

Chapter One

The wire cleared at 4:47 a.m. Pacific time, which was the first thing that bothered Priya Desai when she pulled the alert three days later, because 4:47 a.m. was not an hour at which Julian Vance had ever done anything, alive or otherwise. She'd read enough of his calendar by then to know he answered emails at six, ran at seven, and was in his first meeting by eight-fifteen, every day, for eleven years. Dead men are not famous for changing their habits. But dead men are also not famous for authorizing three hundred and forty million dollars to leave a company they used to run, so Priya supposed the morning of the wire wasn't the strangest thing about it.

She printed the authorization anyway, because Sloane Whitaker liked paper for anything that mattered, and carried it into the converted loading bay in Oakland that Cross River Forensics called an office.

"You're going to want to sit down for this one," Priya said.

Sloane did not sit down. She was already sitting, feet up on a filing cabinet, reading a different case file with the particular stillness she got when she was almost finished being annoyed by something. She held out a hand for the paper without looking up.

It took her four seconds to read the top line. Halcyon Systems. Three hundred forty million. Authorized by: J. VANCE.

"Julian Vance is dead," Sloane said.

"I know."

"He died in March."

"I know, Sloane, I was at the thing where they had that video montage, remember, you cried a little—"

"I did not cry."

"You did the thing where your eyes get wet and you pretend it's allergies indoors in April, which is worse, honestly, own it—" Priya sat on the edge of the desk. "The wire went out nine days ago. Halcyon's audit committee wants somebody outside the building to look at it before it becomes a headline. They asked for you by name."

Sloane set the paper down and looked at it the way she looked at everything that was going to turn into six weeks of her life: like it had already started costing her sleep.

"By name," she repeated.

"Diane Foss. She's chairing the audit committee. She said—I wrote it down because it sounded important—she said, 'I want someone who doesn't care whose feelings get hurt.'"

"That's not a compliment."

"I think it kind of was."

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Three weeks earlier, Julian Vance had been buried—or more precisely, cremated, his ashes distributed among four locations he'd specified in a document that made his lawyers uncomfortable to execute, because it read less like a will and more like a set of coordinates. A quarter of him went into the Sound off Tacoma, where he'd grown up watching container ships from a bedroom window with water stains shaped like Ohio on the ceiling. A quarter went to the roofline garden of Halcyon's Mission Bay headquarters, in a planter nobody was told which one. A quarter to a research

station in Svalbard that Halcyon partially funded, for reasons the document didn't explain and nobody who might have known was willing to explain either. The last quarter, his lawyers had been instructed, was to be kept, unscattered, until further notice.

Nobody thought much of that clause at the time. Grief makes strange requests seem merely sad.

Two thousand people came to the memorial in the atrium under the kinetic sculpture Julian had commissioned and then complained, for six years, cost too much. His son sat in the second row and did not cry either, and was photographed not crying, and the photograph ran in three business publications with captions that used the word "stoic," which was one interpretation.

Six weeks after that, the money started moving.

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Halcyon's headquarters occupied eleven floors of a tower that had been built to look like it was made of water—curved glass, blue-green at the edges, a lobby waterfall that ran even at 2 a.m. for reasons of ambiance that cost, according to a filing Sloane would later read out of pure spite, forty thousand dollars a month. She stood under it on a Tuesday morning with a visitor's badge clipped to a blazer she didn't often wear and thought that the building looked like exactly the kind of place a man would build if he intended to live forever and had simply not worked out the logistics yet.

Diane Foss met her at the security desk personally, which told Sloane something before either of them said a word. Board chairs of eleven-figure companies did not, as a rule, walk down to lobbies.

"Ms. Whitaker." Foss had a handshake like a closing argument. Sixty-ish, cropped silver hair, the kind of tailored suit that had been chosen once, correctly, and worn in variations for a decade. "Thank you for coming on short notice."

"You made it sound like I shouldn't wait for long notice."

"I did." Foss turned and walked, and Sloane fell into step, and neither of them apologized for the pace. "How much do you already know?"

"That Julian Vance authorized a wire nine days after being cremated. That the company hasn't gone to the SEC or the FBI yet, which either means you're confident it's explainable, or you're terrified of what happens if it isn't."

"Both," Foss said, without breaking stride. "That's the honest answer. Both."

The elevator took them to the ninth floor, past a floor of empty desks that Sloane clocked as recently empty—jackets still on chairs, a coffee mug with a ring of evaporated liquid, the particular disarray of people who'd been told to work from home today and had left in a hurry. Foss caught her looking.

"We're keeping this contained," Foss said. "For now. Legal's floor. Fewer people who can see something they'll repeat at a dinner party."

"How many people know the wire happened?"

"Fourteen. Including you." Foss stopped outside a conference room with the blinds drawn, an unusual choice in a building made almost entirely of window. "Fifteen once you meet the general counsel. I'd like to keep it under twenty for as long as that's physically possible, because once it's twenty-one, it's public, and

once it's public, I don't think this company survives the next earnings call in a shape anyone recognizes."

"You're that certain it's fraud."

Foss's hand stayed on the door. For the first time since the lobby, she looked less like a chairwoman and more like a sixty-one-year-old woman who had known Julian Vance for fourteen years and had just watched money leave his company under his name, nine days after she'd stood at his memorial and said something kind about his vision into a microphone.

"I'm not certain of anything," she said. "That's why you're here. I need someone who'll tell me the truth even if the truth is that my friend built something that outlived him on purpose, and I need someone who'll tell me the truth even if the truth is that somebody murdered a dying man to steal his signature. I don't have a preference, Ms. Whitaker. I have a company with forty-one thousand employees and I have eleven weeks until the shareholder vote that decides whether it still exists in its current form, and I need to know, before then, which version of this I'm dealing with."

"There might be a third version," Sloane said.

"There's always a third version. That's usually the one that gets you." Foss opened the door. "Come meet the people who are going to lie to you first, so we can get that part over with."