

THE SUICIDE SONATA

A Scott Drayco Mystery

by BV Lawson

Crimetime Press

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Prologue

It was a strange location for a suicide—isolated, far from town in a godforsaken wood. Nelia Tyler stepped away from the body to get one last set of camera shots. But in her haste, she almost tripped on the slimy leaves under the tree canopy.

Turning to fellow deputy Wesley Giles, she asked, “Got everything bagged and tagged?”

“What I could find. That storm did its best to wash evidence away.”

Nelia looked past the clearing toward what was usually a sleepy creek, now turned into a raging stream. “They’re going to take the body out by boat. Wanna ride?”

Giles snorted. “I hate boats. Even looking at one makes me wanna puke. Think I’ll pick door number one and take the car.”

“It’s over a mile to hike back. And you nearly broke your neck on the way in, falling over that tree root.”

“Killer trees I can handle. Boats, not so much.”

All joking aside, the trek through the woods to the clearing was a challenge. Without a drone and radios guiding their way, it would be easy to get lost. And they’d never hear the last of it if they had to be “rescued.”

Nelia glanced at the young victim's motorcycle parked against a tree. Before the rains, the trail across the creek would have been a little messy, but passable. But it didn't explain why he chose this place to end his life. Nowadays, someone his age would be more likely to livestream it on the internet.

Right as the EMT techs swooped in to put the body in the waiting plastic bag, Nelia spied something. "Wait a minute, guys."

She knelt and used her gloved fingers to flip up a piece of fabric on the deceased's nylon jacket. "Hidden zipper. I almost missed this."

She reached inside the pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. Taking great pains to avoid tearing it, she unfolded the paper and read the writing.

Giles asked, "What is it?"

"If it's a suicide note, it's the strangest one I've ever read."

He peered over her shoulder. "Looks like a poem. Or a song, I guess."

Nelia studied the note. Someone had scrawled the words "soul vibration" in the margins and drawn a triangle next to them. Who would doodle on a suicide note? Didn't make sense.

She said, "Wonder what Scott Drayco would make of this?"

Giles snorted. "He'd take one look at it, tie it in with some obscure ancient Egyptian cult, then tell us exactly what this guy was thinking when he pulled the trigger."

Nelia went to her kit, pulled out a baggie, and sealed the paper inside. "This might mean something, might not."

She placed the bagged note on top of the kit, above the gun found beside the victim. Then she watched as the EMTs zipped up the body bag, studying the scene not just from a forensics angle but also from the human one. She might not have known the young male victim personally—but her mother had.

The few flickering rays of sunlight wafting through the dense canopy illuminated the boy's face like a host of angels kissing that cold, bluish skin. Nelia shook off the fanciful notion and packed up her kit.

As if to emphasize the point, a lone crow settled on a nearby tree and cawed at her. Laughing? Crying? Or was this the same bird that had picked at the corpse's exposed flesh, now annoyed at the loss of dinner?

She said to the black bird, "Crows only live ten years, you know. You'll be here, yourself, soon enough."

Giles, packing up his own kit, looked over at her in bewilderment. "Did you say something?"

"It's nothing. Places like this give me the creeps."

She watched as the techs carried the body to the waiting boat and then gave one last look around. Well, the Medical Examiner would do her thing, and she and Giles would do theirs. And this particular suicide would just be another statistic on the CDC books.

But, as she started the walk back with Giles through the woods, Nelia felt a little shiver of something she couldn't quite identify. It was that damned crow. That must be it. The crow, this setting with its stark loneliness, the tragedy of life cut far too short—this was one of those days she almost wished she'd become an accountant.

She shook it off and continued the trek to the car. It would be followed by a stop at the office with its endless parade of crime scene reports and tedious paperwork. And having to make “that” visit to a worried father telling him his missing son was never coming home.

Chapter 1

Thursday, June 7

“Drayco, where are you?” Scott Drayco couldn’t tell where Nelia Tyler was calling from, but he heard noisy traffic in the background.

He said, “At my townhome in D.C. Where are *you*?”

“In the District, but I won’t be here long. Have to return to the Eastern Shore tonight.”

“Wish I’d known you were in town earlier. I’d love to catch up.”

She let an emergency vehicle with a screeching siren pass by. “I do have something important I want to ask you. But not over the phone.”

“A mystery quest. Sounds cloak-and-dagger.”

With a nervous laugh, she said, “Hate to disappoint you. No spies. Or CIA or FBI or NSA. Look, if you’re too busy—”

“Not too busy for you. Do you want to stop by my place?”

More nervous laughter. “That’s not necessary. But that coffee shop nearby—what say we meet there. Around five-ish?”

He consulted his watch. “Sure, I think I can make that.”

And he did make it in plenty of time—a little too quickly. No signs of Nelia when he arrived at the café at “five-ish.” He went ahead and grabbed some coffee, tasted it, then sprinkled salt into the cup. Much better.

As he settled in to wait on his too-hard metal chair, he indulged his habit of people-watching. One man caught Drayco’s eye, and he observed as flies landed on the man’s table. The guy snared them one by one in a pool of honey poured on a napkin and squashed them.

Drayco turned his attention from the fly-killer to the other café patrons. Most stayed buried in their phones or laptops, hardly glancing up to enjoy their overpriced lattes and croissants.

Ordinarily, he’d have opted for an outdoor table since it reflected fewer textures, colors, and shapes from sounds bouncing off boxy surfaces. Much more comfortable for a synesthete. The rusty-orange pins of the fly-killer’s voice hadn’t helped, though Drayco wasn’t sure which was worse—that voice or the eggplant-colored scalpels from the coffee bean grinder.

But all of those little dramas paled in comparison to his burning questions from Nelia's phone call. What could she possibly want? A bullet-point list of scenarios scrolled through his head, some good, some neutral, some indefinable. He drummed his fingers on the table, chiding himself. Mustn't let his list-obsession take a flight of fancy to parts unknown.

It was a relief when the familiar blonde entered the shop and headed his way. "Hope I'm not late." Nelia smiled as she walked up to his table and then turned to look at the menu board. "Any recommendations?"

"The Kona brew is pretty good. And the raspberry cheese Danish if you're into cheesy things."

"I like cheesy. Just ask Tim. If I want to annoy him, I'll turn on old Abbott and Costello shows."

The mention of Nelia's husband took Drayco's mood down a few notches. Maybe that was why she'd requested to meet him here—at a café *near* his townhome rather than *at* his townhome? When they'd last discussed Tim, she was considering a divorce. Now, she was acting as if afraid to be alone with Drayco.

His thoughts darted back to the barely platonic evening at the marina they'd shared two months ago. Was she as disappointed as he was it ended that way?

Nelia went to the counter to place her order, which gave him a chance to turn his people-watching skills on her. Hair still plaited into a braid, wearing sensible flats and sporting an equally sensible pale blue dress. Must be cooler than her deputy browns on a sticky June day.

When she returned to the table with an aromatic coffee and red-topped Danish, he asked, "How's Tim doing?" He bit his tongue not to ask, "*And has he hit you lately?*"

"Still employed, though the MS makes it tricky. But we hired a live-in aide to help around the house. Such a load off my mind to have Melanie there."

"You're only in town for the day?"

"Finishing up loose ends from the semester."

"I wondered what your schedule was this summer."

She chewed on her lip and looked away. He hadn't meant his comment as a dig. But she'd not spoken with him since May, answering his phone call attempts with terse text replies. Another clue he'd tried to overlook, perhaps.

"I'm working full time for Sheriff Sailor until fall." She took a sip of the coffee and said, "You're right, the Kona's great."

"What happened to Regina, the woman job-sharing with you?"

"Her baby had medical problems. But the prognosis is good. Hopefully, she'll return to work before law school starts in the fall."

"Benny Baskin will miss your legal research skills this summer."

"Oh, I doubt I'm that irreplaceable."

"Benny would beg to differ. But it must be hard living in three places."

"My tiny apartment here in D.C. is spartan. The Cape Unity apartment is bare bones. And I don't make it to the house in Baltimore much."

Drayco didn't miss the slight gritting of her teeth and the tightened jaw. "Doesn't it get lonely? Living in scattered homes?"

She took a nibble of the Danish and took her time answering. "Two jobs and law school part-time? I don't have a microsecond to be lonely."

Nelia was strong, independent, and direct, traits he found so appealing, but she'd make a terrible actress. He let it slide.

She sighed. "Look, I'm sorry I didn't stay in touch over the past couple of months."

"As you said, you're swamped. I understand."

"I thought about you. Wanted to call."

"Why?"

"I was worried how you were taking the end of your mother's case. Having your Mom charged with murder. And having it end like it did."

It was Drayco's turn to take his time answering, letting the salted coffee trickle down his throat. "I had some cases consulting for law enforcement groups. The normal high-stress dance card. But maybe the frenzy of activity wasn't a bad thing. A distraction."

She chewed on her lip. "I suppose so."

He forestalled any further questioning along that line. "So, what's this big mysterious quest of yours?"

"My mother plays violin in a Virginia Beach orchestra. The son of one of her fellow violinists committed suicide a month ago."

Drayco's heart sank. Of all the things he'd imagined she wanted to discuss, this wasn't on the list. Plus, he'd never liked working suicides, and he knew—dreaded—what was coming. "And the parents can't believe their son would take his own life."

She nodded. "The boy's father, Sebastien Penry. His mother died years ago. But Marty's suicide was totally out of character. The young man never showed signs of being suicidal."

"They often don't."

"I was skeptical myself, at first."

"What changed your mind?"

"Mom was a large part of it. She knew Marty Penry, that's the son, and she swears she believes his father, Sebastien."

"Marty also lived in Virginia Beach?"

"Both father and son used to live in Cape Unity, but only Marty stayed. Since Marty's death happened in Prince of Wales County, Sheriff Sailor looked into it. He made a detailed report, and there are inconsistencies in the case. But that was as far as it went. Officially."

That wasn't encouraging. If Sailor believed it was a homicide, he'd have pursued it. "What inconsistencies?"

"For one, Marty shot himself with a pistol, a Smith & Wesson Model 39, yet he didn't own a gun. But it matches the description of one stolen from his best friend's car."

"You think this friend staged the theft and used the gun against Marty?"

"That's a possibility."

"Did you trace it to make sure?"

"A hand-me-down from the friend's father. Who got it from his father."

"Not in the supply chain, then."

She shook her head.

"Fingerprints?"

“Just Marty’s.”

“That detail’s odd. If it belonged to the friend, why would the suicide victim have wiped off the friend’s prints? Was there a note?”

Nelia fished out a paper from her purse. “I found a piece of paper with Marty’s body. And you could interpret it as a suicide note. Or I guess I should say a suicide song.”

Drayco straightened up at that. “Suicide song?”

She handed the paper over. “Here’s a copy of the song with the lyrics. You can keep it.”

Drayco read the text:

*I’m lost in confusion and melancholy,
Drowning in heartache and rivers of grief,
The hours are slowing, my dreams are all crushed,
Like trees turn to husks and metal to rust.*

*I live in the shadows, and alone I shall be,
Gone are the days that were bright and carefree,
The flowers are fading, the light becomes dusk,
Ashes turn to ashes and dust turns to dust.*

*My guilt and betrayal are too much to bear
With nothing to hope for and no one to care,
My time is now fading, like light from the stars,
And peals of the church bells that reach out to Mars*

He said, “This isn’t very cheery. In fact, it’s precisely the type of poetry to attract someone who’s depressed. And what does ‘soul vibration’ in the margin mean? And that triangle?”

“The first two stanzas are from the original song. Marty apparently wrote the third. The margin bit, well, I have no idea.”

Drayco concentrated on those last four lines. “I hate to say it, but ‘my guilt and betrayal are too much to bear’ sounds like a suicide confession.”

“Or the victim of that betrayal is at the bottom of this. And staged it as you suggested.”

“I don’t know, Nelia. The vast majority of suicides are just that. As hard as it is for a family to accept, that’s the statistical truth. One reason I hate suicide cases.”

Nelia stared at the remaining third of the Danish for a few moments before pushing it away. “I knew a guy while I was in the reserves. He’d been in a war zone, had PTSD and personal setbacks. Yet, when his wife found him in his car with the engine running and rags crammed into the exhaust, she didn’t believe he’d killed himself.”

She shook her head. “I realize this seems cut-and-dried. I won’t think badly of you if you don’t want to look into it.”

Drayco grabbed the plate with the Danish and pushed it across the table. “Eat, you’re wasting away. And you’ll need your strength if you’re going to help me with this hopeless case of yours.”

A smile crept across her lips. “You’ll get paid for this one. Sebastien Penry has offered to make your fee. My Mom will kick in the rest.”

“With personal ties, evidence will have to be golden to stand up in court.”

“If anyone can do it, you can.”

Her unwavering faith in his abilities should have made him do a song and dance. But he’d agreed to take the case against his better judgment. And it was possible he’d disappoint a lot of people including Nelia, her mother, and Sebastien Penry. If it were anyone other than Nelia asking him to work a suicide case, he’d say no. They were always the same—the grieving wanting to know the unknowable.

§ § §

Drayco waved at Nelia as they parted company. He walked the short distance to his townhome near Capitol Hill, dodging tourists looking at maps on their cellphones. Once inside, he closed the door and leaned against it with his eyes closed.

After a moment, he headed toward the bookcase and pulled out a biography on Chopin. Turning to the title page, he ran his finger along the dedication, “To my favorite student and future superstar, Scott Drayco. All my best, A. Vucasovich.” Touching Vuca’s signature made the man feel so real, so alive.

He could still see it clearly. Vuca sitting in the front row as the twenty-year-old Drayco finished playing Beethoven’s Emperor concerto with the Boston Symphony, leaping to his feet to lead the standing ovation. Then a week later, the devastation on Vuca’s face as he visited Drayco in the hospital after the fateful carjacking, staring at Drayco’s shattered wrist and arm. Three months on, it was Drayco’s turn to stand and look at Vuca, only this time at a cemetery as Vuca’s coffin was lowered into the ground.

Drayco re-read the book’s dedication, wondering as he always did when he thought of his former piano teacher—*why did you do it, Vuca?* Maybe there were some things no one could ever know. Or ever should know.

He thought of the copy of the “suicide song” Nelia gave him and grabbed his laptop to do a bit of quick research. Not originally a song at all but based on a piano sonata, one mysteriously linked to suicides. Yet that wasn’t what sent a chill up Drayco’s spine. The composer of the sonata was Hungarian—a man who also happened to be Vuca’s friend before the war.

Drayco slid onto his sofa, staring into space, musing on life’s many circles of connection and coincidence. Why this case and why now? The last thing he needed was digging up more emotional graves from his past. But a promise was a promise.

Tired of staring at nothing, he headed for his fridge to grab a bottle of Manhattan Special. Maybe the espresso soda would help? He changed his mind and opened a beer can. He’d need something stronger than a Danish and coffee if this case of Nelia’s turned out to be as hopeless as he suspected it was going to be.

Chapter 2

Thursday, June 14

It took a week for Drayco to tie up his other cases in the District before heading to Cape Unity. The Chesapeake Bay Bridge traffic was thorny, but he made it by mid-afternoon. Driving down Main Street was like driving back in time, with Mom-and-Pop's, no chain stores, and an *Our Town* feel.

Every time he returned to the Eastern Shore, he forgot how much he missed the odor of salt spray and how cleaner the air felt. Nature's aromatherapy for city slickers. Next time, he'd rent a plane, fly over and see it from the air.

He knew what his first stop had to be and was soon parked in the creaky swivel chair in Sheriff Sailor's office. A pile of case folders stacked on the man's desk wasn't a promising sign. The mounted piranha-like fish still glowered at Drayco from the wall, but Sailor's stare was no less intimidating.

Sailor greeted him with, "Once again someone goes over my head to hire you. First Lucy and Maida a year ago. Now, Nelia's mother, of all people."

"I'm not sure this case will take that long."

"You got that right. Suicide note sort of cinches it."

"Not quite a standard note, is it?"

Sailor wadded up a blank piece of paper and tossed it at a galvanized steel trashcan overflowing with paper balls. "I'm sympathetic to the grieving father. But weird note or not, this has the hallmarks of an ordinary suicide. If there is such a thing."

He grabbed a manila folder from the pile and pushed it across his desk for Drayco. "That's a copy of the report. Figured you'd need it."

"I thought you were mad at me."

Sailor smirked. "I am."

Drayco flipped through the folder, stopping first on the photos taken at the scene—the motorcycle, the bullet wound, the blood, the gun. Looked like dozens of others he'd seen before.

He started reading the report next. "Handwriting on the note matched the victim's, as confirmed by the father and Nelia's analysis. Shot with the pistol at close range, one that

matches the weapon stolen from his friend's car." Drayco made a note of the name. "Antonio Skye."

"Yeah, that theft was weird, I admit. A week before the suicide, too. But maybe Marty Penry needed a gun, knew his friend had one, and simply stole it."

"If they were friends, surely there were easier ways to get that gun?"

"People not in their right minds and all."

"Any other sources for the weapon?"

"Marty didn't own one. Neither did his father. Or Marty's other friends. Haven't been able to trace it, so can't tell you much."

Drayco studied one entry in the file. "Odd there are no fingerprints on the gun other than Marty's."

"And there's that."

Drayco drummed his fingers on the armrest. "The song found with Marty has a checkered past, apparently. It's based on a piano sonata dating to 1930, written by a Hungarian, Ado Jan Dobos."

"Marty's father mentioned sheet music. Didn't seem relevant."

"The original piano piece is also known as the 'Suicide Sonata.'"

Sailor's eyes widened. "How's that?"

"A copy was found clutched in a young man's hand after he lay down on railroad tracks as a train barreled through. A few years later, it also turned up beside a woman who'd slit her wrists."

"Two incidents? Hardly enough to make a piece of music infamous."

"The sonata's melody was the basis for a popular song translated into several languages under the title 'Melancholy Morning.' There are reports of a dozen people committing suicide after becoming obsessed with the song. The composer himself took his own life decades later."

Sailor got up to drain the coffee pot into two cups, handing one over. "Adds more weight to Marty's death being exactly what it appears to be."

"On the surface."

"I don't get it. Why are you bothering with this one?"

"A guy's gotta make a living."

"You get plenty of cases. Important ones."

"A favor. Friends and all."

"Uh huh." Sailor gave him a skeptical eye.

Drayco took a taste of Sailor's coffee. Same old sludge, burnt smell and all. So thick, you'd expect a teensy Creature from the Black Lagoon to rise from the murk. He choked some down.

"There are lots of performances of the 'suicide song' on the internet. The sheet music is hard to come by—only one or two sites where you can download it. Don't suppose you looked into that, Sheriff?"

Sailor shrugged. "Doesn't matter ultimately, does it? Marty found it, obsessed over it, died for it."

"Legal downloaders have to pay, so there may be records. I'll need law enforcement muscle to get the site owner to cough up the name." Drayco handed over a list of websites. "Here you go."

Sailor snatched it from him. "Nice to know I'm good for something."

“What about Marty’s father saying the suicide was out of character?”

“That’s the father’s rose-colored glasses.”

“Well, have you at least got the tox screen results yet?”

“You kidding? Backlogs, my friend.”

“Too bad. It would help if we knew whether he was on drugs.”

“No reason to pull strings and request a rush job. Suicides aren’t going anywhere.” Sailor grimaced. “Drug crimes are on the rise around here, but Marty Penry wasn’t on my radar for that.”

Drayco tapped the folder. “You said Marty’s friends, plural. Who were these friends other than Antonio Skye?”

“We spoke with them. It’s all in the report.”

Drayco put down the coffee-sludge to search the folder documents. He found the appropriate page and read the names of Marty’s girlfriend and other close friends. Not a long list.

Sailor half-smiled. “You’re memorizing those, aren’t you, Mr. Eidetic Memory? One word of warning—don’t talk to the third name on that list, Deirdre Pinnick, without calling her father first. Or better yet, let me be there when you do. He’s an attorney and itching for a fight.”

“Why?”

“Had a restraining order taken out against Marty Penry. Alleged stalking of his daughter who dated him, then dumped him. Pinnick and his wife are social climbers around here if there’s any social to climb. He’s Randolph Squier’s attorney. If that tells you anything.”

“That tells me everything. Thanks for the warning.” So that’s who took on Squier’s case after the man’s arrest. Drayco didn’t want to dwell on the fact he’d helped put Squier behind bars. And that Drayco was occasionally seeing Squier’s ex-wife, Darcie.

Another sip of the coffee made Drayco wish he carried around a salt shaker. He coughed out, “Wouldn’t this attorney-father, Emmerson Pinnick, be happy to see Marty Penry dead? That would stop Marty from hanging around his daughter. Permanently.”

“The restraining order seemed to do its job. Why take it further?”

Drayco flipped through the folder and stopped on one piece of paper. “This says Marty was reported missing by the marine biology station when he didn’t show up for work. And your team found the body in a remote spot several days later. Did you use his cellphone GPS to find him? Or just look for a circle of buzzards?”

Sailor glared at him. “Smart ass. He didn’t have his cell with him. Which we still haven’t found, by the way. It was Police Work 101. We asked his most recent girlfriend—”

Drayco interrupted, “Lena Bing.”

“Lena Bing, yes, and she said they’d gone there a few times on their motorcycles to ‘make out.’”

“Have you subpoenaed the—”

“Cellphone records? We put an order in. But we’re low priority since it’s deemed a suicide. Hell, even when it’s an active criminal investigation, I’m lucky if I get a warrant through the court in six weeks.”

Flip, flip, flip. Drayco scanned the report’s pages as fast as he could. “The M.E. had to determine time of death from insects. And it’s approximate. How are the alibis?”

“Without an exact TOD, all his family and friends have alibis galore. But if it’s a suicide, that won’t matter.”

“How remote is this area?”

“We used our new drone to fly in and spot a body before moving in. There was a heavy rain between the time Marty rode there on his motorcycle and when we found him. The one road into the area was flooded.”

“How did you get the body out?” Drayco scanned the evidence summary.

“Used a dinghy. Unusual, but it worked.”

“Anyone else in his circle own a motorcycle?”

“Yep. Lena Bing.”

“Any stolen motorcycles reported?”

“What? Oh, no reports I’m aware of. I can have Giles double-check. In his *spare* time. Again, we have real crimes to solve around here.”

Sailor’s report had sketches and photos from the site where Marty was found. Drayco focused on the one with the body—a young man in his prime, attractive in an actor-ly way, lying on a bed of bloody leaves as if staged for a crime drama. “Gunshot was on the right side of his head. Was Marty right-handed?”

“I asked his father, and yes. None of that bullshit about the wrong hand being used.”

Drayco pulled out his copy of the suicide song Nelia had left with him. “What of the song verse Marty wrote himself? Guilt, betrayal, could be a motive hidden in there.”

“For suicide, yeah.”

Drayco read the last sentence of the verse. “‘And peals of the church bells that reach out to Mars.’ Was Marty religious?”

“Sensing his demise, he turned to a deity? His father didn’t say. At his final moments, maybe he was trying to make peace with his Creator. Who knows?”

“Yes, but, the ‘peals are fading,’ his ‘faith is fading?’”

“Deathbed conversions. It happens.”

“And what of this ‘soul vibration’ thing in the margin?”

“Again, who knows? Madness and all.” Sailor pointed at the song in Drayco’s hand. “Tyler gave you the copy?”

“When she asked me to take on the case as a favor to her mother.”

Sailor shifted in his seat. “About that. I told Tyler she can’t act on behalf of the department, *per se*, due to her mother connection. But she can assist you in *her* spare time. As long as she makes it clear she’s working for the victim’s father.”

Drayco scanned the rest of the pages in the folder and returned it to Sailor’s desk. “Doesn’t mean you and I can’t schedule lunch at the Seafood Hut for old times’ sake, does it?”

“Can’t.”

Drayco blinked at him. “You’re that busy?”

“The Hut had a fire a month ago.”

“I had no idea. How bad?”

“Bad enough. They’ll be closed for the foreseeable future. The upside is they were insured and can rebuild.”

Drayco groaned. He'd really been looking forward to the world's best crab cakes. "Well, I've got to check in with the Jepsons at their B&B, anyway."

"You came here first?" Sailor put his hand over his heart. "I'm touched."

"Some of your employees might say you're touched, all right."

Sailor allowed a smile. "Good to have you back, Drayco."

Chapter 3

Drayco pulled in front of the English Tudor-styled Lazy Crab, the B&B bathed in a golden glow from the late afternoon sun. He probably should have stopped by the Opera House first. When it came to *that* place, procrastination was his middle name. He had a good contractor he trusted, but the building was turning out to be a major headache. More of a nightmare than he hoped when he decided to restore it after a client bequeathed it to him—with a body inside. Still, it kept him involved in his former music life, in a way. And the community was excited about it, so there was that.

He was also putting off seeing Nelia and her mother until tomorrow since they were having a hard time coordinating schedules. Looked like he'd have to make the drive to Virginia Beach if he wanted to meet Sebastien Penry, his new client.

Before Drayco climbed out of the car, he made sure his Glock 27 lay hidden in its safe place. He'd take it with him, but the B&B's co-proprietor, Maida Jepson, hated having firearms in the house. She greeted him with a bear hug and a glass of "iced-tea-syrup," as she called it, and told him dinner would be ready in an hour or so.

He excused himself to take his suitcase to his room, pleased to see it hadn't changed one bit since the last time. Same cool aqua walls, one of the inn's many fireplaces, and a vast four-poster bed with toffee-colored down comforter. As always, the dark paneling on the walls smelled of pine and bayberry, an agreeable mix. The Lazy Crab was an immortal monument locked in a time bubble.

He started to unpack but decided to deal with that later—except for one item he pulled out of his bag. After placing the Chopin biography with Vuca's dedication on the nightstand, he headed downstairs.

Drayco waved out the kitchen window at Major Jepson, who was in the backyard. The man was potting something that looked like a mini version of the carnivorous Audrey II from *Little Shop of Horrors*. Moments later, the patio door banged, followed by the gurgle of running water in the mudroom sink.

When "the Major," as everyone called him, popped into view, Drayco said, "You didn't have to stop what you were doing on my account."

"Tell that to my back. My old, tired, and very aching vertebrae. Guess I should try some of that yoga or pale-ay-tayze."

Maida handed her husband a glass of the tea syrup. "It's pronounced pill-ah-teez, dear."

"Should be called pretzel-teez, if you ask me."

"That reminds me," Maida pulled out a tray and placed it on the table. "Appetizers, anyone? Have some pretzel-ring beer cheese dip."

Drayco nibbled on a soft pretzel section, burning his tongue, and slid into a chair carved like a sailboat. "It's only been a month since I was last here, and your garden has exploded. Major, your thumb isn't green, it's a magic wand for plants."

"Learned it from my father and his father before him. They found the gardening gene in that human genome project, didn't they? One of those CATG combo thingies?"

Maida pulled out a chair to join Drayco. "Since we're on the topic of genetics," she peered at him over a set of chartreuse glasses. "We didn't discuss it much last time, and I don't want to open raw wounds. But I can't stop dwelling on your mother and that horrible murder case. How's your father taking it?"

"As far as he's concerned, it's closure."

"And as far as you're concerned?"

He hesitated. He'd thought of that very question every day over the past couple of months, but easy answers always eluded him. "Sometimes I wonder if we were better off before she came back. I know how that sounds—"

"It's okay, dear. Can't imagine too many shocks greater. Think she's still alive?"

"When I was a boy, and she vanished, my father told me she was dead. I believed the lie. Now she's disappeared once more, I should trust my own instincts."

Maida put a hand on his arm. "What are they telling you?"

"That she's alive. But I'm not sure it means I'll see her again."

"Do you want to?"

"Under different circumstances, yes."

"Then, I hope you do. In the meantime, consider this your adopted home for whenever you need us."

Drayco shook his head. "You might regret that. I seem to attract trouble."

The Major blurted out, "Thank god. Things can get dull around here."

Maida got up to check her Cajun venison casserole in the oven. The pungent aroma of onions, garlic, and cayenne was already filling the room. "I'm glad you're looking into Marty Penry's death, Scott."

"You are?"

"Marty Penry came to talk to me once." She stuck an oven thermometer into the dish and pulled it out to read.

"Here?"

"At the church. Told him I was a lay pastor, and if he needed a good therapist, I could arrange it."

"Can you tell me more? As much as you're comfortable revealing."

"I'm not a psychiatrist or a Catholic priest. That whole confidentiality business doesn't apply, especially if this turns out to be a criminal case. After chatting with Marty, I could tell he was a nice young man. Troubled, but a good soul."

"When you say troubled, what do you mean?" Drayco poured himself more of the tea.

"You know how young people are in their twenties. That first taste of adulthood can be a doozy. Mostly girl problems and work stress. Certainly didn't seem suicidal. But he did want to chat about one odd thing."

"Odd in what way?"

"The Akashic Records."

Drayco choked on his tea. "How in the world did he get interested in the Akashic Records? That whole multi-dimensional, astral plane philosophy?"

"That's the one. It's a little out there, pardon the pun. But I've heard stranger beliefs in my day."

Drayco grabbed his cellphone to look it up on the internet. "According to this, there's a Hall of Records with all knowledge and experiences, past, present and future. Your soul can gain access through psychic readings."

"It's all woo-woo, if you ask me." Major finished munching on a pretzel and half-bowed to Maida. "That's one point my wife and I disagree on. But we have an understanding. I don't go to church, and she doesn't try to convert me. We've been married forty years, so I guess it works."

Maida shoved the casserole into the oven. "Woo-woo or not, Marty was worried over 'karmic debts.' Unfinished business or pending lessons the soul has yet to learn. I think that's how he worded it."

"Like he was seeking forgiveness?"

"I got that impression."

"You're probably right." Drayco trusted Maida's instincts more than those of most psychologists. "Did he mention 'peals of church bells that reach out to Mars?'"

"No, but that would tie in with the whole astral plane thing, wouldn't it?"

"I'll ask Marty's father tomorrow when I see him."

Maida stood with her hands on her hips. "Don't know whether to hope it's suicide or murder. Either way, the poor boy is dead."

"If it's murder, then he deserves justice."

"And if it's suicide, his father will have to live with the guilt." She frowned. "I swear young people are taking their own lives more often."

"The CDC says suicide is the second leading cause of death in Marty's age group."

"It was different when we were kids. Or not reported as much. Or youngsters were less stressed and happier. No one talks to anyone these days. It's all done on tiny screens."

Drayco thought back to his observations at the D.C. café. Maybe they weren't on the same astral plane, but he and Maida were thinking along the same lines. "Does this mean you don't play games on your cellphone, Maida?"

"I only got a cellphone last year. One of those 'dumb' phones. It's one time dumb is better if you ask me. Talk about not stopping and smelling the roses. People don't even *notice* the roses anymore."

Drayco agreed with her on that. Modern young people practically had their phones wired into their hands. So why did Marty Penry not have his with him when he died? Or if he did, where the hell was it now?

The cellphone gods must have been listening in, because Drayco's own phone rang and made him jump. The gruff baritone on the other end said, "Hey, son. My client, who's a pilot,

flew us into Salisbury for the day. Said he needed to stop by Accomack Airport on our way back to D.C. I know this is short notice, but we've got thirty minutes." He paused and then added, "If you're available."

"It'll take me ten to get there, but I can make it."

"Great. See you in ten."

After Drayco rang off, he said "Speak of the devil" and then told Maida and Major the plan.

Maida replied, "Tell him he's missing out on a great dinner. Sure you can't get him and his friend to stay?"

"Sounded like Brock's client is on a tight schedule."

Maida grabbed some of her homemade peanut-butter fudge, bundled it into a container, and handed it over. "Consolation prize."

After thanking her and apologizing again for having to leave after he'd just got there, Drayco headed up US 13 and onto Airport Drive. He passed by some invasive Tree-of-heavens trying to out-evolve the native boxelder and pignut hickory. At least, no turkey vultures strutted around the runway like last time.

A slender, distinguished man with short, graying hair stood outside the small terminal. He strode over to Drayco's car and opened the door. "We've got ten minutes for a whirlwind tour of the town. You up for it?"

"Whirlwind Tours at your service."

Drayco's father hopped in, and they headed toward the heart of Cape Unity. Brock asked, "Is the Opera House nearby?"

"Not too far. The interior's torn up, and things are a bit of a mess."

"Driving by the building itself will be enough."

Drayco parked at the Opera House to let his father take in the patterned shingles and weathered copper rosettes flanking the gables. Drayco said, "You should have seen it a year ago. The windows could best be described as dingy. We've patched up the cracks in the front steps and gussied up the paint."

"Looks better than I feared."

"What were you expecting, then?"

"A disaster."

Drayco gritted his teeth. "You were never on board with this whole project, were you?"

Brock grunted. "Still think you should sell it."

"A little late now. Besides, you were always the one who told me to miter the corners. Do it right, make it tight. Follow through."

Brock softened his tone. "Tell you what. If you can make this thing a success, I'll buy a front-row ticket for opening night."

"I'll hold you to that. And make it two. We could always use the money."

Craning his neck to get a better look at the top of the building, Brock asked, "This is a suicide case you're on, right?"

"The client, the boy's father, doesn't think it's suicide."

"That's what they all believe. I thought you didn't like suicide cases."

"I detest them."

Brock turned to face him, studying Drayco for longer than he was comfortable. “This isn’t just about that boy, is it?”

“It’s a favor. For a friend.”

“Hmm. And for Vuca, perhaps?”

“Music is connected to this case.” Drayco pinched the bridge of his nose. This was not a discussion he wanted to have. “And the composer was a friend of Vuca’s. It’s complicated.”

“I think I see.”

“You do?”

“Vuca was there for you when I wasn’t. You owe him.”

Drayco fixated on the dashboard as they sat in silence, save for the whirring of the AC and rumbling of the engine. Finally, Drayco cleared his throat. “It’s ancient history, isn’t it? Forward, upward, onward.”

Brock gave a half-smile. “That’s what your mother used to say.” He looked at the time on the Starfire’s dash. “And unfortunately, onward means I need to get to the airport where we’ll be going upward soon. Sam gets cranky when he misses dinner with his wife.”

Drayco turned the car around, and they made it with a few minutes to spare. Before his father got out, Drayco handed over the box of fudge.

“What’s that?”

“A gift from Maida Jepson. Trust me—anything she makes is gourmet fare.”

“Please give her my thanks. I’ll meet her on the next trip. Maybe when I buy that front-row seat.”

He slid out of the car. “And give Darcie my regards, too. Hope she’s doing well.”

Drayco winced. “I haven’t seen her in a couple of weeks. But soon.”

Brock gave Drayco one of his bayonet stares. “Couple of weeks. Breathing room’s always good, right?” He gave a quick wave as he added, “Keep me posted on the case,” and headed inside the terminal.

Breathing room. Another coded phrase from Brock, who hadn’t warmed up to Darcie. But he wasn’t enthusiastic about any of his son’s girlfriends, not even Drayco’s ex-fiancée, Tatiana.

Drayco should go inside the building to see his father off properly, but he was on a schedule, too. Maida’s schedule. He pointed the Starfire along Airport Drive and realized he’d forgotten to ask how his father’s case was going. For two former FBI agents, they were woefully lacking in investigating each other’s lives.

§ § §

When Drayco returned to the Lazy Crab, Maida’s dinner wasn’t quite ready. So, he headed to the den and sat at the Jepsens’ mahogany Chickering piano. He’d brought his downloaded copy of the original Suicide Sonata with him from D.C. and propped the sheet music on the stand.

It wasn’t the first time he’d played it, having tackled the piece at his townhome. But on the vintage Chickering, it took on a different tone. Maybe it was the expressiveness of the sound. Or the coppery bass, beveled-jade midrange, and crinkled bamboo treble it created in his brain. Or

maybe it was knowing a Chickering was the house piano at Ford's Theater the night of Lincoln's assassination.

He couldn't deny it was a gloomy tune. Set in the key of D minor, like the Mozart, Fauré, Bruckner, and Reger Requiems. Study after study attempted to show why minor keys sounded "sad" to Western ears. But none had linked minor keys to suicide.

He dug into the notes, transported back a century when the composition was new. The first half of the piece set up the dark mood—murky chords in the bass, tremolos, and a haunting melody making heavy use of tritones.

If the first part was dark, the second was positively despondent. Drayco's fingers glided through the arpeggios, as the bleakness of the broken minor chords drew him in. Beauty in sadness, darkness in joy.

Through the haze of concentration and feeling oddly dizzy, he became aware of a presence in the room. He turned to see Maida standing in the doorway, listening. "I hate to disturb you, but dinner is ready."

"Of course. Hope I didn't keep you waiting."

"Other way around, I'd say. But whatever was that piece? It's lovely but rather sad."

"It has a bizarre backstory. I'll tell you later."

As he followed her out of the den, he took one look back at the piano. The sheet music was still on the stand, a paper link between a tragic past and a tragic present. Something about that disturbed him. But no, it must be the dizzy spell—probably low blood sugar.

As he watched, a page fluttered, seemingly on its own. Ghosts of his imagination? He looked around and saw an air-conditioning vent pointed at the piano. It should be funny, so why didn't he feel like laughing?