



DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

# The Letter

*a 321Lumina.com book*



by Blurt Snodgrass

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*A Drake & Voss Novella*

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## Chapter One

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He arrived on a Tuesday, which Flora noted the way she noted all Tuesdays — with the particular attention of someone marking weather. Not dread. Not relief. Just the noting. The way a sailor noted the barometer, knowing the reading was information and information was what you worked with.

He was seventy. Tall, Igbo-British was her read, something in the cadence of his posture that suggested a man who had lived in several countries and kept something of each — the uprightness that came from one place, the patience that came from another, the particular way he took in a room that came from years of walking into rooms that were not designed with him in mind and deciding to be at ease in them anyway.

He wore a good suit that was not new. A tie that had been tied carefully that morning, the knot sitting exactly where it should. And he carried, in his right hand, a paper bag from the bakery two doors down on Clement that smelled, even from across the room, unmistakably of almond croissants still warm from the oven.

He set the bag on the desk between them without explanation.

Flora looked at it. Then at him.

Nancy came in behind him — had been on the stairs when he knocked, Flora had heard her pause on the fourth step the way she paused on the fourth step, the loose carpet, the pause that was just balance — and she took in the man, the bag, the smell of almonds, and she hung her coat on the right hook and sat at her desk and opened her notepad.

She wrote the date. The time. She looked at the man.

"Mr. —" Flora began.

"Obi," he said. "Cresswell Obi." He sat in the client chair with the ease of a man who sat in a great many chairs in the course of his work and had made a policy of being comfortable in all of them. Not relaxed — comfortable, which was different, which was a decision rather than a state. "The croissants are still warm. I thought if I was going to ask something unreasonable I should bring something."

Flora looked at the bag.

"What's the unreasonable thing?" she said.

"I want to find a letter," he said. "That I wrote in 1974. That I wish I hadn't sent."

Flora looked at him.

"That's not how letters work," she said.

"I know," he said. "I want to find it anyway."

Nancy wrote the time in the margin. Below it: *Cresswell Obi. 70. A letter.*

Below that, smaller, in the shorthand she kept for herself: *clear today. Good.*

She read both lines back. They said what she'd written.

She picked up her pen and waited.

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## Chapter Two

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The letter had been written on the fourteenth of November, 1974, in a room in a terraced house in Clifton, Bristol, England, by a twenty-year-old named Cresswell Obi who had been in England for three years on a scholarship and was homesick in the particular way of someone who has chosen to leave and is not yet certain the choice has been right — who is committed to the choice, who would make it again, who understands why he made it, and who still wakes at three in the morning occasionally with the smell of Lagos in his nose and the sound of his mother's voice in his ears and a feeling he has no English word for.

He had written the letter to his older brother, Emmanuel. Seven pages, by his recollection, though he could not be certain — it might have been eight. He had written by hand, in the cramped longhand he used for things that mattered, on the blue airmail paper that folded into its own envelope, the kind that was its own envelope, that you sealed by licking the edges, that arrived in Lagos four or five days after posting smelling faintly of the aircraft hold.

He had written things he had never said aloud. About their father. About the years before Cresswell left. About a specific afternoon in Lagos in 1969 when something had happened between them — between all three of them, the father and the two sons — that none of them had spoken of since. Not once. Not in the five years since the afternoon, not in the three years since Cresswell had left for England, not in any of the telephone calls from the red phone box on the corner of Whiteladies Road where Cresswell stood on Tuesday evenings, feeding coins, listening to his mother's voice come through the static.

He had sent the letter the same day he wrote it. Before he could think better of it. He had walked to the post box on the corner in the November

rain and pushed it through the slot and stood for a moment with his hand still extended, the slot closed, the letter gone, and felt the particular vertigo of something irreversible.

Emmanuel had never replied.

"Never?" Flora said.

"Not to the letter," Cresswell said. He had taken a croissant from the bag — Flora had gestured at it, help yourself — and he held it without eating it. "We continued to speak. We were brothers. The relationship continued. Emmanuel called me at Christmas, I called him at Easter, we wrote occasionally about family matters, our parents' health, the usual texture of being brothers at a distance." He set the croissant on the edge of the desk. "But the letter was — it existed in its own silence. Like something that had been put in a room and the room locked. We went about our business outside the room. Neither of us tried the handle."

"For how long?" Nancy asked.

"Forty-five years." He said it plainly, without drama, the way you stated a geological fact. "He died in 2019. Covid, in Lagos, in the first wave, before any of us understood what was coming. I flew for the funeral — there were still flights, barely. I was in his house afterward, with his wife Adaeze, with his children. And I looked."

"For the letter," Flora said.

"For the letter. I went through his study with Adaeze's permission — she knew I was looking for something, I told her it was a personal correspondence, she gave me the afternoon. I looked through his files, his desk drawers, the boxes on the shelves." He paused. "Emmanuel kept everything. He was that kind of man. Receipts from 1987. Letters from university friends I'd never heard of. Birthday cards going back twenty years, bundled with rubber bands. An entire folder of train ticket stubs from the nineteen-eighties, I cannot imagine why." He looked at his hands. "He kept everything. Except, apparently, mine."

"He might have destroyed it," Flora said. The question she was required to put in front of him. "People do. Letters that require a response they can't give. Or letters that say things too large to keep."

"He might have," Cresswell agreed. "And if he did, then that's the answer and I'll carry it." He looked at the cork board. "But I can't accept it

as the answer until I've looked properly. Adaeze told me afterward — after I'd looked and not found it — that there was a storage unit. Emmanuel rented it from around 2010 onward, when the study became too full. She had the key but hadn't gone through it. She said she'd get to it." He paused. "That was four years ago. I've been waiting."

Flora looked at him.

"Why did you wait?" she said.

He considered this honestly. "Because asking Adaeze to go through her dead husband's storage unit so that I could look for a letter I wrote fifty years ago seemed —" He stopped. "It seemed like making my need her task. I didn't want to do that." He picked up the croissant again. "And then a colleague mentioned your firm. Someone whose situation you had helped, she said you were good at finding things people had stopped looking for. And I thought: perhaps there is another way."

"What do you want us to do?" Flora said.

"Find out if the letter is in the storage unit," he said. "If it is — I'd like it back. Or I'd like to know it exists. Either one." He paused. "And if it isn't there, then I'll know he destroyed it, and I'll accept that."

"And if we find it," Flora said, "what do you want to do with it?"

He thought about this. A real pause, not a rhetorical one.

"Read it," he said. "I want to read what I wrote when I was twenty years old. I want to know what I said." He set the croissant down again. "I have a version of it in my memory that has been fifty years in the making. I've been editing it that whole time without knowing it. I want to see the original."

Flora opened the croissant bag and took one. She passed the bag to Nancy.

"Tell me," she said, "about the afternoon in 1969."

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The afternoon in 1969 had been an ordinary afternoon in most respects. A Saturday in March. Their father, Daniel Obi, had come home from work with news of a school — a very good school, a school that took the most promising students from across the state, a school that changed the shape of what was possible for the boys who attended it. There was room, in the

coming year, for one student from their district.

Daniel Obi had two sons. Cresswell, who was fifteen, and Emmanuel, who was nineteen. The school was for students who would be entering at the secondary level. Emmanuel was too old. Cresswell was the right age.

"He chose Emmanuel anyway," Cresswell said. "There was a program, a supplementary program, for students Emmanuel's age who showed particular promise in mathematics. My father had somehow arranged — I don't know the details, I was fifteen, I didn't understand the details — he had arranged for Emmanuel to attend on the basis of that program instead." He looked at the window. "Which meant the secondary place, the one for students my age, went to someone else."

Flora was quiet.

"It wasn't malicious," Cresswell said. He said this with the precision of a man who had been over this many times and had arrived at the most accurate possible statement. "My father was not a cruel man. Emmanuel was the elder. In my father's understanding of the world — a real understanding, a deeply held one, not a casual preference — the elder son's opportunity came first. If there was a question of one or the other, the answer was always Emmanuel. That was simply the order of the world as my father understood it."

"But you were the better student," Nancy said.

Cresswell looked at her. "Yes," he said. "My father knew that. He was not unintelligent — he knew very well that I was the more academically promising of the two of us. Emmanuel was good. I was better. My father knew this and he chose Emmanuel anyway, because Emmanuel was the elder." He paused. "I think — I have thought about this for fifty years — I think my father believed that the world would recognize my ability regardless. That I would find my way. That Emmanuel needed the advantage more because he was not the one the world would notice on its own."

"Was he right?" Flora said.

Cresswell looked at her. Something in his face that was complicated in the way of things that are both true and not enough.

"I got a scholarship to Bristol," he said. "I have had a good career. I have a good life." He picked up his croissant at last and ate a piece of it.

"Emmanuel became an accountant. A good one. He built a firm, employed forty people, left his children well. He had a good life too." He set the croissant down. "My father may have been right that I would find my way regardless. He was not right that the manner of the choosing didn't matter."

"And the letter," Flora said. "In 1974. You wrote all of this to Emmanuel."

"I wrote him that I had felt the choosing," Cresswell said. "That I had felt it at fifteen, standing in the kitchen listening to my father explain about the supplementary program, and that I had felt it every day since, and that I had never said so to anyone." He paused. "I also told him that I loved him. I want to be clear about that. It was not an accusatory letter. Emmanuel had not chosen the school — our father had. Emmanuel had simply been the elder. He had not done anything wrong." He looked at his hands again, the large hands with the pianist's span. "I told him that I understood none of it was his fault. I told him I had never blamed him. And I told him that I needed to say all of it to someone who had been there, who had stood in the same kitchen, who knew what afternoon I meant without me having to explain the afternoon. And he was the only person in the world who had been there."

"And he never replied," Flora said.

"He called three weeks later," Cresswell said. "I was at the phone box on Whiteladies Road, the usual Tuesday. He said: Cressie, how are your studies. I said: fine, how is work. We talked for twenty minutes about ordinary things. He did not mention the letter." He paused. "We never mentioned it. Not once in the forty-five years between that Tuesday and his death."

"What did that cost you?" Nancy said.

The question came from her desk, quiet and direct, the question of a woman who had spent thirty years in courtrooms and knew that the question you didn't ask was often the question that held the case.

Cresswell looked at her.

"More than I knew at the time," he said. "Less than I feared." He thought about it. "It cost me the certainty. I've never known, all these years, whether he read it and was hurt, or read it and was relieved that I'd said it, or read it and didn't know what to do with it, or —" He stopped. "I've never known what he did with what I gave him. And that not-knowing became a habit of

mind. I carried it so long it became part of how I thought about him. About myself." He looked at the cork board. "He was my brother for fifty-six years. And I have never once been certain what he made of me."

The office was quiet. The dry cleaner's compressor ran steadily below. The steam came up through the floor in the way it came every morning, reliable and faintly domestic.

"Open the bag," Flora said. "Tell us what you need."

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## Chapter Three

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Nancy found Chisom Obi-Adeyemi in two days, which was fast even by Nancy's standards — but Chisom had a professional footprint that made finding her straightforward, an import-export firm with offices in Lagos and London, a LinkedIn profile that was businesslike and complete, a company website that listed her as managing director.

Nancy sent a message through the business contact form on a Thursday morning, brief and professional: she was a private investigator in San Francisco working on a matter involving the estate of the late Emmanuel Obi, she understood Chisom was the executor, she wondered if Chisom might have a few minutes to discuss a personal correspondence her uncle Cresswell Obi was hoping to locate.

The reply came within ninety minutes.

*Yes — Uncle Cresswell mentioned he'd been looking for something when he came for the funeral. I've been meaning to go through the storage unit for some time but haven't found the occasion. If this helps create the occasion, that seems like the right thing. I can make myself available whenever is convenient. — C.*

Nancy brought it to Flora without comment.

Flora read it twice.

"She said occasion," Flora said. "Not reason."

"Yes," Nancy said. "I noticed that."

"She wants to go through her father's things," Flora said. "She's been waiting for something to make it the right time."

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

Flora called Cresswell.

She read him the message.

He was quiet for long enough that she heard him breathing.

"She's a good woman," he said finally. "Chisom. Emmanuel raised good children." A pause. "He was a good father. I want you to know that about him. Whatever I've told you about 1969 and the letter — he was a good father. His children are the evidence."

"I'll tell her you're grateful," Flora said.

"Tell her —" He stopped. "Tell her I'm sorry it's taken me four years to ask."

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Cresswell came in again the following week. Not about the case — he said this at the door, standing with another paper bag, this one from a different place, a West African restaurant on Geary that Flora knew by smell before he'd said where it was from.

"I'm not here to check on the progress," he said. "I know it takes time. I just —" He set the bag on the desk. "My wife made extra. She said I should bring it to you."

Nancy looked at the bag. "What is it?"

"Jollof rice," he said. "With chicken. She makes it on Sundays. She made too much, she said."

"She made too much on purpose," Nancy said.

Cresswell looked at her. Then he smiled — a whole-face smile, the kind that reorganized everything. "Yes," he said. "She did."

He sat in the client chair without being asked. Flora got plates from the kitchen — they had two, for reasons neither of them had fully articulated, in a kitchen where they mostly just made tea and coffee — and Nancy found forks and they ate at their desks while Cresswell Obi sat in the client chair and talked about his brother.

He talked about Emmanuel the way you talked about someone when the grief had done most of its work and what was left was the person rather than the loss. Emmanuel's laugh — a whole-body thing, a laugh that made rooms rearrange themselves. Emmanuel's habit of reading the newspaper from back to front, sport first, news last, as though he preferred to approach the world's problems from a position of already knowing the scores. Emmanuel's hands, which were their mother's hands, narrow and quick. The

way Emmanuel, every year at Christmas, called Cresswell first — before Adaeze, before his children, before their parents while they were alive. Every year. The first call of Christmas morning.

"I always asked him why," Cresswell said. "He always said the same thing: because you're the one who went furthest. Someone has to call first and it should be the one who stayed, calling the one who went."

Flora set her fork down.

She looked at Cresswell.

"He was answering the letter," she said.

Cresswell looked at her.

"Every Christmas," Flora said. "First call. Forty-five years. He was telling you: I heard you. I know you went. I'm the one who stayed and I'm calling first." She paused. "That was his reply."

The office was quiet for a moment that went on a beat longer than ordinary quiet.

"I know," Cresswell said. His voice was entirely level, the voice of a man who had known this for some time and had needed someone else to say it. "I've known that for twenty years, I think. Thirty, perhaps." He looked at the window. "But knowing is not the same as having it said. And having it said is not the same as holding the letter in your hands and reading what you wrote and knowing he read it too." He looked at Flora. "I want the fact of it. The physical fact."

"I know," Flora said.

"Is that unreasonable?"

"No," she said. "It's exactly reasonable. It's what records are for."

Nancy had been eating her rice quietly through all of this. Now she set her fork down parallel to her plate — the small precise gesture — and said: "Mr. Obi. When you wrote the letter. The seven pages. Did you sign it the usual way? Your name, and then — how did you sign letters to Emmanuel?"

Cresswell looked at her, slightly surprised, the way people were slightly surprised when Nancy's questions turned out to be going somewhere.

"I signed everything to Emmanuel the same way," he said. "Since we were children. A joke between us — he started it. He signed his letters to me: *your better, Emmanuel*. And I signed mine to him: *your best*,

*Cresswell.*"

Nancy looked at him.

"Your best," she said.

"Yes."

"You'll know the letter is yours," she said, "when you turn to the last page."

He looked at her for a long moment.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I will."

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## Chapter Four

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Chisom's message came on a Monday, five weeks after the first contact, at ten-seventeen in the morning. Flora saw it come in on her phone and read it standing at the window, looking out at Clement Street without seeing it.

*Dear Ms. Voss — I went to the storage unit yesterday. I took my brother Emeka with me. It took us most of the day. Papa kept a great deal. I now understand this about him in a way I did not before.*

*In the third box, at the bottom, wrapped in a piece of cloth — I think it was a handkerchief, a good one, the kind men carried — there was an envelope. Uncle Cresswell's name on it, in Papa's handwriting. The envelope has never been opened.*

*I don't know what is right to do. I wanted to ask you before I did anything. — C.*

Flora read it twice. Then she went to Nancy's desk and set the phone on the notepad so Nancy could read it.

Nancy read it.

She read it again.

She looked up at Flora.

"He kept it sealed," Nancy said.

"Yes."

"In a handkerchief."

"Yes."

They looked at each other.

"He was keeping it for him," Nancy said. "Emmanuel was keeping it for Cresswell."

"Yes," Flora said. "That's what it looks like."

She picked up the phone and called Cresswell.

He answered on the second ring. She read him the message, all of it, including the handkerchief, including the envelope never opened.

He did not speak for a long time.

Flora waited. She had learned, in this work, in this room, with this partner across the desk, the specific skill of waiting without filling. The silence that was not empty but full — full of a man on the other end of a phone in an office or a kitchen or wherever he was, holding something he had been waiting fifty years to hold.

"He kept it sealed," Cresswell said.

"Yes."

"In a cloth." His voice was not quite steady. Not unsteady either — somewhere between, the voice of a man who was managing the feeling rather than suppressing it, who had decided to feel it properly rather than not at all. "Emmanuel had good handkerchiefs. Our mother gave him a set when he started at the firm. He kept them for years."

"Yes," Flora said.

"He wrapped my letter in a good handkerchief and put it in a box and kept it for forty-five years," Cresswell said. "He kept it sealed. With my name on it."

"Yes."

"He was waiting," Cresswell said, "to give it back."

Flora sat with that.

"Mr. Obi," she said. "Chisom is asking what she should do with it."

A pause.

"Tell her," he said, "that I'll come to London. She has an office in London — I've looked her up, I should say, I hope that isn't presumptuous. Tell her I'll come to London and she can give it to me there. And tell her —" He stopped. "Tell her that her father wrapped it in a good handkerchief. She should know that."

"I'll tell her," Flora said.

"Ms. Voss."

"Yes."

"He was the elder," Cresswell said. "He got the school. He got the supplementary program. He got the benefit of the doubt, every time, for twenty years of growing up, because he was the first one and that was how our father understood the world." A pause. "And he kept my letter in a good handkerchief and put it in a box and kept my name on the envelope for forty-five years." Another pause. "He was the elder. And he kept what was mine."

Flora looked at the cork board.

*Cresswell Obi. 70. A letter.*

"Yes," she said. "He did."

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## Chapter Five

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He came in on a Friday to settle the account, three weeks after London.

He brought a tin of biscuits — British ones, a tartan lid, the good kind — and he set it on the desk and sat in the client chair and Nancy quoted him the fee and he wrote the check without looking at the amount. He had the quality he'd had at the first meeting, the ease that was a decision, but there was something underneath it now that hadn't been there before. Not peace exactly. Something more specific than peace. The quality of a man who had put something down and found that his arms, after so long carrying it, were not sure what to do with themselves.

"London was good," Flora said.

"London was good," he agreed. "Chisom met me at her office. She gave me the envelope and she left the room without being asked — she said: take as long as you need, the kitchen is to the left if you want tea. And she closed the door." He looked at the tin. "I sat in her office for an hour."

Nancy did not write anything.

Flora did not ask what was in the letter.

The discipline of not asking was one of the things the work had taught her. The thing you'd found belonged to the person you'd found it for. What they did with it in the room after you'd brought it to them was theirs.

Cresswell looked at the window.

"He had read it," he said. "Emmanuel. I could tell — you could see, if you looked carefully at the fold of the paper, the way it had been refolded. Someone had gone through each page and refolded it along the same creases. Very carefully." He paused. "He was a careful man, Emmanuel. Everything he did, he did carefully." He looked at his hands. "He had read my letter and then he had folded it back the way it was and put it in the

envelope and sealed my name over it."

"Why do you think he never —" Nancy started.

"Because he didn't know what to say," Cresswell said. "That's what I think. He read what I wrote and he understood it and he didn't know what to say that would be equal to it." He paused. "Emmanuel was a man who didn't speak if he didn't have the right words. He'd rather say nothing than say the wrong thing." Another pause. "So he kept it. He kept it so that someday, somehow, I would know that he had held it. That he had read my name on the outside and kept it anyway." He looked at Flora. "He called me first every Christmas for forty-five years. That was what he could say. And he kept the letter so that eventually I would know he had said the rest of it too, even without words."

The office was quiet. The steam had stopped — the dry cleaner below had finished the morning's work. The street outside was doing its Friday afternoon thing, the week beginning its loosening, the city exhaling toward the weekend.

"What did it feel like," Flora said, "to read it? The letter. Your own letter."

He thought about it the way he thought about all real questions, with the whole of his attention.

"Like meeting someone I used to be," he said. "Someone very young, in considerable pain, who was trying to be honest about the pain for the first time and didn't quite have the language for it yet." He was quiet for a moment. "He said things — the twenty-year-old who wrote that letter — that were true, and that he had not yet learned to say with the precision that would have made them easier to receive. He was still learning how to be the person he was going to become." He paused. "I wanted to say to him: you will become him. You will figure out the language. You will have a good life in San Francisco and a wife who makes jollof rice on Sundays and the brother you are writing to will call you first every Christmas for forty-five years." He looked at the tin of biscuits. "I also wanted to say: don't send this. The words are not ready yet."

"But then Emmanuel wouldn't have kept it," Nancy said.

"No," Cresswell said. "Then Emmanuel wouldn't have kept it. And I wouldn't have had it back." He looked at her steadily. "So I am glad the twenty-year-old sent it before the words were ready. The imperfect words

were the ones Emmanuel needed. The imperfect words were the ones that required keeping."

Nancy put the cap on her pen. Parallel to the notepad.

"Your best, Cresswell," she said.

He looked at her.

"Last page," she said. "As you said."

He smiled — the whole-face smile, the one that reorganized everything. "Last page," he said. "*Your best, Cresswell*. In my own handwriting, fifty years old, slightly smudged where I must have sealed the envelope before the ink was fully dry." He looked at his hands. "I knew it was mine the moment I saw it. Before I even turned to the last page I knew. But the last page was good to see."

He stood. He buttoned his coat.

He looked at the office — the cork board, the two desks facing opposite walls, the window onto the street, the Farallon Islands postcard above the door, the note on the card stock gone slightly yellow.

He read the card stock.

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

"That's good," he said.

"It is," Flora said.

"Who wrote it?"

"Nancy did," Flora said. "Or she said it first. It amounts to the same thing."

Cresswell looked at Nancy.

Nancy looked at the notepad.

"I don't remember saying it," she said. It was the first time she had said this to a client, Flora realized. Said it plainly, without framing it as a joke or deflecting it as modesty. Just the fact, offered with the directness of a woman who had decided to be honest about it.

Cresswell looked at her.

"My mother," he said, "used to say that the things worth saying got said without you noticing. That the words that mattered most came out when you weren't watching yourself." He looked at the card stock again. "She said those were the ones to write down."

Nancy looked at the card stock.

"Yes," she said. "I think that's right."

Cresswell picked up his coat. At the door he turned.

"If you're ever in the Richmond on a Sunday," he said, "the jollof rice is available. My wife told me to say so. She said: tell them standing, so they know it's a real invitation."

He was standing.

"We'll remember that," Flora said.

"Good," he said.

He went down the stairs. They heard him pause on the fourth step — everyone paused on the fourth step, the loose carpet — and then his footsteps continued down and out, and the street door opened and closed, and Clement Street absorbed him the way Clement Street absorbed everyone, without comment, without ceremony, moving on.

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## Chapter Six

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Nancy opened the tin of biscuits.

She took one and passed the tin to Flora. Flora took one and set the tin on the edge of the desk and they sat at their desks in the Friday afternoon office and ate the biscuits in the quiet that was not empty but comfortable, the quiet of a room that had been organized by use and knew its own rhythms.

After a while Nancy said: "He already knew."

"Yes," Flora said.

"He knew what Emmanuel had done with it long before he came here."

"Twenty years, he said. Maybe thirty."

"He came here for the record," Nancy said. "The physical fact of it. The paper in the envelope in the handkerchief in the box."

"Yes."

"That's what we are," Nancy said. "Sometimes. We're the people who find the physical fact of what someone already knows."

Flora looked at the cork board. The empty pin where Cresswell Obi's name had been.

"The record," she said.

"Yes," Nancy said. She took another biscuit. "Someone has to write it down. Someone has to find it and bring it back and put it in the person's hands so that the knowing becomes something you can hold." She looked at the card stock above the door. "That's different from just knowing."

Flora looked at it too.

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

"Nancy," she said.

"Yes."

"When you said that to me. The first time. I put it on the card stock the same day."

Nancy looked at it.

"I know," she said. "I didn't remember saying it. But I knew you'd put it there because you'd said it the day before and the next morning it was on the wall." She paused. "I was glad you put it there. It helped me remember I'd said it, which helped me remember I thought it."

Flora looked at her.

This was the closest they had come, since the piece of paper on the desk three weeks ago, to the thing they had agreed to talk about. They had talked. The conversation had happened in the evening office, the light long gone, the street quiet, Nancy at the edge of Flora's desk saying *I need to tell you something* and Flora saying *all right* and the thing being said at last, the words finding their way into the room after years of living in margins and shorthand and silences, and the room receiving them the way the room received everything — without drama, without reorganizing itself, just holding what it was given.

They had talked about the systems. About the managing. About the specific categories of what held and what slipped. Nancy had been precise about it, as she was precise about everything — the vocabulary of someone who had spent a year monitoring herself with professional attention and could give you an accurate report.

They had not talked about what came next, because what came next was the work continuing, and the work continuing was its own answer.

Flora looked at the card stock.

"The things worth saying," she said, "got said without you noticing."

Nancy looked at her.

"Cresswell's mother," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "She was right." She finished her biscuit and looked at the tin. "She was right about that."

Outside, Clement Street went on being Clement Street. The dry cleaner below had finished the day's work. The steam was gone. The restaurants were opening for the evening. A dog barked twice and stopped. Someone laughed at something in the street, the unguarded public laugh, the kind that

happened when people forgot to be careful.

The office was quiet and it was theirs.

Nancy picked up her pen.

She wrote the time in the margin.

Below it she wrote: *case closed*.

She read it back.

It said what she'd written.

She put the cap on her pen and set it parallel to the notepad, the small precise gesture, and the Friday evening did what Friday evenings did, and the room held what it held, and the work would continue on Monday.

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*End.*