

DEADLY DANCE

A Scott Drayco Mystery

by BV Lawson

Crimetime Press

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Seek Not to Know

God of dreams:

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;

For by that knowledge of his destiny
He would not live at all but always die.
Enquire not then who shall from bonds be freed,
Who'tis shall wear a crown and who shall bleed.

All must submit to their appointed doom,
Fate and misfortune will too quickly come.
Let me no more with powerful charms be press'd
I am forbid by fate to tell the rest.

poem by John Dryden, music by Henry Purcell

Chapter 1

Tuesday, September 15

The first sign of trouble came at eleven when Scott Drayco's cellphone rang. Attorney Benny Baskin's voice chirped in his ear, "Just giving you a heads-up, boy-o. I'm sending over someone who wants to talk with you."

"Who?"

"A client of mine. You'll see."

"Can't you give me any more details than that?"

"I predict you'll have a sudden desire to stop by my office afterward. Say tomorrow, about this same time?"

"Benny, what in the world—"

"Oops, there's another incoming call. Gotta go."

The attorney hung up, leaving Drayco with a surprising uneasiness to go along with his unanswered questions. Maybe he should blame it on a friend who'd sent a teasing text with the horoscope for Sagittarians, *Today's a good day to prepare for the unexpected*.

He shrugged it off, tossed the phone aside, and slid onto his piano bench to tackle an engrossing Beethoven sonata. He'd only managed a couple of minutes of the first movement when the doorbell rang. Yet, even knowing someone was coming over thanks to Benny's warning, Drayco almost jumped out of his skin. With a sigh, he gave the shiny Steinway a little pat and headed toward the front door.

When he opened it, a figure stood framed against a backdrop of rain so thick, he could barely see the sidewalk across the street. It was the last person he'd expected after Benny's call—but he now realized why Benny was so cagey on the phone. The universal karmic gods certainly had a very dark sense of humor, and the score was horoscope, one, Scott Drayco, zero.

Darcie Squier pushed her way in, shook the rain off her red umbrella, and slid it into the stand by the door. He had to grudgingly admit she looked as good as ever, wearing a form-fitting turquoise knit dress that set off her dark hair nicely.

What the hell could she want? And what did Baskin have to do with it? When she'd told Drayco about her engagement months ago, Darcie said she still craved the physical relationship they'd shared. Was that why she was here?

He started to formulate a polite, but firm, "No," when she shocked him. "You have to help him. Please say you will. I don't trust anyone else."

Her eyes were moist and not from the rain. Drayco helped her wriggle out of her raincoat and guided her into the den where he settled her on the sofa, heading to the kitchen long enough to make a cup of hot Earl Grey tea he handed over.

"What's this all about, Darcie? Who do you want me to help?" He parked on the chair across from her.

"It's Harry."

"Harry Dickerman? Your fiancé?"

She gulped some of the aromatic tea before replying, "He's been arrested and is in jail. But he didn't do it."

"Arrested on what charge?"

"Suspicion of murder."

Drayco leaned back in his chair. "You've retained Benny Baskin."

"I heard you mention him before. That he was the best. So I hired him, and now he wants you to assist. I'm begging you to say yes, even though I'm afraid you won't."

Drayco had a sudden craving for some tea himself, with a shot of vodka. Or maybe just the vodka. "Why don't you start from the beginning. Tell me what happened."

"The murder was four days ago at our house in McLean. I wasn't there at the time, but this woman arrived saying she needed to see Harry, and she's apparently Harry's ex-wife, well fake ex-wife, and—"

Drayco cut off her rambling. "Fake ex-wife?"

"I think so. I'm not clear on all the details. I'm still in shock. They let me see Harry, but he doesn't know what's going on, either."

"Where were you at the time?"

"At the salon. With lots of witnesses. I came home to find the police there, the body being carted away, and Harry hauled off to jail. So, yesterday I hired Benny Baskin."

"Why wait three days?"

"I didn't know what to do. I've been in such a panic. I wanted to call you."

"But you were afraid I'd give you the brush-off, is that it?"

She nodded.

"Oh, Darcie." Maybe they hadn't shared a deep love, but he'd thought she knew him better than that. "Are you sure Harry will want me involved?"

"I don't care. It's for his own good. He'll just have to understand that."

Drayco rubbed his temples. "All right, then. Assuming Harry didn't murder his ex-wife, then someone might be trying to frame him, but who and why?"

"I have no idea. I haven't known him all that long."

"So I noticed."

"Don't be angry with me, Scott. Not now." She set the tea down and clutched her hands together. "I'm afraid I'll be charged, too, as an accessory or some such thing. That's what they do in the movies."

"Sounds like you have an airtight alibi. That should help."

She was shivering, and that's when he realized how wet her clothing was from the rain. "You're soaked. Go get some of my clothes and give me your things. I'll put them in the dryer." He added quickly, "And you can hang out in the guest bedroom, watch the TV, while I make some calls. All nice and proper."

She gave him a small smile. "Just hang out in the guest bedroom?"

"It's much safer that way, don't you think?"

"I suppose so."

"I'm assuming you aren't staying at Harry's place?"

“A friend’s letting me bunk with her until I move back to Cape Unity. I don’t feel right being in Harry’s house without Harry. Not that I’d want to until the crime-scene people have taken care of the. . .of all of that blood.”

Drayco ushered her to the guest bedroom and dutifully took the wet clothes she handed him to the dryer. Truth be told, he was in a bit of shock, himself. He’d have been far more prepared for this if he’d heard of Harry’s arrest when it happened. But he was too busy wrapping up a case in Pennsylvania and out of touch with local Washington-area news.

He perched on the chair in his study to make some of those calls, but couldn’t stop obsessing over the fake-ex-wife part of Darcie’s tale. No doubt, Benny Baskin would fill him in on all the details tomorrow. But a “fake” ex-wife hinted at something deeper and more mysterious than simple jealousy. Just then, a loud clap of thunder rattled the windows. Seems the universe agreed with him.

He gave a longing glance over at the piano, wanting nothing more than to return to the Beethoven Appassionata sonata he was playing before he got Benny’s call. Why did stormy weather make him want to play something in a minor key? Must be his synesthesia. Pieces like the sonata with its F minor key created shimmering, elongated sepia ovals—like twisted noirish raindrops—to his ears. Later, he’d switch to something more upbeat, Chopin’s Mazurka in D major, maybe. Something, anything to chase away his dark mood.

Right now, he had an ex-lover in his bedroom and a date with the phone to make calls to everyone who might have more intel on the murder case. And to plot revenge against a certain pint-sized attorney who’d arranged all this and left out the details as a little “surprise.” Damn the man.

Drayco had the feeling Benny’s horoscope today was something along the lines of, *Someone close to you will wish you harm*. Or perhaps that was Harry Dickerman’s horoscope four days ago. But exactly who would wish Dickerman harm? As far as Drayco knew, he was a typical boring, rich businessman. . .one with a taste for much younger women. With that unpleasant thought, Drayco grabbed the phone and started to dial.

Chapter 2

Wednesday, September 16

Having Darcie in his townhome again was both easier and harder than Drayco expected. It wasn't difficult at all to fall back into the protective lover mode, yet it also sent him down a slope of conflicted emotions he didn't have the time or energy to psychoanalyze.

He certainly hadn't slept well after seeing her off and spending much of the evening digging up everything he could on Harry Dickerman. He found it singularly unhelpful for the most part—scores of career accolades and no hints of scandal. Hopefully, his late-morning meeting would be the eye-opener he needed.

Knowing Benny Baskin's obsession with punctuality, Drayco made sure he was at the attorney's office at fifteen minutes past eleven. Tweaking Benny was one of Drayco's favorite pastimes, although it wasn't easy to take a guy down a peg when he was only four-nine in his platform shoes. He got close once when he gave Benny an eye patch with dollar signs on it to use instead of his customary black one.

All thoughts of the diminutive attorney flew out of Drayco's mind when he bumped into a familiar figure in the hallway, a tall blonde whose hair was pulled back into her usual French braid. He sucked in air through his teeth but managed to paste on a smile. "Fancy meeting you here, Nelia." Two different days, two very different women, and he didn't know how to feel about either of them.

Even though seeing Nelia sent his pulse racing, he'd kept his voice light and joking, and she chose to do the same, as she replied, "Wasn't as if I had anything else to do."

That made him grimace. "I honestly don't see how you go to law school part-time, manage a deputy job part-time, and still intern with Baskin."

"Just call me Super Woman." She drew a big "S" across her chest.

"Can't you get a grant or loan? You could quit the deputy gig and focus on the legal side."

"Not enough grants to go around."

"There must be something—"

"Tim's attorney biz is down due to his illness. We need my part-time salary. This was the only way Tim would agree to me going to law school."

"Doesn't he know what this is doing to you? The toll it's taking on *your* health? And after all you've sacrificed for him?" That came out a little on the harsh side, but Drayco really didn't care.

He almost saw her counting to ten before she replied, "He has his own problems. The MS and all." The usual coppersy shimmer to her voice like tinkling wind chimes—which to a synesthete like Drayco was audio honey—turned sharper, forming jagged crystals with brown edges.

He asked, "Does he still have his personal aide helping out?"

"Melanie's the only thing standing between me and insanity. Plus, she seems to know how to handle his moods."

Drayco bit back an even harsher retort since he'd witnessed the violence and cruelty from some of those moods. Instead, he opted to keep it light. "Well, considering your schedule, your caffeine budget must dwarf mine."

She held out her arm and shook it. "I'm getting injections now. Saves time."

He opened the door to Benny's office for her, and they headed on in. As Drayco looked around, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and the mahogany coat rack in the corner suddenly struck him as dated. The room reeked of dusty books, old leather, and fake-lemon furniture polish. "Benny, you need to hire Nelia when she gets her J.D. to class up the place."

Benny wagged his finger at him. "She'll have her pick of the best. Not sure I'm enough of a draw." At least Baskin's voice still sounded the same—twice as deep as his stature and a little like a salmon-colored tumbleweed.

Nelia smiled at Baskin. "You'll always be my favorite attorney."

Drayco rolled his eyes. "This mutual admiration society is getting syrupy. How about some murder to spice things up?"

Nelia slid into a padded wing chair while Benny grabbed his notes and perched precariously on the edge of his desk. His feet didn't quite reach the parquet floor.

Drayco stood next to a large globe on a stand as tall as the attorney. "Talk to me, Benny. Convince me of why I should help you on this case."

"Harry Dickerman is President and CEO of Mediasio. It's an international radio and billboard advertising business. He's well-respected, beloved, an upstanding citizen with a record as clean as a bleached sheet."

"Until now."

"He's been charged with the suspicion of murdering his ex-wife, Lara Ekaterina Davidenko, whom he thought he'd divorced fifteen years ago. The Fairfax police are in charge since the murder was in McLean."

"What do you mean he *thought* he'd divorced her?"

"She was a Russian immigrant he took pity on and married for green-card status. Vanished soon after the marriage, and he hadn't heard from her since. Apparently, there was a shifty attorney involved. Supposedly filed the Affidavit of Diligent Search for a divorce in absentia. But I guess he forgot." Baskin smirked.

Drayco mulled that over. "Where has this woman been all this time? Did the Fairfax PD trace her history?"

"Off the grid, they said."

"That's kind of important, don't you think? She's a ghost for the last fifteen years, and all of a sudden turns up at her ex-husband's place as a corpse?"

"Odd, for sure. But odd's right up your alley, boy-o."

"How did the murder happen? Who called the police?"

"Harry, after he found Lara's body in his living room."

Drayco was getting irritated at Benny's roundabout account. But when he saw how much the other man was enjoying Drayco's irritation, he gave in. He probably deserved that. "How did the victim get to Harry's house?"

"She had a leased car and listed an address up in Salisbury. Paid for the lease in cash."

"Cash?"

“Yep, but here’s the real fun part. She shows up out of the blue, Harry lets her in. She says she has something she needs to discuss with him, she appears distraught, so he offers to get her some coffee. He goes to the kitchen, isn’t gone for much more than a few minutes, returns, and boom. She’s dying on the floor, blood everywhere, with his letter opener plunged into her back. And only his prints on it.”

“Multiple stab wounds?”

“One, but it was deep. Punctured the pericardium, diaphragm, and liver.”

“Let me guess. The police think Harry killed the victim because he was getting ready to marry Darcie—and this woman was in his way.”

Benny tapped the side of his nose, just missing his black eye patch. “And then, there’s the will.”

“The victim’s?”

“She made a will a year ago with Harry named the sole beneficiary.”

“A year ago? As if this case wasn’t bizarre enough.” Drayco spun the globe around. “Since Harry is already wealthy, her money seems like a weak motive.”

“It just so happens I know the attorney who made up the victim’s will.”

“Oh, really? Okay, then how much money are we talking about?”

“My attorney-friend couldn’t say, of course, but hinted it wasn’t much. I did get him to say the victim seemed skittish and a bit afraid. Not ill or anything.”

“Was her behavior odd in any other way?”

“She said it was time for her to do this. I think her words were, ‘you never know when you were going to suffer a horrible accident.’”

Nelia spoke up, “Seems rather prescient. As if she knew she was in danger.”

Drayco frowned. “But to make Harry the beneficiary after fifteen years? And why did she pick him for her green card back then, anyway? And why that particular time? None of this makes much sense.”

Benny huffed, “If it helps you feel any better, Harry Dickerman is quite the charitable fellow. On various boards of foundations. Gives a bunch of money to worthwhile causes. Orphans, medical research, literacy, arts organizations.”

“I’ll start calling him Saint Harry. He’s a paragon of virtue who’s accused of killing his fake ex-wife to pave the way for marrying Darcie—even when a real divorce would take care of that—and to get his hands on the ex’s money that he doesn’t need. Does that sum it up?”

Benny replied cheerfully, “Yep. Fun, eh?”

“Your idea of fun is karaoke at the Blue Hayes Lounge. I don’t like your definition.”

“Why don’t we mosey over to the scene of the crime and take a look around for ourselves? The police have cleared it. Maybe it will help pique your interest.”

“You mean right now?”

“Sure, why not? I’ll tell my secretary to reschedule my eleven o’clock.”

“You don’t have a secretary.”

“My answering service, then.” Benny’s cheerful tone dipped a bit at that. He hadn’t got over his previous secretary “leaving him” for another law firm. Even though it was because her husband took a job in New York.

Nelia added, “You boys want company? I’ve seen a few crime scenes, myself.”

Drayco's interest in the case suddenly took an upturn. "How could I possibly refuse the best CSI agent I've ever met?"

Her eyes danced. "Flatterer. I'll bet you say that to all the crime scene investigators."

"Never. I am not a two-timing detective." He immediately regretted his choice of words as her cheeks flushed a bright pink.

As if sensing the awkwardness crackling through the room, Benny hopped up from his seat and said, "Come on, kids, let's go play shamus. They do still use that term, don't they? And Drayco, you're driving. Especially if you have that Starfire of yours."

"It's the Generic Silver Camry. Sorry."

"Oh." Benny's cheeks puffed out with disappointment. "Guess I'll cope. But you owe me a ride in that classic car of yours. Out on I-66 west of town, where we can crank it up to almost-legal speeds."

"Almost legal, Benny?"

"Hey, you're the one who'd get the ticket, not me. But that's okay. I know a good attorney."

Drayco groaned. He was having second thoughts about the trip if Baskin was going to be popping bad jokes all day. When they reached the car, Nelia quickly took a backseat as if wanting to put as much distance between her and Drayco as possible.

Benny slid into the shotgun seat with a grin. "I hope you remember how to drive. Just be sure not to 'dicker,' man. Get it? Harry Dicker-man?"

Drayco shook his head. Of all the attorneys for him to be associated with, it had to be a wisecracking esquire. He looked into the rearview mirror expecting to see Nelia smiling at the awful pun, but she was staring out the window with a deep frown.

He tried to cheer her up. "I could stop by the convenience mart and pick up some lottery tickets. They say money buys happiness. Or so I'm told."

She was still frowning, but a little less so, as she replied, "My horoscope said, 'Don't fixate on things outside yourself to solve all your problems.'"

He groaned inwardly. Horoscopes, two, Scott Drayco, zero.

Chapter 3

Drayco had always considered the Eastern Shore home of Darcie Squier and her ex-husband to be a bit on the pretentious side. Even the name, Cypress Manor, was over the top. But that place looked like a squatter's cabin next to Harry Dickerman's McLean residence.

A fountain as big as Drayco's car, topped with a statue of the Greek god, Zeus, loomed in front of the mini-palace made of gleaming white stone and brick. The grounds were as expansive as some museums, and he had the passing thought he'd need to pay admission to enter.

Benny, Nelia, and Drayco navigated up the dozen or so stairs to the front door that Benny opened using a key Darcie had given him. The foyer—or “lobby,” which was more like it—was as gleaming white as the exterior and sported vaulted ceilings and a winding staircase leading to the second floor. Drayco listened for a moment. Quiet and still, save for the low humming of the air conditioner.

He led the way into the living room, where the trio stopped and stared at a section of the beige carpet next to some recessed bookshelves. He didn't have to ask Benny if that was where the victim was stabbed, as the dark red stains were a clear giveaway.

Nelia pulled out some nitrile gloves from her pocket and handed some to Drayco as she said pointedly to Benny, “The police didn't find unusual fingerprints or blood. But don't touch anything. Just in case.”

“Are you kidding? I hate wearing gloves.”

Drayco added, “And if you do touch anything, we'll hold you down and put on some of these gloves by force.”

“You wouldn't dare.”

“Try me.”

Drayco studied the bloodstains. “Shame they didn't recover any DNA evidence of our killer.”

Nelia added, “Be nice to try phenotyping.”

Benny asked, “What's that?”

“It can narrow the suspect's gender,” she replied. “And appearance. It's a fairly new forensic tool.”

“Ah, yes. I've heard of that. Might want to use it in a defense, myself, one of these days.”

Benny waddled over to the bookshelves, stopping short of the stains. “Guess the cleanup crew hasn't been here yet.”

Drayco had made Benny read from the police notes about the murder on the way over, and Drayco now pointed to the door-less study off the main room. “Is that where the letter opener used on the victim was obtained?”

“Allegedly.”

Drayco said over his shoulder as he headed toward the room, “If the killer needed a weapon, that means they didn't bring one with them. So possibly not premeditation.”

Nelia asked, “Or, the killer *did* bring a weapon but saw the opportunity to frame Harry using something from Harry's own home. I mean, it's definitely his, with his initials on it and only his fingerprints, right?”

“So says Benny’s copy of the police report.” Drayco stood in the arched doorway of the study and used his cellphone to take photos.

Next, he strolled over to the desk and pulled out the drawers. Paper, pens, blank envelopes, and paper clips, very ordinary and disappointingly boring. “Harry says he thinks he left the letter opener lying on top of the desk?”

Benny eyed the desk. “Allegedly. If true, you could see it from the living room. Grab letter opener, stab victim, easy-peasy.”

Nelia said, “Except for one thing. If he came through the front door, he would have been seen. Surely both the victim and Harry would have noticed?”

Drayco agreed. “There’s got to be another entry point.” He popped out into the main living area and peered through a doorway toward the rear of that room. “I think I see the kitchen, way back there in a different zip code. With Harry making drinks, he might have created too much noise to hear an intruder. And he is in his mid-sixties. His hearing’s not necessarily top-notch.”

Benny growled at him. “Mid-sixties isn’t all that ancient, boy-o. You’ll be there before you know it. How old are you again? Thirty-six going on a hundred? I keep forgetting.”

“Thirty-seven.”

“A babe in arms. Good thing you’re precocious.”

Drayco ignored him. “The police report indicates a neighbor saw no other visitors that night, just the victim. At least in front of the house.” He peered down a hallway leading away from the study. “Aha.”

“What?”

“A side door with an entryway. I think they call those a ‘mud room’” Drayco headed toward the door as his two companions watched from the hall. He called back to them, “It would be hard for someone to jiggle the lock without triggering Harry’s alarm system.”

Benny said, “Did I not read you that part of the report? Harry had a visitor earlier in the day, a friend bringing over some Petit Verdot from a Virginia winery. The alarm wasn’t turned back on.”

Drayco thought about that for a moment. “A killer wouldn’t know that. But if the alarm didn’t go off when they tried the door, maybe they figured they were in the clear.”

Nelia added helpfully, “Or they didn’t see the alarm system since they entered from the back. Or were in a hurry.”

“True. No dogs, right?”

Benny shook his head. “Nope.”

“Okay, then. Our killer *could* have entered through this side door and surprised the victim enough to stab her in the back.”

Drayco headed toward the bloodstains in the living room. “From the blood spatter, it appears the victim was standing right there,” he pointed at one particular spot, “in front of that section of bookshelves.” He took more cellphone snaps.

Bits of blood dotted a shelf sporting an empty slot—the same width as a book lying on the floor nearby. He added, “Either she was reading that specific book or grabbed onto the shelves when she was stabbed, and the book fell out.”

Benny glanced at the bookshelves. “From the looks of it, Harry alphabetizes his books by title. For what it’s worth.”

Drayco picked up the book from the carpet. "It's a reference of criminal codes." He flipped through it and stopped. "Interesting. There's one torn page. A section on the penalties for murder and accessory to murder."

Nelia peered over Drayco's shoulder. "That's a pretty big coincidence. This is the one that falls to the floor? Out of all these books?" She read off a few other titles from that section. "*Canterbury Tales . . . Chess for Beginners . . . Collecting World Coins . . .*"

Drayco turned to Benny. "You think Darcie or Harry would mind if I kept this book?"

"I doubt it. If it'll help."

Nelia frowned. "I've been wondering how the killer knew the victim would be here at the exact time. Must have stalked her."

"Or tapped her phone. Pretty easy to track people in the digital age." Drayco looked toward the side door. "As I recall from online aerial surveys, there's another street running behind this house."

Nelia replied, "The perp could have arrived that way unseen by the neighbor. Is there a fence in back?"

"According to the aerial maps I consulted, yes, if it's still there." Drayco led the way out the side door toward the rear yard. It was pretty much as Darcie once described to him, with "a giant pool and this huge garden with a grape arbor. Like out of *Architectural Digest*."

Drayco was particularly interested in the dense vegetation of boxwood and barberry bushes. Lots of hiding room, there. He headed toward the pool first, looking around as he asked Benny, "Did the Fairfax PD check for shoeprints here or signs someone climbed the fence? Or blood?"

Benny said, "No, no, and no. Were you sleeping through my reading of the report?"

"You'd put anyone to sleep, Benny." Drayco pointed out a tree behind Harry's fence, an oak around twenty feet tall, with branches hanging over Harry's property. "If you were strong enough and agile, you might be able to climb up the tree, swing into Harry's yard, and then do it in reverse to make your escape."

Benny pursed his lips. "But wouldn't there be a trail of blood all over the place?"

"The letter opener was left in the body, and the police report said there was no arterial spurting. So there might not have been much transfer of blood from the victim to the killer." Drayco pointed to the ground. "And that landscaping mulch means less chance of footprints."

Nelia seemed to agree with Drayco's assessment of the blood. "Blood spatter doesn't always travel far. Since the only fingerprints on the knife were Harry's, our killer likely wore gloves."

Benny eyed the oak skeptically. "There wasn't anything about that tree in the police report."

"There wouldn't be if they were firmly convinced Harry was their man." Drayco gauged how easy it would be for him to haul his six-four frame onto the first tree branch. Never knew until you tried.

As Nelia called out a worried-sounding, "Be careful," he crouched down a few inches and then jumped up, grabbing the top of the fence as he leaped. He managed to hook a leg over a fence post and did his best acrobat impression to swing over to the closest branch.

When Benny started clapping, Drayco said, "Fifteen seconds."

"What?"

"That took me around fifteen seconds. If I can do it, so could someone else."

"Fair enough. Since you're up there, see anything strange?"

Drayco examined the rough, scratchy branch he was perched on. Nothing out of the ordinary. But when he studied the trunk, something that seemed out of place caught his eye. He bent over to get a closer look. “Trees don’t usually bleed, do they?”

“You found blood? For real?”

“A couple of red spots on the bark. Could be from an animal or bird.”

Drayco looked behind the fence. A row of more bushes flanked it on the other side, adding a layer of potential cover. Even more compelling was what he’d seen on the aerial surveys and was now verified—the area beyond Harry’s property had extra privacy from undeveloped parkland on the opposite side of the road.

He took more photos and then hopped back down into Harry’s yard beside Nelia and Benny. “The neighbor-witness stated he saw the victim’s car pull in around seven that night?”

“Yep.”

“The killer would have had approaching darkness helping out, too.” What would have happened if Darcie were there along with Harry? Drayco’s heart beat faster at the thought of Darcie in jeopardy. But he reminded himself that she was safe and sound, and his relationship with her was over.

They made their way back inside, and Drayco grabbed the book on criminal codes he’d laid on a table. Nelia was right—at first blush, it seemed like an incredible coincidence the victim just happened to grab that particular book. And why was that one page torn?

Even though Drayco had taken photos with his cellphone of the house and yard all along, he made sure to capture the bookshelves and stains one more time. He was used to working with various law enforcement agencies as a crime consultant, but he hadn’t dealt with the Fairfax PD lately. They might be collegial, or they might be hostile, you never knew. Best to gather everything he could for his own files.

And yet, it always felt completely natural working side-by-side with Nelia. One thing he was really going to miss was partnering with her in her duties as Sheriff Sailor’s CSI. Sure, he’d probably still see her occasionally in some law firm after she got her J.D. in a little over three years. But it wouldn’t be the same.

With a last look at Harry’s “palace,” they left the way they’d come. Drayco made a note to ask Darcie about the symbolism of a statue of Zeus—a mythological figure known for grudges and betrayal—standing in the middle of the giant fountain in front.

Betrayal was an odd theme for a mere landscaping ornament. Was that simply accidental. . .or a conscious choice on Harry’s part? And if so, betrayal *of* Harry or *by* Harry?

Benny had scheduled a meeting with his client at the jail tomorrow and asked Drayco to tag along. He wasn’t entirely looking forward to it. But then he remembered Darcie’s teary eyes, which steeled his resolve. He needed some answers, and Harry Dickerman damn well better have some good ones.