

THE PRICE OF SILENCE

An Elric Voss Prequel Short

Before the events of **Deadly Truth**, Elric Voss learned what powerful people do with secrets—and what they do to the people who refuse to keep them.

Mike Wessels

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The Elric Voss Mystery Series

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Chapter 1: Paid to Watch

The rent was waiting outside my office before I was.

It leaned against the frosted glass with its hat tipped back and its yellow teeth showing in a smile that looked like it was borrowed from a dead rat. Its name was Milton Cray, owner of the building, collector of other people's bad luck, and living proof that a man could spend sixty years in the world without once bumping into a conscience hard enough to bruise him.

He straightened when he saw me in the hallway and smoothed the front of his coat. It was brown in the same tiring way, old gravy brown. His shoes were wet from the street and left little dark commas on the cracked tile.

"Voss," he said, as if the name itself owed him money.

I stopped at the door and dug in my pocket for the key. "Morning, Cray."

"It could be, if a tenant of mine remembered what day of the month it was."

The hallway smelled like damp plaster, cigarette ash, and the sour steam heat that rose through the bones of the building every winter and never really left in spring. Somebody downstairs was frying onions too early in the day. Somewhere above us a radio was playing a trumpet soft enough to sound tired.

Cray watched me work the key into the lock.

"You know," he said, "for a detective, you'd think you'd be better at tracking due dates."

"I keep hoping they'll confess."

He gave a dry little laugh. It had no humor in it. Men like Cray laughed the way other men checked a pocket watch. Out of habit. To remind themselves time was still theirs.

Inside, the office was exactly what I'd left it the night before: a scarred desk, a filing cabinet with a limp drawer, two client chairs that looked more interrogated than sat in, and a window streaked

by old rain. My name was painted black on the glass panel of the door, though the V in Voss had started to peel. Maybe it knew something I didn't.

Cray came in behind me without being asked. Men like him believed invitation was just another word for weakness.

He stood in the middle of the room, looking around with the proprietary disgust of a man inspecting a life he'd enjoy evicting.

"When are you going to make me proud and fail someplace more expensive?" he asked.

I put my hat on the desk. "I'd hate to abandon local business."

He clicked his tongue. "Three weeks, Voss."

"Two."

"Two and change."

"Then charge the change to my warm regard."

He ignored that and moved closer to the desk. His fingers, pale and soft and shaped like something that had lived too long underground, tapped the blotter near an unpaid electric bill and a half-finished report on a husband who thought fidelity was something that happened to other people.

"Cash is better than charm," he said.

"That must be why you're broke on both."

His eyes narrowed for a second, then widened again with that same weasel patience. Milton Cray never got angry when greed would do.

"I'm a tolerant man," he said.

"You're a landlord."

"Which in this city is the nearest thing left to sainthood."

I sat down and pulled open the desk drawer mostly to give my hands something to do besides his neck. Inside were two pencils, an empty pack of cigarettes, a revolver I preferred not to need,

and an envelope so light it might as well have been an insult. I took out three bills and put them on the desk.

Cray looked at them without touching them.

“That’s all?”

“That’s what the world thought I was worth this week.”

He took the bills and folded them into his inside pocket with a reverence he probably never showed at church. Then he stayed where he was.

That was the first wrong note.

Milton Cray was the kind of man who treated every room like it charged by the minute. If he was still standing there after getting money, it meant he smelled more.

“What,” I said, “no blessing?”

He rubbed a finger along his jaw. There was whisker shadow there, the color of nicotine stains and old bad habits. “Maybe rent isn’t the only thing I came up for.”

“That line works better when you don’t look like mold with a tie.”

He smiled. “You should be nicer to me, Voss. I may be on the verge of improving your fortunes.”

I leaned back in the chair and looked at him harder.

There are men who lie for sport, men who lie for fear, and men who lie because truth feels too naked to wear in public. Cray belonged to a different species. He lied the way some people rented umbrellas in a storm. Whatever the weather, there was money in standing between a man and the sky.

“Go on,” I said.

He did not. Not right away. He walked to the window and peered through the blinds at the street below. Rain had passed before dawn, leaving the pavement dark and shining. Cars moved through it with that city hiss tires make on wet asphalt, like secrets being dragged somewhere they didn’t want to go.

“You ever hear of Price Industries?” he asked.

The name landed soft and wrong.

“Sure,” I said. “Half the city has. They own enough brick and glass to cast a shadow over election day.”

He nodded. “Big people. Clean people. Scientific people.”

“That your sales pitch?”

“That’s the flavor.” He turned from the window. “There’s a research program. Temporary work. Observation, paperwork, chain-of-custody, that sort of thing. They need outside eyes.”

“Mine?”

He lifted one shoulder. “You can read. You can keep your mouth shut when paid correctly. You look respectable enough at a distance.”

“You should write valentines.”

Cray ignored that too. It was one of his talents, sorting language into things that could hurt him and things that cost nothing.

“Contact of mine mentioned they needed someone not married to the company. Someone used to people. Someone who understands how men behave when they’re nervous.” He squinted at me. “That sounded like private detective territory.”

“Funny,” I said. “Usually when a landlord says, ‘contact of mine,’ the next words are ‘don’t tell the police.’”

His smile sharpened. “Police are expensive. This is cleaner.”

That was the second wrong note.

Milton Cray did not know clean. He knew profitable, temporary, and plausibly deniable. If he was using the word clean, someone richer had used it first and he was repeating it like a dog carrying home a stolen glove.

“What’s the work?” I asked.

He spread his hands. “Study stuff.”

“That narrows nothing.”

“Behavioral metrics. Responses. Stress. I don’t know. Men in coats. Clipboards. Machines.” He sniffed. “The kind of thing smart people do so they can look down on the rest of us.”

“Why are they talking to you?”

At that, his gaze slid away half an inch. A small movement, but enough.

This city trained me young in the language of little evasions. A man could tell you about a lie with his chin before his mouth ever got involved.

“I own property,” he said. “People ask questions.”

“What kind of questions?”

“Tenant questions.”

I let the silence hang there.

He filled it, because men like Cray could never leave silence alone if there was even a chance it might be worth money.

“Patterns,” he said. “Who comes and goes. Who pays on time? Who drinks? Who fights? Who keeps odd hours? Which offices get visitors after dark? That sort of thing.”

“And you answered?”

He gave me a flat look that was meant to pass for practical wisdom. “Everybody answers, Voss. The only difference is the quality of the suit on the man asking.”

There it was. Not guilt. Not pride. Just appetite.

“How much did they pay you?” I asked.

“Not enough.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

He leaned one hip against the radiator and folded his arms.

“Enough to know they might pay you more.”

I looked at him across the desk and thought what I usually thought in his presence: some men didn’t sell their souls because that implied, they’d once owned them.

Still, the name had weight. Price Industries. Not a dockside hustle. Not a gambler's backroom ledger. Real money. Real glass towers. The kind of people who used the word ethics in annual reports and buried bodies in paperwork.

"What kind of study wants to know whether a tenant drinks?" I said.

Cray shrugged. "A careful one."

"That answer comes free, or is it part of the package?"

He smirked. "You want the rest. You go hear it from them." Then he reached into his coat and laid a card on my desk. Thick stock. Cream colored. Embossed lettering. Somebody at Price Industries liked expensive understatement.

Dr. Stephen Harlan
Research Operations Coordinator

There was an address in the business district, and a time handwritten on the back in blue ink.

Noon.

"He asked for me by name?" I said.

"Not at first."

At first.

That phrase stayed where he left it.

"What changed?"

Cray clicked his tongue. "I may have said you were behind on rent and therefore highly motivated."

"How generous."

"I may also have mentioned you notice things."

"And I may throw you down the stairs."

He smiled. "After you pay the balance."

I picked up the card. It was heavier than it had any right to be.

"What's the catch?"

Cray's expression turned almost pious. It was his ugliest look.
"Confidentiality."

I laughed once, without joy.

"Of course."

"Nothing unusual," he said too quickly. "Just forms. Procedures. Corporate nerves. Big institutions like to lock doors even when there's nothing inside worth stealing."

That was the third wrong note, and maybe the loudest. Men only volunteered innocence when guilt was already pacing in the room.

"What did you see?" I asked.

He hesitated.

Real hesitation this time. Not performance. His eyes flicked to the door, then the window, as though either might suddenly grow ears.

That interested me more than the card.

"Milton."

He licked his lips. "Basement delivery entrance, two nights ago. I was checking a plumbing complaint. There were crates. Equipment. Medical-looking things. Not hospital medical. Cleaner. Smaller. Cases with wires. Sensors. Headgear." He rubbed his thumb against his forefinger, remembering. "And files. Stacks of them."

"What kind of files?"

He looked at me the way a cheap man looks at a locked till.

"Typed summaries. Names. Age. Work history. Marital status. Financial pressure. Medication. Habits." He gave a little laugh that died young. "It was like reading confessions written by people who'd never met a priest."

A cold draft moved through the room, though the window was shut.

"Why tell me?" I said.

He answered that one quickly. Too quick.

“Because I’m a friend.”

“Now I know you’re lying.”

He spread his hands. “Because if they’re paying a detective to watch whatever this is, then it’s bigger than rent collection. Bigger than me. Which means a smart man gets near it early.”

There it was. Not friendship. Not concerned. Positioning.

A scavenger had found the edge of a carcass and wanted to know if it was safe to feed.

“And if it turns bad?”

He smiled on one side of his mouth. “Then I never left the office.”

For a moment all I could hear was the ticking wall clock and the far-off trumpet from upstairs, winding through the plaster like a lonely man looking for the wrong door.

I tucked the card into my coat pocket.

Cray noticed. He always noticed movement toward money.

“So, you’ll go.”

“I’ll look.”

“That’s all any of us do,” he said.

“No,” I told him. “That’s all you do.”

The line hit, but not deep enough to matter. Men like Milton Cray were armor-plated in self-excuse. You couldn’t shame a man who regarded decency as a bad investment.

He pushed himself off the radiator and straightened his coat.

“Noon,” he said. “Don’t wear that tie if you own another.”

“I don’t.”

“Then try not to breathe on anyone important.”

He headed for the door, then paused with his hand on the knob.

“One more thing,” he said.

I waited.

“The fellow I spoke to asked a strange question.”

“What question?”

Cray looked at me over his shoulder, his face pale in the dirty light from the blinds.

“He wanted to know whether you were the kind of man who could hold information without letting it leak out through his eyes.”

That sat between us a second.

“What did you tell him?”

Cray’s grin came back, thin and vermin-bright.

“I told him that depended on the price.”

Then he left.

The office felt smaller after that. Dirtier too. As if his presence had left a grease film on the air that even the rain outside couldn’t wash off.

I took out a cigarette, found the pack empty, crushed it, and dropped it in the wastebasket. The half-finished report on my desk stared up at me. A cheating husband. Motel receipts. Bad perfume on a collar. The regular crooked furniture of ordinary sin. Usually that was enough to keep a man fed if not proud.

But Price Industries was another class of trouble. Big companies didn’t ask small questions unless they were buying something larger than the answer.

I stood, put on my hat, and crossed to the window.

Below, the city moved under a lid of gray clouds and old rain. Men hurried with collars turned up. Women stepped around puddles that reflected building fronts in broken strips. A bus sighed at the curb and pulled away. Somewhere, a siren rose and folded back into traffic.

The world looked like it always did when something bad was getting organized: ordinary from a distance.

I locked the office, went downstairs, and stepped out into the wet morning.

By noon, I was standing in front of a Price Industries annex on a clean block where even the sidewalks seemed professionally managed. The building was six stories of glass, limestone, and discretion. The brass by the door shone hard enough to make poverty feel impolite.

Inside, the lobby smelled faintly of polish, filtered air, and money trying not to smell like itself.

A woman at the front desk took my name and made a call without changing expression. Her suit was charcoal. Her lipstick was the red of sealed files. Somewhere beyond the walls, I could hear the low electrical hum of expensive things doing quiet work.

“Mr. Voss,” she said, “someone will escort you.”

Escort. Not meet. Not greet. Escort.

I signed in, surrendered my driver’s license for a visitor badge, and sat on a leather chair that cost more than my monthly rent. Across from me hung an abstract painting in steel blues and whites. It looked like a machine dreaming of winter.

A man came through the security door a minute later. Tall. Neat. Silver at the temples. Face arranged into professional concern.

“Mr. Voss,” he said, offering a hand. “Stephen Harlan. Thank you for coming.”

His grip was dry and measured. A man who had practiced not squeezing too hard.

“Your building owner spoke highly of your discretion.”

“That makes one of us.”

He smiled politely, not because I’d amused him but because men like him wore manners the way soldiers wore sidearms.

“We’re conducting a controlled behavioral study,” he said as he led me through the secured door. “There are documentation standards we prefer to maintain with external oversight.”

“Behavioral, meaning what?”

“Response integrity under stress.”

“Sounds friendly.”

“It’s scientific.”

That answer came too smoothly. It had been said before.

We passed through a corridor so clean it seemed scrubbed of human memory. White walls. Recessed lights. Glass observation panels. No clutter. No wasted motion. The floor gave back the soft shine of our footsteps.

A pair of double doors opened with Harlan’s badge.

Inside was a room so bright it felt less lit than interrogated.

A man sat in a chair in the middle of it with sensor bands at his temples, clips on two fingers, and leads running beneath the collar of a hospital-gray shirt. Across from him, a technician in pale gloves asked questions in a voice calm enough to tranquilize cattle.

“Have you ever concealed material information from a loved one?”

The seated man swallowed.

A graph on a nearby monitor jumped.

“Have you ever acted against your own stated beliefs for financial stability?”

Another jump.

His pupils looked too wide. Sweat shone near his hairline. His breathing had that careful rhythm people use when they know they’re being watched and still hope they can control what watching finds.

Harlan folded his hands behind his back beside me.

“As you can see,” he said, “the body is often more candid than the mouth.”

I looked at the wires. The monitors. The man in the chair trying to sit still inside his own skin.

Then I looked at the file on the metal tray beside the technician.

Typed tabbed sections.

Personal history.

Financial indicators.

Relationship dependencies.

Employment volatility.

Not a medical chart.

Not even close.

Something cold moved along my spine and took its time.

“You’re not studying truth,” I said.

Harlan turned his head slightly. “No?”

I watched the man in the chair answer another question with a lie his pulse didn’t believe.

“No,” I said. “You’re studying pressure.”

Harlan’s smile thinned by half a degree.

That was when I knew Milton Cray, for once in his stained little life, had not sold me a small problem.

He had sold me the front door to a bigger one.

And I was already inside.

Chapter 2: The Study

They processed me like a man entering a church that didn't trust prayer.

First came a clipboard. Then a badge. Then a woman with rimless glasses and a voice too polite to belong to anyone innocent asked me to empty my pockets into a gray tray. Wallet. Keys. Coins. Penknife. Notebook. A cheap lighter I'd forgotten was still warm from my hand.

"No recording devices," she said.

"I left the brass band at home."

She didn't smile. Places like that trained humor out of people early. Probably right after empathy.

The tray disappeared behind a counter. My notebook stayed in it.

"That comes with me," I said.

"It can be returned at the end of your visit."

"Then write faster. I'm attached to it."

She pushed a form toward me instead. Three pages. Dense print. Language is built like a brick wall and just as friendly. I skimmed phrases that meant exactly what they were meant to mean, and less than they pretended to mean. **Confidential methods. Proprietary data. Behavioral integrity metrics. Non-disclosure obligations. External observer limitations.**

The kind of paperwork that told you nobody intended to call this thing by its real name in public.

Stephen Harlan stood nearby with his hands linked behind his back, patient as a funeral director.

"Standard procedure," he said.

"Standard for what?"

"Sensitive research."

"That depends on what you're researching."

He gave me a mild smile again. The one that never touched his eyes. “Response behavior.”

I signed anyway. Broke men sign things rich men design. That’s one of the city’s oldest partnerships.

The woman stamped the last page, clipped it to the others, and passed me a fresh badge with my name typed beneath **VISITOR — OBSERVER ACCESS**.

Observer.

Nice word. It suggested distance. Clean hands. A seat in the back row while the knife worked happened somewhere else.

Harlan collected the badge from her and handed it to me himself.

“This way.”

He led me deeper into the building.

The corridors had the same expensive sterility as the lobby. White walls. Brushed steel. Glass panes so clean they looked absent until the light caught them. Behind some of them were offices with desks neat enough to suggest either discipline or fear. Behind others sat rooms with equipment I didn’t yet know the names of but disliked on sight. Monitors. Cables. molded chairs with restraints polite enough to pass for ergonomic design.

No clutter. No warmth. No smell except filtered air, floor polish, and a faint medicinal note riding underneath both. The place felt less built than edited. As though anything human had been cut out in post.

“You said you needed outside oversight,” I told Harlan as we walked.

“Yes.”

“Why me?”

“You’re local. You understand observation. You’re accustomed to difficult personalities. And you were recommended.”

“By a landlord who’d pawn his own blood type,” I said.

Harlan glanced at me. “Mr. Cray described you as perceptive.”

“Then he overcharged you.”

That one earned a small, controlled exhale through the nose. Maybe his version of laughter. Or maybe a systems check.

We reached a glass-walled conference room and stepped inside. A folder sat waiting at one end of the table beside a carafe of coffee, two paper cups, and a plate of untouched biscuits that looked like they had been approved by legal.

“Please,” he said.

I sat. The chair was softer than my office could afford and somehow less comfortable for it.

Harlan remained standing another second, then took the seat opposite mine and opened the folder between us.

Inside were summary sheets. Charts. Timelines. Boxes arranged to reassure the eye while telling it nothing.

“At its simplest,” he said, “the study examines physiological markers associated with stress, deception, memory conflict, and disclosure resistance.”

“Disclosure resistance.”

“Yes.”

“You mean reluctance to talk.”

“That is one interpretation.”

“Seems the shortest.”

He folded his hands. “Human beings are not always accurate narrators of their own motives, Mr. Voss. The body often reveals what language conceals.”

“That line printed on the brochure?”

His expression didn’t move. “Not yet.”

I looked down at one of the pages. It listed categories like baseline variability, cognitive dissonance indicators, reactive delay clusters, social-threat amplification, compliance response thresholds.

A lot of expensive words marching in rows toward one ugly idea.

“What are these people to you?” I asked. “Volunteers?”

“Participants.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

“They are screened adults who consent to monitored sessions.”

“Paid?”

“In many cases, yes.”

“How many cases aren’t?”

Harlan let the silence stand between us, just long enough to remind me it belonged to him.

“This is not a criminal inquiry, Mr. Voss.”

“No,” I said. “Criminal inquiries usually answer more direct questions.”

He slid another page toward me. “Your role is narrow. Observe protocol. Confirm the chain of handling. Note irregularities. Report them to me.”

“To you.”

“That is correct.”

“Not to a board. Not to a medical panel. Not to anybody with a badge or a license framed on the wall.”

“You seem skeptical.”

“I make a living noticing when careful men want careful wording between themselves and plain speech.”

For the first time, a faint weariness touched his face. It made him look more human and therefore more dangerous.

“Mr. Voss,” he said, “institutions cannot function if every internal process is treated as a public spectacle.”

“Depends on the process.”

His gaze held mine. Cool. Even. Clinical in a way that had nothing to do with medicine.

Then he closed the folder.

“You may observe four sessions today,” he said. “Afterward, you can decide whether the arrangement suits you.”

“That generous?”

“That practical.”

He stood. I followed.

The first session was with a city clerk named Thomas Weller, forty-two, divorced, medicated for anxiety, no criminal record, one late child-support payment eight months ago, two written reprimands for insubordination in eleven years of municipal work.

I knew all that because his file sat open on a metal table two feet from where he was being measured.

That bothered me more than the wires.

Privacy had a different smell when it was dead in the room with you.

Weller sat in the same kind of chair I’d seen through the door earlier, wrists resting on padded supports. Nothing visible held him there, but the arrangement had its own kind of restraint. A person surrounded by enough equipment stops believing he can leave even before anyone tells him not to.

A technician in pale gloves adjusted sensors at his temple while another watched the monitors.

Harlan stood beside me in the observation space behind the glass.

“Session fourteen-B,” said a woman into a microphone.

“Beginning recorded response set.”

Her voice came through a speaker above us, clean and soft and stripped of any trace that a real throat had made it.

Mr. Weller wet his lips.

“Please state your full name.”

He did.

“Do you understand that your participation today is voluntary?”

A beat. “Yes.”

The graph on the nearest monitor twitched.

“Have you ever felt pressure at work to alter, delay, or omit information?”

“Yes.”

Twitch again.

“Have you ever concealed material information from a supervisor?”

“Yes.”

A sharper rise.

“Have you ever concealed material information from your ex-wife?”

Weller blinked. “What?”

“Please answer the question.”

His pulse line kicked up on the screen.

“That’s not work-related.”

“Please answer.”

His hands tightened on the armrests.

“Yes.”

Another spike.

The technician noted something in the margin of a tablet.

I looked not at Weller but at the case summary beside his file.

Family dependency markers: moderate. Financial fragility: elevated. Authority compliance: unstable under reputational threat. Disclosure retention: inconsistent.

Not a patient summary.

Not a research note.

A vulnerability map.

Harlan saw where I was looking.

“The classifications help contextualize readings,” he said.

“Contextualize for what?”

“Interpretation.”

“Use.”

He didn’t answer that.

The questions kept coming.

Had Weller ever lied to protect himself? Yes.

Had he lied to avoid shame? Yes.

Had he lied when truth might threaten his livelihood? Long pause. Yes.

Had he ever acted against personal conviction for financial necessity? A longer pause. Then yes again.

Each answer made a little mountain on the screen.

In another room, maybe they call that data.

From where I stood, it looked closer to rehearsal for blackmail.

The second session was with a hospital administrator. Third, a procurement officer from the transit authority. The fourth was a woman in her thirties whose file was thinner than the rest and therefore more alarming. Less history. More precision. Price Industries either knew less about her or needed to know more. Neither possibility did much for my mood.

By the time the last session ended, the coffee in my paper cup had gone cold enough to tell the truth about itself. Bitter. Burnt. Institutional.

I stepped away from the glass.

“You’re not sampling behavior,” I said.

Harlan removed his glasses, polished them with a folded cloth, and put them back on. It was the kind of pause men use when they want their next lie to arrive dressed.

“No?”

“You’re indexing pressure points.”

“That is an imaginative phrase.”

“It’s also accurate.”

He tilted his head. “Explain.”

“You ask questions that aren’t about lying in general. You ask where loyalty bends. Where shame spikes. Where money outranks principle. Where family outranks money. Where authority outranks memory. Then you measure what the body does when that fault lines get touched.”

Harlan looked at me for a moment. Not surprised. Measuring.

“And what would such information mean to you, Mr. Voss?”

“That depends on who’s holding it.”

His hands settled in his pockets.

“To a responsible institution, it could mean safer hiring, better risk awareness, reduced corruption exposure, improved trust calibration.”

“There,” I said. “That word.”

“Which one?”

“Calibration. Men say calibration when they mean control but want to sound educated.”

One corner of his mouth moved. The ghost of a smile. Or the shadow of annoyance.

“You see patterns quickly,” he said.

“That’s how I stay poorer than my clients.”

He started walking, and I followed him out into the corridor again.

“Let me be candid,” he said.

“That would brighten my day.”

“There is public money in several adjacent research tracks. Private money, too. Everyone involved wants measurable outcomes.

Not theory. Not moral panic. Outcomes.” He glanced at me.
“Fraud prediction. Credential integrity. conflict-of-interest
exposure. Behavioral inconsistency under pressure.”

“Human predictability.”

“If you like.”

“I don’t.”

We reached another secured door. He badged us through.

This corridor was quieter. Fewer offices. No glass. Just matte
walls and numbered doors. A place where work happened without
witnesses.

At the end sat a records room with two carts outside it, each
stacked with file boxes sealed in white bands. One band had
slipped loose on the nearest stack.

I only needed half a second.

A typed cover sheet showed through the gap.

Municipal Liaison Batch: Preliminary Stratification

Under it, a list of fields:

Disclosure impulse
Coercion sensitivity
Financial compliance
Familial leverage
Narrative deviation

I stopped walking.

Harlan took two more steps before he noticed.

“*What is narrative deviation?*” I asked.

He looked back at me.

The hallway hummed softly around us. Ventilation. Electricity. A
building breathing through hidden lungs.

“*An internal term,*” he said.

“For what?”

“For inconsistency between stated beliefs and probable action.”

“That’s a clean way to say hypocrisy.”

“Or complexity.”

“Or survival.”

Something in his face acknowledged the point and rejected it at the same time.

“We are trying,” he said, “to understand the gap between what people say they are and what conditions reveal.”

I looked at the sealed boxes.

“No,” I said. “You’re trying to price it.”

That landed.

Not hard enough to crack him, but hard enough to register.

He stepped back toward me. Not close. Just near enough for tone to do what force hadn’t yet needed.

“Mr. Voss, every institution of consequence gathers information. The difference between chaos and order is whether that information remains crude or becomes usable.”

“Usable by who?”

“By those responsible for stability.”

There it was. That word. Stability. Men with too much power loved that word. It covered all kinds of bruises if you spread it around thick enough.

“What happens to the people who score wrong?” I asked.

“No one is scored wrong.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“No,” he said, “it is the only answer I’m obliged to give.”

We stood there a second longer, looking at one another in the expensive hush.

Then a door halfway down the corridor opened, and a young technician stepped out carrying a stack of printouts. Early thirties,

maybe. Dark hair pinned up badly, like she'd done it in a moving elevator. No makeup except whatever worries put under a woman's eyes when she's had too much of it too often.

She saw Harlan, then me, and slowed by a fraction.

"Dr. Harlan," she said.

"Ms. Valez."

She shifted the stack in her arms. Her gaze flicked to my visitor badge.

"This is Mr. Voss," Harlan said. "External observer."

Something moved in her face at that. Quick. Hard to name. Hope maybe, if hope had already had a few fingers broken.

"Of course," she said.

Her voice was level, but her thumb had gone white against the top sheet of paper.

Harlan nodded once. "The archive transfer can wait until review."

"Yes, doctor."

She moved past us.

As she did, one page slid free from the stack and hit the floor near my shoe.

I bent before either of them could.

The top of the page showed a participant summary with color-coded bars along the side.

Name blacked out.

Employment sector: public procurement.

Exposure risk: moderate.

Concealment persistence: high.

Family leverage: severe.

Recommended placement: monitored.

Placed where? Monitored by whom?

At the bottom, almost hidden in the notation field, was a sentence fragment: Secondary utility after pressure conditioning remains promising—

Valez's hand reached down fast and took the sheet from me.

"Sorry," she said.

Her eyes met mine for one second.

Long enough.

People talk too much about what fear looks like. Fear looks like a lot of things. Sweat. Tremor. Silence. Fast speech. No speech. But there's one version of it I trust most: the look a person gives when they want you to understand something without being seen wanting it.

Valez had that look.

Then it was gone. Her face emptied. Professional. Flat.

She slid the page back into the stack and continued down the corridor without turning around.

I watched her go.

Harlan did too.

"Busy place," I said.

"Research generally is."

"What does 'monitored placement' mean?"

He didn't even pretend not to hear me.

"It means," he said, "that context continues after the session."

I let that sit.

"Context," I repeated.

"Yes."

"That word does much work around here?"

"As much as necessary."

He invited me back toward the main corridor with a small motion of the hand. The tour, apparently, had reached the part where curiosity became less decorative.

I walked with him, but it was slower now.

“You said four sessions,” I said. “I watched four.”

“And?”

“And now I know why the forms were thicker than the walls.”

He almost smiled again. “You object?”

“I object to men using scientific language like fresh paint over old rot.”

“That is a dramatic formulation.”

“I’m a dramatic man.”

“No,” he said, “I think you are a perceptive one. Which may yet make this arrangement useful.”

We returned to the conference room. My notebook was back on the table now, right where it had been before. That bothered me in a new way. Somebody had decided what I needed to keep and what I didn’t.

Harlan poured fresh coffee into a paper cup and offered it over.

I took it.

“Compensation,” he said, sitting again, “would be weekly. Above market. The work would remain discreet. Your written observations would come directly to me.”

“Still not a board.”

“No board is involved at your level.”

“At my level.”

He let that one lie there. A man can insult you a dozen ways by speaking plainly and only one by using the truth.

I set the coffee down untouched.

“What exactly do you want from me?”

He opened a new folder. This one is thinner. Cleaner.

“Independent sight. Someone trained to notice irregular human behavior. Somebody who is not sentimental about contradiction.”

“Who told you I wasn’t sentimental?”

“You are a private detective with overdue rent and no visible wedding ring.”

“Your research is flattering.”

“It is basic.”

He turned the folder so I could read the top page.

Observer Deliverables

Protocol deviations

Participant resistance anomalies

Interviewer drift

Unstructured disclosures

Environmental confounds

Chain-of-record irregularities

Then, in smaller type farther down:

Spontaneous truth emergence outside the prompted sequence

I tapped that line.

“What’s this?”

“When subjects disclose unprompted information not directly solicited by the script.”

“You want me to note when people tell the truth by accident.”

“We want to understand when suppression fails.”

I leaned back in the chair.

There it was. Barely dressed, but there.

Not honesty. Not science. Failure points. Stress fractures. The moment a secret slips because the weight inside a body shifts half an inch too far.

A study like that didn't belong in one room. It belonged wherever powerful people wanted a cleaner knife.

I thought of Milton Cray in the hallway outside my office, pretending this was just study stuff. He'd known enough to smell danger and not enough to fear it properly. That was his gift. To mistake every pit for a bargain if there was a coin glinting at the bottom.

"How many participants?" I asked.

"Rotating."

"That isn't a number."

"No."

"You like answers shaped that way."

"I like caution."

"Same thing?"

He considered me. "Not always."

Finally, an honest sentence. I almost respected him for it.

Almost.

I stood.

"So, here's mine," I said. "You're mapping where people bend. You're sorting who lies, why they lie, what they'll protect, and what breaks first when pressure gets personal. You can call that response integrity if it helps you sleep, but I've known extortionists with rougher manners and cleaner labels."

Harlan stayed seated.

"You have a gift for moral language, Mr. Voss."

"And you have a gift for laundering ugly ideas through administrative nouns."

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then he said, "Will you continue?"

That was the question, stripped at last.

Not whether I approved. Not whether I understood. Whether I would keep walking deeper now that the floor had shown me what was under it.

The answer should have been no.

But no is a luxury word. It lives in better neighborhoods than mine.

I thought of the rent in my desk drawer, thin as dignity. Thought of Cray's yellow smile. Thought of my office radiator clanking all night like something dying politely behind plaster. Thought of the participants' files with their calm little boxes for pressure and leverage and family.

And, against my better judgment, I thought of the young technician's eyes when she dropped that page.

Hope with bruises on it.

"What happens if I do?" I asked.

Harlan rose from his chair.

"You are compensated," he said. "You observe. Report. And, ideally, learn."

"About people."

"About truth."

I picked up my hat.

"No," I said. "About what men do when they think truth belongs to them."

Something in his face cooled to another degree. Not anger. Revision.

He extended his hand. "Tomorrow, then?"

I looked at it for a second before taking it.

His grip was the same as before. Dry. Controlled. The handshake of a man who had never once had to earn trust the difficult way.

"*Tomorrow*," I said.

He released my hand.

A woman from reception returned my license and opened the outer door for me. I stepped back through the immaculate lobby, past the abstract painting, past the desk where everything was logged and nothing was said, and out into the late afternoon.

Rain had started again while I was inside.

Not heavy. Just enough to give the city a shine it hadn't deserved.

I stood under the stone awning a minute with my hat low and my collar up, watching people move along the sidewalk without any idea that a building behind brass letters and filtered air was measuring where human beings cracked and calling it research.

Across the street, a bus stop showed a smiling family under the Price Industries logo and some slogan about shaping tomorrow responsibly.

That nearly made me laugh.

A cab hissed through a puddle and soaked the curb.

I started walking.

By the time I reached my office block, the rain had found its rhythm. Thin silver lines in the streetlight. Window glass, rain beading, and running. The whole city looked like it had been left out overnight and was trying not to rust in public.

Milton Cray was in the lobby when I came in, pretending to read mail that wasn't his.

He looked up and saw my face.

"Well?" he said.

"You still owe your mother an apology for surviving childbirth."

He grinned. "Pays that well, huh?"

I kept walking toward the stairs.

"Voss."

I stopped but didn't turn.

“You take it?”

“Yes.”

He made a pleasant little sound in the back of his throat. A man hearing rent arrive before the envelope did.

“Told you,” He said. “Useful to know people.”

I looked back then.

The light in the lobby was weak and yellow, and it made his skin look like paper kept too close to old smoke.

“Careful, Milton,” I said. “One day you’ll sell the wrong thing.”

He shrugged. “Everything’s the wrong thing to somebody.”

I went upstairs.

Inside the office, I hung my coat, sat at the desk, and opened the notebook they’d returned to me. The pages were exactly where I’d left them. Or close enough to make no difference. That somehow made it worse. A violation you couldn’t prove had a longer half-life.

I wrote down the phrases I could remember.

Disclosure resistance.

Family leverage.

Monitored placement.

Secondary utility after pressure conditioning.

Then below them:

They are not studying lies. They are studying when secrets break.

I stared at that line for a while.

Outside, rain tapped the window in a patient, little code.

Somewhere in the building, a pipe knocked. Somewhere on the street, a woman laughed too loudly and too briefly. Somewhere in the city, men in clean rooms were putting wires on frightened people and calling it the future.

I closed the notebook.