

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

The Firm Before

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

The Firm Before

The Firm Before

A Drake & Voss Novella

Blurt Snodgrass

321Lumina.com

Chapter One

He arrived on a Tuesday in March, which Flora noted the way she noted all Tuesdays — with the full present attention of someone who understood that this Tuesday was hers to keep, that it would not be taken in the night and given back to her in reconstructed form. She was here. She would have this.

He was eighty-eight. The eighty-eight of a man who had gone through his eighties without drama, who had arrived at the far end of them still himself, still attending, the quality of presence undiminished even as the physical had diminished around it in the way of an old building where the structure remained sound and the surface showed its years. He used a cane with the honest simplicity of someone who needed it — not Aurelio Vega's cane of principle, not Honorine Castets's cane of punctuation, but the plain cane of a man who had accepted what required accepting and used the tools available.

He came up the stairs slowly.

He sat in the client chair with the care of someone who lowered themselves into chairs with attention now, who knew the specific inventory of what the sitting required.

He looked at the cork board.

He looked at the twenty-one things on it.

He looked at them for a long time.

Not reading them the way some clients read them — quickly, taking in the accumulation. Reading them slowly, the way you read something when you suspected it contained more than it showed.

Then he looked at the sign on the frosted glass door.

The sign that said Drake and Voss Private Investigators, 2nd Floor, By Appointment.

The sign that was slightly crooked.

"I have been here before," he said.

Flora looked at him.

Nancy came in, hung her coat, wrote the name. Wrote the time.

Read both.

Looked at them again.

Good.

She sat very still at her desk.

"When?" Flora said.

"1987," he said. "There was a different name on the door then. A different firm. But the office was the same — second floor above the dry cleaner, the frosted glass, the sign." He looked at the sign. "The sign was crooked then too."

Flora looked at the sign.

The sign had been crooked since they moved in. She had always assumed they had made it crooked, or had inherited it crooked and left it that way, and that it would stay crooked because neither of them had fixed it and they never would. She had not thought about what came before.

"There was a firm here before us," Flora said. "We took the office in 2001. We don't know the firm's history."

"Voss and Drake Investigations," the man said. "The name was reversed then. Voss first, then Drake." He paused. "I remember because I thought it was unusual, the woman's name first. It was 1987."

Flora held very still.

Nancy held very still.

The office was quiet in a specific way — the way it was quiet when something was happening that required all the attention available.

"Mr. Vane," Flora said. "Tell me why you're here."

He looked at the cork board again.

"In 1987," he said, "I came to this office to find my wife. Her name was Constance. We had been separated for eleven years — not divorced, not by choice, by circumstances." He paused. "The firm found her. I went to her."

We had sixteen years together before she died in 2003."

He said this with the complete integration of someone for whom the loss had had twenty years to become part of the architecture of the self — not gone, not diminished, but structural.

"I am here now," he said, "because I want to find the records of that case. Not Constance — I know everything about Constance. I want to find the record of the finding. The notes, the process, what the trail looked like from the outside. Because from the inside it felt like a miracle and I am eighty-eight years old and I would like to understand the miracle before I don't have the chance to."

"We don't have records from before 2001," Flora said. "The office, not the records."

"I know," he said. "I expected that. But someone has those records, or someone knows what happened to them. Or someone remembers." He paused. "And there is one more thing."

Flora waited.

"The investigator who found Constance," he said. "I remember her name. I remember it because I wrote her a letter after, when Constance and I were settled, a thank-you letter, and I addressed it to her by name." He paused. "Her name was Marion Voss."

The office was very quiet.

"Voss," Flora said.

"Yes," he said. "Same name as on the door now. Different order — Voss and Drake then, Drake and Voss now." He looked at Flora directly. "Are you related to her?"

Flora looked at him.

She looked at the sign on the frosted glass door.

"She was my mother," she said.

There was a moment that was not like ordinary moments.

Not dramatic — nothing in the office moved, the steam continued to rise through the floor, Clement Street continued outside the window. But the moment had a different weight to it, the weight of something that had been in the room all along without being visible, and was now visible.

Solomon Vane looked at her.

"Your mother," he said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"She was extraordinary," he said. "I want you to know that. She was exact and patient and she understood things quickly and she never made me feel that what I was asking for was unreasonable." He paused. "I was asking for something that felt unreasonable. Eleven years separated from my wife. I had almost given up and then I came here." He paused. "She found Constance in six weeks."

Flora looked at the door.

The sign that had been on the door since before she and Nancy took the office, which she had always assumed was left by whoever was here before, which she now understood was left by her mother.

"She left the office to you," Nancy said quietly from her desk.

Flora looked at her.

"The sign was there when we moved in," Nancy said. "We assumed it was from a previous tenant. But if the firm was Voss and Drake —"

"She left the office," Flora said. "She left the sign." She paused. "She left it crooked."

She stood.

She went to the sign on the frosted glass door and she looked at it closely, more closely than she had looked at it in twenty-three years of it being in this room.

It was screwed to the door at one corner. The top right screw was gone — the hole was there but the screw was not, which was why the sign hung at its slight angle, the right side lower than the left, the particular crookedness that neither of them had fixed and never would.

Flora put her finger on the empty screw hole.

She looked at the sign.

Voss and Drake Investigations. 2nd Floor. By Appointment.

No — that wasn't what it said. That was what she had assumed it would say if she had read it. She had never read it. She had never looked.

She read it.

Drake and Voss Private Investigators. 2nd Floor. By Appointment.

The same sign.

The same words.

Her mother's sign. Left here when the firm became something else or ended or passed on. Left here for whoever came next.

She turned.

Solomon Vane was watching her.

"She retired in 1998," he said. "I know because I sent her a card when I heard — through mutual connections, people who had used her services over the years. She retired in 1998 and I heard she was unwell." He paused. "She died in 2000, I believe. I'm sorry."

"Yes," Flora said. "2000."

She looked at Nancy.

Nancy was looking at the notepad. Then she looked up.

"You didn't know the office was hers," Nancy said.

"I knew she had an office," Flora said. "I knew she was an investigator. We weren't — we weren't in close contact in her later years." She paused. "I took this office in 2001 because it was available and the rent was right and it was above a dry cleaner which I liked for reasons I didn't examine." She paused. "I didn't know."

The office was quiet.

"Or you knew," Nancy said. "Without knowing you knew."

Flora looked at the sign.

The crooked sign.

"Yes," she said. "Maybe."

Chapter Two

She sat down.

She sat at her desk and she looked at Solomon Vane and she said: tell me about Constance. Tell me what my mother found.

He told her.

He and Constance had been married in 1970. They had been young — he was thirty-three, she was twenty-nine — and they had loved each other with the specific completeness of people who had found the right person and knew it. They had four years together before the separation.

The separation was not a choice. He had been working for an organization he declined to name specifically — government-adjacent, he said, in an era when government-adjacent work sometimes required things of people that those people did not speak about in detail later. He had been sent abroad. He had not been able to tell Constance where he was going or when he would return. He had gone.

He was gone for seven years.

When he came back — to the United States, to San Francisco — Constance was gone. She had waited four years and then she had moved. Disappeared not from him specifically but from the life they had shared, the apartment, the friends, the neighborhood. Gone in the way that people went when they had decided to begin again somewhere else.

He had tried to find her himself.

He had tried for four years.

In 1987 he came to this office.

"Marion Voss listened to me for two hours," he said. "She asked questions I hadn't thought to ask. She said: what do you know about who she was before you met her? What did she love before she loved you?"

Where would she go if she was starting again — not a place, a kind of life?" He paused. "Those questions. I hadn't asked those questions. I had been looking for her based on who she was with me. Marion said: find who she was before you. Then find where that person would go."

Flora looked at the window.

She thought about her mother asking those questions.

She asked those questions. She had always asked those questions. She had not known she learned them here, in this office, from the woman who had left the sign on the door.

"Where did she go?" Flora said.

"A small town in Oregon," he said. "She had grown up near there. She had a cousin there. She had gone back to the landscape she'd come from and she was working as a librarian and she had a small house and she had built a life that was complete on its own terms." He paused. "She had not looked for me. She thought I was dead." He paused. "The organization I worked for — there were times when they didn't correct that assumption when people formed it." He looked at his hands. "She thought I was dead and she had grieved me and built her life again."

"And then you appeared," Flora said.

"And then I appeared," he said. "Which was its own complication. She had built her life. I was arriving into it with my own life. Eleven years of separation is not nothing. People become different people." He paused. "We spent three months writing letters. Marion suggested that — she said: don't go immediately. Write first. Let her know you're real before you ask her to see you." He paused. "Good advice."

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

"We met in December 1987," he said. "In the town in Oregon. We talked for four days. And then she came to San Francisco and we began again." He looked at the cork board. "Sixteen years. She died in 2003. A stroke, very sudden." He paused. "I had been afraid, for those sixteen years, that the arrival had disrupted her built life, that I had taken something from her by coming back. She told me, at the end — she knew at the end that it was ending — she told me: you didn't take anything. You gave back something I had given up on." He paused. "I've thought about those words ever since."

The room was quiet.

The March light came through the window at the angle it came in March, the particular angle of late winter becoming spring, not yet warm but suggesting warmth.

"The records," Flora said. "What my mother kept. We'll try to find them."

"I know it may not be possible," he said. "Thirty-seven years. Records don't always survive."

"No," Flora said. "But we'll try."

Chapter Three

She looked for three weeks.

She looked in the ways available to her — she was, after all, an investigator, and finding things was the work. She found the registration of the firm Voss and Drake Investigations, filed with the state of California in 1979. She found the business license renewals through 1997. She found the lease records for the Clement Street office, which showed Marion Voss as the primary lessee from 1979 to 1999, when the lease transferred to a property management company that had held it until Flora and Nancy arrived in 2001.

She found Marion Voss in the records of the private investigation licensing board, licensed from 1978 to 1998.

She found an obituary in the San Francisco Chronicle from November 2000. Brief, the way her mother had been brief — Marion Agnes Voss, sixty-one, private investigator, survived by a daughter, Flora.

She read it.

She had read it before, twenty-four years ago. She had not read it since.

She read it again.

Nancy found the records.

Not Flora's mother's records specifically — those were gone, the thirty-seven years of cases filed somewhere Flora couldn't reach, possibly destroyed, possibly in a storage unit belonging to an estate that no longer existed. But Nancy found something else.

She found Drake.

The Drake in Voss and Drake.

Nancy found, through the business registration records and then through a quiet inquiry with an old contact at the court system, that Voss and Drake had been a partnership — Marion Voss and a woman named Eleanor Drake, who had been Marion's partner in the firm from 1979 to 1991, when Eleanor Drake had retired.

Eleanor Drake was ninety-one years old.

She lived in a senior living community in Marin.

"She's alive," Nancy said.

Flora looked at her.

"Eleanor Drake is alive," Nancy said. "She was Marion's partner for twelve years. She retired in 1991 but she knew the firm. She knew the cases." She paused. "She may remember Solomon Vane."

She called Eleanor Drake on a Thursday.

A woman answered who was clearly staff — the residential community, a gentle voice that said she'd check if Ms. Drake was available. A pause. Then a voice that was ninety-one years old and entirely present, the voice of someone whose mind was still sharply functional, who had clearly been told there was a call about Marion Voss and had come to the phone with full attention.

"I'm Flora Voss," Flora said. "Marion's daughter."

A silence.

"Flora," Eleanor Drake said. "Marion talked about you."

Flora held the phone.

"I know you didn't have a close relationship," Eleanor said. "She talked about that too. She regretted it." A pause. "She was proud of you. She followed what you did. She knew you took the office."

Flora looked at the sign on the door.

"She left the sign," Flora said.

"Yes," Eleanor said. "She left it deliberately. She said: someone will come who belongs there. Leave the sign." A pause. "She thought it might be you. She didn't know for certain. But she left it."

Flora was quiet for a moment.

"Ms. Drake," she said. "I have a client named Solomon Vane. He came to the office in 1987. My mother found his wife — a woman named Constance who had been separated from him for eleven years. He wants to understand how she found her. He wants to know the record of the finding."

A longer silence.

"Solomon Vane," Eleanor said. "I remember that case. Not the details — it was Marion's case, I wasn't directly involved. But I remember because she was —" She paused. "She was moved by it. Marion didn't talk about cases much, professional habit, but that one she mentioned. She said: there's a man looking for his wife who has been looking for eleven years and he is still looking with the same quality of attention he started with. She said that was unusual. She said most people's attention degraded after a few years. His hadn't."

"He's eighty-eight now," Flora said. "He wants to understand the miracle of it. How she found her."

Eleanor was quiet.

"The records from before 1991 are in a storage unit in Daly City," she said. "I kept them when I retired. Marion asked me to keep them — she said: someone may need them someday." A pause. "I've been paying the storage fees for thirty-three years because Marion asked me to and because she was right that someone might need them." A pause. "It sounds like that someone is here."

Chapter Four

They went to Daly City on a Saturday.

Eleanor Drake met them there — she came in a car driven by someone from the residential community, a young man who helped her out of the car and waited, and she walked to the storage unit with a cane and the specific quality of someone who had been keeping a thing safe for thirty-three years and was now, finally, handing it over.

She was ninety-one and she was formidable in the way that some ninety-one-year-olds were formidable — not despite their age but through it, the way age had clarified rather than diminished, had stripped away everything that wasn't essential and left what was.

She looked at Flora for a long time when they met.

"You look like her," she said. "Around the eyes."

"I know," Flora said.

Eleanor unlocked the storage unit.

Inside: filing cabinets, four of them, the old kind, metal, the kind that had been manufactured to last and had. Each drawer labeled in a hand that was not Eleanor's — Marion's hand, the hand of her mother, the small precise handwriting of a woman who had kept thirty years of other people's cases organized and findable.

Alphabetical. Chronological within alphabetical.

V for Vane.

Eleanor opened the drawer and found the folder and handed it to Flora.

Flora held it.

She looked at the label in her mother's handwriting.

Vane, Solomon. March 1987 — September 1987.

She opened it.

Inside: case notes. In Marion Voss's handwriting, dated and timed in the margin like — Flora looked at them, and then she looked at Nancy, and Nancy was looking at the notes and her expression was the expression she wore when something had landed in a particular way.

Dated and timed in the margin. Like court transcripts.

"She kept notes like yours," Flora said.

Nancy looked at her.

"Or I keep notes like hers," Nancy said.

Flora looked at the case notes. The first entry, March 1987. The questions Marion had asked Solomon Vane. The same questions he had quoted to Flora — *What do you know about who she was before you met her? What did she love before she loved you?*

Written in the margin beside those questions, small: *These are the right questions. Find the before.*

Flora looked at this.

She looked at it for a long time.

Find the before.

She thought about her mother sitting in this office — the same office, the same second floor, the same frosted glass — writing this in the margin of a case note in 1987.

She thought about Cecile Morrow, the geologist, who said: I spend my life reading the record of what was there before. I need to read this record.

She thought about Pauline Sark, the architect, who said: I think about what comes before a building. How the ground shapes what you put on it.

Find the before.

Her mother had been finding the before since 1979.

Flora had been finding the before since 2001.

The same office. The same sign. The same work.

She brought the folder to Solomon Vane.

She brought it to his apartment in Russian Hill — a neat apartment, the apartment of someone who had lived carefully in a space and had organized it for the life he lived in it, the books and the photographs and the objects of

a long life arranged without clutter. On the mantelpiece, a photograph of a woman — not young, in her late fifties perhaps, looking at the camera with the quality of someone who had arrived somewhere she intended to stay.

Constance.

Flora set the folder on the table.

Solomon Vane looked at it.

He looked at Marion Voss's handwriting on the label.

He opened it.

He read slowly.

Flora sat across from him and did not speak, the discipline of waiting that the work had taught her, the understanding that some reading required the full space of its own time.

He read for forty minutes.

When he finished he closed the folder and set his hands on it.

"She asked the right questions," he said.

"Yes," Flora said. "She did."

"Find the before," he said. "That was the key. Constance had gone back to her before — the landscape she'd come from, the cousin, the life she'd had before me. Marion understood that people went back to their before when they needed to start again." He paused. "She found Constance in six weeks because she understood that."

"Yes," Flora said.

He looked at her.

"You do the same work," he said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"In the same office," he said.

"In the same office."

He looked at the photograph on the mantelpiece.

"Constance met your mother once," he said. "After we were settled. Marion came to dinner — she said she never did that, she said it was outside her professional practice, but she came. She and Constance talked for three hours. I barely got a word in." He almost smiled. "Constance said afterward: she is someone who finds people by understanding them. She said: that's a gift." He paused. "She meant it about Marion. She didn't know

she was also describing you."

Flora looked at the folder.

"Can I keep this?" she said. "The folder. I'll make you a copy of everything."

He looked at her.

"It's yours," he said. "It always was."

Chapter Five

She brought the folder back to the office.

She set it on her desk and she sat for a moment looking at it.

Nancy came and stood beside her.

They looked at the folder together.

Vane, Solomon. March 1987 — September 1987.

"The same notes," Nancy said. "The same margin system."

"Yes," Flora said.

"She taught herself the same things," Nancy said. "The margin notes, the dating, the timing. Or you learned it from somewhere that came from her."

Flora looked at the folder.

She thought about learning. About the things that were taught and the things that were absorbed and the things that emerged from somewhere you couldn't trace, the skills that felt native rather than acquired.

She had not grown up with her mother. They had not been close. She had not sat in this office watching Marion Voss work.

And yet.

"The before," she said.

"Yes," Nancy said.

"She found before," Flora said. "She found who people were before they became who they'd been trying to be. She found the version that was there before the adult version, before the accomplished version, before the chosen version." She paused. "That's what we do."

"Yes," Nancy said. "That's what we do."

Flora opened the folder.

She looked at the first case note. The questions in the margin. The small precise handwriting of a woman she had not known as well as she should have.

What did she love before she loved you? Where would she go if she was starting again — not a place, a kind of life?

She picked up her pen.

She looked at the notepad.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She looked at both.

She looked at them again.

She put her pen down.

She looked at Nancy.

"She left the sign," she said.

"Yes," Nancy said.

"For whoever came next," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "And you came."

"And I came," Flora said.

She looked at the sign on the frosted glass door.

The crooked sign.

The top right screw missing, the sign hanging at its slight angle, the right side lower than the left.

She looked at it for a long time.

Then she picked up her pen again.

She wrote at the top of a fresh page: *Marion Agnes Voss. 1939 — 2000. Investigator.*

She looked at what she'd written.

She did not know what she was going to do with it. That was all right. Some things you wrote because they needed to be written, because the record needed them, because they were true and true things belonged in the record.

She put the cap on the pen.

She looked at the cork board.

The twenty-one things.

She stood and went to the cork board and she took the case note from the folder — the first case note, March 1987, the questions in the margin — and she pinned it to the cork board below the twenty-one things.

Find the before.

The twenty-second thing.

She stepped back.

Nancy was looking at the cork board.

"It was always there," Nancy said. "The before. It was there before we were there."

"Yes," Flora said. "It was."

They stood looking at the cork board.

The Farallon Islands above the door.

The twenty-two things below.

The sign on the door still crooked, the screw still missing, the sign hanging the way it had hung since 1979 or before, the way it would hang until the building fell down or the firm ended or something larger than either of them decided it was time.

"Good?" Nancy said.

Flora looked at the sign.

"Good," she said.

The work continued.

Solomon Vane called the following week.

He said: I found Constance's letters. She kept my letters from 1987 — the ones I wrote during the three months before we met again. She kept them in a box. I knew she kept them but I hadn't looked at them since she died.

He said: I read them this week. I read what I wrote in 1987 when I was trying to convince her I was real. I was not a good writer. The letters were awkward and earnest and I said the same things several times because I didn't trust that I was being understood.

He said: she kept every one.

He said: I want to add something to your cork board. Not from me. From Constance. She wrote one letter back — just one, in October 1987, before we met. I have it. I've always had it. I want to bring it.

He came on a Thursday.

He brought the letter in its envelope, fifty-seven-year-old paper, Constance's handwriting on the outside, his name.

He held it for a moment.

Then he gave it to Flora.

Flora looked at it.

She looked at Solomon Vane.

She went to the cork board.

She found a pin.

She pinned it below the twenty-two things.

The twenty-third thing.

A letter in an envelope addressed to a man who had been looking for eleven years and found.

Solomon Vane looked at the cork board.

He looked at all twenty-three things.

He looked at the case note in Marion Voss's handwriting.

Find the before.

He looked at the Farallon Islands above the door.

"She would have liked this room," he said.

Flora said: "She built it."

He nodded.

He went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

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.
A postcard of the Louisiana bayou: He played for two hours. I understand now what he was doing for forty years.
A small folded paper: After the noise. Still.
A letter on architectural letterhead: She said her mother would have approved of Drake and Voss.
A case note in Marion Voss's handwriting: Find the before.
A letter in an envelope addressed to a man who had been looking for eleven years and found.
The sign on the frosted glass door was still slightly crooked.
Neither of them had fixed it.
Neither of them ever would.

End.