

THE LIAR'S GIRL

CATHERINE
RYAN HOWARD



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It's 4.17 a.m. on Saturday when Jen comes to on a battered couch in a house somewhere in Rathmines, one of those red-brick terraces that's been divided into flats, let out to students and left to rot.

He watches as her face betrays her confusion, but she's quick to cover it up. How much does she remember? Perhaps the gang leaving the club on Harcourt Street, one behind the other. Pushing their way through the sweaty, drunken crowds, hands gripping the backs of dresses and tugging on the tails of shirts. Maybe she remembers her friend Michelle clutching some guy's arm at the end of it, calling out to her. Saying they were moving on to some guy's party, that they could walk there.

'Whose party?' he'd heard her ask.

'Jack's!' came the shouted answer.

It was unclear whether or not Jen knew Jack, but she followed them anyway.

Now, she's sitting – slumped – on a sofa in a dark room filled with faces she probably doesn't recognise. The thin straps of her shimmering black dress stand out against her pale, freckled skin and the make-up around her eyes is smudged and messy. Her lids look heavy. Her head lolls slightly to one side.

Someone swears loudly and flicks a switch, filling the room with harsh, burning light.

Jen squints, then lifts her head until her eyes reach a single bare,

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dusty bulb that hangs from the ceiling. Back down to the floor in front of her. A guy is crawling around on all fours, searching for something. She frowns at him.

This place is disgusting. The carpet is old and stained. There are broken bits of crisps, hairs and cigarette ash nestled deep in its pile. It hasn't been laid. Instead, the floor is covered with large, loose sections of carpet, ragged and frayed at the edges, with patches of dusty bare floor showing in between. The couch faces a fireplace that's been blocked off with chipboard, while an area of green paint on the otherwise magnolia chimney breast marks where a mantelpiece once stood. Mismatched chairs – white patio, folding camping accessory, ripped beanbag – are arranged in front of it. Three guys sit in them, passing around a joint.

Another, smaller couch is to Jen's left. That's where he sits.

The air is thick with smoke and the only window has no curtains or blinds. The bare glass is dripping with tributaries of condensation.

He can't wait to leave.

Jen is growing uncomfortable. Her brow is furrowed. He watches as she clasps her hands between her thighs and hunches her shoulders. She shifts her weight on the couch. Her gaze fixes on each of the three smokers in turn, studying their faces. Does she know any of them? She turns her head to take in the rest of the room—

And stops.

She's seen them.

To the right of the fireplace, too big to fit fully into the depression between the chimney breast and the room's side wall, stands an American-style fridge/freezer, gone yellow-white and stuck haphazardly with a collection of garish magnets.

Jen blinks at it.

A fridge in a living room can't be that unusual to her. As any student looking for an affordable place to rent in Dublin quickly discovers, fridges free-standing in the middle of living rooms adjacent to tiny kitchens are, apparently, all the rage. But if Jen can find a clearing in the fog in her head, she'll realise there's something *very* familiar about this one.

She's distracted by the boy sitting next to her. Looks to be her age, nineteen or twenty. He nudges her, asks if she'd like another drink. She doesn't respond. A moment later he nudges her again and this time she turns towards him.

The boy nods towards the can of beer she's holding in her right hand, mouths, *Another one?*

Jen seems surprised to find the beer can there. Tilting it lazily, she says something that sounds like, 'I haven't finished this one yet.'

The boy gets up. He's wearing scuffed suede shoes with frayed laces, jeans, and a blue and white striped shirt, unbuttoned, with a T-shirt underneath. Only a thin slice of the T-shirt is visible, but it seems the design on it is a famous movie poster. Black, yellow, red. After he leaves, Jen relaxes into the space he's vacated, sinking down until she can rest the back of her head against a cushion. She closes her eyes—

Opens them up again, suddenly. Pushes palms down flat on the couch, scrambling into an upright position. Stares at the fridge.

This is it.

Her mouth falls open slightly and then the can in her hand drops to the floor, falls over and rolls underneath the couch. Its contents spill out, spread out, making a *glug-glug-glug* sound as they do. She makes no move to pick it up. She doesn't seem to realise it's fallen.

Unsteadily, Jen gets to her feet, pausing for a second to catch her balance on towering heels. She takes a step, two, three forward, until she's within touching distance of the fridge door. There, she stops and shakes her head, as if she can't believe what she's seeing.

And who could blame her?

Those are *her* magnets.

The ones her airline pilot mother has been bringing home for her since she was a little girl. A pink Eiffel Tower. A relief of the Grand Canyon. The Sydney Opera House. The Colosseum in Rome. A Hollywood Boulevard star with her name on it.

The magnets that should be clinging to the microwave back in her apartment in Halls, in the kitchen she shares with Michelle. That were there when she left it earlier this evening.

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Jen mumbles something incoherent and then she's moving, stumbling back from the fridge, turning towards the door, hurrying out of the room, leaving behind her coat and bag, which had been underneath her on the couch all this time.

No one pays any attention to her odd departure. The party-goers are all too drunk or too stoned or both, and it is too dark, too late, too early. If anyone notices, they don't care enough to be interested. He wonders how guilty they'll feel about this when, in the days to come, they are forced to admit to the Gardaí what little they know.

He counts to ten as slowly as he can stand to before he rises from his seat, collects Jen's coat and bag and follows her out of the house.

She'll be headed home. A thirty-minute walk because she'll never flag down a taxi around here. On deserted, dark streets because this is the quietest hour, that strange one after most of the pub and club patrons have fallen asleep in their beds but before the city's early-risers have woken up in theirs. And her journey will take her alongside the Grand Canal, where the black water can look level with the street and where there isn't always a barrier to prevent you from falling in and where the street lights can be few and far between.

He can't let her go by herself. And he won't, because he's a gentleman. A gentleman who doesn't let young girls walk home alone from parties when they've been drinking enough to forget their coat, bag and – he lifts the flap on the little velvet envelope, checks inside – keys, college ID and phone too.

And he wants to make sure Jen knows that.

Mr Nice Guy, he calls himself.

He hopes she will too.

Will, now

The words floated up out of the background noise, slowly rearranging the molecules of Will's attention, pulling on it, demanding it, until all trace of sleep had been banished and he was sitting up in bed, awake and alert.

Gardaí are appealing for witnesses after the body of St John's College student Jennifer Madden, nineteen, was recovered from the Grand Canal early yesterday morning—

It was coming from a radio. Tuned to a local station, it sounded like; a national one would probably have reminded listeners that the Grand Canal was in Dublin. The rest of the news bulletin had been drowned out by the shrill ring of a telephone.

As per the rules, the door to Will's room was propped open. He leaned forward now until he could see through the doorway and out into the corridor. The nurses' station was directly opposite. Alek was standing there, holding his laminated ID to his chest with one hand as he reached across the counter to pick up the phone with the other.

In the moment between the silencing of the phone's ring and Alek's voice saying, 'Unit Three,' Will caught another snippet – *head injury* – and by then he was up, standing, trying to decide what to do.

Wondering if there was anything he *could* do.

Unsure whether he should do anything at all.

He decided to speak to Alek. They were friends, or at least what qualified as friends in here. *Friendly*. Will waited until the nurse had

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finished on the phone before he crossed the corridor.

'My main man,' Alek said when he saw him. 'They said you were sleeping in there.' Alek was Polish but losing more and more of his accent with each passing year. Five so far, he'd been working here. The last four in Unit Three. 'You feeling okay?'

'I was just reading,' Will said. 'Must have dozed off.'

'Anything good?'

Will shrugged. 'Can't have been, can it?'

Alek picked a clipboard up off the counter and started scanning the schedule attached to it. 'Shouldn't you be in with Dr Carter right now?'

The news bulletin had moved on to the weather. Rain and wind were forecast. In keeping with tradition, the disembodied voice joked, tomorrow's St Patrick's Day parade would be a soggy one.

Will hadn't realised that was tomorrow. It was hard to keep a hold of what day of the week it was, let alone dates and months.

'That got moved to three,' he said. 'I think because she has a court thing...?'

Alek looked up from the clipboard. Patients shouldn't know anything about what the staff did outside of the high-security unit but Will had just revealed to Alek that he did.

If Alek was going to reprimand Will for it, now would be the time.

But Alek let the moment – and the breach – pass.

He treated Will differently to the others. They all did. That's how Will knew his counsellor had a court appearance in the first place. She'd let it slip at the end of their last session when she was advising him of the schedule change, less careful with him than with her other patients. He appreciated this differential treatment and never took it for granted. He felt like he'd earned it over the last ten years. He'd never caused them any trouble. He'd always done whatever he was told.

And now he was going to have to take advantage.

Will checked the corridor. No one else was around. Mornings were for counselling and group sessions; Will wouldn't be here either if it wasn't for Dr Carter's trip to court.

It was pure chance he'd heard the bulletin.

'Ah, Alek,' Will started. 'The radio—'

'Oh, shit.' Alek dropped the clipboard onto the counter and moved in behind it, reaching up for the little transistor radio sitting on the top shelf. The radio clicked off. 'Sorry. That isn't what woke you up, is it?'

'No, no,' Will said. 'It's fine. I was just going to ask you – were you listening to the news just now?' Alek raised an eyebrow, suspicious. 'I thought I heard something there about the, ah, about the canal?'

A beat passed.

Alek picked up his clipboard again. 'I wouldn't worry about it, man.'

'Do you know what happened?'

'Why do you want to know?'

'I was just wondering... ' Will paused, swallowed hard for effect. 'Was it about me?'

'About *you*?' Alek shook his head. 'No. What made you think that?'

'We're coming up on ten years, aren't we? I thought maybe it was something to do with that.'

'It's not.'

'No?'

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

Alek looked at him for a long moment, as if trying to decide something. Then he sighed and said, 'That was Blue FM. They do their news at ten to.' He met Will's eyes. 'It's almost one. I'll put on a different channel.'

'Thanks,' Will said. 'I really—'

'Don't thank me, because I didn't do this.' He reached up and switched the radio back on, moving the dial until he found a station promising a lunchtime news bulletin after the break. Then he took a seat behind the counter and pushed a leaflet about the benefits of mindfulness towards Will. 'Pretend you're reading that, at least.'

It was the top story.

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The leaflet's text blurred in front of Will's eyes as he banked each detail. Jennifer Madden. A St John's College student. A first-year, going by her age. Found in the Grand Canal near Charlemont Luas station yesterday, having last been seen at a house party in Rathmines on Saturday night. Gardaí are treating her death as suspicious. Believed to have suffered a head injury before going into the water. Anyone with information should call the incident room at Harcourt Terrace.

And thanks to the weather report, Will could add another detail: this had happened a few days before St Patrick's Day.

Warm relief flooded his veins.

Finally, after all these years, it was happening.

And just in the nick of time, too.

'Alek,' he said, leaning over the counter, 'I need to speak to the Gardaí. Right now.'

Alison, now

They came to my door the morning after Sal's dinner party.

I was still suffering. It'd been a St Patrick's Day one, held in my honour, me being the sole Irish member of our group. Sal and I had drifted into a motley crew of ex-pats who'd bound themselves to an arrangement to get together once every couple of months, taking it in turns to be Chief Organiser. There was a core group of six or seven who could be relied upon to show up, and then several more who occasionally surprised us. We called ourselves 'The EUs' because while we could claim nationalities in nine different countries, they were all within a train-ride or Ryanair flight of our adopted home. One of Sal's goals in life was to infiltrate Breda's American ex-pat community and convince at least some of them to join our gang.

I'd arrived early to help Sal and Dirk set up, but was forbidden from doing anything except sit on their sofa holding a champagne flute of something Instagram had apparently claimed was called a Black Velvet. It looked a bit like bubbly Guinness. I don't actually *like* Guinness, but I kept that titbit to myself. Instead, I watched as Sal, looking like a 1950s housewife in her belted green dress, bright red lipstick and neat blonde bun, unloaded a bag of garish decorations onto her dining table: gold confetti, rainbow-coloured novelty straws and serviettes with cartoon leprechauns on them.

'Classy,' I remarked.

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'They are compared to what else was on offer,' Sal said. 'You can thank your lucky charms I didn't get any hats.'

'You know "lucky charms" is more of an American thing, right? A breakfast cereal? We don't actually say that.'

'Is a rant about "Patty's Day" coming next?'

'No, I'll wait until everyone else gets here for that. They all need to hear it.'

Sal rolled her eyes. 'Something to look forward to, then.'

'I still can't believe you're throwing a dinner party,' I said. 'Even if it is one with novelty straws and leprechauns. You're such a grown-up.'

'Don't remind me.' Sal paused to appraise her table. It was set for twelve, an impressive showing for The EUs. 'We own white goods, Ali. *White goods*. And then there's this bloody thing.' She held up her left hand, wiggling her ring finger. The platinum band glinted under the ceiling lights. 'I'm still not used to it.'

They'd only been married a month. Dismissive of tradition, Sal had had her wedding here, forcing her family to travel over from London. The skin on her forearms was still lightly browned from their honeymoon in the Maldives, and I hadn't yet worked my way through all the luxury toiletries she'd swiped for me from the bathroom of the five-star resort they'd stayed in. My bridesmaid dress was still at the dry cleaner's.

The doorbell went then and Sal hurried out of the room to answer it. I wondered where Dirk was, then realised he must be the one making all the clattering sounds coming from the kitchen.

I took a tentative sip of my drink and discovered it was, literally, bubbly Guinness. Guinness topped with champagne. A crime against both substances. I was grimacing at the sour aftertaste when the door to the living room opened and an attractive man I'd never seen before walked in, closely followed by Sal, smiling demonically and making suggestive faces at me behind his back.

'*This*,' she announced, 'is Stephen.'

I knew what was coming before she said it: Stephen was Irish too. He had that look about him. Not the red-headed, freckled one we're

famous for, but the more typical reality: pale skin, blue eyes, black hair. Sal had found another one of us and she seemed *very* excited about it. As she explained that he was a colleague of Dirk's, that he'd just moved here a fortnight ago, that he didn't really know anyone yet but we'd snared him for our group now and did I mind sharing my Guest of Honour spot with him for the evening, I realised why: she thought she'd found him *for me*.

Groaning inwardly, I stood up to shake his hand and exchange hellos.

'Drink?' Sal asked him. 'What'll you have?'

Stephen looked to my glass, then to me, and I shook my head as much as I could before Sal would see.

'How about a beer?' he said.

A South Dublin accent. Our age, as far as I could tell. Thirty-ish. And if he worked with Dirk at the software company, that meant he likely had a college degree...

I knew where this was going.

I had to concentrate on keeping a pleasant expression on my face.

'You won't have one of those?' Sal pointed at my glass. 'It's a Black Velvet. They're delicious.'

'I, ah, I don't drink Guinness,' Stephen said. 'That's why I had to leave Ireland, actually. They found that out.'

I forced a laugh. Sal's smile faltered, because although neither Stephen nor I knew this yet, her main was Guinness stew.

They settled on a Heineken and Sal left to fetch it, leaving Stephen and me to have the standard So, You've Just Met a Fellow Irish Person Abroad talk. He confirmed my suspicion that he was from South Dublin, told me he'd spent the last three years in Abu Dhabi and that, this time around, he was trying to avoid repeating what he'd done out there: so assimilated himself within the Irish ex-pat gang that he'd ended up playing GAA every weekend and only ever drinking in an Irish pub that could've been called Six Degrees of Stephen's School Friends. I told him I was from Cork, that I'd been in the Netherlands nearly ten years, that I worked in Ops Management for a travel company, and that Sal and I had met in the laundry room of

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our student accommodation in Den Hague. We'd recognised the confused look on each other's faces as a shared inability to process the instructions posted above the machines, and been friends ever since.

'Don't tell anyone,' Stephen said, 'but the guys at work were saying "den hag" for three days before I realised that meant The Hague.'

I smiled. 'Don't worry about it. When I first got here, I thought Albert Heijn was a politician.' Stephen raised his eyebrows. 'It's a chain of supermarkets,' I explained. 'The supermarket I was going to, on a regular basis, for at least a month before I put two and two together. Dutch sounds nothing like it looks, half the time. To us, anyway. That's the problem.'

'Do you speak it?'

'A little. *Very* little. Nowhere near as much as I should. Everyone speaks English here, so you get lazy. And Suncamp are a British company. It's all English at work.'

'Did you go to college here then or...?'

'I went here.' I took another sip of my drink, forgetting that it tasted like something they make you drink in a hospital before they scan your intestines. He hadn't spoken by the time I'd forced a swallow, so I asked, 'Where did you go?' even though I had already guessed the answer and I didn't want to hear it said out loud, didn't want to hear those three bloody words—

'St John's College.'

All I could do in response was make a *hmm* noise.

'I could walk there from my parents' house,' Stephen said, 'and both of them went there, so I really didn't have a choice.'

I fixed my eyes on my glass. 'What did you study?'

'Biomedical Science.' He paused. 'Class of 2009.'

I did the sums: he'd have been in his third year back then so. But I didn't need to do them. That tone he'd used, an odd mix of pride and solemnness. The dramatic pause. The fact alone that he'd felt the need to tell me when he'd graduated.

It all added up to: *Yes, I was there then. I was there when it happened.*

'Do you get back home much?' he asked me.

'Sorry,' I said, standing up, 'but while I have the chance, I'm going

to find a potted plant to dump the rest of this concoction in. Back in a sec.'

And that was it. The swift and sudden end of Sal's dream that Stephen could be the man for me coming before she'd even returned with his drink.

I'd never be able to tell her why.

Not the *real* reason, anyway.

For the rest of the evening (through three courses, goody-bags consisting of packets of Tayto and Dairy Milk bars, and an hour's worth of *Father Ted* YouTube clips because trying to describe it to our mainland-Europe diners wasn't getting us anywhere), I concentrated on enjoying myself, thankful that Sal's never-ending hostess duties prevented her from grabbing me for a sidebar.

She did it via WhatsApp the next morning instead.

What happened with Stephen? I brought him for you
and you barely spoke to him! Since I know you're going
to give me some I'm-concentrating-on-my-career BS
now and I'M going to have to give YOU the Cat Lady
talk again, I've just saved us both the bother and given
him your number. He was STARING at you all night
(not in a serial killer way). In other news, am DYING.
May actually already be dead. Haven't even gone into
the kitchen yet. Too afraid. Sent D out for caffeine and
grease. Was good, though, right? Send proof of life. X

I read it at my kitchen table, nursing my second cup of black coffee while my stomach gurgled and ached, protesting at last night's abuse.

So Sal had given Stephen my number. How in absolutely no way surprising. When it came to such stunts, the girl had prior. I wasn't annoyed, but I feared Sal would be soon. Because if Stephen did call or text, I'd just deploy my usual, terminally single strategy: say I was busy until next week, cancel *those* plans last minute and then repeat as required until he got annoyed and gave up. It wasn't a great

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plan, but it beat having to tell him – or Sal – the truth further down the line.

I typed a quick reply, assuring Sal that I was indeed alive, thanking her for the party and promising I'd call her later. I didn't mention Stephen at all.

I'd just pressed SEND when I heard the knock on the door.

I thought it was the postman with a parcel. Or that there was a new guy bringing my neighbour's weekly grocery delivery, and he'd accidentally come to the wrong house. But huddled on my doorstep, heads dipped beneath the gutter's narrow overhang in a futile attempt to shield themselves from that morning's heavy rain, were two men about to introduce themselves as members of An Garda Síochána.

The younger one wasn't much older than me. Tall, with a thick quiff of reddish-brown hair and a beard to match. Bright green eyes. Not unattractive. He pulled a small leather wallet from an inside pocket and flipped it open, revealing a gold Garda shield and an ID.

Garda Detective Michael Malone.

The other one I recognised, even though I'd only spent a few hours with him, one afternoon almost ten years ago. The sparse tufts of grey hair left on the sides of his head had been made thinner still by the rain, and patches of bald, pink scalp were shining through. He was turned away, eyes on something further down the road, hands stuck in his pockets.

Garda Detective Jerry Shaw.

'Alison Smith?' Malone asked.

'What's wrong?' I said. 'Is it...? Are my parents—'

'Everyone's fine. Everything's okay.' He glanced down the hall behind me. 'Can we come in? There's something we need to talk to you about. Should only take a few minutes.' He flashed a smile, but if he was going for reassurance he fell way short of the mark.

Two Irish detectives. Here at my door in Breda.

And one of them was Detective Jerry Shaw.

This could really only be about one thing, but I asked the question anyway.

the liar's girl

'What's this about?'

Shaw finally turned towards me. Our eyes met.

'Will,' he said.

Alison, now

I led them down the hall, into the kitchen, suddenly conscious of my loose grey sweatpants and misshapen old T-shirt, the dregs of last night's make-up smudged around my eyes. I'd hit my bed around four, just about managing to kick my shoes off before I fell asleep. Turns out that after you've had five of them, Black Velvets don't taste so bad after all.

While my back was turned to the detectives, I licked a finger and swiped underneath my eyes as discreetly as I could. I tucked my hair behind my ears and ran my tongue over my teeth. I hadn't even brushed them yet.

I glanced down at my sweatshirt. No discernible stains. Good.

I pointed them to my kitchen table. My cup and phone were still sitting there, marking my spot. The detectives took the two seats across from it.

The pot of coffee I'd brewed half an hour before was still half-full. I offered some and both men gratefully accepted a cup. While I watched Shaw spoon a genuinely alarming amount of sugar into his, Malone started telling me about how they were both exhausted because they'd caught the dawn flight out of Dublin and then driven here from Schiphol in a hired car.

'Has he been released?' I asked. I'd interrupted a complaint about the lack of signage on local roads, but I just couldn't wait any longer.

Shaw said, 'No.'

This was the first word he'd spoken since he'd come inside.

My shoulders dropped. I'd been tense with this possibility ever since I'd pulled back the front door.

'He's still in the CPH,' Malone said. 'The Central Psychiatric Hospital. Although he *is* scheduled to be moved to Clover Hill next month.'

'The holiday's finally over,' Shaw said.

'Clover Hill is a prison,' Malone explained. 'It'll be a big change for him.'

'Sorry if this is a stupid question,' I said, 'but shouldn't he be in prison *already*? Why is he in a hospital?'

'A psychiatric hospital,' Malone corrected. 'It's still secure, but he can receive treatment. At some point – very early on in his incarceration, I think – it was decided that his needs would be better served there.'

'He was getting treatment? What for?'

Shaw snorted. 'For being a serial killer, love.'

Malone said to me, 'Will was very young when he entered the system, and he was a... Well, let's just say he was very much a unique prisoner. The Prison Service decided that the CPH was the best home for him. Until now, at least.'

'Why are you here?'

The two detectives exchanged a glance. Then Malone asked me if I kept up with the news at home.

'No,' I said. 'To be honest, I couldn't even tell you who's Taoiseach.'

'Well,' Shaw said, 'you're not missing anything there, love, let me tell you.'

'What about your parents?' Malone pressed. 'Might they mention things to you?'

'If you mean deaths in the parish and the year on next-door's car, then yeah. As for actual news, no.' I looked from one detective to the other. 'Why don't you just tell me what's happened because obviously something has?'

'We found a body,' Shaw said. 'In the Grand Canal. Nineteen-year-old girl. A student at St John's.'

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His tone was so matter-of-fact that it took me a second to put the words together and process what he'd actually said. Malone turned to glare at his colleague but all he got in response was Shaw picking up his coffee and taking a grotesquely noisy slurp.

'What happened?' I asked. My mouth was suddenly bone dry. 'What happened to her?'

'We're still trying to—' Malone started.

'Stunned,' Shaw said, 'it seems like. By a blow to the head. Probably went into the water unconscious then. Cause of death was drowning.'

A cold brick of dread settled in my stomach.

Malone leaned forward. 'We got a report last Saturday morning. A pair of joggers were passing under the Luas tracks at Charlemont when they spotted something in the water. It was the body of Jennifer Madden, nineteen. A student at St John's since September. She'd last been seen at a party in Rathmines the night before.'

The weekend before St Patrick's Day, then.

I said, 'Could it just be a coincidence?'

Malone shook his head. 'Doesn't look like it, no. Jennifer... She, ah, isn't the first. She's the second. Louise Farrington was found in January, by Baggot Street Bridge. It looked like a tragic accident, at the time. But now with this second case... Well, the dates fit.'

'Why did you think the first one was an accident?'

Malone went to answer but Shaw cut in. 'Because that's what it looked like.'

'What's important,' Malone said, shifting his weight, 'is that we don't think that any more.'

'Someone's copying him,' I said.

They both nodded. Shaw said, 'Seems that way.'

I placed my palms flat on the table in front of me and willed the walls to slow and still.

Then I asked the detectives if they had any idea who.

'We're following a number of leads,' Malone said. 'One of them is the reason we're here.'

I honestly had no clue what was coming next. I hadn't lived in

Ireland in nearly ten years. I hadn't been in Dublin since the weekend of Will's arrest. I wasn't in touch with anyone from home except for my parents.

How had any lead led back to me?

'It seems,' Malone said, 'that Will heard a news report about Jennifer the day after her body was found. According to a nurse on staff at the CPH at the time, Will became upset, and asked if he could make a call to the Gardaí. He said he needed to speak with us. We' – Malone indicated himself and Shaw – 'went out there yesterday. To the CPH.'

'You've talked to him?' My mind was racing. *How was he? How does he look? What did he say? Is he sorry? Did he tell you why?* I had to concentrate in order to pluck a single coherent thought from the noise. 'But he can't know anything. He's been inside, all this time. Unless... You don't think...? You don't think he was working with someone back then, do you? That there were two of them? And this is the other guy, back at it now? Is that a possibility?'

'Why would you ask us that?' Shaw was watching me closely. 'Do *you* think that's a possibility?'

I met his eyes. 'I think I learned ten years ago that anything is possible.'

'But,' Malone said, 'specifically.'

I looked to him. 'I can't say I remember anything that made me think that, no. But then I didn't think that my boyfriend was a serial killer either.' I stopped to take a breath, to steady my voice. 'What did Will say?'

I hadn't said his name in so long the sound felt like a foreign object in my mouth, one with sharp edges that pressed painfully against the soft skin of my throat.

'Well,' Malone said, 'that's just it. When we met with him, Will told us he did have information that could potentially assist us, but that he wouldn't tell it to us.'

'That's ridiculous.' I looked from one man to the other. 'Why would he bother telling you he knows something and then refuse to say what it is when you get there? That doesn't make any sense.'

catherine ryan howard

‘What I meant was,’ Malone said, ‘he wouldn’t tell *us*.’

Shaw leaned back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest and mumbled something under his breath.

I thought I heard *waste of time*.

‘Admittedly,’ Malone said, ‘it’s unlikely that Will would have any valuable information. But that doesn’t change the fact that he does have a relevant role here, even if it’s one he hasn’t actively participated in. Our working theory is that this is a copycat. If that’s the case, by this time next week, we’ll have another dead college student on our hands. A third innocent victim, unless we catch this guy. And if we don’t do everything we can possibly can, if we don’t explore every last lead, however small or unlikely, then we will have that girl’s death not just on our hands but on our consciences, too.’

He’d lost me.

I said, ‘I think I’ve missed a step...?’

‘We can’t force you to do this,’ Malone said. ‘So we’re here to ask.’

‘Ask me w—’ I stopped, realising.

No. No way. Absolutely not.

And then I said those words out loud.

‘How about you have a think about it?’ Malone said.

‘I don’t need to.’

‘If it’s the press you’re worried about, that won’t be an issue.’

In my mind’s eye, I saw a flash of a tabloid newspaper’s front page, one side taken up with a picture of me in cut-off shorts and a bikini top, taken on a girls’ holiday to Tenerife the summer before I’d started college. The other side was all headline. *SERIAL KILLER’S KILLER GIRL*.

They got the photo from my Facebook page, which I’d only signed up for a couple of weeks before Will’s arrest. This was before the press copped on to the fact that people’s social media profiles were treasure troves of personal information just waiting to be mined, so it was far more likely that a friend I was connected with on the site had screenshot the photos and sold them.

‘We’ll take steps to ensure that your involvement in this will be

kept top secret,' Malone was saying. 'We'll get you in and out before anyone even knows you're in Dublin.'

'No,' I said again.

'Well,' Shaw said, hoisting himself up out of his chair, 'thanks for the coffee.' He looked at Malone with an expression that said he'd known all along it was going to go this way.

'Why don't you take the day?' Malone said, standing up too. 'Like I said, we can't force you to do this. But we don't know what he might say. It might be important. It might give us the break we need.' He took a business card from a pocket, placed it on the table. 'We need to know no later than four this afternoon, Alison, so you can fly back with us tonight. If you say yes, you'll be meeting with Will at the CPH first thing tomorrow morning. All the necessary arrangements are already in place.'