

RUN

Chapter One

Bernadette had been dead two weeks when her sisters showed up in Doyle's living room asking for the statue back. They had no legal claim to it, of course, she never would have thought of leaving it to them, but the statue had been in their family for four generations, passing down a maternal line from mother to daughter, and it was their intention to hold with tradition. Bernadette had no daughters. In every generation there had been an uncomfortable moment when the mother had to choose between her children as there was only one statue and these Irish Catholic families were large. The rule in the past had always been to give it to the girl who most resembled the statue, and among Bernadette and her siblings, not that the boys ever had a chance, Bernadette was the clear winner: iron rust hair, dark blue eyes, a long, narrow nose. It was frankly unnerving at times how much the carving looked like Bernadette, as if she had at some point modeled in a blue robe with a halo stuck to the back of her head.

"I can't give it to you," Doyle said. "It's in the little boys' room, on the dresser. Tip and Teddy say a prayer to it at night." He kept his eyes on them steadily. He waited for an apology, some indication of backing down, but instead they just kept staring right at him. He tried again. "They believe it's actually a statue *of her*."

"But since we have daughters," Serena said, she was the older of the two, "and the statue always passes on to a daughter—" She didn't finish her thought because she felt the point had been made. She meant to handle things gracefully.

Doyle was tired. His grief was so fresh he hadn't begun to see the worst of it yet. He was still expecting his wife to come down the stairs and ask him if he felt like splitting an orange. "It has in the past but it isn't a law. It can go to a son for one generation and everyone will survive."

They looked at each other. These two women, these aunts, had supported their now dead sister in her limitless quest for children but they knew that Doyle didn't mean for the family's one heirloom to pass to Sullivan, his oldest son. He meant for the statue to go to the other ones, the "little boys" as everyone called them. And why should two adopted sons, two *black* adopted sons, own the statue that was meant to be passed down from redheaded mother to redheaded daughter?

"Because," Doyle said, "I own it now and so I'm the one who gets to decide. Bernadette's children are as entitled to their family legacy as any other Sullivan cousin." Bernadette had always predicted that without a daughter there was going to be trouble. Two of the boys would have to be hurt someday when it was given to the third. Still, Bernadette had never imagined this.

The aunts did their best to exercise decorum. They loved their sister, they grieved for her, but they weren't about to walk away from that to which they were entitled. Their next stop was to seek the intervention of their uncle. As both a priest and a Sullivan they thought he would see the need to keep the statue in their line, but much to their surprise, Father John Sullivan came down firmly on Doyle's side, chastising his nieces for even suggesting that Teddy and Tip should be forced to give up this likeness of their mother, having just given up Bernadette herself. If he hadn't closed the argument down then, chances are that none of the Sullivans would have ever spoken to any of the Doyles again.

It was a very pretty statue as those things go, maybe a foot and a half high, carved from rosewood and painted with such a delicate hand that many generations later her cheeks still bore the high, translucent flush of a girl startled by a compliment. Likenesses of the Mother of God abounded in the world and in Boston they were doubled, but everyone who saw this statue agreed that it possessed a certain inestimable loveliness that set it far apart. It was more than just the attention to detail—the tiny stars carved around the base that earth sat on, the gentle drape of her sapphire

cloak—it was Mary's youth, how she hovered on the line between mother and child. It was the fact that this particular Mother of God was herself an Irish girl who wore nothing on her head but a thin wooden disc the size of a silver dollar and leafed in gold.

Bernadette's mother had given her the statue for a wedding present, and it wasn't until they were home from their wedding trip to Maine and were putting things away in their overlarge house on Union Park that Doyle really stopped to look at what was now theirs. He got very close to it then and peered at the face for a long time. He reached a conclusion that he thought was original to him. "This thing really looks like you," he said.

"I know," Bernadette said. "That's why I got it."

Doyle had certainly seen the statue in her parents' house, but he had never gone right up to it before. His did not have the kind of faith that believed religious statuary was appropriate for living rooms, and now here it was in his own living room, staring down at them from the mantel. He mentioned this to Bernadette. In that bright empty room there was no place else to rest your eyes. The Virgin looked so much larger, holier, than she had in the clutter of her parents' house.

"You don't think it's a bit overtly Catholic?" her young husband asked.

Bernadette cocked her head and tried to divorce herself from her history. She tried to see it as something new. "It's art," she said. "It's me. Pretend that she's naked."

He looped his arms around this beautiful girl who was his wife. The very word, *naked*, made him kiss her ear. "So where did it come from?"

Bernadette looked at him now. "My mother never told you this story?"

Doyle shook his head.

Bernadette rolled her dark red hair around one hand and then stuck a pencil from her back pocket through the knot to secure it to her head. "That's because my mother's afraid of you. She's afraid of boring you. She tells this story to everyone."

"I don't know if I should be flattered or offended."

Back then there was only one sofa, one dinged up chair, one round leather ottoman that looked like a button. They left the boxes and sat together on the couch, her legs draped over his. "It's a sad story," she said.

"I'll remember it," he said. "That way you'll only have to tell me once."

The story she knew began in Ireland, where her great-grandfather was a boy full of stories and high expectations. When he was still young he settled those expectations on the lovely shoulders of Doreen Clark, a redheaded girl whose beauty was outmatched only by her piety. Doreen Clark had made it clear that she had no interest in any of the boys who took such a keen interest in her. She was leaning towards the convent as if a strong wind were blowing her there. No boy who tried had been able to distract her from her prayers and good deeds, so despite all his best efforts, the great-grandfather's courting met with no success. Despondent, the boy left his hometown of Easkey and was gone for more than half a year. If Doreen Clark ever noticed his absence she did not mention it once, even to her sisters.

"When he came home again he was seventeen," Bernadette said. "He looked leaner, handsomer than anyone had remembered, and he had a lumpy bundle tied to his back. He said he had traveled

all over the world trying to put Doreen out of his mind but the cause was hopeless. No one could forget Doreen. When he was in Rome—"

"He went to Rome?" Doyle said. "At sixteen? What year is this?"

"Listen to the story," she said.

The great-grandfather was quick to point out he had traveled all the way to Rome and sometimes implied he had gone even farther. He met a sculptor there whose job it was to carve saints out of exotic woods for the pleasure of the Pope. On one especially golden Roman afternoon the great-grandfather, sick of his own loneliness, sat down beside the sculptor who was turning a block of rosewood into Saint Francis of Assisi. He told this man, a stranger, the story of Doreen's beauty. There was pleasure in hearing himself say the words. No mention was made of there being any sort of language barrier between them. It was only said that the sculptor was so moved by the descriptions he heard of her slender neck, her delicate ears, the red wings of her eyebrows, that he set Saint Francis aside in order to carve a likeness of Doreen Clark, but the statue, because he didn't want anyone to think he wasn't doing his job, was also a statue of the Virgin. In the end it was this merger of the two women, one an Irish teenager and the other the Mother of God, that made the finished product seem to speak of both heaven and earth. The great-grandfather had no money to pay for the statue ("The suitors are always poor," Bernadette said, and she smiled at Doyle—a promising lawyer, who had not been poor at all) but the sculptor insisted he take it on the one condition that it be carried home and presented to the young woman as a gift. It was clearly implied that the sculptor himself had fallen more than a little bit in love with the face he had made.

To win the heart of a beautiful girl, have her represented in art as someone of even greater beauty. To win the heart of a pious girl, have her be the model for Mary Queen of Angels. Not a chip of paint was knocked from her long blue cloak, not a single fingertip on her graceful hands was missing. The statue possessed a kind of ethereal beauty that poor children in Ireland had never been acquainted with, not even in the church, and so this girl who was scarcely sixteen herself was moved beyond words. She had been good her whole life without any thought of reward and yet a reward had come to her. She could reach out her finger and touch it. Standing at the front door of the bakery in the center of town where the great-grandfather had begged her to meet him for just three minutes, Doreen Clark fell in love with the statue. While he told her his story he batted away a bumblebee with his open palm as it tried to menace Doreen Clark, drawn as they all were to the vague lemon scent of her hair.

Soon thereafter they married. The three of them, boy, girl, and Virgin, set themselves up on the top floor of her parents' humble house and promptly had five children. Every morning the girl, who was now a mother and a wife, knelt to say a prayer to her own likeness and was happy. The boy, who was quite grown by now into a man, had won the only thing he had ever wanted in life and so was happy as well. People came by their little apartment on the pretense of visiting or borrowing some tea or admiring a new baby, but really it was just that they never got tired of seeing Mother Mary as Doreen. The women crossed themselves and said its beauty was exactly like hers, though the ones who were jealous added on the phrase "had been." Exactly like her beauty had been.

Bernadette smiled. "That's what you'll say when I'm old," she said to her husband. "Look at that statue over there. That's what Bernadette used to look like."

Doyle leaned over and kissed the part of his wife's hair. "You'll never be old."

No one implied that Doreen and her husband lived a perfect life. They owed the butcher. Their eldest daughter came into the world with one leg that was shorter than the other and her thump thump thump coming up the stairwell was the sound that broke her mother's heart every day. He drank too much, the great-grandfather, but then so did half the island. These were still lean years a scant generation after the Great Famine, and they would have had no more or less than anyone

else they knew but for the statue, which was not only a glorious object but the proof of their love. Love between hardscrabble young married people with five children was a thing in short supply, and so in that sense they were better off than the other hardworking men and their once beautiful wives.

"Then one day something turned inside the Bay of Easkey. Suddenly the sea could not do enough for my great-grandfather. Every fish within twenty miles swam into his net. The more fish he pulled out, the more people lined up to buy them. He made three times as much as he had ever made in a day, and that led to three times as much drinking and the generous buying of drinks, and soon the men were talking about the statue of the Virgin." Bernadette raised her hand and made a slight gesture towards the woman on her mantelpiece to underscore the fact that they were one and the same. "The men were making some mildly scandalous toasts to her beauty and his wife's beauty and my great-grandfather's adventuresome youth. A man called Kilkelly, who was as drunk as the rest of them, leaned himself across the bar and with the drink his friend had paid for in his hand, said, 'Tell the truth for once now. You stole it, didn't you? You walked into a church and took it straight off the altar.'"

Kilkelly would later say he had never in his life had this thought before and that he didn't actually believe it was true. The comment was born in the spirit of a joking sort of cruelty that one has towards a fortunate man. But he did say it, and in all of the merriment and the slamming down of glasses on the bar and the drinking to a sea full of fish, the great-grandfather heard him and the words went through his heart like a spear through the side of Christ.

It happened on a night when he was seventeen years old and far away from Easkey. He was as drunk that night as he had ever been and still been standing, in some town he never bothered to ask the name of, swaying through the streets in a cold fog. He was looking for a dry place to sleep it off and, praise God, the side door to the church was open. A lucky oversight, because those priests kept their property locked up tight from drunks like him. He felt his way along and found a cushion in a pew to put his head on. He went to sleep right there in the first row. When he woke up the light was pouring in through the blue and gold windows, spreading out across the polished floors and the pews and the worn cloth of his own muddy trousers and who did he see in that light but Doreen Clark, the singular dream of his youth right there on the altar smiling down at him. Those were her eyes, those were her little hands, that was her incandescent hair that he had longed to touch every Sunday he had sat behind her in mass since he was a child. This could only mean that God had called on him to go home and win her back. He had to go to Easkey, collect Doreen Clark, and bring her here to see the statue that pointed him to her so directly. But then he closed his eyes and tried to think again. She would never travel to another town in his company if she hadn't even been willing to go down to the harbor with him to watch the fishing boats come in. Logic instructed him to borrow the statue for the week it took to walk it home and back. Surely God made allowances for borrowing in certain severe situations. He took off his jacket and wrapped it gently around the Virgin Mother, whom he was already coming to think of as his little Doreen, then left the church by the same door through which he'd entered. It was an unnervingly simple departure. No one saw him. No one cried out, *Thief!* Mile after mile he looked over his shoulder waiting to see the hoards of angry Catholics chasing him down for kidnapping, but none of them came. The farther away he got with this pleasant weight in his arms, the more he knew the statue was never going back. He had the entire long walk home to imagine different scenarios for what might have happened. Once, he came upon an abandoned church in a town where every last person had died of a fever and so he picked the Virgin up and carried her away. Once, the church had burned to the ground and he found the statue standing unsinged in the embers, her arms raised to him. He thought of winning it in a game of dice with a priest, or receiving it as a gift for performing some act of heroism as yet unimagined, but then he worried that a better man would show benevolence and decline to take what was offered. On the third day of his trip home he decided it would be better if the statue had come from someplace very far away, someplace holy that would sit above all suspicions, like Rome. He had had the statue made for her. It was not a coincidental likeness but a tribute of his own design. It was then he began to see himself as a great man coming back in glory. As ridiculous as his story was, no one had ever doubted it. His proof was in the irrefutable likeness of Doreen Clark's

face, in her iron rust hair. His proof was in the fact that when he finally found his way home and told her the story she'd agreed to marry him.

Every man in the bar saw the truth now, the terrible crumple and blanch of a lie come undone, and the great-grandfather, who was then only twenty-five, turned his back on the crowd and fell on his drink in silence. By the time he had finished, settled the bill and walked home, the news of his crime had swept across the valley like a soaking rain. All the riches the fish had supplied had been consumed by himself and his kind and he had been exposed as a fraud. By the time he walked through the door of his own home, there wasn't a detail of the evening that his wife had not been told.

It was at this point that Bernadette fell quiet. She leaned her head against her husband's shoulder and for awhile they simply waited in the low, gold light of early evening, as if someone else might walk through the front door and finish the story for her. "Well?" Doyle said. He was interested now. He wanted to know.

"Things go downhill from here," Bernadette said. "There's no redemption."

"You only have to tell it once," he said.

Doreen Clark, now Mrs. Billy Lovell, had come to see in one night that her happiness, her marriage, and her children had all been based on thievery and willful deception. The Catholic Church had been robbed and so had she, but there could be no extrication for her now, no returning to her youthful dreams. She lifted the statue of her own likeness into her arms, touching the cheek that had once been her cheek. There was no imagining how empty the apartment would be now. She bagged it gently in one of the wedding pillowcases her mother had tatted with lace, a case she had wrapped in tissue paper and stored in a chest at the foot of her bed without ever once laying her head on it. Then she sent the great-grandfather out of the house and into the horrible darkness. "Take it back," was all she said.

Of course he couldn't take it back, any more than he could take back a leaf in a cluttered autumn forest to the rightful tree from which it fell. Ireland was crowded with pubs and crowded with churches and all he was sure of was that eight years before he had stumbled out of one of them and into the other. He did not know which saint the church was named for. How could he walk to every one of them in the country asking the question door to door, "Have I stolen this from you?" So he walked to no place in particular. He thought about his sins and his intentions, one of which was quite bad and the other of which was pure. He carried the Virgin in his arms like a child and from time to time he would pull the pillowcase back from her beautiful face and weep for the love of his wife. Then he would go home. That was more or less the way it went for the rest of their lives, she turned him out and he came back again. Every time he walked down his own street his children would rush to meet him, their dirty little hands stretching up towards his neck. "Da, did you bring her home?" they'd cry. His wife would let him stay two days or two months or sometimes even two years until she couldn't stand it anymore, living with the burden of their sins. But she was like the children, too, and her heart always stuttered with joy and relief to see the bulky shape inside the pillowcase as her husband started back up the stairs. She would lift the statue from his arms and carry Mary Mother of God back to the dresser, studying the face that had been her face, the serene and tender face that she had outgrown. Had that ever been the color of her hair? Then she would cross herself and say a prayer.

"And she didn't give it back to the church?" Doyle said. "I mean her own church."

"Well," Bernadette said. "It didn't belong to them, not them specifically. And the Lovells were all pretty attached to it. In the end she gave it to my grandmother Loretta, the one with the short leg, and all of her siblings were so furious that Loretta had to pack up the statue and her family and take the boat to Boston."

"It might have been a bit of an overreaction."

She shook her head. "People in my family take this very seriously. When Loretta moved to Florida she gave the statue to my mother, and from there, well .