

REQUIEM FOR INNOCENCE

A Scott Drayco Mystery

by BV Lawson

Crimetime Press

Copyright © 2015

Requiem for Innocence is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, places, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

For information, contact:

Crimetime Press
6312 Seven Corners Center, Box 257
Falls Church, VA 22044

Trade Paperback ISBN 978-0-9904582-4-1
Hardcover ISBN 978-0-9904582-5-8
eBook ISBN 978-0-9904582-3-4

Chapter 1

Monday 6 July

Scott Drayco leaned into the Brahms Rhapsody, the piano keys like daggers of silk beneath his fingers. The music washed over him with sounds akin to barbed, red amaranth flowers—a fitting soundtrack for the graphic crime scene photos lying on the piano.

He dug into the thirty-second-note scales. Maybe a little too hard, opening a cut on his index finger. With his eyes half-closed, he could blissfully ignore the streak of blood on the keyboard.

What he couldn't ignore was the cellphone shattering the music's spell. He grabbed the phone and almost hurled it across the room. Not that it was the phone's fault—it was July, the air conditioner was broken, and despite being stripped to his boxers, he was drenched in sweat.

It wasn't a call from the client he was expecting. Or anything at all he was expecting, for that matter. Maida Jepson's voice on the other end was minus its usual robin-like chirp as she pleaded, "I hate to bother you, Scott. But I'm convinced someone tried to hurt a friend of ours. A twelve-year-old girl in a wheelchair. Her mother is beside herself with worry. Sheriff Sailor is busy working another case, and besides—he thinks it was just an accident."

Then, a slight hesitation as she added, "Can you come?"

Sailor was a thorough and compassionate lawman, and Drayco was inclined to believe his opinion. Yet, though Drayco had only known Maida for a few months, that was long enough to know she didn't indulge in flights of fancy.

"I can't promise anything, Maida. I'll be happy to do some checking and get back to you."

"Thank God. I knew we could count on you." The frown lines disappeared from her voice.

He gave up on the piano, since he was sticking to the bench, and grabbed the Manhattan Special he'd put in the freezer to chill. Forgoing a glass, he rubbed the frost-covered bottle on his forehead, then on his cut finger, and finally against the jagged pink scars on his right arm to dull the throbbing. Draped on a chair next to the piano with his feet propped out the open window, he took a few sips of the bittersweet espresso soda and let the liquid trickle down the back of his throat.

His townhome might be hot, but it was also quiet, even located near Capitol Hill. The sight of the small park across the street, with one lonely bench set under a weeping cherry tree, was a visual sedative for chaotic thoughts.

He reached to grab the four photos stacked on the music rack above the piano keyboard and spread them over his lap. Maida had mentioned a child. Yet, none of the four victims in front of him, sitting dead in their wheelchairs as if posed for a macabre slasher film, was younger than forty-five.

Drayco took on this current case as a favor to a Kennedy Center exec whose brother was photo number three, the man's murder unresolved after six months with the Metro D.C. police. No officers liked to use the "S" word, but after four similar deaths, there was talk of a serial killer. The Metro force hadn't called in the feds yet, especially with no new murders in nine weeks.

Still, when an officer-friend recommended Drayco to the client, he was careful to play up Drayco's Bureau years. Not that it was unusual for agencies to hire him when they wanted the FBI touch without the FBI bureaucracy.

He put the photos back on the piano and picked up the cellphone to tap a number in the address book. "Sailor," the booming baritone voice answered. The amber-tipped ovals were pleasantly neutral to a synesthete, one of the many things Drayco appreciated about the man. It was the kaleidoscopic voices that bothered Drayco the most, spewing forth from their owners' mouths like firework bombs exploding inside his head.

"Sorry I haven't gotten those tickets to the Nationals game yet, Sheriff. I'm working on them, I swear."

Sailor chuckled. "Yeah, right, Drayco. You're too busy wining and dining those hoity-toity clients of yours."

Drayco looked at last night's takeout from the SiAm Thai Emporium, congealing in cardboard boxes on the coffee table. The owner of the restaurant was so accustomed to Drayco coming in, he jokingly offered to adopt him. "Yep, it's filet mignon and **Chablis Grand Cru** every night."

"My wife would kill me for looking at beef. And that's before the red meat had a chance to kill me first. You can eat all you want, Ichabod—which reminds me, the NBA after you yet?"

"Too old, too uncoordinated, and too short."

"Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was still playing when he was forty-two, so you've got six years. But yeah, your measly six-four does make you a shrimp next to Kareem. Or Shaq. Call me crazy, but somehow I don't think this is a social call since it's not yet eight. What's up?"

"Thankfully, you are. I got a call from Maida Jepson about an attack on a girl in Cape Unity. She made it sound like you were writing it off as an accident."

Sailor sighed. "Virginia—not the state, that's the name of the kid—has an overprotective mother. There was a big crowd at the Fourth of July picnic, she got pushed in front of a car. These things happen."

"So definitely an accident."

"The witnesses weren't helpful, there have been no threats on her life, it doesn't add up. Hell, to be honest, I've got my hands full with a bona fide murder that happened a month ago. However," the sheriff paused. "You're going to think they're connected."

“Why is that?”

“The murder victim was disabled and had to get around with a wheelchair.”

“Another child?”

“A middle-aged adult male, Arnold Sterling.”

Drayco stared at one of the photos on the piano, the one of the client’s brother, Marcus Laessig. His hair was as dark as Drayco’s, belying the man’s fifty-plus years. The man was seated in his wheelchair with red, inflamed grooves around his neck from the ligature wire used to garotte him. Purple petechial hemorrhages dotted his skin like a Jackson Pollack painting.

Drayco rubbed his eyes. He forced any emotions he felt about these photos and all the other violent images from his career into the lockbox he stored away in his mind. It was the only way to do this job and stay sane.

“How was the victim killed, Sheriff?”

“Strangled. With wire we found near the body.”

Drayco sat up, dropping his feet to the floor. Some of the details matched those of the Laessig case and the other three victims. But why hadn’t he heard of it? He could understand Detective O’Dowd keeping this from him, but his friend, Detective Skiles? That grated a little. “Did the D.C. police check with you on this?”

Sailor drawled, “You’re referring to those handicapped murders up your way? Let me guess. You’re in the middle of it. Yeah, they checked, didn’t think it related, but still ‘strongly suggested’ we keep details out of the papers. Whoop-de-do.”

Drayco grinned. In a few sentences, Sailor had managed to convey a wide range of emotions—his mistrust of the D.C. force, his fear other agencies might trample over his turf, and his relief that if anyone was going to do the trampling, it was Drayco.

“Can you tolerate a crime consultant playing in your sandbox, Sheriff?”

“Maybe if you bring some of that Chablis. Besides, there are several folks who’ll be glad to see you. And better pack your sunscreen. Just don’t bring us more bodies like you did last time, ’kay?”

Drayco waved off the sheriff’s veiled remark, relieved to have an excuse to escape the stale air and mildew in his furnace-of-a-townhome. Where had he put his suitcase? No time for laundry. He’d cram it in a bag and worry about it later. First, he needed to make a call to Marcus Laessig’s brother. A slim lead was still a lead.

The brother was patient up until now, but Drayco wasn’t sure how much longer that would last. Not that he’d blame the guy. Over one hundred hours logged on research and interviews already.

He stripped off his sweat-soaked boxers as he headed for the shower and tried not to think about the four-hour drive across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and down into the southern end of the Delmarva Peninsula. Hopefully, no major traffic accident-related backups like last time. If he left soon, he’d make it well before dark.

Chapter 2

Maida didn't give Drayco time to dwell on gloomy thoughts or the insanity of the Bay Bridge traffic, welcoming him with a hug and a tall glass of iced tea so sweet he swore he was drinking syrup. She called it "Baptist table wine," the official drink of southern teetotalers, a philosophy Presbyterian lay pastor Maida definitely did not share. If it were later in the day, she'd be handing him one of her legendary potent toddies with its mystery ingredients.

"Nice to see the Crab still standing." He positioned himself in the kitchen in the exact center between opposite open windows where the cross-ventilation was like a cool sheet against his skin.

At first glance, the Jepsons' Lazy Crab B&B was the same as when he left three months ago, except for a tsunami of rainbow flowers in the garden. That was due to the devotion of Maida's husband, Major Jepson, no doubt. Devotion that paid off, for even to a non-gardener like Drayco, the display was eye-popping.

On his way inside, he did spy an object in a corner of the den that wasn't there before. A Chickering baby grand, used, since they hadn't made those since the '80s. Had Maida purchased it for him? That made him smile. He wasn't used to such thoughtful gestures.

He caught an aroma of something spicy, yet saccharine. As he took a few sniffs, Maida smiled and pointed her thumb at the window. "That's coastal sweet pepperbush. Also called 'poor man's soap' because folks rubbed the flower spikes together for a soap substitute."

She bowed, with a flourish of her hand. "Since my better half isn't here, I have to play Trivia Master."

"Where is the Major?" Drayco asked.

"Just missed him. He stayed through the July Fourth holiday when we had guests, then headed up to Baltimore. His sister is in the hospital with pneumonia. In the middle of summer, no less."

"I'm not displacing any tourists, am I?"

"We're free and clear until August, our busiest month. When you D.C. types get tired of broiling in hot-air central."

Almost an entire month without customers. A patch of peeling paint in the hallway was more noticeable since his last visit, and the sun had faded the red fabric bench in the entryway a shade lighter. “The Crab isn’t in danger of closing anytime soon, I hope.”

“We get by.” She smiled slightly, running a hand through her Creamsicle-colored hair. “Most years we break even. So your timing is good if the circumstances aren’t.”

“Speaking of circumstances, when do I meet your young friend?”

The sound of a car engine complaining from having to sip budget octane drew close to the front of the inn. Maida peeked out the front window. “How ’bout right now?”

A thirtyish woman in a plain, orange cotton sundress rescued a wheelchair from the car’s trunk before Drayco had time to lend a hand. She eased a young girl in the wheelchair through the doorway as if delivering a crystal chandelier.

Maida started the introductions. “This is the detective I mentioned, Scott Drayco. Scott, this is Lucy Harston and her daughter, Virginia.”

The girl’s chestnut hair was tied in a ponytail with a clasp decorated like a Monet painting, and she had bright, intelligent eyes. A normal child from the waist up. No limbs dangled below her knees, the unneeded pant legs of her pink jeans tucked underneath her.

Lucy glared at Drayco, then turned to Maida with a strident voice that matched its seagull bluish-gray hue. “I don’t understand why you brought in someone from the outside. The sheriff’s department can handle it. I don’t know this man. And you’ve only known him three months.”

Maida put her hands out with palms upward, likely for his sake as much as Lucy’s. “Now, now, dear, we’ve been through this. Sheriff Sailor’s a fine man, but he has a full plate. Plus, we haven’t convinced him Virginia’s attack wasn’t an accident.”

“I can’t afford to hire anyone.”

Drayco said, “I’m looking into this as a favor to Maida, free of charge.” His inner critic heard more echoes of his accountant’s frequent hysterical laughter. Drayco knew a thing or two about “just breaking even” in the overheated cauldron-of-a-housing-market called Washington, D.C.

Virginia sat silently by, watching the proceedings with her eyes riveted first to her mother, then to Drayco. Flashes of annoyance spiked her glances at her mother, with hints of an X-ray curiosity when she looked at him. She seemed to make up her mind and maneuvered her chair closer to him. “Maybe you can convince Mom she’s too paranoid.”

Lucy stood with her arms plastered to her sides. “People say I’m overreacting. Think what they want, this was a deliberate attack.”

Drayco prompted her, “You mean pushing Virginia into the path of that car.”

Lucy didn’t look at him, her fingers curling up into fists. She looked ready to punch something. Or someone. “I admit there was a lot of jostling from people packed like sardines. Yet, someone pulled me from behind and separated me from my daughter. And Virginia’s too smart to roll herself in front of an oncoming car.”

“So you didn’t see this person behind you? Or the one who pushed Virginia?”

“I turned around, thinking it was a friend. Then I forgot all about that when I heard people screaming and the screech of brakes.”

Maida added, “Virginia fell out of her wheelchair inches in front of that car. Thank God for those alert bystanders.”

Lucy's daughter had a remarkable way of appearing defiant and nonchalant at the same time—dangling over the precipice of teenage-hood if not actively practicing for it. Drayco asked, "Virginia, do you feel you were pushed? Or overhear any threats, maybe from other young people?"

The girl hesitated before answering, then met Drayco's gaze without fear. "When you're down low and everyone else is up high, you get used to staring at belt buckles and purses. I wasn't looking at faces. Besides, everyone was just having fun."

"And the 'being pushed' part?" he prompted.

Virginia shrugged. "Someone coulda bumped into me. A lot was going on—the picnic, the music. Everybody was waiting for the fireworks."

She was so poised and self-assured, it was like talking to an adult rather than someone who was twelve. "Have you had any problems with other kids at school?"

Lucy spoke up, "She's home-schooled and not around children much. There's her fellow art class students like Barry Farland, who's really her best friend. All good kids. I can't imagine anyone with a grudge. My greatest fear is some random act of evil. How do I protect against that?"

That was the age-old question for parents, wasn't it? Raise your kids, love them, teach them to be independent. Then stand back and watch as some unanticipated beast strikes them down—a predator, an accident, cancer. Drayco nodded, hoping his agreement would calm her down.

Lucy added, "Reece Wable agrees with me Virginia must have been pushed. He's been amazingly supportive."

Reece? Drayco hadn't heard one peep out of the historian since his last visit. He hadn't mentioned Lucy before, so maybe this was a new friendship. Or a new something else.

Virginia fidgeted in her chair, then wheeled herself backward away from Drayco until she was six feet away. To his surprise, she stared at his hands. "Maida says you play the piano."

"That I do."

"Are you any good?"

He had to smile at that. "Depends on whom you ask."

"You should show me how to play sometime."

"Have you taken any piano lessons?"

When she shook her head no, he added, "I can teach you a few basics right now."

Lucy began to protest, but Virginia headed her off at the pass. "Mom, please? I've never touched a piano before."

Despite wearing the same scowl plastered on her face like a theatrical mask, Lucy said, "Okay. But we don't have long."

Drayco led the way toward the Chickering piano, helping Virginia onto the piano bench. He sat next to her and showed her how to place her hands on the keys, noting how small her hands were next to his. First, he had her finger her way through a C major scale. Concentrating hard, she practiced it with her right hand several times, then her left hand, then together, the first tentative notes growing more confident.

He complimented her, "You'd get the hang of this in no time. You should take lessons."

Virginia had the first traces of a smile blossoming on her face. "Ya think?"

Lucy stepped in, saying it was time to go. With one last skeptical look in Drayco's direction, she trundled Virginia back to the car.

He waited until they'd driven off into the gathering darkness. "If Mrs. Harston doesn't want me to investigate, I can't go behind her back."

Maida motioned him toward the kitchen and his favorite wooden armchair carved like a sailboat. "Let me work on her. Neither she nor Virginia is around men much. Except for Reece. She doesn't know you like I do. And she's easily spooked. Then there's this whole freakish attack business."

"I appreciate all that, but if you can't convince her—"

"Convince her? I'm still not sure how I feel about this whole thing."

"What makes you say that?"

"What Lucy didn't say is she home-schools Virginia due to bullying from other kids. The usual name-calling and snubbing, mind you. Nothing violent."

Maida brought him a fresh glass of tea. Drained from the bottom of the pitcher, it was more syrupy than the first. He should ask for a spoon.

"You think it was a prank gone bad?"

"We're the third poorest county in Virginia. Poverty does strange things to young people. We've had some assaults, thefts. One eleven-year-old boy brought a hundred rounds of ammunition with him to school."

"Yet Lucy doesn't think another child was behind this."

"Doesn't want to imagine it's another child, you mean."

Drayco could understand that. Especially after his own youthful encounters with bullying. "Why hasn't Lucy gotten prosthetics for Virginia?"

"She did, from the Shriners years ago. But Virginia didn't like wearing them and dealing with the crutches. Plus, they have to be replaced every one to two years as a child grows, and for some reason, Virginia balked at the whole idea."

"They have more high-tech models now. Perhaps she'd like those better?"

"Doubt the Shriners would fork over that much money. But I'm hoping to convince Virginia to try again."

Maida took a sip from her own glass of tea. "Not to change the subject, but you haven't said a word about the Opera House."

Still a sore point, his Opera House. He was grateful the money from his last foray into Cape Unity would pay for restoring his unwanted legacy. But was he doing the right thing? He could still try and sell it—if potential buyers didn't mind the thought of a murder victim found on stage. If he were to poll his colleagues, it would probably shake out forty-five percent for "Restore it, sell it, and make more money" versus fifty-five percent for "You're insane."

"I take it the Cape Unity natives are getting restless wondering when it will open?"

"They're understanding. It was a sleeping beauty for decades after all. Even after the handsome prince came along, there's bound to be a few kinks."

"The foundation we created is looking healthy. Next up, a board of trustees. Want to be a charter member?"

"Hmm. Sounds interesting." She frowned. "Lots of meetings?"

"I promise coffee and donuts. That's all the budget will allow."

Maida grinned, "Why don't you ask Darcie Squier? I'm sure she would jump at the chance to work with you."

He had to admit he'd been having thoughts of Darcie lately, even as he avoided her calls. Four months without one word and now all of sudden, a call every day. It couldn't have anything to do with the fact her husband was recently indicted on embezzlement charges, could it?

Maida continued, "If Darcie's estranged money-bags husband isn't interested, there are other local philanthropists. Winthrop Gatewood and his wife give to a lot of charities."

Drayco made a mental note of the Gatewood name while considering Maida's use of the word "estranged" regarding Darcie's husband. Darcie hadn't mentioned that part on the phone. Suddenly her calls made more sense. And were a lot more disturbing. He'd deal with that later.

"Maida, what's your honest opinion on what happened in the park? Attempted homicide, bullying, or unfortunate accident?"

She hesitated. "My heart says I should listen to Lucy. Can't think of a reason for anyone to hurt either of them. Even bullies. Virginia's father, Cole, has been dead for ten years and they have little other family. They're as poor as the field mice in my church and largely keep to themselves."

"Had either Harston visited the District recently? Or used any D.C. social services like an agency or a health clinic?"

She tilted her head to look up at him. "I do believe you're taking this seriously. And the answer to both questions is no."

He drained the last drop of tea syrup, which sent him hurrying to the sink in search of a water chaser. "I have to be honest with you. I'm working a case in D.C., and there may be a connection with Virginia. Or the recent murder of Arnold Sterling. Or not. I don't want you to think I'm here under false pretenses."

"At this point, we'll take what we can get." She grabbed the glass from him and filled it up with water, with a smile. "Cape Unity better be on its best behavior. Last time you were here, three people died. Trouble follows you like a tiger shark after blue crab."

"Are you calling me crabby, Maida?" He managed a smile. But her words, combined with those of the sheriff earlier, dredged up images he didn't want lingering. Dark images, the kind that seep into your dreams when you're not even aware of it.

Maida brought out a plate of still-warm ginger cookies. "I wasn't being critical, mind you. It's in your official job description to attract trouble, as an investigator."

She grabbed one of the cookies herself and nibbled off the edge like a food taster. "I can help you a bit with that investigating. Arnold Sterling's wife is a good friend of the Harstons."

Drayco broke one of the cookies in half, trying to decide if those were bits of real crystallized ginger. But Maida's words stopped him in mid-analysis. "Did Arnold Sterling himself have close ties to Lucy and Virginia?"

"Truth be told, they stayed as far from him as possible. He was trouble with a neon flashing T."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Don't want to pass along unfounded gossip. Sheriff Sailor can read you verbatim from Arnold's encyclopedic criminal file."

Things were looking more promising than when he left the District. A good thing, too, considering the words his client, Matthew Laessig, said over the phone before Drayco left. “Don’t forget you’re working for me. And I’m not paying for some glorified beach vacation. Find who killed my brother, Drayco. I don’t want Piña Coladas showing up on the bill.”

He uttered those words like the coddled, Rolex-wearing, name-on-his-parking-space executive that he was. An executive talking down to a cubicle-caged neophyte employee, which Drayco wasn’t. The check hanging over Drayco’s head did matter, but he never forgot who he really worked for—not the arrogant Matthew, but Marcus, the murdered brother. The innocent.

Chapter 3

Tuesday 7 July

After his best night's sleep in a while and hoping to get an early start, Drayco wolfed down Maida's linebacker-worthy breakfast and headed downtown as soon as the government buildings opened. Sheriff Sailor's office still had the mounted flounder with the piranha-like teeth, a relic from the building's former life as a fish processing plant. But the office also sported a new L-shaped desk as long as Drayco was tall. Much more sheriff-like than Sailor's old warehouse castoff.

Drayco ran his finger along the smooth edge. Solid wood with hints of red. Cherry, or possibly bloodwood. That would be appropriate. "What'd you do, rob a bank? You said the town council would make Abe Lincoln wince, the way they pinch pennies."

"Not wince. Scream. The council has collective heart failure every time I mention the word 'raise.' This desk is courtesy of my lovely wife who found it at a liquidation sale. Said the other one was too prehistoric. More suitable for someone named Ogg."

Drayco pointed to the shiny new nameplate on the shiny new desk. Matched the occupant's shiny bald head. "Sheriff Ernest Sailor. What happened to the middle Hemingway part?"

"Too long. They charge per letter." The sheriff tipped back in his not-so-new chair that squeaked and set off wavy rectangles of pewter and jute colors in Drayco's brain. Not a pleasant effect.

"'Sheriff' sounds so formal. I should start calling you Ernie."

"You do, and I'll start calling you Doc, Mr. Ph.D."

Drayco recoiled with mock horror. "Sheriff, it is."

Sailor reached over to grab a cup of coffee and guzzled the last of it. "I gather you're here to do some of that so-called consulting of yours."

Drayco gravitated toward a familiar chair in the back of the office, with its swiveling bucket seat and ample room for his extra-long legs. Looking at Sailor's desk, he pointed to the book lying on the side. "*Crime and Punishment*? Isn't that a little predictable?"

"I'll have you know Hemingway counted Dostoyevsky one of his primary influences."

"Are you like Detective Porfiry? Using a mathematical proof to determine a suspect's guilt?"

"If calculus helped me solve crimes, I'd have signed up long ago. Barely made it through algebra."

Drayco had one memorable mid-term from high school trig where he got an "F" because a student he tutored copied Drayco's answers. He had a hard time partnering with anyone after that. He exhaled a long, deep breath. "All right, let's start with basic math and problem number one, Virginia Harston."

"Lucy's known to be a worrywart when it comes to her daughter. And there were an estimated four thousand people. More than the entire population of Cape Unity massed into a tight space. Other than a few fights and a couple of thefts, it was a peaceful bunch."

"And the driver of the car who almost hit her?"

"A local dentist. He was freaked by it all. Very apologetic. And no ties to Virginia."

"Well then, Sheriff Ernest, any threats against Lucy or Virginia? Or the deceased father, Cole?"

"Nothing reported. Look, we had tourists and people from all up and down the shore. So maybe it was just horseplay that got out of hand. Or some goddamn dunderhead with a couple of beers too many."

"Any witnesses?"

"One of my deputies at the picnic talked to the three people who came to Virginia's aid. All had different impressions—one said he didn't think she was pushed. One said he did. The third wasn't sure. They all agreed they didn't see anyone actually do it."

Drayco smiled. "Sounds like Cape Unity's workhorse sheriff had the day off."

"We rotate on holidays. I took volunteers." The sheriff peered out the door, scanning the hallway. "Deputy Tyler was one of the lucky ones who got overtime pay. She was asking about you."

Since his last visit to town, Drayco had entertained himself with reflections on the various Cape Unitarians, as he called them. Not least among them was Deputy Nelia Tyler, the newest, and one of the most dedicated members of the department.

"Nice to hear your staff isn't ready to tar and feather me and send me out of town in a boxcar. If Cape Unity still had a railroad that is."

A woman in a brown uniform with her blond hair pulled back in a French braid poked her head through the door. "Did you know the Eastern Shore Railroad has the sole remaining rail ferry in the country? Across the Chesapeake between Cape Charles and Norfolk. You're probably thinking of the last passenger train that left the Eastern Shore in 1958. A sad day if you ask me."

Sailor waved her in. "We were just discussing you, Tyler."

"So I heard. Not that I make a habit of eavesdropping on my boss. But your door was open ..." She smiled at Drayco. "You here in town on business or pleasure?"

"I've been asked to look into the Virginia Harston incident at the park."

Her eyebrows rose in tandem. "It seemed like a fairly cut-and-dried accident."

"I agree it'll be difficult to prove otherwise. Unless there's another attack."

Sailor piped up, "You haven't heard of another one, have you?"

"Not real or rumored."

“Rumored? You talked to other townsfolk about this?” Sailor’s facial muscles had a way of knitting themselves into expressions Drayco read like tea leaves. He wasn’t overjoyed.

“Just Maida.”

The corners of Sailor’s mouth inched up. “Ah. Well, I predict this will blow over in a week.”

Drayco drummed his fingers on the armrest. “I haven’t mentioned this yet to Maida ... You think the mother, Lucy, was behind this?”

Sailor said, “That Munchausen thing?”

“With the parent inducing symptoms of illness in the child to get sympathy, yeah. This would be the first case of wheelchair pushing I’ve heard of. It’s usually poisoning.”

“Kinda late for that, wouldn’t you say? That syndrome happens when the kid’s younger.”

“Exactly why it’s not at the top of my motive list.” Drayco turned to Nelia. “Problem number two, and the real reason I’m in town, is Arnold Sterling’s murder. It may be tied to a case I’m working in D.C.”

She replied, “Now that’s more intriguing. Nothing like we’ve had here before.”

Sailor was tilted at an angle, and the ceiling lights shining through a crystal fish-shaped mobile created a prism on his balding head. “There are similarities to your D.C. cases, Drayco. The fact he was murdered in his wheelchair, the garroting. And he was alone when he died.”

“You said the wire used to strangle him was found near the body. That wasn’t the case in the District. I don’t suppose you have that wire handy?”

Sailor reached into an evidence box behind his desk, pulled out a see-through plastic bag, and handed it over. Drayco held it up to the light. He wasn’t a technician but had seen plenty of this type before. “That’s piano wire. Several companies manufacture it—Maples and NewOctave in the U.S., Roeslau in Germany, others in Canada, Japan, and China. It’s also used in jewelry and hobbies. You can buy it anywhere. But if it’s high-grade, it’s likely from a piano supply company.”

The sheriff smiled. “I should have placed a bet with Tyler here as to how many seconds it would take you to make that call. Yeah, it’s piano wire. Haven’t been able to trace its origin. Damned things don’t have serial numbers or ballistics.”

“Ah, that word—serial.”

“I’m surprised your old buddies at the Bureau haven’t taken over your case. Or have they?”

“Not yet. I can draw you the same profile they’d come up with. The only things tying the four D.C. victims together are a social services agency they used and a clinic where they got flu shots. Both investigated inside and out.”

Drayco fingered the bag of piano wire in his lap. The District investigation was shooting blanks. In every other way, except for the mode of death, the victims had absolutely nothing in common. Two were wheelchair-bound due to accidents—one car, one diving—the third had cancer. The fourth, the client’s brother, was a Gulf War veteran and double amputee studying to be a counselor to help other vets with PTSD.

Sailor picked up a stack of notes. “The police up your way said none of the victims had rap sheets. Arnold Sterling’s got one a mile long. Allegedly hadn’t been to D.C. in years. And Arnold and his wife Beth Sterling didn’t employ an aide service. Beth’s a Certified Professional Midwife, so they didn’t need one.”

Drayco drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair again but stopped when Sailor stared at him. “Was anything stolen from the Sterlings, Sheriff? Money and other items were taken from the crime scenes in D.C.”

“According to Sterling’s wife, nada.”

“Nothing out of the ordinary?”

“There is one thing.” Sailor got up to pour coffee that smelled like burned popcorn into cups and handed one, black, to Drayco and another with cream to Tyler. “Arnold Sterling had one of those cars equipped with hand brakes. A few days before Sterling died, some young punk, only fifteen, stole his car and totaled it outside of town. We’ve talked with him extensively. Don’t think he had anything to do with the murder. Just ironic, I guess.”

“Sterling could still drive?”

“Barely. But he was stubborn that way.”

“Any motives for Arnold’s death?”

Nelia replied, “Plenty. Sterling was an inveterate gambler who played in nasty circles. Often in debt, frequently in fights.”

“Was that why he was in a wheelchair? Payback for a gambling debt gone wrong?”

“That was due to diabetes. He was too fond of Twinkies and Milky Ways if you get my drift. Or maybe it was Lucy Harston’s pastries that did him in—I often saw Sterling wheeling himself into the bake shop that sells her wares.”

Drayco took a sip of the coffee. Not as sludgy as usual. “On the surface, it doesn’t sound like Arnold’s death and the D.C. murders are connected. It’s not as if there’s a wealth of wheelchair patients on the Eastern Shore to target. It wouldn’t make sense for the killer to head this way. Unless ...”

Sailor looked at him, with a slight smile. “You’re thinking the killer knew you were investigating the murder of your client’s brother. And then discovered your ties to Cape Unity?”

Drayco exhaled through pursed lips. “Shades of last time I was here.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. That scenario is highly unlikely. I hope you’re not taking my joke on the phone seriously. You are not cursed. If anything, it’s a copycat. Sterling was murdered two weeks after news of the D.C. murders leaked out in the papers. It mentioned the wire garroting and a possible serial killer.”

Drayco stared at the oil slick forming on the black coffee in his cup. “The detectives working the case were thrilled with that leak. One of them, Ralph O’Dowd, blamed me for it. He and I have issues that go way back.”

“I’d have some issues, too, with whoever sprang that leak. You’re more apt to go the other way—withholding info.”

Drayco still felt a little bad about that. But complicated cases sometimes meant making complicated decisions. Murder didn’t come with a rule book. He gave up on the coffee and set the cup on the floor. “Is the victim’s wife a suspect?”

“Arnold was enough of a bastard for her to want to off the guy.”

“Any alibi?”

“Of a sort. She was allegedly on her way back from visiting the Harstons, but the timeline fits. Some people call her Saint Beth because she’s delivered so many local children. Sometimes pro bono. We don’t have a lot of doctors around here. For some patients, she’s all they’ve got.”

“Did she deliver Virginia, too?”

“One of hundreds through the years.” The sheriff stopped when Drayco held up a hand. “Yeah, yeah. You hate coincidences. Not that I’m a fan of the damned things, myself.”

Drayco tossed the plastic bag with the piano wire back onto the desk. “I’d like to meet this Saint Beth of yours.”

“Be my guest. She’ll be a challenge for you—totally cooperative. I doubt you’ll get anything useful.”

Tyler moved toward the door, but stopped to ask, “How long are you going to be in town, Drayco?”

“Depends on what I find.”

“So you might be here a while. Lucky, lucky us.” Her smile was one of those that lights up an entire face, a genuine smile with perfect white teeth which, unlike Darcie’s, didn’t hint of veneers. He smiled back. He’d forgotten how at home she made him feel with that smile.

Sailor, who’d been sitting still in his chair, shot up and joined Nelia at the door, using his arms to indicate the exit. “Time’s up, Doc. Wouldn’t want you to wear out your welcome.”

Sailor waited by the door, watching as if to make sure Deputy Tyler went one way and Drayco headed in another. Sailor’s expression was on the neutral side, but Drayco didn’t miss the hint of disapproval before the sheriff walked back into his office and shut the door.