

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

The Right Thing

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

The Right Thing

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A Drake & Voss Novella

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Chapter One

He arrived on a Monday, which was unusual. Most clients came mid-week, Flora had noticed — as though the weekend gave them time to work up to it, and Monday still felt too early, and by Wednesday the thing they'd been sitting with had become heavier than their reluctance to carry it into an office and set it on someone else's desk.

Theodore Brant was seventy-eight. He was the kind of tall that had settled with age into something still impressive — a man who had been built on a large scale and hadn't apologized for it. White, thick-haired, the kind of face that had been handsome in a conventional way when young and was now interesting, which was better. He wore a good coat, carried a hat he didn't put back on after taking it off in the doorway, and he stood for a moment looking at the office with the expression of a man doing a rapid private assessment of whether this had been a good idea.

He decided it had.

Flora read all of this in the ten seconds before he spoke.

"Ms. Voss," he said. His voice was a careful voice, she noted — not a quiet man but a man who had learned to modulate, the kind of voice that had been managed for so long the management was invisible. "I was told you were good."

"By whom?" Flora asked.

He paused. A micro-pause, barely there. "A woman whose daughter you found three years ago. She'd left home, the daughter. She asked to be left alone and you — respected that." Another pause. "She said you were honest about what you could and couldn't do. And that you didn't tell her husband things she hadn't asked you to tell him."

"Sit down, Mr. Brant," Flora said. "I'll get you some coffee."

"Thank you."

Nancy came in seven minutes later, while Theodore Brant was still rearranging himself in the client chair with the careful economy of a tall man in a space sized for someone shorter. She took in the room — him, the hat on the desk, the way he held his coat — and hung her own coat on the right hook and sat at her desk and opened her notepad.

She wrote the date and time without being asked, as she always did. Below it she wrote a name she had not yet heard: *Theodore Brant*, as if she were writing from dictation, except the room had been silent since she walked in.

Flora saw this and did not remark on it.

"Mr. Brant," Flora said, sitting down across from him. "What do you need?"

He looked at his hat for a moment. A very good hat, she noticed, the kind that was an old purchase rather than a new one, well-kept, the felt worn to an exact softness.

"I need to find someone," he said. "Or rather — I know where she is. I need to know how she is." He looked up. "There's a difference."

"There is," Flora agreed.

"Her name is Consolation Reyes." He said it the way you said a name you had not said aloud in some time — carefully, like testing whether it still sounded right. "We knew each other in 1971. I haven't seen her since."

"What happened in 1971?" Flora asked.

The pause this time was longer. Not evasive — the pause of a man deciding how much of a long story to tell first.

"A great deal," he said. "I'll tell you the parts that matter. The rest —" He stopped. "The rest I'll tell you when I understand which parts matter."

Flora looked at him.

He met her eyes steadily. He was not, she decided, a man who was used to being the one asking for things. He had the particular discomfort of someone accustomed to competence now occupying a position of need.

"All right," she said. "Tell me what you can."

Theodore Brant had met Consolation Reyes in the spring of 1971 at a teach-in at SF State — not as students, they were both already past that, but as attendees, young professionals sitting in folding chairs in a room that smelled of coffee and political urgency. He was twenty-four, working in his father's accounting firm, not by choice. She was twenty-one, two years out of a nursing program, working at SF General.

They had argued about something — he could not now remember what, some point of procedure or philosophy, it had seemed important at the time — and afterward they had walked out onto Holloway Avenue in the spring dark and kept arguing and then stopped arguing and stood for a moment looking at each other and then walked to a diner on Ocean Avenue and talked until midnight.

He told this to Flora with the steady considered pace of a man delivering an account he had rehearsed many times inside his own head and was now, for the first time, saying aloud. Nancy wrote without looking up. Flora did not look at her recorder.

"We were together from April to October," he said. "1971."

"What happened in October?"

The careful voice went careful in a different way — not managing now, but controlled in the way of someone managing real feeling rather than managing an impression.

"I ended it," he said. "I was wrong to. Or —" He stopped. "I thought I was doing the right thing. I have spent fifty years wondering whether the right thing and the good thing were the same thing. They are not always the same thing."

Flora looked at him.

"What do you want from us, Mr. Brant?"

He set his hat on his knee. Turned it once, the brim, a slow rotation.

"I want to know she had a good life," he said. "That's all. I don't want to contact her. I don't want to —" He shook his head. "I'm seventy-eight years old. I'm not here to ask for anything she hasn't offered. I want to know she's all right. I want to know that what happened in 1971 didn't —" He stopped.

"Didn't ruin anything for her," Flora said.

He looked at her. "Yes."

"Is there a reason you think it might have?"

The pause that followed was the longest yet. Flora counted it — four seconds, five, six. Long enough to hear the dry cleaner's compressor cycle on below.

"There's something I haven't told you," he said.

"I expect there is," Flora said. "Take your time."

He looked at his hat.

"In October 1971," he said, "when I ended things — Consolation was pregnant."

Nancy wrote the time in the margin.

Below it, small, in the shorthand: *1971. Reyes. I know this name.*

She looked at what she'd written. Turned the pen over. Set it down.

She knew this name from somewhere.

She went to the wall of filing boxes — her archive, thirty years of a court stenographer's life — and stood for a moment running her finger along the labels. The 1970s boxes were at the far end, the oldest of the archive, the cardboard softened and the labels faded. She stopped at one. Pulled it down. Opened it.

She paged through slowly.

The room went about its business around her — Theodore Brant's careful voice, Flora's questions, the steam under the floor. She paged through the folder, through the documents of other people's disputes and losses and legal architectures, all of it recorded in her hand, her younger hand, the hand that had not yet developed the slight tremor she was not discussing with anyone.

She did not find it.

She put the box back.

She wrote something in the margin of her notepad, below what she'd already written. She used the shorthand. Then she looked at what she'd written and found that she could not, with complete certainty, read it back.

She looked at it for a moment.

Then she turned to a fresh page and wrote the date again, and the time, and *Theodore Brant*, and continued.

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Chapter Two

Consolation Reyes had a daughter, Flora established by Wednesday. Elena, forty-four. Married to a man named David Park, two children — a girl of twelve and a boy of nine. They lived in the Inner Sunset, a house on Sixth Avenue with a small garden that Elena maintained with the dedicated attention of someone who treated growing things as both hobby and philosophy.

Consolation herself lived four blocks away, on Kirkham, in a flat she'd rented since 1995. She taught ESL classes at a community center on Noriega three mornings a week. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays.

On Tuesday Flora walked past the community center at nine-thirty and stood for a moment looking through the ground floor window.

The class was in session. Eight or nine adult students at long tables, notebooks open, the particular attentive posture of people who have chosen to be somewhere and are making the most of it. At the front of the room, a woman. Seventy-four, small — Flora had expected small, something about the way Theodore Brant had described her, had implied someone the room organized itself around rather than someone who filled it with presence. Dark-haired gone silver, slight, the particular authority of someone who had spent decades standing at the front of rooms and knew how to make the room come to her rather than projecting herself at it.

She was laughing at something one of the students had said.

Flora stood on the pavement in the October morning and watched Consolation Reyes teach English to a room full of people who were becoming themselves in a new language, and she thought about Theodore Brant in the client chair with his good hat, asking whether the right thing and the good thing were the same.

She walked on.

Thursday she went back to the office and found Nancy at her wall of filing boxes.

This was not unusual — Nancy went to the archive often, for cases, for cross-references, for the pleasure of finding things she had put away precisely for a later occasion that had now arrived. But there was something in the way she was standing — one hand on the open box, not moving, looking at something inside it or at nothing at all, the posture of a woman who had arrived somewhere and then forgotten, mid-arrival, why she'd come.

"Nancy," Flora said.

Nancy looked up. Her eyes cleared. "I'm looking for something," she said. "From the seventies."

"For Brant?"

"I know this name." Nancy turned back to the box. "Reyes. I transcribed something. A proceeding." She paged through the folder, methodical, one sheet at a time. "I'm nearly certain."

Flora sat at her desk. She did not offer to help. This was one of the dignities that cost nothing.

She looked at her notepad. What she had so far: Consolation Reyes, 74. ESL teacher. Sunset District. Daughter Elena, 44. Husband Rodrigo Reyes, deceased 2014, cardiac event.

She turned back a page and looked at the dates. Elena born 1980.

She looked at this for a moment. Then she wrote, below it: *1971 child* —
?

"Got it," Nancy said.

Flora looked up.

Nancy was holding a folder. Looking at something inside it. Her face had gone very still — not the coat-on-the-hook still, not the controlled-attention still, but something more complicated, a woman reading something she recognized but hadn't expected to feel.

"What is it?" Flora said.

Nancy brought the folder to her desk and set it down and stood looking at it.

"Adoption proceeding," she said. "October 1971. Consolation Margarita Reyes, age twenty-one. Surrendering a child, male, born the twelfth of October 1971." She paused. "I transcribed the hearing. November 1971."

The steam moved under the floor. Someone was pressing a suit below, something that smelled of wool and formality.

"A boy," Flora said.

"A boy." Nancy sat down. "She was alone at the hearing. No family, no —" She stopped. "I remember now. I remember because she came in alone and sat through the whole thing alone and when it was done she sat in the chair for a long time before she got up and left. I was twenty-six. I had been doing the work for three years. I thought I had seen everything." She paused. "She sat in that chair for a very long time."

Flora looked at her notepad. Then she looked at Nancy's notepad, open on the desk.

In the margin, in Nancy's small shorthand, two lines. The second line was nearly illegible — the letters formed but imprecise, the shorthand gone slightly wrong, the kind of wrong that didn't announce itself until you tried to read it back.

Flora read it anyway. She was one of perhaps three people alive who knew Nancy's shorthand well enough to reconstruct it when it went wrong.

It said: *1971. Reyes. I know this.*

She had written it before she found the folder. She had known and not known and then found and then confirmed. The note in the margin was from before the confirmation.

Flora did not say this. She looked at the notepad a moment longer and then looked at her own notes.

"A boy," she said again. "Fifty-three years old now."

"If he's alive," Nancy said. "If he wasn't — there are children who weren't." She said this with the flat precision of someone who had sat in many rooms where these facts were stated for the record. "But if he is."

"He might have found her," Flora said.

"He might have found her," Nancy agreed.

"Or he might not know."

"Or he might not know."

Flora picked up her recorder. Held it. Did not press it.

"Theodore Brant ended a relationship with a pregnant woman in October 1971," she said. "The child was adopted out the following month. He is now seventy-eight years old and he wants to know if Consolation Reyes had a good life." She set the recorder down. "He knows about the child."

"You think so."

"He knew something happened. He said he thought he was doing the right thing and he has spent fifty years wondering. He was careful about how he said it. He said *what happened in 1971* and then he said *when I ended things Consolation was pregnant* as though those were two sequential facts." She paused. "He's been carrying the second one for fifty years. He came here because he's seventy-eight and he's stopped being able to carry it in the same way."

Nancy looked at her steadily. "What do you want to do?"

Flora thought about Consolation Reyes alone in a courtroom in November 1971, twenty-one years old, sitting in a chair long after she needed to.

"I need to talk to Theodore Brant again," she said. "Before we do anything else."

Chapter Three

He came in on Friday.

This time he arrived exactly on the hour — not early, not late, which told Flora he'd been thinking about the meeting rather than dreading it. He sat in the same chair, held his hat the same way, and looked at Flora with the steady careful expression of a man who had decided to be more honest than he had been the first time.

"You knew about the child," Flora said. Not an accusation. Just the fact, placed between them.

He looked at her for a moment.

"Yes," he said.

"When did you find out?"

"The day she told me," he said. "October. She told me she was pregnant and I — I was twenty-four years old and I was frightened and I told her I couldn't — that we couldn't —" He stopped. "I left. I told myself I was doing the right thing. That she was better off without a man who wasn't ready. That the child was better off." He turned the brim of his hat once. "Three weeks later a mutual acquaintance told me she'd gone to a hearing. An adoption proceeding."

"You didn't go," Flora said.

"I didn't know until after." He looked at the window. "I found out she'd gone alone. Sat through it alone. Signed the papers alone." He paused. "I have thought about that room more times than I can count."

"What did you do afterward?"

"Nothing," he said. The word landed flat and unadorned. "I did nothing. I was ashamed and I did nothing and I told myself she was better off and I moved on with my life and I was wrong about all of it." He looked back at

Flora. "I married in 1975. We had three children. My wife died in 2019." He said this without self-pity, just as the facts were. "After she died I had a great deal of time to think about things I had not allowed myself to think about."

"And you came here."

"Not immediately. I came here when I understood what I was actually asking." He set his hat on his knee. "I want to know if Consolation is well. I want to know if the child — if there's been any contact. Any reunion." He paused. "If there has been I don't need to know anything else. If there hasn't —" He stopped.

Flora waited.

"I don't know what I'm saying," he said. "If there hasn't been contact. I don't know what that means. I don't know what the right thing is. I seem to have a poor record of knowing what the right thing is."

Flora looked at him for a long time.

"Mr. Brant," she said. "I need to ask you something and I need you to answer me honestly."

"All right."

"Why does it matter to you whether there's been a reunion?"

He was quiet.

"Is it for them?" Flora said. "Or is it for you?"

The silence went on long enough that she began to think he wasn't going to answer. Then he said, very quietly: "Both. I think both. And I'm not proud of the second one."

Flora nodded.

"That's an honest answer," she said.

Nancy had been listening from her desk with the stillness she brought to important things. When Theodore Brant left she turned her chair slightly and looked at Flora.

"He wants absolution," Nancy said.

"He wants to know if the chain of harm stopped somewhere," Flora said. "That's not the same thing."

"Isn't it?"

Flora thought about it.

"No," she said. "I don't think it is. Absolution is for him. Knowing the chain of harm stopped is — it's still for him, partly. But it's also for the record. He wants to know what actually happened." She paused. "He's a man who has been carrying a version of events for fifty years and he doesn't know if it's accurate."

Nancy picked up her pen. "And if it isn't accurate? If the chain didn't stop?"

Flora looked at the cork board.

Consolation Reyes. 74. Sunset District.

"Then we figure out what to do with that," she said.

Chapter Four

Flora spent the following week being careful.

She had learned, over years, the particular discipline of the cases that involved people who had not asked to be involved — the ones who were adjacent to the client's need, who had their own lives and their own privacy and their own right to decide what doors they opened and which ones they kept shut. Consolation Reyes had not hired Drake and Voss. Elena Park had not hired Drake and Voss. Whatever they found was not found for these women's benefit but for Theodore Brant's, and that required a kind of care that didn't always sit comfortably with the work.

She found the boy — the man — through the county adoption records, which were not easy to access and were not fully accessed, but which confirmed enough: a male child, born October 12, 1971, surrendered November 1971, adopted by a family in San Jose.

She found the California Adoption Registry and confirmed that neither Consolation Reyes nor the child — she did not yet have a name for him, only the original record — had filed a contact preference form.

Which meant: no formal search. No formal contact. No request for reunion from either side.

Which meant nothing, in either direction. It meant they had not gone through the official channels. It did not mean they had not found each other another way.

She spent three days looking for another way.

On the fourth day she found a thread she had not been looking for.

She had been searching for Consolation Reyes in the ordinary digital record — the traces people left without meaning to, the small consistent

footprints of a life being lived. Consolation was not a person who lived much online, but she had a presence at the community center, a name in two neighborhood newsletters, a mention in a 2018 article about longtime Sunset residents in a local paper.

In the comments section of that article — which Flora read because she read everything, because the marginal material was sometimes where the story lived — a comment from a user named R_Bautista_SF:

My mother spoke of you often. She said you were the kindest person she met in her first year in this city. She passed in March. I think she would have wanted you to know how much your class meant to her.

Flora read this twice.

Then she read the other comments. Then she read the profile of R_Bautista_SF, which was sparse — a name, a city, a handful of other comments on local news articles stretching back four years, all in the Sunset and Richmond area, all the kind of comments that indicated someone paying attention to a neighborhood rather than performing for an audience.

R. Bautista. Sunset District.

She noted the name and moved on and did not yet know what she had found.

Two days later she found it.

The 1971 adoption record listed the birth name, registered briefly before the adoption finalized, on the original birth certificate: Robert. Robert Reyes, born October 12, 1971.

Adopted by a family in San Jose named Bautista.

Robert Bautista. R_Bautista_SF.

Flora sat for a long time at her desk.

She thought about a man who had left a comment on a local news article about his birth mother, a comment that did not announce itself as such, that offered only condolence and memory, that was close enough to reach and not close enough to require anything.

She thought about Consolation Reyes reading that comment — if she had read it, if she read the comments, if she had a Google alert on her own name as some people did, if she recognized or didn't recognize what she

was reading.

She thought about what it meant to leave a message in a place where someone might find it if they were looking and might not find it if they weren't.

She put on her coat and went to find Nancy.

Nancy was in the kitchen. This was unusual — Nancy spent very little time in the kitchen, she collected her coffee and returned to her desk with the efficiency of someone who did not see the kitchen as a destination. She was standing at the counter with a cup she was not drinking, looking at the wall above the kettle where someone, years ago, had tacked a postcard of the Farallon Islands that neither of them had put there and neither of them had taken down.

"Nancy," Flora said.

Nancy turned. "I was thinking," she said, "about the Reyes case."

"What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about the boy." She looked at her cup. "Fifty-three years old. Whatever kind of man he is, whatever life he has, there's a room in him with a door on it. Might be open. Might be shut. Might be a door he walks past every day and doesn't try." She paused. "I know something about doors like that."

Flora looked at her.

Nancy set the cup down. "My sister," she said. "We didn't speak for eleven years. Some things happened. We chose not to address them and then enough time passed that the not-addressing had become its own architecture and you couldn't alter one part without — we just didn't speak." She picked up the cup again. "She called me in 1998. Out of nowhere. Tuesday, I remember it was a Tuesday, I was at the courthouse, she called my office. She said: I'm in San Francisco this weekend. Can I take you to dinner."

"What did you say?"

"I said yes." Nancy looked at the Farallon Islands postcard. "We had dinner. We didn't talk about the eleven years or what happened or any of it. We just — talked. Like people who knew each other, which we were. We

were people who knew each other." She was quiet for a moment. "She died in 2009. I had eleven good years with her I wouldn't have had if she hadn't just called."

Flora waited.

"I'm thinking about the boy," Nancy said. "Robert Bautista. He's fifty-three years old and he left a comment on a newspaper article and he lives four blocks from his mother and he hasn't knocked on the door." She looked at Flora. "You found him."

"Yes."

"You know where he is."

"Yes."

Nancy looked at her steadily. "And?"

"And I don't know what to do with it yet," Flora said. "I'm still working out what question I'm answering and for whom."

Nancy nodded. She picked up her cup and walked back to her desk.

"When you work it out," she said, "tell me."

"I will," Flora said.

She went back to her desk. She sat down. She looked at the cork board.

She looked at Nancy's notepad, open on the desk. The margin, the shorthand, the line that had gone slightly wrong.

She looked at it a moment longer than she should have.

She looked away.

Chapter Five

On Tuesday of the following week Elena Park came in without an appointment.

She knocked — as her mother had — and stood in the doorway with the expression of someone who had talked herself into this at least twice on the way up the stairs and was not entirely sure the talking-in had taken.

She was forty-four, which Flora had known, but forty-four looked different in person than it did in the architecture of a case — a real woman, medium height, her mother's dark eyes and something of her composure, though carried differently, more visibly effortful, the composure of someone who was managing rather than someone for whom management had become invisible.

"Ms. Park," Flora said.

Elena looked at her sharply. "You know who I am."

"Come in," Flora said. "Sit down."

Elena came in. She did not sit down. She stood in the middle of the room with her coat still on and looked at Flora with the direct undecorated attention of someone who was not here to be managed.

"I saw him," she said. "Last week. Coming out of this building. Theodore Brant." She paused. "My mother has a photograph of him. Had. She put it away when I was young but I found it once and I asked her and she told me who he was. She told me enough." Her jaw was set. "I want to know what he's doing here."

Flora looked at her.

"Ms. Park," she said. "Sit down. Please."

Something in Elena's face shifted — not softening exactly, but a recognition that this was going to require more than she'd prepared for. She

sat.

Flora sat across from her.

"Mr. Brant hired us," Flora said. "He asked us to find out whether your mother was well. That's the brief."

"Why?"

"He's seventy-eight years old," Flora said. "He's been carrying something for fifty years and he wanted to know whether the harm he did was the last harm or whether it led to other harms."

Elena looked at her. "He wanted absolution."

"He wanted to know what actually happened," Flora said. "People sometimes confuse those things. I don't think he has."

Elena's hands were in her lap, not folded — held, one in the other, the posture of someone keeping themselves contained.

"My mother had a child," Elena said. "In 1971. Before me. She told me when I was thirty-two. She said she'd needed to tell someone and I was the right person and it was the right time and I believe her on both counts." She looked at the cork board. "A boy. She gave him up. She's never spoken of it since, to me or to anyone I know of." She paused. "I've thought about him. My whole life, since she told me, I've thought about him. Who he is. Whether he found her. Whether she'd want him to."

The room was quiet.

"Has he?" Flora said carefully.

Elena looked at her. "I don't know. That's why I'm here. Or partly why." She paused. "I'm here because I saw Theodore Brant coming out of this building and I want to know what he knows and what you know and whether any of it is going to —" She stopped.

"Going to what?" Flora said.

"Come toward my mother," Elena said. "Without her asking for it. Without her being ready." She looked at Flora directly. "She's seventy-four. She has a life. She has her work and her grandchildren and her garden and she has whatever she carries about 1971, which is hers, and I am not going to let some old man's need for peace of mind —"

"Ms. Park," Flora said.

Elena stopped.

"Your mother is well," Flora said. "She's teaching on Noriega three mornings a week. She seems—" Flora thought about the window, the classroom, the laughter. "She seems like a person who has built something real." She paused. "That's what Theodore Brant wanted to know. And that's what we've found."

Elena looked at her.

"Is that all he wanted to know?" she said.

Flora held the question for a moment.

"He also wanted to know," she said, "whether your brother had found her."

The word *brother* sat in the room between them. Elena did not flinch from it — she had had twelve years to get used to it in her own interior — but she felt it, Flora could see. The word still had weight.

"And has he?" Elena said.

Flora made a decision.

Not the decision about Robert Bautista, not yet, that decision was larger and required more — but a smaller decision, inside the larger one. The decision about Elena Park, forty-four years old, who had carried a half-sibling in her imagination for twelve years and deserved more than to be managed.

"I don't know," Flora said. "Not for certain."

Which was true.

"But you think so," Elena said.

"I think," Flora said carefully, "that there may be someone who has chosen to be close without being close. Who has found a way to be present without requiring anything." She paused. "That's not a conclusion. It's a possibility I'm still working out."

Elena was quiet for a long time. The dry cleaner's compressor shuddered on below. The steam smell came up — something floral today, something that had been pressed back into something like its original form.

"What do you do," Elena said, "when you find something that belongs to someone who didn't ask you to look?"

Flora looked at her.

"You're careful," she said. "And you figure out whether telling them is for them or for you. And if it's for them, you figure out how to tell them in the way that does the most good." She paused. "And if it's for you, you sit with it until you understand that, and then you decide again."

Elena looked at her for a long moment.

"My mother," she said, "doesn't know I'm here."

"I know."

"I'd like to keep it that way."

"All right."

Elena stood. She straightened her coat, the small automatic adjustment of a woman re-composing herself for the street. She looked at the cork board one more time.

"If there's someone," she said. "Who's close without being close. And if he —" She stopped. Started again. "If he wanted to be less careful about it. If he needed a door to knock on." She looked at Flora. "I'm asking you to give him mine first. Not my mother's. Mine."

Flora held that.

"That's not a small thing," Flora said.

"No," Elena agreed. "It isn't."

She left. The door closed. On the frosted glass her shadow moved and was gone, the way her mother's had been, and Flora sat for a moment in the shape of it.

Nancy had not moved from her desk throughout.

Now she set her pen down parallel to the notepad.

"Well," she said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"She's been carrying him for twelve years," Nancy said. "And she walked in here and handed us the door to give him." She was quiet for a moment. "That's not someone who needs protecting from this."

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

"And the mother?"

Flora looked at the cork board.

"The mother," she said, "sat alone in a courtroom in 1971 and didn't get up for a long time afterward. She built a life. She taught people a language. She told her daughter the truth when the daughter was ready." She paused. "I think she's been ready for a long time. I think she's been ready and hasn't known how to begin and hasn't wanted to ask anyone to begin for her."

Nancy picked up her pen.

"The comment," Nancy said. "On the newspaper article."

Flora looked at her.

"I read your notes," Nancy said, without apology. "You left them on the desk."

"I know I did," Flora said.

Nancy held her pen without writing. "He's four blocks away. He leaves messages in public places. He came back to this neighborhood and he stayed." She paused. "He's been ready too."

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

They looked at each other across the office, the two desks facing opposite walls, the kettle and the cork board and the window onto Clement Street between them.

"So," Nancy said.

"So," Flora said.

Chapter Six

She called Theodore Brant from the office on Wednesday morning.

He answered on the first ring.

"We've found what you asked us to find," Flora said. "Consolation Reyes is well. She's working, she has family, she has a life that is genuinely hers." She paused. "The harm you did was real. And it was not the last thing that happened to her."

A silence. Long enough that she heard him breathe.

"The child," he said.

"I found him," Flora said. "He's alive. He's well. His name is Robert. He's fifty-three years old and he's been living four blocks from his mother for at least four years."

Another silence. This one she did not try to measure.

"Has he —" Theodore started.

"Not formally," Flora said. "Not directly. But I think he's been trying to find a way."

"Does she know he's there?"

"I don't know," Flora said. "I believe she might. I can't tell you for certain."

He was quiet for a very long time.

"What do I do with this?" he said.

Flora had thought about how to answer this. She had thought about it since Elena Park walked out of the office and since before that, since the comment on the newspaper article, since the adoption record, since Nancy standing in the kitchen talking about eleven years of silence and a phone call on a Tuesday.

"You don't do anything with it," Flora said. "It isn't yours to do anything with. It never was." She paused. "You wanted to know if the harm stopped. I can't tell you that. I can tell you that two people have been circling something for four years and they've been doing it carefully and they're going to find their way to each other or they aren't, and that is between them." Another pause. "What I can tell you is that you're not the reason they haven't."

A silence.

"You mean I'm not the damage they're working around," he said.

"No," Flora said. "You were the beginning of something. What they've done with the middle of it has nothing to do with you."

She heard him exhale. Not relief exactly. More like something large being set down — not gone, not resolved, but put somewhere it could be examined rather than carried.

"All right," he said.

"Mr. Brant," Flora said. "One more thing."

"Yes."

"Your children," she said. "They have a half-brother they don't know about. That's a fact that will still be true when you're gone. What you do with it is your decision." She paused. "But I'd encourage you not to make the same decision twice."

A long silence.

"That's direct," he said.

"Yes," Flora said.

He made a sound that might have been a laugh or something adjacent to a laugh. "You're right," he said. "You're entirely right."

"Nancy will send you an invoice," Flora said. "Thank you for coming to us."

She hung up.

She sat for a moment looking at the phone.

Chapter Seven

Robert Bautista agreed to meet her on Friday.

She had sent him a message through the email on his neighborhood forum profile — brief, professional, a name and a number and a sentence: *I'm a private investigator working on a matter in which your name has come up. I'd welcome a conversation at your convenience. No obligation.*

He called back within the hour.

His voice on the phone was careful in the way that immediately told her he knew what this might be about and had decided not to assume.

They met at a coffee place on Irving — his suggestion, his neighborhood, his terms, all of which Flora respected. He was already there when she arrived, which told her the same thing that arriving early had told her about Deirdre Pham, a lifetime ago — anxious, yes, but the anxiety of someone who had been waiting for a very long time and was not going to be late now that the moment had come.

He was fifty-three. Medium height, compact, the kind of face that showed its history without concealing it — not handsome in any conventional arrangement but very present, very there, the face of a man who had learned to be the most solid thing in a room because he'd needed to be. His eyes were Consolation's eyes. Flora registered this and did not remark on it.

"Ms. Voss," he said.

"Mr. Bautista," she said. "Thank you for meeting me."

He had coffee already. She ordered hers. They sat.

"I've been waiting," he said, "for something like this for about four years."

"Four years," she said.

"That's when I moved back to the city." He turned his cup on its saucer — the same small rotation she had seen Theodore Brant make with his hat, the unconscious gesture of someone managing their own tension. "I was in Sacramento before that. I grew up in San Jose." He paused. "I knew who she was. I found out when I was twenty-eight. I did what you do — you get the records, you follow the thread." He looked at his cup. "I drove past her building once. In 2004. That was all I could manage."

"And four years ago you moved here."

"I work in urban planning," he said. "There was a position with the city. A good one. I took it." He looked up. "I told myself it was the job."

"And now?"

He smiled slightly. Not a happy smile — a smile that acknowledged the absurdity of a fifty-three-year-old man who had organized his entire professional geography around a woman he hadn't spoken to.

"And now I've been here four years and I leave her messages in places she might find and I walk past her building and I have not knocked on the door." He paused. "Because she didn't look for me. She had the registry available to her the same as I did. She didn't file."

"That's why you haven't knocked."

"I don't know what it means," he said. "That she didn't file. I've told myself a hundred different versions of what it means." He looked at the window. "Maybe she wanted to be found but couldn't start. Maybe she found her peace with it and doesn't need to reopen it. Maybe —" He stopped. "I don't know. I've never been able to decide."

Flora looked at him.

She thought about what she was holding. Consolation Reyes, seventy-four, four blocks away, teaching English on Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday, her daughter Elena who had walked into Drake and Voss with a photograph in her memory and a door to offer.

She thought about Theodore Brant's voice on the phone when she said *you're not the damage they're working around*. The sound of something being set down.

She thought about Nancy in the kitchen, talking about eleven years and a phone call on a Tuesday and eleven good years she wouldn't have had otherwise.

"Mr. Bautista," she said. "Your mother knows you exist. She thought about you today. She has thought about you, in some way, for fifty-three years." She paused. "I'm not going to tell you that she's waiting for you, because I don't know that. I can't promise you how the door opens." She looked at him steadily. "But I can tell you that her daughter knows you're here. And her daughter would like to talk to you before you knock on your mother's door."

Robert Bautista looked at her.

His hands went very still on the table. Not the stillness of control, not the stillness of a man who had learned to be careful — the stillness of a man who had stopped, fully stopped, because something had happened that required him to stop.

"Her daughter," he said.

"Elena," Flora said. "She's forty-four. She has two children. She's been thinking about you for twelve years." She slid a piece of paper across the table. A phone number. "She asked me to give you this. She said to give you hers first, not her mother's. She thought that was the right order."

He looked at the piece of paper.

He looked at it for a long time.

Then he picked it up with the careful deliberateness of someone picking up something they did not intend to put back down.

Chapter Eight

Flora stayed after Nancy left.

It was full dark by the time she sat at her desk. Clement Street had done its evening migration — the restaurants open, the families walking, the city in its ordinary gorgeous indifferent Thursday self. She could hear it through the window.

She took out her recorder.

She held it for a while without pressing anything.

She thought about Robert Bautista and his mother's eyes and his father's hat and his stillness when she handed him the piece of paper. She thought about Elena Park and twelve years of carrying a half-brother in her imagination and the particular courage of walking into an office and offering a stranger a door. She thought about Consolation Reyes in a classroom laughing at something, her students learning the words for things they had only had in other languages before, and the long work of making yourself at home in a new vocabulary.

She thought about Theodore Brant, seventy-eight years old, sitting in this chair with his hat, asking whether the right thing and the good thing were the same thing.

They were not always the same thing. He had been right about that. The tragedy was that you often didn't find out which one you'd done until much later, when the consequences had already become the landscape everyone was living in.

But sometimes — not always, not reliably, but sometimes — the consequences were also navigable. Sometimes the landscape that had seemed final turned out to have doors in it that no one had tried yet.

She pressed record.

"Theodore Brant," she said. "Seventy-eight. He came to us asking if the harm he did was the last harm. It wasn't. It led to other harms, smaller ones, quieter ones — a woman alone in a courtroom, a boy growing up in a different city, fifty years of almost and not quite." She paused. "But the harm he did is also not the last thing that happened. There's a piece of paper with a phone number on it. That's not something he did. That's something they did. They built the rest of the landscape themselves, without him."

She clicked it off.

She thought about Nancy's margin note. The shorthand that had gone slightly wrong. The words she had reconstructed and used and not told Nancy she'd found.

1971. Reyes. I know this.

She had known it before she found the folder. Her memory had surfaced the name from thirty years of transcribed proceedings and held it up — imperfectly, uncertainly, in handwriting that had lost a little of its precision — but it had surfaced it. The mind still working, still finding things, still trying.

Flora had found the note and read it and said nothing and used what it contained.

She sat with that for a moment.

She was not sure it was the right thing.

She was fairly sure it was the good thing.

She pressed record again.

"Nancy found Consolation Reyes herself," she said into the recorder. "She found her in her own archive before I found her anywhere else. I want to remember that."

She clicked it off.

She sat in the dark office for a while longer, the street below going about its evening business, the cork board holding what it held.

She thought about all the people who had been in this case and had not been clients — Consolation Reyes who had sat in a courtroom and kept on, Elena Park who had offered a door, Robert Bautista who had arranged his whole working life around a building he hadn't yet knocked on. All of them doing the long careful work of being ready without knowing if ready would ever be enough.

There was a kind of courage in that, she thought. The specific courage of people who kept the door available without demanding it be opened.

She thought about her own Tuesdays. All the Tuesdays she had lost and reconstructed. All the versions of herself she had read back from recordings, the way you read a letter from someone you used to be. All the kept things in the place where kept things went.

She picked up the recorder one more time.

"I wonder sometimes," she said into it, "whether the things I don't record are the truest ones. Whether the act of recording changes them. Whether there are things that only stay what they are if you keep them only in yourself." She paused. "And then I remember that I lose Tuesdays and I press record."

She set it down.

She turned off the light.

She went down the stairs, past the fourth step where the carpet was loose, out onto Clement Street where the evening was fully its Thursday self.

She did not take out her recorder.

She walked home through the city, through the ordinary evening of it, through the lit windows and the restaurant noise and the couple arguing gently about something outside the pharmacy and the dog pulling toward a smell in the gutter and the old man sitting in his own doorway watching the street go by.

All of it irreplaceable.

All of it hers, for as long as she had it.

Three weeks later, Nancy took a phone call from Elena Park.

She wrote it in her notepad, dated and timed: Elena Park called. She says: it went well. She says to say thank you.

In the margin, Nancy wrote one more thing, in her small careful shorthand, slightly imprecise at the edges now but readable:

We did the right thing. And I think it was also the good thing. Remember this.

She looked at what she'd written.

The Right Thing

She did not call Flora over to read it.

Some things you kept in yourself, for as long as you had them.

In the office on the second floor, the cork board held what it held.

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

Neither of them had fixed it.

Neither of them ever would.

End.