

CHAPTER ONE

QUIET

“The still water is the one that will drown you.”

Derbyshire, 1995

Daniel’s dad had three rules for living in a quiet village.

1. *Don’t start trouble, but don’t walk away from someone in it.*
2. *Know your place, know your people.*
3. *If something isn’t human, you treat it like it’s loaded.*

Stepping Stones Primary squatted under decades of grime, its limestone walls dulled beneath streaks of bird droppings. Beyond the wire-fenced playground, northern peaks hid behind dark evergreens, the hills glowing faintly with heather.

The lunchtime bell screeched. Doors burst open. Children poured out—cheeks flushed pink, jackets flashing in berry, navy, fuchsia. Scarves snapped in the wind, woollen hats bobbing like bright buoys on a dark sea.

Beneath the staffroom windows, two boys crouched over a shoebox of glossy football cards. The cards rasped in quick flicks; their breath made brief ghosts in the cold. A cough drifted from the staffroom, thin as a warning.

A few paces away, the playground turned to chaos—shouts, laughter, the rhythm of battle. Pebbles flew in uneven arcs, cracking against the ground. Wrists met as if to strike sparks; the gravel bit their palms, but they didn’t stop.

Across the yard, Daniel Marsden advanced in neat, measured strides. His jumper was smoothed flat against his chest, his collar folded with military care—save for a single, defiant lime-green cuff.

Dad called it keeping your wits about you—a work phrase, from a job he never properly explained. He liked to turn it into jokes that didn’t feel like jokes: if anyone’s eyes ever changed colour, you ran and called him, no questions asked.

Daniel simply understood that you kept your head up and your eyes open, even in a playground. Monsters, Dad said, didn’t always look like monsters.

He had been oddly firm about it on the first day of school: “*Befriend Robert Knight. Stick close.*” Daniel had never quite been told why.

Robert Knight stood beside him, clutching a scuffed football tight to his chest. His jumper hung long and loose, waiting for him to grow into it.

Two girls darted past them, their boots cracking a sheet of ice; Mrs Patel’s sharp glance scattered them mid-laugh.

Older boys thundered by, boots clacking like hooves.

“Oi, Marsbar!” one called.

“Knighty needs his blankie!” another said.

Robert’s arms tightened around the ball until the leather creaked. Daniel’s expression did not change, but his stride slowed.

At the far end, a football game consumed the court. Jackets marked the posts. Robert's gaze tracked the ball skidding across slick ground—not his, clutched tight to his ribs, but theirs. The one that moved. His fingers loosened as a boy his age trapped it cleanly and passed. When the ball sailed towards the makeshift goal, Robert's weight shifted with it, as if the motion could pull him into the game.

"Want to play?" Daniel asked.

Robert's lips parted, shaping a silent *yes*.

"We could ask to join," Daniel offered.

Robert leaned towards the idea, briefly, then withdrew. His chin dipped; his fingers tightened on the ball as if it were a secret he couldn't release.

"Or we could find somewhere quiet," Daniel said, saving him. "Kick yours around."

Robert nodded once.

They crossed the yard towards the rainbow-painted bike shed. The sound around them flattened, as if the air itself were thickening; the playground's clamour thinned into a distant, muffled roar.

Robert slowed. Daniel matched his pace. A tremor ran through Robert's frame—a tiny vibration humming beneath his skin.

His gaze drifted back towards the football game—the ball arcing, boys colliding, the shouts of victory. Something shifted in his eyes. Not colour, exactly—a flicker of gold in the blue, gone before Daniel could be sure.

For a moment, Daniel's stomach dipped. He blinked hard, willing it to be a trick of the light.

The cycle shelter hunched against the limestone wall, its translucent roof sweating meltwater. Diesel and leaf-rot soured the air.

Kevin balanced on the balls of his feet, holding a grey handheld console just out of reach. Wiry and sharp-faced, with ginger hair sticking up in tufts, he grinned as he dangled it. Adam jumped for it, frantic, his skinny legs sliding on the white-dusted tarmac. His glasses—wire-rimmed, constantly sliding down his nose—fogged with each breath. Each time he jumped, Kevin raised his arm higher or shoved him back, laughing.

Adam crashed into the racks, setting off a clatter of painted metal. A pedal snagged his jumper; he caught a crossbar.

From the wall, Michael watched, arms folded, grin slack and lazy. He was stocky for Year 4, thick-necked, his hair gelled flat to his skull like his older brother's. A flick of his fingers tapped Kevin's shoulder; a tilt of his head said *prey*.

Dad's voice, from some rainy-night lecture: *"You don't throw the first punch, you don't dog-pile, but if someone's getting battered in the corner, you're not the extra on the sidelines—you're the one who steps in so they're not on their own, like you're the mate who actually shows up when the fight breaks out."*

Kevin's grin cooled. He let the console drop into Adam's waiting hands. Adam clutched the console, eyes flicking to Michael. Michael arched a brow.

Daniel touched Robert's elbow. "Come on."

They turned towards the gate—three steps, maybe four. The air cleared, sharp on their skin.

Robert's grip shook around the ball. The tremor ran through the worn leather, whitening his knuckles.

"You all right?"

Robert didn't answer. His gaze caught on the translucent roof, where meltwater gathered in slow beads before sliding free. Drip. Drip. Each one left a dark coin on the tarmac.

Daniel glanced back towards the playground. Mrs Patel was crossing the netball court, her attention fixed on a cluster of Year Threes. The football game roared on. The gate stood open, fifteen paces away. Easy.

Dad's second rule: *"Learn the village—teachers, neighbours, who's solid and who's trouble; the shortcut past the shop and the corner you can vanish to—and if you tell a mate you've got their back, you prove it, especially when everyone else bottles it and turns theirs."*

"We could still go back," Daniel said quietly. "Find another spot. By the field, maybe."

For a heartbeat, Robert's shoulders eased. His weight shifted forward, towards the light.

“Look who’s here,” Kevin said, his voice pitched just enough to bridge the space.

Michael spat onto the tarmac. “Weirdo and his boyfriend, out for a stroll.”

Daniel gave a slight nod, mechanical. Beside him, Robert stared at the ground, clutching the ball tight against his ribs—armour and burden both.

Lazily, Michael drifted closer, rolling his thick shoulders back. His gaze trailed over Daniel before settling on Robert. “Well,” he said, voice low and drawn out. “This is our bit, innit?” A beat. “You lost or summat?”

Robert shuffled behind Daniel.

“Just walking,” Daniel said evenly.

Michael’s lids lowered, boredom sharpening into cruelty. “Hear that, Kev? ‘Just walking.’ That’s a crime now, innit?”

Laughter cracked. Adam shrank into the wall, his shoulder brushing damp brick.

Michael kept his eyes on Robert. “What’s the matter, Knighty? Cat got your tongue? Some people say you don’t talk at all. Proper freak.”

Daniel moved forward. “Leave it.”

Kevin snorted. “Ooh, leave it. Big man.”

Michael didn’t. He tilted his head, studying Robert like a bug under glass. “Come on, Knighty. Say something. Crack a joke.” He leaned in, eyes glinting. “Or maybe tell us what you did to your mum.”

Robert’s face drained of colour; his body went still.

Adam pushed his glasses up his nose, then spoke before he meant to, the words bursting out too loudly. “What’s wrong with you, anyway? Why can’t you talk?” His voice broke mid-sentence, then shrank to nothing. He stepped back, chin ducking.

A wince flickered across Robert’s face like a shadow. Daniel eased forward, angling his body to block the view. “He hasn’t done anything to you,” he said. “He’s harmless. Leave him alone.”

Michael’s laugh slid in, thin and cutting. He shoved Daniel’s shoulder. The push wasn’t hard, just enough to claim ground. He stepped into the space Daniel had occupied. “Big words, Marsbar. Playing at being his mum?”

Daniel held still. He didn’t puff up. He planted his feet, his weight dropping low. “He just wants to play,” he said, his voice flat, stripped of fear. “Walk away.”

Michael’s grin hardened, all boredom gone. “Or what? You gonna tell your dad?” His words turned blade-thin. “You know what happens to snitches.”

Behind him, Kevin edged closer to Robert, emboldened. “Oi, just hand the ball over, yeah?” He reached. Robert pulled it back against his chest.

Michael’s chin jerked once—do it.

Kevin’s hands shot out, quick and darting. He yanked. Their arms tangled. The ball jolted free. It bounced across the ground to rest by Adam’s feet.

Adam hesitated, his fingers brushing grit. The console sat heavy in his jacket pocket—his, finally returned, only because they’d found new prey. He lifted the ball, holding it at chest height, caught between them. His eyes flicked to Michael, then back to Robert. The air thinned into expectation.

“Chuck it over,” Michael said.

Adam’s arms faltered before the throw, but he obeyed. The ball slipped through his fingers, bounced twice, and nudged Kevin’s leg. Silence followed, sharp and clinical, like the hush before a teacher’s verdict.

Michael cracked his knuckles, then closed in again, narrowing the space until Robert’s back nearly brushed the fence. “That’s what I thought,” he murmured. “Empty, aren’t you?” A finger tapped Robert’s skull. “What’s it like, then? No mum. No luck. Bet your uncles hate you.”

Robert made a rough, strangled sound—not words, just pressure forcing its way out. His arms clenched at his sides, fingers curling as if his body were fighting to contain something that wanted out.

The wind died. For a second, the only sound was the distant hum of traffic, thin and irrelevant.

“Don’t.” Daniel shifted between them, shoulders squared, his body forming a shield. If monsters didn’t always look like monsters, then maybe the people who stood in front of them didn’t look like heroes either. “You’re all right,” he said to Robert, quiet but steady.

Michael shoved him harder this time.

Daniel staggered, arms flailing for balance, but stayed upright.

Michael leaned in so close to Robert that their foreheads almost touched. “You know what my dad says about you, freak?” Michael’s voice dropped, losing its mocking edge. “Says you killed your mum. Says you’re cursed. Says men like him know what you are.”

The phrasing snagged—too close to the way grown-ups in Hope’s End talked when they thought children weren’t listening.

Adam stepped back. Kevin kept the ball tapping against the brick—thud, rebound, thud—steady as a wrong heartbeat.

Robert stilled. His breath turned hot and tight against his ribs. His eyes lifted.

Beyond the bike shed, a whistle blew. A teacher called a name. It sounded distant, as if it belonged to a different world entirely.

The gold flared again—no mistaking it this time. Daniel’s skin prickled; the air itself seemed to hold its breath.

Dad’s third rule surfaced, cold and clear: “*Eyes change, air goes thin, stories sound too old—whatever it is, you get the vulnerable one out, you make it look ordinary to everyone else, and you call me before you decide if it’s a monster or not.*”

Colour bled from the air around Robert, its edges paling under the pressure of some deeper, older light breaking through.

Robert’s fist was already moving.

The punch was clean. It connected just under Michael’s jaw with a sound like splitting wood.

Daniel knew, with a cold, simple certainty, that no eight-year-old should be able to hit like that. Dad’s old warnings stopped being warnings; they started sounding like instructions.

Michael crumpled. Metal clattered; the bike rack rang hollow.

No one moved. The white dust on the tarmac lay undisturbed. Then something small and white spun across the ground—a tooth, streaked with red, skittering to rest.