

56 Days

A THRILLER

CATHERINE RYAN HOWARD

INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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CATHERINE RYAN HOWARD

The Nothing Man

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56 Days

CATHERINE RYAN HOWARD



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*To Iain Harris,
because I couldn't think of what to get you for your fortieth and also, just
because*

Today

It's like one of those viral videos taken inside some swanky apartment complex, where all the slim and fit thirtysomething residents are doing jumping jacks behind the glass railings of their balconies while the world burns. But these ones stand still, only moving to look down or at each other from across the courtyard, or to lift a hand to their mouth or chest. Their faces are pale, their hair askew, their feet bare. Dawn has barely broken; they've just been roused from their sleep. No one wants to film this.

The residents look like they could've all been in school together except for one. Number Four is older than her neighbors by a couple of decades. She owns while the others rent. The patio of her ground-floor apartment has a bistro-style table and chairs surrounded by carefully arranged potted plants; most everyone else's is used to store bikes or not at all. Last Saturday night, she threatened to report Number Seventeen's house party to the Gardaí for breaching restrictions unless it ended *right now*, and when it didn't she stayed true to her word. She is a glamorous woman, usually well dressed and still well preserved, but this morning she is unkempt and barefaced, dressed in a pair of baby-pink cotton pajama bottoms and a padded winter jacket that swings open as she strides across the courtyard.

She is also the only one who knows the code that silences the fire alarm. It went off five minutes ago—that's what has woken them—and the residents assume they have her to thank for taking care of it.

There has never been a fire here but, in the last few weeks, three fire alarms—four if you count this one. The residents have complained

repeatedly to the management company that the system is just *too* sensitive, that it must be reacting to burnt toast and people who smoke cigarettes without cracking a window, but in turn, the management blames *them* for triggering it. The noise no longer signals danger but interruption, and when it went off a few minutes ago they all did what they usually do: went outside, onto their balconies and terraces, to see what they could see, to check for flames or smoke, not expecting any and finding none.

But this time there *was* something unexpected, something interesting: two uniformed Gardaí standing in the middle of the courtyard, looking around.

So they stayed out there, watching and wondering.

The woman from number four stands with the Gardaí while remaining the regulation six feet away. She's pointing at one of the ground-floor apartments—the one right in the corner, at one end of the complex's U shape. They have little patios instead of balconies, marked off with open railings instead of solid glass perimeters. No one is on that patio. Its sliding door is closed. But from some vantage points, the glowing orb of the living-room's ceiling light is visible through the thin gray curtains.

What's going on?

Whose apartment is that?

Nobody knows. The Crossings is a relatively new complex and interactions are mostly limited to pleasantries exchanged at the letterboxes, the trash cans, the parking structure. Sheepish smiles during that window on Friday and Saturday evenings when it seems like everyone is going down to the main entrance to meet their food-delivery guy at the same time. The residents are used to living above and below and beside other people's entire lives while pretending to be utterly unaware of them; hearing each other's TVs and smelling each other's cooking but never learning each other's names.

Even in these last few weeks, when they've all been at home all day every day, they've studiously avoided acknowledging each other when they take to the outside spaces—the balconies, the terraces, the shared courtyard—in an effort to maintain some pretense of privacy, to preserve it. The crisis-induced camaraderie they've been watching in unsteady, narrowly framed short videos online—someone calling bingo numbers through a megaphone at a block of apartments; a film projected onto the side of a

house so a cul-de-sac of homes can have a collective movie night from their driveways; nightly rituals of hopeful, enthusiastic hand-clapping—never really took hold here. They have kept their distance in more ways than one. No one wants to have to deal with a familiarity hangover when normal life returns, which they are all still under the impression will happen soon. A government announcement is due later today.

One of the guards twists his head around and looks up at them, these nosy neighbors. He pulls his face mask down with a blue-gloved hand, revealing pudgy cheeks at odds with a weedy body. They say that the Gardaí looking young is a sure sign you're getting older, but this one actually *is* young, midtwenties at the most, with a sheen of sweat glistening beneath his hairline.

“False alarm,” he calls out, waving. “You can go on back inside.”

As if any of them are standing there waiting to see a fire.

When nobody moves, he shouts, “Go on,” louder and firmer.

One by one, the residents slowly retreat into their apartments because none of them want to be pegged as rubberneckers, even though that's exactly what they are. This is the only interesting thing that has happened here in weeks—if you discount the fire alarms, it's the *only* thing that's happened.

Are they really expected not to look?

Most of them leave their sliding doors open and elect to drink their morning coffees just on the other side, so they can see without being seen. The couples mutter to each other that, really, they have a *right* to know what's going on. They live here, after all. The solo occupants wonder if there's been a burglary or maybe even something worse, like an attack, and if something happened to them now, with things the way they are, how long would it be before anyone noticed, before anyone found them?

This apartment complex is not far from Dublin's city center. Before all this started it was buttressed by a near-constant soundtrack of engine noise, squealing breaks, and car horns coming from the busy road that runs alongside. But in these last few weeks the city has slowed down, emptied out, and shut down, in that order, and, occasional false fire alarms aside, the loudest noise lately has been the birdsong.

Now, the sound of approaching sirens feels like a violence.

56 Days Ago

“Go ahead,” are the first words he ever says to her.

They are both on the cusp of joining the line for the self-service checkouts in Tesco. It’s Friday lunchtime and her fifth time this week coming in for yet another unimaginative meal deal: a colorless sandwich, a plastic bag of apple slices, and a bottle of water, which she’s just noticed is the type with the sickly-sweet fruit flavor added. This realization has stopped her in her tracks, paused by a stack of Easter eggs (Easter? *Already?*), and wondering if she can be bothered to go back and change it when she almost certainly won’t drink it anyway.

That’s when she looks up and sees him, politely waiting for her to make her move, leaving a space for her to join the line ahead of him.

He’s taller than her by some margin. Looks about the same age. Neither muscular nor soft, but solid. His dark hair is thick and messy, but she has no doubt it took forever to pomade into submission, to perfect. He wears a blue suit with a navy tie and a light-blue shirt underneath, but the sleeves of the jacket are creased with strain, the shoulders bunched, and the back of the tie hangs longer than the front. The top button of his shirt is open, the collar slightly askew, the tie pulled off-center. He looks a little red in the face, his cheeks pink above patchy stubble.

And he’s so attractive that she knows instantly the world he lives in is not the same one in which she does, that he can’t possibly experience it the same way. A face like that affords a different kind of existence, one in which you arrive into every situation with some degree of preapproval. But

you don't know it, don't realize that you're being ushered into the priority lane of life every single day.

She wonders what that does to a person.

There's an intensity to him, too, something simmering just beneath the surface. She imagines for him a whole life. He's a man who works hard and plays harder. Who has a circle of friends he calls exclusively by inexplicable nicknames while they sit around a table in the pub necking pints and watching *The Game*. Who runs purely to run off bad calories. Who has someone somewhere that knows a completely different version of him, someone he is unexpectedly and devotedly tender to, who he only ever looks at with kind eyes.

"It's okay," she says, waving the bottle of water, starting to move away. "I've just realized I've got the wrong one." She turns and heads back toward the fridges, feeling his eyes on her as she walks away.

And the beat of her own heart, pulsing with promise.

The second thing he says to her is, "Nice bag."

She has just come out of the supermarket, onto the street, and doesn't know who's talking or if they're talking to her.

When she turns toward the voice, she sees him standing in the next doorway, looking right at her. The sandwich he's just bought is tucked under his arm, getting squished by the pressure. There's the hint of a grin on his face, tinged with something else she can't readily identify.

She stops. "My . . . ?"

"Your bag," he says, pointing.

He means the little canvas tote she's put her purchases in. He must, because her handbag is across her body and resting on her other hip, the one he can't see from where he's standing.

The tote is blue and has a space shuttle on it, piggybacking on an airplane as it flies over the skyscrapers of Manhattan.

She lifts the bag and looks at it, then back at him.

"Thanks," she says. "It's from the Intrepid. It's a museum in—"

"New York," he finishes. "The one on the aircraft carrier, right?" He says this not with smug knowingness but endearing enthusiasm. "Have you been?"

“Yeah.” She doesn’t want to sound like she’s too impressed with herself, so she adds, “Once.”

“Was it good?”

She hesitates, because this is it. This is where she makes her choice.

People think the decisions you make that change the course of your life are the big ones. Marriage proposals. House moves. Job applications. But she knows it’s the little ones, the tiny moments, that really plot the course. Moments like *this*.

Her options:

Say something short and flippant, move on, end this now.

Or say something that prolongs this, stay longer, invite more, open a door.

She keeps a screenshot on her phone of a quote by, supposedly, Abraham Lincoln: *Discipline is choosing between what you want now and what you want the most*. Maybe that’s true, but discipline has never been her problem. It’s *fear* she struggles with. She thinks *courage* might be choosing between what you want now and what you want the most, because what she wants now is to walk away, to shut this down, to close the door. To retreat. To stay in the place where she feels safe and secure.

But what she wants the most is to be able to live a full life, even if the expansion comes with pain and risk and fear, even if it means crossing a minefield first.

This one, maybe.

Ciara grips the handles of the tote and imagines her future self standing behind her, pressing her hands into her back, pushing, whispering, *Do it. Go for it. Make this happen*. She ignores the heat rising inside of her, her body’s alarm. She reminds herself that this isn’t a big deal, that this is just a conversation, that men and women do this all day, every day, all over the world.

“Yeah,” she says. “But not as good as Kennedy Space Center.”

He blinks in surprise.

He straightens up and steps closer.

Moving aside so a woman pushing a double stroller can get past, she takes a step closer to him, too.

“You know,” he says, “I’ve never met someone who can name all five space shuttles.”

“And I *still* haven’t met someone who knows there are six.”

She bites her lip as every blood cell in her body makes a mad dash for her cheeks. What the hell did she have to go and say *that* for? What was she thinking?

“*Six?*” he says.

She’s already ruined it.

So she might as well make *sure* she has.

“There was *Challenger*,” she says to the crack in the pavement by her right foot, “lost January 28, 1986, during launch. *Columbia*, lost February 1, 2003, during reentry. *Atlantis*, *Endeavour*, and *Discovery* are all on display—*Atlantis* is the one in Kennedy Space Center. But there was also *Enterprise*, the test vehicle. It flew, although never in space. It didn’t have a heat shield or engines, but it *was* the first orbiter. Technically. Which is actually what people mean when they say ‘space shuttle,’ usually. They mean the orbiter itself. The rest are just rockets. And *Enterprise* is the one that’s at the Intrepid.”

A beat of excruciating silence passes.

She forces herself to lift her head and meet his eye, lips parting to mumble some lie about needing to get back to work, foot lifting in readiness for scurrying away from this absolute disaster, but then he says—

“I was going to go get a coffee. Can I buy you one, too?”

There are numerous coffee options on this street and the vast majority of them come served with a side of serious notions. There’s the café that roasts its own beans and makes you wait five minutes for a simple filter coffee that only comes in one size served lukewarm. It’s right next to the place that has spelled its name wrong and, inexplicably, with a forward slash: Kaph/A. The most popular spot seems to be a little vintage van in the service-station forecourt, the one with a hatch whose chalk-drawn menu lists not coffee blends but levels of depleted wakefulness: Fading, Sleepy, Snoring.

Ciara is relieved when he directs her past all of them and into the soulless outlet of a bland coffee chain instead.

“Is this okay?” he asks as he holds the door open for her.

“This is great.” She steps inside, turning to talk to him over her shoulder. “I like my coffee served in a bucket at a reasonable price, so . . .”

“I’ve passed the first test, is what you’re saying.”

He winks at her and she laughs, hoping it didn’t come out sounding like a nervous one, although she *is* nervous.

Because of the implication in the word *first*.

Because *she* has to pass this test too.

Because this is already the weight of one whole foot on the edge of the minefield and she has no idea how wide it is, how long it will take her to get all the way across, how long it will be before she feels safe and comfortable and secure.

In the minute it took to walk here, he has told her his name is Oliver and that he works for a firm of architects who have the top floor of the large office building across the street. He is not an architect, though, but something called an architectural technologist. He explained it by saying that architects design the buildings and then architectural technologists figure out how they’re going to actually build them. He tried to dissuade her of the idea that it’s any bit as interesting as it sounds, promising that, in reality, it’s mostly spreadsheets and emails. When she asked him if it’s what he always wanted to do, he said yes, once he’d come to terms with the fact that he was never going to be an astronaut.

Then he asked her what she does.

She explained that after *her* astronaut dreams fell by the wayside, she ended up working for a tech company that just happens to have one of their European hubs in a sprawling complex of glittering glass-and-steel office buildings a few minutes away from where they stand. She held up her bright-blue lanyard and he read her name off it and said, “Nice to meet you, Ciara,” and she said, “Nice to meet you, too.”

Now, at the counter in the coffee shop, she says she’ll have a cappuccino. He orders two of them, both large.

“To go?” he suggests. “We might snag a seat by the canal.”

“Sounds good to me.”

She tries not to look too pleased that he wants to prolong this, whatever *this* is, into drinking the coffees as well.

She goes to wait at the end of the counter and watches him pay at the till with a crisp ten-euro note. She sees the barista—a teenager; she can’t be more than seventeen or eighteen—steal glances at him whenever she thinks he’s looking at something else. She wonders if he’s aware of that and, if he

is, what it feels like. (Approval or scrutiny?) She traces the lines of his body as suggested by his clothes and wonders what it would feel like to know the skin underneath, *if* she will know it, if this really is the start of something or just an anomaly.

She imagines those arms around her, the strength in them, how it would feel to be held by him.

Then she tries not to.

She doesn't put sugar in her cappuccino, even though she normally does, and she thinks to herself, *If this becomes something, I'll never be able to put sugar in my coffee now.*

The sun has been appearing and disappearing all day; when they go back outside, they're met with mostly blue sky. The canal bank is busy with lunching office workers, but they find a spot on the wall by the service station, near the lock.

They settle down.

He prizes the lid off his cappuccino to take a sip. She resists the urge to tell him that this will make it go cold faster but lets him know when he's managed to collect a crescent of foam on his upper lip.

"So," he says, "Kennedy Space Center."

"What about it?"

"Tell me things that will make me very jealous that you've been there."

She describes the bus tour that takes you around the launch pads, the Vehicle Assembly Building, and the famous blue clock that you see counting down to launch on TV. Tells him about the IMAX cinema and the Rocket Garden. The "ride" where they make you feel like you're on a launching space shuttle, how they tilt it straight up so you're lying on your back and then forward a bit too much so you start to slide out of your seat in a clever approximation of zero-G. The Apollo Center where you get to see an actual Saturn V rocket, lying on its side at ceiling-height above the floor. The shuttle *Atlantis*, a spaceship that has actually *been in space*, on magnificent display.

"It's revealed to you," she says. "Unexpectedly. A surprise. You're herded into this big, dark room to watch a video about the shuttle program, and then, at the end, the screen slides up and reveals the shuttle just . . . just *there*, in all its glory, right in front of you. With the cargo-bay doors open and at an angle so it actually looks like it's flying through space. It's

amazing. People actually gasped. After I'd walked around it and taken all my pictures and read all the exhibits and stuff, I went back to where I'd come in and I waited for the screen to go up so I could watch *other* people's faces, so I could see their reactions, and it was . . ." She sees what looks to her like his bemused expression and panics. "It's just that I wanted to go for so long—since I was a child, really—so it was a bit like, I don't know . . . walking around in a dream."

A long moment passes.

Then he says, "I *really* want to go."

Relief.

"You should," she says.

"Thing is, I hate the heat."

"Don't let that stop you. It's all ice-cold air-conditioning and misting machines. Plus, it's not always hot and steamy in Florida. I went in March and it was actually quite nice."

"Was this a girls' trip or . . . ?"

She pretends not to have noticed that he is fishing for information, and he pretends not to have noticed her noticing but pretending not to.

"Work, primarily," she says. "A tech conference in Orlando. So I was able to slip away and go geek-out without an audience, thankfully."

Ciara turns to look out at the canal. It is beautiful up close, she'll give it that. The water is still, the reflections in it defined. The weather is pleasant enough for people to sit on the benches in their coats but not to show skin or plonk down on the grass. A steady stream of office workers and lunchtime runners cross back and forth on the narrow planks of the lock right by a sign that warns of deep water. Watching them makes her nervous, and she looks down at her coffee instead.

She can feel his eyes on her.

"Cork, right?" he says.

"Originally. We moved to the Isle of Man when I was seven."

"The Isle of Man? I don't think I've met anyone who lived there before."

She smiles. "Well, I can assure you, thousands of people do. My dad grew up there and thought I'd want to, too."

"Did you?"

"Not at the time, no. But it was all right in the end. What about you?"

"Kilkenny," he says, "but we moved around a lot."

“How long have you been in Dublin?”

“What’s it now”—he makes a show of thinking about it—“six weeks?”

“*Six weeks?*”

“Well, six and a half. I arrived on a Tuesday.”

“Where were you seven weeks ago?”

“London,” he says. “And you?”

“How long am I in Dublin?” She pretends to think, mimicking him from a moment ago. “Well, next Monday it’ll be, ah . . . seven days.”

“Seven *days*? And here was I thinking *I* was the newbie.”

She laughs. “Nope, I win that game.”

“Where were you before?”

“Cork, since I finished college. I went to Swansea. Not-at-all-notable member of the Class of 2017, here.”

His face can’t hide the fact that he’s trying to do the math. She almost offers, “I’m twenty-five,” but that’s not how this game is played.

She doesn’t know much but she knows *that*.

“What about you?” she asks. “Where did you go?”

“Newcastle,” he says flatly.

Ciara senses that something has changed, that she’s lost him somewhere along the line. What was it that did it? She has no clue, but knows she can look forward to lying awake in the dark and wondering for days to come, forensically analyzing everything she said and then reanalyzing it, trying to find the wrong thing, the mistake, the regret.

“I’m going to be late back.” He says this a fraction of a second *before* he shakes his wrist and looks at his watch.

He stands up then and, not knowing quite what to do, she does as well.

“Yeah, I better go, too,” she lies. “Well . . . thanks for the coffee.”

He chews on his bottom lip as if trying to decide something.

“Look,” he starts, “I was going to go see that new Apollo documentary. On Monday. Night. They’re showing it at this tiny cinema in town. Maybe—if you wanted to—we could, um, we could go see it together?”

She opens her mouth to respond but is so taken aback by this invite that she delays while her brain tries to catch up with this change of course, and into this pause he jumps with an embarrassed, “God, I’m so shit at this.”

This.

She wants to tell him that no, he’s not, and she doesn’t believe for a

second that he thinks he is, but mostly she doesn't want to have to respond to him referring to this as a *this* because what if he didn't mean what she hopes he did?

"That sounds great." She flashes her most reassuring smile. "Sure. Yeah."

He says he will book the tickets. They arrange to meet outside the building where he works at five thirty on Monday evening. He gives her his phone number in case there are any last-minute problems and she sends him a text message so he has hers. They walk back together as far as his office, then wave goodbye. She doesn't take a deep breath until she's turned her back to him.

And so it begins.

Today

Technically speaking, it's Friday-morning rush-hour, but Lee has the roads to herself. She makes it to Kimmage in no time at all and lucks into a parking space right outside the house. The street is still, its residents robbed of all their reasons to get up early, to start their days somewhere farther away than another room of their home. There've been no commutes for weeks now, no school runs, no tourists arriving in or heading off. Even the plague of early morning joggers from the start of lockdown seems to have tapered off.

The nation's collective motivation to make the most of this is waning, that much is obvious. She wonders how many sourdough starters have been, by now, unceremoniously fecked in the bin.

Lee rolls down the driver's-side window and settles in to drink her coffee. The coffee that she had to watch someone make with gloved hands and theatrical caution as if it wasn't a cappuccino they were making but a bomb, whose cost included the forced sanitizing of her already dry and chapped hands before and *after* collecting, that only has two sugars instead of her preferred three because now the barista has to put them in for you and she was too embarrassed to ask for that many, the coffee that she'd literally risked life and limb to get.

She refuses to let it go cold after all *that*.

With her free hand, Lee pulls down the visor and inspects the wedge of her own face she can see in the little mirror there. She seriously needed her roots done *before* they shut down the salons; the brunette is practically

down to her ears and in this natural light, appears to end in a blunt line. Like every other morning she's left home in a hurry, hair still wet, and now it's drying into her trademark helmet of electrified frizz. She thought she had thrown some makeup on but it has evidently managed to clean itself off in the last half hour. The smudge of tan foundation on the collar of her white shirt is the only evidence it was ever there at all.

She *really* needs to get her shit together.

There's a part of her that wishes she had a different job, the kind that's normally done from a stationary desk in an office and can now be—now *must* be—done from home. She's found herself fantasizing about being one of those women who live alone, temporarily free from all exhausting social expectations, finally able to establish a skincare routine and a yoga *practice* with that girl on YouTube who everyone raves about; to crack the spine on the healthy-food cookbooks her family has been pointedly gifting her for years; to go for long walks along beaches and clifftops and through woodland, the kind of treks that leave you pink-cheeked and aching with smug self-satisfaction and reconnected with nature (although Lee would have to connect with it first); emerging from the other end of this lockdown a shinier, smoother, brighter version of herself, Lee 2.0.

And honestly, she'd settle for painting her living room and losing half a stone.

But there are no beaches or clifftops or woodland within a two-kilometer radius of her front door, the hardware shops are closed and there is no lockdown for her. She's still at bloody work.

On the passenger seat, her phone beeps with a new text message.

She knows damn well who it is before a glance at the phone's screen confirms it: KARLY.

Detective Sergeant Karl Connolly. She'd added the "Y" to annoy him and it had worked a treat.

The message says:

BTA?

Lee doesn't pick up the phone. She takes another long, slow sip of her coffee. But when her phone beeps for a second time, she curses, shoves the

coffee into the cup holder between the front seats, and climbs out of the car.

The house looks exactly as it did the only other time she was here. A narrow, two-story redbrick terrace that, were it in mint condition, would easily sell for half a million around these parts. But this one is crumbling. The bricks need cleaning and the roof tiles repairing. The window frames are wooden and rotting in the corners. Paint is enthusiastically peeling off the front door. A skip is parked in the driveway, half-full with seventies furniture and broken things.

It was there the last time, too. Lee distinctly remembers seeing the cracked salmon-colored bathroom sink because her parents had one just like it. This house was a work-in-progress without much progress, and now, like everything else, its renovation is on pause.

She should ring the doorbell, announce her presence. *Should*. But she isn't in a charitable mood this morning. Instead, she goes to the front window and touches her fingers to the underside of its cement sill, feeling for the hollow she's been told is there. She quickly finds it—and the pointy end of the key that's inside.

Stealthily, she lets herself in through the front door.

The house is still, the air a little musty, stale. There are no carpets on the ground floor—only bare, dusty floorboards—but a heinous swirl of shit-brown and bright-orange clings to the staircase. She starts up it, moving slowly and carefully, testing her weight on each step so as to avoid a telltale creak.

There's no noise in the house, no sounds from upstairs, but the quiet has a deliberateness to it.

Someone is *maintaining* it.

He's not asleep, then, but awake and waiting for her.

Maybe he even heard her come in.

Lee reaches the landing. Four doors lead off it. One is open onto a room filled with building materials: a workbench, some sort of sanding machine with its electrical cord wrapped around itself, boxes marked "Crackled White 7.5 × 4." Another is showing her a bathroom that appears to be in mid-update. A third looks like it can only be hiding a boiler. The fourth then, to the front of the house, is the master bedroom.

That door has been pulled closed but isn't fully shut.

She pauses outside, then kicks it open with such force that it opens all