

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

The Before Country

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

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A Drake & Voss Novella

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Chapter One

The woman arrived without an appointment on a Thursday morning carrying a shoebox under one arm and the careful composure of someone who had been holding themselves together for long enough that the holding had become indistinguishable from the self.

Flora watched her from the window — the particular quality of attention she gave to people before they knew they were being watched, before they arranged themselves for an audience. The woman stood on the pavement outside Top Hat Cleaners for a moment, looking up at the second floor, reading the sign on the frosted glass. Then she came in.

Flora heard her on the stairs. A measured tread, neither hurried nor reluctant. A woman who had decided.

She knocked, which clients rarely did.

"It's open," Flora said.

She was seventy-one, or had arrived at seventy-one and worn it into something particular — not old exactly, but fully inhabited. Nigerian-Irish was Flora's read, though she wouldn't have said how she knew, something in the architecture of the face, the posture, the way she took in the office without appearing to. Silver hair cut close, good coat, the shoebox held against her side like something she'd carried a long way.

"Ms. Voss," she said. Not a question. She had done her research.

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

"Tea, if you have it."

Flora looked at her. "We have it."

She put the kettle on. Behind her she heard the woman settle into the client chair, heard the shoebox set carefully on the floor beside it.

Nancy came in at her usual time, paused in the doorway taking in the room, hung her coat on the right hook with the efficiency of someone who had performed this action ten thousand times and saw no reason to vary it.

"Nancy Drake," Flora said. "This is —"

"Mireille Okafor," the woman said. "I called yesterday. There was no answer."

"We were out," Nancy said, which was true. She sat at her desk and opened her notepad. Wrote the date, the time, the name, without being asked. "What can we do for you, Mrs. Okafor?"

Mireille looked at her hands for a moment. They were folded in her lap, a musician's hands — Flora noticed the length of the fingers, the particular callus on the left index from years of pressing strings.

"My son," she said. "His name is Cliff. He's forty-four years old. He lives in Daly City. He has a good job — he manages a logistics warehouse, he's been there twelve years." She paused. "Eight months ago he stopped returning my calls."

The steam was coming up through the floor. It smelled today of cotton, something light being pressed.

"Have you tried to contact him?" Flora asked.

"Every week for eight months. I leave a message. He doesn't call back." She said it without self-pity, just the bare fact of it, the way a doctor states a diagnosis. "I drove to his building once. In the first month. I sat outside for an hour and then I drove home."

"Why didn't you go in?"

Mireille looked at her steadily. "Because he's forty-four years old," she said. "And if he doesn't want to see me, that is his right. I raised him to make his own decisions." A pause. "But I need to understand what I did. Even if it's something I can't fix."

Flora looked at her.

Nancy's pen was moving.

"Tell me about the last time you spoke," Flora said.

"April. He came for Easter. We had lunch — I cooked, he brought wine, we talked about his work, about the garden, about nothing in particular. He helped me carry some boxes from the garage down to the kerb for collection." She stopped. "He was quiet on the way out. Quieter than usual."

I thought he was tired." She looked at the shoebox on the floor beside her.
"Two weeks later he stopped calling."

"The boxes from the garage," Flora said.

Mireille looked at her. Something in her face shifted — very slightly, the way a well-maintained surface shows a crack only in certain light.

"Yes," she said.

"What was in them?"

A silence that went on two beats longer than it needed to.

"Old things," Mireille said. "Papers. I was clearing out."

Flora nodded as though this were sufficient, and let it rest there, and moved on, and did not look at Nancy, who had also, she knew, noticed.

Nancy wrote in the margin, small, in the shorthand she kept for herself:
garage. old things. she knows.

Below it, after a moment: *good day. clear so far. remember this.*

Chapter Two

The shoebox contained photographs.

Mireille set it on Flora's desk and removed the lid and stood back, the way you stood back from something you were offering rather than showing.

They were organised loosely by era — Flora could see the colour shift, the format change, the slow migration from prints with white borders to borderless to the slightly waxy finish of the late eighties. She didn't touch them yet.

"This is your life," Flora said.

"Some of it." Mireille sat back down. "The parts I kept."

Flora picked up the top photograph. A young woman outside a building that might have been a conservatory or a university — somewhere with columns, somewhere serious. She was laughing at something outside the frame, caught mid-turn, her coat half off one shoulder, a bag over her arm. The joy in it was completely unguarded.

"Lagos," Mireille said. "1976. I was twenty-three."

Flora set it down and picked up another. The same woman, older, a man beside her now — tall, very handsome in the way that announced itself as the first thing about him. A baby in her arms. San Francisco behind them, you could tell from the light.

"My husband Francis," Mireille said. "And Cliff. That would be 1980."

Flora moved through the photographs slowly. Cliff growing — a serious toddler, a gap-toothed six-year-old, a boy of seven or eight with his mother's eyes and his father's height already in his frame. Mireille at a piano. Mireille with students. Francis less and less frequently, and then the photographs stopped.

Flora looked at the last one. Cliff, nine years old approximately, in a school uniform, standing very straight, squinting slightly into the sun. He looked like a boy trying to look like a man and not quite knowing how.

She turned the photograph over. On the back, in pencil, almost worn away: *Cliff. April 1987.*

She put it down.

"The photographs stop in 1987," Flora said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Mireille looked at her hands again. The musician's hands, folded, still.

"Francis left in December 1987," she said. "After that I didn't take many photographs for a while. And then when I started again, it seemed strange to mix them in. So I kept them separate." She paused. "The later ones are somewhere. I didn't bring them."

Flora looked at her. Mireille looked back.

It was a true answer. Flora was certain of that. It was also not the whole truth, and Mireille knew that Flora knew, and neither of them addressed it, and the morning went on.

Nancy found Francis Okafor in twenty minutes.

She had her own ways of finding people — not databases exactly, not in the way the younger investigators used them, but the accumulated contacts of thirty years as a court stenographer, the people who owed her small professional courtesies, the particular network of a woman who had spent three decades being invisible in rooms where important things happened and had listened to every word.

Francis Okafor. Deceased November 2019. Obituary in the newsletter of St. Brendan's parish, Daly City. Survived by his wife Pauline, née Carroll, and their three children: James, 36; Aoife, 33; Daniel, 30.

Nancy read this twice. Then she did the arithmetic she suspected Flora would do and confirmed it.

Francis had married Pauline Carroll in 1990. James was born in 1989.

She wrote the dates in her notepad. Looked at them. Wrote one more thing in the margin, in the shorthand, and then she went and stood in the

doorway between the office and the small kitchen area where Flora was making a second cup of tea for Mireille Okafor and she said, quietly, "Flora. When you have a moment."

Flora looked at her over Mireille's head.

Nancy held up two fingers. Two minutes.

Flora nodded once.

Chapter Three

They stood in the small kitchen. The kettle had boiled. Flora left it.

Nancy showed her the notepad. Flora read it. Read it again.

"He had already started," Flora said.

"James was born in November 1989. Francis left Mireille in December 1987." Nancy kept her voice low and precise. "Fourteen months."

Flora looked at the wall. On the other side of it Mireille Okafor sat with her shoebox of photographs that stopped in April 1987, eight months before her husband left for a woman he had apparently already chosen.

"She may not know," Flora said.

"She may not know the dates," Nancy said carefully. "That is not the same as not knowing."

Flora was quiet for a moment.

"Cliff would have been nine," she said.

"Yes."

"Old enough to understand that his father left. Not old enough to understand why. Not then." She looked at Nancy. "But forty-four is old enough."

Nancy nodded. "If he found something in that garage. Papers. Documents." She paused. "A marriage certificate, for instance. Which would have a date."

Flora picked up the kettle. Poured the tea. Stood for a moment looking at the cup.

"She came here," Flora said, "to find out what she did."

"Yes."

"She knows what she did. Or didn't do."

"Yes," Nancy said. "I think so."

"So she came to find out something else."

They looked at each other.

"Cliff," Nancy said.

Flora picked up the cup and went back in.

Mireille stayed for another hour.

Flora asked her questions that seemed to be about Cliff and were partly about Cliff — his work, his life, whether he had a partner, friends, whether he seemed happy in the general run of things. Mireille answered carefully and well. He was not unhappy. He had a good friend called Raymond he'd known since college, they watched football together on weekends. He had been briefly engaged in his thirties, it hadn't worked out, he didn't discuss it. He was, Mireille said, a self-contained person. He had learned that young.

Learned it from whom, Flora did not say.

"What do you want us to do?" Flora asked.

Mireille looked at the shoebox. "I want to understand," she said, "what I did. So that when I see him again — if I see him again — I'm not asking him to explain it to me. I'm not putting that on him." She looked up. "He shouldn't have to be the one who tells me."

Flora held that for a moment.

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

"And if you find something I won't want to hear?"

"We'll tell you," Flora said. "That's what you're paying us for."

Mireille nodded. She put the lid back on the shoebox. She did not take it with her when she left — she set it on the edge of Flora's desk and walked out without it, the way you left something you'd been carrying long enough.

Nancy wrote the time in the margin: *11:47*.

Below it: *She left the box*.

Below that, smaller: *She already knows. She came to find out if he's all right*.

She looked at what she'd written.

Then she looked at it again, the way she sometimes looked at things now — making sure it was still there, that it said what she thought it said, that she could still trust her own shorthand.

It said what she thought it said.

She put the cap on her pen.

Chapter Four

Flora went to Daly City on Thursday afternoon.

She did not go to see Cliff. Not yet. She went to the warehouse on Bayshore — a logistics operation, mid-sized, the kind of place that moved things efficiently and quietly and expected the same from its people. She stood across the street and watched the loading bays for twenty minutes and then she walked around to the office entrance and showed her card to the woman at the front desk and asked if she could speak to the manager about a routine background inquiry.

She was told the manager was on the floor and would she like to wait.

She waited.

She was observing. She did not need to talk to Cliff today — she needed to see him, to take the measure of him before she sat across from him in a room, to know something about how he moved through a space that was his.

He came in from the warehouse side fifteen minutes later, still in a high-visibility vest, pulling it off over his head, already looking at the tablet in his other hand. He was tall, as she'd expected — he had his father's height, from the photograph, but he'd filled it differently, more solidly, a man who worked with his body as well as his head. His mother's eyes. The same set to the jaw.

He looked up and saw her.

Not at her — past her, at the woman at the desk, who tilted her head toward Flora. He looked at Flora then, a quick professional assessment, and came toward her.

"Cliff Okafor," he said. "Can I help you?"

"Flora Voss," she said. "Drake and Voss Investigations." She offered her card. "I was hoping for ten minutes."

He looked at the card. Something moved in his face — there and gone, very controlled.

"Is this about my mother," he said. Not a question.

"Yes."

He looked at her for a long moment. He had, she noticed, very still hands — one holding the tablet, one holding the vest, neither moving.

"Not here," he said. "There's a coffee place two blocks north. Give me ten minutes."

She waited outside. The afternoon was cool, a light wind off the bay, the smell of diesel and salt that was particular to this part of the city. She took out her recorder and did not press it. She was on a Thursday. She would have this.

Chapter Five

The coffee place was the kind that had been there since before the neighbourhood changed and hadn't changed with it — formica counters, a rotating pie stand with two options, coffee that came in a white cup without a sleeve. Cliff was already there when she arrived, in a corner booth, a cup in front of him, the high-vis vest gone.

Flora ordered coffee she would drink and sat across from him.

He looked at her steadily. He had his mother's composure — that particular quality of self-possession that came not from coldness but from long practice.

"She hired you to find out why I stopped calling," he said.

"She hired us to understand what she did," Flora said. "Those are different things."

He looked at her.

"She said: I need to understand what I did. Even if it's something I can't fix." Flora wrapped both hands around the cup. "That was the brief."

Cliff was quiet for a moment. Outside, a truck backed up to a loading dock across the street, its warning beep patient and indifferent.

"She didn't do anything," he said. "That's the problem."

Flora waited.

"I found a letter," he said. "In April. In the garage, in a box she was clearing out. Two letters, actually — one from a music program in Boston. A residency. 1987." He looked at his cup. "She'd been offered a six-month residency. Composition program, serious one. The letter said — it was a good letter. They wanted her."

"She turned it down," Flora said.

"She turned it down." He paused. "There was a second letter. Under it. My father's handwriting." He stopped. He pressed his lips together. "He told her if she went he'd be gone when she came back."

The pie stand rotated slowly in the corner. Lemon. Chocolate cream.

"He left anyway," Flora said. "Eight months later."

Cliff looked up. "You found that."

"My partner did."

He nodded. Looked at his coffee. "I didn't know that part until — I worked it out, after. How long he'd been. The other family." His voice was entirely level. The voice of a man who had been over this many times alone in a room and had burned through the first feelings and arrived at something quieter and more permanent. "She stayed for him and he was already gone. She gave up Boston for a man who was never going to stay."

"And you," Flora said quietly.

He looked at her.

"She stayed for you too," Flora said. "You were nine."

"I know that," he said. "I know that's true. I do know that." He turned the cup on its saucer, a small precise rotation. "But she never told me. She let me grow up thinking she was content. She let me think she had chosen this life. And she had chosen it, I understand that, she chose it over and over, she never stopped choosing it—" He stopped. "But I didn't know it was a choice. I didn't know what it cost her. And now I'm forty-four years old and I'm looking at my mother and I'm seeing all the years she spent being content at me and I don't know how to —"

He stopped.

Flora did not fill the silence.

"I don't know how to be in the same room with her," he said, "until I understand why she never told me."

Flora looked at him.

"I can't ask her," he said. "I'm not going to ask her. She's seventy-one years old and I'm not going to sit across from her and ask her to justify the choices she made when she was thirty-four and alone and frightened." He paused. "But I can't pretend I don't know."

The truck outside finished its maneuver. The beeping stopped.

"Mr. Okafor," Flora said. "Can I ask you something?"

He nodded.

"When you drove away in April. After you'd found the letters. What were you feeling?"

He thought about it seriously, the way his mother had thought about things — with full attention, not reaching for the easy answer.

"Grief," he said. "Not anger. I thought it would be anger but it wasn't." He looked at the window. "I was grieving something on her behalf. Something she never let herself grieve. And I didn't know what to do with that."

Flora held that.

Outside, the afternoon was doing its slow migration toward evening, the light going amber over the rooftops, the street finding its after-work rhythm.

"Your mother," Flora said, "did not tell us about the residency. She did not tell us about the letters. She told us she needed to understand what she did." She paused. "She knows what she did, Mr. Okafor. She's known for thirty-seven years."

He looked at her.

"She didn't come to us to find out what she did," Flora said. "She came to us to find out if you were all right."

The silence that followed was a different kind of silence than the ones that had come before it.

Cliff looked at the table. Then at the window. Then at Flora.

"Is she?" he said. "All right."

"She left us a shoebox of photographs," Flora said. "She carried it in and she told us about your father and about you, and when she left she didn't take it with her." She paused. "She's doing what she's always done. She's managing. She's very good at it." Another pause. "But she misses you. That's not manageable. That's just true."

Cliff put both hands flat on the table.

Musician's hands, Flora thought again. His mother's hands.

"I need some time," he said.

"I know."

"I'm not —" He stopped. "I'm not not going to call her. I'm going to call her. I just need to know what I'm going to say."

"You don't have to say everything," Flora said. "You don't have to say any of it, if you don't want to. You can just call."

He looked at her. "Is that what you'll tell her?"

Flora thought about Mireille Okafor, sitting in the client chair with her shoebox, her musician's hands folded in her lap. *I need to understand what I did. Even if it's something I can't fix.*

"No," Flora said. "I'm going to tell her something slightly different."

Chapter Six

She called Nancy from the street.

Nancy picked up on the second ring.

"He's all right," Flora said. "He's going to call her."

A pause. She heard the pen go down.

"How long?" Nancy asked.

"He didn't say. Soon, I think." Flora walked toward the BART station, the evening coming in off the bay, cool and salt-edged. "He's grieving something for her that she never let herself grieve. He just needs to figure out how to carry it without it being the first thing in the room."

Nancy was quiet for a moment. Then: "What are we going to tell her?"

Flora had been thinking about this since she'd left the coffee place. What Mireille needed to hear and what Mireille had actually asked for were not the same thing, and they were not so different that you could ignore the distance between them, and the question was which truth did the most good and which truth did the least harm and whether those were the same truth or two different ones.

"We tell her," Flora said, "that we spoke to Cliff. That he's well. That the estrangement isn't about her character or her love for him and it isn't permanent." She paused. "We tell her that he found something in the garage that he's been working through. And that she should perhaps consider, when he calls, being the first one to name it."

Silence on the other end.

"That's asking her to open a door she's kept shut for thirty-seven years," Nancy said.

"I know."

"She came to us so she wouldn't have to."

"I know that too." Flora stopped at the corner, waiting for the light. "But she's seventy-one, Nancy. And he's forty-four. And she left us the shoebox."

The light changed. Flora crossed.

"All right," Nancy said. "Come back. I'll put the kettle on."

Chapter Seven

Mireille Okafor came in the following morning.

She sat in the client chair again, straight-backed, composed, her coat buttoned, no shoebox this time. She looked at Flora and waited.

Flora told her what she had decided to tell her, in the order she had decided to tell it. That Cliff was well. That his silence wasn't about anger — that there was no anger in it. That he had found something in the garage in April, something that had given him a great deal to think about, and that he had been thinking about it in the way he did things, which was privately and carefully and at his own pace.

Mireille listened without moving.

"He's going to call you," Flora said. "I believe that. I don't think it will be long."

A silence.

"What did he find?" Mireille said.

Flora looked at her steadily. "I think you know what he found."

Mireille looked at the shoebox, still on the corner of Flora's desk where she'd left it.

"The residency letters," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

Something moved through Mireille's face — not surprise, not relief exactly. More like the feeling of setting down a weight you've carried so long you'd stopped noticing it.

"I should have thrown them away," she said.

"Perhaps," Flora said. "Or perhaps you kept them for the same reason you kept the photographs."

Mireille looked at her.

"You kept the before," Flora said. "The country of before. Even when you stopped visiting it."

Mireille was quiet for a long time. Outside, Clement Street was doing its morning business — the produce stalls opening, the bakery smell coming through from somewhere, a dog barking twice and stopping.

"I didn't tell him," Mireille said, "because I didn't want him to carry it. My choices. My losses. They were mine. He was a child." She paused. "And then he wasn't a child anymore and it was simply — it had been too long. There was no way to begin."

"There's a way to begin," Flora said. "When he calls."

Mireille looked at her.

"You don't have to explain everything," Flora said. "You don't have to justify anything. You can just say: I know what you found. And I should have told you long ago. And I'm sorry I let you carry this alone."

The steam was coming up through the floor, the dry cleaner's compressor in full morning operation. It smelled today of something floral, someone's good dress being restored.

"That's all?" Mireille said.

"That's enough to open the door," Flora said. "The rest you'll find when you're both on the other side of it."

Mireille sat for a moment. Then she reached over and picked up the shoebox from the corner of the desk. She held it in her lap. Looked at it.

"I was good," she said quietly. "I want you to know that. The residency — I was good enough. It wasn't a consolation prize." She looked up. "I've wondered sometimes if I let myself forget that."

"You were good enough," Flora said. "Don't forget it."

Mireille stood. She tucked the shoebox under her arm — the same way she'd carried it in, held close, something worth keeping.

"What do I owe you?" she said.

Nancy quoted her a figure. Mireille wrote a check without looking at the amount, the way people did when they had been managing the practical world for a long time and no longer needed to make a ceremony of it.

At the door she paused.

"Ms. Voss," she said. "The recorder you carry."

Flora looked at her.

"Does it help?"

Flora considered the question with the seriousness it deserved.

"It helps me stay inside my own life," she said. "Whether it helps is sometimes a different question."

Mireille looked at her for a moment. Then she nodded, the nod of someone who understood the distinction between those two things and had been living in the gap between them for a very long time.

She left. The door closed behind her. On the frosted glass her shadow moved and then was gone.

Nancy put the cap on her pen. Set it down parallel to the notepad.

"Well," she said.

"Yes," Flora said.

They sat for a moment in the quiet of the office, the morning doing its ordinary things around them, the street below getting on with itself.

"I'm going to look something up," Nancy said. She turned to her desk, opened a drawer, and began moving through it with the methodical patience of long habit. Flora watched her without appearing to. She had learned the rhythm of Nancy's good searches and Nancy's other searches, the ones that took a moment longer and ended with Nancy's hands going still on whatever she'd been moving through.

The drawer closed.

Nancy turned back to her notepad. She picked up her pen. She wrote something in the margin, in the small private shorthand.

Flora did not ask what it said.

She picked up the shoebox that was not hers and went to put it in the filing cabinet, in the drawer where they kept closed cases, and as she did she noticed that the top of the box, where the lid met the side, was slightly worn, the cardboard softened at the corner from years of being carried.

Some boxes, she thought, you held so long they took the shape of your arm.

Chapter Eight

She stayed after Nancy left.

It was becoming a habit, or had always been one, this particular solitude at the end of a case — the office quiet, the day's business concluded, the street below loosening into evening. She sat at her desk and turned her recorder over in her hands.

She thought about Mireille Okafor at twenty-three, laughing outside a building with columns, her coat half off her shoulder, caught mid-turn, joy completely unguarded. She thought about the woman who had sat in this chair — measured, composed, the shoebox held like something worth keeping.

The same person. The before and the after of the same person.

She thought about Cliff in a corner booth with his mother's hands flat on a formica table, grieving something on another person's behalf, not knowing what to do with the grief except carry it carefully until he found a way to put it down.

She thought about a letter kept in a box in a garage for thirty-seven years. The before country, preserved. Not visited but not surrendered.

Flora looked at the recorder.

She pressed record.

"Mireille Okafor," she said into it. "Seventy-one. She kept the letters because she needed to know the before was real. That she had been that person. That the choice was a real choice, which means the loss was a real loss, which means the life she built afterward was built on something solid and not on the pretense that there had been nothing to give up."

She clicked it off.

Sat for a moment.

Clicked it back on.

"Cliff is going to call her," she said. "I believe that. I don't always believe the things I tell clients, but I believe that one."

Off again.

Outside, Clement Street was doing its evening thing. The restaurants opening, the light shifting, the city loosening. Somewhere below, the dry cleaner's had locked up for the night. The steam was gone. The office smelled only of itself — paper and coffee and the faint accumulated scent of other people's problems, brought in and worked through and carried back out.

Flora held the recorder.

She thought about what Mireille had asked her. *Does it help?*

She thought about Wednesday evening, three weeks ago now, the darkness of this office, the recorder in her hands, the deliberate choice not to press it. The things she had kept in the place where kept things went. Ruth Calloway on the bottom stair with her mug of tea. Nancy not saying *I know that*. The taking of an arm.

Some things you recorded so you could find them again.

Some things you kept in yourself because they were yours and you were not ready to need them retrieved.

The difference between those two things was not the recorder. The difference was knowing which kind of thing you were holding.

She set the recorder down on the desk.

She put on her coat. She took the shoebox from the filing cabinet and looked at it for a moment — the worn corner, the softened edge — and then she put it back and closed the drawer.

She turned off the light.

She went down the stairs, past the fourth step where the carpet was loose, and out onto Clement Street, where the evening was fully itself, and she walked home without recording anything.

Just the city.

Just the ordinary irreplaceable Thursday of it all.

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

Mireille Okafor. 71. Son Cliff, 44, Daly City.

CLOSED.

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

Neither of them had fixed it.

Neither of them ever would.

End.