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## CHAPTER 1

### *Near Devil's Kitchen, Snowdonia National Park*

By the time Edward Schwinn discovered the crash site around one-thirty a.m., an easterly wind crossing the Glyderau range had emptied the skies of cloud. A poacher's moon hung sentinel, companion to a cold scattering of stars.

He'd been driving these mountain roads for an hour, maybe more. Moisture misted the inside of the Defender's windscreen, defying the heater's attempts to disperse it. On a tarp in the back, Argus dozed, a damp coil of doggy fur and rabbit breath.

Lulled into a trance by the 4x4's diesel engine, Edward noticed the first wreckage almost too late. The road, which until now had knifed along the rim of a coal-dark slope, kinked right and plunged through a conifer grove. The trunks of Sitka spruce and Scots pine flashed past, bark bleached white by the headlights. On the road surface, a skin of frost glimmered. And there, lying to the left of the dividing line, a smoking wheel rim, shreds of rubber hanging from it like blackened flesh.

Jaw clenching, Edward hauled the Defender over to the oncoming lane. The vehicle seesawed on its suspension, slinging around the obstacle with inches to spare. The moment it righted itself he stood on the brakes and the nose dived. He heard Argus slide across the tarp and thump into the back of his seat. They were on the wrong side of the road now, twenty yards from a

blind bend. But no lights grew from that direction. No indication of approaching traffic. He knew these mountains; at this time of night the chance of an encounter was slim.

Rolling to a stop, he glanced up at the rear-view mirror. In the back, Argus scrambled onto all fours. The dog shot him a doleful look. Edward tilted the mirror. Examined the reflection of road behind him. The smoking wheel was a stark black shape in the darkness, tinged red by the Defender's brake lights.

Ahead, wind-tattered streamers of smoke blew across the road from a source out of sight around the bend. Watching them, Edward felt his stomach tighten in anticipation.

Argus wormed through the gap between the front seats and rested both paws on the dash. His tongue lolled and he panted. This close, the dog's breath was monstrous – a hot blast of masticated flesh and blood.

'What's out there?'

Argus licked his lips. Whined.

Static, like soft rain, hissed from the Defender's radio. Edward switched it off. From the door cavity he retrieved a chamois hardened into a limpet-like sculpture. A few swabs of the damp windscreen softened it, until he was polishing a perfect porthole of unobscured glass. He peered through it. To his right, the land climbed at a steep angle towards the Carneddau; to his left it fell away to the valley floor. Tossing the chamois onto the dash, he steered off the road and killed the engine.

The mountain stillness dropped like a sackcloth; but its silence did not reign unchallenged. Argus panted metronomically, breath fogging the circle of glass Edward had wiped clean. Outside, a grazing wind stirred the needles of nearby trees. And, from somewhere further away, a ripping, or a fizzing, like the sound of poured champagne.

He could smell the smoke now, could taste it in his throat. When he switched off the Defender's headlights an inky darkness raced up to the windows. His eyes took a few moments

to adjust; then the landscape coalesced. Above the Glyderau rose an indigo sky salted with stars. Directly ahead, the frost riming the road flickered scarlet. Edward unclipped his seat belt and put a hand to the door.

Hesitated.

He didn't need to do this. Five miles away, cupped in a forested elbow of land, waited his cabin, but he didn't have to follow this road to reach it. He could double back, take the Defender on a detour across the scree fields until he found the old ranger's track. The ground was hard-packed and dry; yet to freeze. He'd made the trip in worse conditions.

But what if someone needed his help around that bend? What if someone lay injured? Trapped? Even if that were unlikely, could he really leave the wheel rim blocking the road behind him? Although visibility was good right now, it could deteriorate quickly out here, especially this close to winter. A wind change might drag down a mist from the western peaks. Clouds sailing in from the Atlantic could glove the moon's light in an instant. In either scenario, a following motorist might not see the hazard. A collision at speed, so close to these trees, would likely be fatal.

*How long since you cared about things like that?*

He frowned at the thought. Shook his head free of it.

Beside him, Argus chuffed. Yawned.

Edward recoiled. 'Jesus, buddy.'

Mystified, now, at his earlier hesitation, he cranked open his door and jumped down onto gravel. The bitter night air slapped his face, drew instant tears. His breath spooled away, unravelling in gossamer threads. For the first time, he noticed that the dog's flanks were trembling. 'You coming?'

Argus glanced over. Again, his jaw hinged wide and his tongue lolled. He returned his attention to the view through the windscreen.

'Suit yourself.' Reaching inside, Edward retrieved his torch and flicked on the vehicle's hazards. Their amber pulses

washed away all traces of reflected firelight. Somehow they felt comforting; a statement of intent. 'I'll leave the door open, rabbit-breath. 'Case you change your mind.'

Turning from the dog, he trudged around the front of the vehicle and stepped onto the road. Strange, but for a moment he thought he felt it hum beneath him, vibrating like a plucked guitar string. He glanced over his shoulder. Inside the Defender, Argus was a still black shape. Further down the road, the broken wheel rim threw off a few dying coughs of smoke. Beyond that, absolute dark, as if the land there had folded into a trench. He saw no headlights from following traffic, no illumination from nearby houses or farms. Overhead, the outer spirals of the Milky Way rotated, their scattered lights a distant congregation.

He turned back around. Ahead lay twenty yards of empty tarmac before the road curved out of sight. He saw no slicks of rubber interrupting its jacket of frost. No evidence of a crash. The trees on either side were unmarked, their lower branches intact.

Somewhere in the darkness, a night animal shrieked. The cry, high-pitched and stark, pierced his skin. Polecat probably, announcing a kill. Out here it was a mournful sound, laced with despair. Grimacing, Edward tugged his coat zipper up to his throat.

At the bend's apex the trees grew thick and tall, their boughs screening the moon's light. The road there was clotted with shadow. As Edward approached, instinct told him to keep his torch extinguished.

The stink of burning was stronger now. He could hear fire crackling, the pop of shattering glass. Moments later the road washed an angry red. Through the trees he saw a fireball erupt, heard the *whump* of combusting gasses. A hot wind rolled over him.

He stopped, close to the centre line. Again he felt the road thrum beneath his feet, as if he stood upon a fault line, or over some vast machine buried in the earth. Crouching, he touched

his hand to its surface. Sharp frost and cold tarmac; nothing unusual in that. And yet through it he detected a susurrations, like a low surge of electricity passing through his fingertips.

For three years, ever since the tragedy that had brought him here, Edward Schwinn had lived alone among these peaks. Only once in all that time had he ever seen something he might have been wise to fear. Now, out here on this lonely stretch of road at the foot of the Glyderau, he felt his heart begin to quicken. When the breeze blew, he sensed sweat prickling on his forehead.

Defiant, he rose to his feet. Eyes fixed on the centre line, shoulders squared, he walked around the corner to confront what waited there.

What Edward Schwinn saw next changed everything.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Near Devil's Kitchen, Snowdonia National Park*

Only minutes earlier he'd been contemplating a detour, driving his Defender south across the scree fields. Had he chosen that option he would have avoided this sight altogether. Now he would never forget it.

Strewn along the road, in a haphazard procession, lay the pulverised wrecks of five motor vehicles. Their chassis were crumpled and twisted, as if crushed by the hands of giants. The vehicle furthest from him, an unrecognisable 4x4 heavily modified for off-road use, lay on its roof. Bright snakes of flame leaped from its windows, twisting up into the night.

Hanging upside down in the front seats, the remains of its two occupants burned like candles. Flaming gobs of rubber, or upholstery foam, or human fat, dripped onto the roadway and burned in liquid pools.

Edward squinted. Even from here he could feel the heat. Something exploded in the back of the 4x4 and its windows vented white devils of fire. As the flames intensified, their light brightened the entire scene.

The nearest vehicle, Edward saw, was a 4x4 just like the one on fire. Had he not spotted the Mitsubishi logo on its tailgate he would have been unable to identify it. Anyone who remained inside could not have survived; the vehicle's metal shell had

been wrung like a dishcloth. Dismissing it, he focused his attention on the three cars at the convoy's centre, all identical MPVs. None bore registration plates. Where windows remained intact, the glass was tinted black.

Out of the three, the centremost vehicle seemed to have suffered the least damage. It rested on naked wheel rims even so, skewed at a right angle with all four tyres blown. Both its front doors had come off, exposing an empty driver's compartment and—

Edward frowned. Looked again. Those doors hadn't peeled off naturally during a collision. They'd been intentionally ripped loose, excised with brutal yet surgical precision. One of them lay at the base of a nearby tree, bent out of shape.

Now he noticed something else: none of the cars looked as if they had collided with each other. The damage, in every case, had been inflicted side-on. They'd clearly been driving as a group, in a single direction. And yet . . . that didn't make any sense.

In the grass to the left of the road he spotted a crumpled form. It lay too far away for the flames to illuminate it clearly but Edward knew, in his gut, that it must be a casualty from the vehicle at the convoy's heart. Whatever had burst the MPV's front doors loose had plucked and tossed its occupants as if they'd been no more substantial than rice grains.

Edward closed his eyes. Shielded from the sight of the devastation, he heard the flames crackle as if with greater urgency. He felt the wind change direction, heard the tree boughs creak as it pressed them.

When something brushed his leg he flinched, eyes snapping open, but it was only Argus. The dog shivered at his side, attention fixed on the MPV missing its front doors.

The fire, Edward knew, might burn all night without others discovering it; the road was unlikely to carry further traffic until the sun rose in around five hours. He had no means of calling for assistance – had owned no mobile phone since relocating

to this area of Wales three years earlier. He wanted to retreat to his Defender and get the hell out of here. But while that was an attractive thought, he could not abandon any victims who might have survived, even if instinct told him they were all either dead or beyond his help.

*Why not? You've done it before.*

He scowled at that, felt his fingers tighten into fists. To the dog, he muttered, 'All right. Let's get it done.'

Edging towards the broken shape slumped at the roadside, Edward clicked on his torch. Its beam cut a white finger through the smoke sloughing off the nearby wreck. He knew what awaited him would be grim, but even so the discovery was a shock.

The man had landed in such a way that both the back of his head and his kneecaps were pressed into the soil. No body could survive such a violent reshaping. His spine must have twisted in his torso like a screw until it shattered. Even if by some miracle he had endured that torment, his head injury would have finished him. From right eyebrow to hairline his skull had been flattened. What remained was a dark mush, wet with blood. One eye stared heavenward. The other had loosened in its socket, a slippery white oyster canted towards Edward.

Staring at it, Edward couldn't shake the feeling that the man's head, just like the vehicles on the road, had been clutched, or squeezed; the word he really wanted to use was *popped*.

Despite the gruesome nature of his discovery, he stepped closer. He'd seen corpses before. This one couldn't harm him, and he needed to search it for a phone. The sooner he found one, the sooner he could summon help and deal with the fallout. Ahead lay conversations with people he didn't know. Questions. Hard looks. The mere thought of all that human interaction threw him into a panic, but what choice did he have? If he wanted to get back to his cabin with the remains of his dignity intact, he needed to get this done.

Kneeling in the grass, Edward felt icy mud soak through his jeans. He ignored it, resting his torch in his lap. Beside him, Argus whined. The dog's eyes were orange pools, iridescent with reflected firelight. 'Yeah, well. Would've been quick, at least.'

Reaching out, he patted the stranger's hips, recoiling a little from the warmth they still radiated. Something awful, he thought, about a warm corpse. Still, the trapped heat would dissipate fast under this cloudless sky. He could smell blood leaking into the soil.

Frowning, he pulled his hands away, picked up the torch and angled it. The beam confirmed what his fingers had surmised. Secured to the dead man's thigh with a double leg strap was a tactical holster containing a semi-automatic pistol. As Edward played his beam back and forth, he saw that the firearm was not the only equipment the stranger carried. Around the man's belt, nylon pouches held spare magazines, handcuffs, an unmarked aerosol. His twisted torso was encased in body armour constructed from heavy ceramic plates. Underneath he wore a flight suit, its soft khaki dark with spreading blood.

Edward glanced up. Gazed along the road. At Anglesey, thirty miles north-west, was RAF Valley, a fighter base and pilot training school. Further military sites were scattered throughout the region, yet instinct told him the dead man had no such affiliation. The flight suit and the armour lacked any insignia that might suggest otherwise.

Leaning forward, he examined the stranger's face close-up. He found cheeks sooted with stubble, dark collar-length hair. A clear acoustic tube coiled from one ear to a push-to-talk clipped to the armour vest.

Gingerly, Edward plucked the earpiece loose. A brown slug of wax clogged the teat. Wiping it clean on the man's flight suit, he lifted it close to his own ear and heard faint, electronic music, a high-pitched stream of shifting oscillations. While the

sounds had no discernible rhythm they suggested a vaguely mathematical progression. It was like nothing he had previously heard. Captivated, he lifted the earpiece closer, sensing suddenly that between the fluctuating tones of that strange music was a—

He blinked. Lurched back.

The tube's coils stretched taut and the socket popped loose from the push-to-talk. The music vanished. Edward hurled the device into the trees.

*What the hell? You were about to screw that thing into your ear!*

Climbing to his feet, wiping his hands clean, he thought he heard movement in the undergrowth to his left. He swabbed the nearby trees with his torch beam. Inside the grove, giraffe shadows swung away from him. He glimpsed a rotting pine on a quilt of needles. A pale crop of death cap mushrooms.

By his leg, Argus whined once more.

'Me too,' he muttered, touching the dog's head. 'We'll do this and then we're gone.'

The convoy's second vehicle, although not on fire, was just as badly damaged as the first. Its doors had buckled inwards, windows bursting from the pressure. The roof had been forced down into the passenger compartment. Edward only needed to aim his torch for a moment to see that his help was not needed inside. Its two occupants wore the same body armour as the corpse beside the road. It hadn't saved them, either. The roof had compressed their heads into their torsos. The resultant trauma was both horrific and irreversible. If the remaining wrecks offered Edward no better option he would search the bodies, but not otherwise.

Turning away, he stared across the tarmac towards the MPV at the convoy's heart. Inexplicable, he thought, that it had suffered so little damage compared to the others. Its tyres had blown out and its front doors had ripped free, but other than that it looked unmarked. No dents or scratches marred its bodywork. Its black paint was pristine, its windows intact.

The vehicle sat patiently, as if awaiting his inspection. Studying it, he noticed something else that had escaped him until now: the engine was still running, steadily chugging vapours into the night.

As Edward drew closer, the MPV's hazards pulsed once. He stopped dead, knocked off kilter. From where he stood he had direct line of sight through the front door cavities. No one remained behind the wheel to operate those lights.

Again, as he watched, its hazards pulsed. After everything he had witnessed, the spectacle should have disturbed him more than it did. Instead, the lights had a strangely hypnotic effect. He felt his legs working beneath him even before he made the decision to move, found himself walking, as if in sleep, towards the car. His pace accelerated until he stood right beside it, shining his torch through the opening revealed by the missing driver's door.

Inside, the grey upholstery was spotless, unblemished by blood. The rear passenger compartment, he saw, was cordoned by a privacy wall partitioned at the top by a slab of black security glass. A single crack zigzagged through it. Edward tapped it with the metal rim of his torch. Despite the damage, it seemed sound.

On the dashboard, the sat nav screen glowed blue. As he watched, it concertinaed into a press of jagged lines before returning to the same uninterrupted hue.

Edward leaned in and switched off the engine. As an afterthought, he pulled the key from the ignition and examined it. Nothing hung from its metal loop – no personal items that might offer him clues of ownership.

He moved to the nearside sliding door. When he tried to peer through the window, the tint on its glass defeated him. He tested the door handle: locked. Somehow he'd known it would be. Turning from the MPV, he scanned the landscape. Still no lights anywhere on the surrounding hills.

'OK, time to go.'

He'd done what he could, had tried to offer assistance. His conscience – in that, at least – was clear. Something violent and inexplicable had occurred along this stretch of mountain road. He wanted no further part of it. Seven miles back east was a payphone. He could call in the accident from there, return to the safety of his cabin.

Decision made, he started walking. He'd taken perhaps three steps when he sensed the return of that strange vibration through his feet. He slowed and glanced down, almost expecting to see blue zips of electricity sparking from his boots. Behind him the MPV's central locking disengaged with a clunk.

Edward stiffened at the sound. He still held the ignition key. Had he depressed it? He didn't think so. He'd threaded his finger through its metal hoop, but the key itself hung loose. Turning back, he stared at the vehicle, feeling a bizarre compulsion to return.

Its hazard lights flashed twice.

Edward swallowed. He looked up and down the road. Over the pop and hiss of the burning wreck he could hear the sighing of the wind. He closed his eyes, tried to clear his thoughts. It felt as if he were caught in a dream here, that he might swab the air and watch it distort like an image glimpsed through water.

For the first time in three years, he felt like he had surrendered control, hostage to whatever strangeness had befallen him. By the time he opened his eyes, he discovered he had already returned to the MPV's sliding door. When he tested it a second time, it rolled back without complaint. Edward shone his torch inside.

In the back, slumped across the rear seats, lay a motionless human form. Its head was covered by a loose black hood. Its hands were cuffed with a single plastic tie. Looking at the tips of those fingers, he noticed something else: nail polish. The passenger the dead men had been transporting was a woman.

He leaned into the car, took hold of the hood and lifted it free.

For the first time in three years, Edward Schwinn found himself staring into his dead wife's face.