

## Keen

### Chapter One

Paparazzi bulbs burst on Maeve's skin like heat lightning. She was always surprised they didn't leave a mark she was so pale, and they were more incandescent than the sun. She posed next to Hungry, her date, so covered in fabric and makeup that Maeve knew she couldn't feel the flashes. Hungry didn't smile because it would ruin the effect of her face, her misshapen mouth, her drawn-on cheekbones and black eyes. Maeve MacNamara, the most famous keener in the world, didn't smile because it would ruin her reputation. Maeve loved Hungry's look for this awards show, all white, which didn't make her any less frighteningly uncanny, face mask of jaws ending in pinchers and jewels, lips more like an orchid than an orifice, her teeth-mountain chest tattoo the only skin exposed, long gloves and a corseted wide-legged pantsuit, high heels. Maeve was in a black de la Renta lace sheath, v-neck and low-backed, to let her gleaming skin show. Her dark hair was up in a simple bun, only azalea-pink gloss and long lashes, her star chart of freckles not hidden. She was wearing strings of bright

diamonds in her ears, rows of diamond sparks on her fingers Maeve loved borrowing things and nude Manolo Blahniks she didn't have to give back. She enjoyed her slim silhouette against Hungry's voluminous charisma, the austere next to the ostentatious, and she hoped she'd finally get to kiss her tonight.

At some point in time we just admitted we didn't know how to mourn. We, the de-ethnicized Americans. Jewish people know how to mourn. Mexican people know how to mourn. Indigenous people know how to mourn, within their individual tribal customs. But some of us had been over here so long we didn't know where we were from anymore. A cultural framework shows you what to do. Makes some decisions for you so you're less at sea for how on earth to process this thing that is impossible to process. *They are gone*. So. Wear black. Wear white. Sit shiva for seven days, forget about comfort, cover the mirrors, forget about appearance, that doesn't matter now. Then stand up and go back to your life. Walk in a jazz funeral processions, and the music will move from dirges to dance tunes. Chop up the body and feed it to the vultures. Bury the dead in a coffin shaped like something they loved in life, a rose or racecar or guitar. A year after their death, disinter the body and dance with it, dress it in new clothes, throw a parade, tell them all the news. Dismember, roast, and eat the

dead. Kill a member of another tribe to satisfy your rage. Throw a shovelful of dirt on the coffin, each mourner. Take pictures of the embalmed body. Keep locks of hair. Leave the body with useful tools, your best jewelry, flowers, prepare them for the other side. Some communities still know what to do. But some of us lost loss, forgot.

The Irish Americans started inviting us to their merry wakes, their funerals. It helped. To celebrate their life joyfully, be intimate with the body, it worked for us to collectively remember why it was worth it to love them. Don't cry, it will keep the soul here. Then to watch a public performance of mourning that helped, too. We could watch a woman keen, and it made us feel more pity and sorrow than if we were to cry, and it purged us.

Maeve knew, though we didn't, that the term catharsis was originally a medical term for the expelling of menstrual and reproductive fluids. What the body doesn't need anymore, to restore back to balance. We all knew the term as the reason we turn to art, the reason why seeing someone else play out a tragedy helps us with our own. When the keener straightens her shoulders, lets us see her tears, then walks away, we follow her out of that space.

So, we agreed upon consensual reverse colonization Ireland didn't impose their cultural customs on us, but they let us adopt them.

But of course it doesn't totally work.

Maeve gained her fame because she was beautiful, but not so much to be unattainable. We all could be her if we tried a little harder. We could never be Beyoncé, we knew that. No matter what we bought or who we hired to do our hair we could never be Janelle or Adele or Angelina or Andreja or Rihanna or Gaga or Jazz or Kim or Gwyneth (though we don't really want to be Kim or Gwyneth anymore). But Maeve wasn't so styled, her skin didn't look so plastic. Maybe if we knew what mascara she used we could look so awake. Her arms were a touch plump, barely, so we could maybe accomplish her musculature with a bit of light lifting. And we understood her talent was cultivated, she worked at it, so she felt like us, what we could be if we'd chosen to perfect a skill other than secretarial arts or how to draw blood from a five-year-old without tears.

None of us could afford to hire her to mourn our dead. But we didn't resent her for that, either. Because we'd all seen her work, were all so moved when she channeled our grief over Prince, Bowie, Left Eye, Whitney ... she set the bar so high that the keeners we hired were excellent, had to be to stay in business. Siobhán from down the block was wonderful when Mr. Wilson died, and Sinéad was just as good when our

grandmother passed. If we could hire Maeve MacNamara we would, just like when in junior high when we had extra babysitting money we bought Guess jeans because the triangle on our butts did make us feel cuter, even though our moms were right that jeans from Sears could fit just as well. Maeve was out of our league, but not so much so that she made us feel bad about our keeners or our mom jeans or watching the royal wedding on television and not being invited. She made us happy in her sapphire fascinator. And when she keened for Brexit, we all felt a little better about that severing. And then when she keened for the end of the United Kingdom Ireland reunited, Wales and Scotland independent, the Queen off all the money except in England, everyone else on the Euro she knew without us having to tell her to make it a little bit jubilant, to allow a trill of possibility in her voice, to help us not feel too bad that a dynasty was dying. The modulation of sorrow and terror and love in her keening was sublime, she didn't need a production crew and lighting direction to perform, we knew that Givenchy for a rockstar's overdose was mailed to her apartment in Flatbush she was good but she couldn't afford that and the Versace for the last woman to die of an illegal abortion in Ireland was a gift, the suit she wore for Holly Woodlawn was given because the filth of the grave looks so good on Chanel.

While we wanted to be her, she didn't make us stop wanting to be ourselves.

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The photo that appeared in the tabloids the next day is of Maeve and Hungry laughing. They're at the after-party at Le Bain, sitting near the pool, drinking champagne, and they looked buoyant. The reporter had asked them if they were disappointed that the documentary Maeve appeared in didn't win, and she'd said no, the one that won was more artistic, more of an exploration than an explanation. "We don't need any more information," she said. "I was grateful to be a part of *Threnody*, I'm glad the film exists to show the history of mourning and how we got here, but I'm also glad a lesser-known director won." The reporter asked Hungry, "Why the bones?" and she answered, "We don't need more pretty queens." The reporter thanked them for their time, and after walking away turned back to see them with heads upraised, throats exposed, uproarious. What she didn't hear them say was Maeve telling Hungry, "I want to throw you in that pool so bad, see what you look like when all that slides off of you," and Hungry answered, "But you would never do that."

"No, I would never do that," Maeve said, and they laughed, at the pleasant surprise of companionship and trust. They didn't hear the click of the shot.

"Can I take you home tonight?" Maeve then asked. Hungry nodded, and Maeve felt giddy. She would see more of what the public sees, and see what the public can't.

She'd get to unlie that corset.

Maeve was pleased with the photo. She knew to mostly pose as a lithe, solemn waif for the cameras, but it was okay for the keener to be occasionally caught in an uncalculated moment of mirth. For people to see that she was still capable of that.

She understood her elation to be only ephemeral, but she was grateful that hadn't left her entirely. That made her think she was okay.

The next morning she handed the rag to Hungry, along with a cup of coffee. He was just as lovely without makeup. He smiled at Maeve and said, "You are exquisite. And fierce. You'll be the one to keen Beyoncé someday."

Maeve answered, "The Queen will never die."

We were pleased with the photo, too. We knew Maeve didn't date, instead had a string of one-night stands and hired escorts, but we were glad she and Hungry were enjoying each other. We all loved her a little, this woman no longer capable of love.

We knew Maeve wasn't a happy person, she was famous for the ways she could channel her own tragedies into performing grief for others. Her only real friend was her mother, Clare, named after the county in Ireland her grandparents had immigrated

from. Her mother was retired now. She'd trained Maeve after her first keen, when she spontaneously joined her mother in mourning her father, drowned in the Hudson River. Her mother's last keen was for Maeve's son, a stillbirth. After all that, we understood Maeve to be untouchable.

Maeve never found the person she'd looked for her whole life, never felt that recognition of, *Oh, you. There you are.* So she found a man who would be a strong father and partner and figured, *Let's do this.* She wanted to have a child because it was the only thing that made her hopeful, that the world would become good enough for her child to be in. She and Jake got pregnant quickly, and the pregnancy was hard but no harder than any other.

Then the worst thing that could happen happened.

Maeve recognized the scream right away. The banshee shrieked so many times Maeve yelled back at her, "Go away! Leave my home." The banshee gave her such a sad look, lifted the hood of her cloak, and was gone.

Maeve was sitting up in bed, Jake looking terrified. "It's either my mother or Cillian," she said. "I have no other relatives." She didn't know who to wish for it not to be. Then her water broke, and she knew.



She told Jake not to come to the hospital and he said she knew he couldn't let her do this alone. He asked if she wanted him to call a taxi or an ambulance. Cillian wasn't moving, so she said ambulance, then stopped speaking.

Jake listened from the hallway.

It was as bad as it gets. Hours of labor knowing the child was already gone. She begged for them to knock her out, cut the child from her, please don't make her do this. They told her it was safer for her to deliver her child and she told them to fuck themselves and let her die. Please make this stop. Her mother held her hand the entire time and said nothing because there was nothing to say.

When it was done Maeve held the body that was supposed to be Cillian, and she and her mother smiled at his beauty. He'd been dead for hours, his soul already on its way, and so Clare keened him, softly at first, and when Maeve closed her eyes and acknowledged that this had to happen, then opened them to look at her son, her mother keened loudly enough that every room on every floor of the hospital could hear. The end of a lineage she knew her daughter would never try again. The last MacNamara. This child named for strife would never know pain or pleasure. No one in the hospital that day ever gave an interview to the tabloids, so the public would never know that Chlair ní Conmara, mother of Méabh ní Conmara, grandmother of Cillian

mac Conmara, sounded that day like two boards being banged together, like an owl, she could have shattered glass, she channeled the ancients and her daughter did not cry. All the mothers in all the other rooms shed silent tears for what they could have had to endure. No merry wake. The mother's last keen.

After they'd cleaned and stitched Maeve Jake came in to see her.

"You are so beautiful. And so strong."

"Thank you." Then, "I can never go back there."

"I know. I'll pack up your things. I'll give away the stuff in the nursery. I'll sell the apartment. I'll handle it."

"Thank you."

The room felt empty, even with both of them in it.

Jake said, "I am so sorry this happened to you." The only thing there ever is to say to the face of grief.

Maeve was so grateful for his saying *you*, not *us*, that she gave it back to him.

"I'm so sorry this happened to us."

He thanked her. "You'll be at your mom's then?"

"Oh. Yes."

“Okay then.” And then he said the perfect thing. He ran his hand through his long wavy hair, looked at Maeve with the blue eyes she’d hoped her son would inherit, and he said, “I am glad I got the chance to love you, Maeve.” Then, “If you ever need anything ...”

“I know.”

And then, with Maeve sweaty and distressed, with her still bleeding into the pad they’d put between her legs, on this, the worst day of her life, Jake did the perfect thing, he wound his hand in her dirty hair and kissed her, not holding back, one of the best kisses they ever shared, he kissed her as the woman she was to him and mother he knew she could be, and she was so grateful, and then he said goodbye and she never saw him again.

She thought of Cillian every day, and it never got easier.

That’s when Maeve became world-renowned. That’s when her vocal range expanded, and she became able to hit the note of a selkie who knows her pelt is locked away from her, the resonance of the old man at the pub who doesn’t think the young college girl believes he saw a faerie in his garden when he was a child, the precise shriek of a banshee announcing the death of an O’Brien, the exact growl of a cornered

cat, the hiss of a striking snake that never was on the island of Ireland for St. Patrick to remove, she could rumble at the timbre below human hearing of a mother whale seeking her lost calf and our bones knew it even if our ears didn't, she became able to reach the pitch of every witch set aflame, and when she hit that apex of unleashing everyone listening knew that feeling too. We'd only seen her on television but we'd heard in person she was even more transcendent. When she lost her child and heard her mother's final keen her voice acquired the sound a Hopi farmer makes when his crops perish because the prayers and ceremonies no longer bring the rains in a time of climate change, the wail of a Hopi warrior killing his kin who sheltered the monks and friars they'd expelled who'd returned, the sound of a Laguna woman with a Spanish last name baptizing a child, the cries of a child touched by a priest, the wails of a man who knows no other way to enjoy desire, the tenor of a woman saying no, the tone of a hungry ghost begging to be saved or at least remembered, the weeping of a child who only knows her own language and can't express grief at the loss of her parents in English to the headmaster of the boarding school, the owl whose fledgling can't fly, when Maeve breathed and screamed to birth a child who would never breathe she was connected to the lineage of all those who had loved and lost before her, all who had suffered the more we love, the more we suffer their voices entered her

lungs and her vocal chords, and her throat housed their stories and sang their griefs. She gave pain sound so the ones who loved the one now dead could stay silent, let her do this for them, her voice gave movement to the letting go they all sought, the release.

This week, Maeve keened an unarmed black teenager shot in the back in the street by police in Tennessee, a man electrocuted in Texas, a woman stoned to death in Somalia, a grandmother who died of heatstroke in New Orleans, and three teenagers shot by their classmate at school in Washington. At the end of a tough, typical week, she and Clare, who traveled with her everywhere, went to the hip-hop festival in Paris, featuring Childish Gambino, Kendrick Lamar, the Carters, Drake, Janelle Monáe, and of course Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. Damn. Clare tried to tell Maeve she was too old for this, but Maeve convinced her she wasn't. "We can just stand in the back and listen. We don't have to dance, or get crushed up front." The show was raucous and uplifting. Both Maeve and her mom threw their hands up in the air and sang along. Afterwards, eating fondue at a sidewalk café, on their second bottle of wine, Clare said, "What a great nod to the expatriated, to invite all those artists here. I wonder if any will just stay, say fuck going back to the States."

"I'm tempted to stay," Maeve said.

“If you want to move, we can do that.”

“I don’t think that’s what I really want. It’s just nice to sometimes admit how tired I am.”

Clare understood why her daughter was a workaholic – some kind of furious atonement, not for anything she herself did wrong, but just trying to heal somehow all the inflicted wounds. She’d given up on trying to talk her out of it. They just sat together in silence, in the presence of all the other conversations they’ve had in the past five years, since Clare retired.

Maeve emptied her glass, said, “I miss James Baldwin.”

“Oh man,” her mom said. “Me too.”