

Never
Tomorrow
Judith Rolfs

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ENDORSEMENT

“Layer upon layer of intrigue—laced with murder—propels this novel to the pinnacle of suspense. An ingenious plot, dynamic and complex characters, and an insight into the troubled avenues of human behavior rarely exposed make *Never Tomorrow* a stand-out for readers of mysteries, thrillers, and suspense.”

Patricia Gussin, NYT best-selling author of *AFTER THE FALL*

DEDICATION

To the faithful men and women who struggle through difficult challenges in marriage and do whatever it takes to love well.

And to mystery-lovers of all ages who follow the mental mazes I create for your enjoyment. I love engaging with you in this mind game.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To the Cursillo group of Northern Ireland—because of you I spent three weeks in Ireland where this story begins. My beloved Lake Geneva lake path where I honed the idea for the plot. The Angelus Gift Shop in Walworth which prominently displays all my books for sale and they're not even a bookstore.

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To the constant in my life, my amazing God, who puts wings on a few of my words and helps me string them together with purpose.

ONE

The Aer Lingus 747 began its descent over the variegated green patchwork quilt called Ireland. Lily glanced out the window and tightened her seat belt. Tray tables snapped into place and seats popped upright.

A sense of excitement filled the plane's cabin. Passengers stood as the airplane taxied to its gate in Dublin, despite the male flight attendant's repeated announcement to "Remain in your seats until we've come to a complete stop."

Hardly anyone follows orders anymore, she reflected, smiling a response to the pilot's gracious words at the cockpit door, "Thanks for flying with us." Most of her fellow travelers were probably here for pleasure. Who, but she, had come to commit murder?

The rush of moving bodies carried Lily toward the baggage carousel and rental cars. She paused to read the signs, double-checking the way. She liked to be sure about details, never one to blindly follow a crowd. Her only luggage was the black carry-on wheeled behind her. She fought an impulse to speed walk. No need to rush, even though the plane had been thirty-five minutes late for takeoff.

At the Hertz counter, a dark-skinned Arab feverishly worked a computer as a trainer spouted instructions at his side. Lily tapped her foot, waiting her turn in a line three deep. Just her luck to get a new clerk. Finally, she reached the counter.

"May I be of service, madam?" He spoke with near-perfect English and only a trace of an accent.

Lily tugged out the lanyard around her neck and

opened the leather pouch. She handed over her fake driver's license and passport. How unbelievably easy they had been to procure through the gaping holes in the homeland security system.

Finally, the multiple forms required for rental had been double-checked and the employee directed her to the parking garage. A heavy-set matron in a glass cage handed over keys to the auto in space E12.

She maneuvered the Peugeot out of the airport, following well-marked signage. Driving on the left required close attention at first, but soon she relaxed. Using the map provided by Hertz, she enjoyed the drive to Shannon. Her iPhone sat inside her bedroom dresser in the states. The throwaway cell inside her purse would be untraceable.

Three hours later Lily reached Shannon's narrow streets edged with tourists on foot who paid little attention to approaching cars. She'd forgotten about the congestion around Bunnratty, one of Shannon's must-see tourist attractions.

Quaint stores sporting unusual names like the Blue Onion and Little Hen were crammed with shoppers and interspersed with B & B's, some so close their parlors were visible. Store shelves overflowed with Irish woolen, linen, and Belleek.

Lily reviewed the task before her. Wouldn't her victim be surprised? A website check had provided the tour company's itinerary. She carried a print-out of the schedule in her jacket pocket. Final group dinner, Bunnratty Castle. Eight-thirty. Location: Ten miles from Shannon Airport.

As she drove she considered the private bed & breakfast inns. Irish B & B's were plentiful, except on bank holiday weekends, which this wasn't. Lily hadn't

pre-booked. No record of a credit card or personal check must exist. Fortunately, small businesses still eagerly accepted cash.

An inn with its sign of a galloping white stallion caught her attention. The print on the White Horse B & B sign promised proximity to the castle. Lily stopped at the green and white two-story building draped with vines. She counted parking spots—twelve cars—large enough for a single traveler to go unnoticed, and parked in the lot.

At the door, a lean, gray-haired innkeeper the far side of sixty introduced herself as Helen O’Grady and welcomed Lily with a sales pitch. “I don’t like to brag, but truth is, you’re at the best lodging in Shannon and lucky for you, I’ve a room.” Helen buzzed about like a mayfly, pointing out the sitting room with its rust plaid sofa and loveseat and the glassed-in porch with a table set for breakfast. “I serve from 7 to 8:30. Follow me, I’ll show you a cozy room.”

Helen headed upstairs without waiting for an answer. Lily followed. Helen stopped at the third door past the landing. “Here’s one of my best, simply furnished and en suite.” She lifted her chin proudly as she said the last word. “We redid the upstairs two years ago, turning the closets into private bathrooms. You won’t be finding en suite everywhere. The hooks behind the door work fine for your hanging clothes.”

Lily shuddered at the tiny sink and the toilet bowl that would bring her knees to her chest. Green fern leaf designs splattered across a yellow bedspread overwhelmed the small room.

“This will do. I’ll pay now. I’m getting an early start tomorrow and won’t need breakfast.” Lily pulled five twenties from her wallet.

"I'll be right back with your slip, Miss, Mrs.?"

"Lily, and don't bother, I won't be needing a receipt."

It amused her to use her nickname. Friends had chanted in high school, "Lily-white, you're so good," when she refused to sneak a smoke or skip class with them.

"As you please, ma'am. Tea's available 24/7 in the parlor. Help yourself. Would you like me to suggest a restaurant for tonight?"

"Thanks, I'm all set." She escorted talkative Helen toward the door and locked it behind her. Leaning her back against the worn wood, she drew a deep breath. So far things had gone well. No, actually flawlessly, and she valued impeccable execution of details.

Lily turned the bedspread over, folded it, and set it at the foot of the bed. The fuzzy yellow blanket beneath was all she'd need. She set her phone alarm to ring in thirty minutes and crawled under for a brief rest.

A catnap eluded her, but she rose refreshed after her time of being still. She washed up in the tiny sink and donned her brown silk pantsuit, non-descript and perfect for the evening with her quarry.

* * *

The parking lot at Bunratty Castle held several empty tour buses, one of which displayed the sign of Kendra's group. Lily found a spot near the back.

Inside the restaurant the smell of chips fried to a golden brown mingled with the heavy aroma of Guinness. Lily located the banquet hall on the lower level, admiring the medieval art she passed. She scanned the patrons seated in the softly lit dining room

while waitresses noisily cleared the remains of chicken and ribs and served dessert.

Searching for Kendra up and down the rows of long communal tables to no avail, Lily's hands began to tremble. Would this elaborate plan come to nothing? She'd done her best, but had she made a mistake?

Continuing to scour the place, Lily finally spotted Kendra exiting the restroom. Her chin length brown hair framing eyes the same color swayed jauntily as she returned to her table. Four women sat with Kendra, finishing their coffee.

Lily breathed deeply in and out three times then edged her way over. She widened her eyes in mock disbelief. "Why, Kendra! I never expected to see you here."

Lily had counted on her victim's graciousness and wasn't disappointed.

Observing that Lily was alone, Kendra said, "You're welcome to join us for dessert. We've already eaten at the early seating. How about you?"

"I've had dinner." Lily recalled the chicken sandwich she'd devoured en route. "It would be delightful to sit and visit for a bit."

Kendra introduced Lily to her tablemates who were deep in conversation. Lily glanced at them but made no effort to remember their faces or first names and hoped they'd forget hers as well.

The women were chatting about the highlights of their seven-day tour. "Tomorrow it's back home to Indiana." A fiftyish woman with ladybug-red hair groaned. "Monday I hit the office again."

Kendra turned to Lily. "Not me, I've five more days on my own."

"How wonderful! I'm touring alone, too. It's such

a pleasant way to explore.”

“I hope so. This is my first solo trip ever,” Kendra confided as she stuck a fork into the remains of chocolate cake with green icing. “Tomorrow I go to Ballybunion. Have you been?”

“Yes, it’s a charming place.” Lily leaned closer. “A small coastal town dominated by its famous golf course. In the summer months the course draws a steady crowd, but it’s quiet in March’s off-season. You’ll love it. I’m off to the Ring of Kerry on a one-day bus tour.”

Lily spoke the last words loud enough for the other women to hear in case someone remembered this evening later. Ballybunion would be a perfect place to die.

Kendra chattered on. “I’m thrilled about stopping where I please. Next week I join my daughter at Oxford when her spring break starts. How I’ve missed that girl.”

“What fun.”

“She’s my motivation for this trip. Whitney’s been trying to cheer me up since...” Kendra’s eyes clouded over. “Anyway, she assured me Ireland’s a safe country for women traveling alone.”

“You’ll be fine.” Lily was only too pleased to encourage Kendra. “As long as you have a dependable rental car. What are you driving?”

“A Renault.”

Lily sipped her coffee. “Those little black sedans are everywhere.”

“Mine’s green.”

Lily smiled. “Well, I must be going.” She wished Kendra exciting travels.

“Not too exciting, I hope.” Kendra laughed.

Lily said nothing. Kendra had no idea what awaited her.

* * *

The next morning the sun struggled to make a presence, but steady gray rain overruled it. A perfect atmosphere for murder, Lily marveled as she dressed in her gray sweat suit. Her mind traveled back to her first murder. She'd expected to be nervous but, to her surprise, hadn't been. In fact, witnessing death come seemed anti-climactic after the weeks of careful preparation. She shook her head to free herself from the past and visualize today's plan. Time to head out.

Around nine Lily reached Ballybunion. In less than an hour she hunted down Kendra's green Renault parked two blocks from the center of Ballybunion's shopping district.

Lily pulled her own black sedan into a parking space six cars away then trudged through the light rain. She stopped at each shop, staring through the windows, going inside only when necessary to see the customers better. Finally, she spotted Kendra at a table next to the window of the Owl's Head Tea Room hunched over a cup, studying *Fodor's Ireland* guidebook.

Lily rushed inside. "I don't believe this. What are the chances of running into you twice in two days?"

"No way. I thought you were going to the Ring of Kerry?"

"The rain made me change my plans. How nice to find you. I'd hoped I would. I'm about to go on the Cliff Walk. It's a lovely site. Did you read about it in your guidebook?"

"Yes. I saw the cliff when I drove in."

“Want to join me?”

“Isn’t it terribly steep and rocky?” Kendra was cautious by nature.

“Climbing the trail is perfectly safe. It’s one of the best sites in Ireland.”

“But it’s raining.”

“You have an umbrella and a rain jacket, don’t you? We’ll stay dry. This will be an adventure.”

Kendra tossed her head back. “How often will I have such an opportunity? Let’s.”

They hustled along the two blocks from downtown to the start of the trail. A painted sign at the base read “Caution On Windy Days.”

Kendra appeared to hesitate. “Maybe I shouldn’t after all.”

“Nonsense. There’s only a little wind today. Just mind your step. I’ll go first. You’ll see how easy it is.”

Kendra followed tentatively. “I wish my daughter, Whitney, were here. As a child, she loved playing in the rain.”

Lily smiled. “How nice. We’ll do the walk for her. The view will be incredible.”

The gradual incline seemed to relax Kendra.

Lily pointed toward the sea. “Look at those majestic waves beating against the cliffs.”

Two other tourists who had hiked to the top passed them on their way down.

At the summit the two women stood alone, leaving the other less adventuresome tourists below. Kendra snapped pictures. “Did you ever see anything so gorgeous?”

Lily laughed. “I’m queen of the mountain.” She glanced back at the trail. No one else appeared to be coming up. She waited a few minutes to be sure then

pulled her camera from a zippered black case around her waist.

Ignoring the "No Trespassing" sign at the edge of the cliff, Lily climbed over the three-foot high guardrail. "I can get a better picture from here."

"Be careful," Kendra murmured, her voice catching.

Lily moved within inches of the cliff's edge on the pretext of taking pictures.

Kendra looked away. "I can't bear to watch."

"I'm fine. This is my new Nikon." Lily waved the camera.

Kendra turned her back completely.

Lily took advantage of the moment to stomp and thud to the ground about eight feet past the railing. She cried out, "Damn! I've twisted my ankle and can't get up. Help me, please."

Kendra snapped around, covering her mouth with her hands. "Oh no. I'm sorry, I can't."

"Come a little way past the railing so I can lean on you to get up. Ouch." Lily moaned again. "It hurts terribly."

Kendra edged closer to the metal railing and gingerly leaned over. "Grab my arm. I'll pull you back."

Lily planted her palms on the ground and feigned pushing herself up. She collapsed and grimaced. "I can't get up. I need you to help me stand. It's quite safe. Stay on the level ground."

Still Kendra resisted climbing over.

"Owww," Lily moaned louder.

Kendra blinked rapidly. "Okay, I'm coming." She lowered her head and inched over the rail.

Kendra edged slowly over to Lily's side. Lily

jumped up like a tigress and whipped her arms against Kendra's chest. Lily's advantage of surprise and size prevailed.

Kendra tottered, regained her balance a few seconds, then Lily shoved again, another strong, swift thrust. Kendra gasped and fell backward, her legs folding beneath her. Lily peered over the ledge as Kendra's arms scrabbled for a root, a branch, anything. No foliage grew along the barren precipice.

Her victim tumbled, thrashing wildly.

Kendra's scream echoed briefly before being lost in the sound of the crashing waves beating against the rocks.

Lily stood for a time as if spellbound then calmly climbed back over the rail and wove her way down the path toward her car. The sun surged through the clouds, striping the cliffs with lavender. She stopped twice on her descent to snap a picture. Her fingers shook only a little, causing the sapphire stones in her bracelet to shoot off glittering rays.

At the base of the trail, two tourists sat in their car, engrossed in a map on their laps.

Lily inhaled deeply, strolled past them, and headed for her auto, confident no one had seen what went on above. Kendra had fallen. That was all. There was nothing anyone could do.

The next day, the local paper reported that nuns on their morning stroll from an oceanfront convent had found a female tourist's battered and bruised body washed up in a cove. The name was withheld pending notification of nearest kin.

A week later local news reported that, after investigation, police ruled Kendra Starin's death an accident or suicide. She wasn't the first person to fall

from the Cliff Walk, despite the warning signs. Kendra's tour group had been contacted as a matter of routine. They said she'd completed her itinerary, and they had no contact with her after the tour ended. They were extremely sympathetic but could give no information.

Lily read the article and smirked. The other female travelers Kendra had met were back in their respective states and probably never even heard the news. Not that it mattered to Lily. Even if Kendra's acquaintances had been questioned, no one knew the last name of the woman who had stopped by their table the night before the accident. Besides, the woman was heading to the Ring of Kerry.

The tour company wouldn't be informing other tour members of this tragic event. Kendra was an independent traveler at the time of her death.

Two weeks later in the States, Lily searched out a tiny obit in her local paper with the information that an urn containing Kendra Starin's remains had been flown home in cargo and buried immediately at St. Margaret's Cemetery as requested by her husband.

Lily visualized "Accidental Death, Case Closed" stamped on the paperwork recording Kendra's demise.

No one would ever know anything else.

TWO

A year later.

Gusts of wind blasted Whitney Barnes's shoulder-length hair the moment she stepped from her Honda Accord. She checked her watch then quickened her stride. *Tight for time again, nothing new about that.* As editor of the Cortland Courier, Whitney seemed to thrive on a rushed pace.

With its countywide circulation, the Courier was puny compared to big players in the news industry, but Whitney enjoyed more control than she'd have at a major paper. She loved her job and had been lucky to get the head position at her age. Her career wasn't the problem. Whitney checked the sign on the door of the tan brick building before she entered—Cortland City Counseling Center. Hopefully this appointment would resolve her anxiety issues and she could get on with life. She'd enter the counseling process the way she did everything—all circuits go.

Masking her pain wasn't difficult since she was a skilled pretender, but inner grief submerged her emotionally into grayness. She often felt like a drowning victim. She wasn't too proud to finally admit she needed help. Mom would have wanted her to consult a professional.

Inside the lobby she scanned the list of names then headed down the hall to Office Suite 1C. Five chocolate brown vinyl chairs with chrome arm rests sat on nubby blue carpeting. All were empty except one occupied by a middle-aged man engrossed in *Sports Illustrated*. The office formality was softened by a huge potted fern in one corner, draping fluted arms in three directions.

A middle-aged woman in a fuchsia and pink striped dress shuffled papers into files behind a glass window. Her nameplate read, "Peg Forester—Receptionist."

Whitney approached and Peg slid the glass halfway open. "May I help you?"

"Whitney Barnes to see Dr. Karen Trindle."

Peg reached for a clipboard and handed it to Whitney. "First visit, correct?"

"Yes."

"Please fill out these new client forms."

Whitney clutched the board and walked over to the rack of magazines against the wall because she wasn't ready to sit yet. She browsed and selected a three-week-old Newsweek, more for its familiar cover than to read after her paperwork. She selected a chair and penned four pages of answers about where she lived, insurance, etc.

The sole man at the end of the row of chairs kept his eyes glued to his magazine, much to Whitney's relief. This wasn't the sort of place she wanted to make small talk.

Whitney finished as the side door opened. A frail-looking woman with a thick head of white hair emerged. Beside her, guiding her by the arm, strode an attractive woman in her early-fifties. She transferred the lady to Peg to make another appointment then strolled over to Whitney and stretched out her hand. "Hello, I'm Dr. Karen Trindle."

Her handshake was brief but warm, her demeanor engaging and somehow comforting. Whitney liked her smile.

"Please follow me."

They entered an office that seemed more of a living room with a plump blue and gray striped sofa

and two wide wing back chairs. Whitney settled on the edge of one. Uncharacteristically self-conscious, she wished she were anywhere else.

Dr. Trindle eased into her seat directly across from Whitney and scanned her intake papers. She assured Whitney of complete confidentiality, tucking a notepad on her lap. "I may jot notes from time to time as you speak. Now, Ms. Barnes, may I call you Whitney? Let's start with the primary issue that prompted you to come see me?"

Whitney sensed warmth and sincere concern in the inquiry. She relaxed her grip on the arms of her chair. "My mom's been deceased a little over a year, Dr. Trindle..." A chill settled over Whitney. How she hated saying the word, "deceased."

"I'm so sorry for your loss. By the way, please feel free to call me Karen."

Whitney stalled, searching for words. How to describe the hardest thing in her life now? Handling deep loneliness since her Mom—her very best friend—had died was dreadful. She'd expected that, but not this anxiety, the restless, unsettled feeling, and palpable concern about her mom's fate that she couldn't rationalize away.

Whitney rubbed her palms together. "I still struggle with my mom's death."

"A year is still very fresh grief."

"I often wake up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night, clutching my bedcovers, my body rigid. I know this anxiousness isn't healthy." Whitney leaned forward. "I chose you as my counselor because when I was away at college, Mom wrote me that she came to you for counseling. Do you remember her?"

"I hate to disappoint you, but I don't recall anyone

with the last name Barnes.”

“Mother used her maiden name, Kendra Starin. She hadn’t lived in this area long before her death. She and Dad downsized when I went off to school in England. When I returned, I jumped at the chance to come here to work, thinking it would help me feel close to her. I doubt many people around town know that Kendra Starin was my mother because of our different last names. Do you remember now?”

Karen studied the ceiling as if her records were visible there then shook her head. “I see many women. Perhaps some details about her history would refresh my memory.”

“Around the start of menopause, Mom struggled with depression. I was away at graduate school but could tell when I talked to her on the phone she wasn’t herself. I asked about it, but all she’d say was, ‘I’m a little down, I’ll be fine. Don’t worry, sweetie.’ I didn’t. I believed she was getting over it.”

“Many women have problems with depression during middle age. Unfortunately, without pulling my files, I can’t remember the details of your mother’s case.”

Whitney lifted her shoulder bag from the side of the chair, rummaged within, and pulled a small picture from her wallet. She handed it over.

Karen held the photo in her manicured fingers, examining it in silence for several seconds. “I remember her now, a dear woman. She came several times. I read there was an accident and she lost her life. But not here. Some other country, wasn’t it?”

Whitney nodded. At the moment it was easier than speaking. She drew a breath then related the details of her mother’s death in Ireland, scant as they