

1. The Alert

Maya's phone lit up at 6:52 a.m., forty minutes into a run along the East River that she took every morning for the same reason she'd once heard a surgeon describe scrubbing in: not because it cleared her head, but because it was the one hour of the day nobody could reach her, and she needed proof that hour still existed.

She almost didn't look. She had a rule about the run—no phone, no email, no breaking-news alerts about a Fed governor's stray comma—and she had broken it exactly twice in four years, both times for her father. But the phone buzzed twice more in ten seconds, which was its own kind of information, and she slowed to a walk on the Fulton Street overpass and looked.

BREAKING: Billionaire investor Victor Sloane, 71, dead in early-morning car accident on Long Island Sound Parkway.

She read it three times before the words agreed to mean what they said.

She had left his house seven hours earlier. She had a recorder in her bag with four hours of his voice on it, and a gray hardcover with his handwriting in the margins on her kitchen counter, where she'd set it down at one in the morning without opening it, because she'd been too tired and it had felt, absurdly, like something you should be rested for. She stood on the overpass with the river moving gray and indifferent below

her and felt the vertigo of having been, seven hours ago, one of the last people to see a man alive. The ordinary reporter's instinct arrived half a second behind the grief, cold and clean. It was the instinct that made her good at this job, the one she was not proud of and had stopped apologizing for: *You have the last interview. You have the only recording. Whatever this story was going to be, it is not that story anymore.*

She ran the rest of the way home instead of walking, which told her something about herself that she filed away to examine later.

By the time she reached her building, three more outlets had the story up, all identical in the way breaking news about the extremely rich always was: the fortune, cited to the decimal; the philanthropy; the word *legacy*, already, before a body had even been formally identified. One story, from a wire service with a police-scanner habit, had more. Single vehicle, no other cars involved, no skid marks noted at the scene, driver dead on arrival, road conditions dry, cause under investigation pending a full report. *Dry* sat in her chest like a held note. She had driven the same road an hour ahead of him and it had been dry the whole way, no rain in three days, and dry roads did not usually explain a car leaving the pavement at speed on a straightaway a man had presumably driven ten thousand times.

She told herself that was a strange thing to fixate on nine minutes after learning someone had died, and she was right, and she fixated on it anyway.

Her apartment was one room with good light and bad storage, the kind of place a person keeps for six years by telling

herself it's temporary. The recorder was still in her bag, on the strap, where it had ridden home with her like something alive. She took it out and set it next to the book on the counter and looked at both of them for a long time without touching either, the way you'd look at a door you weren't sure you wanted to open. Whatever was behind it would be there either way. Opening it just meant you couldn't pretend anymore that it wasn't.

She made coffee. She did not open the book. She called Tom.

Tom Reyes picked up on the second ring, which meant he already knew. Tom let calls go to voicemail as a matter of professional temperament and only picked up fast when the morning had already gone sideways. "Tell me you weren't actually there last night," he said, no hello, the newsroom loud enough behind him that she could hear at least two other conversations about the same four words: *Sloane. Dead. Accident. Confirm.*

"I left his house at eleven-forty. I have four hours on tape."

There was a silence on the line that had a shape to it, the shape of an editor doing arithmetic he did not want to be doing at seven in the morning: legal exposure, competitive advantage, the ethics of a death-adjacent scoop, all of it at once. "Say that again."

"I have the last interview Victor Sloane ever gave. Four hours, unedited, recorded last night. He had one condition, and I said yes to it because I thought it was an old man being

precious about his legacy. Now I'm standing in my kitchen wondering if it was something else."

"What condition."

"He wants it published whole. Every pause, every repetition, no cuts. Or not at all."

Another silence, shorter. Tom's editor-brain was filing the strangeness of it next to the news of the death and deciding, correctly, that the two were now permanently attached whether either of them liked it or not. "Get in here," he said. "Bring the tape. Bring whatever else he gave you. And Maya—" He stopped.

"What."

"Nothing. Get in here."

She knew Tom well enough, after six years, to know that *nothing* from him meant something he wasn't ready to say out loud yet. She stood in her kitchen a moment longer after he hung up, looking at the gray book with its cracked spine and its dead man's handwriting waiting in the margins, and thought: *He already knows something is wrong with this. He just doesn't know what yet. Neither do I. But we're both going to.*