

# WHEN THE BOUGH DOESN'T BREAK

## I

It wasn't a conversation to have saved for the plane, halfway across the Atlantic, but that was Ethan for you. She'd once heard someone describe him as the type of person who wouldn't tell you he didn't really want to play Russian Roulette until the bullet was halfway through his head.

"What *I* think?" he said. "I think deep down you're in love with a man you never met, who's been dead for years."

Pandora, looking Ethan in the eye: "Says the guy whose first love was Batgirl."

"Plus he was celibate. Dead and celibate—it's the safest infatuation you could possibly have."

"He was *not* celibate. Patrick had women."

"A few pub tarts...one-nighters, by the tone of his description. His stigmata bled the first time and scared her off, so that one doesn't count. That part's got to be true—who'd make up a humiliating thing like that? And maybe, *maybe*, Maia. If she even exists, and wasn't just some figment of his fevered imagination. Add everything up, it's close enough to celibate for me."

"She exists," Pandora said. "*They* exist. And if you don't think they do, you've done a pretty good job of faking it for the past couple of years."

Ethan's unexpected skepticism was the prelude to a couple hun-

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dred aeronautical miles of frosty silence, until he thawed her out again by doing nothing more than being his pitiful-looking self. His nose was too long; his eyebrows peaked in the middle and sloped outward, making him appear as though he were perpetually on the verge of bursting into tears. His hair was an unruly shock that could only be cured by a buzz cut or the weight of a heavy mane, nothing in between. He brought out maternal instincts in girls who swore they hated children—hardly the reaction he craved.

They'd been friends for years, probably since before either of them had sprouted pubic hair. Ethan, the boy at school who had made her feel less lonely because he was as shunned as she was... what else could he be by now but a brother, and often a better brother than the pair she'd been stuck with by birth.

Ethan, she feared, had come to see things differently. Which probably explained the fine line he walked lately, veering between disapproval and devotion. As though in his eyes she was spurning him to save her affections for a man who could not have been more remote if he were living on Neptune.

Yet once she'd made up her mind to scrimp and save for the trip to Ireland, there was no question but that Ethan would do likewise. He had all along shared this strange obsession of hers, although she suspected it was something he never would've arrived at on his own; that for Ethan, this was like football had been for the more bubbleheaded girls who'd outshined her every day of high school: something they'd convinced themselves they liked so the guys they wanted would want them in return.

So here he was, seeing it through with her from start to finish. Because that's what brothers did. She only hoped that it was for the right reasons. There could be but one wrong reason: hoping that after she'd completed this peculiar pilgrimage, gotten out of her system, she would turn to him as some sort of consolation prize.

*Please, Sisters, anything but that...because he's had enough hurt for one decade.*

It was the closest thing to a prayer she'd composed in years, silently uttered over a patchwork of emerald fields, as west of Dublin they began to descend in what she'd always been uneasy hearing called their final approach.

II

The signposts of history once seemed to her to read like grave markers, instead. A not-uncommon teenage revelation, although perhaps occurring earlier to her than to most, the kind of thing that comes upon the kind of girl prone to suddenly finding the world an unbearable place to live, with a closetful of somber clothes to show for it, and the thing she's most tired of hearing is her mother telling her how much prettier she would be if she'd just make an effort to *smile* once in a while.

Pandora at fourteen, that was...when history class became as impossible to tolerate as, she would later admit, she probably was herself. When she *didn't want* to be pretty. When she *had no right* to be pretty...assuming she could've believed that anyone who hadn't given birth to her might think she was. And she definitely didn't want to smile. Not when—wait for it—there was *so much misery in the world*.

At home, in the stale sanctuary of her room, she began making the chart on the wall that so dismayed her parents. Her dad, even at that late post-countercultural date, could still be caught wearing the occasional tie-dyed T-shirt. After each particularly wrenching class or solo discovery, she added to the columns of dates and events and body counts that reflected such a scale of suffering that she couldn't understand how to other people they could merely be numbers in books or lectures:

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<u>YEAR</u>	<u>PLACE/EVENT</u>	<u>CASUALTIES</u>
79	Mt. Vesuvius buries Pompeii in ash	The entire city
1066	Battle of Hastings	Dunno; just lots of dead Saxons
1845-1848	Ireland – potato famine	1,000,000
1863	Battle of Gettysburg	48,000 (North + South)
1883	Krakatoa eruption	36,380 (163 villages)
1905	St. Petersburg, Russia-Bloody Sunday	100s (exact # not germane to US history books?)
1912	Titanic sinks	1513
1937	Hindenburg blows	36
1939-1945	WWII death camps	6,000,000
1963	Dallas, TX - JFK	1
1972	Londonderry, Ireland-Bloody Sunday	13
1990	Mecca; stampede in pedestrian tunnel	1400

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And so on. And everyone knew better than to get her started on earthquakes, volcanoes, monsoons. Out of this, the name Pandora—*“A box, a room, what’s the difference, just don’t open it up unless you’re ready to deal with all the woes of the world”*—tacked onto her by a scoffing brother and promptly assimilated out of defiance.

On those rare occasions when her mother entered the room and could bring herself to look at it, she would regard the chart with the same repugnance she might feel toward a slick crop of fungus crawling up the wall. Pandora eventually suspected that her parents’ discomfort stemmed from a dread that it would evolve into some grander, bleaker declaration, more sinister than the idea that so many could die for no apparent purpose. That she would slap up another posterboard and summarize everything in one final equation:

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**YEAR + PLACE/EVENT + CASUALTIES = NO GOD**

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Or goddess. You couldn’t quite pin them down, divinity being beyond gender and all. They were like that, in their New Agey way, and oblivious to the fact—clearly shown by the 1963 Dallas entry—that it wasn’t just a numbers game for scrawny little Melanie, now signing household notes and birthday cards as Pandora.

Yet their worries were more justified than she let on: The chart wasn’t just more of the same morbid curiosity that marked her as a classroom freak, but a big screaming question mark, taking the form it did because she wasn’t sure whom to scream at out loud anymore. Even before the maudlin thing hit the deep purple paint of her wall, whenever she learned of some atrocious event, she would ponder all the prayers that would’ve gone unanswered.

A bearded, pissed-off Patriarch on His throne, demanding love and threatening grim consequences for its withholding; a meek Lamb willingly trudging to His own slaughter, sent by a Father who had by now mellowed into an all-merciful old duffer...they each seemed equally improbable to her, and equally frightening. At least the state of the world seemed like something you could more easily pin on the former.

Which was why the chart’s final entry—even as she wearied of updating it, the point having become redundant—seemed out of char-

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acter, bush league. Serial killers had never greatly interested her, most of them just kinky products of a warped upbringing. Yet long before she knew the details, and the rumors his spree inspired, Pandora sensed that this one was different. That he belonged on the chart because his acts were, in some crude and misguided yet brutally poignant way, a response to the entries that preceded them:

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<u>YEAR</u>	<u>PLACE/EVENT</u>	<u>CASUALTIES</u>
This autumn	Belfast, Ireland, et al; Patrick Kieran Malone	13...all priests

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A modern-day friar and parochial Latin teacher, Patrick had been a reluctant stigmatic who'd beheld a vision of a Christ who had denied himself. In despair, Patrick had left both his abbey and the Church that had no use for him. Months later he killed the priests over a span of five weeks, dispatching each with a savagely efficient military knife. He had, in the account he was purported to have written of his sad, strange life and unexpected crimes, likened the spilling of their blood to the biblical description of old wineskins that had burst after being unable to hold new wine. He had killed the priests, had set down his tale...then vanished from the face of the earth.

Of course, anyone who read Patrick's testament—in time, Pandora found it on the Internet, where else?—would know what happened. It left no room for doubt.

As to whether or not it was true, well...sometimes things have to be taken on faith.

### III

Clockwise around this most green of islands, their path had been dictated by the shrines themselves—four of them, it was said, one for each of the cardinal points. They'd started in Dublin, next traveling south to the outskirts of Cork, then swinging up and westward to the shadow of Croagh Patrick in County Mayo, and finally north, deep into the wild highlands of County Donegal.

These were not shrines in the Catholic sense, at least not the Catholicism of the past millennium: gaudy tourist traps whose foundational piety had been usurped by tacky commerce. Instead, Pandora

imagined that these new shrines were more akin to those from the Church's earliest centuries, so humble that they scarcely drew attention to themselves at all—the biggest difference being, naturally, that they existed in opposition to all the Church held sacred.

In Dublin, a fourth of Patrick's bones were said to rest behind a brick wall, concealed by a dense curtain of ivy, on a side street so desolate you would never go there by accident. The southern shrine was a flagstone on a path leading to an ancient cemetery whose ground had been deconsecrated in the eighteenth century. You had to count to make sure you had the right flagstone, but once you found it, you noticed the subtle etchings left by prior visitors. In the west, his resting place was also marked by rock, with the quarter-share of bones rumored to lie far below ground, beneath one of the solemn gray standing stones that had since pagan times listened to the lapping of the waters of Clew Bay.

And here in Donegal, a crooked mile's walk from the village of Glenmullen, they had been repositied into the core of a vast-trunked yew so old it had started to turn hollow. Ancient yews sometimes did that, their roots grown so strong over their first two thousand years that they began to rip the trees open...yet this was not their end, just a new stage of life. It made the finest tomb she ever expected to see.

A man's bones interred the length and breadth of a land—there were plenty of historical precedents, although usually from periods of conquest and terror. After the English had disemboweled Scotland's William Wallace, across the Irish Channel and 700 years of time, they'd drawn and quartered him and sent the pieces to the farthest corners of Britain as a failed warning to others who would dare fight for freedom.

Like Wallace, Patrick too had been dispersed by those who killed him, but any parallels ended there. Hunted and hated, too weary to go on, this most notorious of Ireland's murderers had returned to the only ones he knew would take him back...because even if the Sisters had not made him what he was, his transformation could never have happened without them.

At her feet, the yew's roots writhed in and out of the earth like a vast tangle of snakes. Pandora stepped atop them, almost expecting them to squirm, and splayed her hands across the purple-brown bark of the trunk. It may have been one shrine out of four, but this northernmost among them seemed to dominate the rest.

His skull...surely this was where they'd lain his skull.

“Imagine someone loving you so much,” she said, “that they would do this for you.”

“All of it, you mean?” Ethan asked. “Or just the shrines?”

“Of course all of it,” she said. “Imagine having to tear me apart with your own teeth. Imagine understanding that for all its apparent cruelty, and as much as you’d hate to do it, it’s the last act of kindness you could show.”

“*Hide me*,” Patrick had pleaded, knowing he could not outrun the police forever. “*Hide me where they’ll never find me. Hide me where they never can.*”

And so they had. The three women who, in the mists and shadows of legend, had become known as the Sisters of the Trinity did the only thing they could. Granting his wish by dealing with him as they had been dealing with much more naive men for perhaps longer than this yew tree had been standing.

“*Caress then, these beasts, that they may be my tomb*,” Patrick had written, quoting Saint Ignatius before his own martyrdom in a Roman arena, “*and let nothing be left of my body; thus my funeral will be a burden to none.*”

They devoured him, body and essence.

Lilah, his flesh.

Maia, his blood.

Salíce, his seed.

But, like thousands of saints before him, he’d left behind bones.

Or so the story went.

That the Sisters had treated these bones with such veneration could only be an act of sublime love—not only on their part, but by extension, the scattered society of abominations of which they were a part, referred to by Patrick as The Misbegotten. Surely they’d known exactly what they were doing—both in scattering his gnawed skeletal remains, as well as sending his testament into the world. But because it was only the text, and not the original document, few believed it genuine, and most of those who did dismissed it as further evidence of a delusional mind.

But from where Pandora stood, it was too good not to be true.

The Sisters’ acts, she thought, were intended only for those few in whom they might resonate as lures into a hidden truth: that, as she’d suspected ever since she could remember, the thing that had come to be called God loved nothing but itself. That it had taken

credit for a world it had never created, and drank in the suffering of those who groveled before it. That at least some of those branded as devils were not without honor, decency, and love, living in the darkness not because they were born there, but because they'd been forced into it and found it more welcoming than the light.

"So...what now?" Ethan asked. "You did the legwork. You've found them all. What now?"

A simple question, yet it implied a terrible burden. "Are we just supposed to go home after something like this?"

"Well, yeah, what else?" For the first time, Pandora thought he looked not just annoyed, but genuinely disgusted with her. "What'd you think was gonna happen—you could hang around one of these pathetic little excuses for immortality and some flash of insight would explain why you're alive?"

Maybe she did.

Oh god, maybe she did. Face it: If your free time was consumed by gathering fragments of heresy and fitting them together, if you strained to hear whispers of unholy war, if you went looking for the shrines to a mass-murderer that someone had christened Saint Patrick the Fallen, then you were a freak, motivated by compulsions most people couldn't begin to understand. Least of all yourself.

Ethan wasn't finished. "Once I came across this saying, I don't remember, it was Buddha or the Dalai Lama or somebody like that: 'Before enlightenment, chopping wood and hauling water. After enlightenment, chopping wood and hauling water.' I thought of you. I thought of you, and it fucking *hurt*. Because I knew you'd rather freeze and die of thirst before admitting that *just* wood and *just* water isn't the end of the world."

*And what's wrong with that?* she wanted to know. *I have a life only I don't recognize it anymore. I was taught things I can't believe. I have a job but the best thing about it is I can be here and it doesn't even miss me. I'd have a college degree if I'd had the conviction it would've been worth one more year. Maybe nothing fits, okay...but I refuse to roll over and say nothing ever will.*

"Remember those movies we used to rent?" he asked, and at first she thought of the obvious choices, baroque spectacles of blood and love and sorrow. *The Crow*—they'd watched it a jillion times, and not once had she made it through with dry eyes. Ethan would hold her and tell her...

Oh. Right. These couldn't be the movie nights he had in mind right now.

"Those stupid high school comedies we used to laugh *at* instead of *with*?" Ethan said. "The ones where the idiot guy or the idiot girl is totally in love with the unworthy asswipe? But meanwhile, there's always the geek who's been right in front of them the whole time, with *so* much more to offer...except the geeks are invisible for the first hour and forty-five minutes. Well..."

He couldn't say the rest. Didn't need to say the rest. Because they both knew everybody real lived in that first hour and forty-five minutes. They never got to the end, just kept rewinding the tape.

The rest of the argument? Pretty much like that, only worse. Plenty of time to get worse, because as near as she could tell, in Ireland the clocks turned more slowly. Time enough to go from painful to ugly, then degenerate from there.

Time enough for the best friend she'd ever had to turn his back on her, stalking across the meadows and leaving her to the remains of this suddenly cheerless autumn day.

She hadn't tried to stop him as he'd set off alone, merely followed later, back into Glenmullen. The village was a woolly little place tucked among the trees and streams of a rough-hewn valley, serviced by one decent road up from Letterkenny, and the rest of any traveling done on glorified footpaths. Picturesque, to be sure, but ramshackle enough to discourage tourists who expected something cushier.

There was no proper hotel or hostel, so they'd rented a second-floor room at a pub and inn bearing the unlikely name of The Mouth of Oran. When they'd asked Fergus and Kathleen, the owners, what it meant, they were told it dated back to when Fergus' grandfather owned the place, and spitefully renamed it after an old sheep farmer and steady patron who, whenever he was on the premises, would rather have died than let anyone get the better of him in an argument...or friendly conversation, for that matter. The place was more pub than inn, but took care of creature comforts and food and alcohol alike.

After the blow-up, Pandora gave Ethan a couple hours to cool off—long enough, she hoped, to welcome a peace offering of a round of porters—only to hike back and discover that he'd cleared out entirely, the sad-eyed little shit. Backpack gone, along with everything that had

burst from it to make such a litter throughout the room. If Fergus and Kathleen had seen him vacate, they didn't let on. Hard to tell what they genuinely didn't notice and what was provincial discretion.

But they had to figure it out soon enough, as she stayed on alone rather than immediately finishing the circuit back to Dublin. Comforting, she found it, to dig in and make a home away from home like this. She would eat herself miserable each morning with Kathleen's traditional Irish breakfast: eggs, ham, bacon, black and white puddings, fried tomatoes, coarse brown bread soppy with country butter—meal enough for the rest of the day, almost.

Of the evenings she would listen to the local musicians who gathered around the fireplace...if not down in the pub itself, at least from her bed, as the old songs, both the lively and the lamenting, filtered up through rafters and stone. Music, she had come to understand, permeated County Donegal the same way honeysuckle sweetened the air of spring. Under this roof, it wasn't organized and it wasn't for pay. They just came, bringing their guitars and mandolins, their whistles and flutes, their bodhrans and their pipes and most of all their fine, strong voices, and played as the spirits moved them.

Did they get many tourists in Glenmullen, to hear such zest and zeal? Pandora was curious but knew that asking would make it all the more obvious she didn't belong, a fact evident enough already...and for a week, at least, she *wanted* to belong. But no one else here looked quite like her. Her draping bush of raven hair was an easy enough fit, while her skinny frame, her dark-rimmed eyes, her wardrobe of black tights and jeans and boots and shapeless charcoal sweaters marked her as from parts beyond. But this seemed cause for no comment and only a few disparaging glances. Maybe, with that secret shrine not far off, they had in recent years become accustomed to the sight of the types of visitors it would draw, even if the locals didn't know why such folk had come. Surely, in a land so intrinsically Catholic, they would be loath to tolerate such a blasphemy in their midst.

Blasphemy or not, it was where she spent the biggest part of her days—the chasm between breakfast and nightfall when the hours seemed longest. She would hike to Patrick's yew by a different route each morning, through rain and sunshine alike, ambling down rutted lanes and trekking across pastures of grazing sheep, approaching the grove from a new direction, a fresh way of looking at it.

Interruptions were rare, and never anything that didn't seem part

of everyday life—a farmer, a shepherd, a retiree out for a stroll. Never any pilgrims like herself, which both relieved and aggrieved her. She knew that people were drawn here, and to the other three shrines—they spoke of it in chatrooms and bulletin boards, or argued over exact locations—but she'd never gotten a sense of how many. On any given day, dozens, if not hundreds, would trudge up rocky Mount Brandon at the opposite end of the island...in bare feet, if they were particularly devout. Here, could the numbers really be so few? The shrine's loneliness would protect it, yet her solitude here only underscored how few they must be—those who could believe in the righteousness of devils.

Encouraged by the tranquility of the yew, she would stretch along the ground beneath it and think of Patrick Kieran Malone. The man, not the blackened saint with the blood of priests on his hands. Born a few years earlier, and in a different place, she surely could've saved him. Could've pulled him back from his despair. *Yes, there's much more to life than that god they raised you on, crushed you with*, she would have breathed into his mouth. *There's more to love than that terrible god's illegitimate son and how he tried to assert his real truth through you...through your split flesh, your blood. You've only confirmed what I've always suspected, so let's just exist in defiance of it all.* She would've guided his inexperienced cock into her not-much-more-experienced cunt and felt him tremble with the newness of his life. She would've placed his hands upon her breasts—whose modest endowments had drawn more than one look of disappointment—and he would've found them delightful.

Yeah. Right.

First the fantasies, then the sense of humiliation. As a college dropout, the last thing she was entitled to was a stupid schoolgirl crush, although she didn't let it stop her from heading out Kathleen's door each morning. And the fourth such afternoon, without a soul in sight, she thought what the hell, this must be what it had been building up to all along...and so while lying beneath the tree, she skinned her hands beneath the elastic of her tights to slowly, deliciously, wank herself to a silent but shuddering release.

So was it coincidence, Ethan's timing, or had he been watching while hidden in a hedgerow or treeline? She would never know, only suspect that, okay, probably he *had* seen what for him was the last straw: that she preferred a ghost to him.

So it seemed the fifth morning upon Pandora's approach to the

yew—leisurely at first, then at an apprehensive jog, and finally a terrified sprint, certain that once she got there she would see how wrong she was, that there wasn't really anyone or anything that looked like Ethan hanging by the neck from the yew's lowest bough.

#### IV

She hadn't realized it at the time, but when Ethan was still alive, still her friend, and together they were far to the south, the equinox had come and gone. Day and night in perfect balance on the fulcrum of a single day. The land had since tipped toward night. At this latitude, the plunge was more obvious than it would be back home in Ohio, a perceptible chunk shaved off each evening. Soon the darkness would be hungry for afternoon, too.

Fine by her; Pandora wanted little more than to sleep. In less than a week she'd grown accustomed to finishing each day smelling like sun and rain and the fields. Now she stank of her own sheets.

"Not off tramping about on your all-day hikes anymore, I see," Kathleen said to her the second afternoon she was spending near the fireplace, over pints and a book. "If it's your ankle you've turned, we've a splendid doc just down the road."

"No, I didn't turn anything, I don't need a doctor."

"Today, you say, but it's a dietician you'll be needing soon if you keep eating those breakfasts I serve you and then go and not walk 'em off."

Which brought the first real smile Pandora had let go of in days. Kathleen's voice, like that of most everyone Pandora had heard since coming here, could turn even chiding into a kind of music. Speaking from experience, perhaps, Kathleen was on the wrong side of thickset, although surprisingly light on her feet. She must've been around Pandora's mother's age, yet seemed both much older and much younger, with a braid of black hair, as thick as one of the yew's roots, worn down her back.

"Now if it's the fella situation that's been causing you to keep to our dampest, draftiest corners and risk your death of pneumonia...? Fellas come and fellas go, and another'll be turning up soon enough...although much as I love the filthy old place, I doubt he'll be turning up beneath *our* roof."

This brought an insulted howl from one of the daily regulars that Pandora had chatted with a few times. Too early for music yet, with almost a dozen scattered about the place...no way were they having a private conversation, no matter how much the others pretended to ignore them.

“Well, it’ll not be the likes of you, Michael Ennis,” Kathleen called over to him, “so best you take your face and all three chins, and stick ’em deep in that glass of yours, where you’ve forever found a more welcome reception!”

Much laughter, the kind Pandora had always imagined erupting in places such as this, where the ones laughing and the one laughed at had known each other since birth. No secrets here, she imagined. No secrets, and it would be a difficult thing to manage dying alone.

“He wasn’t my fella,” she said, so quietly now that only Kathleen could have heard. “He was just a friend.”

“Ah. And a fine loyal one too, he looked to be, in his brief time here.”

Brief time. Oh, she had no idea.

“So maybe you shouldn’t be as quick to give up on him as you’ve seemed these past days.”

No idea that Ethan wouldn’t, couldn’t, have a change of heart and come walking through the front door tonight, tomorrow, ever. Not a soul in this village did. If the last secret she shared with Ethan stayed where secrets should, not a soul ever would.

Kathleen lingered at the table another couple of minutes, then seemed to sense that any more optimism might be overdoing it, and pushed back from the table to leave.

“Before I forget...” Pandora dug into the pocket of her pullover sweater. “Did you leave this on the dresser in my room yesterday? I didn’t notice it until this morning, but the way I’ve been looking at the floor most of the time, there could’ve been a garden gnome up there and I might not have seen it.”

She set it on the tabletop between them, a lump of gray-green stone that fit her palm perfectly. And make no mistake, the hand *wanted* to hold it. It had been carved and polished so smooth and round that it begged for caressing.

For a moment too long, Kathleen merely stared.

The image itself, as near as Pandora recognized, was prehistoric—one of those ponderously proportioned female figurines that

seemed all belly and boobs, tapering like an egg with a blunted head, tiny feet. As for this one's origins, Pandora imagined it had probably come from some still-breathing artisan with a fondness for the Stone Age, or maybe just plump breeders with oversized parts.

Kathleen's hand moved to claim it, on the verge, Pandora was certain, of blaming her own carelessness. Then Kathleen stopped herself, as if realizing she had no right to do what she was about to. She recovered well—if Pandora had had another ale she might not have noticed—and instead nudged the icon back toward Pandora's hand.

"A souvenir for a long-term guest, of whom we've become very fond. I meant to tell you and it slipped my mind," Kathleen said. "Anybody can leave you a silly wee cake of soap, can't they now?"

*Liar*, thought Pandora.

Although considering what she'd done with Ethan, she felt a good deal less than deserving.

But of course, Kathleen's fib hardly settled the matter of where the statuette *had* come from. They had no maids here; the place was not so big that whatever needed doing couldn't be handled by Kathleen herself, with the exception of wrestling new kegs into place down in the cellar.

For a couple of minutes, Pandora turned herself queasy with thoughts that it might have been Fergus who'd slipped in and left the fertility trinket as some perverse rural prelude to an attempted seduction. But the more she considered it, the more absurd it seemed. For one thing, Kathleen no doubt would've snatched the thing up after all, then bounced it off her husband's skull. For another, Fergus hardly seemed the type to rely on creeping guile. *Narrowbacks*, Pandora had heard that the Old World Irish sometimes called their New World descendants—whether a reference to a taller, leaner stature or a dismissive conviction that they weren't up to their ancestors' capacity to shoulder heavy burdens, either way it was none too flattering. Well, Fergus seemed a broadback through and through, and if he wanted you, she imagined that he would come straight for you. Not without charm, but straight-on just the same.

By whose hand, then? No one she could fathom. If the thing had borne the least resemblance to a hanged man, she might've had cause for worry, that her actions of the other morning hadn't gone unseen. But no... whatever this meant, it felt incidental to Ethan's suicide.

On the most appealing level, it was enough to hold the thing in

her hand—its smooth curves, its comforting solid weight—and believe in magic.

Over the past three days, she'd needed a mother. For the first time in years, she wanted a mother. But one who was enough of a realist to admit that young men who were still boys inside sometimes killed themselves; a mother who could empathize with the loss without emptying buckets of judgment on her head, or delivering sermons on karma and wasted potential.

So for now, it was enough to believe that she'd found two such mothers under the same roof: one to prod her out the door again...another to hold in her hand.

**V**

She came awake without knowing why, slowly enough that she couldn't be sure what was real and what wasn't. She recalled an ugly noise in a dream that was already fading...a cry like the squall of butchered hog.

As she turned over and burrowed into the quilts, she heard it again: an agonized bellow that had worked its way into her dreams. Jesus—it was the sort of shriek that made you curl into a ball and hope to go unnoticed, praying for a best-case scenario: some drunken unfortunate still lurching around after last orders, stumbling into...what, a crosscut saw, by the sound of it? Just his bad luck, please. Let there be nothing out there that might move on, unsatisfied, and start looking into windows.

She sat up and drew the covers around herself as tight as ceremonies, as beyond the window and curtains, Glenmullen roused to an angry nocturnal life. A shout from the north, a keening wail to the west; other voices, one and two at a time, joining in. From down the block she could hear the clacking of a doorknocker; a minute later and it had come to The Mouth of Oran, an urgent fist battering at the front door downstairs. Barred by a heavy oak beam, the door had, until this moment, seemed merely quaint.

Next, the sounds of someone opening up—Fergus, emerging from the private quarters that branched off the pub. She could hear a low rumble of voices belonging to men who sounded as though they would give anything to have remained in their own beds, the conver-

sation weighted by a terrible gravity. She strained to pick up something from it, but their talk surrendered nothing. Gaelic; they had reverted to Gaelic.

She waited in the dark as the visitors left and the door thudded shut; a moment later, the sounds of more words, more haste. She wanted to crawl into a closet, except the room was so old it didn't have one.

How old was the staircase out there, too, the one she'd walked every morning, every night? Suddenly it sounded grim with age, centuries of creaks and groans turning their spite upon her. She knew which of them it had to be; Kathleen's feet had never sounded as heavy as this.

At her door, finally, a knock that she could feel on her breastbone.

"Kathleen?" she called out, knowing better.

"A word with you, Pandy, if you please."

And if she didn't? No problem, Fergus would eat the door off the hinges.

She slid from the bed and into the room's autumn chill. In the dark, she threw on the clothes from yesterday, same as the clothes from the day before that. Out in the hall, Fergus waited in an oppressive silence, until doomsday or whenever she opened the door, whichever came first.

"Downstairs," he said. "'Tis a talk for downstairs."

Once there, Fergus surprised her by continuing to play the host, taking his place behind the bar while having her sit on one of the cracked leather-topped stools. Braced upon the bar, his arms looked as thick as her legs. His face was square and lined from an earlier life of raw weather, his hair curled like filings of iron...and her back felt very, very narrow.

"We'll drink," he said, "and as we share those drinks we'll talk as those who have too much respect for one another to go taking the piss. Bushmill's for you?"

Like she would argue at this point? He set them up, the bottle and two glasses.

"Where's Kathleen?"

"She's tending to other matters. And as we talk," he pushed on, "you'll be wanting to rid yourself of any notions you may have been holding to that all we are here's a bunch of sheep-shaggers and bog-trotters with no good idea what goes on in the midst of us."

“No, I never—” she started to protest.

“Course you did. Yez all do when you come here, and most generally that’s the best thing for us both, but tonight that goes out the window.” He tapped her glass. “You’re not drinking.”

She remedied that, felt the smooth burn all the way down to her belly.

“And whatever it is you tell me, out with all of it, and don’t feel as you have to spare my delicate sensibilities,” he said. “I’ve a pretty fair idea why yez both came here, you and the lad...less so why yourself has stayed as long as you have, not as we’ve minded. But it was *him* brought you here, right?”

“If by *him* you mean Patrick...?”

“Let’s call him what he is: Saint Patrick the Fallen. No point in confusing him with the other. Visit his bones, then, did you?”

She nodded.

“And where’d you go?”

“There’s a huge yew tree,” she whispered, “about a mile—”

“I know where the yew tree stands. Only lived here my whole life, haven’t I?” The breath began to whistle through his nostrils. “How’d you know to go there?”

She explained about the web sites, the bulletin boards; how the electronic cult of Patrick had inspired her, along with Ethan, to go circling the whole of Ireland.

“Ah, jaysus,” Fergus groaned. “Says so on your Internet, so that makes it gospel, does it?”

No idea what was really going on, and still she was beginning to feel like the most gullible person ever born.

“You and the lad...something happen between the two of you you’ve been keeping to yourself? More than just himself going his own way and you lagging behind to moon about it? Something bad, I mean.”

“Ethan hanging himself from the yew,” she spat, with a sting in her eyes and a pit again opening in her heart, “is that bad enough for you?”

“Ah, *jaysus*. And you without a word to another blessed soul!” Fergus brought a hand to his mouth, steadied himself against the bar with the other. “The body—what’d you do with the body?”

It felt as if she were describing acts committed by someone else—not someone who should’ve known better, but rather someone

who in those minutes had been so much stronger of body and will. How else could she have scaled the tree, then crawled out onto the bough from which Ethan hung? How else could she have maneuvered the dead weight of his body up and onto the limb, then undone the noose from the puffy, stretched flesh of his neck? How else could she have found it within herself to haul him along the bough and back to the yew's massive trunk...then lower him into the rotting hollow to join the bones, she'd thought, of Patrick?

While she hadn't done these things without tears, without hating Ethan, she had tried to force herself to see the beauty in his exit, the still repose of his body depending from its stern loop of rope. *Of course* they had, half a decade ago, spent sleepless nights talking about suicide; fantasizing about it, sketching verbal rhapsodies of deathly scenarios. *Of course* they had written embarrassingly awful poetry about the loving embrace of their graves.

*Of course* she had thought he'd outgrown it too.

Years later, assaulted by the sight and the smell of it, she conceded that she could have found it beautiful only if it had been someone she'd never known.

"Aw, Pandy," Fergus said with crushing sorrow, "why would you go and do a thing like that?"

"What, I was supposed to send him back to be buried by the people he most wanted to be away from, so they could pretend they'd loved him all along? Sorry, but no. He would never have forgiven me if I'd done that. I know he'd rather everyone think that one day he walked away from everything he knew and didn't look back." Surely anyone who understood would not condemn. "Ethan's father broke his wrist when he was thirteen. He wouldn't tell me why. It's the only thing he ever refused to tell me. I just know it was another typical day at home."

"A terrible thing," said Fergus, not without sympathy, "but the yew..."

"I *know* about yew trees. I know what people used to believe about them, maybe still do in places like this. It just felt like the last thing I could do for him."

"What, the symbol of eternal life? Of renewal from decay?" he said, now with scorn. "A gateway to a new and better realm? Those would be the things you know about yews?"

In a small, weakening peep: "Yes."

“Then what you know’s worse than nothing. Have you never heard of a yew to stand as a barrier between the right and the wrong?” He shelved the bottle. “What you know’s just enough to get this place noticed by the eye of God once again, and it was kept well enough when he was looking the other way.”

Fergus swept up their emptied glasses, then went for a jacket and told her she should do the same, because she would soon enough be shivering from more than the chill.

“And as if it matters now, the bones those Sisters brought...?” he said. “It was never the yew where they took ’em. What you paid visit after visit to is something else entirely.” He shook his head in rebuke. “Well, you came here to plunge yourself into the thick of all that’s holy and all that’s not, and damned if I let you not look upon what it is you’ve done.”

The last thing he grabbed, from behind the bar, was a shotgun.

“For all the good it’s likely to do,” he said.

## VI

It wasn’t just the power of suggestion and the sight of so many bucolic people stirring with such urgency after two in the morning. A few steps beyond the door of The Mouth of Oran, the feeling enveloped her as surely as the damp chill: Something here had gone terribly wrong. With each breath she felt it as a thickness in her lungs, a sour taste upon her tongue. In the distance, as the beams of powerful flashlights swept to and fro, even the light seemed sickly.

Fergus’ legs were scarcely longer than hers, but still she had to struggle to keep pace, catching up whenever he stopped to confer with one person or another. Again, language was used as a barrier, so that any clue as to what was happening was denied her. They cloaked themselves in their darkest wools and tweeds, as if to blend into the night. Their eyes were never still, searching trees and the blue moonlit clouds. Like Fergus, many carried weapons normally reserved for the hunt or for the fields.

And right now they hated her, didn’t they? Or was that much, at least, her guilty imagination?

“A wee story,” he said once they were past the heart of the village, “so you can get your brain around what it is you may be soon seeing.

And it'll put the lie to what we told you about the name on our sign. Ever heard of Saint Columba, have you?"

She didn't think so, and before he could say another word: "Fergus, are we safe out here?"

"Safe enough for now, I suppose, if Gerry Fallon's aim is as good as his word."

"How good is his word?"

"Well, there's been some debate on that." She couldn't tell if he was serious, or thought she deserved being kept unnerved. "Saint Columba, as I was saying. Holy man, as you can tell from the saint part, 'bout fifteen hundred years ago. Did a good amount of travel in the name of his lord and savior. Came from the Donegal area, though it's his travels in Scotland that are best known. Before it *was* Scotland. 'twas the Picts living there in Columba's time. Had himself a friend named Oran—brother, some say—and the pair of 'em and a dozen others went to the isle of Iona, off Scotland's coast, bent on founding a monastery. One of his earliest acts was to banish women and cows from Iona, which alone makes him a peculiar enough fella in my estimation."

Fergus led them off onto a side lane that wound past a thicket of hedges and a gauntlet of gnarled oaks, a breeze stirring their leaves with a papery murmur.

"Columba and his crew, they tried to raise a chapel but weren't having much luck in the construction of it, what with the walls falling over all the time. A clear sign that the isle didn't much care for them and their business, but folk like that, you've got to kill 'em first to deter 'em. So they decide they need to consecrate the ground, then settle as the best way to get that done's with a burial...and a live burial, at that. Oran says he'll be the fella. Take one for the team, I suppose as you'd say now. He laid his corpus down into the foundation pit, and didn't they shovel him over?"

The lane led them across an arched stone footbridge that she'd traversed a time or two in her wanderings. In the day, as picturesque as a postcard; tonight, the bridge and the brook beneath it hoarded the moon, reflecting sharp angles and points of light as baleful as soulless eyes.

"Some days later Columba decides he wants to make a final farewell, so they dig back down and scrape the dirt from Oran's face, and aren't they surprised stupid when they find the head has a few

things yet to say: ‘Heaven is not what it is said to be, nor is Hell what it is said to be. The saved are not forever happy, and the damned are not forever lost. The way you think it is may not be the way it is at all.’”

“I’ll bet that went over well,” Pandora said.

“Oh, like the ton of bricks. So Columba decides, ‘Nah, that’s not Oran any longer, Oran wouldn’t say such things. What that is down there’s a demon that’s got inside him.’ So they shoveled him over again quick as they could and that was the end of that. Except it must’ve made enough of an impression on at least one of those other lads that he saw fit to make sure the tale didn’t stay down there with Oran. The truth, no matter how unpalatable to some, it has its way of not staying buried.”

By now they’d left the lane for a narrower path, crowded by weeds and thick tufts of grass. Someone’s private land, she was sure, even before they rounded a bend and she saw the peaks of a cottage outlined against the sky.

“If people know the story, instead of the bullshit you told Ethan and me...don’t they look at you weird, naming your place what you have?”

“Well, ’tis a very old tradition, and I’ll not be the one to break with it,” Fergus said. “But it’s not a problem. They just think we’re a rude load of buggers. There’s an old saying, see. If you want to stop someone talking about something unpleasant, why, you ‘throw mud in the mouth of Oran.’”

“I know you didn’t tell me that to explain an old proverb I never heard,” she said, “so I’m afraid to ask what it has to do with tonight.”

“Many a thing, but the main one...? Amongst these isles and the people who’ve always called them home, there’s a long, strange history of heads having their say well past the point you’d think they could. We’ll start with that and take it from there as needed.”

“Christ, you don’t mean that we’re on the way to—”

“Hush yourself,” he said, with a hand light upon her shoulder. “Show some reverence, even if you don’t feel it.”

They had gone past the darkened cottage, a whitewashed hulk with a thatched roof, to a lower, flatter building—a stable, perhaps. It looked as though it could have been standing as long as the stones in County Mayo, built from the ground up with wide, flat rocks fitted together with patience and mortared into fortress-like walls. She saw

a pair of armed men, silhouetted on the roof like gargoyles, keeping a silent watch.

At Fergus' knock and a word, they were let inside, then the heavy door was secured after them with an iron bolt and a wooden beam. She wanted to stoop, the roof just inches from her head. Fergus, hand still on her shoulder, led her past a half-dozen others who milled about in the glow of lanterns hung from walls and rafters. Most of the lights were gathered toward one end, around a pair of long worktables pushed close together, with just enough room to walk between.

"Aw, jaysus," Fergus groaned after he'd taken a moment to stare down at what the tables held.

*These are real*, she had to force herself to acknowledge. *They're not latex in a movie. These are real.*

"Look hard," he told her. "See what it is you and your fella have done."

"Fergus," Kathleen said sharply. "You don't know that yet, but even if we learn the worst, there'll be no blaming her. 'twas sure to happen in one generation or the next, or the next, and if after centuries of peace it's happened in ours, then it's ourselves that bear the blame, because we grew careless enough to *let* it happen."

Fergus lowered his head with a disgruntled murmur, but disputed nothing.

"Years ago, we used to guard that yew, same as those before us," Kathleen went on. "Then we must've thought we knew better—silly old tradition, what's it matter if we're lax? Well, I never heard you once raise your voice in objection—or any of yez here, or myself for all that—because it saved our arses some cold nights, didn't it? So. There'll be no blaming *her*."

Easier decreed than lived by, Pandora feared.

Two men, one upon each table: They looked, she thought, as bodies would have looked long ago when brought home on ox carts from battles fought with swords, axes, sledges—things that hacked and things that crushed. From knees to scalps, they were rent with lacerations that laid them open to the bone, even into bone. One man she recognized from the music sessions in the pub, a blond-haired fellow in his early thirties whose fingers, broken now, seemed to never hit a wrong note no matter how fiercely he picked and strummed his cittern. His head hung by scraps of gristle and bone. She didn't recognize the other...but how could she, with such damage to his skull?

Pandora asked their names and was told; could not force out the words to ask why, with all that the talented Sean Reardon had suffered, they were making it worse. Hadn't his body been savaged enough already?

Evidently not. Using a knife that she imagined had cut into countless sheep, an older man finished taking off Sean Reardon's head, then passed it to a woman who wore a cowled cloak against the chill. She dipped a cloth into a bucket to wash his cheeks, his forehead, his sparse, blood-matted beard. Pandora thought that would be the end of it...until this surgeon, butcher, whatever he was, began slicing into the chest and the lower stump of the neck.

"You don't need to keep looking," Fergus whispered into her ear. "This is ugly work, I know."

"If it's my fault," she told him, "then I'll watch."

Perhaps it was easier to take because of the tenderness they showed the body, in spite of what they were doing to it. This was not mutilation for the sake of spite, not even when they used shears to snap through the upper ribcage and expose the top half of Sean Reardon's lungs. Pandora wondered if the woman half-hidden in the cloak was his wife, or lover, summoned to perform the last kindness she could, softening the barbarity of the ritual. If so, her composure and grace were remarkable.

A few minutes more and the cutter had freed what he wanted: the ringed length of Sean Reardon's severed windpipe, removed just above the point at which it branched into the bronchials. This too they washed, and trimmed its tattered upper end. By the time they rejoined it with the head, tightly stitching the trachea back to where it had been parted from the upper neck, Pandora was past the worst of her revulsion.

*He was a stranger to me. It's not like Ethan. A stranger, she thought. So isn't there beauty in this...?*

There had to be. It lay in the care, the devotion...

She turned a questioning glance to Fergus, then mouthed, *But why?*

"If they're to speak, they need to breathe," he told her. "But the dead can't breathe on their own."

The woman who had washed the head now held it as carefully as she might a newborn, supporting its weight while the windpipe dangled loose...then Kathleen knelt and grasped it and put its free end to her mouth.

"Few can do this," Fergus told her, "but some have been able in Kathleen's line, as far back as we know it to go."

Spellbound by the soft glowing lights, the dance of shadows across expectant faces, she watched as Kathleen exhaled breath after slow, gentle breath through the remnants of Sean Reardon's airway. She could hear it leaking from the head...sighing through the nostrils, where popped a bubble of watery blood; puffing free at the slack corners of the mouth. She'd heard Ethan's breath escape like that sometimes, when they would talk late into the night and fall asleep together on the sofa. The tongue peeked out next, forced by air pressure...or so she thought until it dragged itself on a slow path from one dry corner of the mouth to the other. The eyelids eased open, no more than halfway, but good god, *they'd moved*, the eyes staring even though they seemed not to focus, and now the lips began to quiver and the chin to twitch.

And while the breath may have been borrowed, Sean Reardon rasped out a groan that was very plainly his own.

Pandora couldn't help herself: "No...fucking...way."

She'd heard of heads lifted from baskets beneath the blades of guillotines—how they stared in shock with eyes still bright, how their mouths struggled silently to convey some final message that was lost forever, because they had no breath to carry it. Poised for moments between life and death, what secrets might they have had to tell, if only, if only? She wondered if what she was witnessing was less an act of magic than a titanic act of will from a fading ember of spirit that hung on as long as it could in hopes that it might be permitted one last declaration.

Words were exchanged—Gaelic again, forever keeping her on the outside—but Sean Reardon's were few, brief, and ragged, and soon extinguished as the eyelids drifted shut and the breath Kathleen gave was spent, sputtering through flesh that was now truly dead.

Judging by the somber faces all around, the news they had gotten was as bad as they'd evidently feared. Together, Kathleen and the other woman returned the head to the table, to reunite it with its body.

The skinny old man who'd done the carving cursed. "So much for hopes 'twas some escaped nutter, who we'd find dead of his own wound soon enough."

"And that," Pandora said, "would be the good word and aim of Gerry Fallon?"

Fergus nodded. "The same."

"So, even though from the way it sounded earlier, that it was just a temporary solution, who's he supposed to have shot?"

"Have you not suspected already? If you were to go back to the yew, it's a dreadful surprise you'd be getting from who you *wouldn't* find there."

She must have shaken her head, something. It's what you did when you reached your threshold of the impossible. *Ethan...? Okay, work with it.* The second point, maybe, from the tale of Oran and from Columba's dismissal, accurate or not, of the message his friend had relayed: It's not Oran anymore, but something that's usurped the rightful place of maggots so it might take up its own residence inside.

"In Ethan...there's a demon?"

"That depends on your perspective."

For the first time, the woman who'd washed and cradled Sean Reardon's head spoke. She stepped closer, away from the tables and the pair of slaughtered men, and now, no longer distracted by the carnage, Pandora noticed the face inside the hooded cloak.

"The way it sees things, *I'm* the demon," she said. "Even though we're both creations of the same god."

*I've never seen you, not even in my most hopeful dream,* Pandora thought, *but now that I have, I would know you anywhere...*

"We'll leave her to you," said Fergus, and Pandora almost answered him, until she realized the obvious: *He wasn't talking to me.*

## VII

Her name was Maia, and she should have been dust. Before the first blocks were laid for the Acropolis and the Tower of Babylon, she should have been dust.

Online, Pandora had encountered much rumor, much speculation about her—much bullshit, as she understood now. Know-nothings had credited Maia and her two Sisters with everything from plagues and miracles to the rise and fall of empires.

What Pandora thought most likely to be true were the relatively few details contained in the brief autohagiography of Saint Patrick the Fallen: that Maia and her Sisters had been born ordinary women in

Assyria, where they had become concubines of King Sennacherib; that they had been betrayed and abandoned to the Hebrew King Hezekiah after the Assyrian army's failed siege of Jerusalem; that the god of Israel had ravaged them with a triune fate, beyond death but with an eternal hunger for the bodies and essences of mortal men...

Lilah, their flesh.

Maia, their blood.

Salíce, their seed.

Pandora sought her face for some sign of origins in the Middle East, and in her dark hair and eyes it was there to be found...but over more than two and a half millennia her countenance had assumed a translucent luster that seemed to transcend race. She could live anywhere, belong anywhere, and be revered.

Yet her splendor had been shaped by sorrows above all. She was as beautiful now as she must've been during the siege of Jerusalem, when her babies had been fed to appease a demon unleashed by her king's sorcerers, after it had turned on them. She was as beautiful tonight as she would've been the day in Belfast when, after seven-year-old Patrick Kieran Malone had nearly been killed by an IRA bomb, she kissed the blood from his knee and tasted his destiny. She was as beautiful now as she had been during the years she'd watched Patrick grow; as the day she took him as her lover; as the evening she'd drunk his tainted stigmatic's blood to steal secrets from heaven; as the night she and her Sisters consumed him.

And Maia would be beautiful, Pandora knew, long after she herself had turned to dust.

The surprise, after encountering Maia in the first place, was that the cottage and the stable where the dead man had spoken were hers. For one who'd slept in palaces, it seemed so...prosaic. After Fergus and Kathleen and the others had left, she had taken Pandora in, away from the sight of butchery, and made a pot of herbal tea for her. Tea, for gods' sakes.

"The stone, the carving," Pandora said, and thought of it sitting on the dresser in her room. She wished she'd thought to bring it, a talisman to touch in the night. "You left it for me, didn't you?"

"You seemed to need it," Maia said.

"You watched me...? The way you watched Patrick?"

"Does it matter?"

*Did it matter?* Pandora almost laughed. Did this woman not know

there were people out there who longed for such a thing to happen, who *prayed* for it...present company included? *Did it matter?* It was only the most flattering thing she'd ever heard.

Only moments later did she look at it from the other side, sensing what an awful life it would be to spend it forever out of reach of the maternity that Maia had briefly known, then had ripped away. Lifetimes of letting herself be drawn to surrogates, who often never knew she existed, and watching them grow, flourish, mature, wither, die.

Because of the sustenance Maia was forced to rely on, she was, a monster—or so said traditions all over the world—yet Pandora could not see it. The only monstrosity she could recognize was whatever had turned its wrath upon the people of Glenmullen. Why—because Maia lived as one of them?

“You didn’t stay in Dublin,” Pandora said, thinking of the estate Patrick had told of, where the Sisters of the Trinity had lived in privilege and privacy it would’ve taken an army to breach.

“How could we, if we were going to release what Patrick had written? We could’ve been seen for who and what we were then. We would’ve been too easy to find.” She smiled, an enigma. “We had been there long enough.”

Now she lived in the simplicity of a villager whose family had been bound to the same land for generations, surrounded by roughly plastered walls, unvarnished timbers, heavy crockery. The obvious carryover were two of the mastiffs Patrick had mentioned patrolling the grounds in Dublin, of a lineage that extended back to the war dogs of ancient Rome. Bulky masses of muscle and black and brown fur, they had padded agitatedly about for the first few minutes after Maia had brought her inside, and now watched her from the floor with their great heads settled upon their paws.

“We distributed his bones within the first month,” Maia said, “and within the year had made all the arrangements we needed to disappear. We decided against remaining together, because Patrick had described us well, and we were determined not to change a word of what he wrote...even if it meant the three of us might be easier to recognize for those who knew what to look for.”

Years apart, even decades—what would it matter for those unbound to time? They could reunite a generation later and it would be as a vacation to the rest of the world.

While there was no reason to think that all three Sisters had remained in Ireland, Pandora suspected they had. Even before Maia confirmed it, the pattern implied by the shrines became clear: one shrine in Dublin, near the home they'd abandoned; one Sister and a shrine she kept in the south, another in the west, and Maia with the fourth shrine here in the north. Had no one else discovered this, or even suspected it? Online, would-be acolytes had described so many futile searches in Dublin—or claimed success in what were obvious lies—that she'd thought it pointless to try looking for them.

"You risked everything," Pandora said, and almost asked why. She didn't have to ask. She *knew* why. If she hadn't already known why, she never would have made this journey in the first place.

Patrick himself had written all the explanation anyone needed: *As for me, I'll not mind leaving bones, and I hope they keep them around, gnawed and clean, true relics for the inspiration of disciples yet to come.* In this plaintive statement of faith, he seemed to have foreseen his own future in the quiet but ongoing and perhaps even doomed struggle against their common enemy, described by Maia in sadly lyrical terms:

*"Imagine an arrogant and greedy and demented child on a beach, building castles in the sand...only to kick them over out of boredom, leaving what's left for the waves. Which of course begs one more question:*

*"Where did the sand come from?"*

Pandora had memorized that years ago, even if she thought it too gentle. Call such a god what it was: a monster that had taken credit for a world it had never created, and grew bloated on the suffering and misplaced faith of the innocents mired in its deserts and mud.

"You're too generous," Maia said. "Patrick risked everything. The people of Glenmullen, they risked. *You've* risked, because you believed enough to bring yourself this far." She looked to one side—at the rough white wall? "My Sisters and I...? We're better at inspiring risk than assuming it ourselves."

No, not the wall. At the stable beyond the wall, and the carcasses inside.

"But let's forget that for now," said Maia. "You came here for something you've left undone. You never visited the northern shrine, you only thought you did." She stood. "Come. I'll take you."

Pandora thought of the wounds she'd seen, of Ethan resurrected,

of the violence that she had unwittingly instigated. "It's not safe out there."

Softly, Maia uttered some word that brought the mastiffs snapping to their feet.

"Why would you think it's any safer in here?" she said.

## VIII

With the moon ducking in and out from behind low clouds, the path they walked was barely visible, little more than a furrow in tall grasses that led through bowers smelling of autumn and farmland nearing the end of its season. Now and again they would cross a clearing, still close enough to the heart of town that she could see it, a small scattering of dwellings and other shelters huddled together against the dark. Periodically the crack of a gunshot would pierce the gloom, or a shout; less often a scream, lingering like a wound in the chilled air.

"I don't understand. Ethan would never do this." Pandora blinked at the tears burning their way through. A wonder they'd waited this long. Until now she wouldn't have believed it possible for the same long night to be both the best and worst of her life. "Isn't there anything of Ethan left inside?"

"A little, maybe. The souls of those who have taken their own lives, or died violently...they sometimes linger."

"Does he feel anything?" Thinking of the claim that he'd been shot. "Does he feel pain? Or remorse?"

"Remorse, I most surely doubt. Pain, perhaps, but I imagine only to the point that it drives him away from what could destroy his body. They say he was wounded earlier. He would've had to retreat for a time. To heal. To learn. To formulate a new plan." Could Maia read her questioning face in the dark? Perhaps she could. "What moves him is no longer his own will—that's gone. What moves him is a fragment of God that was broken loose and dropped here a very long time ago. An avenging angel, you might call it—that's close enough. But without a body, it's just intent and wrath. Without a body, it has no sense of time. Until tonight, it understood blades best...so that's what it resorted to."

Pandora's imagination began to fill in the gaps: Ethan rousing;

slithering backwards, upwards, until he was free of the yew's hollow core. Ethan stalking through fields, barns, stables, until he had found...what? Sickles, axes, knives kept sharp enough to slit the throats of lambs? Ethan, who could only ever hurt himself, turning these blades on others.

"They move frightfully quick," Maia said. "But against guns...?" She pointed toward town, where a flickering orange glow backlit the silhouette of one of the taller buildings. "So you can see...he's come back with fire."

*Please, not The Mouth of Oran; not Kathleen and Fergus*, she mouthed, painfully aware of the absurdity of it, with no idea who might hear such a prayer, much less grant it. She lowered her lips to her tea; had taken along another large serving in a glazed earthenware mug—for warmth mainly, and something to hold onto.

"You've seen this one before," Pandora said. "Haven't you?"

"It's why I came here after Dublin. Glenmullen is very old. *Very*. It's owed my Sisters and me a debt for much of its history. They've never forgotten that here. All the generations that have lived and died, and they've never forgotten. They know what I am, too, and they accept that. Maybe because I don't need to kill to feed—only Lilah has to kill. Or maybe after all this time, they still regard the debt as that binding. If we had time, I could show you a story in stained glass that hasn't been seen by anyone who wasn't born here almost since Christopher Columbus was alive..."

"In this valley," she went on, "there was an ancient tradition of worship. Much stronger once than it is now, but even today it survives."

Pandora thought again of the matriarchal figure Maia had left for her, wondering anew how old it truly was.

"It predated the Druids, although it's said that they never interfered with it. It survived the rise of the Celtic Church—which may have tolerated it too, if they were aware of it. Later it survived the Council of Whitby, when the Roman Church declared itself the only true church...only now their survival depended on the people here taking care to guard their secrecy.

"Then, many generations back, a slip of someone's tongue betrayed them to a pair of missionaries who'd come to the valley. If it was ever known what aroused their suspicion to begin with, it's been forgotten...but not the depth of their condemnation. And you

must remember, this was an age when heretics could be burned by the dozens.

“So the people of Glenmullen killed one of them. The other escaped long enough to pray for the wrath of God. He was heard...and answered. Maybe he was expecting fire from Heaven. He certainly couldn't have been expecting his own body to be used as the sword of judgment.”

*A fragment of God*, Maia had said, *broken loose and dropped here*. Pandora had, of course, heard plenty about demonic possession, even if she'd had a hard time believing in it. She'd never once heard of its opposite.

“My Sisters and I had already lived in the valley for many years. It suited us. The people knew there was something different about us, even if they didn't know what it was...but unlike the Christians of that age, they didn't equate different with evil. Some suspected we might be survivors of one of the earlier races lost to myth...the *Tuatha Dé Danaan*, or the *Daoine Sidhe*...and we were happy to encourage that.

“So on the day the slaughter began, they sent a runner to us, begging for help. It wasn't our fight, yet the source of their massacre was the same god who'd designed our own fate. How could we have said no? By the time we got there it had killed more than thirty of them, with no discrimination.”

For several paces, Maia said nothing; then: “My Sisters and I, and all the others that Patrick wrote of...we've never known why we were made what we are, not with any certainty. We only know that the centuries have given us power, and cunning. And so, together, the three of us were a match for it, barely—Lilah especially. She knows intimately how to take a body apart, and quickly. Even so, we were all badly wounded before it was done.

“The people of the valley took the pieces and buried them beneath the yew, amid the roots—the tree was intact in those days—and then they consecrated it, in their own way, in the hope of holding the spirit there. I think they knew, without us telling them, that even though it may have been beaten, it wasn't destroyed. *Can* you even destroy a piece of God? I don't know.”

“It couldn't move to another body?” Pandora asked. “Or wouldn't God just send another one?”

“What your parents may have raised you to believe in as

God...we've always suspected it's not omnipotent, nor all-seeing. It sends something like this, but then in its arrogance it trusts that the job can't fail to be completed. And so it forgets...

"As for moving to another body, no, I don't think it would be as simple as that. When it was loose the first time, it used the missionary, and he hated the place already. They seem to need that—a meshing of intent. They work in harmony with what they find. It could never have worked with those who loved their home. You tell me Ethan could never have done this? Perhaps not. But in the time he was here, he must have developed a terribly deep resentment toward Glenmullen."

*Yes, I guess he did, and Pandora felt her heart sink. Because this is where he thought he'd lost me to a dead man.*

"So that fragment of God...it lay waiting all these years," Maia said. "If it recognized time, maybe its hatred might have dissipated. If it could've felt the passing of centuries, maybe it might have forgotten the need to destroy."

*Years ago, we used to guard that yew, same as those before us, Kathleen had said. But at some point they'd grown complacent. And so Pandora had to wonder if there wasn't more behind the mistake in locale that she and Ethan had made than she'd first thought. If the disinformation online that she had so gullibly swallowed was not deliberate—someone, something, hoping to steer unstable visitors toward the yew.*

She turned her face to the heart of the village again. Although trees blocked the view, through their thinning branches she saw that the flames had grown bolder.

"If your Sisters were here, could you...?"

"They're coming. But it may not be soon enough."

"Then shouldn't you be doing something anyway?" she said. "Or...we?"

At her side, Maia's hand found its way around hers for a moment, gave a small squeeze. "We are."

And her hand was as warm as any woman's, no more, no less. Another myth dispelled. Pandora thought it likely it was her own hand that felt cold as death. She wrapped both hands around the thick earthenware mug to leech the last of its heat.

"Why did Ethan kill himself the way he did?" Maia asked. "Do you think it was only because you both thought the tree was Patrick's

and he wanted to defile that for you? Or was there something about hanging that meant more?"

God. What a question. Because it had an answer.

Pandora sipped at the tea, with greed now, found it calming, soothing, despite turning lukewarm. Maybe these herbs were just what she needed. She spent a moment swamped by the sense of well-being that often descends in the midst of tragedy: *It will be all right. Somehow it will be all right...*

"I've thought about it ever since I found him," she said. "We used to talk about suicide, you know? When we were younger. When you go through that stage where you romanticize it. Except I guess Ethan still did. And it's funny, because back then he would dwell on the idea of cutting his wrists. For him, that would've demonstrated the ultimate commitment: opening yourself up, literally. So if you'd told me ahead of time I was going to find his body, that's how I would've expected to find it."

Tramping through the grass. One foot after the other. Jesus, shouldn't they be coming upon Patrick's real shrine by now?

"But I had this poster. I thought it was the most beautiful thing, in a morbid way: a picture of a medieval hanging tree. It must've been autumn, but later than it is now, because there weren't any leaves. Or winter, before the snows. It showed this huge oak silhouetted against a purple twilight sky, and from the lower branches there were all these bodies hanging from the neck. Men, mostly, but a few animals, too. Horses, dogs. I remember reading that back then they executed animals sometimes. Everything was in silhouette, so there weren't any gory details. Whoever did it must've Photoshopped it, because a thing like that isn't going to exist today...which maybe was part of the appeal. I found it peaceful more than anything. Their struggles were over."

Tramping through the grass. One foot after the other. Though Glenmullen burned, she felt as if she could walk forever...then was drawn from her reverie when the first diffident raindrops spattered her cheeks.

"So when I found Ethan," she went on, "even though I knew he'd killed himself out of selfishness, and a perverse jealousy, I knew it was the last thing he had to say to me, too: *'Is this what it takes for you to want me?'*"

"I'm sorry," Maia whispered.

"Aren't we all." Tramping through the grass. One foot after the other. Feeling as though she could curl right up in the grass and go to sleep. "Why couldn't I have loved him the way he wanted? Why couldn't he have seen that I'm not anything special?"

She wanted to hear a rebuttal, expected it even, Maia telling her no, no, she *was* special, she was *very* special, that she'd seen this in Pandora the same way she had in Patrick. Except Maia said nothing. And said no more until she at last stopped walking and announced that here was the place.

A well. They had put the final share of Patrick's bones down a well. Flanked by trees, encroached upon by dense growths of brush, even in the moonlight it looked very old. It was ringed by a wall made not by brick but stones, rough and flat and mortared together however they might fit, this ancient mouth a yard tall and less wide. In the moonlight, its growths of moss and lichen looked dark as blood.

And somewhere down its wet black throat lay Patrick's skull. Surely this was where they'd lain his skull.

She thought of it down there, submerged, half-buried in silt, grinning up at her past, what—ribs, femur, clavicle? She wondered how his blood had settled in Maia's belly, his flesh and seed taken by the other two Sisters. If she lowered a bucket, drew it up, drank a draught, would it fill her with any of the things for which she'd hungered?

The rain fell heavier now. Maia raised one palm, tipped her face to the sky with a smile she then turned upon Pandora. "Glenmullen has more than one defense. It *will* survive."

Pandora went to her knees—not even willing the act, it just happened—and watched her arm disappear to the shoulder down the stone gullet. She reached, fingers splayed wide, felt nothing but a cold moist exhalation from below; was aware, dimly, of the earthenware mug tumbling from her other hand, striking something hard. It was too dense to shatter; it cracked, like a fallen egg, and the earth drank the last of the tea.

And she could not stand up again.

*The tea...?*

"Don't fight it," said Maia, now a weight bearing down upon her.

Right. After so many years, Maia would know all about herbs, wouldn't she?

At first Pandora thought the sound of feet that she heard were her own shoes, or Maia's maybe, whisking through the grass during their

pitifully short struggle. She was wrong. When she saw a pair of male faces looming above, etched against the sky as grim as granite, she didn't know whether to feel relieved because neither belonged to Fergus, or if it meant he'd sent others to handle something more terrible than even he wanted to be part of.

"Please don't fight it," Maia pressing her against the stones, Pandora trapped between soft warmth and hard cold, arms around her, arms that had held the countless children Maia had never borne, the same tender arms Pandora had for years dreamt of feeling, because their embrace would mean she was worth more than the world had ever given her credit for. *Hold me, teach me*, she would've pleaded from their sanctuary. *Show me the world through a better pair of eyes.*

But it was all one lie after another, wasn't it, and these instead the ruthless arms that had welcomed the countless men who had come to Maia to die, whether they knew it or not...and surely deep down most of them had.

For who could fail to notice the grief in her eyes?

She would cradle the dying as if in a pietá, a virgin embracing her rotting son.

## IX

With the impotent detachment of a dream, she saw. Whether imagination, or the disembodied omniscience of the dead, she saw, and couldn't turn away. Over treetops and a steeple, past roofs of shingles, slate, and thatch, Pandora drifted with the smoke of dying fires. She ran with the blood that ebbed down muddy lanes; she merged with the shadows that lashed Glenmullen together as one, its buildings and its people and its secrets, and roped them to their fate.

And when that fated judgment befell another, it did so with frightful quickness, detaching itself from the dark in a blur of rain and wrath, obliterating any distinctions between heaven and hell.

No matter how sturdy the man's legs, or how broad his back, they could never stand before the razored whirlwind wearing the scarred remnants of Ethan's face —

Her eyes opened, blinking at the coldwater tears falling from the

sky, dripping through limbs and leaves, streaming down her skull. A wonder she could get her eyelids over them; they felt ready to burst from their sockets.

Pandora weighed less than a paper doll; she was dense and cold as marble. She realized she was staring at the tips of her shoes as they spun in slow arcs against the grass below. A breeze, bearing needles of rain, gave her a nudge and left her swaying, gently swaying, as water beaded upon the tip of her tongue and sluiced down her chin.

She creaked her head upright, through the corrosion that gripped her neck, like a hinge that had rusted shut. Her throat tried to open for air and was all but denied, protesting with a reedy whistle. Somewhere between throat and shoes, her wrists twitched and her fingertips jittered, the most they could manage no matter how desperately she willed them to rise, rise.

Had the rope been thinner, had the noose been cinched lower, it would surely have cut deep enough to close her airway entirely. Instead, the thick round collar of it sat wedged beneath her jaw, the right side more than the left, so that she hung suspended by a precarious shelf of support.

Her heart began to hammer, and when she tasted watery blood, she knew she was biting the tip of her tongue. She pulled it from her teeth and tried to maneuver her sideways-sagging head until a grinding scrape of gristle and vertebrae radiated into her ears.

At first she thought she must be near the well, still...but with another gust of wind and a creak of rope she turned again and this time saw the serpentine tangle of thick roots. The yew. They'd taken her back to the yew.

The war within her was escalating by the moment, panic raging against the lingering stupor of the soporific she'd been fed. Her toes began to scabble for a grip and found only air. She wanted to scream but couldn't, felt her face bloating into a hot purple mass—meat, she was meat suspended in air, kept alive by the same agonizing immobility that threatened to drive her mad.

And worse yet...

*She wasn't alone inside her skin.*

It glowed inside her like a coal banked beneath ashes, left for the night and then forgotten—another presence, scratching futilely at the walls of her soul as surely as her fingers scratched at air. It was male—she sensed this because it seemed in so many ways the oppo-

site of her—and so full of loathing for itself that had it been forced upon her even on her best day, it would still have convulsed her with sickness.

Revelation, then, and not reason: A body need not be as dead as Oran's to be invaded; near to death must open doorways just as wide.

"Patrick...?" she croaked, or tried to.

It wouldn't answer, or couldn't. Or its answer was beyond words and thought, and the response she got was the only kind it knew how to give—she felt flooded with its black biles of guilt, of regret, of condemnation from the unforgiving tyranny of its own conscience.

And she wanted to die.

For all that she had hoped, for all that she had believed, for all that was now so plainly the yearnings of a fool...she wanted to die.

Soon enough, no doubt. With each pelting drop of rain that soaked her sweater to the skin, she felt as though she gained a pound, more weight to stretch her neck until it snapped, or seal her throat completely after a final wheezing breath.

Soon she heard the sound of shoes squelching upon sodden ground. The arrival set Patrick to scurrying inside her like a rat, as if confined by walls and about to drown. She let her gaze rove about its limited range but saw no one. Somebody come to gloat, maybe—look at her now, stupid girl from America who'd let herself get played for the village idiot.

*A flash of memory—not her whole life but right now it seemed representative enough, and wasn't that a sad statement—the second or third day she'd had a car of her own to drive to school, and even though she'd been accounted a nothing by the irrefutable standards that divided people like her and Ethan from all those who mattered, her new mobility must have caught someone's eye and imagination. Because they'd snapped off the radio aerial halfway, then skewered three dead bats onto the sharp end.*

The feet were still mucking across wet earth, closer now, coming to a stop a few moments before she saw the dull gray flicker of a blade.

*Ever since that day, she'd never stopped wishing she'd had the stomach to clean up the mess unphased...slide the dead bats free like papers off a spindle and continue on her way, giving as little satisfaction as possible to the assholes who had to be watching from afar, braying their stupid laughter over how they'd put another one over*

*on the resident spooky chick they all loved to revile. But she'd been unable to do it without getting sick, possessed by a dread that the bats hadn't been dead first, that they might come to twitching life at the touch of her fingers.*

She wouldn't have ducked the blade even if she could've, preferring it to a slow death by suffocation. But it flickered past, inches from her eye—hurled, she realized; no one had arms this long. She heard the sharp woody whack as the metal edge bit deeply into wet bough—thrown with such ferocity that it must have encountered no resistance from the rope at all. The pressure on her neck suddenly eased and she plummeted.

*In the end, she'd found Ethan, still at school because the bug for drama had bitten him and he was volunteering for the spring play's backstage crew. Reviling herself for needing his help, needing anyone's help, she'd led him out to her car and turned her back until the cleanup was done, the small skewered bodies stuffed into his book bag. There were no words, of course, and he'd understood that so purely, Ethan turning shy and awkward because he knew, he knew, that the bats weren't the half of it. He could've said so many wrong things right then...yet he had avoided every single one of them.*

*"You're my angel," she'd told him, and that day, he was.*

But look at him now.

Just look at him now.

She'd already seen the dead speak tonight; was it any worse a miracle to see them walk now, as well?

Pandora lay sprawled across wet grass, spongy soil. She whooped for air, like vomiting in reverse, hands clumsy as she tugged the noose wide enough to slip over her head. She raised herself on an elbow, tipped her face to meet the rain, and watched him in the gloom as the first gray of dawn crept down through the gutted clouds.

Neither she nor anyone else had ever thought of Ethan as a towering figure. He hadn't lacked for height, but he'd slouched something awful, trying to melt below the notice of the world. Now, though, from where she lay, he would brush his shoulders on branches and scrape his head against the sky.

Last week's clothes hung from him in tears and tatters, stained with mud and blood. From head to toe he streamed with water, his hair was a plastered veil. And yet he stood so tall. His pride was the pride of angels, and his remaining weapon that of a reaper. Dangling

from his hand was a sickle, until this night used for someone else's lifetime of cutting wheat, oats, barley.

She tried her voice but it failed her. Did he expect thanks? Would he even know the meaning of the words?

Back up a bit: Was there anything of Ethan left to hear her at all?

There *must* be—they had hung her, and he had known. They'd betrayed her and then hung her, left her to awaken soaked and choking in the last gasp of night, echoing his suicide, and he'd been drawn...by what, her distress? If all that lived within and moved him were an avenging angel, would he have cared? Would he have bothered to pause and save a life instead of taking one more?

She sought his face for answers, anywhere behind that cold, blank stare.

He gazed at her, his wonderful downturned eyes lending pathos to an otherwise pitiless face. His lips slackened and parted, then dribbled over with rain. And there *was* recognition there, wasn't there?

*What do you think, Patrick?* she asked silently. *One mass murderer in the presence of another...*

But he was no help, pooling like sludge into her darkest recesses, and she wondered if he could feel that her keenest wish was that she'd never heard of him. Even more than she hungered to breathe without pain, more than she wanted Ethan living, she wished she'd never heard of Patrick Malone, never let herself fall under his undeserving spell. Because that would take care of the rest.

Ethan closed the last few steps between them, then dropped to his knees. For a few precious moments she could imagine he was still her friend, and that the dawn tried a little harder to break through.

Naive as ever, naturally.

Though he'd dulled his blade on the bones of others, it was still sharp enough to wield in one final assault. He scarcely needed longer to hack away her clothes than he did to remove what remained of his own.

She didn't lack the will to fight, only the breath, the strength. When he forced his way inside her, it didn't hurt as much as she thought it would. Perhaps she'd passed the point beyond which she could feel much more...or it mattered less because, as far as she was concerned, she'd been raped once tonight already. She found a bitter comfort in realizing that while she no longer knew which side of this jihad she was on, it no longer seemed to matter.

He was a cold, slick weight upon her, exuding a strangely sweet fragrance that made a mockery of his corruption and the god from which he fell. She mourned the Ethan she'd known, loving him because she knew that he, at least, would never have done this...even if his old desires may have fueled the attack. *They work in harmony with what they find.* Still, the wrathful thing that had been made of him seemed to take no satisfaction in its battering thrusts, neither cruel nor carnal, and so she couldn't tell which carried the greater guilt here—the avenger itself, or the deep remembered longings of the body it exploited. This could've been punishment, or lust, or both.

And heaven was well served.

The Sisters, according to Patrick's account, had been transformed by a kind of sacrosanct rape in an Israelite palace. She hoped that this was to be her fate as well—anything to bring meaning to something so ugly—but could not sustain the belief. No, this felt so base, so low. It had begun in mud and in mud it would end.

Arms pinned wide, nailed through the middle to the ground beneath her, she sucked blood from her tongue and spat it into the face above. He took it impassively; it diluted in the runoff to rain back to her eyes.

No dawn had ever taken longer to arrive. He had to weary of this sometime. She imagined the end as if seeing it through someone else's eyes, happening to someone else's body: He would rise and leave her to abhorrence and memory; or he would take up the sickle again and reduce her to one more bleeding carcass.

She couldn't settle on which would be worse.

But whichever it would prove to be, it was moments away—she could feel it as surely as she'd felt Patrick, cowering and unworthy as a thief. While Ethan, or the thing inside him, had found ecstasy elusive, it was not altogether absent. Pandora sensed the build-up the same as she had with any guy she'd ever given her body to. They'd never had to gasp that they were coming for her to know. As long as they were inside her—not merely her mouth, but inside *her*, so resolutely connected—she knew. It was more than hardness and spasms and breath. It was power, a welling force that overwhelmed flesh and cried out in triumph across time. Even if the rest of the sex was a wretched, mechanical mistake—and it usually had been—she'd always found this moment to be somehow sacred, a breach into the innermost core.

So who could've guessed it was what Patrick had been waiting for?

It abruptly felt as if he gathered deep down in her belly, as full as any pregnancy come to term, straining to be expelled in blood and pain and...

And then he was gone, just...

Gone.

Ethan reeled from between her legs, falling backward onto his ass as his face was overtaken by surprise, by a toxic disgust—but anything was better than its indifferent devotion to duty. He sat in the muck that their thrashings had dug, then reached for the sickle. As the blade lifted, dripping purest morning rain, his face had never looked so much like the Ethan of old as it did now—so stricken and so torn.

She lunged to stop him, felt herself caught from behind.

The first cut was slow, methodical, disciplined. He stood even as entrails burst out across his lap, then raised the sickle again and again, chopping it down and down as if chasing a nimble mouse, until he and the frantic blade achieved a blur of terrible speed and fouled the rain with blood.

She reached for him and screamed with all the voice their rope had left behind, knowing it was Maia's hands that held her even before she saw the face pressed over her shoulder. Pandora struggled until she conceded the futility of it, toppling onto her side with Maia's arms wrapped around her from behind in a perfect imitation of someone who actually cared.

Someone, *something*, like this—would she laugh at you if you told her she'd done to you the worst thing anyone ever had, or ever could?

Or would she wither you with her aloof wisdom and tell you to live with the consequences you'd brought upon yourself?

Whichever it might prove to be, Pandora didn't want to hear it. So she held her bitten tongue as Maia held onto her long after the frenzy of blade and blood was over, clinging to her like a long-lost daughter as the dawn gathered strength. One of them was trembling, but she didn't know who. She contemplated the enveloping arms that she'd dreamt of for years, so sinuous and strong, marveling now at how powerful they must be to bear so much hollow desolation.

*If I tried to leave them, Pandora thought, I think she would kill me...*

So she lay within them as long as it took to survive, until once more she heard feet crossing the sodden turf. Villagers, she reasoned,

welcoming the easing of Maia's arms almost as much as she had the cutting of the rope. Two figures emerged from the mists—not villagers after all.

She'd never seen them, not even in her most hopeful dream...but now that she had, she would know them anywhere:

Lilah, the eater of flesh.

Salíce, the eater of seed.

Even knowing now what they truly were, and not what she had hoped, how could she feel anything but diminished by knowing she was something else?

They said nothing to her, or maybe it was nothing she wanted to hear, staring down at her in her wounds and squalor as if she were a creature both lesser and greater than they could ever be again.

"You should've been content with the Patrick you imagined," Maia said, lips soft and breath warm upon her ear. "Then you never would've had to know what he's become."

Maia rose and joined her Sisters. They gathered up the raw litter of remains, as it must have been done once before, long ago, and cast them into the mausoleum at the heart of the yew. Then, with a reproachful look at Maia, her Sisters took her with them into the mist from which they'd emerged, and if she spared a pitying glance behind, it went unseen. Pandora no longer wanted to see their backs.

They were not born, she knew. They were made, remade, from the insignificant lives with which they'd started. Knowing this had felt like such a whisper of possibility.

As late as a few hours ago, she wanted nothing more than to be one of them. But now it was not enough. Now she wanted to be better than them, and worse, more beautiful and terrible in every way, if that was what it took to matter.

She lifted her gaze again, higher than Ethan had ever stood, and held nothing back—not rage, not sorrow, not bitterness or spite or disappointment. She unleashed them all on whatever might be listening.

And the rain fell, as always.

"I never slipped and fell from grace," she said, in a whisper now, then struck her fist in the draining slick of Ethan's blood. "I jumped."

But the god she cursed was silent, as if having decreed long ago that the flesh she knew, and its slow wilting decay, would be damnation enough.