

Movie-making can be murder.

The project

Final Draft, a psychological horror, being filmed at a house deep in a forest, miles from anywhere in the wintry wilds of West Cork.

The lead

Former soap-star Adele Rafferty has stepped in to replace the original actress at the very last minute. She can't help but hope that this opportunity will be her big break – and she knows she was lucky to get it, after what happened the last time she was on a set.

The problem

Something isn't quite right about *Final Draft*. When the strange goings-on in the script start to happen on set too, Adele begins to fear that the real horror lies *off* the page...

Catherine Ryan Howard is the author of *56 Days*, which was an overall No. 1 bestseller in Ireland and a Kindle top ten bestseller, as well as winning Crime Fiction Book of the Year at the Irish Book Awards 2021, and *The Nothing Man*, which shot straight to the top of the Irish bestseller charts on publication and was a Kindle No. 1 bestseller in the UK. Her work has been shortlisted for the CWA/John Creasey New Blood Dagger, the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Award for Best Novel, and for the Irish Crime Novel of the Year several times. Catherine's third novel, *Rewind*, is currently being developed for television. She lives in Dublin.

www.catherineryanhoward.com

Twitter: @cathryanhoward

Instagram: @cathryanhoward

Publicity enquiries

Tel: 020 7269 0246 Fax: 020 7430 0916

Email: KirstyDoole@atlantic-books.co.uk

Sales: Natasha Drewett

Tel: 020 7269 0249 Fax: 020 7430 0916

Email: NatashaDrewett@atlantic-books.co.uk

Atlantic Books

Ormond House,

26–27 Boswell Street,

London, WC1N 3JZ

Tel: 020 7269 1610

Fax: 020 7430 0916

Email: enquiries@atlantic-books.co.uk

RUN TIME

Catherine Ryan Howard



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[*dedication to come*]

v

The road is narrow, the edges of it crumbling, as if losing its battle to hold the treeline back.

Donal is tense behind the wheel. Grip tight, back ramrod-straight, eyes fixed on the road surface illuminated by the beam of the headlights. The rental is a seven-seater Volvo that gave him pause when he saw it first and made him sweat nervously when he found he had to step *up* into it. He's only ever driven his own succession of second-hand Nissan Micras, and only around and between cities on smooth, well-lit streets. This car is far bigger and more powerful, and this road is basically a boreen with ambition.

Underneath the wheels, he feels the surface start to gently rise. It's cutting through dense, gloomy forest, steadily thickening with darkness on either side of the car. Donal knows this is because it's gone six on an overcast, late-January evening, but it feels like it's because the forest is absorbing the light, sucking it in, swallowing it up whole.

Feeding on it.

'It's so creepy out here,' he says.

Steve, sitting in the passenger seat, snorts and says, 'That's, like, the whole idea?' in a tone that adds a silent *you idiot* on to the sentence's end.

A heat flares across Donal's face.

He's already downsized his goals from *Do such an amazing job that you and Steve Dade cement a years-long professional partnership that will culminate in you both on stage at the Kodak*

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Theatre holding a pair of little gold men to Don't get fired before shooting starts. Donal has never held an assistant director position before. Not even close unless you counted the word *assistant*. His most recent job was glorified receptionist-slash-dogsbody at a casting agency. Getting a gig as Steve Dade's AD on this was an incredibly lucky break and Donal cannot blow it.

The problem is that he's intensely aware of that and has been a ball of acute anxiety ever since he reported to set. He can only hope that when shooting starts tomorrow, he'll be better at his job than he's been at making conversation.

'This is such a waste of time,' Steve says. 'They're probably not even there.'

'We can leave a note.'

'Can't we just leave a note anyway?'

'Joanne asked that we speak to them,' Donal says, 'as a courtesy. That you do.'

Joanne is the owner of Cedarwood House, their set, and also this other, smaller property, Cedarwood Lodge. Steve had refused to spend the money to book out the lodge as well, so here they are, driving to warn the Airbnb-ers who *did* book it this weekend about the shoot.

Steve groans like a teenager who's just been ordered to go do his homework.

'What are they even *doing* out here?'

'Mini-break,' Donal says. 'A last-minute booking.'

'Who books a house in a place like this in *January*? Wait.' Steve twists in his seat to look back down the road. 'Did you miss the turn? She said the gates were a mile apart. We should have— *There!*'

This exclamation coincides with him jutting an arm across Donal's face to point at something on the driver's side, obstructing Donal's view and making him slam a foot on the brake in panic.

The car screeches and shudders to a violent stop that jerks both men forward against their seatbelts before shoving them back against them again.

'Dude,' Steve says. 'What the fuck?'

Donal mumbles an apology even though it was clearly Steve's fault, then looks for what Steve was pointing at.

The right headlight has found a wooden sign, hand-painted and peeling, nailed to a tree trunk at the edge of the road: CEDARWOOD LODGE, above a black arrow. In the gloom beyond, Donal can just about make out that the arrow is pointing to a pair of wrought-iron gates hung between two stone pillars. One stands open, inviting them to turn on to what looks like a dirt track through the trees that immediately disappears into a dense, inky blackness.

'Cedarwood,' Steve scoffs. 'Where did they get the name? Aren't these – what are Christmas trees?'

'Firs,' Donal answers. 'And maybe they're U2 fans.' He turns to find Steve looking at him blankly. 'That's where Bono grew up. Cedarwood Road. In Glasnevin. They have a song about it. On *Songs of Innocence*.'

The blankness is morphing into bemusement, so Donal clears his throat and looks back at the gates, hoping the gloom in the car will hide his blushing cheeks. He just should stop talking to Steve entirely. Become mute. Stop the stupidity that is apparently intent on constantly leaking out of his mouth in the presence of this man.

‘Go on, then,’ Steve says, pointing. ‘Let’s go.’

Donal eyes the narrow entrance. ‘I should hop out and open the second gate, shouldn’t I?’

‘Don’t be daft. You’ve *loads* of room.’

‘Are you sure? I don’t think—’

‘It’s not a bloody *bus* you’re driving.’

It’s not a bus, no, but the gap made by the single open gate does not look as wide as the vehicle Donal actually *is* driving.

He bites his lip to stop himself from saying this out loud and lowers his window in the futile hope that this will somehow help him see in this dark. He swaps the brake for the accelerator and begins to turn the wheel, his grip slipping a little on a surface made moist by his own sweat. Tentatively he noses the car through the gap inch by inch, barely breathing, braced for the horror sound of a scrape.

Once he sees the rear of the vehicle has cleared the second, closed gate, he lets his muscles relax with warm relief and, accidentally, breathes a sigh of one too.

‘All right, *Granny*,’ Steve says.

It is indeed a dirt track beyond the gates, narrower than the road they’ve just left and dotted with unexpected mounds and water-filled potholes. The chassis bounces over and into every one, while Donal winces in time. Every cent on this shoot counts – because there’s so few of them – so of course they opted for the cheapest insurance cover on the car, the policy that probably says if you do any damage at all, you’ll have to pay for it out of your own pocket.

‘This is *so* pointless,’ Steve says. ‘They’re not even going to hear anything. Not all the way out here.’

And then, as if on cue, they hear something: a high-pitched, otherworldly, testicle-retracting shriek. Loud and getting louder, because whatever is making it is heading right for them.

A set of red glowing brake lights appear on the track up ahead. Except they're not brake lights, because they can't be, because they're too high up off the ground.

Not lights, but *eyes*. Glowing red, in the middle of two enormous wings.

On something that's *flying*.

At high speed.

Directly at them.

At the windshield.

The shrieking takes on a kind of raw, guttural sound that reminds Donal of the demons that get exorcised from dead-eyed, white-haired children in the kind of seventies horror movies he doesn't have the stomach to watch. He jams on the brakes just as he hears Steve say, 'What the—' and then the shrieking reaches a fever-pitch that makes Donal's eardrums thrum with pain, and then there's yelling too, and then a *whooshing* sound, as the ... the *thing*, this huge, black, feathered *thing* with a pair of glowing red eyes swoops past them and over the car and disappears into the night.

Silence.

Utter silence. As if, all around them, the dark is holding its breath.

Donal is holding his, *has* been holding his for way too long to be healthy, and now he starts gasping and coughing and trying to swallow down lungfuls of air, while also trying *not* to do this because he's pretty sure he just made a fool of himself and nearly

crashed the car and almost wet his pants because of an owl.

An owl.

Who, flying directly into their headlights, looked surprisingly large and like he – she? – had red eyes.

‘What,’ Steve says. ‘The fuck. Was *that*?’

‘An owl.’ Donal thinks he’s redeeming himself by saying this. Yes, he reacted like it was some kind of monster coming at them, but now he’s realised the error of his ways and can offer an informed explanation. ‘Barn owls make those kinds of weird screeching noises. That’s one of the explanations for banshees, actually. Owls and foxes. Foxes, especially, at this time of year. They’re mating calls, but they sound human. Well, human-like. That’s what people were actually hear—’

‘Foxes don’t fly,’ Steve snaps, ‘and that was way too big to be an owl. Did you not see the *size* of it?’

‘Yeah, but it’s just a perspective thing. It looked bigger because it was flying right at us.’

‘Or because it *was* bigger. That thing was as big as a man. The wingspan must have been, what? Five metres across?’

Donal would’ve gone with more like one, but he doesn’t say this.

‘Hey,’ Steve says then, ‘did you ever hear of the Mothman?’

A chill travels down Donal’s spine and into his bladder because, unfortunately, he has. The Mothman was a ghoulish, winged creature, larger than a man, with black feathers and burning red eyes, who was said to stalk the town of Point Pleasant, West Virginia. If you saw him it meant that some kind of awful tragedy was about to happen, or that you were watching a generally mediocre but occasionally terrifying early-noughties movie starring Richard Gere.

Donal had first seen *The Mothman Prophecies* as an impressionable eleven-year-old thanks to an irresponsible babysitter (his older brother) and for years had been convinced that its most disturbing sequence involved the Mothman walking on his wings, like a pterodactyl. But re-watching it (just once) as an adult, he'd discovered there was no such scene.

It must have come from one of the many nightmares he'd had in the weeks after his first viewing.

'Because it looked just like that,' Steve is saying. 'The red eyes, the massive wingspan, the swooping down on to the road ...'

'It was just an owl.'

Donal is telling Steve this, but he's also telling himself.

'Like hell it was,' Steve mutters. 'But hey, did we pick the right place to make a horror movie or what?'

Final Draft is due to start shooting in twenty-four hours, on a secluded set, in the dead of winter. This first week will be all night shoots, in a week that Met Eireann promises will be plagued by violent storms and freezing temperatures. Donal hasn't yet mastered talking to the director, let alone helping him achieve his vision and doing everything that an AD should do, which is basically holding the whole show together. If something goes wrong, the blame will almost certainly land squarely at his feet.

And mothmen, banshees ...

They didn't come to tell you that everything was going to work out just great, don't worry, all good.

It was just an owl, Donal says silently, before releasing the brake and taking them onwards down the dirt track.

The track twists and turns through the trees, hiding the house until the very last moment. It's a small, square, red-brick bungalow sitting in a puddle of gravel which crunches under the wheels as Donal pulls up, parallel to the muddy Ford Fiesta already parked there. Smoke billows from the chimney but only one of the windows – the nearest one to them, to the left of the front door – suggests there's a light on inside. When the headlights disappear, the window transforms into a rectangle of buttery yellow glow.

'Looks like a gatekeeper's lodge,' Donal says. 'Only it's a bit too far from the gate to do any keeping.'

Steve snorts. 'Looks like a shithole to me.'

They get out, their breath clouding in the freezing air. The surrounding trees block what little is left of the daylight. The only way to know there is any is to look straight up, between the trees, into the patch of the blue-grey sky directly above their heads. In a few minutes' time, it will be completely dark.

It's deathly quiet. As they make their way to the lodge's door, the only sound is the crunch of gravel underfoot, and then Steve's firm double-knock on it seems to ricochet off the trees, dangerously loud.

'They won't be expecting anyone,' Donal whispers. 'Not out here. So let's just hope no one has a gun.'

'Or is a screenwriter.'

'Or worse, thinks they're one.'

Steve makes a *humph* noise that Donal chooses to interpret as a lazy laugh because, bloody hell, he needs the win.

They hear a rustling noise from inside and then the door, creaking open – just a few inches, enough to reveal a rusting

safety-chain pulled taut and, beyond it, half the face of a man eyeing them coldly.

‘Hey there,’ Steve says, holding up a hand to signal that they come in peace. ‘Joanne asked us to call round – the owner?’

The only eyebrow they can see rises in question.

‘My name is Steve Dade.’ Steve pauses here to, Donal presumes, allow the man the opportunity to say something like, ‘Wow! Really? *You’re* Steve Dade?’ When it doesn’t happen, he pushes on. ‘I’m directing a movie that we’re shooting down at the main house—’

The door abruptly slams shut.

Steve is muttering a, ‘What the ...?’ when the safety-chain rattles and the door re-opens, wide enough now to reveal the whole of the man.

‘Sorry,’ the man says. ‘Say again?’

The man is a little older than Steve, Donal would guess, so late thirties, early forties, but not trying as hard as Steve to look like he hasn’t had to start ticking the next box along on the form. He’s wearing jeans and an old T-shirt and his feet are in thick, woollen socks, the kind you wear inside hiking boots. Strong jaw, bright blue eyes. He’s holding a stemless wine glass, half-filled with red, and something smells good in the air that’s wafting out into the night from the space behind him.

They’ve interrupted his dinner, Donal thinks.

‘We’re shooting a feature,’ Steve says, ‘down at the main house.’ He points into the woods, pointlessly; the main house is at least a mile away through the trees, so there’s nothing to see. ‘A horror movie. Starting tomorrow evening. So if

you hear any strange noises ... We'll mostly be shooting at night, you see, and there's going to be a bit of screaming. You shouldn't hear anything from here but just in case you do, we wanted to give you a heads-up. So you don't, you know, think someone's getting murdered and call the Gardaí.' Steve laughs here. The man does not. 'We've, ah, spoken to them too, so they should know to tell you anyway. The lads in the station in Durrus, I mean. But Joanne insisted we—'

'We wanted to tell you ourselves,' Donal interrupts, before Steve can suggest they're only here because they were forced to come, or casually deploy any more phrases like *shooting a feature*, or refer to members of An Garda Síochána as *the lads* another time. 'And to give you this, just in case.' He hands over one of his business cards.

It's a very simple affair: plain white, the thinnest paper-stock, Arial in black. All it says is CROSS CUT PRODUCTIONS above his name, email address and mobile phone number. Donal made them himself, on the inkjet in the production office, just this morning, because Steve said printing professional ones was an unnecessary cost.

'This is Donal,' Steve says. 'My assistant.'

First assistant director, Donal corrects silently. His official credit, but not one Steve has thus far acknowledged in real life.

But then, everyone is wearing many hats on this project. Donal is also, effectively, the line producer *and* production manager. He's his own assistant and an assistant to Steve – who is directing *and* producing – as well as acting as the assistant director. *Assistant* is probably just the easiest catch-all thing to call him, really, when you think about it. That's all it is.

Donal *hopes* that's all it is.

The man is frowning at the business card.

‘Don’t worry,’ Donal says quickly. ‘At this distance, with the trees, it’s very unlikely you’ll hear anything.’

The man opens his mouth to respond – to argue, Donal worries, and he’d be right to because if they’re not going to hear anything, why are he and Steve here to warn them not to call the Gardaí if they do? – but before he can, a new hand appears from behind the door.

This one has delicate fingers, pale skin, and tapered nails painted in a high-gloss red. It curls around the edge of the door and pulls it open wider, revealing a second occupant: a woman in a bathrobe. Her long, dark hair is dripping wet.

She takes the business card out of the man’s hands and asks Steve, ‘What did you say your name was?’

‘This is ridiculous,’ the man says to her, snatching it back. Then he turns and disappears into the gloom beyond the door.

A moment later, an internal door slams like a thunderclap.

The air swirls and shifts, infused with a new tension. Steve clears his throat and looks off to his left, into the black of the forest, which Donal instinctively knows, after just a few hours in this man’s presence, is a signal that his boss is done with this situation and now it’s up to him to extricate them from it.

‘Don’t mind him,’ the woman says, managing to pull her eyes off Steve long enough to roll them. ‘He’s been in a mood since we got here. Says he was told something about a sea view and of course he just *cannot* allow for the fact that maybe he looked at a few places and got two of them mixed up. He wants to move to somewhere else, but pickings are pretty slim around here. I guess it’s the time of year.’ She sighs. Eyes back to Steve. ‘Did you say you were the *director*?’

Donal thinks he recognises the tone, the accompanying expression on the woman's face. This conversation is about to go one of three ways. One: she'll ask Steve a bunch of stupid questions, starting with the classic, 'I've always wondered ... what does a director actually *do*?' Two: she'll pitch an idea she's convinced would make a great film that in reality barely amounts to an anecdote. Three: she'll say she's always dreamed of being, or is, or thinks she could be, an actor.

Steve knows this too, because he says a curt, 'Yep,' and then, without leaving a pause, 'Anyway, we should be getting back.'

'Sorry to disturb your evening,' Donal says. Steve is already turning to go, collecting Donal at his elbow, turning him around too just as Donal adds an excruciatingly cheerful, 'Have a good night!'

They crunch their way across the gravel, back to the car. The woman stays standing in the open doorway, watching them, until Donal revs the engine and starts reversing. Only then does she turn and go back inside.

'I think we should make as much noise as we possibly can,' Steve mutters. 'To make *sure* they leave.'

ACT I

FINAL DRAFT

Based on a terrifying true story.
That hasn't happened – yet.

Written by
Daniel O'Leary

January 2022

Cross Cut Films
Temple Bar, Dublin 2
danielod@crosscutfilms.ie

FADE IN:

EXT. TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN - DAY

Granite university buildings form an imposing U-shape around an expansive cobbled square in the heart of Dublin's city centre. At the mouth of the 'U' sits the emblem of Trinity College Dublin: the 100ft campanile.

Hundreds of students mill about in early-morning sunshine, dressed for cold weather.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

A vast room with a vaulted ceiling, overlooking Front Square. Oil paintings of old white men hang from the walls in antique frames.

A dozen twenty-somethings sit around a table, listening intently to OLDER MAN 1 (50s, distinguished looking, designer knitwear) who is seated at the head of it. Beside him is OLDER MAN 2 (50s, distracted professor vibes, tweed blazer with scuffed leather elbow patches).

OLDER MAN 1

So if your characters don't surprise you, how on earth do you expect them to surprise your *readers*?

Heads nod, sounds of agreement are made.

At the opposite end of the table sit KATE (20s, fresh-faced beauty, bookish) and GUS (20s, gangly, floppy-haired and badly dressed).

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GUS

(whispering to Kate)

If your characters are genuinely surprising you, you should probably seek the services of a mental health professional.

KATE

(to Gus)

Ssshhh.

OLDER MAN 2

Unfortunately that's all the time we have today. Round of applause, please, for our distinguished guest, who has been so generous with both his time and his expertise.

The students comply. Gus does a slow handclap.

OLDER MAN 2 (CONT'D)

And all the best with the Booker announcement. But of course, whatever happens, it truly is an honour just to be nominated, isn't it?

Older Man 1 smiles tightly.

OLDER MAN 1

So they say.

The students collect themselves, stand to go. The room grows noisy with their leaving.

GUS

(To Kate)

It might be an honour but it's not fifty grand, is it?

Kate slaps his arm in playful reprimand.

EXT. TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN - DAY

Kate and Gus make their way across Front Square, joining the flow of other students disappearing into the tunnel beneath the thick concrete and grimy windows of the Brutalist Arts Block.

EXT. BOOKSHOP - DAY

They emerge into chilly, midday sunlight and make a beeline for a bookshop housed in a distinctive, red-brick building with a pair of large bay windows at the front. The sign over the entrance reads 'HODGES FIGGIS'.

One window displays multiple copies of the same book: *Evenings* by George Weston. Hanging behind them is a large photo of the author posing behind a chesterfield desk in a book-lined office, no computer in sight. George Weston is Older Man 1.

A small, handwritten note on paper torn from a pad and hastily taped to the glass at elbow-rather than eye-line says that Joel Jackson will be signing copies of his new book *Inside* in-store today.

Kate and Gus disappear inside ...

INT. BOOKSHOP - DAY [CONTINUOUS]

... and enter an expansive bookstore, full of nooks and crannies. Customers browse in respectful quiet, as if in a library.

Kate goes to shelves marked 'Fiction A-Z' and starts reading the spines.

GUS

What are you looking for?

KATE

That book George mentioned. The one about the British butler during World War II.

GUS

(scoffing)

George? You two are BFFs now, are you?

KATE

That's what he said to call him.

GUS

He didn't mean it.

KATE

Help me look or be quiet.

GUS

I'll be quiet in Crime.

He leaves Kate to her search, which ultimately proves fruitless. Kate spots a man stacking books on a table nearby and approaches him.

This is JOEL (30s, handsome, wearing trendy trainers and trendy frames).

KATE

Sorry to bother you, but do you have *The Remains of the Day*?

JOEL

Oh - I don't work here. Sorry.

Kate looks down at the table, confused.

JOEL (CONT'D)

These are mine. I mean, I wrote them.
It.

An acrylic sign is sitting on top of the books.
He turns it around so Kate can see it. It's a
picture of Joel holding a copy of *Inside*.

KATE

Oh God. I'm so sorry.

JOEL

Don't be. Happens all the time. And
at least you asked me about a book.
Usually people are looking for the
toilets.

KATE

Sounds glamorous.

JOEL

Hey, gets me out of the house.

KATE

Are you here to do a signing?

JOEL

I am, but alas no one is here to get
their book signed.

KATE

That's not true. I'm here.

JOEL

You're looking for Ishiguro.

KATE

Not any more. I've changed my mind.

JOEL

You shouldn't. Trust me.

KATE

Do they teach you how to promote your own books or are you just a natural at it?

(pointing to the books)

Will you sign one for me?

JOEL

Are you *sure*?

KATE

I have enough points on my loyalty card to cover it, so I don't really need to be, do I?

JOEL

Well, God knows I need the sale.

He picks up a copy and takes a pen from a pocket.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Who should I make it out to?

KATE

Kate. Spelled the usual way.

Joel signs the book.

JOEL

Nice to meet you, Kate spelled the usual way. I'm Joel.

KATE

I should hope so. Otherwise you're just desecrating that book.

Joel laughs.

JOEL

So what do you do, Kate? Besides take pity on unpopular authors.

He hands the signed book back to her.

KATE

I dream of being an unpopular author someone else takes pity on one day. I'm a student. On the Creative Writing MA, across the street.

JOEL

So you're a writer.

KATE

Trying to be.

Gus reappears, clutching a couple of blood-splattered true-crime books.

KATE (CONT'D)

(to Joel)

This is my friend, Gus. He's trying to be a writer, too.

(to Gus)

This is Joel. And this is his book.

Gus and Joel exchange silent nods. Gus looks down at the table of books, makes a face.

GUS

Looks like it's flying off the shelves.

KATE

(warningly)

Gus.

GUS

(faking innocence)

What?

A beat of awkward silence.

KATE

(to Joel)

Well, we better go. We have a seminar starting soon.

JOEL

And I have a very busy afternoon of standing here alone to get to.

KATE

Can I ask you something?

JOEL

Sure.

KATE

What's the best writing advice you ever got?

Gus rolls his eyes while Joel considers the question.

JOEL

I'd have to say ... Write the book you want to read but can't find on the shelf.

KATE

Oh, that's good.

JOEL

Isn't it? Unfortunately I didn't take it, so now no one else wants to read it either.

KATE

That's not true. I do.

JOEL

Get back to me in fifty pages.

KATE

I will.

JOEL

I hope so.

His gaze lingers on Kate until she looks away, blushing.

A cranky Gus pulls her away by the elbow. They join the queue for the cash registers.

While awaiting her turn, Kate opens her copy of *Inside* and sees that Joel hasn't just signed it - he's written his number in it too. She looks back towards the table where Joel is standing, meets his eye and smiles.

DISSOLVE TO: