DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

What He Needed

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 wet February morning, which was not unusual for February, but the wet had a particular quality to it — not raining exactly, more the city exhaling cold moisture from every surface, the kind of morning that made the steam coming up through the office floor feel less like an annoyance and more like a gift.

Josephine Sully was sixty-nine. She had the build of someone who had once been physically formidable and had redistributed rather than diminished with age — broad-shouldered, upright, the posture of a woman who had spent thirty-one years walking into rooms where things were wrong and not letting the rooms know she'd noticed. Her hair was white and cut efficiently. Her coat was practical. Her face was the face of a person who had arrived at this office as a last resort and had enough professional self-respect to be embarrassed about it.

She was not embarrassed enough to leave.

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

"Please," Josephine said. She sat. She looked at the cork board with the assessing gaze of a woman accustomed to reading rooms.

Nancy came in while the coffee was pouring — took in Josephine, the coat, the posture, the way she was studying the office — and hung her coat on the right hook and sat at her desk and opened her notepad. Wrote the date and time.

Flora brought the coffee and sat.

"Tell me," she said.

Josephine wrapped both hands around the mug. "My brother," she said. "Dennis. He's sixty-one. Eight months ago he stopped answering his phone. Stopped showing up to the things he showed up to. I went to his apartment

— he was renting in the Richmond, a place he'd had for nine years — and his landlord told me he'd given notice in June. Cleared out over a weekend." She paused. "Left no forwarding address."

"Did you go to the police?"

"Week three." Her voice was dry. "They were kind. They explained what adult missing persons means in practice for a man with no evidence of foul play, no criminal history, no history of mental illness on record. They were very thorough about explaining what they couldn't do." She looked at Flora steadily. "I was a social worker for thirty-one years. I know what they couldn't do. I went anyway because I didn't know what else to do, and I don't like not knowing what to do."

"What was he like?" Flora asked. "Dennis."

Josephine considered this with the seriousness of someone who was not going to give a reflexive answer about a person she loved.

"Quiet," she said. "Not shy — he wasn't shy, he could talk to anyone, he just didn't feel the need to do it constantly. He worked at the main library for twenty-two years. Reference desk." A small pause that had something fond in it. "He knew where everything was. Not just in the library. In the city. People would ask him things on the street — directions, restaurants, which bus — and he always knew." She paused. "He was the kind of person who paid attention to the world and didn't make a performance of it."

Flora wrote: *Dennis Sully, 61. Library. 22 years. Quiet. Attentive. Left deliberately.*

"Family?" she asked.

"Our parents are gone. I have a husband, two adult children, grandchildren. Dennis never married. He had —" She paused. "He had a long relationship, in his forties. It ended. He didn't discuss it." She looked at her coffee. "We were close. We had dinner every two weeks, more or less. He came for Christmas. He called on my birthday and I called on his." She looked up. "I know people have brothers they've lost track of. That's not what this is. He was present and then he wasn't and I don't understand it."

"Did anything happen?" Flora asked. "In the months before he left. Anything that seemed different."

Josephine was quiet for a moment. A real pause — not searching, more like deciding.

"He was quieter," she said. "In the spring. The last few times I saw him. I asked him once and he said he was tired, that work had been busy. He'd retired from the library the year before so I knew that wasn't it, but I let it go." She paused. "I let it go because he was a private person and I'd learned over sixty years not to push." She looked at the window. "I've thought about that a great deal in the last eight months."

"Ms. Sully," Flora said. "What do you want us to do if we find him and he doesn't want to be found?"

Josephine looked at her.

It was a direct question and Flora watched her receive it — the slight adjustment, the recognition that this was not a standard intake question, that it meant something specific about how Drake and Voss operated.

"I want to know he's safe," Josephine said. "That's the first thing. If he's safe and he's chosen this —" She stopped. "He's entitled to make choices. I know that. I've spent my whole career knowing that people are entitled to make choices I disagree with." She looked at her hands. "But I want to know. Even if I can't see him. Even if he never knows I looked." She paused. "I just need to know he's all right."

Flora looked at her.

She had heard this before. Nearly this exactly. *I want to know she's well.* Theodore Brant in this same chair, the same need, the same careful disclaimer about entitlement.

She had found what Theodore needed to find and it had gone well.

She looked at Nancy, who was writing, who did not look up.

"We'll look into it," Flora said.

Nancy wrote in the margin, in the shorthand: *She's asking the right question. Not: find him. Bring him back. Just: is he safe.*

Below it: *Good day. Remember this one.*

She looked at the second line. Read it back.

She put the cap on her pen.

Chapter Two

Flora found Dennis Sully in eleven days.

Not because he had hidden himself badly — he had hidden himself adequately, which for a private person with modest needs and no one actively hunting him was sufficient. But Flora had thirty years of the city in her hands and Nancy had thirty years of its records and between them they could find most people who were findable.

He was registered at the Regency Arms on Turk Street under the name David Sills, which was close enough to his own name to be easy to remember and different enough to create distance. He had a library card at the Tenderloin branch under the same name. He had a tab at a Vietnamese place on Larkin he visited three times a week. He had, as best Flora could establish, a life.

She watched the hotel for a morning before she went in.

He came out at nine-fifteen, which was a Tuesday — Flora noted this, she always noted this now, the way you noted weather — in a good coat and a hat, walking with the deliberate pace of someone taking care about the pavement, not hurrying, not dawdling. He was tall, like Josephine, and he had her coloring — a family face, the same jaw, the same set to the eyes. He carried a library book under one arm.

He walked to the branch library on Larkin and was inside for forty minutes and came back with two books instead of one.

Flora went in to the hotel and spoke to the man at the desk and left her card and said she'd like to speak to David Sills when he returned, if he was willing. She said she was a private investigator and that no one was in trouble. She said he could say no.

She went to the Vietnamese place on Larkin and had coffee and waited.

He came in forty-five minutes later.

He stood in the doorway for a moment, looking at her, her card in his hand. He had the stillness she had come to associate with people who had thought about things. Not the stillness of suppression — the stillness of arrival. A man who had decided something and lived with it long enough that the deciding was no longer the main event.

He sat down across from her.

"My sister," he said.

"Yes."

"Is she all right?"

Flora looked at him. The question was the first thing he'd said, and it was about Josephine.

"She's worried," Flora said. "She's been looking for eight months. She's all right."

He nodded. Looked at the table.

"How did you find me?" he asked. It was a genuine question, not a hostile one — curiosity, the librarian's instinct.

"You kept your own name close," Flora said. "David Sills. The library card."

He almost smiled. "I couldn't give up the library card."

Flora looked at him. He was sixty-one and he looked — not young, but present. Clear-eyed. The coat was good, the hat was good, he was clean and fed and unhurried. Whatever he was doing in this room on Turk Street it was not falling apart.

"Mr. Sully," she said. "I have to ask you something directly."

"All right."

"Are you safe? Are you in any kind of trouble?"

"No," he said. "Nothing like that."

"Are you ill?"

A pause. Shorter than she expected.

"Yes," he said.

She waited.

He looked at the table. Then at the window. Then back at her, with the directness of someone who had spent enough time alone with a thing that he

could say it plainly now.

"Parkinson's," he said. "Diagnosed fourteen months ago. Early onset, relatively. They tell me I have time before — before the things that take the things." He paused. "I'm managing it. I have a neurologist. I have a plan."

"Does Josephine know?"

"No."

Flora sat with this.

"Why?" she asked.

He was quiet for a moment. When he spoke his voice was level and considered, the voice of a man who had answered this question many times inside his own head.

"Because she would fix it," he said. "Or try. And there are things you can't fix and she doesn't —" He stopped. "Josephine has been solving problems her whole life. She's extraordinary at it. If I told her I was sick she would bring all of that to bear, and it would come from love, and it would be the right instinct, and I would spend whatever good time I have left being her project." He paused. "I didn't want that. I wanted this." He gestured slightly — the room, the Larkin Street outside, the library books on the table. "I wanted to be a person in a city, reading books, eating good food, walking while I can walk without thinking about what it means that I'm walking."

Flora looked at him.

"That's a fair thing to want," she said.

"I think so," he said. "I've thought about it a great deal."

"Have you thought about what happens when you can't manage alone?"

"Yes." He said it without defensiveness, just the flat acknowledgment of someone who had done the work. "I have a plan for that too. An attorney. Documents. There are facilities —" He paused. "I've made arrangements. They don't involve Josephine. I know that's hard. But they're made."

Flora looked at the library books on the table. The top one was a history of the California missions. The other she couldn't see.

She thought about Josephine Sully in the client chair, precise and frightened, saying: *I just need to know he's all right.*

She thought about Ruth Calloway on the bottom stair with her mug of tea and her green bag packed.

She thought about Dennis Sully, right here, clear-eyed, asking first about his sister.

"Mr. Sully," she said. "I'm going to be honest with you. Your sister hired me to find you. I've found you. What I do with that — what I tell her — is something I have to decide." She looked at him directly. "I want you to know that I take that seriously. Both what you've told me and what she's carrying."

He looked at her.

"What will you decide?" he said.

"I don't know yet," she said.

He nodded, as though this were the right answer.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Yes."

"Do you believe me?" he said. "That I'm all right. That this is — that I haven't lost my mind. That this is a real choice."

Flora looked at him for a long time. The clear eyes. The library books. The question itself, which was not the question of a man in crisis but of a man who understood the position he was putting her in and wanted to give her what he could.

"Yes," she said. "I believe you."

He nodded again. He picked up the library book and set it back down and left his hand on it, the way you rested a hand on something solid.

"Thank you for finding me," he said. "I mean that. She shouldn't have had to not know."

Flora looked at him.

"I'll be in touch," she said.

She left him with his books and the window and the city going about its business outside, and she walked back to Clement Street and climbed the stairs and sat at her desk for a long time without speaking.

Nancy waited.

She had learned, over years, when to wait.

She wrote the time in the margin. Below it she wrote: *Flora found him.*

Below that: *She's deciding.*

Chapter Three

They talked about it that evening, after the office had closed and the street below had gone to its dinner-hour self. Nancy made tea, which was care, and they sat across from each other in the way they sat when things were serious, which was simply at their desks, facing the room rather than the wall.

Flora told Nancy everything. Dennis Sully's room, the library books, the Vietnamese place, the Parkinson's diagnosis, the arrangements he'd made, the question he'd asked at the end: *Do you believe me that this is a real choice.*

Nancy listened without interrupting.

When Flora finished Nancy held her cup in both hands and looked at the cork board and was quiet in the way she was quiet when she was thinking rather than when she had lost the thread. Flora knew the difference now — had known it for some time. The thinking quiet had a quality of presence to it, a sense of weight being applied. The other quiet was different. Was its own thing.

This was thinking.

"He's competent," Nancy said finally.

"Yes."

"He's informed. He knows his diagnosis, he knows what it means, he's made legal arrangements."

"Yes."

"He hasn't harmed anyone. He's not in danger."

"No."

Nancy looked at her tea. "He's asked for the same thing Ruth Calloway asked for," she said. "The right to disappear into a life he chose. On his own

terms."

"Yes," Flora said. "That's what I keep coming back to."

"And we honored that for Ruth."

"We did."

Nancy was quiet again.

"What's different?" she said.

Flora looked at the window. Outside, a car went by slowly, its headlights sweeping the ceiling.

"Ruth was leaving something," Flora said. "Dennis is — not hiding from something. He's holding onto something. The time before. The time when he's still himself in the way he recognizes." She paused. "And Ruth had Deirdre. She had a network, people who knew, people who would be there when she landed." She looked at her tea. "Dennis has an attorney and a folder of documents and a plan he made alone."

"And Josephine doesn't know the plan exists," Nancy said.

"No."

"So if something happens —"

"She's still next of kin on an eleven-year-old form," Flora said. "That's all she has."

Nancy set her cup down parallel to her notepad. The small precise gesture of a woman organizing herself.

"If we don't tell Josephine," Nancy said, "and something happens, she gets a phone call from a hospital about a brother she's been looking for for eight months. She walks in knowing nothing. His wishes, his doctors, his — all of it is in a folder with an attorney she doesn't know exists."

"Yes."

"And if we tell Josephine," Nancy said, "Dennis loses the thing he left to have. The time that is only his. His sister comes with all her competence and all her love and she is not wrong to come, she loves him, but she changes the room he's been trying to live in."

"Yes," Flora said.

They sat with it.

"He asked for our confidence," Nancy said. "He didn't ask in so many words but he offered us the truth and he knew what he was doing when he

offered it."

"I know."

"He trusted us."

"I know that too."

Outside someone on Clement Street laughed at something — the unguarded laugh, the public laugh, the kind that happened when people forgot for a moment that the world was complicated.

"What do you want to do?" Nancy said.

Flora looked at the cork board.

Josephine Sully. 69. Brother Dennis, 61.

"I think," Flora said slowly, "that Dennis Sully is a competent adult who has made a real choice in full possession of himself. I think he is entitled to that choice. I think if we honor Ruth's choice we have to honor his." She paused. "I think Josephine hired us to find out if he was safe and the answer is yes, he is safe, and we can tell her that without telling her where."

Nancy looked at her.

"And the Parkinson's," Nancy said.

"That's his to tell," Flora said. "Or not tell."

"Yes," Nancy said.

A long silence.

"I would make the same decision," Nancy said.

Flora looked at her.

"I'm not saying it to absolve you of it," Nancy said. "I'm saying it because I would. And I want you to know that you're not carrying it alone."

Flora held that.

"All right," she said.

She picked up the phone.

Josephine Sully listened to the same careful professional voice Flora had used for Marty Calloway, for Theodore Brant, for all the conversations that required the voice that was not unkind but was not soft.

She told her that Dennis was safe. That he was in the city. That he had chosen to step away from his previous life and was living privately and did

not wish to be found. That there was no evidence of harm, no evidence of crisis, no evidence of anything except a man who had made a deliberate choice.

She told her they were closing the case.

Josephine was quiet through most of it.

When Flora finished there was a silence.

"Is he sick?" Josephine said.

Flora closed her eyes for a moment.

"Ms. Sully," she said. "I can tell you that he's safe. I can tell you that he's the same person you described to me — present, careful, paying attention to the world. I can't tell you more than what I've told you."

Another silence.

"That's not an answer," Josephine said.

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

A very long silence.

"All right," Josephine said.

She thanked Flora. She was gracious about it, the grace of someone who had worked with systems long enough to know when a system had done what it could do. She hung up.

Flora held the phone.

Then she set it down.

Across the desk Nancy was looking at her notepad, her pen moving in the margin, writing something Flora didn't ask about.

"Done," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said.

Neither of them said anything else.

Chapter Four

The months passed the way months passed.

March came in with the kind of clarity that made you forgive February. The dry cleaner below changed something in their process and for two weeks the steam smelled of lavender, which neither Flora nor Nancy mentioned and both of them noticed. A case in April about a missing will that turned out not to be missing. A case in May about a husband who was where his wife had suspected he was, which resolved in the way those cases resolved, which was not well.

Flora thought about Dennis Sully.

Not constantly — she had learned, over years, the discipline of leaving cases in the cases file, of not carrying other people's truths around in her daily life like stones in a coat pocket. But she thought about him. The library books on the table. The way he'd asked: *Do you believe me.* The hand resting on the cover.

She did not tell Nancy she was thinking about him. Nancy, she suspected, was thinking about him too.

In June she walked past the Tenderloin branch library and stopped on the pavement and stood for a moment. She did not go in. She walked on.

In July she passed the Vietnamese place on Larkin and looked in through the window, a quick glance, the way you glanced at something you were trying not to look at. She didn't see him. She kept walking.

She did not go to the Regency Arms.

This was the discipline. She had made a decision and the discipline of the decision was not to hover at its edges, not to half-check, not to give herself the comfort of surveillance without taking the responsibility of intervention. She had closed the case. The case was closed.

She left it closed.

Nancy's notes from this period, if you read the margins — and Flora did not read the margins, had not read them since The Thing With The Shorthand that she had not told Nancy about, was being careful about — would show a woman keeping track.

March 4: Good week. Clear.

March 19: Took wrong coat from hook. Flora didn't mention it. Good.

April 7: Lost a word in front of the Hirsch client. Found it. Probably fine.

April 22: Flora is carrying something. Don't ask. She'll tell you when she's ready.

May 10: Left keys in the door. Inside, not outside. No one saw.

June 3: Good day. Remember this.

June 3, later: Remember what.

She looked at that last entry for a long time.

Then she turned to a fresh page and wrote the date and continued.

Chapter Five

The call came on a Tuesday in September.

Flora heard it but she wasn't in the office — she was on the street, coming back from the produce market two blocks down with coffee for both of them, the particular extravagance of good coffee from the place that charged too much and was worth it. She heard her phone. Looked at the number. Didn't recognize it.

She answered.

"Ms. Voss." Josephine Sully's voice. Composed in the way that required effort. "I'm at San Francisco General. I need to ask you something."

Flora stood on the pavement with the coffee in one hand and the phone in the other.

"All right," she said.

"My brother is here," Josephine said. "A neighbor found him. In his room. He's alive — he's stable, they say, he's stable. But he's —" She stopped. Began again more carefully. "They called me. I'm still his next of kin apparently, on some old form. I didn't know where he was until an hour ago when a hospital called me." A pause. "They're telling me things about his condition. Medical things. I don't — I'm walking into this with nothing. I don't know his doctors, I don't know what he's been managing, I don't know what he wants." Her voice stayed level throughout this with the effort that Flora now understood was not coldness but survival. "I don't know anything because I didn't know where he was."

"Ms. Sully —"

"I'm not calling to be angry at you," Josephine said. "I know what you told me and I know why and I know you were doing what you thought was right." Another pause. "I'm calling to ask one question. Did you know he

was sick."

Flora stood on Clement Street in the September morning. The coffee was warm in her hand. A dog was pulling its owner toward something in the gutter. A bus went by and the world went briefly loud and then quiet again.

"Yes," Flora said. "I knew."

A silence.

"All right," Josephine said.

"Ms. Sully —"

"I have to go back in," Josephine said. "Thank you for telling me the truth."

She hung up.

Flora stood on the pavement for a long time.

Then she walked back to the office and set the coffee on the desk and sat down and looked at the cork board.

Nancy came and stood in the doorway of the kitchen, looking at her.

"Dennis Sully is in SF General," Flora said. "A neighbor found him. He's stable." She looked at the cork board. "Josephine is there. She called me. She asked if I knew he was sick."

Nancy came to her desk. She sat down. She put both hands flat on the surface the way she did when she was grounding herself in something solid.

"What did you tell her?" she said.

"The truth," Flora said.

Nancy nodded.

They sat in the office. The steam came up through the floor — someone was pressing something below, something being made ready for someone. The sound of Clement Street came through the window, ordinary and indifferent. A Tuesday in September.

"I keep thinking about the folder," Flora said. "He had a plan. An attorney, documents, arrangements. He told me. He said he'd made arrangements." She looked at her hands. "But Josephine walked into that hospital with nothing. Because the folder exists and no one there knew about it."

"His attorney would have been reachable," Nancy said.

"If anyone knew to call." Flora paused. "If Josephine had known to call."

"Yes."

Flora looked at the window.

"I keep asking myself," she said, "whether I would make the same decision again."

Nancy was quiet.

"And?" she said.

"I don't know." Flora looked at the cork board. "He had the right to make that choice. I believe that. I believed it in March and I believe it now. A competent adult with a real diagnosis who made a real decision." She paused. "And he spent seven months alone. Going through something that his sister — who loves him, who is competent, who would have managed him and also held his hand — didn't know was happening."

"You gave him what he asked for," Nancy said.

"I gave him what he said he needed," Flora said. "Those aren't always the same thing."

Nancy looked at her.

"No," she said. "They aren't."

A long silence.

"I would have made the same decision," Nancy said.

"I know you would," Flora said. "You told me."

"I'm not saying it to comfort you," Nancy said. "I'm saying it because I think we were right and I think we were wrong and those can both be true and usually are." She paused. "We honored what he asked for. We didn't know — we couldn't have known — that the Parkinson's would progress as fast as it did. His plan assumed he'd have more time."

"Yes," Flora said.

"His plan failed," Nancy said, "not because we kept his confidence but because his plan didn't account for what happens when plans fail." She paused. "That's not the same as us being wrong."

"Isn't it?"

"I don't know," Nancy said. "I've been sitting here for an hour asking myself that."

Flora looked at her.

Nancy held her gaze steadily. The steady gaze of a woman who was being honest, who was not going to make this easier than it was.

"I think," Nancy said slowly, "that the cases we decide are the cases we carry. And this one we're going to carry. And that doesn't mean we decided wrong." She paused. "It means we decided and now we know what it costs."

Flora sat with that.

Outside, the Tuesday went on being a Tuesday. Clement Street went on being Clement Street. The dry cleaner below sent up a breath of steam — someone's good dress, something that had been packed away and brought back out, something being made ready for an occasion.

"I'm going to go to the hospital," Flora said.

Nancy looked at her.

"Not to fix anything," Flora said. "Not to explain myself to Josephine. Just to —" She stopped. "Dennis Sully asked me if I believed him. I said yes. I want him to know that I still do. That it was a real choice. Even now."

Nancy looked at her for a long moment.

"Do you want company?" she said.

Flora thought about it.

"No," she said. "This part is mine to do."

Nancy nodded.

Flora put on her coat. She picked up her recorder, then set it back down.

She went out.

Chapter Six

SF General in September had the quality of a place that had decided to keep going regardless. The light in the lobby was the light of a building that had seen everything and developed a policy of not remarking on it. The people in the corridors moved with the particular purpose of people who had somewhere to be inside a system that was too large to hurry.

Josephine was in a waiting area on the third floor. She was sitting with the same posture she'd had in the client chair — upright, contained, a woman not allowing the room to see what it was costing her. She had a paper cup of coffee she wasn't drinking.

She looked up when Flora came.

She did not look surprised.

"I didn't call you here," she said.

"I know," Flora said. "I came anyway."

Josephine looked at her for a moment. Then she indicated the chair beside her.

Flora sat.

They sat for a moment in the way of two people who did not yet know which part of the truth to begin with.

"He's sleeping," Josephine said. "They say he's stable. The Parkinson's —" She stopped. "It moved faster than they expected. He has a neurologist here, apparently. They were able to pull his records." A pause. "He had records. He had a plan. He had an attorney." She said this without bitterness, or with bitterness she had already processed past. "He'd thought about everything except what happens when the plan doesn't hold."

"Yes," Flora said.

Josephine looked at her paper cup. "Why didn't you tell me?" she said. "I'm not asking to be — I want to understand."

Flora looked at her hands.

"Because he asked for the same thing every person asks for who steps out of their life with deliberateness," she said. "The right to make that choice. To not be found. And I've honored that before and it was the right thing to do."

"But this time it wasn't."

Flora was quiet for a moment.

"I don't know," she said. "That's the honest answer. I don't know if it was wrong. I know what it cost." She paused. "He told me he had a plan. He told me he had an attorney, documents, arrangements for when he couldn't manage alone. I believed him. I still believe him — he did have those things." She paused. "What I didn't account for was what happens when a plan that assumes time runs out of time."

Josephine was quiet.

"He didn't want to be my project," she said.

Flora looked at her.

"I know that's what he thought," Josephine said. "I know him. I've known him for sixty-one years." She turned the cup in her hands. "He's not wrong that I would have — I would have brought everything I had to it. I wouldn't have been able to stop myself." She paused. "But I also would have held his hand. And he didn't —" She stopped.

They sat in the waiting room of SF General and the hospital went on around them, enormous and indifferent and doing its best.

"I'm not going to tell you it's all right," Josephine said finally. "It isn't all right. But I understand it. And I'm not — I'm not angry at you." She paused. "I'm going to be in that room with him and that's what matters now."

Flora nodded.

"If there's anything —" she started.

"There isn't," Josephine said. Not unkindly. Cleanly, the way you closed something so you could open something else.

Flora stood. She put on her coat.

She had one more thing to do.

She found a nurse and asked, and the nurse checked, and Flora was not family and was not authorized, and she had known this, and she had come anyway.

She stood in the corridor outside the room and looked through the small window in the door.

Dennis Sully was asleep. He was smaller than he'd been on Larkin Street, or the bed made him look smaller, or the tubes and the monitoring equipment redistributed the eye's sense of scale. But his face was the same — the same set to the jaw, Josephine's jaw, the same quality of presence even in sleep. There was a library book on the nightstand beside him. Someone — Josephine, it must have been Josephine — had put it there.

Flora stood in the corridor for a moment.

She thought: *I believed you. It was a real choice. I still think it was a real choice.*

She thought: *I wish you hadn't been alone.*

She turned and walked back down the corridor and out of the hospital and into the September afternoon, which was doing what September afternoons in San Francisco did — the light going golden and long, the marine layer retreating to the horizon, the city emerging from its fog like something remembered.

She walked back to the office.

She did not take out her recorder.

Chapter Seven

Nancy was at her desk when Flora came in.

She looked up. She took in Flora's face and whatever she saw there she absorbed without comment, the way she absorbed important things.

Flora hung up her coat.

She sat at her desk.

She looked at the cork board.

Josephine Sully. 69. Brother Dennis, 61.

She looked at the Farallon Islands postcard.

She had looked at it a thousand times and not seen it — it was furniture, it was the office, it was part of the permanent inventory of the space they worked in. But today she looked at it.

It was a real postcard, she could see now that she was actually looking — not a print, not a reproduction, a postcard that had been sent and received, the edges worn from handling, the image slightly faded by years in various lights. The Farallones in winter light, grey and specific, the way they looked from the coast on a clear day, close enough to see and too far to reach without purpose.

There was no writing on the front.

"Nancy," she said.

Nancy looked up.

"This postcard," Flora said. "Do you know where it came from?"

Nancy looked at it.

The looking went on a moment longer than it would have, once. She looked at it with the careful attention of someone checking something.

"It was here when we moved in," she said. "I think."

"You think."

"I think." Nancy looked at it a moment more. "Or I put it there. I can't —" She paused. "I can't be entirely certain." She looked at Flora with the steadiness that was one of the things Flora had known about her longest. "Does it matter?"

Flora looked at the postcard.

"I think someone left it for whoever came next," she said.

Nancy looked at it.

"Yes," she said slowly. "That feels right." She tilted her head slightly. "A record of a view. Left for someone who might need to know it was there."

They looked at it together for a moment.

"Don't take it down," Flora said.

"I wasn't going to," Nancy said.

Flora looked at the cork board. At *Josephine Sully. 69. Brother Dennis, 61.*

She reached up and took the paper down.

She looked at it for a moment — the case, the name, the brief and insufficient summary of a complicated thing.

She turned it face down on her desk.

"We need to write this one up properly," she said. "Not for the file. For ourselves." She paused. "I want to know what we think we should have done. While we can still think it clearly."

Nancy opened her notepad to a fresh page. Wrote the date. Wrote the time. Left a space where the analysis would go.

"When you're ready," she said.

Flora picked up her recorder.

She held it for a moment.

Then she set it down and picked up a pen instead, which she had not done in longer than she could remember, and she began to write, in her own hand, the way you wrote things you didn't want to find at a remove.

Chapter Eight

She stayed after Nancy left.

The office in the evening was the office she knew best — the street below doing its loosening, the light going, the cork board and the desk and the window making their familiar shapes in the dimness.

She sat with the pen and the paper.

She thought about what they had decided and what it had cost and whether those were the same decision now as they'd been in March. She thought about competence and consent and the right of a person to manage their own ending on their own terms. She thought about a library book on a nightstand. She thought about Josephine in the waiting room, upright, containing what it cost, saying: *but I also would have held his hand.*

She wrote for a long time. Not conclusions — she had no clean conclusions, and she was wary now of clean conclusions, had always been wary but was warier now. She wrote the shape of it. What they had known and what they had weighed and what they had decided and what the deciding had not included because you could not include what you didn't know.

She wrote: *He had the right. I still believe that. The right to decide and the right to be alone with it if alone was what he chose.*

She wrote: *But Josephine would have held his hand. And he chose not to let her. And we honored that choice. And I don't know if honoring it was the same as it being right.*

She wrote: *The right thing and the good thing. We said that. In the last case we said that. I thought I understood what it meant.*

She stopped writing.

She looked at the Farallon Islands postcard.

A record of a view, Nancy had said. Left for someone who might need to know it was there.

Flora sat in the dark office and thought about what you left and what you kept and what the difference was between recording something and preserving it and whether the record was ever the same as the thing.

She thought about all the Tuesdays she had lost. All the versions of herself she had read back from a recorder, the way you read a letter from someone you used to be. She thought about what she had chosen not to record — Ruth Calloway on the bottom stair, Wednesday walking home — and how those things lived in her still, unretrieved, hers.

She thought about Nancy's margin note. *1971. Reyes. I know this.* The shorthand gone slightly wrong. The thing she had read and used and not told Nancy about.

She thought about what it meant to carry something for someone else. Whether it was a kindness or a theft.

She did not reach a conclusion.

She picked up the recorder.

"Dennis Sully," she said into it. "Sixty-one. He wanted the time before. The time when he was still himself in the way he recognized. We gave him that." She stopped. "Josephine Sully, sixty-nine. She wanted to hold his hand. We didn't give her that." She stopped again. "We gave him what he asked for and we didn't give her what she would have asked for if we'd told her there was something to ask about." She paused. "I don't know how to weigh those. I've been trying all day and I don't know."

She clicked it off.

She sat for a while longer in the quiet.

Then she did something she had not done in the office before, or not that she remembered, or not since the partnership was young enough that the rules of it were still being made. She picked up the pen again and wrote one more thing, at the bottom of the page, separate from the rest.

We will be wrong again. We will make careful decisions in good conscience and they will cost someone something we didn't mean to cost them. That is the work. The question is whether we can keep doing it honestly. Whether we can stay the kind of people who don't make the hard decisions easy just because the easiness would be a relief.

She put the pen down.

She turned off the light.

She went down the stairs, past the fourth step where the carpet was loose, out into the September evening, which was everything September evenings were — the golden light, the cooling air, the city gathering itself toward night.

She walked home through it.

She pressed record once, at the corner of Clement and Sixth, and said into the recorder: *Nancy said we were right and wrong and those can both be true. I think she's right about that. I think I'm going to need to hear her say it again.*

She clicked it off.

She kept walking.

Dennis Sully was in SF General for three weeks.

Josephine was there every day.

On the day he was transferred to a residential facility in the Sunset — not a bad one, the attorney's plan had been a good plan, he had chosen well — Josephine walked out of the hospital into the September afternoon and stood on the pavement for a moment and then she called a number.

Flora answered on the second ring.

"He told me," Josephine said. "About your conversation. In the café on Larkin. He remembered it."

Flora was quiet.

"He said you believed him," Josephine said. "He said that mattered."

"It was true," Flora said.

A pause.

"He also said," Josephine said, "that he should have made a better plan. That he knows he put the weight of it in the wrong place. He said to tell you he's sorry for that." A pause. "He's not much for phone calls. He asked me to tell you."

Flora held the phone.

"Tell him," she said, "that we think about him."

"I will," Josephine said.
She hung up.

In the office on the second floor, the cork board held what it held.
The Farallon Islands postcard was still pinned above the door.
Flora had looked at it.
Nancy had looked at it.
That was enough, for now.
The sign on the frosted glass door was still slightly crooked.
Neither of them had fixed it.
Neither of them ever would.

End.