

# Winter's Wife

## ELIZABETH HAND

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*In the—appropriately enough—chilling story that follows, she shows us what happens when all the money and influence and bright shiny gadgets of the modern world come into conflict with ancient magic. Magic old and slow and cold, and as immovable as rock.*

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# W

INTER'S real name was Roderick Gale Winter. But everyone in Paswegas County, not just me and people who knew him personally, called him Winter. He lived in an old school bus down the road from my house, and my mother always tells how when she first moved here he scared the crap out of her. It wasn't even him that scared her, she hadn't even met him yet; just the fact that there was this creepy-looking old school bus stuck in the middle of the woods, with smoke coming out of a chimney and these huge piles of split logs around and trucks and cranes and heavy equipment, and in the summer all kinds of chain saws and stuff, and in the fall deer and dead coyotes hanging from this big pole that my mother said looked like a gallows, and blood on the snow, and once a gigantic dead pig's head with tusks, which my mother said was scarier even than the coyotes. Which, when you think of it, does sound pretty bad, so you can't blame her for

being freaked out. It's funny now because she and Winter are best friends, though that doesn't mean so much as it does other places, like Chicago, where my mother moved here from, because I think everyone in Shaker Harbor thinks Winter is their friend.

The school bus, when you get inside it, is sweet.

Winter's family has been in Shaker Harbor for six generations, and even before that they lived somewhere else in Maine.

"I have Passamaquoddy blood," Winter says. "If I moved somewhere else, I'd melt."

He didn't look like a Native American, though, and my mother said if he did have Indian blood it had probably been diluted by now. Winter was really tall and skinny, not sick skinny but bony and muscular, stooped from having to duck through the door of the school bus all those years. He always wore a gimme cap that said WINTER TREE SERVICE, and I can remember how shocked I was once when I saw him at Town Meeting without his hat, and he had almost no hair. He'd hunt and butcher his own deer, but he wouldn't eat it—he said he'd grown up dirt-poor in a cabin that didn't even have a wooden floor, just pounded earth, and his family would eat anything they could hunt, including snake and skunk and snapping turtle. So he'd give all his venison away, and when people hired him to butcher their live-stock and gave him meat, he'd give that away, too.

That was how my mother met him, that first winter fifteen years ago when she was living here alone, pregnant with me. There was a big storm going on, and she looked out the window and saw this tall guy stomping through the snow carrying a big paper bag.

"You a vegetarian?" he said, when she opened the door. "Everyone says there's a lady from away living here who's going to have a baby and she's a vegetarian. But you don't look like one to me."

My mother said no, she wasn't a vegetarian, she was a registered certified massage therapist.

"Whatever the hell that is," said Winter. "You going to let me in? Jesus Q. Murphy, is that your woodstove?"

See, my mother had gotten pregnant by a sperm donor. She had it all planned out, how she was going to move way up north and have a baby and raise it—him, me—by herself and live off the land and be a massage

therapist and hang crystals in the windows and there would be this good energy and everything was going to be perfect. And it would have been, if she had moved to, like, Huntington Beach or even Boston, someplace like that, where it would be warmer and there would be good skate parks, instead of a place where you have to drive two hours to a skate park and it snows from November till the end of May. And in the spring you can't even skate on the roads here because they're all dirt roads and so full of potholes you could live in one. But the snowboarding is good, especially since Winter let us put a jump right behind his place.

But this part is all before any snowboarding, because it was all before me, though not much before. My mother was living in this tiny two-room camp with no indoor plumbing and no running water, with an ancient woodstove, what they call a parlor stove, which looked nice but didn't put out any heat and caused a chimney fire. Which was how Winter heard about her, because the volunteer fire department came and afterwards all anyone was talking about at the Shaker Harbor Variety Store was how this crazy lady from away had bought Martin Weed's old run-down camp and now she was going to have a baby and freeze to death or burn the camp down—probably both—which probably would have been okay with them except no one liked to think about the baby getting frozen or burned up.

So Winter came by and gave my mother the venison and looked at her woodpile and told her she was burning green wood, which builds up creosote, which was why she had the chimney fire, and he asked her who sold her the wood, so she told him. And the next day the guy who sold her the wood came by and dumped off three cords of seasoned wood and drove off without saying a word, and the day after that two other guys came by with a brand-new woodstove, which was ugly but very efficient and had a sheath around it so a baby wouldn't get burned if he touched it. And the day after *that*, Winter came by to make sure the stove was hooked up right, and he went to all the cabin's windows with sheets of plastic and a hair dryer and covered them so the cold wouldn't get in, and then he showed my mother where there was a spring in the woods that she could go to and fill water jugs rather than buy them at the grocery store. He also gave her a chamber pot so she wouldn't have to use the outhouse, and told her he knew of someone who had a composting toilet they'd sell to her cheap.

All of which might make you think that when I say "Winter's wife" I'm referring to my mom. But I'm not. Winter's wife is someone else.

Still, when I was growing up, Winter was always at our house. And I was at his place, when I got older. Winter chops down trees, what they call wood lot management—he cuts trees for people, but in a good way, so the

forest can grow back and be healthy. Then he'd split the wood so the people could burn it for firewood. He had a portable sawmill—one of the scary things Mom had seen in his yard—and he also mills wood so people can build houses with the lumber. He's an auctioneer, and he can play the banjo and one of those washboard things like you see in old movies. He showed me how to jump-start a car with just a wire coat hanger, also how to carve wood and build a tree house and frame a window. When my mother had our little addition put on with a bathroom in it, Winter did a lot of the car-pentry, and he taught me how to do that, too.

He's also a dowser, a water witch. That's someone who can tell where water is underground, just by walking around in the woods holding a stick in front of him. You'd think this was more of that crazy woo-woo stuff my mother is into, which is what I thought whenever I heard about it.

But then one day me and my friend Cody went out to watch Winter do it. We were hanging out around Winter's place, clearing brush. He let us use the hill behind the school bus for snowboarding, and that's where we'd built that sweet jump, and Winter had saved a bunch of scrap wood so that when spring came we could build a half-pipe for skating too.

But now it was spring, and since we didn't have any money really to pay Winter for it, he put us to work clearing brush. Cody is my age, almost fourteen. So we're hacking at this brush and swatting blackflies, and I could tell that at any minute Cody was going to say he had to go do home-work, which was a lie because we didn't have any, when Winter shows up in his pickup, leans out the window, and yells at us.

"You guys wanna quit goofing off and come watch someone do some real work?"

So then me and Cody had an argument about who was going to ride shotgun with Winter, and then we had another argument about who was going to ride in the truck bed, which is actually more fun. And then we took so long arguing that Winter yelled at us and made us both ride in the back.

So we got to the place where Winter was going to work. This field that had been a dairy farm, but the farm wasn't doing too good and the guy who owned it had to sell it off. Ms. Whitton, a high school teacher, was going to put a little modular house on it. There'd been a bad drought a few years earlier, and a lot of wells ran dry. Ms. Whitton didn't have a lot of money to spend on digging around for a well, so she hired Winter to find the right spot.

“Justin!” Winter yelled at me as he hopped out of the truck. “Grab me that hacksaw there—”

I gave him the saw, then me and Cody went and goofed around some more while Winter walked around the edge of the field, poking at brush and scrawny trees. After a few minutes he took the hacksaw to a spindly sapling.

“Got it!” Winter yelled, and stumbled back into the field. “If we’re going to find water here, we better find a willow first.”

It was early spring, and there really weren’t any leaves out yet, so what he had was more like a pussy willow, with furry gray buds and green show-ing where he’d sawn the branch off. Winter stripped the buds from it until he had a forked stick. He held the two ends like he was holding handlebars and began to walk around the field.

It was weird. Cause at first, me and Cody were laughing—we didn’t mean to, we couldn’t help it. It just looked funny, Winter walking back and forth with his arms out holding that stick. He kind of looked like Franken-stein. Even Ms. Whitton was smiling.

But then it was like everything got very still. Not quiet—you could hear the wind blowing in the trees, and hear birds in the woods, and someone running a chain saw far off—but still, like all of a sudden you were in a movie and you knew something was about to happen. The sun was warm, I could smell dirt and cow manure and meadowsweet. Cody started slapping blackflies and swearing. I felt dizzy, not bad dizzy, but like you do when the school bus drives fast over a high bump and you go up on your seat. A few feet away Winter continued walking in a very straight line, the willow stick held out right in front of him.

And all of a sudden the stick began to bend. I don’t mean that Winter’s arms bent down holding it: I mean the stick itself, the point that stuck straight out, bent down like it was made of rubber and someone had grabbed it and yanked it towards the ground. Only it wasn’t made of rubber, it was stiff wood, and there was no one there—but it still bent, point-ing at a mossy spot between clumps of dirt.

“Holy crap,” I said.

Cody shut up and looked. So did Ms. Whitton.

“Oh my God,” she said.

Winter stopped, angling the stick back and forth like he was fighting with it. Then it lunged down, and he yelled, "Whoa!" and opened his hands and dropped it. Me and Cody ran over.

"This is it," said Winter. He pulled a spool of pink surveyor's tape from his pocket and broke off a length. I stared warily at the willow stick, half-expecting it to wiggle up like a snake, but it didn't move. After a mo-ment I picked it up.

"How'd you do that?" demanded Cody.

"I didn't do it," said Winter evenly. He took the stick from my hand, snapped off the forked part, and tossed it; tied the surveyor's tape to what remained and stuck it in the ground. "Wood does that. Wood talks to you, if you listen."

"No lie," I said. "Can you show me how to do that sometime?"

"Sure," said Winter. "Can't today, got a towing job. But someday."

He and Ms. Whitton started talking about money and who had the best rates for drilling. The next time my mom drove past that field, the drill rig was there hammering at the ground right where Winter's stick had pointed, and the next time I ran into Ms. Whitton in the hall at school she told me the well was already dug and all geared up to pump a hun-dred gallons a minute, once she got her foundation dug and her house moved in.

Not long after that, Winter announced he was going to Reykjavik.

It was after school one day, and Winter had dropped by to shoot the breeze.

"What's Reykjavik?" I asked.

"It's in Iceland," said my mother. She cracked the window open and sat at the kitchen table opposite Winter and me. "Why on earth are you going to Reykjavik?"

"To pick up my wife," said Winter.

"Your wife?" My eyes widened. "You're married?"

"Nope. That's why I'm going to Iceland to pick her up. I met her

online, and we're going to get married."

My mother looked shocked. "In *Iceland!*"

Winter shrugged. "Hey, with a name like mine, where else you gonna find a wife?"

So he went to Iceland. I thought he'd be gone for a month, at least, but a week later the phone rang and my mom answered and it was Winter, say-ing he was back safe and yes, he'd brought his wife with him.

"That's incredible," said Mom. She put the phone down and shook her head. "He was there for four days, got married, and now they're back. I can't believe it."

A few days later they dropped by so Winter could introduce us to her. It was getting near the end of the school year, and me and Cody were out-side throwing stuff at my tree house, using the open window as a target. Sticks, a Frisbee, a broken yo-yo. Stuff like that.

"Why are you trying to break the house?" a woman asked.

I turned. Winter stood there grinning, hands in the pockets of his jeans, his gimme cap pushed back so the bill pointed almost straight up. Beside him stood a woman who barely came up to his shoulder. She was so slight that for a second I thought she was another kid, maybe one of the girls from school who'd ridden her bike over or hopped a ride in Winter's truck. But she didn't have a kid's body, and she sure didn't have a kid's eyes.

"Justin." Winter squared his shoulders and his voice took on a mock-formal tone. "I'd like you to meet my wife. Vala, this is Justin."

"Justin." The way she said my name made my neck prickle. It was like she was turning the word around in her mouth; like she was tasting it. "*Gleour mig ao kynnast per.* That's Icelandic for 'I am glad to meet you.' "

She didn't really have an accent, although her voice sounded more English than American. And she definitely didn't look like anyone I'd ever seen in Maine, even though she was dressed pretty normal. Black jeans, a black T-shirt. Some kind of weird-looking bright blue shoes with thick rubber soles, which I guess is what people wear in Iceland; also a bright blue windbreaker. She had long, straight black hair done in two ponytails— one reason she looked like a kid—kind of slanted eyes and a small mouth and

the palest skin I've ever seen.

It was the eyes that really creeped me out. They were long and narrow and very very dark, so dark you couldn't even see the pupil. And they weren't brown but blue, so deep a blue they were almost black. I'd never seen eyes that color before, and I didn't really like seeing them now. They were cold—not mean or angry, just somehow *cold*; or maybe it was that they made me feel cold, looking at them.

And even though she looked young, because she was skinny and her hair didn't have any gray in it and her face wasn't wrinkled, it was like she was somehow pretending to be young. Like when someone pretends to like kids, and you know they don't, really. Though I didn't get the feeling Vala didn't like kids. She seemed more puzzled, like maybe we looked as strange to her as she did to me.

"You haven't told me why you are trying to break the house," she said.

I shrugged. "Uh, we're not. We're just trying to get things through that window."

Cody glanced at Vala, then began searching for more rocks to throw.

Vala stared at him coolly. "Your friend is very rude."

She looked him up and down, then walked over to the tree house. It was built in the crotch of a big old maple tree, and it was so solid you could live in it, if you wanted to, only it didn't have a roof.

"What tree is this?" she asked, and looked at Winter.

"Red maple," he said.

"Red maple," she murmured. She ran her hand along the trunk, stroking it, like it was a cat. "Red maple ..."

She turned and stared at me. "You made this house? By yourself?"

"No." She waited, like it was rude of me not to say more. So I walked over to her and stood awkwardly, staring up at the bottom of the tree house. "Winter helped me. I mean, your husband—Mr. Winter."

"Mr. Winter." Unexpectedly she began to laugh. A funny laugh, like a little kid's, and after a moment I laughed too. "So I am Mrs. Winter? But who



should be Winter's proper wife—Spring, maybe?"

She made a face when she said this, like she knew how dumb it sounded; then reached to take my hand. She drew me closer to her, until we both stood beside the tree. I felt embarrassed—maybe this was how they did things in Iceland, but not here in Maine—but I was flattered, too. Because the way she looked at me, sideways from the corner of her eyes, and the way she smiled, not like I was a kid but another grown-up ... it was like she knew a secret, and she acted like I knew it, too.

Which of course I didn't. But it was kind of cool that she thought so. She let go of my hand and rested hers against the tree again, rubbing a patch of lichen.

"There are no trees in Iceland," she said. "Did you know that? No trees. Long long ago they cut them all down to build houses or ships, or to burn. And so we have no trees, only rocks and little bushes that come to here—"

She indicated her knee, then tapped the tree trunk. "And like this—lichen, and moss. We have a joke, do you know it?"

She took a breath, then said, "What do you do if you get lost in a for-est in Iceland?"

"I shook my head. "I dunno."

"Stand up."

It took me a moment to figure that out. Then I laughed, and Vala smiled at me. Again she looked like she was waiting for me to say something. I wanted to be polite, but all I could think was how weird it must be, to come from a place where there were no trees to a place like Maine, where there's trees everywhere.

So I said, "Uh, do you miss your family?"

She gave me a funny look. "My family? They are happy to live with the rocks back in Iceland. I am tired of rocks."

A shadow fell across her face. She glanced up as Winter put his hands on her shoulders. "Your mother home, Justin?" he asked. "We're on our way into town, just wanted to say a quick hello and introduce the new wife—"

I nodded and pointed back to the house. As Winter turned to go, Vala gave me another sharp look.

“He tells me many good things about you. You and he are what we would call *feogar*—like a father and his son, Winter says. So I will be your godmother.”

She pointed a finger at me, then slowly drew it to my face until she touched my chin. I gasped: her touch was so cold it burned.

“There,” she murmured. “Now I will always know you.”

And she followed Winter inside. When they were gone, Cody came up beside me.

“Was that freaky or what?” he said. He stared at the house. “She looks like that weird singer, Boink.”

“You mean Bjork, you idiot.”

“Whatever. Where is Iceland, anyway?”

“I have no clue.”

“Me neither.” Cody pointed at my chin. “Hey, you’re bleeding, dude.”

I frowned, then gingerly touched the spot where Vala had pressed her finger. It wasn’t bleeding; but when I looked at it later that night I saw a red spot, shaped like a fingerprint. Not a scab or blister or scar but a spot like a birthmark, deep red like blood. Over the next few days it faded, and finally disappeared; but I can still feel it there sometimes even now, a sort of dull ache that gets worse when it’s cold outside, or snowing.

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THAT same month, Thomas Tierney returned to Paswegas County. He was probably the most famous person in this whole state, after Stephen King, but everyone up here loves Stephen King and I never heard anyone say anything good about Thomas Tierney except after he disappeared; and then the only thing people said was good riddance to bad rubbish. Even my mom, who gets mad if you say something bad about anyone, even if they hit you first, never liked Thomas Tierney.

“He’s one of those people who thinks they can buy anything. And if he can’t buy it, he ruins it for everyone else.”

Though the truth was there wasn’t much that he wasn’t able to buy, especially in Paswegas. People here don’t have a lot of money. They had more after Tierney’s telemarketing company moved into the state and put up its telephone centers everywhere, even one not too far from Shaker Harbor, which is pretty much the end of nowhere. Then people who used to work as fishermen or farmers or teachers or nurses, but who couldn’t make a liv-ing at it anymore, started working for International Corporate Enterprises. ICE didn’t pay a lot, but I guess it paid okay, if you didn’t mind sitting in a tiny cubicle and calling strangers on the phone when they were in the mid-dle of dinner and annoying them so they swore at you or just hung up.

Once when she heard me and Cody ranking on people who worked at ICE, my mom took us aside and told us we had to be careful what we said, because even if we hated the company, it gave people jobs, and that was nothing to sneeze at. Of course a lot of those people who worked for ICE ended up not being able to afford to live here anymore, because Tierney gave all his friends from away the expensive jobs; and then they bought land here, which used to be cheap, and built these big fancy houses. So now normal people can’t afford to live here, unless they were lucky enough to already own a house or land, like my mom and Winter.

But then Tierney got caught doing something bad, sneaking money from his company or something, and ICE got bought by a bigger com-pany, and they shut down all their operations in Maine, and all the people who worked there got thrown out of work and a lot of them who did own their own houses or land got them taken away because they couldn’t afford to pay their bills anymore. Then people *really* hated Thomas Tier-ney; but it didn’t do any good, because he never even got in trouble for what he did. I mean he didn’t go to jail or anything, and he didn’t lose his money or his house down in Kennebunkport or his yacht or his private airplane.

As a matter of fact, the opposite happened: he bought the land next to Winter’s. Winter dropped by the day he found out about it.

“That sumbitch bought old Lonnie Packard’s farm!” he yelled.

Me and Cody looked at each other and sort of smirked, but we didn’t say anything. I could tell Cody wanted to laugh, like I did—who the hell actually says “sumbitch?”—but at the same time it was scary, because we’d never seen Winter get mad before.

“I can’t blame Lonnie,” Winter went on, shifting from one foot to the other and tugging at his cap. “He had to sell his lobster boat last year ‘cause he couldn’t pay his taxes, and then he had that accident and couldn’t pay the hospital. And it’s a salt farm right there on the ocean, so he never got much out of it except the view.”

Cody asked, “Why didn’t he sell it to you?”

Winter whacked his palm against the wall. “That’s what I said! I told Lonnie long time ago, ever he wanted to sell that land, I’d take it. But yes-terday he told me, ‘Winter, your pockets just ain’t that deep.’ I said, ‘Well, Lonnie, how deep is deep?’ And he pointed out there at the Atlantic Ocean, and said, ‘You see that? You go out to the Grand Banks and find the deep-est part, and I’m telling you it ain’t deep as Thomas Tierney’s pockets.’ “

So that was that. Tell you the truth, I didn’t give much thought to it. Where we snowboarded in the woods was safely on Winter’s property, I knew that; besides which, it was late spring now, and me and Cody were busy working on that half-pipe behind Winter’s house and, once it was done, skating on it.

Sometimes Winter’s wife would come out and watch us. Winter had made her a bench from a hunk of oak, laid slats across it, and carved her name on the seat, VALA, with carved leaves and vines coming out of the letters. The bench was set up on a little rise, so that you could look out across the tops of the trees and just catch a glimpse of the ocean, silver-blue above the green. Vala was so tiny she looked like another kid sitting there, watching us and laughing when we fell, though never in a mean way. Her laugh was like her eyes: there was a kind of coldness to it, but it wasn’t nasty, more like she had never seen anyone fall before and every time it hap-pened (which was a lot) it was a surprise to her. Even though it was warmer now, she always wore that same blue windbreaker, and over it a sweatshirt that I recognized as one of Winter’s, so big it was like a saggy dress. It could get wicked hot out there at the edge of the woods, but I never saw her take that sweatshirt off.

“Aren’t you hot?” I asked her once. She’d brought some water for us and some cookies she’d made, gingersnaps that were thin and brittle as ice and so spicy they made your eyes sting.

“Hot?” She shook her head. “I never get warm. Except with Winter.” She smiled then, one of her spooky smiles that always made me nervous.

“I tell him it’s the only time winter is ever warm, when he is lying beside me.”

I felt my face turn red. On my chin, the spot where she had touched me throbbed as though someone had shoved a burning cigarette against my skin. Vala’s smile grew wider, her eyes too. She began to laugh.

“You’re still a boy.” For a moment she sounded almost like my mother. “Good boys, you and your friend. You will grow up to be good men. Not like this man Tierney, who thinks he can own the sea by buying salt. There is nothing more dangerous than a man who thinks he has power.” She lifted her head to gaze into the trees, then turned to stare at me. “Except for one thing.”

But she didn’t say what that was.

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I had always heard a lot about Thomas Tierney, and even though I had never seen him, there were signs of him everywhere around Shaker Harbor. The addition to the library; the addition to the school; the big old disused mill—renamed the ICE Mill—that he bought and filled with a thousand tiny cubicles, each with its own computer and its own telephone. The ICE Mill employed so many people that some of them drove two hours each way to work—there weren’t enough people around Shaker Harbor to fill it.

But now it was empty, with big FOR SALE signs on it. Winter said it would stay empty, too, because no one in Paswegas County could afford to buy it.

“And no one outside of Paswegas County would *want* to buy it,” he added. “Watch that doesn’t drip—”

I was helping Winter varnish a crib he’d made, of wood milled from an elm tree that had died of the blight. He wouldn’t say who it was for, even when I asked him outright, but I assumed it was a present for Vala. She didn’t look pregnant, and I was still a little fuzzy about the precise details of what exactly might make her pregnant, in spite of some stuff me and Cody checked out online one night. But there didn’t seem much point in making a trip to Iceland to get a wife if you weren’t going to have kids. That’s what Cody’s dad said, anyway, and he should know since Cody has five brothers and twin sisters.

“I think they should make the mill into an indoor skate park,” I said, touching up part of the crib I’d missed. “That would be sweet.”

We were working outside, so I wouldn't inhale varnish fumes, in the shadow of a tower of split logs that Winter sold as firewood. I had to be care-ful that sawdust didn't get onto the newly varnished crib, or bugs.

Winter laughed. "Not much money in skate parks."

"I'd pay."

"That's my point." Winter shoved his cap back from his forehead. "Ready to break for lunch?"

Usually Winter made us sandwiches, Swiss cheese and tomato and horseradish sauce. Sometimes Vala would make us lunch, and then I'd lie and say I wasn't hungry or had already eaten, since the sandwiches she made mostly had fish in them—not tuna fish, either—and were on these tiny little pieces of bread that tasted like cardboard.

But today Winter said we'd go into town and get something from Shelley's Place, the hot dog stand down by the harbor. It was warm out, mid-August; school would start soon. I'd spent the summer hanging out with Cody and some of our friends, until the last few weeks, when Cody had gone off to Bible camp.

That's when Winter put me to work. Because along with the crib, Win-ter had started building a house—a real house, not an addition to the school bus. I helped him clear away brush, then helped build the forms for the foundation to be poured into. Once the concrete cured, we began fram-ing the structure. Sometimes Vala helped, until Winter yelled at her to stop, anyway. Then she'd go off to tend the little garden she'd planted at the edge of the woods.

Now I didn't know where Vala was. So I put aside the can of varnish and hopped into Winter's pickup, and we drove into town. Most of the summer people had already left, but there were still a few sailboats in the harbor, including one gigantic yacht, the *Ice Queen*, a three-masted schooner that belonged to Thomas Tierney. According to Winter she had a crew of ten, not just a captain and mate and deckhands but a cook and house-keeper, all for Tierney; as well as a red-and-white-striped mainsail, not that you'd ever have any trouble telling her apart from any of the other boats around here.

When he saw the *Ice Queen*, Winter scowled. But there was no other sign of Tierney, not that I could see. A few summer holdovers stood in line

in front of Shelley's little food stand, trying to act like they fit in with the locals, even though the only other people were contractors working on job sites.

And Lonnie Packard. He was at the very front of the line, paying for a hot dog with onions and sauerkraut wrapped in a paper towel. It was the first time I'd seen Lonnie since I'd heard about him selling his farm to Thomas Tierney, and from the look on Winter's face, it was the first time he'd seen him, too. His mouth was twisted like he wasn't sure if he was going to smile or spit something out, but then Lonnie turned and nodded at him.

"Winter," he said. He pronounced it "Wintah" in this exaggerated way he had, like he was making fun of his own strong accent. "How's it hanging?"

Winter poked at the bill of his cap and gave his head a small shake. "Not bad." He looked at Lonnie's hot dog, then flashed me a sideways grin. "Now *that* looks like lunch. Right, Justin?"

So that's how I knew Winter wasn't going to stay pissed about Lonnie selling his farm, which was kind of a relief.

But Lonnie didn't look relieved. He looked uncomfortable, although Lonnie usually looked uncomfortable. He was a big rough-faced guy, not as tall as Winter but definitely plus-sized, with a bushy brown beard and baggy jeans tucked into high rubber fisherman's boots, which kind of surprised me since I knew he'd had to sell his boat. Then I remembered all the money he must have gotten from Thomas Tierney; enough to buy another boat, probably. Enough to buy anything he wanted.

"Gotta run," said Lonnie. "Got you an assistant there, eh, Winter?"

"Justin does good work," said Winter, and moved up to the window to place our order. For a moment Lonnie stared at him like he was going to say something else, but Winter was already talking to Shelley.

Instead, Lonnie glanced at me again. It was a funny look, not like he was going to speak to me, more like he was trying to figure something out. Lonnie's not stupid, either. He puts on that heavy accent and acts like he's never been south of Bangor, but my mother said he actually has a law de-gree and fishes just because he likes it better than being a lawyer, which I think I would, too. I waited to see if he was going to talk to me, but instead he turned and walked quickly to where a brand-new SUV was parked in one of the spots reserved for fishermen, got inside, and drove off. I watched

him go, then angled up beside Winter to get my food.

Shelley gave me a quick smile and went back to talking to Winter. “See you’re putting a house up by your place,” she said, and handed him a paper towel with two hot dogs on it, a container of fried clams for Winter, and two bottles of Moxie. Winter nodded but didn’t say anything, just passed her some money.

“Regular housing boom going on down there,” Shelley added, then looked past us to the next customer. “Can I help you?”

We drove back to Winter’s place and ate, sitting outside on a couple of lawn chairs and listening to woodpeckers in the pine grove. The air smelled nice, like sawdust and varnish and fried clams. When I was almost done, Vala stepped out of the school bus and walked over to me.

“*Ertu buinn?*” she said teasingly. “Are you finished? And you didn’t save any for me?”

I looked uncertainly at Winter, still chewing.

“Mmm-mm,” he said, flapping his hand at me. “None for her! Nothing unhealthy!”

“Hmph.” Vala tossed her head, black ponytails flying. “Like I’d eat that—it’s nothing but grease.”

She watched disapprovingly as the last fried clam disappeared into Winter’s mouth, then looked at me. “Come here, Justin. I want to show you something.”

“Hey!” Winter called in mock alarm as Vala beckoned me towards the edge of the woods. “He’s on the clock!”

“Now he’s off,” retorted Vala, and stuck her tongue out. “Come on.”

Vala was strange. Sometimes she acted like my mother, grumpy about me forgetting to take my shoes off when I went into the school bus, or if me and Cody made too much noise. Other times, like now, she acted more like a girl my own age, teasing and unpredictable.

The way she looked changed, too. I don’t mean her clothes—she pretty much wore the same thing all the time—but the way that sometimes she would look old, like my mom does, and other times she’d look the



same age as me and my friends. Which creeped me out, especially if it was one of those times when she was acting young, too.

Fortunately, just then she was acting young but looking older, like someone who would be married to Winter. For one thing, she was wearing his clothes, a pair of jeans way too big for her and cuffed up so much you couldn't even see her shoes, and that baggy sweatshirt, despite it being so hot.

"I said *come*," she repeated, and whacked me on the shoulder.

I stood hastily and followed her, wondering if everyone in Iceland was like this, or if it was just Vala.

Under the trees everything was green and gold and warm; not hot like out in the full sun, but not cool, either. It made me sweat, and my sweat and the dim light made the mosquitoes come out, lots of them, though they never seemed to bother Vala, and after a few minutes I ignored them and (mostly) forgot about them. The ground was soft and smelled like worms, a good smell that made me think of fishing, and now and then we'd go by a kind of tree that smelled so good I'd stop for a second, a tree that Winter calls Balm of Gilead, because its buds smell like incense.

Winter owned a lot of land, more than a hundred acres. Some of it he cut for firewood or lumber, but not this part. This part he left wild, because it joined up with Lonnie's land—Thomas Tierney's land, now—and because it was old-growth forest. People think that all the woods in Maine are wild and old, but most of it isn't much older than what you'd find someplace like New Jersey—the trees were cut hundreds or maybe a thousand years ago by the Passamaquoddy or other Indians, and when those trees grew back they were cut by Vikings, and when those trees grew back they were cut by the English and the French and everyone else, all the way up till now.

So there's actually not a lot of true virgin forest, even if the trees look ancient, like what you see in a movie when they want you to think it's someplace totally wild, when it's really, like, trees that are maybe forty or fifty years old. Baby trees.

But these trees weren't like that. These were old trees—wolf trees, some of them, the kind of trees that Winter usually cuts down. A wolf tree is a big crooked tree with a huge canopy that hogs all the light and soil and crowds out the other trees. Wolf trees are junk trees, because they're crooked and spread out so much they're not much good for lumber, and they overwhelm other, smaller trees and keep them from growing up tall

and straight so they can be harvested.

When I was little I'd go with Winter into the woods to watch him work, and I was always afraid of the wolf trees. Not because there was anything scary about them—they looked like ordinary trees, only big.

But I thought wolves lived in them. When I said that to Winter once, he laughed.

"I thought that too, when I was your age." He was oiling his chain saw, getting ready to limb a wolf tree, a red oak. Red oaks smell terrible when you cut them, the raw wood stinks—they smell like dog crap. "Want to know the real reason they call them that?"

I nodded, breathing through my mouth.

"It's because a thousand years ago, in England and around there, they'd hang outlaws from a tree like this. Wolf's-head trees, they called them, because the outlaws were like wolves, preying on weaker people."

Where the wolf trees grew here, they had shaded out most other trees. Now and then I saw an old apple tree overgrown with wild grape vines, remnants of Lonnie's family farm. Because even though this was old-growth forest, birds and animals don't know that. They eat fruit from the farm then poop out the seeds—that's how you get apple trees and stuff like that in the middle of the woods.

I was getting hot and tired of walking. Vala hadn't said anything since we started, hadn't even looked back at me, and I wondered if she'd forgot-ten I was even there. My mother said pregnancy makes women spacey, more than usual even. I was trying to think of an excuse to turn back, when she stopped.

"Here," she said.

We'd reached a hollow on the hillside above the farm. I could just make out the farmhouse and barn and outbuildings, some apple trees and the overgrown field that led down to the ocean. There was no real beach there, just lots of big granite rocks, also a long metal dock that I didn't remember having seen before.

It was still a pretty spot, tucked into the woods. A few yards from the farmhouse, more trees marched down to a cliff above the rocky beach. Small trees, all twisted from the wind: except for three huge white pines,

each a hundred feet tall.

Winter called these the King's Pines, and they were gigantic.

"These trees are ancient," he'd told me, pointing up at one. "See anything up there?"

I squinted. I knew bald eagles nested near the ocean, but I didn't see anything that looked like a nest. I shook my head.

Winter put his hand on my shoulder and twisted me till I was staring almost straight up. "There, on the trunk—see where the bark's been notched?"

I saw it then, three marks of an axe in the shape of an arrow.

"That's the King's Mark," said Winter. "Probably dating back to about 1690. That means these were the King's Trees, to be used for masts in the King's naval fleet. Over three hundred years ago, this was a big tree. And it was probably at least three hundred years old then."

Now, with Vala, I could see the King's Pines jutting out above the other trees, like the masts of a schooner rising from a green sea. I figured that's what Vala was going to show me, and so I got ready to be polite and act like I already didn't know about them.

Instead she touched my arm and pointed just a few feet away, towards a clearing where trees had grown around part of the pasture.

"Whoa," I whispered.

In the middle of the clearing was a bush. A big bush, a quince, its long thin branches covered with green leaves and small red flowers—brilliant red, the color of Valentines, and so bright after the dim woods that I had to blink.

And then, after blinking, I thought something had gone wrong with my eyes; because the bush seemed to be *moving*. Not moving in the wind—there wasn't any wind—but moving like it was breaking apart then coming back together again, the leaves lifting away from the branches and flicker-ing into the air, going from dark green to shining green like metallic paint, and here and there a flash of red like a flower had spun off, too.

But what was even more bizarre was that the bush made a noise. It

was *buzzing*, not like bees but like a chain saw or weed whacker, a high-pitched sound that got louder, then softer, then louder again. I rubbed my eyes and squinted into the overgrown field, thinking maybe Thomas Tierney had hired someone to clean up, and that's what I was hearing.

There was no one there, just tall grass and apple trees and rocks, and beyond that the cliff and open sea.

"Do you see what they are?"

Vala's voice was so close to my ear that I jumped, then felt my skin prickle with goose bumps at her breath, cold as though a freezer door had opened. I shook my head and she touched my sleeve, her hand cold through the cloth, and led me into the clearing, until the bush rose above us like a red cloud.

"See?" she murmured.

The bush was full of hummingbirds—hundreds of them, darting in and out as though the bush were a city, and the spaces between the leaves streets and alleys. Some hovered above the flowers to feed, though most flew almost too fast to see. Some sat on the branches, perfectly still, and that was the weirdest thing of all, like seeing a raindrop hanging in the air.

But they didn't stay still; just perched long enough that I could get a look at one, its green green wings and the spot of red on its throat, so deep a red it was like someone had crushed its tiny body by holding it too hard. I thought maybe I could hold it, too, or touch it, anyway.

So I tried. I stood with my palm open and held my breath and didn't move. Hummingbirds whizzed around like I was part of the quince, but they didn't land on me.

I glanced at Vala. She was doing the same thing I was, this amazed smile on her face, holding both arms out in front of her so she reminded me of Winter when he was dowsing. The hummingbirds buzzed around her, too, but didn't stop. Maybe if one of us had been wearing red. Humming-birds like red.

Vala wasn't wearing red, just Winter's grubby old gray sweatshirt and jeans. But she looked strange standing there, eerie even, and for a second I had this weird feeling that I wasn't seeing Vala at all, that she had disappeared, and I was standing next to a big gray rock.

The feeling was so strong that it crept me out. I opened my mouth, I was going to suggest that we head back to Winter's house, when a hummingbird flickered right in front of Vala's face. Right in front of Vala's eye.

"Hey!" I yelled; and at the same instant Vala shouted, a deep grunting noise that had a word in it, but not an English word. Her hand flashed in front of her face, there was a greenish blur, and the bird was gone.

"Are you okay?" I said. I thought the hummingbird's sharp beak had stabbed her eye. "Did it—?"

Vala brought her hands to her face and gasped, blinking quickly. "I'm sorry! It frightened me—so close, I was surprised—"

Her hands dropped. She gazed at the ground by her feet. "Oh no."

Near the toe of one rubber shoe, the hummingbird lay motionless, like a tiny bright green leaf.

"Oh, I am sorry, Justin!" cried Vala. "I only wanted you to see the tree with all the birds. But it scared me—"

I crouched to look at the dead hummingbird. Vala gazed back into the woods.

"We should go," she said. She sounded unhappy, even nervous. "Win-ter will think we got lost and get mad at me for taking you away. You need to work," she added, and gave me a tight smile. "Come on."

She walked away. I stayed where I was. After a moment I picked up a stick and tentatively prodded at the dead bird. It didn't move.

It was on its back, and it looked sadder that way. I wanted to turn it over. I poked it again, harder.

It still didn't budge.

Cody doesn't mind touching dead things. I do. But the hummingbird was so small, only as long as my finger. And it was beautiful, with its black beak and the red spot at its throat and those tiny feathers, more like scales. So I picked it up.

"Holy crap," I whispered.

It was heavy. Not heavy like maybe a bigger bird would have been, a sparrow or chickadee, but *heavy*, like a rock. Not even a rock—it reminded me of one of those weights you see hanging from an old clock, those metal things shaped like pinecones or acorns, but when you touch them they feel heavy as a bowling ball, only much smaller.

The hummingbird was like that—so little I could cradle it in my cupped palm, and already cold. I guessed that rigor mortis had set in, the way it does when you hang a deer. Very gently I touched the bird's wing. I even tried to wiggle it, but the wing didn't move.

So I turned the bird in my cupped palm onto its stomach. Its tiny legs were folded up like a fly's, its eyes dull. Its body didn't feel soft, like feathers. It felt hard, solid as granite; and cold.

But it looked exactly like a live hummingbird, emerald green where the sun hit it, beak slightly curved; a band of white under the red throat. I ran my finger along its beak, then swore.

“What the frig?”

A bright red bead welled up where the dead bird's beak had punctured my skin, sharp as a nail.

I sucked my finger, quickly looked to make sure Vala hadn't seen me. I could just make her out in the distance, moving through the trees. I felt in my pocket till I found a wadded-up Kleenex, wrapped the hummingbird in it, and very carefully put it into my pocket. Then I hurried after Vala.

We walked back in silence. Only when the skeletal frame of the new house showed brightly through the trees did Vala turn to me.

“You saw the bird?” she asked.

I looked at her uneasily. I was afraid to lie, but even more afraid of what she might do if she knew what was in my pocket.

Before I could reply, she reached to touch the spot on my chin. I felt a flash of aching cold as she stared at me, her dark eyes somber but not unkind.

“I did not mean to hurt it,” she said quietly. “I have never seen a bird like that one, not so close. I was scared. Not scared—startled. My reaction

was too fast,” she went on, and her voice was sad. Then she smiled and glanced down at my jeans pocket.

“You took it,” she said.

I turned away, and Vala laughed. In front of the house, Winter looked up from a pile of two-by-sixes.

“Get your butt over here, Justin!” he yelled. “Woman, don’t you go distracting him!”

Vala stuck her tongue out again, then turned back to me. “He knows,” she said matter-of-factly. “But maybe you don’t tell your friend? Or your mother.”

And she walked over to kiss Winter’s sunburned cheek.

I muttered, “Yeah, sure,” then crossed to where I’d left the varnish. Vala stood beside her husband and sighed as she stared at the cloudless sky and the green canopy of trees stretching down to the bay. A few boats under sail moved slowly across the blue water. One was a three-masted schooner with a red-striped mainsail: Thomas Tierney’s yacht.

“So, Vala,” said Winter. He winked at his wife. “You tell Justin your news yet?”

She smiled. “Not yet.” She pulled up the sweatshirt so I could see her stomach sticking out. “Here—”

She beckoned me over, took my hand, and placed it on her stomach. Despite the heat, her hand was icy cold. So was her stomach; but I felt a sudden heat beneath my palm, and then a series of small thumps from in-side her belly. I looked at her in surprise.

“It’s the baby!”

“*Eg veit,*” she said, and laughed. “I know.”

“Now don’t go scaring him off, talking about babies,” said Winter. He put his arm around his wife. “I need him to help me finish this damn house before it snows.”

I went back to varnishing. The truth is, I was glad to have something to

do, so I wouldn't think about what had happened. When I got home that evening I put the hummingbird in a drawer, wrapped in an old T-shirt. For a while I'd look at it every night, after my mother came in to give me a kiss; but after a week or so I almost forgot it was there.

\* \* \* \*

A few days later Cody got back from Bible camp. It was September now. Labor Day had come and gone, and most of the summer people. School started up. Me and Cody were in eighth grade; we were pretty sick of being with the same people since kindergarten, but it was okay. Some days we skated over at Winter's place after school. It was getting crowded there, with the piles of split firewood and all the stacks of lumber for the new house, and sometimes Winter yelled at us for getting in the way.

But mostly everything was like it usually was, except that Vala was getting more pregnant and everyone was starting to think about winter coming down.

You might not believe that people really worry about snow all the time, but here they do. My mother had already gotten her firewood from Winter back in August, and so had most of his other regular customers. Day by day, the big stacks of split wood dwindled, as Winter hauled them off for delivery.

And day by day the new house got bigger, so that soon it looked less like a kid's drawing of a stick house and more like a fairy-tale cottage come to life, with a steep roof and lots of windows, some of them square and some of them round, like portholes, and scallop-shaped shingles stained the color of cranberries. I helped with that part, and inside, too, which was great.

Because inside—inside was amazing. Winter did incredible things with wood, everyone knew that. But until then, I had only seen the things he made for money, like furniture, or things he made to be useful, like the cabinets he'd done for my mother.

Now I saw what Winter had done for himself and Vala. And if the outside of the little house looked like a fairy tale, the inside looked like something from a dream.

Winter usually carved from pine, which is a very soft wood. But he'd used oak for the beams, and covered them with faces—wind-faces with their mouths open to blow, foxes and wolves grinning from the corners,



dragons and people I didn't recognize but who Vala said were spirits from Iceland.

"*Huldufolk*," she said when I asked about them. "The hidden people."

But they weren't hidden here. They were carved on the main beam that went across the living room ceiling, and on the oak posts in each corner, peeking out from carved leaves and vines and branches that made the posts look almost like real trees. There were *huldufolk* carved into the cupboards, and on benches and cabinets and bookshelves, and even on the headboard that Winter had made from a single slab of chestnut, so highly polished with beeswax that the entire bedroom smelled like honey.

So even though the house looked small from the outside, when you got inside you could get lost, wandering around and looking at all the wonder-ful carved things. Not just carved so the wood resembled something new, but so that you could see what was *inside* the wood, knots and whorls turned to eyes and mouths, the grain sanded and stained till it felt soft, the way skin might feel if it grew strong enough to support walls and ceilings and joists, while still managing to remain, somehow, skin, and alive.

It was the most amazing house I've ever seen. And maybe the most amazing thing wasn't that it made me want to live in it, but that after spending hours working on it, I began to feel that the house lived in *me*, the way the baby lived inside Vala.

Only, of course, I could never tell anyone that, especially Cody. He would think I'd gone nuts from inhaling varnish fumes—even though I wore a dust mask, like Vala wore a fancy ventilating mask that made her look like Darth Vader.

She was working inside, too, building a stone fireplace. She found rocks in the woods and brought them up in a wheelbarrow. Big rocks, too, I was amazed she could lift them.

"Don't tell Winter," she whispered to me when I found her once, heft-ing a huge chunk of granite from the edge of the woods. "He'll just worry, and yell at me. And then *I* will yell at *you*," she added, and narrowed her spooky blue-black eyes.

Once the rocks were all piled inside she took forever, deciding which one would go where in the fireplace. When I made a joke about it she

frowned.

“You do not want to make rocks angry, Justin.” She wasn’t kidding, either. She looked pissed off. “Because rocks have a very, very long mem-ory.”

It was early morning, just after seven on a Saturday. My mom had dropped me off at Winter’s place on her way to see a client. It was a beautiful day, Indian summer, the leaves just starting to turn. I could see two sailboats on the water, heading south for the winter. I would rather have been skating with Cody, but Winter was anxious to get the inside of his house finished before it got too cold, so I said I’d come over and help trim up some windows.

Winter was outside. Vala, after yelling at me about the rocks, had gone up to the bedroom to get something. I yawned, wishing I’d brought my iPod, when upstairs Vala screamed.

I froze. It was a terrifying sound, not high-pitched like a woman’s voice but deep and booming. And it went on and on, without her taking a breath. I started for the steps as Winter raced in. He knocked me aside and took the stairs two at a time.

*“Vala!”*

I ran upstairs after him, through the empty hall and into the bedroom. Vala stood in front of the window, clutching her face as she gazed outside. Winter grabbed her shoulders.

“Is it the baby?” he cried. He tried to pull her towards him, but she shook her head, then pushed him away so violently that he crashed against the wall.

“What is it?” I ran to the window. Vala fell silent as I looked out across the yellowing canopy of leaves.

“Oh no.” I stared in disbelief at the cliff above the Bay. “The King’s Pines—”

I rubbed my eyes, hardly aware of Winter pushing me aside so he could stare out.

*“No!”* he roared.

One of the three great trees was gone—the biggest one, the one that stood nearest to the cliff edge. A blue gap showed where it had been, a chunk of sky that made me feel sick and dizzy. It was like lifting my own hand to find a finger missing. My chin throbbed and I turned so the others wouldn't see me crying.

Winter pounded the windowsill. His face was dead white, his eyes so red they looked like they'd been smeared with paint. That frightened me more than anything, until I looked up and saw Vala.

She had backed against the wall—an unfinished wall, just gray Sheetrock, blotched where the seams had been coated with putty. Her face had paled, too; but it wasn't white.

It was gray. Not a living gray, like hair or fur, but a dull, mottled color, the gray of dead bark or granite.

And not just her face but her hands and arms: everything I could see of her that had been skin, now seemed cold and dead as the heap of fireplace rocks downstairs. Her clothes drooped as though tossed on a boulder, her hair stiffened like strands of reindeer moss. Even her eyes dulled to black smears, save for a pinpoint of light in each, as though a drop of water had been caught in the hollow of a stone.

“Vala.” Winter came up beside me. His voice shook, but it was low and calm, as though he were trying to keep a frightened dog from bolting. “Vala, it's all right—”

He reached to stroke the slab of gray stone wedged against the wall, reindeer moss tangling between his fingers, then let his hand drop to move across a rounded outcropping.

“Think of the baby,” he whispered. “Think of the girl . . .”

The threads of reindeer moss trembled, the twin droplets welled and spilled from granite to the floor; and it was Vala there and not a stone at all, Vala falling into her husband's arms and weeping uncontrollably.

“It's *not* all right—it's *not* all right—”

He held her, stroking her head as I finally got the nerve up to speak.

“Was it—was it a storm?”

“A storm?” Abruptly Winter pulled away from Vala. His face dark-ened to the color of mahogany. “No, it’s not a storm—”

He reached for the window and yanked it open. From the direction of the cliff came the familiar drone of a chain saw.

“It’s Tierney!” shouted Winter. He turned and raced into the hall. Vala ran after him, and I ran after her.

“No—you stay here!” Winter stopped at the top of the stairs. “Justin, you wait right here with her—”

“No,” I said. I glanced nervously at Vala, but to my surprise she nodded.

“No,” she said. “I’m going, and Justin, too.”

Winter sucked his breath through his teeth.

“Suit yourself,” he said curtly. “But I’m not waiting for you. And listen—you stay with her, Justin, you understand me?”

“I will,” I said, but he was already gone.

Vala and I looked at each other. Her eyes were paler than I remem-bered, the same dull gray as the Sheetrock; but as I stared at her they grew darker, as though someone had dropped blue ink into a glass of water.

“Come,” she said. She touched my shoulder, then headed out the door after her husband. I followed.

All I wanted to do was run and catch up with Winter. I could have, too—over the summer I’d gotten taller, and I was now a few inches bigger than Vala.

But I remembered the way Winter had said *You stay with her, Justin, you understand me?* And the way he’d looked, as though I were a stranger, and he’d knock me over, or worse, if I disobeyed him. It scared me and made me feel sick, almost as sick as seeing the King’s Pine chopped down; but I had no time to think about that now. I could still hear the chain saw buzzing from down the hill, a terrible sound, like when you hear a truck brake but you know it’s not going to stop in time. I walked as

fast as I dared, Vala just a few steps behind me. When I heard her breathing hard I'd stop and try to keep sight of Winter far ahead of us.

But after a few minutes I gave up on that. He was out of sight, and I could only hope he'd get down to the cliff and stop whoever was doing the cutting, before another tree fell.

"Listen," said Vala, and grabbed my sleeve. I thought the chain saw was still running, but then I realized it was just an echo. Because the air grew silent, and Vala had somehow sensed it before I did. I looked at her and she stared back at me, her eyes huge and round and sky-blue, a color I'd never seen them.

"There is still time," she whispered. She made a strange deep noise in the back of her throat, a growl but not an animal growl; more like the sound of thunder, or rocks falling. "Hurry—"

We crashed through the woods, no longer bothering to stay on the path. We passed the quince bush shimmering through its green haze of feeding hummingbirds. Vala didn't pause, but I slowed down to look back, then stopped.

A vehicle was parked by the farmhouse, the same new SUV I'd seen that day down at Shelley's hot dog stand: Lonnie Packard's truck. As I stared, a burly figure came hurrying through the field, the familiar orange silhouette of a chain saw tucked under his arm. He jumped into the SUV, gunned the engine, and drove off.

I swore under my breath.

"Justin!" Vala's anxious voice came from somewhere in the woods. "Come on!"

I found her at the head of the trail near the cliff. Through a broken wall of scrawny, wind-twisted trees I could just make out the two remaining pines, and the bright yellow gash that was the stump of the one that had fallen. The sharp scent of pine resin and sawdust hung in the air, and the smell of exhaust fumes from the chain saw.

But there was no other sign of Lonnie, obviously, or of anyone else.

"Look," said Vala in a hoarse whisper. She clutched me and pulled me towards her, her touch so cold it was like I'd been shot up with Novocain. My entire arm went numb. "There! The boat—"

She pointed down to the boulder-strewn beach where the dock thrust into the bay. At the end of the dock bobbed a small motorboat, a Boston Whaler. Farther out, the hulking form of the *Ice Queen* rose above the gray water, sails furled.

She was at anchor. Several small forms moved across the deck. I squinted, trying to see if I recognized any of them. A frigid spasm shot through my ribs as Vala nudged me, indicating the rocks below.

“Is that him?” she hissed. “This man Tierney?”

I saw Winter loping across the beach towards the dock, jumping from one boulder to the next. On the shore, right next to the end of the dock, stood two men. One was tall, wearing an orange life vest and a blaze orange watch cap and high rubber boots. The other was shorter, white-haired, slightly heavysset, wearing sunglasses and a red-and-white windbreaker, striped like the *Ice Queen’s* sails.

“That’s him,” I said.

Vala fixed her intense sky-blue gaze on me. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah. I’ve seen his picture in the newspaper. And online.”

She stood at the top of the trail and stared down. An angry voice rose from the rocks—Winter’s—then another voice joined in, calmer, and a third, calm at first, then laughing. I heard Winter curse, words I couldn’t believe he knew. The third man, Tierney, laughed even harder.

I glanced at Vala, still staring at what was below us. One of her hands grasped the branch of a birch tree beside the path. She seemed to be think-ing; almost she might have been daydreaming, she looked so peaceful, like somehow she’d forgotten where she was and what was happening. Fi-nally, she shook her head. Without looking back at me, she snapped the branch from the tree, dropped it, and started down the trail towards the beach.

I started after her, then hesitated.

The branch lay across the narrow path at my feet. Where Vala had touched them, the leaves had shriveled and faded, from yellow-green to the dull gray of lichen, and the white birch bark had blackened into tight, charred-looking curls.

I tried to lift the branch. It was too heavy to move.

“It’s *my* land now.” Thomas Tierney’s voice echoed from the cliff face. “So I suggest you get the hell off it!”

I looked down to see Vala’s small form at the bottom of the trail, hopping lightly from one boulder to the next as she headed for the dock. I scrambled down the path after her.

But I couldn’t go as fast. For some reason, maybe because first Winter, then Vala had raced down before me, rocks had tumbled across the narrow trail. Not big rocks, but enough of them that I had to pick my way care-fully to keep from falling.

Not only that: in spots a white slick of frost covered the ground, so that my feet slipped, and once I almost fell and cracked my head. I stopped for a minute, panting. As I caught my breath, I looked away from the beach, to where the cliff plunged into a deep crevice in the granite.

There, caught in the gigantic crack so that it looked as though it had grown up from the rocks, was the fallen pine. It tilted over the water, black in the shadow of the cliff, its great branches still green and strong-looking, the smell of pine sap overpowering the smell of the sea. In its uppermost branches something moved, then lifted from the tree and flew out above the bay—a bald eagle, still mottled brown and black with its young plumage.

I couldn’t help it. I began to cry. Because no matter how strong and alive the tree looked, I knew it was dead. Nothing would bring it back again. It had been green when no one lived here but the Passamaquoddy, it had seen sailors come from far across the sea, and tourists in boats from Paswegas Harbor, and maybe it had even seen the *Ice Queen* earlier that morning with her red-and-white-striped mainsail and Thomas Tierney on the deck, watching as Lonnie Packard took a chain saw to its great trunk, and the tree finally fell, a crash that I hadn’t heard.

But Vala had.

*You stay with her, Justin, you understand me?*

I took a deep breath and wiped my eyes, checked to make sure I could still see Vala on the rocks below, then continued my climb down. When I fi-nally reached the bottom, I still had to be careful—there were tidal

pools everywhere between the granite boulders, some of them skimmed with ice and all of them greasy with kelp and sea lettuce. I hurried as fast as I could towards the dock.

“*You don’t own those trees.*” Winter’s voice rang out so loudly that my ears hurt. “Those are the King’s Pines—no man owns them.”

“Well, I own this land,” retorted Tierney. “And if that doesn’t make me the goddamn king, I don’t know what does.”

I clambered over the last stretch of rocks and ran up alongside Vala. Winter stood a few yards away from us, towering above Thomas Tierney. The other man stood uneasily at the edge of the dock. I recognized him—Al Alford, who used to work as first mate on one of the daysailers in Paswegas Harbor. Now, I guessed, he worked for Tierney.

“King?” Vala repeated. “*Hann er klikkapor.*” She looked at me from the corner of her eyes. “He’s nuts.”

Maybe it was her saying that, or maybe it was me being pissed at myself for crying. But I took a step out towards Tierney and shouted at him.

“It’s against the law to cut those trees! It’s against the law to do any cutting here without a permit!”

Tierney turned to stare at me. For the first time he looked taken aback, maybe even embarrassed or ashamed. Not by what he’d done, I knew that; but because someone else—a kid—knew he’d done it.

“Who’s this?” His voice took on that fake-nice tone adults use when they’re caught doing something, like smoking or drinking or fighting with their wives. “This your son, Winter?”

“No,” I said.

“Yes,” said Vala, and under her breath said the word she’d used when I first met her: *feogar*.

But Winter didn’t say anything, and Tierney had already turned away.

“Against the law?” He pulled at the front of his red-and-white wind-breaker, then shrugged. “I’ll pay the fine. No one goes to jail for cutting down trees.”



Tierney smiled then, as though he was thinking of a joke no one else would ever get, and added, "Not me, anyway."

He looked at Al Alford and nodded. Al quickly turned and walked—ran, practically—to where the Boston Whaler rocked against the metal railing at the end of the dock. Tierney followed him, but slowly, pausing once to stare back up the hillside—not at the King's Pines but at the farm-house, its windows glinting in the sun where they faced the cliff. Then he walked to where Alford waited by the little motorboat, his hand out to help Tierney climb inside.

I looked at Winter. His face had gone slack, except for his mouth: he looked as though he were biting down on something hard.

"He's going to cut the other ones, too," he said. He didn't sound disbelieving or sad or even angry; more like he was saying something everyone knew was true, like *It'll snow soon* or *Tomorrow's Sunday*. "He'll pay the twenty-thousand-dollar fine, just like he did down in Kennebunkport. He'll wait and do it in the middle of the night when I'm not here. And the trees will be gone."

"No, he will not," said Vala. Her voice was nearly as calm as Winter's. There was a subdued roar as the motorboat's engine turned over, and the Boston Whaler shot away from the dock, towards the *Ice Queen*.

"No," Vala said again, and she stooped and picked up a rock. A small gray rock, just big enough to fit inside her fist, one side of it encrusted with barnacles. She straightened and stared at the ocean, her eyes no longer sky-blue but the pure deep gray of a stone that's been worn smooth by the sea, with no pupil in them; and shining like water in the sun.

"*Skammastu pei, Thomas Tierney. Farthu til fjandanns!*" she cried, and threw the rock towards the water. "*Farthu! Ldttu peog hverfa!*"

I watched it fly through the air, then fall, hitting the beach a long way from the waterline with a small thud. I started to look at Vala, and stopped.

From the water came a grinding sound, a deafening noise like thunder; only this was louder than a thunderclap and didn't last so long, just a fraction of a second. I turned and shaded my eyes, staring out to where the Boston Whaler arrowed towards Tierney's yacht. A sudden gust of wind stung my eyes with spray; I blinked, then blinked again in amazement.

A few feet from the motorboat a black spike of stone shadowed the water. Not a big rock—it might have been a dolphin’s fin, or a shark’s, but it wasn’t moving.

And it hadn’t been there just seconds before. It had never been there, I knew that. I heard a muffled shout, then the frantic whine of the motor-boat’s engine being revved too fast—and too late.

With a sickening crunch, the Boston Whaler ran onto the rock. Winter yelled in dismay as Alford’s orange-clad figure was thrown into the water. For a second Thomas Tierney remained upright, his arms flailing as he tried to grab at Alford. Then, as though a trapdoor had opened beneath him, he dropped through the bottom of the boat and disappeared.

Winter raced towards the water. I ran after him.

“Stay with Vala!” Winter grabbed my arm. Alford’s orange life vest gleamed from on top of the rock where he clung. On board the *Ice Queen*, someone yelled through a megaphone, and I could see another craft, a little inflated Zodiac, drop into the gray water. Winter shook me fiercely. “Justin! I said, *stay with her*—”

He looked back towards the beach. So did I.

Vala was nowhere to be seen. Winter dropped my arm, but before he could say anything there was a motion among the rocks.

And there was Vala, coming into sight like gathering fog. Even from this distance I could see how her eyes glittered, blue-black like a winter sky; and I could tell she was smiling.

\* \* \* \*

THE crew of the *Ice Queen* rescued Alford quickly, long before the Coast Guard arrived. Winter and I stayed on the beach for several hours, while the search and rescue crews arrived and the Navy Falcons flew by overhead, in case Tierney came swimming to shore, or in case his body washed up.

But it never did. That spar of rock had ripped a huge hole in the Boston Whaler, a bigger hole even than you’d think; but no one blamed Alford. All you had to do was take a look at the charts and see that there had never been a rock there, ever. Though it’s there now, I can tell you that. I see it every day when I look out from the windows at Winter’s house.

I never asked Vala about what happened. Winter had a grim expression when we finally went back to his place late that afternoon. Thomas Tierney was a multimillionaire, remember, and even I knew there would be an investigation and interviews and TV people.

But everyone on board the *Ice Queen* had witnessed what happened, and so had Al Alford; and while they'd all seen Winter arguing with Tierney, there'd been no exchange of blows, not even any pushing, and no threats on Winter's part—Alford testified to that. The King's Pine was gone, but two remained; and a bunch of people from the Audubon Society and the Sierra Club and places like that immediately filed a lawsuit against Tierney's estate, to have all the property on the old Packard Farm turned into a nature preserve.

Which I thought was good, but it still won't bring the other tree back.

One day after school, a few weeks after the boat sank, I was helping to put the finishing touches on Winter's house. Just about everything was done, except for the fireplace—there were still piles of rocks everywhere and plastic buckets full of mortar and flat stones for the hearth.

"Justin." Vala appeared behind me so suddenly I jumped. "Will you come with me, please?"

I stood and nodded. She looked really pregnant now, and serious.

But happy, too. In the next room we could hear Winter working with a sander. Vala looked at me and smiled, put a finger to her lips then touched her finger to my chin. This time, it didn't ache with cold.

"Come," she said.

Outside it was cold and gray, the middle of October, but already most of the trees were bare, their leaves torn away by a storm a few nights earlier. We headed for the woods behind the house, past the quince bush, its branches stripped of leaves and all the hummingbirds long gone to warmer places. Vala wore her same bright blue rubber shoes and Winter's rolled-up jeans.

But even his big sweatshirt was too small now to cover her belly, so my mother had knit her a nice big sweater and given her a warm plaid coat that made Vala look even more like a kid, except for her eyes and that way she would look at me sometimes and smile, as though we both knew a

secret. I followed her to where the path snaked down to the beach and tried not to glance over at the base of the cliff. The King's Pine had finally fallen and wedged between the crack in the huge rocks there, so that now seaweed was tangled in its dead branches, and all the rocks were covered with yellow pine needles.

"Winter has to go into town for a few hours," Vala said, as though answering a question. "I need you to help me with something."

We reached the bottom of the path and picked our way across the rocks until we reached the edge of the shore. A few gulls flew overhead, screaming, and the wind blew hard against my face and bare hands. I'd followed Vala outside without my coat. When I looked down, I saw that my fingers were bright red. But I didn't feel cold at all.

"Here," murmured Vala.

She walked, slowly, to where a gray rock protruded from the gravel beach. It was roughly the shape and size of an arm

Then I drew up beside Vala and saw that it really was an arm—part of one, anyway, made of smooth gray stone, like marble only darker, but with no hand and broken just above the elbow. Vala stood and looked at it, her lips pursed; then stooped to pick it up.

"Will you carry this, please?" she said.

I didn't say anything, just held out my arms, as though she were going to fill them with firewood. When she set the stone down I flinched—not because it was heavy, though it was, but because it looked exactly like a real arm. I could even see where the veins had been, in the crook of the elbow, and the wrinkled skin where the arm had bent.

"Justin," Vala said. I looked up to see her blue-black eyes fixed on me. "Come on. It will get dark soon."

I followed her as she walked slowly along the beach, like someone looking for sea glass or sand dollars. Every few feet she would stop and pick something up—a hand, a foot, a long piece of stone that was most of a leg—then turn and set it carefully into my arms. When I couldn't carry any more, she picked up one last small rock—a clenched fist—and made her way slowly back to the trail.

We made several more trips that day, and for several days after that.

Each time, we would return to the house and Vala would fit the stones into the unfinished fireplace, covering them with other rocks so that no one could see them. Or if you did see one, you'd think maybe it was just part of a broken statue, or a rock that happened to *look* like a foot, or a shoulder blade, or the cracked round back of a head.

I couldn't bring myself to ask Vala about it. But I remembered how the Boston Whaler had looked when the Coast Guard dragged it onshore, with a small ragged gash in its bow, and a much, much bigger hole in the bot-tom, as though something huge and heavy had crashed through it. Like a meteor, maybe. Or a really big rock, or like if someone had dropped a granite statue of a man into the boat.

Not that anyone had seen that happen. I told myself that maybe it re-ally was a statue—maybe a statue had fallen off a ship or been pushed off a cliff or something.

But then one day we went down to the beach, the last day actually, and Vala made me wade into the shallow water. She pointed at something just below the surface, something round and white, like a deflated soccer ball.

Only it wasn't a soccer ball. It was Thomas Tierney's head: the front of it, anyway, the one part Vala hadn't already found and built into the fire-place.

His face.

I pulled it from the water and stared at it. A green scum of algae covered his eyes, which were wide and staring. His mouth was open so you could see where his tongue had been before it broke off, leaving a jagged edge in the hole of his screaming mouth.

"*Loksins,*" said Vala. She took it from me easily, even though it was so heavy I could barely hold it. "At last ..."

She turned and walked back up to the house.

\* \* \* \*

THAT was three months ago. Winter's house is finished now, and Winter lives in it, along with Winter's wife.

And their baby. The fireplace is done, and you can hardly see where

there is a round broken stone at the very top, which if you squint and look at it in just the right light, like at night when only the fire is going, looks kind of like a face. Winter is happier than I've ever seen him, and my mom and I go over a lot, to visit him and Vala and the baby, who is just a few weeks old now and so cute you wouldn't believe it, and tiny, so tiny I was afraid to hold her at first but Vala says not to worry—I may be like her big brother now, but someday, when the baby grows up, she will be the one to always watch out for me. They named her Gerda, which means Protector; and for a baby she is incredibly strong.

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