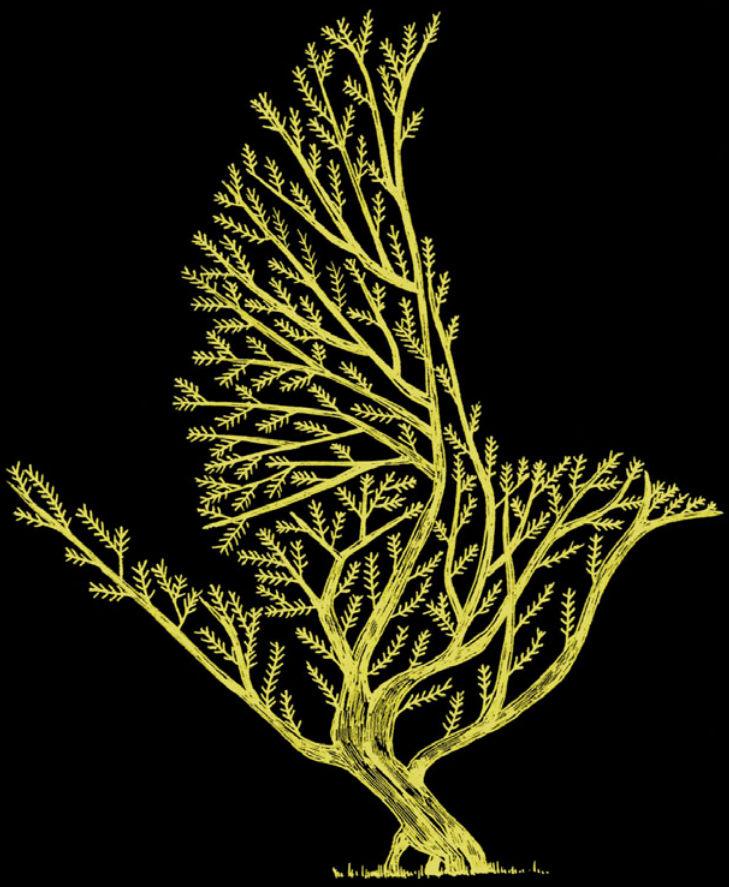
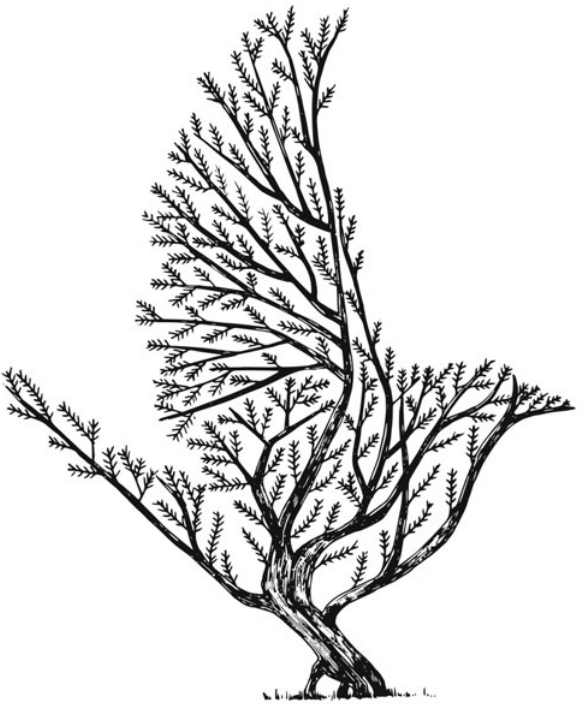


THE WREN HUNT

MARY WATSON

BLOOMSBURY



THE WREN HUNT

MARY WATSON

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in February 2018 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

www.bloomsbury.com

BLOOMSBURY is a registered trademark of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © Mary Watson 2018
Additional artwork copyright © Shutterstock

The moral rights of the author and illustrator have been asserted

All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying
or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 8493 5

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

The wran, the wran, the king of all birds,
On St Stephen's Day was caught in the furze.
Her clothes were all torn, her shoes all worn,
We chased her all night, right through until dawn.

Dreoilín, Dreoilín, where is your nest?
It's in the bush you all know best.
Between the holly and the ivy tree,
Where all the boys do follow me.

We followed the wran three miles from home,
Through hedges and ditches and piles of stone.
We caught her at last and we broke her knee,
And hung her up in a hawthorn tree.

For we are the boys that came your way,
To bury the wran on Stephen's Day.
So up with the kettle and down with the pan,
Give us a penny to bury the wran.

Traditional, as sung in Kilshamble

ONE
With honey

You catch more flies with honey.

Maeve's words chased through my head as I walked towards the village, her flowery bag slung over my shoulder. Good girl gone looking for trouble.

It was quiet in the main street. It always was the day after Christmas. In other towns the wren hunt was a happy occasion with dancing and music. Wrenboys in costumes with loud banging drums. Delighted crowds looking on. But things were a little more bloody in Kilshamble. That's how it goes in a village built around an open-air slaughterhouse.

The Spar was shut, the handwritten sign at the Gargoyle turned to '*closed*'. The twinkling lights outside the pub only emphasised the quiet: no laughter, no music spilled from inside. I paused, scanning the village green. They liked to hide around there. They'd fold out of the shadows, from the church's stone façade, from the thick hedge.

I passed the butcher's, the hotel, until I came to the ghost

estate on the outskirts: semi-detached houses that had been hastily assembled in the boom years and now stood empty, running to ruin. No one wanted to move out here. Not if they didn't have to.

This wasn't how it was supposed to work. The boys usually came looking for me, not the other way round. But earlier that afternoon, Maeve had found me in the kitchen, where I'd been staring at burned toast.

'You catch more flies with honey,' she'd said, handing me the flowery bag, the one she used at the Spar for bread, cheese and a naggin of Powers. She stepped closer, conspiratorially.

In the bag was a bottle of whiskey and a loaf of Maeve's apple bread.

'I think you should talk to them,' Maeve had said. Backlit by the window, her fuzzy hair was framed by the dark clouds and their silver linings. 'Reason with them. They're older now. The game has run its course.'

'Smith said to stay home.'

'Smith also says that facing up to problems,' Maeve looked at the burned toast in my hand, 'is better than hiding from them.'

Hiding seemed pretty appealing to me. But if I didn't go out today, they'd wait. They'd come to the cottage tonight, throw stones at my window, signalling the beginning of the

hunt. And the anticipation of when they would finish, maybe on my way home from the shop tomorrow or out at the weekend, was worse.

She frowned, and standing there in her dress with its crazy flowers Maeve looked strangely dangerous.

'I'll go.' Before Smith woke from his nap.

'This ends today,' Maeve had said. She spoke so fiercely it seemed like it was possible. That I would give them gifts and it would stop.

Taking my face in both hands, Maeve kissed my forehead. I had to dip to let her. Her roots were showing grey again.

'This ends today,' she repeated. But it lacked the fervour of the first time.

Dropping the toast in the slop bucket, I searched the junk drawer for the letter opener I'd stashed there. Then Maeve hustled me out, jacket in hand.

She sent me into the dark day to catch some flies.

And there I was, alone in the ghost estate, feeling the creeping cold. I ran my eyes over the houses, wishing I wasn't the stand-in bird in this warped version of the hunt. It struck me as odd that I'd never seen a real wren hunt, except on TV, and there the masked wrenboys parading the streets with the plastic bird made it look like such a merry, rousing thing. Not like this, this secret hunt that none of the

villagers seemed to notice, this chase that was so dark and unhappy. On TV, the masks and music were mysterious and thrilling, but here they felt sinister.

'David.' I cupped my hands around my mouth. My voice echoed through the untended square. The houses stared back with empty eyes.

No trace of the boys. Just an old Coke can in the middle of the road.

It was always the thrill of the chase for them. Those final exhilarating minutes when they closed the distance between us. It didn't happen often, but there'd been years when I won. When I got away, gasping for breath as I ran through the cottage gate while David watched from the trees.

But most of the time, they caught me. Tracked me through the village, the forest, even down by the lake. And they'd make me sit with them while they drank beer and decided on their trophy.

A dull, echoing scrabble that might have been boots against loose stone came from the other side of the rubble heap. My immediate reaction, deeply ingrained, was to run. I held my body rigid and refused to turn away.

'David.' My voice was loud and angry.

The sound of high-pitched male laughter echoed through the empty space. I moved towards the running

footsteps. By the time I climbed the rubble heap, they were gone.

Not for the first time, I cursed my name.

Wren.

Might as well stick a sign on my back saying, '*Please hassle me on Stephen's Day*.' It was the only thing my mother had given me before she ran off with a man from God knows where when I was a few days old. Fallen in with a bad crowd, her judgement had been clouded by an addiction to heroin. She'd taken money and jewellery and left me behind.

I jumped down from the rubble and kicked the Coke can, watching it rattle away. Walking on, I heard deliberate noises from just beyond: scuffling, some rustling. But when I turned and called out, no one was there. Purple clouds hung low, making the near darkness tighter.

Talk to them, Maeve had said. When I left the cottage, flowery bag in hand, I was sure I would find the boys, hand over whiskey and cake, and reason with them. But that was before the darkness started settling in. That was before they started playing hide-and-seek.

A distant noise broke the silence. It could have been an echo of laughter or a cry from somewhere in the woods. A fox, I hoped.

The faint smell of cigarette smoke wafted over, and then it was gone.

In the village, they said that the woods weren't friendly after sundown. They said that bad things lurked in the forest, hidden behind the dank, fallen boughs. The good people of Kilshamble liked nothing more than blood and gore. We were fed gruesome stories with mother's milk.

We loved best the stories of the bloodthirsty tuanacul, the people of the forest, who would crush you in their embrace. Beautiful, strong tree men with roped muscles, who kissed you until you withered. Women with lips of petal, who lured you close and wrapped vine-like arms around you, choking the life out of you.

I believed these stories as much as I believed in aliens and ghosts, so barely at all. Except on those days when the light was violet and the wind blew wild and the forest and fields felt restless.

'Wran.'

He said my name the way they did in the old song.

My tormentor.

While I was fixed on imaginary dangers, the real trouble had nestled in close. He spoke my name as gentle as a caress.

Wran.

He almost sighed it.

I felt a hand on my shoulder.

'David.' Maybe I could pretend that this was a normal chat between neighbours. 'You have a good Christmas?'

He reached out his other hand and steered me to face him.

'Sure.' He leaned in, smiling. 'But I prefer Stephen's Day.'

He was good-looking, tall, with the back and shoulders of a rower. For the last three years, he'd attended a posh boarding school overseas. He had that easy confidence that came from wealth. From being told that he deserved the best and no one else mattered. But it was more than his rich-boy arrogance that made me despise him.

He was one of *them*.

If it wasn't so awful, it might almost be funny, David's instinct to target me. That somehow, blindly, in playing this game, he'd stumbled upon his true enemy. I was the Capulet to his Montague, the hot to his cold, the white queen to his black knight. I was the oil to his water, the bleach to his ammonia, the salt to his wound. We were everything that was anathema to the other.

I was augur to his judge.

We would never be friends.

David didn't know what I was, yet he sensed something was amiss. Something about me vexed him. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He didn't know that from that very first chase years ago he'd unwittingly recognised me. This game was blueprinted in hundreds of years of hostility between judges and augurs.

'About that,' I said. 'About the *game*.' I said the word carefully, hoping he couldn't read my fear. 'It's been enough.'

'Enough?'

'Yes. No more. This ends today.' Maeve's words sounded weak and watery when I said them.

'Yeah?' David seemed to have come closer without having moved at all. 'What are you going to do about it?' He took a drag of his cigarette before crushing it under his shoe. 'Run?'

'Nothing to chase if I'm not running.' If only it were that simple. Better to be a hunted wren than a sitting duck.

I pulled the whiskey from the flowery bag. But looking at David, something seemed different. He was cooler than usual. Smirkier. Behind stood his toadies, Brian and Ryan. All muscle and no brain.

'I'm calling a truce, David.' I handed over the whiskey.

David smiled, then examined the bottle.

'I'm after passing my exams,' he said. 'In the mood for a little celebration.'

He twisted the cap open.

'I'm getting a new tattoo to mark the occasion. Maybe a wren?' He paused as he held the bottle to his lips. 'In a cage. What do you think?'

He took a slug, and slowly screwed the cap back on. He held out his hand to shake mine. Reluctant, I placed

a tentative hand in his large, rough one. He closed on my fingers and pulled me towards him, whispering in my ear with whiskey-flavoured breath, 'You better fly, little bird.'

Pulling away, I stood my ground, holding myself stiff so that my legs wouldn't just run, run, run, as everything inside was braced to do.

'Game over,' I said.

'Little Wren, the game is just beginning.' And there it was again, that cool assurance, which made me think that the stakes were somehow raised this year.

I searched his face to see if he'd finally figured out why he hated me so much. As I stared, I saw a flicker of distaste, his sense that something about me was just plain wrong.

But he didn't know.

He came closer. I didn't move. This close, I could feel the heat from his chest. He reached out a hand to clamp my wrist.

'Maybe we should see if your friend wants to play. What's her name again? The pretty blonde one?'

Nearly dropping the flowery bag, I pulled away. But damn it if I was going to let him bring Aisling into his crazy game. Even as a child playing in the woods or quarry, Aisling had never liked to run. No way would anyone do this to her.

I turned on my heel and fled.

'I'll give you to fifty,' David called after me.

I was out of reach by three. I could hear him counting slowly, as if we really were playing hide-and-seek and he was being especially patient.

It would be quicker to cut through the woods. But I wasn't the idiot girl in the movies who hurled herself into the arms of the axe-wielding maniac by going into dark places.

David and the others were right behind. They were gaining on me fast. Night would fall within the hour. I picked up my pace.

Turning the bend, I saw the boy standing in the road. Waiting. His clothes were dark and the way he stood, still and slightly hunched, made me think of the tuanacul. He was like a tree come to life, sorrowful and ancient. He turned his head, and it was Cillian, wearing a mummer's mask. The surprised, painted eyes stared at me. Of the four bullies, he was the one most likely to become a finger-severing psychopath once he graduated from terrorising girls. That boy put the kill into Cillian.

He began the slow whistling of the song I had come to hate: *The wran, the wran, the king of all birds.*

Of course they had split up. That's why David had given me such a generous start. Cillian was ahead, waiting. To the right was the McNally farm, Cillian's family. I

couldn't go there. Behind me, the other boys were getting closer. I could hear their answering call, fast and raucous: '*Up with the kettle and down with the pan. Give us a penny to bury the wran.*'

So, like the idiot girl in the movies, the one who ends up hacked to bits, I ran into the woods.

TWO
Going to bury you

The peonies are a study in colour: blood red on green.
AdC

It was darker among the trees. Moss-covered stones and exposed tree roots slowed me down, but I pushed on. Every now and then I would hear calling or whistling as they drew closer. Or maybe I imagined it. It was easy to imagine things there in the forest, there beneath the thick canopy of leaves.

I had to get to the river, it was the easiest route home. I knew the terrain well. I'd run there in frost, rain and fog. But it was different today. It always felt different with the boys at my back. My feet were less sure. The trees had rearranged themselves, closing over the paths I knew. Ahead, I could see the crumbled outline of the ruined cottage. Behind me, whistling through the woods, was that jolly, awful tune.

For we are the boys that come your way,
To bury the wran on Stephen's Day.

I pushed harder, stumbling over the uneven ground until a partially concealed root sent me sprawling, face to dirt. I pulled myself up. Steadying against a tree, I breathed deeply. There it was, that faint whistle. I pressed on, running through the trees, the thin branches scraping at my face and the wet leaves slippery beneath my feet.

I reached a fallen bough that blocked the path, and was about to climb over when I saw something near the ruin. It could be just another dark forest shadow shape. Or it could be one of them. I crouched down, watching from behind the bough, taking air deep into my lungs. Nothing moved ahead and I couldn't hear anyone behind me. But that was how David liked to play it. That was the fun of the chase: to let me get away first.

From behind the bough, I paused to think. The river was too obvious. There were more of them and they were faster. I would almost certainly run into an ambush. But if I headed back towards the road, they might not expect that.

My eye traced the outline of the ruin. No one ever went there. Most people in the village were wary of it, but the cottage had never bothered me. And just behind it was an overgrown path back to the road.

Having a plan instead of running helter-skelter gave me confidence. I would do this. I would evade them. They'd

had their chase. The thought of getting away brought new energy. They wouldn't catch me this year.

I left the path, ducking in between the trees on the slope. It slowed me down, but stealth above speed. Watching carefully, I reached the ruined cottage. Hardly a cottage, there were only the remains of four walls overgrown with moss and ivy.

In the 1800s, the mad girl artist had lived there. Arabella de Courcy. She'd fallen in love with a tree man, the prince of the tuanacul, who lured her to the cottage. He didn't mean to kill her, but every time he loved her he drew vitality from her. Some would swear to seeing a blonde girl in old-fashioned white petticoats between the trees, her hair like tangled branches. With lips of petals and skin as rough as bark.

But these were just stories. Of that I was certain. Because I knew magic, and it wasn't ghost stories about a tree girl in a ruined cottage.

A yew had split the back wall and I pulled myself up on the trunk and climbed. From the high branches, I scanned the ground, not seeing anyone. The cold settling through my jacket, I waited.

They came up from the river, flitting through the trees. His face now hidden by a mummer's mask, David prowled closer. There were two figures behind him and one coming

along the slope. Using hand signals, they conferred. One continued on the slope, the two behind split up, one retracing his steps and the other pressing forward with David. They moved quietly, surefooted on the uneven ground. One last look back from David, the fixed smile on his masked face turned in my direction. Then they were gone.

Out of my hiding place, I sprinted uphill, away from the boys. Steep, the ground loose, I slipped a few times as I scrabbled forward. The woods were thinner and brighter here. There were fewer places to hide.

The beginnings of a cramp started in my side and I breathed through the pain. In the distance, the grey road appeared. The sound of a car nearby. The trees at the edge lit up, and the car passed. I ran, nearly falling over a broken tricycle that had been dumped behind a tree, its glittery pink streamers lifting in the wind. Pushing on, I went towards the road, hating the chase, hating that this still happened. Every year, and I didn't know how to make it stop.

I heard nothing, saw nothing until I was down. I knew only the slam of bone against bone, hard, gritty ground on my face. David's head cracked against mine and we fell together. My cheek scraped stones and twigs and dirt; something sharp cut the skin on my temple. Pain strobed

through my skull. Dazed, nonsense words echoed inside: *Wren has left the building!* And in my mind's eye, I saw the mesmerising swing of a stone pendant on a worn gold chain moving sweetly from side to side.

I felt David's weight on me, crushing the air from my lungs. His mask scraped my cheek. Fear throbbed through me. I was caught.

I tried to twist out from under him, my terror lending me strength. I crept forward, first one inch, then another. But he tightened his grip, holding me still. Along with earth and wood, I smelled the whiskey and cigarette smoke that clung to his clothes and hair.

'Gotcha.' He sat up to his knees.

He pushed the mask off his face and smiled. 'Just a bit of fun, eh, Wren? No real harm done.' The bruises faded, the cuts healed. I couldn't pinpoint the moment when it had shifted from a game that I didn't enjoy but could tolerate, into this. My heartbeat was loud and fast and I struggled to catch my breath. I repeated Maeve's words like they were a charm or a prayer: this ends today. But how?

David pulled me up, gripping my arms. In passing him on the streets, I might have noticed the bit of stubble, the gradual change from solid boy to thickset teen. I saw it properly now, facing all four of them, unnervingly no

longer boys but not yet adults. They were bulked out, big arms and thick thighs. With shorn hair and underage tattoos, they were terrifying.

They won't hurt me, I told myself. But it didn't stop the fear.

'We're not really going to bury you,' David said.

He was every inch the village princeling. Most of our neighbours wouldn't understand the significance of his position in the hierarchy of judges, that as nephew of Calista Harkness he was as good as royal. But they understood that David was rich. That his family owned much of the land in and around Kilshamble.

The other three boys looked on, smiling.

'What do you want?' I tried to sound bored.

Whenever they caught me, they took a trophy. Maybe a button from my dress, a thread of unravelled wool. Last year, it was a lace from my shoe. This time, I wore a cheap string of charms around my wrist, feather earrings from the Saturday market. I worried that these useless objects could whisper my secrets. That if David listened hard enough, he'd know the truth that eluded him so.

'Do you know, in the old tradition, why they chased the wren?' David said. He pushed his hand into my hair and then twisted it around his fingers. My ear scraped the tree as he pulled me towards him.

'Because it's so strong and manly to hunt a small defenceless bird?' I said.

But it didn't sound as glib as I intended. My eyes were stinging from my pulled hair. I could feel every bang and scrape from when they first started chasing me. My temple hurt like buggery. I was not in the mood to play Q&A.

'The knife,' David said to Cillian. His hand tightened around my hair. The flowery bag fell to the ground.

'They chased her because the wren is a treacherous creature who betrays those that trust her.' He took the knife from Cillian.

'How can I betray you if I'm not on your side?' I said, feeling his fist against my scalp. Pulling hair was such a dirty trick.

'The wrenboys would punish her by taking her feathers.'

They did so love to go on about punishment, the judges.

Then David lined the knife on my hair and I realised what he meant to do. I reached for the flowery bag but he had me at an awkward angle. Should have put the letter opener in my pocket.

'Just one dark chunk,' David said, working the blade through my hair. 'You won't even miss it.'

I didn't want him taking my hair. This year's trophy was different. David had intent, which I'd never seen before.

This wasn't a useless object to be tossed into a drawer and forgotten. By taking my hair, David would take a part of me. An augur could never allow a judge to own a piece of her. Who knew what dark magic he might do with my hair?

I brushed the fabric of the bag. The tip of the letter opener was between my left fore and middle fingers. I pulled it up a little more until I had a better grip. David's knife pressed against the hair twisted in his hand. The blade sawed through a few more strands.

I jabbed the sharpened edge of the letter opener deep into his hand. It was an awkward, messy stab. David snarled as he dropped the knife and let go his hold. Long, blunt ribs of hair were wrapped around his fingers.

'What the hell, Wren?' he spat. As if in slow motion, I saw his blood fall. In the dim light, I thought I saw three drops hit the dirty leaves, then a more steady stream. David slipped my hair into his pocket.

As the first drop touched the ground, I felt it coming in a powerful wave. Then a second drop seeped into the dirt and mulch. The skin on my palms began to prick ever so slightly. I was transfixed by the pretty pattern. It was like a lens coming into focus. Just a little more, then I would see.

'What's wrong with her?' I heard one of them say.

'She's having convulsions, man.'

'I'm out of here.' Brian's words were muffled, as though he had already turned away. I barely registered the sound of the other boys following.

When the third drop hit, the pattern was complete. The dirt, the mulch, the exposed root of the tree and the blood. The soft edges of a sweet kind of bliss. I knew I should stop, but I couldn't. I focused on the pattern of blood against the leaves. The lines blurred, and suddenly I could see the secret picture inside. And with it came the head rush. This was stronger than anything I'd ever felt before. My eyes rolled back in my head as I heard the last set of footsteps running off.

As I fell, I saw a large table made of solid wood, laden with ripe fruit. Pitchers of wine and bowls of rich gravy and sauce. A crowd gathered around a large, roasted animal, tearing chunks of meat. I couldn't tell who it was that stuffed food into their mouths with both hands, barely chewing. Someone shifted and then I saw her.

Sorcha.

My long-lost mother.

Laid out on the table, adorned with slices of orange. Cocktail umbrellas in her hair. And, at her heart, a stone pendant on a worn gold chain, like an unseeing third eye. She was missing chunks from her legs and arms. A large bite mark on her shoulder. I heard cartilage tear as her arm came off the socket. A large hand reached towards the stone. The

image of Sorcha fuzzed over, and for a brief moment I thought I saw her hair change from red to dark waves. For a second, it wasn't Sorcha on the table. It was me.

The hand closed over the stone and pulled. But as it pulled, the stone splintered into a thousand shards. And then I lost consciousness.

THREE
And then they ate her

The Gallagher boys have left to defend the Rose.
My beloved Elizabeth longs to follow her brothers as
they subdue the brutish Grovers who wreak havoc
across the country.
AdC

I sat in the growing dark. The chase had left me utterly drained. There was blood on my shirt, and my scalp still ached from where David had pulled my hair. I touched my temple, feeling the graze where I'd hit the ground. Troubled by the vision of Sorcha, I began the slow walk home. I didn't know how to begin explaining it to Smith. I didn't want to tell him at all. Seventeen years, and Sorcha still caused him pain.

When Sorcha ran away, she'd stolen jewellery from the house. All I had of my mother was a list of things we no longer owned: a man's watch with a leather strap, two rose-gold ladybird earrings (wings aflutter) and an old necklace

with an unpolished stone. The necklace I'd seen in the vision. Smith had tried to find her, but I was a sickly baby and demanded all his attention. He never said, but I guessed my failure to thrive came from Sorcha's addiction.

During those months, in and out of hospital, we'd met Maeve, then a nurse. By the time I was on the mend, any trail Sorcha had left was cold. So Smith and I had settled in the cottage at the edge of the village, surrounded by the sprawling wood and farmland. Further up, the old abandoned quarry.

Moving here was an act of defiance; the judges didn't want augurs in Kilshamble. A few, like the Laceys, who were more than a little fearless, might settle in the townlands right outside. But the village, from the quarry to the lake, was judge territory. It hadn't always been like that, not in the days when augurs divined through blood and guts on the old green.

Most people in the village didn't realise we were different. There was a lazy, half-awareness of something a little other. Like it was in the wind or the soil or the water, that sense of a different kind of normal, living alongside them. It leached through, like the taint of copper coins on a wet sink. We were an infection that the rest of the body didn't quite know what to make of, so they closed around as if nothing were otherwise.

For years, Smith presented himself as the amiable geography teacher, now retired. Keeping our identity secret, we were able to watch them. To keep an eye on our enemy in this sleeping war. Smith, who knew such things, had found the best place where we could observe without being seen. When the house next door became free, Maeve and her two girls moved in.

Sometimes I envied the judge children, especially when I saw how close they were; how they distanced themselves from the other village children, that air of secrecy around them. I wanted to tell them that I wasn't just an ordinary village child who knew nothing of draoithe and their nemeta and rituals. I wanted to remind them that judges and augurs, for all our differences, were once united. That despite our conflict, we all needed nemeta to preserve the old ways and feed the rituals that had been passed through the generations. I longed to tell the judge kids that I was like them. Kind of. Apart from the enemy thing.

But Smith had forbidden it. And even though I felt lonely, we weren't alone. Far beyond the dark fields and distant lights, other augurs were spread out over the neighbouring townlands and into the surrounding villages. Our grove. Fifteen families, and we were tight.

'You OK, honey?' Maeve's voice came from the bench in

her garden. She always went overboard with the fairy lights at the winter solstice. 'Did you talk to them?'

Through the window, I saw Smith in his armchair. I buttoned my jacket, hiding streaks of muck and blood, and turned to Maeve.

'Yeah, we talked.' No lies there. 'What you doing out in the cold?'

'Looking at stars.' She gestured above. Maeve always had an eye on the sky. 'Watching for you.'

I should have known she would be waiting. From my earliest memories, Maeve was there. Her relationship with Smith was for a long time platonic, until one day it wasn't. It was Maeve who'd stood in Sorcha's place at my coming-of-age ceremony when I turned sixteen, who'd guided me through the ritual while I stared at my inner forearm in dismay.

Maeve had shown me the old ways, the secret traditions passed down through generations. Some of them so old they came from the time when draoithe were one, with no division, no hostility. A time when we worked together as the prophets, poets, arbiters and advisers to kings.

But that was before we began dividing among ourselves, distinguishing between draoithe who worked patterns, the astrologers, healers, architects, metal-workers and alchemists, and the draoithe who upheld the law. The augurs

and the judges. That was before we started fighting each other.

'I'm grand, Maeve. Go on in. You'll catch a cold,' I scolded, grateful for the dimly lit path.

My hand on the doorknob, I glanced up but could see no stars.

Just inside, I could hear the singsong voice of the newsreader: 'And in other news, Basil Lucas, prize-winning geologist and media personality, died unexpectedly at his home in Galway.' Smith was watching intently and I used his distraction to cross the living room.

'Wren,' he said, holding out a hand like a traffic officer on a wet Monday morning. 'You should listen to this.'

I paused, not turning round. If I hugged the shadows, maybe he wouldn't see the dirt, the blood and grazes. But I got as far as the passage before my curiosity about Lucas won out.

'Earlier this year, Basil Lucas bequeathed his archive, valued in excess of five million euros, to the Harkness Foundation, effective upon his death. Calista Harkness, director of the Harkness Foundation, expressed her sympathy to the Lucas family.'

The report switched to a clip where Calista Harkness tried to contain her glee at acquiring the archive. She had

the same pinched nose as her nephew David, whose blood currently stained my shirt.

'It's happening,' Smith said. 'Just as you said.'

Foretelling Basil Lucas's death at Christmastime had been one of my better moments as an augur. I'd seen him lying in a coffin. Not an ordinary coffin, one wrapped in Christmas paper and tied up with a bow. Like a dead-man-shaped Christmas present. I'd seen it while staring at the peeling paint on the walls of Dr Kelly's waiting room, and it took all my control to not shriek like a loon. In the village, they already found me more than a little odd.

'Wren?'

I turned round. Smith broke off, breathing hard, as he looked at my face.

'It's Boxing Day,' he said. He rubbed his jaw with his hand. 'Why didn't you stay in?'

I shook my head, no use rehashing the afternoon. Behind him, the newsreader was smiling: 'And to end this evening's broadcast …'

'I'll get the tin.' He raised himself from the large armchair and went into the kitchen.

'… a round-up of wren hunts from around the country.' The newscaster beamed and my nausea rose as the song began, '*The wran, the wran the king of all birds*.'

I didn't want to look, but couldn't help myself. The

swirling colour of the parades, the straw-clad dancers and musicians. Bright ribbons streaming from the fake bird carried on a holly bush by masked boys. The deep, regular drumbeats and laughing flute. A boy explained that they were collecting money for the wren's funeral. After they'd symbolically killed her and decorated her with ribbons.

I turned off the TV, hitting the button harder than was necessary.

Smith came back, balancing an old cake tin that said *First Aid Kit* in a faded script with a glass of whiskey and a bowl of steaming water.

He took a piece of cotton wool and dipped it in water. Reaching inside the cake tin, he pulled out a tube of ointment that looked like it had been bought when Sorcha was a girl.

'How bad?' Smith dabbed the cuts on my face with the beige stuff.

'The usual.' I didn't want to talk about it.

'Did they hurt you?' His blue eyes held mine.

'I'm fine, Smith.'

His eyes flicked to my temple.

'I fell.' I touched my hand to the graze, glad he couldn't see my shirt. 'It's nothing.'

'You should have stayed home.' Never had a graze been so thoroughly cleaned.

'I saw something,' I said. 'There was blood.' And hair. I couldn't tell Smith that David had taken my hair. What if it meant something? Maeve would fret and Smith would glower. I couldn't handle their worrying. Or maybe it was that I didn't want to bring scrutiny to the unwelcome intimacy of it, that David had stolen a part of me.

'Blood?' His hand faltered slightly and then dabbed briskly again.

'Not mine.' Not most of it, anyway.

'What happened?' He took a huge gulp from his tumbler.

This close, I could smell whiskey and a faint scent of mould. He never aired his clothes properly when he washed them. He was always folding them away before they completely dried. Smith stopped his dabbing but kept his eyes on the graze on my forehead.

'I took the letter opener. Just in case.' Sharpened down to a stiletto. Because really, no one ever used the wretched thing. Not for opening letters anyway. It was an entirely unnecessary instrument, I thought, shrugging out of my jacket.

'And what did you do with the letter opener?'

'Skewered his hand like a kebab.' Was it bad that I smiled?

Smith sighed. 'If David tells his dad …'

He turned to pick up another ball of cotton wool soaked with stinky beige ointment, but I saw the small smile. Not

every girl had a grandfather who'd be proud of her for stabbing someone in the hand.

'He's all right. Ouch.' I pulled away as Smith started on my shoulder. 'He'll live.'

The silence stretched. Smith was trying not to ask but eventually he couldn't help it. 'You saw something?'

'Sorcha.' I dreaded saying it. 'With a stone.'

Smith busied himself, throwing the used cotton wool balls in the wastepaper basket. He took his time screwing the cap on the tube of ointment. A useless endeavour, it leaked out of the sides in three different places.

'A Daragishka stone?'

I nodded. The one she'd stolen. Smith turned away. He bent over the old cake tin as if he were looking for something inside it. Something that could cure heartbreak.

'It happened quickly. She was,' I paused while trying to find a delicate way to put it, 'laid out on a table wearing the stone. A bunch of people around her. But it was like they were using her to get to the stone. They cut into her body and served it up. And then they ate her.' So much for delicacy.

Smith snapped the lid of the cake tin down, his long fingers on the rim, carefully sealing it. I could see his mind working. He was figuring how this affected the plan. Just how ominous it really was. I didn't tell him that for the

briefest flash I'd seen myself on the table. Now that I was home, I wasn't sure I'd seen it at all.

'What do you think it means?'

He picked up his whiskey, swirling the melting ice.

'It means we have to find those stones. Soon.'

From when I was little, Smith had taught me that it wasn't answers that mattered but knowing the right questions to ask. Which made questions seem very important. So the words rasped against my throat: 'What happens if we don't?'

Smith gestured to the TV. 'You saw the news. Calista Harkness owns the Lucas Archive now. If we don't get into it and find Lucas's map of the Daragishka stones, they will.'

'Would that be so bad?' I hated how timid I sounded.

'The stones are our only hope. If we don't get them, it's the beginning of the end for us. It happened to the bards, don't think it won't happen to us.'

Smith drained the glass and set it on top of the tin. No one liked thinking about the bards, the third group of draoithe, who'd wanted no part in the fight between the judges and augurs. No one liked to talk about how, after losing their nemeta, the bards' songs and poems lost their magic. Their numbers dwindled and then they were no more. Not with a bang but a whimper.

'And the internship is the only way.'

Smith had ensured the internship would go to one of his girls. Someone either owed him a favour or wanted to keep a secret. That was how things were done in Kilshamble. I dreaded the thought of me or Aisling going undercover at Harkness House. The place where David and the wrenboys worked. All of them, whether it was David or Calista Harkness or any other judge, had a burning hostility towards us.

'I can't tell the future,' Smith said, his face soft with concern and perhaps remorse. He didn't need to touch or hug me, his face was unguarded in that moment and I felt loved, cared for. 'But from mapping the situation, the possible options and outcomes, this is really our best chance.'

'Then we do it.'

He turned to the kitchen, clearly in search of more whiskey.

'Who do you think they were?' I stopped him. 'The people. Who fed on her.' Those hands, grabbing at Sorcha. At me.

Smith paused in the wide squared frame leading to the kitchen. He turned slightly. 'Why, the judges. Of course.'

Before I reached the stairs, he spoke again, still framed by the square. 'That was a blood vision, Wren.'

I gave a short nod. There would be consequences, I knew that. There were always consequences, usually teeny tiny consequences that you hardly noticed. But the small things added up over time, until eventually they formed one big thing that could crush you beneath its weight.