

DIES IRAE

A Scott Drayco Mystery

BV Lawson

Crimetime Press

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PART ONE

Seek not to know what must not be reveal'd,
Joys only flow when hate is most conceal'd.
Too busy man would find his sorrows more
If future fortunes he should know before.

—From the song “Seek Not to Know,” poem by John Dryden
music by Henry Purcell

Wednesday, 15 October

The chiming wall clock filled the room with swirled purple ovals that felt like grainy silk. Almost seven o'clock. How long had he been pacing? It only took five steps up, five back to cross the room. A sixty-step-per-minute rate that would wear a groove on the hardwood floors, if he kept it up.

He cast an eye over at his piano. Maybe pounding out a Prokofiev sonata would be more constructive. His arm would cramp up, but it would be worth it. Decision made, he headed toward the piano but was stopped by a rapping on the front door.

The man framed in the entryway must have come straight from work, wearing a traditional FBI suit and tie. Unless something had changed, those regulation-looking shoes were a pair of Justin cowboy boots disguised by the man's slacks. His jute hair still sported a military cut, grayer at the temples, but everything else was the same as Scott Drayco remembered.

Neither of them moved for a moment as a jump-cut-movie of memories played in Drayco's head. What would the soundtrack for that be? Something noirish with shrieking violins, to match the staccato beats of the pouring rain outside.

He waved Agent Mark "Sarg" Sargosian inside. "Better come in before you melt."

Sarg entered and stood just inside the door as he looked around. "Think I've come to the wrong place. A Spartan would feel comfy here. And is that pine air freshener?" Sarg's tone was joking, but his right hand curled and danced at his side as if fingering a hat.

"Got tired of tripping over things. I have a piano, sofa, refrigerator and microwave. What more do you need?"

"According to Elaine, quite a bit. We traded in a perfectly good bed for one of those giant four-poster canopy things. With matching dresser and nightstand." Sarg tugged on his ear, a nervous habit that also hadn't changed.

"How did you get here? I didn't see your car."

"In the shop. Took the train to Union, then a cab. It's waiting down the block."

"Don't expect to be here long, I take it?"

"Depends on you. And your answer."

Sarg's call earlier in the day was cryptic, short on details and long on rambling non-sequiturs, unlike the blunt partner Drayco once knew. "You could have told me over the phone. Cheaper and faster. The train from Quantico to D.C. is what, an hour?"

"I owed you more than that." Sarg shifted his feet in place. "And this is too important. I need your help."

How many people had lived, fought and died over those four words? *I. Need. Your. Help.* Such simple words. Dangerous words. No-going-back words. Drayco's feet felt glued to the floor as Sarg continued to tug on his ear.

Drayco took a deep breath, then turned to walk in the direction of his living room, looking over his shoulder to see if Sarg followed. Should he make coffee? He hesitated a moment, then bypassed the kitchen and dropped onto his frayed red sofa.

Sarg lowered himself onto the chair opposite. Both legs bounced in rhythm as he looked everywhere but at Drayco. Ten seconds turned to thirty, then sixty.

Drayco leaned forward. "All right, let's hear it, Sarg. You said you needed my answer. What's the question?"

Sarg's legs stopped bouncing as he morphed into professional mode. "The BAU's assisting on a D.C. police case. I'm the lucky guy given the assignment. Two months ago, a Parkhurst College student, Cailan Jaffray, was walking home after a late-night lab project. Never made it. Her half-nude body was found in Kenilworth Gardens, though the MPD thinks she was carted there after her murder. A knife through the heart, no weapon found. Signs of cauterizing around the wound, like the knife was heated."

Drayco sat up straight. Stabbing deaths were common, not so much heated murder weapons.

Sarg continued, "It was mid-August, so most of the campus was on summer break. A few people still around had motives. A former boyfriend. The victim's rival. A college groundskeeper accused of being a stalker. Shaky alibis, no concrete evidence."

"This type of case doesn't usually prompt the Park Police or MPD to draw in the Bureau."

Sarg nodded. "Most of 'em would rather swim in a pool of cottonmouths."

"Then I don't see why—" Drayco caught Sarg's glance over at him, the way he bit his lower lip. "Which important person's daughter was she?"

"Niece of a Parkhurst religion professor, her legal guardian. Not particularly important per se, but Parkhurst is an elite school. Progeny of senators, grandchildren of Supreme Court justices, other illustrious alumni."

The type of circles BAU Unit Chief Jerry Onweller liked to hang around in. If Drayco won the lottery, he'd bet his winnings Onweller was friends with someone in the Parkhurst administration. "All right. I see why they want Bureau help. Scandal-abatement. Why do you need me?"

Sarg pulled out a piece of crinkled paper from his pocket and handed it over. "The girl was a music student. Rather promising. She received three unsigned letters in nine-by-twelve white envelopes with no return address. She threw away the first two. This is a copy of the third."

Drayco unfolded the paper and studied it. It looked like an excerpt from ordinary sheet music with a treble line for soprano—or violin, since there were no words—and a piano accompaniment. Oddly, no dynamics or tempo or pedal markings. The key signature had no sharps or flats, yet the unfamiliar tune wasn't in either C major or A minor.

He played the piece in his mind, drawing out the notes slowly at first, hearing each chord, each arpeggio. The accompaniment was uninspired, and the dissonant melody wasn't musical in a traditional sense. More of an exercise or a joke, or possibly some sort of code.

"I'm surprised you didn't check with the music faculty at Parkhurst."

“The MPD did. Some had no idea, most didn’t want to get involved.”

“You said this was the third music puzzle. The MPD couldn’t have known the victim threw away the first two unless someone told them.”

Sarg cleared his throat. “That would be Tara.” His eyes locked with Drayco’s. “My Tara.”

Dear God, Sarg’s daughter would be college age now. Three years ago, she was a senior in high school. Now she was a student at Parkhurst? Where naturally, the bubbly teenager had made new friends, and among them, one murdered music student.

The ex-Army Ranger Sergeant would never beg, but the message in his eyes was clear. Whatever it took, whatever bitter pill he had to swallow. This was his little girl, and he was worried.

“You think I can help because I play the piano?”

“Partly. You were always the best at solving puzzles. And there’s another connection you have with the case.”

Drayco was still absorbing the news Tara might be involved in a murder, so Sarg’s postscript took a moment to register. “And that is?”

“The lab project. The one the victim was killed walking home from. Some guy’s dissertation. It’s about that sensory thing of yours, seeing colors and shapes when you hear music.”

“Synesthesia?”

“Yeah, the girl had synesthesia, like you. The MPD doesn’t think there’s a connection, but I thought you’d find it interesting. Maybe help you get inside her mind better.”

Drayco studied the piece of paper before handing it back to Sarg. “This is similar to twelve-tone music. To most people, it sounds like cacophony. To me, it’s like blue-orange branching twigs with a rough bark feel to it. But no two synesthetes are alike, so I can’t tell you what the victim experienced.”

Sarg took the paper but didn’t fold it up. He was in danger of falling off the chair, perched on the edge. After another good half-minute of silence, he muttered, “Three years.”

Drayco didn’t have to ask what he meant. He knew full well how long it had been.

“Three years and I keep replaying the same day over and over.” Sarg looked briefly at Drayco, then away.

Drayco knew this man well. To Sarg, guilt was an invading force to be vanquished, not allowed entry. “I was thinking of leaving anyway.” Drayco lied. “You had a family to support.”

“Wouldn’t have lost my job. Probably.”

“Yet, if I had to do it all over ...” Sarg rubbed his boot tips together. “Hasn’t been the same since.” He cleared his throat. “I meant to call you.”

“Me, too.”

The silence descended on them again as Drayco considered his options. He could offer his services, only to find they weren’t needed. Some would say refusing to help was justified payback. Or Sarg and the MPD might solve the case on their own, with or without the music puzzle.

But then, there was Tara. “Onweller won’t want me consulting on this.”

“I’ve thought of a way to smooth it over, make him see how much we need you. All nice and official, with pay.”

The fusion of contrition and hope on Sarg's face sent a shiver through Drayco. He'd thought that bridge long burned, the ashes cooled and scattered. Yet here it was stretching out in front of him, inviting him to cross over. Should he take the chance?

The look on Sarg's face turned to disappointment when Drayco said, "You'd better not keep that cab waiting too long, or your fare will cost a year's salary." Then Drayco added, "And if I'm going to help, I'll need a copy of that puzzle."

Sarg passed the puzzle back and stood up, moving like a man ten years younger than the one who'd arrived. He paused, then thrust out his hand. Drayco shook it.

"I'll arrange everything with Onweller so we can get going first thing tomorrow."

"I'd like to start by talking to Tara. If that's okay with you."

"Done. And Drayco ..." He opened his mouth to add something, then stopped himself in mid-speech. "I'll see you in the morning."

"You coming via Union Station again? If so, I'll pick you up."

The details settled, Sarg left to finish his expensive taxi ride. Drayco resumed pacing, but with a glance at the music puzzle, he headed to the piano instead.

Ordinarily, he'd use Chopin to relax. Right now he needed black-and-blue jagged rocks tinged with an iridescent burgundy, the coastal wavelines of Prokofiev. He massaged his right arm first to stave off the stiffness and pain, then launched into the color-tsunami of Prokofiev's fourth piano sonata. It soon carried him onto a distant shore where the only thing broken was the silence.

Thursday, 16 October

Drayco awoke to a cascade of light pouring through the window. Hadn't he closed the blinds before he went to bed? Then a soft, warm body slid into bed beside him, and he remembered. Darcie Squier stopped by last night. Well, he *had* invited her to visit him at his townhome, hadn't he? Just not to show up on his doorstep as a "surprise."

After finally succumbing to Darcie's relentless seductions on his trips to the Eastern Shore over the past few months, it was almost a relief to wake up and find her there after a night of lovemaking. A relief? He didn't have time to dwell on that thought as Darcie started nibbling on his ear before working her way farther south.

When it came to sex, she was like a reluctant nun trapped too long in a convent, doing her best to "Make up for lost time," as she'd told him. And perhaps she'd summoned up his inner caveman as she talked of years spent in her loveless marriage crying alone in her room—although her ex-husband's riches seemed to dull the pain.

Drayco still wasn't sure what his feelings for her were. He knew his Cape Unity friends didn't approve of her—their words "shrew" and "alley cat" came to mind. But after Sarg's visit last evening, having Darcie here was better than a Cacao Espresso Stout from the Fiddler's Green Tavern. He *needed* this.

But his mind just wouldn't shut off, and his meeting with Sarg kept coming back to him. Sarg's baffling music puzzle poked at his subconscious, demanding he pay attention. He'd even had dreams of it last night, the staves leaping off the page and forming a knife headed straight for his heart.

No more avoiding the inevitable. He headed to the shower to clear mind and body of distractions, but Darcie had other ideas. She followed him inside, helped him dry off, then made him breakfast before he dressed because "she liked watching him walk around nude." He was going to protest for equal time, but she looked rather fetching in the kitchen wearing only lacy red panties.

She was disappointed when he told her he couldn't take her sightseeing because he was meeting Sarg. Her pout lasted only as long as it took for a friend of hers on the phone to mention Saks Fifth Avenue and something about Saint Laurent croc-embossed leather booties. When she squealed to him they were on sale for "only" nine hundred dollars, he spit out some of his coffee and grabbed for a paper towel.

The last shoes he'd bought were black garden-variety loafers. If Darcie didn't have her ex's money to play with, Drayco had a feeling she wouldn't be hanging around him long on his crime-consultant salary. She needed a senator or lobbyist and a mansion in Georgetown or McLean. Humble Cape Unity and its coastal small-town life must feel like a death sentence to her.

As Darcie babbled on the phone with her friend, Drayco grabbed his copy of Sarg's music puzzle and played it in his mind again. What could it mean? But the tuneless line kept morphing into Prokofiev and then to Bach. Soon his thoughts were in Cape Unity on the Eastern Shore inside the Opera House he'd inherited. His life, as always, seemed to be surrounded by musical puzzles.

Darcie finished her conversation, grabbed one of the egg sandwiches she'd made and plopped onto the couch beside him. "What's that?" She peeked at the puzzle.

"Part of that case I mentioned. And why I'm meeting Sarg later."

"So that's the reason you can't take me to see the First Ladies' dresses." She peered over at the paper. "Doesn't look terribly interesting. Is it important?"

He held up the paper to the light. "Possibly. It was sent to a college student before she was murdered."

Darcie put her plate on the coffee table and slid closer to him. "What was she like?"

"What?" He turned to face her.

"The girl who got killed. Tell me about her."

She had a way of surprising him like that. Showing a deeper side of herself to him than she did to others.

Last night, Drayco searched the Web for traces of Cailan Jaffray's social media footprint. She'd appeared like a fairly normal college-age girl at first. Then he noticed a more pensive, darker turn to her online posts in the weeks leading up to her death. Premonitions? Or hidden secrets?

He replied, "Well, music was a passion of hers. So much so she didn't have a lot of time left over for her friends."

"Kind of like you were at her age?"

He nodded. "Being a classical soloist is like having a lover who demands all your time. And you gladly give it. Once it gets a grip on your soul, it won't let go."

"I'd love to have you think of me that way." She reached up to stroke his hair. "But you make it sound like I'd always be playing second fiddle. Or whatever the piano equivalent is."

"I can't perform anymore, remember?"

She winked at him. "Only the piano, Darling. But you can still play, can't you?"

"For short periods. Until my arm cramps."

Darcie moved her stroking to his right arm. "Was the murdered girl a pianist?"

"A singer. Opera."

"Oooh, now there's more my thing. All those lovely dresses and jewelry and gorgeous sets. Was she any good?"

"Quite good, by all accounts."

"Then why would anyone want to kill her? Unless it's a rival."

He blinked at her. "She did have a rival, for love more than music."

"Then where does that puzzle come in? A form of musical death threat?"

And there she was again—much sharper than she let on. "That's what we aim to find out."

"How was she killed?"

"Stabbed."

"Ah, now see, that screams a crime of passion."

Drayco didn't think Sarg or the MPD would want some of the details of the murder made public, like the wound cauterizing, so he didn't mention that. Yes, a crime of passion might involve a stabbing. But to take the time to heat the knife first? That screamed premeditation, not spur-of-the-moment passion.

It wasn't often his thoughts were so vivid they translated into sensory links, but he could swear he smelled something burning. Darcie sniffed the air and jumped up, running over to the kitchen. As he got up to join her, she met him at the archway holding a blackened blob speared with a fork.

He tilted his head. "That doesn't look like an egg sandwich. In fact, I'm not sure what the hell that looks like."

"It was supposed to be a cinnamon roll. If you like them well done, there are five more in the oven just like it."

He started laughing. She was a worse cook than he was, and that was saying a lot. He grabbed the fork and tossed the blob into the sink. Then he wrapped his arms around her and captured her lips in a deep, slow kiss. She tasted like egg and coffee and cream, and right now, it was like a little taste of heaven.

The morning drizzle tightened the District's notorious braided-knot commute into a noose of traffic. But true to his word, Drayco picked Sarg up from the train station in his faithful blue Starfire, and they headed toward Parkhurst College. Their only conversation in the car was Sarg reading snippets from the case file he'd made and answering Drayco's questions.

No talk of the upcoming Washington Capitals season opener. None of Sarg's tirades over his Fredericksburg neighbor, the one who staged Civil War re-enactments in his yard—with action figures as Confederates and garden gnomes as Union soldiers shot to smithereens with a BB gun.

When they pulled into a Parkhurst lot, it didn't take long to spy signs of the college's deep-pocketed endowments. The campus coffeehouse where Drayco and Sarg were meeting Tara at ten-thirty had gleaming new everything. Pop-art light fixtures that looked suspiciously like Chihuly, crisp red shirts on the baristas, and a spotless self-serve espresso machine next to a case of pastries a French chef would envy.

"No crumbs." Drayco examined the floor around the table he'd chosen, the most isolated one in the back.

"What?" Sarg slid into the booth opposite and placed his caramel macchiato and éclair on the table.

"I thought this was a college, not a five-star resort."

"From what these kids pay, might as well be. One of the lessons Elaine and I learned when the kids started applying to colleges. And why it costs so much these days. No more barracks dorms. Gotta have satellite TV hookups, WiFi, and sushi made to order in the dining hall."

Sarg wrinkled his nose as Drayco picked up the salt shaker and sprinkled grains into his plain black coffee. "I don't care what you say, Drayco, salt does not make bitter coffee taste sweet."

Those were the exact words Cape Unity's Sheriff Sailor had said to him a few months ago. Sailor and Sarg might get along like gangbusters. Or maybe like magnetic poles, they'd repel each other.

Drayco sniffed the coffee. Maybe not quite plain java, because he caught a whiff of hazelnut. "You must have picked the right stocks. Because I doubt most FBI agents can afford a college like this."

"Stocks? What are those? Nah, Tara's the market winner. Got a full scholarship due to her overall brilliance and superiority."

"So she's taking after Elaine, then?"

Sarg smiled briefly, and Drayco almost smiled back. At least they were talking.

He said, "That case file you read to me. It screams a love-affair-gone-wrong scenario. The victim's recent breakup with a boyfriend, Garrington 'Gary' Zabowski, plus the victim's rival,

Shannon Krugh. And there's the fact Cailan had the date-rape drug Rohypnol in her system. Illegal in the U.S., but legal in Mexico, where Gary traveled over the summer."

"Yeah, but then you have those odd burns around the edges of the wound."

"And why was she moved to Kenilworth Gardens, of all places, after the murder?"

"Beats me. Didn't find anything like it in ViCAP records or checking with area PD sex-crime units."

Drayco thought about that for a moment. Where did Tara fit into this, if at all? Tara, a friend of Cailan and acquaintance of Gary and Shannon. Although Drayco didn't have kids, he felt protective of Tara. Last time he'd seen her, she still had braces, was smartly sarcastic and liked challenging him to word game duels. He hoped three years of college hadn't remade her into an über-sophisticate type dropping Ayn Rand and Sylvia Plath into every other sentence.

He reached for the salt shaker again but jumped up as something hot and wet spilled onto his leg. A hand with a pile of napkins frantically dabbed at the spot.

"Oh, dear Falkor, I am so sorry." Tara's face wrinkled up into a wreath of embarrassment, as she continued to blot his trousers.

He reached for her hand to stop her and smiled. "This must be an experiment for sociology." He wanted to put her at ease, despite a nagging thought—was the dousing intentional? He had no idea what her father had said about him in the three intervening years. He sat back down and motioned for her to take the seat next to Sarg.

Her long hair was still naturally blond and crowned with a plain headband, and she wore little makeup. Her sweater had swaths of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. The colors of the rainbow.

And she'd called him Falkor. Her nickname for him when she'd first met him and learned Drayco's name was from the Latin word for dragon. She'd promptly dubbed him Falkor, the dragon from her favorite *Never Ending Story*.

Drayco looked to Sarg, who nodded, giving his tacit approval to start. "It's good to see you again, Tara. Although it's still hard for me to believe you're old enough to be a college student. How are your studies going?"

She rewarded his question with a small smile. "Oh, you know. Full of declensions, derivations, and learning how to dump coffee on people."

"Ah, so I *was* a project. I hope I helped you get an 'A'."

"The easiest one I'll ever get." She hesitated, biting her lip. "As much as I appreciate you helping me with my 'project,' Dad said you needed to ask me about Cailan's murder? I mean, I'm not sure how I can help."

Sitting there, watching the young woman in front of him looking confident and vulnerable at the same time, he had a sudden insight as to how Sarg must be feeling. Ready to pack her up and send her to a convent. Preferably one with a fortress and a moat.

He said, "I'm sorry to have to discuss such an unpleasant topic, Tara."

"The police have already grilled me, right Dad?" She glanced at Sarg.

Drayco said, "I'm mostly interested in those music letters Cailan received."

She stared down into what was left of her latte. "Cailan was a singer. Guess you know that. She was a finalist in the Met Opera Regionals, which is kinda big for someone her age. Anyway,

she didn't think it was all that weird when she got the first letter. Creepy, maybe. She was angry when she showed it to me. And after she got the second one, she was furious."

"Did they look like this?" Drayco pulled out his copy of the third letter and handed it over.

Tara the A-student took a few minutes to study it. "I don't read music like a pro. But after calc and chem equations, you get a knack for memorizing stuff. It's close to the other two letters she showed me, though each was different. She sang the tunes for me. Well, mostly, 'cause part of it was out of her range."

That's one of the things Drayco had noticed right away. The top line of music jumped around too much to be intended as a singable melody, making it less likely the "gift" was from a composer sending Cailan recital fodder. "Why did she throw them away?"

"She thought they were from Gary. That he was ragging on her."

"Gary, the ex-boyfriend. Gary's also a music student, a composer, which is why Cailan suspected the letters were from him?"

Tara nodded.

"Why did she and Gary break up?"

Tara bit her lip. "Shannon."

"Gary's current girlfriend."

"Ex. They broke up last week, too, or so I heard. I haven't had much to do with them since ..."

Tara looked away for a moment. "Gary is a spoiled rich brat and Shannon's mental."

Drayco asked, "You mean her bipolar disorder?" Sarg's case file was very thorough, complete with bullet points.

"That's not her fault, is it? Choosing not to take her lithium sure is."

Drayco exchanged looks with Sarg. Bipolar disorder left untreated could lead to some strange and erratic behavior. "Why not take her meds?"

Tara adjusted her headband. "Self-destruction is easy. Self-creation is hard. That's what Professor Gilbow says. I think it was more than that. Shannon likes being a bully. She gave poor Cailan no end of grief."

"Gilbow. That wouldn't be Andrew Gilbow, would it?"

"I've got him for psych."

Sarg interrupted, "Onweller arranged for us to consult with him on the case."

First Onweller, now Gilbow. Definitely not reconnect-with-your-favorite-people week. "We'll discuss him later. Tara, who besides you might be familiar enough with Cailan's schedule to know she walked to her apartment after her lab project?"

Drayco caught a slight movement from Sarg, whose voice dripped with blue icicles as he said, "Tara didn't have anything to do with this."

Tara looked from one man to the other, wrinkling her nose. "He meant do I know any other suspects, Dad."

Drayco nodded. "Other suspects and potential stalkers."

Tara continued to pass dark glances at her father as she answered Drayco, "I thought that, too. There was that weird hippy stalker guy. I mean, hello—the '60s were decades ago."

"The college groundskeeper?"

"Yeah, he followed Cailan around. I think he's this big opera fan." Tara giggled. "His name is Elvis, can you believe it?"

The sound of maple cloud-like tones seeped out of a small fanny pack case Tara wore. She pulled out her smartphone and stared at the calendar on the screen. “Ohmygod, I’m going to be late for Gilbow’s class.”

She drank the last half of her coffee in one gulp, grabbed her backpack, and started to slide out of the booth. She gave Drayco a quick look and said, “Cadet Tile.”

Drayco scanned the room until he spied a young couple at a table, drinks in front of them. He replied, “Iced Latte,” and Tara grinned.

Sarg stopped her before she left. “I want you to add Drayco’s number to your phone. In case you can’t get me for some reason.”

Tara rolled her eyes. “Dad ... ”

“Humor me, will ya? And put a screen lock on that phone like I asked you to.”

Tara stuck her phone out at her father but dutifully typed the numbers into her phone contact list as Drayco recited them. Sarg added, “Don’t be calling him unless it’s an emergency.”

Tara’s pale face showed off her sudden red splotchy flush as she gave her father a quick kiss and waved at Drayco before hurrying off. He watched her go, then asked, “What was that all about?”

“You mean my overreaction or Tara’s schoolgirl crush?”

Drayco’s jaw dropped as he processed that last part. “What, me?”

“As my wife once pointed out, you have no idea the effect that dark hair and those purplish-blue eyes of yours have on women, do you? Especially the married ones for some reason.”

“She’s like a kid sister. Or surrogate daughter.”

“There’s only fifteen years between you. Hey, don’t tell her I said anything, ’kay? I’ll be crossed off her Christmas list. And her wedding list. And added to her shit list.”

Drayco shook his head and took another sip of coffee. Should he be flattered or horrified? To him, Tara would always be the little girl who liked chocolate sprinkles on her gummy-bear ice cream. Sarg’s pointed reference to married women, on the other hand ... No, he was not going to think about the charming deputy he hadn’t seen in months. He didn’t need another awkward personal relationship in his life right now.

Sarg lightened his tone of voice as he asked, “Cadet tile?”

“Anagrams, one of the word games Tara and I used to play.” He drummed the fingers of his left hand on the table.

Sarg stared at Drayco’s hand for a few seconds. “Whatcha got?”

“The usual counterpoint at the outset of a case. Different lines and voices entering, demanding attention, only to be turned backward and upside down.”

“That music letter thing?”

“If you want to call it music. Unsingable melody, dissonant harmony, obviously created using a computer program. I doubt it was intended to be performed.”

“So, a code.”

Drayco switched to twirling his spoon. “A good guess.”

“That should narrow it down, right?”

“Anyone anywhere can download music software from the Internet. And every student, every professor, every secretary or janitor has access to a computer.”

Drayco gulped down the rest of his coffee. “Has Cailan’s apartment been cleared out?”

“The lease was for a year. The uncle hasn’t been able to bring himself to see it. Let alone remove her stuff. So he told the police to use the key he gave them whenever.”

Sarg licked his fingers as he finished the éclair, then added, “The cops picked the place apart.”

“Still ... ”

“I got Onweller to agree to bring you on board, provided you only work on that music angle. Don’t think he’d be pleased for you to go beyond that.”

“I don’t have to worry what Onweller thinks anymore, do I? You’re the one who wanted my help.”

Sarg pursed his lips into a scowl, and Drayco braced himself. *Here we go.* But Sarg just slid out of the booth and turned toward the door. “You comin’?”

* * *

Tara was angry. She raced to her next class as if there were rockets in her shoes, but those rockets weren’t fueled by the clock as much as embarrassment. God, could she have been any more lame? She’d called him Falkor like she was in fifth grade. And dumped coffee all over him! Definitely a lame-oid.

Not that she was trying to impress him or anything. As if. Besides, it’d be a lot harder to impress a Scott Drayco than John or Gary. Tara stopped in her tracks and grabbed hold of a nearby bench as she took a deep breath. Gary, Shannon, Cailan. How had it gone so wrong?

When an image of Cailan singing “Climb Every Mountain” from *Sound of Music* popped into Tara’s head, she blinked back tears. It was so unfair. Cailan losing her parents but still somehow managing to dream big. And then this happens.

Tara would never forget the first time she met Cailan. In orientation before their freshman year, when Tara promptly dumped coffee all over her, too. Maybe that had been an omen. Falkor—Mr. Drayco—had better look out.

She’d never understood why Mr. Drayco left the FBI. And whenever she asked her father, he always had some non-answer. “He wanted to start his own business” or “It was just time.” She wasn’t that dense. She saw the way Dad tensed up every time Mr. Drayco’s name came up and caught that funny look in his eye.

It must have been big. Something so horrible that he and Dad hadn’t spoken in three years. Maybe it was better for her not to know. At the same time, she was disappointed Dad didn’t respect her enough to tell her the truth.

He’d probably withhold information about Cailan’s murder, too. Worried how she might take it, maybe. But damn it, Cailan was a good friend, Tara had a right to know what happened.

Tara fingered the case with her cellphone. She’d saved the last text on her phone Cailan sent before she died. “Meet u @ gb @ 7.”

They’d been looking forward to trying out the new Ethiopian restaurant ever since it opened. When Cailan didn’t show up, Tara knew something was wrong. And when Tara couldn’t get Cailan on the phone, she’d called everybody they knew, even Gary. But nobody had heard from her. That’s when Tara called Campus Security.

Tara had never told Cailan about Dad's "threat assessment" rules. Maybe if she had, Cailan would still be alive. What if, what if, what if. She wasn't going to go down that road because it only led to insanity.

But why hadn't Gary or Shannon seemed all that upset by Cailan's death? Tara had started avoiding the "Deadly Duo," as she dubbed them, after the murder. Maybe that wasn't being fair, but Gary had dumped Cailan and started dating Shannon not long before Cailan was killed. Coincidence? Mr. Drayco used to say how much he hated coincidences.

Tara sighed and continued her way to class, walking this time. Why hurry? Another boring Gilbow lecture about some trivial abstract thing. She'd have to wait until after class to dwell on the important kind of psychology. The kind she'd been asking herself over and over since Cailan died. What leads a person to kill someone else like their life had no meaning? No textbook in the world held the answer for that.

Drayco was surprised to see Cailan's apartment located in a pricier neighborhood, on the third floor of a rowhouse. The line of renovated brick and stone rowhouses was left over from days when D.C. had more of a community feel, lost during the government box-building of the '60s. The blight of office cubes housing lawyers and lobbyists popped up like chokeweeds in the manicured lawn of the family homestead.

Old building, no elevator. Sarg took the stairs two at a time, whether to prove he was still fit or due to nervous energy, it was hard for Drayco to tell. Sarg opened the door with the key Cailan's uncle gave the MPD. Even after Sarg flipped the light switch, the end-unit apartment on the third floor was dim. The heavy burgundy blackout drapes over the window shades likely had something to do with that.

When Drayco pointed them out, Sarg put his hands on his hips and gave the drapes an accusing glare. "Thought I'd learned to know her from her file. But nothing that would explain this. A sleep disorder?"

"Or she wanted to practice and needed to dampen the sound."

Drayco's townhome didn't need sound muffling, thanks to being on the end and having a partially deaf neighbor. Otherwise, someone might have called the cops by now. Most people don't appreciate a live piano concert at five in the morning.

He said, "Did your case file include all the notes from the police investigation? Because they didn't find much in here. Or from her social-networking sites or cellphone records, for that matter."

"Didn't you notice the bullet points?" The note of disapproval in Sarg's voice was clear. Sarg was obsessive about his bullet points. He laid some empty evidence bags on a chair and handed over a pair of nitrile gloves. "It's been dusted, but just in case."

Drayco wasn't sure what he'd expected. The room seemed so ordinary, an interchangeable room that could belong to any other college girl. Except most college girls didn't have posters of tenors with matinee-idol looks like Jonas Kaufmann on the wall. He fingered the blackout drapes as he passed by. Soft velvet.

He picked up framed photos of Cailan posing with friends, including Tara. Another photo had a much-younger Cailan with two adults Drayco recognized from Sarg's case file. Cailan's deceased parents. They looked relaxed, happy, no hint of the tragedy to come.

The genes of Cailan's mother, a native of Guatemala, shone through in the girl's medium complexion and long black hair. Her pale gray eyes were from her father. Cailan oozed confidence, daring anyone to stand in the way of her dream to sing on the stage of the Met.

Sarg opened the closet door and pulled out a pair of well-used boxing gloves. "Bet you didn't expect these. Guess they're from that self-defense class a year ago. Or she took up boxing as a hobby."

He put them back on the same hanger as if expecting their owner to return. “I’m not feeling the love for this Gilbow fellow, Drayco. Don’t care for self-important, media-whoring psychology gurus?”

“He was the prosecution’s expert witness in a case Baskin and I worked after I left the Bureau.”

“Ah, Benny Baskin, the world’s most diminutive defense attorney. Been a while since I heard anything outta him.”

“The same Benny Baskin who has a near-perfect record of getting his clients off. Save one.”

“Let me guess. The Gilbow case. I’d heard Gilbow was pretty good in court.”

“He can be charming, entertaining. And very convincing. Came up with a piece of psych theater using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory—”

Sarg snorted. “Not that again.”

Drayco wished those personality tests had never been invented. Lawyers used them as if they were indisputable mathematical proofs. Trait from Column A plus trauma from Column B equals evil. Any psychopath worth his salt could fake them.

He replied, “Gilbow had the jury in the palm of his hand. But Benny won on appeal. Gilbow appeared on a chat show afterward and hinted Benny and I were unethical. He referred to us—half-jokingly—as the shrimp and the pimp.”

One of Sarg’s eyelids twitched, and he covered up a sudden cough. “I think I might have heard about that.”

Drayco stared at Sarg. “How? Onweller?”

Sarg looked up at the ceiling as he tugged on his ear. Of course, it was Onweller.

“I don’t give a damn about the name calling. But after his ‘unethical’ comment, Benny and I had visits from ethics investigators.”

“And Onweller wants us to consult with Gilbow. Goody.”

Drayco continued to prowl around the room, hoping to find something to make meaning of the music puzzles. Not many books. Textbooks and a stack of commercial sheet music—Mozart, Fauré, Brahms, Puccini. He thumbed through each one. No puzzles, just a few notes in the margins. “Practice half-tempo,” and “Work on *passaggio* here.” He laid the books down and moved on.

Some of the compartment doors in a tall jewelry box on her dresser were open. More signs of the police search. He opened a heart-shaped locket hanging on a side hook.

The small photo inside was of a young man, the pouting mouth and two-toned bangs also familiar from Sarg’s case file. So Cailan threw away the letters she thought were from Gary Zabowski, yet kept his picture in a locket? Talk about love-hate relationships. Or perhaps their breakup was a sham and Shannon found out?

Sarg stood in front of the bed. “What is it with women and pillows? Is it in their DNA? The pillow gene?”

Drayco moved next to him and counted no less than ten pillows of all sizes, shapes and colors. “We should ask Gilbow, the omniscient.”

He sat down on the bed and examined the pillows one by one. He caught a whiff of a strawberry perfume. Hair gel? A sachet? When he picked up a red paisley pillow heavier than

the others, he stopped and ran his fingers around the back. The fabric lined up in a way that hid a small, covered zipper.

He unzipped it, then reached in and pulled out two small dolls and a few photos. He held the dolls up to the overhead light. They were made of rough burlap cloth, with long black yarn for hair. In the front of each, over the heart area, someone had stuck tiny straight pins.

Sarg took the dolls from Drayco as he handed them over. “Voodoo? Really?”

Drayco reached into the depths of the pillow pocket for anything that might explain the dolls and eased out a piece of paper with block letters that said, “I’m watching you.”

He next studied the photos, three in all. Possibly printed from a phone camera though the phone Cailan carried with her was never found. It was hard to tell if the photos were taken at the same time. The first showed the dolls and the “watcher” note sitting on her bed. The image in the other two was identical—a mirror with letters written across it in a red substance that spelled BEWARE OF OCHOSI.

He surveyed the room for the mirror in the photos, but not spying one, got up and headed into the bathroom. When he held the pictures to the side of Cailan’s mirror, they were a match. He rejoined Sarg. “Looks like she got some effigy dolls and someone threatened her. I don’t recall this from the bullet points.”

“Can’t believe the MPD didn’t think to look inside those.” Sarg frowned at the pillows.

Drayco handed the photos and dolls to Sarg to put into the evidence bags. “Do you have her uncle’s office schedule? Think we could button him down for a few questions?”

“He’s high on my list. And who better to discuss voodoo with than a religion professor?”

Drayco cast one last survey around the murdered girl’s room. He thought of the boxing gloves on the hangar, waiting. The room had stayed the same since her death and held the air of a life frozen in time. Or an empty vase waiting for a budded flower that would never open.

He’d agreed to help Sarg out of curiosity over the puzzle and concern for Tara. Seeing Cailan’s room, learning more about her, feeling the tendrils of the music connection wrapping around his inner core—he was angry. Angry at whoever did this, angry at Cailan for not being more careful, angry that violence had so much power to silence lives and music.

Gilbow would spout something regarding displaced anger, no doubt. Injustice plus sacrifice equals tragedy. Drayco avoided looking at Sarg as they headed out the door.

END EXCERPT