if this were true, Ostergaard would have shot himself in the head. Hypothermia is a slow way to go, plenty of time to think better of it.

Luke eases his truck into an empty parking space at the Aroostook County Hospital, cuts the engine, and promises himself, again, that he is going to get out of St. Andrew. He just has to sell his parents' farm and then he is going to move, even if he's not sure where.

Luke sighs from habit, yanks the keys out of the ignition, and heads to the entrance to the emergency room.

"Luke," the duty nurse says, nodding as Luke walks in, pulling off his gloves. He hangs up his parka in the tiny doctors' lounge and returns to the admitting area. Judy says, "Joe called. He's bringing in a disorderly he wants you to look at. Should be here any minute."

"Trucker?" When there is trouble, usually it involves one of the drivers for the logging companies. They are notorious for getting drunk and picking fights at the Blue Moon.

"No." Judy is absorbed in something she's doing on the computer. Light from the monitor glints off her bifocals.

Luke clears his throat for her attention. "Who is it then? Someone local?" Luke is tired of patching up his neighbors. It seems only fighters, drinkers, and misfits can tolerate the hard-bitten town.

Judy looks up from the monitor, fist planted on her hip. "No. A woman. And not from around here, either."

That is unusual. Women are rarely brought in by the police except when they're the victim. Occasionally a local wife will be brought in after a brawl with her husband, or in the summer, a female tourist may get out of hand at the Blue Moon. But this time of year, there's not a tourist to be found.

Something different to look forward to tonight. He picks up a chart. "Okay. What else we got?" He half-listens as Judy runs down the activity from the previous shift. It was a fairly busy evening but right now, ten p.m., it's quiet. Luke goes back to the lounge to wait for the sheriff. He can't endure another update of Judy's daughter's impending wedding, an endless lecture on the cost of bridal gowns, caterers, florists. *Tell her to elope*, Luke said to Judy once, and she looked at him as though he'd professed to being a member of a terrorist organization. *A girl's wedding is the most important day of her life,* Judy scoffed in reply. *You don't have a romantic bone in your body. No wonder Tricia divorced you.* He has stopped retorting, *Tricia didn't divorce me, I divorced her*, because nobody listens anymore.

Luke sits on the battered couch in the lounge and tries to distract himself with a Sudoku puzzle. He thinks instead of the drive to the hospital that evening, the houses he passed on the lonely roads, solitary lights burning into the night. What do people do, stuck inside their houses for long hours during the winter evenings? As the town doctor, there are no secrets

kept from Luke. He knows all the vices: who beats his wife, who gets heavy-handed with his children; who drinks and ends up putting his truck into a snow bank; who is chronically depressed from another bad year for the crops and no prospects on the horizon. The woods of St. Andrew are thick and dark with secrets. It reminds Luke of why he wants to get away from this town; he's tired of knowing their secrets and of them knowing his.

Then there is the other thing, the thing he thinks about every time he steps into the hospital lately. It hasn't been so long since his mother died and he recalls vividly the night they moved her to the ward euphemistically called "the hospice," the rooms for patients whose ends are too close to warrant moving them to the rehab center in Fort Kent. Her heart function had dropped below 10 percent and she fought for every breath, even wearing an oxygen mask. He sat with her that night, alone, because it was late and her other visitors had gone home. When she went into arrest for the last time, he was holding her hand. She was exhausted by then and stirred only a little, then her grip went slack and she slipped away as quietly as sunset falling into dusk. The patient monitor sounded its alarm at nearly the same time the duty nurse rushed in, but Luke hit the switch and waved off the nurse without even thinking. He took the stethoscope from around his neck and checked her pulse and breathing. She was gone.

The duty nurse asked if he wanted a minute alone and he said yes. Most of the week had been spent in intensive care with his mother, and it seemed inconceivable that he could just walk away now. So he sat at her bedside and stared at nothing, certainly not at the body, and tried to think of what he had to do next. Call the relatives; they were all farmers living in the southern part of the county . . . Call Father Lymon over at the Catholic church Luke couldn't bring himself to attend . . . Pick out a coffin . . . So many details required his attention. He knew what needed to be done because he'd been through it all just seven months earlier when his father died, but the thought of going through this again was just exhausting. It was at times like these that he most missed his ex-wife. Tricia, a nurse, had been good to have around during difficult times. She wasn't one to lose her head, practical even in the face of grief.

This was no time to wish things were different. He was alone now and would have to manage by himself. He blushed with embarrassment, knowing how his mother had wanted he and Tricia to stay together, how she lectured him for letting her go. He glanced at the dead woman, a guilty reflex.

Her eyes were open. They had been closed a minute ago. He felt his chest squeeze with hope even though he knew it meant nothing. Just an electrical impulse running through nerves as her synapses stopped firing, like a car sputtering as the last fumes of gas passed through the engine. He reached up and lowered her eyelids.

They opened a second time, naturally, as though his mother was waking up. Luke almost jumped backward but managed to control his fright. No, not fright—surprise. Instead, he slipped on his stethoscope and leaned over her, pressing the diaphragm to her chest. Silent, no sluicing of blood through veins, no rasp of breath. He picked up her wrist. No pulse. He checked his watch: fifteen minutes had passed since he had pronounced his mother dead. He lowered her cold hand, unable to stop watching her. He swore she was looking back at him, her eyes trained on him.

And then her hand lifted from the bedsheet and reached for him. Stretched toward him, palm up, beckoning him to take it. He did, calling her by name, but as soon as he grasped her hand, he dropped it. It was cold and lifeless. Luke took five paces away from the bed, rubbing his forehead, wondering if he was hallucinating. When he turned around, her eyes were closed and her body was still. He could scarcely breathe for his heart thumping in his throat.

It took three days before he could bring himself to talk to an- other doctor about what had happened. He chose old John Mueller, a pragmatic GP who was known for delivering calves for his rancher neighbor. Mueller had given him a skeptical look, as though he suspected Luke might have been drinking. *Twitching of fingers and toes, yeah that happens,* he'd said, *but fifteen minutes later? Musculor-skeletal movement?* Mueller eyed Luke again, as though the fact that they were even talking about it was shameful. *You think you saw it because you wanted to. You didn't want her to be gone.*

Luke knew that wasn't it. But he wouldn't raise it again, not among doctors.

Besides, Mueller had wanted to know, what difference does it make? So the body may have moved a little—you think she was trying to tell you something? You believe in that life-after-death stuff?

Thinking about it now, four months later, still gives Luke a slight chill, running down both arms. He puts the Sudoku book on the side table and works his fingers over his skull, trying to massage out the confusion. The door to the lounge pushes back a crack: it's Judy. "Joe's pulling in up front."

Luke goes outside without his parka so the cold will slap him awake. He watches Duchesne pull up to the curb in a big SUV painted black and white, a decal of the Maine state seal on the front doors and a low-profile light bar strapped to the roof. Luke has known Duchesne since they were boys. They were not in the same grade but they overlapped at school, so he's been seeing Duchesne's narrow, ferretlike face with the beady eyes and the slightly sinister nose around for more than twenty years.

Hands tucked into his armpits for warmth, Luke watches Duchesne open the back door and reach for the prisoner's arm. He's curious to see the disorderly. He's expecting a big, mannish biker woman, red faced and with a split lip, and is surprised to see that the woman is small and young. Could be a teenager. Slender and boyish except for the pretty face and mass of yellow corkscrew curls, a cherub's hair.

Looking at the woman (girl?) Luke feels a strange tingle, a buzz behind his eyes. His pulse picks up with something almost like—recognition. I know you, he thinks. Not her name, perhaps, but something more fundamental. What is it? Luke squints, studying her more closely. Have I seen her somewhere before? No, he realizes he's mistaken.

As Duchesne pulls the woman along by the elbow, her hands tied together with a flexicuff, a second police vehicle pulls up and a deputy, Clay Henderson, gets out and takes over escorting the prisoner into the emergency ward. As they pass, Luke sees the prisoner's shirt is wet, stained black, and she smells of a familiar blend of iron and salt, the smell of blood.

Duchesne steps close to Luke, nodding in the pair's direction. "We found her like that walking along the side of the logging road to Fort Kent—"

"No coat?" Coatless in this weather? She couldn't have been out for long.

"Nope. Listen, I need you to tell me if she's hurt, or if I can take her back to the station and lock her up."

As far as law enforcement officers went, Luke's always suspected Duchesne of being heavy-handed; he's seen too many drunks brought in with lumps on their skulls or facial bruising. This girl, she's only a kid—what in the world could she have done? "Why is she in custody? For not wearing a coat in this weather?"

Duchesne gives Luke a sharp look, unaccustomed to being mocked. "That girl is a killer. She told us she stabbed a man to death and left his body out in the woods."

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Luke goes through the motions of examining the prisoner, but he can barely think for the strange pulsing in his head. He shines a penlight into her eyes—they are the palest blue eyes he's ever seen, like two shards of compressed ice—to see if her pupils are dilated. Her skin is clammy to the touch, her pulse low and her breathing ragged.

"She's very pale," he says to Duchesne as they step away from the gurney to which the prisoner has been strapped at the wrists. "That could mean she's going cyanotic. Going into shock."

"Does that mean she's injured?" Duchesne asks, skeptical.

"Not necessarily. She could be in psychological trauma. Could be from an argument. Maybe from fighting with this man she says she killed. How do you know it's not self-defense?"

Duchesne, hands on hips, stares at the prisoner on the gurney as though he can discern the truth just by looking at her. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "We don't know anything . . . she hasn't said much. Can't you tell if she's wounded? 'Cause if she's not hurt I'll just take her in . . ."

"I have to get that shirt off, clean off the blood . . ."

"Get to it. I can't stay here all night. I left Boucher in the woods, looking for that body."

Even with the full moon, the woods are dark and vast, and Luke knows the deputy, Boucher, has little chance of finding a body by himself. Luke picks at the edge of his latex glove. "So go help Boucher while I do the examination . . ."

"I can't leave the prisoner here."

"For crissakes," Luke says, jerking his head in the slight young woman's direction. "She's hardly going to overpower me and escape. If you're that worried about it, have Henderson stay." They both glance at Henderson tentatively. The big deputy leans against a counter, leafing through an old Sports Illustrated left in the waiting room, a cup of vending machine coffee in his hand. He's shaped like a cartoon bear and is, appropriately, amicably dim. "He won't be of much help to you in the woods . . . Nothing is going to happen," Luke says impatiently, turning away from the sheriff as though the matter is already settled. He feels Duchesne's stare bore into his back, unsure if he should argue with Luke.

And then the sheriff lurches away, heading for the double set of sliding doors. "Stay

here with the prisoner," he yells at Henderson as he jams the heavy, fur-lined hat onto his head. "I'm going back to help Boucher. Idiot couldn't find his own ass with both hands and a map."

Luke and the nurse attend to the woman strapped to the gurney. He hefts a pair of scissors. "I'm going to have to cut your shirt away," he warns her.

"You might as well. It's ruined," she says in a soft voice with an accent Luke can't place. The shirt is obviously expensive. It's the kind of clothing you see in fashion magazines and that you would never find someone wearing in St. Andrew.

"You're not from around here, are you?" Luke says, small talk to loosen her up.

She studies his face again, evaluating whether to trust him—or so Luke assumes. "I was born here, actually. That was a long time ago."

Luke snorts. "A long time ago for you, maybe. If you were born here, I'd know you. I've lived in this area almost my entire life. What's your name?"

She doesn't fall for his little trick. "You don't know me," she says flatly.

For a few minutes there's only the sound of wet fabric being cut and it is hard going, the scissors' tiny beak moving sluggishly through the sodden material. After it's done, Luke stands back to let Judy swab the girl with gauze soaked in warm water. The bloody red streaks dissolve, revealing a pale, thin chest without a scratch on it. The nurse drops the forceps holding the gauze into a metal pan noisily and hustles out of the examination room as though she knew all along that they'd find nothing, and yet again, Luke has proven his incompetence.

He averts his eyes as he drapes a paper sheet over the girl's naked torso.

"I'd have told you I wasn't hurt if you'd asked," she says to Luke in a low whisper.

"You didn't tell the sheriff though," Luke says, reaching for a stool.

"No. But I'd have told you." She nods at the doctor. "Do you have a cigarette? I'm dying for a smoke."

"I'm sorry. Don't have any. I don't smoke," Luke replies.

The girl looks at him, those ice blue eyes scanning his face. "You gave them up a while ago, but you started again. Not that I blame you, given everything you've been through lately. But you have a couple of cigarettes in your lab coat, if I'm not mistaken."

His hand goes to the pocket, out of instinct, and he feels the papery touch of the cigarettes right where he had left them. Was that a lucky guess, or did she see them in his

pocket?

And what did she mean by given everything you've been through lately? She's just pretending to read his mind, trying to get inside his head like any clever girl who finds herself in trouble would do. He has been wearing his troubles on his face lately. He just hasn't seen a way to fix his life yet; his problems are interconnected, all stacked up. He'd have to know how to fix all of them to take care of even one.

"There's no smoking in the building, and in case you've forgotten, you're strapped to a gurney." Luke clicks the top of his pen and reaches for a clipboard. "We're a little shorthanded tonight, so I'm going to need to get some information from you for the hospital re- cords. Name?"

She regards the clipboard warily. "I'd rather not say."

"Why? Are you a runaway? Is that why you don't want to give me your name?" He studies her: she's tense, guarded, but under control. He's been around patients involved in accidental deaths and they're usually hysterical—crying, shaking, screaming. This young woman is trembling slightly under the paper sheet and she jiggles her legs nervously, but by her face Luke can tell she's in shock.

He feels, too, that she is warming toward him; he senses a chemistry between them, as though she is willing him to ask her about the terrible thing that happened in the forest. "Do you want to tell me what went on tonight?" he asks, rolling closer to the gurney. "Were you hitchhiking? Maybe you got picked up by someone, the guy in the woods . . . He attacks you, you defend yourself?"

She sighs and presses back into the pillow, staring at the ceiling. "It was nothing like that. We knew each other. We came to town together. He"—she stops, choking on the words—"he asked me to help him die."

"Euthanasia? Was he already dying? Cancer?" Luke is skeptical. The ones looking to kill themselves usually pick something quiet and surefire: poison, pills, an idling car engine and a length of garden hose. They don't ask to be stabbed to death. If this friend really wanted to die, he could have just sat under the stars all night until he froze.

He glances at the woman, trembling under the paper sheet. "Let me get a hospital gown and a blanket for you. You must be cold."

"Thank you," she says, dropping her gaze.

He comes back with a much-laundered flannel gown edged in pink and a pilling acrylic

blanket, baby blue. Maternity colors. He looks down at her hands, bound to the gurney with nylon strap restraints. “Here, we’ll do this one hand at a time,” Luke says, undoing the restraint on the hand closest to the side table where the examination tools are laid out: forceps, bloodied scissors, scalpel.

Quick as a rabbit, she lunges for the scalpel, her slender hand closing around it. She points it at him, wild eyed, her nostrils pink and flaring. “Take it easy,” Luke says, stepping backward off the stool, out of her arm’s reach. “There’s a deputy just down the hall. If I call for him, it’s over, you know? You can’t get both of us with that little knife. So why don’t you put down the scalpel—”

“Don’t call him,” she says, but her arm is still outstretched. “I need you to listen to me.”

“I’m listening.” The gurney is between Luke and the door. She can cut her other hand free in the time it takes him to make it to the door.

“I need your help. I can’t let him arrest me. You have to help me escape.”

“Escape?” Suddenly, Luke isn’t worried that the young woman with the scalpel will hurt him. He’s feeling embarrassed for having let his guard down, allowing her to get the drop on him. “Are you out of your mind? I’m not going to help you escape.”

“Listen to me—”

“You killed someone tonight. You said so yourself. I can’t help you escape.”

“It wasn’t murder. He wanted to die, I told you that.”

“And he came here to die because he grew up here, too?”

“Yes,” she says, a little relieved.

“Then tell me who he is. Maybe I know him . . .”

She shakes her head. “I told you—you don’t know us. Nobody here knows us.”

“You don’t know that for sure. Maybe some of your relatives . . .” Luke’s obstinacy comes out when he gets angry.

“My family hasn’t lived in St. Andrews for a long, long time.” She sounds tired. Then she snaps, “You think you know, do you? Okay— my name is McIlvrae. Do you know that name? And the man in the woods? His name is St. Andrew.”

“St. Andrew, like the town?” Luke asks.

“Exactly, like the town,” she replies almost smugly.

Luke feels funny bubbles percolating behind his eyes. Not recognition, exactly . . .

where has he seen that name, McIlvrae? He knows he has seen it or heard it somewhere, but that knowledge is just out of reach. “There hasn’t been a St. Andrew in this town for, oh, at least a hundred years,” Luke says, matter-of-fact, stung at being upbraided by a girl pretending to have been born here, lying about a meaningless fact that won’t do her a bit of good. “Since the Civil War. Or so I’ve been told.”

She jabs the scalpel at him to get his attention. “Look—it’s not like I’m dangerous. If you help me get away, I’m not going to hurt anyone else.” She speaks to him as though he’s the one being unreasonable. “Let me show you something.”

Then, with no warning, she points the scalpel at herself and cuts into her chest. A long, broad line that catches her left breast and runs all the way to the rib area under her right breast. Luke is frozen in place for a moment as the line blooms red across her white skin. Blood oozes from the cut, pulpy red tissue starting to peep from the opening.

“Oh my god,” he says. What the hell is wrong with this girl—is she crazy? Does she have some kind of death wish? He snaps out of his baffled inertia and starts toward the gurney.

“Stay back!” she says, jabbing the scalpel at him again. “Just watch. Look.”

She lifts her chest, arms outstretched, as though to give him a better view, but Luke can see fine, only he can’t believe what he is seeing. The two sides of the cut are creeping toward each other like the tendrils of a plant, rejoining, knitting together. The cut has stopped bleeding and is starting to heal. Through it, the girl’s breathing is rough but she betrays no sign of pain.

Luke can’t be sure his feet are on the floor. He is watching the impossible—the impossible! What is he supposed to think? Has he gone crazy, or is he dreaming, asleep on the couch in the doctors’ lounge? Whatever he’s seen, his mind refuses to accept it and starts to shut down.

“What the hell—,” he says, barely a whisper. Now he is breathing again, his chest heaving up and down, his face flushing. He feels like he is going to vomit.

“Don’t call for the policeman. I’ll explain it to you, I swear, just don’t yell for help. Okay?”

As Luke sways on his feet, it strikes him that the ER has fallen silent. Is there even anyone around to hear him if he did call out? Where is Judy, where is the deputy? It’s as if Sleeping Beauty’s fairy godmother drifted into the ward and cast a spell, putting everyone to

sleep. Outside the door to the examination room, it's dark, lights dimmed as usual for the night shift. The habitual noises—the far-off laugh track of a television program, the metallic ticking from inside the soda vending machine—have disappeared. There is no whir from a floor buffer wending its way laboriously down the empty halls. It's just Luke and his patient and the muffled sound of the wind beating against the side of the hospital, trying to get in.

"What was that? How did you do that?" Luke asks, unable to keep the horror from his voice. He slides back onto the stool to keep from dropping to the floor. "What are you?"

The last question seems to hit her like a punch to the sternum. She hangs her head, flossy blond curls covering her face. "That—that's the one thing I can't tell you. I don't know what I am anymore. I have no idea."

This is impossible. Things like this don't happen. There is no explanation—what, is she a mutant? Made of synthetic self-healing materials? Is she some kind of monster? And yet she looks normal, the doctor thinks, as his heart rate picks up again and blood starts pounding in his ears. The linoleum tiles start to sway underfoot.

"We came back—he and I—because we missed the place. We knew everything here would be different—everyone would be gone— but we missed what we once had," the young woman says wistfully, staring past the doctor, speaking to no one in particular.

The feeling he had when he first saw her this evening—the tingle, the buzz—arcs between them, thin and electric. He wants to know. "Okay," he says, shakily, hands on his knees. "This is crazy—but go ahead. I'm listening."

She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes momentarily, like she is about to dive underwater. And then she begins.