The house sits on the edge of the woods, isolated, with no neighbors for miles. Years of footsteps between the house and the nearby barn have worn the ground down to bare, muddy earth. The barn itself looks forgotten, its wear obvious beneath the damp air filled with the song of bugs and frogs. Aside from that chorus, everything is still. The dark windows of the house stare blankly into the night.

Somewhere in the darkness, something stirs and approaches the house.

A thump.

Nadine's eyes snap open. She sits up abruptly, blinking into the dark, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Her bedside clock reads 4:30 AM. Strands of wild gray hair have come loose from her braid. A flash of lightning lights up her bedroom, and a low rumble of thunder follows seconds later. She isn't sure if the storm woke her.

She swings her bare feet onto the cool wooden floor. The chill prickles her skin. For a moment, she sits in the dark, eyeing her warm covers with longing. Maybe she imagined the sound.

Another thump and she's off the bed.

Creeping through the house, shotgun raised. Her own breathing sounds too loud in her ears, so she holds her breath and her pulse thunders as she nears the kitchen. With a quick flick, she turns on the light. Harsh brightness floods the shabby room. The refrigerator hums steadily. The back door is slightly ajar. The screen door moves in the wind.

Thump.

Her cat sits serenely on the old table, licking its fur.

Nadine exhales in a rush. She crosses the room and peers outside. The rain has begun again. She stares into the darkness for a long moment, seeing nothing.

With a shrug, she latches the screen door. Then, grabbing a spray bottle and towel from under the sink, she cleans the muddy floor. Satisfied, she scratches the cat behind the ears and starts toward her bedroom.

A sudden crackle from the ham radio makes her jump.

"Nadine? Over." The voice comes through the speaker.

She rushes over and grabs the microphone.
"Hey, Bill! What's got you calling me at this hour? Over."

Static hisses, followed by his reply.
“It’s good to hear your voice! I was worried. There was a report of a flash of light and an explosion not far from you. Did you hear it? Over.”

“An explosion? In the woods? Over.”

“Probably a lightning strike. I’m worried about fire. Can you see anything? Over.”

Nadine moves to the kitchen window, then checks the one on the opposite side. Only darkness and rain greet her. She returns to the radio.

“I don’t see nothing ‘cept rain and all I’ve heard is thunder... and my screen door thumping. Over.”

“What? Over.”

“The cat... never mind. If there’s nothing more, I’m going back to bed. Over.”

“Roger that. Over.”

Nadine gives one last glance out the window before turning in.

The cat pauses its grooming, leaps off the table, and pads after her.

She lies in bed, tossing and turning, until finally she sits up. The clock now reads 4:45 AM. Aside from the occasional crack of lightning, the world remains dark.

She sighs heavily and reaches for her robe.

The cat sits on it. When she tries to move it, it hisses at her. Startled, Nadine pulls back.

“What the hell?”

Outside, bugs and frogs continue to sing in the humid air. Lightning flashes again, and thunder follows more quickly now. The rain pours harder.

In the muddy yard, an old oil drum lies on its side. Inside is a dead cat—one that looks just like the one in Nadine’s house.

Strange, inhuman footprints – already starting to fade in the rain - trail away from the corpse – straight to the back door.

A scream echoes faintly from the house, nearly drowned by the roar of the rain.