



Chapter One

New Haven (Edge of Town)

When her cat went missing, Mallory Clark lived in a single-story, clapboard house. It was her worst fear—losing Luna—and at first she blamed Roland, her husband. Her day would only get worse.

She'd always hoped, secretly, that Roland and she would die together. Two soft hospital beds, side-by-side. Apart from him, Mallory only had her sister. They'd all lived here forever, and they always would.

But on the day when her cat went missing—taken—Mallory was distracted. She'd been in the garden for a couple hours. With soft, warm dirt against her shins, she cradled a basket of tomatoes and peppers. The pressure in her knees was getting worse, and the sharp pain in her lower back had returned.

"Lord almighty." Mallory stood up and groaned with a hand on her spine. "Break time, I think."

She lifted the basket and crossed the backyard toward the small patio. It was a beautiful late afternoon, heat starting to cool off as the sun drifted toward its bed.

Their little blue house—*home* for thirty-five years—was about two miles outside of New Haven. When they were younger, she and Roland could walk to town, passing by the old railroad station, which hadn't been in use since the 40s. She knew everybody in town, knew all the stories, and she'd come to understand their town was a lie. But a nice one.

On warm, summer evenings, back in the early 70s, Roland and Mallory would meet with George Davis and whatever girlfriend he had at the time. George had always been a flirt. Later on, they attended his wedding at the Methodist church on 1st Street and stopped by his store weekly.

Until it burned down.

And now, in less than a week, they'd be attending his funeral in the same, high-steepled sanctuary where they'd clapped for him and his bride. In the dark, Mallory could still hear those church bells, and with every passing year they sounded more grim.

Every time she and Roland drove into town, they passed the spot where George's shop had been. As young adults in New Haven, they had been regular customers, and George's dad had always offered a friendly smile.

"People don't smile like that nowadays," Roland said to her one evening. "This town ain't the same."

"Things don't stay the same forever, Roland."

"Sure, but why's it gotta change for the worse?"

She heard those bells, and she had to agree.

When George took over the Davis family store, it'd felt right. And now, ever since his tragic death, everything felt very, very wrong.

When Mallory trudged to the house, she was thinking about dinner and Roland's doctor appointment that weekend. But to her shock, there was a long-haired, orange cat sitting at the back door, huddled against the wall.

"Cleo!" She rushed over and bent down for him. Her knees were shaky, but she grabbed onto her cat. "How'd you get out here?"

Mallory looked around with a worried expression. She twisted the door handle, Cleo clutched to her breast like an infant, and nearly tripped as she hurried inside.

"Roland!"

She slammed the door behind her and set Cleo on the floor. He meowed and slunk away through the kitchen, toward the bedroom. She saw Roland straight ahead in his recliner, leaning all the way back, eyes half-closed.

Mallory rushed down the hallway and into their bedroom. She flicked on the light, checked under the bed, behind the curtains. Cleo sat on the carpet, watching with his ears back. When she didn't find anything, she hurried back into the living room. Roland was still half-asleep in his chair, an old *Wheel of Fortune* playing on the TV.

"Roland!" she yelled again, stomping on the carpet. It rattled the walls and the boxy television.

He peered up at her, squinting. "What, hun? I'm—" He yawned loudly.

"Cleo was outside, and I don't see Luna anywhere! She's—"

"She's probably under the bed." Roland stretched his arms out straight like a mummy rising from a sarcophagus.

"She's not! I checked!" Mallory clutched at her chest with both hands. "Why'd you open the door?"

"I didn't open anything," he protested.

"Well, the cats sure didn't do it!"

"Honey, I've been in this chair the whole time you were outside." He lowered the footrest and sat up straight now. "And you know how loud that damn door is. I would've... heard if it..." He scratched at his stubble. "They must've..."

"You were *asleep*, Roland. It's not like your memory's all that sharp, either. *Luna isn't here.*"

Roland frowned as soon as she mentioned his memory. He huffed, eyes on the carpet.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't trying..." Mallory groaned and ran both hands over her face. "I don't know how they got out. But we gotta find her. I should call my sister. I bet... I bet that farmer's dog would kill her if he—!"

"No, no he wouldn't." Roland rose from his chair, pressing against the armrests for support. "Come on, hun. Let's check around the house. Maybe she... crawled up under something. We'll find her. We can call your sister later. You know she's probably busy."

"Beth could... I don't... I just don't know how Luna got out..." Mallory shook her head, and they stepped into the kitchen together. Her sister, Beth Turner, was married to the man who

owned the pizza shop. He'd always give them discounts, and her sister was always reliable in a crisis like this. "Maybe she could—"

At that moment, their landline rang. Mallory and Roland exchanged a look. He moved across the room and answered it, leaning against the counter.

"Hello, Roland Clark here." He pressed the phone harder against his ear, and his eyes widened. "What? *Where?*"

He glanced over at Mallory, and she mouthed, "What is it?"

Still speaking into the phone, he said, "Okay. Right. I understand. Yes, we're coming. We're coming right away. Thank you, sir."

He hung up the phone and breathed a sigh of relief. "Well... good news. Someone's got Luna. They found her up the road. By the old Campbell's Soup billboard."

"That's like a mile away." Mallory furrowed her eyebrows.

"He said we gotta come quick. He's got somewhere urgent to get to. Not... sure who it is. Do you know anyone with the last name Hemlock?" Roland opened two drawers as he spoke and looked through them.

"No. What are you looking for?"

"Keys."

Mallory reached over to the counter beside her and jingled them. "We don't keep them in there, honey."

"Right." He straightened up with a red face and extended his hand. "Well, anyway, I don't know any Hemlocks, and I know everyone in this town. So, I'll go meet him—"

"I'm clearly coming with you," she said. Mallory handed him the keys and walked over to the table.

"Okay, we'll meet him. I can drive us over."

She grabbed her purse from the kitchen table and pulled out a dark, plastic pepper spray canister.

"It's not far, so—uh, why do you need that?"

"Just in case." Mallory walked to the oven and shuffled through the same drawer he'd been digging in. "I don't think Luna would run all the way over there. I don't think she'd even leave the porch. She's scared of everything!"

"But the guy—"

"Right." Mallory straightened up, holding Roland's hunting knife and pocketing the pepper spray. "We have to go. But I'm taking these in the truck at least. What about your shotgun?"

"My shotgun?"

"Can you bring it, too?" she asked. "If it's... If everything's fine, we'll leave it in the truck. But just in case."

"Okay, Mallory." He paused. "This seems like... No, you're right. Let's be safe about it."

Neither of them said it, but Mallory knew they were both thinking about George Davis and his son. She knew the gossip going around town, and she trusted her gut. They needed to be careful.

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Nearly ten minutes later, they were finally leaving. It had taken Roland some time to dig his shotgun out of storage and then go pee before they left. Mallory grew more anxious with each minute. She found herself waiting by the truck, staring at the hillside across the road.

I hope he doesn't just let her go, she thought. Hurry up, Roland...

Every day seemed shorter, and every task took more time—struggling out of bed, hobbling to the kitchen, even walking to the car. The days slipped through her fingers, more liquid every morning. Two thick curtains were closing on their final act.

Luckily, it would only be a few minutes to the Campbell's Soup billboard. It was faded now and barely legible, but even after sixty years, she could never forget it. They'd never taken it down, and no one wanted to redo a billboard nobody would ever see. Nobody except her.

North of New Haven, there was a whole range of hills, and their house was so far around the back they couldn't see any of Main Street. Just the huge hillside covered in towering trees. And behind their house, endless fields eternally farmed, like all the others. But when the sun set in the evening, those hills came alive with color and shadows.

The west side of the hills was the most forgotten and the quietest. But Mallory loved being so close.

Roland finally emerged, and they started off, his beat-up truck following the winding road, as dense woods towered over their right. The truck was caked in dirt, wore multiple scratches and dents, and Mallory had gotten tired of seeing it in the driveway. The engine rumbled and shook like it didn't want to make this trip ever again.

"Why don't you buy a new truck?" she'd asked him after they sold all their fields. It was too much to keep up with, even after she retired from nursing. A younger farmer bought the fields and let them keep the blue house. "All that extra money, since we sold—"

"Now I don't need a new one," he'd said, avoiding her eyes. "This one can get me by 'til..."

Til the end, he didn't say.

But she knew.

Most people didn't. Roland hid it well, but his months were numbered. They had been for a couple years. Each visit to the specialist—fifty minutes away—was just an update. *How many months now? Is he ahead of schedule? Yes, we have our affairs in order. Yes, we've talked to the insurance people. No, they won't cover it.*

George had known. His family brought us lasagna until I had to ask them to stop. His boy helped Roland fix and clean the truck last summer.

They finally saw the billboard in the distance. A faded mess, it had once shown a Campbell's soup can with a dark-haired lady beside it. She wore a bow and a blue-and-white dress. Now, the yellowing soup can was the only thing recognizable.

As they pulled close, they noticed an older man standing beside the billboard. He wore a loose-fitting, camouflage outfit and smiled behind his patchy, gray beard. In his arms, Mallory saw a jet-black cat.

"Luna!" she cried out.

Roland pulled over to the side of the road. The old stranger approached their car, holding Luna in his arms. She kicked with her back legs for a moment and then stopped fighting.

Mallory cranked her window down. "Thank you so much! I can't believe you found her out here."

Silas Hemlock came closer, still smiling. He had bright eyes below his wild, bushy eyebrows. There were more wrinkles on his face than both the Clarks put together, and his hair was solid gray.

"Well, here you go," he said, sticking Luna through the window. "I found it walking by the road. I've always had a soft spot for cats, so of course I couldn't just let it go once I saw the collar."

"I never thought that collar with our telephone number might actually have a use," Roland laughed.

Silas smiled. Then he stepped back from the truck. "I apologize for being so rushed, but I must get back. My friend and I were hunting, see, and he injured his ankle. Nasty business, really."

"Oh, wow..." Mallory saw the concern on his face. Luna, walking in circles on her lap, rubbed against her chin.

"Yeah. Fell out of the deer stand. Not too high, but enough. I need to take him in, I think. Get it x-rayed." Silas exhaled and rubbed his head. "We have to get to our truck somehow. Not sure if he can walk..."

"Where's your... gun?" Roland asked, leaning forward slightly. "Your hunting rifle?"

"Left it back with him." Silas narrowed his eyes. "So I could meet you over here."

Roland nodded. "And he's hurt?"

"Can't hardly walk."

"You know..." Mallory paused. She glanced over at Roland and then down at Luna. "Sir, I used to be a nurse. If you... I could help wrap it up, at least."

His eyebrows rose. "Really? I mean, I don't want—"

"I owe you one. For Luna. Maybe we can give you a ride, too. Back to your truck."

Silas Hemlock smiled. "Thank you both. Really."

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Leaving Luna in the truck with the windows cracked, Roland and Mallory followed Silas past the billboard. She glanced up at it one final time and plunged into the tree line.

A noisy choir of birds overhead and the gentle leaves rustling filled Mallory with something she hadn't felt in a while. The forest smelled fresh and youthful, all shades of green and yellow exploding around her. She forgot about the pepper spray in her pocket and started to smile.

"We should hike together, Roland," she suggested, taking his hand. "It's so nice out here."

He grunted with a nod. His head was on a swivel, snapping in every direction as he stared far away.

"This forest is always alive," Silas said without looking back. "There's nowhere else like it."

“Oh, we live close by, but we don’t hike much.” Mallory noticed a small bush to the left. “Wow, look at that. It’s so red.”

Silas chuckled. “Have you lived in New Haven long?”

“Oh, yes.” She smiled. “Our whole lives. Graduated from... well, the local school. We were high school sweethearts. They changed the school name, but we were class of 1959.” She squeezed Roland’s hand. “Our fiftieth wedding anniversary is actually this winter.”

“Well, congratulations. That’s quite an achievement.”

Mallory grinned. She saw a squirrel climbing a tree. This hunter was surprisingly friendly. Easy to talk to. And what a beautiful place. Roland didn’t seem into it, but she thought he might just be overwhelmed with the forest like she was.

Why haven’t we come out here more? Instead of watching from the house.

Silas led them deeper in, and she looked back, noticing the road wasn’t visible anymore and neither was the billboard.

“What about you?” she asked him. “Local?”

“Oh, yes.” Silas chuckled. “I’ve actually lived here longer than you, I believe.”

“Really?” Mallory tried to do some quick math. This guy couldn’t be *that* old? He didn’t seem any older than seventy-something. He did have an intense, aging strength about him, though, like a seventy-year-old firefighter.

“How much farther?” Roland asked out of nowhere.

“Not too much.”

Mallory looked over. Roland’s face had turned a greenish color. He was gripping her hand so hard it ached.

“You okay?” she asked quietly, letting go of his hand for a moment to squeeze his bicep. “Are we walking too fast?”

Roland shook his head and swallowed hard.

“I think my husband might need to go back,” Mallory spoke up. “He seems ill.”

Silas kept walking forward without stopping. They were on steeper ground now, and he moved with long, lunging steps.

“Hey, did you hear me?”

Roland stopped walking and bent over, hands on his knees. Mallory looked at him, hurried away, and tapped on the hunter’s shoulder.

“Listen, sir—”

Silas Hemlock spun around, raising a handgun. He held it with both shaking hands, pointed at Mallory. “We have to keep going, ma’am.”

Mallory froze and raised her hands. She took a few steps back, closer to Roland. “Wait, listen...” She could hear the *thud-thud* of her heart growing quicker. Her knee pain returned. Her sick gut-feeling. “We... wait—”

“Stop talking.” Silas stepped closer. He was slightly taller than them on the steep hillside. “*Stop. Talking.*” He jerked the gun toward Roland. “Hands.”

Roland straightened up, moaning, and raised his hands.

"I am not a hunter." The old man's grip on the gun was shaking worse now. "I won't kill your cat. But I will kill you. I'm taking you up there. Dead or alive."

"Please," Mallory begged, hands still raised. "We just wanna go home. We won't tell anybody. I can't walk much more. I'm not—"

"Stop talking," he said, gritting his teeth, "or I will shoot you."

"I—"

"*Mallory*," Roland spoke weakly. "He's serious. Listen, please. Just think."

"I wasn't *even* supposed to do this today!" Silas waved his gun in the air for a moment. "The other guy... He isn't so forgiving. He's the brawn, and I'm the brains. So, consider yourselves lucky. Now, come on."

"Why?" Roland asked before Mallory could speak. "Why is it better for us—?" He clutched at his stomach again, taking deep, shaky breaths.

Silas cocked his head. "What?"

"Why's it better for us to go... there and not die here?" Roland huffed for a minute and spat on the ground. "All the same, right?"

Silas looked disgusted. "You get a month together—eh, month or so—if you'll stop talking and walk. Limited time offer."

"I'm not going up there!" Mallory screamed. She collapsed to the earth, sinking to her knees. The pain got worse as they crunched against the ground. She screamed again, "We'll give you money. Please, just let... let us..."

As her voice faded, Silas stepped forward. He lowered the gun partially and stared at her.

"I am sorry," he said without much emotion. "I am every time."

From the corner of her eye, Mallory saw Roland curl his fists. And then he moved.

He jumped toward Silas, hollering. Roland swung his arms down and connected. Silas stumbled back, barely holding the gun. He reset his feet, regripped the weapon, and brought it crashing down on Roland's head.

Mallory heard a terrible crunch. Her husband of forty-nine years landed face-down in the leaves and twigs. There was blood trickling from the back of his head down his neck. She saw him writhing, pressing into the dirt, legs twitching.

"Please stop!" Mallory cried. "We have money. However much you want. Please, please, please."

Silas turned to her, frowning, and pointed the gun down at her husband.

"Please..." Roland moaned from the ground. "Let her go. You can have me."

"I need you both. Hungry mouths to feed. Well, a hungry mouth."

"I'll... I can help—"

Silas closed his eyes when he did it.

The world flashed and the air split.

Mallory's ears rang. She fell on top of her husband, clutching at his hands, his hips. Trying to turn him over. He wasn't twitching anymore. "You bastard!" she screamed. "No, Roland... Roland!"

The world flashed again.

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Silas Hemlock trudged past the Campbells billboard, hunched over. In one hand, he gripped a keychain. A small locket jingled against the keys, showing a picture of Mallory and Roland, much younger.

He approached the truck without a word and opened the side door. The black cat was on the seat, sleeping. In the fading sun, it rolled onto its back and stretched out, showing all its sharp teeth as it yawned.

Silas grabbed the animal with both hands and tossed it onto the grass. He pulled his gun out of its holster, pointed down, and held it for a moment. Then he placed it on the passenger seat. Finally, he shut the door, walked around, and climbed in the driver's side.

As he pulled onto the road and drove away, the black cat watched.

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