

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

Forty-Seven Letters

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

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Chapter One

She arrived on a Monday morning in August carrying a small box, the kind that had once held stationery, cream-colored cardboard worn soft at the corners, tied with kitchen twine in the simple knot of someone who needed to keep something closed without making a ceremony of the closing.

She was fifty-two. Indian-American, second generation, the specific San Francisco version that had been here long enough to be part of the city rather than a newcomer to it. She had the look of someone who worked with precision — the hands of it, the way she set the box on the desk with an exactness that suggested she measured things, or built things, or both. She looked at the cork board with the thirteen things on it and she read them the way people read them when they had the patience to read them rather than just look.

She sat.

She set the box on her knees, then on the desk, then looked at it there.

"Ms. Tamboli," Flora said. "What do you need?"

Iris Tamboli looked at the box.

"I need you to tell me what to do with this," she said.

Flora looked at her.

"That's not quite what we do," she said.

"I know," Iris said. "But I don't know who else to ask."

Nancy came in, hung her coat on the right hook, wrote the name from the phone call. Wrote the time. Read both.

Looked at them again.

Good.

She sat and opened her notepad and looked at the box.

"Tell me," Flora said.

Iris looked at the box tied with kitchen twine.

"My mother died in March," she said. "Carol Tamboli. She was seventy-eight. She'd been ill for two years — cancer, managed for a long time, and then not managed. She died at home. I was with her." She paused. "After the funeral, when I was clearing her things, I found a shoebox under the bed. Not hidden — not locked away, not at the back of a closet. Under the bed, with a lid on it, where she could reach it." She paused. "Inside the shoebox were forty-seven letters."

"From whom?" Flora said.

"A man named Peter Soh," Iris said. "The letters span twenty-two years — the earliest is from 1997, the most recent from November 2019. Four years before she died." She paused. "My mother was married to my father from 1969 until he died in 2003. These letters are from within that marriage and after it." She paused. "Peter Soh was not my father."

The office was quiet.

"I've read all of them," Iris said. "I know I didn't have to. I could have put the lid back on the box and left it. But —" She paused. "But my mother is gone and the letters are what's left of whatever this was, and I couldn't not know."

"What are they?" Flora said. "The letters."

Iris looked at the box.

"They're not —" She stopped. "They're not what I expected. I expected guilt, or secrecy, or the kind of thing you'd keep hidden because you were ashamed of it. But they're not that." She paused. "They're the most beautiful letters I've ever read. He writes to her about what he sees in her. What she makes him think about. What the world looks like from beside her." She looked at her hands. "He understood her in a way that —" She stopped again. "I'm fifty-two years old. I was her daughter for fifty-two years. I thought I knew her. These letters showed me that I knew a version of her. A real version, a true version, but not the whole of her." She paused. "Peter Soh knew a part of my mother that I didn't. And now she's gone and I have his letters and I don't know what to do with them."

"Why not keep them?" Nancy said. "They're hers. They came to you when she did."

Iris looked at her.

"Because he doesn't know she's dead," she said. "The letters stopped in November 2019. Four years before she died. I don't know what happened in November 2019 — whether they stopped seeing each other, whether something happened, whether he's even alive. But if he is alive and he doesn't know she's gone —" She stopped. "He wrote to her for twenty-two years. He deserves to know."

"You want to find him," Flora said.

"I want to tell him," Iris said. "That she's gone. And that she kept the letters. All forty-seven of them. Under her bed where she could reach them." She paused. "I want him to know that." She paused. "She told me once, when I was thirty — I didn't understand it then — she said: there is someone I love who I cannot be with. I asked her who. She said: it doesn't matter who. It matters that love like that exists." Iris looked at the box. "I thought she was being philosophical. I didn't know she meant a specific person who was writing to her every few months for twenty-two years."

"Why couldn't she be with him?" Flora said.

"I don't know," Iris said. "The letters don't say directly. He never says: I wish we could be together. She never says in the letters — I only have his side, I don't have her letters to him, I don't know if she wrote back or what she said. But the letters suggest — they suggest something complicated. Something that wasn't about secrecy or shame but about constraint. Something that couldn't be otherwise." She paused. "I've thought about it for five months. I don't know what the constraint was. I just know that whatever it was, it was real to both of them, and they honored it for twenty-two years."

Flora looked at the box tied with kitchen twine.

"Leave the box with us," she said. "We'll find him."

Iris looked at the box.

She reached out and touched it — just the edge of it, the worn corner of the cardboard, the soft place where the box had been handled many times over twenty-two years by hands that were not hers.

"Be careful with them," she said.

"We will," Flora said.

Iris nodded. She stood. She went to the door and stopped and looked back at the box on the desk.

"She kept them under her bed," she said. "For twenty-two years. Not hidden. Just — accessible. Within reach." She paused. "That's important. I don't know why exactly, but it's important."

"Yes," Flora said. "It is."

Iris went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

Flora looked at the box.

Nancy came and stood beside her.

"May I?" Nancy said.

Flora untied the kitchen twine carefully — the simple knot came apart easily, it had been tied and untied before, the twine knew the motion — and she lifted the lid.

Forty-seven envelopes. Arranged chronologically, the earliest at the bottom, the most recent at the top. Each envelope had been opened and refolded and replaced with care. Each bore a return address — the same address on all of them, a street in the Sunset District — and was addressed to Carol Tamboli at the address in the Richmond where Iris had grown up.

He had written to her at her home.

Her husband would have seen these arriving.

"Her husband knew," Nancy said.

Flora looked at the envelopes.

"Or she collected the mail," Flora said. "Or there was an arrangement." She paused. "Twenty-two years. Something was arranged."

Nancy looked at the return address on the top envelope.

"Peter Soh," she said. "The Sunset. That address would be — if he's been there a long time, that would be straightforward to find." She paused. "If he's still there."

"How old do you think he is?" Flora said.

Nancy looked at the letters — the span of them, the earliest dated 1997. "If he was in his thirties when he started writing —" She paused. "He could be in his late sixties now. Or older."

"Find him," Flora said.

Chapter Two

Peter Soh had lived at the Sunset address for thirty-one years.

Nancy found this in the property records — he owned the house, had owned it since 1993, a single-story on Noriega Street with the small garden that the records showed had been there since before he bought it and which Google's street view, several years old now, showed to be well maintained in the specific way of a garden that was someone's primary project.

He was seventy-one years old. Chinese-American, third generation, born in San Francisco in 1953. He had been a high school science teacher for thirty years, retired in 2018. He was, as far as Nancy could establish, in good health — no significant public health records, still listed at the Noriega address, still a registered voter.

He was alive.

He did not know Carol Tamboli was dead.

Flora went to Noriega Street on a Wednesday morning. She did not call ahead — she had decided, after thinking about it, that this was not the kind of approach that could be managed over the phone, that the message she was carrying required a door and a face and the actual presence of another human being receiving it.

The house was as the street view had shown it — small, well kept, the garden in late-summer form with the roses that bloomed on the Sunset side of the city even in August. She stood outside it for a moment. The ordinary street, the fog already beginning to burn off, a dog going past with its owner, a delivery truck double-parked two houses down.

She knocked.

He came to the door after a short wait — the wait of someone who was home and not in a hurry. He was seventy-one, slight, with the quality of

someone who had spent thirty years in classrooms and had the classroom teacher's specific kind of attentiveness, the watchfulness that came from being responsible for the understanding of many young people simultaneously. He looked at Flora with this attentiveness — not suspicious, not wary, just attending.

"Mr. Soh," Flora said. "My name is Flora Voss. I'm a private investigator. I've been hired by Iris Tamboli." She paused. "Carol's daughter."

His face changed.

Not dramatically. The change was small and very large at the same time — the specific change of someone for whom a name, unexpectedly heard, reorganizes everything in the room for a moment before the room settles back.

"Iris," he said.

"Yes."

He looked at Flora. He understood from her face, before she said it, what she had come to say.

"Carol," he said.

"She died in March," Flora said. "She was seventy-eight. Her daughter was with her."

He stood in the doorway.

He stood for a moment that was longer than most moments, the moment doing the work that moments did when they contained something very large — expanding to hold it.

"Come in," he said.

The house was a teacher's house — books on every available surface, organized in the way of someone who had a system and maintained it, the system being personal rather than conventional. The front room had a desk by the window that looked onto the garden, the desk of someone who still worked at something, retired or not. He led her to the kitchen, which was the room that was most lived in, the room where the tea was and the chairs were comfortable and the window looked onto the back of the garden, the roses from this angle close and specific.

He made tea.

He did not ask what kind. He made it the way he presumably made it every morning, the particular tea of a particular person's habit, and he set it in front of her and sat across the table.

"When did she get sick?" he said.

"Two years ago," Flora said. "Iris told me she was ill for two years and managed it for a long time."

He nodded.

"She didn't tell me," he said.

Flora waited.

"I hadn't —" He paused. "We had a —" He looked at the garden. "In November 2019 I went to see her. We talked. We decided — she decided, and I agreed because she was right — that we should stop. That we had been in this for twenty-two years and it wasn't changing and it wasn't going to change and continuing it was —" He stopped. "She said: it isn't fair to either of us. She said: you should have a life that's whole. She was right." He paused. "She was nearly always right about things."

"What was the constraint?" Flora said. "If you don't mind my asking."

He looked at the tea.

"Her mother," he said. "Carol's mother was alive until 2021 — she was ninety-three when she died. A very traditional woman. Very religious. The idea of Carol — a widow by then, yes, but still — the idea of Carol with a man who was not —" He paused. "Who was Chinese." He paused. "It would have broken something that Carol wasn't able to break. She'd tried, in small ways, over the years. Her mother never shifted." He looked at the garden. "And then Iris. Iris had her own life, her own sense of who her mother was, and Carol — Carol didn't want to change what Iris thought she knew." He paused. "And by the time her mother died, we had been doing what we were doing for so long that the doing of it was — it had its own shape. Its own integrity. Neither of us knew how to make it something different."

"Did you want to?" Flora said.

He looked at the roses.

"Yes," he said. "And no." He paused. "We had something real. Something I have never found elsewhere and never expected to find

elsewhere. The shape of it was the shape of it." He paused. "I accepted the shape. I understood it. November 2019 I stopped accepting it because she asked me to and because she was right that it wasn't fair." He looked at Flora. "And then she was sick and didn't tell me and now she's gone."

His voice remained entirely level throughout this. The level of someone who had loved someone for twenty-two years and had been practicing, since November 2019, the management of a loss that had now become final.

"Iris found the letters," Flora said.

He looked at her.

"She kept them," Flora said. "All forty-seven of them. Under her bed, in a shoebox, where she could reach them."

He was very still.

"Under her bed," he said.

"Yes."

The stillness that was not emptiness. The fullness of a moment that needed to be very still to be held.

"She read them," Flora said. "Iris. She told me they were the most beautiful letters she'd ever read. She said they showed her a part of her mother she didn't know." She paused. "She said they made her understand her mother in a way that fifty-two years of being her daughter hadn't."

Peter Soh looked at the table.

Something moved in his face that was old and large and had been very carefully held for a very long time.

"She was —" He stopped. He started again. "She was the most — I have known a great many people. I taught for thirty years. I have been in rooms with hundreds of young people and I have known what was in them, the capacity, the shape of what they would become. I knew people." He paused. "I never knew anyone the way I knew Carol. She was — she was the most completely herself of anyone I've ever met. She knew what she thought and why she thought it and she was honest about it even when it was inconvenient." He paused. "She was honest with me about everything. Even the things that were hard to be honest about."

"Even November 2019," Flora said.

"Especially November 2019," he said. "She was honest then. She said: this is what's true. She didn't make it easy. But she was honest." He paused.

"I was angry for a while. Not at her — at the situation. At the shape of it that had kept us —" He stopped. "And then I wasn't angry anymore because the anger didn't serve anything and she had been right and I knew it."

"She kept the letters," Flora said.

"Yes."

"She didn't have to," Flora said. "She could have returned them. She could have burned them. She kept them under her bed for twenty-two years where she could reach them."

He looked at her.

"I want to tell you something," he said. "That she said to me once. We were walking — we used to walk, sometimes, early in the morning when the fog was still in. We were walking and she said —" He stopped. He was finding it in himself, the specific memory, the specific words. "She said: you are the person who knows the most about me and has the least claim on me. And I said: that's a strange way to put it. And she said: it's the true way to put it. And I said: do you want me to have a claim on you. And she said: no. I want you to know me." He paused. "That was what we were. I was the person who knew her."

"And now Iris knows," Flora said.

He looked at her.

"From the letters," Flora said. "Iris knows. Not everything — she doesn't have your side of it, she doesn't have Carol's letters to you if there were any. But she knows from what you wrote that her mother was known. Completely, by someone, for twenty-two years. She knows that about her mother now."

He sat with this.

The kitchen was quiet. The garden was in the late morning light, the roses doing what roses did in the Sunset in August, which was more than they did anywhere else in the city, as though this particular fog and this particular cool had suited them specifically.

"Did Iris want anything else?" he said. "Other than to tell me."

"She wanted you to know that Carol kept the letters," Flora said. "That was the whole of what she wanted to give you." She paused. "She also has a question, I think, that she hasn't asked directly. Whether you'd be willing to meet her."

He looked at the garden.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I don't know what I am to Iris or what she is to me. I was in her mother's life for twenty-two years and she didn't know I existed." He paused. "I know a great deal about her. Carol talked about her. Iris the engineer. Iris who worried. Iris who was precise and generous and who looked like her father but thought like her mother." He paused. "I know her through Carol's eyes."

"She knows you through your letters," Flora said. "Through what you saw in her mother."

He was quiet for a moment.

"I'll think about it," he said.

Flora nodded. She stood.

"Mr. Soh," she said. "One more thing."

"Yes."

"The letters," she said. "Iris has them. All forty-seven. She wanted to know what to do with them. She asked us that when she came in — she said: tell me what to do with this box."

He looked at the table.

"What did you tell her?" he said.

"I told her that wasn't quite what we did," Flora said. "But I think the answer is: they belong to whoever needs them most." She paused. "You wrote them. Carol kept them. Now Iris has them." She paused. "I think Iris should keep them. I think they're how she'll know her mother now that her mother is gone."

He looked at the roses.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I think that's right."

Chapter Three

She called Iris.

She told her about Peter Soh — the house on Noriega, the garden, the thirty years of teaching, the November 2019 conversation, the constraint, the walking in the early morning fog. She told her what he'd said about Carol: *I was the person who knew her.*

She told her what Carol had said to him once: *I want you to know me.*

Iris was quiet for a long time.

"She wanted to be known," Iris said.

"Yes."

"She didn't want a claim," Iris said. "She wanted to be known."

"Yes."

Another long silence.

"I didn't know her that way," Iris said. "She was my mother. I knew her as my mother. That's a different kind of knowing."

"Yes," Flora said. "But it's also knowing."

"Is it enough?" Iris said.

Flora thought about this.

"I think," she said carefully, "that different people know the same person in different ways and none of those ways is complete and all of them are true. Your knowing of your mother is true. His knowing of your mother is true. Neither one cancels the other."

Iris was quiet.

"She told me when I was thirty," she said, "that there was someone she loved who she couldn't be with. She said: it matters that love like that exists." She paused. "I thought she was being philosophical. But she was

telling me. In the way she could tell me." She paused. "She was honest with me too. In the way she could be."

"Yes," Flora said.

"She told me enough," Iris said.

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

"Does he want to meet me?" Iris said.

"He said he'd think about it," Flora said. "He wasn't sure what you'd be to each other. He knows you through your mother's eyes — she talked about you. He said Iris the engineer. He said you looked like your father but thought like your mother."

Iris made a small sound that Flora couldn't fully read — grief or something adjacent to grief, the sound of receiving something you didn't know you needed.

"She talked about me," Iris said.

"Yes," Flora said. "He said she talked about you."

Another silence.

"Tell him," Iris said slowly, "that I'd like to walk with him. Early morning, in the fog, the way they used to walk. If he'd like that." She paused. "I don't know what we'll talk about. But I'd like to walk in the places they walked and have him there." She paused. "He knew her in a way I didn't. I knew her in a way he didn't. Maybe between us we can —" She stopped. "Maybe between us we can hold more of her."

Flora looked at the cork board.

The thirteen things. The piece of paper.

"I'll tell him," she said.

Chapter Four

She came in the following week to settle the account.

She came without the box — the box was in her possession, the letters were hers now, both of them understood this. She sat in the client chair and Nancy quoted the fee and she wrote the check and she set her hands on her knees and looked at the cork board.

"You told him," she said.

"Yes," Flora said. "He said yes. He'd like to walk with you."

Iris looked at the cork board.

She looked at the thirteen things.

She looked at the torn piece of paper — *Tell Flora. Today.* — the twelfth thing, the one that was different from the others, the one that wasn't from outside the room but from inside it.

She looked at it for a long time.

"What is that one?" she said.

Flora looked at the piece of paper.

"Something from inside the office," she said. "From Nancy. Something she needed to say and found the way to say."

Iris looked at Nancy.

Nancy looked at the notepad.

"Something I was keeping," Nancy said. "That needed to be on the record instead."

Iris looked at the piece of paper.

"Tell Flora," she said. "Today."

"Yes," Nancy said.

"She said it," Iris said. "Eventually."

"Yes," Nancy said.

"That's what the letters are," Iris said. "For my mother. Things she was keeping. That eventually needed to be on the record instead." She paused. "She kept them under her bed. That's as close to the record as she could get them." She looked at the piece of paper. "She was working up to it. For twenty-two years she was working up to it."

Nancy looked at her.

"Yes," Nancy said. "I think that's right."

Iris looked at the cork board for a moment longer.

"Can I add something to it?" she said.

Flora looked at her.

"You send things from outside," Iris said. "Things people send back to tell you what the work did. Can I add something?"

"Yes," Flora said.

Iris reached into her bag and took out an envelope. She set it on the desk.

"That's one of the letters," she said. "The third one. From 1999. It's the one where he describes what it is to know someone — what it feels like, what it does. It's the most —" She stopped. "It's the one I've read most." She paused. "It should be somewhere that does what this room does. Which is hold things that matter and make them available to whoever needs them."

Flora picked up the envelope.

She looked at Iris.

"Are you sure?" she said.

"She kept them under her bed," Iris said. "So she could reach them. This one should be on the wall." She paused. "So it can reach further."

Flora took the envelope to the cork board.

She found a pin.

She pinned the envelope to the cork board, below the thirteen things.

She stepped back.

The fourteenth thing.

An envelope with Peter Soh's handwriting on the outside and Carol Tamboli's name and the date, 1999.

Iris looked at it.

"She'd have liked that," she said. "I think."

She stood and picked up her bag and went to the door.

At the threshold she stopped.

"I don't know if Peter and I will become — anything," she said. "We might walk once and have nothing to say to each other. We might find that we were both part of her life in incompatible ways." She paused. "But I know what I know about my mother now. I know she wanted to be known and she found someone who knew her and she kept his letters under her bed for twenty-two years because the knowing was real even when she couldn't let it be public." She paused. "That's what I know." She looked at the card stock above the door. "Not what I feel. What I know."

She went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

Chapter Five

Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and they sat in the August office, the fog burned off now, the afternoon warm in the particular way of a warm August afternoon in San Francisco when the fog had burned off, the warmth that felt like a gift because it was not guaranteed.

They looked at the cork board.

The fourteen things.

The envelope from 1999 below the torn piece of paper below the cream card and the postcard of the lake and the folded note and the card on good paper and all the rest, all the way up to the Farallon Islands above the door.

"She wanted to be known," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"And he knew her," Nancy said. "For twenty-two years. In the way she needed." She paused. "And now Iris knows. And we know. And the letter is on the wall." She paused. "The knowing keeps spreading."

Flora looked at the envelope.

She thought about Carol Tamboli keeping forty-seven letters under her bed in a shoebox with a lid, accessible, within reach. Keeping them for twenty-two years after the first letter and four years after the last one. Keeping them through her husband's death and her mother's death and two years of illness.

Keeping them until she died.

"She wanted to be known," Flora said. "And she wanted the letters to be findable. She could have burned them. She could have put them somewhere no one would look." She paused. "She put them under her bed."

"For Iris," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said. "I think so. I think she knew Iris would find them. I think she arranged it." She paused. "She was a woman who made arrangements. She arranged twenty-two years of something that couldn't be public. She knew how to manage things carefully." She paused. "She put the letters where Iris would find them."

Nancy looked at the envelope on the cork board.

"She wanted Iris to know her," Nancy said. "The way Peter knew her."

"Yes," Flora said. "The way she could give that."

Nancy held her tea.

"I've been thinking," she said, "about what I know."

Flora looked at her.

"What the work is," Nancy said. "We've talked about it before. What we actually do." She paused. "Aurelio said: like a library. Things go out and come back." She paused. "Thomas said: someone should say you were right. Honorine said: the smell existed in other people's lives." She paused. "All of it is about being known." She looked at the cork board. "People come here because they need to know something or to be known by something. They need the record to say: this existed. This was real. This mattered to someone."

"Yes," Flora said.

"And we provide that," Nancy said. "We go find the evidence. We bring it back. We say: this was real." She paused. "That's the work."

Flora looked at the envelope from 1999.

"Carol kept Peter's letters," she said. "Because they were the record of being known. She kept them under her bed because she needed to be able to reach the record."

"And now Iris has them," Nancy said. "And the best one is on the wall."

"And Peter is going to walk in the fog with Iris," Flora said. "And maybe they'll hold between them more of Carol than either of them could hold alone."

"Yes," Nancy said.

They sat in the August office and the fog that had burned off would come back tonight, as it always did, the marine layer returning in the evening with the patience of something that knew it was inevitable, and tomorrow morning the fog would be in and Peter Soh and Iris Tamboli

might or might not walk in it, and the city would go on being the city, and the case would be in the past, and the envelope would be on the wall.

Flora picked up her pen.
She wrote the date.
She wrote the time.
She waited for the next case.

Six weeks later a postcard arrived.

No return address. San Francisco postmark.

On the front: the Great Highway at sunrise, the fog rolling in over the Pacific, the light doing what the light did when it met the fog — not blocked but changed, diffused, made into something larger than itself.

On the back, two handwritings. One she recognized as Iris's from the check. The other she didn't recognize and understood immediately was Peter Soh's.

Iris had written: We walked. The fog was in.

Peter Soh had written: She thinks like her mother.

Flora read it.

She passed it to Nancy.

Nancy read it.

She stood and went to the cork board and pinned it below the envelope from 1999.

Fifteen things.

She stepped back and looked at the cork board.

The Farallon Islands above the door.

Everything below.

The work continued.

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. The postcard from Penang.

A folded note: Second movement. Last night. I got out of the way.

A single sheet: He wrote back.

A postcard of a table: I'm the one who gets to sit at it first.

A cream note in fountain pen: You cannot smell your own smell. But you can know that it exists.

A card on good paper: Tell him he was right.

A postcard of a lake: She sang the song on Wednesday. She knew all the words. She held my hand.

A cream card: Tell Cecile she has her grandmother's eyes.

A torn piece of paper: Tell Flora. Today.

A note in careful English: The book is home.

An envelope from 1999 in a hand that was not theirs.

A postcard of the Great Highway: We walked. The fog was in. / She thinks like her mother.

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

Neither of them had fixed it.

Neither of them ever would.

End.