DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

The Flooded Town

a 321Lumina.com book

by Blurt Snodgrass

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A Drake & Voss Novella

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Chapter One

She arrived on a Wednesday in June carrying a canvas shopping bag and the specific energy of someone who had been efficient their whole life and was facing, for the first time, a problem that efficiency could not solve.

This was visible before she sat down. It was in the quality of her movement — purposeful, organized, the movement of someone who had spent thirty years in the field and knew how to cover ground without wasting it — and in the way it was currently failing her, the slight hesitation at the door, the pause before she sat, the hand that went to the bag and then away from it as though she'd reached for a tool and remembered she wasn't sure which tool applied.

She was fifty-nine. A geologist's fifty-nine, which was a specific thing — weathered in the way that fieldwork weathered people, the skin of someone who had spent decades outdoors reading landscapes, the eyes of someone accustomed to looking at long timescales and understanding them. She set the canvas bag on the floor beside the chair and looked at the office with the assessing gaze of her profession, reading the room the way she would read a core sample.

She looked at the cork board.

She looked at the nine things on it.

She looked at them carefully, the way she would look at a section of exposed strata, reading the sequence.

"Ms. Morrow," Flora said. "What do you need?"

Cecile Morrow looked at her.

"I need to find out who my mother was," she said. "Before she was my mother."

Nancy came in, hung her coat on the right hook, wrote the name from the phone call. Wrote the time. Read both. Looked at both again.

Good.

She opened her notepad and waited.

Dorothy Morrow, née Beaumont, was eighty-one years old and lived in a care facility in Marin where she had been for two years, since the dementia had progressed to the point where living alone in the house in Novato was no longer safe and Cecile had made the arrangements with the efficiency she brought to everything and had cried in the car on the way home and had not cried since.

"She has moderate dementia," Cecile said. "She knows me most of the time. She knows where she is most of the time. The recent past is difficult — she'll repeat herself, she'll lose the thread of a conversation, she'll sometimes not know what day it is or be confused about whether my father is alive." She paused. "My father has been dead for fifteen years. She sometimes thinks he's coming to visit."

"And the deep past?" Nancy said.

"The deep past surfaces," Cecile said. "That's what they tell you — recent memory goes first, the older memories persist longer. She'll talk about her life with my father, their early years in San Francisco, her work at the telephone company before she had me." She paused. "But before San Francisco. Before 1965. Nothing coherent comes up. Fragments. Names I don't recognize. Once, a song." She paused. "The song was in — I don't know what language. Something Southern, something old. I recorded it on my phone but I've never been able to identify it."

"She never talked about before," Flora said.

"Never," Cecile said. "Not once in fifty-nine years. She was born in a town in rural Georgia called Linden — I know that much from her birth certificate, which I found after my father died when I was going through their papers. Linden, Georgia. Born 1944." She paused. "Linden doesn't exist anymore. The town was flooded in 1962 when the Army Corps of Engineers built a dam. The whole community was displaced — farms, houses, the church, the school. All of it under water." She paused. "My mother was eighteen when it flooded. She came to San Francisco three

years later, in 1965, and she has never mentioned Georgia in my presence. Not Linden, not the flooding, not her family, not her childhood. Nothing."

"You asked," Flora said.

"I asked when I was a child, the way children ask. She changed the subject. I asked when I was older and she said: that's finished. I asked after my father died and she said: I have told you. That's finished." Cecile looked at the canvas bag. "I accepted it. For a long time I accepted it because it was her past and her right to keep it and I was not going to take from her what she had chosen to close." She paused. "And then two months ago I cleaned out her storage unit."

"She'd had the unit for thirty years," Flora said. "And never let you open it."

"She paid for it herself. Twelve dollars a month from her own account. I found out about it after we moved her to the facility — I was dealing with her finances, I found the direct debit, I went to the unit." Cecile reached into the canvas bag. "Most of what was in it was ordinary. Old documents, some of my childhood things she'd kept, things from the house. But at the back, in a box that was older than the others, older than the unit I think, a box she must have moved into the unit when she got it —"

She set a photograph on the desk.

Flora looked at it.

A black and white photograph, the specific quality of photographs from the late 1950s, the paper slightly thick, the image slightly soft. Three people in front of a wooden church. A woman in her thirties with a direct gaze and a good dress and the eyes of someone who was accustomed to being the person who held things together. Beside her a girl of perhaps twelve, slightly turned toward the woman, a posture of proximity — not leaning, but close, the closeness of a child and the person they were oriented toward. Dorothy. Unmistakably Dorothy, the same bone structure, the same set to the jaw that Cecile saw every Wednesday when she drove to Marin.

And beside the woman, slightly apart, a man. Older than the woman, perhaps, or aged differently. And holding his hand, a boy. Seven or eight. Looking at the camera with the particular solemnity of a young child who has been told to stand still and is doing his best.

"She has never mentioned a brother," Cecile said. "Not once. Not a word."

Flora looked at the photograph.

"You're sure it's a brother," she said.

"No," Cecile said. "That's what I want to find out. It might be a cousin, a neighbor's child, someone from the congregation. But the way the man is holding his hand —" She paused. "He's holding his hand the way you hold the hand of your own child. And the boy has my grandmother's eyes. The woman is my grandmother — I'm certain of that, the resemblance to my mother is too strong. And the boy has her eyes."

Flora looked at the photograph.

The boy looking directly at the camera, solemn and cooperative, the hand held by the man beside him.

"What happened to the flooding victims?" Nancy said. "The Linden community. Do you know where they went?"

"That's what I've been able to find out on my own," Cecile said. "Some stayed in Georgia — there were relocation payments, new housing was provided in the county seat. Some left. The community was Black — Linden was a historically Black community, which I also did not know until I started looking. The flooding displaced roughly three hundred families." She paused. "I'm a geologist. I know how to read records. I've been reading the historical records of this flooding for two months and I know the shape of what happened but I can't — I can't find individuals. I can't find my grandmother by name, I can't find the man in the photograph, I can't find the boy." She paused. "I need someone who knows how to find people in the historical record. People who were displaced, who scattered, who may not have wanted to be found."

"Why didn't they want to be found?" Flora said.

Cecile looked at her.

"I don't know yet," she said. "That's part of what I want to understand." She looked at the photograph. "My mother said: that's finished. She said it the way people said things they had decided about. Not the way people said things because they were painful — the way people said things because they had made a determination and were not going to revisit it."

Flora looked at the photograph one more time.

The wooden church behind them. The Georgia light. The boy with his grandmother's eyes.

"What will you do with what you find?" she said.

Cecile looked at the photograph.

"I'll go to my mother," she said. "I'll sit with her and I'll tell her what I found and I'll see if she can hear it. She may not be able to. The dementia may have taken the part of her that could receive it." She paused. "But I want to try while she's still there to try with. Before the window closes."

"All right," Flora said. "Leave us the photograph."

Cecile hesitated for a moment. Then she set it on the desk.

"Be careful with it," she said.

"We will," Flora said.

Chapter Two

Linden, Georgia had existed from 1891 to 1962 when the Hartwell Dam was completed and the reservoir rose over it. It was not the only town flooded — the reservoir took several communities — but Linden was the one that had been predominantly Black, that had been built by freedmen after the Civil War, that had its own church and its own school and its own cemetery, and that had been, by the accounts Flora found in the historical record, a self-sufficient and cohesive community that the flooding destroyed without ceremony or adequate compensation.

Nancy found the historical record over four days of the kind of work she was best at — patient, cross-referential, the slow building of a picture from fragments. She found a collection of oral histories recorded in the 1980s by a Georgia historian who had interviewed former Linden residents about their lives before and after the flooding. She found census records from 1950 and 1960 that documented the Linden community. She found a church registry that had been preserved in the archives of the AME church in the county seat.

Dorothy Beaumont appeared in the 1950 census as Dorothy Ann Beaumont, age six, daughter of James and Ruth Beaumont. In the 1960 census she appeared again, age sixteen, and beside her in the household was a boy listed as Calvin Beaumont, age eight.

A brother.

Calvin Beaumont, born 1952.

"He would be seventy-three now," Flora said.

"If he's alive," Nancy said.

"If he's alive."

They looked at each other.

"The oral histories," Flora said. "Are there Beaumonts in the oral histories?"

Nancy had found two.

The first was an interview with a woman named Ruth Beaumont — Dorothy's mother, the grandmother in the photograph — recorded in 1984. Ruth had been sixty-five at the time of the interview. She had spoken about Linden with the particular clarity of someone who had organized their grief into a narrative they could deliver, the story having been told enough times that it had become polished, the rougher edges worn smooth by repetition. She talked about the church, the school, the way the community had worked together, the farming, the social life of a small Southern Black community in the 1940s and 1950s.

She did not mention her daughter Dorothy.

She mentioned Calvin once, briefly — *my son Calvin went to Atlanta* — and moved on.

The second oral history was from a man named Elias Tatum, a neighbor, who spoke warmly about the Beaumont family, said James Beaumont was the finest man he'd known, said the flooding had broken something that couldn't be put back together, and said — Flora read this carefully, and then again — *I don't know what happened to the children. Dorothy went north I heard. Calvin stayed south. I don't know more than that.*

"Calvin stayed south," Flora said.

"Atlanta," Nancy said. "His mother said Atlanta."

Flora looked at the photograph again. The boy with his grandmother's eyes. Seven or eight in the late 1950s, which put his birth at approximately 1952, which made him seventy-three now.

"Calvin Beaumont in Atlanta," she said. "Let's find him."

It took nine days.

The name was not uncommon enough to narrow easily and Atlanta was not a small city and seventy-three years of a life left many possible traces and many gaps. Nancy worked through the Atlanta voter rolls, the Georgia driver's license records as far as publicly accessible, the professional registries, the AME church networks — the Beaumont family had been

AME, the church registry confirmed it, and the AME network in Atlanta was a coherent community with institutional memory.

On the ninth day Nancy found him.

Calvin Beaumont, seventy-three, retired postal worker, lived in Decatur, the suburb east of Atlanta where a significant portion of Atlanta's Black professional class had settled over the decades. He had a phone number attached to an address that had been his for twenty-two years.

Flora called on a Tuesday.

She noted this the way she noted all Tuesdays.

He answered on the third ring.

His voice was the voice of a man who had lived in the South his whole life — not the performed Southern accent of movies but the real thing, the cadence and the music of it, the particular way of taking time over consonants that came from a specific place.

"Mr. Beaumont," Flora said. "My name is Flora Voss. I'm a private investigator in San Francisco. I'm calling about your sister."

A silence.

Not the silence of not knowing who she meant.

The silence of knowing exactly who she meant and having been waiting, in some form, for some version of this call, for a long time.

"Dorothy," he said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"She's alive?" he said.

"Yes," Flora said. "She's eighty-one. She's in a care facility in Marin. She has dementia."

A longer silence.

"Her daughter hired you," he said.

"Yes. Her daughter Cecile. Cecile found a photograph — the three of you, your mother, in front of the church in Linden."

"I know the photograph," he said. His voice was steady. The steadiness of someone receiving information they'd been preparing to receive for a long time. "My mother had it."

"Your mother gave an oral history in 1984," Flora said. "She mentioned you briefly. She said you went to Atlanta."

"I went to Atlanta in 1965," he said. "Same year Dorothy went to San Francisco." A pause. "We left the same year. Separately."

"Had you been in contact?" Flora said. "Over the years."

"No," he said.

"Not at all?"

"Not since 1965." He paused. "Dorothy made a decision. She was very clear about it. She said: I'm going to San Francisco and I'm going to make a life there and I'm going to be finished with all of this." He paused. "She meant Georgia. She meant the flooding, the relocation, all of it. She meant —" He stopped. "She meant some other things too. Things that were harder to say." He paused. "I respected her decision. For fifty-eight years I have respected her decision."

"Mr. Beaumont," Flora said. "What happened in Linden? Before your mother left. Before Dorothy left. What is it that Dorothy was finished with?"

A long silence.

Flora waited.

The silence had a shape to it — not reluctance, not refusal. The shape of a man deciding whether the time had come to say the thing he'd been carrying for fifty-eight years, and arriving at: yes.

"Our father," he said.

Chapter Three

She drove to Marin on a Thursday to see Dorothy before she saw Cecile.

She did not have a professional reason to do this. The case was Cecile's, not Dorothy's, and everything she found was Cecile's to give or not give to her mother as she saw fit. But she had asked Calvin Beaumont if she could share what he'd told her with Dorothy, and he'd been quiet for a long time and then said: yes. Tell her I'm not angry. Tell her I never was.

The care facility was the kind that had been designed to feel like it wasn't a care facility — the gardens, the common rooms with their good light, the staff who called residents by their first names. Flora had been in enough of them over the years of the work to understand that the design was not cynical, that the people who worked in these places mostly meant it, that the attempt to make something livable out of an unlive-in situation was a genuine attempt even when it was imperfect.

Dorothy was in the garden.

She was a small woman, eighty-one, sitting in a garden chair in the June afternoon with a blanket across her knees despite the warmth, the way some old people kept blankets across their knees regardless of temperature as though the warmth was not about the temperature but about the boundary, about knowing where they ended and the world began.

Flora introduced herself. Said she was a friend of Cecile's. This was close enough to true.

Dorothy looked at her with the specific quality of attention that dementia produced — fully present in some moments, the intelligence still clearly there and working, and then a flickering, a shift, the thought going somewhere else briefly before returning.

"Cecile," Dorothy said. "She comes on Wednesdays."

"Yes," Flora said. "She told me."

"She worries," Dorothy said. "She's always worried. Even when she was small she worried. I used to tell her: Cecile, the earth is four billion years old, it will still be here on Thursday." She paused. "She became a geologist. I don't know if I caused that."

"I think you gave her a way of thinking about time," Flora said.

Dorothy looked at her.

"Who are you?" she said. Not hostilely — genuinely, the question of someone whose memory had shifted for a moment.

"A friend of Cecile's," Flora said. "I came to tell you something."

"Tell me," Dorothy said.

Flora looked at the garden. The roses, the June light, the other residents at other chairs and benches, the ordinary afternoon of a place where people were being looked after.

"I found Calvin," she said.

Dorothy went very still.

The stillness that was different from all her other stillnesses. Not the dementia stillness, not the resting stillness, not the attending-to-something stillness. The stillness of a woman who had not heard that name in fifty-eight years and was hearing it now and the hearing was very large.

"Calvin," she said.

"Yes. He lives in Decatur, outside Atlanta. He's seventy-three. He's well." Flora paused. "He asked me to tell you he's not angry. He said he never was."

Dorothy looked at the roses.

Her hands, which had been folded in her lap under the blanket, moved. She took her hands out from under the blanket and held them in her lap, open, palms up, the way Thomas Spry had held his hands in the client chair, the gesture of someone checking what they were carrying.

"He was so small," Dorothy said. "When I left. He was thirteen."

"Yes," Flora said.

"I couldn't take him," Dorothy said. "I couldn't take him because —" She stopped. She looked at Flora. "Do you know why I left?"

"Yes," Flora said. "He told me."

Dorothy looked at the garden.

Their father, James Beaumont, had been what Calvin had told Flora he was — carefully, without drama, in the measured way of someone who had a long time ago found the words for it and used them only when required: a man who hurt his family. Not all the time. Not in ways that the outside saw. But consistently, and in ways that had shaped Dorothy from childhood, and in ways that had shaped the decision she made at twenty-one to go to San Francisco and be finished with all of it.

She had left Calvin behind.

Calvin had been thirteen and their mother had been alive and Dorothy had calculated — a twenty-one-year-old's calculation, a frightened person's calculation — that Calvin would be all right, that their mother would protect him, that she could not save both of them and she had chosen to save herself.

She had spent fifty-eight years not knowing if she was right.

"He was all right," Flora said. "Your mother protected him. He went to Atlanta when he was grown. He had a good life." She paused. "He became a postal worker. He has two children and four grandchildren. He goes to the AME church every Sunday." She paused. "He has a photograph of the three of you in front of the Linden church. He's had it his whole life."

Dorothy looked at her hands.

"I thought about writing to him," she said. "Many times. When Cecile was born. When her father died. When the dementia started and I knew —" She stopped. "I knew I was losing time. I thought about writing." She paused. "I was afraid he would be angry."

"He said he never was," Flora said.

Dorothy was quiet.

A bird landed in the roses nearby and considered them and flew on.

"He was thirteen," Dorothy said again. "He used to follow me everywhere when he was small. He wanted to do everything I did. He wanted to read what I was reading and go where I was going." She paused. "He was very good. A very good boy." She looked at Flora. "Is he happy?"

"He seemed content," Flora said. "He has his family. He has his church. He's been in the same house for twenty-two years." She paused. "He's been waiting for someone to tell him Dorothy was all right."

Dorothy looked at the garden.

Something moved in her face — something large and old and very carefully held for a very long time, moving.

"I was all right," she said. "I became all right." She paused. "I had Cecile. I had her father. I had a life." She paused. "Is that enough?"

"I think so," Flora said. "I think that's what he wanted to know."

Dorothy looked at her hands again.

"Will you tell Cecile?" she said.

"Yes," Flora said. "She hired me to find him."

"She found him," Dorothy said. "Through you." She almost smiled. "She always found things through persistence. Even as a child. She didn't stop until she understood the thing." She paused. "She became a geologist. She reads the record of the earth." She looked at Flora. "I didn't want her to read my record."

"I know," Flora said.

"I was wrong," Dorothy said. "To close it the way I did. To say that's finished and mean it so completely that it became true." She paused. "You can't just decide things are finished. The things are still there. They're just underwater." She looked at the roses. "Like Linden."

The afternoon was warm and still. The garden held its June light.

"Cecile is coming on Wednesday," Flora said.

"She comes every Wednesday," Dorothy said.

"Tell her about Calvin," Flora said. "When she comes. Tell her what you want to tell her. She can hear it." She paused. "She's been waiting to hear it for a long time."

Dorothy looked at her.

"She's been worried," she said.

"Yes," Flora said. "But she's also been patient. The way a geologist is patient." She paused. "She understands long timescales."

Something in Dorothy's face that was not quite a smile but was what came before one.

"The earth is four billion years old," she said.

"Yes," Flora said. "It will still be here on Thursday."

Chapter Four

She told Cecile everything.

Cecile came in on a Friday, the Friday before the Wednesday she would go to see her mother, and she sat in the client chair and Flora told her about Calvin — Decatur, the postal service, the four grandchildren, the AME church, the photograph he had kept for fifty-eight years. She told her about their father, carefully and with the care the subject required. She told her about going to see Dorothy in the garden on Thursday, the blanket across her knees, the stillness when she heard Calvin's name.

She told her what Dorothy had said.

You can't just decide things are finished. The things are still there. They're just underwater. Like Linden.

Cecile sat with this.

She sat with it for a long time in the way of someone who was a scientist and knew that some things required sitting with before they resolved.

"She went to see her," she said finally. "Before I could go. You went to see her."

"Yes," Flora said. "I'm sorry — I should have discussed it with you first. But I'd spoken to Calvin and he said: tell her I'm not angry. And I thought —"

"No," Cecile said. "No, you were right. She needed to hear it from someone who wasn't me." She paused. "She's spent fifty-eight years being finished. Hearing it from me would have been — she would have needed to manage it for my benefit. With a stranger she could just —" She paused. "Just receive it."

"Yes," Flora said. "That's what I thought."

Cecile looked at the photograph, still on the desk where Flora had been keeping it carefully.

"Can I have it back now?" she said.

"Of course," Flora said.

Cecile picked it up. She looked at it for a long time — Dorothy at twelve, her grandmother, the man holding the boy's hand, the wooden church in the Georgia light.

"I'm going to show her this on Wednesday," she said. "Tell her I know about Linden. Tell her I know about Calvin." She paused. "And then I'm going to sit with her and let her tell me whatever she can tell me. However much she has left."

"Yes," Flora said.

"She may not remember on Wednesday what she knew on Thursday," Cecile said. The scientist's precision. "The dementia doesn't —it's not reliable. She may be somewhere else on Wednesday."

"Yes," Flora said. "That's possible."

"But she'll have had Thursday," Cecile said. "She'll have had Thursday when she heard. Whatever she does or doesn't remember on Wednesday, Thursday happened." She paused. "That's something. That's not nothing."

"No," Flora said. "It isn't."

Cecile held the photograph.

"The boy," she said. "He has our grandmother's eyes."

"Yes," Flora said.

"He's seventy-three," Cecile said. "He's been alive for seventy-three years and I didn't know he existed." She paused. "I have an uncle."

She said it the way you said something you'd known abstractly and were only now knowing actually, the way the fact became real in the saying.

"You have an uncle," Flora said.

"I'm going to write to him," Cecile said. "After Wednesday. I'm going to write to him and tell him who I am."

"He'll want to hear from you," Flora said.

Cecile looked at the photograph one more time. Then she put it carefully in the canvas bag.

She looked at the cork board.

The nine things on it. She looked at them the way she'd looked at them when she came in, reading the sequence.

"These are all from the people you've found things for," she said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"They wrote back," she said.

"They sent things back," Flora said. "Not all of them wrote. Some of them sent photographs. One sent a postcard with two sentences. One sent a note that said four words."

Cecile looked at the nine things.

"The record," she said. "Of what the work has done."

"Yes," Nancy said from her desk.

Cecile looked at Nancy.

"You kept it all," she said.

"It belongs on the board," Nancy said. "It's evidence. Of what was there."

Cecile looked at Nancy for a moment with the focused attention of someone registering something.

"My mother says she's finished with things," she said. "She says things are underwater. But the record stays. Even when the town is flooded, the record stays. You just have to know where to look for it."

"Yes," Nancy said. "That's right."

Cecile picked up the canvas bag.

She went to the door.

She stopped at the threshold and looked back one more time at the cork board, at the nine things, at the accumulation.

"She used to sing," Cecile said. "When I was a child. In the kitchen when she cooked. She stopped when I was older — I don't know when, I didn't notice when, one day I realized she hadn't sung in years." She paused. "When the dementia started she started singing again. In her room at the facility. The nurses mentioned it." She paused. "I recorded it on my phone. The song. The one in the language I couldn't identify."

"Yes," Flora said.

"Do you know what language it might be?" Cecile said.

Flora looked at Nancy.

Nancy looked at the notepad.

"In the oral history records," Nancy said, "Linden had a significant Gullah community. People whose ancestors came from the Sea Islands. Some communities in rural Georgia had retained elements of Gullah — the language, the music." She paused. "It's possible the song is Gullah."

Cecile looked at her.

"My grandmother's eyes," she said slowly. "The boy had my grandmother's eyes. And my grandmother —"

"It would explain some things," Nancy said. "About why your mother felt the need to close so completely. About what was finished." She paused. "Not just the flooding. Not just your grandfather. The whole — the whole fabric of where she came from, which was complicated in ways that a twenty-one-year-old might have needed to put down completely in order to walk forward."

Cecile was very still.

"She wasn't just leaving Georgia," she said.

"I don't know," Nancy said carefully. "I'm speculating. But it's possible she was leaving something larger than the flooding. Something that felt, in 1965, impossible to carry all the way to San Francisco."

Cecile held the canvas bag with the photograph in it.

"And Calvin carried it," she said. "He stayed in the South. He went to the AME church. He kept the photograph." She paused. "He carried what she put down."

"Yes," Flora said. "I think so."

Cecile looked at the window.

"I need to learn about Gullah," she said. Not to them. To herself. The scientist identifying the next piece of the record to read.

She went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

Chapter Five

Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and they sat in the June office and the afternoon did what June afternoons did — warm, the light generous, the city outside the window going about its long summer business.

"The song," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"She started singing again when the dementia came," Nancy said. "When the recent past started going. The older memory surfacing."

"Yes."

"Linden surfaced," Nancy said. "Even though she'd said it was finished. She'd said it was underwater. But it surfaced." She paused. "Things don't stay finished. They stay submerged, sometimes. But not finished."

Flora looked at the cork board.

The ten things — they had added Calvin's address, written on a slip of paper, not an artifact from the outside but a piece of the record, something that would eventually become a letter Cecile would send and something that would eventually come back to the board in some form, she believed. The returns kept coming. The record kept accumulating.

"She was Gullah," Flora said. "Or partly. Or her people were."

"Possibly," Nancy said.

"And she came to San Francisco in 1965 and said that's finished," Flora said. "And she built a life and she raised Cecile to be a scientist who read the record of the earth." She paused. "And at the end, when the recent past goes and the old past surfaces, what surfaces is the song."

"The body remembers," Nancy said.

Flora looked at her.

"There's a kind of memory that isn't in the mind," Nancy said. "That's in the body. In the breath and the voice and the hands. When the mind starts losing its grip the body sometimes holds on." She paused. "The song is that kind of memory."

"Yes," Flora said. "I think so."

Nancy held her tea.

She was quiet for a while.

Flora looked at her — the careful hand, the notepad, the pen set parallel. The daily discipline. The managing that was real work.

"Nancy," she said.

Nancy looked at her.

"The song in your body," Flora said. "The court stenographer's muscle memory. The shorthand. The thirty years of sitting in rooms and recording what happened."

"Yes," Nancy said.

"Is it still there?"

Nancy looked at her hands.

"Some of it," she said. "The older parts. The parts I learned first, when I was young and the learning went in deeply." She paused. "The recent things are harder. The things I learned in the last five years. But the old things — the grammar of it, the basic vocabulary — those are still there." She paused. "My hands still know how to hold a pen. They know the weight of it. They know the pressure." She paused. "I don't think I'll lose that."

Flora looked at her.

"Good," she said.

Nancy looked at the notepad.

She picked up the pen.

She held it for a moment — the weight of it, the pressure, the thirty years of holding it.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She read both.

She looked at them again.

"Good," she said.

The word that was not for Flora. The word that was the daily confirmation.

Flora heard it.

She picked up her pen.

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

She wrote the time.

Outside, Clement Street went on being Clement Street in the June afternoon, the long light of early summer doing what it did, the city going about its oldest business, the business of people being here and then not being here and leaving things behind for whoever came next.

She waited for the next case.

Four weeks later two things arrived on the same day.

The first was a postcard from Cecile. A photograph of a lake — still, blue-grey, the Georgia hills behind it, the water that had been there since 1962. On the back, in Cecile's geologist's hand:

She sang the song on Wednesday. She knew all the words. She held my hand.

Below that: Calvin is coming in September. She knows.

The second was a card from Calvin Beaumont. Cream card, careful handwriting, the handwriting of a man who had learned his letters carefully and had never stopped caring how they looked.

It said: Tell Cecile she has her grandmother's eyes.

Flora pinned both to the cork board.

Nancy read them.

She read the second one again.

She put the cap on her pen and set it parallel to the notepad and looked at the cork board for a long time.

Then she said: eleven things.

Flora said: yes.

The work continued.

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.

A postcard of a table: I'm the one who gets to sit at it first.

A cream note in fountain pen: You cannot smell your own smell. But you can know that it exists.

A card on good paper: Tell him he was right.

A postcard of a lake: She sang the song on Wednesday. She knew all the words. She held my hand.

A cream card: Tell Cecile she has her grandmother's eyes.

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

Neither of them had fixed it.

Neither of them ever would.

End.