

CHAPTER 1: The Man Who Gave It All Away

Adrian Vale gave away eleven billion dollars on a Tuesday, on television, in a gray suit that cost more than most people's cars, and he did it so calmly that the interviewer's first follow-up question was not why but are you feeling all right.

Maya Cross watched it from the third floor of the Castleford Ledger, standing behind a row of seated colleagues because every chair near a screen had filled up nine minutes earlier. Someone had dragged an old TV out of a storage closet and balanced it on a filing cabinet, and the picture had a faint green tint, so that Adrian Vale's face looked slightly ill, which felt, to Maya, like the first honest thing about the broadcast.

"I have surrendered control," Vale said, "of every share, every account, every instrument I own or influence, to an irrevocable trust. I will not sit on its board. I will not direct its trustees. I will not benefit from its income beyond what any employee of mine would consider a reasonable salary." He paused, the practiced pause of a man

who had said the next sentence to a mirror at least a dozen times. "The trust exists for one person. My son."

The interviewer, a broadcaster named Petra Solis who had spent eleven years asking rich men gentle questions, leaned forward with the particular hunger of someone who knows she is about to get a real answer for once. "Elias."

"Elias," Vale said, and something moved in his face that the low-resolution feed didn't quite have the fidelity to explain. Grief, Maya thought at first. Then she thought: maybe. Then she thought: I don't actually know what that was, and neither does anyone else in this room, and that is exactly the problem with a man who has spent thirty years being photographed.

Around her, the newsroom made the sound a newsroom makes when something happens that everyone understands to be historic and no one yet understands to be a story. Phones came out. Someone laughed, not unkindly, and said, "Eleven billion dollars. I lose my keys twice a week." Priya Nakamura, the Ledger's business editor, stood very still near the coffee machine with her arms crossed, watching the screen the

way a woman watches weather rolling in over water she is about to sail on.

Maya did not reach for her phone. She watched Vale's hands instead. They were folded on the small glass table between him and Solis, still, deliberately still, the stillness of a man who has trained himself out of a tell. She had spent nine years learning to watch hands instead of faces, because faces are for the camera and hands are for the person.

"Can you tell us anything about him?" Solis asked. "Elias. What is he like?"

"He's twelve," Vale said. "He likes maps. Actual paper maps—he collects the old fold-out kind, road atlases, that sort of thing, which I find completely baffling in a boy who's never known a world without a phone in his hand." A small, real-looking smile. "He's kind. Quieter than his mother was. I'd rather not say more than that. He didn't ask for any of this—the money, the attention—and I'd like to keep as much of his life private as I still can."

"Where does he go to school?"

"I won't say."

“Can we see him? A photograph, perhaps, for
—”

“No,” Vale said, pleasant and absolute, the way a locked door is pleasant and absolute if it's a nice door. “That's precisely the kind of thing I'm trying to protect him from.”

Solis let it go—of course she let it go, Maya thought, she had forty more minutes of a man worth eleven billion dollars sitting across from her and no incentive to make him walk out—and the interview moved on to the mechanics of the trust, the name of the law firm that had drafted it, the philanthropic pledges that would flow through it over the coming decade. Vale answered every question with the same unhurried precision, a man reciting a route he had memorized because he did not trust himself to find it in the dark.

Maya became aware, somewhere around the twenty-minute mark, that she had stopped watching the interview and started making a list in her head. Trust name: Sable Harbor. Drafting firm: Calloway Prentice, out of the Castleford office, which meant it would be a matter of public record within days whether the filings were domestic or routed offshore. Trustees: unnamed,

“a panel of independent fiduciaries,” which meant exactly nothing until someone pulled the actual instrument. Beneficiary: Elias Vale, age twelve, son of the late Isla Vale, no surname given for a mother because everyone in Castleford already knew Isla Vale had died four years earlier of the kind of cancer that gets a euphemism instead of a diagnosis in polite conversation.

“You're doing the thing,” said a voice at her shoulder. Tobias Renn had a habit of appearing at her elbow without announcing himself, a skill she suspected he'd built over a decade of walking into county clerks' offices and public-records rooms without anyone quite noticing him arrive. He wasn't Ledger staff—he freelanced his research out of a converted laundromat two blocks from the courthouse, and he showed up at the paper often enough that the security desk had stopped calling upstairs to confirm he was expected.

“What thing.”

“The thing where your face doesn't change but your eyes start doing math.” He nodded at the screen, where Vale was now discussing, with visible discomfort, how the trust would handle his art collection. “You don't believe him.”