

A MOLE ABOVE THE LIP

It was only a mole — until it wasn't.

The Mole Above the Lip

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First Edition — 2025

Cover Design by Author

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PREFACE

There are moments in life when truth hides in plain sight — quiet, harmless, almost trivial. A word overheard in a corridor. A misplaced letter. A mark above the lip.

We are taught to look for the dramatic — the scream, the betrayal, the confession — but rarely for the detail that trembles in the corner of our vision. And yet, the world often changes because someone, somewhere, paused long enough to notice the small thing no one else did.

This story began with a woman who had outlived urgency. Her name was **Roni Devine**, seventy-three, retired, widowed, a keeper of silences and teacups and wool. She carried her knitting basket everywhere — not for habit alone, but because it gave her hands something to do while the world forgot how to wait.

She never sought to uncover anything. She had no badge, no authority, no reputation. All she had was an eye for detail and the patience to let truth find its way to her.

And one afternoon, under a **maple tree**, when a young woman with laughter in her eyes sat beside her, Roni's quiet life began to unravel into something vast — a secret so meticulously designed that even grief had been programmed into it.

This is not a tale of murder alone, nor of science gone astray.

It is about **what happens when technology imitates the soul**, and how even in a world built on code and clones, *a single human observation* can still shake the foundations of power.

In the end, this story belongs to two women — one who died too soon, and one who refused to let her die in vain.

And to a mole, barely visible, above a lip that no longer smiled —
a mole that changed everything.

— *T. K., 2025*

INTRODUCTION

Moscow, the year 2056.

The city had grown quieter in its ambitions, colder in its comforts. Snow fell not from clouds anymore but from sky drones, programmed to “recreate seasonal mood.” Buildings blinked in coded rhythms, neon and frost sharing the skyline like reluctant companions. Beneath the digital hum, the old city still breathed — through its cracked pavements, its slow trams, and its people who remembered what silence used to mean.

Among them lived **Mrs. Roni Devine**, a woman who carried seventy-three years of grace and stubbornness in equal measure. Her apartment on Volkovsky Residences was small but orderly, her windowsills lined with ceramic owls and knitting yarns the color of old stories. Her life was measured in tea refills, radio crackles, and the dull companionship of her own resilience.

She had outlived her husband, her sisters, and perhaps even her generation’s understanding of simplicity. Her two daughters — **Kavita**, settled in Fiji, and **Meera**, in Mauritius — called when they could, which was not often enough to fill a week. Yet Roni never complained. She had learned long ago that solitude, when treated gently, could become a friend.

Every afternoon, she walked to the small park near her building — a humble patch of earth where an **old**

maple tree stood guard over the seasons. That tree had seen everything: lovers quarreling, children chasing wind-blown leaves, and now, a silver-haired woman who sat beneath it knitting patterns that no one else knew how to read.

It was under that tree that **Mary Kovalenko** entered her life — a young woman of laughter and restlessness, who seemed to belong to both science and sorrow. She sat beside **Roni** one afternoon, asking if the seat was free, and within minutes, the two were speaking as though they had been separated by time rather than introduced by chance.

They talked of loneliness, of love, of the quiet ache of existing in a world that mistook connection for noise. Mary's words had a spark — the kind that hides sadness beneath wit. She spoke of her work at a place she called "*The White Lab*", where she claimed, half-jokingly, that they were "learning to grow hearts."

Roni laughed at the remark then.

Later, she would realize that Mary hadn't been joking at all.

Two weeks later, Mary was found dead in her apartment.

The police called it suicide.

Roni called it strange.

The girl's photo appeared on the morning news. And there — in that fleeting image between headlines and

advertisements — Roni noticed something so minute, so human, that the rest of the world dismissed it as nothing.

A mole.

Just above her lip.

So small, so perfect — and so *wrong*.

Because Roni remembered Mary's face better than the police, better than the lab, better than memory itself.

Mary had no mole. Not then. Not ever.

And so began Roni Devine's descent into the silent machinery of deception — into files and protocols, into ethics and erasures, into the heart of a project that had learned to recreate bodies, but not conscience.

A Mole Above the Lip is the story of a truth stitched together one observation at a time. It is about the courage to question what we are told is natural, the danger of science without soul, and the fragile, radiant intelligence of an old woman who believed that even in the age of replication, *some things remain unrepeatable*.

FOREWORD

by Detective Arman Stepanov

It has been fifteen years since the case of **Mary Kovalenko**, yet I still find myself returning to that small apartment on Leninsky Prospekt — not in person, but in thought. The city has changed since then; so have I. But every now and then, when the wind cuts through the Moscow skyline just before the first snow, I think of a seventy-three-year-old woman who noticed what none of us did — and changed the meaning of evidence forever.

Her name was **Mrs. Roni Devine**.

The department called it *The Maple Case* — an administrative shorthand that flattened everything human about it. But to me, and to those who remember, it was something else entirely. It was the day silence outwitted science.

When I first met her, I didn't see a detective. I saw an elderly widow who knitted scarves in the park, carried a wicker basket, and spoke in the kind of calm that makes men nervous. I remember thinking: *She's harmless. Kind, maybe lonely — but harmless.*

How wrong I was.

What Roni possessed wasn't just intelligence — it was a kind of moral precision, the ability to look at the world without noise. She didn't chase leads. She listened to them. She didn't interrogate; she observed. While I pored over digital scans, retinal data, and forensic sequences, she sat by her window, tea steaming beside her, and noticed

the one thing that no machine or algorithm could: **the mole above the lip.**

That single detail unraveled a conspiracy built by people far more powerful, far more educated, and far more dangerous than she realized.

When she first told me her suspicion — that the dead woman in the morgue wasn't Mary at all — I laughed. I told her grief often invents mistakes. She smiled, not offended, just amused, as though she'd expected that reaction.

"Detective," she said, "sometimes the dead don't lie — but those who report them do."

It took months, perhaps years off my life, to see what she saw so effortlessly. Beneath that mole was not vanity, but intent. A marker. A tag for ownership. The girl we found had been manufactured — not born, not even properly cloned, but *produced*.

When the truth came out, there was outrage. Committees were formed, heads rolled, articles published. But through it all, Roni remained what she had always been: steady, understated, impossible to ignore.

She refused every interview. Declined every award. Her only comment to the press was six words:

"Small truths can still move mountains."

I last saw her two winters ago. I brought her tulips, because she liked contradictions — warmth in cold, color in gray. She told me I was still too quick to speak and not patient enough to listen. I told her the city missed her.

She smiled, wrapped her scarf tighter, and said,

“Cities don’t miss people, Arman. People miss people.
The rest is weather.”

I’ve served in homicide for over thirty years. I’ve seen confessions wrung out of guilt, fear, and greed. But hers was the only investigation I’ve known where the confession belonged not to the criminal, but to the world itself — the quiet admission that we’d stopped looking closely.

That case taught me that the smallest observation can expose the largest machine, and that conscience — untrained, unarmed, uninvited — is sometimes the only real detective left.

Now, as I write this, I look out my window and see the maple tree still standing in the park. Someone has carved her initials on the bench beneath it. **R.D.**, faint but deliberate. And every time I pass it, I think of that day — of the woman with soft eyes and sharper perception than all our scanners combined — and I whisper, as she once did,

“Even a mole can be a map.”

— *Detective Arman Stepanov*
Moscow, Winter of 2071

CHAPTER 1 – THE MAPLE TREE

The year had folded itself into a cool, brittle afternoon. Moscow wore its autumn like a practiced mask: slate skies, the distant hum of trams, and a pale light that made everyone look a little more careful with their faces. In a small square of the city, hemmed in by low-rise apartment blocks and a narrow line of cafés, an old maple tree kept an impossible, stubborn crown of orange. Beneath it, on a bench whose varnish had long ago given up the fight against weather and time, sat Ronita Devine.

People called her Roni because the syllable fit more neatly into conversation than the whole name did; friends and strangers alike found nicknames easier, quicker. She stared at the tree and, in doing so, looked at everything the tree held — the birds that argued in quick staccato, the squirrel that was always on a mission, the pale strip of sunlight that cut across the bench and warmed the knitting basket at her feet. The basket was a small, steady constellation in her life: a haphazard collection of yarns, needles that shone when she rotated them, a piece of half-finished scarf folded over as if in a promise. She carried it everywhere the way other people carried reading glasses or a day planner. It made the world smaller and kinder.

Roni's face was a topography of time. Wrinkles ran like map lines, each crease a ledger of laughter and

grief. There was a firmness to her jaw, the kind that does not surrender to pity. Age had folded her in, yes, but it had not softened her edges. She had learned to move through a city that often seemed designed for speed and dismissal, and she had learned, more importantly, how to listen.

It was near four in the afternoon. The maid had come that morning and would return in the evening; the small apartment they kept clean for her was a tidy island of things that knew their places. Her daughters lived oceans away — Kavita in Fiji, Meera in Mauritius — and when they spoke, their voices travelled that distance like a warm packet of tea. The calls were full of grandchildren's laughter and vacations and the quiet, efficient habits of people who had settled into lives that rarely needed help from their mother. Roni was proud, and she was lonely. Those two truths lived together and made her move through the days with a soft, patient step.

She had been watching the way light fell through the maple's leaves when a movement at the edge of her vision arrested her attention. A young woman approached on the far side of the path, the sort of person who belonged to a different decade: precise, lit from within by a sort of restless cheerfulness. She paused where the path curved and glanced at Roni with the quick, daring appraisal of someone who could see the life behind another's eyes without needing many words.

"Mind if I sit?" she asked.

Roni considered the woman. She looked to be in her early twenties, with hair like a spill of coffee and an expression that alternated between softness and pointed observation. There was a scar, barely visible, at the edge of her eyebrow — a thing that made her face more like a storyteller's. Roni patted the bench as if she had been expecting company.

“Please. The park is half empty and half full at the same time. Best to share it.”

The woman sat and set down a small canvas bag. She folded her hands around the strap as if it were a safe thing to cling to. When she spoke, her voice had a cadence that made Roni think of music that could be both familiar and new. “I’m Mary,” she said. “Mary Kovalenko.”

“Ronita,” said Roni, and the woman brightened. “People call me Roni.”

They fell into the kind of conversation that thickens without needing the chaff of small talk. Mary spoke of neighbourhood cafés that made coffee like a ceremony, of a flat that was slightly too modern to be comfortable and slightly too neat to be truly loved. She glanced at Roni’s knitting basket and smiled as if she, too, had once known the therapeutic tyranny of a single, stubborn pattern.

“You knit?” Mary asked, fingers reaching toward the ball of blue yarn.

“Sometimes,” Roni said. “Mostly I watch the stitches and let my mind do the rest.”

“It looks comforting,” Mary said. “Like someone’s keeping a secret safe.”

Roni laughed, a sound that was more wind among leaves than anything else. “Secrets are heavy. It’s good to have a place for them.”

They spoke of the city, and then of the city as a thing that keeps changing its face and forgetting its old names. Mary said she worked nearby, in a lab that made her both proud and tired. Roni heard the pride — the way it warmed the younger woman’s voice — and she heard the tiredness in the silence a little after the words. People her age learned to read silence as easily as a script.

“Do you like the park?” Mary asked at one point, watching a pair of children chase a stubborn pigeon.

“I like the sound of the city when it is quiet enough to let me hear myself think,” Roni said. “And I like watching things that keep going on, no matter what happens to us.”

Mary nodded, eyes softening. There was something earnest about her, a kind of hunger for ordinary companionship that made Roni’s chest ache in an unexpected way.

“You come here often?” Mary ventured, then corrected herself with a smile. “I’m sorry if that’s

nosy. I don't know why I'm talking like this. It's... you have an air."

Roni studied the young woman's face: the quickness of her smile, the way her hands opened and closed as if she were cradling small, private thoughts. She saw loneliness there too, tucked under the bright surfaces like an inconvenient truth. Perhaps that was what drew the two of them into conversation: a mutual recognition of solitary lives that had learned to be visible without being loud.

"I come here more than necessary," Roni admitted. "It helps to be where small lives keep living. Squirrels are very good teachers."

Mary laughed and then, after a moment, said, "I like that. Squirrels as philosophers."

They exchanged the kind of stories that are more talismans than content — the small, steady things people hand one another to feel less alone. Mary spoke of a sister who lived abroad, of a brother who had moved to St. Petersburg for work. She spoke of music she could not quite afford and of a book she kept moving from shelf to shelf as if avoiding making it a commitment.

Roni listened and, when appropriate, offered advice like old coins: small, worn, still useful. She told Mary about her daughters, the way Kavita had taken to the ocean and Meera to architecture, the images of them in far-off lands that arrived on Roni's phone in bursts of holidays and school recitals. Mary's eyes warmed

when she heard the names. There was something almost maternal in the way Roni spoke of her children — a tenderness that had been diluted by distance into a clear, drinkable thing.

When Mary asked about Roni's late husband, Roni's hand moved to the basket and rested on the knitting needles. "He taught me to be precise with words," she said. "He taught me to read a room like a book. He was patient. He could sit very still and watch the television for hours, even if he did not understand half of it. He was the best of small things."

The sun slanted lower and the air took on the mild vibration of approaching evening. People bunched together under awnings, and the tram that had passed earlier slowed into the background. Mary, who had been watching Roni with a mixture of attentiveness and a kind of urgent curiosity, reached into her canvas bag and pulled out her phone.

"We should exchange numbers," she said. "I think... it would be nice to have someone to talk to who doesn't rush away."

Roni hesitated just the width of a breath, then nodded. There was something rare in the gesture — a reciprocal offer that did not feel needy or grandiose. They swapped numbers. Mary saved Roni with a fresh, audacious label: *Roni — Maple*. Roni's phone lit briefly and then settled into the quiet blue of the afternoon.

“Promise me you’ll come back,” Mary said as they rose to leave.

“I’ll come back as long as the tree keeps its crown,” Roni said with a small, private smile.

They parted like strangers who, for the moment, had become conspirators. Mary walked away with a light step, her shoulders carrying the weight of the city as if it were a shawl she loved. Roni watched her go, then turned the basket in her lap as if to test the stitches for truth. She rose, slowly, and walked home the long way, past the little bakery that pretended to be French and the panel of shops that sold things for apartments people had not yet bought.

At home, the apartment smelled of lemon cleaner and the faint undertone of the maid’s steaming laundry. Roni made tea in the kind of teapot that held warmth long after the water had cooled. She set the phone on the table and thumbed through the contact list until she found *Mary – Maple*. She touched the entry as if blessing it.

After dinner – a modest affair of boiled potatoes and pickled vegetables, eaten with care – Roni went to her window. The maple’s silhouette was dark against the sky. A tram light smudged across the far distance. She could still see the bench where she and Mary had shared words like cigarettes on a cold evening: small, combustible, necessary.

Before bed she sat down, needle poised, and began to knit. The rhythm of the needles is a language

older than some tongues; it sets thoughts to a pattern and tucks them away. She thought about Mary: the quick laugh, the way she had said “learn to grow hearts” as if it were both a job and an apology. She wondered what sort of lab made such a thing a sentence a young woman could say with a grin.

When sleep finally came it did so without fanfare. Roni dreamed, as she sometimes did, of a sea she had never crossed — a warm, endless surface with boats that never sought shore. In the dream a voice — maybe her own, maybe not — said, gently, “Keep a watch. Keep your stitches close. People will come and need you.”

Morning arrived with a thin, translucid light and the sound of someone sweeping the stairwell. Roni rose and prepared her tea with the sort of movements that had been practiced over decades. She was not given to superstition, but she had an instinctive sense that a small life can alter the course of a day. She folded the scarf she had been working on into the basket, placed the knitting needles across its top like a pair of small compasses, and, with the quiet deliberateness of someone who has learned to keep appointments with herself, walked to the bench under the maple tree.

The city breathed around her, and she felt, with a clarity that surprised her, that she had traded a little of her solitude for the possibility of something new. The bench was empty. For a moment she considered that Mary might not come — that the bright

enthusiasm of youth is occasionally weathered by the practical tides of work and sleep — but Roni found she did not mind. The tree kept its crown. The squirrels argued on schedule. Her knitting basket warmed the bench like a small, approving heart.

She told herself, aloud this time, as the leaves fell in thin sheets around her feet, “We are all small things in a large city. That is no reason to stop speaking.” Then she waited, and the park, obedient and patient, listened.

CHAPTER 2 – THE KNITTING BASKET

The apartment smelled like the promises of small things: lemon polish, the faint starch of freshly laundered sheets, and the soft, indeterminate perfume the maid used when she ironed pillowcases. Sunlight came sideways through the thin curtains, cutting the room into a band of gold and a band of soft grey. Roni moved in the gold, like someone threading a memory through a needle.

She put the kettle on the stove with the ease of a practiced ritual — quick flick, the meeting of metal and flame, the tiny caravan of steam that gathered and left. The radio on the small dresser murmured in the background: a presenter's voice that rolled over the city like a tide. News droned there, a neutral river of facts and faces; it was the kind of voice that had no time for the spaces between headlines. Roni let it be a cameo in her morning, an ambient hum she could listen to while her hands spoke in the language she had known longer than many of the people she loved.

The knitting needles clicked. The rhythm steadied her the way the tram's measured clatter steadied the streets outside. Each stitch she pulled up was a deliberate thought, tucking away the loose ends. The scarf grew beneath her hands: a length of indigo that took the light in different ways as she turned it, sometimes luminous as a lake at noon, sometimes

shadowed as a face in evening. There was a comfort to seeing progress; it made the absent people feel like projects instead of ghosts.

She had saved Mary's number the night before — *Mary Maple* — and the way the name sat in her phone was both a small victory and a small promise. She looked at the contact, the digits arranged like a new constellation, and felt the faint thrill of possibility bloom in the rib of her chest. It was foolish perhaps, to imagine that a seed sown in a park could make anything grow; and yet she had spent decades learning that unlikely things often take root where the soil looks poorest.

The radio's anchor spoke of a municipal council meeting, then of a new exhibition at the Tverskaya Gallery. An advert creased the conversation with a jingle about a smart kettle that could be told when to boil. Roni's fingers moved — one knit, one purl — and she listened to the words the way she listened to the city: to find rhythm in noise.

The maid arrived with her usual punctuality. Sonya was young enough to be patient and old enough to have ironed reeds into the seams of her own life. She moved through Roni's rooms with the thoroughness of someone who respected boundaries. Where Roni had a lifetime of polite solitude, Sonya carried the quiet satisfaction of doing things well and being useful.

“Good morning, Madama,” Sonya said, placing a cup of tea near the knitting basket without looking at the radio. There was a small, efficient ceremony to her movements: setting the cup, smoothing the tray, folding a napkin with a wrist that did not hesitate.

“Good morning, Sonya,” Roni answered. Her voice was the same soft tone she used for the birds and the squirrel and the neighbors she had known for years. “I was thinking of finishing the blue tonight.”

Sonya glanced down at the scarf and smiled. “It will be warm. For winter.”

“For winter and for people who remember me in small things,” Roni said. She saw, in Sonya’s face, a flicker of a smile that suggested sympathy rather than pity. Sympathy was less dangerous. It tended to preserve a person’s dignity.

While Sonya tidied and spoke of the market — fresh apples, a sale on sour cream — Roni’s mind drifted across the geography of her life. She thought about the sound of her husband’s shoes on the kitchen floor in the early mornings before he lost the patience to make coffee. She remembered his hands — callused in ordinary ways, careful with things that mattered: a book, a radio dial, a leaky faucet. He had been a small man with a careful laugh and a habit of saying, “Patience is a craft,” when the kettle took too long to boil. She could still feel the shape of his presence in the apartment, as if the house had been a

garment he had once worn and simply left on the chair.

Kavita's voice hummed through her phone later, warbling slightly with the thinness of a satellite call. The girl's laughter was contagious even through the lag of continents. Roni closed her eyes and let it wash over her: the image of her eldest daughter walking on a beach in Fiji with a husband whose hands were ink-stained from environmental reports; the way Kavita sent photos of coral gardens as though she were trying to stitch small miracles into her mother's world from across the ocean.

"How is the scarf coming along?" Kavita asked, pleased.

"Sturdily," Roni said. "The blue is fierce."

"Don't make it too fierce," Kavita laughed. "Meera says you should add a touch of grey — it'll match your eyes when you squint."

Roni felt a warmth that had little to do with the tea. "I miss you," she said, and the words were spare as bread but steady. Kavita, who had been raised on both affection and independence, answered with the kind of pragmatic tenderness that made Roni's throat ache in a way she had learned to call nostalgia.

"We will come in winter," Kavita promised. "Meera has a week off, and we have enough frequent flyer miles to make the sky jealous."

Roni told them again about the maple tree, about the squirrel who had learned to steal only the bits the children dropped and not the ones tied with care. Meera, in Mauritius, had sent a voice note: brief, efficient, full of architectural metaphors that made Roni smile at the things her younger daughter loved more than anything — symmetry, the way a room could put a hand on a person and steady them. They would visit, they said, they would make plans. And yet, as always, the calls ended with the soft folding of time: there would be a visit, yes, but months away. So Roni sat by the window and knitted.

There was a particular way she liked to arrange the day: small acts inscribed with ritual. Morning for tea and knitting; midday for the park and the errands that allowed her to notice people; afternoon for letters she never sent and for the bread she bought at the bakery that pretended to be French. In these rituals she found her authority: the assurance that she could still govern a few small things in a large and indifferent city.

After the phone call, she turned the radio up a degree, curious more than anything. The presenter's tone changed; there was a low undertone that made Roni's knitting needle pause mid-air. The news segment had shifted to a light interview with an ethicist about the latest advances in medical tourism — transplants, clones, and the ethical knots that followed when men and markets and science began to make new kinds of life.

“People will pay for near-miracles,” the ethicist said. “There is a hunger for time, for youth, for the ability to repair the body as if it were a clock with replaceable cogs.”

Roni thought of Mary’s phrase from the bench — “learning to grow hearts” — and the words braided in her mind with the presenter’s discussion like two threads waiting to be knit. She did not know why, but the phrase sat oddly, like a stitch that had been pulled too tight.

Sonya brought a bowl of kasha and the conversation turned to mundane things — the way the mailbox sometimes jammed in the rain, the neighbor’s cat that had begun sleeping on the windowsill. “Your friend in the park?” Sonya asked, not looking up from the plate she was clearing. “Is she younger? You seem glad.”

Roni threaded a needle through yarn and paused, looking at the scattering of sunlight on the scarf. “Yes, she’s young,” she said. “Mary. She sits under the maple sometimes. She’s... she tells stories.”

“Good to have someone,” Sonya said. She had an economy of speech that left space for gestures. She looked at Roni the way people look at a garden they water but cannot enter.

In the afternoon, the city made its usual transitions: the light softened, the trams began to empty, and the smell of frying onions folded into the air like an offering. Roni dressed in a sweater and put her

knitting basket over her arm, not out of necessity but ritual — to carry the day's work like a talisman. The bench under the maple awaited her like a faithful neighbor, and she found it exactly as she had left it: the sun slanting through a narrow gap in the buildings, the pigeon that preferred the left side of the path. She sat and let the world present itself.

Mary arrived like a comet that had chosen to orbit the same bench. She looked slightly unsettled, her fingers wrapped around her phone like a compass. She sat and, without preamble, spoke of an invitation she had received.

"There's an exhibition at the university," Mary said, her eyes large and quick. "They're showing work about human tissue engineering. I thought of you — because you said you liked the quiet work of people who make things."

Roni smiled and felt a small prickle. "It sounds marvelous."

"But..." Mary hesitated, which was a small off-key in her rhythm. "They asked if I could help as an assistant. Not for the show itself — more of... logistics. But it's connected. They work with living tissues. It's strange. It feels like the future is happening in small rooms and we just pass by with our shopping bags."

Roni's fingers found the edge of the scarf and tugged. "Some futures are quiet, some futures are loud," she said. "Both find a way."

They walked, later, to the small bakery that pretended to be French and shared a slice of apple tart that was more honest than the sign promised. Their conversation folded into the simplicities of the day: the names of their favorite trees, the taste of tea that had been brewed too long, the small injustices that alighted on the elderly in a city that prized agility. Mary listened when Roni spoke of her husband, and Roni watched Mary listen as if the younger woman were learning to build a map of a life she did not yet own.

When Mary left that evening, she hugged Roni in a way that made Roni remember how it felt to be the recipient of someone else's warmth. "I'll call tomorrow," Mary promised. "Mary Maple will text."

Roni went home with the basket warm against her hip and the city folding into an evening that smelled like roasted chestnuts. She made tea, placed the phone beside the kettle, and opened the contact list to look at *Mary Maple*. The name glowed in the soft screen light like a small, new star. She tapped it once and felt the mild, childlike thrill of connection — the feeling that the universe, despite all its indifferent machinery, still made room for small, human resistances.

That night she sat by the window and knitted until her fingers knew the pattern so well they could have performed it with their eyes closed. Between stitches she thought of Mary — that quick laugh, the scar by her eyebrow, the way she had said "learning to grow

hearts” as if it were both impossible and ordinary. Roni could not know, then, that phrases have a way of settling like dust on evidence. A small, mundane sentence can be the slow beginning of a long map.

She folded the scarf into the basket, placing the needles across the top like a pair of small compasses pointing toward a direction she could not yet name. The radio, finally, slid into a lullaby of late-hour programming; a soft voice recited a poem about winter in a voice that sounded like a rain-washed shawl. Roni listened for a while, then turned off the set and went to bed.

In the dark, the city sounded far away and intimate at once. She dreamed, not of the sea this time, but of a room full of clocks, each one ticking a slightly different time. In the dream a small hand reached into the pile and straightened one of the clocks as if to say, simply and with quiet defiance, “Not all time is lost to hands that forget.”

Morning came with a small ferocity of ordinary light. Roni dressed with the same care she used to fold letters and arranged her knitting as if preparing for pilgrimage. She filled a thermos with tea, tucked the basket under her arm, and left the apartment with the gentle certainty of someone who had been entrusted with a small and essential thing.

On the bench, under the maple, the world was waiting. The squirrel was where it usually was. The bench had kept its varnish’s last sigh. Roni sat, her

needles resting for a moment, and looked at the path like someone on the edge of an old map.

She had no sense, then, that the thin line between acquaintance and catastrophe is often where the ordinary sits; she had no inkling of the way a name in a phone book can become a key, or a reference point in a life that wills truth into shape. She only knew that the scarf she was knitting had to be finished, that the scarf would be warm around someone's neck, and that for the first time in years she had something new to tell her daughters when they phoned: a small story about a park, a maple, and a young woman who had decided, for reasons both clear and mysterious, to sit beside her and share the afternoon.

It was, in its own modest way, an offering. And Roni, accustomed to the economy of soft and measured gestures, accepted it as though it might be the beginning of something that would demand all the patience she had been taught to keep.

CHAPTER 3 — CONVERSATIONS AT DAWN

The morning had not yet broken; it had only promised to. The light lingered somewhere below the horizon like a secret rehearsing its confession. Inside her small Moscow apartment, Mrs. Ronita Devine sat by the window wrapped in a shawl of quiet grey wool, the steam of her tea rising like an unfinished prayer. She liked these hours before the city awoke — when trams were still shy of movement, when human voices were merely dreams escaping from cracked windows.

The knitting basket rested beside her as it always did, its contents a collection of patient work and private thoughts. On the radio, a soft piano interlude drifted like mist — something from the old world, something that made her remember slow rain and her husband reading newspapers under yellow lamplight.

Her phone blinked once on the table, vibrating with a single, polite tremor. A voice message from *Mary Maple*.

Roni's lips curved. She had saved that name with mild amusement and mild affection, and every time she saw it glow on her screen, it felt as though a small leaf had fallen again from the maple tree and found its way to her door. She pressed play.

“Good morning, Roni!” Mary’s voice was bright, but not in the way of sunlight — more like the glimmer of a bulb flickering in an uncertain room. “It’s too early, I know. I couldn’t sleep again. Long night at the lab. We were trying to sync... something. Anyway, I thought of you. Hope you’re still asleep and dreaming of coffee.”

Roni chuckled, shaking her head. “Sync something,” she murmured. “What sort of world have we built where people talk like computers?”

She typed a reply — not a message, but a voice note, because words sounded warmer when breathed.

“Mary, my dear, I was never one for sleeping late. The city’s best moments happen before anyone realizes they’re awake. I made tea. You’d hate it — too bitter. Try sleeping, or at least pretending to. It’s good for the mind to rest, even when it doesn’t believe in rest.”

Minutes later, another voice note arrived, this time with the muffled hum of machinery in the background.

“You’re right,” Mary said, her tone lighter now. “But it’s hard to rest when your brain thinks it’s running a marathon inside a snow globe. My workplace isn’t exactly quiet. You’d laugh if you saw it — all white walls, white floors, white coats. Everything so spotless it’s unnatural. We call it *The White Lab*. Like something out of an old movie. Even our thoughts feel disinfected here.”

Roni smiled at the description, picturing sterile corridors, young scientists walking briskly under artificial light, and Mary — with her quick laugh and distracted grace — floating among them like a bird trapped in symmetry.

She poured another cup of tea and recorded a reply.

“The White Lab,” she said softly, as though tasting the phrase. “Sounds like a place where the snow forgot how to melt. What are you all making there? Dreams? Robots? New kinds of bread?”

The response came within moments, accompanied by the distant beep of electronic instruments.

“Hearts,” Mary said, half laughing, half whispering. “We’re learning to grow hearts.”

Roni laughed outright, a rich, unguarded sound that filled the small room. “Grow hearts,” she repeated to herself. “As if people didn’t already have enough trouble using the ones they’re born with.”

But even as she said it, something in Mary’s tone made her pause — a flicker beneath the humor, like a candle struggling against a draft.

That day passed in a blur of ordinary rituals. Sonya came in, clattering pans and scolding the dust. Roni read a few pages from an old novel she’d been revisiting for the twelfth time — *The Woman in White*. The irony of the title amused her now. When

she looked up from her book, the phrase *The White Lab* had already curled itself into her thoughts.

Evening came with its palette of orange and blue. Roni sat by the window again, knitting. The scarf now reached past her knees, its fabric soft and dense, the kind of warmth that remembered the hands that made it. She imagined giving it to one of her granddaughters one day — something tangible from a grandmother who lived across oceans of time zones and silences.

Her phone chimed again. A video call. *Mary Maple*.

The screen flickered and settled on Mary's face — tired but radiant, the kind of beauty that light couldn't quite erase. Behind her was a blur of sterile white surfaces, glass walls, and a faint green glow from machines Roni couldn't name.

"Roni!" Mary smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I just needed to see a familiar face. Today's been—well, long."

"You look exhausted, child," Roni said gently. "Are you eating? Sleeping?"

Mary made a mock grimace. "Define sleeping. If you mean closing your eyes and pretending the world isn't humming around you, then yes. Occasionally."

Roni studied her carefully. The young woman's pupils seemed dilated, her movements slightly delayed. The screen behind her showed what looked

like a sealed chamber — frost-covered, with condensation dripping from its edges.

“What is that behind you?” Roni asked.

“Oh, that?” Mary waved dismissively. “A freezer unit. Cryogenic storage. You’d be surprised how delicate life becomes when it’s on ice.”

There it was again — that undertone, the faint quiver beneath her words.

Roni leaned forward. “Mary, do you like your work?”

Mary’s smile faltered, then steadied. “I used to. Now it feels like... like the work is doing *me*. You know what I mean?”

Roni nodded slowly. “I do. I’ve seen people lost to their work before. My husband used to say, *the trick isn’t to work well, it’s to know when to stop.*”

Mary laughed softly, then exhaled. “He sounds like someone I’d have liked.”

“You would have,” Roni said, eyes soft. “He was steady. Not brilliant, not remarkable. Just steady — like a good clock. You could set your life by his patience.”

Mary looked down, and her hair fell across her face. For a moment, Roni thought she saw tears, but the camera’s light was deceptive.

“Sometimes,” Mary said quietly, “I think I work with people who believe patience is a disease.”

Roni tilted her head. “And you?”

“I...” Mary hesitated. “I just want to make things right. You know, give people a second chance. We’re building hearts here — literal ones, not metaphors. Synthetic, but alive. I suppose that makes us creators. Or maybe thieves.”

“Thieves?” Roni echoed, surprised.

Mary forced a laugh. “We take nature’s blueprint and sign our names on it. Isn’t that theft?”

Before Roni could respond, someone called Mary’s name offscreen — a man’s voice, firm, authoritative.

“I have to go,” she said hurriedly. “Talk later, okay? Don’t worry — I’m fine.”

The screen blinked to black.

That night, Roni sat awake long after the city’s lights had dimmed. The words circled her like moths —
The White Lab. Grow hearts. Thieves.

The clock struck midnight. Outside, snow had begun to fall, the flakes moving with such quiet authority that they seemed to erase sound itself. She watched them gather on the balcony railing, a slow accumulation of silence.

Her husband would have loved this, she thought. He always said snow was the universe reminding us to hush.

The phone buzzed again. Another message. Mary.

“Can’t sleep. Don’t laugh, but I think of you sometimes when the machines beep. Like... you’d scold them for being too loud.”

Roni’s smile was tired and tender. She sent back a simple voice note:

“Then scold them yourself. Machines only behave when they know someone is listening.”

A few seconds later came the reply — a soft laugh. Then silence.

Days passed. The calls continued, weaving themselves into the fabric of Roni’s routine. Mary would call at odd hours — dawn, sometimes just before midnight — her voice alternating between energy and exhaustion.

One morning, Roni woke to find five unread messages. The first was a short video of sunlight streaming through a laboratory window, the glass tinted blue. The second was a photo of a white corridor, lined with sealed doors labeled “BioStorage A-L.” The third was a blurry selfie — Mary with a man standing behind her, half-visible, wearing a grey coat. His face was turned away. The fourth message

was a single line of text: *Ever felt like you're being watched by your own creation?*

And the fifth — a short voice note.

“Roni... sometimes I think the things we make here know more about us than we do about them.”

Roni replayed that message three times, the unease growing like frost in her stomach.

She replied carefully, her voice steady:

“You’re talking in riddles again. Take care, my dear. The world doesn’t reward those who feel too deeply about their work.”

Mary’s answer came an hour later:

“You sound like my conscience.”

“Maybe I am,” Roni typed back.

A week later, Mary stopped calling.

The silence was abrupt, like a curtain falling mid-scene. Roni waited a day, then two. She left a message — cheerful at first, then concerned.

“Mary, I hope all is well. Call when you can. The maple tree’s shedding fast — I’ll save a leaf for you.”

There was no reply.

That night, Roni couldn’t sleep. The knitting lay unfinished in her lap. The scarf seemed heavier than

before, the yarn coarse under her fingers. The clock ticked, deliberate and cruel.

Finally, at 3:17 a.m., her phone blinked. A message. From Mary.

It was audio only. No words — just breathing. Shallow, irregular. A muffled sob. Then a sound — metallic, faint, like the closing of a latch.

And then, in a whisper that barely touched the microphone:

“We shouldn’t have done it.”

Roni froze. “Mary?” she said aloud, as though the voice could hear her through the silence.

But there was nothing more.

The message ended, and with it, the night’s fragile peace.

At dawn, the city stirred — unaware that somewhere within it, a thread had just begun to unravel.

Roni sat by the window, her knitting untouched, her tea cold. The sunlight crept over her table, illuminating her phone, where *Mary Maple* still glowed faintly — unread, unspoken, and unbearably alive.

She looked at the maple tree outside, now almost bare, its last few leaves trembling in the wind.

“Learning to grow hearts,” Roni whispered, half to herself. “And losing your own in the process.”

The needles lay beside her, waiting, but she did not touch them. She stared at the phone again, the name glowing softly like a warning.

A single stitch dropped from her scarf and unraveled down several rows, pulling the pattern apart in a quiet, unbroken fall — just as Mary’s voice echoed once more in Roni’s memory:

“The White Lab.”

And though she didn’t yet know it, the first thread of the mystery had just come loose.

CHAPTER 4 – THE MORNING FLASH

The morning began like any other. A pale, reluctant sun crept over Moscow's skeletal skyline, lighting rooftops still slick with frost. The city stirred in slow gradients — a cough from the next apartment, the distant hum of a tram, the muffled sound of boots crossing wet pavement. Inside her small, tidy apartment on the sixth floor, Mrs. Ronita Devine stirred a teaspoon of honey into her tea.

The news channel flickered soundlessly on her holoscreen — subtitles dancing beneath the image of an over-enthusiastic anchor rehearsing artificial cheer. She watched absently, not really reading. The steam from her cup fogged the lower edge of the glass.

Her knitting basket waited patiently beside her armchair, yarn coiled like sleeping snakes. Outside the window, the maple tree looked skeletal now — stripped of its leaves, its branches tracing faint scars against the pale November sky.

Roni sipped her tea and thought, *Mary must be sleeping in*. The girl hadn't replied to her messages from the night before. She'd written two, both unanswered. It wasn't unusual — Mary had those long work nights, after all. But still. There had been something strange in that last voice note, that whisper half-swallowed by static.

We shouldn't have done it.

The phrase replayed in Roni's head, soft but insistent, like a pulse in her temple. She took another sip. The tea was too hot, too bitter. She reached for the remote and unmuted the news, half to distract herself.

The anchor's voice came sharp and clean, slicing through the stillness.

“—a tragic discovery early this morning in the city's central district. A young woman was found dead in her apartment on Petrova Lane. Authorities have identified her as twenty-four-year-old Mary Kovalenko, an employee at BioNova Laboratories, commonly known as *The White Lab*.”

Roni froze.

The cup in her hand trembled once, twice, before she managed to set it down. A few drops of tea splashed onto the saucer, then bled into the linen tablecloth, forming an expanding brown bloom.

She turned toward the screen. The camera cut from the newsroom to a live feed — a grey, snow-dusted street cordoned off with yellow security tape. Police drones hovered lazily in the air, their lenses blinking like insect eyes. A female reporter stood in front of a nondescript apartment building, her coat too bright against the bleak morning.

“—sources confirm the young woman lived alone. Neighbors describe her as quiet and polite, though often seen returning late at night. Authorities suspect suicide, but investigations are ongoing. A preliminary statement from The White Lab says Miss Kovalenko had been under ‘immense work-related stress.’”

Roni’s breath caught.

Then came the photo.

A headshot, cropped from some social media page. Mary’s face filled the screen — smiling, bright, alive. Her hair fell over one eye, the faint scar above her brow barely visible.

But there was no mistaking her.

Roni’s world constricted around that image.

Her throat felt dry, as though she’d swallowed sand. The announcer’s voice continued, detached and clinical, but the words dissolved into static. Her vision blurred, a dull roaring filled her ears.

For a long time she didn’t move.

The maple branches outside quivered in the wind, tapping softly against the glass. Somewhere downstairs, someone’s radio played an upbeat jingle about laundry detergent. The absurdity of it almost made her laugh.

When she finally stood, her knees ached. She gripped the edge of the table to steady herself.

“No,” she whispered. “No, no, no. It can’t be.”

Her hand reached for the phone automatically. She tapped Mary’s name — *Mary Maple* — and listened. The dial tone rang once, twice, three times. Then the automated voice answered:

“The number you are trying to reach is currently unavailable.”

The sound of that sterile sentence broke her.

She sank into her chair and pressed the phone against her chest, rocking slightly. The knitting needles beside her fell to the floor with a metallic clatter.

It took several minutes before she could breathe steadily again.

Then, like an instinct long dormant, the old, quiet discipline returned — the part of her that had once taught children to read patterns, to look for logic where emotion threatened to swallow sense. She wiped her eyes, picked up the remote, and rewound the broadcast.

Mary’s face appeared again.

Roni studied it carefully. The image was taken recently — the hair longer, the eyes more tired, but still the same girl she’d met under the maple tree.

Yet something was off. Something so small it almost escaped her.

She leaned closer to the screen.

There — just above Mary’s upper lip — a faint, dark spot. A mole.

Roni frowned.

No, that wasn’t right. She had spent hours talking to Mary, had seen her laugh, smile, frown. She would have noticed that mole. She was sure of it.

Her first impulse was to dismiss it — perhaps the light, the photo quality, or a shadow. But the certainty in her memory was sharp and clean: Mary’s skin had been flawless, unmarked.

She pressed pause. The frozen image stared back at her, serene and lifeless.

A knock at the door startled her. Sonya, the maid, peeked in with her usual brisk energy.

“Madama, should I—?” She stopped mid-sentence when she saw Roni’s face. “What happened?”

Roni pointed at the screen wordlessly.

Sonya stepped closer, squinting. “Oh... oh dear. That’s the girl from the park, isn’t it? The one you talk to?”

Roni nodded, unable to speak.

Sonya crossed herself quickly, murmured something in Russian, and switched off the TV as if

extinguishing a candle. “You shouldn’t watch that. It’s bad for the heart.”

But Roni turned the screen back on immediately.

“No,” she said firmly. “Leave it.”

Sonya hesitated, then backed away, muttering, “As you wish, Madama,” and retreated to the kitchen.

Roni watched as the reporter’s segment ended and the feed switched to a studio interview. A psychologist appeared, talking about depression among young professionals, work stress, loneliness in the digital age.

The words washed over her without meaning.

All she could see was that mole.

And the cold, procedural tone with which the world had already decided that Mary’s death was self-inflicted.

She picked up her knitting needles, only to find she couldn’t hold them steady. Her fingers trembled too much. The scarf she’d been working on — Mary’s favorite indigo — lay folded beside her. It felt suddenly heavy, as though soaked with invisible rain.

Roni put the needles down and reached for her phone again.

She opened their old messages.

Mary's voice notes played one by one — laughter, chatter, fatigue. Then that last one.

“We shouldn't have done it.”

Her pulse quickened.

What did she mean by *we*?

Roni's eyes darted to the news ticker running along the bottom of the screen. It read:

“BioNova Laboratories issues statement following employee's death. Ongoing project: Human Organ Regeneration Initiative (codename *Protocol Delta*).”

She whispered the words aloud, as if they might reveal something by sound alone. “Protocol Delta.”

A phrase like that did not belong to the world of ordinary people. It belonged to the realm of secrets and systems — to those sterile corridors Mary had shown her through the screen.

She could still hear Mary's voice describing *The White Lab*, laughing about its walls and lights, her tone bright but brittle.

“Even our thoughts feel disinfected here.”

Roni stood, pacing the room. The movements steadied her mind. She walked to the bookshelf, ran a hand along its spines, then stopped at a framed photograph — her husband, smiling awkwardly at the camera, his glasses tilted.

“I can’t just sit here, Barun,” she murmured to the photo. “Not this time.”

The sound of her own voice startled her. It sounded too calm, too clear.

She looked out the window again. The maple tree shivered. A gust of wind carried a few brittle leaves down to the pavement below.

She decided.

Within an hour, she was dressed — not hurriedly, but with the precision of someone packing herself back into the world. A dark overcoat, a scarf, gloves, the knitting basket hooked on her arm as always. Inside it, she tucked her phone, her reading glasses, and a small notepad.

When she reached the street, the air was sharp with cold. She hailed an autocab, her voice steady.

“Petrova Lane. The building from this morning’s news.”

The cab hummed to life. As it moved, she watched the city roll past — glass towers reflecting the bruised sky, people hurrying with collars up, the occasional burst of laughter from a café that hadn’t yet surrendered to winter.

Moscow looked the same as always. But for Roni, the city had tilted.

At Petrova Lane, she saw the crowd from a distance — reporters, bystanders, the slow movement of

uniforms. The building itself was modest, grey, with balconies like tired eyelids. Police drones floated above, their red lights pulsing rhythmically.

Roni's heart hammered as she approached. She expected someone to stop her, but when a young officer asked for identification, she said simply, "I'm her friend. Her only friend, perhaps."

The officer hesitated, scanning her face, then nodded toward the entrance. "Don't touch anything. They're still processing the scene."

Inside, the air was cold and antiseptic. The scent of disinfectant mingled with something metallic — faint but undeniable. The corridor lights buzzed.

Mary's door stood open.

Roni stepped across the threshold, her breath catching.

The room was neat, eerily so. A small living space with a sofa, a bookshelf, a table with a half-finished cup of coffee gone cold. A single chair had been knocked over, resting awkwardly against the wall.

The police were photographing the bedroom. Roni glimpsed the edge of the bed — sheets rumpled, a mirror cracked.

"Cause of death appears to be self-inflicted overdose," a voice said behind her. "Sleeping pills."

Roni turned to see a tall man with cropped hair — Detective Arman Stepanov. His tone was professional, but his eyes were kind.

“I’m sorry,” he said, seeing her expression. “You knew her?”

“Yes.” Roni’s voice trembled, then steadied. “We spoke often. She wasn’t... she wasn’t like that.”

“People hide things,” the detective said gently. “She’d been under pressure. The lab she worked for — demanding place.”

Roni’s gaze drifted to a framed photo on the shelf — Mary with a man, older, his hand on her shoulder. He was perhaps fifty, distinguished, confident. The caption read: *With Dr. Viktor Solenov — The White Lab, 2056.*

Something in that smile unsettled her.

She moved closer to the photo. “Her employer?”

“Yes,” the detective said. “Head of the lab. They were... close, apparently.”

Roni didn’t reply. She only looked at Mary’s eyes in the photo — bright, alive, unaware.

She reached for her phone. “May I?” she asked softly, lifting it toward the crime scene.

The detective hesitated, then nodded. “As long as you don’t interfere.”

Roni took three pictures — the photo frame, the coffee cup, and the doorway. Her instincts, old and stubborn, guided her hand. She didn't yet know what she was looking for.

When she stepped outside again, the wind had turned colder. Snow had begun to fall again, silent and fine, settling over the steps like dust.

She stood there for a long time, her gloved hand pressed over her chest, as if holding something fragile inside.

The world continued around her — traffic, voices, life. But for Roni, everything had changed shape.

As she walked away from the building, the words from the newscast replayed in her head: *BioNova Laboratories... Protocol Delta.*

She repeated them softly, under her breath, as though saying them aloud might untie their knots.

“Protocol Delta. The White Lab.”

And beneath that — quieter, sharper, truer — another phrase, the one that would follow her into sleepless nights:

We shouldn't have done it.

The scarf in her basket pressed against her arm, heavy with its unspoken promise.

Roni didn't yet know that what had begun as grief would soon become investigation — that a seventy-

three-year-old widow, armed with nothing but observation and patience, was about to chase a secret that even death had tried to bury.

But as she turned the corner, she knew this much:

She could not — would not — let Mary Kovalenko become just another name in the news ticker.

And somewhere deep inside her, a small spark of purpose — calm, sharp, and quietly dangerous — began to stir. She needed to go back to the scene, to see it again with her own eyes, if what she suspected was true — that it wasn't suicide at all, but something far darker.

CHAPTER 5 — THE VISIT

After about an hour, she found herself back at the scene. The street outside Mary's building hummed with a quiet tension — yellow tape fluttered faintly in the wind, reporters huddled together with their breath turning to mist, and police officers moved with a practiced rhythm, their footsteps measured and deliberate. Even the pigeons seemed to sense the gravity, keeping to the far edges of the square. Roni held her knitting basket close beneath her coat, as though the half-finished scarf within could somehow shield her from the ache settling in her chest.

Detective Arman Stepanov stood by the lobby, hands folded against his chest. He had an officer's build — not bulky, but deliberately straight; his face was young enough to still surprise people with the earnestness behind it. When he saw Roni approach, he came forward with a half-step that was more courtesy than command.

"Mrs. Devine, you've come back?" he asked, his tone even and official, yet carrying a faint note of sympathy.

"Yes," Roni answered quietly. "I just thought I might look around a little more." Her voice faltered, fading into the cold air. "I knew Mary... we used to talk in the park. I just felt I should stay for a bit — at least as a friend."

Arman's eyes searched her face briefly, because it is the work of a good detective to read the people who read others. He gestured toward the cordoned-off staircase. "We've limited access, ma'am. Families and close friends only. Identification?"

Roni produced her small ID with the steadiness that had become a reflex of years. The officer glanced, then stepped aside. "You'll have a short time. Don't touch anything. Don't move things. We're taking prints."

"I won't," Roni answered. Her voice was quiet but clear. She felt the weight of the building's stairwell like a slow pulse beneath her feet. Each step upward was a small commitment. At the third floor landing she paused and drew a breath as if inhaling a memory—of sun on the maple, of Mary's laugh—and then continued.

The apartment door was open a fraction, the white paint dulled by fingerprints that the investigators had already outlined with tiny, respectful chalk marks. A smell met her first: antiseptic thin with something metallic under the surface. It was the smell of hospitals and laboratories, of places where life and instruments crossed too often. Roni's throat tightened; the scent felt like a name she couldn't say.

Arman moved ahead and touched the edge of the doorway, eyes taking everything in with a trained calm that was almost intimate. "Be mindful," he said. "This is active. You'll need to stay to the perimeters."

His hand was firm at the small of her back, guiding without pushing.

The living room was exactly what she had expected and exactly what she had not. Neatness reigned: a sofa with a single throw, a bookshelf arranged by color rather than author, a small round table with a coffee cup still on its saucer. A lamp cast a pool of domestic light that seemed out of place in the time-stilled air. The smart speaker on the shelf blinked with a dormant, watchful face — the sort that listens politely for commands. No clutter, no signs of long-term disorder. It all looked like the careful arrangement of someone who tidied to reassure themselves that the world could be controlled.

Arman's colleague, a young woman with rubber gloves, moved between rooms photographing and annotating as if the apartment were a map she was tracing. She nodded at Roni in that curt, practiced way of professionals who understand the rituals of grief.

"You were friends?" the woman asked quietly, as if conversation could replace the formalities of forensic notes.

"Yes." Roni's gaze drifted toward the bedroom archway. Her breath hitched when she saw it — a bed made but for a single disturbance, a chair overturned at the foot as though someone had stood up in haste. Small signs of human interruption like these are more eloquent than any declaration.

They led her to a chair near the bedroom door.
“You can look, but please don’t interfere,” Arman said. “We need to preserve everything.”

Roni sat and watched the professionals at their work, the way they moved their hands like slow instruments. She felt every tick of the clock as if it were a second in someone else’s life. The room seemed too quiet; silence in a place that had recently known a body carries an intensity that is almost a presence.

When they allowed her to cross the threshold, her knees felt the odd tremor of a person stepping into water for the first time. The bedroom was smaller than she’d imagined, pale walls, a single window with blinds like closed eyelids. The bedspread was white, the sheets bunched in a way that suggested a final struggle, or a sudden slump into sleep. On the chest of drawers stood a framed photograph: Mary smiling in sunlight, hand in the hand of an older man — Dr. Viktor Solenov, perhaps. The same face Roni had glimpsed on the news.

And there — there was the body.

Roni had expected stillness; she had not expected the almost ceremonious calm of it. Mary lay as though asleep, the sheet tucked beneath her chin like a blanket folded over a gentle child. Her face, in the light, looked smaller and colder than in memory. Her lips were closed. Her hair fanned across the pillow in soft, careless waves. For a moment Roni’s

mind supplied warmth and breath and bright, awkward laughter — images that felt like trespass in that room.

Detective Arman's voice was low. "Cause of death — preliminary— appears to be ingestion of prescription sedatives. There's still toxicology pending. We're treating it as possible suicide." He watched Roni for reaction.

Roni's hand moved on its own and brushed the knitting basket at her feet. Her fingers found the fabric of the scarf as if the wool were a chain of calm. "She left a voice on my phone," she said slowly. "A whisper. *We shouldn't have done it.*"

Arman's expression did not change, but something flickered in his eyes — interest, or the recognition of a thread in a broader tapestry. "Did she say what 'it' was?" he asked.

"No," Roni answered. She shook her head, the motion deliberate. "Only hints. She... worked at The White Lab. She said they were 'learning to grow hearts'." The phrase tasted strange, as if it belonged to someone else's language. She watched Mary's face again, memorizing its planes.

Her gaze landed, inexorably, on Mary's mouth.

There was a small, dark mole just above the right side of her upper lip. It was unmistakable in the light — a small punctuation mark on a face that Roni had thought unmarked. Her first reaction was denial; her

mind tried to find explanations — camera angle, a shadow, a stray speck of makeup. But the mole was a physical certainty, stubborn and direct.

She reached into her bag and drew out her phone with the practiced stealth of someone who has always photographed things to remember them. Arman's colleague raised an eyebrow but made no move to stop her when Roni asked, voice small but steady, "May I take a few pictures? For memory. For... for my own record."

Arman hesitated a beat, then inclined his head. "A couple. Don't get in the way."

Roni moved closer, knees soft, and took a silent photograph of Mary's face — a close-up, the mole sharp against the skin. She took a second of the whole room, then a third of the cup on the table, the smudge on the saucer, the overturned chair. Her fingers shook, but the camera captured the scene without judgement.

Something else caught her attention: a faint smudge of powder on the hem of the blanket by the bed. She paused, knuckled at the fabric. The police technician followed her gesture with clinical interest. "Possible residue," she said. "We'll test it."

Roni's eyes fell to the bedside table. There was no evidence of pill bottles, no blister packs that had been emptied and carelessly discarded. No used packets in the bin. The drawer where personal items might be kept was closed and latched; the investigator

made a note to have it opened with gloves. A small glass vial lay tucked under the bed in the shadow, almost invisible — a thing that seemed misplaced among domestic order. Roni made a mental note of it and waited for the technicians to retrieve it.

Arman watched her closely. “Did she show any signs of depression?” he asked softly.

“No,” Roni said. “She was tired, distracted. But proud of the work. She would call me at odd hours. She sent messages about things we don’t often speak of — tissue engineering, bio-storage. But she laughed, Sir. She laughed when she was afraid. That was her way.”

Arman nodded. “Sometimes that is the case. A public laugh can mask private storms.” He paused. “You knew of Dr. Solenov?” he asked, indicating the photograph.

“Yes,” Roni answered. The name pressed like a foreign coin in her mouth. “She mentioned him in passing. He’s a figure at the lab. Older. Commanding.”

“Do you have any other contact? Anyone else close to Mary?” Arman asked.

Roni thought of the man in the grey coat from Mary’s selfie — the half-visible figure in the background. She thought of the voice notes, the late-night beeps, the whisper in the dark. “No,” she said. “No one I can think of who would be here at this

hour. She had colleagues, but not... family, as far as she told me.”

A technician approached with the vial she’d seen earlier. It was small, clear, and labeled in a cramped professional script. The label read: *Sample – Unknown*. The technician’s gloved fingers turned it like a jeweler turning a gem under light. “Found beneath the mattress,” she said. “Not yet tested.”

Roni felt the apartment converge into a few sharp questions. Mole. Vial. No empty pill containers. A quiet that felt rehearsed rather than sudden. Mary’s smile in the photograph seemed to mock the room’s present calm.

“May I see the bathroom?” Roni asked, voice steady in a way that surprised even her.

Arman hesitated, then nodded. “A quick look. But stay where we can retrieve you if needed.”

The bathroom was small, the tiles freshly scrubbed. A smear of lipstick on the rim of the sink caught her eyes — dark, but softened by water. A towel lay folded on a rack, damp at one corner. The mirror had been wiped clean but for a single, small fingerprint at the lower left corner. A faint residue clung to the inside edge of the medicine cabinet, as if someone had recently handled something powdered or crystalline. The light’s reflection made the residue look like the ghost of sugar.

Roni's hands felt strangely calm as she noted each detail. She had been a teacher once; she had led classrooms full of students whose habits were windows into their souls. She read rooms the way people read letters — for the small clues left behind. The absence of expected things sometimes says more than their presence.

When she returned to the bedroom, Arman was waiting with a small folder. "I'm going to have to ask you some routine questions," he said. "Names of people she might have been in contact with, text messages, anything—"

"I have everything," Roni said. "Her messages are on my phone. She called me often at odd hours. I saved her voice notes." She felt a stubborn flare of protectiveness at the thought that someone had reduced Mary to a headline without first hearing what she had been thinking, what she had been afraid of. "She left a message last week... it was a whisper: *We shouldn't have done it.*"

Arman's pen paused, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "We'll need to hear that message. We'll need access to your phone."

Roni handed it to him willingly, the little device a repository of an intimacy that might now be evidence. She watched as his gloved hands tapped and scrolled, bringing up a list of calls and the voice notes Mary had left. He downloaded them to his secure tablet, the process quick, mechanical, and

entirely devoid of ceremony. When he returned the phone, his face wore the mask of a professional who had seen grief enough to recognize when it required more than procedure.

“You did the right thing by coming,” he said finally. “People like you — ordinary witnesses with extraordinary memory — often see things that the instruments miss.”

The words warmed her like the sun behind winter clouds. She felt a tender pride, as though the city had, for an instant, admitted that old women who sit under trees could hold a kind of authority.

Before she left, Roni took one last look at Mary. She stood at the foot of the bed and, quietly, as if speaking to someone who might still hear, she said, “You were not alone.” Her voice did not break. It was a sentence to hand forward, a small compass to guide whatever came next.

Outside, the street had not changed; life dragged its ordinary cart forward — buses, shops, people wrapped in scarves. But Roni felt as if she had crossed a threshold. The maple tree, in the clear light of day, looked older; the bench beneath its boughs seemed hollower. She kept her knitting basket close, the scarf inside folded like a promise not yet delivered.

As she walked away, Detective Arman called after her. “Mrs. Devine?”

She turned.

“We’ll call if we need you for more questions. Thank you.”

“You will?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “We’ll be in touch. And... thank you for coming.” There was an earnestness in his tone that felt like a hand offered in the dark.

Roni nodded, and for a moment their eyes met — two people on different sides of an event, both quietly reckoning with the responsibility of knowing. Then she descended the steps and out into the cold, the noise of the city folding around her as if to hide what had occurred in a small, domestic room the way a hand covers a wound.

She kept thinking of the mole, an odd punctuation on a familiar face. It lodged there like a question she could not yet frame. She thought of the vial beneath the bed, and of the absence of the ordinary detritus of a suicide. She thought of the whisper— *We shouldn’t have done it* — and felt, with a certainty that surprised her, that the world had opened a tiny, dangerous seam.

Homeward, she walked through the park. The bench was empty. Leaves skittered like hurried apologies across the path. She sat and opened her knitting basket, fingers finding the scarf as if to remind herself that some things could still be mended by patient work.

The phone inside her pocket buzzed with a notification she imagined would be routine. It was not. It was the city, continuing to move as it always does, unaware that those who watch closely sometimes catch the first threads of truth before the larger machines do.

