

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

The Last Tuesday

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

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Chapter One

The dry cleaner below them opened at seven. Flora had learned to be at her desk by six-forty-five, before the steam started coming up through the floorboards and made the office smell like someone else's shirts.

She hung her coat on the hook behind the door — her hook, left side, Nancy's was right, a distinction that had never been discussed and never needed to be — and stood for a moment looking at the cork board.

Ruth Calloway. 58. Last seen Tuesday the 11th.

Flora had taken the case on Friday. Today was Wednesday. Somewhere between those two facts was a Tuesday she could not account for, and somewhere in that Tuesday, if she knew herself at all, was something important.

She sat down and opened the recorder.

Her own voice came back to her flat and slightly too loud, the way recorded voices always were.

"Calloway residence, 11 Orchard Slip. Spoke to the husband — Martin, goes by Marty, retired electrician, big hands, keeps them very still when he talks which I don't love. Says Ruth left for her book club Tuesday morning and didn't come back. Book club meets at a woman called Deirdre Pham's house on Taraval. I have the address. The husband made me tea I didn't drink. There's something about the kitchen I want to think about more."

Flora stopped the recording. Played that last sentence again.

There's something about the kitchen I want to think about more.

She had not thought about it more. She had lost the day before she could.

She heard Nancy on the stairs — the particular rhythm of it, the pause on the fourth step where the carpet was loose, the longer pause at the top

while she found her keys. Flora had the kettle on before the door opened.

"You're early," Nancy said, which was what she said every morning.

"You're late," Flora said, which was what she said every morning. Nancy was not late. Nancy was never late. It was simply what they said.

Nancy hung her coat on the right hook, set her bag on her chair, and looked at the cork board with the expression she reserved for new cases — not quite a frown, not quite interest, somewhere precise between the two.

"You've been staring at Calloway," she said.

"I lost Tuesday."

"I know you lost Tuesday. I was there." Nancy opened her bag and produced a manila folder, which she set on Flora's desk with the particular firmness of someone delivering evidence. "I was also taking notes."

Flora looked at the folder. Twelve pages, Nancy's handwriting, dated and timed in the margin like court transcripts. She felt the familiar mixture of gratitude and something she had never found the right word for. Not shame exactly. Something quieter than shame.

"The kitchen," Flora said.

Nancy poured herself the first coffee, checked it, poured Flora's. "Page seven."

Flora turned to page seven.

14:32 — F. notes kitchen. Returns to it twice without explanation. On third pass stands in doorway approx. 40 seconds. Says: there's something about this room. Does not elaborate. Photograph taken (attached).

Flora turned the page. The photograph was paperclipped to the back — Flora's own phone camera, slightly tilted. A normal kitchen. Pale yellow walls. A calendar on the wall beside the refrigerator.

She looked at it for a long time.

"The calendar," she said.

Nancy came and stood beside her, reading glasses on now, looking at the photograph. She was quiet for a moment in the way she was quiet when she was thinking rather than when she had lost the thread.

"Every month is a woman's name," Nancy said.

Flora looked again. The calendar was the kind charities sent — a different photograph for each month. She hadn't been able to read the names

from this distance, but the format was clear. A woman's face. A woman's name.

"What month was it open to?" Flora asked.

Nancy looked at her over her glasses. "You didn't write it down."

"I know I didn't write it down. I'm asking if you remember."

A pause. Shorter than Flora feared, longer than she would have liked.

"March," Nancy said. "I'm fairly sure it was March."

Flora wrote it down. *Calendar. Women's names. March.*

Outside, the dry cleaner's compressor shuddered to life. Steam began its slow migration through the floor. Somewhere on Clement Street a delivery truck was backing up, its warning beep patient and indifferent.

"There's a woman coming in at nine," Nancy said, returning to her desk. "Says she knows something about Ruth Calloway. Wouldn't give her name on the phone."

Flora looked up. "How did she sound?"

Nancy considered this with the seriousness she gave all questions of tone and register. "Frightened," she said. "But not of us. Of something she already knew."

Flora nodded and turned back to page seven.

She read her own Tuesday back to herself, word by word, the way you read a letter from someone you used to be.

Chapter Two

The woman arrived at eight-forty-three.

Flora noted this because punctuality told you something — early meant anxious, late meant ambivalent, and seventeen minutes early meant whoever this was had been sitting in her car on Clement Street for longer than she'd intended, working up to it.

She was around fifty, or had been hard on fifty and come out the other side. Good coat, wrong shoes for the weather, hair that had been arranged carefully that morning and had since given up. She stood in the doorway looking at the office the way people looked at doctors' waiting rooms — taking inventory, reassessing, deciding whether to stay.

"Mrs. —" Flora began.

"Pham," the woman said. "Deirdre Pham."

Flora kept her face neutral. Nancy, at her desk, did the same. They had learned not to react to things simultaneously — it unnerved clients.

Deirdre Pham. The book club. Ruth Calloway's last known destination.

"Sit down, Ms. Pham," Flora said. "I'll get you some coffee."

"I don't want coffee." She sat anyway, on the edge of the client chair, coat still buttoned. "I want to know what Marty Calloway told you."

"That's not how this works," Nancy said, not unkindly, from her desk. She didn't look up from what she was writing. "You tell us what you know. We tell you what we can."

Deirdre Pham looked at Nancy the way people sometimes looked at Nancy — recalibrating. Expecting a receptionist, finding something else.

"Ruth didn't go missing," Deirdre said. "She left. There's a difference and Marty knows there's a difference and if he hired you to find her then he's not looking for her, he's looking for where she went so he can —" She

stopped. Pressed her lips together. Started again more carefully. "Ruth planned this. For a long time. I helped her plan it."

The steam was coming up through the floor now. Flora could smell someone's wool suit, or the ghost of one.

"How long?" Flora asked.

"Eight months." Deirdre finally unbuttoned her coat, as though the decision to speak had made her warm. "The book club was a cover. Has been for two years. We don't read books. We help women leave."

Nancy had stopped pretending to write. Flora heard her pen go down on the desk, quietly, the way Nancy did things when she was paying her fullest attention.

"Leave as in —" Flora said.

"Leave as in leave." Deirdre met her eyes. "Safely. With somewhere to go. With their documents, their money, their children if there are children. We've helped eleven women in three years. Ruth is the twelfth." She paused. "Was supposed to be the quietest. Marty isn't — he hasn't hurt her. Not the way you'd think. But there are other ways to hurt someone and Ruth had been hurt in all of them for twenty-two years and she was done."

Flora thought about the kitchen. The very still hands. The tea she hadn't drunk.

"Why come to us?" Flora asked.

"Because Marty hired you." Deirdre looked between them. "And I need to know what you found on Tuesday. Before you found it."

Flora felt the particular stillness she felt when a case turned — the moment when the shape of it changed and you could either catch up or fall behind.

"Ms. Pham," she said. "I need to be honest with you about something."

Deirdre waited.

"I have a condition. A neurological condition. I lose my Tuesdays — the memory of them. I was at the Calloway house on Tuesday and I have no direct recollection of it." She watched Deirdre's face move through surprise and out the other side. "My partner was with me and took detailed notes. But there may be things I noticed that didn't make it into the notes. Things I can't retrieve."

A long silence.

"You're telling me," Deirdre said slowly, "that the investigator Marty hired to find his wife can't remember what she found."

"I'm telling you," Flora said, "that whatever I found on Tuesday, Marty Calloway doesn't know about it either. Which means right now you and I are in the same position." She leaned forward slightly. "There's a calendar in the Calloway kitchen. Women's names. Open to March. What's in March?"

Deirdre Pham went very still.

Then she reached into her bag and put a key on the desk between them.

"That," she said, "is what I came here to tell you."

Nancy picked up her pen and wrote the time in the margin of her notepad: *08:51*.

Below it she wrote: *Case has turned*.

Below that, smaller, in the shorthand she used for things she didn't want Flora to see but needed to record: *Good day so far. Remember this one*.

Chapter Three

The key was brass. Small, the kind that opened a padlock or a post office box, worn smooth on one side from years of being carried somewhere close to the body.

Flora did not touch it.

"Where does it go?" she asked.

Deirdre looked at the key the way you look at something you have been carrying for a long time and are not sure you are ready to put down. "There's a storage unit on Nineteenth. Industrial part, near the rail yard. Ruth rented it eighteen months ago under a different name." She paused. "Her mother's name."

"What's in it?"

"Everything she's leaving behind. And everything she's taking with her." Deirdre finally looked up. "We use them as staging points. The women put things there over months — documents, cash, things they can't carry out of the house all at once without being noticed. When they go, they go to the unit first. Pick up what they need. Then they're gone."

Nancy had her notepad open. Flora could hear the pen moving without looking.

"Ruth went to the unit on Tuesday," Flora said. It wasn't a question.

"She was supposed to. That was the plan. Tuesday morning, book club as cover, unit by eleven, out of the city by noon." Deirdre's hands were folded on her knee, very still. "She never arrived."

The steam shifted under the floor. A cable car bell rang somewhere down the hill, faint and unhurried.

"You've been to the unit since?" Flora asked.

"Yesterday. Her bag is there. Packed. Everything she needed." Deirdre's voice stayed even with some effort. "She got that far and then she didn't get any further."

Flora looked at the key. Thought about a woman who had spent eighteen months quietly, carefully, building her way out — the discipline of it, the patience, the loneliness of a plan you cannot tell anyone about, the way you would have to look at your life every day and pretend it was the only life you had.

"Ms. Pham," she said. "Is it possible Ruth changed her mind?"

Deirdre's answer was immediate. "No."

"People do."

"Not Ruth. Not after twenty-two years." She said it the way Nancy stated facts — without heat, without the need to convince. Just the weight of knowing someone. "She didn't change her mind. Something happened."

Flora picked up the key.

It was lighter than she expected. She turned it over once and set it down in front of her, not giving it back, not keeping it, just placing it between them where they could both see it.

"We'll need the address of the unit," she said. "The name it's registered under. And the names of the other women in the group."

Deirdre shook her head. "Not the other women. They have nothing to do with this and I won't put them at risk."

"One of them might have seen something."

"No."

Flora looked at her. Deirdre looked back. It was the look of someone who had learned, the hard way, which things were negotiable and which ones weren't.

"All right," Flora said. "The unit and the name."

Deirdre reached into her bag again and produced a folded piece of paper, which she set beside the key. "It's all there. The unit number, the combination for the outer gate, the name." She stood, buttoning her coat with the same efficient composure she'd had when she walked in, restored now that the key was no longer hers to carry. "One more thing."

She looked at Flora directly.

"Marty Calloway has very still hands," she said. "Did you notice that?"

Flora felt something move through her — not memory exactly, because she had no memory of Tuesday. More like the shadow a memory casts. The shape of something she had known and lost.

"My notes say I noticed," she said carefully.

"People who keep very still," Deirdre said, "have usually learned to. Because moving unpredictably got them into trouble." She picked up her bag. "Ruth told me that. She said it took her eleven years to understand what his stillness meant."

She left. The door closed behind her with the particular quiet of someone who had learned not to slam things.

Flora sat for a moment. Then she unfolded the piece of paper.

Unit 14. Outer gate: 2-7-4-1. Registered to: Eileen Marsh.

She looked at the name. Something about it.

"Nancy," she said.

"Already on it," Nancy said from her desk. Flora heard the sound of a drawer opening, a folder being pulled. Then a pause — longer than it should have been. Then Nancy's voice, carefully steady: "Eileen Marsh. That name is familiar to me."

"From where?"

Another pause. The drawer closed.

"I'm not sure," Nancy said. "Give me a moment."

Flora waited. She had learned, over years, how to wait through Nancy's moments — how to keep her face turned away, how to let the silence sit without filling it, how to give Nancy the dignity of arriving at her own answer.

"The courthouse," Nancy said finally. "1987 or 1988. An estate case." She paused again. "I transcribed it."

Flora turned around slowly.

Nancy was sitting very straight, both hands flat on her desk, looking at nothing in particular with the expression she wore when she was reading something written only inside her own head.

"The Marsh estate," she said. "There was a daughter. A dispute over the will." She stopped. Then: "I need to find something."

She stood and went to the wall of filing boxes that lined the back of the office — her own archive, older than the partnership, older than this office, thirty years of a court stenographer's meticulous life. She ran a finger along the labels. Stopped at a box near the end. Pulled it down.

Flora watched her open it and begin to page through folders with the focused precision that was still, on good days, entirely Nancy.

"What am I looking for?" Flora asked.

"I don't know yet," Nancy said. "But I wrote it down."

Chapter Four

Nancy found it in the third folder.

Flora knew she'd found it because the paging stopped. The particular sound of Nancy working through paper — methodical, steady, one sheet at a time — simply ceased, and in its place was a silence that had a different quality to it. Not the silence of not finding. The silence of finding something you weren't entirely prepared for.

Flora waited.

"Ruth Calloway," Nancy said, "was born Ruth Eileen Marsh."

Flora set down her coffee.

"Marty Calloway married Eileen Marsh's daughter," Nancy continued, her voice taking on the flat careful tone she used when she was reading from her own transcripts, the professional voice, the one that had spent three decades keeping its own reactions out of the record. "The estate dispute in 1988 was between Ruth and her brother over their mother's property. A house on Quintara. Ruth lost."

"How did she lose?"

"Her brother produced a later will. Ruth contested it. The judge found for the brother." Nancy paused. "I remember now. She was very young. Twenty, twenty-one. She sat very straight through the whole thing and when the judgment came she didn't react at all. I remember thinking that was either very strong or very bad."

Flora thought about a twenty-year-old woman sitting straight in a courtroom, learning that stillness. Learning it years before she married a man who had his own reasons for keeping still.

"The storage unit," she said. "She registered it in her mother's name."

"Yes."

"Not to hide it. To remember something."

Nancy closed the folder. "That would be my read."

Flora stood and went to the cork board. She pinned the piece of paper with the unit details to it — Unit 14, 2-7-4-1, Eileen Marsh — and stood looking at it alongside Ruth Calloway's photograph. A woman in her late fifties, the photo pulled from a neighbourhood newsletter Marty had provided. She was smiling at something outside the frame.

"We need to go to the unit," Flora said.

Nancy looked at the window. It was quarter past nine. The fog was still down, the kind that didn't burn off until noon.

"Today is Wednesday," Nancy said.

"I know what day it is."

"I'm noting it for the record," Nancy said, which was what she said when she was noting it for herself. "You'll remember today."

Flora looked at her. Nancy was already putting on her coat.

"Bring the recorder," Nancy said.

Chapter Five

The storage place on Nineteenth was the kind that had existed in that spot forever, or felt like it — corrugated iron, a hand-painted sign, a forecourt puddled from the night's rain. The kind of place that didn't ask questions because its entire business model depended on not asking questions.

Flora punched in the gate code. 2-7-4-1. The gate shuddered and rolled back.

Unit 14 was at the far end of the second row, tucked against the back fence where a stand of eucalyptus dropped leaves onto the roof. Flora crouched and fitted the brass key into the padlock. It turned without resistance, the way a lock turns when it has been used regularly and recently.

She lifted the door.

The unit was small. Eight feet by ten, maybe. Concrete floor, bare bulb on a cord, the particular smell of a space that has been visited often but never inhabited. Along the left wall, a row of banker's boxes, each one labeled in a handwriting Flora didn't recognise — careful, upright, the handwriting of someone who had learned to be legible. Along the right wall, a folding table. On the table, a bag.

A good bag. Soft leather, the dark green of old library shelves, worn at the handles. Packed and zipped and ready.

Flora didn't touch it yet.

Nancy stood in the doorway behind her, taking in the room with the slow methodical gaze she brought to evidence. Flora heard her breathing — steady, a little effortful from the walk across the forecourt.

"The boxes," Nancy said.

Flora looked at the labels. Dates, mostly. Going back four years. One was labeled *M* and nothing else.

She lifted the lid of the nearest one.

Documents. A passport in the name of Ruth Eileen Marsh — not Calloway, Marsh, her mother's name again — issued fourteen months ago. A driving licence in the same name. A birth certificate. A social security card. A folder of bank statements for an account Flora had never heard of, the balance, as of last month, just over forty thousand dollars.

Flora set the lid back down carefully.

"She built a whole life," she said. "A whole other life, ready to step into."

"They all do," Nancy said from the doorway. "That's what Deirdre told us. Documents, money, a name." She paused. "It takes longer than people think. You can't rush it or he notices."

Flora stood and looked at the bag on the table. Green leather, worn handles, packed and ready for a woman who hadn't arrived to collect it.

She unzipped it.

Clothes, neatly folded. A wash bag. A phone, prepaid, still in its packaging. A notebook, small, dark blue. And underneath everything, wrapped in a cotton scarf, a photograph.

Flora lifted it out.

Two women, young, standing in front of a house — a modest house, a bay window, a small front garden, the kind of house that exists in every neighbourhood in the city. The younger of the two was unmistakably Ruth, twenty years ago at least, lighter around the eyes, not yet trained into stillness. She was laughing at something. The other woman was older, sixty perhaps, with Ruth's same jaw and Ruth's same hands, one arm around Ruth's shoulders.

On the back, in the same careful upright handwriting as the box labels: *Mum and me. Quintara Street. 1999.*

Flora stood holding it for a long moment.

The house on Quintara. The one Ruth lost in the estate case. The one her brother took with a later will and a sympathetic judge and a twenty-year-old sister who sat straight and didn't react and learned that day what it cost to lose something you had believed was yours.

She had been going back to it. All those years. Carrying her mother's name, carrying this photograph, and somewhere in the planning of her escape she had made the house on Quintara the thing she was escaping toward.

Flora put the photograph down on the table very gently.

"Nancy," she said. "The house on Quintara. Do you know if Ruth's brother still owns it?"

Silence from the doorway.

Flora turned.

Nancy was standing with one hand on the door frame, looking at the eucalyptus trees beyond the fence. Her face had the expression Flora had learned to read over the last two years — not confusion exactly. More like a person standing in a room they recognise without being able to name.

"Nancy."

"I heard you." A pause. "I don't know. I would need to look it up." Another pause, shorter. "I will look it up."

Flora nodded. She took out her recorder and pressed play.

For the record, she said into it, Wednesday. Unit 14, Nineteenth Avenue. Ruth Calloway, born Marsh, was here recently. Bag packed. Passport ready. Photograph of her mother's house on Quintara. She looked around the room one more time. She wasn't running away. She was running back.

She clicked the recorder off.

Outside, the fog was beginning, finally, to lift.

Chapter Six

The brother's name was Paul Marsh.

Nancy found him in twenty minutes flat, which was the kind of thing she could still do without effort — the focused, purposeful search, the cross-referencing, the instinct for which record to pull next. Flora watched her work and felt the particular relief of watching Nancy be entirely herself.

Paul Marsh, 64. Retired. The house on Quintara still in his name, property records confirmed it, no mortgage, taxes current. No criminal record. No litigation since the estate case in 1988. A man who had won what he wanted and then gone quietly about his life.

Flora looked at his address. He lived four blocks from his sister.

"Did she know that?" Flora said.

"If she didn't know when she married Marty," Nancy said, "she knew eventually. You can't not know, living that close." She took off her reading glasses and set them on the desk. "The question is whether she minded."

Flora thought about that. A woman who spent eighteen months planning an escape. Who registered her getaway unit in her dead mother's name. Who packed a photograph of the house she lost at twenty and carried it to a storage unit on Nineteenth Avenue like a thing she intended to reclaim.

"She minded," Flora said.

She stood and went to the window. Clement Street below was doing its late-morning business — a woman pushing a cart of groceries, two men arguing pleasantly outside the barbershop, a child pulling a dog that had no intention of moving. The fog was gone now, burned off cleanly, the sky the particular pale blue of a San Francisco morning that has decided to behave itself.

"I want to talk to Paul Marsh," Flora said.

"He doesn't know he's relevant yet."

"No." Flora watched the dog sit down on the pavement with great finality. "I'd like to keep it that way for as long as possible."

Nancy was quiet for a moment. Then: "You think he's involved."

"I think Ruth was going back to that house. I think she grew up in it and lost it and spent thirty years four blocks away from it and I think that does something to a person." She turned from the window. "I think on Tuesday morning, on her way to the storage unit, she may have gone past it. Or to it." She paused. "And I think someone may have seen her."

Nancy looked at her steadily. "You think she went to see her brother."

"I think it's possible she went to settle something before she left. Something she'd been carrying for a long time." Flora picked up her coat from the back of her chair. "People do that. Before they go for good, they go back and they say the thing they've been not saying."

"And if Paul Marsh didn't want to hear it?"

Flora put her coat on.

"Then we need to know that," she said.

The house on Quintara was a narrow Victorian, the kind the city was full of — bay window, painted steps, a small garden kept to the point of tidiness without warmth. Dark blue, recently repainted. A house that was being maintained rather than loved.

Flora stood on the opposite pavement and looked at it.

She tried to imagine Ruth standing here. At twenty, losing it in a courtroom. At forty, driving past it on the way to the grocery store, or not driving past it, taking the long way around, or driving past it slowly on purpose, she didn't know which was worse. At fifty-eight, packed bag in a storage unit four miles away, standing on this pavement for the last time.

What do you say to a house.

What do you say to a brother.

She crossed the street and rang the bell.

A long pause. Then footsteps — unhurried, the footsteps of a man who lived alone and had no particular reason to hurry to his own front door.

Paul Marsh was tall, gone thin in the way some men went thin in their sixties, the flesh retreating to leave the frame. He had Ruth's jaw, Flora noticed immediately, the same line, the same set to it. He looked at Flora with the cautious, assessing expression of someone who didn't get many unexpected visitors and wasn't sure how he felt about this one.

"Mr. Marsh," Flora said. "My name is Flora Voss. I'm a private investigator." She offered her card. "I was hoping to talk to you about your sister."

Something moved across his face. There and gone, too fast to name.

He looked at the card for a long time.

Then he stepped back from the door and held it open.

"I was wondering," he said quietly, "when someone would come."

Chapter Seven

The house smelled of coffee and old paper and the particular quietness of a space where one person had lived alone long enough that solitude had become the furniture.

Paul Marsh led her down a hallway to a sitting room at the back. The bay window Flora had seen from the street looked out onto a narrow garden, neat and largely empty — a pot of rosemary, a wooden bench that hadn't been sat on recently. The room itself was full of books, shelved floor to ceiling on three walls, the spines organised by some system Flora couldn't immediately read.

He didn't offer coffee. He sat in the chair by the window and indicated the sofa opposite with a gesture that was more resignation than welcome.

Flora sat. She took out her recorder and held it up in question.

He looked at it for a moment. Then nodded.

"She came on Tuesday," he said. He didn't wait to be asked. "Eight-fifteen in the morning. I was still in my dressing gown." A pause. "I hadn't seen her in eleven years."

Flora kept her face neutral and her mouth shut. She had learned early that the most useful thing an investigator could do in a room was take up very little of it.

"We didn't — there was no falling out. Not exactly. We just." He looked at his hands. They were Ruth's hands too, Flora noticed, the same shape, the same stillness. "After our mother's estate. It became difficult to be in the same room. Not because of anger. Because of the other thing. The thing that's worse than anger."

"Guilt," Flora said.

He looked up.

"I'm not here to judge the estate case," Flora said. "I'm here to find your sister."

He nodded slowly. "She looked well. That was the first thing I thought. She looked — lighter than I remembered. As if she'd already put something down." He paused. "She told me she was leaving. Not where, not how, just that she was going and she wasn't coming back and she wanted me to know before she did."

"How did you respond?"

A long silence. In the garden, a sparrow landed on the rosemary pot, considered it, left.

"I asked her if she was safe," he said. "She said she would be. I asked her if there was anything she needed." He stopped. "She said there was one thing."

Flora waited.

"She asked me for the house," he said. "Not — she wasn't asking me to give it to her. She knew that wasn't possible, it was never going to be possible. She just." He pressed his lips together. "She asked if she could walk through it. Every room. On her own, without me following her. Just — walk through it once, before she left."

The room was very quiet.

"I said yes," he said. "Obviously I said yes. I went and sat in the kitchen and I made coffee I didn't drink and I listened to her walk through my house for twenty minutes." His voice was entirely steady, the voice of a man who had been over this many times in his own head since Tuesday. "She didn't take anything. She didn't move anything. She just walked through it."

"And then?"

"And then she came into the kitchen and she sat down across from me and she looked at me for a long time without saying anything." He paused. "And then she said: *I forgive you, Paul. I need you to know that.* And she stood up and she left."

Flora looked at him.

His hands were very still in his lap.

"Mr. Marsh," she said carefully. "What time did she leave?"

"Nine o'clock. Just after."

Flora did the arithmetic. Ruth left her brother's house at nine. She was supposed to be at the storage unit by eleven. Two hours, four miles. Plenty of time.

She never arrived.

"Did she say where she was going next?"

"No."

"Did she seem frightened? Distressed?"

"No." He said it without hesitation. "She seemed — resolved. Like someone who had finished something." He looked out at the garden. "I thought about calling her. After. To make sure she got where she was going. But I didn't have a number for her anymore. And I thought — she's resolving things. Don't be one more thing she has to deal with." He paused. "I've been sitting here since Tuesday wondering if that was the right decision."

Flora looked at the recorder in her hand. The little red light steady and patient.

"Mr. Marsh," she said. "Did you see anyone outside when Ruth left? Anyone on the street, anyone in a car?"

He thought about it seriously, the way people thought about things when they understood the weight of the question.

"A car," he said slowly. "There was a car parked across the street when she arrived. I noticed it because it was there when I brought the milk in at seven and it was still there at eight-fifteen." He paused. "It was gone by the time she left. Or — I didn't notice it anymore. I was watching her go."

"What kind of car?"

"Dark. Saloon. I couldn't tell you the make." He looked at her directly for the first time since she'd sat down. "Marty drives a dark saloon."

Flora clicked off the recorder.

She sat for a moment in Paul Marsh's quiet house, in the room full of books, in the chair across from a man who had been waiting since Tuesday for someone to come and ask him what he knew.

"Thank you," she said. She stood and buttoned her coat. "I'll see myself out."

She was in the hallway when he spoke again.

"Ms. Voss."

She turned.

He was standing in the doorway of the sitting room, one hand on the frame.

"She walked through every room," he said. "All three floors. She was up there for a long time." He looked past Flora, at something further away. "When she came back down her eyes were red. But she wasn't crying anymore. She looked —" He stopped. Started again. "She looked like someone who had just remembered something they'd thought they'd lost."

Flora held that for a moment.

Then she walked back down the hallway, past the rows of books, past the photographs on the wall she hadn't let herself look at too closely, and out into the pale blue morning.

She stood on the painted steps and took out her recorder.

Marty Calloway, she said into it, was outside this house on Tuesday morning.

She clicked it off and walked down to the street.

Four blocks away, Marty Calloway was sitting in his kitchen with his very still hands, waiting to hear what she'd found.

She was going to make him wait a little longer.

Chapter Eight

She called Nancy from the street.

Nancy picked up on the second ring, which was always a good sign.

"Marty Calloway was watching the house on Quintara on Tuesday morning," Flora said. "Paul Marsh saw his car."

A pause. Flora heard the sound of the pen going down.

"He followed her," Nancy said.

"He knew she was leaving. Or suspected it. Either way he was outside her brother's house at seven in the morning, which means he was following her before she got there." Flora walked toward the corner, where a bus was pulling away in a cloud of diesel. "He hired us the same day."

"To find her," Nancy said. "Or to make it look like he was trying to find her."

"Yes."

Another pause, longer this time.

"Flora," Nancy said. "If he was outside that house at seven and Ruth left at nine and she never arrived at the storage unit —"

"I know."

"That's two hours."

"I know."

The bus was gone. The street was quiet again, the ordinary mid-morning quiet of a residential neighbourhood going about its business, knowing nothing about any of this.

"Come back," Nancy said. "We need to think before we go near Marty Calloway."

Flora looked back at the house on Quintara. Dark blue paint, bay window, a life inside it that Paul Marsh had won and never quite been able to enjoy.

"I'll be twenty minutes," she said.

Nancy had tea waiting, which meant she had been worried. Coffee was habit. Tea was care.

Flora sat down and wrapped both hands around the mug and told Nancy everything — Paul Marsh's sitting room, the books, the hands, the twenty minutes Ruth had spent walking through every room of the house she had lost at twenty, the sparrow on the rosemary pot, the words Ruth had said before she left.

I forgive you, Paul. I need you to know that.

Nancy listened without interrupting, which she could do better than anyone Flora had ever known. When Flora finished, Nancy was quiet for a moment, looking at the cork board.

"She was saying goodbye," Nancy said. "To all of it. The house, the brother, the grievance. She was putting it down before she left."

"Yes."

"Which means she was in a particular state of mind when she walked out of that house. Open. Unguarded." Nancy paused. "And Marty was waiting."

Flora looked at her tea.

"We don't know that he stopped her," Flora said, because it needed to be said, even if she didn't believe it.

"No," Nancy agreed. "We don't know that." She picked up her pen and held it without writing anything. "What do we know?"

Flora laid it out the way Nancy had taught her, years ago, without inference, without feeling, just the bare sequence of what was established.

Ruth left the house on Quintara at nine on Tuesday morning. Marty's car had been parked outside since at least seven. The car was gone by the time Ruth left, or Paul Marsh had stopped noticing it. Ruth did not arrive at the storage unit on Nineteenth. Her bag, her passport, her new life were all still there, packed and waiting. Marty Calloway had hired Drake and Voss on Tuesday afternoon to find his missing wife.

"The notebook," Nancy said.

Flora looked up.

"In the bag. You said there was a notebook."

Flora saw it again — small, dark blue, underneath the folded clothes, underneath the prepaid phone, underneath the photograph of her mother. She hadn't opened it. She had looked at it and moved on to the photograph and then Nancy had been standing in the doorway with that expression and she had clicked on the recorder and —

"I didn't open the notebook," Flora said.

Nancy looked at her over her reading glasses with an expression that was not quite reproach and not quite patience and somewhere between the two.

"We need to go back to the unit," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "We do." She was already reaching for her coat. Then she stopped. She stood with one hand on the coat, not moving.

Flora waited.

"Tuesday," Nancy said.

The word sat in the room between them.

Tomorrow was Thursday. They had today, Wednesday, and then Flora would lose Thursday — no, Thursday was fine, it was Tuesday she lost, today was Wednesday, tomorrow was Thursday, she was fine, Flora was fine, but —

She looked at Nancy. Nancy was looking at the coat on the hook. Not at Flora. At the coat.

"Nancy," Flora said gently. "What day is it?"

A pause that went on two beats too long.

"Wednesday," Nancy said. And then, more quietly: "I knew that."

"I know you did."

Nancy took her coat from the hook and put it on with the steady deliberate movements of a woman who was not going to be hurried by her own mind.

"The unit," she said. "Let's go."

Flora picked up her recorder. Checked it was running.

She left it running.

The Last Tuesday



Chapter Nine

The gate code still worked.

Flora punched in 2-7-4-1 and the gate shuddered back and they walked across the puddled forecourt in the early afternoon light, past the corrugated iron fronts of other people's stored lives, to Unit 14 at the far end of the second row.

The padlock was open.

Flora stopped.

She put her hand out — not touching Nancy, just a gesture, the kind they had developed over years, meaning *stop, wait, don't speak*. Nancy stopped.

The padlock was hanging open on the hasp. Not broken. Opened with a key, or by someone who knew the combination, and not closed again. The door itself was pulled down but not secured.

Flora stood looking at it for a moment.

Then she crouched and lifted the door.

The bag was gone.

Everything else was as they had left it — the banker's boxes along the left wall, the bare bulb on its cord, the folding table on the right. But the table was empty. The green leather bag, the passport, the prepaid phone, the notebook, the photograph of Ruth and her mother standing in front of the house on Quintara — all of it gone.

Flora straightened up slowly.

Behind her she heard Nancy step into the unit, heard her take in the room, heard the small sound she made that wasn't quite a word.

"Someone knew we'd been here," Nancy said.

Flora looked at the boxes. Undisturbed, as far as she could tell. She lifted the lid of the nearest one — documents still inside, bank statements,

the careful architecture of Ruth's escape still intact. Whatever had been taken, it was only what was on the table.

Only what would prove Ruth had been here and what she had been carrying.

"Not someone," Flora said. "Marty."

"He would need to know the gate code. The unit number."

"Yes." Flora looked at the empty table. "He's been following her for longer than Tuesday. Long enough to find this place." She paused. "Or Ruth told someone who told him."

Nancy was quiet behind her.

"The book club," Nancy said carefully.

Flora turned.

Nancy's face was composed, the way it was composed when she was working, but there was something underneath it — not uncertainty exactly, but the shadow of it.

"Deirdre Pham came to us this morning," Nancy said. "She knew we'd been hired. She knew about the unit. She gave us the key."

Flora looked at her.

"She gave us the key," Flora said slowly, "after the bag was already gone, or before?"

They looked at each other.

Flora took out her recorder.

Note, she said into it. Establish timeline. Deirdre Pham arrived at the office at eight-forty-three. We arrived at the unit at — She looked at Nancy.

"Ten-forty," Nancy said. Without hesitation. Flora felt something loosen slightly in her chest.

Ten-forty, Flora continued. Bag present at ten-forty. We left the unit at approximately eleven-fifteen. Someone accessed the unit between eleven-fifteen and now, approximately one-forty-five. She paused. *Deirdre Pham had two hours and thirty minutes after leaving our office to access this unit before we returned.*

She clicked off the recorder.

"You think Deirdre took the bag," Nancy said. It wasn't an accusation. It was the tone she used for testing a proposition.

"I think we don't know who took it," Flora said. "I think we were given a key and a story this morning and we followed where they pointed and we left this unit unlocked behind us." She looked at the hasp. "Did we lock it?"

A pause.

"I thought you —" Nancy began.

"I had the recorder in my hand."

They stood in the empty unit in the smell of concrete and eucalyptus. The bare bulb swung slightly in a draught from somewhere.

"I don't remember," Nancy said. Very quietly.

Flora nodded. She kept her face still.

"It may not matter," she said. "Either we left it open or someone had a key. Either way the bag is gone." She looked around the unit one more time, fixing it in her memory — today was Wednesday, she would have today, she could keep today. "The boxes are still here. Whoever took the bag left the boxes."

"Why?"

Flora thought about it. "Because the boxes are registered to Eileen Marsh. They lead back to Ruth, to her past, to the estate case. They're not useful for what Marty needs." She moved toward the door. "The bag had the notebook. The passport. The new identity." She stepped out into the forecourt. "If you wanted to stop someone leaving, you'd take the thing they were leaving as."

Nancy came out behind her. Flora pulled the unit door down and clicked the padlock shut and pocketed the key.

"We need to talk to Deirdre Pham again," Nancy said.

"Yes."

"And we need to talk to Marty Calloway."

"Yes." Flora looked at the gate, standing open at the end of the row. "But not yet. Not until we know which of them is lying and which of them is frightened and whether those are the same person or two different ones."

She walked toward the gate.

Behind her, she heard Nancy stop walking.

She turned.

Nancy was standing in the middle of the forecourt, looking at the rows of units with an expression Flora had not seen before — not the coat-on-the-hook expression, not the pause-on-the-stairs expression, but something more open than those, more unguarded. Lost was too strong a word. Misplaced was closer.

"Nancy."

Nancy looked at her. Her eyes cleared.

"I was trying to remember," Nancy said, "whether we locked it."

"It doesn't matter now," Flora said. "Come on."

Nancy walked toward her. Steady, deliberate, her coat buttoned against the afternoon chill.

She did not say *I know that*.

That was the part Flora would remember. That was the part that told her something had shifted, quietly, without announcement, the way the important things shifted.

She took Nancy's arm as they walked through the gate.

Neither of them remarked on it.

Chapter Ten

Deirdre Pham didn't answer her phone.

Flora tried twice from the car, parked half a block from the storage place on Nineteenth, Nancy beside her with the notepad open on her knee. Two rings and voicemail, both times, a recorded voice that was professionally warm and gave nothing away.

"She's either busy or she's avoiding us," Flora said.

"Or she's with Ruth," Nancy said.

Flora looked at her.

"If Deirdre took the bag," Nancy said, carefully, the way she laid out a proposition she wasn't certain of, "it wasn't to help Marty. She runs a network that helps women leave. She wouldn't hand Ruth's identity documents to the husband." She paused. "She took them to give them to Ruth."

Flora sat with that.

"Which means Ruth is reachable," she said.

"Which means Ruth may already be gone," Nancy said. "Which would be the best possible outcome."

Flora thought about the notebook. Small, dark blue, tucked under everything in the green bag. She had not opened it. She had stood in that unit holding a photograph of a woman and her mother and she had not opened the notebook and now it was gone and she did not know what was in it and that not-knowing sat in her chest like a stone.

"I need to know she's safe," Flora said.

"That's not the same as needing to find her," Nancy said.

"I know that."

"Marty hired us to find her."

"I know that too."

They sat for a moment in the parked car. A forklift moved across the forecourt behind the gate, unhurried, carrying something large and wrapped in plastic.

"We have a client," Nancy said. Not as an instruction. Just as a fact, laid on the table between them.

"We have a client," Flora agreed, "who followed his wife to her brother's house on the morning she was planning to leave him, and who we now believe accessed a storage unit registered in a false name and removed the contents." She paused. "We also have a client who, as far as we can establish, has not hurt his wife in any way that would show."

"Deirdre said there were other ways to hurt someone."

"Yes."

"And Ruth said it took her eleven years to understand what his stillness meant."

Flora looked out through the windscreen at the street. A woman walked past with a pushchair, not looking at anything in particular, the ordinary determined walk of someone with somewhere to be.

"If we go to Marty now," Flora said, "we tell him everything we know and we give him Ruth's whereabouts if we find them and we collect our fee." She paused. "If we don't go to Marty, we're in breach of contract and he finds another firm and they may not ask the questions we've been asking."

"Or Ruth is already gone and none of it matters," Nancy said.

"Or Ruth is already gone and none of it matters," Flora agreed.

Nancy looked down at the notepad. She had written, Flora could see, a single line in the margin, the small shorthand she used for herself. Flora didn't read it. She had learned not to read Nancy's margin notes, the way she had learned not to finish Nancy's pauses or correct Nancy's minor errors in front of other people. There were dignities that cost nothing to preserve.

"I think," Nancy said slowly, "that we go to Deirdre Pham's house on Taraval."

Flora looked at her.

"Not to find Ruth," Nancy said. "To find out if Ruth is safe. There's a difference and we both know there's a difference and I think it matters

which one we're doing."

Flora thought about the Calloway kitchen. The pale yellow walls. The very still hands. The tea she hadn't drunk, on a Tuesday she couldn't remember, but whose shadow she had been standing in all day.

"Taraval," she said.

She started the car.

The house on Taraval was a wide Edwardian with a recently painted porch and a bay tree in a pot by the front door. The kind of house that was a home rather than a property — lived in, tended, particular. A wind chime over the door, a child's bicycle chained to the railing, two recycling bins with their lids aligned.

Flora rang the bell.

A long pause. Then the sound of movement inside — quick, deliberate, someone who had been watching the street.

The door opened on a chain.

One eye. A slice of Deirdre Pham's face, unreadable.

"Ms. Pham," Flora said. "We need to talk."

"I can't —"

"I'm not here about Ruth," Flora said. Which was almost true. "I'm here about the unit. Someone accessed it after we left. The bag is gone."

The eye changed. Something in it shifted — not surprise. Something that was absorbing information and recalibrating.

The door closed.

The chain came off.

The door opened.

Deirdre Pham stood back to let them in, and in the hallway behind her, sitting on the bottom stair with a mug of tea and a face that was exhausted and calm and quietly, absolutely resolved, was Ruth Calloway.

She looked at Flora.

Flora looked at her.

"I took the bag," Ruth said. "I went back for it this morning. After you'd been." Her voice was level, unhurried. The voice of someone who had been

rehearsing a great many things for a very long time and had reached the other side of the rehearsal. "I was watching from the street. I saw you go in and I waited until you left and then I went back."

Flora stood in Deirdre Pham's hallway and looked at the woman she had been looking for since Wednesday morning.

"You saw us," Flora said.

"Yes."

"You were there when we were there."

"Yes." Ruth looked down at the mug in her hands. "I wanted to see who Marty had hired. I wanted to know what kind of people were looking for me." She looked up. "You took the recorder out and you talked to it. And then you looked at my photograph for a long time." She paused. "You looked at it the way someone looks at something they understand."

Flora didn't say anything.

"Your partner," Ruth said. "When you turned around she was holding the door frame. You didn't make a thing of it. You just said her name and waited." She looked at Nancy. "That was when I decided."

"Decided what?" Nancy said.

"That you weren't going to tell Marty where I was," Ruth said. "That you might not be sure of it yet. But that you weren't."

The wind chime moved over the front door. Somewhere in the house a clock ticked with the patient indifference of a clock that had been keeping time in this hallway for thirty years.

Flora looked at Ruth Calloway, born Marsh, fifty-eight years old, sitting on the bottom stair of her friend's house with a mug of tea and a green leather bag at her feet, packed and ready and going nowhere until she chose to go.

"Are you safe?" Flora said.

Ruth considered this as though it were a real question, which it was.

"Not yet," she said. "But I will be. By Thursday I will be."

Thursday, Flora thought. By Thursday I won't remember today.

"Then I suggest," Flora said, "that you be somewhere else by Thursday."

Ruth looked at her for a long moment.

Then she nodded.

Flora turned to Nancy. Nancy was already reaching for the door.

They let themselves out into the late afternoon, the wind chime sounding once behind them, and walked back to the car without speaking, and Flora did not take out her recorder, and some things she decided to keep only in herself, for as long as she had them.

Chapter Eleven

They went back to the office.

The dry cleaner below had closed for the day. The street was doing its evening thing — the restaurants opening, the light changing, the particular loosening that happened to a city neighbourhood when the working day let go of it. Flora climbed the stairs ahead of Nancy, paused on the fourth step where the carpet was loose, waited at the top while Nancy found her keys.

Old habit. Good habit.

Inside, the cork board waited. Ruth Calloway. 58. Last seen Tuesday the 11th.

Flora unpinned the photograph.

She looked at it for a moment — the woman smiling at something outside the frame, the newsletter photograph, the only image Marty had offered them — and then she set it face down on her desk.

Nancy hung up her coat. Sat down. Opened her notepad to a fresh page, dated it, wrote the time in the margin.

"We need to call Marty," she said.

"Yes."

"What are we going to tell him?"

Flora sat down across from her. The office was quiet, the steam long gone, just the two of them and the cork board and the last of the afternoon light coming through the window that looked onto the street.

"We're going to tell him," Flora said, "that we've conducted a thorough investigation and we have been unable to locate his wife." She paused. "We're going to tell him that in the course of our investigation we found no evidence of foul play, no evidence of an accident, and no evidence that Ruth Calloway left the city against her will." Another pause. "We're going

to tell him that in our professional assessment Ruth Calloway left voluntarily and does not wish to be found, and that we are therefore closing the case."

Nancy wrote this down, or some version of it, her pen moving in the steady shorthand that had recorded thirty years of other people's truths and could manage one more.

"He'll go to another firm," Nancy said.

"Probably."

"Another firm may find her."

"Possibly." Flora looked at the window. "By Thursday she'll be gone. That's what she said."

"You believed her."

"Yes."

Nancy finished writing. Looked at what she'd written. "We'll need to return his retainer. We haven't completed the work he hired us for."

"I know."

"It'll be a lean month."

"It'll be a lean month," Flora agreed.

Nancy put the cap on her pen. Set it down parallel to the notepad, the way she always set it down. Outside, someone on Clement Street laughed at something — a real laugh, unguarded, the kind that happened when people forgot they were in public.

"Flora," Nancy said.

Flora looked at her.

Nancy was looking at the notepad. At the margin, where she had written something in her small private shorthand during the drive back. She had not looked at it since writing it, and she was looking at it now with the careful attention of someone who had left themselves a message and was making sure they could still read it.

"What does it say?" Flora asked quietly.

Nancy looked up. Something in her face that was not quite an apology and not quite relief.

"It says," Nancy said, "*we did the right thing.*"

Flora held that.

Outside the laughter faded down the street. The light through the window had gone the colour of weak tea, the last of it, the city settling into evening around them.

"I'll call Marty," Flora said.

She picked up the phone.

Marty Calloway answered on the first ring.

She told him what she had decided to tell him, in the order she had decided to tell it, in the professional voice that she had developed over years for exactly this kind of conversation — the voice that was not unkind but was not soft, that gave the facts and let the facts be what they were.

He was quiet through most of it.

When she finished there was a silence that went on long enough that she thought for a moment the call had dropped.

"She's not coming back," he said. Not a question.

"No," Flora said. "I don't believe she is."

Another silence.

"Did you find her?" he said. "Not — I mean did you. Did you actually find her."

Flora looked at the cork board. The empty pin where the photograph had been. The piece of paper with *Unit 14, 2-7-4-1, Eileen Marsh* still pinned at the corner.

"No," she said.

Which was true, in the way that the most carefully chosen things were true.

"All right," Marty said.

His voice was very still. The same stillness as his hands, she thought. The stillness of a man who had learned that moving unpredictably got you into trouble.

"We'll return the balance of your retainer," Flora said. "You'll have it by the end of the week."

"Keep it," he said.

He hung up.

Flora held the phone for a moment. Then set it down.

Across the desk Nancy was watching her with the steady unhurried attention she brought to important things.

"Done," Flora said.

Nancy nodded. She picked up her pen and wrote one more thing in the margin of the notepad, and Flora didn't ask what it was, and Nancy didn't say, and that was all right.

Flora stayed after Nancy left.

She sat at her desk in the darkening office and took out her recorder and held it in both hands. The little red button. The habit of years. The thing she used to keep herself, to bring herself back from Tuesdays, to stay inside her own life.

She did not press it.

She sat for a long time in the quiet, letting the day exist only in herself — Paul Marsh's sitting room, the eucalyptus trees beyond the fence, the wind chime over Deirdre Pham's door, Ruth Calloway on the bottom stair with her mug of tea and her green leather bag and her face on the other side of the rehearsal, and Nancy not saying *I know that*, and the way Flora had taken her arm and neither of them had remarked on it.

She let herself have all of it.

Tomorrow was Thursday. By Thursday Ruth would be somewhere else, stepping into a life built in a dead woman's name, carrying a photograph of a house she had finally walked through and finally left, and Flora would wake up and it would be Thursday and she would read her notes and listen to her recordings and reconstruct her Wednesday from the outside, the way she always did, the way she had always done.

But not this part.

This part she would keep in the place where kept things went, the place that was not Tuesday, the place that was hers.

She set the recorder down on the desk.

She turned off the light.

She went down the stairs, past the fourth step where the carpet was loose, and out onto Clement Street, where the evening was fully itself now,

and she walked home through it without recording anything, just walking, just the city, just the ordinary irreplaceable Wednesday of it all.

*In the office on the second floor, the cork board held what it held.
The sign on the frosted glass door was still slightly crooked.
Neither of them had fixed it.
Neither of them ever would.*

End.