

PROLOGUE

Frank Cavanaugh jolted awake on his olive recliner, blinking at the big-box television that blared before him. For the briefest instant, he'd thought he'd felt a mild tremor. A commercial truck reaching the end of Forest Street must have turned around in front of his house without him noticing. His hearing wasn't quite what it used to be, after all. Over the New York Giants in the background, even a ringing phone would likely go unnoticed. His wife, Estelle, would attest to that.

Since the game still appeared to be at half-time, he knew he had only dozed a few minutes. Sports, exciting as they were, did very little to warrant his attention despite the nail-biting, score-tying play against the Monsters of Midway (*Da Bears*). And he knew it was only a matter of time; his eyelids would eventually shut him out.

This Monday evening began the same as any other—with Frank, lounging, putting back can after can of light beer, eating marshmallows, watching whatever relevant sporting event happened to be airing that night. The marshmallow binging was something he'd developed as a replacement for cigarettes, which he successfully quit

fifteen years earlier—triple bypass surgery made sure of that. Empty cans, junk food bags, and finished crossword puzzles cluttered the side table and floor around him—a natural occurrence when Estelle was out for the evening.

Frank stood and headed through the kitchen to get another drink, the sliding glass door catching his eye as he made his way across the chilled tile floor. Tonight was the first unconditionally clear evening in weeks, following a streak of unfavorable weather. And although the moon shone full and bright, its reflection shimmering across the undulating surface of the river that stretched behind Frank's house, the neighborhood sounded anything but peaceful. The crickets screeched especially loud, their deafening chirps rivaled only by the critters rustling through the foliage and a great horned owl hooting in the distance.

After a long, concerning hunt through leftovers and an endless supply of condiments—mostly expired—Frank unearthed a solitary can in the fridge. Slipping on thick, round prescription specs, he walked out to the back deck while turning off the light to “admire the view,” or, more accurately, to satiate his curiosity as to what was happening on the island across the water. The *usually* quiet area of town was becoming increasingly inhabited in recent weeks, bustling with activity. Frank identified it as some development underway but had a hard time delineating further with his poor vision, further hindered by a desperate need for a prescription update.

A cool breeze off the current whisked through the grayish hair around the side of his shiny, bald scalp. Frank savored it as he sam-

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pled his newly cracked beer. Though the bustle of activity on the island intrigued him, the night grew late, and he thought he might have to call in a favor with a few old friends to file a complaint if it continued. The racket across the way ruined the otherwise beautiful, picturesque view of the Yantic and Thames confluence, which he had often marveled over since purchasing the property more than fifty years ago.

Sighing, he turned back toward the house but stopped short, his heart almost leaping from his chest. Something flashed across his face, and he gasped out loud, dropping the can and spilling it over the deck. It took him a few seconds to refocus—to evaluate what just happened and why his last beer drained down a crack of sun-damaged cedar. A gray cat had leaped from the roof, landing in front of him. Its large, piercing yellow eyes and dilated pupils caught Frank's gaze; it let out a long, penetrating hiss.

Confused and a bit startled, he took a step back, not breaking eye contact with the fierce creature. The cat kept its ears flat back, baring teeth, and carefully watched Frank's every move while puffing up the spiked fur along its raised spine, crouching low on high defense. After a brief standoff, Frank slowly sidestepped left, the cat mimicking the move, as two anxious gunslingers would, studying one another, anticipating who'll draw first.

The wind gently picked up, setting off Estelle's Corinthian wind-chimes, which hung from a metal hook on the edge of the house; the soft ping of each aluminum tube struck a multitude of long, mellow bells resonating amid the tension. A low grumble reverberated from

the animal with each step he took across the chafing floorboard. As he neared the door and finally regained some confidence, he became immediately irritated by the situation, ignoring the cat as he pulled open the slider. An orange tabby trotted along from around the corner and up the steps as Frank squeezed through, closed, and locked the door.

The cat skipped over and stood up on hind legs, tapping vehemently on the glass with its golden, fur-tufted paws. A third made an appearance, followed by a fourth, then a fifth. Frank backed up slowly, bewildered, watching as the strange phenomena commenced.

What in the name of good Christ is going on? For years, he had been accustomed to an occasional feral in the area, and from time to time, he would see a few pass through his yard. A couple of times, he had even caught one or two stretched out along the deck railing taking in the riverfront view before jumping away, as he would turn on the light to do the same. This particular event, however, seemed most bizarre. The cats had never before come close enough to make actual contact—not that he had any interest. He flicked on the outside light and gazed beyond the deck, where he noticed the garbage bin tipped on its side with bags ripped open, trash scattered, dissipating into the night.

Little scavengers...

Frank closed the curtain over the door and went back to the recliner. Though annoyed, he knew the trash cleanup would have to wait ‘til morning. The excitement exhausted him. And as the Giants’

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Amani Toomer went forty yards for a touchdown, Frank put the cats out of his mind and reached for a marshmallow. Since he still expected Estelle, currently visiting a friend's house across town, he decided to stay up to wait and watch more of the game.

Not long into the fourth quarter—mere minutes in fact—the Giants were down—again—and Frank started to have a hard time keeping his eyelids open. Moderately interested as he was, his expectations remained quite low, and not without reason; he was used to the disheartenment that being a fan of New York football would bring.

Hell, there's always next weekend, right?

Finally, he surrendered, figuring Estelle would just wake him for bed when she returned—whenever that was. Tonight was bingo night. All bets were off.

With one last slow blink, he glanced over at the dated pictures of his wife on the mantle. Their wedding photo in particular caught his eye—she in her white dress, and he in his Navy Service Dress Blue. They had married as soon as he returned from Korea, though, knowing his wife had fallen for a man in uniform, he'd then joined the police force, continuing to wear his badge for all their family portraits. He smiled, eyelids sagging as he finally dozed off.

POP!

Abruptly and extremely disoriented, Frank woke, jumping out of the chair. Everything went black. He stumbled into the coffee table, knocking over a lamp while he yelled the Lord's name in vain. A noise that sounded like a gunshot had brought him to conscious-

ness, though now, blinking through the shadowy room, he struggled to process whether it had been real or dreamt.

Unaware of how long he'd slept this time, he called for Estelle, but her returned silence assured him he'd passed out only briefly. The moonlight beamed through the windows, guiding him around the dark house while he rustled through drawers in search of any source of light. Eventually, he decided to check the garage. The automatic door didn't function, so he opened it manually, letting the moon pour in, hitting the workbench against the back wall. He located a heavily scraped Maglite in one of the drawers—a relic from his time on the force that at one time shone light through the darkest of alleyways—and tested it, surprised yet thankful it actually turned on.

Faint meows and the pitter-patter of feet sounded in the driveway as he quickly made way across to close the garage, but he was too late; those outlaws began to invade, tails waving in the air as they made their advance. Frank panicked and paced toward the house door, barely entering before they neared. Without a second thought, he carried on. The power outage took precedence, overruling any other thought process in his mind.

A transformer had probably blown, but Frank at least wanted to check the fuse box in the basement first. He took each creaking step, slowly, one at a time, down to the bottom, holding firmly to the railing. Though he usually only went downstairs during the day, navigating in the dark wasn't out of the norm for either Estelle or himself due to the inoperability of the basement light switch—one

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of many home improvement projects he had *underway*, put off for another time.

Soon, rows of tall, narrow cubed shelving came into view, brimming with muddled collectibles from generations past: porcelain china—dinnerware, cups, saucers—odd trinkets of crystal art, glass vases, copper jewelry boxes, animal figurines. They lived untouched for decades on crowded shelves. Much like the attic and every spare room in the house, the basement had become storage for decades worth of junk and unused appliances, along with the washer and dryer unit. Cardboard boxes dispersed throughout, some stacked high against each wall, filled with effects from every decade they lived on Forest Street. Somewhere, long-buried away, the Cavanaugh's still kept their four children's baby clothing and first pair of shoes.

An old, plastic-covered, tufted leather sofa sat in one corner, also holding boxes. Lying next to it stood a Westport billiards table—feet removed—and a 1960s wooden console television. Frank had a workbench of southern yellow pine near the foot of the stairs, much like one in the garage, but it hadn't surfaced from the depths of boxes in years. Grime coated the waning aggregate walls, and a well-aged Tabriz Persian animal rug partially carpeted the floor. The smell of must emanated from growing dry rot shrouded by the quarter-inch of dust that adorned most surfaces in the space. Anyone familiar with the Cavanaugh's would kindly consider them amateur antique collectors, while anyone else would probably just call them hoarders.

As Frank reached the bottom of the stairs, the flashlight started to flicker, the ancient batteries battling their way out of stagnation.

He stepped over a dirty laundry pile and made his way to a utility closet, where he retrieved a heavily dusted oil lantern. He specifically recalled, for reasons unknown, picking it up in Old Saybrook at a yard sale right before his deployment. After wiping some grime off the glass cover with a sleeve, he lit it with a wooden match taken from a stockpile of odd matchboxes collected over time.

Even with the soft glow of the oil lantern, pitch black cloaked the room, and Frank, already having difficulty seeing, walked face-first through hanging cobwebs, trying to locate the fuse panel. After moving a few mildew-covered boxes to create a narrow path, he came across familiar territory. He saw the panel next to the dryer and opened the rusted hatch, nicking a finger on a serrated edge as he checked the circuits. Everything looked fine. Scratching his head, he figured at this point, a transformer *must* have blown, which would account for the noise heard earlier. With all the activity happening across the water, his assumption seemed a safe bet. Frank turned, held up the lamp, and proceeded toward the exit.

A succession of shrill rings next to Frank caused him to nearly jump out of his skin; the flashlight dropped from his hand, rolling out of sight. Several hardwired telephone landlines hung throughout the house, with the basement having one installed in the 1970s—a time when the family utilized the room more for hobbies, gaming, and of course, laundry.

Frank picked up the receiver, which hung from a square pillar in the center of the room. “Frank, did I wake you?” Estelle asked with a hint of guilt.

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The sound of her voice flooded Frank with relief. He pictured her standing in the kitchen, holding the end of a green wall phone in Florence's house, on the other end of town. Behind her, Florence and three other elderly ladies sat around a rectangle table littered with paper bingo sheets and various colored ink dotters used to mark the sheets. The image of her made him smile.

"Estelle? No," Frank said, as if her assumption was preposterous. "The power is out at the house—you have power by you?"

"Huh, that's strange. Everything is fine over here. Did you check the fuse box?"

"Yeah, looks fine to me. I heard a bang—I think a transformer went or something."

"Well, I'm all *bingo-ed* out—just going to say goodbye to everyone and head home. Do you need anything while I'm out? I can swing over to the gas station and get some candles or batteries. I'm assuming you've found flashlights?"

"Yup. I found ole reliable in the garage. We also have the oil lamp, and wouldn't you believe it, it actually works!" Frank snickered. "I don't think I've lit this thing in over thirty years or so. What a great find this was. I ever tell you that story, dear?"

"Only about a hundred times, hun. It was at the house with all the old stuff that got you into your antique hobby," Estelle said in a storied tone. "All right, I'm leaving shortly. See you in a bit, Frank. Be careful, will ya? You don't want to hurt yourself down there in the dark."

Frank smiled. "Heh, I make no promises, dear."

Hanging up the phone, he grabbed a nearby rag for his finger, which had begun bleeding significantly now, then held up the lantern to see where the flashlight had rolled. He started toward the back, then stopped abruptly. To his astonishment and disbelief, a tear in the foundation corner protruded outward from the floor and wall. Chunks of slate and dirt lay scattered around the edges of the gap. Frank pinched himself, wondering if he'd nodded off to sleep again. Then, squinting his eyes in an attempt to focus, he took off his glasses, inspecting the lenses. His eyes didn't deceive him. Frank cautiously stepped toward the corner to examine the damage. His vision began to adjust as he grew close, revealing much more than he had anticipated.

The *tear* became an oblong hole three to four feet in diameter. Frank picked up a chunk of rock, and on further inspection, noticed deep corrosion. Some degeneration of concrete, he figured—not uncommon, especially in older houses so close to saltwater. He dropped the rock and reached over to touch the edge of the orifice, where he felt a thick, viscous substance, tacky to the touch as he rubbed it between his thumb and index finger.

Frank leaned in to smell it when a curious *thud* prompted him to look up. The sound came from the adjacent side of the room. Now wondering if a squirrel or other small woodland creature could have made its way inside, he walked over to take a look. For an instant, he recalled three years earlier, when he found a raccoon that had snuck in an open window and had given birth to a small litter under the workbench.

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The sound of something large clattering to the solid floor resonated through the damp room, and Frank stopped in his tracks. Slightly unnerved, he decided to end his exploration, snatching up the flashlight and heading straight toward the stairs with a much brisker pace. He rounded the corner and caught a glimpse—a double-take—of bright, glowing eyes in the reflection of a six-foot-high and profoundly tarnished, mid-century Gilt mirror situated diagonally from him. The sight provoked an immediate response laterally, causing him to trip over a milk crate filled with various gardening tools and knocking over several leaning billiard cue sticks.

Frank came crashing to his knees, dropping the flashlight to better secure the lantern in his other hand. The glasses flew off his face and slid out of reach. His vision now blurred; all he could see in darkness were two round, bright auras from each light source. Frantically, he began to crawl and feel his surroundings. Adrenalin started pumping through his veins, elevating his heart rate rapidly. The first item he discovered, to his instant relief, was his glasses; quickly shoving them to his face, he proceeded.

Next, he spotted the flashlight, but it appeared oddly distorted. The lenses had cracked, and everything he saw began to have a stained-glass effect. He picked himself up as fast as his aging body would allow, panting, out of breath, and scanned for the exit, disregarding either light source in his frantic attempt to escape his unknown aggressor. At that moment, nothing mattered more than leaving the basement.

J.J. ALO

A low, gurgling growl shattered the stale air. His hair stood on end, and he froze.