

CHAPTER ONE

Monstrous

They called her Sissy because her red hair made them think of the actress in that movie they'd both loved where pretty much the whole town winds up dead. But names are a big deal in Catholic families, so it was agreed the birth certificate should say Cecilia. That way, Anne could tell everyone that her first granddaughter was named after the patron saint of music. Everyone was happy. No one anticipated any problems. Of course, the baby didn't have much of a say in anything, though she became very clear she preferred Sissy to Cecilia, no matter what the kids in the playground had to say about it.

Despite the shock of the first grandchild being born out of wedlock, Anne took comfort from the fact that Sissy's arrival was sure to bring Peter back to his senses. He'd return to the law, and in time she was sure Peter and Jude would marry. The baby, like all babies, was a marvellous opportunity to put everything back on track.

But seventeen years later, none of that had come to pass, and now the family were gathered in Peter's hallway awaiting the arrival of the cars for his funeral. His sister, Susan, had travelled from Manchester with her three boisterous sons and unfaithful husband, from whom she would never be parted, because that is the Catholic way. His brother, Danny, was there with his two well-behaved daughters, but not their

mother because she – the vixen – had left him, and although Lauren had wanted to attend the funeral, Danny had forbidden it because you don't get to pick and choose your loyalties; you're either with the Donnellys or you're not, and if you're not, then you might as well be against them.

The assembled family looked to the top of the stairs where Sissy stood, wearing a dress for a thirteen-year-old child that she'd found in M&S a couple of days previously. Her dad would have laughed at that. On her feet were a pair of navy blue cowboy boots he'd brought back from a tour around the States. He'd made a mistake with the sizes and bought a couple of sizes too large.

'You're not wearing *those*, are you?' said Anne, as Sissy clumped down the stairs, fascinated by the strangeness of her own feet. When she reached the bottom, she smiled widely and clicked her heels together: *there's no place like home there's no place like home there's no place like home*. Nobody laughed, but Lucy, who was the youngest of Danny's girls, gave a watery smile and whispered to her that they were awesome.

Danny leaned over and kissed Lucy on the head. 'Good girl,' he said, and Sissy experienced it as a stab to the heart. No more daddy kisses for her.

She searched for her mother and found her leaning against the wall behind Grammy. Red-eyed and vacant, Jude was no longer the mother she'd always known. It remained to be seen who she was now, indeed, who they were, and what they would become together.

'The cars are here,' said Susan, from her look-out post at the living room window.

A barely perceptible pause followed, then Danny said, 'Right. Everyone move out.'

The front door opened and everyone began to shuffle out. The three youngest cousins darted through the grown-ups, desperate for exercise.

'Wait,' said Susan, catching Sissy by the arm.

She brought her into the downstairs bathroom. Taking the corner of the hand towel, she soaked it, squeezed it, and wiped Sissy's face. Then she reached into her handbag and retrieved a comb with which she teased out the tangles in Sissy's hair and twisted it into a low ponytail.

'It'll be windy at the cemetery,' Susan said.

How clever she is to know that, Sissy thought.

'And here,' said Susan, pulling out a pair of tights from her bag. 'Your feet'll get sore in those boots otherwise.'

Susan knelt down and tapped on Sissy's knee, triggering a long forgotten morning routine. Sissy raised first one foot and then the other to allow Susan to pull her boots off.

'Right,' said Susan, running her fingers down the leg of the tights and stretching out the foot. Sissy wiggled her toes into the little cave Susan had created. So many times she had done this with Jude, holding onto her head to keep balanced, always forgetting her mother preferred her to use her shoulders.

But today Sissy held onto the sink for balance, and studied her aunt's head, which she didn't think she'd seen from this angle before. Susan's roots were an inch long and greying. Something about this moved Sissy. She felt sorry for her aunt who'd be seeing absolutely everyone in the whole extended family today. It was the sort of day you'd normally want to make an effort for.

Three stretch limousines carried them to the church because Anne said it had to be done properly. Even among the principal mourners there was a hierarchy: Sissy and Jude travelled in the first car, Anne, Danny and Susan in the second, and all five cousins in the car behind, with Susan's husband their reluctant chaperone.

Sissy and Jude took a window seat each. Jude wondered later if perhaps it was the car being so big that put all that space between them. And perhaps it was Anne's tiny stature that made Susan and Danny sit so close, as though their presence was required merely to keep the old lady propped up.

And Susan's husband, Phillip, stared at his phone the whole way, while the eldest girls, Lucy and Emma, kept his three boys entertained with a series of games ranging from I Spy to Yellow Car Touch in an effort to keep them calm.

'There's glasses in here!' shrieked the youngest, Andrew, having pressed a button to reveal a drinks cabinet hidden in the door. Lucy and Emma shared a look, a silent agreement to tolerate this now, but tell all to their dad afterwards about how inappropriate the boys had been in the funeral car, knowing already that Danny would nod, then shake his head, and say what else could you expect from boys as wild as they?

Jude had some pills from the doctor, one of which she had swallowed an hour before with one of her special teas, Earl Grey laced with vodka. Her journey to the church passed in a pleasant fuzz, although she was acutely aware of all the edges of her reality, and somewhat amused by the expanding hole at the centre of her which seemed to creep closer and closer to the boundary of her existence. She deliberately let her right arm trail into the centre of the back seat in case Sissy needed something to hold onto. She would always be there for Sissy. Sissy was the most important thing. For Sissy, her hand would always be open, lying between them like a half-built bridge.

The service was different things to different people. Sissy was insulted by it. Her dad hadn't been to Mass in years, he didn't believe in Catholic teachings, he'd never met Father whatever-his-name was, standing up there, bald and spitty, acting like some sort of authority over their family. She grasped the pew in front of her and her knuckles whitened. She wanted to use them to smash that stupid man to pieces, especially when he said the words 'cerebral haemorrhage' with that sad face on. Everyone listening knew fine he was the only person in the whole church who hadn't been affected at all.

To the left of Sissy was Anne, for whom every word from the priest was a balm carried on divine energy from God,

seeking to find rest in her very soul. She allowed herself to be tangled and carried, his holy words wrapping around her, soothing the skirmish inside. She'd thought she was safe, that she'd seen the worst of everything. They say to lose a child goes against nature, but to lose anyone at her age was a resurrection of all past griefs. A tumult of mixed memories; the mother she barely remembered, her distant father, the childhood she'd never had, the life she should have lived, her husband's passing. All the grief was resurrected and catapulted her to a new world of wisdom, because now she knew how petty, how *insignificant*, each of those losses had been because this loss – *this* – was the truest grief she'd ever experienced, and unless God sent an army to save her, she did not think she could endure it.

But she cleaved to the priest's words. He said all the right things, having been thoroughly briefed in the days between then and now. God would see her through. He always had.

Sissy, offended by the stranger's display of familiarity with her father, looked to her mother for comfort, but Jude's eyes remained closed throughout, her whole being numb with medication, barely hearing anything at all.

When it came time for Communion, the priest came along the front row and offered everyone the Body of Christ. Sissy clamped her lips together and shook her head. She soon regretted her decision when everyone else took it and kneeled down to give thanks. She sat conspicuously upright, like a creature in that game – What was it? Whack-a-Mole – and thought this probably wasn't the time or place for making statements, so she left her pew and joined the line at the back of the church.

She'd never seen so much black before. So many old-looking faces. Were the faces really old, or did grief just make them like that temporarily? She moved slowly down the aisle, unable to look anyone in the eye, anxiety building as she neared the front. She wasn't supposed to take Communion without having made confession, and by refusing Communion

the first time hadn't she pretty much declared she wasn't ready to receive it? What if the priest turned her away? In the end, he didn't even recognise her. The bread stuck stubbornly to the roof of her mouth, refusing to enter her undeserving body. She battled it down with her tongue and swallowed it, then hurried to her seat and waited in silence for everything to end, fearing that to join everyone in hymn and prayer would dismantle her fury. If that went, she didn't know what she would have left.

They followed the coffin out but Sissy was the only one who followed it all the way to the car. She watched in disbelief as two grey-haired men in mourning suits settled the coffin inside. Feeling stupid, but unable to restrain herself, Sissy kissed her fingers and darted forward to place them onto the wood, her heart bursting with gratitude that she'd had the foresight to place a small cream envelope in his inside pocket.

She, Jude and Anne had gone to view the body together, and while she'd known writing him a letter didn't make much sense, it had been their thing to leave little notes around the place for each other. It was an absolutely crucial thing to do and if her mother or grandmother thought she was mad, well, she didn't care because she was not ready to stop loving him.

The men closed the doors and she was stranded on the other side of the glass. She knew she'd never be this close again, that he didn't belong to her any more, that he would be transported from here to the cemetery and that hundreds of people would see him pass and not understand what a spectacular human being he had been. They'd see the box, the flowers saying SON and DAD, and the cars following behind, and they'd know for a moment that something awful had happened, but then they'd move on, untouched, never to think of it again. It was just another hearse to slow down for. Something intriguing to sneak glances at from the safety of the sidelines.

She turned around, looking for someone to hold onto,

and was surprised to see she'd put considerable distance between herself and her family. Everyone else had stopped at the bottom of the church steps, slowing the exit of those in the back rows. Her mother was already smoking. Her littlest cousins were running around in circles on the church lawn.

She looked for Cam and Rik. She hadn't expected them to be there but as she'd followed the coffin out of the church she'd spotted them squeezed in at the back. They'd probably never understand how grateful she was to see them.

She walked back up the path and joined the fringes of her family, feeling like an intruder. The rest of the congregation gradually escaped the church and drifted off in groups to smoke and talk, probably reluctant to complete proceedings. Then there was a flurry of activity. *Do you know where it is? Can I follow you? You'll get a lift with them if you're quick. I'll see you up there.*

Back in the limousines. People on the other side gawking as they passed. The walk up the hill. That rectangular shape dug out in the ground. The heap of dirt beside it. The green fabric marking the place. Was that to make it look better? Was it something to do with health and safety? The priest standing by the grave, as though he was the head of the dinner table and they all his guests. The red ropes that allowed the coffin to slip into place. Handfuls of dirt to scatter *rat-a-tat-tat* across the box.

The day was grey and dry with a light wind. Unremarkable, really.

The wake was held at the hotel Jude worked at. For some reason she'd reacted strongly against holding it there, but Danny had stepped in when she became hysterical, and her boss, Aleks, said he would take care of everything. It was easier to give in. Platters of sandwiches and sausage rolls came out in their hundreds. There was so much food left over, Father Murphy took a doggy bag home. Waste not, want not.

Sissy, Jude and Anne each sat in three different corners of the room, like boxers, each with their own entourage. Sissy greedily welcomed the vodka Cam had stolen from home. He splashed it into her lemonade beneath the table, making sure she got the biggest measures of the three of them.

Jude also had a long line of drinks before her, and in a short while she'd transformed herself. No longer the zombie of the past few days, she found these people enlivened her. At one point someone said something and she shrieked with laughter, causing the whole room to turn around.

She's sparkly, thought Sissy. How fucking dare she? A week of silence, locked away in her bedroom, unreachable, thinking of nothing and no one but herself, and now look at her.

Anne, on the other hand, maintained a dignified exterior, passing quiet conversation with people who had waited reverentially in line to pass on condolences, sometimes with a soft pat on Anne's hand or arm. If Sissy hadn't been worried about the smell of drink on her breath she might have sat down with Anne and held her hand. He'd been her son, after all. It hadn't occurred to Sissy that her grandmother was affected at all until she'd overheard a stranger in the bathroom talking about it. 'Goes against nature, so it does,' the voice said. 'A terrible thing.' Sissy had remained in the cubicle until she was sure she was alone, reluctant to rejoin a world where, as well as surviving her own grief, she had to think about someone else's too.

On the way out, she met Uncle Danny. He greeted her like a long-lost friend, rather than someone with whom he'd spent the past few days in close proximity. 'Sissy!' he exclaimed, and wrapped an arm around her. They shuffled their way along the corridor, he trying to loosen his tie with his free hand.

'He was some man, your dad. My big brother. He was! We didn't always see eye to eye, mind you, but he was my big brother and I loved him. Always looked out for me. See when

that bitch... sorry, sorry, I know I shouldn't talk like that. See when your Auntie Lauren left me, I was in bits. I don't mind saying it. I was on the floor. You're too young to remember, but look, right, everyone was blown away by this. Ask your mother. Everything had been completely fine. No problems. No nothing. And then out of nowhere... bam! She screwed me. And your dad, Sissy, your dad brought me in. Do you remember that? Into his house. Me and the girls living with you? It wasn't for too long. She got the lawyers on me quick-smart. We're bastards, us lawyers.'

'I think I do remember, right enough.'

'Hi Daddy!' said a sing-song voice. Sissy was relieved to see Emma coming down the corridor towards them, the expression in her eyes a sharp contrast to the sweetness of her voice.

'Sweetheart,' said Danny, his breath wet and beery. 'I was just saying about your Uncle Peter. Did I tell you about the time he took on the Gillespie twins for me? Battered them both. They never looked at me again after that. That's the Donnelly way. Stick together. I hope you and your sister remember that. He was my hero. My big brother and my hero.'

Emma had slipped beneath his free arm and, with Sissy's help, began walking him back to the main room.

'Okay, Daddy,' she coaxed, bright and breezy. 'Grandma's just right round this corner, so maybe tone it down a wee bit. We'll sit you here and get you a coffee. Sissy, will you wait with him till I come back?'

Without waiting for a reply, Emma darted off to the bar. Sissy sat beside her uncle and wished for Rik or Cam to make an appearance. Maybe they'd gone into the garden for a smoke. A succession of strangers came by with commiserations. She nodded and bared her teeth in an approximation of a smile and gave thanks to each of them. So much gratitude required.

'Ah, here's my girl,' said Danny, as Emma made her way back to them with a coffee. 'Talk about your alpha females,

eh, Sissy? No messing with this one. She keeps me in line, don't you, honey?'

Emma smiled blandly as she placed the cup down.

'Has she told you what she's up to, Sissy?' asked Danny. 'Has she? Have you?'

'Daddy, I don't think this is the place,' murmured Emma with a sigh, sweeping her hair behind her ear and securing it with a clasp.

'Don't be daft,' Danny reached across and gripped her knee. 'She wants to know, don't you, Sissy?'

Emma rolled her eyes and shook her head to signal her embarrassment, then confessed she'd been cast in a television drama.

'It's just a small part,' she said. 'It's no big deal.'

'No big deal,' said Danny. 'It's massive! It'll be seen all across the US. She's in two episodes.'

'Wow,' said Sissy. 'That's... surreal.'

'Your Uncle Peter would have been proud.'

'No doubt,' Sissy continued to smile and nod, like one of those toy dogs you get in the back of cars. 'Well done, cuz.'

Later, she found Rik and Cam smoking at the back of the hotel gardens beside the pond, and Cam advised her to get herself some normal relatives.

'Yeah,' agreed Rik. 'It's your dad's funeral. You should be everyone's focus, not her. What a knob.'

The sun was about to slip behind a cluster of trees. The day would soon be over. Suddenly Sissy realised her feet were throbbing. She kicked off the boots and removed her tights. In the function suite, overhead lights came on, prompting people to rise and gather their belongings. She shuffled herself to the water's edge and lowered her feet into the pond. The coldness of the water was soothing, distracting.

'He looks just like him though,' she said. 'I never noticed before.'

They had no idea what to say, so they removed their socks

and shoes and rolled up their trouser legs and joined her in the pond. They smoked and drank and laughed, revelling in the oddity of the situation, and gentle ripples on the water marred their dark reflections.

No one wanted to leave, surprisingly even Jude. As the place gradually emptied, the presence of Susan's three energetic boys became overwhelming.

'Come and sit by your grandma,' Anne urged them, but they could only bear to sit for a moment before the urge to slide across the function suite's dance floor overtook them.

'Oh, Phil, take them away,' Susan sighed, and he began the business of rounding them up.

The family members were at last sitting around the same table, forced together as more and more people left. Lauren had collected Emma and Lucy from the hotel and that, more than anything else all day, had pushed Danny into an unrivalled moroseness. If it weren't for the fact that his mother needed him to be strong, he might have allowed himself the luxury of tipping over the edge.

'Where's Sissy?' Anne asked, but no one knew. Anne rattled her nails against the table. She didn't enjoy one of her brood being unaccounted for now that the place was so empty. She didn't enjoy either that Jude, mother of the missing child, seemed not to mind. She clicked her tongue, only too aware that everyone around her had moved into a state of uncaring exhaustion, and that soon she would be deposited in her house and left alone with her thoughts and grief.

'Andrew, come here!' Phil's voice put paid to the giggling that had grown steadily louder and more manic.

'For God's sake, Susan, can't you do something about that?' asked Danny, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

'He's five, Danny. What do you expect?' said Susan, who rose anyway and went to assist her husband.

Danny rolled his eyes in Anne's direction but she was looking past him out into the garden. Out of the shadows emerged three swaying figures. They were all bare-foot and soaking wet up to the waist.

They struggled with the sliding door, and when they finally managed it, they tumbled laughing into the room, too drunk to notice their audience.

'Cecilia Donnelly!' said Anne, whose voice had barely risen above a whisper all day but now, powered by indignation, could be heard clearly by everyone. Even the woman drying glasses behind the bar turned around to stare.

'Sissy!' a young voice cried.

Sissy whipped herself round in time to see her littlest cousin running and throwing himself at her. She tried to catch him but the surprise of his enthusiasm, combined with her drunkenness on the wet, slippery floor, conspired to knock her over. She landed flat on her back.

There was a stunned silence, and then a wailing from Andrew, and then came laughter from Rik and Cam, and before she could help herself, she was laughing too. Phil plucked Andrew from the floor and carried him out, and Cam and Rik each took one of Sissy's hands and pulled her up. The room whirled unpleasantly around her.

'You are a disgrace, young lady. Have you forgotten where you are?'

Anne had crossed the room and stood now, tiny and ram-rod straight before her granddaughter. Sissy felt herself shrinking beneath her glare. The room was so bright and hot after the cool darkness of the gardens. She closed her eyes and was greeted by a wave of nausea. She immediately buckled and vomited, narrowly missing her grandmother's pointy shoes. She was distantly aware of voices around her, expressing their dismay.

Jude and Aleks swooped in and carried her through to their office, while Susan and Danny steered Anne in the direction of a waiting taxi.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sissy mumbled. ‘Is Andrew okay?’

‘What did he think he was doing running at you like that?’ said Jude, wiping Sissy’s chin.

‘He’s just a kid,’ Aleks said. ‘Take it easy.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ Jude snapped, and then, ‘sorry. I’m sorry. You’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he replied. ‘It’s a difficult day.’

Jude poured water from a jug on her desk and gave it to Sissy. Then she turned to Aleks and said, ‘I need to pay you.’ She reached into her bag for her cheque book.

Aleks frowned and held his hands up. ‘No. Jude, come on. You don’t pay.’

‘Please, Aleks. I must.’

He stepped towards her and covered her hands with his. He spoke softly. ‘No. No way. Let’s not have this.’

She leaned back from him, twisting her head round to check on Sissy. A timid knock came on the door and Cam peeked his head in.

‘I brought this,’ he said, holding out a red plastic bucket.

‘I think that ship has sailed, but thank you,’ said Aleks, taking it from him.

‘Sorry,’ Cam said. ‘I should have been watching her.’

A derisive snort came from Jude, who was leaning against the desk, feeling none too steady herself. ‘None of us are in best shape, Cam. Not your fault. Come on, Sissy, time to go.’

She stretched her hand out for Sissy to take and succeeded only in knocking her handbag off the desk. The contents spilled over the floor.

‘I will drive you,’ said Aleks. ‘You can’t manage on your own.’

His words instantly dismantled Jude’s already fragile authority. She collapsed into herself, her shoulders heaving as huge sobs raced out of her. Aleks apologised profusely, taking her in his arms, telling her he hadn’t meant she wouldn’t be able to cope without Peter. Of course she would, she was strong, she was a good mother – all of this in his gentle,

Polish-accented, near-perfect English. Neither of them noticed Sissy slide off her chair to gather up the contents of Jude's bag.

Cam remained at the door, unsure of what to do. He looked back down the corridor to the reception area where Rik waited for him. Rik's mother was due to pick them both up and drop Cam home. He took one last look at the tableaux in the office and decided Jude's boss could manage without him.

Aleks sat Jude down and urged her to breathe deeply. She tried to catch hold of his words, nodding as she gulped down huge pockets of air. Like a tent in a storm, all her ropes were untethering. She gripped his hands as he knelt on the floor before her, coaxing her back to calmness. When the panic subsided, she looked into his eyes: hazel, flecked through with amber, and brimming with concern. He was asking nothing of her, and yet she had a driving need to get away from him, couldn't face his kindness. She had no choice but to accept his offer to drive them home. Only thirty more minutes in his company. Count it down.

Kneeling on the floor behind her was Sissy. She'd packed up the bits and pieces that had fallen out of her mother's purse and thrown into the wastepaper basket a series of crumpled tissues. Now she stared down at the collection of cards and envelopes that had slipped out along with everything else. One cream-coloured envelope in particular caught her eye. Her brain told her it couldn't be, but her hand reached forward and picked it up. It was as real as all the others. The rest of the room fell into insignificance as she turned it over with trembling hands. There, in her own forward-sloping handwriting, was the word *Daddy*, and what came crashing down harder than the monstrous sense of betrayal, was the certain sad knowledge that it was now too late for it ever to be delivered.