

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS
Four Thousand Meters

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

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Chapter One

She arrived on a Friday morning in November, the first cold Friday of the season, wearing a coat that was too light for the weather — not thin exactly, but a coat that belonged to October, a coat that had not yet been exchanged for the coat that belonged to November, as though she had not quite accepted that the season had turned or had not noticed it turn, or as though some other preoccupation had prevented the noticing.

She was forty-one. The specific forty-one of someone who had been in science for twenty years, who had spent fifteen of them at sea, whose face had been shaped by weather on decks and by the particular strain of looking at screens in dark rooms and by the specific kind of focus that marine biology required, which was the focus of someone trying to understand systems so large and so ancient that understanding them required a kind of sustained patience that most people did not have the capacity for. She was not restless. She was not searching around the room. She was very still in the way of someone who had learned to be still professionally because stillness was what the work required and she had brought it home.

She looked at the cork board.

She looked at it for a long time.

All sixteen things.

She read them. Not glanced — read, the way she would read data, the way she would read a record of something observed over time, understanding that the sequence mattered and the accumulation mattered and that the whole of it said something that the individual items did not say alone.

Then she looked at Flora.

"I think I'm in the wrong place," she said.

"Why don't you tell me what you need," Flora said, "and we'll find out."

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

Good.

She looked at Sylvie Crane and said nothing and waited.

Sylvie looked at her hands.

"I need to find myself," she said.

She said it with the specific tone of someone who knew what it sounded like and was saying it anyway because it was the most accurate description of the situation and she had been trained to prioritize accuracy over impressiveness.

Flora waited.

"I know how that sounds," Sylvie said. "I know that's not what you do. I know you find things that are missing and return them to people." She paused. "I am missing something. Or I found something. I cannot tell which. And I've been sitting with this for two years and I need someone to help me look at it from the outside."

"Tell me," Flora said.

Sylvie looked at the window.

"I'm a marine biologist," she said. "Deep-sea ecosystems specifically — the organisms that live below the photic zone, below where light penetrates. The creatures that have evolved in complete darkness, at pressures that would destroy most biological structures, in conditions of extreme cold and scarce nutrients." She paused. "I've been doing this for fifteen years. I love it. I'm good at it. Two years ago I was on a research vessel in the Pacific — a long voyage, six weeks — and I went down in a submersible to four thousand meters."

Flora waited.

"The submersible was fine," Sylvie said. "Mechanically. Nothing went wrong. I was down there for four hours, which is a long dive, conducting observations of a hydrothermal vent community I'd been studying for three years." She paused. "I've been in submersibles before. Many times. The dive to four thousand meters was not my deepest. It was not technically unusual." She paused. "Something happened."

"What happened?" Nancy said.

Sylvie looked at Nancy.

"I was at four thousand meters," she said. "In complete darkness except for the instrument lights and the external lights of the submersible, which you keep minimal because the light disrupts the organisms you're observing. So it was close to dark. The water was dark. The seafloor was dark." She paused. "I looked out the viewport. And I felt —" She stopped. She was precise about this, the way she was precise about everything, finding the most accurate word rather than the easiest one. "I felt completely at home."

"At home," Flora said.

"Not metaphorically," Sylvie said. "Not as a professional satisfaction, though I have had that many times before in submersibles and it was not this. Not as the pleasure of being somewhere interesting, which it always is. This was —" She paused. "This was a fact of my body. A recognition. The way you recognize something you've always known without knowing you knew it. The way you recognize a truth that was true before you had the language for it."

The office was quiet.

The steam was beginning to come up through the floor — the dry cleaner below, the morning pressing underway, the warm wool smell of it.

"And then?" Flora said.

"I came back up," Sylvie said. "I finished the dive. I wrote up my observations. I ate dinner with the other researchers. I did everything I always do." She paused. "And I have not been quite the same since."

"How are you different?" Nancy said.

Sylvie looked at her hands.

"I'm not depressed," she said. "I want to be clear about that. I'm not in crisis. I function well — I do the work, I publish, I teach, I am present in my life. My colleagues would say I'm exactly as I've always been." She paused. "But I know I'm not. There's something that shifted when I came up from four thousand meters, some understanding I arrived at down there that I haven't been able to locate precisely since. Like a word that was very clear for a moment and then was gone but left a shape where it had been." She paused. "I've been trying to find the word for two years."

"What does the shape feel like?" Flora said.

Sylvie looked at the window.

"It feels like I had been somewhere very loud for my entire life," she said, "and I had not known it was loud because I had never been anywhere quiet. And then I was somewhere quiet and I understood for the first time what the noise had been." She paused. "And now I'm back in the noise and I remember the quiet but I can't quite get back to it, and the not-being-able-to-get-back is — it's not painful exactly. It's more like the feeling of a word on the tip of your tongue. Perpetual almost."

Flora looked at her.

She thought: this is not a case.

She thought: this is exactly a case.

"Tell me about the noise," she said. "What is it that was loud."

Sylvie looked at her.

"That's the question," she said. "That's the thing I can't locate. I know it was there and I know it was constant and I know that at four thousand meters it stopped. But I don't know what it was." She paused. "I've tried to find it through my work — I've read things, I've talked to colleagues who study meditation and contemplative traditions, I've talked to a therapist. None of it has given me the shape of it." She looked at the cork board. "And then I heard about this office. Someone I know whose sister you found something for. They said you found things that were hard to name. Things that weren't objects." She paused. "I don't know if you can help me. But I didn't know who else to ask."

Flora looked at her.

She thought about what Nancy had said, months ago. *Someone comes in not recognizing themselves and they go out someone you can see.*

"Stay for a while," she said. "Tell me about what your life was before the dive. Tell me about the noise."

Chapter Two

She stayed for two hours.

She had not planned to stay for two hours — she had not planned for any particular length of time, she had come not knowing if she would stay at all, and then she began talking and the talking found its own length.

She talked about her childhood in Connecticut, the daughter of an engineer and a high school chemistry teacher, a family that valued precision and evidence and the verifiable. She talked about loving the ocean from the first time she saw it at age seven, a family vacation on Cape Cod, the specific quality of the Atlantic there, the force of it, the wildness underneath the beach-vacation surface. She talked about the decision to study marine biology — not a decision exactly, more a recognition, the same word she had used for the submersible, the same quality of knowing something that had been true before you named it.

She talked about fifteen years of fieldwork. The research vessels, the collaboration, the slow accumulation of knowledge about a part of the world most people never saw and had no reason to think about. She talked about what drew her to the deep sea specifically — not the drama of it, not the alienness, but the age of it. The hydrothermal vents, she said, were among the oldest ecosystems on the planet. Some of the organisms that lived there had analogues going back three billion years. To study them was to look at life as it existed before anything that lived in the lit world had been imagined by evolution.

"It's the oldest record," Nancy said.

Sylvie looked at her.

"Yes," she said. "It's the oldest record. The things down there are the record of what life was before it became what it is now. Before it learned to use light. Before it moved toward the surface." She paused. "They didn't

evolve to go up. They stayed where they were. In the dark. In the pressure. And they found every resource available to them and they thrived." She looked at the cork board. "I love that about them. That they didn't try to become something else. They became the most complete version of what they were."

Flora looked at her.

"Tell me about your life on the surface," she said. "Not the work. Your daily life. What fills it."

Sylvie was quiet for a moment.

"My work," she said. "My colleagues. A relationship that ended eighteen months ago — not dramatically, just the slow divergence of two people whose lives were heading in different directions." She paused. "My apartment in the Richmond. I run in the mornings. I cook. I go to talks, lectures, the occasional concert." She paused. "I'm not —" She stopped. "I'm not describing a life that sounds insufficient. I know that. The life is not insufficient."

"But," Flora said.

Sylvie looked at the window.

"But at four thousand meters," she said, "I looked out the viewport and I felt completely at home. And I have never felt completely at home anywhere on the surface." She paused. "And I can't tell if that's because there's something wrong with me or something wrong with the surface or something I need to understand about myself that I haven't understood yet."

"Those aren't mutually exclusive," Nancy said.

Sylvie looked at her.

"No," she said. "They're not."

"What would it mean," Nancy said, "if it was nothing wrong. If it was simply that you found a place where you recognized yourself and the recognition was real."

Sylvie looked at her hands.

"It would mean," she said slowly, "that I need to find out what it is about down there that I recognized. What quality of that place is also a quality of me." She paused. "And then I'd need to figure out how to have more of that. Here. On the surface. In my life."

"Yes," Nancy said. "That's the work."

Sylvie looked at her.

"Can you do that?" she said. "Can a private investigation firm do that?"

"We find things," Flora said. "Sometimes the thing that's missing is not an object. Sometimes it's understanding." She paused. "We're good at asking the questions that open the right doors."

Sylvie looked at the cork board.

The sixteen things.

The postcard from the Gulf of Guinea coast, most recent, at the bottom.

She read it.

Now he's in the record and you're in his record.

She read the torn piece of paper.

Tell Flora. Today.

She read the card on good paper.

Tell him he was right.

She looked at the Farallon Islands above the door.

"I'll tell you what I know," she said. "Everything I know about what happened at four thousand meters. And you tell me what questions you'd ask."

"All right," Flora said.

Chapter Three

She came back three times over the following two weeks.

Each time she sat in the client chair and Flora and Nancy asked questions and she answered them and the answers generated more questions and the questions generated more answers, the way a good inquiry built on itself.

Flora had done work like this before, or something adjacent to it — the cases that were not about finding a person or an object but about finding an understanding, the shape of what had happened and what it meant. Octavia Brennan sitting with the question of what she had known. Thomas Spry sitting with the question of what he had seen. But those had been retrospective, looking back at a thing that had already happened and needed to be understood.

Sylvie's case was different. It was prospective. She was looking forward at a life she needed to understand before she could live it properly.

Flora found this interesting in the specific way she found things interesting when they were genuinely new — not the comfortable recognition of a pattern she'd seen before but the sharper attention of encountering something that required a new way of thinking.

She asked Sylvie about her childhood in Connecticut. About the engineer father and the chemistry teacher mother. About the household she'd grown up in — what was valued, what was expected, what the ambient message of that house had been about what a good life looked like and how you built one.

Sylvie talked about precision. About the value of getting things right. About a household that expressed love through competence — through things done well, through problems solved, through the taking of difficulty and the reduction of it to something manageable. She talked about learning

early that the way to be loved was to be capable, and the way to be capable was to be excellent at a thing, and the way to be excellent at a thing was to work at it constantly.

"Was it a loud household?" Flora said.

Sylvie looked at her.

"No," she said. "It was very quiet actually. Very —" She paused. "Very organized. Very controlled." She paused. "But there was a kind of noise in it that wasn't sound. The noise of always having to perform. The noise of competence as love." She paused. "I internalized it. I've been performing competence my whole life. It's not false — the competence is real, the work is real, I genuinely love what I do. But the doing of it has always been partly —" She stopped.

"Partly for them," Nancy said.

Sylvie was very still.

"Yes," she said. "Partly for them." She paused. "And at four thousand meters there was no one to perform for. The organisms down there don't care about competence. The pressure doesn't care about your publications. The dark is completely indifferent to your achievements." She paused. "And in that indifference I was —" She stopped.

"Just yourself," Flora said.

"Just myself," Sylvie said. "Whatever that is."

She looked at her hands.

"The noise," she said slowly. "The noise is the performance. The constant background performance of being someone who is excellent at things, who justifies her presence in the world through excellence, who cannot simply be without also being good." She looked at Flora. "That's what stopped at four thousand meters. The audience disappeared. There was nothing to perform for. And I —" She paused. "I was still there. Without the performance I was still there. I didn't know that with certainty before."

The office was quiet.

The dry cleaner below, the steam, the smell of pressed wool.

"You found out you existed," Nancy said, "independent of what you did."

Sylvie looked at Nancy.

"Yes," she said. "That's what I found."

Nancy looked at the notepad.

She wrote something in the margin. She looked at it. She looked at it again.

"The organisms at four thousand meters," she said. "You said they found every resource available to them and thrived. That they became the most complete version of what they were."

"Yes," Sylvie said.

"They didn't go up," Nancy said. "They didn't try to become something different. They inhabited what they had and they became complete in it."

Sylvie looked at her.

"Yes," she said.

"You came from a household," Nancy said, "that taught you to go up. To be better, more excellent, more capable. Always moving toward something that would justify your presence." She paused. "And at four thousand meters you stopped going up. You were just where you were. And it was enough."

Sylvie sat with this.

She sat with it the way she sat with data that was good — the particular stillness of a scientist receiving something that was true.

"Yes," she said quietly. "That's what happened."

"The question," Nancy said, "is not what happened at four thousand meters. You've known what happened at four thousand meters. The question is what you do with it on the surface."

"Yes," Sylvie said. "That's the question."

"What resources do you have?" Nancy said. "Here. On the surface. What do you have that you're not using because you're performing instead of inhabiting."

Sylvie was quiet for a long time.

She looked at the window. The November afternoon, the Richmond outside it, the ordinary city going about its business.

"I have the work," she said. "The actual work — not the publishing, not the recognition, not the competence. The looking at things. The understanding of systems. The love of the deep and the dark and the old." She paused. "I have that. I've always had that. But I've been performing it

rather than —" She stopped. "Rather than just being in it."

"Yes," Nancy said. "What else."

Sylvie thought.

"I have people," she said slowly. "Colleagues. Friends. Not many, but real ones. People who know me well." She paused. "I've been performing for them too. The capable, excellent version." She paused. "I don't know what I would be to them if I stopped performing."

"Have you ever tried?" Flora said.

"No," Sylvie said.

"That's the experiment," Flora said. "That's the work."

Sylvie looked at her.

"You're not going to find me something," she said. "You're not going to find the missing thing and put it in my hands."

"No," Flora said. "The missing thing is not an object. It's not findable that way." She paused. "But we can help you see what you already have. That's what we do sometimes. We help people see what's already there."

Sylvie looked at the cork board.

She looked at the sixteen things.

She read each one again, slowly, in sequence.

"The woman who wanted to find a smell," she said. "She wanted to know she wasn't the only one who remembered. She wanted witnesses."

"Yes," Flora said.

"I want a witness," Sylvie said. "That's what I came here for. I've been sitting with this for two years and I needed someone to witness it. To say: this is real, this is what happened, you are not making it up or misremembering it or over-interpreting it." She looked at Flora. "Tell me it's real. What happened at four thousand meters. Tell me it was real."

Flora looked at her.

"It was real," she said. "What you found down there was real. You found out you existed independent of what you did. That's real. That's one of the most real things a person can find."

Sylvie held this.

She held it the way she held a finding that was true — steadily, with the full weight of her attention, not flinching from it.

"Thank you," she said.

"The work now," Flora said, "is figuring out how to live from that place. On the surface. Which is harder than finding it was."

"I know," Sylvie said. "But I know what I'm looking for now. That's different from two years ago."

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

Chapter Four

She came in one final time, two weeks later, to settle the account.

She came in the same coat — the October coat, still too light for November. She sat in the client chair and Nancy quoted the fee, which was modest because the work had been modest in the external sense, and she wrote the check.

She looked at the cork board.

"I want to add something," she said.

Flora looked at her.

"Not from outside," Sylvie said. "Not something to return. Something to put in." She reached into her bag and produced a small photograph — printed on plain paper, the way you printed photographs when you printed them yourself, from a laptop, not quite the quality of a real print but good enough to see clearly.

The photograph showed a viewport. Not Sylvie — just the viewport, a circular window of thick glass, and beyond it complete darkness, and in the darkness the faint ghost of bioluminescence, a creature glowing its own light at four thousand meters.

"I took this on the dive," she said. "I've been looking at it for two years." She set it on the desk. "I want it here. On the record."

Flora looked at the photograph.

The viewport, the darkness, the faint cold light of something that had learned to make its own.

"Where someone was completely at home," Flora said.

"Yes," Sylvie said.

Flora took the photograph to the cork board.

She found a pin.

She pinned it below the sixteen things.

The seventeenth thing.

A viewport. Darkness. Something making its own light.

Sylvie looked at it.

"The organisms down there," she said. "The bioluminescent ones. They don't need the sun. They don't go up toward the light. They make their own." She looked at the photograph. "That's what I need to learn to do. On the surface. Stop going up toward something and start making my own."

"Yes," Nancy said. "That's exactly right."

Sylvie looked at the cork board one more time — the seventeen things, the accumulation, the record.

She looked at the Farallon Islands above the door.

"Islands in the middle of the ocean," she said. "I've been out there. On a research vessel. They look like nothing from the water. Just rock. And then you're close enough to see the birds, the sea lions, the whole ecosystem living on that rock, and you understand that what looks like nothing from far away is a complete world from close." She paused. "That's what all of these are." She gestured at the cork board. "Things that look like small things from far away that are complete worlds when you're close."

She went to the door.

She paused.

She looked back at the photograph on the cork board.

"I'm going to call my mother," she said. "I haven't told her about any of this. The dive, the two years, the noise." She paused. "I don't know if she'll understand. She's very —" She stopped. "She's very excellent. She values excellence very much." She paused. "But she's also my mother and I've been performing for her for forty-one years and maybe it's time to see what happens if I stop."

"Yes," Flora said. "Maybe it is."

Sylvie went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

Four Thousand Meters

Chapter Five

Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and they sat in the November office, the light thin and early-setting, the steam welcome through the floor, the season having completed its turn while the case was in progress.

They looked at the cork board.

The seventeenth thing.

The viewport and the darkness and the faint cold light.

"She found it," Nancy said. "At four thousand meters. She found the thing she'd been missing and she didn't know she was missing it because she'd never had it before."

"Yes," Flora said.

"She found out she existed," Nancy said, "independent of what she did."

"Yes."

Nancy held her tea.

She was quiet for a while.

Flora looked at her.

The quality of the quiet — the thinking quiet, the weight of something being considered.

"I've known for a long time," Nancy said, "that I was good at the work. Thirty years of stenography, the work was precise and important and I was good at it. And then this work, the finding work, which is different and which I'm also good at." She paused. "But the goodness at the work was — it was always part of how I understood myself. I was the woman who was good at this. The precision, the memory, the attention." She paused. "And now the precision is less than it was. The memory is less certain. The attention requires more effort." She paused. "And I've been — I've been

afraid that without those things there was less of me. That the losing of capacity was the losing of self."

Flora was very still.

"And?" she said.

Nancy looked at the photograph of the viewport.

"And something she said," Nancy said. "About the organisms at four thousand meters. That they found every resource available to them and they thrived. That they became the most complete version of what they were." She paused. "The resource I have now is different from the resource I had thirty years ago. It's less in some ways. But it's what I have." She paused. "I'm still here. The capacity is less and I'm still here. Like she was at four thousand meters — the performance stopped and she was still there." She paused. "The performance of precision and infallible memory is harder now and I am still here."

Flora looked at her.

"Yes," she said. "You are."

"That's something," Nancy said.

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

Nancy looked at the notepad.

She picked up the pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She read them both.

She looked at them a third time, the new habit, the necessary check.

Good.

She set the pen down.

She looked at Flora.

"Good?" Flora said.

"Good," Nancy said.

The shared word, the shared confirmation. The thing that had been private becoming the thing between them, the small daily record of where they were.

Flora picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.
She looked at the cork board.
The Farallon Islands above the door.
The seventeen things below.
The viewport with the faint cold light of something that had learned to
make its own.
She waited for the next case.

A month later a postcard arrived.

On the front: a deep-sea photograph, the kind taken by ROV cameras, a hydrothermal vent community in full bioluminescent display, the colors improbable, the life improbable, the whole of it improbable and real.

On the back, in Sylvie Crane's precise handwriting:

I called my mother. She didn't understand everything. But she listened for a long time. She said: I didn't know you were performing. I thought you were just being you.

Below that:

I think she was right. I think it was both. I think the performing and the being became so mixed up I couldn't tell them apart. That's what four thousand meters separated.

Below that, one more line:

I'm going back down in March. This time I'll know what I'm looking for.

Flora read it.

She passed it to Nancy.

Nancy read it.

She read it again.

She stood and went to the cork board.

She found a pin.

She pinned the postcard beside the photograph of the viewport.

The eighteenth thing.

She stepped back.

I'm going back down in March. This time I'll know what I'm looking for.

She looked at it for a long time.

*Then she turned.
"Good," she said.
Flora said: "Good."
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.
A postcard of the Gulf of Guinea coast: Now he's in the record and
you're in his record.
A photograph of a viewport: darkness and faint cold light.
A deep-sea postcard: I'm going back down in March. This time I'll know
what I'm looking for.
The sign on the frosted glass door was still slightly crooked.
Neither of them had fixed it.
Neither of them ever would.*

End.