

Chapter 1

Before Dawn

Claire Bellamy woke at 5:12 without an alarm.

For a few seconds she stayed still beneath the heavy winter quilt, listening to the house settle around her. The refrigerator humming downstairs. Heat clicking through the baseboards. Wind pushing against the siding.

Then her mind started.

Snow later.

Need batteries.

Mrs. Hargrove's porch light stayed on half the night again.

The sound under the kitchen sink still wasn't right.

She got up before she could decide whether she was tired.

The floor was cold against her feet. She pulled wool socks from the chair beside the bed and stood for a moment in the dark room. Across from her, the digital clock glowed blue.

5:13.

She used to wake like this for hospital shifts. Almost six years after leaving the ER, her body still seemed unconvinced vigilance was no longer required.

The coffee maker sputtered alive while she stood at the kitchen sink staring into the dark street.

Alder Street looked half-asleep under the orange wash of streetlights. Snowbanks lined the sidewalks in uneven gray piles. Somebody's recycling bin had tipped over during the night, scattering cardboard halfway down the road.

The house next door still hadn't fixed its front steps properly.

Temporary plywood since October.

Claire watched one of the boards lift slightly in the wind.

Someone was going to slip eventually.

She made coffee and drank half the first cup standing up.

The kitchen was already clean, but she wiped the counters anyway while waiting for daylight. A dish towel hung slightly crooked from the oven handle. She fixed it.

Then the freezer.

Plastic containers stacked in neat rows. Soup. Chili. Stew. Pasta sauce. Dates in black marker.

She shifted two containers because one stack leaned farther left than the others.

When she closed the freezer door, the silence in the kitchen felt heavier.

Not peaceful.

Controlled.

There was a difference.

She opened the junk drawer looking for batteries she already knew were there.

Flashlights. Matches. Scissors. Extra charging cords. Elastic bands sorted into sandwich bags. A tiny screwdriver set.

The batteries sat exactly where they belonged.

Still, she tested them.

By six-thirty, she had unloaded the dishwasher, checked the weather advisory twice, tightened the loose hinge on the hallway closet, texted Mrs. Hargrove about the porch light, started a grocery list, folded two blankets, and cleaned out the fridge shelf that didn't need cleaning.

Outside, dawn finally pushed weak gray light across the street.

Claire stood near the living room window with her second coffee and watched the town wake slowly.

Mr. Leduc across the street moved carefully over his icy driveway carrying a shovel. The younger couple in the rental house fought silently while loading their truck. You could tell from the way they moved around each other without looking up.

Somebody farther down the block started their car three times before the engine caught.

Ordinary winter morning.

Ordinary lonely town.

Her phone buzzed on the counter.

RUTHIE CALDER.

Claire considered ignoring it. Ruthie would leave a voicemail either way.

Instead she answered.

“You’re awake,” Ruthie said.

“It’s morning.”

“It’s barely morning.”

Claire opened the pantry and stared at the canned goods. “What’s wrong?”

“You always assume something’s wrong.”

“You only call before seven when something’s wrong.”

“That’s not true.”

“It’s mostly true.”

Ruthie laughed softly. Claire could hear dishes clattering in the background.

“You’re still coming tonight, right?”

Claire closed her eyes briefly.

“To what.”

“The town meeting.”

“I said maybe.”

“You said probably.”

"I absolutely did not say probably."

Ruthie ignored that. "They're trying to shut down the garden."

Claire moved a can of tomatoes half an inch farther back on the shelf. "Then I assume people who care about gardens should attend."

"Oh, don't start."

"I'm serious, Ruthie."

"No, you're avoiding."

Claire shut the pantry door harder than necessary.

Outside, the town plow crawled past the house, spraying sand over the intersection.

Ruthie kept talking.

"They're saying the maintenance costs are too high, and nobody's volunteering anymore, which isn't even true because June Holloway practically lives there all summer, and the school kids still use the beds near the fence, and honestly if Gerald Simmons gets his way everything in this town will become either a parking lot or a storage unit—"

"Ruthie."

"What."

"I don't garden."

"You know perfectly well this isn't about gardening."

That irritated her immediately because Ruthie was probably right.

Claire walked into the living room and straightened the folded blanket over the couch arm.

The whole house looked staged for a life nobody was actively living in.

Books stacked neatly beside the chair. Unused knitting basket. Television remote aligned with the edge of the coffee table.

Everything maintained.

Nothing relaxed.

"You could just come sit with me," Ruthie said. "Half these meetings are Gerald complaining about taxes while everyone else stares at the floor pretending not to exist."

"I have things to do."

"You always have things to do."

Claire looked back toward the kitchen where the coffee maker blinked 6:52 in green numbers.

Groceries. Pharmacy pickup. Mrs. Hargrove. Hardware store. Basement shelves. Maybe the hall closet.

None of it needed doing today.

Still.

"You know what your problem is?" Ruthie said.

Claire snorted softly. "I assume you're about to tell me."

"You retired and somehow got busier."

"I'm efficient."

"You alphabetized your spice rack."

"That was one time."

"You made labels."

"The labels were practical."

Ruthie laughed again, warm and tired at once.

Claire leaned against the wall beside the window.

Snow had started lightly now. Tiny dry flakes drifted sideways across the street.

"I'm not promising anything," she said.

"That means no."

“It means I’m thinking about it.”

“You hate community events.”

“I hate unnecessary folding chairs.”

“Same thing.”

Claire smiled despite herself.

That annoyed her too.

Ruthie lowered her voice. “Just come for an hour. June gets upset when they talk about closing it.”

Claire looked outside automatically.

Three houses down, June Holloway’s curtains remained closed.

Same as always.

“June doesn’t get upset,” Claire said.

“Oh, honey. Some people get upset very quietly.”

The silence stretched.

Claire shifted her mug between her hands.

At the hospital she used to recognize grief by what people did with their hands. An exhausted husband refilling ice water three times because he needed somewhere to stand. A woman calmly asking about vending machines after being told her brother had died.

People thought grief looked like crying.

Usually it looked like organization.

“I’ll think about it,” Claire said.

Ruthie sighed dramatically. “Fine. But if they turn the whole thing into extra parking, I hope you feel personally responsible.”

“I’ll try to survive the guilt.”

“There she is.”

The line clicked dead before Claire could answer.

She set the phone down and stood quietly in the kitchen.

The snow thickened.

A delivery truck stopped at the corner. Someone’s dog barked twice and then stopped.

Claire rinsed her mug immediately after finishing the coffee.

She always rinsed mugs immediately.

The sink knocked faintly when she turned off the hot water.

Still there.

She crouched beneath the sink with a flashlight and wrench.

No leak.

Just a vibration in the pipe when the pressure shifted.

Probably nothing.

She tightened the connector another quarter turn.

When she stood too quickly, dizziness moved through her head. Not severe. Enough that she steadied herself against the counter and waited.

The doctor had told her last year she needed to eat more regularly.

She’d nodded like someone who planned to change.

The kitchen clock read 7:26.

Too early to vacuum without becoming the neighborhood problem.

Claire pulled on her coat instead.

Outside, cold air hit sharp against her face.

The snow squeaked beneath her boots as she crossed toward Mrs. Hargrove's house.

The porch light still glowed weak yellow against the daylight.

Claire knocked once before letting herself in with the spare key hidden beneath the fake rock beside the planter.

"Mrs. Hargrove?"

The television played loudly somewhere in the back room.

Claire shut the door behind her and stepped over a pile of unopened mail near the entryway.

"Mrs. Hargrove?"

"In here," came the irritated answer.

Claire found her wrapped in blankets in the recliner, half-asleep beneath a shopping channel playing at an unreasonable volume.

"You left your porch light on."

Mrs. Hargrove blinked at her. "Did I."

"Yes."

"Well. Good thing the town has you."

Claire ignored that. "Did you take your pills this morning?"

Mrs. Hargrove narrowed her eyes. "You sound exactly like my daughter."

"Your daughter lives in Winnipeg."

"And somehow still bothers me weekly."

Claire checked the pill organizer sitting untouched beside the lamp.

Mrs. Hargrove noticed.

"I was about to take them."

"Mhm."

“You nurses become unbearable after fifty.”

“I was unbearable before fifty.”

That earned a reluctant laugh.

Claire moved around the room automatically, opening curtains, collecting empty tea cups, turning down the television, checking the thermostat.

The house smelled faintly like dust and canned soup.

“You don’t have to fuss,” Mrs. Hargrove muttered.

Claire straightened a crooked lampshade. “I know.”

“That’s the concerning part.”

Claire almost replied.

Instead she stopped.

The woman wasn’t wrong.

Helping people had become easier than being one.

Mrs. Hargrove swallowed her pills dramatically while glaring at her.

“There. Happy?”

“Thrilled.”

“You going to that ridiculous town meeting tonight?”

Claire frowned. “Why does everyone know about that already?”

“Small town.”

Mrs. Hargrove waved toward the television. “They should keep the garden.”

“You don’t even use it.”

“Neither do half the people who complain when things disappear.”

Claire pulled her coat tighter around herself.

“That’s not how budgets work.”

Mrs. Hargrove snorted. “Budgets are just people deciding what matters.”

Claire opened her mouth to argue.

Then didn’t.

She remembered the hospital administrator who once explained staffing cuts with a PowerPoint about resource optimization while three nurses cried quietly in the hallway afterward.

Mrs. Hargrove settled deeper beneath the blankets.

“You should go,” she said.

“To the meeting.”

“You spend too much time alone in that tidy little house.”

Claire reached for the empty tea cups.

“I like being alone.”

Mrs. Hargrove looked at her over the top of her glasses.

“That isn’t what I said.”