



THE TRAP

A N O V E L

CATHERINE RYAN HOWARD

INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PRAISE FOR CATHERINE RYAN HOWARD

“Topical, twisty, and with a real heart-stopper of a moment halfway in that’ll make you turn the lights back on.”

—GILLIAN MCALLISTER, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR

“Dark and witty and clever. An original and highly gripping read, I couldn’t turn the pages fast enough. Catherine Ryan Howard has a deliciously dark imagination and always tells a good tale.”

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OF *DAISY DARKER*

“This one will chill you to the bone! *The Trap* is a taut police procedural, psychological thriller, and family drama crafted into one brilliant, breathless thrill ride. This might be my favorite Catherine Ryan Howard novel yet!”

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FORGOTTEN*

“Dark, creepy and very clever, *The Trap* will lure you in and keep you captive until the very last page. Catherine Ryan Howard is the Queen of the Unguessable Twist.”

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“*The Trap* is an irresistibly suspenseful, heart-pounding read, full of perfectly executed twists. I never wanted to stop turning the pages. It has everything anyone could possibly want in a thriller.”

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“A skillful, compelling read, I absolutely loved it.”

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“Everything a thriller should be: clever, page-tearing, devastating. Catherine Ryan Howard makes you feel for her characters so much, whether you love them or absolutely loathe them. It’s impossible to stop reading—or to stop thinking about *The Trap*, long after you’re done.”

—ABIGAIL DEAN, AUTHOR OF *GIRL A*

“*The Trap* is everything you want in a book—breathless pace, clever plot, addictive characters, and very pertinent social commentary on how victims are judged. Whip smart, utterly absorbing, and unputdownable.”

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“A taut, gripping page-turner. Catherine Ryan Howard at her dark and disturbing best.”

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“Dark, gripping, and terrifying with a killer final twist in the blistering, head-spinning final pages. Utterly brilliant!”

—ELLERY LLOYD, AUTHOR OF *THE CLUB*

“A breakneck thriller with so many twists and turns that your head will spin. I absolutely tore through *The Trap*.”

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“Catherine Ryan Howard is an absolute master of suspense...A must-read.”

—MAY COBB, AUTHOR OF *THE HUNTING WIVES*

“A heart-in-your-mouth, punch-you-in-the-gut, gripping thriller. Everything you’d expect from a Ryan Howard read. Chilling, page-turning, and shocking! This book will leave you breathless, terrified, and desperate for more.”

—L. C. NORTH, AUTHOR OF *THE UGLY TRUTH*

“It’s no surprise Catherine Ryan Howard has done it again. I’m always amazed and flabbergasted by her books, and *The Trap* is no exception. Howard’s creativity knows no bounds, and neither do her twists! I dare you to figure this one out.”

—SAMANTHA DOWNING, INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *MY LOVELY WIFE*

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She'd been *out-out*, and town had been busy. Stumbled out of the club to discover that there wasn't a taxi to be had. Spent an hour trying to flag one down with one hand while trying to hail one via an app with the other until, resigned, she'd pushed her way on to a packed night bus headed not far enough in sort of the right direction. Her plan was to call someone at its terminus, apologize for waking them and ask them to come get her, but by the time she got there—to a tiny country village that was sleepy by day and empty by night—her phone had died. She'd been the last passenger and the bus had driven off before she could think to ask the driver if she could perhaps borrow *his* phone. It was four in the morning and beginning to drizzle, so she'd started walking. Because, really, what other choice did she have?

This is the story she tells herself as she leaves the village and crosses into the dark its streetlights had been holding back.

All around her, the night seems to thrum with disapproval.

Silly girl. This is exactly the kind of thing your mother told you not to do. There has to be some kind of personal responsibility, doesn't there?

An ex-boyfriend had once told her that his favorite part of a night out was the walk home. Just him and his thoughts on deserted streets, the evening's fun still warm in his chest. He had no tense wait for a taxi. He

didn't need to walk to the front door with his keys squeezed between his fingers, ready to scratch, to disable. He had never texted a thumbs-up emoji to anyone before he went to sleep so that they could go to sleep as well.

The part of the night he loved was the part *she* had to survive.

When she'd told him this, he'd pulled her close and kissed her face and whispered, "I'm so sorry that you think that's the world you live in," in so patronizing a tone that, for a brief moment, she'd considered using her keys on his scrotum.

The drizzle gives way to a driving rain. When the footpath runs out, her high heels make her stumble on the crumbling surface of the road. The balls of her feet burn and the ankle strap on the right one is rubbing her skin away.

For a while, there's a watery moonlight inviting forms to take on a shape and step out of the night—a telephone pole, a hedgerow, a pothole—but then the road twists into a tunnel of overhanging trees and the dark solidifies. She can't see her own legs below the hem of her dress now. Her body is literally disappearing into the night.

And then, through the roar of the rain—

A mechanical whine.

Getting louder.

She thinks *engine* and turns just in time to be blinded by a pair of sweeping high beams. Twin orbs are still floating in her vision when the car jerks to a stop alongside her. Silver, some make of saloon. She stops too. The passenger window descends in a smooth, electronic motion and a voice says, "You all right there?"

She dips her head so she can see inside.

There's a pair of legs in the driver's seat, lit by the blue glow of the dashboard display, wearing jeans.

"Ah . . . Yeah." She bends lower again to align her face with the open window just as the driver switches on the ceiling light. He is a man in his

thirties, with short red hair and a splotchy pink face of irritated skin. His T-shirt is on inside out; she can see the seams and, at the back of his neck, the tag. There are various discarded items in the passenger-side footwell: fast-food wrappers, a tabloid newspaper, a single muddy hiking boot. In the back, there's a baby seat with a little stuffed green thing belted into it. "I got off the night bus back in the village, and I was going to ring for a lift but—"

"Sorry." The man taps a forefinger to a spot just behind his left ear, a move which makes her think of her late mother applying a perfume she seemed to fear was too expensive to ever actually spritz. "My hearing isn't great."

"I got off the night bus," she says, louder this time.

He leans towards her, frowning. "Say again?"

The passenger side window isn't all the way down. An inch or so of glass digs into the palm of her hand when she puts it on the door and leans her head and shoulders into the opening, far enough for the roar of the rain to fall away into the background, for the sickly sweet smell of a pine air freshener to reach her nostrils and—it occurs to her—for the balance of her body weight to be inside the car.

If he suddenly drove off, he'd take her with him.

"I got off the night bus in the village," she says. "I was going to ring home for a lift, but my phone died."

She pulls the device from her pocket, a dead black mirror, and shows it to him.

"Ah, feck," he says. "And I came out without mine. Although maybe . . ." He starts rooting around, checking the cubbyholes in the driver's door, the cup holders between the front seats, inside the glove box. There seems to be a lot of stuff in the car, but not whatever he's looking for. "I thought I might have a charger, but no. Sorry."

"It's OK," she says automatically.

“Look, I’m only going as far as the Circle K, but they’re open twenty-four hours and they have that little seating area at the back. Maybe you could borrow a charger off someone there. Or they might even let you use their phone. It’d be a better place to wait, at least?”

“Yeah.” She pulls back, out of the window, and looks down the road into the empty black. “Is it far?”

“Five-minute drive.” He’s already reaching to push open the passenger door and she steps back to make room for the swing of its arc. “Hop in.”

Somehow, the last moment in which she could’ve decided not to do this has passed her by. Because if she steps back now, pushes the passenger door closed and says, “Thanks, but I think I’ll walk,” she may as well say, “Thanks for your kindness, but I think you might be a monster so please leave me alone.”

And if he *is* a monster, then he won’t have to pretend not to be anymore, and she won’t be able to outrun him, not out here, not in these shoes—and where is there to run to?

And if he *isn’t* a monster, well, then . . .

It’s perfectly safe to get in the car.

She gets in the car.

She pulls the passenger door closed. *Clunk*. The ceiling light switches off, leaving only the dashboard’s eerie glow and whatever’s managed to reach them from this wrong end of the headlights. Her window is ascending. Then, as the engine revs and he pulls off, she hears another sound.

Click.

The central locking system.

“So,” he starts. “Was it a good night, at least?”

Now the seatbelt sensor sounds and she fumbles in the shadows, first for the belt itself and then for its buckle, both of which feel vaguely sticky.

“It was all right,” she says. “If I’d known how much trouble I’d have getting home, I might have just stayed there. How about you?”

Why are you out driving around at four in the morning?

“I was fast asleep,” he says, “when I got an elbow to the ribs. I’m on an Alka-Seltzer run. My wife is expecting our first, and she can’t eat a thing now without getting heartburn. You got kids?”

She says, “*God* no,” before she can think to be a bit less aghast at the idea of doing the thing this man and his wife have already done.

He laughs. “There’s plenty of time for all that.”

In front of them, the surface of the road is dashing beneath the wheels. The wipers slash furiously across the windscreen, back and forth, back and forth. There are no lights visible in the distance.

They don’t pass any other cars.

He asks her where she’s living and she provides the name of the townland, purposefully avoiding specifics.

A sideways glance. “You there by yourself, or . . . ?”

She wants to say no and leave it at that, but saying that risks coming across as unfriendly, mistrustful, suspicious. But telling him she lives with her boyfriend is telling him that she *has* a boyfriend, and that could sound pointed, like she’s trying to stop him from getting any ideas, which would also be accusing him of *having* ideas, and offending him might anger him, this man she doesn’t know who’s driving the locked car she’s in. But then, saying yes would be telling him that the young woman with the dead phone he just plucked off a country road has no one waiting up for her, no one wondering where she is, and if she doesn’t come home tonight it could be hours or even days before anyone realizes—

“I live with my sister,” she lies.

“That’s who’ll come and get you?”

“If I can find a way to call her, yeah.”

“They’re a curse, those bloody phones. Always dead when you need them.”

And yet, he’s come out without his.

Would you, with a pregnant wife at home?

Maybe you would, she concedes, if you’re only on a quick run to the shop.

“You know, you look really familiar to me,” he says, and then he turns his head to look at her some more, for a fraction longer than she’d like on this road at this speed and in these conditions. “Have we met before?”

“Don’t think so.” She’s sure she’s never seen this man before in her life.

“Where do you work?”

She tells him that she works for a foreign bank, in an office block near the airport, and he makes a *hmm* noise.

Twenty, thirty seconds go by in silence. She breaks it by asking, “Is it much further?” Because all that is out there in the night ahead of them is more night.

Still no cars. Still no lights.

No sign of anything except more road and dark and rain.

“No.” He jerks the gearstick with more force than he has before and, as he does, she feels his warm fingers graze the cold, damp skin of her bare knee. The touch is right on the line between an accidental graze and an intentional stroke. His eyes don’t leave the road. “Nearly there.”

“Great,” she says absently.

She doesn’t know what to do. If it *was* an accident, wouldn’t he apologize? Or is he not apologizing because there’s nothing to apologize for, because he hasn’t even realized he did it, because he didn’t *do* anything at all?

The rain is heavier now, a steady roar on the roof.

“Awful night,” he says. “And you’re not exactly dressed for it, are you?”

Then he turns and openly appraises her, and there can be absolutely no mistake about this. His gaze crawls across her lap, combing over the thin cotton of her dress which, wet, is clinging to the outline of her thighs.

It feels like some slinking predator, cold and oily, slithering across her skin.

She moves her hands to her knees in an attempt to cover up and waits for his eyes to return to the road while a cold dread swirls in the pit of her stomach.

But then, she *isn't* dressed for this weather. That's a statement of fact.

Jesus Christ, you really can't say anything these days, can you?

“Yeah, well,” she says, with a brief smile she hopes won't encourage him *or* antagonize him. “I thought I'd be able to hop in a cab.”

“They really need to do something about the taxi shortage.”

“Yeah, the—”

“Especially considering the missing women.” He glances at her. “How many is it now? Three? Four?”

The temperature of her cold dread has dropped a few degrees to an icy, nauseating fear.

But then, what if it were a woman behind the wheel? She wouldn't think anything of this. They'd just be making conversation. They'd just be talking about what everyone was talking about, discussing what was in the news.

Now he's pointing towards the mess at her feet.

“Did you see the latest?” he says. “It's on the front of the paper, there.”

The safest option feels like reaching for the folded tabloid. As she picks it up, it obligingly unfurls to reveal its front-page headline, screaming at her in large caps. MISSING WOMEN: SEARCH CONTINUES IN WICKLOW MOUNTAINS. There are two pictures underneath it: a large

one showing people in white coveralls picking through a wild landscape, and a smaller one of a young, smiling brunette holding a dog in her arms.

She is familiar to anyone who follows the news. Not just the woman herself, but this specific picture of her.

“That’s not that far away from here, you know,” he says. He jerks his chin to indicate the road ahead. “If you drove for fifteen minutes up into the hills, you’d probably be able to see the floodlights.” A pause. “They’re always at that, though, aren’t they? Conducting searches. Everyone gets all excited, but they never find anything. Thing is, people just don’t understand how much space we got up here, you know? My old fella was always giving out about that, back when the first lot went missing. The ones from the nineties. There was always some reporter or relative or whatever saying, ‘Oh, she’s up in the Wicklow Mountains, we just need to search.’ They’d think if you just looked everywhere, you’d find them. But you *can’t* look everywhere, you see. Not around here. There’s just too much ground to cover.” Another pause, this one a shade longer. “So they probably *are* out here somewhere, but no one’s ever going to fucking find them.”

There’s a pinching pain in her chest now. She forces a breath down into her lungs in an attempt to alleviate it, but it feels like the oxygen can’t get past her throat.

“You know,” he says, turning towards her, “you have the look of one of them.”

She lets the paper drop.

She thinks about the *clunk* sound the passenger door made when she pulled it closed. How a few minutes ago, it might have represented rescue. A portal to the warm and the dry, to lights and transport, to other people, ready to save her from the dark abyss of this endless night.

But what if every threat that dark had posed had climbed into the car with her?

What if she was trapped in here now, with them?

With *him*?

“Is it much further?” she asks again.

He doesn’t answer.

This was a mistake, she can see that now. She’s been foolish, full of bad ideas. She’s not cut out for this.

Keeping her eyes forward, she puts her left hand down below her left thigh and starts surreptitiously exploring the door panel with her fingertips. Nothing feels like a button that will reverse the lock. And even if she gets the door open, what then? She’s strapped in and releasing her seatbelt will trip the alarm, alerting him. She’s wearing a small cross-body bag. It has a strap. She could take it off and loop the strap around his head, but it’s a cheap, fast-fashion item; it could snap, and even if it doesn’t, what’s her plan exactly? To choke him, she’d really have to be behind him, but once she makes a move there won’t be time to climb into the back seat of the car. And he’s driving. If she does anything, the car will crash. She has a flash of his face inches above hers, his skin even redder, his features strained, one rough hand around her neck and the other fumbling in her underwear as he prepares to force the burn of his body into the delicate depths of hers, and she thinks that maybe dying in a car crash is the better option. She could suddenly reach over and yank on the steering wheel, forcing them off the road, or pull on the handbrake, which she thinks would lock up the wheels and send them skidding.

But what if there’s no need?

What if she’s overreacting? What has he *done*, really?

What if she crashes this car and he turns out to be just a man and not a monster?

But what if he just *wants* her to think like that, so she does nothing until it’s too late to do anything at all?

“My sister will be freaking out,” she manages to say, the words feeling dry and dusty on her tongue, sounding limp and untrue even to her.

“At this time of night?” In her peripheral vision, she sees his shrug. “Nah. She’s probably dead to the world.”

Dead to the world.

The car is a depressurized airlock whose hatch has just been blown out into space by those words. There’s no air left in it at all. The pinching in her chest flares up, igniting, and now every attempt at a breath feels like a searing burn. Her chest won’t move, won’t expand, and it feels like it’s getting smaller, clenching like a fist, and her throat is closing, and she—

Lights.

Up ahead. Lots of them.

So close she thinks they must be a mirage.

The headlights have punched a hole in the night big enough for an entire service station to get through. It’s the one he promised, the Circle K. She can see a floodlit forecourt. A canopy in colors she recognizes, a familiar logo illuminated by a spotlight. A glowing square of white fluorescents—the shop—with bundles of peat briquettes stacked outside its glass façade and handwritten signs advertising special offers. There are even other people: a man leaning against a Jeep parked at one of the pumps and a woman walking out of the store’s automatic doors, twirling her car keys around her finger.

When he pulls in and parks by the shop’s entrance, it’s so bright it feels like daytime. After she releases her seatbelt, she has no trouble finding the handle that will open her door, but it doesn’t work.

It’s still locked.

“Oh,” he says. “Hang on one sec—”

Click.

She presses down on the handle again and this time, it opens easily.

A tidal wave of relief vaporizes all the adrenaline in her system, leaving her cold and clammy. Something lurches in her stomach and her mouth fills with a sour, acrid taste she can’t seem to swallow away, and she realizes