

# 1

## MR. OCTOBER

**T**he first time I set eyes on Mr. October, he didn't look like anything special. He didn't look like a man who'd stand out in a crowd, let alone a man who could change anyone's life, turning everything inside out. But that's what he did to me, and that's why I have to explain what I did and how it all came about.

It wasn't my fault, that's all. It wasn't his fault, either, but sometimes I think it would have been better if we'd never met, if my life had turned out to be normal like everyone else's.

I was wandering through Highgate Cemetery at the time. It was a late Saturday morning with low clouds and a thick, muggy atmosphere. By the time I arrived, visitors were flocking through the north gate and following tour guides down the paths, but I'd found another, cheaper, way in, over the fence down the hill.

Inside, the place was a maze, and without a map I hadn't a clue where anyone was. Karl Marx was here somewhere, and George Eliot and Henry Moore, but I was more interested in the stones themselves, the way they leaned at strange angles as if they'd fallen from the sky and landed just so. I liked the way bright, shiny new monuments rubbed shoulders with chipped and broken tombs overgrown with ivy and moss.

I found a stone with no name on it and sat to eat a chicken salad sandwich and sip bottled water from my packed lunch. The clouds parted and patterns of light and shade played on the paths between the headstones. I wished I had a camera to capture the scene, but I did have my sketch pad and pencil. On a clean page of the book, I outlined the path where it forked in two directions with the stones on either side of it and the trees running alongside.

A group of four girls with Liverpool accents strolled past, heading down the path to the right. I paused until they moved out of the frame before going on. It was hotter now, and a bead of sweat fell from the tip of my nose and hit the page, creating a smeared shape in front of one tomb. It looked like a blurred, ghostly figure.

When I looked up again, a shape like the one the sweat had made on the page was standing in the near distance, sixty feet or so up the slope. The tomb behind him was a creamy off-white, nearly the same color as his suit, so I didn't see him clearly until he began to move.

He seemed to be waving or gesturing to someone and

mopping his face with a handkerchief. It took a moment before I realized he was in trouble. Wobbling on his feet, he stopped near the edge of the path, falling side-on against a marble cross. He looked about ready to keel all the way over.

“Mister?” I said, but he didn’t seem to hear. “Mister, are you all right?”

Dropping my sketch pad, I started up the path.

He didn’t look up as I approached. He simply gripped the cross with one hand, holding out the other for balance.

“My,” he gasped. “Oh my, sometimes it’s all too much.”

As I came up beside him, catching him by the elbow, his legs buckled and he fell against me with his full weight, which didn’t feel like much at all. When I was sure he wouldn’t fall, I walked him to the path and sat him down on a flat square stone. He looked around as if he didn’t know where he was.

“Should I get help?” I asked.

He looked up at me with misty gray eyes and a weary smile, the look of a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“No, I’ll be fine in a minute. It’s only a spell.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, young man, I’m sure.”

I ran for the water bottle, uncapping it on my way back and handing it to him. He took it and sipped slowly, staring into space. Looking at the brown liver spots on the backs of his hands and his white-whiskered jaw, I wondered how old he might be. Seventy, maybe. Probably older. Sunlight flared off his bald head like a halo.