

Chapter One — Six Weeks Gone

The flowers on Walt Pryce's grave had started to go the way flowers go in a Vermont October, which is to say quickly and without apology, and Maren Ellis stood over them with her hands jammed in her coat pockets, thinking that somebody ought to clear them off before the frost turned the whole thing into a compost heap of good intentions.

Nobody had. Six weeks now, and nobody had.

She supposed that was its own kind of tribute. Walt would have hated a fuss, and the town, in its way, had settled on this instead: a slow, comfortable rot of carnations and drugstore roses, left where they'd been laid, because taking them away felt too much like being finished with him.

"You're not supposed to be back here," said a voice behind her, and Maren turned to find Ruth Okafor picking her way across the wet grass in shoes that were not built for it, one hand holding her cardigan closed at the throat. "Cemetery closes at dusk. Sign says so. I put the sign up myself, twenty years ago, when the Hendricks boys kept coming out here to do God knows what with a case of Pabst."

"It's not dusk."

"It's getting there." Ruth stopped beside her and looked down at the flowers with the particular flatness of someone who had looked at this exact patch of ground

more times than she wanted to count. She was the postmaster, had been for eleven years, and before that she'd been the assistant postmaster for six, and before that a rural carrier herself, on a route two towns over, so that when people in Millhaven said Ruth Okafor had post office in her blood they meant it as more than a figure of speech. "I keep meaning to bring shears. Cut the good ones back so they don't have to look so sorry for themselves."

"Would he have wanted that?"

"He'd have wanted us not standing here at all. He'd have told us to go on home, there's nothing to see, and if he ever caught us hanging around a cemetery on a Tuesday afternoon he'd have found some chore to put us to instead. Walt Pryce did not believe in idle hands, and he did not believe in wallowing, and he did not believe—" Ruth stopped. Her jaw worked once, twice, like she was chewing something down that didn't want to go quietly. "He didn't believe in much that wasn't useful. That was the whole man."

Maren had known Walt Pryce for twenty-six of her thirty-four years, which was to say for as long as she had memories at all. He had delivered mail on Cobb Street and up along the ridge road and down through the hollow past the old orchard for forty-one years, on foot for the last quarter mile of it even after the route went to trucks, because he said a man ought to know a place with his feet and not just his tires. When Maren was eight and her

father had not yet left but was already mostly gone in the ways that mattered, Walt used to let her walk the last stretch of the route with him after school, and he'd tell her the names of the dogs before the dogs could get to her, and he'd let her put letters through the brass slots herself, and once, memorably, he had let her hold a garter snake he found sunning on the Widow Prosser's steps, an act of such reckless trust in an eight-year-old that Maren had never quite gotten over being grateful for it.

She had not walked with him in a long time. That was the plain fact of it, unadorned, and she had been turning it over in her head for six weeks the way you turn a stone over looking for the smooth side, and there wasn't one.

"You didn't answer me," Ruth said. "About the flowers."

"I think he'd have let them rot," Maren said. "And felt bad about it the whole time."

Something in Ruth's face loosened, just slightly, the way a held breath goes when it finally lets go. "That's about right." She looked at Maren sideways, assessing, the way she looked at a package she suspected might be improperly addressed. "You writing something for the paper? About him?"

"Nat wants a remembrance piece. For the one-month —" Maren stopped, recalculated. "For the six-week. We missed the one-month, honestly. I couldn't get it to sit right."

"What's not sitting right about it?"

Maren looked out past the headstones toward the tree line, where the hill dropped away into the valley and you could just make out, if you knew where to look, the gray thread of Bell Hill Road winding down toward the chapel overlook. She had driven past the turnout every day for six weeks without once stopping the car, and she could not have said, if pressed, whether that was grief or cowardice, or whether at this point in her life she had gotten so practiced at telling the two apart that she no longer needed to.

"I keep starting with the route," she said. "Forty-one years, this many miles, this many houses. And it's true, all of it, and it's the kind of thing everybody already knows, and none of it says anything about who he actually was." She shook her head. "I don't know how to write eight hundred words about a man who knew everyone in this town better than they knew themselves, and make it sound like more than an inventory."

"Maybe that's because you're trying to write it about the town's version of him," Ruth said. "Instead of yours."

It was, Maren thought, exactly the kind of thing Walt himself would have said—not unkindly, but with a precision that left you no room to argue your way around it—and for a moment the resemblance was so sharp it felt like a hand laid flat against her sternum.

"I have an errand tomorrow morning, before the office opens," Ruth said, in a different voice now, brisker, the voice she used for closing out a conversation before it

could go somewhere neither of them wanted it to. "Walt's desk. His personal things. Nobody's touched it since—since. There's no family to send it to. You know that. I've been putting it off because I didn't want to be the one alone in that room going through a dead man's drawers, and I thought, well. I thought you might not mind the company either way."

Maren understood, in the particular way you understand things that have already half-formed themselves in your chest before your mind catches up, that this was not really a request for help with paperwork.

"What time?" she asked.

"Seven. Before Denny comes in to sort." Ruth was already turning to go, cardigan clutched tight, moving with the brisk economy of a woman who had spent thirty years learning not to waste a single motion in the cold. At the edge of the plot she paused, and without turning around, said, "Bring coffee. Not from the Spoon. Peg's been putting cinnamon in it since the leaves turned, and I can't be doing with cinnamon before seven in the morning, not the week I'm having."

"What kind of week are you having?"

But Ruth only lifted a hand, not quite a wave, more an acknowledgment that the question had been asked and would not be answered today, and walked back toward the gravel lot with her shoulders set against the wind, leaving Maren alone again with the flowers and the gray thread of road below and the particular silence of a town that had