

MELODY OF MURDER

A Scott Drayco Mystery

BV Lawson

Crimetime Press

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For information, contact:
Crimetime Press
6312 Seven Corners Center, Box 257
Falls Church, VA 22044

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Chapter 1

Friday, November 19

Scott Drayco opened his eyes and saw nothing but pitch blackness. Why was it so dark? Why couldn't he move? What the hell was going on?

As his senses came back online, he became aware of a scratchy fabric over his eyes, a rough cord cutting into his wrists, and the roaring of an engine. He forced himself to focus, to take stock of the who, what, where, when, why, and how.

The good news was he was alive, and nothing seemed to be broken. But judging by the engine noise and jarring bumps, he must be in the trunk of a car.

He inched his body around the space as best he could since his hands and legs were bound. It was a pretty tight fit. Whose car was this, and how did he even get here?

He struggled to shake off the brain fog and nausea. After several minutes of pounding his bound fists against the side of the car in hopes the pain would shake him out of his haze, the evening came back to him in bits and pieces.

He was in Georgetown walking down the street to meet a new client for dinner at a restaurant. It was night, it was crowded, someone jostled him . . . and he felt a stinging in his hand. Couldn't be a wasp or bee in late November, could it?

He'd shrugged it off, and then he got a call on his cellphone telling him to go around the next block to meet his client. The "client" had advised him to take a shortcut—an alleyway—to avoid a large group of noisy street partiers.

He'd headed down the alleyway and made it as far as a couple of blocks. Then his legs turned to rubber, and he felt as if he were in a descending elevator plummeting to the ground. The next thing he knew, he was waking up in the trunk of this car.

Definitely not a bee sting, then. More like some kind of drug, maybe propofol?

The scratchy fabric was apparently a blindfold, and Drayco started working on it, rubbing his face against a piece of plastic sticking out from the side of the trunk. The cloth was pretty tight, but he got it to ride up a bit. It was enough to tell him it was still nighttime because no peeks of sunlight streamed through cracks in the trunk latch.

Good thing he had on his jacket since the forecast called for near-freezing temps. Even so, he could feel the cold seeping through his pant legs.

He struggled to get his bearings. Must be an older sedan, fairly large, judging from the roomier space not found in an economy car. As he moved, he could tell from the rough material that the floor had a carpeted surface, not plastic, reinforcing his hypothesis about the older-model car. But it should be modern enough to have a safety release. If he could operate it.

He took some deep breaths to quiet the rising tide of panic as his claustrophobia bubbled up despite his best efforts to shut it down. He'd had to deal with that not too long ago on another case, and he was getting sick and tired of being stuffed into confined spaces.

Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. He focused on the icy sensation from the cold air and also the sounds around him—in case he got out of this ordeal and needed to retrace his route. It was largely quiet with no traffic noise, so he couldn't still be in Washington, D.C. Must be out in the country somewhere?

He worked on the rope around his wrists to see if he could free himself, but just then, the car began slowing down. Moments later, he heard the crunch of tires on gravel as the car pulled to a stop and the engine cut off.

The banging of car doors soon followed, and then the sound of footsteps. The trunk creaked open, and he was hauled out of the car and onto the ground, where someone cut the rope around his legs so he could walk.

He noticed his blindfold-removal efforts created a gap at the bottom, and he tilted his head up toward the sky—just in time to catch a glimpse of one man's face staring back at him. The man called out to one of his companions, and someone slipped a hood over Drayco's head.

Two men, one on either side of him, grabbed his arms and dragged him toward the building he'd also glimpsed briefly. He got the impression it was nothing out of the ordinary, a simple house-like structure with nondescript siding and plain windows.

As they made their way inside, Drayco heard a buzzing noise not too far away . . . and the faint ringing of bells in the distance. Not a siren or cowbells or church bells. This sounded more like a carillon. Very few of those around, so which one could it be? Were they even still in the Washington metro area? They could have been driving for hours, as far as he knew.

He didn't have time to ponder any of that as his captors guided him down a hallway, pushed him into a room, cut the rope around his wrists, and shut the door behind him. He also heard the distinct sound of a deadbolt lock as it engaged.

When he ripped off the hood and blindfold, he saw he was in a tiny, windowless room that was bare save for one twin bed, a desk, and a chair. The lamp on the desk cast light onto a small tray with a mug perched on it. Not exactly the Ritz, but at least there was heat coming from somewhere, so he wouldn't freeze to death. Still, his feet were cold, and he stomped them on the floor to boost his circulation.

He spied a tiny bathroom, but it had no door. He looked around for security cameras and didn't spot one straight away. If there were any, somebody would get a peep show out of it. He hoped that wasn't the motive behind all of this, but quite honestly, he hadn't a clue why he was here—wherever “here” was.

He patted his pockets. No cellphone, keys, or wallet. Of course.

The patches of mold and mildew on the otherwise bare white walls stood in silent testament to the fact the bleach he was smelling hadn't entirely done its job. But the bleach did cover up *most* of the dankness and smelly neglect of the room.

Studying his prison more closely, he noted the tray and mug weren't the only items on the desk. Out of curiosity, he walked over to take a better look. There was also a pile of papers, and the one on top had a list of instructions.

He read the words on the paper with growing disbelief. He was brought here to solve a puzzle, which was attached, and the rules were simple: solve the puzzle, ring the bell, and he'd be returned home safely and unharmed.

Bell? Surely they didn't mean the carillon he'd heard? He looked around for a bell and spied one hanging over the door with a pull rope. Hopefully, he'd be ringing that damned thing very soon. Then again, the “instructions” hadn't said what would happen if he *didn't* solve the puzzle.

He rubbed his eyes. Perhaps the puzzle itself would give him some of his answers, like who was behind this stunt and why. The brief glimpse of one unfamiliar man's face and the equally unfamiliar building hadn't helped at all.

He caught only fragments of whispered voices when they removed him from the car—along with the carillon bells—but one voice had a familiar color and tone. He just couldn't quite put his finger on it. But maybe it was a sedative hangover at work, and it would come to him later.

The question bugging him the most was that surely there were easier ways to get his help than kidnapping? Couldn't they have merely asked? Even a rogue intelligence group would have found another way.

He got a whiff of an aroma more pleasant than bleach and mildew wafting up from the dark liquid in the mug on the tray. Taking a chance, he dipped a finger into it and tasted it. Black coffee. A plastic spoon sat next to it . . . and a little packet of salt. Okay, now this was getting even weirder. What kidnapper in the world would know he liked salted coffee?

The desk had one drawer, which he pulled out, noting they'd “thoughtfully” given him a writing pad, pencils, pens, and erasers. He flipped over the instructions page and studied the next paper in the pile that he assumed must be the mysterious puzzle.

It comprised a bunch of letters, both English and French—with grave and acute accents and diereses—arranged in small groupings. The puzzle filled up an entire legal-sized page. At first

glance, it seemed like a simple substitution cipher where one letter stood for another. But it couldn't be that easy, could it? Why in the world would they have needed his expertise, if so?

The instructions didn't say how long they would give him to solve this code. Hours? Days? Weeks? Did he have an expiration date?

With his adrenaline level still kicked into high gear, he knew he wouldn't get much sleep despite the sedative hangover. He might as well tackle the puzzle first. The sooner he solved it, the sooner he'd get out of here—unless they had no intention of “returning him home safely and unharmed,” as the note said.

Still, it wasn't like he had a lot of options at the moment. With a sigh, he sat down in the chair and grabbed a pencil. Time to get to work.

Chapter 2

Saturday, November 20

Drayco awoke with his heart racing, and it took him a few moments to realize he wasn't in his own bed. Right. He'd been drugged, kidnapped, and dropped off in this smelly, clammy dump.

After working unsuccessfully on the puzzle for several hours, he'd tried to get a few hours of sleep, hoping it would help his thought processes. But the bed felt like it was stuffed with rocks—make that ice cubes—so he hadn't slept much.

At least, he didn't think he had. His internal chronometer was usually pretty good, and under ordinary circumstances he'd guess it was about five-thirty in the morning. But how could he be sure with no windows and no way to tell time?

He hoped the mattress didn't have bedbugs, although he'd checked for signs before lying down, prepared to sleep on the cold tile floor if he had to. He could always use his coat as a blanket.

It was a dreamless sleep, a pity. If he were luckier, his subconscious would have worked overtime while he slept to solve the puzzle, and he'd be done with it. But instead, he had more of his paralyzing hypnopompic nightmares on waking—this time, being trapped in dark, brackish water and running out of oxygen. *Wonder why you'd had that one?* His recent near-drowning case loomed in his memory.

With a sigh, he swung his sock-clad feet onto the hard concrete floor, trying to ignore the pervasive bleach-mildew stench in the room. It was showtime again. That puzzle wouldn't solve itself.

He rubbed a hand through his hair in lieu of a comb. Then he hopped up to splash some water from the toilet tank on his face, since the faucet in the sink didn't work. He found he was wistfully hoping for more salted coffee when he noticed someone had placed a new tray just inside the door during his slumber.

Lukewarm coffee, cold bagel. Better than nothing.

He sat down on the bed to “enjoy” his breakfast, hoping it would be a welcome distraction from the tiny room. The dank space wasn't helping the leftover claustrophobia from the car trunk.

One thing Drayco hadn't heard again were the carillon bells. Either he was in an interior room, which made sense because of the lack of windows, or he'd imagined the bells during his half-drugged state while being dragged out of the car.

Coffee in hand, he picked up the notepad, where he'd sketched out different ways of solving the puzzle, and sat down again at the little desk. The puzzle had to be a substitution cipher, but what about the French characters mixed in with the English letters? Not very characteristic of a typical cipher.

Okay, that skewed the whole basic cipher idea, but surely it couldn't be all that hard. He'd worked on far more complicated codes than this without any problem solving them. But he hadn't been abducted, cold, hungry, thirsty, and sleep-deprived, had he?

After what felt like several hours of fruitless labor, he got up and paced in his little cell. The room was so tiny, he could barely get three strides in one direction. Even if he weren't six-four, he doubted he could have paced more than four steps at a time. But the pacing did nothing for his problem-solving.

If only he had his Steinway, he could pound out some Bach fugues and have this thing solved in a half hour. Bach's counterpoint never failed to spark his imagination. It had served him well during his ill-fated piano career, then his thorniest cases at the FBI, and later in his private practice. It was a miracle of the universe.

Frustrated and angry, he flopped onto the bed and looked up at the ceiling, playing through some Bach in his head, hoping it would suffice. Sure enough, after a few passages from the D major fugue, he had a brainstorm.

This time, he knew he was on the right track, and it *was* a "simple" cipher, except the extra French letters were crucial to fill in the key. He'd already tried several combinations and thought he was close. But with this new idea, he figured out what appeared to be a solution.

Or was it? With dismay, he looked at his handiwork. The results were a string of words for numbers, like "three," "nine," and "two," followed by two Latin words, *caelesti* and *amplexus*, and then another group of numbers starting with "six," "five," and "nine."

He leaned back in the chair, staring at those words and feeling irked at both the situation and himself. He was certain he'd solved the cipher, that it must be the only correct solution, yet he didn't know what in the world the results could mean.

Was this the complete answer to the coded cipher? Or was there something more, some other critical aspect he was overlooking? More importantly, would it placate his captors enough for them to release him?

His stomach made rumbling noises. He was suddenly ravenous. His kidnappers had kept him juiced up on caffeine, but hadn't left him much in the way of food other than the one bagel. So he decided to go ahead and ring the bell. What did he have to lose at this point?

Moments later, he heard steps outside the door, followed by the sound of the deadbolt being clicked open. A man walked in, wearing a hood and mask and not saying anything as he carried in a tray with an opened bottle of soda and a sandwich. Even though Drayco couldn't see the man's face like he had with the guy outside last night, he was pretty sure this was a different captor, because this fellow was taller and heavier.

Drayco said, “I think I solved it, at least part of it. But you’re going to have to help me interpret the results.” He walked over to the table and picked up the paper he’d been working on, which he waved in the air.

The man didn’t reply and put the tray on the floor before turning around to leave. Before he shut the door, Drayco heard music playing in the background. Not carillon bells this time, but a big band arrangement of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” a version he’d never encountered before. Were they holding a dance party out there?

The silent jailer closed the door. Once again, the lock clicked into place.

That went well. So much for the solve-the-puzzle-and-be-released promise. Or maybe the masked delivery boy was just a lower-level flunky who was reporting the news back to his master.

Drayco examined the newly arrived tray of food. It was one of his favorite types of sandwiches, pastrami on rye. Another coincidence, like the salted coffee? And what about the opened soda—poisoned? Drugged? He could go for days without eating. But he was so thirsty, he wasn’t sure he could avoid drinking the soda. He wasn’t quite ready to guzzle water from the toilet tank without being able to boil it first.

Well, the coffee wasn’t drugged, right? He took a chance and sipped some of the drink, which was thankfully not lukewarm. But after only a few minutes, he had second thoughts and said aloud to the empty room, “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” as he started to get drowsy again. His vision faded around the edges until everything winked out.

Chapter 3

Once again, Drayco found himself waking up inside a car. This time, bright sunlight streamed through the windows, and he was alone and buckled into the passenger seat. Not only that, but the car looked familiar—a late model Mercedes sedan with a wood-and-leather steering wheel and beige leather upholstery. And a DVD player above the center console.

Where was he now? Not back in Georgetown, nor at his townhome. He heard a tapping on the window, so he tried the door handle and found it unlocked.

As he inched the door open, he stared at the man standing next to the car. “What are you doing here, Dad?”

Looking around at what appeared to be a vacant lot with overgrown weeds and cracks in the concrete, he added, “And where is here, anyway?”

Brock Drayco looked both worried and relieved at the same time. “Someone stole my car last night. Then today, I got a call letting me know where I could find my stolen car but to come alone. To be honest, I was much more worried about you than the car. I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for two days.”

“Seems like a lot longer.”

“Where the hell have you been, son?”

“Wish I knew. I was drugged, kidnapped, and taken to a small room somewhere. I have no idea where or how far because I was unconscious during the drive, both to and from.”

“But whatever for? Don’t get me wrong, I’m thrilled to have you back safe and sound. But why kidnap you just to release you with no ransom?”

“You’re not going to believe it.” Drayco swung his legs around to the ground to stretch out a few kinks.

“Try me.”

“I was tasked with solving a puzzle.”

Brock frowned. “A puzzle? Are you kidding me?” He scanned his son’s face. “Okay, you’re serious. So what kind of puzzle?”

“A substitution cipher. English and French characters that spell out words for numbers and one Latin phrase.”

Brock raised an eyebrow. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, but that’s bizarre, even for you.”

Drayco muttered. “Tell me about it.”

Brock studied his son more closely and said, "I want you to go to the hospital and get checked out. Just to err on the side of caution. Some of those knockout drugs can be pretty potent. Lots of side effects."

"I'd rather not if it's all the same to you. Besides, I'm fine. Other than being hungry. And thirsty." He'd only had a few sips of that drugged soda.

"If you won't let me take you to the hospital, I'll call my personal physician. Maybe he can squeeze you in with an emergency appointment. If he's still there at this time of day."

That's when Drayco noticed the sun angle. "What time is it?"

"Close to three."

Drayco groaned. "Then I've been gone for two full days. I don't have time for this. What if a client tried to get in touch with me?"

Then he remembered the cellphone, keys, and wallet his captors had taken from him. He patted his pockets. They'd been returned. Not that he was going to touch them without getting them fingerprinted first.

Brock whipped out his own cellphone, and Drayco could tell his father had convinced the doc to see him. Brock slid into the driver's seat, saying, "Good thing I had a taxi drop me off." He pulled out his car keys and cranked up the engine.

When they arrived at the physician's office, it was the end of the workday for them, and Drayco and Brock were the only two people left in the waiting room. As he continued to give his son anxious glances from time to time, Brock said, "I assume you recall the answer to that puzzle you solved."

"Naturally."

"Then they must not have known you have a photographic memory."

"I wouldn't be so sure. My kidnappers knew *some* things about me. They had a cup of black coffee and some salt waiting. And my favorite sandwich."

Brock's eyes widened. "Did you see any of them? Or hear any of them? Or observe anything that would offer a clue to their identities?"

Drayco leaned forward in his chair. "I caught a glimpse of one man, but I didn't recognize him. And I have a vague recollection of one specific voice being familiar, but the man was whispering. I was still under the influence of whatever zombie drugs they gave me."

Drayco spied some scratch paper on one table at the end of the room and grabbed it. Brock pulled a pen out of his pocket that he handed over, and Drayco scribbled down the puzzle, starting with the complete cipher and then his solution.

Brock studied it. "I should never doubt your code-solving skills by now. But I'm pretty amazed you figured this out. What do those numbers and that Latin phrase stand for?"

"That part is hazy. I don't know if what I came up with makes sense to them or not. They didn't say, and I didn't have a chance to ask."

"But why kidnap you for this? They could have simply hired you. Or any other code expert." Brock pounded his fist against his leg in frustration. "Whoever could be behind this insanity?"

"I thought about a rogue intelligence group. Or a freelancing spy. But who knows?"

Brock glanced at the paper again and grumbled. "This would even be too low for your shady uncle, Alistair. I hope whoever it was appreciated your efforts."

Drayco sighed. “That’s what’s bothering me. I solved the puzzle, and yet I didn’t. Unless I’m way off on all of this. It’s making me doubt myself.”

“You? Way off? I don’t think so. But you’ll figure it all out. Give it a little time after you’ve had more rest.”

A nurse popped her head out and said, “Scott Drayco?” And Drayco headed toward the examination rooms, trailed by his father. After some poking, prodding, and blood drawn for lab work, Dr. McDonnell told Drayco he seemed to be fine and to go home and get some sleep.

Brock drove Drayco to his townhome, following him inside. He kept hanging around so closely that Drayco was getting annoyed. “Dad, I’m fine. You heard the doc. I just need rest. As in, put your feet up and watch TV.”

“So do it, already.”

Brock waited for Drayco to get settled onto the couch, and then he disappeared into the kitchen for a few minutes. When he reappeared with a bottle of Manhattan Special soda, he handed it over and added, “I called Thai Tanic for some Panang curry and spring rolls. Should be here in fifteen.”

“Thanks.” Brock had remembered that the restaurant was one of his favorites? That was a surprise.

Brock continued to hover nearby. “One thing’s for sure. Whoever’s behind this kidnapping scheme planned it well. They kidnapped you with no witnesses. As you know, I have pretty good security measures at my house. Yet they stole my car without triggering cameras or alarms.”

“They didn’t seem like amateurs to me, either.”

“For whatever reason, they treated you with kid gloves. By all known kidnapping standards I’m familiar with.”

Brock went to the kitchen to grab another soda for himself and sank down onto a chair next to his son. “I must say your safe return is my best birthday present ever.”

Drayco groaned. “Oh no. I forgot it was today. God, I’m so sorry.”

Brock grinned. “I think you were otherwise occupied.”

“I did get you a present. It’s around here somewhere.” Drayco was still foggy-brained from the lack of sleep, but he got halfway up to go in search of the gift before Brock reached over and pushed him back down.

“As I said, having you returned safely is the only present I need.”

“If you can take a rain check, we’ll have a belated celebration later.” Drayco noticed the bag of crunchies on the counter in the kitchen and suddenly remembered Cat, the half-feral silver tabby who hung around his townhome.

Brock followed his gaze and said, “Don’t worry. I gave her fresh food and water while you were away. She even came inside for a few minutes. Does she do that a lot now?”

“From time to time. Like that spider incident a few months ago.”

“Right, right. I remember. The hero kitty saving little Scotty from a spidey.”

Drayco winced at the “Scotty” reference, since that’s what his mother called him, one of the few people who got away with it. But he was both surprised and grateful his father thought to look out for Cat while he was “away.”

He almost laughed at that. Sounded like he’d just gone off for a mini-vacation. Come to think of it, some ocean views and a little sea breeze sounded damned good right about then.

Brock took a few more swigs of his soda. “I know what you’re thinking. You’re gonna want to pursue this and track down those kidnappers. This time, leave it to the police. They’re perfectly capable of handling something like this.”

“Would you leave it alone if the shoe was on the other foot?”

Brock nodded. “Doubly so, if I already had a full caseload. Solo vigilante justice rarely pays well.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

Drayco’s tone must have reflected his sudden irritation because Brock soft-pedaled a bit. “I’m only thinking about your career, son. That wasn’t a dig.”

Maybe not, but Brock knew as well as Drayco that living and maintaining an office in the District wasn’t cheap. And that Drayco’s budget was often stretched to the limit. Plus, there was Drayco’s “gift” Opera House on the Eastern Shore with all its expensive renovations. Something Drayco didn’t have the energy to think about right then.

He hated to just let this kidnapping thing go. But his father was right—when you’re your own client, all you get is a massive headache and an empty bank account for your trouble.

Chapter 4

Sunday, November 21

Brock had stayed late into the evening, smothering Drayco with uncharacteristic concern. Truth be told, Drayco had wanted to be alone to decompress for a while. But it was his father's birthday.

After Brock left, Drayco felt whatever remaining energy he had drain from him. He hadn't even bothered showering, although he really needed one, and just stripped and fell into bed.

Maybe that's why he'd slept late this morning, something he didn't like to do. He toyed with the idea of taking his usual jog along the Tidal Basin, but opted instead to sit down at the piano before eating anything. He felt out of sorts and wasn't sure why.

Nonetheless, he was happy to be reunited with his beloved Steinway. In a sense, the instrument was one of his oldest friends. Not that he'd upgrade anytime soon. From a synesthesia point of view, it was the right tone that made all the difference. Hearing the wrong instrument felt like eating raw fish, which was a sensation hard to describe. But his Steinway, with its pearls of cobalt silkiness, was just right.

Good tone, bad tone aside, his thoughts were a jumble. As in his little "prison," maybe some Bach would bring his mind into focus—but what to play? He still had the carillon bells in mind. The opening movement of the eighth Chorale Cantata used a continuo to create a sound like tolling bells, didn't it?

First things first. The rough handling by his captors hadn't helped his gimpy right arm any, and he had to soak it for a good ten minutes in hot water before the muscles stopped cramping. With any luck, the kidnappers' ropes didn't erase any benefits from his recent therapy. Not that his card shuffling and tennis ball-squeezing were helping all that much.

He sat down at the keyboard to create an impromptu transcription of the Bach chorale. But before long, he'd morphed into a riff on "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," the song he overheard during his captivity.

After a few minutes of that, he stopped and sighed. Since he couldn't get that damned nursery tune and those carillon bells out of his head, he might as well do something about it.

He hopped up to conduct some online research about nearby carillons, tapping on the keyboard with his left hand while squeezing a tennis ball with his right hand. One by one, he

called up various videos to see if they matched the synesthesia “signature” of the carillon bells from his kidnapping.

The Washington Cathedral bells didn’t. Nor did the Taft Memorial Carillon or the bells at the Netherlands Carillon near the Iwo Jima memorial. That last one would have been a bold choice since it was near the Pentagon. After not having much success with the videos of the carillons in the area, he decided he’d cast his net wider to other parts of Virginia, Maryland, and maybe Pennsylvania.

But later, not now. First, he had to take care of his stomach, which was rumbling so loudly that it threatened to overwhelm the piano. He went to the back door to check on Cat and make sure she had crunchies and water and then grabbed the small box of leftover Thai Tanic for himself and made some coffee.

To his surprise, the act of putting his usual salt in the coffee made him lose his appetite. It reminded him of the smells of his moldy-bleachy prison. The Thai food’s pungent lemongrass, lime, and sweet basil should have helped, but his stomach wasn’t in the mood for that, either.

He tossed the rest in the trash and rummaged through his cupboard, grabbing a box of microwavable bachelor chow and a few items from the refrigerator. It wasn’t much, but it would have to do.

And what better activity to go with breakfast than obituaries? Not that he was in a morbid frame of mind. But he’d developed a habit of reading the obits years ago as part of his study of human behavior. Sometimes, he even knew these people from former cases.

He scrolled through the listings in the *Washington Post* and spied the usual Congress critters, professors, business leaders, and diplomats. But one face that popped up made him spill some of his coffee right onto the floor. The photo was of a heavy-set man with thinning blond hair and a small V-shaped scar on his chin.

The glimpse of the one kidnapper’s face Drayco saw underneath his blindfold two nights ago was enough to burn that image into his memory. So much so, he was convinced the man staring back at him from the newspaper was the same guy.

But for him to die not long after Drayco saw the man’s face? Could that be a mere coincidence? Drayco scanned the text to learn more about the man, Graham Tibbs, and the circumstances of his death. It got even weirder from there. Tibbs had allegedly perished in a fire—five years ago.

The obituary had a footnote that the police were investigating. Since the cause of Tibbs’s “latest” death was a hit-and-run in Arlington, Drayco called up the phone number of a beat cop he knew on the APD force, Sergeant Gus Lorenzo. Drayco was in luck—the man had pulled a weekend shift.

“Drayco, you old dog. What is it this time? A missing heiress? Somebody’s private Rembrandt was stolen?”

Drayco knew Gus was only half-kidding with his jibes about wealthy clients, and he let it pass. “This isn’t a case. It involves a kidnapping.”

“If not your case, then whose?”

“Nobody’s right now. I was the one kidnapped. And yes, I’m going to file a report, but it was in the District. So you can breathe easier.”

Sergeant Lorenzo whistled. “Seriously? So why are you calling me, then? Not that I don’t love the sound of your dulcet tones.”

“There was a fellow potentially involved in the kidnapping who was killed by a hit-and-run two nights ago. Name of Graham Tibbs.”

Drayco could hear the other man gritting his teeth over the phone. “Ah, that guy. What a mess. Was allegedly burned in a fire and buried. But his prints match an old rap sheet in the database. He also had a sister who lives nearby, and we had her in for a positive ID.”

“What did the sister have to say?”

“Nothing. Other than she was in shock. Who wouldn’t be?”

“That’s the woman listed in the obituary, Aria D’Angelo?”

“That’s her. A former singer. Opera, I think. But that’s more your line, right? Beethoven and Mozart and all that.”

“An opera singer named Aria? I’m guessing it’s not her birth name.”

“Probably, but you’d know more about that highfalutin music stuff than me. We checked her out. Had to retire due to health issues. Lives up in Montgomery County.” Lorenzo paused and then added, “You say this Tibbs guy kidnapped you?”

“Pretty certain.”

“Huh. Kinda coincidental he dies right afterward, seeing as how it was a hit-and-run.”

“Maybe. Or bad karma.”

“Yeah.” Lorenzo laughed. “Look, maybe you should have a chat with one of the detectives. You know, if your kidnapping and our hit-and-run case are related.” Lorenzo had a mocking tone in his voice. “Halabi loves shooting the breeze with you.”

Drayco winced at Halabi’s name. “Love” wasn’t the term Drayco would use to describe his past relationship with the detective. He replied, “I’ll do that. Maybe I’ll drop off some doogh for you while I’m at it. You still like that nasty Persian yogurt drink, right?”

“If they could find a way to shoot it directly into your veins, I’d be first in line.”

“Your boss know you’re an addict?”

“You kidding? He’s the one who got me hooked.”

Drayco hung up and made a note to buy some doogh the next time he was at Shishkabob Express. After grabbing another cup of coffee, he conducted more research, first on Graham Tibbs. He didn’t find a lot of details, not even a social media presence, but Sergeant Lorenzo was right—Tibbs had a rap sheet from years ago when he was much younger.

He also looked up Aria D’Angelo. Like Sergeant Lorenzo said, she was a top-notch opera singer before she retired. Interesting enough. But it seemed unusual to have an opera singer, even a retired one, with a brother who turns out to be a kidnapper who had a rap sheet. But they always say you can’t pick your family.

Graham Tibbs. Mystery man. Dead man-turned-kidnapper-turned-dead man. Why would such a guy be involved in kidnapping Drayco to solve a puzzle? And if that wasn’t strange enough, who among Drayco’s kidnappers knew him well enough to have salted coffee waiting for him? It certainly wasn’t Tibbs.

Someone hearing that bizarre story for the first time could be forgiven for thinking Drayco dreamed it all up. Part of Drayco wished he had, and he half-suspected Brock thought so. At any rate, a face-to-face with Detective Halabi was usually something to be wary of, but this time,

Drayco felt like celebrating. It was a tangible step he could take, which was a hell of a lot better than stewing in a pot of his own growing anger and irritation.