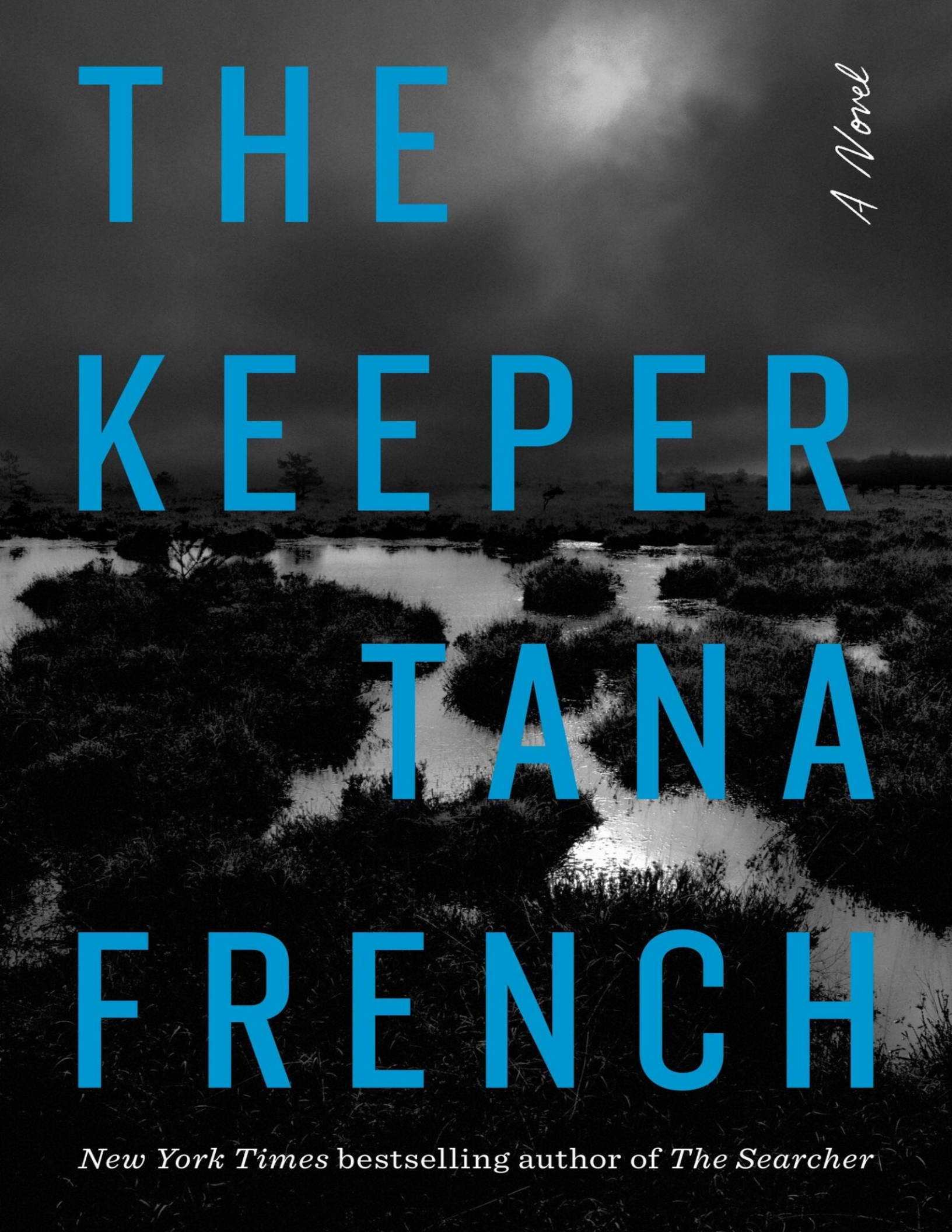




THE

A Novel

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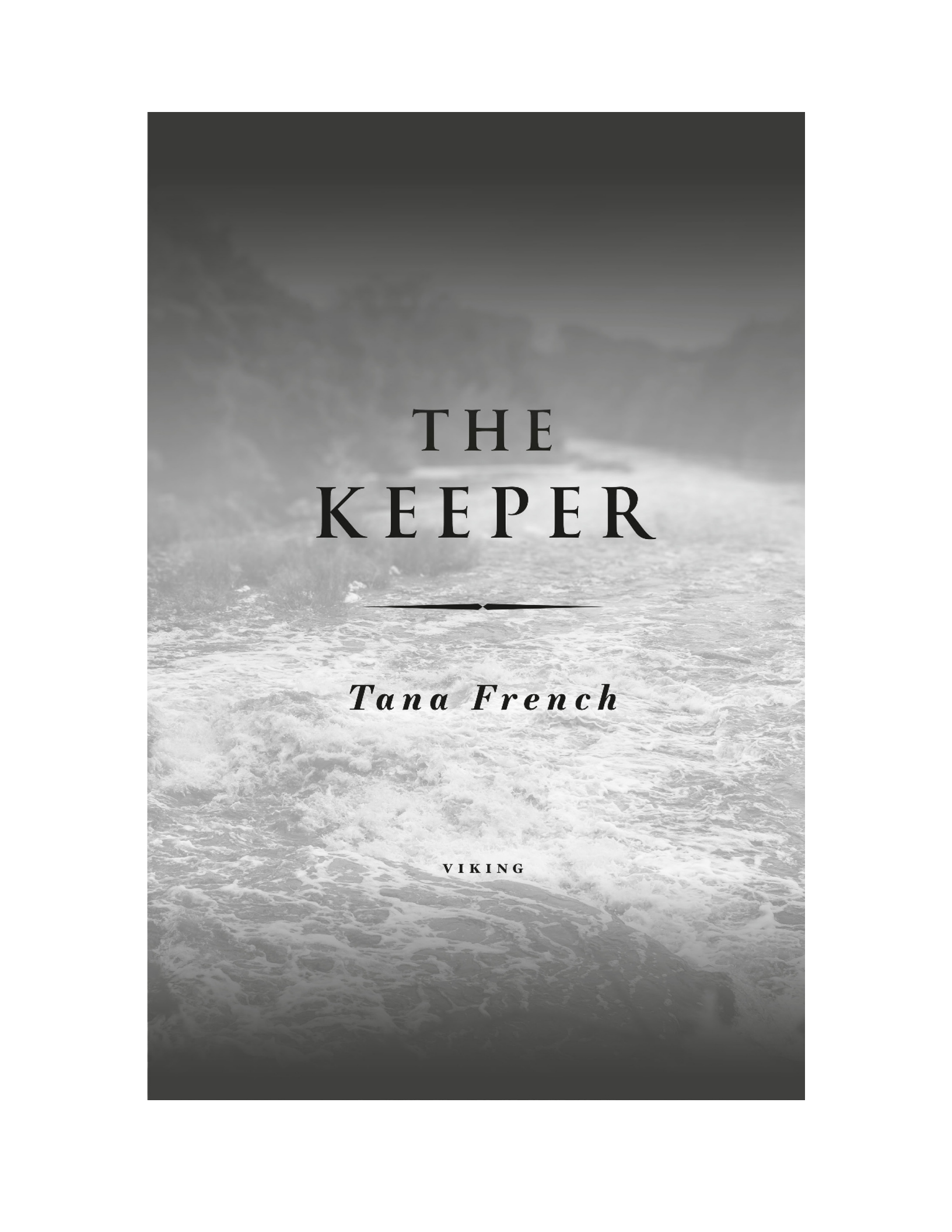
The Secret Place

Broken Harbor

Faithful Place

The Likeness

In the Woods



THE KEEPER

Tana French

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For Andrea, the editor every writer dreams of (of whom every writer dreams?).

If these books are anywhere close to what they should be, it's because of you.

ONE

Cal gets the first whiff of trouble when he's in Noreen's shop on a Saturday afternoon, buying eggs. The shop is in fact where Cal would expect to get wind of trouble, or of anything else underway in Ardnakelty townland, from pregnancy to potato blight. In spite of this, he more or less misses the hint altogether, because Noreen is coming at him with so much other stuff.

It's November. The townland lies still under rain, and has for weeks: what Cal's neighbor Mart Lavin calls a soft rain, one that doesn't fall but hangs in the air as a fine mizzle, coating you in a layer that only feels wet once you get indoors. The mountains, off on the horizon, are near-invisible, only a flick of outline here and there. Cal has battled it out with the rabbits for his last parsnips, and with the squirrels for the nuts from his handful of hazel trees. The tillage fields wait for plowing under their green cover of clover and vetch; the cows still unhoused have left behind the tail-flicking irritability of summer and lie chewing the cud in slow, somnolent rhythms under a gray sky.

Cal has been in the West of Ireland long enough that he discounts this level of rain and walks to the shop. His house, an undistinguished 1930s cottage that he's gradually retrieved from dilapidation, is only a couple of miles from the village, and the road is in decent enough shape that he won't get himself too muddy. He leaves his door unlocked, a laxness that still gives him a spark of pleasure. Cal's previous neighborhood, in Chicago, wasn't a bad one, but it had plenty of action, and some of that action would definitely have appreciated an unlocked door. Here, any form of action would have to be lost to end up at his place, and someone would notice it along the way and

spread the word. If by some remote chance it does come calling, Cal's dog, Rip, can probably scare it off. Rip is a stubby little beagle cross, but he hasn't noticed that: he has both the bark and the self-esteem of a Rottweiler.

To the bafflement of his neighbors, who consider bitching about the weather to be a national duty, Cal likes this time of year. Autumn is when Ardnakelty comes into its own. Its summers and winters are half-assed by Cal's standards, but autumn is meant for nuance and there this place is expert, layering the air with the smells of earth and wet leaves, shading the land with every subtlety of green and gold, coding its weather hints in the slightest twist of breeze or shift of cloud. The last geese, straggling southward, send up their forlorn clamor. In the main street of the village, the colors of the little mismatched houses are muted; the air smells of turf smoke, and tentative piano notes weave through the rain from behind some lace curtain where a kid is practicing. When Cal pushes the shop door open, the ding of the bell is blurred by the damp air.

The shop is small, warm, and bright, with bad country music playing cheerfully on a tinny little radio. Noreen is kneeling on the floor, bopping her rear end back and forth in time to the music and neatly whipping fake spiderwebs off her vegetable stand. "There's yourself," she says, through a mouthful of thumbtacks. "These cobwebs are like they're made of glue, they stick on everything; I'll be here all day. Next year I'm not bothering my arse, I'm just putting that witch in the window and that's me done."

"Can I give you a hand?" Cal asks. Cal is six foot four; Noreen is five foot one and not constructed for climbing. He comes in here expecting to fetch things off high shelves.

Noreen spits her tacks into a Ziploc bag. "Go on, so; get down them pumpkins. Honest to God, I feel like I only put these up yesterday, and now here's me taking them down. It'll be the feckin' reindeers and Santys before I know it. My mammy always said that's how you know you're getting old: the years start flying in."

"You haven't aged a day since I got here," Cal says. He starts taking down miniature pumpkins from where they've been artfully tucked into the few

square inches of free shelf space between soup mix, baby wipes, canned peaches, razor blades, envelopes, and everything else that keeps Ardnakelty running. “If I didn’t know you had all those great big kids, I’d swear you weren’t a day over thirty.”

“G’way outa that. The wrinkles on me.”

“Thirty. Twenty-five, maybe.” Cal likes Noreen, even if some days she does make him feel like he should have had more coffee.

Noreen makes a *pfft* noise. “I’m telling you, this week I feel like I’m a hundred. The kids threw a Halloween party, God help me. All the girls dressed up to the nines as sexy fairy murdered cheerleaders, you’d get more material in a bikini, and all the lads dressed up as themselves, lucky if they bothered their holes putting on a clean pair of trackie bottoms. And me running around like a blue-arsed fly, trying to make sure no one had a pocket fulla weed vapes or was riding anyone else down the back of the garden. I’m still recovering.” She shoots Cal a glance over her shoulder. “Your Trey was invited. She didn’t make it in the end, but she was asked.”

“Much obliged,” Cal says. “She was sorry to miss it, but she had to take her little brother and sister trick-or-treating.” He has no problem stretching the truth in the name of harmony. Trey Reddy—who isn’t technically his kid, but who counts as such for most practical purposes—has a less prickly relationship with Ardnakelty than she used to, but it’s not friendly enough, and Trey isn’t sociable enough, that anything short of a hostage situation would drag her to the Duggans’ party.

“Speaking of invites,” Noreen says ominously, pointing her handful of spiderwebs at him. “Where’s mine?”

Cal is engaged to Noreen’s sister Lena, but not in the sense that either of them has any inclination to get married—they’ve both done that before, and feel once was plenty. The summer before last, Lena told Noreen they were engaged, for reasons that made good sense at the time, but what she hadn’t taken into account was that once the reasons were gone, the engagement was still there. Neither of them was sure what to do about it. They couldn’t call it off without people assuming they’d quarreled, which would not only have

complicated their lives but could potentially have made Noreen quit stocking Cal's favorite cheddar. In the end they decided to leave it be, in the faint hope that people would give up on it, but that's not how Ardnakelty rolls. The engagement has taken on a life of its own. People keep introducing themselves as Cal's new relations and asking where the wedding reception is going to be; Angela Maguire, who has a reputation for cakes, wants to know whether they prefer fruit cake or chocolate biscuit cake or a layer of each, taking into account that the young people like chocolate but it doesn't agree with Lena's aunt's digestion. Enough people hassled Lena about her ring that in the end Cal drove to Galway and bought her one, not a diamond but a tiny sapphire, since she likes blue. When he gave it to her she started laughing, and then he did too, but she wears the ring.

"We're still picking out the lettering," he says. "I got my heart set on the fancy curly stuff, but Lena's more of a straight-up-and-down kinda gal. Maybe you could talk to her, try and bring her around to my point of view."

Noreen snorts. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I thought you'd more respect for me than that. Where would I be if I fell for that class of aul' rubbish, and me with four kids? Besides, you tried that one on me last winter."

"Gotta get that lettering right," Cal explains. "Something this important, I wouldn't want to make the wrong choice."

"You won't have any choices left if you don't set a date. Everywhere'll be booked out for years ahead. There's four townlands sharing Father Eamonn, and the poor man's still waiting on his knee replacement; he can't be standing up for two weddings in one day. And if you don't get the Breggan Court for the reception you'll be stuck with the Kilcarrow Arms up in town, and sure they gave half the county food poisoning at Georgia Healy's baba's christening. D'you want to spend your wedding night puking your guts up?"

"We were figuring on having the reception in Seán Óg's," Cal says. "All the toasted sandwiches people can eat."

"You," Noreen informs him, shaking a plastic vampire bat at him, "you're lucky I don't believe a word outa your mouth, or I'd be taking a heart attack

right here. You can't be having your reception in a dirty aul' pub, like some wee teenager that's after getting his girlfriend up the pole."

"No one ever got food poisoning from a toastie," Cal points out. "Better safe than sorry."

Noreen, throwing the bat into a big plastic box labeled HALLOWEEN, tuts at him. "You didn't useta be this much of a messer. When you got here, you were well-behaved, so you were."

"Lena's a bad influence," Cal says.

"Put them pumpkins in that bin liner over there, they're going soggy already. All I'm saying is, you'd want to get a move on with the bookings. Once it gets to Christmas and New Year, there'll be people getting engaged right and left, and then where will you be?"

Cal is saved from answering this: the bell dings, the door flies open, and Tommy Moynihan strides into the shop like he's walking into a merger meeting. "There's her ladyship," he booms, rubbing his hands together. "How's the form?"

Tommy is some kind of big shot in the meat-processing plant over towards Kilhone, which makes him Mr. Big-Balls in this townland. This doesn't seem like much to get puffed up about, given that the townland would just about make a good-sized yard in backwoods North Carolina, where Cal comes from; Tommy, though, either hasn't noticed this or doesn't care as long as he's surrounded by the respect he deserves. He's got a farmer's solid bulk, a politician's frozen silver hair, a C-list cattle baron's ranch house, a Range Rover the size of a buffalo, and an annual family holiday to Mexico. Cal dislikes Tommy, although he acknowledges that this may be partly because Tommy's kid, Eugene, is a douche and Tommy's wife, Clodagh, looks at Trey like she's scanning for nits.

"Grand," Noreen says, getting to her feet—Tommy, unlike Cal, warrants standing up—and dusting off the knees of her slacks. "Up to my ears in mini Mars bars and Twix, lookit—I got them in for the trick-or-treating, the same amount as every year, but only half of them went. I heard people were getting theirs cheap off some fella that went round in a van." She throws a

rubber rat into the box with a vengeful snap. When she finds out names, which she will, Cal doesn't envy anyone who bought their candy on the down-low.

"I'll take a few of them off your hands," Tommy says magnanimously. "I'm a great man for the aul' Mars bars. You can keep your fancy artisan chocolates, isn't that right? Give me the good old-fashioned stuff."

"Clodagh won't have Mars bars in the house," Noreen informs him. "She's going on the diet again, the one with the curly kale. I've that ordered in for her; tell her it'll be here on Thursday."

"Ah, go on, give us a few packets there. What the missus doesn't know won't hurt her." Tommy winks at Cal. "Howdy, pardner." Cal has been American for the entire three and a half years he's lived here, so the novelty should have worn off by now, but Tommy is apparently proud enough of spotting it that he needs to point it out every time they meet.

"Well, how de do," Cal drawls, tipping his baseball cap. Noreen shoots him a behave-yourself glare behind Tommy's back. Cal gives her a mock-sheepish flinch and goes back to detaching skull-and-crossbones bunting from the shelves.

"Flying form," Tommy says, rocking back and forth on his heels and surveying the shop. "Flying form. We've Eugene down from Dublin for the weekend, so the missus says we need a bag of spuds and a rake of sausages. We can't be feeding a young lad on curly kale, amn't I right?"

Cal follows his nod to the window. Two people are standing outside, in the gray day that looks like twilight against the shop's brightness. Eugene—on the weedy edge of good-looking, wearing a long dark coat that's probably sophisticated business gear in Dublin but down here is just weird—is bent towards a tall blond girl, talking fast. The girl has her head down and her hands tucked deep in her pockets. She's wearing a white puffy jacket and some kind of black leggings, but the leggings are erased by the dimness so that she looks like she's floating, about to drift away from him on the eddies of rain.

“Eugene’s looking well,” Noreen says, peering out the window and rubbing away condensation. “Who’s that out there with him? God, I think my eyes are going on me, I’ll be on the bifocals before I know it. Is that Rachel?”

“It is, o’ course,” Tommy says. “You couldn’t keep them two apart. Young love, isn’t it great?” This explains why Eugene is waiting outside, getting his pretty coat wet: he’s too careful of his dignity to risk Noreen puncturing it in front of his girlfriend. Eugene has some hotshot job in finance, Cal isn’t sure what and doesn’t care as long as he doesn’t have to hear about it, which means he avoids Noreen’s when Clodagh Moynihan is in there.

“There you go,” Noreen tells Cal, pouncing on the fresh opportunity. “D’you see them two out there? They’ll be getting engaged any day now. Won’t they?” she shoots at Tommy.

“Ah, now,” Tommy says, tapping the side of his nose and smiling. “I’m saying nothing.”

“Ah, they will. I knew as soon as Clodagh said she was back on the diet: she has to look her best for the engagement do. And I’ll tell you one thing, mister”—this is to Cal—“they won’t be waiting any year and a half to set their date. They’ll have the Breggan Court nailed down before the ring’s properly on her finger. And that’ll be one less date for you and Lena.”

“Oh-ho-ho,” Tommy says, clapping his hands together. “Who’s got cold feet?”

“Just leaving room for the young ’uns to get down the aisle,” Cal says. He drops the bunting into the storage box and goes to find his eggs. Noreen has earned the right to give him a hard time; Tommy hasn’t, seeing as they’ve probably spent a grand total of less than ten minutes in conversation. Tommy, although he makes sure to grace the lower orders with his notice, represents a different echelon of local society from the guys Cal hangs out with. He dresses the same way, work pants and fleeces and puffer vests, but on him the getup looks like a costume, probably because it’s always clean.

“Fair play. They’re in a lot more of a rush than us aul’ fellas, amn’t I right?” Tommy guffaws and mimes elbowing Cal in the ribs, even though Cal

is halfway across the shop. Noreen titters obligingly. Cal keeps inspecting eggs.

“I’d say it’s Lena that’s dragging her heels,” Tommy says, still grinning at Cal. “Hah? She’s been in that house a long time; she mightn’t fancy leaving it to move down to your wee place, no harm to it.”

“You figure she oughta move?” Cal inquires politely.

“A change is as good as a rest,” Tommy says, like that means something. “Will I have a word with her for you? Give her a nudge?”

Cal would pay good money to watch Tommy try to have a word with Lena. “More haste, less speed,” he points out, since apparently this is what they’re doing. Tommy laughs like he said something hilarious.

“There you go,” Noreen says, ringing up Tommy’s sausages and adding them to the impressive heap of Mars bar packets on the counter. “Keep those well hid from herself.”

“It’ll be our little secret,” Tommy says. “Don’t be giving me away, now.” Noreen titters again, and Tommy pays and strides himself out.

“There’s a bitta luck,” Noreen says with satisfaction, once the door’s closed behind him. “I thought I’d be stuck with them Mars bars; no one wants any more sweets in the house, after Halloween. But Tommy can’t pass up a chance to be the big man.” She rings up Cal’s eggs. “And he won’t be feeding Eugene feckin’ sausages and spuds for the Sunday dinner. Tommy and Clodagh go into town for the big shop, is what they do, so she can get all the fancy ingredients for her Ballymaloe recipes. Then they come in here to honor me with their little bits and bobs.”

She frowns out the window at Tommy, who’s clapping Eugene on the shoulder and talking up a big hearty storm. “D’you know something? The pair a them don’t look great. Eugene and Rachel, like. The way she wasn’t even looking at him.” Noreen’s warmth is even bigger than her nosiness; she’s genuinely concerned, not just scouting for gossip. “I know Eugene’s an awful dose, but Rachel’s pure mad about him. They’re together since she was sixteen, sure; she’s never been without him. If he’s after getting himself some Dublin one, it’ll break her heart. Do they look all right to you?”

“Dunno,” Cal says. He’s disinclined to give the Moynihans any more conversational space than he has to. “I’m not acquainted with either one of ’em enough to tell. You know anything about making soufflés? Trey read about them in some schoolbook and wanted to know what they were, so I said I’d give it a shot.”

Noreen goes off into a barrage of soufflé-related tips and variations. The window has misted over again, turning Tommy and Eugene and Rachel into blurred shapes swaying like scarecrows.

Lena has somehow found herself spending her Saturday afternoon driving over the mountain in a car full of teenagers. Seeing as she doesn’t have kids, she didn’t choose her car with this scenario in mind, but Trey had a football match in Lisnacarragh and her mam picked up an extra shift at the supermarket in town, so now Lena’s Skoda has five kids squashed into each other’s laps, elbowing and sniping and snickering and having a whale of a time. Trey and Kate’s team won the match—the other three are just along for the crack, there not being much else to do around here at the weekend—so they’re all on a high. Lena has already threatened to make them walk home twice. The narrow mountain roads, switchbacking and dipping, make for dodgy driving at the best of times; in this weather, with the spruce groves rising out of gray haze and the fields below veiled by the fine rain, their danger presses in close. In general, Lena sees no reason why teenagers should behave themselves—most of them will do that for long enough—but she draws the line at them sending her car down the mountainside.

“Missus,” says the freckly boy in the back—Ross, Lena thinks—leaning forward between the seats. “Here, missus.”

“She’s Missus Dunne, ya thick,” Aidan tells him from up front.

“She is not. She’s married to your man Whatshisname, the Yank that lives at O’Shea’s old place. Ya fuckin’ thick.” Somewhere along the way, Trey’s mates have filed Lena under Noncombatant Adult, meaning they don’t worry

that she'll squeal on them to the real adults for minor infringements like cursing.

"She is not," Trey says. "Why would he be in O'Shea's and her in her place, if they were married?"

"Exactly," Aidan says triumphantly.

"If I was married to you I'd live in Australia," Kate tells him.

"You won't be."

"Fuckin' right I won't."

"Missus," Ross says, not to be sidetracked. "Should Ciara here go out with Aidan?"

"Shut up, ya fuckin' Teletubby," Aidan says, twisting around to hit him. He ducks. Lena slaps Aidan's arm back into place.

"She should give him a lash, amn't I right? He's a fine-looking fella—"

"Jesus," Ciara says, covering her face with her hands and trying to disappear into her corner. Trey and the rest are laughing.

"You'd take him out for a spin at least, wouldn't you? If you were our age, like?"

"I'd need more info," Lena says. She likes watching Trey in the middle of this. Trey spent her entire childhood on the defensive against Ardnakelty, which by age-old tradition considers the Reddy family to be more trouble than they're worth, so she turned out on the solitary side; by the time she started discovering things like mates and messing, it was late enough that Lena wasn't confident she'd get the knack. She enjoys the evidence that she was wrong. "Is this fella just a pretty face, or can he do anything useful? Talk ye outa hassle? Build a house? Bake cakes? Play the guitar?"

"Kate plays bass," Ross says, and punches Trey in the arm. Trey and Kate both hit him back at once. Lena's eyebrows go up.

"Hear that?" Aidan tells the rest. "She says I'm a pretty face."

"She needs fuckin' glasses."

"Your ma needs fuckin' glasses."

"Your ma needs a time machine and a johnny."

"Your ma needs deez nuts."

A scuffle breaks out. Lena leaves them to it. She likes teenagers, or this bunch of them anyhow: the wildness and messiness of them, the rocket-fueled energy shooting in every direction. They fizz with the glorious knowledge that they're untamable, that no rules, no matter how ferociously ingrained and enforced, are strong enough to hold them. Lena, even while knowing that's untrue, finds a deep pleasure in it.

She takes the opportunity, while they're occupied, to have a proper look at Kate in the rearview mirror. She's seen Trey's friends here and there, mostly at football matches, but none of them are from Ardnakelty, so they're not kids whom Lena's known since they were born and before. Trey likes her life compartmentalized; it's only recently that she's been willing to allow even this much overlap. Lena and Cal, aware that one slipup could have their privileges revoked, are careful.

Kate is tall and long-legged, with wide, cheerful features, a dark ponytail, and a smattering of freckles. Lena knows nothing about her except that she plays defense alongside Trey and can hold her own amid this shower, which seems like a decent start. She wonders what Cal will make of this, whatever this is. She reckons she'll have to talk him down from running background checks.

The scuffle has escalated to the point where Aidan is kneeling up backwards in his seat and Ciara, thrown sideways across the rest, is squealing. "Quit that," Lena says, raising her voice to carry over the noise, "or I'll drive through a pothole and give the lot of ye concussions." Aidan gets in one final punch and sits down, and the back seat subsides to an undertone of snorts and snickers. Lena slows the car down further. They're out of the spruce groves and onto open mountainside, amid wide stretches of heather; one mistake could send her wheel into a bog.

"I'm useful," Aidan tells her, returning to the original issue. "I swapped out the light fixture in the sitting room for my mam yesterday. That's useful."

"Does your dad know yet?" Kate asks.

"He was in there last night watching telly. I'd say he saw it."

"Not the light fixture, you dope."

“I’m gonna tell him.”

“He’s gonna lose the head,” Ross says.

“That’s why you oughta tell him now,” Kate says. “Give him time to lose the head all he wants, and then get used to it.”

“Aidan’s dad thinks he’s going onto the farm,” Trey explains to Lena. “Only he’s gonna be an electrician.”

“’Cause Ciara doesn’t like the smell of cow shite,” Ross says. Ciara hits him.

“I’m gonna tell him,” Aidan says to Lena. “Just waiting for a good time.”

“You’re grand,” Lena says. “I’m saying nothing. I don’t even know your dad.” She understands his worry. Unless Aidan has brothers, coming out as an electrician is likely to be a much bigger deal than, say, coming out as bi, or as an atheist. Regardless of how old-fashioned his dad is, a bi atheist farmer can keep the land in the family. Nothing matters more than that.

Lena’s phone rings. It’s Cal. Mostly Cal goes to Trey’s matches, but today he got press-ganged into helping the McHugh brothers cut back their hedges. With the plowing only a few weeks away, farmers are using this time to trim and mend, getting their land in order for winter. Sonny McHugh got pinned to a wall by a heifer and has one arm in a sling, so the McHughs are a man down. “Here,” Lena says, putting the phone on speaker and handing it to Aidan. “You hold that. And the rest of ye, keep quiet.”

“How’s she cuttin’?” Aidan inquires into the phone, in his biggest, deepest voice. The back seat dissolves into giggles.

“Hey,” Cal says. “That your fancy man?”

“He’s spoken for,” Lena says. “I’ll stick with you a while longer.”

“They win?”

“Yeah,” Trey says, disentangling herself from the rest to lean forward between the seats. In spite of being sixteen, Trey is unembarrassed by Cal’s existence, possibly because he’s no actual relation to her. “Three–two.” Kate throws in a whoop of triumph. “This horse of a one was after me the whole time, trying to take the legs out from under me. I dodged and she went on her arse. She was yelling for a card, but the ref told her to get fucked.”