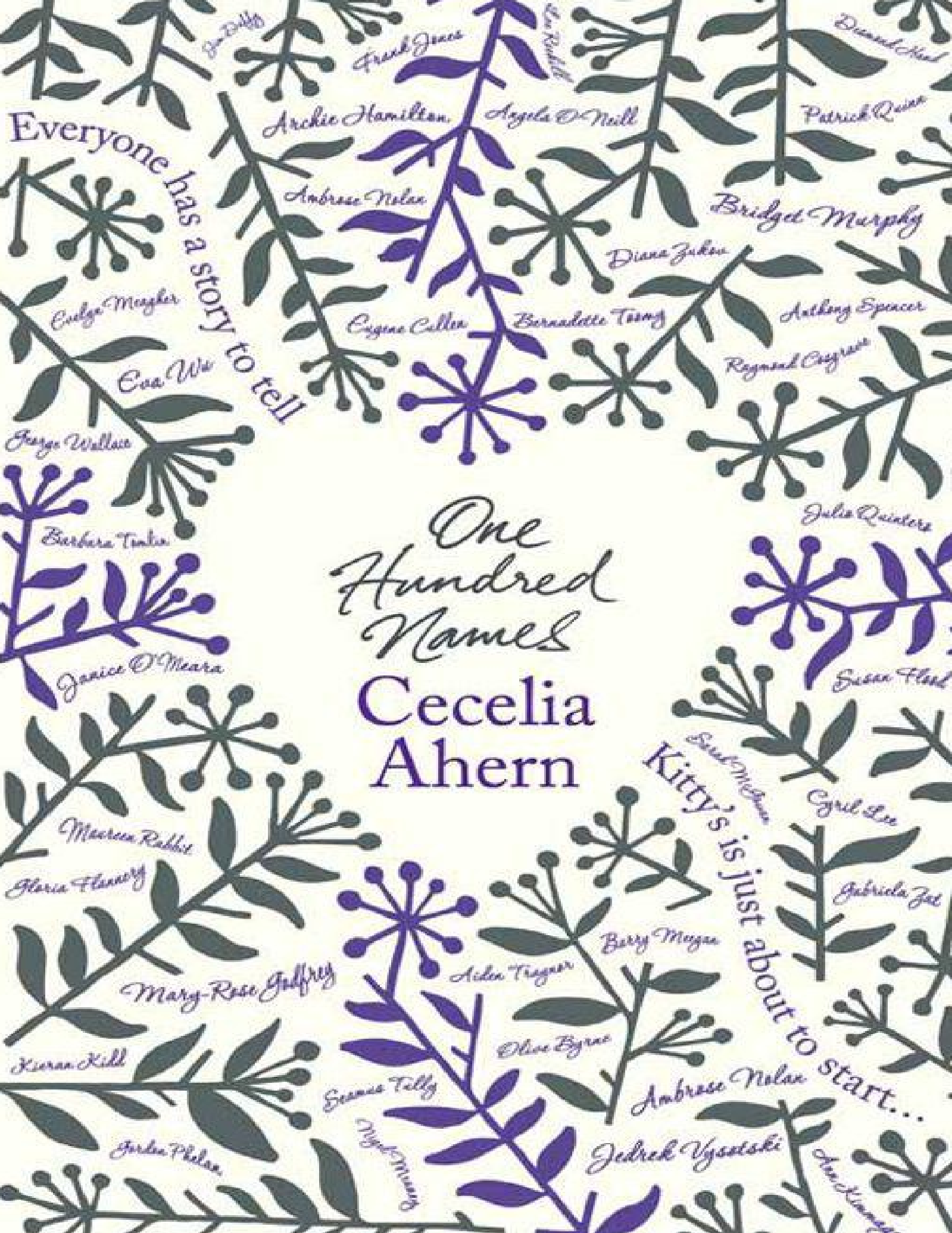


Everyone has a story to tell

One
Hundred
Names
Cecelia
Ahern

Kitty's is just about to start...



CECELIA AHERN

One
Hundred
Names



HarperCollins*Publishers*

Dedicated to my uncle Robert (Hoppy) Ellis.
We love you, and miss you, and thank you for all the memories.

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CHAPTER ONE

She was nicknamed The Graveyard. Any secret, any piece of confidential information, personal or otherwise, that went in never, ever came back out. You knew you were safe; you knew you would never be judged or, if you were it would be silently, so you'd never know. She was perfectly named with a birth name that meant consistency and fortitude, and she was appropriately nicknamed; she was solid, permanent and steady, stoic but oddly comforting. Which is why visiting her in this place was all the more agonising. And it *was* agonising, not just mentally challenging; Kitty felt a physical pain in her chest, more specifically in her heart, that began with the thought of having to go, grew with the reality of actually being there, and then worsened with the knowledge that it wasn't a dream, it wasn't a false alarm, this was life in its rawest form. A life that had been challenged, and would subsequently be lost, to death.

Kitty made her way through the private hospital, taking the stairs when she could take elevators, making deliberate wrong turns, graciously allowing others to walk before her at every opportunity, particularly if they were patients moving at a snail's pace with walking frames or wheeling intravenous lines on poles. She was aware of the stares, which were a result of the current crisis she was in, and the fact she had at times walked in circles around the ward. She was attentive to any bit of conversation that any random person wished to have with her, anything and everything that she could do to postpone arriving at Constance's room. Eventually her delaying tactics could continue no longer as she reached a dead end: a semicircle with four doors. Three doors were open, the occupants of the rooms and their visitors visible from where Kitty stood, though she didn't need to look inside. Without even seeing the numbers, she knew which room contained her friend and mentor. She was grateful to the closed door for the final delay she had been granted.

She knocked lightly, not fully committing to it, wanting to make the effort to visit but truly hoping she wouldn't be heard, so she could walk away, so she could always say she'd tried, so she could rest easily, guilt free. The tiny part of her that still clung to rationality knew that this wasn't realistic, that it wasn't right. Her heart was pounding, her shoes were squeaking on the floor as she moved from foot to foot, and she felt weak from the smell. She hated that hospital smell. A wave of nausea rushed through her and she breathed deeply and prayed for composure, for the supposed benefits of adulthood to finally kick in so she could get through this moment.

While Kitty was in the process of looking at her feet and taking deep breaths, the door opened and she was faced, unprepared, with a nurse and a shockingly deteriorated Constance. She blinked once, twice, and knew on the third time that she ought to be pretending, that it would not help Constance to see her visitor's true reaction to her appearance. So she tried to think of something to say and words failed her. There was nothing funny, nothing mundane, nothing even nothing, that she could think of to say to the friend she'd known for ten years.

'I've never seen her before in my life,' Constance said, her French accent audible despite her living in Ireland for over thirty years. Surprisingly, her voice was still strong and solid, assured and unwavering, as she had always been. 'Call security and have her removed from the premises immediately.'

The nurse smiled, opened the door wider and then returned to Constance's side.

'I can come back,' Kitty finally said. She turned away but found herself faced with more hospital paraphernalia and so turned again, searching for something normal, something ordinary and everyday that she could focus on that would fool her mind into thinking she wasn't there in a hospital, with that smell, with her terminally ill friend.

'I'm almost finished there. I'll just take your temperature,' the nurse said, placing a thermometer in Constance's ear.

'Come. Sit.' Constance motioned to the chair beside her bed.

Kitty couldn't look her in the eye. She knew it was rude, but her eyes kept moving away as though pulled by magnetic force to things that weren't sick and didn't remind her of people that were sick, so she busied herself with the gifts in her arms.

'I brought you flowers.' She looked around for somewhere to put them.

Constance hated flowers. She always left them to die in their vase whenever anybody attempted to bribe her, apologise to her or simply brighten her office. Despite knowing that, buying them had been a part of Kitty's procrastination, particularly as there had been an enticing queue before her.

'Oh dear,' the nurse said. 'Security should have told you that flowers aren't allowed in the ward.'

'Oh. Well, that's not a problem, I'll get rid of them.' Kitty tried to hide her relief as she stood up to make her escape.

'I'll take them,' the nurse said. 'I'll leave them at reception for you so you can take them home. No point in a beautiful bouquet like that going to waste.'

'At least I brought cupcakes.' Kitty took a box from her bag.

The nurse and Constance looked at one another again.

'You're joking. No cupcakes either?'

'The chef prefers patients to eat food which has come only from his kitchen.'

Kitty handed the contraband to the nurse.

'You can take them home too,' she laughed, studying the thermometer. 'You're fine,' she smiled at Constance. They shared a knowing look before she left, as if those two words meant something entirely different – they must have done – because she wasn't fine. She was eaten away by cancer. Her hair had begun to grow back, but sprouted in uneven patterns around her head, her protruding chest bones were visible above the shapeless hospital gown and she had wires and tubes connected to both arms, which were thin and bruised from injections and tube insertions.

'I'm glad I didn't tell her about the cocaine in my bag,' Kitty said just as the door closed behind the nurse, and they heard her laugh heartily from the corridor. 'I know you hate flowers but I panicked. I was going to bring you gold nail varnish, incense and a mirror, because I thought it would be funny.'

'Why didn't you?' Constance's eyes were still a sparkling blue and if Kitty could concentrate on just them, so full of life, she could almost forget the emaciated frame. Almost, but not quite.

'Because then I realised it wasn't funny.'

'I would have laughed.'

'I'll bring them next time.'

'It won't be so funny then. I've already heard the joke. My dear ...' She

reached for Kitty and they clasped hands tightly on the bed. Kitty couldn't look at Constance's hands, they were so sore and thin. 'It is so good to see you.'

'I'm sorry I'm late.'

'It took you a while.'

'The traffic ...' Kitty began and then gave up joking. She was over a month late.

There was a silence and Kitty realised it was a pause for her to explain why she hadn't visited.

'I hate hospitals.'

'I know you do. Noscomephobia,' said Constance.

'What's that?'

'Fear of hospitals.'

'I didn't know there was a word for it.'

'There's a word for everything. I haven't been able to poop for two weeks; they call it anismus.'

'I should do a story on that,' Kitty said, her mind drifting.

'You will not. My rectal inertia is between you, me, Bob and the nice woman I allow to look at my bottom.'

'I meant a piece on phobia of hospitals. That would make a good story.'

'Tell me why.'

'Imagine I found somebody who is really sick and they can't get treatment.'

'So they medicate at home. Big deal.'

'Or what about a woman in labour? She's pacing up and down on the street outside but she just can't bring herself to go through the doors of the hospital.'

'So she has the baby in an ambulance or at home or on the street.' Constance shrugged. 'I once did a story on a woman who gave birth whilst in hiding in Kosovo. She was all by herself and it was her first child. They weren't found until two weeks after, perfectly healthy and happy together. Women in Africa have their babies while working the fields, then they go straight back to work. Tribal women dance their babies out. The Western world goes about childbirth the wrong way around,' she said, waving her hand dismissively in the air, despite having no children herself. 'I wrote an article on that before.'

‘A doctor who can’t go to work ...’ Kitty continued to push her idea.

‘That’s ridiculous. He should lose his licence.’

Kitty laughed. ‘Thanks for your honesty, as usual.’ Then her smile faded and she concentrated on Constance’s hand wrapped around hers. ‘Or how about a selfish woman whose best friend is sick and she wouldn’t visit her?’

‘But you’re here now and I’m happy to see you.’

Kitty swallowed. ‘You haven’t mentioned anything about it.’

‘About what?’

‘You know what.’

‘I didn’t know if you wanted to talk about it.’

‘I don’t really.’

‘Well, then.’

They sat in silence.

‘I’m being torn apart in the newspapers, the radio, everywhere,’ Kitty said, bringing it up anyway.

‘I haven’t seen any papers.’

Kitty ignored the pile of papers on the windowsill. ‘Everywhere I go, all week, everyone is looking at me, pointing, whispering as if I’m the scarlet woman.’

‘That is the price of being in the limelight. You are a TV star now.’

‘I’m not a TV star, I’m an idiot who made a fool of herself on TV. There’s a distinct difference.’

Constance shrugged again as if it wasn’t a big deal.

‘You never wanted me to work on the show in the first place. Why don’t you just say “I told you so” and get it over with?’

‘They are not words that I use. They do nothing productive.’

Kitty removed her hand from Constance’s and asked quietly, ‘Do I still have a job?’

‘Haven’t you spoken to Pete?’ She looked angry with her duty editor.

‘I have. But I need to hear it from you. It’s more important that I hear it from you.’

‘*Etcetera*’s stance on hiring you as a reporter has not changed,’ Constance said firmly.

‘Thank you,’ Kitty whispered.

‘I supported you doing *Thirty Minutes* because I know that you’re a good reporter and you have it in you to be a great reporter. We all make mistakes,