# The Bird Woman

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Extract

# Chapter 1

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The first time ever I saw Liam he was standing at the bar of Hartley's in Belfast. I was married to Robbie then — I'd been married to Robbie for near on four years for all I was only twenty-three. I was married and that was that; I'd no more thought of going off with anyone else than of dandering down to the travel agents and booking myself a nice wee holiday on the moon.

I was to meet Robbie around eight, along with a bunch of his drinking friends that he'd known from way back. I walked in, and the minute I saw Robbie I knew from the cut of him that he hadn't just strolled through the door. Stan and Rita were there, they were sitting at a table along with a couple more of our crowd, plus a black-haired girl with a widow's peak who I'd never laid eyes on before. She was wearing jeans and a sweater, and she hadn't a scrap of makeup on her, though it was Friday night and there wasn't another woman in the place without heels and lipstick and mascara. She wasn't talking to anyone, and no one was talking to her.

Robbie was up at the bar buying a round, and he called me over.

"Mike phoned," he told me. "Christine started early. He's away up to the hospital to hold her hand —"

"I thought she wasn't due for another month?"

"So did she. But she got ahead of herself, and nothing would do her but she had to have Mike. I told them a bit of a story at work, and they're not expecting me back till sometime next week. I'm covering for Mike while he's otherwise occupied, I've been round at the gallery all afternoon.

"This is Liam," he added. I looked up at this tall, thickset man with brown curly hair and grey eyes. "He's from Dublin, so he is. He's up here about a show in the Arts Council Gallery."

Robbie was an electrician with a firm on the Lisburn Road, but he did nixers on the side whenever they came his way. His mate Mike did the lighting for the Arts Council Gallery, and he made sure to always ask Robbie when he needed an extra hand.

"Robbie's been great," Liam said. "We've been sorting out what we'll need for the show —"

Robbie nodded, but he didn't say anything. I knew right away he didn't like this Liam. Then the drinks came and more chairs were fetched across, and when everyone finally settled down again, there I was, beside Liam.

Liam was introduced all round and so was the black-haired one in the jeans, whose name, it seemed, was Noreen. Liam told us he was a sculptor, and your woman Noreen was a potter from Cork and something called the Crafts Council of Ireland was organising a group exhibition in the North in November. They were up here in Belfast, he said, to look at the "space."

No one was listening; none of us cared. I saw Stan look at Robbie, and his eyes closed down from inside, plus that wicked wee pulse that means he's up to something was showing beside his

mouth. After that, I knew not to bother my head with them; that look of Stan's meant Liam and Noreen wouldn't be with us for long.

Stan wouldn't be one for socialising with those from the other persuasion. Especially not when they came from the South.

Liam gave me a cigarette. I was only a few weeks out of the hospital and still smoking like a chimney. He brought out a lighter and stuck it under my nose and flicked it. It didn't light. He looked at it, surprised, then shook it and tried it again, but still it didn't light. I remember being surprised that he was surprised by his lighter not lighting; I mean, it isn't exactly unusual — lighters are always playing up or running out or just not working. I was watching him and thinking all this in an idle, distant sort of a way; then I glanced down at his other hand, laid flat on the table, and I got this terrible shock. It was a big hand, broad, with a thatch of brown hairs on the back and nails that weren't that clean. I looked, and the noise of the bar dropped away and I couldn't look anywhere else, for I knew for certain sure that I had some business with this Liam that I didn't want.

Business? Ah, tell the truth, Ellen. You knew this "business" of yours was bed, and maybe a whole lot more.

I dropped my cigarette, and it rolled onto the floor. I bent down and started fishing around for it, the sweat springing out on my skin. *I'm going crazy again,* I thought, though I wasn't seeing anything and nothing was happening that definitely shouldn't be happening; there was only this weird knowing-something-ahead-of-its-time that always frightens me stupid.

I didn't want to come up, I'd have stayed right there, safe among the chair legs, but Robbie was watching me like a hawk since the hospital, so I didn't dare.

I found the cigarette, wet through in a puddle of beer, then I

unbent myself and lifted my head up over the edge of the table. My eyes met Robbie's.

*For fuck's sake, woman,* Robbie's eyes said, *for fuck's sake get ahold of yourself —*

Implacable, his eyes. No softness, nowhere to hide. So I knocked back the vodka, straightened my backbone, and turned to this Liam and talked.

I drank a lot that night, and I wasn't the only one.

I was waiting for Stan — it was always Stan who made the moves — but he didn't; he let them sit on.

He'd glance across at Liam, who was labouring away, trying to get the conversation up and running; then he'd sneak a wee look at Noreen, but she'd given up and was staring into her glass.

Sound move. She wanted to go — any fool could tell you that — but she couldn't catch Liam's eye, he was way too busy with me.

I began to wonder what game Stan was playing. Stan could be cruel — a cat-and-mouse streak a mile wide. Was he waiting for Robbie to catch on that someone was trying too hard with his wife?

The paranoia was fairly setting in when Stan starts reminding Robbie we're meeting up with Suds Drennan and Josie at ten. Then he turns round to Liam, his face dead serious, and he tells him he's sorry but the place we've fixed to meet Suds and Josie in wouldn't be anything like the bar we're in now.

Liam nods and smiles warily. He knows he's being told something; he just hasn't figured out what.

Stan says what he means is the bar we're going to wouldn't be that mixed.

They're all attention, even Noreen. This is Belfast after all,

this is what they're here for. Stan says "hard line," he mentions their accents, he mentions the fact that Liam's called Liam, which is a Catholic name. . . . He lets his voice trail off regretfully. They understand.

Northerners love frightening Southerners — telling them what not to say, where not to go, where not to leave their Southern-registered cars — seeing their eyes grow large and round. The Southerners love it too, you can nearly hear them telling themselves what they'll tell their friends when they go back home down South.

Everyone loves it: the drama, the bomb blasts, the kick of danger in the air. So who's suffering, tell me that? No one at all, till some unreasonable woman starts into grieving over the daughter blown to bits, the son sitting rotting in jail, the husband shot through the head, his body thrown down an entry or dumped on waste ground.

Some woman, or maybe some man. For men grieve too, and even your hardest hard-man is not as hard as he likes to let on when it comes to next of kin. And children are soft; children cry easily and long.

It's a sorry business alright, we humans are a sorry business, the way it's all mixed up inside us, the ghoulish bits that come alive watching the horror, the soft, gentle bits that will go thinking the sky's fallen in when we find out that someone's not coming home to us ever, ever again.

Where was I? In Hartley's, 1988.

So we left them sitting there, the two of them, and went dandering off up the road to the Lancaster, which is a mixed bar, safe as houses, where you'll get served till two in the morning, no bother at all. And I was drunk, and frightened even through the drink. I thought if I could only get clear of Liam that awful feeling that he was my fate would vanish away.

At the Lancaster we fell in with the crowd we still knocked around with from student days, so we sat down and set about getting much drunker. And somewhere along the way Robbie began collecting money. He was organising a carry-out to drink back in the flat.



It had got so late it had turned into early. There was no drink left, half the crowd had gone home, and the rest were mostly passed out in their seats or they'd slithered down onto the floor. Suds was still hanging in there, but wee Peter Caulfield was out for the count and so was Suds's girlfriend, Josie.

Time for bed. Robbie made it up onto his feet, shook Stan awake, pulled out the spare blankets, and dumped them onto the floor. Stan was all for bedding down there and then, but Rita was soberer — she found their coats and somehow got him downstairs. Then she heaved his arm over her shoulders and staggered him off up the road.

Suds had given up; he was curled on the floor like a baby, and there was no way Josie was about to wake him up and take him home. I shook out a blanket and covered her up, then I threw another one over the foetal Suds. He stirred, tucked the edge of it in under his chin, smiled, and snuggled down deeper into the manky old carpet without once opening his eyes.

I thought I'd start lifting the glasses and bottles out into the kitchen, but I couldn't seem to aim my hand straight, so I sat and smoked a cigarette instead. I could drink for ages without passing out or vomiting in those days. I thought I was great and Robbie was proud of me; I never once stopped to ask myself did I like it or what was the point or was it worth the crucifying awfulness of the hangover the next day.

I was desperate for bed, but I held off joining Robbie; I

wanted to be certain sure that he wouldn't wake up. I didn't like sex with Robbie when he was really drunk, I could have been anyone or no one for all he cared, he was clumsy and rough and only thought of himself.

I'd have bedded down with the rest on the floor, but I knew there'd be no holding Robbie if he woke in the morning and I wasn't there alongside him where I belonged. He'd accuse me of doing I-don't-know-what with I-don't-know-who — then he'd take me by the shoulders and shake the teeth near out of my head while the rest of them scuttled off-side as fast as they could like so many crabs with the runs. And it was all in his head. There wasn't a sinner who wasn't way too afraid of him to look sideways at me, much less try to get a leg over Robbie's wife.

But if I hated Robbie in bed when he'd drunk too much, I hated him worse when we were out together and the drink took him in that twisted way it sometimes did. There were times he got so jealous I couldn't even take a light off someone. I'd be grabbed by the wrist, pulled from a room, pushed into a corner of some landing or hallway, and fucked against the wall. That was Robbie with the drink on him: not caring how I felt, not caring if anyone saw, not caring about anything except himself and whatever it was that was eating him alive.

I've seen me walk home holding my skirt closed to keep it up, torn knickers stuffed into my pocket, dead tear trails running down my face.

And in the morning he'd be all over me: how sorry he was, how he knew I didn't look at other men, how it was only the drink —

If he remembered at all, that is.

And I learned fast; I'd forgive him fast — at the start because I was shocked and ashamed, later because I knew if I didn't he'd stop being sorry and start into listing the things he'd seen me do

with his own two eyes. What I'd said to this one, how I'd flirted with that one —

It was a funny time, I can see that now, and I know what Liam means when he says he can't understand why I stood for it. But it wasn't like that — it wasn't a question of standing for things.

I was young, I didn't know much, I thought if he was that jealous it meant he was dying about me.

And I was dying about him — I really was — he was that good-looking and streetwise and together. Sometimes I'd be waiting for him and I'd see him coming up the street before he'd spotted me. Then I'd stand there, watching him, and I couldn't believe my luck.

# Chapter 2

When I met Robbie I was a good girl trying hard to be a bad one. I was at Queens, studying Russian and living in a flat with four girls from Lurgan who were all doing geography and knew each other from school. I'd got talking to one of them in the coffee bar at the end of the first week: they'd rented this flat, she said, and there was a room going spare if I didn't mind it being a wee bit poky.

"How poky's a wee bit poky?" I asked.

"There's space for a single bed. And a window as well, but it's too high up to see out."

I said yes right away. It was cheap, and already I hated my landlady. Besides, if there'd been enough room they'd have stuck in another bed and I'd have had to share. But they didn't really want me, nor I them. They were into country and western and the Scripture Union and cocoa in their pyjamas and studying hard. I wasn't, but I might as well have been. I was stuck with them, knowing there was more to this student-thing than I was getting, not knowing how I was going to lay hands on it. Until I met Robbie, that is, and everything changed.

It was in the canteen of the Students Union. I mostly didn't go there because it was cheaper to eat at the flat, but I was going to see a Russian film at the University Film Theatre and there wasn't time to go back before it began. There I was, a plateful of

food on a tray in one hand, cutlery from the plastic bins in the other, when Robbie knocked into my elbow and near sent the whole lot flying.

"Sorry," he said.

"That's alright," I said, though my fried egg had a wet, orange look to it and the chips and sausages were afloat in spilled Fanta. Then he was trying to give me his plate and I was refusing and he was insisting, and the end of it was we were sitting at the same table sharing his chips and his fry and I never did get to *The Battleship Potemkin* and the girl I was supposed to see it with never spoke to me again.

After that I was Robbie's girl.

I thought it had all been a providential accident, but a week hadn't passed before he was telling me he'd had me picked out, he was only waiting his chance.

"What d'you mean by that?" I asked him.

"I fancied you, stupid," he said, sliding his hand between my thighs. But I wasn't having that, or not right away, so I made him spell it out.

He'd fancied me, he said. He'd seen me around, but somehow I always vanished before he got near enough to speak. Then there I was, right under his nose, so he'd knocked into me, just to get talking like, and look how we'd ended up.

Robbie wasn't a student, but he lived two streets up and he shared a flat with students. He used the university canteen because it was a good place to pick up girls. He looked at me hard when he said the last bit, but I wasn't going to rise to that one; I knew it was sort of a test to see would I make a fuss.

I didn't rise, but I did take my courage in both hands and I asked him why he fancied me. I wasn't fishing for lies or for compliments either — I badly needed to know.

He said it was my hair, but he wouldn't say anything more.

Later, when we'd been to bed a few dozen times in about two days, he said he'd been right, so he had, I looked so repressed, a volcano waiting to blow.

I didn't say anything. Part of me was offended, and part of me was the opposite. *Repressed* at least held potential. And I sort of liked the volcano bit. But maybe he'd meant *frustrated?*

A couple of weeks later I moved into Robbie's flat. His flatmates smoked dope and drank way too much and never went near the Scripture Union. I was shy with them, but I liked them as well, and soon I knew loads of the wrong sort of people and felt I was halfway alive.

Just the same, it wasn't that long before we started looking around for a place of our own. It was Robbie's idea, but I was into it too. We wanted to be by ourselves.

We found a place and moved in, and Robbie began to talk about getting married. I'd say I was nearly flattered to begin with, but then it dawned on me that he meant it and I panicked.

I couldn't, I told him, I hadn't even finished first year. Besides, I was way too young, and everyone would think I was pregnant.

He gave me a funny look.

It was a shock that look, I can tell you.

"Hold on now," I said to him, hardly knowing what I was saying. "Marriage is one thing — I could maybe even get used to it. But not pregnancy. Pregnancy is definitely, definitely out."

He laughed and said he could always get a rise out of me, and when did I want to get married, what about early July? He'd take extra time, and we could go off somewhere over the Twelfth Holiday and I could start into my second year with a ring on my finger, then everyone would know who owned me.

You'd think, wouldn't you, that I'd have had the wit to hear that, but I didn't. I never had sense — my mother was never tired

telling me that — I never had any idea of what I was doing till it was done.

Before we were married I took Robbie home to Derry for the weekend. Londonderry, I should say, for I was a proper Protestant then, a paid-up member of the tribe. It only turned into Derry after I'd moved down South.

We went to Londonderry on the bus. Separate rooms and best behaviour. Robbie's idea. I could have told him for nothing we weren't about to get anyone's blessing.

My brother, Brian, took me aside about half an hour after the introductions.

"You're not *serious*, are you?" He didn't expect an answer.

I phoned my mother from Belfast for her verdict, though it was plain as the nose on her face what she'd thought. But I couldn't ever leave her be, I always had to force her hand, to make her spell things out in black and white.

There was a small, deep silence down the phone line. Then, in that neutral, damning voice of hers, she told me he was common.

And I laughed aloud, for he *was*, he was all the things she had reared me against — he was working-class, sectarian; he drank too much; he neither knew nor cared what people thought.

And there was I, the teacher's daughter.

I laughed, but she'd hurt me and she'd meant to.

Poor Robbie, he wanted me to have my family's blessing; he was trying in his own way to do right by me.

Dream on. The only thing in his favour was that he wasn't a Catholic, but even I couldn't make her say that out loud, for being sectarian was part of being common.

So that was that. My father was dead, and I'd no other siblings, which meant there was no one else to object except for

Robbie's family. And they did, by Christ they did. If they said I was the wrong girl for him then that was far and away the kindest thing they said.

None of them liked me. His brother Billy said four years, five at the most — it would take that long for the bed to cool. And there'd be no children — not unless I got caught — there'd be nothing to hold us together, so we'd part.

His sister Avril said my mother's unsayable: *at least she's a Protestant*. Which shocked his sister Rita, for it had never once occurred to her that anyone belonging to her would even think of marrying out.

They said all this to Robbie behind my back, knowing full well he'd repeat every word to my face. He wouldn't listen any more than I would. He booked the Registry Office, and he put the notice in the paper; then he told them they could come if they wanted or stay away, it was all the same to him.

We didn't even ask my family.

In the end they all came, but Billy was right, it was four years and only half a child, and yes, he was right again, I was taking no chances, I hadn't been on the Pill that first night with Robbie, but I was round at the family planning clinic first thing the next morning.

The baby — what there was of her — was only because I got drunk and slipped up.

You'll think me hard, but I wasn't hard, only very young. And you weren't reared there, you don't know what it is to grow up in a place where everything seems normal enough on the surface but underneath it's all distorted and wrong. And the worst part is that you don't even know it's distorted because for you it *is* normal, and if you don't leave it behind and live somewhere *truly* normal, you'll never find out.

I suppose the Catholics were right when they called it a war,

though our lot denied it. It was a war, but it wasn't like a normal war; there weren't any uniforms or fronts or advancing-and-retreating armies, and when the peace finally came there wasn't any going back home to your own place and learning how to forget. A civil war.

A few years back, Liam showed me a catalogue someone had sent him, the work of a German painter called Otto Dix. These were portraits Dix had done in Germany between the two World Wars, Liam said, when Germany was all busted up and the streets were full of profiteers and prostitutes and starving young soldiers minus their arms or legs.

But it wasn't despair that Otto Dix had painted; it was people who'd made money fast and were getting through the pain of the world by living as hard as they could. Black-marketeers, pimps, club owners, satirists. The paintings were normal, but at the same time they were distorted, they fairly glittered with rage and hopelessness, they hurt you as you looked. I glanced through the first few pages then shut the catalogue fast and put a big pile of ironed clothes down on top of it to cover it up. I wanted to be by myself with it, to turn the pages slowly and stare at the pictures, which frightened me yet somehow brought me home.

Robbie only ever struck me the once, and that was on account of his sister Rita leaving her husband and my not being home all night.

Rita was fifteen years older than Robbie, she had more than half-reared him, so his feelings were softer for her than for Avril or any of the brothers. Rita was married to a man by the name of Larry Hughes, who had strong paramilitary connections. Larry was UDA and no picnic to live with, but he'd got himself a longish stretch for aiding and abetting on a murder charge, so it was a good while since she'd had to.

Well, Rita buckled down, she went out to work, reared the two young ones, never looked at another man nor missed out on a prison visit. Not for Larry's sake, mind, but to keep Larry's comrades in the Organisation off her back — or that's what she told Robbie. And she told him she'd be gone the minute Larry was out, but he never really believed her. He thought it was only talk.

Larry did five years then got early release, and home he came. The key was in the lock, the fridge was stuffed with food, the whole place was spotless. But when Larry lifted his voice and yelled for Rita he knew from the feel of the silence that the house was empty.

He went mad. He went straight to the mother — no joy — then he went and got Robbie out of his work, for if anyone knew where she'd gone it would be Robbie.

But Robbie didn't know. He told Larry over and over till Larry had no choice but to believe him.

Larry started coming on heavy. He wanted her found or he'd know where to lay the blame, he told Robbie. Robbie was soft for his sister, he said, and every bit as bad as she was. He wasn't rational. Robbie was sorry for Rita, but in his book she shouldn't have left no matter what, so he let himself be worked on and shamed by Larry, and the end of it was that Robbie said he would find her, and off he went with Larry to leave no stone unturned.

They asked everyone, they looked everywhere, they even sent Avril to the women's refuge to check if she was there. But Rita wasn't in Belfast at all; she was on the boat with the kids and heading for London, where the cousin of an aunt-by-marriage had promised to make room for them till they got a start. The mother knew alright, but she wasn't saying. If Larry found Rita, the mood he was in, Rita wouldn't be walking for months.

So, no joy all over again, and off they went to a bar to make a few further enquiries. Larry started running Rita down. He said

she was a fat, idle, good-for-nothing bitch, a toe rag, not fit to lick the corns on his feet, and a whole lot more besides. Robbie took it for a bit then he said that was his sister Larry was slagging off, but Larry didn't care whose sister she was, he got worse and worse, till the filth fairly rolled off his tongue. So Robbie hit him — which took some courage — and soon they were rolling around on the floor among the chair legs, half the bar either joining in or trying to pull them apart.

Robbie made it home in the early hours. He was battered and bruised, his tail between his legs; he was looking for comfort, but I wasn't there.

No way was I there, I wasn't stupid. I was afraid of Larry, and there was a girl I was friendly with just round the corner who owned a passable sofa. I left no note, in case they came looking.

The next day I took my time. I went to a lecture then sat on in the coffee bar, and when I got home I let myself in very quietly and stood in the hallway, listening. Silence. The flat was empty, Robbie away back out to work. But he wasn't away back out to work. He was there, in the kitchen, waiting.

"Where were you?" he asked, but I didn't answer. He lifted his hand, and the black eye he gave me took weeks to lose its colour.

That was back in the early days, we weren't long married, and I suppose I bought into the hard-man myth along with near everyone else in Belfast at that time. And he was sorry, really sorry — he promised he'd never do it again, and he didn't.

But not doing it again was killing him — even I could see that — it was the reason he shook me till my teeth rattled; it was why he couldn't let me be when we were out together.

And he was a nice lad when he let himself off the hook. That's all he was, just a lad who thought he had to be a hard-man, take no shit, drink till he couldn't stand up, and look out for his own. He was bright too — every bit as clever as I was. He'd

grown up on the streets, education was crap, but a part of him hungered after it. That's why he hung round with students — it wasn't only to pick up girls, the way he let on. And he wasn't a hard-man either, he was a soft man with a hard-man's training. His own man as well, for he'd feinted and ducked and somehow stayed clear of the paramilitaries. Not so many — reared as he was — managed that at all.

So that was Robbie, poor Robbie that never did anything on me but what he'd been programmed to do: find a girl, stick a ring on her finger, get some kids on her, feed them and clothe them, and keep the whole show on the road whatever the cost. Well, we'll leave Robbie out of this now, I've nothing to hold against him — not the torn knickers, nor Barbara Allen, nor the hospital for the mind that came after the hospital that saw the last of Barbara Allen. He couldn't help himself. He was near as much a victim of himself as I was.

And those were strange times, and people found strange ways of coping. Sometimes down here I remember those times and hardly believe myself that some of the things that happened happened at all. And I couldn't ever talk about them to folk here. They'd think I was mad or I'd made them up.