



DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

# The Book on the Bus

*a 321Lumina.com book*



by Blurt Snodgrass

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*A Drake & Voss Novella*

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## Chapter One

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He arrived on a Thursday morning in July walking slowly and without assistance, the walk of a man who had decided that walking without assistance was a matter of principle and was honoring that principle at some personal cost. Not frailty — principle. There was a difference and it was visible in the quality of the uprightness, the way he held himself inside the slowness.

He was eighty-four. Mexican, San Francisco's particular long-settled Mexican, the kind that came before the Mission was what the Mission became, the kind that had been here long enough that the city was his in a way that the newer arrivals couldn't quite claim, not because he owned anything but because he knew where everything was and remembered when it was something else. He wore good clothes for the occasion, the way his generation wore good clothes for occasions — a pressed shirt, trousers with a crease, shoes that had been shined. He carried a canvas bag and he moved through the door and up the stairs with the patience of someone who had stopped being in a hurry some years ago and had found that unhurry was not the loss he'd feared.

He sat.

He set the canvas bag on his knees.

He looked at the cork board.

He looked at it the way people looked at it when they were reading it carefully, the way the clients who had sent things back to it would have looked at it if they'd known it was there, the way you looked at a wall that was holding evidence of things that had mattered.

He looked at the eleven things.

He said nothing for a moment.

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

Good.

She waited.

"Mr. Vega," Flora said. "What do you need?"

He looked at her.

"I want to give something back," he said.

Flora looked at him.

"Not find something," he said. "Give something back." He reached into the canvas bag and produced a book. A paperback, the kind from the early 1960s, the paper the color of old honey, the spine cracked in the specific way of a book that has been read once with great intensity and then preserved rather than used. He set it on the desk between them with the care of someone setting down something that had weight beyond its physical weight.

Flora looked at it.

The cover was a novel she recognized — not famous exactly but known, a novel that had been significant in a particular moment and had since become the kind of thing that appeared on lists of underappreciated books from that period. She looked at the inside front cover.

In handwriting that was not Aurelio's — a woman's hand, the kind of handwriting taught in schools in the 1940s, the careful loops and the deliberate formation of letters that suggested someone who had learned to write as an act of respect for language — a name and a date.

*Elena Marsh. June 1963.*

"I found it on a bus," Aurelio said. "In the summer of 1963. I had been in San Francisco for six weeks. My English was not good. I was twenty-three years old." He looked at the book. "A woman was sitting beside me. She got off at her stop and I realized she had left the book on the seat. I called after her but she was in the crowd already. She didn't hear me or she didn't stop."

"You kept it," Flora said.

"I read it first," he said. "With a dictionary. My English was not good enough for it and I read it anyway, over many weeks, looking up every word I didn't know. By the time I finished I was better at English." He paused. "And the book had become something to me." He looked at it on

the desk. "You know how a book can become something to you. Not because of what it says, necessarily, though what it says is part of it. But because of the circumstances of reading it. Because of what you were going through when you read it and what it did for you."

"What were you going through?" Nancy said.

He looked at Nancy.

"I was alone," he said simply. "I was twenty-three and I was in a city that didn't know me yet and I had no one and my English was bad and I was frightened in a way I would not have admitted to anyone at the time." He paused. "And I read this book. And the book — the book was company." He paused. "Elena Marsh left her company on a bus and it became my company. For sixty-one years."

"You kept it for sixty-one years," Flora said.

"In a box, in a drawer, on a shelf. Always somewhere. Always there." He looked at his hands. "My wife knew about it. She thought it was — she was amused by it. She said: you have been waiting to return a library book for sixty years. She was not entirely wrong." He almost smiled. "She died four years ago. And now I am eighty-four and I think about what I want to do with the years I have left and what I want to not leave unfinished." He looked at the book. "This is unfinished."

"Elena Marsh," Flora said. "If she was at least twenty in 1963 she'd be over eighty now."

"I know," he said.

"She may not be alive," Flora said.

"I know that too," he said. He looked at the book. "If she's gone I want to find someone who belonged to her. Someone who will understand what it is." He paused. "Someone who will know what it meant that this book was in her bag on a July day in 1963 and that she read it enough to write her name in it and that she left it on a bus and a stranger kept it for sixty-one years." He looked at Flora. "I want someone to know that. Before I go."

Flora looked at the book on the desk.

*Elena Marsh. June 1963.*

"We'll find her," she said. "Or someone who knew her."

Aurelio nodded.

He did not pick up the book.

He left it on the desk.

"You'll need it," he said, "for the looking."

He stood, slowly, with the principle intact, and he went down the stairs and out into the July morning, and Flora sat for a moment looking at the book on the desk.

Nancy came and stood beside her.

They looked at it together.

"Elena Marsh," Nancy said.

"June 1963," Flora said.

"Sixty-one years," Nancy said.

"Yes."

Nancy looked at the book for a moment longer.

"Let me look at her handwriting," she said.

Flora opened the cover.

Nancy looked at the handwriting. The careful loops, the deliberate letters.

"She was educated somewhere that still taught penmanship," Nancy said. "This is pre-war penmanship. She learned to write before 1950, I'd say. Which means she was born before 1940, probably." She paused. "If she wrote her name in the book in June 1963 and she'd had it long enough to write her name in it —"

"It was a new book," Flora said. "June 1963. She may have bought it and written her name in it immediately. People who cared about their books did that."

"Then she could have been any age," Nancy said. "Twenty and buying a new novel, or forty and buying a new novel." She looked at the name. "But the handwriting suggests someone who was at least thirty. The penmanship is a woman who learned to write with full attention, not a hurried learner." She paused. "My estimate: born between 1920 and 1935. She'd be between eighty-nine and one hundred and four now."

"Gone, most likely," Flora said.

"Most likely," Nancy agreed. She looked at the book. "But someone will know her."

## The Book on the Bus

## Chapter Two

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Elena Marsh was a name that appeared in San Francisco in several ways.

Nancy searched the city directory for 1963 and found two Elena Marshes — one in the Richmond, one in the Sunset. She searched the voter rolls for 1962 and found one Elena R. Marsh, registered address in the Inner Sunset, on 9th Avenue.

She searched for Elena Marsh in the death records.

Elena Ruth Marsh had died in 2019. She had been ninety-one years old.

Born 1928. Which put her at thirty-five in June 1963, sitting on a bus in San Francisco, a book in her bag with her name written in it in the handwriting she'd learned before the war.

"She died in 2019," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "But she was here until 2019. Ninety-one years." She paused. "Eighty-nine of them with a book she didn't know she'd lost."

Flora looked at the obituary Nancy had found, brief, from a neighborhood paper online.

*Elena Ruth Marsh, 91, died peacefully at home on the 14th of March, 2019. A longtime resident of the Inner Sunset, Elena worked for thirty years as a librarian at the San Francisco Public Library, retiring in 1993. She was a devoted reader, a lover of gardens, and a generous friend to many. She is survived by her daughter, Margaret Lorne, of Palo Alto, and her grandson, Daniel Lorne.*

Flora read it twice.

"A librarian," she said.

"For thirty years," Nancy said.

"She wrote her name in her books," Flora said. "Because she was a librarian. Because she understood that books needed to know who they

belonged to."

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

"She probably wondered what happened to it," Flora said. "At some point she noticed it was gone. She would have noticed."

Nancy looked at the obituary.

"A devoted reader," she said. "She would have noticed."

Flora looked at the book on the desk.

"Her daughter," she said. "Margaret Lorne. Palo Alto."

"I'll find her," Nancy said.

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Margaret Lorne was sixty-three, which meant she had been born in 1961, which meant she was two years old in June 1963 when her mother sat on a bus in San Francisco with a new novel in her bag and her name written on the inside cover.

Nancy found her through the ordinary channels — a professional listing in Palo Alto, a retired teacher. She had a phone number that was on the public record.

Flora called on a Tuesday.

She noted this.

Margaret answered on the second ring with the voice of someone who answered calls attentively, who was present to whoever was calling. A teacher's voice. The voice of someone accustomed to giving their full attention.

Flora introduced herself. Said she was a private investigator in San Francisco. Said she was calling about Elena Marsh.

A pause.

"My mother," Margaret said. "She died in 2019."

"Yes," Flora said. "I know. I'm calling because someone has something that belonged to her. A book she left on a bus in the summer of 1963. The man who found it has kept it for sixty-one years and wants to return it."

A silence.

A long one.

"A book," Margaret said.

"A novel. Her name is written on the inside cover. Elena Marsh, June 1963."

Another silence.

"She always wrote her name in her books," Margaret said slowly. "She did it her whole life. Even when she retired she did it. I have her books — she left me her books. They all have her name in them." She paused. "She was a librarian. She said: books need to know who they belong to."

"Yes," Flora said. "That's what I thought."

"She lost a book once," Margaret said. "I remember her mentioning it. When I was older, when I was a teenager. She said she'd left a book on a bus years ago and she'd always wondered what happened to it." She paused. "I don't know if it was this one. I don't know if she knew which book it was."

"The novel is from 1963," Flora said. "The date in the cover is June 1963."

Margaret was quiet.

"June 1963," she said. "I was two years old. My father had just left." She paused. "I don't know if that's relevant. It's just —" She stopped. "She was reading a lot that summer. She was working at the library and she was reading everything she could get her hands on and she was managing." She paused. "She was always managing. That was what she did. She managed things and she read books."

Flora held the phone.

She thought about Elena Marsh in June 1963, thirty-five years old, a librarian, her husband recently gone, a two-year-old daughter at home, sitting on a bus with a new novel and her name written on the inside cover, managing.

"Ms. Lorne," Flora said. "Would you be willing to receive the book? The man who found it very much wants to give it back."

"Yes," Margaret said. Without hesitation. "Yes. Of course."

She paused.

"Can I ask — what's his name? The man who kept it."

"Aurelio Vega," Flora said.

"He's been keeping it for sixty-one years," Margaret said.

"Yes."

"Why?" she said. Not accusingly. With genuine curiosity.

Flora thought about what Aurelio had said. About being twenty-three and alone and in a city that didn't know him yet and frightened in a way he would not have admitted to anyone. About the book becoming company.

"He was newly arrived from Mexico City," Flora said. "His English wasn't good. He read the book with a dictionary. By the time he finished he was better at English and the book had become something to him." She paused. "He said it was company. When he needed company."

A long silence.

"My mother would have understood that," Margaret said. "That a book could be company." She paused. "She would have been glad it went to someone who needed it."

"Yes," Flora said. "I think it went to exactly the right person in 1963."

"And now it's coming home," Margaret said.

"Yes," Flora said. "If that's all right."

"It's all right," Margaret said. "It's more than all right."

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## Chapter Three

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She called Aurelio.

She told him about Elena — the librarian, the Inner Sunset, the thirty years at the public library, the name written in every book. She told him about the husband who had recently left and the two-year-old daughter and the summer of reading and managing.

She told him Elena had died in 2019 at ninety-one.

He was quiet.

"Ninety-one," he said.

"Yes."

"She had a long life," he said.

"Yes. She was a librarian until she retired. She left her books to her daughter."

He was quiet again.

"She left a book on a bus," he said. "And she had eighty-nine more years." He paused. "Good." He said it the way Nancy said it — the word of confirmation, the word that meant: the thing I needed to know is known.

"Her daughter wants to receive the book," Flora said. "She's in Palo Alto. She said her mother would have understood about the book being company."

He was quiet for a moment.

"I want to bring it myself," he said. "If that's acceptable. I want to put it in her hands."

"I'll ask," Flora said.

Margaret said yes.

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He came in the following week to collect the book.

He came the same way he'd come before — the pressed shirt, the good shoes, the principle of walking without assistance intact. He sat in the client chair and Nancy quoted the fee and he wrote the check without looking at the amount and he looked at the book on the desk.

"May I?" he said.

Flora passed it to him.

He took it. He held it the way he'd held it when he came in — with the weight of sixty-one years acknowledged in the holding. He opened the cover and looked at the name inside.

*Elena Marsh. June 1963.*

He looked at it for a long time.

"She was managing," he said. "That summer. Her husband had left. She had a small daughter. She was managing and she was reading." He closed the book. "I was managing too. Different things. But managing." He paused. "We were both on the bus, managing."

"Yes," Flora said.

"I'm going to tell Margaret that," he said. "When I give her the book. That her mother was managing and that the book helped someone else manage too. That the book did double work." He paused. "Margaret should know that about her mother. That something she left behind by accident did work in the world."

Flora looked at the cork board.

The eleven things. The returns from the outside.

"That's exactly what she should know," Flora said.

He put the book in the canvas bag. He stood.

At the door he stopped.

He looked at the cork board.

He looked at it for a long time — all eleven things, the accumulation, the sequence of them.

"This room," he said. "It sends things out and things come back."

"Yes," Flora said.

"Like a library," he said.

Nancy made a small sound that was not quite a laugh but was adjacent to one.

"Yes," Flora said. "Like a library."

He looked at the card stock above the door.

*What do you actually know. Not what you feel. What you know.*

He read it.

He nodded once, the nod of a man encountering a sentence that said the thing correctly.

"Elena would have liked that," he said. "She was a librarian. She believed in knowing things properly." He paused. "She believed in the difference between knowing and feeling." He paused. "All good librarians do."

He went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.



## Chapter Four

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Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and they sat in the July office, the summer afternoon making the room warm, the window open onto Clement Street, the sounds of the street coming in with the air.

"Elena Marsh," Nancy said.

"Elena Marsh," Flora said.

"She wrote her name in her books because she was a librarian," Nancy said. "Because books need to know who they belong to."

"Yes."

"And because she wrote her name in this one," Nancy said, "Aurelio knew who to return it to. Sixty-one years later."

"Yes," Flora said. "The name did the work. All those years later. She wrote it in 1963 not knowing it would be needed in 2024."

Nancy held her tea.

"The long record," she said. "What Cecile's mother put underwater. What Thomas Spry wrote in his students' margins. What Ida Swann said to Wallace and what Eilidh kept on a CD in Stockbridge." She paused. "The record reaches. Even when you don't know it will."

Flora looked at the window.

The July afternoon. Clement Street. The dry cleaner below, the steam not running in the July heat, the building quiet in its lower floors, the office existing in its own particular atmosphere above the ordinary business of the block.

"The book did double work," she said. "Aurelio said that. The book helped him manage when he was twenty-three and alone, and now he's going to give it to Margaret and it will be evidence that her mother left

something behind that mattered to someone." She paused. "Elena Marsh never knew she did that. She got off the bus and the book was gone and she probably wondered about it and then she got on with managing."

"She managed for eighty-nine more years," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"And now her daughter is going to know," Nancy said, "that the book her mother left on a bus in 1963 was picked up by a twenty-three-year-old Mexican man who had no English and no one and that he carried it for sixty-one years and got better at English reading it and found it was company when he needed company." She paused. "That's a good thing to know about your mother."

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

Nancy looked at the notepad.

She was quiet for a while.

Flora watched her — the quality of the quiet, the specific quality, the thinking quiet rather than the other quiet, the presence in it.

"I've been thinking," Nancy said, "about what we've kept."

Flora looked at her.

"The cork board," Nancy said. "The eleven things. Each one is something that came back from someone we found something for. The record of the finding." She paused. "But we keep other things too. Things we don't pin to the board." She looked at the desk drawer. "Things in the drawer."

Flora looked at the drawer.

"The piece of paper," Nancy said. "The one you put in the drawer. Tell Flora."

Flora looked at her.

"I know it's still there," Nancy said. "I haven't asked you to move it. I put it in the bin and you found it and you put it in the drawer and I heard the drawer and I knew." She paused. "I've wanted to ask you to take it out of the drawer. To pin it to the board. Because it's part of the record." She paused. "But I didn't know if that was — I didn't know if it was right to ask."

Flora looked at the drawer.

Nancy looked at it too.

"It's right," Flora said.

She opened the drawer. The piece of paper was still there, on top of the spare battery and the two pens and the card from a case three years ago. Two inches square, torn along the perforation. She took it out.

She looked at it.

*Tell Flora.*

And below that, in different ink:

*Today.*

She held it for a moment.

Then she went to the cork board.

She found a pin.

She pinned the piece of paper to the cork board, below the eleven things, below the card that said *Tell him he was right* and the postcard of the lake and the cream note in fountain pen and all the rest.

She stepped back.

The twelfth thing.

Two words and one more word.

*Tell Flora. Today.*

She stood for a moment looking at it.

"It belongs there," Nancy said from her desk. "It's evidence. Of what was there."

"Yes," Flora said.

"Of what I knew and couldn't say and finally said," Nancy said.

"Yes."

"And of what you knew and waited for," Nancy said.

Flora turned and looked at her.

Nancy was looking at the cork board with the expression she wore when something had been received and acknowledged and could now be part of the record rather than part of the carrying.

"The record," Nancy said. "It reaches. Even when you don't know it will."

Flora looked at the twelve things.

The Farallon Islands above the door.

The card stock in Nancy's handwriting that Nancy had said without knowing she was saying it.

The twelve things that had come from outside the room and the one thing that had been inside the room all along.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She waited for the next case.

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*A month later Aurelio sent a note.*

*Brief, in the handwriting of a man who had learned to form his English letters carefully because he'd learned them from a dictionary and a novel on a bus in 1963.*

*It said: Margaret cried. She said her mother would have wanted him to keep it longer. I told her sixty-one years was long enough. She laughed. She has her mother's eyes.*

*Below that, one more line:*

*The book is home.*

*Flora pinned it to the cork board.*

*Thirteen things.*

*Nancy looked at it.*

*She looked at the piece of paper beside it.*

*Tell Flora. Today.*

*She picked up her pen.*

*She wrote the date.*

*She wrote the time.*

*She read both.*

*She looked at both again.*

*Good.*

*The work continued.*

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*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.  
The sign on the frosted glass door was still slightly crooked.  
Neither of them had fixed it.  
Neither of them ever would.*

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*End.*