



DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

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by Blurt Snodgrass

*a 321Lumina.com book*

She Was Right

# She Was Right

*A Drake & Voss Novella*

Blurt Snodgrass

[321Lumina.com](http://321Lumina.com)

## Chapter One

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He arrived on a Thursday in April, which was the kind of April Thursday that San Francisco produced occasionally as proof that it understood spring — warm in the sun, cool in the shade, the air carrying something from the bay that was neither salt nor sweetness but both at once, the kind of air that made people stop on pavements for a moment and look up without quite knowing why.

He was thirty-eight. Mixed race, Nigerian and British was Flora's read, something of the name and something of the face — the particular combination of features that came from two very specific places and produced something entirely its own. He was lean in the way of people who moved through the world quickly, who covered ground as a matter of habit rather than urgency. He wore a canvas jacket with two pockets on the chest that had the particular shape of pockets that were always full — small notebooks, lens caps, the accumulated daily cargo of a person who documented things. A camera bag over one shoulder, which he set on the floor beside the client chair rather than on the desk, the instinctive placement of someone who didn't put their equipment on surfaces they didn't control.

He carried, in addition to these things, a notebook that he set on his knee when he sat down and did not open. His hands rested on top of it. He looked at the cork board and then at Flora and then at the cork board again, and Flora recognized this as the behavior of someone who had been arguing with himself about this visit for long enough that the argument had left marks — a residual restlessness, a quality of not quite having arrived even though he was here, in the chair, in the office.

"Mr. —" Flora said.

"Okafor-Bright," he said. "Wallace. Sorry — I'm not —" He stopped. Looked at the notebook on his knee. "I'm not sure where to start."

"Start anywhere," Flora said. "We'll find the shape of it."

He looked at her. Something in his face adjusted — the restlessness settling slightly, the recognition that this was a room where he didn't have to have it organized before he spoke.

Nancy came in from the stairs, coat still on, keys in hand — she had been at the archive two blocks away, chasing something for a pending case, and had come back to find the office occupied. She took in Wallace, the camera bag on the floor, the notebook on his knee, the specific quality of his presence in the chair, and she hung her coat on the right hook and sat at her desk and opened her notepad without a word.

She wrote the date and the time.

Below it: *Wallace Okafor-Bright. 38. Photographer.*

She looked at him and waited.

"I want to find my teacher," he said. "A woman named Ida Swann. She ran a photography workshop on Potrero Hill — a studio on 18th Street, she had it for eleven years. She took six students at a time, one cohort a year, and she taught them — she taught us —" He paused, looking for the word. "She taught us to see. Which sounds like something people say about photography, which is why I'm hesitating, but I mean it specifically. She had a method. She was rigorous about it. It wasn't about technique — the technique she assumed you'd already handled, or would handle, that was your own business. It was about what you were looking for before you raised the camera. What question you were asking."

"When were you in her workshop?" Flora said.

"2010," he said. "The last cohort. I was twenty-four. I'd been shooting for four years — street work, some portrait work, I thought I knew what I was doing." He almost smiled. "I did not know what I was doing."

"What did she show you?" Nancy said.

He looked at Nancy. The question had the directness of a woman who wanted the real answer rather than the one that sounded good.

"That I was taking photographs of what I saw," he said, "instead of photographs of what I wanted to understand." He paused. "She said: there's a difference between recording and questioning. You're very good at

recording. You're not yet asking. She said this to me in the third session. In front of the other students." He looked at the window. "I was furious. I thought she was wrong. I went home and looked at two years of my work and I understood she was right and it was one of the most uncomfortable experiences of my professional life and also the most important."

"What happened to her?" Flora said. "The workshop."

"She announced at the final session — my cohort's final session, in December 2010 — that she was done teaching. She thanked us. She said the work had been everything she wanted it to be and she was finished with that chapter. She asked us not to contact her through the studio because she'd be leaving the studio." He looked at his hands on the notebook. "She didn't give us a forwarding anything. She said: go make the work. That was it."

"And you haven't seen her since."

"None of us have," he said. "There were six of us in the cohort and we've stayed in touch — loosely, the way people do — and none of us has found her. She had a gallery presence until about 2011, and then nothing. No website, no social media, no shows. She'd be sixty-three now." He paused. "She's either living very privately or she has left photography entirely or both."

"Why now?" Flora said. "Fourteen years later."

He looked at the notebook.

"I've been offered a commission," he said. "A documentary project — a year's work, maybe longer, following three families in three different countries through a period of significant change. The kind of project that —" He stopped. "The kind of project Ida told me, in 2010, that I would be capable of when I was ready. She was very specific about it. She said: there's a long project in you, a year or more, something that requires sustained attention to a few things rather than broad attention to many. She said I wasn't ready yet but I would be." He paused. "I didn't believe her. I thought she was being generous." He looked at Flora. "I've been offered the project. I want to tell her she was right."

Flora looked at him.

"Is that all?" she said.

He looked at the notebook on his knee.

His hands, which had been resting on it, moved. Not opening it — just moving, the way hands moved when they were aware of something they were deciding about.

"No," he said.

Flora waited.

He looked at the cork board. At the Farallon Islands postcard above the door. At the note on the card stock in Nancy's handwriting. He read it — she could see him reading it — and something in his face changed.

"She wrote me a letter," he said. "In 2011. Eight months after the workshop ended. I don't know how she found my address — I'd moved, I was in a different apartment. But she found it." He paused. "It was a short letter. Two paragraphs. She said she'd been thinking about my work and she wanted to say one more thing that she hadn't said in the workshop." He paused again. "She said she thought I was going to spend the next ten or fifteen years being good in a way that would feel sufficient, and that the risk of sufficient was that you could live inside it without noticing you'd stopped asking the question." He looked at his hands. "She said she hoped I wouldn't do that. She said she hoped I'd find the moment when sufficient stopped being enough."

"Have you?" Flora said.

He looked at her directly.

"I don't know," he said. "That's the other reason I want to find her. I want to ask her." He paused. "I've been good. I've had a good career. I've done work I'm proud of. And I've been offered this commission and I can't tell if it's the moment she was describing or if I'm just —" He stopped. "I can't tell if I'm ready or if I just think I'm ready, which is a different thing, and there's only one person whose judgment I trust enough to ask."

The office was quiet for a moment. The dry cleaner's compressor ran steadily below, the steam beginning its morning migration through the floor, the smell of warm cotton rising.

"You haven't accepted the commission yet," Nancy said.

He looked at her. "No."

"How long do you have?"

"Three weeks."

Nancy wrote something. Flora did not look at what.

"Tell me about Ida Swann," Flora said. "Not the workshop. Her."  
He opened the notebook.

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## Chapter Two

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He had pages about her. Not notes for the meeting — notes accumulated over fourteen years, the way you accumulated notes about someone who had mattered, the scraps and fragments of memory written down before they could blur. Flora could see his handwriting from across the desk, small and dense, the handwriting of someone who filled the space available because there was always more to say than there was room for.

He didn't read from it. He used it the way you used a thing you knew by heart — glancing at it occasionally to confirm, not to retrieve.

Ida Swann had been, before she taught, a documentary photographer of some reputation. Not famous — not the kind of name that crossed from professional recognition into public awareness — but respected in the field, her work collected by two museums, shown in group exhibitions, reviewed seriously. She had spent her thirties and forties making long projects: a decade on a fishing community in Alaska; six years on and off in a Sudanese refugee camp in Chad; three years documenting a single street in Detroit through its demolition and the lives of the people who had lived on it. The work was quiet in the way that work was quiet when the photographer had made themselves invisible — not invisible literally, but trusting enough that the subjects had stopped performing for the camera.

"She talked about that," Wallace said. "In the workshop. She said: your job in the early months of any long project is to become furniture. Not to disappear — you can't disappear, and pretending you can is dishonest. But to become something the room is used to. Something people stop adjusting themselves for." He paused. "She said the photograph you want is never available in the first six months. The photograph you want only exists when they've forgotten you could want it."

"What made her stop?" Nancy said. "The fieldwork. Before she started teaching."

"She had a period of illness," he said. "I don't know the specifics — she didn't discuss it and we didn't ask. But around 2007, 2008, she stepped back from the long projects. She started the workshop in 2000, when she was still doing fieldwork, but after 2008 the workshop was all she did." He paused. "She was good at it. She was — I've had other teachers, I've done residencies, I've had mentors. She was categorically different from all of them. She knew what she was looking at when she looked at your work. She knew what the work was trying to do before you knew."

"Was she kind?" Flora said.

He thought about it.

"She was honest," he said. "Which sometimes looked like kindness and sometimes didn't. She wasn't — she didn't manage you. She didn't soften things to make them easier to receive. She said what she saw and she trusted you to be able to hear it." He paused. "The thing about being trusted to hear hard things is that you generally rise to it. I've never been harder on my own work than I was in that workshop, and I've never been more certain, at the same time, that the work was worth doing."

"Do you know anything about her personal life?" Flora said.

"She lived alone," he said. "She'd been married in her thirties — briefly, from what she mentioned, and she mentioned it only once. No children. She had a — there was a woman she spoke of occasionally, a friend from her Alaska project, someone named Pearce. They seemed close. She came to one of our sessions once, this woman, she sat in the back and didn't say anything. Ida introduced her as an old collaborator."

"First name?"

He thought. "Helen," he said. "I'm fairly sure Helen."

Nancy wrote this down.

"The studio on 18th Street," Flora said. "Do you know if she owned it or rented?"

"Rented, I think. It was a shared building — other studios on the other floors. She had the second floor. There was a print shop below and a ceramics studio above."

"Do you have anything with the address?"

He opened the notebook to a page near the front and set it on the desk and turned it toward Flora. An address on 18th Street in Potrero Hill, written in a different hand than the rest of the notes — older ink, the handwriting of someone younger, the careful printing of a twenty-four-year-old writing down the address of the place that was going to matter.

Flora took a photograph of it on her phone.

"Mr. Okafor-Bright," she said. "The letter she sent you. In 2011. Do you have it?"

He closed the notebook.

"Yes," he said.

"Can I read it?"

He looked at her for a moment. Then he opened the notebook again, to a page near the back, and took from it a folded piece of paper — not a page from the notebook, something that had been kept inside it, thin paper, the kind of paper that had been folded and unfolded many times over fourteen years until the folds were soft and the paper had taken on the quality of cloth.

He handed it to Flora.

She unfolded it carefully.

Two paragraphs, as he'd described. Ida Swann's handwriting — small and precise, the handwriting of a woman who thought about what she was putting on the page before she put it there. No date at the top. No address.

Flora read it.

She read it again.

She passed it to Nancy, who read it without expression and passed it back.

Flora folded it along the existing folds and handed it to Wallace.

"We'll find her," she said.

He took the letter and put it back in the notebook and closed it and set his hands on top of it again.

"Thank you," he said.

He stood. He picked up the camera bag. At the door he paused, the way clients paused, and he read the card stock above — *What do you actually*

*know. Not what you feel. What you know.* — and he stood there reading it for a moment longer than people usually did.

"Did one of you write that?" he said.

"Nancy did," Flora said.

He looked at Nancy.

"It's the question she was always asking," he said. "Ida. In the workshop. She never used those exact words but that's the question." He paused. "What do you actually know. Not what you think you see. Not what you feel about what you see. What do you know." He looked at the card stock. "She'd like that."

He went down the stairs.

They heard the fourth step — the loose carpet, the brief hesitation — and then the street door and then Clement Street absorbing him the way Clement Street absorbed everyone, without ceremony.

Nancy looked at the card stock.

"What did the letter say?" she said.

"What he said it said," Flora said. "And more." She picked up her pen. "I'll tell you when we've found her. Some things are better read in the right order."

Nancy looked at her.

"All right," she said.

She turned back to her notepad and wrote the time and began.

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## Chapter Three

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The studio on 18th Street had changed hands twice since 2010.

Flora went on a Friday, a bright April Friday with the Potrero Hill wind doing what Potrero Hill wind did — purposeful, directional, the kind of wind that felt like it had somewhere to be. The building was a two-story commercial Victorian, the kind that had survived the earthquake and the development pressures of a century and arrived in the present looking slightly surprised to still be there. The print shop below was now a yoga studio. The ceramics studio above, Nancy had established, was still a ceramics studio, different owners.

Flora went to the ceramics studio.

The woman who answered was sixty, grey-haired, hands that showed the work. Flora introduced herself and explained she was looking for information about a former tenant of the second floor — a photographer who had rented the studio until around 2010 or 2011.

The woman — her name was Rosario, she'd had the studio for twenty-two years — looked at her with the assessing gaze of someone who shared a building with strangers for decades and knew how to evaluate them.

"Ida," she said. Not a question.

"You knew her," Flora said.

"Twelve years," Rosario said. "She was below me for twelve years. We shared the bathroom on the landing — the building only had the one, between the floors — which is either the fastest way to hate someone or the fastest way to know them." She leaned against the doorframe. "We knew each other."

"Do you know where she went?" Flora said. "After she left the studio."

Rosario looked at her carefully. "Are you family?"

"No," Flora said. "I've been hired by a former student of hers. He wants to tell her something. Something good."

Rosario studied her.

"She had reasons for leaving quietly," she said. "She was very deliberate about it. I don't know that she'd want to be found."

"I understand that," Flora said. "And if she doesn't, we'll tell our client that and close the case." She looked at Rosario steadily. "But she might want to know this particular thing. And there's someone who needs to tell her."

Rosario looked at the Potrero Hill sky for a moment — the blue of it, the purposeful wind moving through it.

"There was a woman," she said. "Helen Pearce. She and Ida had been friends for thirty years — they'd worked together in Alaska, back when Ida was still doing fieldwork. Helen lives up in Bolinas." She paused. "After Ida left the studio I lost direct contact. But Helen would know. If you find Helen, she'll tell you whether to come any further."

"Thank you," Flora said.

"Tell the student," Rosario said, "that she spoke of her students well. She said once — we were having coffee on the landing, one of those mornings — she said: the work I'm proudest of is the work in their cameras, not mine." She looked at Flora. "Tell him that."

"I will," Flora said.

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Helen Pearce lived on the mesa in Bolinas in a house that was weathered in the way of houses that had decided to simply be part of the coast and let the coast do what it wanted to them. She was seventy, tall, with the permanent squint of someone who had spent decades looking at bright things — snow, water, the particular light of high latitudes. She came to the door in paint-stained overalls and looked at Flora with the same careful assessment Rosario had used, and Flora understood that Ida Swann had been protected by women who knew how to look at people and judge them.

"I got a call from Rosario," Helen said. "She said you'd be coming."

"I'm sorry to arrive without more notice," Flora said.

"Don't be. Come in."

The house was a working house — canvases against walls, books in piles rather than shelves, a kitchen table covered with the evidence of a life that didn't organize itself around visitors. Helen moved through it with the ease of someone for whom the clutter was the order. She made tea without asking and set it on the one clear corner of the kitchen table and sat across from Flora and looked at her.

"Tell me about the student," she said.

Flora told her about Wallace. The workshop, the fourteen years, the commission, the letter. She did not tell Helen what the letter said — that felt like Wallace's to give, not hers.

Helen listened with the quality of attention that Flora had come to recognize in people who had spent their lives looking at things closely. The stillness that was not passive but was the opposite — the stillness of someone for whom paying attention was the whole of the work.

When Flora finished, Helen wrapped both hands around her mug and looked at the table.

"Ida left photography," she said. "You should know that. It's not that she's living privately and still making work — she genuinely left. She made a decision and she's been living it." She paused. "She'd be uncomfortable hearing that her work in the classroom mattered. She has a complicated relationship with that period."

"Why?" Flora said.

Helen looked at her carefully. Deciding how much was hers to give.

"She was sick," she said. "During the teaching years. Not during the workshop itself — she managed the workshop through it — but she was dealing with something serious in the years after. In 2011, 2012. She made decisions about what she wanted her time to look like." She paused. "Teaching had meant a great deal to her and leaving it was hard. It's possible she doesn't want to be reminded of it."

"And photography itself?" Flora said.

"She misses it," Helen said. "She would deny that. But I've known her for thirty-five years and she misses it." She looked at the canvas against the wall — her own work, Flora could see now, the clean geometric abstractions of a painter who had once been a photographer and shifted.

"We both do, in different ways. You don't stop seeing the way you learned to see. You just stop recording it."

Flora thought of Wallace's letter on its folded cloth-soft paper. What Ida had written to him about sufficient. About stopping asking.

"Does she still see?" Flora said.

Helen looked at her.

"Every day," she said. "She lives on a marsh outside Inverness. She walks it every morning. She knows every bird, every change of light, every inch of it through every season." She paused. "She just doesn't have a camera."

Flora sat with that.

"He needs to tell her something," Flora said. "And I think — I think she might need to hear it. But you know her and I don't. I'm asking you to judge."

Helen looked at her tea.

"What does he need to tell her?"

Flora told her about the commission. About Ida's words in the workshop — the long project in you, when you're ready. About the fourteen years of being good in the way that felt sufficient. About Wallace sitting in the client chair with his hands on a notebook and saying: I can't tell if I'm ready or if I just think I'm ready, and there's only one person whose judgment I trust enough to ask.

Helen was quiet for a long time.

Outside, the Bolinas wind moved through the coastal scrub, the sound of it layering with the distant sound of the Pacific, the rhythmic indifferent conversation the coast held with itself.

"He hasn't accepted the commission," Helen said.

"No."

"How long does he have?"

"Two and a half weeks now."

Helen looked at the window.

"Tell me his name again," she said.

"Wallace Okafor-Bright."

Something crossed Helen's face — recognition, or the edge of it. "She mentioned him," she said slowly. "In 2011. The last cohort. She said there was a student who was going to be important. She didn't say his name — she never named students to me, she felt that was a confidence — but she described the work." She paused. "She said: there's one in this cohort who's going to spend too long being comfortable, and I'm afraid I won't be there when he finally stops." She looked at Flora. "She wrote to him."

"Yes," Flora said. "He kept the letter. He carries it with him."

Helen looked at her hands.

"I'll call her," she said. "I'll tell her. And then it's her decision." She looked at Flora directly. "I won't give you her address or her number without her permission. But I'll call her and I'll tell her, and if she wants to hear from him, she'll find a way."

"That's exactly right," Flora said.

Helen looked at her.

"You're not going to push further than that," she said. It wasn't a question.

"No," Flora said. "That's not what this is."

Helen nodded slowly. She picked up her mug.

"Rosario said to tell you — she said to tell the student something Ida said once on the landing. About the work in their cameras."

"She told me," Flora said. "I'll tell him."

"Good." Helen stood, which was the way you indicated a conversation was complete in a house that didn't organize itself around politeness. "I'll call her today."

Flora stood. She put on her coat.

At the door she paused.

"Ms. Pearce," she said. "When you shifted from photography to painting. Was that a loss?"

Helen looked at her for a long moment.

"Yes," she said. "And it was also something else. Something I don't have a name for that isn't loss and isn't gain but is what it is when you stop doing the thing you thought you were and find out what's underneath it." She looked at the canvases against the wall. "The seeing didn't stop. The

recording did. There was more there than I expected once I let the recording go."

Flora looked at the canvases.

"Thank you," she said.

She drove back to San Francisco through the coastal hills, through the Point Reyes corridor, the late afternoon light making long shadows of the eucalyptus trees and the low sun turning the grass to a color that didn't have a name either, and she thought about Ida Swann walking a marsh every morning knowing every bird and every shift of light and not reaching for a camera.

She thought about the letter on its soft folded paper.

She thought about Wallace with his hands on the notebook.

She drove.

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## Chapter Four

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Ida Swann called the office on a Tuesday.

Flora noted this the way she noted all Tuesdays — with the attention of someone who understood that Tuesdays were information.

She called at nine-forty-seven in the morning, which meant she had waited until after nine, which meant she had thought about it, which meant she had decided rather than reacted. The voice on the phone was the voice Flora had constructed from Wallace's description and Rosario's and Helen's and it matched all three and was also its own thing — a voice that had spent decades in difficult places and come back from them knowing more about silence than most people knew about sound.

"Ms. Voss," she said. "Helen Pearce called me."

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

"I'm not going to make this easy for you," Ida said. "I want you to know that. I left the workshop deliberately and I left photography deliberately and I've built a life that doesn't include either and I'm not — I'm not interested in being drawn back into something I closed."

"I understand," Flora said.

"But," Ida said.

Flora waited.

"Helen said he carries the letter." A pause. "That he's carried it for fourteen years."

"Yes."

"In a notebook."

"Yes."

Another pause. "What kind of notebook?"

Flora thought about the notebook on Wallace's knee. The canvas jacket with the full pockets. The handwriting small and dense, filling the space.

"A working notebook," Flora said. "Not a journal. A notebook he uses every day. The letter has been in it the whole time."

Ida was quiet.

"What does he want to tell me?" she said. "Specifically. Helen told me the outline but I want it specifically."

"He wants to tell you that you were right," Flora said. "About the long project. He's been offered the commission. He wants to tell you that the thing you saw in him in 2010 was there, and that he knows it now." She paused. "And he wants to ask you something. Whether he's ready. He says you're the only person whose judgment he trusts enough to ask."

A silence.

"That," Ida said, "is a great deal of weight to put on someone who has been living quietly in Inverness for twelve years."

"Yes," Flora said. "It is."

"Does he know I left photography?"

"No," Flora said. "I haven't told him anything yet. I wanted to find you first."

"He'll want to know why," Ida said. "He'll ask. He was always someone who needed to understand the why before he could move." A pause. "It was one of the things that made him slower than he could have been and better than he would have been otherwise."

Flora looked at the cork board. At the empty space where she would have pinned Ida Swann's name if she'd had it.

"Ms. Swann," she said. "Would you be willing to see him?"

The silence that followed was long enough that Flora heard, distantly, through the phone, the sound of what she assumed was the Inverness marsh — wind across water, the distant complaint of a bird.

"Not in the city," Ida said finally. "Not in San Francisco. If he wants to come to Inverness, I'll see him." A pause. "Tell him to bring the notebook. And tell him —" She stopped. "Tell him I'm not going to answer the question he thinks he's asking. He's asking if he's ready. The real question is different. He'll have to come here to find out what it is."

"All right," Flora said.

"Ms. Voss," Ida said.

"Yes."

"Helen told me what your sign says. The one above the door."

Flora looked at the card stock in Nancy's handwriting.

"What do you actually know," she said. "Not what you feel. What you know."

"Yes," Ida said. "I want you to tell your partner — whoever wrote that — I want you to tell her that's the difference between a photographer and someone who takes photographs." A pause. "Between the question and the answer."

"I'll tell her," Flora said.

Ida hung up.

Flora sat for a moment with the phone.

Then she looked at Nancy.

Nancy was writing in the margin of her notepad, and she finished the sentence she was writing and then she put the cap on her pen and looked up.

"Well," she said.

"She'll see him," Flora said. "Inverness. He has to go to her."

"Of course he does," Nancy said. "That's exactly right." She looked at her notepad. "What did she say the real question was?"

"She wouldn't say," Flora said. "She told him to come find out."

Nancy looked at the window.

"She's still teaching," she said.

"Yes," Flora said. "She doesn't know it."

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## Chapter Five

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Wallace came in on Thursday.

He came in the same way he'd come in the first time — the canvas jacket, the full pockets, the camera bag on the shoulder set on the floor beside the chair. The notebook on his knee. But the restlessness was different now, the quality of it changed. Not the argument-with-himself restlessness of the first visit. Something more focused. A man who had been given a direction and was triangulating.

Flora told him what there was to tell.

Not everything — some of it was Helen's to hold and Rosario's to hold, and she gave him the outline and not the interior. She told him that Ida had left photography deliberately, that she was living on a marsh in Inverness, that she walked it every morning, that she didn't have a camera. She told him Ida would see him if he came to her. She told him to bring the notebook. She told him Ida had said the real question was not the one he thought he was asking.

She told him what Rosario had said on the landing. *The work I'm proudest of is the work in their cameras, not mine.*

He sat with that for a long time.

His hands were on the notebook and the notebook was very still.

"She left photography," he said.

"Yes."

"Does she miss it?"

Flora thought of Helen at the kitchen table. *Every day. She would deny that. But she misses it.*

"I think so," she said. "But she's made a life that holds the missing."

He looked at the cork board. At the postcard above the door.

"She's walking a marsh every morning," he said.

"Yes."

"Knowing every bird."

"Yes."

He was quiet for a long time. Flora let the quiet sit. Nancy was at her desk, pen down, waiting.

"She told me," he said finally, "in the workshop. She said: the question you ask before you raise the camera is the whole of it. If you have the right question the photograph takes care of itself. If you don't have the question it doesn't matter how good your eye is — you're just collecting images." He looked at his hands. "She walks a marsh every morning and she has the question and she doesn't have a camera." He paused. "That's not stopping. That's just — the question finding a different form."

"Yes," Nancy said from her desk. "That's exactly what it is."

He looked at Nancy.

"She said something else," Flora said. "On the phone. She said to tell you —" She paused, making sure she had it right. "She said the real question isn't whether you're ready. She wouldn't say what the real question was. She said you'd have to come to Inverness to find out."

He almost smiled. The full smile, when it came, was his mother's, Flora thought, or whoever had given him the Igbo side of his face — a smile that arrived completely, that didn't hold anything back.

"That's very her," he said.

He stood. He picked up the camera bag. He was already somewhere else — already on the road to Inverness, already on the marsh, already in whatever conversation was going to happen in whatever room Ida Swann had built for herself at the edge of the water.

At the door he stopped.

He took the notebook from his pocket.

He opened it to the page at the back, where the letter lived in its soft folded paper, and he took the letter out and looked at it for a moment, not unfolding it, just holding it.

Then he looked at Flora.

"When I read this," he said, "fourteen years ago — the part about sufficient, about the risk of living inside what's enough without noticing you've stopped asking — I thought she was warning me. I thought she was saying: watch out, this is a trap you might fall into." He paused. "I've been reading it that way for fourteen years." He looked at the letter. "But standing here now I think she was saying something else. I think she was saying: this is going to happen, and when it does, it's going to feel like failure, and it isn't failure, it's the thing you have to pass through on the way to the question that's actually yours." He folded the letter along its existing folds and put it back in the notebook and put the notebook in his pocket. "I think I've been treating it as a warning when it was a map."

Flora looked at him.

"When you see her," she said. "Tell her that."

"Yes," he said. "I'm going to."

He went down the stairs. The fourth step — the pause, the adjustment — and then the door, and then the street.

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## Chapter Six

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The office settled after he'd gone in the way the office settled after a case had resolved — not emptied, but returned to itself, the room re-establishing its own quiet after the particular quality of another person's need had filled it.

Nancy made tea.

She brought Flora's cup and set it on the desk and went back to her own desk and sat and wrapped both hands around her own cup and looked at the cork board.

"What did the letter say?" she said. "The full letter. You said you'd tell me when we'd found her."

Flora looked at the letter that wasn't there — the photograph she'd taken of it on her phone, which she'd looked at several times over the past two weeks. She had not shared it. It had felt, each time she considered sharing it, like something that needed to be said rather than shown.

"She wrote it in 2011," Flora said. "Eight months after the workshop. She said she'd been thinking about his work." She paused. "The first paragraph was what he told us — the warning about sufficient, about noticing when you've stopped asking." She looked at her tea. "The second paragraph she didn't tell us about."

Nancy waited.

"She said: I have been doing this work for eleven years and I have had sixty students and I can count on one hand the ones who had the question before they had the camera. You are one of them. I didn't say this in the workshop because it's the kind of thing that can go wrong if it's said too early. But I'm saying it now because I'm not going to teach anymore and I won't have another chance to say it, and the things worth saying should be said even when the timing isn't right." Flora paused. "She said: go make the

work. Make it like someone who knows what they're looking for. And if you ever find yourself not knowing, go outside and stay there until the question comes back. The question always comes back."

The office was quiet.

The steam came up through the floor.

Nancy looked at her tea.

"She knew she was going to stop," Nancy said. "When she wrote it. She was already saying goodbye."

"Yes," Flora said. "She was putting something in the wall."

Nancy looked up.

Flora looked at the cork board. The photograph of Sorrel Finch's shoe was long gone, the case closed, the pin empty. But she was thinking about the shoe, about Catherine Pearse wrapping something in a good cloth and placing it where it would be held, and about Ida Swann writing to a twenty-four-year-old she had no way of knowing would carry the letter for fourteen years in a notebook he used every day.

"She put the letter where she thought it would be kept," Flora said. "She didn't know if he'd keep it. She didn't know if he'd read it right. But she wrote it and she sent it and she put it in his hands and then she let it be what it was going to be."

"And it was kept," Nancy said.

"And it was kept."

Nancy looked at her notepad. She picked up her pen and wrote something in the margin, slowly, with the careful deliberate hand she used now, the second system layered inside the first.

She looked at what she'd written.

She looked at it again.

It said what she'd written.

Flora watched her do this — the reading back, the confirming — and felt the thing she always felt when she watched it, the thing that was not grief and was not fear but lived in the same neighborhood as both, the thing she was learning to carry without letting it become the main thing in the room.

Nancy looked up.

"The question," she said. "The real question. The one Ida said she'd have to go to Inverness to find out."

"Yes," Flora said.

"What do you think it is?"

Flora looked at the card stock above the door.

*What do you actually know. Not what you feel. What you know.*

"I think," Flora said, "the real question is whether he's asking because he's ready or because he's afraid. Whether the commission is the long project she saw in him or whether it's sufficient wearing the costume of the long project." She paused. "I think she's going to look at him and know which it is. And I think he's going to Inverness because at some level he already knows too, and he wants someone to say it out loud either way."

Nancy looked at her steadily.

"And which is it?" she said.

Flora thought about Wallace in the client chair with the letter in his hands, reading it as a warning for fourteen years and arriving, here, today, at reading it as a map.

"I think," she said, "that a man who has been carrying a letter for fourteen years in a notebook he uses every day has been asking the question the whole time. I think sufficient was never quite enough for him. I think he's been walking the marsh his whole career and he just didn't know that's what he was doing."

"So he's ready," Nancy said.

"I think Ida is going to tell him he's been ready," Flora said. "And that the question was never whether he was ready. The question was whether he knew it."

Nancy looked at her tea.

"What do you actually know," she said quietly. "Not what you feel."

"Yes," Flora said.

They sat in the office in the April afternoon. The light coming through the window onto Clement Street had the quality of the morning's light extended into later in the day, generous with it, the kind of afternoon that didn't announce itself but accumulated. Below, the dry cleaner's compressor cycled on. The steam came up.

After a while Nancy said: "I walked past a marsh last week. In Marin. I was up there for — I was up there for something, I don't remember what, and on the way back I stopped." She looked at the window. "There was a heron. Standing absolutely still in about four inches of water. Just — waiting. In that particular way herons have of waiting that doesn't look like waiting, looks like being." She paused. "I stood there for a long time watching it."

"Did you have your phone?" Flora said. "For a photograph?"

"I had my phone," Nancy said. "I didn't take it out."

Flora looked at her.

"The seeing was enough," Nancy said. "The heron was enough. I didn't need to record it." She picked up her pen. "I'm going to remember that heron for a while. And then I'm going to forget it. And that seems —" She paused. "That seems all right."

Flora held her tea.

She thought about what Helen Pearce had said in Bolinas. *The seeing didn't stop. The recording did. There was more there than I expected once I let the recording go.*

She thought about Nancy writing *tell Flora* in the margin of her notepad and then looking at what she'd written and then looking at it again, making sure.

She thought about a heron standing still in four inches of water in a marsh in Marin, and Nancy standing on the edge of it not reaching for her phone, and the heron being enough, and the seeing being enough, and what it meant to let a thing exist only in yourself for as long as you had it.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date at the top of a fresh page.

She wrote the time.

She did not write anything else yet, because the case was closed and Monday was coming and the next client was coming and the work would continue, and she wanted a moment first, just the room and the tea and the afternoon light and Nancy across the desk with the heron in her and neither of them saying anything about it.

She sat.

The room held what it held.

*Three weeks later a postcard arrived at the office on Clement Street.  
Postmarked Inverness. No return address. A photograph on the front —  
a marsh at dawn, the light low and horizontal, a heron standing at the edge  
of the water, absolutely still.*

*On the back, in handwriting Flora didn't recognize but understood  
immediately:*

*He knew. He went. — I.S.*

*Flora pinned it to the cork board.*

*Nancy read it when she came in and said nothing and sat at her desk  
and wrote the date and the time and continued.*

*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 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.*