

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS
What the Nose Knows

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

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Chapter One

She arrived on a Tuesday in April, which Flora noted the way she noted all Tuesdays — with the specific attention of someone who had learned that Tuesdays were information, that Tuesdays carried a particular quality of weight she could not access later and so must register now, in the moment, before the day took it from her.

The woman who came up the stairs was seventy-eight. French — the accent established itself before she'd finished her name, an accent that had spent fifty years in San Francisco becoming something that was not quite French and not quite American but was entirely its own, the accent of a person who had made a permanent home in a language that was not her first and had made it hers by living in it rather than translating into it. She was small and upright, the upright carriage of someone who had been tall once and had decided to remain so in bearing if not in fact. She carried a cane — wooden, good, with a brass tip that rang against the stairs as she climbed — but she used it the way some people used their hands when they spoke, as punctuation rather than support, tapping it for emphasis, planting it when she wanted to be still.

She looked at the office.

She looked at the cork board. The accumulation of it — the postcards, the note, the folded things. She looked at the Farallon Islands above the door with the attention of someone who appreciated coastlines.

She sat.

Nancy came in, hung her coat, wrote the name she'd gotten from the phone call. Wrote the time.

Read both.

Looked at them again.

Good.

"Madame Castets," Flora said. "What can we do for you?"

Honorine Castets set her cane across her knees and looked at Flora with the clear directness of a woman who had been alive long enough to have stopped softening her requests with preamble.

"I want to find a smell," she said.

Flora looked at her.

"Not a person," Honorine said. "Not an object. A smell. The smell of a bakery." She paused. "My husband's bakery. It was on Balboa Street — in the Richmond, you know the Richmond? — from 1974 to 1989. It was called Castets Boulangerie, which was not an imaginative name, but Henri was not an imaginative man in some ways and in other ways —" She tapped the cane once on the floor. "In other ways he was extraordinary. His bread was extraordinary. The smell of it —" She paused. "I cannot describe the smell to you in a way that will mean anything. That's the nature of smells. You cannot describe them. You can only remember them or forget them."

"And you remember it," Flora said.

"Every day," Honorine said. "Every single day for thirty-five years I remember it. I wake up in the morning and for a moment, before I am fully awake, I am in the bakery and I can smell Henri's bread." She tapped the cane again. "And then I wake up fully and I am in my apartment on California Street and Henri has been dead since 1989 and the bakery has been a dry cleaner and then a mobile phone shop and then a yoga studio and now I don't know what because I stopped walking past it." She paused. "I have been to other bakeries. Many bakeries. Paris, Lyon, I go back every few years. I have been to bakeries in New York and in Vancouver and in Montreal. I have found good bread. I have found excellent bread. I have not found the smell."

"What was different about it?" Nancy said.

Honorine looked at her.

"He used a starter that was — he brought it from Normandy," she said. "When we came in 1971. In a jar. He fed that starter for eighteen years in San Francisco. When he died I didn't know what to do with it and after some days I put it in the bin." She stopped. She looked at the window. "That was the wrong decision. I have known that for thirty-five years."

Flora sat with this.

"He used that starter," Honorine said, "and he used flour that he had shipped from a mill in Normandy, which was expensive and which I told him every month was too expensive, and he ignored me every month for fifteen years, and the bread was what it was." She tapped the cane. "The smell was not just the bread. It was the bread and the starter and the flour and the wood of the oven he had made — he built the oven himself, which took him six months and which the city inspectors came three times to look at — and the early morning, six o'clock, when he was baking and I was in the back and the smell came through and I would stop whatever I was doing and simply —" She stopped. "Simply be in it."

"What do you want us to find?" Flora said carefully. "You said you want to find a smell. But smells —"

"I know smells cannot be found," Honorine said. "I am seventy-eight years old, not twelve. I know this." She looked at the cork board. At the accumulation of it. "I want to find someone who remembers it. Someone who walked past that bakery on Balboa Street between 1974 and 1989 and stopped. The way you stop when a smell reaches out and takes you. Someone who stood on the pavement for a moment and breathed it in and then went on with their day." She paused. "I want to know I am not the only one who remembers. I want to know the smell existed in someone else's life as well as mine." She looked at Flora. "Is that a thing you can find?"

Flora looked at her.

She thought: this is not a case.

She thought: this is exactly a case.

"Yes," she said. "We can find that."

Honorine nodded once, the nod of a woman who had decided she'd come to the right place and was prepared to proceed.

"Good," she said. "Henri would have been pleased. He liked people who said yes when they meant yes."

Chapter Two

The bakery on Balboa Street had been Castets Boulangerie from 1974 to 1989, which was fifteen years of bread being made in a Richmond neighborhood before the Richmond was the Richmond it was now, when it was a quieter, less discovered version of itself, a neighborhood of families and small businesses and the particular rhythms of people who had come from somewhere else and were building their American lives with the materials available.

Flora walked Balboa Street on a Wednesday morning.

The space that had been Castets was now, as Honorine had said, something she hadn't been able to identify — a small wellness studio offering services Flora didn't entirely understand from the sign in the window. The building itself was the same building, a two-story commercial Victorian, the bones of it unchanged from 1974. She stood outside it for a moment and looked at it and tried to imagine the smell. She could not. That was the nature of smells.

She went into the hardware store two doors down, which had the specific permanence of a hardware store that had been in a neighborhood long enough to be a community institution rather than just a shop. The man behind the counter was sixty-five, the kind of sixty-five that had worked with his hands its whole life and was comfortable in its own accumulated experience.

Flora introduced herself. Said she was looking for information about a bakery that had been on the block from 1974 to 1989.

He looked at her.

"Castets," he said.

"Yes."

"Henri Castets's bakery," he said. "I've been on this block since 1981. My father had the store before me. Henri's place was —" He stopped. He looked at the ceiling for a moment, not looking for anything, just looking up the way you looked up when you were reaching for something stored at a height. "Tuesday mornings," he said. "Tuesday mornings were the best. He made something on Tuesdays that he didn't make other days. I don't know what it was. A pastry of some kind, something with almond and something else I could never name. I would time my morning to be outside my own door when he opened at six-thirty because the smell would come down the block —" He stopped again. "I haven't thought about that in years," he said. "Not in years." He looked at Flora. "Why are you asking?"

She told him about Honorine.

He was quiet for a moment.

"She's still here," he said.

"On California Street."

He nodded slowly. "I didn't know. I knew the bakery closed when Henri died and I never saw her after that. I assumed she'd gone back." He paused. "She wants to know if anyone else remembers."

"Yes."

He looked at the counter. His hands were flat on it, the hardware store man's hands, large and capable and entirely at rest.

"I remember," he said. "I remember every Tuesday morning from 1981 to 1989. I remember the smell of it and I remember that there was no name for it, not exactly, it was its own thing." He paused. "I remember that when the bakery closed the block smelled different. Not worse, necessarily — just different. Like a note that had been in a chord and then wasn't." He looked at Flora. "Tell her. Tell her that."

Flora wrote it down.

The Richmond had a neighborhood email list, a local paper that had been online since 2004, a community board at the library, a Facebook group for longtime residents that Nancy found and joined under a professional account she maintained for exactly this kind of purpose.

Nancy posted to the group on a Thursday morning.

She wrote: *I'm doing research on behalf of a longtime Richmond resident into a French bakery called Castets Boulangerie that operated on Balboa Street from 1974 to 1989. If you have any memories of this bakery — its bread, its smell, anything about it — I'd be grateful to hear from you. All responses will be treated with care and shared with the bakery's surviving family.*

By Friday evening there were forty-three responses.

Nancy printed them and brought them to Flora's desk and they read them together.

Some were brief — *I lived on Balboa in the eighties, I remember the bakery, the bread was wonderful* — the kind of general recollection that registered the existence of a thing without going further. But others were specific. Others had the quality of people who had been waiting, without knowing they were waiting, for the occasion to say the thing.

I was seven years old and my mother took me every Saturday. I remember standing at the counter and the smell was like being inside something warm. I grew up and became a baker myself and I have spent twenty years trying to understand what he did differently. I still don't know.

I walked past every morning on my way to work from 1977 to 1984. I would stop at the corner and wait for the smell to reach me before I went on. I was not religious but it felt like something close to that.

My father was dying in 1988 and I would bring him bread from Castets and he said it was the best thing about being alive still. He died in February 1989 and I don't know if he knew the bakery closed in April.

I was a student at USF and I used to run past on my morning runs. I adjusted my route specifically to go past Castets. I told myself it was the most efficient route. It was not the most efficient route.

The smell was something to do with wood and something sweet and something I can only describe as early, as if the smell itself was the smell of earliness, of things not yet fully formed.

My wife and I had our first date walking on Balboa Street in 1976 and we walked past and the smell stopped us both at the same time. We looked at each other. We went in and bought a loaf and ate it sitting on a bench in the park and that is the meal I think about when I think about the beginning of everything.

Flora read this last one twice.

She passed it to Nancy.

Nancy read it.

She set it down.

"Find that person," she said.

His name was Gregory Lau. He was seventy-two, retired, lived in the Inner Sunset. He answered Flora's call on the second ring with the voice of someone who had been expecting it — or not expecting it specifically but expecting something, the particular readiness of a man who had posted something personal on a neighborhood forum and understood that personal things sometimes came back to you in unexpected ways.

His wife's name had been Joan. She had died in 2021. Two years after the beginning of the pandemic, which she had navigated and then hadn't.

Flora told him about Honorine.

He was quiet for a long time.

"She's Henri's wife," he said.

"Yes."

"Henri made the bread," he said. "That day. The bread we ate on the bench."

"Yes."

Another silence.

"Would she want to hear from me?" he said. "Or is this — is it better if you just tell her?"

"I think," Flora said, "she'd like to hear from you. If you're willing. She wants to know the smell existed in other people's lives. Hearing it from you would be different from hearing it from me."

He was quiet again.

"My wife used to say," he said, "that smell was the most honest sense. That you couldn't argue with a smell the way you could argue with something you saw or heard or thought you understood. A smell just — was. It told you what it told you and there was no interpreting it."

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

"The smell on Balboa Street that morning," he said, "told me that I was in the right place. That I was exactly where I was supposed to be." He paused. "I hadn't felt that before. I was twenty-two. I hadn't felt that before and I recognized it immediately, which is strange, recognizing something you've never felt." He paused. "Joan smelled it at the same time. I think that's why we stopped together. We both knew something at the same time and we looked at each other because we had the same knowledge and we didn't have words for it yet."

"Would you like to talk to Honorine?" Flora said.

"Yes," he said. "I would."

Chapter Three

Honorine came in on a Monday.

She came in the same way she'd come the first time — the cane, the upright carriage, the accent that was its own country — but with a quality about her that Flora identified as anticipation, the particular held quality of someone who was about to receive something they had been waiting for and were managing their expectations of it.

Flora had the printed responses on the desk. Forty-three of them. She'd arranged them in a rough order, the briefer ones at the front, the more detailed toward the back, and the Gregory Lau response last.

She handed Honorine the stack.

Honorine looked at it.

"How many?" she said.

"Forty-three," Flora said. "Some are brief. Some are —" She paused. "Take your time."

Honorine took the stack and set it on her knees and looked at the first page.

She read slowly.

Flora and Nancy went about their business in the way they went about their business when a client was in the room reading something — quietly, the ordinary occupation of the office, not ignoring and not watching, present but not intrusive.

After twenty minutes Honorine set the stack on the desk.

She did not speak immediately.

She looked at the cork board.

She looked at the card stock above the door.

She looked at the Farallon Islands postcard.

Then she said: "The man who walked past every morning and waited at the corner for the smell."

"Yes," Flora said.

"He said it was like something close to religious." She paused. "Henri would have — he would have been embarrassed by that. He would have said: it's bread. It's just bread. I made bread and it smelled like bread." She tapped the cane once. "He was wrong. It wasn't just bread. He could never smell his own bakery the way other people could. He was too inside it. You can't smell your own smell."

"No," Nancy said. "You can't."

Honorine looked at the stack.

"The man and the woman who had their first date," she said. "Who ate the bread on the bench. And the woman died."

"Yes," Flora said. "His name is Gregory Lau. He'd like to speak to you, if you're willing."

Honorine looked at Flora.

"He's still here?" she said. "In the city?"

"Inner Sunset," Flora said.

Honorine was quiet for a moment.

"His wife smelled Henri's bread on their first date," she said. "And now she's gone." She tapped the cane. "I understand this man."

"Yes," Flora said. "I thought you might."

"Can I call him?" she said. "From here. Now."

Flora looked at Nancy.

Nancy already had the number written on a slip of paper.

She set it on the desk.

Honorine looked at it. She picked up her phone — old, not a smartphone, a small simple phone that did calls and nothing else — and she dialed.

Flora and Nancy did not leave the room. They had not been asked to leave the room.

They turned slightly toward their desks and allowed the room to be what the room was — a place where things happened and were witnessed without being made into a production.

"Monsieur Lau," Honorine said into the phone. "I am Honorine Castets. You ate my husband's bread on a bench in the park in 1976 and you remember the smell." A pause. "Yes. I am calling because I want to say thank you." Another pause, longer. "Not for remembering. Anyone can remember. For knowing, at twenty-two years old, that you were exactly where you were supposed to be. Henri would have wanted to know he made that possible." A longer pause. "Yes." A very long pause. "Yes, I would like that very much."

She hung up.

She set the phone on her knee and looked at the window for a moment.

"He's going to come for tea," she said. "Next week. He wants to bring a photograph of his wife." She paused. "He says she always talked about that bread. He says she would have wanted to tell me herself that the smell was the beginning of everything for them."

"That's a good thing," Flora said.

"Yes," Honorine said. "It is." She tapped the cane. "I told him Henri would have been embarrassed to know his bread was the beginning of everything. He laughed. He said: I'm glad I'm telling you instead."

She sat for a moment in the way of someone who had arrived somewhere they'd been trying to get to and was allowing themselves to know they'd arrived.

"Forty-three people," she said.

"Forty-three who responded," Nancy said. "The post was up for forty-eight hours. There will be more who remember who didn't see it, or saw it and didn't know how to respond, or responded in their own way — which is to say nothing, just to remember for a moment when they saw the question."

Honorine looked at her.

"You understand this," she said.

"I was a court stenographer for thirty years," Nancy said. "I know the difference between the record and what actually happened. The record is always smaller."

Honorine looked at her for a long time.

"The smell is gone," she said. "It can't be recovered. The starter is gone, the flour is gone, the oven is gone, Henri is gone." She paused. "But it

existed. It was in forty-three people's lives and probably in a hundred more and probably in the life of every person who walked past that corner of Balboa Street on a morning when the wind was right between 1974 and 1989." She tapped the cane once. "That is not nothing."

"No," Flora said. "It isn't."

"It is, in fact, a great deal," Honorine said.

She stood. She picked up the stack of forty-three responses and held them against her chest with one arm and the cane in the other hand.

"Can I keep these?" she said.

"They're yours," Flora said.

At the door Honorine stopped.

She turned.

She looked at the office one more time — the room, the furniture, the accumulated things on the cork board, the card stock above the door.

"You know what I have not been able to find?" she said. "In thirty-five years. Not the smell — I told you that. Something else."

Flora waited.

"Someone to tell," Honorine said. "Someone to tell that Henri's bread was the best thing. Someone who would understand what I meant." She paused. "My children understand. My grandchildren are kind. My friends know I loved him." She tapped the cane. "But to tell someone who knew the smell. Who stood at the corner and waited for it. Who ate the bread on a bench and knew they were exactly where they were supposed to be." She looked at the forty-three responses in her arm. "I have been looking for someone to tell for thirty-five years." She paused. "Now I have forty-three of them."

She 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 April afternoon, the office full of the good quiet that followed a thing being resolved, the particular quality of air in a room where something had been put down.

"She came in wanting to find a smell," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"She found forty-three people," Nancy said.

"Yes."

Nancy wrapped her hands around her cup. She looked at the window. The April light, which was doing the thing April light did in San Francisco — suggesting more warmth than it had, making promises about May.

"I've been thinking about what she said," Nancy said. "About Henri not being able to smell his own bakery. Being too inside it."

"Yes," Flora said.

"I think about that with the work," Nancy said. "That we're too inside it to smell it. That we can't know what it is from the outside — what it's like to walk past and have it reach out and take you." She paused. "The postcards come back. The notes come back. Sable's card. The one that said he wrote back. We get these returns from the outside." She paused. "That's how we know."

"The record is always smaller," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "But the returns tell you the record is smaller. The returns are the evidence of what the record couldn't hold."

Flora looked at the cork board.

The accumulation of it. Inverness, Penang, the second movement, he wrote back, I'm the one who gets to sit at it first. Six things from outside the

room that told them what the room had done.

She thought about forty-three people on a neighborhood forum remembering a smell.

She thought about the man at the hardware store who had timed his Tuesday mornings by the moment the smell came down the block. Who had said it was like a note that had been in a chord and then wasn't.

She thought about Gregory Lau at twenty-two years old on a bench in a park eating bread with a woman who would become his wife, both of them stopped at the same moment by the same smell, both of them knowing something they didn't have words for yet.

She thought about Henri Castets feeding a starter for eighteen years in San Francisco, a starter he'd carried in a jar from Normandy, never knowing that what he was making every morning was the beginning of everything for at least one couple and the best thing about being alive for at least one dying man and a note in a chord for at least one man who would stand at a corner every Tuesday morning for eight years waiting for it to reach him.

Never knowing because you couldn't smell your own smell.

"What do you think it smelled like?" Flora said.

Nancy considered this seriously, as she considered all real questions.

"Something with wood in it," she said. "Because of the oven he built. Something warm that came from something older than warm — the starter, the flour from the specific soil of a specific place." She paused. "Something that smelled like it had been made with full attention, which sounds impossible, but I think there are things where you can tell. Where the attention is in the thing." She paused. "And something —" She stopped. "Something that smelled like someone knew what they were doing. Like the person making it had been making it for so long that the making was the most natural thing, and the naturalness came through in the smell."

Flora looked at her.

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

They sat with the April afternoon and the tea and the office full of its own accumulated history and the cork board with its six outside things and the card stock and the Farallon Islands and the slight crookedness of the sign on the frosted glass door.

"Nancy," Flora said.

Nancy looked at her.

"You said you've been uncovering things," Flora said. "Looking at them directly."

"Yes," Nancy said.

"How is that?" Flora said.

Nancy looked at the notepad.

"Hard," she said. "And also —" She paused. "Also the right thing. The same way the chair was hard for Sable and also the right thing. The same way Octavia's letter to Desmond was hard and also the right thing." She paused. "I keep finding that hard and right are not opposites. That hard is sometimes just what right feels like from the inside."

Flora looked at her.

"I know what I am," Nancy said. "I know what the work is now. I know which things I need to check and how often and what it means when I check them and they're right and what it means when I check them and they're not." She paused. "I can't smell my own smell. But I can read my own margins. And today my margins are right." She paused. "That's today. Tomorrow will be what tomorrow is."

"Yes," Flora said.

"Today is good," Nancy said.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She read them both.

She looked at them again.

"Good," she said.

The word she said to herself, the small daily confirmation. Flora heard it the way she had been hearing it, now, fully — not protected from the weight of it but holding it, the way you held things that were both hard and true simultaneously.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date at the top of a fresh page.

She wrote the time.

She waited for the next case.

A week later Honorine sent a note.

On cream paper, fountain pen, the handwriting of a woman who had learned her letters in French and never stopped forming them that way.

It said: Gregory came for tea. He brought a photograph of Joan. She was laughing in it. He said she always laughed like that when she talked about the bread.

Below that: I told him Henri was embarrassed when people praised his bread. He said: Joan would have told him to accept the praise. I said: Henri would have said he was just doing his job. He said: Joan would have said that doing your job beautifully is not just doing your job.

Below that, a line in French that Flora read slowly, working through it:

On ne peut pas sentir sa propre odeur. Mais on peut savoir qu'elle existe.

You cannot smell your own smell. But you can know that it exists.

Flora pinned it to the cork board.

Nancy read it when she came in.

She read the French line.

She read it again.

She put the cap on her pen and set it parallel to the notepad and looked at the note for a long time.

Then she said: Henri knew.

Flora said: yes. I think he did.

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.

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

Neither of them had fixed it.

Neither of them ever would.

End.