

Between Here and Way Far Away

Chapter One

More days than not, some woman at a rest area or truck stop would notice Myrna Sweeney as she exited her glistening purple Peterbilt.

“That your truck?” they’d ask.

“Yup,” Myrna would answer.

“You drive it?”

“No one else.”

Before turning back to the man who waited for them ten steps away or to the car stuffed with too many kids and dogs, most said they’d never dare to do what she does, muscle a loaded eighteen-wheeler eighty feet long all over Maine and beyond. “On these roads? In winter?” they’d say. “*By yourself?*”

But a few persist. *How’d you learn?* they’d ask. *Where do you go?* and *Don’t you get lonely?* And occasionally, one or two would dare: *Can I buy you a cup of coffee?*

Usually, that’s all it would be. A cup of coffee.

Not always, though.

Myrna hadn’t known her commercial driver’s license would be powerful chick bait, but, hey. A lot easier than scouring dating apps or screwing up the courage to make the first move.

She’d answer their questions. The driving was easy, she’d tell the ladies. They could learn, too. She met lots of interesting people. Money was good, and she liked the freedom.

The hard part, she’d say, was staying awake.

Like on this desolate section of Interstate 95, a hundred plus miles of trees, trees and more trees. Good road, but boring as hell. Packed-in spruce, an occasional pine or cedar. Popple and maple made for a few spots of fall color after a summer's worth of green green green but were only gray skeletons now. Hadn't seen a half-dozen vehicles since she left Houlton. Nothing else to eyeball either.

Except Katahdin.

Myrna sipped her scorched coffee, kept track of the few exits, and watched for the three places where the forest grudgingly gave way and allowed for a glimpse of the mountain. If the weather was right, which it was. The sun was up, though barely, and the air clear and dry.

At the first spot, the two slumped basins and the east-facing summit, still winter-smothered in snow and ice, shimmered in the first traces of the peach-tinted dawn. Made for that familiar twang, right under her breastbone.

Then, like a blanket of snuffling fog, the trees won out again.

The next break would be in twenty-five miles, a wide-angle shot across frozen-solid Salmon Stream Lake where the luminous mountain hovered on the horizon to the west. Not as spectacular a view as when rolling north on the higher-up lanes, but still, some decent.

Then sixty-three miles to Bangor. After that, fewer trees, more to keep the brain engaged and the eyes open.

Rolling good so far. Plenty of time to get back home to Bart's Island. First, today's drop—42,000 pounds of potatoes, The County's finest—at the Humpty Dumpty chip factory south of Portland. On the flip-flop, pick up seedings for the Farm Store in Bucksport. Maybe Dana will be on the loading dock. Maybe she'll ask Myrna for dinner. Or an overnight. Anything's possible.

But if not, it'd be okay. Myrna was fine by herself. Good thing, because that's the way she was most every night, truth be told. She could bunk in her truck if she got held up. That's why she'd spent the big bucks on a super-deluxe sleeper cab. Everything she needed, right behind the driver's seat. Except a bathroom, but that's what rest areas and truck stops were for. When down for the night, she'd curl into her berth and cue up a movie. Can't beat a Hugh Grant rom-com for kicking back. Sexy devil.

Myrna swiped through tunes she'd stored on her iPhone. Singing in a truck cab was as good as crooning in the shower. Great acoustics. The engine made for a throaty bass, and the vibrations up through the seat? What a turn on. She wouldn't make it general knowledge, though she wished she dared to ask her trucker buddies if it worked that way for men. Did make thinking of Dana even more fun. Convenient that she traveled with a bed.

She cued up her driving fav, the Highwaymen, Willie singing lead. *I was a highwayman, along the coach roads I did ride*. She knew all the words, didn't matter if her voice cracked on the high notes. *Many a young maid lost her baubles to my trade*. Loved that line, belted it right out. She'd caught a few maid's baubles herself.

Last verse, Johnny Cash warbling. *And when I reach the other side, I'll find a place to rest my spirit if I can*, was so sad, she could barely stand it. Even broken-hearted blues would be an upper after that. With those self-driving vehicles coming up fast, probably just a matter of time before there'd be a country song where a guy's truck leaves him, too. The Stones for a mood switch, maybe? Still pretty early in the day, though, for that much raunch.

Exit 244, the ramp for Millinocket, whizzed by, and with it, her last flash of the mountain, over her right shoulder.

Gotta get this trip done. Home 20 and the bridge to Bart's for a long weekend. Maybe

best buddy Ev will be up to go to the Codger for pizza. That'd be cool.

What a jeezily boring ribbon of asphalt.

No point looking for a radio station since the stretch was a wicked dead zone. Nothing now to break up the monotony of all those goddamned trees until the exit for Orono.

Just as she was queuing up another tune, she caught a glimpse of something in the woodsy median, a deep gulch. Moving too fast to see for sure. Couldn't tell what, but it wasn't right. In her rear view were what looked like bush-hogged saplings. Were those fresh tire tracks? Down the median embankment of the northbound lanes? She hadn't noticed anything on the trip up yesterday.

Someone ditched? What else would leave that kind of a trail?

Might nobody else notice—looked like nobody had—unless they were high up in a truck cab like she was.

What if it was her? Or someone she knew?

She backed off on the accelerator. Mile marker 235 blurred by on her right.

She'd been cruising the limit, seventy-five. By the time she'd get the rig stopped, it'd be a two-mile walk back. At least ten to the next exit.

She could keep going. No one would know.

She was way too long and way too heavy to cheat with a uey on one of those turnarounds for emergency vehicles. So she'd have to go to the next exit and double back. Maybe she'd be able to spot whatever it was from the south rather than circle at the next exit. It'd save precious minutes, could mean the difference. All those downed trees, that would be the signal, even if she couldn't see what was in the gully. She'd stopped for accidents before, but she'd never been the first on the scene. Most times the Staties and the fire trucks and the EMTs were already there.

Well, shit. She'd been making such good time.

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Myrna grabbed the emergency kit from the outside storage box of her semi and yanked out the reflective triangles, then trotted back behind the trailer to set them in place. The kit in her left hand, she skidded and stumbled down the mud-slippery banks of the gulch that sliced through the median, grabbing at weeds and saplings to break her slide. Didn't help much, but she didn't fall either.

Her boots tangled in brush and dead grass, then, as she got close, crunched on glass and scattered debris. The smells smacked her in the face. That metallic sweetness—antifreeze—and rust, burned rubber and motor oil, overlaid the fresh-crushed spruce and pine. Only the faintest whiff of gasoline. What looked like a mangled front bumper was wrapped around a birch trunk.

The car was jammed in the crevasse, upside-down and nose-first, camouflaged from the road by the tangle of snapped spruce. The roof was flattened halfway to the body, the rear slightly elevated, the windows popped. A Dodge. Brown with a whitish salt coating. The rusty wheel wells said old.

Smells again, that dusty, burnt-rubber odor of a deployed air bag. Traces of sweat, mildew, and pissy bathroom, and the slimy residue in the bottom of a neglected refrigerator.

The poor dude hung upside down, suspended in his seat belt. His head was squeezed between his shoulders and the ceiling. Pressed against the shattered driver's side window was the Red Sox logo, two jaunty cherry-red stockings embroidered on the shoulder of his black hoodie. Glittery chunks of glass jutted from his face. His forehead was cratered, maybe from a collision with the rear-view mirror. His chest sandwiched the flattened airbag against the steering wheel. Blood pooled purplish inside his scalp and had ballooned his head into a garish bruise. More

puddled in the ceiling, congealed in the knots of the man's scraggly curls. His left hand laid palm-up beside his smashed skull. The dusky flesh looked like a too-old chuck roast. She reached through the broken window and nudged it. Stiff. Marble-slab cold. He must've been dead for hours. Probably sometime last night. Headlights busted or someone would have spied them in the dark. Not that he could have been saved. Gone before the wheels stopped spinning, most likely.

She peered around the man best she could, into the passenger side where the roof was even more squished. No more bodies, though pretzels, the kind like big logs, lay akimbo on the ceiling. A rubber ducky with sunglasses, a gold neck chain, and a helmet with a whirligig on top hung upside down from the inverted dash. The tiny propeller spun lazily.

For half a second, she considered grabbing the ducky, it was so cool, even though it would mean slithering her arm around the dead guy. No one would ever know. Then, *Jesus, Myrn! That is sick. Get a frigging grip.*

The space behind the front seats was crammed full, a tangled mess of mangled groceries, work boots, and a chain saw. A jar of bread and butter pickles had exploded green discs into the chaos. Splashes of yellow, like paint, though smelled like mustard, dripped down the back of the driver's seat. The contents of a box of Froot Loops was tossed all over like psychedelic snow. Some stuck crazily in the mustard.

She raised her head and tried to slow her breathing, then swallowed to keep her breakfast down. Outside was the housewifely-clean perfume of pine and spruce the car had plowed through. And mud. It was quiet, ghost-like except for a burble of snow melt further down the ravine. A fish crow screeched in the distance.

Myrna stepped away, slapped her hands on the crusty underside of the vehicle, and

sucked in a fresh lungful. She didn't have words that fit and never prayed anyway. She hoped silence would be enough.

Nothing more she could do for the unfortunate sucker but to see if she could rustle up some help. That's what was called for, help.

Christ, what a place to get it. Would 911 work? She patted her jacket over twice before she found her phone in a back pocket of her overalls, fumbled as she keyed in her password. The little wheel on the screen spun round and round as it searched.

No service. Shit.

A car zipped by going south. Didn't even slow.

Maybe she could get a signal up on the road. Or flag down another driver, if only one would appear.

She pulled back from the wreck and contemplated the climb up the embankment. But just as she turned, she thought she heard something.

There it was again. Sort of a squeak, not quite a whistle.

She froze, then swiveled her head and tried to locate the sound.

Snow melt? Wind? A hawk?

Again. But where?

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She circled to the other side of the car and pushed back the mangled saplings. The ravine was so steep that she almost slid underneath. Brush snagged her pants. She pulled loose, ignored the sound of ripping denim and the probable gash on her leg. Finally, feet planted, she leaned over, twisted, and peered into the inverted passenger side, back.

A baby. A tiny one, just a few months old. Strapped in a carrier, hanging suspended,

stomach and head down.

It was dressed in a yellow snowsuit. A Mickey Mouse stocking hat, black and white, poked askew from under the hood and almost covered one eye. A small arm waved feebly.

The baby blinked, stared at Myrna, and pushed out a tiny peep.

Myrna grabbed the handle of the door and tugged. The car ceiling was jammed into the frame of the door and had wedged it tight shut. It didn't budge. She tried the front door. Same. She struggled to the other side of the car. Those doors were stuck fast, too.

Son of a bitch.

She looked into the rear seat again. Couldn't see any blood. The baby was breathing. Its little face was flushed and puffy like an overripe peach. Who knows how long it had been hanging there? The man was cold and stiff. Rigor mortis. How long does that take? Six, eight hours? Definitely happened after dark last night, or someone would have noticed.

“Hold tight, Baby. You did good. Myrna's here. I'm coming after you.”

The baby waved again and squeaked.

The tyke was alive but maybe not much longer. Probably dehydrated and cold. She could smell it needed a diaper change. That red face was scary. The baby barely moved and whimpered only now and then. Any healthy kid would be bellowing. This one wasn't.

She could go for the police. She'd have to crawl back up the gully to her truck and drive until she got a cell signal, then loop back, yet again, to direct the cops. But that would mean leaving the kid behind.

That baby needed to be sprung from the wreckage. Now.

She stepped back, looked for options.

Weren't any except for her, and the only way in was through a window.

The openings big enough were the windshield and the back. They'd been popped but not mashed flat. Through the front meant slithering past the dead man. He filled more than half the space. And the nose of the car was jammed into the crevasse, hood down, so there was no room between the ground and the hood. That left the back.

The rear of the car was elevated with more space between scraped dirt and the overhanging trunk. The shattered window was a shark's jaw filled with jagged teeth of laminated glass.

Worse than awful.

Maybe she should try to get help. If only someone would stop. If only someone would frigging come by. Maybe she should be up on the road, not down here. Maybe try the phone again, up there. Sometimes signals get through, even in dead spots. Weather's good, that should help. Maybe she could drum up somebody.

But no, that's not right. That baby was in big trouble, and its best chance was her. She needed to move, and move now.

Start at the beginning. One thing at a time.

Gloves. She could be the only human between the baby and death, so it wouldn't do to slash her hands and bleed out. Her gloves were in her truck, not here.

What about the emergency kit? Where was it? Did she drop it on the ground while she checked out the driver?

Yes, there it was, over there.

She shook so bad that she wedged the bag between her knees and held her right hand steady with her left so she could unzip it. Gloves? Yes! Pliers, too. Foil blanket. Take that.

Kit nearby and gloved up, she was on her knees at the back window. She brushed and

tossed the shards into the trees. She could feel stabs on her legs from splinters she'd missed.

The baby's feeble mewlings pulled her faster. On her belly now, she wriggled close.

"Hey Baby, I'm here." She pulled dagger-like chunks out of the window frame with the pliers, one after another, and tossed them in the bushes. The child stared at her, its eyes wide and round. "I'm going to get you. Don't you worry, Myrna's coming." She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. She hadn't any baby practice since she left home and babysitting behind. Forever she'd thought. "Did you ever get rescued by a truck driver, Baby? Huh? This truck driver never rescued a baby neither. So that makes two of us."

The baby coughed, whimpered, then sneezed. A good cry had been whupped right out of him. Or her.

Best to go in opposite the baby. That'd give more room to maneuver. Though there wasn't much room, period. What with her tits and the roll around her middle, it'd be a tight squeeze.

She stuck her head in the opening. Glass on the underside of the ceiling. She brushed the chunks away, pushed the mangled groceries aside, shoved the chain saw into the front. She eased further in. The ground, still frozen a few inches down, was cold and wet under her thighs and knees. More Froot Loops poured insanely out of the smashed box. Some tangled in her hair.

The car seat with the baby in it hung to her left. She rolled over onto her right shoulder. The vehicle shifted with a metallic shriek. She stopped and the sound did, too.

She took a breath and adjusted her position gingerly. Couldn't go much farther, the squashed opening wouldn't allow for her hips. She inched towards the baby, craned her neck to see underneath the contraption that saved its life.

Two buckles. She squirmed on her back as close to under the baby as she could get. The

gloves now bristled glass slivers. She pulled them off and tossed both out the rear window. Then her right hand, palm up, cradled the baby's stomach while she pressed the chest buckle with her left thumb.

The infant tumbled out of the carrier and right onto Myrna's chest. They were almost nose to nose, so close she felt the whoosh of baby breath with the impact. Its eyes were wide, its tiny lips a startled "Oh!"

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Myrna wriggled the both of them out of the maw, then laid child in a patch of dry grass, head high, and did an eyeball exam but didn't undress it. Too cold. Baby looked pretty good. Color better, the redness fading. No blood except the smears on the yellow snowsuit from fresh jabs to Myrna's hands. Not even any bruises that she could see.

Heat and liquids, that's what's called for. And a clean diaper.

Wrap the baby in that foil blanket from the kit. Like a fat burrito. That would keep whatever warmth the baby had left inside. She could do more heat in her truck.

She had water, even some canned milk. But no way to get it into a baby.

Maybe there's something in the car. Most folks with babies carry totes full of gear. She wedged the baby-bundle tight in a grassy dip, then stumbled back to the wreck.

Peering again through the side windows, into the front past the ducky with the still-spinning whirligig, she spotted a small duffel, white with little dancing bears all over, pink and blue, yellow and green. In the worst place ever, deep in the foot-well of the front passenger seat.

Ten feet into the thicket, she found a downed spruce. The trunk was about an inch across. She snapped the top off over her knee, stripped away the dead brush, and left a rugged-looking limb to use as a hook.

It took a few tries, but she managed to snag the diaper bag by its loopy strap.

Without even checking to see what was inside, she slung the bag around her neck and clasped the baby, crinkly foil and all, snug on her left shoulder. She could feel the child's velvety breath on her neck. She clawed her way up the precipitous embankment with her right arm, grabbing bushes, clumps of weeds, and finally the guardrail next to the highway.

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The truck's engine idled, the flashers were on. Myrna pushed the heat to HIGH. She wrapped the bundled baby in a blanket she kept folded on the sofa behind the front seats then tucked it in the corner. Didn't think the sweet thing had the energy to turn over, but you never know. Its face was now a more-normal pink, the red nearly gone except for rosy cheeks.

She grabbed her cell phone. Probably still useless, though worth yet another try. Her hands bled onto the phone. She punched in 911. Her fingers slid in her own blood. Had to do it three times, she shook so bad. *Call failed* glared from the screen.

Shit fire. And not a vehicle in sight.

She wrapped her hands in paper towels and unzipped the diaper bag. Who packed it? The dead man? The baby's mother?

Folded on the top was a baby-size quilt. Myrna tossed it to the far end of the sofa. Underneath, three diapers. Baby wipes. A clean onesie. And two bottles full of milk. Cold.

She was some glad she had sprung for that microwave. At home, Myrna's mother would have heated the bottle in a pan of hot water on the woodstove. You want it warm but not hot, she'd say. Myrna peeled back the paper towels on her hands. Bleeding had mostly stopped. She shook out some milk on the back of her wrist. Warm enough, smelled fresh. Then she licked the drops. Tasted all right.

“Okay, Baby. Let’s give it a try.” She picked up the child and nestled it in her left arm, then rubbed the nipple onto its lips. A drop or two oozed out. The baby licked, tasted, then latched onto the nipple and sucked, hesitant and slow at first, then faster and faster, snorting with the effort. Tiny furrows wrinkled its forehead.

“Good Baby. Good boy. Or girl. Whatever.” Myrna rocked the child back and forth. “Do I know how to feed a baby or what?” She looked at the infant who stared back at her. It had the deepest blue eyes, indigo maybe, like a new pair of jeans, and curly black eyelashes.

It had sucked down half the bottle with accompanying piggy grunts and slurps when Myrna remembered the burp routine. She had to work to pull the nipple out, the baby had such a firm grip. It finally released with a sucking pop, followed by panicky screams. Another good sign. Myrna tipped the now-struggling child up and placed it over her left shoulder, stroked and patted its back. The baby responded with an enormous belch between furious screeches.

“My, are you pissed!” She shifted the baby off her shoulder, back into the feeding position, and it nuzzled around in search of a nipple. “Let’s do a little more of this good stuff, and then we’ll see about that diaper.”

She heard and felt before she saw the eighteen-wheeler that whooshed by, horn tooting. Did it slow? Could that mean help?

The rig pulled over ahead of hers a few hundred yards down the road, and the driver jumped out of the cab. She couldn’t tell who it was. The man hustled to put out emergency markers.

She burped the struggling infant again, crooning “Good baby,” when she startled to a loud banging on the door of her truck.

Pete Bouchard stared through the passenger-side window.

Pete? For God sake.

A trucker, yes, but not her first choice. She nodded, and he crawled in.

“Myrn. Saw the flashers. Knew that purple truck had to be you. What’s up? You okay?”

She didn’t smell booze. Maybe it was too early for him to start sipping. She held up her bundle.

“That a baby? I’ll be fucked.” Pete said. “Didn’t think you knew how to make one.”

Low shot.

Christ, but he made her skin crawl. “Wreck.” She pointed at the median with her chin.

“Dead guy down in the gulch, greasy side up. Baby was in the back.”

“You don’t say?” Pete leaned in and peered at the baby. “Boy or a girl?”

“Don’t know yet.” She stepped back to the far corner of the sofa, cradling the baby. “The first thing to do was get some liquid into the critter. We’ll do a diaper change once it’s had enough to eat.”

He pointed to her bloody hands. “Want I should bandage you up? I used to be a Boy Scout. Even got a First Aid badge.”

Myrna checked one hand, then the other. “I think I’m good.”

The baby wriggled, whimpered, and geared up for a scream. Myrna poked the nipple into its mouth, and the baby relaxed. “Call the Smokies when you get reception and tell them there’s a 10-52 in the median, mile 237.”

Pete nodded and started out of the cab, then turned back. “How about you come with me? Don’t feel right leaving you two here alone.”

“We’re doing okay. Someone’s got to stay and show the cops where the wreck is.” She tipped up the bottle. “Got any fresh milk?”

“All I have in my fridge are Red Bull and a case of Bud.”

Myrna watched Pete shuffle away before turning back to the baby. She wondered if someday she'd find him dead in a gully, too.