

Prologue

There are helplines for people who want to die.

None for people who want to kill.

The thoughts didn't arrive all at once. They built slowly, quietly, until they felt normal.

Until they felt justified.

Ryan Walsh.

Even thinking his name sharpened something inside me – put me on high alert. I pictured it often – how it would happen. Not messy or rushed, but precise. Controlled. Every step planned, every risk accounted for. No panic. No mistakes. Just a clean exit.

Afterwards... I tried to imagine what I would feel. Not guilt. Not fear. Something else. Relief. Satisfaction. Like a hunger finally satisfied.

Outwardly, nothing about me had changed. I still looked like any other girl my age. I nodded, smiled and laughed along when I was supposed to. I blended in. That was the whole point.

People think they'd recognise someone like me.

They wouldn't.

Chapter One

Sunday, 5 August 2018. The Day Everything Changed. Mum and Dad were on their way home from Dublin. They'd been at a wedding the day before. I was staying with my grandparents, Mamó and Daideo; my older brother, Greg, was at his girlfriend's flat. I was showing Daideo *Cristiano Ronaldo's Top Goals* on YouTube.

'This is the best goal ever!' I said to my granddad. 'Watch this. Watch this.'

'Ooooh... That's pretty impressive alright,' Daideo replied, beaming back at me.

'Ronaldo's class, isn't he?'

'He sure is. You love the bit of soccer don't ya, Ciara?'

'Yeh, I do. And guess what, Daideo? There's girls' soccer at my new school.'

'That's great. Are you looking forward to starting secondary at the end of the month?'

'Yeh, I can't wait. I hope I'm put into the same class as my friends. Especially Ellie. We've been in the same class since Junior Infants.'

'Same with Eamonn and me. We were in the same class all through school as well.'

'That's cos yeer twins.'

'Yes.'

'I'll be a teenager in just twenty-two days, Daideo,' I reminded him.

'Thirteen already... Where does the time go?' he mused.

‘Seems like only yesterday when your mother was that age.’

‘Mum said you made her keep a vocabulary and phrases notebook when she was my age.’

‘I did indeed. And look at her now. An English teacher.’

‘She makes me keep one too. She says I’ve to learn a new word every day and at least one new phrase or proverb every week. Hey, d’you wanta hear my phrase for this week, Daideo?’

‘Oh, I’m dying to hear it!’

‘Okay it’s... *You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar!* I reminded Mum on Friday when she was dropping me off to school that I got no phrase this week. So, she gave me one really quickly but didn’t have time to explain it cos I was getting out of the car as she said it and she was rushing to get to her school. She told me to try and figure out the meaning myself while she’s away.’

‘And d’you know what it means?’

‘Yeh, if you’re trying to catch flies use honey not vinegar.’

‘Not just flies, though. People too. Do you understand the deeper meaning?’

‘Eh no, not really.’

‘Well, it’s about using charm instead of sourness or anger to get people to do what you want. It’s all about sweetening people up in order to get your way.’

‘Oh.’

The double bong of the doorbell rang. I went over to the window. Separating two slats of the wooden blinds, I peered out.

‘There’s a Garda at the door, Daideo,’ I said, noticing the uniformed man outside shifting his weight from one foot to the other, glancing around.

‘A Garda? Hmmm... What does he want on a Sunday morning, I wonder?’ Daideo frowned as he got up stiffly from his armchair and made his way to the door.

‘How d’ya know it’s a *he*?’ I said, grinning over at him.

‘Aaah, just a wild guess,’ said Daideo, with a knowing wink and a tilt of the head as he reached the door.

By the time we got to the hall, Mamó was already shuffling towards the front door. I could smell the freshly baked bread from the kitchen. Their ancient oven was humming in the background. Donnacha Rua, their red setter dog, barked and bounded ahead of her – his claws tapping rapidly on the parquet hall floor as he rushed towards the door.

‘Garda atá ann, a deir sí,’ Daideo muttered in Irish behind Mamó. She turned her head slightly. Her eyes widened.

‘Garda, an ea?’ she replied.

‘Mind that dog, Ciara,’ Mamó said as she reached her hand up to unchain the door. I gripped Donnacha Rua’s collar. I knew he’d charge out excitedly to have a good sniff at the stranger. She slowly unbolted, unchained and opened the front door.

There was a long strip of a Garda in his early thirties standing there with pursed lips and an intense stare. He was patting his tie. My mind recalled the last time there was a Garda at our house in St Anthony’s Park. The first thing he’d said when Dad opened the door was: *Honyia! How’s it goin’? Don’t worry, I’m not here with bad news or anything.* He had proceeded to alert Dad of recent burglaries in the area and advised him to ensure that all doors and windows were locked at night.

The first thing I noticed about the Garda was how embarrassed he looked. He had this *yikes* expression. I wondered had he done something wrong? But then I thought, he can’t have, he’s a Garda, like, they go round catching other people who’ve done something wrong. I waited for him to say: *Don’t worry, I’m not here with bad news or anything,* like that other Garda had said to Dad that time.

‘Good morning,’ the Garda said in this serious voice. He gave a quick nod and removed his hat, slow and deliberate, as if he’d practised it.

‘Are you Kitty and Dan O’Sullivan?’

He was clutching his hat tightly against his chest now, like it was a shield.

‘Yes?’ Mamó replied.

‘I’m Garda Ray Grealish. May I come in, please?’

‘Has something happened?’ Mamó asked, eyebrows raised. I noticed she had flour all over her apron and some on her cheek. I could see the Garda take a deep breath before speaking. His whole chest rose and fell.

‘We should sit down first.’ He said it in a whisper. Mamó’s face darkened. Her lips moved like she was mouthing something but no words came. She opened the door wider and stood back to let him in. He stepped inside. Daideo and I stood awkwardly behind Mamó. The little front porch suddenly seemed crowded.

‘What’s happened?’ Daideo asked, frowning. He was stroking the edge of his jaw as if he’d just remembered that he’d forgotten to shave.

‘Em... you might want to hear this news privately,’ the Garda said quietly, glancing over at me and then looking back at Mamó. His whole face had contorted into a wince.

‘It’s alright, you can tell us in front of Ciara,’ Mamó replied with eyebrows sloped upwards. Then her voice suddenly became louder and urgent. ‘Please, just *tell us!*’

‘Why don’t we sit down?’ the Garda suggested gently, gesturing over towards the two-seater sofa and wicker chairs in the far end of the porch. Mamó and Daideo obediently shuffled across the sandy-coloured tiles and sat down. I sat next to Mamó on the sofa and the men sat on the wicker seats. The Garda leaned forward in his chair, took a deep breath and spoke in a low, sombre tone.

‘I have some news regarding your daughter, Cathy and her husband Tom. I’m very sorry to have to tell you that there’s been a fatal accident. Cathy and Tom were struck by a vehicle on the Dublin Road in Ballinasloe this morning, just outside Nirvana Café. Unfortunately, they both died shortly after arriving at Portiuncula Hospital. I’m very sorry...’ His words hung in the air. A brief silence followed.

‘*Died?* Both of them?’ Mamó asked feebly, barely able to get

the words out. She was staring at the Garda with a grave, searching look.

‘Yes. I’m afraid so,’ he replied gently. Mamó and Daideo looked at one another before gazing down at the tiles, motionless. I could feel Mamó’s hand clutch mine. The Garda began talking again but his voice seemed to drift off. I couldn’t focus on what he was saying. The same words kept ringing in my head: *There’s been a fatal accident... There’s been a fatal accident... They both died... They both died... They both died.*

I clamped my eyes shut. No, no, no. Wait. Stop. Hold on. This can’t be right. Not Mum and Dad. Out of all the people in the world? No way. That can’t be right. Mum had texted me earlier in the morning, when they were leaving Dublin. I felt Mamó’s arm around my shoulder. Her fingers gripped me tightly. I opened my eyes again and tried to tune in to the Garda’s voice. He was saying something about paramedics having done everything they could at the scene of the accident and that a full investigation would be carried out immediately.

It was as if all the oxygen got sucked out of the room, like the world stood still. Waking up in a nightmare instead of waking up out of it. A sudden switch from normal living to this. I could feel my heart thumping wildly and I had to take one deep breath after another.

Mamó stared across at Daideo and then at me with shocked eyes. She was gently rubbing my back, just like she used to do when I was a little kid, if I was crying. Daideo’s head was bent now as he stared back at the floor. His eyes were focused on the one spot. He was blinking rapidly as if the most dazzling light was torturing his eyes.

‘Are you quite sure that it’s *our* Cathy and Tom?’ Daideo asked in a pleading voice. Immediately, my mind imagined lots of other Cathys and Toms it could have been instead.

‘Yes, I’m afraid so.’ The Garda sounded apologetic. ‘We found Cathy’s wallet with her driver’s licence and bank cards. Their car

was parked nearby.’

‘They... they weren’t in their car?’ Daideo sounded confused.

‘No, from what we can gather so far, they had just crossed the road and were walking along the footpath when a car veered off the road and struck them.’

‘In Ballinasloe?’

‘Yes.’

‘Just an hour from Galway... Almost home.’

‘Yes.’

‘They must have stopped there for a break,’ Daideo muttered quietly, still staring at that same spot on the floor.

‘That’s what appears to have happened,’ the Garda replied softly. He seemed to be looking down on the same spot on the floor as Daideo.

‘And... and... what will happen next?’ Daideo asked in a choked voice, now raising his eyes and staring blankly at the Garda as if in a trance.

‘The Family Liaison Officer will be calling to you shortly and she’ll talk you through everything. When you feel ready – and there’s no need to rush it – but when you feel able, the next stage will involve a family member making a formal identification.’ The Garda patted down his tie. He was now sitting on the edge of the seat.

‘Is there anything I can do for you before I leave? Anybody you’d like me to contact for you?’ he looked from Daideo to Mamó.

‘Em... No, I... I don’t think so...’ said Mamó slowly. She took a deep breath. ‘We’ll have to get in touch with Greg... Cathy and Tom’s son.’

‘I did look for Greg at the family home earlier. A colleague at the station knows him, but there was nobody home. Is there someone else you’d like me to contact?’ There was a short pause. Everyone now looked confused. Mamó took charge.

‘No, no, that’s alright... We’ll make the necessary calls... Greg’s probably at his girlfriend’s flat in town.’

'I'm very sorry for your loss,' the Garda said in a low voice before standing up awkwardly. Daideo rose as well. He shook hands with the Garda in the most robotic manner. His eyes were glazed, like he was sleepwalking. Not the usual mischievous, warm eyes that I knew so well. This was a totally different Mamó and Daideo beside me now. I barely recognized them in this frozen state. It was as if the world had suddenly come to a shuddering halt. Mum and Dad had died but it kinda felt like *we* had as well.

Daideo walked the Garda over to the door. There was a strange heaviness in the porch now, despite the morning sunshine streaming in. Daideo shook hands with the Garda again – obviously forgetting that had already done so. The Garda just went along with it and shook the elderly hand like it was for the first time. Then he patted Daideo lightly on the arm.

I remember watching the Garda trudging out with his head bowed. Daideo shut the door really slowly behind him and just stood there staring blankly ahead, breathing heavily and rhythmically, like he was running out of air. His right hand remained on the door catch. He put his left hand on top of his right hand then and leaned in towards the door and rested his forehead on his hands that were still stuck to the catch. This lasted for just a few seconds before he withdrew, turned around and slowly stepped back over to us. I had got up at this stage. I was standing by the window, watching the Garda getting into his patrol car out on the road. Daideo stood behind me as I looked out. I could feel his big hands on my shoulders. Then he kissed the top of my head. I stood there motionless. Unable to respond. Just kept looking out. Daideo then sat down on the sofa next to Mamó and held her hand. They both sat there in stony silence, staring into space.

I couldn't help but envy that Garda as I observed the patrol car drive off again. It was fine for him. He could just arrive here, dump this news on us and then drive off again. I wished in that instance that I could suddenly escape from my life and enter his instead. How lucky he was, I remember thinking, not having to deal

with this horrific news. Poor Greg, I thought then. Jesus! Mum and Dad are dead and Greg doesn't know yet. *Mum and Dad are dead.* Those words felt like a cold blade sinking into my heart.

I could recall certain details of that day – The Day Everything Changed. After the Garda left, Mamó phoned Greg's mobile but he didn't pick up. She phoned a few minutes later and left a voicemail. I knew Greg would cop straight away from Mamó's trembling voice that something terrible had happened. He arrived within the hour. His face was all grim as soon as he walked in the door.

'What's happened?' he asked.

'It's very bad news, peteen...' whispered Mamó.

The four of us sat at the kitchen table, the fridge whirring nearby, the Sunday roast still sitting in the oven, untouched. Each one of us trying to absorb the enormity of it. I started to wonder was there any hope that it wasn't Mum and Dad who'd been killed in Ballinasloe? Could this be a big mistake? I remember coming up with all kinds of reasons why the Gardaí had made a dreadful error. Maybe Mum had dropped her wallet with her driving licence in it. Yeh, that'd be right. Mum was forever losing things – her phone, wallet, keys. I imagined a lady on the street in Ballinasloe picking up Mum's wallet on the pavement and saying to her husband, *We'd better hand this in somewhere.* She then decided to hand it in to the café nearby but before she could do that she and her husband were hit by a car and killed. The Gardaí then found the driving licence in that woman's bag and assumed she was Cathy McKnight. So, logically, they then presumed the woman's husband was Tom McKnight. But it wasn't them at all.

A terrible mix-up! A case of mistaken identity. That's it. That's what happened. All because another woman had Mum's driver's licence in her bag. Well, you can see how the Gardaí got the wrong end of the stick, can't you? Any minute now, my phone would ring and I'd hear Mum's voice. She'd natter away to me. Dad would be driving. They were on the N4. They'd be arriving in Galway shortly. They'd be here in about fifteen minutes. And I'd say, *Hang on a*

sec, to Mum and I'd beam over at Mamó and Daideo and tell them delightedly that it was all a false alarm. Mum and Dad were alive! I'd pass the phone over to Mamó and she'd hear Mum's voice and her whole face would light up and she'd cry out: *Oh God, Cathy! You won't believe what just happened... A Garda called and told us ye were both dead!* And I'd hear Mum's lively voice sing out dramatically in that distinctive lilt of hers, half-shocked, half-amused: *Wha-a-a-t? Oh my Gawd! Oh... my.... Gawd! You're not seeeer-ious!* And Daideo's eyes would crinkle and he'd give a warm grin and he'd say: *Well, thanks be to God!* over and over.

I had it all worked out in my head. That's what was going to happen next. And then Mum and Dad would arrive in the door. Mum – a noisy whirlwind landing in – full of chat, all the news and gossip from the wedding. Dad quieter, more low-key. Mamó would give them both an extra tight hug. And they'd talk about the crazy mix-up that had happened. Mamó would probably say: *All's well that ends well!* And Dad would laugh it off and say: *Rumours of my passing have been greatly exaggerated!* He had always wanted to use that line. Mum would tip my nose playfully with her index finger and she'd say: *You're not getting rid of us that easily... We're not going anywhere for a long time! Your father and I have a lengthy bucket list!*

I took out my phone and stared down at the screen. In my mind I was begging Mum to ring and end the torture. I thought if I just wished hard enough, it might happen. I kept waiting for the phone to ring, the screen to light up with the word, MUM. But none of that happened. It was all in my head. No case of mistaken identity. No lost wallet. Just lost parents.

My abiding memory of that day was going up to the attic room at the top of the house that evening, kicking off my shoes, standing on the bed, opening the big skylight above it and sticking out my head and shoulders. I gazed across towards Blackrock and Galway Bay as the sun went down. By then, a lot of people had arrived at the house. Relatives, friends of Mamó's and Daideo's, neighbours

from the road. I had to get away from the din of people.

As I stuck my head out and felt the Salthill breeze on my face, I could smell the fresh sea air. When I looked left, I saw the imposing dome of Galway Cathedral in the distance. I couldn't see Galway Hospital but I knew it was just down the road from the Cathedral. I recalled what the Family Liaison Officer had told us. Mum and Dad were now at the mortuary in Galway Hospital. And all I could think of was, *that's not where they're meant to be right now. They're meant to be at home with me and Greg, laughing and joking. Having the craic.*

I remembered the last funeral we had attended the year before for Daideo's brother Mick. He'd been in hospital for a week before he died of cancer. I recalled something my granddad had said in the car as Dad drove us from Galway Cathedral to Rathmore Cemetery. We were sitting in traffic in front of Galway Hospital with the Cathedral a short distance behind us. Funerals always made my granddad philosophical and that day was no exception. Daideo said that our whole lives are a back-and-forth shuffle between hospital and church. Life begins and often ends in hospitals, with happy and sad church occasions scattered in between. I thought of Mum and Dad. They were both born in Galway Hospital. They'd returned to that same maternity department decades later when Greg was born in 1991 and then for my birth in 2005. They'd made their First Holy Communion and got married in Galway Cathedral where they'd later had me and Greg christened and it was where my brother and I made our First Holy Communion as well. Now they were lying dead in the mortuary of that same hospital where their lives began. From hospital to church. Back and forth till we die. And all the stuff in between.

Then I started thinking, when Mum and Dad woke up that morning and packed their bags to return home after my cousin Colm's wedding, little did they know that they wouldn't be sleeping in their bed that night. No, instead they'd be zipped up inside body bags, in refrigerated containers in a hospital mortuary. I'd seen

those metal containers in movies.

Then another thought struck me. Today was my parents' last day of life. Their last day breathing and walking around the planet. I looked out towards Blackrock. I could see the silhouette of the diving tower in the distance. There was a blazing sunset of gold, pink and bluey grey. Mum loved sunsets. How many summer evenings had we sat on those deep stone steps at Blackrock and looked out past the raft in the water and the diving boards and watched the sun set over Galway Bay? Mum used to say: *a sunset is the sun's fiery kiss to the night!* That awful realisation just hit me as I leaned forwards, staring across the bay, savouring each second of that fading sunlight before darkness crept in. I knew I'd never ever be able to return to the last day of Mum and Dad's lives. Each day, for the rest of my life, would be a day when I'd wake up in a world where Cathy and Tom McKnight were dead.