

## Prologue

*16:07 Eastern Standard Time:*

Two hundred yards from the highway, in a shallow dip where the grass grew a little sparser and the frosting of snow had fallen a little closer, molecules moved.

A snowflake tipped and nudged the next, which slid and took others with it: a micro snow-slip. The tiny crystals changed the angle of reflection of the rays from the low sun.

The light moved.

A pair of white-tailed deer startled, lifting their heads and staring before bounding away across the pasture, and a snowshoe hare crouched with flattened ears and then leapt into a run toward the trees.

Another snowflake stirred.

*21:07 Greenwich Mean Time:*

In a cottage in the grounds of a country hotel a pencil rolled across the table.

A man raised his eyes from the journal on his lap. He hadn't jogged the table, yet the pencil ran smoothly to the edge and dropped off. The man frowned slightly, and then became aware of a faint rattling.

Faint but close by, and persistent.

He set down the book and his coffee mug and opened the door to the passage.

Louder.

He followed the rattle – or a thrumming, perhaps – and opened the door to the smallest room, where one wall was covered by speckled mirrors in old frames.

The mirrors were moving slightly, trembling; almost shivering.

And then they were still.

*9:07 pm:*

The wind soughed across the island, its cold song familiar to the cattle and sheep and ponies where they grazed. It ruffled the

heather and caused the pines to sway, and sighed and thumped around farmhouses and barns.

Beneath the glass of the cabinet in the castle drawing room, where no wind could possibly reach, torn and faded silk shimmered briefly, catching the moonbeam from the window and making the light waver.

On a hillside a thorn bush shivered, scratching against the stone without and the stone within, and the fragile bones on the floor shivered too, and the feathers drifted and then settled.

The wind passed by.

*Seven minutes past nine in the evening:*

The television set in the back room of the Ferry House crackled and the picture jumped.

'It's the wideband.'

'It is *not* the broadband.'

'What's up with Milly?'

The two old men watched the tabby cat as she slipped down from the armchair and slunk low-bellied between the chair legs and into the kitchen. They heard the cat flap slap. It slapped again. Then it slapped for the third time.

They exchanged looks.

It slapped one more time, and both breathed again.

'What's got into the cats?'

Their companion, emerging from the kitchen with the tray, stared at the stuttering screen and then at the curtains closed across the north-facing window.

The signal steadied and the sound returned.

He put down the tray.

'Well it's nothing to do with us.' He lowered himself with a sigh into the armchair in the corner. 'Who are we voting off tonight, then?'

## Chapter One

As before, crossing the threshold rocked his balance, and as before, he stumbled sideways and went down on one hand and one knee.

This time the ground under his palm was ice-cold and powdery with snow, and he stood quickly, brushing his hand against his worn jeans and staring at the unfamiliar landscape.

The grass was too short for moorland and the country too open, too featureless for a park. Pasture? Very big pasture; he could see no cattle or sheep but there was a line of posts, probably supporting wire, downhill to the left. Was Shropshire like this? Or Wales?

He was reluctant to turn round and look back the way he had come, but he forced himself, tensing his stomach for what he should see.

But there was nothing, just the single lump of rock and a gentle dip in the turf where his footprints began, as if the earth there had sucked in its belly, and under the dusting of snow the broader, flatter leaves of a plant that resembled ground ivy, clinging fiercely to strange soil.

Then lifting his eyes, he followed the slope of the land to where a dark wall of trees marked the end of the grass, and breathed sharply in as he saw the great steep of the mountain rising to the clouds, and its dense cladding of evergreens.

Not Shropshire then.

And it was freezing.

Roy Colvin drove with the side window open three inches despite the bitter air, so that the smoke was drawn out of the cab and he could knock ash from his cigarette from time to time. October, and the first snowfall had come early. The road was freezing over, but the way was straight and level and driving took little concentration.

He jettisoned ash again and frowned at the dark figure ahead, walking at the side of the highway. When he drew close, he braked gently and allowed the truck to roll to a standstill a couple of strides ahead. He leaned across the passenger seat to wind down the window.

'You need a ride, son?'

It was a convenience question; the kid was in a thin tee-shirt and sneakers, hunched and shivering.

'I'm sorry, I didn't—'

'Climb in.'

Roy stretched further and pulled the lever to open the door. The kid clambered into the cab, slamming the door on the cold air and winding up the window quick.

Roy eased the pickup back into motion, sliding only a little on the thin ice. Glancing sideways, he guessed the kid was probably older than he'd first thought. He looked about the same height as Robby, but Robby, like all the Colvins, was tall. This boy was shaving, dark stubble emphasising his sharp jaw and high cheekbones; and his shoulders were wider than Robby's.

'Roy,' he said. 'Roy Colvin.'

The kid turned to meet his gaze, and kind of – landed in the present, as if he hadn't been there before.

'Sorry. I'm – Daniel...Passenger...Daniel Passenger.'

Roy offered his hand and they shook awkwardly across the gear-shift; the kid's fingers were dead cold.

'So, Daniel, d'you know where're you headed? Nothing much out here but farms.'

The snow-covered fields sped away to either side, too fast to focus on. The truck can hardly have been doing more than, say, thirty, but the motion made Daniel's head ache. He fixed on the road ahead instead, straight and inexorable, the post and wire fences each side sucking him towards an unknown vanishing point in the dusk.

'Where are you headed?' the guy had asked, very reasonably. How to answer? *I don't know because I don't know where I am.*

So cold.

*He'll think I'm a junkie.*

Daniel dragged his remaining resources together into one massive, combined effort, an all-out attempt at normality. He drew his hands out from under his thighs where they were trying to thaw, and forced his back to straighten and his shoulders to drop. Hardest of all, he hauled his eyes off the darkening road to look across at the driver instead.

Roy. Roy Colvin. He wore a baseball cap with the peak curved and a padded jacket, the outer skin creased and scuffed, as weather-beaten as his cheeks. He looked like someone out of an American movie, a minor character at a gas station or diner. He was leathery and smoky, and English men in their seventies just didn't wear jeans and baseball caps, or at least, didn't look at ease in them.

His accent wasn't English and the steering wheel was on the wrong side.

*This is America.*

But had he landed up in the United States or in Canada? He didn't know enough about accents to guess.

*Oh God.*

The question still hung there, and for certain the suspicion.

Daniel took a breath, hating that it shook.

'Mr Colvin, I – I think I've been stupid. I had a lift with some people and they – chucked me out. They took my coat. My wallet.'

'Where're you from?'

'I...A long way. I'm not sure even...where this is.'

It sounded so lame, but the driver just said, 'You're in Antler Hollow. Burlington's behind us, about twenty miles.'

'Burlington...'

'Burlington, Vermont. You've been in Vermont for the last eighty miles, Dan.'

'Okay. Right.'

Daniel faced front again, the flanking lines of wire keeping him grounded and contained at least to a degree. He felt the old man's eyes on him, out to the left.

'Guess you'd better come along home with me.'

Nothing much out here but farms, the guy had said. The road was practically empty; they passed two pickups going the other way, headlights yellow in the dusk, and a giant lorry (*'That'll be his last drop today'*), and were overtaken by a motorcycle (*'Some fool on this ice'*). That was all. If Roy Colvin had not stopped to give him a lift he'd have frozen to death.

They passed a couple of turnings, each marked by a signboard that Daniel couldn't read in the gloom, and then slowed and took a right into a road that curved and swooped around a snow-covered hummock and finally delivered them to the shelter of buildings grouped around a yard. Roy cut the engine and sudden quiet rolled over them. It had been snowing again, lightly, the large flakes chased off the windscreen by the long wiper blades, and now the air was muffled as Daniel dropped down from the cab and winced.

His feet in the wet trainers ached.

He followed Roy across the yard and round the corner of a single-storey building, and into light falling across the snow from the windows of a house.

Roy led him through a side door into a room full of boots and winter coats where Daniel shed his soaked trainers, and then through a second door into the warmth – oh, warmth – of a passage where a striped rug covered polished floorboards and framed aerial photographs hung on wood panelling. A television was on somewhere nearby, voices overlapping one another excitedly, and there was the shocking smell of meat cooking, salty and rich, so that Daniel almost gasped. His guts creaked and he swallowed the sudden rush of saliva.

'Patty!' Roy's fingers on his back prodded him onward. 'We got company!'

Daniel found himself in a kitchen where saucepans were steaming and the smell was strong enough to undo him. He swallowed again, feeling suddenly faint, the voices muzzy. He put one hand on the back of a chair. A straight-backed woman with iron-grey hair hooked behind her ears was saying something, but somehow he couldn't catch the words.

Then his hand lost the chair as someone pulled it out and pressed him down onto it, and he dropped his face into his hands, his elbows on his knees, letting his life move on around him by

itself for a moment. He couldn't make any more decisions right now.

'Son?'

A hand on his shoulder and another smell to ambush him: chocolate?

'Here.' The woman, Patty, held the mug until he had his hands firmly on it. 'It's not too hot, you can drink it straight down.'

Daniel sipped and then gulped the thick, warm liquid, part chocolate, part coffee, mostly heated milk, feeling his fingers itch as the blood returned to them against the hot china. The mug was white with large black letters: LOOK OUT HILL, HERE I COME, and on the other side, red numerals: 40.

A plate arrived on the table in front of him, a blue rim framing a saucer-sized cookie. 'Dinner's not for thirty minutes,' Patty told him. 'So eat up.'

Nobody was asking any questions, and everyone was being so kind. Daniel pictured fleetingly his own home, if you could still call it that, faced with a situation like this – the chilly, cramped kitchen, fish fingers and peas in the freezer, the twins staring, his sister harassed... But of course his father would never have rescued a stranger to begin with, just sworn at him for walking on the road and driven by.

Don't think about him. Them.

The business of the household flowed around him. A lanky boy brought him a pile of clothes and led him to a shower room along the hall where he changed and washed his hands, the fresh jeans and tee-shirt and zip-neck fleece – and *socks* – scented from laundry detergent and puckered from the pegs that had hung them to dry. Putting clean clothes on made Daniel feel faint again, and he waited another minute, leaning on the wall, his forehead on the smooth wood.

He was ashamed of his own clothes, worried that they smelled, and worried that he smelled too. He wanted to take a shower, but should you do that, uninvited, in a strange house? He hadn't shaved for three days and the face in the mirror over the basin was awful, hollow and grim, the bones accentuated by the beginning of a beard. His hair was wild, down past his shoulders

and greasy. He ran his fingers through it, pushed it behind his ears, and then tried to lift his brows and even smile. He looked manic.

*Oh God.*

If he lingered any longer someone would come looking for him, checking on him. He unlatched the door and found his way back to the kitchen, his old clothes in a bundle under his arm. 'What should I...'

There was a second woman in the kitchen now, younger, wearing jeans and a sloppy sweater. 'Well, hi,' she said, casual and smiling as if he was just a regular person. 'Oh, just put those in the washer, will you? In the mud room, where you came in? They can go with the next load.'

Daniel found the washing machine next to the rack of coats and worked out that the way in was through the top. He dropped the bundle in and was closing the lid when he remembered, with a sickening jolt of shock, and pulled the jeans back out; he found the hip pocket and rescued the cards.

God, that was close.

Aware he was trembling, he slid them into the pocket in his borrowed jeans and returned along the hall, determined to be normal, or at least to act normal.

*Forget it all for now. Think about it later. Just...try.*

He walked into the kitchen to face the family.



