

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

The Tuesday Night

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

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A Drake & Voss Novella

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Chapter One

He arrived on a Monday morning in December, the last Monday before Christmas, when Clement Street was doing what Clement Street did in the last week before Christmas — the shops busy, the bakery running double shifts, the particular mixture of festivity and exhaustion that descended on commercial streets in this week, the festivity on the surface and underneath it the exhaustion of a city that had been doing too much for too long and knew the holiday was nearly here and was almost grateful.

He was seventy-five. The specific seventy-five of a musician — not the outdoors weathering of a geologist or the sea weathering of a navigator, but the indoor weathering of someone who had spent forty years in clubs and studios and rehearsal rooms, in the specific light of those places which was usually bad and the specific air of those places which was usually not ideal and the specific hours of those places which were not the hours of people who valued their health. He had the quality of someone who had been beautiful in a particular way when young — not handsome exactly, but present, the kind of presence that required a room to rearrange itself slightly — and who was now seventy-five and the presence was still there but the beauty had become something more interesting than beauty.

He sat.

He set his hands on his knees.

Flora looked at his hands.

The knuckles enlarged, the specific enlargement of arthritis, the fingers slightly curled inward at rest in the way of hands that had been performing a complex motion for forty years and had been stopped mid-motion and were still mid-motion even now. The hands of a pianist who no longer played.

"Mr. Monk," she said.

He looked at her.

"Ezra," he said. "I haven't been Mr. Monk since I retired. Before that I was always Ezra." He paused. "Musicians don't do the Mr. thing much."

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

Good.

She looked at the hands and said nothing.

"Tell me what you need," Flora said.

He looked at the cork board.

He looked at the eighteen things on it with the attention of someone who read music, who understood that the relationship between elements was where the meaning lived.

"I need to find a musician," he said. "A man named Marcus Cole. He was a saxophonist. I played with him in the late 1970s, early 1980s. He disappeared from the music in 1981 and I've been thinking about him for forty-four years." He paused. "I want to know if he's alive. And if he is, I want to hear him play one more time."

"Tell me about him," Flora said.

He looked at his hands.

"He was the most gifted musician I ever played with," he said. "Not the most famous — he never got famous, which is one of the injustices of jazz, that the famous ones are not always the best ones and the best ones are sometimes not famous at all. But the most gifted." He paused. "He had a quality that I have heard very rarely in forty years of playing with serious musicians. He had the quality of — when he played, the music wasn't coming from him. It was coming through him. He was a medium for it, not a maker of it." He paused. "Most musicians, even great ones, you can hear them choosing. You can hear the craft, the intelligence, the decision. With Marcus there were no decisions. There was only what the music needed and he provided it."

"You played with him how long?" Flora said.

"Three years," he said. "1978 to 1981. A quartet — piano, bass, drums, and Marcus on tenor sax. We played the clubs, we recorded once, an album that was never properly distributed, I have one of the few remaining copies." He paused. "And then in 1981 he stopped. He simply stopped. Stopped showing up to sessions, stopped returning calls. The word came

through the network — Marcus went back to Louisiana, there was a personal situation, he was done." He paused. "I didn't go after him. I was twenty-nine and I had my own life to live and I told myself: he knows where to find me if he wants to. And then enough time passed that it became one of those things." He looked at the cork board. "One of those things you carry."

"And now," Flora said.

He looked at his hands.

"My hands," he said, "have been unusable for serious playing for seven years. I retired seven years ago. And since then I have had a great deal of time to sit and think about what I should have done and didn't do." He paused. "I should have found Marcus Cole in 1981 and asked him why." He paused. "That's not the question anymore. I don't need to know why. I just want to know if he's alive. And if he is —" He stopped.

"If he is?" Flora said.

"I want to hear him play," he said. "Once more. Before —" He paused. He looked at his hands. He did not finish the sentence.

Flora did not ask him to finish it.

"Tell me about the Tuesday night in 1979," she said.

He closed his eyes.

He kept them closed for a moment — not performing the remembering, actually doing it, going back to the place in himself where 1979 still existed as a live thing rather than a memory of a thing.

"A club in North Beach," he said. "It doesn't exist anymore. None of the clubs from that era exist anymore." He paused. "A Tuesday night in November. We were the late set — eleven to two, the set after the people who had to work the next day had gone home, the people who stayed were the people who were there for the music rather than the experience of being somewhere that had music." He paused. "We started playing. And something happened."

"What happened?" Nancy said.

"We were in the first tune — a standard, something we'd played a hundred times — and Marcus started to play and the room changed. Not the physical room. The room changed in the way that rooms changed sometimes when something real was happening in them. Everyone who was

there felt it. You could see it in the bodies, the way people who had been scattered and individual became a single thing, all attending in the same direction, all receiving the same transmission." He paused. "We played for four hours. We were supposed to play for three. We didn't stop because we couldn't stop. The music didn't stop." He paused. "When we finished — when it ended, because we didn't finish it, it ended on its own — I sat at the piano and I knew I had just been part of the best music I would ever make." He paused. "I was twenty-seven years old. I had forty more years of playing ahead of me. And I knew then that this was the best of it."

He opened his eyes.

He looked at Flora.

"Was I right?" she said.

"Yes," he said. "I was right."

"Leave us what you have," Flora said. "A name, a last known location, anything."

He reached into his jacket and produced a piece of paper, folded once. He set it on the desk.

"Louisiana," he said. "That's all I know. Louisiana in 1981. He had family there — I knew he was from the Gulf Coast somewhere, a small town, I never knew which one." He paused. "And the album. I can bring you the album."

"Yes," Flora said. "Bring us the album."

He stood.

He looked at the cork board one more time.

He looked at the torn piece of paper — *Tell Flora. Today* — and he looked at the photograph of the viewport and the darkness and the light.

He went to the door and stopped.

"We recorded the album six months before he left," he said. "We recorded it in two days — a studio in SoMa, a friend of mine owned it, we had it for the weekend. We recorded twelve tracks. Marcus plays on all twelve." He paused. "I have listened to it hundreds of times. I know every note. I have never found another recording of him — not professional, not bootleg, nothing." He looked at the door. "If he's gone, the album is all there is of him. If he's alive and he still plays —" He stopped. "I want to give him the album. He never had a copy. The distribution fell through before we

could get them to him."

He went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

Chapter Two

He brought the album the following day.

It was a vinyl LP, the cover designed by someone who had taken it seriously — a photograph of the four of them in the club, the photograph catching something of what the playing was, the quality of people who were entirely inside something. On the cover: *The Marcus Cole Quartet. Live at the Blue Moon. Recorded November 1979, San Francisco.* The album title was printed below: *After the Noise.*

Flora looked at the cover.

The four men. She found Ezra — young, twenty-seven, the presence already there in the way he held himself at the piano. And beside him, the saxophonist, a tall man with the instrument at his side, looking not at the camera but at something slightly off it, something only he could see.

Marcus Cole.

She looked at his face.

She did not read faces the way Nancy read handwriting, but she had been doing this work long enough to read the quality of a person's attention in a photograph, and what she saw in Marcus Cole's face was something she recognized — the quality of someone who was somewhere else while being entirely present, the specific quality of a person for whom the interior life was so alive it was almost visible from the outside.

She put the album on the desk.

Nancy came and looked at it.

She looked at Marcus Cole.

"He's from the Gulf Coast," Nancy said. "A small town. 1981." She picked up the piece of paper Ezra had left. "He has family there still, presumably. Forty-four years is a long time but families stay in places." She

paused. "Marcus Cole. It's a common name."

"The album might help," Flora said. "If there's any record of it anywhere. A name in a database, a music archive."

"I'll start with the jazz archives," Nancy said. "USF has a good jazz collection. And there are national ones — the Institute for Jazz Studies at Rutgers. If the album was ever catalogued anywhere it'll be there."

She went to her desk.

Flora looked at the album cover.

After the Noise.

She thought about Sylvie Crane at four thousand meters. The noise that stopped. The quiet that was the first real quiet she had known.

She thought about a musician who was a medium for music rather than a maker of it, who played without deciding, who simply provided what the music needed.

She thought about what it was to have that and then stop.

The album was catalogued.

Nancy found it in three days, through the Institute for Jazz Studies database and a cross-reference with the San Francisco jazz archives at the public library. It had been submitted to the archives by someone in 1983 — the submission record listed the submitter as E. Monk — and had been catalogued and shelved and occasionally referenced in academic work on the San Francisco jazz scene of the late 1970s.

In two of those academic references, Marcus Cole was mentioned by name.

In one of them, a footnote: *Marcus Cole (b. 1952, Lafourche Parish, Louisiana) is notable for his brief but significant presence in the San Francisco jazz scene of the late 1970s. Cole left San Francisco in 1981 and returned to Louisiana, where he is believed to have continued playing in local and regional contexts.*

Believed to have continued playing.

In a footnote, in an academic paper, from 1998.

"Lafourche Parish," Nancy said. "That narrows it considerably."

"Is he alive?" Flora said.

"I don't know yet," Nancy said. "But Lafourche Parish is not large. And if he continued playing in local and regional contexts, there'll be a trace of that."

She found the trace in a week.

Not easily — the trail required patience and the specific lateral thinking that Nancy brought to searches that didn't have obvious paths. She went through Louisiana music databases, local newspaper archives digitized by the state library, a community radio station in Thibodaux that had been broadcasting since 1962 and had a searchable archive of its programming going back to the 1980s.

In 2011, the Thibodaux community radio station had broadcast a live session from a local jazz musician named Marcus Cole. The announcement on the station's website — still archived, the kind of website that was built once and never updated — described him as *a local legend, a saxophonist who played with the greats in San Francisco in the 1970s before returning home to Lafourche Parish, where he has been playing locally for thirty years.*

A local legend.

Sixty-one years old in 2011. Seventy-three now.

Nancy found a phone number through the Thibodaux music community network — a contact at a music store who knew everyone who played in the parish, who said: Marcus Cole, sure, he plays the St. James Parish festival every summer, he plays the church sometimes, he plays — he's around. You want his number?

She called on a Tuesday.

Flora noted this.

He answered on the third ring.

His voice was the voice of the Gulf Coast, the specific music of it, the French influence that had been in that part of Louisiana since the colony, the way the vowels sat differently from other Southern accents, the particular warmth that was not performance but was simply how the people there spoke.

"Mr. Cole," Nancy said. "My name is Nancy Drake. I'm calling from San Francisco. I'm trying to reach the musician Marcus Cole who played in San Francisco in the 1970s."

A pause.

"That's me," he said. Not warily — simply confirming.

"I've been hired by Ezra Monk," Nancy said. "He plays piano. He played with you in a quartet in the late 1970s."

A longer pause.

"Ezra," Marcus Cole said. The same quality Honorine had when she said Henri. The same quality Bernard had when he said Kweku Atta. The quality of a name not said aloud in a long time, encountered again with the full weight of what it carried.

"He's well," Nancy said. "He lives in San Francisco still. He retired seven years ago — his hands." She paused. "He wanted to know if you were alive. And he wanted to know if you still play."

A silence.

Then Marcus Cole said: "I still play."

Nancy looked at Flora across the desk.

Flora looked back.

"He has a copy of the album," Nancy said. "The quartet album from 1979. He'd like to give it to you." She paused. "And he'd like to hear you play one more time."

The silence this time was longer.

Then Marcus Cole said: "He kept the album all this time."

"Yes," Nancy said.

Another silence.

"He was the best pianist I ever played with," Marcus Cole said. "I want you to tell him that. The best pianist and the best listener. He heard what I was doing before I knew what I was doing." He paused. "Tell him that."

"I will," Nancy said.

"Tell him to come to Louisiana," Marcus Cole said. "I'll play for him. There's a church in Thibodaux — I play the Sunday service sometimes. Tell him to come on a Sunday."

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Chapter Three

She called Ezra.

She told him Marcus Cole was alive and seventy-three and still played, and that he played the Sunday service sometimes at a church in Thibodaux, and that he had said: come on a Sunday.

And that he had said: he was the best pianist I ever played with. The best pianist and the best listener.

Ezra was quiet for a long time.

"He said that," Ezra said.

"Yes," Nancy said.

"The best listener," Ezra said.

"Yes."

Another silence.

"I've been thinking about him for forty-four years," Ezra said. "I've been thinking: he was the most gifted musician I ever played with. He's been thinking the same thing about me in a different direction." He paused. "We've been thinking about each other for forty-four years and neither of us knew it."

"Yes," Nancy said. "That's what it looks like."

He came in the following week to settle the account.

He came with the album under his arm — the vinyl LP in its sleeve, *After the Noise*, the cover photograph of the four men in the club, Marcus Cole looking at something only he could see.

He set it on the desk.

He wrote the check.

He looked at the cork board.

He looked at the eighteen things on it for a long time.

He looked at the Farallon Islands above the door.

"I'm going to Louisiana after Christmas," he said. "My son is going with me. He's forty-five and he's never understood what his father did for forty years — he's a software engineer, the music was always something his father did, something that happened in places he wasn't. I told him where I was going and he said: I want to come." He paused. "I said: why. He said: because you've been talking about this man my whole life and I want to see what it is about him." He paused. "He doesn't know yet that it's not about Marcus. It's about the music. It's about what happens when two people are completely inside the same thing at the same time."

"Maybe he'll find out," Flora said.

"Maybe," Ezra said. He picked up the album. He held it. "Marcus never had a copy," he said. "The distribution fell through. He left before we could get one to him." He looked at the cover. "He's been playing for forty-four years without ever hearing what he sounded like that Tuesday in 1979."

"Now he will," Flora said.

"Yes," Ezra said. "Now he will."

He stood.

He looked at the cork board one more time.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"The torn piece of paper," he said. "The twelfth one. Tell Flora. Today." He paused. "Who wrote that?"

Nancy looked at the piece of paper.

"I did," she said.

He looked at her.

"You needed to tell her something," he said.

"Yes," Nancy said.

"And you did," he said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "Eventually."

He nodded slowly.

"In jazz," he said, "there's a concept called the delayed resolution. The note that should resolve doesn't resolve when you expect it to. It waits. It

builds tension. And when it finally resolves —" He paused. "When it finally resolves it's better than if it had come on time. It carries everything it gathered while it was waiting."

He looked at the piece of paper on the cork board.

"Tell Flora. Today," he said. "That's a delayed resolution."

Nancy looked at it.

"Yes," she said. "I think that's right."

He went to the door.

He stopped.

He looked back at the album in his hands.

"The album is called *After the Noise*," he said. "Marcus named it. I asked him why. He said: because everything before that night was noise. That night was the first time I heard the music clearly." He paused. "I didn't understand what he meant in 1979. I do now."

He went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

Chapter Four

Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and they sat in the December office, the shortest days of the year, the light going at four in the afternoon, the city outside already in its early dark, the Christmas week doing what it did.

"After the noise," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said.

"He named it in 1979," Flora said. "Before Marcus left. Before the forty-four years."

"Yes," Nancy said. "He already knew what it was."

Flora held her tea.

"He said everything before that night was noise," she said. "And then the music was clear." She paused. "And then he left."

Nancy looked at the window.

"Maybe he couldn't stay," she said. "Maybe having heard the music clearly once made it impossible to stay in the noise." She paused. "Going back to Louisiana. Playing the church. Playing the festivals." She paused. "Maybe that was the quiet he needed. Like Sylvie at four thousand meters."

"And Ezra stayed in the noise," Flora said.

"Ezra had forty more years of playing," Nancy said. "He made his life in it. The noise was his medium." She paused. "But he heard the clear thing once. On a Tuesday night in 1979. And he's been carrying it ever since."

"The way Marta carried Oren's private maps," Flora said. "The way Thomas carried what he'd seen in Patience."

"Yes," Nancy said. "The things you hear once clearly and spend the rest of your life trying to hear again."

Flora looked at the cork board.

The eighteen things.

The viewport with the faint cold light.

The postcard from Anomabo.

The torn piece of paper.

All the way up to the Farallon Islands above the door.

"Nancy," she said.

Nancy looked at her.

"The delayed resolution," Flora said.

Nancy looked at the torn piece of paper on the cork board.

"Yes," she said.

"It keeps resolving," Flora said. "Every time I look at it, it resolves again." She paused. "Every time you say good and I say good back, it resolves again." She paused. "That's not a single delayed resolution. That's — it keeps happening."

Nancy looked at the piece of paper.

"Yes," she said. "I think that's right." She paused. "I think that's what it is to keep going. The resolution isn't final. It keeps happening. Every day it has to happen again."

"Every day you write the date," Flora said.

"And read it back," Nancy said. "And read it again." She paused. "And it resolves."

"And then tomorrow," Flora said.

"And then tomorrow," Nancy said.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She read them both.

She looked at them a third time.

Good.

She set the pen down.

"Good?" Flora said.

"Good," Nancy said.

The December dark was settling outside. The dry cleaner below had closed for the day, the building quiet in its lower floors, the steam long done. Clement Street was in its evening mode, the restaurants lit, the last shoppers of the day heading home with their bags, the city settling toward Christmas.

Flora looked at the cork board.

She thought about a Tuesday night in 1979 in a club in North Beach that didn't exist anymore, four musicians playing something that resolved into a kind of clarity none of them had expected, the room full of people who became a single thing all attending in the same direction.

She thought about the music that didn't stop because it ended on its own.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She waited for the next case.

In January, two things arrived on the same day.

The first was from Ezra's son — a postcard of the Louisiana bayou, the specific quality of bayou light, the cypress trees with their knees in the water, the Spanish moss, the ancient patience of a landscape that had been this way for millennia.

On the back, in handwriting that was not Ezra's:

He played for two hours. My father sat in the front pew and listened. He didn't say a word for the whole two hours. When it was done he stood up and he was crying. I've never seen my father cry before. I understand now what he was doing for forty years. — D.M.

The second was a small piece of paper, folded once. No postmark — hand-delivered, pushed under the door.

Ezra's handwriting. Four words.

After the noise. Still.

Flora read them both.

She passed them to Nancy.

Nancy read them both.

She pinned both to the cork board, side by side, below the deep-sea postcard.

The nineteenth thing. The twentieth thing.

She stepped back.

She looked at the cork board.

Twenty things.

The Farallon Islands above the door.

Everything below.

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 viewpoint: darkness and faint cold light.

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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.

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

Neither of them had fixed it.

Neither of them ever would.

End.