Chapter One

The Call Nobody Is Ready For

The call came at 4:17 on Monday morning, exactly the sort of hour Marvin would have considered unreasonable. He believed respectable trouble waited for daylight—a man who couldn't hold his emergency until sunrise wasn't having an emergency, he was having a mood. Claire had heard that line so many times growing up that some part of her still expected to hear him say it now, muttering into the dark at a phone that had rung too soon.

She was awake before the second ring, had been sleeping lightly for three nights with the volume turned up loud enough to wake Mark and possibly the neighbors. When CEDAR RIDGE REGIONAL lit the screen, she stared at it a beat longer than necessary, as if not answering might hold the moment in place. Mark lifted his head before she'd even moved. "Is it the hospital?"

She nodded, though he couldn't have seen it, and answered on the third ring. The nurse—Angela—said Marvin had taken a turn, said the family should come, and said it kindly, without theater, the way people talk when they've learned that clarity is its own mercy. "How long?" Claire asked.

A pause, a nurse deciding how much a daughter could carry at seventeen minutes past four. "I would come now," Angela said, and that was as much as she'd promise.

Claire thanked her, which struck her afterward as absurd—you don't thank someone for telling you your father is dying—and set the phone down. Mark was already moving through the dark without needing the light, the way a man does after thirty-two years of sharing a room. He didn't ask what she needed. He laid her jeans and sweater across the foot of the bed within reach. "I'll drive," he said.

"You have that meeting at eight."

"Claire."

"I can drive."

"I know you can. That has never been the question."

She dressed with the phone already pressed to her ear, calling Danny. Twice it went to voicemail, his easy recorded voice promising a callback as if this were an ordinary Monday. On the third try he answered, thick and disoriented. "Claire?"

"It's Dad. The hospital called. They said we need to come now."

Danny went quiet long enough that she checked whether the call had dropped. Then she heard a drawer slide open too fast, something hit the floor. "I talked to him last night. He sounded better."

"I know what he sounded like." Sharper than she meant, though not sharper than she felt. She'd been in the vinyl chair when the nurse handed Marvin the phone, had watched him straighten against the pillows the way he used to straighten his shoulders before opening the shop, and find ten whole minutes of energy to discuss the old service van and a football game neither one was watching. He never once mentioned the tubes in his arm.

"Is Ruth there?"

"She stayed last night."

"I can be on the road in twenty minutes."

Claire wanted to say twenty minutes was too long, that he should have come Sunday. Then she remembered the two hundred and fourteen miles between his house and Cedar Ridge, and that distance didn't bend for grief no matter how badly a person wished it would. In their family, distance had learned how to be both a fact and an accusation, depending on who was speaking. "Drive carefully," she said. "Call me when you're moving."

The roads were nearly empty, streetlights holding their orange circles over pavement no one else needed. Mark kept both hands on the wheel while Claire watched dark storefronts slide past and tried not to calculate. Forty minutes to Cedar Ridge on an ordinary morning. Her father might have thirty-six minutes left, or six hours, or—she hated the thought the moment it arrived—he might already be gone.

At the edge of town they passed the narrow storefront on Willow Street where Carter Appliance & Repair had stood almost fifty years. The sign still hung above the door, faded to a tired pink, a hand-lettered CLOSED sign curling at its corners in the glass. Claire had driven past it a hundred times without seeing it. Tonight it reached out and took hold of her on purpose.

Marvin had kept the shop open long after it stopped making sense on paper—fewer customers, an unreliable knee, an inventory built for appliances whose manufacturers had moved on to sleeker, less repairable machines. She'd once asked him, standing there with cold coffee in her hand, why he still drove down three mornings a week for a business that barely covered its own electric bill.

"People know where to find me," he'd said, not looking up from the mixer he was rewiring.

"They know where you live."

"That's different. At home they stay too long."

The truth was more tangled than the joke let on. People stayed at the shop too, telling him the whole history of a dead mixer or a limping dryer while he worked, as if the appliance's story mattered as much as its wiring. Marvin listened with his head tilted, the way a man listens to a broadcast he isn't sure he trusts.

When Claire was ten, she'd believed her father could fix anything. By fourteen she understood there were things he could fix and things he could only make last longer than they had any right to. By fifty-eight, riding beside her husband toward a hospital, she understood the difference between those two things could be very expensive, and nobody had told her which category tonight belonged to.

Mark rested his hand over hers on her knee and asked nothing. She was grateful, and irritated, in roughly equal measure.

The hospital entrance opened into too much fluorescent light, the kind that makes everyone look slightly ill. Claire signed the clipboard with a hand that didn't feel entirely her own, and the elevator climbed to the third floor with a small mechanical shudder. When the doors opened, Ruth was already in the corridor holding two paper cups of coffee.

Ruth Carter Bell was seventy-eight and had never once accepted that age excused a person from looking presentable, hospital corridor or not—gray hair combed into its usual wave, lipstick still holding on to half her mouth. She had also been wearing the same navy slacks since Sunday afternoon, which told its own quiet story about the night.

"He's still here," Ruth said, before Claire could ask. "The coffee isn't. I bought you one anyway."

Claire took it, mostly because refusing anything from Aunt Ruth took more energy than she had. "Did the doctor come?"

"Twice. The first one explained numbers. The second one explained the same numbers again, only with a face." Ruth's jaw tightened toward the closed door, then let go. "I understood the face better."

Mark set his own coffee down long enough to put an arm around her. Ruth leaned into him for exactly one second, then straightened and became businesslike again, as if leaning had used up her whole allotment for the morning.

Inside, Marvin looked smaller than the night before, his cheekbones more visible than even a month ago, though his eyebrows remained as vigorous and disapproving as ever. Claire had trimmed them herself Friday afternoon, after he complained one had begun interfering with his vision "like a bad houseguest." He'd told the nurse afterward, with real satisfaction, that his daughter had always been bossy around anything sharp, going back to the pocketknife she'd confiscated in 1987.

Now his eyes were closed. The oxygen made its soft rushing sound, and the monitor kept announcing, in patient green light, that time was continuing whether anyone wanted it to or not. Claire sat in the chair nearest the bed. Ruth had already arranged Marvin's glasses, wallet, and a folded handkerchief into a plastic basin on the counter—the kind of small, useless order people build when the larger situation refuses management. "Dad?" Claire laid her hand over his. "It's me."

His fingers moved faintly. She couldn't tell whether it was an answer or just a body doing what bodies do until they stop.

"He knew I was here around three," Ruth said, settling into the other chair. "I told him the vending-machine coffee had gotten even worse. He opened one eye at that. Just the one."

"That sounds like him," Mark said from the window, smiling a little.

"It may have been a medical event," Ruth allowed. "I've decided to take it personally regardless."

They settled into the room without discussing how, the way families do when there's really only one arrangement that makes sense. Claire held her father's hand and noticed, not for the first time, the small half-moon of grease still lodged beside his thumbnail, stubborn as a birthmark. He hadn't worked at the shop in years, and still he couldn't walk past a loose cabinet hinge without coming away marked by it.

The doctor came a little after five, speaking quietly the way people speak in libraries and hospital rooms. Marvin's heart was failing, his kidneys along with it. They could adjust some medications, but the adjustments would only change the pace, not the direction. Claire asked three questions—blood pressure, oxygen, pain—and disliked herself faintly for feeling grateful to have something useful to ask.

When the doctor left, Ruth said, mostly to the air, "Your father would want to know what all this costs."

Claire gave her a tired look. "The doctor?"

"All of it. He once refused an ambulance because he said he could be sick for free in his own truck."

"He also drove himself to urgent care with a nail through his boot. That's not thrift, that's stubbornness wearing a thrift costume."

"That was different. The truck was already pointed that direction."

Mark laughed into his coffee cup, and Claire found herself laughing too, and for one brief moment the room became a place where Marvin was not only dying but also, still, faintly and impossibly, himself.

The last time Claire had asked him where an important key was kept, he'd looked genuinely offended, as if she'd asked him to explain gravity. "Where it's always been," he'd said.

"I don't know where it has always been."

"Well." He'd gone back to his newspaper. "That's going to make it harder."

They'd been talking about the safe-deposit box. The memory arrived uninvited, because apparently some part of her mind had decided this was an appropriate moment to start a list. The will was in that bank box somewhere. The key was, per Marvin, exactly where it had always been, which told her nothing. The house would need locking up. Walter—the lean gray cat who did not, by Marvin's own repeated insistence, belong to him, and who nonetheless ate two meals a day on his porch like clockwork—would need someone to feed him.

Claire's hand drifted toward her purse, toward the spiral notebook she carried everywhere, then stopped. Her father was still alive. She could allow herself a little longer before turning him into a list of tasks.

At 5:38, Danny called from the highway. Claire stepped into the hallway to take it. "I'm outside Franklin. How is he?"

"Still here. The doctor says it won't be long now."

"Can you put me on speaker?"

She held the phone near Marvin's pillow. Danny talked, a little too fast, about the drive, then the weather, then, almost helplessly, about the old service van in his driveway—Ben still wanted to get it running, having inherited every bit of Marvin's unreasonable confidence around engines and none of his patience. "I'm coming, Dad," Danny said, his voice cracking on the word. "I should've come yesterday. I'm coming now."

Marvin didn't open his eyes. The monitor continued its small green journey, unbothered.

Ruth leaned close to the phone. "He knows. Keep driving, but don't drive like an idiot."

"Good morning to you too, Aunt Ruth."

"Morning has nothing to do with it."

Claire ended the call after he promised, twice, to stop for gas before the warning light came on.

For the next hour, very little happened, and somehow everything did. Nurses moved in and out. Mark found coffee down the hall. Ruth told a story about Marvin at twelve taking apart their mother's floor fan during a heat wave and needing three days to put it back together, the family sweating it out on the porch.

"He was thirteen," Claire said automatically.

"That is not the important part of the story."

"It's important if you're planning to tell it at the funeral."

Neither of them acknowledged the word once it had entered the room. It simply sat there among the coffee cups until the moment passed.

Shortly after seven, Marvin opened his eyes. Claire leaned toward him. "Dad?"

He looked past her, first at Ruth, then toward the window, where the first gray light was edging the blinds. His mouth moved. Claire bent closer, close enough to feel the faint warmth of his breath.

"What did he say?" Ruth asked, half rising.

Marvin tried again, the words barely more than breath given shape.

"He said the porch light is on."

Ruth looked at Mark. Mark looked at Claire.

"It probably is," Claire said softly, her throat tightening. "I'll turn it off."

Marvin's eyes settled on her, and for one second she saw the exact expression he used to wear when a repair had finally been understood correctly. Then his eyes closed, and did not open again.

He died at 7:26, Claire holding his hand, Ruth beside her, Mark at the foot of the bed. There was no speech, no shift in the weather, nothing to mark the moment as anything other than exactly what it was. The nurse came in without being called, silenced the monitor, and quietly gave them the room.

Claire sat there until the warmth began, slowly, to leave her father's hand. Then she stood, because someone had to call Danny, and she didn't want him hearing it from a ringing phone on the highway. He picked up before the first ring finished. "Claire?"

"He's gone."

Danny didn't say anything at first. She heard the small click of his turn signal, then the sudden hollow quiet of a car pulling onto the shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Claire said, though she couldn't have said with certainty whether she meant sorry Marvin had died, sorry Danny had missed him, or sorry those were simply the only words she had.

"I told him I was coming."

"He knew."

"You don't know that."

Claire looked through the doorway. Ruth was folding Marvin's handkerchief along creases already there, smoothing them flat with her thumb. Mark stood with a hand on her shoulder.

"No," Claire admitted. "I don't. But I think he did."

Danny breathed into the phone, long and unsteady. "I'll be there in an hour."

"Stop if you need to."

"I've already stopped."

"Then sit for a minute before you start driving again."

He went quiet again, and this time Claire let the silence belong entirely to him.

When she came back into the room, Ruth had already closed Marvin's glasses into their case with a small, final click. "We need to go by the house," she said. "Betty fed Walter last night, but she won't know what to do about today."

"Walter isn't Dad's cat."

"Walter has not received that information, and I doubt he'd believe it if he had."

Claire took out the notebook after all and wrote, in handwriting steadier than she felt: *Betty. Walter. Porch light. House keys.* Then she looked at the four items, aware that the list had begun whether she was ready or not, and that there would be no putting it down again for a very long time.

Mark took the coffee cup from her hand before it could slip. Ruth gathered the plastic basin holding Marvin's wallet, glasses, and handkerchief, cradling it against her side like something breakable. Together they walked down the corridor toward the elevator, carrying what remained in that room, and thinking, each in their own way, about everything still waiting for them at the house.