



DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

# The Eleven Cloths

*a 321Lumina.com book*



by Blurt Snodgrass

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*A Drake & Voss Novella*

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## Chapter One

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He arrived on a Thursday morning in March carrying a child.

Not a small child — a boy of about ten, angular and quiet, with the particular self-containment of a child who had learned recently that the world was not as stable as he'd believed and had decided, in response, to take up less space in it. He wore a dark blue anorak and carried a library book and he came into the office behind the man and found a spot on the floor in the corner near the window and sat down and opened his book and did not look up.

Flora noted this.

She noted the way the man positioned himself — not between her and the boy, but at an angle that allowed him to see the boy in his peripheral vision without turning. The specific vigilance of someone recently responsible for something precious and terrified of losing sight of it.

"Mr. —" Flora began.

"Okonkwo," he said. "Sable." He was forty-seven, Nigerian-American, a large man who moved carefully, the careful movement of someone who worked with his hands and had learned that the relationship between force and material was more negotiation than command. He wore work clothes — not dirty, but marked with the specific traces of the workshop, a faint smell of wood and finish and the particular oil he used on his tools, the smell of someone who had come from work rather than come from home. "This is Finn. My nephew. I hope it's all right to bring him."

"Of course," Flora said.

The boy did not look up. Flora looked at him for a moment — the dark blue anorak, the library book held with both hands, the absolute concentration of a child who was not reading but was performing reading, which was a different thing and required more effort.

Nancy came in from the kitchen with two cups and saw the man and the boy and took the scene in with the economy of long practice and brought the cups to the desk and went back for a third, smaller cup, which she filled with water from the tap and set on the floor within the boy's reach without looking at the boy or speaking to him, and then she sat at her desk and opened her notepad.

The boy looked at the cup of water.

He did not pick it up.

But he looked at it.

Nancy wrote the date and the time and waited.

"Tell me," Flora said.

Sable Okonkwo looked at his hands on his knees. Large hands, the knuckles slightly enlarged from the work, the particular topography of hands that had been doing the same skilled labor for twenty years and had shaped themselves around it.

"I'm a furniture maker," he said. "Custom pieces — chairs, tables, cabinets, the occasional bed frame. I have a workshop in the Dogpatch, ground floor of the building I live in. I've been doing this for twenty years." He paused. "My sister died in September. Her name was Adaeze. She was thirty-nine. An aneurysm — no warning, a Tuesday morning, she was getting ready for work. Finn was at school." He said all of this in the flat careful way of someone who had said these facts many times and had developed a way of saying them that got them out of his mouth without destroying him. "Finn came to live with me. I'm his — I'm his guardian now. His father is not —" He stopped. "His father is not in the picture. It's just us."

Flora looked at the boy.

He was still looking at the cup of water.

"Since September," Sable said, "I can't finish anything."

Flora looked back at him.

"I start pieces," he said. "I work on them. I put full attention into them, the skill is there, the work is there. And then I reach a certain point — not always the same point, not predictable — and I stop. I cover the piece with a cloth. I start something new." He paused. "I have eleven pieces in the workshop. All begun since September. All covered." He looked at his

hands. "Eleven cloths."

"What happens when you reach that point?" Flora said. "The point where you stop."

He thought about this.

"The piece becomes itself," he said. "That's how I think about it. There's a point in every piece where it stops being material I'm working and becomes the thing it's going to be. Before that point it's mine — I'm making decisions, I'm shaping it, it answers to me. After that point it's —" He paused. "It's its own thing. It exists. And whatever it is, it's permanent. It'll outlast me. It'll go into someone's house and be there for decades." He looked at the window. "Since September I can't get past that point. The piece becomes itself and I look at it and I cover it."

"Why?" Flora said.

He was quiet for a long time.

"Because Adaeze is gone," he said, "and the pieces keep becoming permanent things, and she isn't." He said it the way you said the thing you'd worked out alone and were saying aloud for the first time, the thing that had been inside you waiting for the right room to say it in. "Every time a piece becomes itself, it becomes something that will exist after her, something she'll never sit in or put her hands on, and I —" He stopped. "I cover it because I can't look at it."

The office was quiet.

The boy in the corner had turned a page. Flora wasn't sure he'd read what was on it.

"You want to find a chair," Flora said.

"Yes." He reached into the pocket of his work jacket and produced a photograph, which he set on the desk. An old photograph, printed on paper, slightly creased — a chair photographed in a room Flora didn't recognize, an ordinary wooden chair, the kind that had been made in its thousands in the mid-twentieth century, ladder-back, simple, designed for use rather than beauty. But on the left rear leg, visible if you looked, a repair — a piece of wood, a slightly different grain from the original, set in with a joint that was, even in the photograph, noticeably precise.

"I made that repair fifteen years ago," he said. "When Adaeze was twenty-four and the leg cracked and she brought the chair to me and I fixed

it. I was twenty-eight. I was still learning what I could do and I was — I was proud of that joint." He paused. "She used that chair for fifteen years. She ate every meal in it, she said. She read in it. She sat in it to call me on the phone." He looked at the photograph. "When she died and the apartment was cleared — there was so much to do, Finn, the funeral, the legal things, I wasn't paying attention to every detail. The apartment contents were dealt with by her landlord and a clearance company. By the time I thought about the chair, it was gone."

"Do you know which clearance company?" Flora said.

"I found that out." He produced a piece of paper from the same pocket. "Clearance company in the Mission. I called them. They said they couldn't tell me what happened to specific items — they sort and sell and donate and it goes where it goes." He paused. "They said the apartment contents were cleared on October the fourth. Nearly six months ago."

Flora looked at the piece of paper. The company name, the date.

She looked at the photograph again. The repair on the left rear leg. The joint that a twenty-eight-year-old had been quietly proud of.

"You want it for Finn," she said.

"Yes," he said.

Flora looked at the boy.

The cup of water had been moved. He hadn't drunk from it — or she hadn't seen him drink from it — but it was in a different position. Closer to him.

"Does Finn know you're here?" she said.

Sable looked at the boy.

The boy kept his eyes on his book.

"Finn knows everything," Sable said. "That's part of the problem."

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He said this and did not elaborate and Flora did not push him on it — there was something in the way he'd said it that suggested the elaboration would come when it was ready and not before. She let it sit. She asked the practical questions: the apartment address, the clearance company, what other furniture had been in the apartment, whether Adaeze had any regular buyers or sellers of second-hand goods, whether she'd mentioned the chair

specifically in recent years.

He answered. The apartment had been a one-bedroom in the Outer Sunset. Adaeze had worked as a social worker — the profession made Flora think of Perpetua Seng for a moment, the way the work accumulated in a person, what it took. She had lived modestly, the apartment furnished with a mix of things she'd had for years and things she'd found. The chair had been with her since she was nineteen, when she'd bought it at a garage sale in Oakland for two dollars.

"Two dollars," Sable said. "She always said that. Two dollars and I've had it longer than I've had anything." He paused. "She brought it to me when the leg cracked because she didn't want to get rid of it. She said: can you fix it so it doesn't show. I said: I can fix it so it's better than it was. She said: don't make it better, make it itself. Just fixed." He paused. "I made the joint as close to invisible as I could get at twenty-eight. She said: you can see it if you know to look. I said: that's how repairs should be." He paused. "She kept it for fifteen more years."

When he left he stood at the door and looked at the boy, who closed his book and stood and came to stand beside him. They left together, the man and the boy, the boy slightly ahead on the stairs, negotiating the fourth step with the cautiousness of someone encountering it for the first time.

Nancy looked at the photograph on the desk.

"The repair," she said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"That's how repairs should be," Nancy said. "You can see it if you know to look."

Flora looked at the photograph.

"We need to find the chair," she said.

"Yes," Nancy said. She picked up her pen. "We do."

## Chapter Two

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The clearance company was on Valencia Street in the Mission, the kind of business that occupied a liminal space in the city's economy — necessary, unglamorous, the work of dealing with the material residue of other people's lives. Flora went on a Monday.

The man who ran it was named Terry, sixty, a pragmatist who had been sorting other people's possessions for thirty years and had developed the specific equanimity of someone who understood that objects were objects and attachment to them was human and both things were true simultaneously.

He remembered the October fourth clearance.

"Outer Sunset," he said. "One-bedroom. Woman who'd died suddenly, the landlord wanted the place cleared quickly. It happens." He pulled up the records on a tablet that had seen better years. "We donated most of it — the furniture in reasonable condition went to a resale charity on Irving. The stuff that wasn't worth reselling went to the recycling center." He looked at the record. "What you're looking for — a wooden chair, ladder-back, old — that would have gone to Irving."

The resale charity on Irving was run by a woman named Bea who had the organizational capacity of someone who had been managing the material surplus of a neighborhood for twenty years and had built systems to handle it. She knew her inventory. She kept records.

She found the chair in eleven minutes.

"Sold November second," she said, looking at the card file she kept for larger items. "Ladder-back wooden chair, good condition, repair on one leg. Eight dollars." She looked up. "We don't keep buyer information. Cash sale. But —" She looked at the card again. "One of our regular volunteers was working that day. She might remember. She has a good eye for who buys

what."

The volunteer's name was Margaret. She was seventy-eight, came in on Tuesdays and Fridays, and when Bea called her that evening and described the chair she said, without hesitation: "The Cortland woman. She came in specifically looking for a wooden chair, something old. She said it was for her kitchen."

"Do you know the Cortland woman?" Bea said.

"I know her face," Margaret said. "I think she lives on Cortland. In Bernal."

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Flora spent two days in Bernal Heights.

Not searching desperately — walking, looking, the slow patient work of someone who understood that a neighborhood was a system and that systems had patterns and patterns could be read if you were willing to spend the time reading them. She walked Cortland Avenue, the main street, and the blocks around it. She looked in windows. She went into the coffee shop and the bookshop and the hardware store and she asked, carefully, in the way she asked things when she was asking without appearing to ask, about a woman who had recently bought a wooden chair.

On the second day, in the hardware store, the man behind the counter — sixty, bearded, the easy authority of someone who knew his neighborhood — said: "A chair? Are you talking about Vera? Vera Sandoval? She was in here last week asking about wood oil. Said she'd just gotten an old chair and the wood was dry."

Vera Sandoval.

The address was on Wool Street, three blocks from Cortland.

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She knocked on a Wednesday afternoon.

Vera Sandoval was fifty-three, compact and direct, with the face of someone who made decisions quickly and stood by them. She opened the door and looked at Flora with the assessment of a woman who was not unfriendly but was not going to be managed.

"Ms. Sandoval," Flora said. "I'm a private investigator. I've been hired to find a wooden chair — a ladder-back chair with a repair on the left rear leg.

I believe you may have purchased it at the charity shop on Irving in November."

Vera Sandoval looked at her.

"Why?" she said.

Flora told her about Sable. About Adaeze. About the two-dollar garage sale find and the cracked leg and the joint a twenty-eight-year-old had been quietly proud of. She told her about Finn.

Vera Sandoval listened.

When Flora finished she stepped back from the door.

"Come in," she said. "It's in the kitchen."

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The chair was at the kitchen table, one of four chairs around a table that had clearly been accumulated rather than bought as a set — each chair different, the collecting of someone who preferred character to coordination. The Adaeze chair was immediately identifiable: the age of it, the slight lean to the ladder-back from decades of people sitting in it and angling slightly toward whatever they were doing, and on the left rear leg, if you looked, the repair. The piece of complementary wood, the precise joint, the seam that was visible if you knew to look.

Flora looked at it for a long time.

"I didn't know," Vera said. She was standing in the kitchen doorway. "I didn't know it came from someone who'd died. I just liked it. I was looking for something wooden, something old, something that had been sat in a lot." She paused. "I liked that it had been sat in. You could tell."

"Yes," Flora said. "You could."

"He wants it back," Vera said.

"For the boy," Flora said. "The nephew. Finn. He's ten and he's living with his uncle now and he —" She paused. "The chair is the piece of furniture she sat in for fifteen years. And his uncle is a furniture maker who made the repair on it. It's the only thing that connects both of them to her."

Vera looked at the chair.

She looked at it for a long time, the way you looked at something you'd been sitting with for four months, something you'd bought because you liked it and had come to like more.

"I'll give it back," she said.

"I want to pay you," Flora said. "Whatever you think is right."

Vera shook her head. "Tell him to come and get it," she said. "And tell him —" She paused. "Tell him the chair was well sat in. That's what I noticed. Some chairs have been sat in a little. Some chairs have been lived in. This one was lived in."

Flora looked at the chair.

The ladder-back, the slight lean, the repair on the left rear leg.

"I'll tell him," she said.

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## Chapter Three

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She called Sable from the street outside Vera Sandoval's house.

He answered on the first ring.

She told him she'd found it. She told him where it was. She told him Vera would give it back and had asked him to come and collect it, and she told him what Vera had said — that the chair was well sat in, that it had been lived in rather than merely used.

He was quiet for a moment.

"Lived in," he said.

"Yes."

Another silence, longer.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Yes."

"When you found it," he said. "What did it look like."

Flora stood on Wool Street in the March afternoon, the Bernal hill above her, the city spread below in the specific way it spread from Bernal — a view of many neighborhoods at once, the city as a whole rather than its parts.

"It was at a kitchen table," she said. "With three other chairs, all different. She'd bought it because she liked it. She said she could tell it had been lived in." She paused. "The repair is visible. On the left rear leg. You can see the joint." She paused. "It looked like itself. It looked like the chair from your photograph."

He was quiet.

"Fifteen years," he said. "Adaeze sat in it for fifteen years."

"Yes."

"And Vera Sandoval sat in it for four months."

"Yes."

"And Finn is going to sit in it," he said.

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

He made a sound that was not quite a word but was not not a word either — the sound of something large being received, something the chest could barely hold. Then he said: "I'll go today. This afternoon. Is that too soon?"

"I'll call Vera and let her know," Flora said.

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He came in the following Thursday to settle the account.

He came alone this time. He wrote the check without looking at the amount and he sat in the client chair and he looked different from the way he'd looked three weeks before — not lighter exactly, but differently weighted, as though the weight he was carrying had been redistributed rather than removed.

"The chair is in my kitchen," he said. "Where Finn eats breakfast."

"How is Finn?" Flora said.

Sable looked at the window.

"Better," he said. "I don't mean — I mean something specific. He was sitting in the chair the first morning it was there, eating his cereal, and he looked at the leg. The repair. He got down from the chair and he looked at the joint from the floor — just looked at it, lying on the floor, looking up at the leg the way you'd look at a building from the ground." He paused. "And then he got up and sat back down and finished his cereal." He looked at Flora. "He didn't say anything. But something changed."

"What changed?" Nancy said from her desk.

"He's been — he's been very contained," Sable said. "Since September. Very self-contained. He contains himself. He takes up the minimum amount of space. I've been watching it and not knowing how to —" He stopped. "That morning with the chair, something let go a little. Not everything. But something." He paused. "He's a child. He should be taking up space."

Flora looked at the cork board.

"And the workshop?" she said.

He looked at his hands.

"I've been in the workshop every day this week," he said. "I haven't finished anything yet. But I've uncovered two of the pieces." He paused. "Just looked at them. Spent time with them." He paused. "I think I'm going to finish one. I think I know which one." He looked at Flora. "There's a table. I started it in October. I got close to the point and I stopped and covered it. But the table is —" He paused. "The table wants to be finished. I can feel it. The wood has been patient." He almost smiled. "Wood is patient in a way that is either very comforting or very humbling, depending on the day."

Nancy had stopped writing.

Flora looked at her.

Nancy was looking at the cork board. At the accumulation of it. Then she looked at Sable.

"The cloths," she said. "The eleven cloths."

He looked at her.

"You covered the pieces because you couldn't look at things becoming permanent," Nancy said. "Things existing after her."

"Yes," he said.

"But she existed," Nancy said. "She was real. Fifteen years in a chair is real. That's not nothing, a person sitting in a chair for fifteen years. That's —" She paused. "That's permanent too. In a different way. Not the chair's permanence. Her permanence. The mark she left on it." She paused. "Your repair is on that chair. Your twenty-eight-year-old self is in that joint. She's in the lean of the back, the way it shaped itself around her. That's not going away because she did."

Sable looked at Nancy.

Something in his face that was large and controlled and being held.

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

"The table in your workshop," Nancy said. "When you finish it. It will exist after her. But it will also be something you made after losing her. The making of it is not separate from the loss. It's — it carries the loss inside it. The work you do from now on carries September inside it." She paused. "That's not a terrible thing. That might be the way the work continues."

He sat with this for a long time.

The March afternoon light came through the window and made a rectangle on the floor between the two desks, moving slowly as it did.

"My sister used to say," he said, "that the thing about my work was that you could always tell who had made it. Not from a signature — from the choices. The way I solved a problem, the joint I preferred for a particular angle, the thickness I chose for a particular surface." He paused. "She said: your furniture is you. She said: every piece is you making a decision and the decisions are you." He looked at his hands. "I used to think that meant my best self. The most skilled, the most deliberate." He paused. "But she meant all of it. She meant the choices I made when I was learning and the choices I make now and the choices I'll make when I'm old and my hands are less sure. All of those are me." He looked at the window. "The table I'm going to finish is me right now. Which means it's me after September. And that's what it is."

He stood.

He picked up his jacket.

At the door he stopped.

"Finn asked me something last week," he said. "He asked me: when you make a chair, do you know who's going to sit in it?"

"What did you tell him?" Flora said.

"I told him: sometimes. Sometimes a client tells me, sometimes I can imagine. But mostly I don't know." He paused. "He said: do you think about who might sit in it someday. People you haven't met. I said: yes. I think about that." He looked at the door. "He said: I think Mum sat in the chair a thousand times and she was probably thinking about something else. She wasn't thinking: I'm sitting in the chair Uncle Sable fixed. She was just sitting." He paused. "He said: I think that's the best way to sit in a chair. Just sitting."

He went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

## Chapter Four

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Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and sat and the March afternoon held its light in the room and neither of them spoke for a while, the particular quiet of after, the room finding itself again.

"Just sitting," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said.

"He's ten," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "Children do that. They say the thing that took you fifty years to get to because they haven't been taught yet that it needs to take fifty years."

Flora held her tea.

She thought about Finn on the floor in the corner with his library book, not reading but performing reading, taking up the minimum amount of space. She thought about him lying on the floor looking up at the repair on the left rear leg of his mother's chair, looking at the joint his uncle had made at twenty-eight, the two of them connected through the wood.

She thought about the eleven cloths in the workshop in the Dogpatch.

"He'll finish the table," she said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "I think he will."

"And then he'll finish another one," Flora said. "And each one will carry September inside it, the way Nancy said. And that will be what his work is now."

Nancy looked at the window.

"The best repairs," she said, "are the ones where you can see the joint if you know to look."

Flora looked at her.

"Yes," she said.

Nancy wrapped both hands around her cup.

"I've been thinking about the cloths," she said. "The covering. He covered the pieces because he couldn't look at things becoming permanent when Adaeze wasn't." She paused. "I understand that. I understand not being able to look at the thing that is going to outlast."

Flora was still.

"I've been covering things," Nancy said. "Not with cloths. But covering." She looked at her cup. "Not from you — you know, you've known. But from myself. Telling myself the managing is sufficient. That if the managing is working the thing being managed doesn't need to be looked at directly."

"Nancy," Flora said.

"I'm looking at it," Nancy said. "That's what I'm saying. Not asking you to do anything different. Just — I'm uncovering it. Sitting with it." She paused. "Like Finn with his cereal. Just sitting."

Flora looked at her.

Nancy looked at the notepad.

She picked up her pen.

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

She wrote the time in the margin.

She looked at both.

She looked at both again.

She put the cap on her pen and set it parallel to the notepad and looked at the Farallon Islands above the door and the card stock in her own handwriting and the accumulation of the cork board and the March light moving slowly across the floor between the desks.

"Good," she said.

Not to Flora. To herself.

A word she had been saying to herself for two years, the small daily confirmation that the thing she'd checked was still there, the ground still under her feet.

Flora heard her say it.

She had heard her say it before — many times, the small word at the end of the reading-back, the private confirmation — but she had not let herself hear it until now, had protected herself from the full weight of it the way you protected yourself from things you weren't ready to hold.

She heard it now.

She held it.

She did not say anything.

Some things you received in silence. Some things you let sit in the room and did not make a production of, because making a production of them was not what the room required.

The room required that they sit here, in the March afternoon, with their tea, and let the day be what it was.

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.

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*Two months later, a postcard arrived.*

*No stamp — it had been hand-delivered, pushed through the gap under the door.*

*On the front: a photograph of a table. Oak, clean lines, the surface finished to a warmth that came through even in a photograph. A simple piece. A piece that had been made with full attention.*

*On the back, in handwriting Flora recognized:*

*The table is finished. Finn says it's the best one.*

*He would know.*

*Below that, in smaller writing, a child's hand, careful and deliberate:*

*I'm the one who gets to sit at it first.*

*Flora read it.*

*She passed it to Nancy.*

*Nancy read it.*

*She put it on the cork board.*

*They looked at it for a moment.*

*Then Nancy said: he's taking up space.*

*Flora said: yes.*

*The work continued.*

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*In the office on the second floor, the cork board held what it held.*

*The Farallon Islands postcard above the door.*

*The note on card stock gone slightly yellow.*

*The postcard from Inverness. The postcard from Penang.*

*A folded note: Second movement. Last night. I got out of the way.*

*A single sheet: He wrote back.*

*A postcard of a table: I'm the one who gets to sit at it first.*

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

*Neither of them had fixed it.*

*Neither of them ever would.*

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*End.*