

ELEGY IN SCARLET

A Scott Drayco Mystery

by BV Lawson

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Chapter 1

Thursday, February 14

If the hearing was a farce, it was nicely choreographed. The members of the Board of Appeals and Review looked down on Scott Drayco from behind their table on the elevated platform, two men wearing glasses bookending a woman in the middle. All three sported black suits as if attending a funeral, and in a way it was—the potential death of Drayco’s career.

The man standing next to Drayco, Benny Baskin, Esquire, wasn’t wearing his usual platform shoes, making him closer to four-six than his usual four-nine. Benny had opted against a black suit, his olive green number reminiscent of a military general dressing for battle.

Drayco tried his best to look neutral and professional, despite his own charcoal tweed getup that made him itch in the hot, windowless room. He’d be wearing a white flag of surrender, if D.C. Mayor Gavin Kozell had his way—the same mayor who’d been good friends with ██████████, [removed to prevent spoilers from the previous book] now lying in his grave thanks in part to Drayco.

As if the images of the dying ██████████ enveloped in a wall of flames weren’t enough to hijack Drayco’s thoughts, he was distracted by the odor of the room, like someone had mopped up vomit with a saccharine-sweet cleaning solution. It was a fitting accompaniment to the maroon razor blades that squeals from the heating vents were flinging into his eardrums. He silently cursed his synesthesia and tried to block out the assault on his senses and focus instead on the tribunal trio.

Board member Saul Bobeck peered at Drayco. “You understand this conference is to refine the issues before your evidentiary hearing? Stipulations, pending motions, approval of prospective witnesses. An assessment of your case’s settlement potential?”

Drayco nodded. He almost looked around, but there was no audience to see. Benny had gotten his way with that one—no gawkers, no media, just empty seats.

Bobeck droned on, “Mayor Kozell requested this action due to D.C. Code section 2010.1, pertaining to the licensure of private investigators. And violations of the code, including any offense involving fraudulent conduct in the judgment of the mayor.”

Baskin spoke up. “May I remind the board my client was not charged with any crimes by the Metropolitan Police Department? And absolved of any foul play in the death of ██████████? In fact, they found it was self-defense on my client’s part and decided not to press charges. I can only conclude the mayor is mistaken in his assertion of any alleged ‘fraudulent’ conduct.”

Bobeck doubled down. “The MPD agreed the bullet in [REDACTED] skull was from your gun, Mr. Drayco, is that correct?”

Baskin had warned Drayco not to speak unless he gave a quick flip of his left wrist. Baskin’s hand stayed by his side, so Drayco let the attorney answer. “Yes, but the primary cause of death was from the fire. And for the record, it’s Dr. Drayco.”

“Well then, *Dr. Drayco*, you admit [REDACTED] was still alive when shot?”

Baskin shifted his feet but not his hands. Again, Drayco stayed silent. “The Medical Examiner determined that to be the case, yes. But only barely alive. He would have died within moments, regardless.”

The woman in the middle, Carlotta Peggs, asked, “This gun was fully registered with the MPD as required by law, is that correct?”

Baskin flicked his wrist, and Drayco finally replied, “That’s correct.”

She shuffled through some papers on the desk. “I don’t see any witnesses listed for the evidentiary hearing.” She stopped on one piece of paper. “Ah, here we are. Two names. Detective William Gonzalez of the MPD and FBI Special Agent Mark Sargosian. They were both present at the scene, it says here.”

Peggs glanced at the other two board members. “I have no objections to these witnesses, do you?”

The two men shook their heads, and the third member, Douglass Scarpato, finally spoke. “I think we know why we’re here. [REDACTED] was an esteemed member of the academic community. A nationally known consultant in high-profile court cases and on television.” Was there a hint of sarcasm in his voice? Drayco couldn’t tell by looking at the man’s blank face. Best not to read anything into it.

Baskin added cheerfully, “You forgot the part about being a serial killer. Whose horrific actions my client,” Baskin nodded at Drayco, “unmasked, thereby preventing any additional murders. In my opinion, this board should be convening to offer him a medal, not grilling him on baseless charges.”

Scarpato coughed and hid his mouth behind his hand, making it hard to tell if he were frowning or trying to stifle a laugh. Perhaps Scarpato *was* on Team Drayco. Just, as it seemed, was everyone except the mayor. Benny had hit the ceiling upon learning about the mayor’s “bee-up-his-butt vendetta” and fought to get the mayor’s case dismissed. No dice.

Benny had also told Drayco earlier he thought he could count on Scarpato and Peggs. He wasn’t as sure where Bobeck stood since Bobeck and the mayor were a lot closer than the other two board members. That suspicion was borne out when Bobeck continued the questioning, “It’s the preferred procedure to capture a suspect alive, is it not? To give his side of the story, perhaps prove his innocence?”

Drayco almost jumped into that one, but Baskin beat him to it. “And if law officers are killed first, *their* side of the story will be silenced. In the heat of battle, they hardly have the luxury for a meeting like this before taking action to protect themselves.”

Benny grabbed a stack of documents and waved them at the board. “The evidence against [REDACTED] is overwhelming and verifiable beyond any shadow of a doubt. Had he lived, he’d be warming a jail cell right now and facing life in prison. His survival would not have changed that cold, hard fact.”

Peggs leaned forward in her chair. “My colleague makes a valid point. However, I disagree with its intent or relevance. Do you have any motions to present on behalf of your client at this time, Mr. Baskin?” The frown on her face at the mention of her colleague was interesting and made Drayco sit up straighter. Maybe Team Drayco just added another member?

Baskin tossed the papers back into his briefcase. “I’m requesting a dismissal of the case on the grounds it is fundamentally baseless and unfair.”

Not surprisingly, Bobeck was the one to reply. “There must be complete agreement on that count. And since I do not agree, your request is denied. The evidentiary hearing will go forward.” He looked at his watch and jumped up.

Drayco joined him in standing as did Peggs and Scarpato. But before his exit stage left, Bobeck added, “The hearing will be held on February the twenty-first. I expect to see you there.”

The man didn’t glance at any papers or digital calendars before making his pronouncement. Which could only mean one thing—he’d decided before the hearing started that Drayco should be forced to endure a protracted legal battle. The mayor wanted a scapegoat, Drayco was the target, and Bobeck the facilitator.

Drayco waited for the remaining two board members to depart, leaving him and Benny alone. The air vent whistled and started blowing out hot air again, making the sweet-vomit smell grow stronger. Either that or Drayco was having a stroke. He flicked his wrist at Benny and rocketed past the rows of deserted khaki chairs toward the exit and much-needed fresh air.

Chapter 2

Once out in the hallway, Drayco leaned against a wall and waited for the cooler air to evaporate the sweat at the back of his neck. A glance at an old-fashioned wall clock made him laugh at the little hand pointing to three—merrily ticking its way toward technological obsolescence above the people absorbed in their sophisticated cellphones.

Baskin stopped bouncing on his feet to gaze up at his client. “I thought it went okay, but not *that* well, boy-o.”

Drayco shook his head, not bothering to explain about the clock. Maybe he was just in the mood for absurdities.

Benny continued his bouncing. “This whole pre-hearing conference thing is a sham, anyway.”

“That’s not what the board thinks, is it? Or I wouldn’t be here.”

“You did shoot an important man. Albeit an almost-dead one who tried to kill you. Still, self-defense, yada yada.”

The face of that almost-dead man, the only part of him not engulfed by fire at the time, kept rising up from the mental lockbox in Drayco’s subconscious where he tried to keep it buried. It was the man’s eyes—those eyes trapped in a living hell—that would haunt him forever. But Drayco wasn’t sorry for what he’d done and damn the consequences.

Benny stopped bouncing to cross his arms over his chest. “The mayor had to look like he was doing something. I’ll bet my third-born grandchild the board won’t suspend your P.I. license. Or gun carry privileges. Besides, even if they do suspend you, we’ll appeal. And you can still do consulting—that doesn’t require a license. It would just be a teensy bit of a black mark on your record.”

“Who would hire me?”

“Plenty, with your background and brainiac reputation. You’re a damned fine crime consultant. Hell, I’d hire you, you know that. I’d find a way to make it all nice and legal. Natch.”

A delivery man from a flower shop bumped into Drayco, and the vase of yellow and pink roses the man carried slipped out of his hands. The man caught it in the nick of time, but some of the water from the vase splashed onto Drayco’s sleeve. The man mumbled an apology and moved on.

Drayco had forgotten it was Valentine’s Day. One thing he didn’t have to worry about. Then he winced when he thought of Darcie and made a mental note to wire her flowers as soon as he got a free moment. Velvety red roses to match her velvety red voice. He stifled a sigh. Darcie deserved better, in more ways than one. With his record of failed relationships, maybe every woman deserved better.

Behind Drayco, a different feminine voice tinged with a familiar coppery shimmer said, “Here are the files you asked for, Benny.”

As Drayco spun around, Benny nodded from him to the woman. "I believe you know Deputy Nelia Tyler? She's doing some work for me while she gets her J.D."

Drayco's feet turned to concrete as Benny's words registered. The concrete moved up his legs and through his spine, turning him into a statue.

He hadn't seen Nelia since the incident with [REDACTED] and the warehouse fire. Her look of shock and disapproval that day over his actions still hung like a cumulonimbus over him. Since then, not one word from her. Not that it was all her fault. He hadn't sought her out in her stomping grounds in Cape Unity when he'd visited Darcie or other friends there. Why should he be surprised at bombshell news like this?

He willed away the concrete. "You resigned from the Sheriff's Department?"

She shifted the files to one hand, using the other to finger her blond, braided hair. "Sheriff Sailor is being generous with a staggered work schedule. And I've heard you going on about Benny Baskin for so long, I thought I could earn extra money doing legwork for him."

"You didn't tell me you'd decided to get your law degree." He didn't mean for it to come out like an accusation, but the defiant glint in her eyes told him it had.

"I wasn't aware I needed to inform you first."

Benny looked from Nelia to Drayco and raised an eyebrow. "Now, now, children. If we're going to be one big happy family, we need to get along."

Drayco didn't want to give Benny the satisfaction of knowing he'd struck right at the heart of the problem with his "getting along" comment. Besides, Drayco had used up his absurdity quota for the day. "Tell you what, Uncle Benny. Buy us some balloons and ice cream, and we'll have a nice sing-along to seal the deal."

Nelia gritted her teeth and thrust the folders into Benny's hands. "'Happy families' isn't something I'm very good at right now."

Drayco couldn't help himself. "And why is that?"

"For starters, I notice I wasn't added to the witness list for your hearing."

A sideways glance at Benny showed the attorney's one good eye had grown as wide as the black eyepatch over his other. Drayco replied, "Maybe it's because we didn't know whether to list you in the defense or prosecution column."

She gave Drayco a frosty glare as she said, "Benny, is that all you needed for the moment?"

Benny didn't answer either one of them. He was looking beyond Drayco with his face formed into a mask of wrinkles, all pointing downward. "Thought you said your father wasn't coming today."

"He's not. A crucial deposition with the McDonald case he's working on."

"Then that must be his doppelgänger heading our way."

Brock Drayco strode up to them, dressed in his usual elegant, tailored clothes with a silver tie that matched his hair. And as usual, the smell of his favorite musk cologne preceded him.

Drayco couldn't contain the groan that escaped his lips. "The meeting's over, and—"

"I'm not here about that."

Drayco took in details of his father's appearance he'd missed at first, a twitching eyelid, hands clenched into fists, and a posture so rigid, it resembled rigor. Well, more rigor than usual.

Brock was never partial to polite niceties. "It's about your mother. And murder."

Drayco rubbed his temples. The day's absurd-o-meter had just pegged the top of the scale and zoomed off into the Twilight Zone. "Her body was found after all these years, I take it. How did they make a positive ID?"

"It's pretty easy to make a positive ID when someone is very much alive."

Drayco stared at him. He must have heard his father wrong. Alive? His mother couldn't be alive. "You told me she was dead. Years ago."

"I believed she was. All signs pointed in that direction." Brock held out his hands to his sides. "But there's no question in my mind it's her. Guess we'll know for certain after the DNA tests come back."

"Then what did you mean about that murder bit?"

"She's the one who's charged with murder."

The hands on the wall clock seemed to stop as if somebody opened a rift in spacetime, trapping Drayco in an alternate universe where nothing was what it seemed. He caught a glimpse of the concerned faces of Benny and Nelia out of the edge of his suddenly burred vision.

Brock said, "Let's go grab some coffee."

Drayco followed, surprised his feet actually seemed to work. No matter what Brock told him, the orderly arrangement of everything in his little corner of the universe would never be the same.

Chapter 3

After buying the coffee, Drayco and his father sat at a mahogany-and-steel table so small, it was like a child's toy. They'd chosen a remote corner of the Tex-Mex cafe next to the courthouse to avoid any eavesdroppers, but it didn't matter. It was later in the day, and they had the place to themselves.

Drayco inhaled the dark-roasted aroma from the java before sprinkling salt into his Styrofoam cup. Most people wrinkled their noses when he did that, but it really did cut the bitterness of the coffee. Brock stared at him, even though he'd seen him perform this ritual many times. He never asked his son about it. One item in a long list of things they didn't discuss.

Drayco's mother was another. At least, they hadn't discussed her in a long, long time. Vague remembrances and snippets from those conversations bubbled up to the surface. "You told me she was declared legally dead."

"After seven years, the court granted a presumption of death." Brock took a sip of coffee and winced. "We've been through all that."

Drayco was twelve when they finally had the conversation. He'd wondered how they could do that without a body, a grave, or any kind of proof. Part of him wanted to prove his father and "them" wrong, but the part that hated his mother won. He never pursued it afterward.

Drayco tasted the coffee. Still bitter. He stirred in more salt. "How'd you get the news of her being alive and the murder charge?"

"Not from her. In fact, she refused her phone call privilege. Instead, I got a call from Detective John Halabi of the Arlington County homicide unit. Maura didn't have many possessions on her, but my name was in her wallet."

"You've talked to her?"

Brock picked at the rim of his cup, creating a mini Styrofoam snowstorm. "I identified her from her mugshot. I have no interest in talking to her. What can she possibly say that would set everything right? To make up for all the pain and suffering she caused?"

That was one item they agreed on, it seemed. "The evidence. Is it conclusive?"

"She was caught standing over the body of the victim, a former TSA agent by the name of Jerold Zamorra, holding the knife that killed him. Her prints are all over the thing. The man was stabbed in the abdomen and the groin."

"Did she admit her guilt? Or say why she did it?"

"She told the police she stabbed him. But only once. And he was already dead." Brock gave a small laugh. "Would have expected a better excuse from her."

"What did the autopsy show?"

"Body's with the Medical Examiner now."

Drayco had only seen a few pictures of his mother, ones he rescued from the trash after his father threw them away. They now lay hidden in a photograph album buried under other unused

items in his attic, probably as faded as his mental snapshots of her. She was always smiling in those photos, the real ones and the ones in his head.

“Any chance of bail?”

“The arraignment hasn’t been held yet. She’s being kept as a pre-trial detainee because she’s considered a flight risk. Imagine.” The plastic spoon Brock grasped in his hands broke in two with a loud crack that startled both men.

“Where has she been all this time?”

“I have no idea. Mars, Atlantis, Timbuktu, what’s the difference?”

“Are you telling me you aren’t the slightest bit curious about any of this? To find out why she left? Why she never tried to contact us?”

“I’m saying she’s as dead to me now as she was then.”

Brock tossed the broken pieces of spoon on the middle of the table. “Do what you want, son. I’ve told Detective Halabi everything I know about Maura before I married her and after, which isn’t much. I’m washing my hands of the whole thing, and I’d advise you to do the same.”

His father jumped up from his chair, the no-nonsense mask his former FBI colleagues knew so well firmly in place. “After you talk to Halabi, that is. I told him you haven’t seen her since you were five, but he insists. Said to stop by tomorrow morning. The earlier, the better.”

As he turned to leave, Drayco remained planted in his seat, staring at the spoon shards. Brock started to say something, paused, then mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

He left before Drayco could ask what he was sorry about.

Moments after Brock disappeared, Benny and Nelia joined him at the tiny table. Nelia sat across from him while Benny grabbed a nearby chair after snagging a couple of extra cups of coffee. “We’re your new stalkers. We followed you here. You okay, boy-o? You look a little pale.”

“Ghosts will do that to you, or so I’m told.”

“Ghosts, shmots. You got a real-live woman claiming to be your long-lost mother, but we don’t know it’s her. Could be some ploy.”

Nelia swept the broken spoon and Styrofoam flakes into a napkin that she folded into a neat square. “Stolen identity rings are big business. And they particularly target identities of the deceased.”

Benny nodded. “Nelia’s right. Another scam. What did Brock say? Did he talk to this imposter?”

“He refuses to talk to her. Says he doesn’t care if it’s her or not.”

“He may not have the luxury, he should know that. The police’ll push him to do it, at any rate.”

Drayco nudged the sugar container over to Benny, who dumped half of it into his coffee. Coffee-candy, as Drayco called it. Drayco said, “You know Brock. Stubborn as a mule. No, that’s too ordinary and clichéd for him. More like as stubborn as the Ebola virus.”

Nelia tentatively reached out and placed a feather touch on his arm. A simple gesture, yet it felt like a shot of pure adrenaline. “What are you going to do? Will you go and see her?”

“I suppose it depends on what the DNA tests show. If this woman is not my mother,” his tongue tripped over the word, “then the police don’t need me. And if it is her ... I don’t know. Guess I’ll do whatever is required to assist the police on this. And maybe that’s all.”

Benny squinted his right eye, making the eyepatch on the other rise an inch. “I hate to remind you bad things come in threes, what with this news and your case hearing. You should hit the hay early. Safe and sound at home.”

Drayco didn't look at Nelia and bit his tongue to retort that Benny wasn't good at counting. No, seeing Nelia wasn't so much a bad thing as a ... what? Confusing thing? Painful thing? Awkward thing? Then it hit him—if he ignored the hair-color difference, Nelia bore a slight resemblance to the woman from those fading photos in his attic.

Chapter 4

For once, Drayco thought Benny had an excellent idea. Hay-hitting never sounded so good. It was strange enough being on the wrong side of the bench during the hearing, but the whole recounting of the warehouse fire and ██████'s death was far worse. As if his subconscious hadn't already punished him the past few months with a series of violent dreams—dreams of being trapped in a fire that made him wake up sweating.

He wasn't sweating now as he made his way to his car in the twenty-degree weather. Fortunately, the forecast for snow had been downgraded, and he was able to make a stop by a florist on the way back to his Capitol Hill townhome.

Would Darcie like the roses? Or was that too flashy? He popped himself on the side of the head. This was Darcie he was talking about, definitely roses. The more expensive, the better.

Flowers ordered—with a very high same-day delivery fee added—he headed home under the dark, moonless sky for time alone with his piano and a glass or two or three of Riesling before bed. Just as he stepped across the threshold, he got a whiff of coffee. And was that garlic bread he smelled?

He dropped his coat on the wingback chair near the door, grabbed a baseball bat from the umbrella stand, and strode into the kitchen. Darcie Squier greeted him with a glass of red wine and a kiss. "You're early. No problem. The food won't take long."

Drayco lowered the bat. After eying the smoke detector and not seeing any signs of Darcie's usual burned cuisine, he said, "How did you get in?"

"Your lovely neighbor, Mrs. Chapman. She's seen me here enough I was able to con her into letting me in. You told me you gave her a key in case of emergencies. And this was an emergency. Well, a Valentine's Day emergency. And I've seen you punch in your code."

Drayco made a mental note to change his security codes. And ask for his key back. "You didn't tell me you were coming. I wired some flowers to Cape Unity."

Darcie opened the oven and pulled out an aluminum-foil container, kicking the door shut behind her. "I knew you couldn't come to me with your board hearing and all. So, I came to you, instead."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. So much for being alone with his piano and his thoughts. "It was sweet of you. Truly. But I've had a horrible day. Not sure I'll be great company."

"Nonsense. What could possibly be so bad it would ruin the most romantic day of the year?"

"Finding out your mother has risen from the dead and was arrested for murder."

Darcie almost dropped the pan in her hands, but Drayco rescued it in time. "She's still alive? That's awful." She stood there a moment, then grabbed a couple of plates and served up the lasagna. Drayco spied a takeout bag from Luigi's Primo Pasta on the counter.

"Not quite the response I expected from you."

"Not awful she's alive, I suppose. But after turning her back on her family decades ago. I mean, why now? Unless she's dying and trying to make amends."

“People don’t usually try to make amends by killing a government employee.”

“She murdered somebody? Oh, God, that is awful. Too bad she didn’t stay missing.” Darcie balanced the plates of lasagna in her hands. “Ever wonder if your mother abandoning you makes it harder for you to trust women? Because I’ve wondered that.”

He glared at her. “Are you my shrink now?”

After putting the lasagna on the table she’d set with red placements and candles, she grabbed his hand and pulled him after her. “Eat. You’ll feel better on a full stomach.”

He wasn’t hungry but didn’t want to offend her after all the trouble she’d gone to. Luigi’s had the best Italian around, and it wasn’t as difficult a task to wolf down the meal as it would have been otherwise.

She hopped up from the table to grab something out of the refrigerator and put it on the table. “For the *pièce de résistance*,” she opened the lid. “Tiramisu. They say it’s an aphrodisiac.”

She winked at him, then put her hands on the zipper of the dress she wore. It wasn’t her usual getup, hardly form-fitting and more like a tent. The reason became clear when she pulled down the zipper and let the dress fall to the floor. “And if the tiramisu doesn’t do it, maybe this will.”

She wore what resembled a red ribbon, with thin straps over the shoulders, bows that barely covered her breasts, and a strap hanging down just below her navel. And that was all. “Aren’t you going to unwrap your present?” She winked at him.

Maybe it was the pent-up anger from long-simmering emotional fires, maybe it was the stress of the hearing, maybe a little of it was seeing Nelia unexpectedly. But he did more than unwrap Darcie. He picked her up and carried her to the bedroom, removed his clothing in seconds flat, and proceeded to engage in some of the most torrid and rough sex of his life. Not thinking, not feeling, not caring, just primal and raw.

Afterward, Darcie rolled on top of him and nibbled on his neck. “If this is what having your mother return from the dead does to you, I take it back. It’s not awful at all.”

He lay there, staring at the ceiling, barely feeling Darcie’s presence. The sex hadn’t helped his frustrations one bit. He should grab a block of C4 and go blow up something instead.

She poked his shoulder. “Tell me what you’re thinking, darling.”

“Your flowers are going to be pretty sorry looking when you return home.”

“We’ll get more. Nothing lasts forever.” She slid out of bed, and he heard her going downstairs. When she returned, she had the tiramisu in hand. “And this won’t last much longer if we don’t eat it now.”

“Not sure I have the appetite for it.”

“Well, I sure do.” She dipped into the creamy cake with her finger and smeared some on his body in various sensitive places. He relaxed and gave in to his fate of becoming her dessert, banishing thoughts of the photos in his attic and of their subject, now locked firmly away in an Arlington detention facility.

§ § §

The observer put down the infrared binoculars on the passenger seat, then grabbed some seeds from a plastic bag and popped them in his mouth. As he chewed, he watched the

townhome across the street, but there was no new activity inside or out. The light in the upper window switched off, making him smile.

He picked up his cellphone. After thumbing the screen over to the phone list, he pressed the first entry and then said to the voice on the other end, "Scott Drayco is at his townhome with a brunette."

He listened for a moment then repeated back what he heard. "Darcie Squier? Is she a problem? No? Okay, then. One less person to follow. What about Drayco? I think he's settled in for the night."

After more instructions, he replied, "A sound plan. I'm getting too old to use a car headrest as a pillow all night, anyway—get a crick you wouldn't believe. I'll keep an eye on Drayco when he meets with that Arlington cop tomorrow. And good night to you, too, boss."

He rang off and flipped through the photos on his sim card. Lots of Draycos—both of them—also Benny Baskin, the brunette, of course, then Drayco's neighbor, and Nelia Tyler. He stopped on that one. The brunette was a looker, all right, but if he were Drayco, he'd be banging Tyler. He'd always been a sucker for the whole beauty-and-brains combo.

With one last look at Drayco's window, he started up the car and pulled out of his parking spot. He flipped the radio to a station playing folk music. Sounded like the Wemyss Weavers playing a Scottish ballad. A good omen.

He hummed along as he cranked up the heater and drove down the street with regular glances in his rearview mirror. You could never be too careful, even with the night on your side.