



DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

# Did You Know

*a 321Lumina.com book*



by Blurt Snodgrass

Did You Know

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*A Drake & Voss Novella*

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## Chapter One

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She arrived on a Wednesday morning in February carrying an umbrella she didn't need.

The day was dry — not warm, February in San Francisco was never warm, but dry, the kind of clear cold morning that came after a run of rain and made the city look scrubbed, everything sharper than usual, the edges of buildings precise against the sky. There was no reason for an umbrella. Flora noticed this from the window as the woman came down Clement Street and turned toward the building — the umbrella carried not over her shoulder but held in front of her, gripped at the middle, something to put between herself and whatever came next.

She was seventy-two. White, Irish-American was Flora's read, something in the set of the jaw and the quality of the composure — not the composure of someone who was naturally calm but the composure of someone who had spent decades in rooms where composure was required and had built it so thoroughly that it was now structural, load-bearing, the thing the rest of her was organized around. Her hair was white and kept with the kind of precision that was not vanity but was dignity — the same category of decision as the good coat, the leather shoes, the umbrella carried like a staff. She was a woman who had decided long ago what kind of person she was going to be in public and had been that person consistently enough that the decision had become the fact.

She stood in the doorway for a moment looking at the office.

Nancy was at her desk. She looked up, took in the woman and the umbrella and the particular quality of her standing in the doorway, and she wrote a name in her notepad that she had gotten from the phone call two days before. She wrote the time beside it.

She looked at both lines.

Good.

"Judge Brennan," Flora said. "Come in."

Octavia Brennan came in and sat in the client chair and set the umbrella across her knees, holding it with both hands, and she looked at the cork board and the postcards and the note on the card stock and she said: "I was told you were discreet."

"We are," Flora said.

"I was told you found things without making a production of the finding."

"We try."

Octavia looked at her. The assessment of a woman who had spent twenty-three years on the bench looking at people and evaluating them. Flora let herself be evaluated.

"I'm a retired judge," Octavia said. "Family court. I retired four years ago after twenty-three years. I'm here because six weeks ago I received a letter from a man named Desmond Hare."

She reached into her handbag and produced the letter, which had been folded and unfolded many times — Flora could see it from across the desk, the softness of the paper at the folds, the particular weariness of a document that had been lived with. She set it on the desk without unfolding it.

"He's forty-four years old," she said. "He lives in Portland, Oregon. In 1987, when he was seven years old, I made a ruling in a dependency case that removed him from his mother's custody and placed him in foster care." She paused. "He believes the placement was inadequate. He has documentation he believes supports this." She paused again. "He is not threatening legal action. He is not threatening anything. He has written me a letter."

"A long one," Nancy said from her desk.

Octavia looked at her. "Fourteen pages," she said. "Careful and specific. He describes what happened to him after the ruling and what he has done with his life since." She looked at the letter on the desk. "At the end he asks me one question."

She unfolded the letter to the final page and turned it to face Flora.

The last paragraph. Flora read it.

*I don't want anything from you. I'm not asking for an apology and I'm not asking you to feel what I felt or to take responsibility for what a system did to me after your decision was made. I'm asking one thing only, because it is the one thing that has mattered to me for thirty-seven years. I need to know: did you know. Did you understand, when you made that ruling, what you were sending me to. Did you have information in front of you that would have told you what the placement was and did you weigh it and decide it was acceptable, or did you not know, or did you know and decide it was adequate and were wrong, or did you know and decide it was inadequate and rule anyway because the alternative was Clara and you had decided Clara was worse. I need to know which of those is true. I can live with any of them. I cannot live without knowing.*

Flora read it twice.

She looked up at Octavia.

Octavia was looking at the letter with the expression of a woman who had read those words eleven times and was still reading them, still encountering them as though for the first time because they had not yet resolved into something she could hold.

"You remember the case," Flora said.

"I remember it," Octavia said. "I remember the boy — Desmond, he was called Des, someone in the record called him Des. I remember he was small for his age. I remember he sat in the hallway outside the courtroom with a social worker and he was very quiet. Children who are very quiet in those hallways are —" She stopped. "They're quieter than children should be. That quietness is information."

"And the mother," Flora said. "Clara."

"Clara Hare," Octavia said. "Young — mid-twenties, I'd have been. Substance issues, documented. A history with the system going back several years. Two prior referrals, both unsubstantiated. The third referral had more to it." She paused. "She was —" She stopped again. "The record shows what the record shows. What the record doesn't show is that she was in the courtroom and she was trying. She was frightened and she was present and she was trying, and I remember thinking: this woman is trying. And I ruled as I ruled."

"Why?" Flora said.

Octavia looked at her steadily.

"Because the record was what it was," she said. "Because the record said substance issues and prior referrals and instability, and the placement — the foster placement — was on paper a stable environment. A family in the Sunset, two adults, prior fostering history." She paused. "On paper."

"And off paper," Flora said.

Octavia said nothing.

"Judge Brennan," Flora said. "Did you know. At the time."

Octavia looked at the umbrella across her knees.

"That," she said, "is exactly the question I cannot answer. And I've been trying to answer it for six weeks." She looked up. "I need you to find Clara Hare. I need to know what her life looked like in 1987 from her side of the courtroom. Not the record — the record I have. From her. What she knew, what she understood, what she was managing that the record didn't capture." She paused. "I need to understand what I decided before I can tell Desmond the truth."

"Why not write back to him first?" Flora said. "Start the conversation. Tell him you're looking into it."

Octavia looked at her.

"Because he asked if I knew," she said. "He said: I can live with any of them. Any version of what happened. But he cannot live without knowing, and I cannot give him an answer I'm not certain of." She paused. "I spent twenty-three years on the bench making decisions with incomplete information because that was the nature of the work — you decided on what you had and you were accountable for what you decided. I'm not on the bench anymore. I have time. I have the capacity to know more than I knew then." She looked at the letter on the desk. "He deserves a true answer. I'm not going to give him a partial one."

Flora looked at her for a long time.

"We'll find Clara," she said.

Octavia nodded. She picked up the letter and folded it carefully along its existing folds and put it back in her handbag.

She did not pick up the umbrella yet.

"There's something I should tell you," she said. "Something I've been sitting with."

Flora waited.

"In 2003," Octavia said, "I had a case. Different case, different family, a mother I was about to rule against. And a clerk in my office — a young woman who had been with me for two years — came to me the day before the ruling and said: there's something in the record you might have missed. She showed me a document. A report from a visiting nurse that had been filed but not flagged. It changed the picture substantially."

"You changed the ruling," Flora said.

"I delayed it," Octavia said. "I called for additional information. The ruling I eventually made was different from what I would have made without that document." She paused. "I've thought about that clerk many times since. About what it cost her to come to me the day before. About the courage of that." She looked at the window. "And I've thought about whether there was a clerk in 1987 who saw something and didn't come to me. Or whether I saw something and didn't stop to read it carefully enough." She paused. "That's the part I can't recover from memory alone. That's why I need you."

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## Chapter Two

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Clara Hare was not easy to find.

She was not impossible — she existed in the public record in the way that people who had been through the court system existed, appeared and disappeared and reappeared, the traces intermittent and sometimes contradictory. But finding her took eleven days and required a kind of careful reading of partial evidence that was, Nancy said, more like archaeology than investigation.

They found her in pieces.

Clara Hare, 1987, twenty-four years old. The dependency case. Two prior referrals before Desmond's removal. After the removal the record showed continued involvement with child welfare services — she had a second child in 1989, a daughter, and that child was also removed in 1991, and then the record went quiet for several years, the specific quiet that meant either things had improved or the person had moved beyond the reach of the systems that had been tracking her.

In 1996 she appeared in a treatment program record in Sacramento — a residential program, twelve months, completed. In 1998 she appeared in an employment record in Sacramento, a cleaning company. In 2001, a different Sacramento address, a different employer.

After 2001, in Sacramento, nothing.

Flora drove to Sacramento on a Thursday, which was a Tuesday-adjacent day that she'd been noting more carefully since the Roland Achebe case, since Nancy had said: you're more in it than you used to be. She drove up through the valley in the February morning, the agriculture flat and specific on either side, the sky doing the thing it did over the valley — enormous, uncomplicated, a sky that had room for itself.

She had an address from 2001 and the name of an employer and a thread from a community health center that Nancy had found through a contact at a former colleague's organization, the kind of thread that came from thirty years of a court stenographer's accumulated network deployed in a direction no one had anticipated.

The thread led to a woman named Rosalind Hare.

Clara's sister.

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Rosalind Hare lived in a house in Arden-Arcade, a suburb east of Sacramento, in a neighborhood of single-story houses with yards that ranged from carefully tended to optimistically unkempt. Her house was in the middle of that range — a garden that had been thought about and attended to without being managed within an inch of its life, pots of herbs on the porch, a lemon tree at the corner of the yard that had been there long enough to be a fact of the property.

She opened the door before Flora knocked, which meant she'd seen the car.

She was sixty-four, stocky, with the face of a woman who had weathered a great deal and declined to be defined by it. She looked at Flora with the assessment of someone who had been assessed by a great many official-seeming strangers over the years and had developed a method for it.

"You called about Clara," she said.

"Yes. Thank you for agreeing to talk to me."

"Come in," Rosalind said. "I made coffee. You want some?"

She wanted some.

They sat at Rosalind's kitchen table, which was a table that had been used for meals and homework and arguments and reconciliations for twenty years, the surface of it carrying the record of all of it in the way surfaces did. Flora wrapped her hands around the cup and waited.

"Clara is alive," Rosalind said. "I'll say that first because that's what people usually want to know." She looked at her coffee. "She's been sober for twenty-two years. She lives in Chico. She works at a food bank — she's been there for fifteen years, she runs the distribution operation. She has a good life." She paused. "She doesn't have a relationship with Desmond.

He's tried, over the years. She's — it's complicated."

"Can you tell me about 1987?" Flora said. "What Clara's life looked like then. Not the record. From inside it."

Rosalind looked at her.

"Why?" she said. Not hostile — the question of a woman who had learned to ask why before she gave anything.

"A judge who made the ruling on Desmond's removal has been contacted by Desmond," Flora said. "She's trying to understand what she decided. She hired me to find Clara and to understand what the record doesn't show." She paused. "She's not trying to reopen anything. She's not trying to protect herself. She's trying to answer a question Desmond asked her, and she wants to answer it truthfully."

Rosalind looked at her for a long time.

"What question?" she said.

Flora told her.

Rosalind looked at her coffee.

"Did she know," she said slowly. "The judge."

"Yes."

Rosalind was quiet for a while.

Outside, the lemon tree moved in a small wind. Through the window Flora could see it — the yellow fruit against the February sky, the particular brightness of it, the thing that kept producing regardless of the season.

"Clara in 1987," Rosalind said. "Clara in 1987 was — she was in trouble. I'm not going to pretend she wasn't. The substance issues were real. The instability was real. She was twenty-four and she'd been in trouble since she was sixteen and she had a seven-year-old son she loved desperately and was failing." She paused. "What the record didn't show was that she was three weeks into a program when the hearing happened. Three weeks. She'd gone into the program herself — no one made her, she went because she knew she needed to go, she made the appointment and she went." She paused. "The social worker knew. Clara told the social worker. The social worker said she'd put it in the report."

Flora sat very still.

"It wasn't in the report," she said.

Rosalind looked at her.

"It wasn't in the report," Rosalind said. "Clara found out later — years later, when she got her records — that the report submitted to the court didn't mention the program. It mentioned the prior referrals and the substance history and the instability. It did not mention that she had, three weeks before the hearing, on her own initiative, entered a treatment program."

The kitchen was very quiet.

"Clara asked about it," Rosalind said. "When she got the records. She asked her attorney, who she'd had to fight to see those records in the first place. The attorney said there was nothing to be done, the ruling was made, the case was closed." She paused. "Clara carried that for a long time. That she'd done the thing she was supposed to do and it hadn't been in the record."

Flora looked at the lemon tree.

"The social worker," she said.

"Long gone," Rosalind said. "Clara tried to find her, years ago. She'd left the department, left the city. Clara couldn't find her." She paused. "I don't know if it was deliberate. I don't know if the social worker made a mistake or made a choice. I know the information wasn't in the report and that information was the difference between a judge who might have delayed the ruling and a judge who ruled on what she had."

Flora looked at her hands around the coffee cup.

"Does Clara know Desmond has contacted the judge?" she said.

"No," Rosalind said. "Desmond doesn't — they don't talk. She knows he's tried over the years and she — she can't." Rosalind paused. "She carries a great deal of guilt. About Desmond. About what happened after. The foster placement — she found out later what it was like and she's carried that since. She's been sober for twenty-two years and she has a good life and she still carries it." She paused. "She's never been able to face him because facing him would require facing what she did and what was done to her simultaneously and she hasn't found a way to hold both of those at once."

Flora sat with this for a long time.

The coffee in her cup had gone cool.

"Rosalind," she said. "Would Clara be willing to talk to me?"

Rosalind looked at her.

"That," she said, "I don't know. I can ask her. I can tell her what you've told me — about the judge, about Desmond's question." She paused. "But Clara makes her own decisions. She always has. That's not a failing in her — it's the same thing that made her walk into that program three weeks before the hearing. She does things on her own timeline and in her own way."

"I understand," Flora said.

"Leave me your number," Rosalind said. "I'll talk to her."

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## Chapter Three

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Clara called on a Monday.

She called the office directly — Rosalind had given her the number — and Flora answered and the voice on the other end was the voice of a woman who had made a decision and was implementing it before she could change her mind, the voice of someone acting from resolution rather than comfort.

"I'm Clara Hare," she said. "Rosalind said you wanted to talk to me."

"Yes," Flora said. "Thank you for calling."

"She said a judge wants to answer a question my son asked." A pause. "That's what she said."

"Yes. The judge made the ruling in 1987. Your son has written to her asking whether she knew — whether she had information about the foster placement before she ruled. She wants to give him a true answer and she's trying to understand what information she had."

A long silence.

"The program," Clara said.

"Yes," Flora said. "Rosalind told me it wasn't in the report."

"It wasn't in the report." Clara's voice was even. The evenness of someone who had said this fact many times inside her own head and had learned to say it without the feeling overwhelming the fact. "I went into the program myself. Three weeks before the hearing. I told the social worker. She said she'd include it." A pause. "It wasn't there."

"No," Flora said.

"So the judge didn't know," Clara said.

"The judge didn't know," Flora said. "Not from the record. There may have been other ways she could have known — that's what she's trying to

work out. But the program wasn't in the report."

Another long silence.

Flora waited.

"He wrote to her," Clara said. "Desmond."

"Yes."

"He found her and he wrote to her."

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

Flora paused. The letter was Desmond's. But Clara was the other person whose life the letter was about.

"He described what happened to him after the ruling," she said carefully. "And what he's made of his life since. And he asked her if she knew."

"What has he made of his life?" Clara said.

"I don't know the details," Flora said. "The judge received his letter. I haven't spoken to Desmond directly."

Another silence. Longer.

"Rosalind says the judge is trying to do right by him," Clara said. "By finding out what she actually knew before she answers."

"Yes," Flora said.

"That's —" Clara stopped. She started again. "I spent a long time being angry at that judge. I didn't know her name, I never knew her name, judges — you don't always know the name. But I was angry at the decision for a long time." She paused. "And then I got sober and I got better and I started to understand that what happened to Desmond was not only the ruling. It was the ruling and it was the placement and it was the report that didn't say what it should have said and it was everything I'd done in the years before that gave the system what it needed to justify the ruling." She paused. "I stopped being able to locate the blame in one place. Which was harder than having somewhere to put it."

"Yes," Flora said. "I imagine it was."

"Is she going to write back to him?" Clara said. "The judge."

"That's what she intends," Flora said. "When she knows what to say."

Clara was quiet for a moment.

"Tell her," she said slowly, "that I went into the program three weeks before the hearing. Tell her the social worker knew. Tell her it wasn't in the report." She paused. "Tell her that if she made her ruling on what the report said, she made it on incomplete information. Tell her that's not the same as not caring. Tell her I know the difference between those things."

Flora looked at the window.

"Clara," she said. "Would you be willing to speak to Octavia Brennan directly? The judge. Not for the case — the case is long closed. Just to —"

"No," Clara said. Immediately, clearly, without anger. "No. I've done what I can do. I've told you what I know. That's what I can give." A pause. "Desmond is who she needs to talk to. He's the one who wrote to her."

"Yes," Flora said.

"Tell her —" Clara stopped. She started again. "Tell her I hope she gives him a true answer. He deserves a true answer." Another pause. "Tell her I'm sorry I couldn't give him more. That I couldn't give him the mother he deserved in 1987." Her voice stayed even. The evenness of someone who had said this too, many times, inside herself, and had learned to say it clearly without falling into it. "That's not something she can carry. That's mine. But I want it said."

"I'll tell her," Flora said.

Clara hung up.

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## Chapter Four

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Octavia Brennan came in on a Friday.

She arrived without the umbrella this time. She sat in the client chair with her hands in her lap and she listened while Flora told her what she had found — Rosalind, Sacramento, the lemon tree in the yard, the program that wasn't in the report. She listened without interrupting, in the way she had listened to testimony for twenty-three years, the listening of someone for whom listening was a professional discipline and who had never stopped practicing it.

When Flora finished she was quiet for a long time.

Nancy had been at her desk through all of it. Now she put her pen down parallel to the notepad and waited.

"The program wasn't in the report," Octavia said.

"No."

"The social worker knew."

"Yes."

"And I had no other way of knowing," Octavia said. She said this not as a defense but as a fact being established, the way you established facts in a courtroom before building on them. "If the information wasn't in the report and I had no other way of knowing — "

"There may have been other ways," Flora said carefully. "Clara's attorney could have raised it. Clara herself could have raised it in testimony, if she gave testimony. I don't know the full record of the proceeding. But the treatment program was not in the primary document."

Octavia looked at her hands.

"I read the record again," she said. "All of it. When you called to say you'd found Rosalind. I went back and read everything." She paused. "Clara

didn't give testimony. She was represented by an attorney who — " She stopped. "The attorney was not effective. I remember thinking at the time that the representation was not effective. There are things you can do as a judge and things you cannot do, and questioning the competence of counsel in open court has consequences that sometimes harm the very person you're trying to help." She paused. "I made a note in my own record. A private note. That the representation concerned me."

"But you ruled as you ruled," Flora said.

"I ruled on what the record showed," Octavia said. "Which was substance issues and instability and a foster placement that on paper was adequate." She paused. "Off paper."

Flora looked at her.

"What did you know off paper?" Flora said.

Octavia looked at the window for a long time.

"The foster family," she said. "The Dussarts. I had seen them before. Different cases, different children, over several years. They were on the approved list. They had no substantiated complaints against them." She paused. "But I had a feeling." She said this with the precision of a woman who had spent twenty-three years being careful about the difference between what she knew and what she felt. "A feeling. That the Dussart household was not what it appeared to be. I had no evidence. I had a pattern of children who came through their placement and were — not damaged in any documentable way, but quieter than they'd been. Smaller than they'd been."

"Like Desmond was quiet in the hallway," Flora said.

Octavia looked at her.

"Yes," she said. "Like that." She was quiet. "A feeling is not evidence. A pattern of quietness is not evidence. You cannot rule on a feeling. You cannot remove a child from an approved placement on the basis that children who have been through that placement seem quieter than they were." She paused. "But I had the feeling. And I ruled for the placement. And I have thought about that feeling every year since Desmond Hare was seven years old."

The office was quiet.

The steam was coming up through the floor.

"Judge Brennan," Nancy said from her desk.

Octavia looked at her.

"He said he can live with any of it," Nancy said. "Any version of what happened. He said he cannot live without knowing."

"Yes," Octavia said.

"You know now," Nancy said. "You didn't have the program information. You had a feeling about the placement that you couldn't act on because it wasn't evidence." She paused. "Those are both true. Those are what you know."

Octavia looked at Nancy steadily.

"Yes," she said. "Those are what I know."

"Then you can answer him," Nancy said. "You can't give him a clean answer. But you can give him a true one."

Octavia looked at the notepad on Nancy's desk. At the margin notes she couldn't read from across the room. At the pen set parallel to the notepad.

"What do you actually know," she said, reading the card stock above the door. "Not what you feel. What you know."

"Yes," Nancy said.

"I know the program wasn't in the report," Octavia said. "I know the social worker knew and didn't include it. I know I had a feeling about the placement that I couldn't act on." She paused. "I know that a seven-year-old boy sat in a hallway outside my courtroom and was too quiet and I registered that and I ruled as I ruled." She paused. "I know that I did not knowingly send him somewhere inadequate. And I know that I had information — instinct, impression, the pattern of quieter children — that I was not able to translate into action." She looked at Flora. "He asked which of those was true. The answer is: more than one. The answer is: I didn't know what the report withheld and I knew something I couldn't use."

"Yes," Flora said. "That's what you know."

Octavia sat with this.

Outside, Clement Street was doing its Friday afternoon thing — the week loosening, the weekend beginning its approach. A dog barked once, twice, and stopped. A bus went by, the sound of it brief and departing.

"Clara said something," Flora said. "She asked me to tell you."

Octavia looked at her.

Flora told her what Clara had said. The program. The social worker. *If she made her ruling on what the report said, she made it on incomplete information. That's not the same as not caring.* And then: *I hope she gives him a true answer. He deserves a true answer.* And the last part, which Flora delivered carefully, giving it the space it required: *Tell her I'm sorry I couldn't give him more. That's not something she can carry. That's mine.*

Octavia sat with that for a long time.

Her hands in her lap were very still.

"She went into the program three weeks before the hearing," Octavia said.

"Yes."

"On her own initiative."

"Yes."

Octavia looked at the window.

"She was trying," she said. Quietly, to herself rather than to Flora. "I remember thinking she was trying. I was right about that."

Flora didn't say anything.

"I was right about that," Octavia said again, "and I ruled as I ruled, and both of those things are true, and I have to write to Desmond Hare and put both of those things in a letter and let him do with them what he needs to do."

"Yes," Flora said. "That's what you have to do."

Octavia nodded slowly. She picked up her handbag. She stood.

She looked at the cork board. The accumulation of it — the postcards, the folded note from Roland, the Farallon Islands above the door, the card stock in Nancy's handwriting.

"You find things," she said, not particularly to either of them. "You find what was there and what was missing and what was felt but couldn't be acted on. You find the shape of what happened." She paused. "That's useful work."

She went to the door.

She stopped.

"There's something I haven't told you," she said.

Flora waited.

"In 2017," Octavia said. "A year before I retired. I was reviewing a case — a placement review, a child who had been in foster care for three years. And the family being reviewed was the Dussarts." She paused. "They were still on the approved list. I had the file in front of me and I read it very carefully and there was —" She stopped. "There was enough, by 2017, to act on. The pattern had become evidence. I had the complaint that had finally been substantiated."

"What happened?" Flora said.

"I removed every child in their care," Octavia said. "And I referred the matter to the appropriate authorities and I wrote a letter to the oversight board and I made sure the Dussarts were removed from the approved list permanently." She paused. "I did what I should have done earlier. When I finally had what I needed to do it."

"That matters," Flora said.

"It matters," Octavia said. "And it doesn't undo what came before. Both of those are true also." She looked at the card stock. "I'll write to Desmond. I'll tell him what I know." She paused. "And then I'll let him decide what to do with it."

She went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.



## Chapter Five

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Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and sat and they sat in the Friday office in the way they sat after a case had resolved, the room returning to itself, the particular quality of the air after someone's need had been in it and then departed.

"She knew," Nancy said. "And she didn't know. And she acted when she could act and she couldn't act when she couldn't."

"Yes," Flora said.

"He asked which of those was true," Nancy said. "The answer is all of them."

"Yes."

Nancy wrapped her hands around her cup. She looked at the card stock.

"I've been thinking about that question," she said. "Did you know. The question he asked her."

Flora looked at her.

"When you know something and can't act on it," Nancy said. "Whether that's the same as not knowing. Whether the knowing that can't be used is still knowing."

Flora held her tea.

"I think it is," she said. "I think knowing and being able to act on what you know are different things. She knew about the Dussarts. She couldn't act. That's not the same as not knowing."

"No," Nancy said. "It isn't." She paused. "But the not being able to act on it — that's its own thing. That's its own weight."

"Yes," Flora said.

Nancy looked at the window.

"I know things," she said. "About — about what's happening. To me. I know things and there are things I can act on and things I can't." She paused. "Telling you was acting on what I knew. Building the systems is acting on what I know. Some of it I can act on." She paused. "The rest I just know."

Flora looked at her.

"Yes," she said.

"That's what I wanted to say," Nancy said. "I don't know why that case brought it out but it did." She picked up her pen. "Octavia Brennan carried a feeling about those children for thirty years before she could act on it. She carried it and she acted when she could act." She paused. "I think that's —" She stopped. "I think that's what you do. You carry what you can't yet act on and you act when you can and you don't confuse the carrying with the failing."

Flora held her tea in both hands and looked at Nancy across the desk.

Nancy looked at the notepad. She wrote the date at the top of a fresh page. She wrote the time in the margin. She looked at both.

She looked at them again.

Good.

She put the cap on her pen and set it parallel to the notepad and looked at the window and the February light coming through it, thin and cold and perfectly sufficient for what it was.

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*Six weeks later a letter arrived at the office. No return address. San Francisco postmark.*

*Inside: a single sheet of paper. No greeting, no signature.*

*He wrote back.*

*That's all it said.*

*Flora showed it to Nancy.*

*Nancy read it.*

*She put it on the cork board.*

*Neither of them said anything for a while.*

*Then Nancy said: that's enough.*

*Flora said: yes.*

*The work continued.*

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*In the office on the second floor, the cork board held what it held.*

*The Farallon Islands postcard above the door.*

*The note on card stock gone slightly yellow.*

*The postcard from Inverness. The postcard from Penang.*

*A folded note: Second movement. Last night. I got out of the way.*

*A single sheet: He wrote back.*

*The sign on the frosted glass door was still slightly crooked.*

*Neither of them had fixed it.*

*Neither of them ever would.*

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*End.*