DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

The Man in the Water

a 321Lumina.com book

Top Hat
CLEANERS

by Blurt Snodgrass

The Man in the Water

A Drake & Voss Novella

Blurt Snodgrass

321Lumina.com

Chapter One

He arrived on a Wednesday morning in September carrying a folded newspaper — not today's, an old one, the paper yellowed to the color of old ivory, the fold lines deep and permanent from thirty-seven years of being folded and unfolded and refolded along the same creases, the paper knowing its own shape so well it fell into it without being pressed.

He was sixty-seven. Ghanaian-American, the specific version that had come in the 1970s as a young man and had built a life here over decades while remaining, in some fundamental way, also elsewhere — the elsewhere of a person who had grown up in one country and lived most of their adult life in another and was completely at home in neither and entirely at home in both. He was a large man, broad through the shoulders, with the particular quality of someone accustomed to confined spaces — not cramped exactly, but economical, a man who had learned to take up exactly the space he needed and not more, which was a different thing from the minimum-space Finn had occupied in the corner of the office, entirely different in quality.

He set the newspaper on the desk.

Not the whole newspaper — a single page, folded to show a specific column of text. He set it down and looked at it as though it might look back.

He sat.

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

Good.

She looked at the newspaper page on the desk and said nothing.

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

He looked at the newspaper.

"I need to find a man who saved my life," he said. "In 1987."

He said it plainly, without preamble, the way he said everything — she would come to understand this about him, the directness of a man who had spent thirty-two years giving and receiving information in conditions where ambiguity could kill, who had learned to say the thing and mean the thing and not dress it up.

"Tell me," Flora said.

He told her.

He had been a junior navigator on a cargo vessel making its way through the Gulf of Guinea in March of 1987. A storm, the kind the Gulf of Guinea produced with the specific malice of a body of water that had been doing this for millennia and had perfected its technique. A mechanical failure during the storm. A sequence of events that he had gone over in his mind ten thousand times since and still could not entirely account for, the way accidents resisted accounting for because they were by nature the product of circumstances that individually were manageable and collectively were not.

He went into the water.

The water in the Gulf of Guinea in March was warm. He would remember this as incongruous — that the water was warm, that he was drowning in warm water, that the warmth felt obscene given what was happening. He had an injury he didn't yet know was an injury — a blow to his shoulder that had taken the arm out of commission, so that he was in the water with one working arm and a life vest that was keeping him up but not getting him anywhere.

He was in the water for approximately twenty minutes before the fishing boat came alongside.

What happened next he remembered and did not remember simultaneously — the specific quality of memory that emerged from situations where the body was in survival mode and the mind was recording things it couldn't fully process in real time. He remembered the rope. He remembered a figure coming over the side of the fishing boat on a line, not quickly but deliberately, the movement of someone who had made a decision and was implementing it. He remembered the figure reaching him. He remembered hands — large hands, rough, the hands of someone who worked with nets and rope and the physical resistance of the sea.

He remembered being held.

Not supported — held. The specific quality of being held by someone who intended to keep you, who had committed to your continued existence with their body.

He remembered getting to the ladder.

He did not remember getting up the ladder. He came back to himself on the deck with a blanket around him and the captain of the fishing boat looking down at him and other faces he could not later identify.

The man who had gone into the water was not among the faces he could see.

He had asked for him. The captain told him the man was fine, he was below, he had gone to change his wet clothes. Bernard asked for his name. The captain said something in a language Bernard didn't speak — he had some Twi, some Ewe, not this, whatever this was — and one of the other men on deck said in English: he is a passenger, he goes to his village up the coast, he is not crew.

By the time Bernard was coherent enough to insist on a name, on a face, on some anchor for the gratitude that was filling him like water filling a hold, the fishing boat had reached its next port and several passengers had disembarked.

The man who had gone into the water was gone.

"I tried to find him," Bernard said. "At the time. I was in hospital for two weeks with the shoulder and some other things, and when I got out I went back to that port and I asked. The fishing boat captain remembered him as a regular passenger — a fisherman from a village up the coast, a man he saw several times a year. He didn't know his name. He knew the village, approximately. I went to the area." He looked at the newspaper page. "This article appeared a few days after the incident. It named me. I have kept it because it is the evidence that it happened — that the incident was real and I was in the water and someone came for me." He paused. "I went to the approximate village area and I asked and I could not find him. My language was inadequate. My information was insufficient. I was twenty-nine and I was not yet — I did not have the resources I would later have. I went back to sea and the life went on."

"And now," Flora said.

"And now I am sixty-seven," he said. "I have been on land for seven years, which is enough time to understand that the land is where I will stay. I have a wife of thirty-eight years. I have three children and six grandchildren." He paused. "Last year my youngest grandchild was born. I held her in the hospital and I looked at her and I thought: she exists because a man went into rough water in 1987 for a stranger." He paused. "Someone should know that. Someone who belonged to him should know that the consequences are still going."

"If he's alive," Flora said, "he'd be elderly."

"Yes," Bernard said.

"A fisherman in rural Ghana in 1987, if he was, say, forty then, would be at least ninety-seven now."

"I know," Bernard said. "He may not be alive. That is likely." He looked at the newspaper page. "But his family may be. His children. The village he came from." He paused. "I want to go to Ghana. I want to go to that coastal area and I want to find whoever is findable. I want to look someone in the face who belonged to him and tell them what he did."

"You don't need us for that," Flora said. "You know the approximate area."

"I know the approximate area," Bernard said. "I am a navigator. I know how to find places. But this is —" He paused. "This is not a place I am looking for. It is a person, or the trace of a person. In a community I am not from, in a language I don't speak well, looking for a man I have no name for." He paused. "I need someone who knows how to find people from very little."

Flora looked at him.

She looked at the newspaper page.

The article was in English, a Ghanaian English newspaper. She could read it — the brief account of the incident, the names of the four crew members rescued, the acknowledgment of the fishing vessel that had assisted. No names of the fishing vessel's passengers. No name of the man who had gone into the water.

"Do you know the name of the fishing boat?" she said.

"The captain's name was written on the hull," he said. "I remember the name of the boat because I looked at it from the water when I was trying to understand what was happening to me. It was called —" He paused. "It was called the *Maame Esi*. A woman's name. I remember looking at it and thinking: I am going to remember this name."

He had.

For thirty-seven years.

"The *Maame Esi*," Flora said.

"Yes."

Nancy was writing.

Flora looked at her.

Nancy was writing with the careful deliberate hand she used now, the second system, but she was writing quickly, which was a different thing — quickly with care, the way you wrote when the thing you were writing was important and you didn't want to miss any of it.

"We'll need to find the fishing boat," Flora said. "Or records of it. And the captain."

"The captain would be old," Bernard said. "He was not young in 1987."

"The boat may still exist," Nancy said from her desk. "Fishing vessels are maintained for decades in working fishing communities. The boat may have passed to a son or a nephew. The captain's family may still be on the water."

Bernard looked at her.

"Yes," he said. "That's the shape of it. That's how it would work."

"Leave us the newspaper page," Flora said. "We'll start there."

Bernard looked at the page.

He had carried it for thirty-seven years.

He picked it up and held it for a moment — the held-long weight of it — and then set it on the desk.

"Be careful with it," he said.

"We will," Flora said.

Chapter Two

The *Maame Esi* had been a wooden fishing vessel operating out of a port in the Central Region of Ghana. This was what Nancy established in the first week — not easily, the records were not the kind that were digitized and available, and she worked through the maritime contacts she had accumulated over years of cases that had brushed against shipping, through a network of contacts at the port authorities, through a Ghanaian maritime history project at a university that had been documenting traditional fishing vessel records since the 1990s.

The *Maame Esi* had been registered to a man named Kofi Mensah in 1979. Kofi Mensah had been the captain. He had died in 2004.

But the boat had continued.

His son, Emmanuel Mensah, had inherited the boat in 2004 and had continued to use it until 2016, when the boat was retired and a newer vessel purchased. Emmanuel Mensah was sixty-two now and still fishing, out of the same port, and he still had his father's records — paper records, kept in a box, because his father had been meticulous about the business of the boat in the way of men who had built something and wanted it to last.

Nancy called Emmanuel Mensah through a contact at the maritime project, a researcher who agreed to facilitate the call.

Emmanuel Mensah remembered the incident.

He did not remember it directly — he had been a teenager in 1987, not yet on the boat. But his father had talked about it. The rescue. The man from the cargo vessel who had gone into the water. His father had talked about it because of the passenger who had gone in after the man, the passenger who was not crew, who had simply — Emmanuel said this with the cadence of someone quoting a father's words rather than his own — who had simply seen that someone needed help and gone.

"He knew the passenger?" Nancy said.

Emmanuel said: his father knew him as a regular passenger. A fisherman from a village called Anomabo. His name was Kweku Atta.

Kweku Atta.

The name.

Thirty-seven years of no name, and now the name.

Nancy wrote it in the margin and then on the page and then she looked at both.

Both said the same thing.

Kweku Atta. Anomabo.

She brought it to Flora.

Flora looked at it.

"Kweku Atta," she said.

"From Anomabo," Nancy said. "A fishing village on the Central Region coast. Emmanuel Mensah says his father mentioned the name occasionally over the years. He says his father had great respect for the man — that going into rough water for a stranger was the kind of thing his father admired without reservation."

"Is Kweku Atta alive?" Flora said.

"I don't know yet," Nancy said. "Anomabo is a real place — a coastal town, about forty kilometers east of Cape Coast. Fishing community, has been for centuries." She paused. "If Kweku Atta was forty in 1987, he'd be seventy-seven now. Possible. Not certain."

"Can we find out?" Flora said.

"Through Emmanuel Mensah," Nancy said. "He says he knows people in Anomabo — the fishing communities along that coast know each other. He offered to make inquiries."

Flora called Bernard.

She told him about Emmanuel Mensah. About his father Kofi, the captain, who had talked about the rescue. About the name.

Kweku Atta. Anomabo.

Bernard was silent for a long time.

"Kweku Atta," he said.

"Yes."

"That's his name," Bernard said. The words carrying thirty-seven years of namelessness.

"We don't know yet if he's alive," Flora said. "Emmanuel Mensah is making inquiries. We should know more in a few days."

Bernard was quiet.

"Kweku," he said. "It means born on Wednesday. A Wednesday child."

"Yes," Flora said. "I didn't know that."

"I know the naming traditions," Bernard said. "I grew up with them." He paused. "He went into the water for me on a Wednesday." He paused again. "March the fourth, 1987. I looked it up many times. A Wednesday."

* * *

Emmanuel Mensah called back in four days.

Kweku Atta had died in 2019. He had been seventy-two years old. He had fished until he was sixty-eight, when his health began to decline, and he had spent his last years in Anomabo in the house where he had been born, cared for by his family.

He had a daughter.

Her name was Akosua Atta. She was forty-four. She had grown up in Anomabo, married a man from the town, had children of her own. She was a schoolteacher at the local primary school.

Emmanuel Mensah had spoken to her.

He had told her about the inquiry — the man in San Francisco, the cargo vessel, the rescue in 1987. He had told her that someone was looking for her father.

She had been quiet for a long time, Emmanuel said.

Then she had said: my father talked about that rescue. He talked about it sometimes. He said it was the right thing to do and he didn't understand why people made a fuss about it. He said any man would have done it.

Emmanuel had said: not any man.

Akosua Atta had said: that's what we always told him too.

She was willing to speak to the man from San Francisco. More than willing — she said her father would have been glad to know. She said her father would have been embarrassed but glad.

* * *

Chapter Three

Flora called Bernard.

She told him about Kweku Atta. The death in 2019. The daughter Akosua, the schoolteacher in Anomabo, forty-four years old. The way Kweku had spoken of the rescue — the right thing to do, any man would have done it, the embarrassment at being made a fuss of.

Bernard was quiet for a long time.

"He talked about it," Bernard said.

"Yes," Flora said. "His daughter said he talked about it sometimes."

"He remembered," Bernard said.

"Yes."

Another long silence.

"He remembered and I remembered," Bernard said. "Two men on opposite sides of the world, both remembering March the fourth, 1987." He paused. "I never thought about that. That he would remember it too. I thought only about whether he knew what had happened to me afterward. Whether he knew the consequences." He paused. "I never thought he might be wondering about me."

"His daughter said he would have been glad to know," Flora said. "And embarrassed. She said that's what he was like — glad and embarrassed simultaneously."

Bernard made a sound that was not quite a laugh but contained something that was what laughter came from.

"I want to speak to her," he said. "Akosua. I want to speak to her and then I want to go to Anomabo."

"We can arrange the call," Flora said. "The trip is yours to arrange."

"Yes," he said. "The trip is mine." He paused. "My wife is coming. She said: if you're going to Ghana to thank the man who kept you alive, I'm coming." He paused. "She was not wrong."

"No," Flora said. "She wasn't."

The call was arranged through Emmanuel Mensah, who stayed on the line as a quiet presence, a bridge between languages if needed, though Akosua Atta spoke English well — the schoolteacher's English, precise and careful, the English of someone who had taught children to read it and write it for twenty years.

Flora did not listen to the call. She had arranged it and stepped back from it, the way she stepped back from the things that needed to happen between the people they found and the people who had found them.

Bernard called her afterward.

He called from home, the voice slightly different from the office voice — softer, the softness of a man who had been moved and was still in it, still in the space the conversation had opened.

"She cried," he said. "When I told her what I have. The wife, the children, the grandchildren. The youngest, the one born last year. She cried and then she said: my father would be —" He stopped. He started again. "She said: my father would say it was nothing. He would say any man would have done it. He always said that." He paused. "I told her: I was in the water for twenty minutes. I know what I was. I was someone who needed help. Not many men went into the water."

"What did she say?" Flora said.

"She said: I know. We know. We told him that his whole life and he never believed us." He paused. "She said: now someone who was there is telling me. She said that helped." He paused. "She said: he died not knowing if you were all right. He always wondered. He would have been glad to know you're all right."

Flora looked at the cork board.

The fifteen things.

"She asked me," Bernard said, "if I could bring something. When I come to Anomabo. She asked if I could bring the newspaper page. She said her father would have wanted to see it. She said: he would have liked knowing there was a record."

Flora looked at the newspaper page on the desk.

It had been on the desk since Bernard left it. She had kept it carefully, the way she kept all the things that were brought here.

"I'll give it to you when you come to settle the account," she said. "It's yours to take."

"Thank you," he said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"Thirty-seven years," he said. "I carried his name as a blank. A shape where a name should be. And now I know it." He paused. "Kweku Atta. Born on a Wednesday. He went into the water on a Wednesday."

"Yes," Flora said.

"I'm going to tell my grandchildren," he said. "All six of them. The youngest when she's old enough to understand. I'm going to tell them: there was a man named Kweku Atta and he went into the water for your grandfather on a Wednesday in 1987, and because he did, you exist." He paused. "They should know that. Children should know that they exist because someone did something."

Chapter Four

He came in the following week to settle the account.

He came with his wife.

She had not been mentioned in the phone calls, or not specifically, but she appeared now — sixty-three, Ghanaian-American also, with the quality of someone who had been beside this man for thirty-eight years and knew him completely, the way you knew someone after thirty-eight years, which was differently from how you knew them at the beginning but not less. She sat in the client chair beside him, the two of them taking up the space as a unit, and she looked at the cork board and she read the fifteen things with the attention of someone who read carefully.

Bernard wrote the check.

He looked at the newspaper page, still on the desk.

He picked it up.

He held it for a moment — the thirty-seven-year weight of it, the fold lines, the yellowed paper, the three paragraphs that had been the evidence that it happened.

"I'm going to leave a copy of it here," he said. "If that's all right."

Flora looked at him.

"A copy?" she said.

"I'm going to have it copied before I go to Anomabo," he said. "The original I'll take to Akosua. But I want —" He paused. He looked at the cork board. "I want something here. On the record." He paused. "This room keeps records."

"Yes," Flora said.

"Then this should be in the record," he said. "The record of what happened on March the fourth, 1987. The record of Kweku Atta." He paused. "He should be here. In this room. Where things are kept."

He handed Flora the newspaper page.

She took it carefully.

"I'll have a copy made," she said. "And return the original before you leave."

"Good," he said.

His wife had been looking at the cork board throughout this.

"The piece of paper," she said. "The small torn one. The twelfth thing." She looked at Nancy. "Tell Flora. Today."

Nancy looked at the torn piece of paper.

"Yes," she said.

"You said it," Bernard's wife said. "Finally."

"Yes," Nancy said.

Bernard's wife looked at her for a long time with the specific attention of someone who had been beside the same person for thirty-eight years and knew what it looked like to carry something a long time before you said it.

"Good," she said.

It was the word Nancy said to herself every morning after reading back her notes. In someone else's mouth, directed at Nancy, it sounded different. It sounded like what the word actually was — not confirmation of a fact but acknowledgment of the person.

Nancy looked at her.

She held the acknowledgment.

She set her pen down parallel to the notepad.

"Thank you," she said.

Chapter Five

Bernard and his wife went to Anomabo in October.

Flora knew because he sent a postcard.

He sent two, actually — one from Accra on arrival, which said only: *We are here.* And one from Anomabo, a week later, a photograph of the coast — the beach, the fishing boats pulled up on the sand, the particular light of the Gulf of Guinea coast, the light that was different from Pacific light, older somehow, heavier, the light of a place that had been a place for a very long time.

On the back of the Anomabo postcard, in Bernard's navigator's handwriting — precise, clear, the handwriting of a man accustomed to writing coordinates and headings in conditions where precision was the difference between arriving and not:

Akosua has his eyes. I gave her the newspaper. She put it in her father's Bible. She said: now he's in the record and you're in his record.

Below that, in different handwriting — smaller, rounder, a schoolteacher's handwriting:

He would have said any man would have done it. He was wrong. Thank you for finding us. — A.A.

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 below the fifteen things.

The sixteenth thing.

She stepped back.

The cork board, with the sixteen things, with the Farallon Islands above the door and the card stock below it and everything below that, the accumulation of a year and more of cases and returns and the things people had sent back to say: it was real, it happened, this existed.

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

Nancy looked at it.

She looked at the Farallon Islands above the door.

She looked at the card stock.

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

She looked at the torn piece of paper in the middle of everything.

Tell Flora. Today.

She looked at the postcard from Anomabo.

She turned and looked at Flora.

"The records talk to each other," she said. "That's what she said. Now he's in the record and you're in his record." She paused. "The finding puts you in each other's records. That's what the work does."

"Yes," Flora said. "That's what it does."

Nancy looked at the notepad.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She read them both.

She looked at them again.

She looked at them a third time, which was new, which was the managing requiring a little more than it had, which she acknowledged to herself with the honesty she had decided to bring to the monitoring.

The third reading confirmed the first.

Good.

She set the pen down.

She looked at Flora.

Flora was looking at her.

"Good?" Flora said.

"Good," Nancy said.

This was new too — saying it aloud to Flora rather than to herself. The private confirmation becoming shared. Another small adjustment of the boundary, another thing that had been internal becoming part of the record between them.

Flora nodded.

"Good," she said.

And they sat in the October office, the light going earlier now, the season turning, the steam beginning to feel welcome rather than merely present, the cork board with its sixteen things and the door with its sign and the window with its Clement Street and the room being what it was, which was theirs, which was the room they worked in, which was the record of the work and the place the work continued from, always, the door opening when it opened and the case coming in when it came, and the work going on.

Flora picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She waited.

* * *

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. / Thank you for finding us.

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

Neither of them had fixed it.

Neither of them ever would.

End.