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WALKER
BOOKS

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To the unlikeable main characters

O PART
ONE

CHAPTER ONE

HERE'S SOMETHING THAT THEY DON'T TELL YOU ABOUT being cursed. The first thing you feel is fear. But the second thing – the thing you really notice – is beauty. The world is so beautiful when you don't think you'll have long to look at it.

The colours shine brighter. Even now, in the December twilight, when it's almost completely dark. The chilly mist from the river melds with the light of the city, and all you can see is a gold-and-blue blur. A box of jewels you need to squint your eyes just to look at. The sense of a city dancing in your blood.

Thirty-six days have passed since I became responsible for the death of two women. One who tried to kill me; the other who died trying to save my life.

“There you are,” Fiona says, flinging open the door to Nuala's house. No matter how early I get to Nuala's house these days, she's always here first. “Come on, the Apocalypse Society is already in session.”

She takes me through to the kitchen, and everyone's here: Manon, studying a bound stack of paper; Nuala, taking something out of the oven; Roe, peeling an apple with a knife; Lily, sitting on the kitchen counter.

The question: were we directly responsible for the death of Heather Banbury and Sister Assumpta, or was it all an

accident? Does the Housekeeper even care about accidents, or does she swing the axe regardless of who's guilty?

"That's the problem," Nuala says mid-flow, gesturing with a wooden spoon. "The Housekeeper is revenge without judgement. She's not a thing who can make her mind up. She's a wind-up toy. Isn't that right, Maeve?"

I haven't even taken my coat off. "How come no one ever says hello to me any more?" I say indignantly. "What am I? Dead?"

"Not yet," Manon muses, highlighting a line of text with a yellow marker. "But soon, perhaps."

"Well, joyeux Noël to you, too."

There have been three known Housekeeper sightings, spread out over the last thirty years. The first was when she was summoned by Nuala's sister, Heaven, who traded her own life to bring on the death of their abusive father.

The second was Aaron, when he called her to break out of his far-right Christian rehab centre. She took his friend then. Matthew Madison. A death that Aaron spent three misguided years trying to atone for within the gnarled fingers of the Children of Brigid.

And the third: Lily. A botched tarot reading that ended in chaos, and that brought us all together.

Who knows what a fourth visit might bring about? Who might fall victim, and who might be spared? Aaron hasn't waited around to find out.

I bend down to kiss Roe on the cheek, the movement unravelling my thick scarf.

"Hello," he says, nuzzling me. "You're cold."

"Hey." Lily is drawing on the window with acrylic craft paint, her knees under the sill, feet trailing in the kitchen

sink. She appears to be drawing a very complicated pig, its face filled with red and green swirls.

“What’s this?”

“A boar. A yule boar.”

“Of course.”

Lily pushes a strand of blonde hair back off her face. “I didn’t want to do something boring like a Christmas tree. I thought we would do something pagan. For winter solstice.”

“Hence the yule boar.”

Lily starts to smile to herself and keeps painting. “Hence the yule boar, yes.”

When Lily and I summoned the Housekeeper, it happened in days. And we hadn’t even meant to call her. She was just a spirit who was accidentally woken by a combination of my sensitivity, the Well of magic below Kilbeg, and the throbbing hatred Lily and I had for each other. Dorey told me almost a month ago that she was planning on calling the Housekeeper – surely she would have done it by now.

Dorey’s warning to me was clear. She spoke like the Queen of the Fairies, offering foul bargains through a glinting smile. The Children wanted total dominion over the Well in Kilbeg, and would do anything to get it. Anything, that is, except kill us. Murder in the magical world is more trouble than it’s worth: everything comes back to you eventually. But if you have just cause for summoning something like the Housekeeper, you can let her do the dirty work for you.

So where is she?

“We must first understand,” Manon says, “whether they truly do have just cause.”

“We killed Heather Banbury,” Roe says flatly.

“No, we didn’t,” Fiona responds, her voice unusually high-pitched. “She accidentally died.”

“While she was magically bound to our will,” Nuala corrects. “Although, if the Children hadn’t come to the tennis courts, it wouldn’t have happened at all. So they could be equally responsible.”

“In the eyes of who?” Lily asks, still painting her boar.

“I don’t know.” Nuala throws her hands up. “The great cosmic abacus that doles out fairness?”

“Justice,” Fiona says, holding up the tarot card. I might be the sensitive, but Fiona’s eye for tarot is now every bit as good as mine. She shuffles the pack and straightens the cards, tapping the deck twice on the table so they’re neatly aligned.

At that moment, as if in response, there is a tap on the glass panel of the kitchen door. An orange-tipped magpie flutters outside, waiting to be let in. Fiona reaches for the handle.

“We cannot let that thing in here,” says Manon, wrinkling her nose.

“Don’t talk about Paolo that way,” Fiona says defensively. Paolo and Manon have very quickly become the two great obsessions of Fiona’s life, and so of course they are permanently in opposition.

Manon shudders. “I hate birds.”

Paolo the magpie hops in and balances himself on the long arm of the tap. Lily shuffles her feet over. Paolo starts noodling the spout with his beak, looking for drops of water.

“Can I fill a bowl, Nuala?” Fi asks.

“You can, love.”

“Fionnuala!” Manon protests. Manon has an abandoned child’s tendency to be overly formal with her own mother. “*Fin.*”

“Manny,” Nuala replies soothingly. “He’s no harm.”

“I don’t *like* him.”

I’m nearest the cupboard, so I fill a bowl for Paolo. I even get him the filtered water, out of the fridge. I don’t have any sense of what Paolo thinks or feels, but I do think that he prefers filtered water. He’s Fiona’s familiar, after all, and Fiona does enjoy the finer things.

Fiona rests her gaze on him and, after a moment, he comes to perch on her shoulder.

“Well?” I ask, trying not to sound too expectant. “Does he have any news?”

Fi tilts her head for a moment, then closes her eyes. The magpie doesn’t touch her, doesn’t fuss with her hair, but it’s obvious that they are communicating. Paolo has become our little drone, scouting the city from the air.

“No,” she says at last, blinking her eyes open.

“Are you sure?” I press. “How can you know?”

“I know what Paolo knows. He hasn’t seen him. Or the Children, for that matter.”

“Are we still acting like they’re two different things?” A long line of skin has fallen from the apple that Roe is peeling, almost touching the floor. “I mean, let’s face it. He’s gone back to them, hasn’t he?”

“We don’t know that,” I reply. “We have no proof of that.”

Aaron disappeared after the conversation with Dorey, on the day of Sister Assumpta’s funeral. There are only two ways to interpret the disappearance: betrayal or cowardice. It’s

hard to know which with Aaron. He was, after all, a master manipulator working on behalf of a right-wing religious cult, which indicates weakness and betrayal. He also had the courage to leave them and to radically reassess his own worldview, which signals bravery, as well as character.

Where are you, Aaron?

The first time we met him, Aaron was mentally torturing teenagers in order to get them to join the Children. Roe and I had a fight then, on the bus home. He said Aaron and I were two sides of the same coin.

I had flipped out. But it turned out that Roe was right. Aaron and I are both sensitives, both born to safeguard the magic of our respective hometowns, and had both failed at it. The longer I sit with that information, the more it disturbs me. The violence, the callousness, the predatory behaviour I had witnessed in Aaron – is all of that in me, too? The only thing that separates us are the meagre facts of our own lives: that I was born to a liberal, artsy family who let me traipse around the place with tarot cards, and that Aaron was born to a right-wing Christian family who locked him up as soon as his sensitivity – as well as his OCD – started to show.

I want him to come back, and not just because we need him if we're going to fight the Children. I want him to come back so he can remind me that we're different, and I want him to come back so he can reassure me that we're the same.

“Paolo says that there's new MISSING posters,” Fiona suddenly says. “Some boy.”

“Who?”

“He doesn't know. Paolo can't read.”

The “duh” here is implicit.

“But he can read the word *missing*?”

“He can *intuit* it.”

Nuala puts a cup of tea down in front of Fiona.

“Where, Fi?”

Fi closes her eyes again. She is gathering a picture, in the same way I gather mine with my telepathy. Worming her way into a bird’s memories, trying to see what he saw, pushing against the limitations of the fact that his brain is the size of a peanut.

“The writing is all blurry,” she says, “but he’s white. Brown hair. The poster is ... it’s not in the city, it’s in some village in the countryside. I can see, like, farm stuff in the background.”

Manon has put her book down. “Incroyable,” she says, and means it. Manon is aloof about eighty per cent of the time, but whenever she says something in French, she’s being utterly sincere.

Fiona’s concentration breaks at the compliment. I don’t know whether she has told Manon how she feels yet. She hasn’t even told *me* how she feels about Manon yet, but she knows I know. When you know someone’s brain so well, you can’t help occasionally stumbling into it and picking stuff up.

There’s an awkward kind of intimacy to having a telepath for a best friend: we both pretend I don’t know things, and in that pretending there’s a kind of gratitude. *Thank you for not confronting me about my own secrets.*

Nuala takes out a notebook and writes down the information that Paolo has shared. “That’s the third in a month,” she says.

“How many kids is normal to go missing?” Roe asks. “And yes, I realize that is a weird and profoundly tragic question.”

“In Kilbeg county?” Nuala muses. “Maybe a dozen a year.”

Lily turns around. “That feels like a lot.” And she is, of course, thinking of her own disappearance. It was hard for Lily to understand at first that what was a profoundly liberating experience for her was the source of huge trauma for everyone she’s ever known. But she’s grasping it now. Grasping life again, and the emotions that come with it.

“You were an unusual case, Lily,” Nuala says, inspecting the yule boar. “Middle-class, white, nice school. You got a lot of coverage. But you know, immigrant communities, Traveller communities, or just very poor kids – we hear less about those kinds of people. And Kilbeg county is big. You’re city kids, so you don’t think about it. But all the towns have their own little issues.”

“So if one kid, on average, goes missing a month,” Fiona says, “we’ve tripled our numbers in the last thirty days.”

“And still no Housekeeper,” Roe adds grimly.

“And still no Housekeeper,” I repeat.

Then silently, to myself: *And still no Aaron.*

CHAPTER TWO

IT'S STILL TECHNICALLY A SCHOOL NIGHT, EVEN THOUGH IT'S hard to take school seriously any more. First, because it's only a few days until the Christmas holidays. Second, because there is no school to go to. The fire that killed Sister Assumpta and Heather Banbury also took down about two million euro of property, the pristine new refurb that was granted to St Bernadette's under the condition it came under Children of Brigid's control.

The younger years have all been absorbed into different schools, and there's a general sense that St Bernadette's, as a concept, is over. There is no St Bernadette's without Sister Assumpta, after all. But at some point it was agreed that the Leaving Cert students, only months from their exams, shouldn't be exposed to any more trauma. So we all tune in on our laptops every day, cameras off, playing out the end of our school days alone in our bedrooms.

Roe drops me home at nine, giving me a long kiss from the driver's seat.

"Oh, Maeve. *Whatever* will I do now?"

I smile, leaning in. "Well, gosh. I can't think."

"Drive around, I expect. Get into a knife fight in a car park." He raises an eyebrow, a pantomime James Dean.

"Getting yourself into all kinds of trouble."

“All *kinds* of trouble,” Roe repeats, sliding a hand underneath my jumper, fingertips cooler than rain.

“I guess I’ll see you ... when I see you.”

Roe smiles. “See you when I see you, Chambers.”

We are smiling because we love each other, and we are smiling because we have a secret.

I go inside. I talk to my parents. They are frightened of me now. The fact that I was there when the fire happened, that Sister Assumpta inexplicably left the school building to me, and that several journalists have been in touch about doing a story around the Famous Witch of Kilbeg has alienated them to the point that they don’t know how to speak to me. Can you blame them? I used to be the black sheep of the family. Now I’m the Black Death.

The siblings will be home in a few days, so we talk about that, and then I say that I’m tired. And then I go upstairs.

I go into the bathroom, the one that Aaron said was now a hot spot and might wreak havoc on the next people who live here, and I start my spellwork.

I came home one day, a week after Sister Assumpta’s will reading, and all my magic books were gone. My crystals, my tarot collection. It would have been more upsetting if I hadn’t known it was coming. My parents had been thinking about it for days, as the newspapers kept circling around the story of the lucky girl who inherited a fortune.

I syphoned off the valuable stuff well in advance – the good ingredients, the powerful crystals, my one really important tarot deck – and hid it all in a shoebox in the ceiling tiles of the bathroom. What my parents have confiscated are the spell books, some stuff on Wiccan theory and magical history, a random book about pagan myths.

I don't need any of it. I can make up my own spells now, and I'm pretty good at it.

I pour chamomile blossoms and lavender sprigs into my palm. Weirdly, sometimes I find myself narrating my own process, like I'm one of the authors of the spell books. "Chamomile flowers," I say in a singsong voice. "Available cheaply in any health food store!"

My thumb is wet with rose oil. I crush the mixture into a pulp, grains and stems grinding under my nail, stabilizing my palm by pressing down on the knuckles. I feel like I'm about to drive a hole through my own hand. I turn the tap on. "Deep sleep," I say simply. "Deep sleep, deep sleep, deep sleep."

The oily flowers swirl around the drain, clogging slightly at the plughole. There's a burning at the back of my throat, the feeling of magic talking back. I gesture to it in my mind. *Hello, hello, I say. You're here again. I just want everyone to have a nice sleep.*

I'm better at magic since the fire. More intuitive, more confident, more capable of calling to something that I can feel but can't see. "Maybe she's born with it," I murmur to myself. "Maybe she's a magic teen!"

I can feel a tide of swirling energy, and I can feel it agree with me. It goes down the plughole and into the pipes, and soon the house will hum with cosy peace. My parents, who could not sleep for days after the fire, will rest soundly. An alarm might wake them up, but a front door closing won't.

An hour later, I leave the house, and I don't even bother to tiptoe. I go straight to St Bernadette's, wrapping my big black overcoat around me. It's a man's coat, technically. I would have felt weird about wearing men's clothes a few

years ago, before Roe made me see how weird it is to give fabric a gender. Now I love the drama of this big thing, leaving me snug against the December chill.

The whole building appears as though it's slouching on the thick ring of scaffolding that surrounds it. An old woman leaning on her crutches. It looks impossible and dangerous to penetrate, with its layers of police tape and boarded-up windows. But we are, it turns out, impossible and dangerous. I climb through, phone torch shining out from my breast pocket.

As soon as I'm inside, I hear the sound of an unplugged electric guitar being comfortably played by Ireland's next greatest rock star. I follow the sound and stumble into Sister Assumpta's old office, tripping over a pile of rubble that seems to have fallen out of the ceiling.

"Oh," I say in mock surprise. "Fancy meeting you here."

Roe looks up from the battered old couch, one of the few things you can still sit on and not come away covered in ash stains. We've bought blankets from charity shops to layer over it. Towels from home.

I watch him for a moment. Pale skin, red mouth, black hair.

Delicious delicious delicious.

His eyes follow me around the room, but he doesn't say anything. Just keeps playing the guitar, fingers picking out a blues scale.

"You know," I continue, "this *is* private property."

"What's private," Roe replies, "between two old friends?"

"You tell me," I say, and slowly start unbuttoning my shirt. Coat still on.

Would I be able to talk like this, act like this, if we were in the car or my bedroom? I don't know. But there's something about this building. Something about knowing that it's *mine*.

There's a click of a space heater, the room filling with stiff warm air. Another thing brought from Roe's house. I would be nervous of the electricians here if it weren't for Roe's gift for them.

There are no buttons left.

Roe speaks again. Throat stuck. Voice warm.

"I think we can go more private than that."

I let my coat fall to the floor.

There are so many things in my life that I am forced to feel strangely about, but sex, thank god, isn't one of them.

It can be difficult to find a time and a place. My family hardly leaves the house these days, and Roe is constantly doing something with the band. I imagine plenty of teenage relationships have this problem, and we're uniquely privileged in that I happen to be the sole benefactor of a giant, empty house. With a giant, empty sofa.

"Has there been any research into the possibility," Roe says, twirling a length of my hair as I lie on his chest, "that you are the hottest woman in the country?"

"Not nearly enough research," I reply, tracing a circle on his bare skin. "It's so hard to find funding for that kind of thing."

"A real shame."

"I know. Think of everything we could learn."

Roe kisses the top of my head. "You love to accept a compliment, don't you, Maeve Chambers?"

“Well, I don’t get *that* many.” I used to be the kind of girl who couldn’t accept a compliment. Now I am the kind of girl who could be dead in a week. I am going to feel as good as I can until then. “Do you think she’s coming?”

“The Housekeeper?”

“Who else?”

“I don’t know. It feels as though we’ve been waiting a long time for this threat to materialize. Maybe she’s dead. Or maybe sealing the Well means that there’s less magic for her to live off.”

It’s not the first time we’ve shared this theory, and now we’ve shared it so many times that it’s become a bedtime story. Something to soothe us, ease us into sleep.

I look up. “You have eyeliner boogies,” I say. “Black eye snot.”

“Ew, get it out.”

Tenderly, I swipe my pinkie finger under his eye, picking up traces of kohl as I go. I show Roe the accumulated grime. “Make a wish. A Christmas wish.”

But instead of making a wish, Roe just pulls me closer. Or maybe that is the wish. It’s hard to tell. I lay my head on his chest and try to listen to the quiet. Sometimes I convince myself she’s still here, somewhere. Sister Assumpta, I mean. I don’t always come to meet Roe. Sometimes I come alone, to feel her out.

I tried to explain this to Roe once, and he wasn’t impressed.

“So according to you, we’re boning under the watchful eye of a dead nun?”

“No!” I exploded. “Don’t make it weird.”

“You’re the one who made it weird!”

But I like to think of her here, casually underestimated by everyone, straining hard to protect Kilbeg with the magical strands she managed to weave into a blanket. I close my eyes, focus my brain, and I almost feel like I can connect with her. The sensitivity thread that connects me and Aaron must have also existed between me and Assumpta. I try to access it. I cannot tell if I am experiencing supernatural phenomena or a strange form of delayed grief, but sometimes, I can feel her. A presence. A *something*.

There's a sound. A clatter. The sound of a foot going through a floorboard.

We both jump. I grab the blankets instinctively, painfully aware that I am naked except for my socks.

“What the *hell* was that?”

Roe gets up immediately, pulls on a jumper and underwear. He turns around, takes a look at me. “It's not the Housekeeper,” he says soothingly. “Her thing isn't breaking and entering, is it?”

“No,” I reason, still freaked out. “I suppose not.”

Roe's jumper is emerald green, and so loose that it falls around his arms, exposing a shoulder.

“It's probably nothing. Come back to the couch,” I say quickly.

“When, in any horror film, has ‘it's probably nothing’ turned out to be nothing?” Roe responds, pulling on jeans.

Another clatter. The sound is getting closer now, and I'm beginning to regret trying to communicate with Sister Assumpta's ghost.

“*Shit*, Roe.”

“I'm going to check it out.”

“Don't *leave* me!”

But Roe is already halfway out of the door, so I throw on my own clothes as quickly as I can and follow. The space heater ticks and crackles, and I think: *If I lose the one nice thing left in my life, I might truly go insane.*

CHAPTER THREE

I REGRET NOT PUTTING MY SHOES ON. BY THE TIME WE'RE in the hallway, I can feel that my socks are caked in ash, dust and general debris. Little splinters of wood, tiny bits of gravel that have somehow found their way inside.

"It's coming from upstairs," Roe says, putting one foot on the stair. He closes his eyes. "Hang on."

I can see him burrowing down into his gift, talking to the house. The pipes, the wiring. "Hold my hand."

I lace my fingers through his. He leads us up the rotting staircase, dodging each faulty step, taking his hand off the banister whenever he knows there's weakness.

"Your hand is shaking," Roe notes. "You're not *really* scared, are you?"

"No," I say. It is not convincing.

"It's probably squatters. Housing crisis, you know."

But Roe didn't talk to Dorey at the funeral. Roe didn't see the satisfaction in her eyes, the sense that the package would be all wrapped up just so. There was zero doubt in her voice that day. What if this is it? The end?

"Roe," I say. "I love you, OK?"

"Huh?"

"If anything happens, I don't want our last conversation to have been about eye goo."

"OK, Maeve, I love you, too."

But there's another sound, a sound of feet, a sound of furniture being dragged, a sound of movement. I feel Roe's hand tense. Feel him think: *maybe it's not nothing, after all.*

Up the stairs again. We're on the second floor now. Memories of doing my geography homework on the landing, copybook propped up on my thigh, minutes before class. Fiona telling me to hurry. That was only seven months ago. Can really so much have changed?

We reach the door of 3A, and there's no doubt that whoever is in my house is behind that door.

"Hold on," Roe whispers, looking around. He crouches down next to a defunct radiator, one of the many radiators I used to spend the winter months sitting on, and runs his hand along the thin copper pipe fixing it to the wall.

"Come on, sweetheart," he whispers. And the pipe, swooning, comes away in Roe's hand. He examines it, focuses on it, and slowly it bends into the shape of a crowbar.

"Did you just make a weapon," I whisper back, "out of a radiator pipe?"

Roe shrugs like it's nothing. "Come on, then."

And then, with his hand on the door, he opens up 3A.

We don't see anyone at first. But what we do see is this: a sleeping bag, a backpack and a camera. The camera throws me. It's a Polaroid, but one of those updated Polaroids they started making a few years ago and that girls sometimes take to parties. It confuses me, but Roe's thought pattern is instant, clear: *why has someone brought a camera to a place where I have sex with my girlfriend?*

A strange mix of terror, relief and disgust washes over both of us. *Oh, I think. It's just a pervert! A bog-standard pervert. Not a revenge demon. Well, that's something, isn't it?*

Then a voice. A familiar one.

“Roe?”

I whirl around, and Aaron is standing by the window, partially obscured by what’s left of the curtains. I don’t know why he says Roe’s name first, or why he sounds so confused. But Aaron’s here, and I feel a release, as though I’ve just found my passport.

“What the hell?!” I say. “Aaron?!”

Aaron is hanging out of the window, smoking a cigarette. There’s some scaffolding that he is half balancing on, a pole he is leaning his back against. His hair is buzzed short, his eyes tired. He’s lost weight. He didn’t have very much of it to begin with. I can see the frame of his face much more now, the bones of his cheeks jutting slightly.

“Dude,” Roe says, already picking up the camera, “what the *hell?*”

“Put that down,” Aaron says, far too fiercely.

“Why are you sneaking around St Bernadette’s? With a camera?”

It’s the emphasis on the word *camera* that throws Aaron slightly, and he pauses to take us both in. Then he realizes that we’ve clearly dressed ourselves in a hurry.

“Wow,” he says drily. “I didn’t realize I was interrupting the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah. Why are you carrying a copper pipe? Are you going to beat me to death with it?”

“Jury’s out,” answers Roe, still holding the pipe.

“Oh, for god’s sake, what are you doing here?” I ask. “And where have you *been?*”

Aaron looks at me oddly then, cigarette hovering in front of his face. His eyes go between me and Roe, and back to me again.

“Around,” he says at last. “I’ve been around.”

Next to the sleeping bag is a black plastic sack of clothes and a small backpack with its zip open. I can see a can of deodorant, some shower gel, a razor. “Aaron, have you been sleeping rough?”

“I’ve ... not been sleeping soft.”

“So, what, you’ve been around the world and now you’re crashing here?”

He squints at me, as if trying to figure out my game. As if I’m the one talking in riddles. It’s too frustrating. I can hear my voice taking on a high, manic tension, the tone of someone who might cry if she doesn’t scream.

“You’ve had us all *sick* with worry, Aaron, and we’re all terrified of this Housekeeper stuff as it is. The least you can do is tell us why you left.”

“And why you’re back,” Roe adds. “With a camera.”

Roe moves towards it again, brows furrowed. Aaron steps away from the window.

“Don’t touch it, Roe.”

His voice is low, with a hint of his old fundamentalist condescension. That tone of *I know better than you do, kid*.

“Why?” Roe snaps. “Why don’t you want me to touch it?”

I’m struggling to understand why Roe is so interested in the camera. Even on his worst days, it’s hard to imagine Aaron snooping around, spying on us. But then I realize that the new-old Polaroid camera is giving off a frequency that only Roe can read. In the same way I can see people’s colours, Roe can see some kind of charge in the air, strange atoms that are sluicing off this tiny machine.

“Just don’t, OK?” Aaron says, almost threateningly. “Just don’t.”

“Why are you *here*?” I stress, trying to get back to the matter at hand.

Roe is moving closer to the camera, and it’s like watching two siblings in a turf war over the same shared bedroom. Aaron is twitching, like he’s about to spin out.

“Oh, for god’s sake, Maeve, you know why I’m here. I’m here because you sent me the note.”

“The note?” I’m deeply confused by this.

“The *note*?” Roe says, horrified. And finally, they forget about the stupid camera.

“What did it say?” I ask, carefully assessing my memories, checking for any note-sending. When Heather Banbury was draining my magic, my movements were so fuzzy and hard to remember. Could some of that sickness be hanging over me still, without me realizing?

But no. I had no idea where Aaron even was. How on earth could I send a note to him?

“It doesn’t matter,” Aaron says.

“Was it to meet Maeve here?” Roe asks, sounding deeply suspicious. “Alone?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Which is why you were so surprised that I was here.” Roe’s parents very much wanted him to be a doctor, but in my opinion, he would make a much better lawyer.

“Jesus, Roe,” Aaron says, sounding exhausted. He starts massaging his temples, like he has a migraine coming on. “Give it a rest, will you? Sorry I interrupted your . . . *rendezvous*. I would make sure your tetanus shots are up to date, by the way; this is not a safe space to take your clothes off.”

Aaron leans out the window and taps his cigarette, and I can see a postcard sticking out of his jacket pocket. A postcard with writing on the back. Roe sees it, too.

“Is that it?” Roe asks. “The note?”

Roe reaches forwards to grab it, and Aaron pushes him off. Only he pushes a little too hard. So Roe pushes back.

Aaron’s knees buckle against the windowsill, and instinctively, he grabs at Roe to steady himself. But all he does is drag Roe out with him.

Suddenly, both of them have gone out of the window.

I scream and rush to the sill, terrifyingly conscious that it’s a three-storey drop and Fiona is at home in bed. There’s no one to mend broken legs, to stop heavy bleeding, to knit skin back together.

I shouldn’t have worried, though, because as soon as I get to the window, I see that the scaffolding has caught them. They are both gingerly getting to their feet, the “ground” only two planks of wood wide.

“Well, thank *god* for that,” I breathe, almost feeling like I should say a prayer to something. “Come on,” I say, holding out my hand. “I’ll help you both up.”

But it’s not over. Roe moves towards Aaron, furious.

“Why the *hell* did you do that? Why did you drag me out with you?”

The scaffolding rattles underneath them.

“Why did you push me out of the window, you asshole?”

Aaron swipes at Roe, almost like a slap, except that he catches the heel of his hand off Roe’s neck. Roe catches Aaron’s arm and twists it. Roe’s shorter than Aaron, but stronger.

“Stop!” I scream out of the window. “Stop it, you *idiots*.”

It's not about me, or the camera, or the note, or the fact that Aaron deserted us. It's about all those things, but it's also about this: that ten months ago Aaron showed up to Roe's gig, washed a kid's face clean of make-up, and incited a riot. Roe can understand on an intellectual level that Aaron is trying – or at least *was* trying – to atone, but at base, this is who they are to each other.

“Get in. *Stop*. You're acting *nuts*.”

But they don't hear me. I burrow into their minds, and it's a thick knot of fury and contempt.

I try to quickly dive into their thoughts, access both minds at the same time. For some reason, I can only get Aaron's. That snap of sensitivity puts us in the same frequency, and I get a stream of his thoughts as the scaffolding rattles.

Galatians 5:19–21 – Now the works of the sinful flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, complete lack of restraint—

The sudden stream of Bible verse blows me backwards. I've never been able to access Aaron's mind quite like this before, and the magnitude of it, the fierceness of it, is terrifying.

—idolatry, sorcery, hatred, discord, jealousy, outbursts of anger... Then his thought pattern pauses briefly. What's the rest of it? It doesn't matter, does it, because I don't believe that any more. Do I. Do I? God, Roe, calm down, for god's sake, Roe.

The thought breaks again, and he's back to Bible verse. *I warn you, just as I also warned you before, that those who continue to do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

Then something else happens. Their gifts – Roe's for machinery, Aaron's for weakness – seem to twine around each other. This can happen. Together, Lily and Fiona can charge a phone back to a hundred per cent. Roe and I can

switch the radio station. Our gifts work in combination, but nobody has ever combined with Aaron's before.

I can feel a tremor from underneath. The scaffolding is shaking all over.

Shit.

Impurity, sorcery, hatred, discord.

"Stop, *please*," I beg. "I think your gifts are..."

Usually when our gifts come together, it's in the spirit of collaboration. But right now, they're coming together in combat. Aaron sees weakness; Roe talks to machinery, to buildings, to things that have been constructed. And so now the whole building is screaming with fragility.

Impurity, sorcery, hatred, discord.

I run downstairs, jumping over the faulty steps, desperate to catch at least one of them when they inevitably fall. Aaron's thoughts, still pounding in my head, are compulsive, confused and unwelcome. *Impurity, sorcery, hatred, discord. You don't believe that. Or you do. It's all connected. Magic sex sin hatred sorcery hell. All connected. Or it isn't.*

I make it outside just in time for them to notice that the house is shaking. I think of Sister Assumpta, her solid armadillo body, her cold, trembling hands. She feels alive for a moment, alive in the spirit of her cherished school.

"Your gifts are combining!" I yell from the ground. "You need to stop."

They stop fighting. There's a moment of stillness. And then:

Crack!

The wooden planks snap beneath them like a biscuit. They fall, the next level catching them. I wince when I see that Roe has landed awkwardly, on his side. I remember the

scar on his stomach, still angry red, from the knife back in March. Still delicate, in the tight way of new wounds.

But the school goes on trembling like a spooked horse.

“We *have* stopped!” Aaron yells back.

I wrestle with my own gifts, trying to regain a sense of control. What’s *happening*?

They may have stopped punching, but their powers are still scratching at each other like cats. They are witches, after all. And witches don’t fight the way regular people do.

Crack!

Another layer down. Both their bodies crash, and Aaron howls in pain.

“You have to stop being so pissed with each other, I think,” I yell. “Stop being pissy.”

Impurity, sorcery, hatred, discord.

They jump from the first-floor scaffolding to the ground, cradling their wounds as they go.

“I am not being *pissy*,” Roe retorts, but the building does not agree. He tries to focus his gift, to relax the house like he sweet-talked the radiator. But it’s too late, he’s too mixed up in Aaron’s talent for weakness. The building is too enmeshed in the dynamic, confused by itself.

I hate this. I hate them for being stupid, and I hate them for jeopardizing my only responsibility in the world: to keep this place safe. This, the mouth of the Well, the place that Sister Assumpta gave to me. My own rage unfurls, a hot sense of justice flooding through me. They’re being pigs. I wanted Aaron to carefully explain what happened after the funeral. I wanted to feel less alone in my sensitivity. I didn’t want this childish swiping and stupid aggression. We’ve been through enough, haven’t we?

They both look at the building. “Nice work, man,” Roe says drily.

“As *if* you’re going to blame this on me.”

A flood of white rage feels like it’s about to burst me open, and then...

The feeling of something. Stars, moons, planets. The shattering of a thousand dinner plates. I’m momentarily certain I have had a stroke, an aneurysm, a heart attack. The sense of something stretching. A new frontier being reached in my brain. My hearing goes fuzzy and my face gets hot.

“What the hell?”

Aaron says it first, then Roe says something similar. I don’t know. It’s suddenly hard to focus.

I look to both of them, and their eyes have gone milky.

“I can’t see anything,” Roe says. “Maeve? Why can’t I see anything?”

Their eyes are like opals, like white smoke, like saucers of cream. It’s terrifying to look at, both of their faces so strange, so fundamentally wrong. I feel like I’m in a dream, a dream where life is the same as real life except for one horrible, jarring thing.

They feel around, and I take a step backwards, fear trumping everything. Even love. Even friendship.

“I... I don’t know.”

I remember myself and try to recover. I slip my hand in Roe’s. “Don’t worry, babe, I’m here.”

I feel his hands clutch me, grateful. I reach out for Aaron, grab his shoulder. “Dude?”

“I ... I can’t...”

The tremors have stopped. That, at least, is something. The scaffolding has broken but the house is thankfully

intact. I try to sound authoritative, calm. “Listen,” I say clearly. “I don’t know what’s going on, but we’ll fix it, OK?”

A cloud passes in front of the moon, and rain starts to fall. Scattered drops, cold and slight.

“It’s gone,” Aaron suddenly says, blinking his eyes back to their ordinary blue.

Roe is the same. Liner smeared, sockets like big dark shadows. “OK, wow. That was ... not good.”

At least they’ve stopped fighting. They are now just partners in the inexplicable. They keep looking around, pupils refocusing, like kittens that have just opened their eyes for the first time.

Roe and Aaron were blind only for a minute, but I can tell it’s not something either of them will forget in a hurry.

“Maybe she was protecting herself,” I say, gazing up at the house. “Or maybe I was protecting her. A sensitivity thing, y’know?”

“The Kilbeg sensitive,” Aaron agrees, still brushing himself off. “Protecting the Kilbeg Well. It tracks.”

We stand together, looking at the old building. “Maybe,” Roe says, sounding ashamed.

“Lots of people get struck blind in the Bible,” Aaron murmurs. “Saul.”

“What was the deal with him?” Roe asks tentatively.

“He persecuted Christ, and then he was blinded for three days, and then he saw the light.”

“Then what?” I nudge. “What happened to Saul?”

“Then he became the Apostle Paul.”

“Name change,” Roe remarks. “Love that for her.”

Aaron raises an eyebrow. “You two should really know more about this stuff, you know. You went to *Catholic* school.”

“I’m a Protestant, so it’s really more about traybakes and church bingo,” Roe says.

“And my parents are agnostic,” I reply.

“Figures,” Aaron sighs, with implicit disrespect for the term *agnostic*. “All right, shall we go somewhere and talk like grown-ups?”

So we go back into Sister Assumpta’s office, and I wonder how long it took for the other apostles to accept that Saul wasn’t up to something.

CHAPTER FOUR

“FIRST OF ALL,” I SAY, HANDING AARON A GRANOLA BAR from my satchel, “why don’t you try telling us where you’ve been?”

Roe and I sit on either end of the couch, while Aaron sits on the floor, his back flush with the wall.

“And why you disappeared,” Roe adds.

“I was scared,” Aaron replies, and just lets it hang there. It’s hard to believe. He doesn’t sound scared. He sounds like himself.

“Well, we’re *all* scared,” I say irritably. “That’s no excuse to abandon your friends.”

Aaron starts turning over the granola bar in his hands, catching the foil packaging in the light. “It’s different for you guys. You weren’t there, that day on the bus. With Matthew. The last time you came up against the Housekeeper, you won. You’ve got a gambler’s mentality. You don’t think you need to leave the casino. You believe that you’ll win again.”

He looks up at us, the circles under his eyes deep as bruises.

“But when I hear the Housekeeper coming, all I know is that I’m going to be found dead next to someone I care about, or they’re going to wake up dead next to me.”

“So, what, you’d rather be alone?” I ask, perhaps a little too drily.

“Than find another friend’s corpse? Yes,” he says. “Neither of you have seen a dead friend. What if it was Lily? Or Fiona? That’s your last image of them for ever, you know.”

Neither Roe nor I know how to respond. Does Aaron really believe there’s no chance of us winning? Particularly when things have been so quiet, for weeks?

“There’s something else,” he says, getting back on his feet. “My visa.”

“Your *visa*?”

“I don’t have one. I was here on a work visa, remember? Under the Children’s sponsorship. Now I’m here illegally.”

Roe snorts. “Oh, come *on*.”

“What?” Aaron replies, immediately defensive.

“You’re a white American,” Roe says flatly. “No one in Irish immigration is going to throw the book at a white American. Get real.”

“I *am* being real,” Aaron snaps. “Why do you think there hasn’t been a single mention of Heather Banbury in the newspapers? Dorey has everyone in her pocket. She’s a puppet master. I’ve had to throw another phone away, because I keep getting calls about my *status*. And these were not friendly calls.”

There’s something about the way he says “puppet master” that makes me think it’s more than a figure of speech.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “What do you mean by puppet master?”

“Dorey’s a sensitive, like us. Didn’t you feel it, when you met her? Her powers are all about seeing people, controlling them. You can read minds, I can see vulnerabilities, but Dorey ... she can manipulate them on, like, a cosmic level.”

“Cosmic how?” Roe asks, interested.

Aaron runs his hands through his hair. “Like, the day I met Dorey I was a grieving eighteen-year-old who was into tarot cards and felt pretty strongly that my church was wrong about gay people.”

Roe nods. “And she made you into baby Hitler?”

“Right.” Aaron grimaces, but doesn’t correct him.

“Assumpta could see the future,” I say, just realizing that all sensitives do have a kind of “seeing” power. I had never put it together before.

“How do you think Dorey got that insane contract to effectively take control of your school? She can make people do whatever she wants. She just needs to talk to them for a while, work her charm, get a string on them. Then she can pull that string for ever.”

“And you think ... what? She could get you deported?” I press. “If she doesn’t kill you first, I mean?”

“Deported, imprisoned for breaking the terms of my visa, you name it.”

Roe keeps a steady eye on Aaron, still reluctant to believe him. “So what have you been doing, then?”

Aaron shrugs. “I’ve been around.”

“Around *where*?”

“Places where you don’t need a last name to stay.”

“So, what, like? Shelters?” Roe suggests.

“*Motels*?” I say, and immediately feel stupid, like I’m someone play-acting for an American movie. Ireland doesn’t have motels.

“Shelters, hostels, bus stations. You know. Squats.” He stops to look around at the still-intact ceiling of Sister Assumpta’s office. “I’m surprised this place hasn’t become one.”

I'm conscious of how sheltered Roe and I are. How alien we are to this kind of nomadism, how much younger we must seem. We are, at the end of the day, just a couple of middle-class kids who have always – no matter how bad things have been – had a warm bed to sleep in.

“That’s part of the reason I wanted to talk to you,” Aaron continues. “I stumbled on some ... some pretty messed-up stuff. Stuff about the Children.”

“I thought you got a *note*,” Roe stresses, and Aaron ignores it.

“I was in Limerick,” Aaron continues, “and I met a kid. A runaway. A former Child. He used to come to my meetings at the old apartment. He sold me the camera. The one that Roe is so nuts about.”

Roe’s eyes flicker to the camera, currently resting on a dusty end table. There’s some kind of energy pouring out of it, a mood only he can see.

“And he told me...” Aaron walks to the window, his hands in his jacket pockets. He’s talking like he’s still trying to figure out what he’s going to say, or whether he believes it. “He told me about the Lodge.”

“The Lodge?”

“A home for the Children’s most devoted. Kids are running *away* to this place.”

“Why?”

“This kid, Connor, he had a bad situation at home. Abuse, drinking, the works. He had been spending time at Children meetings just to feel ... I don’t know, like he had a community, I guess. Pretty soon he gets invited to live at this place: the Lodge. He figures it can’t be any worse than what he’s got, so he goes.”

Maybe it's my imagination, or maybe it's our shared sensitivity, but the picture of this kid starts to form in my head. A picture of the whole situation: the camp beds he and Aaron are sitting on, the gentle bustle of volunteers handing out blankets. The way both of them are holding on to their bags of clothes, even as they talk to each other. Connor with tufts of red hair, a blaze of freckles across his face.

"He said that it was normal and fun, for a little while. Lots of games and trust exercises and sharing chores. Real commune vibes. But then it gradually started to ... I don't know. He was confused about it."

"Confused how?"

"Like he didn't trust his own version of events. His memory was spotty. But he did say that they were sternly encouraged to make a lot of sacrifices. Like to not eat, or to ... to punish themselves."

The squint comes back into Aaron's eye. A nervous twitch that looks a little like the pained blink of an old dog.

"So he escaped. Not left. Escaped. He had to wait until night, walk miles into the nearest village, hitchhike at dawn. He was really scared of being caught, even though he couldn't put into words why. I asked him if he thought they would hurt him, and he said no. Not physically. But he saw people changing around him, going nutty. He was afraid."

Silence. The world outside is starting to brighten, as though it's beginning to move through a paint swatch. Midnight blue to royal. It's almost four a.m. I think of Paolo, scouting the world out for Fiona, finding the MISSING posters all over the city. Has he seen Connor, too?

"I just can't believe..." Aaron begins, and then stops.

Tries again. “No, I *can* believe it, that’s the problem. Did I always know that this is where it was going?”

“What do you mean?”

“If I hadn’t ... left. Because of you guys. Would I be there? Getting kids to starve themselves? And for *what*?”

I can feel that Roe wants to say “Probably, yes” but chooses to ignore the question entirely.

“Tell me about the camera,” he says instead.

Aaron goes to the table and hands the camera to Roe. They exchange a look – a *We’re good now, yeah?* – and Roe starts turning it over. He pops the back, where the film should live.

“It’s empty,” Roe says, but he keeps running his hands over it.

“They take your phone away when you get to the Lodge,” Aaron continues. “But they give you one of these instead.”

“Pretty crappy trade,” Roe says.

“I guess. But I think part of the allure of this place is, you know, we’re all going to unplug, go off-grid, phones are ruining our brains, blah blah blah.”

“I mean,” I reason, “they probably are.”

“So they give them these cameras instead. And it’s very: *‘We’re going to make amazing memories! We’re going to scrapbook! We’re going to build a wall of photos as we make our new home beautiful!’*” Aaron says all this in his most American voice, like he’s a youth pastor for a megachurch. Which, I guess, at one point he was.

“And that *works*?”

“Oddly, yes.”

“So you bought the camera off him.”

“Yeah. I thought it might ... I don’t know, I thought we could do something with it.”

“So ... you were always planning on coming back, then?”

Aaron shrugs. “I don’t know. After a few weeks of not dying, I thought I should probably make some kind of plan.”

“A plan sounds like something we should all be making. So where is it, then? Where’s the Lodge?”

“I don’t know. The kid didn’t know, either. His memories weren’t working right. There must be a ton of charms on the place.” Aaron gestures towards Roe. “I thought Thomas Edison over here might be able to work something out with the camera.”

Roe looks up. “I don’t know. It’s not really saying anything. There’s no film in it, so there’s no imprint, no shadows. It’s just an empty camera with bad juju.” He takes a long look at it again, holds it at arm’s length. “Leave it with me.”

“OK. Be careful, though. That thing cost me two packs of cigarettes.”

Exhaustion starts to snap at me like a hungry animal. We were only supposed to be here for an hour, and it’s almost dawn. The sleep spell only lasts about six hours, usually. I have school in the morning. I stand up, stretch out my arms and legs.

“Sleep here tonight, Aaron,” I declare, half yawning. “There’s a heater, and we’ll leave some snacks. But go to Nuala in the morning. Ask her if you can stay with her and Manon.”

“I’m not sure if Nuala will want...”

“She will,” I say with finality. “Besides, we’ve been keeping track of these kids going missing. She’ll want to hear what you have to say. We need to get on this. Who knows what the Children are planning?”

I start lacing up my boots, and Roe rubs his eyes. "I'll go warm up the car," he says, kissing the crown of my head. He turns towards Aaron. "Let's not wreck a building and go hysterically blind next time we meet, m'kay?"

Aaron nods. "Deal."

I'm still lacing my shoes when I catch Aaron, leaning against the opposing wall, watching me with a worried look.

"What?"

"There's still... There's still the postcard."

"Right. My alleged note. What did it say?"

He passes it over to me wordlessly.

Aaron, I need you to meet me at the school tomorrow night. Just after midnight. We need to talk about us. Maeve

I keep blinking at it, the words smearing together in my exhaustion.

"We need to talk about us?" I stumble. "What *us*?"

He plucks it out of my hands.

"Well, I don't know. That's why I thought it was weird. I didn't want to bring it up in front of Roe, though, in case he put two and two together and made five million. He already wanted to kill me the second he saw me."

"Who would send this?"

"Someone who wanted us all in the same place. Take us out, maybe."

"But no one's here. It's just the three of us."

"Well, then." He looks at me, then back at the note. "Someone who wants to cause friction, I guess. Mission accomplished."

The shaking building. The collapsing scaffolding. The terrifying minute where Roe and Aaron were struck blind.

“You think it was the Children?” I say, dumbfounded. “Doesn’t passing notes seem, I don’t know, a little below their pay grade?”

“Nothing is below their pay grade. We have to ask ourselves: what do they have to gain from seeing us fight? Clearly, they knew you and Roe were coming here. They wanted something to happen. Divide and conquer.”

I suppose it makes sense. Now that the Housekeeper is a no-show, perhaps they’re looking for more organic ways to fracture the group. It can’t be comfortable for them to know that so many powerful witches are gathered together, and against them.

“OK. Let’s tell the others,” I say, and then pause. “But maybe let’s leave out the ‘we need to talk about us’ bit.”

Aaron cocks his head. “Are you and Roe really that unsure of each other? He knows there’s no ‘us’. There never was.”

“I just...” I don’t really know what I’m getting at, except that Aaron is back, and we have to be able to work together. If tonight’s performance is anything to go on, Roe and Aaron need very few excuses to fight. “I just don’t want to make things more difficult than they have to be.”

Aaron nods, takes a lighter from his pocket, and sets the postcard alight. I watch it burn for a moment, and wonder if truly innocent people set fire to things.

I head out to the car, my head aching from tiredness, deep pressure forming at my temples.

“Is he all right?” Roe asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. And then a new fear unfurls in my chest. “They’ve been watching us.”

CHAPTER FIVE

I'M SO TIRED THE NEXT DAY THAT I CHALK EVERYTHING strange up to my own exhaustion, and almost miss something else. My laptop screen looks different. There should be a word for digital feng shui, when your online layout is just slightly off and it sort of trips you up all day. Like when they add a new button on TikTok, or something.

I finally zero in on it after lunch: it's our class layout. It's different. It's usually a grid: six by six, thirty-six pupils in all. That's how many people are left in our Leaving Cert class, after the fire. Today the final row only has five windows in it.

Is someone missing today?

Lorna, Fi messages back. Lorna McKeon.

Right, of course.

There's nothing "of course" about it, though, because I probably wouldn't have remembered Lorna in a million years. She's a perfectly nice, blend-into-the-background kind of girl. Smart enough to be in all Fiona's classes. Brown swinging ponytail. She let me borrow a pencil once.

If this were an ordinary day of school, I wouldn't have noticed, because people are missing from school all the time. But since school went online, everyone logs in, even when they're sick.

That's obviously not the only reason. I'm suddenly distracted by her absence. I can still feel the chill of the Lodge in my bones, like a shadow, the fragments of a fading dream. We're all supposed to go to Nuala's again tonight, where we can talk about it properly. Nail it to the floor. Dress it up in logic and reason. I wonder if Aaron has made it to Nuala's yet, or whether he's deserted us again.

I follow Lorna on social media, but we've never interacted and so the algorithm keeps us apart. I look at her, observing for the first time the private life of a girl I've gone to school with since I was twelve. She hasn't posted anything in months, which isn't unusual. Most people rarely commit to the grid. Even I get performance anxiety about it: the last thing on my profile is a picture from the summer, of a box of onion rings. The caption just reads "ahnyun rings".

It was very funny at the time.

Lorna's pictures reveal someone who is well behaved, modestly dressed and smiley. The longer I look, the more I feel myself adding a narrative. Is she *too* modestly dressed? Sleeves to the wrists, collars to the neck. Is this the Children's influence? Is she in the Children? Is her smile real? Is the group photo of her family at a relative's birthday a shiny front for some kind of hidden abuse?

I put the phone down, realizing I have spun out for twenty minutes about a girl I don't know whose only crime is not logging on to class today.

There are two days until the Christmas holidays begin. I guess I can keep an eye on her until then.

Roe picks me up, and the fight with Aaron is already forgotten. He's spent the day with the band, strategizing their single release like dictators pushing flags around a map.

“I don’t think ‘Wolf Girl’ is our *best* song, but it hits all four of the banger quadrants,” Roe says, gripping the steering wheel a little too tightly.

“It’s a banger, for sure,” I say, patting his knee.

“Big chorus, check. Good lyrics – but not, y’know, *too* good, too good to go over people’s heads, anyway – check. Musicianship, check. Dee sounds amazing on it. And vocals, you know. I think I sound pretty good.”

That queasy feeling again, that Roe’s own trajectory is leading him away from magic. Away from me.

Who needs the occult when you have fame calling? Who needs a high school girlfriend when you have the world at your feet?

Even with his memories, Roe is straddling two worlds. The one with us, and the encroaching adult world that has already laid a claim on him. Neither of us will win, so we have to learn to share.

We talk about the single, allowing ourselves to bounce around the world of wardrobe choices and magazine features, until we pull up outside Nuala’s house and fall silent. We sit still.

“Are we going to go in?” I say finally.

“Yeah,” Roe says, rubbing at his temples. “I’m just savouring this moment, before we tell our friends that the Children are watching us.”

“I think on some level,” I say carefully, “we kind of knew they would be.”

“Just the idea of us going into the school the last few weeks, our only time alone together, and that ... they were keeping tabs on us the whole time. Like, how much did they *see*?”

“God. I don’t want to think about it.”

“There’s also the whole thing of ... y’know, telling the gang we’ve been using the school as a shag palace.” Roe grimaces. “Lily and I are close but we’re not ‘siblings who talk about their sex lives’ close.”

I grimace, opening the passenger door.

“Come on, then. Ask not for whom the uncomfortable-conversation-bell tolls. It tolls for thee.”

“Poetry!”

“You know it.”

We get inside, and Aaron is already there. Fiona, Nuala and Lily are at the kitchen table, Manon sitting on the countertop. Manon’s wearing a big shirt, presumably her father’s, and tapping the end of a pencil off the tip of her nose. Paolo is perched on top of the fridge.

Lily looks up as we come in.

“Hey,” she says, appearing slightly disturbed. “Aaron just told us.”

“It’s not a crime,” I reply, feeling a bit defensive. “It is *my* house after all.”

“What?”

“I told them about *the Lodge*,” Aaron stresses. “I thought I’d leave the other thing up to you.”

“Oh.”

“What did you think he told us about?” Fiona asks, confused.

“Ah, just, the Children are sort of ... watching us, and they sent Aaron a forged note pretending to be from me. To bring us all together at St Bernadette’s last night. And cause, like, a fight.”

“Why were you and Roe at St Bernadette’s last night?”

Manon asks. And then, as if she has answered her own question, “Oh.”

Nuala is unfazed. “I assumed they would be watching us. Now we need to be watching them. We need to find out about the Lodge. Aaron mentioned a camera. Roe?”

“Right.” Roe digs out the old Polaroid from his bag and explains that there’s no film. “I think I have an idea, though. Nuala, do you have a white sheet? Something that you don’t mind destroying?”

“Ominous,” Nuala says. “Let me look.”

She leaves the room and comes back with a bedsheet, tossing it towards Roe. It seems we won’t have to talk too much about either the sex or the weird postcard. Or, I realize, the fight. I train my mind on Aaron and Roe: they, it seems, aren’t too keen on talking about it, either. Or the temporary, inexplicable blindness.

“Great. Thanks,” Roe says, catching the sheet. “And a line of string. Or yarn, or something?”

Nuala grabs a roll of string from the top drawer and throws it to him.

“OK, everyone get up.”

We’re all mystified as we watch Roe pull out the kitchen table from the wall and fix the string between two parallel kitchen cabinets. Then he drapes the white sheet over it, like it’s a makeshift cinema screen. Roe turns off the lights and moves a desk lamp in from the living room, pointing it so only the white sheet is illuminated.

“Are you quite done ruining my house, Roe?” Nuala murmurs.

Roe stands on a stool in front of the sheet. “So. The guts of the camera has no memory, yeah? But the bulb itself does. It remembers everything it’s flashed at.”

He swivels, pointing the camera to the sheet and pressing the flash button. The room lights up for a moment, dazzling us all.

Roe studies the sheet and then quickly goes to it, taking a Sharpie from his pocket. He removes the lid with his teeth and draws a big shape. We watch him, his mop of curly hair blocking out most of the drawing until he stands back from it.

“All that,” Manon says finally, “for a rectangle.”

It’s actually a square, a rectangle, and a squiggly line.

“OK, look,” Roe says, trying not to be dissuaded, “I know this doesn’t look like ... much, but the picture isn’t clear in my head yet. All I can see are grey shapes, so I’m drawing where I can see the shapes.”

Aaron steps towards the white sheet, tracing Roe’s abstract drawing. “You’re saying that this could be where the Lodge is?”

“It’s a reasonable guess, right?” Roe says, excited that someone is finally grasping it, even if he’s disappointed that it’s Aaron. “If the Children-in-training are all at the Lodge, then it seems likely that the last photo taken is of the building.”

Aaron nods. “The kid said he used up all the film before he left.”

“Maeve.” Roe beckons to me. “Come over here. Merge your gift with mine for a minute. You can read minds; maybe you can get the camera to jog its memory, get a clearer picture.”

I go, bewildered by the request, but stranger things have happened. Our gifts once melded so that we could listen to phone calls through Roe’s car radio, so anything is possible.

“Look through the viewfinder,” Roe says, holding my hand. “Press the flash, and tell me what you can see.”

“Hang on, hang on, hang on,” I say, trying to find my bearings. “I can’t just switch it on like that.” I focus on Roe’s grip, Roe’s crystal-white light, his connection to the camera. The camera as an extension of Roe. “OK. I’m ready.”

I press the flash and immediately understand why Roe needed the white sheet. Like a black-and-white photograph that is only just starting to develop in a darkroom, I can see lines and shapes, the suggestion of an external location. But nothing else. Just lines. Just shapes.

“It’s no good,” I say, still peering through the viewfinder. “I can only see what you see.”

“Let me try,” Aaron suddenly says.

“What? Why?”

“Maeve doesn’t really do memories. She does what people are thinking, here and now. My gift is about delving into people’s histories, bringing out the stuff they wish they could forget. It seems ... pertinent.”

“That’s a good point,” Nuala says. Manon nods silently, takes a notebook from her breast pocket, and writes this down.

“I would like us to talk about that,” Manon says to Aaron, sounding like a therapist. “Later.”

Roe eyes Aaron suspiciously. “All right,” he says at last, reaching out his hand.

Aaron hesitates. “Just grab on to my wrist, or something.”

Awkwardly, Roe grabs Aaron’s wrist, his hand like a bracelet. Aaron takes a few silent moments, settling his gift. Then he looks through the viewfinder, and the room flashes white.

“OK,” Aaron says. “Big building. No. Big ... castle.”

Roe throws the Sharpie to Lily. “Lily,” he says quickly. “You’re the artist.”

Lily catches it. Goes to the sheet. “What kind of castle?”

“Like a ... like a Victorian Gothic castle. But you know, not real. Fake. It’s made to look like that, but it’s new, you know. There are solar panels on the roof.”

Lily starts drawing. “Turrets?”

“Three.”

“Where are they?”

“You can *see* all this?” I say, dumbfounded by this new aspect of Aaron’s power. He seems a little taken aback, too. He’s talking quickly, like this power is a runaway train he’s struggling to keep ahold of.

Aaron nods, his eyes manic. He pushes the flash button again. “It’s on an incline. Like a hill.”

“And roads?” Nuala interjects. “Landmarks?”

“No. No roads,” Aaron answers. “It’s all overgrown. Long grass. Nettles. Those yellow flowers.”

“Gorse?” Nuala suggests.

“Huh?”

She goes to the books lined up on the windowsill and pulls out *Ireland’s Wild Plants*. “Long weedy-looking things, yellow petals,” she says, flipping to a page and showing him.

Aaron nods. Lily takes a look at the page, too. “OK, where are they?”

Aaron snaps the flash again. “Bottom right. Actually. The whole bottom of the photo, scattered, except for the very left-hand corner.”

“What’s there?” Lily says, taking her art case out, trying to find yellow.

“A fence. Wire fencing. The kind you put around a building site.”

We go on like that for an hour. Aaron snapping. Lily

being the visual stenographer. Roe in steady concentration, too focused to speak. Nuala taking out reference books, aerial survey maps, travel guides from twenty years ago. What began as squiggles and shapes emerges as a real drawing. A recognizable landscape.

I keep expecting one of them to ask for a break. Fiona, Manon and I try to offer snacks or cups of tea, but we end up just watching. Useless, but fascinated.

Finally, Aaron flops down into a chair. “There,” he says. “That’s it. That’s as close as we’re going to get, I think.”

We each step back, surveying the bedsheet like it’s a fresco.

“A fake castle,” Fiona murmurs.

“It’s hideous,” Manon adds flatly.

Nuala starts nodding. “A Celtic folly. Maeve, get another round of teas in.”

I start collecting mugs. “What’s a Celtic folly? Is that another Irish mythology thing? Like the Housekeeper?”

Nuala actually spit-takes the last of her tea. “No,” she laughs. “Nooo, not a mythological thing. Very much a ‘humans are idiots’ thing.”

We all look at her, clueless.

“Christ.” She rolls her eyes. “Sometimes I forget that I hang around with teenagers. Right. So, you know the financial crash? 2008?”

Only Fiona and Aaron look fully confident. “I’ve heard *of* it,” I say defensively.

“After the crash, there were all these luxury hotels that were partly completed and ran out of investor funding. So these big behemoths were left to rot, often in the middle of nowhere, because they were planning on tourism booms

that never happened. This” – Nuala points to the sheet – “is a failed hotel. I’d bet my house on it.”

Fiona nods. “My mum has told me about them. Spooky.” She whistles sharply, and Paolo flies down from his fridge perch. “You OK, pal? Can you see that drawing?”

The bird observes the drawing, rotating his head to different angles, like his body is a lens trying to focus.

The two of them fall into a silent communication, and every few seconds Fiona murmurs something affectionate in Tagalog. She speaks to him very softly, like baby talk, like how she must have been spoken to when she was a small child. She opens the window, and Paolo flies off into the night.

“He gets it,” she says, closing it again.

“You’re teaching him your mother tongue?” Manon says, sounding impressed by Paolo’s existence for the first time.

“I don’t know, it just comes out naturally. I’m a bit like his mother, I guess.”

“He’s your familiar,” Nuala says fondly. “It’s a special thing.”

“I wish I had a familiar,” Lily and I both say at once, sounding like petulant children.

“I’m your familiar,” Roe says, putting an arm around my shoulder.

“Oh, we’re familiar all right.”

Lily puts her hands over her ears. “Can we not? I thought we avoided that conversation pretty well, no?”

We managed not to say a thing about the fight, the white eyes, the rocking scaffolding. The tension between Roe and Aaron, which hinges at least partly on me and therefore would embarrass them both. It’s only later that night, when I wake up after a dream about blindness, that I wonder whether we should have avoided it.

CHAPTER SIX

I FORGET TO CHECK FOR LORNA MCKEON THE NEXT DAY in class. The dream woke me up at three a.m., and then I couldn't get back to sleep for an hour. I log on late and cranky, and with the dream in fragments. The whole day gets away from me then: I can't concentrate, can't remember what homework I've done or not done, what test prep I said I'd do. It takes the whole afternoon to piece the dream back together, but this is what I end up with:

I'm in a house. An old house. It is genuinely old, not fake old like the Lodge, so I know it's not a vision about the Children. It's dirty. Every surface has a drink on it. A wine goblet forgotten on a mantelpiece, a teacup left to fester on a table. Everything is beautiful and weary, like it's the night after a party. There's a card table in the centre of the room, but with playing cards, not tarot. Kings and Queens stuck to Twos and Fours, all grime, no order.

I hear a noise. I turn around. There are people, but I can't make them out because my vision is blurring, and then my sight is gone. I can still hear people, feel the edges of tables, the plushness of the rug under my feet. It's a feeling of flailing.

Lily phones the minute I close my laptop. She doesn't really text. Every so often in the group chat she'll smash a few weird emojis just to show she's alive and agrees or disagrees, but usually she calls.

“Hey,” she says. “Can I come over? Can I use your bathroom?”

“You want to come over to use my bathroom?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Great, I’ll invite Fiona, too.”

I’m puzzled. “Does she need the toilet, too?”

“No, why would she?” And she hangs up.

Fi arrives before Lily does, and we eat toasted Scotch pancakes with thick slabs of Kerrygold butter. She’s just as confused by Lily’s summit as I am. It’s only when we’re on our third pancake that I remember.

“Hey,” I nudge. “You know that girl, Lorna?”

Fi is licking melted butter off her hand. “Lorna McKeon?”

“What’s she like?”

“Quiet? And, uh ... organized?” She takes a bite. “Why?”

“I don’t know. I have a feeling. She was missing yesterday.”

She thinks. “She was missing today, too. There’s only six of us in physics. She wasn’t there.” Fiona eyes me thoughtfully. “You don’t think...?”

“The Lodge? I don’t know. We literally just learned about it, so maybe now I’m just, like, hyper aware of people not being where they should be.”

“The Lodge is the hammer, and now everything looks like a nail, that kind of thing?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Lily arrives, marching through the front door with the smell of winter on her, a supermarket carrier bag swinging from her arm.

“Yo,” she says, sounding furious. “So, I guess we *are* being watched.”

She takes a copy of the *Kilbeg Evening Star* out of the bag and slams it on the kitchen table. The Christmas tree quivers slightly at the force of her.

The newspaper is already folded open to the relevant page. It’s a feature on “The Witches of St Bernie’s”: me, Fiona and Lily.

There are quotes from anonymous classmates, and a rundown of the strange events of the last year. The events as they are known to the public, anyway. It begins with me, and the tarot. Then Lily’s disappearance in February, followed by her strange reappearance a month later. The article refers to The Chokey throughout. Always in scare quotes, as if it’s a place we went to choke people.

Then the fire, Sister Assumpta’s death, the strange will she left behind bequeathing her property to the troublesome Maeve Chambers – the failing student who has been variously accused of witchcraft, bullying and downright stupidity. And who, crucially, was there when Sister Assumpta died.

You have to admit, it’s a pretty compelling story.

Worst of all, there are photos of us. Complete with little text boxes about our “traits”. All our school photos have been used. My picture is horrible. My hair is huge and frizzy, an oily shine on my forehead and nose. Lily looks completely checked out, like she hasn’t even seen the photographer, her eyes half-closed. Fiona, predictably, looks amazing. Huge, glowing white smile. Bright, brown laughing eyes.

LILY O'CALLAGHAN, 17

- Talented artist
- “She had a crush on me!”
- Pisces!
- Disappeared last February for a month

FIONA BUTTERSFIELD, 17

- Aspiring actress
- Taurus!
- “Was always nice to everyone ... until she wasn't...”
- Irish father. Mother emigrated from the Philippines in 2003.

MAEVE CHAMBERS, 17

- The ringleader
- Chambers began reading for classmates before Lily's disappearance
- “A real cow!”
- Sagittarius!

“Who gave you this, Lil?”

“A girl in Youth Orchestra. They went crazy over it. They all wanted me to sign their copies.”

“They all had a copy?”

“Yeah, it's a free paper. There was a big stack of them left in the hall we practise in.”

“Oh, god, Lil, I'm sorry. That sounds shit.”

“It *was* shit!” She slaps the paper for emphasis, rattling the table. “I'm trying really hard, you know? To be a person, be a body, be a thing that dies. Even though it feels, like,

completely freakish and unfair. And when things like this happen it just feels so much *more* freakish.”

Fiona and I each put a hand on her shoulder, making quick, concerned eye contact with each other. It’s so hard when Lily gets upset like this. I wish Hallmark had cards that said “I’m Sorry You’re No Longer a River”.

“Hey,” I say, trying to find humour in the whole thing, “I wonder who called me a cow.”

“Might be a shorter list if you consider who *doesn’t* have a reason to call you a cow,” Fiona says, elbowing me.

“OK, bitch!”

“Hey, at least no one’s citing your parents’ immigration history,” Fi says, examining the piece. “This is so screwed up.”

“Absolutely FUBAR,” I agree. “Sorry, Fi.”

I turn to Lily. “Why did you want to use my bathroom? Are we doing a spell or something?”

Lily reaches into the carrier bag and takes out a bottle of bleach and a bottle of blue hair dye. “Sort of.”

“Right,” Fi says, gathering Lily’s fair hair to the nape of her neck, “are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I’m sitting on the edge of the tub with Paolo, and Fiona looks more nervous than Lily does.

“Can you make it grow back if you mess it up, Fi?” I ask, before adding, “Not that you *would* mess it up.”

“Uh, maybe?” Fi says. “I’ve never done hair before.”

“Just do it,” Lily says to her reflection.

Fiona gathers the hair again and swipes through it with the scissors in one clean movement. Six inches of hair come

away clean in her hand, a ponytail without a pony. We all look at it in silence, remembering Heather, remembering the tea bags she saved from each cup to drain my magic, remembering Fiona's eyelash and handwriting in her journal. The evening in Nuala's bathroom, when Fiona rolled down her tights and told us through tears that her gift had begun to cease, but that her self-harm had not.

I told Fiona to go and speak to Heather. We so badly needed therapy after the ritual. Miss Banbury. What a genius construction. The right thing at the right time. A sympathetic ear that was sucking us both dry.

We all say the same thing at once.

"Burn it."

We put Lily's hair in the plastic shopping bag that the dye came in, ready to be burned later, and Fiona starts layering on the bleach. I start inspecting the newspaper article again.

"This is them," I say. "This is the Children."

"You think they *wrote* it?" Fiona asks disbelievingly.

"I don't know. We already know they have connections everywhere, and that they're watching us. Maybe they didn't write it, but maybe they can influence the people who do. Or the owners of the paper, or something."

"What makes you so sure that we're not just ... a very compelling human-interest story?"

"This is burning," Lily interrupts. "Is it supposed to burn?"

"A little, yes."

"It doesn't mention Heather Banbury, right? Because Dorey knows if people go poking around about Heather, they'll follow the lead back to the Children eventually."

“Right.” Fiona nods. “So why would they plant this story about us, then?”

“To discredit us,” Lily replies. “So if we come forward with anything, there’s already a narrative of us being murderous weirdos.”

“Jesus, I hadn’t even *thought* of that,” I say, so exhausted that I lie down in the empty tub. “This makes me want to sell the stupid school and move us all to Fiji.”

“That’s literally what the Children want you to do,” Fiona says. “Pass the showerhead. Lily, lean your head back over the sink.”

I pass her the showerhead. “I know that’s what they want me to do, but I can still *dream*.”

My phone buzzes. Roe.

You at home?

“Roe’s coming over,” I say while texting back. “Full house of O’Callaghans.”

I sit up, watching Fiona rinse Lily’s now yellow-white hair. “The other night,” I say carefully, “Roe and Aaron went blind.”

“What do you mean they *went blind*?”

“Like, they lost their sight.”

“For how long?”

“Like, a minute.”

The girls don’t have a chance to respond because Roe crashes up the stairs hollering something about being a rock star. He bursts through the door, looking drunk already.

“Oh wow, bathroom orgy!” he proclaims. “What the shit?”

“We’re dying Lily’s hair,” I reply. “Now that we’re famous.”

He looks confused. “Huh? Since when are you famous? I’m the famous one.”

“What?”

Roe holds up an issue of *Hot Press*. “Single of the Week, baby!”

We all go nuts. Roe’s got his own carrier bag, only this one is full of cava. He’s got three bottles, and the first one gets utterly lost to drenching us all like Formula 1 drivers.

“Oh, my god, Fi, this won’t mess with the bleach, will it?” Lily says, holding up a strand of soaked yellow hair.

“No.” Fi laughs. “Sit back down. I’ll paste some blue on.”

“Single of the Week,” I say, marvelling at the tiny review that might just change Roe’s life. “Roe, this is huge.”

“Huge,” he agrees, happily slugging from the bottle. “It can be seen from space. Wait, what were you guys talking about?”

We explain, while the blue hair dye sets, about the Witches of St Bernadette’s. Roe examines the newspaper wincingly.

“Wow,” he says flatly. “Way to steal my thunder.”

I don’t dare tell him what I’m thinking, and what Fiona and Lily must be thinking also. If the Children were responsible for that piece in the *Kilbeg Evening Star*, could they be behind the piece in *Hot Press*, too? One is a local paper, and the other is a national magazine. One article is a deliberate attack on us; the other is a few sentences about an indie rock single. What would they have to gain from printing a rave of Small Private Ceremony?

Fracturing, I suppose. They’ve seen how our powers can merge, and we’re getting better at it all the time. Roe and Aaron have even started to trace their location, just by fusing

their gifts together. We are undoubtedly stronger together. Why *wouldn't* you try to split us up?

The more attention SPC gets, the more gigs they'll do, the likelihood of us losing Roe increases. But Roe, having been almost lost, surely can't be mislaid again?

Can he?

We all marvel at Lily's new hair. Which, despite Fiona's reluctance to dye it, actually looks pretty great. She looks impish, full of pretty mischief, and can't seem to believe her luck.

"Can you believe it?" she says, admiring her reflection. "Don't I look incredible?"

"I agree," I say. "You look incredible."

"All right," Fiona says, admiring her handiwork, "I gotta get home. Mum's doing fajitas. Are we still going to this thing tomorrow night?"

This "thing" is Holly McShane's Christmas party, a supposedly annual event that Fiona has been to and that Lily and I had never heard of. We're invited this year, though. There's a sense that the remaining St Bernadette's girls are bonded by trauma, or at least by our own rarity. We're the last dodos, the final graduating class. It's a sentiment that trumps cliques or vague ideas of popularity. Or at least it did before the article.

"I don't know," I say, glancing down at the newspaper again. "I mean, after this? I don't know if I want to party with people who are ratting us out to the press."

"Calm down, Lady Di," Fiona replies. "They were probably made-up quotes. Or if they weren't made up, taken out of context. Give them more credit than that." She looks at the time. "All right, it's fajita o'clock, I'm gone."

Lily ends up going with her, admitting that fajitas are one of the few things that being human can offer that being a river cannot. Then it's just me and Roe, drenched in cava and blue hair dye and sitting in the tub.

“Read it again,” Roe says. “Read it out loud this time.”

“OK.” I grin, taking a long slug from the bottle. “Small Private Ceremony is an eclectic punk-rock foursome from Kilbeg who first attracted attention touring with Honor Own earlier this year. Their first single, “Wolf Girl”, is a full-throated, foot-stomping anthem that asserts itself as both a classic ode to young love and a breathless story of transformation.”

I look up from the magazine, full of glee. “I *told* you they would love it.”

“You did. Read on.”

“The single, paired with the mischievous yet defiant B-side, “Mind Your Business, Glinner”, firmly places Small Private Ceremony within the Irish queer music scene. Special mention should go to Roe O’Callaghan, whose voice rings out like a velvet buzz saw – a little Luke Kelly, a little Dolores O’Riordan. If “Wolf Girl” is anything to go by, they might just be the next great Irish vocalist.”

I put the magazine on my chest. “Babe,” I whisper, “they called you the *next great Irish vocalist!*”

“Maeve,” Roe whispers back, with a smile so big I think it might be generating electricity, “they called me *they*.”

I pick it up again and scan the last line. “Oh yeah!”

There’s a small silence, a happy silence, and I know it’s my job to let Roe fill it.

“It feels really *good*.”

“What does it feel like?”

“It feels like ... like graduation. Like I’m ready? Ready for ... I don’t know. Ready.”

“To do the pronoun thing?”

I immediately want to hit myself on the head for referring to it as “the pronoun thing”. Thankfully, Roe just nods.

“Yeah. To do the pronoun thing.”

“Oh, my god,” I say, and I rest my head on the cold enamel of the bathtub, looking at this person. The winter sunlight falls through the small circular window in the bathroom, shooting a prism of colour across the tiles, and I can see them for all their vivid multiplicity.

“Congratulations,” I say shyly. “Should we toast?”

“Yeah,” they say, holding up the cava. “To, ah, self-acceptance and self-knowledge.”

“And Spanish champagne.”

“Yeah. To self-acceptance and self-knowledge and Spanish champagne.”

We kiss, and it’s the Roe I grew up with, and the Roe I almost died with, and the Roe the world gets to see onstage. All of them, all together. All at once.