

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

The Naturalist

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

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Chapter One

Iris Cho arrived on a Thursday.

Flora noted this because Thursday was the day after she lost, the day she spent reconstructing — reading her own notes, listening to her own recordings, reassembling Wednesday from the outside in. By Thursday afternoon she was usually herself again, or the version of herself that passed for herself, which was close enough. By Thursday afternoon she could take a client.

She had been at her desk since seven, which was habit, and had spent the morning going through the previous week's recordings and finding nothing in them she hadn't already found. The Calloway case was closed. The cork board was empty, the pins still in it but holding nothing, which she found faintly unsettling in the way that an empty cork board always was — not blankness exactly, more like potential, like a held breath.

Nancy arrived at eight, which was also habit, pausing on the fourth step, taking a moment at the top with her keys. Flora had the kettle on before the door opened.

"You're early," Nancy said.

"You're late," Flora said.

Nancy hung up her coat and looked at the empty cork board and said nothing about it, which was the right response.

They had their coffee. Nancy worked through the post — two circulars, a letter from their accountant about quarterly filing, a card from a former client whose dog had been located living happily in a neighbour's garden two streets away. Nancy pinned the card to the board, which was better than nothing.

At half past ten the door opened and Iris Cho walked in.

She was 44 and carried herself the way people carried themselves when they had been holding something heavy for long enough that they had forgotten what it felt like not to. Good coat, good shoes, dark hair pulled back with the efficiency of someone who had more important things to think about than her hair. She stood in the doorway for a moment the way clients always stood — taking inventory, reassessing, deciding whether to stay — and then she came in and sat in the client chair and put her bag precisely on her lap and looked at the cork board.

She looked at the single postcard on it — a Labrador, grinning, sitting in someone's garden — and then she looked at Flora.

"My father died three weeks ago," she said. "The coroner said he fell down the stairs."

"I'm sorry," Flora said.

"He was terrified of stairs." Iris said it the way you said a fact you had repeated so many times it had worn smooth. "Since 2019. He had a fall in the garden that year — nothing serious, a twisted ankle, he was fine within a week — but it changed something in him. His relationship with the ground, I used to think. The way it could betray you without warning." She looked at her hands, which were folded over her bag, very still. "After that he held the rail every time he used the stairs. Both hands, always. Without exception. I watched him do it for four years."

"How often did you see him?" Flora asked.

"Every week. Sunday dinners, mostly. Sometimes midweek if I was passing." She paused. "We were close. He lived alone and I worried about him and he knew I worried and he was patient about it in the way he was patient about most things." She opened her bag and produced a photograph, which she set on the desk facing Flora. "This was taken in October. Six weeks before he died."

Flora looked at it.

A man in his early seventies, slight, white-haired, standing on a beach with his hands in his jacket pockets and his face turned slightly toward the water. Not posed — caught, the way the best photographs caught people, in a moment between moments. The face of someone who was used to looking at things carefully and had found, over a long life of looking, that patience was the main requirement.

"Edmund Cho," Iris said. "Seventy-one. He retired six years ago — thirty years as a marine biologist at the oceanographic institute on the bay. Before that he taught at Berkeley. He was — he was very well regarded." She said it quietly, not as a boast but as a fact she needed on the record. "He lived alone on Funston Avenue. He'd been in that house since 1987."

"A Victorian?" Nancy said from her desk.

Iris looked at her. "Yes. Three floors. He loved it. After the fall in 2019 he talked about moving — something single storey, no stairs, more practical. But he couldn't leave it." She paused. "He had the staircase modified instead. Had a second rail fitted — one on each side, so he always had something to hold. He used both of them every time. Every single time."

Flora looked at the photograph of the careful man on the beach.

"The police weren't interested," Iris said. "There were no signs of forced entry. No signs of a struggle. A seventy-one year old man living alone, found at the bottom of his stairs by his neighbour on a Wednesday morning." She paused. "The neighbour had a key. They had an arrangement about the post when one of them was away." Another pause. "The police were very kind. They explained about older people and falls and how quickly things could happen. They were not unkind about it." Her voice was entirely level. "They were wrong."

"What makes you certain?" Flora said.

Iris looked at her steadily. "I know my father. I know how he moved through that house. I know what he was afraid of and I know what he was careful about and I know the difference between a man who falls and a man who doesn't." She stopped. "He did not fall."

Nancy's pen was moving. Flora could hear it without looking.

"Tell me about the weeks before he died," Flora said. "Anything different. Anyone new. Any change in his routine."

Iris was quiet for a moment, the kind of quiet that meant she had been thinking about this for three weeks and was choosing where to begin.

"He was working on something," she said. "He'd been retired for six years but he still went out — to the bay, to the coast, the way he always had. Birdwatching, mostly. Marine mammals when he could get to them. He kept notebooks. He'd kept notebooks his whole career and he didn't stop

when he retired, he just stopped having to write reports about what was in them." She looked at the window, at the grey Clement Street morning beyond it. "In September he started going out more. Earlier, sometimes before dawn. He didn't say why. I asked him once and he said he was following something up."

"Following what up?"

"He wouldn't say. Not yet. That was what he said — not yet." She looked back at Flora. "And then the Sunday before he died he called me. He sounded — not frightened. Careful. The way he sounded when he was working through something he hadn't finished thinking about yet. He said he'd found something. I asked him what. He said he wasn't sure yet and he'd tell me when he was." She stopped. "That was the last time I spoke to him."

The compressor in the dry cleaner below ran its steady rhythm through the floor. Outside a delivery was being unloaded, someone calling instructions in Cantonese, the ordinary Wednesday-morning life of the street going about itself.

"His notebooks," Flora said. "The ones he kept."

"Gone," Iris said. "I went to the house after — after the funeral. I wanted to find whatever he'd been working on. He always kept his notebooks on the shelf in his study, going back decades, thirty years of them in order." She paused. "The recent ones were gone. The last two years, maybe more. Everything else was there. Just the recent ones missing."

Flora looked at Nancy. Nancy looked back over her reading glasses. The pen had stopped moving.

"Did you tell the police?" Flora said.

"Yes. They said he may have moved them. People do, apparently. They may have been lost in the — in clearing the house." Iris opened her bag and took out an envelope, which she set on the desk beside the photograph with the precise movement of someone who had been holding it for a long time. "That is everything I have. His address. His neighbour's name. The name of his department head at the institute, who called me after the funeral and said Edmund had been in touch with him in October about something he wouldn't discuss over the phone." She paused. "He was going to go and see him the week he died."

Flora looked at the envelope. Then at the photograph of Edmund Cho on his beach, hands in his pockets, face turned toward the water, patient and careful and used to finding things that other people had walked past without seeing.

"Ms. Cho," she said. "We'll take the case."

Iris Cho nodded once, the nod of someone who had been carrying something alone for three weeks and had just, for the first time, put a small part of it down.

"Thank you," she said.

She stood, straightened her coat, picked up her bag. At the door she stopped and looked back at the cork board — the single postcard, the grinning Labrador, the empty pins holding nothing.

"He found something," she said. "Whatever it was, it was important enough that someone didn't want it written down." She looked at Flora. "Find out what it was. That's all I'm asking."

She left. The door closed behind her.

Flora picked up the photograph of Edmund Cho and pinned it to the centre of the cork board.

Below it she pinned a piece of card and wrote on it in her careful block letters:

EDMUND CHO. 71. FOUND WEDNESDAY. FUNSTON AVENUE.

She stepped back and looked at it.

Nancy came to stand beside her, reading glasses still on, arms folded, looking at the board with the expression she reserved for the beginning of things.

"A marine biologist," Nancy said. "Who found something he wouldn't talk about on the phone."

"Yes."

"And kept thirty years of notebooks, all of which are present and correct except the last two."

"Yes."

"And fell down a staircase he was famously, almost obsessively careful about."

"Yes."

Nancy looked at the photograph. The careful face. The beach. The hands in the pockets.

"What do marine biologists find," she said, "that gets them killed?"

Flora looked at the envelope Iris Cho had left on the desk. The department head who had been expecting a visit. The notebooks that weren't there. The Sunday phone call from a man who had found something he hadn't finished thinking about yet.

"That," she said, "is where we start."

Chapter Two

The department head's name was Victor Reyes.

Nancy found him in ten minutes — still at the institute, still running the marine biology department at sixty-three, the kind of man who had been offered retirement and declined it on the grounds that he had nowhere better to be. His photograph on the institute's website showed someone broad-shouldered and serious, with the permanent squint of a person who had spent decades looking at bright water.

Flora called him from the office.

He picked up on the third ring.

"Dr. Reyes," she said. "My name is Flora Voss. I'm a private investigator. I've been retained by Iris Cho regarding her father's death."

A silence that was not surprised. The silence of someone who had been expecting a call and was deciding how to answer it.

"Edmund," he said. Not a question. Just the name, held for a moment.

"You spoke with him in October," Flora said. "He was planning to come and see you the week he died."

"Yes." Another pause. "I've been — I wasn't sure who to call. The police seemed satisfied. Iris didn't know what Edmund had told me, or I assumed she didn't." He stopped. "How much do you know?"

"Very little," Flora said. "That's why I'm calling."

A long breath. She heard him push back from something — a chair, a desk — and then the sound of a door closing, and the quality of the silence changed, became more private.

"Edmund called me on the fourteenth of October," Reyes said. "He was agitated, which was unusual — Edmund was one of the least agitated people I have ever known. Thirty years I worked with him and I can count

on one hand the times he raised his voice." He paused. "He said he'd been monitoring a stretch of coastline south of the city. Pacifica, down toward Montara. He'd been going there since September, early mornings, tracking something he wouldn't specify over the phone."

"What was he tracking?"

"He said he needed to show me rather than tell me. That was exactly what he said — I need to show you, Victor, not tell you, because if I tell you without the evidence you'll think I'm losing my mind." Another pause, heavier. "Those were his words. Losing my mind."

Flora looked at the cork board. Edmund Cho's photograph. The careful face. The beach.

"Did he give you any indication at all?" she said.

"He said one thing. He said: something is happening down there that shouldn't be happening, and someone knows it is, and they would prefer it didn't get written down." Reyes's voice was very steady, the voice of someone reciting something they had gone over many times. "I asked him if he was safe. He said he didn't know yet." A pause. "And then he said he'd come in the following week and show me his notebooks and we'd go from there."

"He never came."

"No. He died on a Tuesday. I read about it in the — his neighbour put a notice in the local paper. Accidental fall." He said the two words with a flatness that contained everything he thought of them. "I've been sitting with it for three weeks."

Flora picked up her pen. "Dr. Reyes. The coastline he was monitoring — Pacifica, toward Montara. Do you know specifically where?"

"No. But Edmund was methodical. He would have had a fixed observation point, somewhere he returned to consistently. And he would have written it down." A pause. "The notebooks."

"Gone," Flora said. "The recent ones. Iris found everything up to two years ago. Nothing after."

The silence this time was longer.

"Then someone has already been to the house," Reyes said.

"That's our assumption."

"Before or after he died?"

"We don't know yet."

Flora heard him exhale slowly, the exhale of a man recalibrating the size of the thing he was sitting with.

"Dr. Reyes," she said. "Is there anything else? Anything Edmund said or did in the months before October that seemed different?"

He thought about it seriously. She appreciated that — the pause that meant actual thought rather than the performance of it.

"In August," he said slowly, "he submitted a records request to the California Coastal Commission. He told me about it in passing — he said he was checking something against the public record. I didn't ask what. Edmund checked things against the public record the way other people checked the weather. It was just how he thought." Another pause. "I don't know if the request was ever fulfilled."

"Do you know what he was requesting?"

"No. But the Coastal Commission keeps records of everything — permits, environmental assessments, development applications, discharge reports. If Edmund was looking at a specific stretch of coastline and something was happening there that shouldn't be —" He stopped. "The records request would tell you what he suspected."

Flora wrote it down. *Coastal Commission. Records request. August.*

"Thank you, Dr. Reyes," she said. "If you think of anything else —"

"Ms. Voss." His voice had changed slightly. Not softer — more deliberate. "Edmund Cho was one of the finest field biologists I have ever known. Forty years of careful, patient, meticulous observation. He did not lose his notebooks. He did not fall down his stairs." A pause. "Find out what he found."

"That's what we're here for," Flora said.

She hung up.

Nancy was already at the filing cabinet, pulling out the San Francisco map — the large one, the one they used for cases that needed geography. She spread it on Flora's desk and stood back, reading glasses on, arms folded.

"Pacifica to Montara," Flora said. "South of the city. He was going before dawn."

Nancy looked at the coastline on the map — the long stretch of it, the cliffs and coves and the grey Pacific beyond. "Coastal Commission records request in August," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"That takes time. Weeks, sometimes months." Nancy looked at her. "If he submitted in August and died in November, the response may have arrived after he died."

Flora looked at the map. The coastline. The particular stretch of it that Edmund Cho had been watching since September, early mornings, something happening that shouldn't be happening, something someone preferred not to be written down.

"It may have arrived at his house," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said.

"Which means we need to go to Funston Avenue."

"Yes." Nancy folded the map with the practised efficiency of someone who had folded many maps over many cases. "And we should go before anyone else decides to."

Flora looked at the cork board. Edmund Cho on his beach, patient and careful and used to finding things.

"Tomorrow is Friday," Flora said.

Nancy looked at her over her glasses. "Yes."

"And next Tuesday I lose the day."

"Yes."

Flora picked up her recorder. Checked it was running.

"Then we have Friday, the weekend, and Monday," she said. "Let's not waste them."

Chapter Three

The house on Funston Avenue was a narrow Victorian painted the colour of old bone, three floors rising steeply from a small front garden that Edmund Cho had kept with the same patient attention he had brought to everything else. The garden was beginning to show three weeks of no one — the edges softening, a pot by the door gone dry, a tendril of something reaching past its stake with no one to redirect it.

Flora stood on the pavement and looked at it for a moment.

Nancy stood beside her. Neither of them spoke.

Iris Cho had given them a key. She had also given them the neighbour's name — Margaret Foss, seventy-three, the woman who had found Edmund on a Wednesday morning and had been, according to Iris, not quite herself since. She lived in the house to the left, same vintage, better garden, a row of terracotta pots along her front wall that had been tended within the last day or two.

"We should speak to her first," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said.

They went left.

Margaret Foss answered the door before Flora had finished knocking, which meant she had seen them from the window and had been deciding whether to answer. She was small and white-haired and wore the expression of someone who had been waiting for something and wasn't sure if this was it.

"Mrs. Foss," Flora said. "My name is Flora Voss. This is Nancy Drake. We're investigators, retained by Iris Cho. We were hoping to ask you a few questions about Edmund."

Margaret Foss looked at them for a long moment. Then she looked past them at the house next door, at the dry pot by the door and the tendril past its stake.

"Come in," she said. "I've just made tea."

Her sitting room was the sitting room of a woman who read seriously and gardened seriously and had strong opinions about both. Books on three walls, a bay window full of plants that were alive and evidently thriving, two cats arranged on separate chairs with the territorial precision of cats who had worked out a treaty.

She poured tea without asking how they took it, which Flora found she didn't mind.

"I found him at eight in the morning," Margaret said, settling into the chair that was evidently hers, the cats having claimed the others. She said it with the flatness of someone who had said it several times to several people and had learned that flatness was the only way to say it without coming apart. "I had a parcel for him. The postman had left it with me the day before because Edmund wasn't answering — which wasn't unusual, he went out very early, sometimes he wasn't back until afternoon." She paused. "I knocked. No answer. I used my key."

"What time did the parcel arrive?" Nancy said.

Margaret looked at her. "Tuesday. The postman comes at half past nine, usually. I'd say it was ten, thereabouts."

Flora looked at Nancy. Nancy's pen moved.

Edmund Cho had died on a Tuesday. The postman had tried to deliver a parcel on Tuesday morning and found no one home.

"Mrs. Foss," Flora said. "The parcel — do you know where it is now?"

"Iris took it. When she came to sort through things." Margaret looked at her tea. "It was a large envelope. Official looking. One of those government ones, cream coloured, with a return address I didn't pay much attention to."

Flora kept her face still.

"Did you notice the return address at all?" she said. "Any part of it?"

Margaret Foss looked up with the expression of a woman who did not appreciate being underestimated. "Sacramento," she said. "The return

address was Sacramento. And there was a seal on it — a circular seal, blue, the kind government departments use." She paused. "I noticed because Edmund didn't get much official post. He'd been retired six years."

Flora set her cup down carefully.

The California Coastal Commission was based in Sacramento.

"Mrs. Foss," she said. "Can I ask you about Edmund in the weeks before he died. Did you notice anything different? Anyone visiting, any change in his routine?"

Margaret was quiet for a moment, the quiet of genuine consideration.

"He was going out earlier," she said. "He'd always been an early riser — we both are, we used to wave to each other from our windows sometimes, half past six, seven in the morning, it was a sort of joke between us — but in September, October, he was going out before it was light. I'd hear his door." She paused. "I asked him about it once. He said he was birdwatching. Which was true, I suppose — Edmund was always birdwatching. But he said it in the way he said things when he didn't want to say more, and I left it alone because that was how we were with each other."

"Did anyone come to the house?" Flora asked. "Anyone you hadn't seen before?"

"Once," Margaret said. "In October. A man. I didn't see him clearly — I saw him from the upstairs window, which looks down on Edmund's front step. He was there for perhaps twenty minutes and then he left." She paused. "He was youngish. Forty, perhaps. Dark jacket. He carried a bag — a laptop bag, the kind businesspeople carry."

"Did you see his face?"

"Briefly. When he left he looked up the street and I saw his profile." She paused. "I didn't know him."

"Did Edmund seem different after the visit?"

Margaret looked at her hands. She had a gardener's hands, Flora noticed — capable, slightly roughened, the hands of someone who worked with them regularly and didn't apologise for it.

"He came round that evening," she said. "Which wasn't unusual — we had supper together once a week, sometimes more. But he was quieter than usual. He ate and he drank his tea and he looked out my window at the street for a long time without saying what he was looking at." She stopped.

"Before he left he said something I've been thinking about since." She looked up. "He said: Margaret, if anyone comes asking about me after I'm gone, tell them to look at what the water knows."

The sitting room was very quiet. One of the cats stood, stretched, and resettled itself.

"Those were his exact words?" Nancy said.

"Yes." Margaret said it without hesitation. "I remember because I didn't understand them and I meant to ask him what he meant and then he left and I forgot and then —" She stopped. Looked at her tea. "And then he was gone and I couldn't ask him anymore."

Tell them to look at what the water knows.

Flora looked at Nancy. Nancy was writing, her face composed and still, giving nothing away.

"Mrs. Foss," Flora said. "Thank you. You've been extraordinarily helpful." She stood and buttoned her coat. "One more thing. The morning you found him — before you used your key, before you went in — was there anything on the street? Any car you didn't recognise, anyone you noticed?"

Margaret Foss looked at her steadily. "There was a car," she said. "Parked two doors down. Dark blue, or black, I couldn't say which in that light. It was there when I came out at seven to put my recycling out and it was gone by the time the ambulance came." She paused. "I told the police. They wrote it down."

Flora nodded. "Thank you," she said again.

At the door Margaret stopped them.

"Edmund was a good man," she said. "A very careful, very good man. He would not have fallen." She said it the way Iris had said it — not as a plea, not as an argument, just as a fact that had been true for three weeks and would remain true regardless of what anyone official had decided. "Find out what happened to him."

"We intend to," Flora said.

They let themselves into Edmund Cho's house with Iris's key.

The hallway was the hallway of a life lived carefully and with intention — coats on their hooks, boots on their rack, a small table for post with nothing on it except a pen in a holder and a dish for keys. To the right, a staircase.

Flora stood and looked at it.

The rails were there, one on each side, exactly as Iris had described — fitted, solid, at the right height for a man of Edmund's build to hold with both hands. The carpet on the stairs was a dark pattern, slightly worn in the centre where feet had fallen for thirty-five years, undisturbed at the edges. A lamp on the hall table threw clean steady light across the bottom two steps.

She crouched and looked at the bottom of the stairs. The floor at the foot of them was hardwood, polished, unforgiving. She looked at it for a long time without touching anything.

"The parcel," Nancy said from behind her. "We need to call Iris."

"Yes." Flora stood. She looked up the staircase — the two rails, the worn centre, the lamp light reaching the first landing and no further. A man who held both rails every time, always, without exception. "We need the parcel and we need to know what the water knows."

She took out her recorder.

Friday morning, she said into it. Funston Avenue. Margaret Foss saw a man in October — forty, dark jacket, laptop bag, twenty minutes. Edmund said: look at what the water knows. A parcel arrived Tuesday morning from Sacramento. Iris has it. She looked at the staircase one more time. The rails are solid. Both of them. A careful man would have used them.

She clicked it off.

Outside, the fog was coming in off the bay, the way it came in off the bay on Friday mornings in November, slow and indifferent and covering everything equally.

Chapter Four

Iris Cho lived in a flat in the Inner Sunset, fourth floor, a building that had been modern in 1972 and had been making its peace with that ever since. She buzzed them up without asking who it was, which meant she had been expecting them, or expecting someone, or had reached the point in grief where it no longer seemed to matter who came through the door.

She met them in the hallway outside her flat in the clothes of someone who had been working from home and had stopped working some time ago without quite admitting it. She looked at them the way people looked at investigators when investigators came to their door on a Friday afternoon — with the particular combination of hope and dread that came from wanting answers and knowing that answers had a way of being worse than the question.

"You've been to the house," she said.

"And to Margaret Foss," Flora said. "May we come in?"

The flat was orderly in the way that flats became orderly when their occupants were holding things together by main force. Everything in its place, surfaces clear, a controlled environment maintained against the chaos of the last three weeks. On the kitchen table, a cardboard box — the contents of her father's house that Iris had brought back and not yet been able to go through. Sitting on top of the box, a large cream envelope, unopened.

Flora looked at it.

Iris followed her gaze.

"I couldn't open it," she said. "I've had it for two weeks and I've picked it up four times and I couldn't." She looked at the envelope the way you

looked at something that was going to change things and that you were not quite ready to have changed. "It felt like — if I opened it I was accepting that he was gone. That there was no one left to open his post but me."

Nancy sat down at the kitchen table without being invited, which was the right thing to do. She folded her hands on the table and looked at Iris steadily.

"Would you like us to open it?" she said.

Iris looked at her for a moment. Then she pulled out a chair and sat down across from Nancy, and Flora sat at the end between them, and Iris reached out and picked up the envelope and held it for a moment and then set it in front of Flora.

"Yes," she said. "Please."

Flora looked at the envelope.

Cream, official, heavy stock. A circular blue seal in the upper left corner: *California Coastal Commission*. Edmund Cho's name and address in the centre, typed. Postmarked Sacramento, the third of November. He had died on the eleventh.

It had sat in the postal system for eight days and arrived the morning he died and had been sitting in this flat for two weeks waiting for someone to be ready.

Flora opened it.

Inside, a covering letter, two pages, and behind it a thick sheaf of documents — photocopied permits, environmental assessment forms, discharge reports, the dense bureaucratic record of a stretch of California coastline going back seven years. Flora set the covering letter on the table where all three of them could read it.

It was dated the first of November. It was signed by a records officer whose name Flora didn't recognise. It confirmed receipt of Edmund Cho's public records request dated the fourteenth of August and provided the requested documentation pertaining to coastal management activity in the Pacifica-Montara corridor, San Mateo County, for the period January 2017 to present.

Flora turned to the documents.

Nancy leaned in beside her.

They were permits, mostly — development permits, water usage permits, environmental impact assessments for a range of coastal activities. Flora was not a marine biologist and could not read most of them with any confidence, but she could read dates and she could read names, and two things became apparent within the first five minutes.

The first was that a company called Pelagic Solutions LLC had been operating in the Pacifica-Montara corridor since 2019, holding a series of permits for what were described as marine research and monitoring activities. The permits were renewed annually. The most recent renewal was dated September of this year — the same month Edmund Cho had started going out before dawn.

The second was that the environmental impact assessments for Pelagic Solutions' activities had been signed off by the same assessor every year for four years. A consultant named R. Garfield, operating out of a firm called Pacific Environmental Services, San Francisco.

Flora set the documents down.

"Pelagic Solutions," she said. "Do you know that name?"

Iris shook her head. "No."

"Your father never mentioned it?"

"No." She was looking at the documents with the focused attention of someone reading a foreign language by sound alone. "What do they do?"

"According to their permits, marine research and monitoring." Flora looked at Nancy. "Which is also what your father did for thirty years."

Nancy was already writing.

"He would have known," Iris said slowly. "If a company was operating on that stretch of coastline, doing marine work — he would have known about them. He knew everyone in that field." She paused. "Or he found out about them. That September, when he started going out before dawn — he found them."

"And he didn't like what he found," Nancy said, not looking up from her notepad.

"The permits say research and monitoring," Flora said. "But permits say what the applicant tells them to say." She looked at the environmental assessments, four years of them, signed by R. Garfield of Pacific Environmental Services. "What the water knows is different from what the

paperwork says."

She picked up the covering letter again and looked at the date. The first of November. Edmund had been alive for ten more days after this was posted. He had known it was coming — he had submitted the request in August, he knew the response was on its way. He was going out before dawn, watching the coastline, filling notebooks he no longer had.

He had been building a case.

"Ms. Cho," Flora said. "Your father's study — you said the recent notebooks were gone but everything else was there. Were there any other papers? Correspondence, printouts, anything loose?"

Iris looked at the cardboard box on the table. "I haven't gone through it properly. I took what was on his desk and in his in-tray and I brought it here and I haven't been able to —" She stopped. Looked at the box. "I haven't been able to go through it."

Flora looked at Nancy. Nancy looked at the box and then at Iris.

"Would you like us to do that now?" Nancy said. "Together, with you here."

Iris put both hands flat on the table. Looked at the box. The discipline of three weeks of holding herself together was visible in her face — the effort of it, the cost of it, the particular exhaustion of a person who had been composed for longer than composure was designed to last.

"Yes," she said. "All right. Yes."

Nancy reached over and pulled the box toward her and began, with the careful methodical patience of thirty years in courtrooms, to go through it.

Flora watched her work and thought about a man who had spent forty years looking at the ocean carefully enough to notice when something was wrong, and who had spent the last months of his life building a record of what he had seen, and who had told his neighbour to look at what the water knew, and who had died on a Tuesday morning at the bottom of a staircase he was famously, obsessively careful about.

The documents from Sacramento sat on the table between them.

Outside the window the fog had reached the Inner Sunset, moving up from the ocean the way it always did, steady and inevitable, turning the late afternoon the colour of old silver.

"Here," Nancy said.

She set something on the table.

A folded piece of paper, handwritten, in the careful upright script of a man who had kept notebooks for forty years and knew how to make his writing last. At the top, a date — the seventh of November, four days before he died. Below it, a single line.

If something happens to me — Montara State Beach, the north end, the rocks below the lookout point. Low tide. You'll see it.

Flora read it twice.

Then she looked at Iris.

Iris was looking at her father's handwriting with an expression that was beyond grief, past it, in the place grief left you when it had finished with you for the moment and left something quieter and harder in its place.

"He knew," Iris said. "He knew something might happen."

"Yes," Flora said.

"He left us a map."

"Yes."

Outside, the fog moved through the streets of the Inner Sunset like something that had always been there and always would be, patient and indifferent and knowing everything the water knew.

Chapter Five

Low tide on Saturday morning was at six forty-seven.

Flora knew this because she had checked it three times on Friday evening and written it on a piece of card that she put on her desk, on her kitchen counter, and in her coat pocket. Not because she would forget — Saturday was not Tuesday — but because the habit of redundancy was how she lived, and the habit had kept her functional for sixty-two years and she saw no reason to stop now.

Nancy picked her up at five-thirty.

This was not discussed or arranged. Flora came downstairs at five twenty-five and Nancy's car was already at the kerb, engine running, two coffees in the cupholder, Nancy in her good walking coat with her notepad on the passenger seat. Flora got in and moved the notepad to her lap and said nothing and Nancy said nothing and they drove south through the sleeping city in the dark.

The city thinned out below Daly City. By the time they reached Pacifica the sky was beginning to separate itself from the ocean — not light exactly, more the idea of light, a grey loosening at the horizon that suggested dawn was considering the possibility. The coast road ran along the cliffs and the Pacific was dark and enormous to their right, occasional white lines of surf showing where the waves were breaking, the sound of it coming through the car's ventilation like something breathing.

"How's your knee?" Flora said.

"Fine," Nancy said, which was what she said about her knee.

"The path down to the beach —"

"I've looked at it on the map," Nancy said. "It's a path, not a scramble. I'll manage."

Flora looked out at the ocean. "We should have brought Iris."

"No," Nancy said. "Not yet. Not until we know what we're looking at." She paused. "If we find something that can be found. If Edmund hid something four days before he died and the tide has been in and out thirty times since —"

"He said low tide," Flora said. "He was a marine biologist. He knew what survives a tide."

Nancy was quiet for a moment. "Yes," she said. "He did."

Montara State Beach was empty at six in the morning in November, which was the only sensible way for it to be. They parked in the small lot above the beach and sat for a moment looking at the water, which was grey and serious and going about its business without any interest in being observed.

Flora checked the note. *North end, the rocks below the lookout point. Low tide.*

The lookout point was visible from the car park — a promontory of rock at the northern end of the beach, a rough path climbing to it from the sand. Below it, where the cliff met the beach, a tumble of dark rocks exposed by the retreating tide, slick with kelp, the water still draining off them in thin streams.

They got out of the car.

The wind came off the water immediately, cold and purposeful, the kind of wind that didn't apologise. Flora turned her collar up. Nancy already had hers up, had had it up since Pacifica, knew this coast and what it did in November.

They walked north along the beach. The sand was hard-packed and dark at this hour, easier to walk on than it would be in the afternoon. To their left the cliff rose, pale in the early light. To their right the ocean made its steady argument with the shore.

Flora thought about Edmund Cho walking this beach before dawn. September, October, November — the mornings getting darker, the wind getting colder, a seventy-one year old man with a notebook and forty years of knowing how to look at things, coming back here again and again because he had found something that needed looking at.

Something is happening down there that shouldn't be happening.

They reached the rocks below the lookout point.

Close up they were larger than they'd appeared from the car park — great dark slabs of them, some the size of a desk, some larger, angled and piled by whatever forces had put them there, draped in kelp and barnacled and smelling of the deep cold ocean. The tide had left pools among them, still and clear, small complete worlds that would be underwater again in six hours.

Flora stood at the edge of them and looked.

"He said you'd see it," Nancy said, standing beside her. "At low tide."

"Yes." Flora looked at the pools. At the rocks. At the kelp-draped surfaces and the barnacled faces and the places where the rock was bare and pale from constant exposure. "He was a naturalist. He was used to looking at things other people walked past."

She stepped onto the first rock carefully, testing it, finding her footing. It held. She moved further in, picking her way between the pools, crouching occasionally to look at something more closely. Nancy stayed at the edge, watching, her notepad ready.

Flora worked methodically, the way she had been taught to work — not looking for something specific, because you never found what you were looking for when you were looking for it, but looking at everything, letting the wrong things be wrong, waiting for the right kind of wrongness to announce itself.

It took eleven minutes.

She was crouched over a pool in the shadow of the largest rock, looking at the pool itself rather than the rock, when she saw it. Not in the pool. On the face of the rock above it, at a height that would be submerged at high tide — a crack in the rock, wider than it should be, the edges of it too clean, the darkness inside it too uniform.

She reached in.

Her fingers found plastic. A waterproof bag, the heavy-duty kind, sealed with a roll closure, wedged into the crack with the deliberate placement of a man who had spent thirty years in the field and knew how to cache a sample against the weather.

She pulled it out.

She carried it back to the edge of the rocks and set it down and looked at Nancy and Nancy looked at it and neither of them said anything for a moment.

Flora opened the bag.

Inside, wrapped in a second waterproof layer, a notebook. Small, dark blue, the same as the ones Iris had described. On the cover, in Edmund's careful upright hand: *Vol. XLVII. September — November.*

And underneath the notebook, a USB drive.

Flora held the notebook in both hands and looked at the ocean. The sky was lighter now, properly light, the sun still below the horizon but committed to arriving. The waves came in and went out with the patience of something that had been doing this for longer than there had been anyone to watch it.

Edmund Cho had sat on these rocks in the dark, before dawn, for three months. He had watched and recorded and eventually hidden what he'd found in a crack in a rock that would be underwater twice a day, because he understood tides and he understood evidence and he understood, by the seventh of November, that someone might come for what he knew before he could tell it to anyone.

He had been right.

"Flora," Nancy said.

Flora looked at her.

Nancy was looking at the notebook in Flora's hands with the careful expression she wore when she was thinking about something she hadn't said yet.

"Tuesday," she said.

Flora looked at the notebook. Then at the USB drive. Then at the ocean.

Tuesday was three days away. Whatever was in this notebook, whatever was on this drive, they had three days to understand it before she lost a day and Nancy — Nancy had been having a good morning, a clear morning, but good mornings were not guarantees and three days was not nothing but it was not everything either.

"We need Victor Reyes," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "We need someone who can read what Edmund wrote."

"Today," Flora said. "Not Monday. Today."

She put the notebook and the USB drive back in the waterproof bag and sealed it and put it in her coat pocket and felt it there, solid and present, the last testimony of a careful man who had trusted the ocean to keep it safe until someone came who would understand what it meant.

She took out her recorder.

Saturday, she said into it. Montara. North rocks, below the lookout. Notebook volume forty-seven, September to November. USB drive. Both retrieved six fifty-one a.m., low tide, as Edmund indicated. She paused. He knew we would come. He knew we would look.

She clicked it off.

They walked back down the beach toward the car, the wind behind them now, the ocean catching the first flat light of the morning and throwing it back at the sky.

Chapter Six

Victor Reyes answered his mobile on the second ring, which on a Saturday morning meant either that he was already at his desk or that he had been waiting for the phone to ring.

"I found his notebook," Flora said. "And a USB drive. He cached them at Montara, in the rocks, before he died. I need someone who can read what he wrote."

A silence that was not surprise. The same silence as the first call — the silence of a man who had been sitting with something and had just been given permission to stop sitting with it alone.

"Come to the institute," Reyes said. "I'll be there in an hour."

The oceanographic institute sat on the bay side of the city, a low complex of buildings that smelled of saltwater and decades of serious work. Reyes met them in the car park — broad-shouldered as his photograph, the squint even more pronounced in person, the look of someone who had spent so long studying the surface of the water that he had forgotten how to look at things that didn't move.

He looked at the waterproof bag in Flora's hand and said nothing. He led them inside.

His office was the office of a man who had been in the same room for thirty years — sedimentary, the layers of work and time visible in the strata of papers and books and equipment, the walls covered in charts and photographs and pinned notes going back further than anyone would have cause to check. Two chairs had been cleared, recently, in anticipation of visitors. A laptop was open on the desk.

Flora gave him the bag.

He opened it with the careful hands of a field scientist — not reverent exactly, more the automatic precision of someone for whom handling evidence was second nature. He took out the notebook. Read the cover. Set it down and looked at it for a moment the way Margaret Foss had looked at the house next door — the look of someone seeing a thing that was present when its owner was not.

Then he opened it.

Flora watched his face.

He read for four minutes without speaking. His expression moved through several things — recognition, concentration, and then something else, something that settled into his jaw and stayed there.

"He was right," Reyes said. Not to them. To the notebook, or to Edmund through it.

"What did he find?" Flora said.

Reyes looked up. He took off his glasses and set them on the desk and looked at the two of them with the expression of a man deciding how to explain something complex to people who needed to understand it quickly.

"You know what a harmful algal bloom is?" he said.

"Broadly," Flora said.

"Red tide," Nancy said. "Toxic algae."

"Yes." Reyes put his glasses back on. "Certain species of algae, under certain conditions, proliferate rapidly. The bloom can cover miles of coastline. It produces toxins — domoic acid, saxitoxin, others — that accumulate in shellfish and fish and move up the food chain. Marine mammals. Seabirds. In severe cases, people." He paused. "Blooms occur naturally. They always have. But they're sensitive to conditions — water temperature, nutrient levels, salinity. And nutrient levels can be influenced by what goes into the water."

"Discharge," Flora said. She thought of the permits in the Sacramento envelope. The records she couldn't read. "Pelagic Solutions."

Reyes looked at her. "You've done your homework."

"We have the Coastal Commission documents. Their permits describe marine research and monitoring."

"Research and monitoring." He said it the way you repeated something that had a different meaning in your mouth than it had had in someone

else's. "What Edmund found —" He looked at the notebook again. "He was tracking a bloom. A recurring bloom, same stretch of coastline, September through November, three years running. Unusual in its persistence, unusual in its location. He was mapping it." Reyes turned the notebook so they could see the pages — dense columns of observations, coordinates, dates, water condition notes, and interspersed throughout, sketches. Careful, precise field sketches of the coastline and the water and something Flora couldn't immediately identify, a regular structure just below the surface, drawn from multiple angles across multiple visits.

"What is that?" Nancy said. She had leaned forward, reading glasses on, looking at the sketches.

"That," Reyes said, "is a discharge pipe. Underwater, running from the cliff face into the bay. Edmund measured it, estimated its diameter, tracked its output schedule." He turned more pages. "He documented twelve separate discharge events between September and November. Always at night. Always on an outgoing tide, which carries whatever is discharged south along the coast and disperses it before it can be easily sampled." He paused. "The bloom follows the discharge by four to six days. Consistently."

Flora looked at the sketches. The careful lines of a man who had sat in the dark on wet rocks in November and drawn what he saw with the patience of forty years.

"Pelagic Solutions has permits for marine research," she said. "Not for discharge."

"No," Reyes said. "Not for discharge. And certainly not for the discharge of whatever is producing a persistent harmful algal bloom on a protected stretch of coastline." He closed the notebook. "Whatever they're putting into that water, Edmund spent three months documenting that they're putting it there, and that it is killing things." He paused. "Seabirds. Marine mammals. Shellfish beds that have been there for decades. He has it all in here."

The office was very quiet. Outside, somewhere in the building, something electronic hummed at a frequency just below hearing.

"The USB drive," Flora said.

Reyes took it and plugged it into his laptop. A folder opened — photographs, hundreds of them, date and time stamped. He opened the first

few. Night photographs, taken with a long lens, grainy with the low light but clear enough — a pipe, an outflow, the water disturbed around it. The cliff face above. And in several of them, at the top of the cliff, a light. A vehicle, its headlights caught at the edge of the frame.

"He photographed them doing it," Nancy said quietly.

"Yes." Reyes opened another folder. A second set of photographs, these taken in daylight — the aftermath, the bloom itself, the dead birds on the sand, the kelp beds discoloured, a seal on the rocks that was not sleeping. Edmund had photographed all of it with the same meticulous attention. "He was building an evidence file. For me, I think. For the Coastal Commission. For whoever would listen." He looked up. "The man in the dark jacket. The one who came to his house in October."

Flora looked at him. "You know about him?"

"No. But Edmund wrote about him." Reyes opened the notebook again, near the back. "October the nineteenth. A man came to the house. He said he was from Pelagic Solutions. He knew Edmund had been on the beach. He said he wanted to discuss Edmund's observations, that there may have been a misunderstanding about the nature of their activities." Reyes read directly from the notebook, Edmund's words coming through his voice like a broadcast from somewhere far away. *"He was polite. He was also very clear. He said that the work Pelagic Solutions was doing was of considerable economic importance and that a misunderstanding of this kind, allowed to develop, could have significant consequences for everyone involved. He did not specify what consequences. He did not need to. I told him I didn't know what he was talking about. He said he thought that was probably for the best. He left at half past four."* Reyes closed the notebook. "Four days later Edmund called me."

Flora sat with that for a moment. The polite man with the laptop bag who had stood on Edmund's doorstep for twenty minutes and left without raising his voice and had made himself absolutely clear without saying anything that could be repeated to a police officer.

"Edmund kept going back," Flora said. "After the visit."

"Of course he did," Reyes said, and there was something in his voice that was grief and pride together, the way you felt about someone who had done the right thing at considerable cost. "He was Edmund."

Nancy had been writing steadily. She looked up now. "Dr. Reyes. The environmental assessments for Pelagic Solutions' permits. Four years, all signed by the same consultant. R. Garfield, Pacific Environmental Services."

Reyes looked at her. Something in his face shifted.

"Rob Garfield," he said slowly. "Robert Garfield. He was a postdoc here. Eight, nine years ago." He paused. "Edmund supervised his work."

The room was very quiet again.

"He knew Edmund," Flora said.

"He knew Edmund very well." Reyes looked at the notebook on his desk. "And Edmund would have known his work. His methods. His standards." Another pause. "Edmund would have known immediately if Garfield's assessments were fraudulent."

Flora thought about a man sitting in the dark on wet November rocks, drawing a discharge pipe from memory, photographing the dead birds and the discoloured water and the vehicle at the top of the cliff. A man who had found, in the course of watching the coastline he had watched his whole career, not just a company breaking the law but a man he had mentored helping them do it.

That was what he hadn't finished thinking about.

That was what he hadn't known how to say on the phone.

"We need to go back to the house on Funston Avenue," Flora said. "The staircase."

Reyes looked at her.

"Edmund didn't just find a discharge pipe," Flora said. "He found the man who certified it was safe. A man who knew Edmund's methods well enough to know that Edmund would keep looking until he had enough to end him." She stood and buttoned her coat. "That changes the shape of it."

Nancy was already putting her pen away.

"Dr. Reyes," Flora said. "Keep the notebook and the drive here. Somewhere secure. Don't tell anyone you have them."

"And if someone asks?"

Flora looked at him. "No one should ask. If they do, call me immediately." She gave him her card. "Don't call the police yet. Not until we have more."

Reyes took the card. He looked at it and then at the notebook on his desk and then out the window at the bay, which was bright now in the late morning light, the water moving with its customary indifference to everything that happened on its shore or in its depths.

"He trusted the rocks to keep it," Reyes said. "He trusted the tide."

"He trusted someone would know to look," Flora said.

She walked out of the office and down the corridor and out into the car park, and Nancy walked beside her, and neither of them spoke until they reached the car, and then Flora took out her recorder and held it and looked at the bay.

Saturday, she said. Pelagic Solutions. Illegal discharge, Pacifica-Montara corridor, three years. Harmful algal bloom, documented. R. Garfield — Robert Garfield — former postdoc, Edmund's supervisee, signing off fraudulent environmental assessments. The man in the dark jacket knew Edmund was watching. Edmund kept watching anyway. She paused. Tuesday is coming. We have two days.

She clicked it off.

The bay threw the light back at the sky, bright and cold and knowing nothing about any of this.

Chapter Seven

They went back to Funston Avenue on Saturday afternoon.

The fog had come in properly now, the way it came in on November Saturdays when it had made up its mind — not the tentative morning fog that burned off by ten but the settled, committed fog of midday, turning the street soft and grey and muffling the sound of the city into something almost rural. The house on Funston Avenue looked smaller in it, more closed, the dark windows holding whatever they held.

Flora let them in with Iris's key.

She went straight to the staircase.

She had looked at it on Friday morning and she had seen what she expected to see — two rails, solid, fitted, a carpet worn in the centre, a lamp at the base throwing steady light across the bottom steps. She had recorded it and moved on because there had been other things to move on to and because she had not yet known the shape of the thing she was looking at.

She knew more of the shape now.

She crouched at the base of the stairs and looked at the floor. Hardwood, polished, old. She looked at the bottom step. The carpet, the worn centre, the edges undisturbed.

She looked at the left rail.

The rail was fitted to the wall with brackets, three of them, evenly spaced up the staircase. She stood and put her hand on it and applied pressure. Solid. She went up three steps and tried again. Solid. She went to the top of the first flight, where the staircase turned, and put her hand on the bracket there and pressed.

It moved.

Not much. A fraction. The bracket was in the wall but the wall had given slightly, the fixing loose in a way that the other brackets were not, and she pressed again and felt the small sick shift of something that should be immovable being movable.

She went back down.

"Nancy," she said.

Nancy was at the foot of the stairs, looking up at her.

"The top bracket on the left rail," Flora said. "The one at the turn. It's loose."

Nancy looked at it from below. "How loose?"

"Enough." Flora came back down and stood beside her. "A man coming down the stairs in the dark, both hands on the rails. Left hand reaches the turn, puts his weight on the rail —"

"The bracket gives," Nancy said.

"And he goes." Flora looked at the bottom of the stairs. The hardwood floor. "It wouldn't take much. At his age, in the dark, the surprise of it alone —" She stopped. "And then someone tightens the bracket back up before the ambulance arrives."

Nancy was very still.

"You're certain it's loose," she said. It was not a challenge. It was the voice she used for establishing facts before she wrote them down.

"I'm certain it moves when it shouldn't," Flora said. "Whether it was loose before Tuesday or made loose before Tuesday I can't tell you. But it moves."

Nancy looked at the bracket for a long moment. Then she opened her notepad and wrote the time.

"We need a structural engineer," she said. "Or a joiner. Someone who can say definitively whether that bracket has been tampered with or whether it's simply old."

"Yes." Flora looked at the staircase. The two rails, the worn carpet, the lamp. The small friendly lamp that Edmund Cho had presumably turned on every time he came downstairs, the way a careful man turned on the light. "We also need to know if he came down in the dark or in the light."

"The lamp," Nancy said.

"The lamp." Flora went to the hall table and looked at it. A standard table lamp, a pull switch on the cord. She looked at the cord. Looked at the table. Looked at the position of it — to the right of the staircase, close to the wall. She crouched and looked at the floor around it.

The lamp's plug was in the socket. The socket was a double socket, both ports occupied — the lamp in one, something else in the other. A phone charger, she assumed, or had been before someone cleared the house. She looked at the socket more closely.

The socket was on a switched plate. The switch was in the off position.

"The socket is switched off," Flora said.

Nancy came and looked.

"If the socket was switched off," Nancy said slowly, "the lamp wouldn't work."

"No." Flora looked at the lamp. At the switch on the socket. "Edmund comes downstairs in the early morning, before dawn. He reaches for the lamp. It doesn't come on. He continues down in the dark." She paused. "In the dark, at the turn, he puts his weight on a rail that moves."

The hallway was very quiet.

"Someone switched the socket off," Nancy said.

"And loosened the bracket." Flora stood. "And then after — switched the socket back on and tightened the bracket. Enough that it held, enough that a quick examination wouldn't find it." She looked at the socket again. "But not quite enough."

Nancy was writing. Flora watched her hand move across the page, the steady shorthand that had recorded thirty years of other people's worst days, recording this one.

"Robert Garfield," Nancy said without looking up.

"The man in the dark jacket," Flora said. "Forty, laptop bag, twenty minutes on the doorstep. Edmund described him as polite." She thought about polite. The particular kind of polite that was a threat with the volume turned down. "He knew the house. He'd been to the house."

"He knew Edmund went out before dawn."

"Yes."

"He knew he used the stairs in the dark."

"He supervised under Edmund for — what did Reyes say, eight, nine years? He would have known Edmund's habits. Edmund was not a man who varied his habits." Flora looked at the staircase one more time. The two rails. The lamp that didn't work if the socket was off. The bracket at the turn of the first flight that moved when it shouldn't. "He came back. After the doorstep visit in October. He came back and he did this." She paused. "Edmund wrote about the visit on October nineteenth. He died on November eleventh."

"Three weeks," Nancy said.

"Three weeks of Edmund continuing to go out. Continuing to photograph. Continuing to build his case." Flora picked up her recorder. "Garfield came back when he realised Edmund wasn't going to stop."

She recorded what they had found. The bracket, the socket, the sequence of it, the geometry of a man coming downstairs before dawn reaching for a light that wasn't there and then reaching for a rail that wasn't solid. She recorded it in the flat precise voice she used for things that needed to be unambiguous when she heard them back.

When she finished she stood for a moment in Edmund Cho's hallway, in the smell of a house that had been lived in carefully for thirty-five years, in the quiet that had been there since a Tuesday three weeks ago when the hallway had been briefly and violently not quiet and then had been quiet again, continuously, since.

"We have two things," she said. "What happened and who did it. We don't have proof of either."

"The notebook and the drive establish motive," Nancy said. "The bracket and the socket establish method."

"Circumstantially."

"Yes." Nancy closed her notepad. "Circumstantially."

Flora thought about what came next. Robert Garfield, forty years old, dark jacket, laptop bag, a man who had been trained by the person he had killed and who was walking around San Francisco on a Saturday afternoon while Edmund Cho's house sat in the fog and held its evidence quietly and waited.

"We need to find Garfield," Flora said.

"Pacific Environmental Services," Nancy said. "He won't be in his office on a Saturday."

"No. But his address will be findable." Flora buttoned her coat. "And I want to find it before Tuesday."

Nancy looked at her. The look she sometimes gave when she wanted to say something and was deciding whether to say it.

"What?" Flora said.

"Monday," Nancy said. "We'll have Monday."

"Yes."

"And this Monday —" She stopped. Started again more carefully. "I have a doctor's appointment on Monday morning. I've had it for six weeks. I should —"

"Keep it," Flora said immediately. "We'll have the afternoon."

Nancy looked at her steadily. "It may run long."

"Then we'll have what we have." Flora met her eyes. "Keep the appointment, Nancy."

A pause. Something in Nancy's face that was not quite gratitude and not quite relief but somewhere in that territory.

"All right," she said.

They let themselves out of the house on Funston Avenue and stood on the front step in the fog. The street was quiet, the terracotta pots next door barely visible in the grey, the city muffled and soft around them.

Flora looked up at the house.

Three floors. Thirty-five years of a careful life. A man who held both rails every time, always, without exception, until the night someone made sure that wasn't enough.

She turned and walked down the steps to the street.

Behind her she heard Nancy pause on the second step — not the knee, not hesitation, just a moment of standing in the fog outside a dead man's house — and then follow.

Chapter Eight

Robert Garfield lived in Noe Valley.

Nancy found him on Sunday morning in twenty minutes — the same focused efficiency she brought to all searches, the instinct for which database to pull next, the cross-referencing that was still, on good days, entirely intact. Pacific Environmental Services was registered to a business address in SoMa, but the sole director, Robert James Garfield, age forty-one, gave a residential address on Sanchez Street, Noe Valley. No criminal record. No litigation. A LinkedIn profile that described him as an environmental compliance consultant with fifteen years of experience in coastal and marine regulation.

Flora looked at the LinkedIn profile for a long time.

The photograph showed a man in his early forties, dark-haired, the kind of unremarkable face that was easy to be in a crowd with. The kind of face Margaret Foss had seen in profile from an upstairs window and not known and not forgotten.

She printed the photograph and pinned it to the cork board next to Edmund Cho.

Two faces. A man on a beach looking at the water he had spent his life studying. A man in a professional headshot looking at whoever was taking the photograph with an expression of practised neutrality.

She looked at them for a while.

Then she put on her coat and went to Noe Valley.

She did not tell Nancy.

This was a considered decision, not an impulsive one. Nancy's doctor's appointment was Monday — today was Sunday — and Nancy had been

quieter than usual since Saturday afternoon, since the house on Funston Avenue, since the fog. There were days when the case got into Nancy in a way that cost her, and Flora had learned to read those days and to manage the caseload accordingly, and today was one of those days and going to Noe Valley alone was the right management.

She recorded a note to that effect as she walked to the car, for the sake of the record and for Nancy, who would read it later and who would not be pleased but who would understand the reasoning because the reasoning was sound.

Sanchez Street on a Sunday morning was doing what Noe Valley streets did on Sunday mornings — the coffee shops open, the dog walkers out, the particular unhurried ease of a neighbourhood that had the city's rhythms but kept its own time. Garfield's building was a well-kept Edwardian, the ground floor flat, a small bay window facing the street, a bicycle locked to the railing.

Flora sat in her car across the street and looked at it.

She was not, she told herself, going to knock on the door. She was going to look at the building and look at the street and let the neighbourhood tell her what it knew, the way neighbourhoods always told you things if you sat still and let them. She was going to add to the record and go home and eat something and sleep and be ready for Monday afternoon and whatever it brought.

She sat for twenty minutes.

At the end of the twenty minutes the door of the ground floor flat opened and Robert Garfield came out.

He was wearing the dark jacket. The laptop bag was over his shoulder.

Flora watched him lock his door and turn and come down the front steps. He turned left on the pavement, away from her, walking with the brisk purposeful pace of someone with somewhere to be on a Sunday morning.

Flora got out of the car.

She told herself she was stretching her legs. She told herself she was getting a sense of him, the way he moved, the rhythm of him, all legitimate fieldwork. She told herself she was not going to approach him because

approaching him now, without more, would be a mistake.

She followed him for half a block.

He turned into a coffee shop on the corner. Flora stood on the pavement outside and looked through the window. He was at the counter, ordering, his back to her, the laptop bag sliding off his shoulder to the floor while he reached for his wallet.

Flora went in.

She ordered a coffee at the far end of the counter and stood with her back to the wall and looked at him.

He was unremarkable in person as in photograph. Average height, average build, the dark jacket a good one, the laptop bag expensive. He collected his coffee and took it to a table by the window and opened his laptop and began to work with the focused efficiency of someone catching up on something that couldn't wait until Monday.

Flora took her coffee to a table two away from his.

She sat and looked at her phone and was not looking at him and was entirely looking at him.

He worked for forty minutes. She drank her coffee slowly. Around them the coffee shop did its Sunday morning business — couples, dog owners, a man reading a very large newspaper with the dedicated folding technique of someone who had been doing it for decades.

At the end of the forty minutes Garfield's phone rang.

He looked at the screen. Something in his face changed — not much, a tightening, the professional neutrality contracting slightly around something underneath it. He picked up.

"Yes," he said. Low, not quite quiet enough. Flora did not look at him. She looked at her phone. "I told you, it's handled." A pause. "Because it is. The materials were retrieved, the notebooks are gone, there's nothing left to —" Another pause, longer. His voice dropped further. "The investigator is not going to find anything. There's nothing to find." A pause. "I understand that. I understand the timeline. I'll be there Tuesday."

He hung up.

He sat for a moment looking at his laptop screen without seeing it. Then he closed the laptop, finished his coffee, picked up his bag, and left.

Flora sat at her table.

The materials were retrieved. The notebooks, taken from Edmund's house before or after he died. *There's nothing left.* The evidence, as Garfield understood it, gone. *The investigator is not going to find anything.*

He didn't know about the rocks.

He didn't know about the waterproof bag wedged in the crack below the high tide line, the notebook and the USB drive that Edmund had hidden in the last careful act of a man who understood tides and trusted the ocean and knew that a good observer always kept a backup.

He didn't know that Edmund had been smarter than him at the end, as presumably Edmund had been smarter than him at the beginning, and all the years in between.

Flora picked up her recorder.

Sunday, she said into it quietly, her hand around the recorder, her voice low. *Garfield. Coffee shop, Sanchez Street. Phone call, unidentified party. Quote: it's handled. The materials were retrieved. The investigator is not going to find anything. He'll be somewhere Tuesday.* She paused. *He doesn't know about the notebook. He doesn't know about the rocks.* Another pause. *Tuesday. He said Tuesday. The same day I lose.*

She clicked it off.

She sat for a moment in the coffee shop, in the Sunday morning ease of it, the man with the newspaper still folding, a dog under a nearby table resting its chin on the floor with the patience of a dog that had accepted that this was simply where it was now.

She thought about Tuesday.

Garfield had somewhere to be on Tuesday. She would lose Tuesday. Nancy had a doctor's appointment Monday morning and they had Monday afternoon and then Tuesday was gone and Garfield would be wherever he was going and she would wake up on Wednesday and read her notes and listen to her recordings and reconstruct the day she had lost.

She could not afford to lose this Tuesday.

She took out her phone and called Nancy.

Nancy answered on the second ring.

"I'm in a coffee shop on Sanchez Street," Flora said. "Garfield just took a phone call. He's going somewhere Tuesday. Something is happening Tuesday and he used the word handled and I need to think."

A pause.

"You went to Noe Valley without telling me," Nancy said.

"Yes."

"On a Sunday."

"Yes."

A longer pause, which was not anger — Nancy did not do anger in the conventional sense — but was the pause that substituted for it.

"Are you safe?" Nancy said.

"Yes. He didn't see me."

"Come back," Nancy said. "Come back and we'll think together."

Flora looked out the window at Sanchez Street, at the Sunday morning going about itself, at the space on the pavement where Robert Garfield had been standing a few minutes ago with his laptop bag and his phone call and his confidence that there was nothing left to find.

"Yes," she said. "All right."

She left the coffee shop and walked back to the car and drove back across the city through the Sunday quiet, and the recorder sat in her pocket with Garfield's voice on it saying *the investigator is not going to find anything*, and she thought about Tuesday, and what happened on Tuesdays, and what she was going to do about it.

Chapter Nine

Nancy was at her desk when Flora got back.

She had made tea, which meant she had been worried for long enough that the worry had moved through her and come out the other side as practicality. Two mugs on the desk, both still steaming. She looked at Flora when Flora came through the door and then looked back at the cork board, where Garfield's face now sat beside Edmund Cho's, and said nothing about Noe Valley.

Flora sat down and picked up her tea.

"Tuesday," Nancy said.

"Yes."

"He said he'd be somewhere Tuesday. He didn't say where."

"No." Flora looked at the cork board. The two faces, the pinned notes, the geography of the case laid out in the way they always laid cases out — not neat, not linear, but present, everything visible at once, the connections between things findable if you stood in front of it long enough. "Pelagic Solutions will have an operational base. Somewhere on the Pacifica-Montara corridor. Somewhere accessible from the cliff, with a discharge pipe running into the water."

"Edmund's photographs showed a vehicle at the top of the cliff," Nancy said.

"Yes. Which means road access. Which means it's not a remote location — it's something that looks legitimate from the outside." Flora stood and went to the board. "Marine research and monitoring. That's what the permits say. So there's infrastructure. A building, or a compound, something that passes for a research facility."

Nancy opened her laptop. Flora watched her search — property records, coastal permits, satellite maps of the Pacifica-Montara corridor, the methodical layering of one source on another. This was Nancy at her best, the researcher's mind that had spent decades knowing which record held what truth and how to find the seam between what was documented and what was real.

Twenty minutes. Thirty.

"Here," Nancy said.

Flora came around the desk.

On the screen, a satellite map of the coastline south of Pacifica. Nancy had zoomed to a section of cliff top, a gravel access road running from the coastal highway to a cluster of low buildings set back from the cliff edge. The buildings were industrial — prefabricated, the kind that went up quickly and were designed to look purposeful without being memorable. A chain-link fence. A gate. A small car park.

"Leased to Pacific Environmental Services," Nancy said. "Which is Garfield's firm. Which is the operational entity for Pelagic Solutions." She looked at Flora over her glasses. "The lease started four years ago."

Four years. The same year the fraudulent environmental assessments began.

"That's where the discharge runs from," Flora said.

"The cliff below those buildings is the cliff in Edmund's photographs." Nancy pointed at the screen. "You can see the rock formation at the base — it matches his sketches."

Flora looked at the satellite image. The cluster of buildings on the cliff top, the access road, the chain-link fence. Garfield would be there on Tuesday — or somewhere connected to it, the next step in whatever operation this was, whatever they were putting into the water and had been putting into the water for four years while the blooms came and the birds died and the kelp beds turned and Edmund Cho sat in the dark on the rocks below and drew what he saw.

"We need to go there," Flora said.

Nancy looked at her.

"Monday," Flora said. "Before your appointment if we go early enough. I want to see it."

"Flora —"

"I want to see it before Tuesday. I want to have seen it with my own eyes on a day I'll remember." She looked at the screen. "Whatever happens on Tuesday, I want Monday's eyes on that place first."

Nancy was quiet for a moment. She looked at the satellite image — the buildings, the fence, the access road, the cliff edge and the ocean beyond it.

"Six o'clock," she said. "We go at six, we're there by seven, we're back before nine and I make my appointment."

"Yes."

"We don't go in. We look."

"We look," Flora agreed.

Nancy closed the laptop. She picked up her tea and held it in both hands and looked at the cork board with the expression she wore when she was thinking about something she hadn't said yet.

Flora waited.

"The phone call," Nancy said. "Garfield said *the investigator is not going to find anything*. Singular."

Flora looked at her.

"He thinks there's one investigator," Nancy said. "He knows about you. He doesn't know about me."

Flora sat with that.

It was true. Garfield had come to Edmund's house and spoken to Edmund, had watched the beach and watched the house and taken the notebooks and been confident that the evidence was gone. He had hired — or someone had hired — someone to look into whether an investigator had been retained, and that someone had found Flora Voss of Drake and Voss and had not, apparently, looked further.

People often didn't look further than the name on the door.

"He thinks I'm alone," Flora said.

"Yes."

"Which means he doesn't know about you. Doesn't know about the archive. Doesn't know that you transcribed the Marsh estate case in 1988 and have been keeping records since before he was a postdoc." Flora looked at Nancy. "Doesn't know that there's thirty years of someone else's careful

attention sitting in boxes at the back of this office."

Nancy set down her tea. She picked up her pen. She opened her notepad to a fresh page, dated it, wrote the time in the margin.

"Tell me everything he said on the phone," she said. "Exactly. Word for word."

Flora took out her recorder and played it back, and Nancy wrote it down in the shorthand that had recorded thirty years of other people's worst days, and the office was quiet around them except for the recorder and the pen, and outside Clement Street went about its Sunday evening and knew nothing about any of it.

When it was done Nancy looked at what she had written.

"*I'll be there Tuesday*," she read back. "There. Not here. Not the office, not the city. There." She looked up. "Wherever there is."

"The facility," Flora said. "The cliff top."

"Something is happening at the facility on Tuesday." Nancy looked at the board. "Garfield said the materials were retrieved, the notebooks were gone, the investigator wouldn't find anything. He said all of that and then he said he'd be there Tuesday. Which means Tuesday is not about covering their tracks." She paused. "Tuesday is operational. Something is happening regardless of Edmund, regardless of us, regardless of the investigation. It was already planned."

Flora thought about the permits. Annual renewal. The most recent renewal dated September, the same month Edmund had started going out before dawn. The discharge events Edmund had documented — twelve of them, always at night, always on an outgoing tide.

"They're doing another discharge," she said.

Nancy looked at her.

"Tuesday night. Outgoing tide." Flora went to her desk and pulled up the tide tables she had looked at for Montara. Scrolled forward. "Low tide Tuesday is at eleven forty-seven p.m. Outgoing from approximately six. An overnight discharge on an outgoing tide, the bloom follows in four to six days, dispersed along the coast, difficult to sample, consistent with everything Edmund documented." She looked at Nancy. "They've been doing this every autumn for three years. Edmund interrupted the pattern this year. Garfield thinks the interruption is handled. So the pattern continues."

Nancy was very still.

"If we can document the discharge," Flora said slowly, "on the night it happens, with the evidence Edmund gathered and Victor Reyes's testimony and the Coastal Commission records and the bracket and the socket —"

"It becomes a pattern," Nancy said. "Not a single event. Not an accident. A system."

"Yes." Flora looked at the board. "And Garfield at the facility on the night of the discharge puts him there. Places him in the operation, not just the cover-up."

The office was very quiet.

"Tuesday," Nancy said. Not the way she usually said it — not as a fact about Flora's condition, not as a calendar note, not as the quiet acknowledgement that sat between them when the day came up. This was different. This was Tuesday as a deadline and an opportunity and a problem all at once.

Flora looked at her.

"I lose the day," she said. "Whatever we find on Tuesday, whatever we see, whatever happens — I lose it."

"Yes."

"But you don't."

Nancy looked at her steadily. "No," she said. "I don't."

"You'll remember Tuesday."

"I'll remember Tuesday," Nancy said. "And I'll write it down."

Flora held that.

Outside, the last of the Sunday light was leaving Clement Street, the shop fronts going gold and then grey, the city settling toward evening. The dry cleaner below had been closed since five. The office smelled of tea and paper and the accumulated quiet of a working day ending.

"Monday," Flora said. "Six o'clock. We go and look at the place."

"Yes."

"And then your appointment."

"Yes."

"And then Monday afternoon we take everything to the police. The recorder, the notebook, the drive, the photographs, the bracket, the socket,

the Coastal Commission records, the tide tables." Flora looked at the board one more time. "Everything Edmund built and everything we've built. We give it to them and we let them decide whether to be on that cliff on Tuesday night."

Nancy looked at her. "And if they're not?"

Flora picked up her recorder. Held it for a moment without pressing anything.

"Then on Wednesday," she said, "I'll listen to what you recorded and we'll decide what to do next."

She set the recorder down on the desk.

She did not press it.

Some things, she had decided, she would keep only in herself, for as long as she had them.

Chapter Ten

They left at six.

The city was dark and largely to itself at that hour on a Monday morning, the streets belonging to the delivery drivers and the night-shift workers heading home and the occasional determined runner who had made a decision about their life and was sticking to it. Flora drove. Nancy sat with the map on her knee though she didn't need it — she had looked at the route the night before and committed it the way she committed things she considered important, with the deliberate attention of someone who no longer trusted the committing to happen automatically.

They didn't speak much. The car was warm and the city slid past the windows and the Bay Bridge appeared briefly to the left, lit and enormous, and then they were on the coast road heading south and the ocean appeared to the right and stayed there.

Flora thought about Edmund making this drive in the dark. September, October, November, the mornings getting darker and colder, the coast road empty at that hour, the Pacific beside him going about its ancient business. A seventy-one year old man with a notebook and a long lens and forty years of knowing how to be patient with things that didn't want to be observed.

She wondered if he had been frightened. She thought probably not, not at first — not until the man in the dark jacket came to his door and was politely, precisely clear. And even then. Even then Edmund had kept going back. Because the thing he had found was real and was wrong and was killing the coastline he had watched his whole life, and Edmund Cho was not the kind of man who stopped because someone stood on his doorstep and made implications.

The coast road narrowed below Pacifica. The cliff top to their right was dark, the ocean beyond it darker, the horizon invisible where the sea met the

pre-dawn sky.

"Here," Nancy said.

Flora slowed.

The access road was a gap in the scrub — gravel, unpaved, a chain across it with a padlock and a sign that said PRIVATE NO ENTRY in the tone of a sign that expected to be obeyed. Beyond the chain, the gravel road ran straight for perhaps a hundred metres to the cluster of low buildings they had seen on the satellite map. At this hour the buildings were dark. No vehicles in the small car park. No lights.

Flora pulled off the road onto the verge and cut the engine.

They sat and looked at it.

The compound was exactly as the satellite image had suggested — prefabricated buildings, chain-link fence, a utilitarian purposefulness designed to look like legitimate infrastructure without inviting closer examination. From the road it could be anything. A monitoring station. A utilities substation. Something official and boring that people drove past without curiosity.

From the rocks below, Edmund had drawn what it actually was.

"The discharge pipe will run under the fence," Flora said. "Down the cliff face. Probably encased, probably looks like a drainage or utilities conduit from the outside." She looked at the cliff edge, barely visible in the dark beyond the compound. "You wouldn't know what it was if you didn't know what you were looking at."

"Edmund knew," Nancy said.

"Edmund knew."

They sat for a moment. The wind off the ocean moved through the scrub around the car, a steady purposeful sound, the sound the coast made when it was simply being itself and not performing for anyone.

"I want to walk the fence line," Flora said.

Nancy looked at her.

"Outside the fence," Flora said. "On the public side. Just to see it properly."

Nancy looked at the chain across the access road, at the dark compound beyond it, at the cliff edge and the invisible ocean. She looked at her watch. It was six forty-three. Her appointment was at nine.

"Ten minutes," she said.

They got out of the car.

The wind hit them immediately, colder than it had been in the city, the November coast wind with nothing between it and the water. Flora turned her collar up and walked to the chain across the access road and stood looking down the gravel track at the buildings.

At this distance, in this light, she could see more than the satellite image had shown. The buildings were three — one larger, central, with what looked like ventilation equipment on the roof, two smaller flanking structures. The chain-link fence ran around all three, perhaps two metres high, topped with a single strand of wire. Professional without being aggressive. The fence of a place that wanted to discourage casual entry, not the fence of a place that expected a serious attempt.

They were not going to make a serious attempt. They were looking.

Flora walked the fence line north, where it ran along the cliff edge. The ground was rough here, the scrub giving way to bare rock and sea grass, the cliff dropping away ten, fifteen metres to the rocks below. She looked over the edge.

Dawn was beginning in earnest now, the horizon separating from the sky, the ocean coming into resolution — grey-green, enormous, the waves catching the first light and throwing it back in small bright pieces. She looked at the rocks below.

She could see, even from here, the rock formation Edmund had sketched. The dark slabs, the pools between them, the particular geography of the place where he had hidden his notebook. And running down the cliff face, partially obscured by rock but visible now that she knew what she was looking for — a conduit. A pipe, encased in grey concrete, blending with the cliff face, running from the base of the compound's fence down to the waterline.

She took out her recorder.

Monday, she said. Pacifica facility. Compound confirmed — three buildings, central structure with ventilation. Chain-link perimeter. Discharge conduit visible from cliff edge, running to waterline, consistent with Edmund's sketches. She moved the recorder slightly. This is what he saw. This is what he drew in the dark.

She clicked it off.

Nancy was beside her, looking at the conduit, her notepad already open, the pen moving in the grey light.

"Photograph," Nancy said.

Flora took out her phone and photographed the conduit — three shots from different angles, the compound behind it, the cliff face and the waterline, the orientation that placed it geographically. She photographed the compound. The fence. The access road and the private sign and the chain with its padlock.

She photographed the ocean.

She wasn't sure why she photographed the ocean. It wasn't evidence of anything. But she did it anyway — the grey-green water, the waves, the rocks below where Edmund had sat in the dark and watched and recorded and trusted that someone would eventually come and look.

"Flora," Nancy said.

She looked at her watch. Seven-twelve. They needed to leave.

She took one more photograph. The conduit. The waterline. The place where whatever Pelagic Solutions was discharging into the water met the ocean that Edmund Cho had spent his life studying.

Then she put her phone away and turned from the cliff.

They were back in the city by eight-thirty.

Flora dropped Nancy at the medical building on Sutter Street and watched her go through the door and then sat in the car for a moment with the engine running.

Monday. She had Monday. She had everything she had gathered since Thursday — the notebook in Victor Reyes's office, the USB drive, the Coastal Commission documents, the bracket and the socket, the recording of Garfield's phone call, the photographs from the cliff this morning. She had Nancy's notes, thirty pages of them, dated and timed to the minute, the architecture of a case that Edmund Cho had started building in September and that Drake and Voss had been building since Thursday afternoon.

She had the afternoon. Nancy's appointment would be done by noon, she had said. They had the afternoon to take it to the police.

And then Tuesday would come and she would lose it and Nancy would be there.

She thought about Nancy going into the medical building. The appointment that had been made six weeks ago. The appointment that Nancy had almost not mentioned, that she had mentioned only when Flora pressed, that she had agreed to keep only because Flora had not given her an alternative.

Flora sat with that.

She thought about the doctor's appointments that had been made six weeks ago, and what kinds of appointments got made six weeks in advance at Nancy's age, and what kinds of results they produced, and what it meant that Nancy had said it might run long.

She did not record these thoughts.

She put the car in gear and drove to the office and made coffee and sat at her desk and looked at the cork board and waited for Monday afternoon.

Nancy came back at one-fifteen.

She came through the door in the way she came through the door when she did not want to be asked about something immediately — hanging up her coat with particular attention, setting her bag down with care, going to the kettle before she turned around. Flora watched her do all of this and said nothing.

Nancy made tea. Set a mug in front of Flora without being asked. Sat down.

She looked at the cork board.

"How was it?" Flora said. Not *what did they say*. Just *how was it*.

"Long," Nancy said. Which she had predicted and which told Flora nothing and everything.

A pause.

"I have another appointment," Nancy said. "In two weeks." She picked up her pen. Looked at it. Set it down parallel to the notepad, perfectly parallel, the way she always set it down. "It isn't urgent. That's what they said. It isn't urgent."

Flora looked at her.

Nancy looked at the cork board.

"Right," Flora said. "Good."

"Yes," Nancy said.

They sat for a moment in the office on the second floor above the dry cleaner, in the smell of coffee and old paper, in the quiet that was not uncomfortable but was the quiet of two people who had just put something aside because there was work to do and work was what they had and work was, for now, enough.

"The police," Flora said.

"Yes." Nancy picked up her pen again. "Where do we start?"

Flora looked at the board. Edmund Cho on his beach. Robert Garfield in his headshot. The notes between them — the conduit, the bracket, the socket, the notebook, the USB drive, the Coastal Commission documents, the tide tables, Garfield's voice on a recorder saying *the investigator is not going to find anything*.

"We start," Flora said, "with what the water knows."

Chapter Eleven

The detective's name was Yolanda Reyes.

No relation to Victor, she said, when Flora mentioned the institute. She said it with the flat economy of someone who had been making that clarification for the duration of a career spent in a city full of Reyeses. She was fifty-three, broad-faced, the kind of still that came from years of sitting across tables from people who were lying and learning not to let them see you notice.

She listened to everything.

That was what Flora would remember about Monday afternoon — not the police station's particular smell of burnt coffee and institutional carpet, not the interview room with its one high window showing a rectangle of pale sky, not the forms or the preliminary questions or the young officer who brought water nobody drank. What she would remember was Yolanda Reyes listening. The quality of her attention, the way she sat without moving and let everything come to her and took nothing at face value and dismissed nothing either. The way she looked at Nancy's notes — thirty pages of them, dated and timed — with the expression of someone who had just been handed something considerably more useful than she had expected.

Flora laid it out in order. The Cho case. Iris's account of her father's habits on the stairs. Victor Reyes's telephone account of Edmund's October call. Margaret Foss and the man in the dark jacket and the Sacramento envelope and Edmund's message — *look at what the water knows*. The storage unit at Montara, the notebook, the USB drive. The Coastal Commission documents and Pelagic Solutions and Robert Garfield of Pacific Environmental Services. The bracket. The socket. The geometry of a man coming downstairs in the dark.

Then she played the recording.

Garfield's voice in the coffee shop on Sanchez Street, Sunday morning, low and not quite quiet enough. *It's handled. The materials were retrieved. The investigator is not going to find anything. I'll be there Tuesday.*

Reyes sat without moving through all of it.

When Flora finished, Reyes looked at the recorder on the table between them for a moment. Then she looked at her own notes, which were considerably less than thirty pages but were precise in a different way — the précis of a mind that was already organising, already sorting what was evidence from what was inference, already building the shape of what could be used.

"The notebook and the drive," she said. "They're at the institute."

"With Victor Reyes," Flora said. "He's expecting your call."

"The bracket."

"Still in the house on Funston Avenue. Untouched. Iris Cho has the key."

Reyes looked at Nancy. "Your notes are contemporaneous? Dated and timed throughout?"

"Yes," Nancy said. "I was present for or was directly informed of every event recorded. The dates and times are accurate."

Reyes looked at her for a moment with the assessment she applied to everything, the measurement of reliability and precision. Then she nodded, once, the nod of someone who had made a decision about a witness and was moving on.

"The recording," she said. "Garfield says he'll be there Tuesday. Did he indicate a time?"

"No," Flora said. "But the discharge events Edmund documented were all on outgoing tides. Low tide tomorrow night is at eleven forty-seven."

"So the operation runs overnight."

"That's my read. Edmund documented twelve events, all on outgoing tides, all at night. They've been doing this every autumn for three years."

Reyes was quiet for a moment. She looked at the tide tables Flora had printed and placed on the table. She looked at the photographs from the cliff that morning — the conduit, the compound, the fence.

"You were at the facility this morning," she said. It was not an accusation. It was the tone of someone establishing facts.

"On the public side of the fence," Flora said. "We didn't enter the property."

"But you have photographs of the conduit."

"Taken from the cliff edge. Public land."

Reyes looked at the photographs. "You can see the conduit clearly."

"Edmund could see it more clearly from the rocks below," Flora said. "He drew it. Multiple times. From multiple angles. It's in the notebook."

Reyes set the photographs down and looked at the ceiling for a moment, which Flora had learned was not inattention but its opposite — the posture of someone doing rapid internal calculation about things they were not going to say out loud in an interview room.

Then she looked back at Flora.

"The bracket," she said. "And the socket. Your assessment is that they were tampered with."

"My assessment is that the bracket moves when it shouldn't and the socket was in the off position in a house belonging to a man who was meticulous about his safety and who held both rails every time he used those stairs." Flora paused. "The bracket and socket together describe a method. The notebook and the drive describe a motive. Garfield's presence at Edmund's house in October, documented in Edmund's own handwriting, places him at the scene three weeks before Edmund died." She looked at Reyes steadily. "I'm not telling you what to conclude. I'm telling you what we found."

Reyes held her gaze for a moment.

"Drake and Voss," she said. "You've been on this since Thursday."

"Thursday afternoon."

"Five days."

"Edmund had been on it since September," Flora said. "He did most of the work."

Something moved across Reyes's face. Not quite a smile. The nearest thing to one that the interview room permitted.

She stood. "I'll need the recorder. I'll need copies of your photographs. I'll need contact details for Victor Reyes, Iris Cho, and Margaret Foss." She looked at Nancy's notes. "And I'll need to take those."

Nancy looked at Flora.

"We kept copies," Flora said.

Nancy slid the notes across the table.

Reyes picked them up. Looked at them one more time — the thirty pages, the dated margins, the careful shorthand of three decades of professional attention. "These are good notes," she said.

"Thank you," Nancy said. Without inflection. As though it were simply true and acknowledgement of it was appropriate.

Reyes walked them out to the corridor. At the door she stopped them.

"Ms. Voss," she said. "Tomorrow."

Flora looked at her.

"I understand you have a condition. A neurological condition." She said it without particular weight, as a fact she had noted and filed. "Tomorrow is Tuesday."

"Yes," Flora said.

"If anything happens tomorrow that we need you to be aware of — if we need a statement, if there are developments —"

"Call Nancy," Flora said. "Whatever happens tomorrow, Nancy will be available and Nancy will remember it."

Reyes looked at Nancy.

"I'll remember it," Nancy said. "And I'll write it down."

Reyes nodded. "Good." She looked at them both for a moment — the two of them in the corridor outside the interview room, the recorder and the photographs and thirty pages of notes now on the table behind her, Edmund Cho's last testimony working its way into the machinery of the law that he had trusted with it.

"Edmund Cho was a careful man," Flora said. "He deserved better than what happened to him."

"Yes," Reyes said. "He did."

She went back into the interview room.

Flora and Nancy walked out of the police station into the Monday afternoon, the sky above them the pale blue of a city that had made up its mind about the weather, the street busy with the ordinary commerce of people who did not know that somewhere in the building behind them a detective was picking up a phone to call a marine biologist at an institute on the bay.

They walked to the car without speaking.

Flora sat in the driver's seat and did not start the engine for a moment.

"She'll do it," Nancy said. "She'll be on that cliff tomorrow night."

"Yes," Flora said. "I think she will."

She thought about Tuesday. About what would happen on the cliff above Montara when the tide went out and Garfield arrived with his laptop bag and his confidence that the investigation had found nothing and the pattern could continue. About the police who would be there and the evidence that would be gathered and the case that Edmund Cho had started building in September that would reach its end on a Tuesday night that Flora would not remember.

She would wake up on Wednesday and Nancy would tell her.

Nancy would have been there — not on the cliff, not in person, but present in every way that Nancy was present, on the phone with Reyes, noting the times, writing it down.

"Tomorrow," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said.

"You'll be all right."

It was not a question. Nancy looked at her.

"I'll be all right," Nancy said. "I know what day it is. I know what's happening. I have the notes and I have the recorder and I have Yolanda Reyes's number." She paused. "I'll be all right."

Flora looked at her for a moment. Then she started the car.

She drove them back across the city through the Monday afternoon, through the streets that were the same streets they always were and would be different tomorrow for reasons that had nothing to do with the day of the week, and the bay appeared briefly to the right as they crossed the hill, grey and enormous and entirely indifferent, and she thought about Edmund Cho on his beach in October, looking at the water he had spent his life studying,

finding what was wrong with it and beginning, patiently, to write it down.

Look at what the water knows.

She drove. Nancy sat beside her with her notepad on her knee and the pen in her hand, ready.

Chapter Twelve

Flora woke on Wednesday knowing it was Wednesday.

This was how it always was — not a gap, not a hole, nothing so dramatic as darkness where something had been. Just Wednesday, arriving as Wednesday always arrived, complete and present, the city outside her window doing its Wednesday morning business as though Tuesday had been perfectly ordinary and had simply passed the way days passed.

She lay still for a moment.

Then she got up and went to her desk and pressed play on the recorder.

Nancy's voice came back to her.

Not Flora's voice — Nancy's, which was unusual, which meant Nancy had recorded this herself, deliberately, for Flora to find on Wednesday morning. She had recorded it sitting in the office, Flora could tell from the background — the particular quiet of the second floor above the dry cleaner, the distant sound of Clement Street.

Wednesday morning, Nancy's voice said. I'm recording this Tuesday night, just after midnight. I want you to have it in my voice rather than yours because I think it will be easier to hear.

Flora sat very still.

At eleven forty-one on Tuesday night, Yolanda Reyes called me from the cliff above Montara State Beach. She called because she had said she would call and because she is, I think, a woman who does what she says she will do. A pause. Robert Garfield was arrested at the facility at eleven fifteen. He was not alone — there were two others, employees of Pelagic Solutions, operating the discharge equipment. All three were taken into custody. The facility has been secured. The Coastal Commission has been notified. Victor Reyes is going to the site this morning with a water

sampling team.

Flora looked at the window. The Wednesday morning light, pale and ordinary.

Reyes — the detective — said the notebook was the thing. Edmund's sketches matched the conduit exactly. The USB photographs matched the facility exactly. Forty years of professional observation, she said, is not easy to argue with in court. Another pause, longer. She also said the bracket had been examined by a structural specialist yesterday afternoon. The fixing had been partially withdrawn and reinserted — there are tool marks, apparently, inconsistent with ordinary wear. She said it will be in the report.

Flora pressed her hand flat on the desk.

Edmund Cho, Nancy's voice said. The specialist's assessment and the totality of the evidence are sufficient, Reyes said, to support a charge of homicide alongside the environmental charges. She was careful about the word. She said it once and didn't repeat it. A pause. I thought you should hear it clearly. Homicide. Someone will answer for what happened to Edmund.

The dry cleaner below started up. The familiar shudder of the compressor, the steam beginning its slow migration through the floor.

Iris Cho called me at midnight, Nancy continued. I had already called her, when Reyes called me, so she would not hear it first from a news alert. She was quiet for a long time and then she said: he knew. He knew what he was doing and he kept doing it. I said yes. She said: he trusted someone would come. I said yes, he did, and someone did. A pause. She cried then. I let her. There wasn't anything better to do.

Flora sat in the early morning quiet and listened.

Margaret Foss, Nancy said. I called her too. She said: I knew he wouldn't have fallen. Just that. I knew he wouldn't have fallen. And then she said goodnight and hung up, which is exactly what Margaret Foss would do.

A small silence.

Flora. The way Nancy said her name — not the office voice, not the professional voice, something quieter and more careful. I want to tell you something while you're not here to redirect me. I've been thinking about

how to say it and I think the only way to say it is plainly.

Flora was very still.

I had my results on Monday. From the appointment. It isn't urgent, they said, which is the truth — it isn't urgent in the way that some things are urgent. But it is what it is and it will become more of what it is over time and there isn't anything to be done about that. A pause. I know you know this. I know you've known for longer than I've said anything. I know you've been managing around it and I know how careful you've been and I want you to know that I know, and that I'm grateful, and that I intend to keep working for as long as working is what I can do. Another pause. I also want you to know that Tuesday was a good day. One of the better ones. I knew where I was and what I was doing and I wrote it all down and I'm telling it to you now and I remember all of it. She paused. I remember all of it, Flora.

Flora looked at the recorder.

Last night, after Reyes called and after I'd called Iris and Margaret, I sat in the office for a while. I made tea. I looked at the cork board. Edmund on his beach. Garfield in his headshot. A pause. I thought about the rocks at Montara. The notebook in the crack, below the high tide line, waiting. Edmund trusting the ocean to keep it and trusting someone to come and look. Another pause. We looked. That's what we do. We come and we look at what other people have walked past without seeing, and sometimes it's enough and sometimes it isn't and this time it was.

The compressor settled into its rhythm below.

There's coffee made, Nancy said. In the office. I made it before I left last night because I knew you'd go straight there. It'll need reheating but it's there. A brief pause that might, Flora thought, have been the closest Nancy Drake came to a laugh in a recording she was making alone in an empty office at midnight. The sign on the door is still crooked.

The recording ended.

Flora sat for a moment in the morning quiet of her flat, with the recorder in her hands and the Wednesday light coming through the window and the city going about itself below.

Then she got up and put on her coat.

The dry cleaner opened at seven. Flora was at her desk by six-forty-five, the coffee reheated, the cork board in front of her.

She looked at Edmund Cho on his beach.

She looked at him for a long time — the careful face, the hands in the pockets, the slight turn toward the water. A man who had spent forty years looking at things carefully and who had found, at seventy-one, one more thing that needed looking at, and who had looked at it with the same patience and the same precision he had brought to everything, right up until the moment someone decided that patience and precision were too dangerous to allow.

She unpinned his photograph.

She held it for a moment.

Then she went to the filing drawer and found a folder and labeled it in her careful block letters — *CHO, EDMUND. CLOSED.* — and put the photograph inside it and put the folder in the drawer and closed the drawer.

She went back to the cork board.

It was empty again. The pins still in it, holding nothing, the potential of it, the held breath.

She heard Nancy on the stairs. The pause on the fourth step. 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.

"You're late," Flora said.

Nancy hung her coat on the right hook. She looked at the empty cork board. She looked at Flora.

Something passed between them that didn't need to be said and wasn't said.

Nancy sat down. Opened her notepad. Dated the page. Wrote the time in the margin.

"Reyes called this morning," she said. "Before I left. Garfield is being charged. The environmental charges are separate — the Coastal Commission is handling those. She said Iris has been informed." She paused. "She also said she may need a statement from you in the next few days. About the bracket and the socket."

"I'll give her one," Flora said.

"She said the structural report is thorough. She said —" Nancy stopped. Started again. "She said Edmund Cho's notebook is going to be entered into evidence. Forty years of fieldwork, establishing baseline conditions for that stretch of coastline. Every session, every observation, going back to the nineteen-eighties." She paused. "She said the prosecution barrister described it as the most compelling piece of evidence she had ever been given."

Flora looked at the empty cork board.

"He was building it his whole career," she said. "He just didn't know that's what it was for."

Nancy was quiet for a moment.

Then she picked up her pen.

Outside on Clement Street the morning was doing what Clement Street mornings did — the deliveries, the first coffee shop customers, the gradual accumulation of the ordinary day. The steam came up through the floor from the dry cleaner below, warm and faintly domestic, smelling of someone else's shirts.

"The next case," Nancy said.

Flora looked at her.

"It will come," Nancy said. "They always come."

"Yes," Flora said. "They do."

She looked at the empty cork board. The pins, the potential, the held breath of it.

She picked up her recorder.

She set it down again.

Some days didn't need recording. Some days you just lived.

In the rocks below the lookout point at Montara State Beach, at low tide, the crack in the largest rock was empty now.

The ocean came and went over it twice a day, the way it always had, indifferent and patient and keeping its own record in the only language it had ever needed.

The water knew.

The Naturalist

It had always known.

It would go on knowing long after all of them were gone.

End.