

CHAPTER 1

It was a dull morning on November 8th when Kyle stepped out of the car, and yet the daylight seemed to hurt his eyes. He squinted at the whitish-grey sky and thanked the Garda who had given him a lift home.

He stepped onto the gravel path leading up to the house. He had thought, for that brief moment on Saturday night, that he would never see the house again. It was an ugly house on the outside, a big brick and glass thing that was modern when it was built in the early '90s. The rusty-coloured landscape behind it almost camouflaged the house at this time of year. Kyle had always been glad of it, and that morning he hoped that the house with its contents could simply blend into the surrounding nature altogether so that nobody could come looking for them.

As it was, though, he pulled his keys out of his jeans pocket and walked up to the looming front porch. He pushed the door open and was met with the warm, cosy smell of an open fire and freshly made toast. He could hear his sister's voice on the telephone out in the hall, spelling out her name for what sounded like approximately the thirteenth time.

"No, Cassandra DAHLIA French. Yes, that's right, like the flower, followed by the nationality."

Kyle pushed the door closed behind him. He could tell that his arrival had been noticed. The phone call ended soon after.

Kyle had just entered the kitchen when his sister showed up at the other doorway.

"Hi," she said with a worried-looking smile. Kyle nodded and sat down at the end of the long oak table.

"Do you want tea? Coffee?" Cassie asked, stretching the sleeves of her grey, woolly jumper.

"Coffee," Kyle replied, reaching out for the newspaper on the table.

"Toast?"

"No."

"Kyle, you know you need to eat..."

He let out a big sigh. "Fine. Cereal then."

Cassie hurried over to the press to sort out his breakfast.

Kyle turned over the newspaper to see the front page. "Psychic's son survives fatal crash," it said in big letters on the front.

"Why did you get this?" he asked, looking up at his older sister.

Cassie turned around at the fridge and brushed her long fringe off her face. "They gave it to me on the plane."

"When did you get here?" Kyle said, glancing through the article.

"Yesterday afternoon. As soon as I could. It still cost me a fortune."

Cassie put a bowl of cereal and a mug of coffee in front of Kyle and sat down at the table too.

"Where's Ciara?"

"She took Wanda for a walk," Cassie replied.

"That article is a load of bollocks, you know," she continued.

"They only make a big deal out of it because of mum. They wouldn't give a shit otherwise," Kyle said, pushing the paper away from him across the table. "How do they even know?"

"It was in the local papers yesterday," Cassie said. Kyle knew that she was tense around him, as if he was going to blame her for it or something.

"Bastards," Kyle said, dropping his spoon into the cereal. He had no appetite, but he knew that Cassie was right; he had to eat. If he didn't, Cassie would lose it altogether, even though she seemed calm at the moment.

The front door opened and closed, bringing with it a touch of cool air. Ciara appeared at the kitchen door in a grey hoodie. Wanda ran into the kitchen and sat down at Kyle's feet, glancing up at him with her big, bulgy eyes.

"Hi," Ciara said. Kyle could see that she had been crying. She probably hadn't taken the dog for a walk but for a cry instead. Kyle nodded at her and realised, for what felt like the first time, how

alike his sisters were. They were both wary around him, ready to catch him if he was to fall or to put him out if he was to go on fire. They had the same expression on their faces. The only differences were the eight years between them and the different manufactured hair colours, Cassie's blonde and Ciara's dark.

Cassie hurried to turn on the kettle and make herself and Ciara a cup of tea.

"So, you got home all right?" Ciara said, sitting down.

"Why not?" Kyle said, pushing the empty cereal bowl away from him.

"So, what's gonna happen next?"

Ciara was pulling her hoodie off over her head and thanked Cassie for the fresh cuppa.

"I've spoken to the funeral home... I think it will be on Friday."

"Friday? What the fuck for?" Kyle glared at his sister.

"It's the soonest they can do it. It will take... a lot of cleaning up," Cassie said, tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

"I don't wanna see them. I don't," Ciara said, glancing at the two of them.

"You won't have to, pet," Cassie said, reaching out to touch her hand.

"Can they not clean up a bit faster?"

"Don't be so harsh, Kyle. They're doing their best."

"Whatever," Kyle breathed into his coffee.

"I spoke to the lawyers too. I'll see them later in the week."

"We won't have to move, will we?" Ciara looked worried.

"No. I'm sure the house is safe. You can stay here. You might need somebody to stay with you though."

"Can't you stay, Cassie?"

"I don't know, Ciara. I can't just up and leave and move back home. I need to have a job... And there's Rob too."

“Yeah, but... I’m 18 next month, it’s not like I need a nanny or anything. I’d rather we were all together.”

“How do you think we would live?” Kyle said sarcastically.

“Mum and dad had money...”

“Yeah, THEY had money. What about inheritance tax and all that shite? You’re a student, I’m a student, and Cassie’s hardly gonna be able to give us much from London.”

“Kyle...” Cassie tried to stop him.

“Yeah, well, it’s just not gonna work, is it? I’ll get some shitty job in McDonald’s or something just to keep us going, will I? As if that’s gonna work.”

“Kyle, it will all be fine. We’ll get money.”

“Sure.” He pushed his chair back from the table. He saw tears in Ciara’s eyes now too, but he didn’t care.

“Where are you going?” Cassie shouted after him.

“To the bathroom, if you must know,” he muttered.

Kyle walked to the downstairs bathroom, next to the only downstairs bedroom and his father’s study. He walked over to the sink, turned on the cold tap and splashed his face, over and over again, even though it hurt and stung and the coldness of the water made him think his face and hands were going to go numb.

He dried himself off, and then wiped the splashes off the mirror. He put the towel back on the chrome towel warmer and looked in the mirror. His mousey-brown hair with the blond highlights that he had only got done a couple of weeks earlier was now shaved off in two points on the right-hand side of his head. The bald patches were covered in little bandages. The nurse had told him in the morning that the hair would grow back quickly once the cuts were healed, but it looked horrible. He’d have to get his whole head shaved now.

And his face wasn’t much better. There was a big, ugly gash right under the hairline on his forehead and two smaller cuts on his right cheek, one of them getting dangerously close to the

corner of his eye. "You're lucky to be alive," they'd all said. What exactly was lucky about being 20 and losing both parents in a car crash? More so, he would now have to look after two hysterical sisters as well as the funeral and a whole pile of legal matters that meant nothing to him... What the hell would happen to his father's business, too?

Kyle heard the doorbell outside, followed by a couple of stifled barks from Wanda. That would start now too, now that it was in the papers. People would come over with flowers and other useless things and offer their condolences...

Still, he couldn't hide in the bathroom forever. He unlocked the door and stepped into the hall. He heard another female voice in the kitchen. Iris.

"Oh, you shouldn't have!" Cassie exclaimed just as Kyle walked back into the kitchen.

"It's the least I could do," Iris said, wrapping her arms around the oldest French daughter.

"Thank you so much, Iris." Tears were running down Cassie's cheeks again.

Kyle was annoyed with the buddy-buddy attitude of his sister's. Yes, he knew that Cassie had done some work experience at their father's business during her college years and become friendly with Iris, who was only five years older than her. Still, Iris was only an employee of their father's.

Ciara had spotted him in the doorway.

"Iris brought over some groceries. Isn't that good of her?" Ciara said, encouraging him to say something polite.

Iris had separated herself from Cassie and looked at Kyle. He only nodded. Groceries were the last thing on his mind.

"Look at you, Kyle. You really were lucky." Iris stepped closer to him to inspect the cuts on his face and head, but Kyle turned away. Iris sensed his reluctance and changed the subject.

"Is there anything else I can do for you guys? Anything at all? Do you want to stay somewhere else or call someone to stay here with you?"

"No, thanks, that won't be necessary. We're all adults," Cassie said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“Are you sure? It’s a bad time...”

“We’ll be fine,” Kyle interrupted. Ciara had started unpacking the groceries – pizzas, lettuce, chocolate chip cookies, a loaf of bread, fresh milk, chicken breasts, pasta, tissues... Bloody tissues, like she was trying to be thoughtful.

“Sure, if there’s nothing else you want me to do, I better head back... It’s mental at the office... Although I’m sure that’s the least of your worries.” Iris stuck her hands in the pockets of her smart-looking black jacket.

“Can you bring me into town?” Kyle asked abruptly, much to his sisters’ dismay.

“Kyle... What do you want to go into town for?” Cassie asked with a look of horror on her face.

“I’ve things to do,” Kyle said, checking his pockets for his keys.

“Yeah, sure,” Iris said, glancing at the two other women as if looking for back-up.

“I think we should stick together,” Cassie said, crossing her arms.

“I don’t give a fuck what you think,” Kyle said so quietly that nobody heard him. “Like I said, I have some things to do.” He walked into the hall with Iris right behind him.

He sat down in the passenger seat of Iris’s little red Tigra. She reversed out of the driveway and turned the car towards town.

“Where am I taking you?”

“Anywhere in town,” Kyle replied. It was too early to ask, they were still a 15-minute drive away.

He sat in silence the whole way into town, and Iris gave up after a couple of attempts. She pulled in to a bus stop on the main street once they got into town and asked if it was OK. Kyle nodded, thanked her and got out.

His hairdresser was just around the corner. It was just after 11 o’clock in the morning, but the streets seemed full of people. They were all looking at him, and Kyle wished that he had worn a hat or sunglasses, maybe both. Wearing sunglasses in November would look odd too.

He had just crossed the street when he heard somebody call his name. He didn't need to turn around because the girl caught up with him. He had hoped to go unnoticed, but no such luck. It was Melanie. Donal had introduced her to Kyle some weeks earlier, hoping that they'd hit it off. It was a bit unnerving, Donal knowing girls who were so much younger than his 28 years. Melanie was only 19, perfect for Kyle and pretty too, but certainly not somebody he wanted to talk to just now.

"Oh Kyle. Oh my god!" Melanie had caught up with him and blocked his way. She was standing in front of him, at least four inches shorter than him, despite her habit of wearing massive heels. Kyle had never felt as self-conscious as he did at that moment, with Mel running her eyes all over his superficial, external injuries.

"I saw it in the paper yesterday, it's so horrible. Are you OK?"

What a stupid question. His parents were dead, what did she think?

"Yeah, yeah. It's grand."

"I couldn't believe it, I was meant to come and see you play on Saturday, but you were gone before I got there... You know Donal only found out Sunday morning? It's, like, nobody called any of them or anything..."

"Yeah. It was all pretty shit."

"Well, the cuts will heal soon. You'll be back to being the hottest boy in town in no time! Not that you're not anyway," Mel corrected herself.

Oh jeez. Girls, Kyle thought, and shook his head; at first he thought he was only doing it in his head but then he realised he actually was shaking his head. Mel looked confused but kept smiling sweetly.

"Yeah, well, I got to go. I've some stuff to do," Kyle said, pointing at a random direction with his thumb.

"Yeah, sure. I think Donal will come and see you in the next couple of days. He felt really bad about the whole thing. Take care of yourself," Mel said, squeezing Kyle's arm.

Kyle picked up his pace and got to the salon in no time. The bell clanged noisily behind him, and everybody's heads jerked up. Luckily, it wasn't busy. Kyle counted one customer having her hair cut and another one having her hair washed. Georgina looked up from the shampoo bottles she had been arranging at the back of the shop.

"Jesus, Kyle, what are you doing here?" she said, rushing over. "My god, you look a state!"

Kyle was painfully aware of all the eyes on him.

"Why are you here?" Georgina asked again.

"I need a haircut."

Georgina looked at him, uncomprehending.

"I need a haircut," Kyle said again, "I want it all shaved off."

"But..."

"Can you please just do it?" Kyle said quietly.

Georgina nodded, her dark curls bouncing around her head.

"Yeah. Take a seat."

Kyle sat down in the nearest chair. The place was unusually quiet. There was no chatting between the other two workers and their customers, and the radio seemed quieter than usual. There were no hairdryers on, no water running. Just silence.

"You mean, all of it?" Georgina asked, the trimmer shaking in her hand. Kyle nodded but refused to look into the mirror to face Georgina's worried eyes. He kept his eyes averted while he listened to the buzz of the trimmer and felt tufts of hair fall onto his shoulders. Conversation had resumed around them, although it seemed to be in whispers. Perhaps it was all just in his head.

"Right. Done," Georgina announced and whipped the cape off his shoulders in a one-hand movement.

Kyle stood up without a single glance in the mirror. He had never wanted to go for the skinhead look, yet here he was.

He walked over to the counter. Georgina shook her head.

“No, I don’t want you to pay anything.”

“Ah, don’t.”

“But I only put those highlights on you two weeks ago. It wouldn’t be right.”

“I don’t want your fucking sympathy!” Kyle shouted, slamming his hand on the counter.

“How much is it?”

Georgina, taken aback, stepped closer to the counter.

“A tenner.”

Kyle pulled a crumpled ten euro note out of his wallet and laid it on the counter.

“Thanks,” he said and walked back out onto the street. He caught his reflection in the window of the clothes shop next door and walked straight in. Trying to keep his head down, Kyle walked over to the rack with hats and caps on it and bought a dark-grey woolly cap that reminded him of one he had worn as a teenager on a trip to Norway.

It was a bit easier after that. The hat covered his shaved head with its bandages as well as the cut on his forehead. Judging by his face, he might as well have been in a fistfight at the weekend, except of course for the people who knew him – and in a small town, there were lots of them. His parents had been well known, his father being an estate agent and his mother being a clairvoyant when she felt like it. Psychic she was not, no matter what the papers said.

Kyle dropped into a newsagent’s in the outskirts of town and bought a bottle of Coke and a Mars bar. He was not hungry or thirsty, but it was a long walk home and he needed to keep his sugar levels up.

He had not even thought of his mobile for almost two days. He reached out for it in the inside pocket of his jacket only to find that the battery was dead. Sure, it had been low on Saturday night. The last activity was probably the call to his parents...

He picked up his pace on the side of the road. It wasn’t quite lunch time yet, but it would get dark early, and he wasn’t exactly dressed for a walk in the dark countryside in his black leather

jacket. Let alone that his hands were going to fall off with the cold. Not that he would mind that; maybe the physical pain of frost-bite would take his mind off things...

A couple of miles up the road, the houses got fewer and further apart. It was quiet except for a light wind in the trees and a dog barking some distance away. He didn't normally notice the silence around. He almost always had his earphones on, plugged into his phone. The earphones were still there in his pocket but not much use with the phone dead.

A couple of cars passed him on their way to wherever they were going. The cold air was seriously starting to get to him, and his head was beginning to ache. Kyle pulled the Mars bar out of his pocket and started chewing on it.

About halfway there Kyle started to realise that walking home had not been a good idea. He should have called Cassie, or even a cab. No chance of doing that now. He felt weak, his head was pounding, and the elbow that was not meant to be seriously injured was starting to feel like a knife was stuck into it.

He had just decided to sit down on the stone wall along the road when a silver BMW pulled up beside him.

"Kyle? What are you doing walking around here? It's freezing. Hop in!"

Oh, the neighbours. He hadn't thought of them. Had it been somebody else, Kyle would have thought that they were just after the gossip as well, but Moira McKinley was not like that. She was possibly the nicest person he had ever met, and she had looked after the French kids when they still needed babysitting.

"Did you walk all the way back from town? And no gloves! Oh, what are you like!" Mrs McKinley yanked up the heating inside the car and Kyle stuck his hands right up to the vents.

"You should have gotten a lift. How did you get to town?"

"Iris gave me a lift," Kyle said, blowing on his fingers. "Iris is..."

"Ah, I know Iris. Michael McGloin's daughter. Your father's very fond of her, you know? Not in a bad way, but she's a great girl is Iris."

Kyle was grateful that Moira did not correct herself for talking about his father in present tense.

“Are you kids OK for everything for tonight?” she asked when they got closer to the house.

Kyle nodded. Moira pulled into the French house’s driveway. Kyle put his hand on the door handle but turned back towards Moira.

“The funeral’s on Friday. I don’t know what time yet...”

“You’ll get a lift off me and John, sure. Don’t want you driving on a day like that.”

“I’ll get Cassie to give you a shout,” Kyle said, getting out of the car.

For the second time that day, he walked up to the front porch with a sense of foreboding.

“Where the hell have you been?” Cassie stood in the hall with her arms crossed when Kyle came in. “We’ve been worried sick. And your phone’s dead!”

“I know,” Kyle said, heading towards the stairs.

“You shouldn’t go off on your own like that! You’re not fully recovered...”

“Yes, sis,” Kyle said in a mocking tone and pulled his cap off.

“What the hell...” Cassie shrieked at the sight of his bald head. “You can’t go to the funeral looking like that!”

“I could hardly go looking the way I did either,” he defended himself and carried on up the steps.

Kyle’s room was at the back of the house, looking onto a small forest and a couple of fields with a flock of sheep, normally, and occasionally some horses grazing on it. Ciara had always envied him for having the view of the field with horses in it. He couldn’t give a shit about the view, but he didn’t want to give up the room.

His room had a dark wooden floor with pale-coloured walls. Duck egg, his mother used to say it was called. The double bed was walnut and a little grown-up for his taste, although very comfortable. The desk beside the door and the wardrobe opposite the bed were of the same set. He

hadn't had much of a say in the decor of the room, although he had insisted on framing his signed Slipknot poster and putting it above the bed.

He knew that something was missing as soon as he came in. Of course it was missing; nobody had been worried about it when they left the club on Saturday. Donal probably still had it, and he'd better return it in mint condition.

Kyle plugged his phone in to charge, and as soon as he was able to turn it on, the texts started flowing in. There were voicemails too. What did all these people want? To revel in his loss? To congratulate him on his survival? To offer their condolences? To find out what had really happened? To ask if he needed anything?

He threw his jacket in a corner and lay down on the bed. He hadn't realised how tired he was, not until his head hit the pillow...