

*FOR JUST CLAWS*

## **PROLOGUE**

Our small town of Hadley, nestled in the rolling green hills of lower Michigan, is normally pretty quiet. We ride our horses, pay our bills and sometimes forget to lock our doors. Murder and mercy killing, robbery and street protests are distant evils, things we read about in the Sunday newspaper, published forty miles away in Detroit, and brought by truck in the middle of the night.

All that was about to change.

# CHAPTER ONE

I swung my lead rope and clucked to the two chestnuts eyeing me suspiciously from the corner of the paddock. I worked them, sending them swerving and turning, controlling their movements, outside turn, inside turn, herding them into the barn. Their hooves flung clods of black April muck, as they trotted to their stalls and I threw home latches behind them. The phone in the tack room sent me racing, counting the rings before the answering machine in the house picked up.

“What time are we saddling up?”

Puffing from the run, I glanced at my watch. “Hi Denise. I just brought the horses in. Feather’s a real pigsty, mud from stem to stern.” I fiddled with a balled-up spider carcass lying on the window ledge, rolling it between my fingers. “Grooming her isn’t going to be quick. Let’s meet in the meadow, at, say, half past twelve?”

“Great. I can’t go for a long ride, got to be home by two. Todd and I are leaving for the hospital at three.”

“How’s his mom doing?” I asked, dropping the spider into the trash can.

“The cancer is taking over, day by day. Nothing will stop it now. We feel so helpless.”

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"How's Todd taking it?"

"We have these awful silences, when I ask him about things, like her will or her funeral, and he answers in a single word, then he doesn't want to talk anymore."

"Give him time, he'll come around."

"Time is the one thing we don't have. Somebody's got to talk to her about the important stuff. Does she want to be cremated or buried? Life support or not? But no, they talk about trivial things, like the weather or who won the baseball game."

"It hasn't sunken in yet. What's obvious to us, I mean. He's still denying that she's dying."

"He knows the truth, just as sure as you and I."

Feather fidgeted on the cross-ties, shifted her weight, and cocked her right hind heel. "Not to change the subject, but I've got housecleaning and grocery shopping on today's agenda, so I can't go for a long ride either."

"Sounds good. See ya' later."

I curried and brushed my mare, picked out her feet and combed her mane and tail. Stretchy neoprene wraps went on to protect her legs and support old, worn tendons.

Her stablemate, Echo, poked his head over his Dutch door and yawned. "Tomorrow's your turn," I reminded him. "Feather goes today and you go tomorrow." He shook his head, flapping his tongue against the stall door.

Closing the paddock gate behind us, I led Feather across the lawn and stood on the picnic table, positioning the mare alongside, to slide my foot into the stirrup. We ambled down the gravel road, sun peeking through cottony clouds and a warm breeze ruffling last autumn's damp leaves. The dirty snow had melted, giving way to spring flowers crowning moist earth.

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I tapped my heels against Feather's sides and we trotted onto a path that wound around some honeysuckle bushes and opened into a meadow. Following a narrow deer trail through the meadow, this was a shortcut that saved riding up a steep, rocky hill on the gravel road. Lemon-yellow sulphurs flitted among the yet unfurled honeysuckle buds.

Feather's ears twitched forward and back, listening. We scrambled over the rubble of an old stone wall and stepped onto a two-track left by hunters, rutted with the deep gouges of four-wheel drives. A hundred feet to the south, the two-track dead-ended into the county road.

Denise and I usually met along this stretch, where the land is state owned and posted as equestrian trails and, during hunting season, open to hunters. I closed my legs around Feather's sides, almost imperceptibly released the reins, and we broke into a canter, her steel horseshoes rhythmically clicking on the stony path. Rounding a curve, Denise rode toward us.

She pulled up her gelding, Beezer, and turned him, so he and Feather walked side by side. "Like your hair," I said. She'd gotten it done since I last saw her. "Nice highlights." Her brown eyes, fringed in dark downcast lashes, gave her a coy princess charm.

"I stopped by Jill's salon Thursday after work," she said. "She did my hair while I looked at pictures of her new filly." She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her denim jacket and lit one. The smoke curled and spiraled upward, like spirits rising to heaven.

"Having a sister that's a hair stylist definitely has its perks. What's the new horse like?" I asked.

"It's not a yearling, like she wanted. She ended up getting a two-year-old through one of her trainers."

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“A two-year-old is better anyway. She won’t have to pour as much time and money into her before she’s rideable.”

“The down side is that she had to pay more than she expected.”

“Looks like she’ll need a few more of those hundred-dollars-a-cut customers to help pay the bills.” We were at a fork in the two-track. “Which way?” I asked.

“Let’s take Blood Road, go through the pines and up the big hill to the overlook.” She pulled an old prescription bottle from her pocket, pinched the end of her cigarette butt, and dropped it into the bottle. “How’d they ever come up with a name like Blood Road?” she asked.

“You never heard the rumor? Way back when we were in high school?”

She shook her head. “I wasn’t raised around here, remember? I was a city girl.”

“Yeah, I always forget.” She seemed so at ease in the country, with her horses and dogs and chickens, I always forgot she was transplanted. “Well, the story was that couples came out here to park or party, drink beer, whatever. With it being so desolate, no houses and all, it was a popular spot. Supposedly a couple stopped to park but left their radio playing. When they wanted to go home, the battery was drained and the car wouldn’t start, so he said he would walk to the nearest house for help. He told her to lock all the doors and not to let anybody in, except him. Sometime in the night, she fell asleep, but dreamed she heard a tapping noise.”

“And no doubt it was a stormy, moonless night.” Denise said skeptically.

“Of course,” I said. “When the sun came up, she found the source of the tapping—her boyfriend hung from a tree,

a noose around his neck, his shoes tapping the driver's side window."

She threw me a crooked grin and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "You believe that?" she asked.

"Of course not," I laughed. "But that's why it's called Blood Road." The road was sandy and straight here, perfect for a short gallop. "Let's canter," I called to her.

Feather surged forward when I drew back my leg and laid my heel against her side. The wind whistled past. At Blood Road, we slowed to a walk and turned right, then took a path leading to a stand of towering Tamarack pines so dense and dark and foreboding that even on the brightest day, only a blue-green streak of light passed through to the forest floor. Silent except for the crunch of hooves on fallen pine needles and creaking saddle leather, the pine forest was a mystical vacuum cut off from the rest of the world.

We went up a steep hill, where erosion exposed the gnarled roots of the tall pines. The horses carefully picked their way over the roots, some as thick and strong as woven nylon rope. At the top of the hill, out of the shadows of the Tamaracks, welcome sunlight streamed down again. The horses puffed from the long climb.

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you," said Denise, "remember Kathy's son, Derrick? He's come back to live with her."

"As if she doesn't have enough to do—the only ranger managing a four-thousand acre state park—now she's got him to look after, too." Less than thrilled to hear he was in the neighborhood, I said, "Nail down everything that moves and board up your house."

"Carol, give the kid a chance. He's been gone three years."

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"In the first place, he's not a kid. He must be seventeen by now. And in the second place, you know Kathy only sent him to live with his dad in Detroit because she couldn't do a thing with him. And I hate to generalize, but Detroit hasn't been voted best community to raise children in lately, so I doubt he's improved."

"She says he's grown up a lot. Some of the bad things he did were just part of being a kid."

"So being a kid gives free license to be a kleptomaniac?"

"Would you want to be judged the rest of your life on what you did as a teenager? Give him another chance, even if just for Kathy's sake."

"Let's say I'm not ready to have him house-sit while Jack and I go on vacation."

"Honestly, Carol, you'd be suspicious of Noah, if it was raining and he offered you a lift in his Ark."

"I'm not that bad, I'm just realistic. I can't help it; it comes from living with Jack." Husbands are easily blamed for shortcomings. I figured he had it coming, since it was his cynical nature rubbing off on me.

After climbing the last ridge to the overlook, we let the horses snack on grass while Denise and I dangled our feet out of our stirrups. We could see far to the south, over the tops of the trees, and all the way to the water tower fifteen miles away.

"Guess I'd better head home," Denise said. "Wish I could ride longer."

"Me too. You know how weekends are—errands, laundry, housecleaning, grocery shopping. It's always a mad rush to catch up, like fitting your entire life into two days a week."

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“The hectic life of a working woman,” she said. “Want to ride tomorrow if it doesn’t rain?”

“Sure. Around one o’clock?”

“It’ll be Echo’s turn.” I always reminded her when I brought Echo, my problem horse. Last fall, he grabbed Beezer’s bridle and pulled it off his head, breaking the bridle in the process. Denise rode home with a polo wrap fashioned into a makeshift headstall. Another time, he bit Beezer’s knee. A third time he took hold of Beezer’s tail and yanked it, starting a kicking spree that ended with Denise face down in the dust.

“We’ll just stay far enough apart so he can’t get into mischief,” she said.

“You’re so good natured about his naughtiness. I don’t think I’d be as charitable.”

“He’s just playful. And it’s not like he’s ever done any real damage. You’ve got to let them have their personalities, Carol, just like kids.”

“He’s got a personality, all right—a bad one. A thousand pounds of juvenile delinquent, with poor vision and the mentality of a scared rabbit.”

She laughed. “You’re too hard on him. It’s a good thing you never had kids. They wouldn’t have ever had any fun.”

“At least they wouldn’t be total brats, either, like most kids nowadays. They aren’t taught any respect, the way we were.”

“This is a discussion for another day, Carol Ward, you old fogey.” She smiled. “I’ve got to go.”

“Just cut me off, mid-sentence, that’s okay,” I complained. “No respect for your elders.” Denise was exactly six months younger than me.



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# CHAPTER TWO

The sun was low by the time I turned my truck into Marge Butler's drive. Bailey Boo, her twelve-year-old collie, lifted his head from the porch step and opened clouded eyes, sniffing the air. Good old Bailey Boo couldn't see a thing, except maybe shadows.

The green aluminum-sided split-level was sheltered from the road by a group of large pine trees. To the right and behind the house stood a green pole barn, where Roy Butler's well-drilling equipment had been stored. The business had been sold, along with the equipment, when he died five years ago.

I banged my knuckles hard on the aluminum screen door to get Marge's attention. She pulled the inner wooden door open and I saw her weathered face break into a smile.

"Carolyn, good afternoon!" she chirped, like I had just set the universe aglow.

Thinking someone actually enjoyed seeing me that much made me smile. "Hi Marge. Got everything on your list this week, except the Cheerios. They were out. Said they'd have more Monday, I can get them for you then, if you'd like."

"Don't worry, I've got plenty of corn flakes. You do enough, getting my groceries every Saturday, like you do."

I just wish you'd let me pay you for your trouble." She pulled the loops of one of the plastic bags from my wrist.

"It's no trouble. I'm going to the supermarket anyway, what's the bother picking up a few extra things?"

Her white hair, tinged slightly blue, was neatly curled, as if she had simply slid the curling iron out of each curl, leaving it intact, and sprayed it with lacquer. Dressed in a navy-blue flowered tunic and beige polyester slacks with taupe crepe-soled shoes, she led me into the kitchen.

"The half-gallon milk was on sale, so I got it instead of your usual quart. I hope that's okay."

"Sure is. I can always use some extra calcium."

"I think we all could. By the way, the clothing drive is next Sunday. Did you want to donate anything?" By anything, I meant Roy's old clothes.

"I've got the bags all ready to go, in the living room."

The house had the musty, closed-up smell of old mothballs, but there wasn't a speck of dust to be found. Cotton doilies lay across the headrests of the easy chairs. Mahogany woodwork bordered willow-green walls and carpeting the color of creamy eggnog. Bailey Boo's plaid cedar-filled bed lay in front of the hearth.

Her eyes darted to the bags on the floor. "I've gone through everything. It took me all week, believe it or not. I'd cry a little, and have to sit down for a cup of tea. Then, when I felt better, I'd go back to it again. Little by little, I got it done."

"I'm sorry, Marge, I should have offered to help. How thoughtless of me."

"Oh, no mind. It was the kind of thing one has to do alone. I looked at something, remembered how he looked wearing it, remembered when I bought it for him, remembered his favorite things, his not-so-favorite things.

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Then I'd remember how much I miss him." She toyed with the gold locket she wore around her neck. "I'm not sure I would have been good company; and you've got so much, working all day and taking care of all those animals, you don't have the time to fuss with an old lady like me."

"Don't be silly. You know the saying, 'If you're too busy for friends, you're just plain too busy.'"

She pointed to the bags on the floor. "Well, there they are. Let me help you get these out to your truck."

She pulled a gray wool sweater from the top of one of the bags. "On second thought, I know someone who would love a nice warm sweater like this. I'm surprised I didn't think of him sooner." She held it up, as if sizing it. Roy's initials were monogrammed in black thread, the three letters forming a diamond.

"It's a beautiful sweater," I agreed.

Bailey Boo tagged along as we carried the bags out to my truck. I set them down on the passenger side floor, got in the driver's side, and rolled down the window. "Let me know if you need anything. And don't be afraid to ask Wolfman Jack, either. He doesn't bite, he just looks like a hairy beast. Judging by the hours he spends in front of the television, he's got loads of free time."

She laughed. "The things you girls say about your husbands these days!"

"I'm afraid they've fallen off their pedestals," I yelled out the window, heading down the drive.

Jack sat in a patio chair on the deck, unlacing his work boots. "The back door wasn't locked."

Here we go again. "I was only gone a few minutes, just to deliver Marge's groceries."

"I want you to lock up when you leave the house."

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“Look around you, Jack, who do you see? It’s just us. We live in the country, remember?”

He slid the patio door open. “I don’t care. Just lock the doors, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” I mumbled. He was right, I knew. Especially now that Derrick was back.

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# CHAPTER THREE

A bushy tail swiped back and forth, like a metronome, across my face. Cat hairs danced and floated in the beam of sunlight streaming through the open blinds. Maximilian, an obese coon cat, sat on my pillow, and three more felines slept at the foot of the bed: Angelic white Camille, black as night Imp, and golden-eyed Boots. Hannibal, my beloved schizophrenic, who, in a split second changes from a sweet, sensible lap cat to a fangs barred, claws unsheathed, demon, slept on the chair across from my bed. Obviously brother and sister, with almost identical black and white coats, Boots and Hannibal came as a package deal last year, found crouched near my mailbox, in what Jack believes was a perfectly orchestrated drop-off.

I've scheduled an appointment for Hannibal with a kitty psychiatrist, but *aggressive behavior*, his receptionist informs me, *is absolutely rampant*, and the good doctor is so overbooked, he can't fit us in until next month. Now to find a way to justify cat psychiatry, on our meager budget, when Jack balances the checkbook.

An early riser, wide awake the instant his eyes opened, Jack sat on the couch reading the Sunday paper and sipping coffee. "Hannibal left three headless mice on the door mat."

“Wonder why he eats only the heads?” I asked, pouring myself a cup of coffee.

“Because he’s a psycho cat.”

I warmed my hands around the mug. “What’d you do with them?” I asked.

“Nothing. I left them for you, since he’s your cat. Front page or sales ads? I know you don’t want the sports section,” he said.

“Neither. I’ve got to feed.” The horses stood at the gate, voracious eyes focused on the house, waiting for the moment the patio door slid open, and, amid fervent nickering, I emerged. So involved was I in my daydream, that I jumped when the phone rang.

“Yeah, she just rolled out of bed. Hang on.” Jack held the phone out, “It’s Denise.”

“What’s up?”

“Kathy just called. Do you know Rene’s daughter?”

“Julie? Sure.” If it weren’t for the row of blue spruce along our driveway, I could see the back of their barn. “She feeds my horses and cleans my stalls when we’re out of town. Why?”

“She needed a tape-recording of bird songs for her college biology class, so she hiked into the park yesterday afternoon and she’s still not back. Rene’s worried sick that she’s lost.”

“How could she be lost?” I asked. “She’s ridden those trails as many times as you or I.”

“I don’t think she’s lost,” Denise continued. “After dark, Rene called Kathy and told her Julie still wasn’t back and the two of them went looking for her. But by then they couldn’t see a thing, so Rene called the police. Two officers came out, looked around the house and barn, asked

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a lot of questions and then drove through the park. Nobody's seen hide nor hair of her."

"What about her girlfriends? Maybe she spent the night at a friend's house."

"They called her friends. None of them know a thing."

"No wonder Rene's sick with worry," I said. I ran my fingers nervously through my uncombed hair, tugging at the ends.

"The police suggested she's simply left home without telling Rene, but that's ridiculous. She loves that horse of hers. She wouldn't leave Cinders and not say a word to Rene."

"Julie's got more sense than that," I said. Jack's startled eyes lifted above the newspaper. "This is really strange. What if she's sprained an ankle or broken her leg and can't walk home? She's probably terrified after a night alone in the woods, not to mention cold and hungry. Why didn't someone call us last night to look for her? We know those trails like the backs of our hands."

"The police searched all night. They're bringing in the K-9 Unit from Oakland County right now. Call it intuition or ESP or whatever you want, but I'm getting a funny feeling about this. Why don't you and I saddle up and help look? They don't want Rene to leave the house in case Julie calls or shows up."

I looked at the wall clock, calculating time. "I haven't fed the horses yet, but I can be saddled up by half past nine."

"We can meet on Fox Lake Road, then split up and meet back on Blood Road, by the sand hills. That'll cover the main trail. If we still haven't found her, we can decide which way to go after that."

I hung up the phone. "What's going on?" Jack asked. "Where's Julie?"

"Good question. She's been gone since yesterday afternoon."

He folded back the front page of the sports section. "She take her horse?"

"No. Denise says she hiked into the park to tape-record songbirds for a college science project and that's the last anyone's seen of her. Poor kid, it's spooky out there at night." I thought of Denise's premonition.

He looked at his watch. "I'd better get going. Tom and I are running the store by ourselves today."

"We're going to have a look. We were going riding anyway, we'll just split up and cover different trails."

"Don't go stickin' your nose in where you're not wanted. The police have plenty on their hands as it is, without you two making matters worse."

Pulling on my jacket, I said, "It can't hurt to look."

Down at the barn, I scooped oats into Feather and Echo's buckets, then packed their hayracks and filled the water tank before heading up to the house.

Jack gave me a quick kiss on his way out the door, as I was coming in. "I hope we've found her by the time you're home from work," I said.

"I hope so, too. Gotta' go. Don't make a nuisance of yourself with the police, okay? The last thing they need right now is Lucy Ricardo and Ethel Mertz interfering."

A muddy field boot sailed through the air, but my timing was off, and all it hit was the back of the door.