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The Seven Names

a 321Lumina.com book

by Blurt Snodgrass

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A Drake & Voss Novella

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Chapter One

She arrived on a Monday morning in May, which was a morning that couldn't decide between fog and sun and had settled, by the time she climbed the stairs to the second floor, on something in between — a soft diffused light that made Clement Street look like a photograph of itself, everything present but nothing casting a shadow.

She was sixty-six. Chinese-Malaysian was Flora's read, the specific combination of features that came from the Straits settlements, from centuries of particular mixing — something of the south Chinese coast in the bone structure, something of the peninsula in the coloring, the whole of it arrived at through generations of people choosing each other in a specific place. She was small, compact, the kind of small that was not diminutive but concentrated, a woman who took up exactly the space she occupied and not a fraction more. She wore her hair in a silver-streaked braid, a silk blouse the color of jade, reading glasses pushed up onto her forehead. She carried a handbag that was old and good and had been resoled once at the heel, the kind of handbag that had been chosen carefully a long time ago and had earned the right to continue.

She had a piece of paper in her hand.

She set it on the desk when she sat down, smoothed it flat with the palm of her hand — a single sheet, folded twice, seven names in neat handwriting, the handwriting of someone who had spent decades writing in patient legible letters because the people reading what she wrote were under stress and couldn't afford to misread it.

She looked at Flora.

"I want to find all of them," she said.

Flora looked at the list.

Seven names. All women's names, or names that had been women's names then — Soo Lin, Adibah, Constance, Maricel, Eunice, Theresa, Boon Kee. Below the names, in smaller writing: *St. Catherine's Convent School, Penang, 1968-1971.*

Nancy came in while Flora was reading the names. She took in the client, the silk blouse, the paper smoothed flat on the desk, the quality of stillness the woman had that was not calm exactly but was what came after something large had happened and you had stopped fighting it. Nancy hung her coat on the right hook and sat at her desk and opened her notepad and wrote the date and the time without being asked and waited.

"Tell me about them," Flora said.

Perpetua Seng looked at the seven names.

"We were at school together," she said. "A convent school in Penang — St. Catherine's, the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus ran it, Irish nuns mostly, which was its own strangeness in a school full of Malaysian girls." She looked at the window. "We were in the same form for three years, 1968 to 1971. I left Penang when I was eighteen and I have not been back." She paused. "I came to San Francisco for university. I became a pediatric nurse. I worked at UCSF for thirty-one years. I married a man named George Seng — he was an engineer, a good man — and we had two children and we built a life in the Outer Sunset." She looked at her hands on the desk, the nurse's hands, the hands that had been laying flat and now she folded them together. "George died eight months ago. Pancreatic cancer. From diagnosis to death was four months."

"I'm sorry," Flora said.

Perpetua received this with a slight nod — not dismissive, the nod of a woman who had received a great deal of condolence in the past eight months and had developed a method for it that allowed her to accept it without being derailed by it.

"I've been sitting in the house in the Outer Sunset," she said, "since he died, becoming someone I don't recognize." She said this with the precision of a nurse describing a symptom — clearly, without drama, because the drama was in the fact and not in the telling of it. "Not grief, exactly. I expected grief. I understand grief, I've sat with a great many families in grief, I know what it looks like and I was prepared for it." She paused. "This is something else. This is — I look in the mirror and I see a woman who

was a wife for thirty-four years and a nurse for thirty-one years and a mother and a grandmother and a resident of the Outer Sunset and I don't —" She stopped. "I don't know who that woman is without the context she was built in. The context has changed and I've lost the thread back to who I was before the context existed."

She looked at the seven names.

"These women knew me at fifteen," she said. "At sixteen, seventeen. Before San Francisco, before nursing, before George and the children. They knew what I laughed at. What frightened me. What I wanted to be before I knew what I would become." She paused. "I want to know if they're alive. I want to know who they became. And I want to write them each a letter. If they're willing to receive one." She looked at Flora directly. "Not a reunion. I'm not looking for a party or a group photograph or a shared memory session. Just a letter. Just — to say: I existed then. You knew me then. Here is who I became."

Flora looked at her for a long time.

"Why now?" she said. "Why not ten years ago. Twenty."

Perpetua looked at the list.

"Because George died knowing everything about who I am now," she said. "Everything. Thirty-four years. He knew every version of me from thirty-two years old onward." She paused. "And he knew nothing about who I was before. I told him things, of course — stories, anecdotes, the texture of growing up in Penang. But knowing about someone's past is not the same as knowing their past." She looked at Flora. "There are people who hold the other half of me. I've been in this city for forty-eight years and I've let the other half go unattended and I don't know how much time I have to find it."

The room was quiet.

The steam was coming up through the floor — the dry cleaner below, someone's clothes being made ready, the warm smell of pressed linen.

Nancy had stopped writing.

Flora looked at the seven names again.

Soo Lin. Adibah. Constance. Maricel. Eunice. Theresa. Boon Kee.

"We'll find them," she said.

Perpetua looked at her. Something shifted in her face — not relief, something more careful than relief, the expression of a woman who had been managing alone for eight months and had just allowed herself to not manage one thing.

"There's something else," she said.

Flora waited.

"One of them," Perpetua said. "Boon Kee. We had a falling out. The last year of school. I said something — I did something — that I have carried for forty-eight years." She looked at the name at the bottom of the list. "I'd like to find her most of all. But I'm most afraid of what she might say."

"What did you do?" Flora said.

Perpetua looked at the window, at the diffused May light.

"I told a truth," she said, "that wasn't mine to tell. About her family. To people who didn't need to know it and couldn't be trusted with it." She paused. "I was seventeen. I told myself it was an accident — that the words came out before I'd thought about them. But I've had forty-eight years to examine that and I don't believe it anymore. I think I wanted to be interesting. I think I wanted the attention that came from knowing something other people didn't. And I told her secret in front of people who mattered to her and I watched her face change and I have never —" She stopped. "I have never been able to make it right because I left and she stayed and the years accumulated and it became the thing you can't go back to because going back to it would require being the person who did it."

"And now?" Flora said.

"And now George is dead," Perpetua said, "and I'm sixty-six years old, and I don't have the luxury of the years accumulating anymore." She looked at Boon Kee's name. "I want to find her. I want to write to her. I don't expect forgiveness — I'm not going looking for absolution. I want to say what I did and what I've thought about it for forty-eight years and let her do with that whatever she needs to do."

Flora looked at the list.

"All right," she said. "We'll find all seven. We'll start looking today."

Perpetua smoothed the list once more with her palm — the gesture of a woman confirming something — and then she left it on the desk and sat back.

Nancy had been looking at her notepad. Now she looked up.

"Ms. Seng," she said. "What were you going to be? When you were fifteen and didn't know yet what you would become."

Perpetua looked at her.

"An architect," she said. A pause, and then something in her face that was not quite a smile but was what came before one. "I was going to design buildings. I spent two years drawing buildings in the margins of my exercise books. The nuns were not pleased." She looked at the window. "I became a nurse instead because my mother was practical and there was a scholarship and the scholarship was for nursing." She paused. "George always said I had the wrong career. He said I was an architect who happened to work with bodies instead of buildings." She was quiet for a moment. "He wasn't wrong."

Nancy wrote this down.

Chapter Two

The finding took three weeks.

It was not the hardest finding they had done — the women were findable in the way that women of sixty-six were findable if you knew where to look and had the patience to look carefully, and Nancy had the patience and Flora had the method and between them they worked through the seven names with the thoroughness the work required.

Nancy took the first three: Soo Lin, Adibah, Constance. She worked through the Malaysian diaspora records, the university alumni networks, the professional registries of three countries. She had the professional contacts of thirty years and she deployed them without sentimentality, the contacts being useful and usefulness being the point.

Flora took the next three: Maricel, Eunice, Theresa. She worked the Philippine networks for Maricel, who had a surname suggesting Filipino-Chinese heritage, and found her in Vancouver. Eunice she found in London through a legal professional registry — she'd become a barrister. Theresa took longer, the name too common, the trail too diffuse, but a thread through a Penang heritage group on a platform Flora rarely used led to a daughter who led to an address in Kuala Lumpur.

Boon Kee they approached together.

The name was unusual enough to narrow the search and common enough to complicate it. They worked through school records where accessible, through the Malaysian civil registry where publicly searchable, through the networks of people who had known St. Catherine's Convent School in those years. It took eleven days.

They found her on a Thursday.

She was in Penang still. She had never left. She ran a small business — a shop selling traditional textiles and fabrics, on a street in Georgetown that

Nancy found on the maps and studied for a while before she said anything.

"She stayed," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"All the others left. Five different countries." Nancy looked at the address. "She stayed in Penang and opened a fabric shop."

"Yes."

Nancy was quiet for a moment. "Perpetua left and Boon Kee stayed. And what Perpetua told — about Boon Kee's family — she'd have had to live with the consequences of that. In a city where everyone knows everything."

"Yes," Flora said.

"And she stayed anyway," Nancy said.

"Yes."

They sat with that.

"She's strong," Nancy said. "Or she had no choice. Or both."

"Both," Flora said. "I think both."

They called Perpetua when all seven were found.

She came in on a Thursday afternoon — the kind of afternoon in May that San Francisco occasionally produced, warm enough to have the window open onto Clement Street, the sound of the street coming in with the air. She sat in the client chair and Flora gave her the sheet — seven names, seven locations, seven brief accounts of what they'd found.

Soo Lin: in Singapore, a retired secondary school teacher, three children, a grandchild on the way.

Adibah: in Kuala Lumpur, a doctor, obstetrics, still practicing at sixty-six.

Constance: in Melbourne, a restaurant owner, a place in Fitzroy that had been open for twenty years.

Maricel: in Vancouver, a social worker, recently retired, active in the Filipino-Canadian community.

Eunice: in London, a barrister specializing in immigration law, a career that had the specific logic of a woman who had left one country for another

and understood what that cost.

Theresa: in Kuala Lumpur, a grandmother of five, her husband a retired civil servant, her occupation listed in the records as homemaker but who had, Flora had found from a Penang heritage newsletter, spent twenty years running a community literacy program.

Boon Kee: in Penang. The fabric shop on the street in Georgetown. Unmarried, the records suggested, or widowed — the civil records were not entirely clear. The shop was called, Flora had found on a small local business directory, *Kee Fabrics and Textiles*, which was either the most practical name imaginable or the name of a woman who had decided that her name was enough, that she didn't need anything more decorative than the truth of what she did and who she was.

Perpetua read all seven.

She read them slowly, the way she had smoothed the original list — with full attention, treating each name as the whole of the thing rather than one item in a series.

When she finished she set the sheet on the desk and looked at the window for a long time.

"All alive," she said.

"All alive," Flora said.

"Eunice is a barrister." A pause. "She was the cleverest of us. We all knew she'd do something. We didn't know what." Another pause. "Adibah is still practicing medicine at sixty-six. Of course she is. She was the most stubborn person I've ever known in my life. Stubbornness is underrated in a doctor." She looked at Constance's entry. "A restaurant. That's right. Constance always fed people. If you were unhappy she fed you. If you were happy she fed you. It was her first response to everything."

Flora watched her moving through the seven names, doing what you did when you received news of people you'd lost — not just taking in the facts but comparing them to the remembered versions, measuring the distance between what you'd known and what they'd become, revising your understanding of who they'd been all along.

"Boon Kee," Perpetua said.

She said the name the way you said the name of something you'd been waiting to get to.

"She stayed," Flora said.

"Yes." Perpetua looked at the address — the street in Georgetown, the fabric shop. "Of course she stayed. Boon Kee would never leave. She was the one who was most — she was the most rooted of all of us. Her family had been in Penang for four generations. She used to say: I know every stone on this island. I know where all the stories are buried." She paused. "She did know. She had that quality of knowing a place that comes from being part of it rather than just living in it."

"She kept the name," Nancy said. "The shop. Kee Fabrics."

"Yes." Perpetua looked at it. "That's very her. She wouldn't —" She stopped. "She was always unsentimental about herself. She didn't believe in dressing things up. She called things what they were." A long pause. "What I did to her. What I said. She would have called that what it was too. She would have looked at me afterward and known exactly what I'd done and why. She was seventeen and she was already that clear-sighted."

"She may have forgiven you," Flora said. "Forty-eight years is a long time."

"Or she may not have," Perpetua said. "Both are possible. I'm not going to assume." She looked at Boon Kee's entry. "If she doesn't want a letter I'll accept that. I just —" She paused. "I want the chance to send one."

Flora looked at her.

"Ms. Seng," she said. "Before you write — would you be willing to tell me what you said? To Boon Kee. In 1971."

Perpetua looked at her.

"I told you," she said. "I told her secret."

"Yes. But I'd like to know what it was. Not for the case — the finding is done. But because I think it matters what kind of secret it was. Whether it's the kind that can be written about in a letter or the kind that needs to be said in person." She paused. "Some things don't travel well by mail."

Perpetua was quiet for a long time.

The street noise came through the open window — a cable car bell in the distance, a woman calling to someone, a dog, the ordinary layered sound of a city afternoon.

"Her father," Perpetua said. "He had two families. A wife and children in Penang — Boon Kee's family — and a woman in Ipoh, another

household, other children. This was not — it was not entirely unknown. People knew things, or suspected. But Boon Kee didn't know. She genuinely didn't know. She believed her father was what he appeared to be." She paused. "I found out from my mother, who had heard from someone, the way things traveled in those communities. And I told Boon Kee in front of four of our classmates. I didn't plan it. We were talking about something else and her father's name came up and the words came out and I watched her face —"

She stopped.

She looked at her hands.

"I have watched her face in my memory for forty-eight years," she said. "The way it changed. The way she looked at me. She didn't say anything. She just — her face changed, and then she looked at me, and then she turned and walked away. She didn't come to school for a week. When she came back she sat in a different seat and she never spoke to me again."

The office was quiet.

"And a month later I left for San Francisco," Perpetua said. "I left before I could — I told myself it was coincidence, the timing. But I think I was relieved to go. I think I was glad to put the ocean between myself and her face."

Flora looked at her steadily.

"What you did," she said, "was real. The harm was real. And you know that. You've known it for forty-eight years." She paused. "I think you should write the letter. And I think, if Boon Kee is willing, you should consider whether a letter is enough."

Perpetua looked at her.

"Are you suggesting I go to Penang?" she said.

"I'm suggesting," Flora said carefully, "that some things don't travel well by mail. And that Boon Kee stayed. She stayed in Penang, on her island, knowing every stone, knowing where the stories are buried. You left." She paused. "If there's anything to resolve — really resolve, in the way that changes the weight of what you're carrying — I think you might need to go back."

Perpetua looked at the window.

At the May afternoon, the diffused light, Clement Street going about its business.

"I haven't been back in forty-eight years," she said.

"No," Flora said.

"I don't know what it looks like anymore."

"No," Flora said. "But Boon Kee does."

Chapter Three

She sent the letters herself. Flora had offered to help draft them but Perpetua had shaken her head — quietly, without explanation, in the way of someone for whom this particular task could only be done alone.

She came in once more in June, not about the case, to bring a container of kueh — small Malaysian cakes, pandan green and coconut white, in a tower of careful layers — which she set on the desk with the same matter-of-fact gesture as the clients who brought croissants and jollof rice and tartan tins of biscuits, the gesture of people who understood that the work required something back and that food was the oldest currency for that.

She sat in the client chair and told them about writing the letters.

She had written each one by hand. She had sat at the kitchen table in the house in the Outer Sunset, the table where she and George had eaten thirty-four years of meals, and she had written seven letters in seven nights, one each night, beginning with the ones she was least afraid of and working toward Boon Kee.

"Soo Lin first," she said. "Because I remembered her best, I thought. We had been closest, or had felt closest. The letter to Soo Lin was two pages and took four hours. I rewrote it three times. I kept wanting to make it — lighter than it was. I kept wanting to make it an update, a catching-up, a newsy letter. And every time I did that it felt false, and I'd throw it away and start again."

"What did the real letter say?" Nancy said.

"It said: I am sixty-six years old and my husband died four months ago and I am trying to find my way back to who I was before I became who I became. It said: I don't know what you remember of me. I know what I remember of you. It said: if you have any desire to be in correspondence, I

would be grateful. If you don't, I understand." She looked at her hands. "That's what all of them said, more or less. Tailored to each person — I told Constance I'd heard she had a restaurant and I'd always known she would feed people one way or another. I told Adibah I'd become a nurse and thought of her when I dealt with stubborn patients, which was a compliment. But the shape of them was the same."

"And Boon Kee?" Flora said.

Perpetua looked at the window.

"I wrote seven drafts," she said. "Over three nights. The first six were — I kept writing around what I'd done. I kept finding ways to approach it obliquely, to soften it, to contextualize it, to make it smaller than it was." She paused. "On the seventh draft I threw everything away and I wrote: I told your secret. I knew what I was doing. I watched your face change and I knew what I'd done and I was relieved to leave the country a month later. I have carried that for forty-eight years and I want to say it plainly: I was wrong. Not thoughtless, not careless — wrong. I am sorry. You don't owe me forgiveness or a response or anything at all. I just needed to say it in words rather than carrying it any longer in the wordless place where I've been keeping it."

The office was quiet.

The kueh sat in its tower on the edge of the desk, green and white, patient.

"That's the real letter," Nancy said.

"Yes," Perpetua said. "The seventh draft."

"Did you send it?" Flora said.

"Yes." Perpetua looked at her. "I almost didn't. I had it sealed and addressed and I held it for two days before I posted it. But then I thought: George is dead. Holding things is no longer a strategy I can afford." She paused. "So I posted it."

"How long ago?" Flora said.

"Three weeks." She looked at the window. "I've had responses from four of them. Soo Lin, Adibah, Constance, Maricel. All warm. Soo Lin sent six pages by return post — she apparently had things she'd been wanting to say too. Adibah sent a WhatsApp message at midnight that just said: *I wondered when I'd hear from you.* Constance sent a photograph of her

restaurant and a recipe." She almost smiled. "The recipe is exactly right. Constance would send a recipe."

"Nothing from Boon Kee," Flora said.

"Nothing from Boon Kee," Perpetua said. "Or Eunice, or Theresa. But those two — I'm not worried about those two. The post from London is slow and Theresa was always a slow correspondent. I'll hear from them." She paused. "Boon Kee is the one I think about."

"Have you thought more about going to Penang?" Flora said.

Perpetua looked at the kueh.

"Every day," she said.

Chapter Four

She came back in July.

She stood in the doorway rather than sitting, her coat still on, as though she hadn't decided yet whether this was a visit or a passing, and she said: I heard from Boon Kee.

Flora put down what she was writing.

Nancy put down her pen.

Perpetua came in and sat in the client chair and took from her handbag an envelope that had been handled — you could see it had been handled, the paper softened at the edges, the same soft quality as Wallace Okafor-Bright's letter from Ida Swann, the quality of a piece of paper that had been taken out and put back many times.

She did not take out the letter. She held the envelope.

"She wrote by hand," Perpetua said. "Four pages. Her handwriting is the same. I recognized it immediately — we used to pass notes in class, the nuns were always confiscating them, Boon Kee's handwriting was always the most — it was always the most decisive. Very clear letters. No hesitation in the line." She paused. "The handwriting is the same and she's sixty-six years old. That seems like something."

"What did she say?" Flora asked.

Perpetua looked at the envelope.

"She said she remembered," she said. "She said: of course I remember. I've remembered every day. I want you to know I don't say that as an accusation — I say it as the truth of what happened, which is what you asked for." She paused. "She said her father came to her the following week and told her himself. He'd heard she'd found out, the way things traveled. He sat with her for an afternoon and told her the full truth and they talked

about it and it was — she said it was the most important conversation she ever had with him. She said: I might never have had that conversation if not for what you told. I'm not saying that means it was right. I'm saying it's what happened."

The office was very quiet.

Flora looked at her hands.

"She said," Perpetua continued, "that she was angry at me for a long time. She was honest about it — she said: I was very angry and I didn't have a way to give it to you because you left and there was nowhere for it to go so I held it." She paused. "She said she'd held it for some years and then she'd stopped, not because she'd forgiven but because holding it was using up room she needed for other things." She looked at the envelope. "She said: the anger is not something I can give you back after all this time. It became part of the geology of me. But I don't wish you harm. I never did, not really, even when I was most angry. I knew you were seventeen and I knew you were a person who wanted to be interesting more than she wanted to be kind and I knew that was going to cause you trouble in your life, and I think it probably did."

Flora sat with that for a long time.

A person who wanted to be interesting more than she wanted to be kind.

"She offered you something," Nancy said. It was not a question.

Perpetua looked at her.

"She said," Perpetua said slowly, "that if I was ever in Penang, I should come to the shop. She said: come to the shop on the street in Georgetown and I'll show you the fabrics. I have some that are older than us. I have some that have been in the island as long as the island has been the island." She paused. "She said: bring something to wear that can take the heat. San Francisco makes people forget about heat."

Nancy made a sound that was not quite a laugh but was adjacent to one.

"She's inviting you," Flora said.

"Yes," Perpetua said.

"Are you going?"

Perpetua looked at the envelope in her hands. The softened edges. The familiar handwriting inside, the decisive letters that hadn't changed in forty-eight years.

"My daughter thinks I should go," she said. "My son thinks I should wait. He's worried about me — he thinks I've been making too many large decisions since George died, that I'm not stable enough yet to —" She stopped. "He thinks grief makes you impulsive."

"Does it?" Nancy said.

Perpetua looked at her.

"I don't think this is impulsive," she said. "I think this is the opposite of impulsive. I've been thinking about Boon Kee for forty-eight years. Going to Penang is the least impulsive thing I've considered in my life." She paused. "My son doesn't understand that sometimes you wait so long to do something that when you finally do it it looks sudden from the outside."

"When are you going?" Flora said.

Perpetua looked at the window.

"September," she said. "I've already booked the flight." She looked at Flora. "I wanted to tell you. You found her. You found all of them. I wanted you to know what came of it."

"Thank you for coming," Flora said.

Perpetua stood. She smoothed her coat. She picked up her handbag.

She looked at the cork board. At the postcard from Inverness that had been added since her last visit — the heron at dawn, *He knew. He went.* — *I.S.* — and at the Farallon Islands postcard above the door, and at the note on the card stock.

She read the note.

"My husband said something like that," she said. "In his last weeks. We had a great deal of time to talk, the last weeks — you'd think there'd be nothing left to say after thirty-four years but there was, there was so much, we talked for hours every day." She paused. "He said: I don't know what I know anymore. I thought I knew what was important and now I'm not sure I was right. He said: I hope you keep looking after I'm gone. I hope you keep asking."

She looked at the note.

"I'm going to Penang," she said. "That's keeping asking."

"Yes," Nancy said. "It is."

Perpetua nodded. She went to the door.

She stopped at the threshold — not the way clients stopped, not to read the card stock or ask a final question. She stopped the way you stopped when you were leaving somewhere that had been useful and you wanted to mark the leaving.

"The kueh," she said. "From last month. Was it all right?"

"It was excellent," Nancy said. "The pandan."

Perpetua smiled — fully, for the first time, the smile arriving in her eyes as well as her mouth.

"My mother's recipe," she said. "I'll bring more if I come back."

She went down the stairs. The fourth step — the pause — and then the door, and then the street, and then the May afternoon absorbed her the way afternoons absorbed people, without ceremony, into the ongoing business of the city.

Chapter Five

Nancy made tea.

She brought it to the desk without being asked and sat at her own desk and wrapped both hands around her cup and looked at the cork board and the postcard from Inverness and the empty pin where Perpetua's list had been.

"She's going to Penang," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"Forty-eight years."

"Yes."

Nancy looked at her tea. "I went back to Galway," she said. "In 1991. I hadn't been back since I left in 1969. Twenty-two years." She paused. "I went for a cousin's wedding. I walked the streets I'd grown up on and they were completely different and completely the same, the way places are. The bones were the same. The surface was different."

"Was it what you expected?" Flora said.

"No," Nancy said. "It was more. And less. Both." She paused. "I stood outside the house I grew up in and the people who lived there had painted it a color my mother would have hated and I stood there for twenty minutes." She looked at the window. "I didn't knock. I just — stood there. Looked at it." She paused. "I think I was saying goodbye to it. I didn't know that at the time. I thought I was just looking. But I think I was saying goodbye."

Flora looked at her.

"The shoe in the wall," Flora said. "Like Catherine Pearse walking through her mother's house before she left."

Nancy looked at her.

"Yes," she said. "Exactly like that." She paused. "There are things you have to go back and see in order to leave them properly. You can't leave something you've never returned to. It just — stays unresolved. It follows you."

Flora thought about Perpetua Seng on a street in Georgetown, looking at a fabric shop with a name above the door. About what it would feel like to stand outside a place you'd been avoiding for forty-eight years and find that the person inside it had invited you in.

"She's going to be all right," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "I think she is." She looked at her notepad. She picked up her pen. She wrote something in the margin and looked at it and read it back and it said what she'd written. "She came in not recognizing herself," Nancy said. "And she's going to Penang. That's not the same woman who came through the door in May."

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

"That's the work," Nancy said. "Sometimes. Someone comes in not recognizing themselves and they go out someone you can see."

Flora looked at the cork board. At the seven names, now resolved into seven lives in seven places, at the postcard from Inverness, at the Farallon Islands postcard above the door, at the note on the card stock in Nancy's handwriting.

She thought about the other half. The half that Perpetua had called the other half of herself — the fifteen-year-old in Penang who had been left in 1971 and who was still, after forty-eight years, intact enough to be recovered, still held in the memories of six women who had been in the same form at St. Catherine's Convent School and had scattered across the world and kept, each of them, a version of the girl Perpetua had been before she became the woman she was.

You could lose track of yourself, Flora thought, for decades. You could build a life so full and so real that the self before the life became theoretical. And then the life changed — the husband died, the career ended, the children grew — and you looked up and found yourself in a room that didn't have a mirror anymore, or had a mirror that showed you the context and not the person inside it.

And what you did then — if you were Perpetua Seng — was write seven letters by hand and go to Penang.

She picked up her recorder.

She held it.

She set it back down.

Some things didn't need to be recorded. Some things you let exist in the room and the Tuesday afternoon and the steam coming up through the floor and the sound of Clement Street and Nancy's tea going cool on the desk, and those things were enough, they were the record, they were what you actually knew.

She picked up her pen instead.

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

She wrote the time.

Chapter Six

A postcard arrived in October.

Postmarked Penang. A photograph of the Georgetown waterfront, the colonial buildings along the esplanade, the specific blue of the Strait of Malacca in the morning light.

On the back, in two different handwritings — one Flora recognized as Perpetua's nurse's hand, legible and careful, and one she didn't recognize, decisive and unhesitating:

We had tea. We looked at fabrics. I showed her the oldest ones — some of them 80 years old, older than both of us. She bought three meters of a blue silk. She said she'd make something from it, she didn't know what yet. — B.K.

I didn't make it into a building. But I made something. That seems like enough. — P.S.

Flora read it twice.

She passed it to Nancy.

Nancy read it. She looked at it for a long time in the way she looked at things she wanted to keep clearly.

Then she handed it back.

Flora pinned it to the cork board, below the postcard from Inverness, below the Farallon Islands postcard, below the note on the card stock in Nancy's handwriting.

She stood back and looked at the cork board.

All the cases that had been pinned there and been resolved and been unpinned, the names and the photographs and the evidence of other people's carried things, and what remained was this — the permanent record of the things the office had sent out into the world and received back in the form

of postcards and letters and phone calls and tins of biscuits and containers of food, the evidence of a room that had been organized by use and kept being useful.

Nancy was at her desk. She had her pen in her hand and her notepad open and she was writing the date at the top of a fresh page, the date and the time, in the careful deliberate hand she used now, the second system layered inside the first.

She finished writing and looked at what she'd written.

She looked at it again.

Flora watched her do this — the reading back, the confirming, the small daily discipline of a woman who had decided to keep going and was keeping going with the full knowledge of what it cost — and felt the thing she always felt, the thing that lived next door to grief but was not grief, was something she still didn't have a name for and was no longer looking for a name for, because some things were what they were without needing to be named.

Nancy looked up.

"She didn't make it into a building," Nancy said. "But she made something."

"Yes," Flora said.

"Three meters of blue silk." Nancy looked at the postcard on the cork board. "I wonder what she'll make."

"Something she can wear," Flora said. "Something she can take back into the life she's building in the Outer Sunset."

"Something that came from Penang," Nancy said.

"Yes."

They sat in the October office — the window closed now against the autumn, the steam coming up from the floor more welcome than it had been in summer, the dry cleaner's warm smell of pressed cloth rising through the boards. The afternoon light was low and amber, the specific light of October in San Francisco, the city at its most golden and most melancholy and most fully itself.

Flora looked at the cork board.

She thought about the fifteen-year-old girl in Penang who had drawn buildings in the margins of her exercise books while the Irish nuns

confiscated her notes. The girl who had wanted to be an architect before the scholarship was for nursing and the nursing was a career and the career was a life and the life accumulated until the girl was somewhere underneath all of it, not gone, just covered.

She thought about blue silk. Three meters of it, folded in a bag, crossing the ocean.

She thought about what you made from the fabric of who you'd been.

She picked up her pen.

The next case would come when it came. It always came. The door opened and someone came up the stairs and paused on the fourth step and stood at the frosted glass and knocked, and they would say tell me, and the case would tell them, and the work would continue.

The work always continued.

That was the room.

That was what it meant to be in it.

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

The Farallon Islands postcard above the door.

The note on card stock gone slightly yellow.

The postcard from Inverness: He knew. He went.

The postcard from Penang: She didn't make it into a building. But she made something.

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

Neither of them had fixed it.

Neither of them ever would.

End.