LOVE LOST

by

Mary Minnock

Copyright © 2024 by Mary Minnock

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Mary Minnock asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

For Mathilde, Nora, Johanne and Ashlinn.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Acknowledgements

Chapter 1

Dublin 2004

Later, Dennis Byrne would relive the day over and over, recalling every tiny detail so that it stood out in sharp relief in his memory and became the hinge of his life on which hung the before and after.

It was one of those sunny March days—a Friday—that tricks people into believing in summer. But behind the warmth of the direct sun, there was a warning chill.

Dennis parked not far from St. Stephen's Green and walked down Grafton Street. There was a cheery atmosphere among the busy crowd: maybe it was the lifting of the long, wet winter, maybe it was the end of the working week and the start of the weekend or maybe it was just Dennis transferring his own mood to the crowd as he made his way to meet Ciara for lunch.

Even though he hadn't fully sorted out the problem with Pat Casey's faulty clutch, he had happily downed tools and left the garage to join her. Ever since she started college, he didn't get to see her as often as he'd like and he was looking forward to the catch-up.

One of the women selling flowers outside the Westbury called out to him with a cheeky grin, 'Go on, handsome, get some lovely

daffodils for her!' The flattery put a bit more pep in his step and he grinned back.

He hurried on past the buskers, past the teenagers hanging around the entrance to McDonalds, past the women laden down with their shopping bags to the end of the pedestrian street. On his right was the front entrance of Trinity College. He was still amazed that his daughter could be going there. When he was growing up, he had thought it only for posh people who moved in circles far removed from his own and yet now, his Ciara was studying physics there. Every time he passed by the impressive old facade, the pride grew inside him until he wanted to stop strangers in the street and tell them.

His strides lengthened as he approached his destination: The Last Drop, a sandwich bar and coffee shop on Westmoreland Street. He bought the newspaper at a newsagent's next door. He knew his daughter well enough not to expect her to be on time.

Still, he took a quick look around to check and, when he was sure she wasn't there, he bought a pot of tea and sat at a table near the window where he could feel the heat of the sun and watch the people passing by. He pushed back from the table to stretch out his long legs underneath. He was examining the inside of the teapot to see if the last of the tea was stewed beyond drinkability when two hands landed on his shoulders and a kiss smacked the centre of the ever-increasing bald patch on the top of his head.

'It's not getting any better, Dad,' Ciara said with the seriousness of a surgeon delivering a difficult prognosis.

'Sit down, cheeky. You're late.'

Ciara threw her coat over the back of a seat, tossed her bag under the table and slid into a chair opposite Dennis, all in one effortless movement 'Still, look at the bright side. No bad hair days, no sticky gel, just one quick rub to put a bit of a shine on it

and you're off.' She leaned in towards him and lowered her voice. 'And I've been told that it drives older women crazy. Reminds them of Sean Connery.'

Dennis ran his hand across the top of his head. 'Sean Connery? That old fella? He should be so lucky! I'm only coming into my prime now.'

Ciara grabbed the menu from the table and studied it intently. 'I'm starving,' she said. 'I had nothing to eat for breakfast. Someone ate all the yoghurts I had in the fridge and the milk was gone off. I love my room on campus but it's a pain not to have my own kitchen.'

'I get the hint. Somehow your purse probably got cleared out too.' A warm familiar glow rekindled in Dennis as it often did when he was with Ciara. Did every father feel like this about his daughter or was he just exceptionally lucky?

Ciara grinned. 'How'd you guess? Lucky I have you, Dad. At least you won't let me starve.'

'Come on, let's get something to eat. Although a bit of starvation might improve your money management skills,' Dennis said and followed Ciara to the counter to order lunch.

Deep down, he didn't care how much of his money she frittered away, he couldn't think of a better way to spend it anyway, but he felt that he should make the point, just for the principle.

As they sat down again at the table, Ciara's plate piled high with about six different kinds of salad, Dennis looked with pleasure at his vibrant, dark-haired daughter. She was wearing a hand-knitted, multi-coloured jumper in wools of different textures and weights with dark-blue jeans that were only barely hanging on to her hips. She wore no make-up as usual but still managed to exude what would always be fathomless beauty to him. Technically, he knew that the dark blue eyes set in a face that never stayed still, the dark

hair cropped in a short, choppy style and the pale skin dotted with the freckles she hated, all added up to prettiness rather than beauty but, to his eyes, the whole was so much more than the sum of the parts.

'So, how are things going at college?' he asked. He expected a rambling, witty account of her week; funny incidents from class, minor run-ins with lecturers, outings with classmates, maybe even a tirade against the university's recycling policy but instead her smile dimmed.

She sighed. 'All right, I suppose.'

'That doesn't sound like you. Is there something up?' Dennis examined her face.

'Oh, it's nothing.' Ciara continued stirring her coffee. 'It's not worth talking about.'

'It's not a problem with your studies, is it? If there is anything I can help you with, just ask. You know how physics holds very few secrets from me.'

'Yeah, right, Dad. Don't worry, I'm not that desperate yet.' Ciara laughed as he intended she should. 'At least with physics, I know where I stand. No, this is a personal thing but I'll sort it out. No big deal.' She made an impatient sweeping gesture with her hand as though to brush away annoying thoughts clinging like cobwebs. 'Anyway, that's not the reason I asked you to meet me for lunch.'

'Ah, here I was, operating under the delusion that you wanted to spend time with your dear old dad, make fun of his receding hairline and squeeze some money out of him.'

'Well, of course I do want to do all of those things but the main reason I asked you to meet me is that there's something I need to talk to you and Mam about. I was hoping we could all get together

this weekend so we could discuss it.' Ciara paused with a forkful of salad in front of her mouth to look earnestly at Dennis.

'Now you are beginning to worry me. Why can't you tell us separately? Are you devising some kind of diabolical plan to make us fight with each other so that we don't turn on you when you tell us about some hare-brained scheme you have in mind?'

'What an excellent idea! I never even considered that! I'll keep it in mind for another time. But no, this time, what I need to talk to you about has nothing to do with me, well, very little really, it's more to do with the two of you.'

Dennis frowned. 'Ciara.' He could hear the warning tone in his own voice. 'You are not a little girl anymore; you can't matchmake between us.' He caught a glance from an elderly woman at the next table and leaned forward, lowering his voice. 'What happened between me and your mother is over and will never come back. You know we haven't had a normal civil conversation for years and we're not likely to start now. The best thing for everyone is for us to see as little of each other as possible.'

'Do you think I don't know that? Whenever you're in the same room, you're like a pair of stiff, prickly cactuses. Don't worry, getting you two back together is a crusade I gave up long ago. No, this is an entirely different matter altogether. Please come over to Mam's house this weekend? Or even this afternoon? I'm going home for the weekend so what about dropping me off on your way back to the garage and coming inside then?'

'Ciara, I have to get back to work. It's Friday and people want their cars back for the weekend. In any case, I don't like this kind of pressure.' Dennis spoke more sharply than he intended and to compensate, he leaned over and ruffled her hair. 'Listen, it's not a problem to drop you home but I don't want to go into the house,

especially if she doesn't know I'm coming. Leave it with me. I'll think about it.'

As they left the café and stepped into the bright sunshine in the street, Dennis felt troubled. This had not been quite the amusing distraction in his working day that he had anticipated. He hated any kind of disagreement with Ciara.

As though reading his thoughts, Ciara gave his arm a quick squeeze as they walked. 'Don't make a big thing of it, Dad. This wouldn't take long and you know I wouldn't ask if this wasn't important.'

With every step, Dennis shook off the burrs of anxiety clinging to him.

'So where is your Golf? Why aren't you driving it?' he asked.

'I leave it out in Mam's during the week. It's more hassle than it's worth to have it in the city centre. I bus or bike everywhere. It's handy for the weekends though if I'm going away. Thanks again, Dad.' She flashed a smile at him.

Dennis's dark green Jaguar XJ6 was parked on a side street where four small boys were hovering around it with transparent admiration. As Dennis and Ciara approached, the sound of the locking system, activated remotely by Dennis, made them jump. The boys took a step back and looked around.

'Nice car, mister,' one cheeky face shouted at him.

'No wonder you can pull the young ones!' Another one with red hair and a mass of freckles shouted, although at the same time he took a wary step backwards, ready to break into a run. Dennis made a sudden movement as if to catch one of them and they scattered like mice. He laughed at their impudence.

He listened with pleasure to the soft click of the smoothly engineered mechanism as he opened the car door and slid into the driver's seat.

'Dad, your safety belt.' Ciara prompted him as he indicated his way out of his parking space.

'I will in a minute,' he said. 'Once we get out on the open road.' He never liked the restraint of the safety-belt; it took away from the sense of power and freedom he felt when he was behind the wheel.

'No, Dad, put it on now.' Ciara was having none of it. 'Don't you remember what happened to Dermot Sharkey?'

'How could I forget? You remind me often enough.'

'Well then, don't be so pig-headed about it. Put it on.'

Not for the first time, Dennis thought that if he had known that Ciara would be as deeply affected as she was by Dermot Sharkey's car accident he would never have allowed her to attend the court proceedings with him. Years before, Dennis had helped with the extraction of the young man from his mangled vehicle and, as a result, had been called to court as a minor witness. Ciara had pestered him to bring her with him, curious to see how a court case was in real life. Her eyes never left Dermot Sharkey who sat at the front of the courtroom between his parents, a metal plate inserted in the back of his head to hold his brain in. He would probably have sustained only minor injuries if he had been wearing his seat-belt, the court found.

Traffic was slow on this Friday afternoon as the momentum of the weekend started to chug into action. The journey to Mag's home in the suburbs took twice as long as it normally would but Dennis revelled in his daughter's company as she explained with passion the dangers of global warming and deplored the minimal efforts being made to counteract them. She had a habit of illustrating the stories she told with grimaces and expressions that made him laugh. It reminded him of when she was a child, when

she displayed her inner feelings with expressions that were cartoon caricatures of those emotions.

When she ran out of breath, he asked if her heart was committed entirely to the ozone layer or if there was a corner left over for any mere mortal.

She made a rueful face at him. 'Oh, men! I think I should steer clear. Relationships always get so complicated and I'm no good at sorting them out.' She gave him a nudge. 'Maybe it's a hereditary thing.'

He glanced away from the road at her and she raised an eyebrow. 'Maybe I should go and talk to Sister Dolores, see if she could fit me in.'

Dennis laughed. Despite his belief that the talents of his daughter were limitless, one career where he could never see her was as a nun.

He was almost sorry to see the black wrought-iron gates and cherry trees at the front of Mag's house, the house that had once been his too and where he had lived for almost ten years before they had separated.

'The cherry blossoms will bloom shortly,' Ciara said. 'It's a shame they last for such a short time. Or maybe that's what makes us appreciate them all the more.'

Dennis leaned across her to open the car door on her side. 'Go, go. Philosophise on your own time. I have work to get done before I lose all my customers.'

'All right, I'm going, you philistine.' Ciara gave him a peck on the cheek. 'Please call over on Sunday, Dad. It's important.'

Dennis found it difficult to ever say no to his daughter. 'Let me call you on your mobile. Talk to your mother first. Make sure it's OK with her.'

Dennis paused for a moment to watch Ciara run up the driveway to the house—

she never walked when running was an option. She ran past the front door, unlatched the garden gate at the side and, just before she closed it behind her, she turned and waved at him.

And that was the last time he saw her.

Chapter 2

Mag was on her knees in the garden planting tulip bulbs in a corner where she had recently created a small rockery. A tall sycamore had stood in the spot previously but it had become diseased and she had been obliged to have it cut down. She had kept a section of the trunk to make a rough garden seat. The earth was moist and dark under her fingers. She plopped the bulbs into the hollows she made for them. She loved gardening for the moments like this when she felt in harmony with her own little corner of the world. She was leaning back on her heels admiring her work when her daughter arrived in a whirlwind of movement.

'Hi, Mam,' Ciara said. 'How are you? Wow, this looks great. You've done a great job.' She tested out the bench and looked around the garden. 'I know you were sorry to have to cut down that old tree but it does make the garden less dark and shadowy.'

Mag got up and sat beside her daughter. How like her father she was, in every way. She had his dark, impish good looks but she also had his ebullient optimism, his impetus towards the future and away from the past.

'Yes, I'm pleased with the way it's turning out in the end.' Mag brushed the earth from the knees of her old sweatpants. 'Come inside, I could do with a cup of tea after all that.'

They walked up the sloped path which led from the garden to the patio above and went through to the kitchen. Ciara sat at the large, well-worn table, sorting through the post that had come for her over the past couple of weeks while her mother put the kettle on to boil.

'It's good to see you, love, I wasn't expecting you this weekend.' Mag stood by the kettle watching her daughter's face as she opened the envelopes.

'I know but I felt like coming home. You don't mind that I just arrived in on top of you, do you? I wouldn't mind having some quiet time to think about things, sort out what I'm doing with my life.'

Mag looked into her empty mug before speaking but she couldn't keep her voice completely neutral. She tried hard not to interfere in Ciara's life, to let her come to her but it was easier said than done. 'Of course not. You're welcome here any time, Ciara, you don't have to ask. Is there anything wrong, anything I can help you with?'

'No, Mam, it's all right. I don't want to hassle you with this, I'll be fine. I just got myself into an awkward situation but don't worry, I'll sort it out.'

'I have a bit of experience with awkward situations myself.' Mag made a wry face at her daughter. 'Maybe I could help. I'm a tougher nut that you give me credit for, you know.'

'I'm beginning to realise that. Now more than ever.' Ciara gave her a quick, sympathetic smile. 'You are great, Mam. I love you.'

Mag focused on pouring the boiling water into the mugs. 'In any case it's not as if I was planning anything particularly exciting, just the usual hill-walking with Kathleen and the gang tomorrow morning.' She put the mugs on the table and sat opposite Ciara.

'I have a thing on tonight with the Trinity gang. Not sure what time I'll be back but I doubt I'll be awake to hear you leave tomorrow. Maybe we could go out for a late lunch after you get back if you feel like it.' Ciara always held her mug cupped in her two hands as if to draw all the warmth out of it.

'That sounds lovely. Let's do that.' Mag looked out through the patio windows as a ray of spring sunshine arrived in the garden. 'So, will that young lad from your class be there then? Are you still seeing him?'

Ciara shook her head. 'Vincent? No, that's over months ago. It wasn't working out. We had a bit of a falling out but I think we'll be friends eventually.'

'Oh well, take your time, I'm sure one of these days you'll meet the right one.'

'Hmm,' Ciara got up to throw the scrunched up envelopes and junk mail in the bin. 'I think I'd be better off concentrating on college for a while.'

'That sounds very sensible of you. Delighted to hear it. You must have your final exams coming up soon. What are your plans for after? Are you going to be job-hunting or will you take a break?'

Ciara hesitated. 'I don't know yet. It all depends. There's a bit of stuff going on. I'll have to see how things pan out.'

Mag looked at her. She was determined not to interfere. 'You know you're welcome to stay here after you move out of your college room. I'd be delighted to have you.'

'I know, thanks.' Ciara gave her a quick smile. 'By the way, there's something else I need to talk to you about. I invited Dad over here on Sunday. There's something I need to discuss with you both.'

Mag raised her eyebrows. 'And he has to come here to hear it?'

'Only because I want to tell you together. I know I should have discussed it with you first but I saw him for lunch and it made sense to invite him. You don't really mind, do you?'

'Well, I'm not exactly thrilled but I don't have much choice now, do I? So what is it you want to tell us?'

'I can't say now. I'll tell you on Sunday.'

'You're being very mysterious, Ciara, it's not like you. Is there something wrong?' Mag looked at her more closely.

'No, this is good news.' Ciara stopped as if not quite sure of the truth of that. 'Well, I hope that's the way you'll see it.'

Mag felt her stomach lurch. She paused a moment before asking quietly, 'You're not pregnant, are you, Ciara?'

Ciara was obviously surprised by the question but answered evenly. 'No, I'm not, Mam, don't worry, you can put that thought out of your head. Don't start imagining all sorts of scenarios. Just wait until Sunday and I'll tell you then.'

'All right then, if that's what you want.' Mag tried to banish the worries that insisted on burrowing through her mind. She really had to stop being so melodramatic. It was probably nothing. It wouldn't be the first time that Ciara's passionate nature swept her up in some all-absorbing scheme that subsided to insignificance over time.

Ciara grinned. 'Thanks, Mam. I'll explain everything on Sunday.'

'It's been a while since he was here,' Mag mused as she stood up to clear away the table. She shook away the thought. 'Now, what about dinner this evening? Are you eating here?'

'Yes, that would be good. I'm going out after that.' Ciara drained the last of her tea and put her mug in the sink.

Later, Mag would try to recapture every second of that evening, to string together every inconsequential word exchanged as if they were scattered pearls from a broken necklace. While they prepared and ate dinner together, they laughed and talked until Ciara, realising how late it was, dashed upstairs to change.

When she came back down again, Mag thought her daughter looked older and more sophisticated than she had ever seen her

look before. She had smoothed and tamed her unruly hair so that it looked pretty and feminine. She was wearing make-up which she rarely did and had put on a denim skirt with a blue-green top. For her mother's benefit, she sashayed down the stairs, as if she were an old-time movie star entering a saloon full of admiring men. Then, she laughed and the pose evaporated.

'Well, how do I look?' the real Ciara said.

Mag longed to reach across this new-found elegance and hug her closely but she held back.

'You look great, lovey,' she said. She heard a jangling noise and picked up her daughter's hand to examine her wrist. 'Oh, it's your grandmother's charm bracelet. I've never seen you wear it before.'

Mag's mother had left the heavy, red-gold bracelet to Ciara. Numerous charms hung from it; a tiny treasure chest; an antlered deer; a die; a revolving disc that seemed to have random markings on both sides but the words 'I LOVE YOU' could be read on it when it was spun. Looking at these familiar pieces drew Mag back to a safe time of loving, chapped hands and sugar sandwiches, a time when her mother was still alive.

'I know. I always thought it was too old-fashioned before but they're coming back into fashion and anyway I like to get dressed up from time to time.' Ciara picked up her battered leather jacket and large shoulder bag and gave her mother a quick peck on the cheek. 'I'd better go or I'll be late. Please don't stay awake for me. I know you do even if you say you don't. Sleep well and I'll see you tomorrow.'

Through the sitting room window, Mag saw the lights of Ciara's blue Golf flash and then diminish as she drove away. The house was quiet afterwards, a quiet that even the senseless babble from the television couldn't chase away.

Chapter 3

Dennis was a deep sleeper. Mag used to tease him that sometimes he fell asleep even before his head hit the pillow. He used to reply that it was the sure sign of a clear conscience. That night, he struggled to haul his mind up through the deep well of sleep towards wakefulness. When he managed to register what was happening around him, he realised that someone was pressing persistently on his door-bell and had been for a while. He fumbled his way out of bed and down the narrow stairs of his small flat above the garage.

When he opened the door and saw the two uniformed Gardaí standing on his doorstep, the wisps of sleep that still lingered were blown away by the cold wind of fear.

'Could we come inside to have a word?' The voice of the Garda was low and wary. He was the older of the two and looked to be about fifty, the same age as Dennis. The other one, at least twenty years younger, seemed ill-at-ease and turned away as if searching for an invisible suspicious presence in the dark, empty street behind him.

'Garda Mullins.' The older man identified himself. 'And this here is Garda Cuff. You are Dennis Byrne; I presume?'

'That's right.' Dennis took a step back into the hallway which was too small to accommodate the three men comfortably. He led them upstairs to the living room. Dim, ghostly shadows created by the light from the street lamps filtered through the curtains. He banished them with a flick of a switch.

'Is there something wrong?' Even as he asked the question, his mind was preparing to move barriers into position to block out what they might tell him.

Mullins removed his cap. 'First of all, you might like to sit down.'

Dennis looked from one to the other. 'No, I don't want to sit down. What's this about?'

The two men exchanged a glance. Mullins continued. 'I'm afraid we have bad news. It's about your daughter, Ciara Byrne. She's been in a car accident.'

Strangely, Dennis felt relief. Hope anaesthetised his mind. It was just an accident. So Ciara was alive. She might be hurt but she was alive. She'd be OK, he'd make sure of that.

'My God, how is she?' Still, he was afraid to know.

'Are you sure you don't want us to sit down?' Cuff looked down at his uniform and tugged at his tunic.

'No, I don't,' Dennis snapped. 'Now tell me how my daughter is.'

Mullins visibly steeled himself before he spoke again. 'I'm afraid she died instantly, Mr. Byrne.'

Dennis stared at him. His mind shut down. A world without Ciara couldn't exist. 'That's not true. No fucking way.' He clenched his fists. He wanted to punch the man in the face. Mullins looked as if he might let him. Cuff was nervous. They were silent. Finally, after Dennis's shoulders slumped, Garda Mullins took his arm and guided him to a leather armchair as if he were a helpless old man. He nudged him to sit.

Cuff made his way to the open kitchen area at the other end of the room. 'Can I get you a glass of water? Or a cup of tea?'

'Water's fine,' Mullins said shortly. He pulled over a chair and sat opposite Dennis. 'How are you feeling, Dennis? Would you like us to call a doctor?'

Dennis heard these words floating towards him, coming from a long distance away. Who were these men who had come into his house in the middle of the night and were behaving as if they knew him?

Mullins continued. 'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You can come and make the formal identification now or later if you want but there appears to be no doubt. It's your daughter.'

He wanted to ask how sure they were that she was really gone but a small part of him knew how ridiculous that question was before he expressed it.

'What…? How?' His mind couldn't even formulate the questions he needed to ask. All other information seemed as nothing beside the infinity of the revelation.

The two guards looked at each other and then Mullins proceeded. 'The accident happened in the Dublin Mountains, on the Enniskerry road about two hours ago. She was alone. She drove over the side of the mountain. There was no other vehicle involved.' He paused. 'Death was instantaneous. She didn't suffer.'

Each word was enunciated clearly and slowly as though he were speaking to someone who didn't understand English very well.

Dennis glared at him. 'Where is she now?'

'The investigation team are still at the scene of the accident. They will transfer her shortly to the morgue at St. Vincent's Hospital. You'll have plenty of time to get there before them.'

'Does Mag… Does her mother know?' The thought materialised before him through the mists of his mind and he hung on to it like a drowning man clinging to a life-buoy. It gave him

something to do, something to focus on rather than the horrible reality.

'No, not yet. I presume you're divorced or separated. She had both of your names and addresses in her note-book. We were planning to go to see her mother now and tell her…' He paused and his voice softened. 'Was she your only child?'

The use of the past tense stabbed viciously at Dennis's heart.

'Yes, there was only Ciara. I'll tell her mother. I'd prefer if it was me.' Dennis was already out of his seat and heading to his bedroom to look for clothes to wear.

'Of course, if that's what you want but let us take you there. It's not safe for you to drive at the moment.'

'No. I'll take my own car. Then, I'm going to Enniskerry.'

'Do you think that's advisable, sir?' Cuff said. 'You've had a terrible shock. You should take it easy.'

'And what do you suggest, Garda?' Dennis snarled at the man who held up his palms in a pacifying gesture. 'That I should go back to bed? I'll tell you what I am going to do: I am going to tell my wife what has happened and then I am going to see my daughter, whether you like it or not.'

Somewhere in his brain, Dennis registered that he had called Mag his wife for the first time in many years although that is what she still was, officially. In recent years, he had tended to refer to her as Ciara's mother but, with a flash of pain, he realised that this last link connecting them had been cut.

Dennis got into his car. The illuminated digits of the clock glowed 04:43. The streets were quiet, unnaturally quiet, and he quickly covered the two kilometres that separated his garage from Mag's home. It was only when he shut off the engine and the ensuing silence overwhelmed him that he quaked in front of the task he had taken on.

He didn't have long to wait. As he switched off the lights of his car, he noticed the curtains in Mag's bedroom twitch and before he could reach the front door, it opened.

Mag stood on the doorstep. Her soft brown curls were messy but her clear blue eyes were sharp and lucid. She wore a long blue dressing-gown, the same colour as her eyes, which she clutched around her. Her face was white. She said nothing as she stepped backwards to let Dennis in. Mag stood motionless at the end of the stairs. She gripped the bannister. Dennis raised his eyes to the level of her hands but could go no higher. He addressed her gleaming white knuckles.

'She's gone, Mag,' Dennis said. 'Ciara's gone. There was a car accident. She's dead.'

Mag swayed and he thought she was going to faint. He leapt forward to catch her but she stabilised herself and sat down heavily on the last step of the stairs. A whimper of anguish escaped her. She held her head in her hands and, in the silence, he could hear her heart breaking.

'The Gardaí just came to the flat to tell me.' His voice cracked. 'I don't know much. The accident happened on the Enniskerry road. Apparently, she went off the road on a bend and crashed into the mountain below. I'm going there now. I have to see what's going on. Do you want me to call someone to come and stay with you?'

She took a tremulous breath. 'No, I'll go with you.' She looked at him, her eyes defying him to deny her the right. He hesitated but, acknowledging the futility of resistance, he nodded. He felt awkward; he didn't know how to react with this woman who had once, in another lifetime, been his heart, his soul.

'I'll be ready in a minute,' Mag said. Halfway up the stairs, she stopped for a moment and looked down at him. 'Oh, Dennis,' she

said. The sounds emerged with a painful struggle, like bubbles bursting to the surface. He kept his head down, afraid to look at her. They both stood there for a second before her heavy steps continued to the top of the staircase. She returned a couple of minutes later dressed. She ran her fingers through her short curls to put them in order and picked up her bag and coat from the hallway.

'Let's go then,' she said.