



**'ENTHRALLING'**

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*The Girl Before*

**IT'S HER WORD...**

# **THE CONFESSION**

**...AGAINST HIS**

**JO SPAIN**

# THE CONFESSION

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Quercus

For a friend from Derry, who never got to write his own book.  
Rest well, mo chara.

# Prologue

*Present day, 2012*

It's the first spray of my husband's blood hitting the television screen that will haunt me in the weeks to come – a perfect diagonal splash, each droplet descending like a vivid red tear.

That, and the sound of his skull cracking as the blows from the golf club rain down.

There's something so utterly shocking about that noise. I'd never heard it before and yet, the moment I did, I knew instinctively what it was. The crunching sound of a fractured head is strangely and horrifically unmistakable.

A few minutes earlier, the two of us had been watching a crime thriller on that television, now criss-crossed with blood. We were sitting separately in our armchairs – expensive black leather recliners. A particularly scary scene was playing out on the wide LCD screen. The killer in the show was on to his third victim and as he hunted her in deserted, creepy woodland I placed my hands over my eyes, unable to watch the inevitable. Harry laughed at me for being so girly.

That was when the stranger walked into the centre of our living room.

We hadn't even heard him enter the house.

A golf club dangled loosely from his right hand, but he didn't seem threatening, if you ignored the unexpectedness of the situation. A pair of jeans, a T-shirt. It was like he'd just strolled in off the golf course that sat to the rear of our property.

Harry turned to me, completely bewildered. Then my husband stood up, his body faster than his brain, a mammal reacting to this peculiar invasion of our space. His mouth was just opening to form the first indignant question when the man swung the golf club at him.

Harry buckled, momentarily winded. He was stunned but his eyes met mine and I saw him make a quick calculation. My husband has always been great like that. Throw him into any awkward situation and he'll negotiate himself out of it in minutes. Charm the birds out of the trees, my mother always says. Although, this time, it didn't look like words were going to work.

Harry is a strong, athletic man. He works out several times a week and one of those sessions is with a boxing coach. He's had a lot of stress in the last few years and there's nothing like laying into a punchbag to let off steam.

So when he pivoted to deliver a right hook to the man standing so nonchalantly in front of us, I thought, *This is it*.

Except it wasn't.

The man hit Harry again while my husband's fist was mid-air.

And again and again, and he's still hitting him.

Harry didn't stand a chance.

My husband is on the floor now, his attacker visibly sweating

and grunting from his exertions as he brings the golf club down repeatedly. His knuckles are white on the iron, his arm muscles tense. Every time the weapon lands it makes a stomach-churning thumping sound, and each blow draws fresh blood, cartilage, saliva, teeth. There's vomit spewing out of Harry's mouth and a damp patch has spread down the leg of his beige trousers.

I'm still in my chair, watching all this.

I don't speak.

I don't run for my phone.

I don't launch myself at the stranger.

What I really want to do as all this is happening is cover my eyes. I want to block out the sight of the horror, just as I did with the thriller on TV.

At last the beating stops. The man releases his grip on the golf club and surveys the damage.

Harry is unrecognizable. There's blood everywhere. This is what they mean when they use the expression 'beaten to a pulp'. This . . . mess. A barely human form. Here lies the man I've known nearly all my adult life. A man who has held my hand, kissed my lips, lain beside me, been inside me – I know every inch of his body and recognize not a bit of it right now.

Then the intruder bends down to Harry's ear and whispers something, quietly, softly, like a lover's sweet nothing.

What? What did he say?

The man stands up and studies me. He has dark eyes – black, in fact. Black hair too. Not dark brown – coal-like. Thick eyebrows. Full, red lips. Younger than me but not by much, maybe ten years or so. He is good-looking. Even covered in my husband's blood.

I know what he is.

A reckoning.

We aren't perfect, Harry and I. All of us have our secrets, don't we? The little petty lies. The bigger sins.

But what has Harry done to provoke this?

My eyes are drawn back to his body, and I whimper. I've imagined Harry dead many times but not this . . . I never thought it would be like this.

Then the man turns on his heel and walks out of the living room door. Just like that, he's gone.

I dimly register the front door opening and slamming shut.

I'm alone, bar the bloodied and battered form on the floor inches from my feet.

That's when I finally do something, when my body throws itself into action.

I wet myself.

# Part One

# Julie

When I first met Harry, he told me he worked in finance.

What does that even mean? I asked. To me, finance was a title sharp-suited men gave to ambiguous jobs in new-build office blocks in the capital. They weren't *real* jobs. I grew up in a little village in rural Ireland. I was used to men in overalls, with calloused hands and bent backs, weather-beaten faces and an all-round lesser sense of entitlement.

In the early nineties in Ireland, 'finance' took off in a big way. The eighties had been bleak for our little country – mass emigration and unemployment, high taxes, politicians up to their necks in brown envelopes and dodgy deals. But in the nineties there was a shift. None of us knew it, but the state was about to embark on its Celtic Tiger journey. Wealth was flooding into Ireland and, Jesus, you've never met a nationality that could get comfortable with money faster. You'd swear we'd always had it.

My background didn't prepare me for what was coming. Dad managed a small farm long before the European Union made it profitable, and Mam stayed at home, rearing child after child. She'd

missed the memo in the seventies that said nobody gave a shite any more what the Pope thought about condoms and what went on in the marital bed. Luckily, for me. I was the youngest of our large family. I was adored and spoiled, for all that you could be spoiled with what little we had.

But I was never content. Leitrim had nothing to offer. Thankfully, as the last of the brood, there were no expectations on me to hang around the farm or live close by. My older siblings carried all those responsibilities. I was allowed to finish school, and I worked hard – hard enough to earn myself *the* golden ticket: a place at Trinity College Dublin to study the arts. My plan was to become a teacher. I'd read Maeve Binchy's *Circle of Friends*. New pals, the capital, three months off every summer and a great pension? Yes, please.

Leaving the county was the first indication I was a breed apart. My poor grandmother almost had a heart attack when she heard where I was headed. Fair enough, it was the nineties, but she was of her age – eighty-five – and she'd had a number of rules beaten into her over the decades. Firstly, single girls didn't move from Leitrim to Dublin on their own unless it was to deal with an unpleasant and unwanted surprise in their bellies. Secondly, they didn't go to college unless it was to learn hairdressing or secretarial skills. And thirdly, if they were going to flout every rural tradition going, they certainly didn't go to Trinity, which was bursting at the seams with sneaky, superior Protestants. She still thought the college had its ban on Catholics.

Turns out, she was right. Trinity would prove very dangerous for me. Not the place, but the people I would meet there.

I first saw Harry McNamara at the college ball in my third year, 1994.

My date had got, as we country people say, langed, and it wasn't even midnight. My pal Grace had also abandoned me, in order to suck the face off a PhD biology student. Left to my own devices, I walked around the various old stone courtyards, my face changing colour every time I passed one of the multicoloured ground lamps strategically placed to illuminate Trinity's Victorian-era walls. I hoped I'd bump into one of my friends to finish the night in company. I was never comfortable being alone.

I heard a low whistle, followed by the words:

'Well, now, if it isn't Jessica Rabbit.'

Harry called out to me through a circle of people, all gathered around him, the centre of their universe. He was leaning casually against the wall of the provost's garden, holding court. His bow tie hung open around his neck and a cigar stuck out of the side of his mouth. He was, without exception, the most handsome man I'd ever laid eyes on. He was so *un*-Irish-looking. Thick, wavy brown hair framed a tanned, sculpted face, and his tux was expensive – perfectly tailored, the way a man should wear a suit. And tight-fitting enough for me to see he had the toned and muscular body of an athlete.

But his smile – oh, his smile was the clincher.

The group parted like the sea for Moses as he moved towards me, all of them envious at the newcomer who'd unintentionally and so easily won his attention.

'Are you addressing me?' I said, eyebrows raised as I looked around, pretending to check he hadn't intended the comment for

somebody else. 'Is that your thing? Yelling sexist remarks at random women?'

I was well able for him, used to the attention of the opposite sex. I'd been born with natural flaxen curls, sky-blue eyes and plump red lips. Attractive to most men, I guess. My curves, though, as Harry had so evidently noticed, were my selling point. I've always been petite (Polly Pocket, my older sisters affectionately termed me early on). But as soon as I hit my teens, I developed, big time. All the Ferguson girls were alike, blonde curls and pretty faces. But none of them got my chest. My sisters were disgusted.

The night I caught Harry's attention, I knew I looked sexy. I was wearing a tight emerald-green evening gown. It had started out as a cheap thing from Primark but had been transformed into something magical after Grace's mam got her hands on it and gussied it up on her sewing machine.

'Jesus,' Grace had said, green-eyed. 'Mammy, you wouldn't let me across the threshold in that get-up, and you practically stitch Julie into it.'

'I love you, petal, but Julie has a figure to work with,' Mrs Delaney had replied, giving poor Grace's two fried eggs the once-over.

'Everything I haven't got, I inherited from you, you horrible old woman,' Grace grumbled.

The dress would have been put to better use on my sex-mad friend. Unlike many of my peers in college, I wasn't there to find a man. I loved that our mam had always been home, but the thought of being a young, settled housewife sent me into a panic. And I certainly didn't want to end up with a bun in the oven before I had a ring on my finger.

I'd kidded myself into thinking I was Ms Independent.

I knew nothing about myself.

Harry had laughed when I snapped my retort back at him, then tutted playfully.

‘Is it sexist to point out you’re the best looking woman here? Honestly, I don’t know who you came with tonight, but the man is a simpleton leaving you alone. Unless you figured that out yourself and it was you who abandoned him?’

I smiled, despite myself.

‘He’s . . . somewhere.’

‘I see. So, while he’s somewhere, I’m going to seize this opportunity to woo you, and I’ll start by getting us some champagne. It’s just not right, you gliding around, goddess-like, without a drink in your hand. And it can only be the best.’

‘It’s far from champagne I was reared,’ I snorted. ‘And did you just say “woo”?’

He blushed.

‘I did, didn’t I? It’s your dress. It looks like it was made for you and your . . . eh, assets. I can’t remember my own name, let alone what century we’re in.’

‘Wow. Tell me. Did you practise in a mirror before coming out tonight, or is this just you?’

‘Seriously now – would you fake being this cheesy?’ He lowered his head and smiled out at me from under his fringe, an adorable brown-eyed puppy. ‘Please. Don’t torture me any longer. That gang behind me are watching to see if I can pull this off and if you knock me back my reputation will be ruined, utterly. Can you even pretend you don’t think I’m a total arse?’

‘I would take pity on you, but you promised me fancy champagne and they’re not serving it.’

‘Well, now. I see light at the end of this tunnel you’re making me crawl through. They have it all right. You just haven’t been to the right bar.’

‘U-huh. Just so you know, I can’t be bought. Fizz or no.’

‘Are you saying you’re priceless?’

‘Got it in one.’

I’m not a cliché. I didn’t fall for Harry McNamara just because he was a smooth talker and happened to have a case of bubbles behind the bar reserved for the alumni of the college. And, even with him charming and me tipsy, there was no way I was jumping into bed with him. I was still a girl from a small country village – nowhere near cosmopolitan enough for one-night stands.

We talked and, as we did, I discovered that he was actually a former, not a current student, which explained his access to the alumni bar.

‘Dear God, how old are you?’ I asked. ‘Is the college aware you’re here, preying on young, vulnerable women? And what is your actual job – in finance, I mean?’

He was amused by that.

‘I’m twenty-seven,’ he said. ‘I hope that’s not too old for you. What are you – early twenties? Come on. I’m hardly a predator. And my job? I’m a banker. Of sorts.’

‘Oh! Well, why don’t you just say that? You work in a bank. Why does everybody have to use fancy terms these days like “finance” and “consultancy”? I’m going to be a teacher. Not a “provider of knowledge”. What? What are you laughing at?’

‘You,’ he said, leaning in, until his long-lashed chestnut eyes were centimetres away from mine and I could feel his breath hot against my lips, mint and alcohol-flavoured. ‘I could listen to that accent

all night. It's melodic. Are you always so frank?'

'Oh. I thought you were laughing because I just want to be a teacher.'

He came close to my ear and whispered, 'Come on, now. You could never be *just* anything.'

I pulled back, blushing, alarmed at how much my body was responding to his. I was still a virgin but all I could think was *I want this man to fuck me senseless*. Turns out I was a latent harlot.

'Do you want to get out of here and we can get a drink somewhere more private?' he asked.

'No. My friends are here too. I need to find them. We have a policy – no woman left behind.'

'Ah, go on. Ditch 'em. The night is young. It's only . . . shit, it's not even light out yet. I'm not giving up on you.'

'Yes, well, I don't give up easy either,' I said. 'And I can see my pal Grace over there. It looks like she's come up for air. I have to go.'

Everything about Harry was an aphrodisiac. It wasn't just his looks – it was his confidence, the power he exuded, that assuredness. He was that little bit older and he was seducing me, but not in a sleazy way.

And there was something about him. Something . . . dangerous. Like he didn't play within normal rules.

I'd always been a good girl. Good girls are meant to go with good boys. But being the focus of Harry's attention was intoxicating.

In the end, there was more pulling me towards him than even I knew. I was an ambitious young woman but I was used to being loved. A large, tight-knit family will do that for you. I might have wanted to carve my own path in the world but I didn't want to do it alone.

And I think I sensed something similar in Harry. I'd learn, as time went on, that he wasn't as confident as he came across. He liked having people around him, lackeys and sycophants. But he'd never really had anybody who mattered. No family, I'd later find out, and no real friends. He let very few people get close.

The night of the Trinity Ball, I gave him my number.

Here's something I didn't know at the time.

Harry had come to the ball that night with a date. She wasn't with him when he saw me – maybe she'd gone to the loo or to touch up her make-up or something. Harry was gone by the time she got back.

You could say it was love at first sight and she was incidental to the story.

That would be the romantic interpretation.

Would it have mattered, anyway, if I'd known how easily he could pick up and drop women? Harry probably would have just spun it another way and I'd have most likely chosen to believe him. We were both good at that, but him especially.

Like when he told me that night that he was a banker – what he failed to mention, or at least correct me on, was that he didn't just work in a bank.

He owned one.

In his early twenties Harry had started his own bank; it dealt predominantly with funding up-and-coming property developers, headed by an up-and-coming financier. Here was a man well used to getting what he wanted.

I resisted him for months, which made the chase all the more exciting.

By that stage, I was head over heels for him and he with me.

## THE CONFESSION

You see us, don't you?

Young, innocent, hopeful, in love.

That was us at the beginning of our fairytale.

But here's the thing about fairytales.

Sometimes they're darker than you can ever imagine.