

THE SENIOR PARTNER

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Chapter One

Stuart watched his daughter Ashley through the library's bay window. She was playing in the backyard with Shogun, their golden retriever, causing the few snowflakes which were falling to swirl about in the brisk January air. But Stuart's unaided eyes could only see blurred streaks of blond, pink and a yellowish brown, the remnants of Ashley's hair, her skiing outfit and Shogun's jumps in the air, so he settled back into his chair to read. His half-glasses were tilted slightly to the right in their accustomed place on the bridge of his nose.

Stuart read *The New York Times* carefully, gleaning information about European attempts to encourage Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait and about Baker's offer to meet Saddam Hussein in Geneva, but Stuart remained impatient for the fighting to begin. The necessity of using force appeared so inevitable to him that he even wondered why some of the younger partners, still in their 40s, did not see that inevitability clearly.

As always, Stuart simply assumed that each of them had had his or her mind muddled by having been a teenager during the '60s. And, as always, he was pleased that he had escaped a similar fate by just a few precious years. But Stuart Craxton also prided himself on his restraint and had privately chided the senior partner who had suggested over lunch that the United States just "nuke 'em all".

When he had finished the paper, Stuart folded it carefully and walked over to the kitchen. The only indications that the paper had been touched were two penciled-in stars over Russell Baker's essay on pushups being required of reporters in the Gulf, Stuart's

usual way of letting his wife Catherine know that she might enjoy an article.

As he set the paper down on the counter, Stuart noticed an open bottle of white wine. He returned to the library with a glass of that wine, picked up a recent spy novel and resumed reading on page 73.

Several minutes later a stifled scream from Catherine's bedroom caused Stuart to jump, losing his place.

Hysterical, he thought momentarily as he leaned over the edge of the chair, trying futilely to reach his favorite bookmark without getting up.

But then a second scream followed, a crescendo of intense maternal pain that invaded every nerve of Stuart's bent body.

It was Saturday afternoon, January 5, 1991. Violence had visited Stuart E. Craxton III's family for the first time in 70 years.

Chapter Two

Takahiro Nishizaki raced furiously through his elegant, small home on the outskirts of Kyoto, searching for something he believed he could never lose. He clutched a piece of paper tightly, crushing it in his anger, but smoothing it out every few minutes to stare at it, to attempt to destroy its reality by force of will.

He threw open a window in his son's small bedroom and searched through the garden for the tenth time with his eyes. The quick movements of several branches of a large bush brought a surge of hope, but the brisk January breeze that was their cause soon reached Takahiro, increasing the pressure in his temples.

"Kaoru!" he silently screamed in despair before falling back on his son's bed, quietly sobbing his only child's name over and over again.

When the pressures in his head finally subsided, Takahiro smoothed out the crumpled paper carefully once again and set it in front of him. He stared for a long time at the rip in the corner he had caused when he had grabbed the paper too hastily from the spokes of the deserted bicycle.

When he finally looked up he saw the framed picture of Michiko which Kaoru kept near his bed, but he was still unwilling to comprehend the obvious. Several more minutes passed before his unwillingness began to dissolve. Takahiro had successfully avoided facing reality for so long that he had begun to imagine he would never have to.

"Michiko, I beg your forgiveness," he whispered to his dead wife, and then left for his office to make the necessary arrangements to fulfill the note's detailed instructions.

Chapter Three

Stuart Craxton stood over Shogun's lifeless form, still out of breath from his quick but fruitless search of the neighborhood. He held Catherine back, to prevent her from touching anything, as they stared at the small pool of blood forming beneath the golden retriever's head. A few drops of blood shone near his ear in the late afternoon light.

Catherine was the first to notice the rolled-up note tied to Shogun's collar, but when she grabbed for it Stuart continued to hold her back. She could not speak. She just pointed in fear. He saw the note immediately.

Stuart took a clean white handkerchief out of his pocket, covered his hand with it, and tried to remove the note, but it was tied to Shogun's collar too tightly. Without being asked, Catherine ran inside to get a scissors. She returned with a small nail clippers and gave it to Stuart.

When he snipped the string, the note slipped out of his handkerchiefed grasp. One edge dipped into Shogun's blood before he grasped it again. Stuart then carried the note carefully back to the kitchen, as if it were a bomb that might explode if handled recklessly.

Stuart spread the note, one edge tinged red, on top of the newspaper sitting on the kitchen counter. He unconsciously dropped his handkerchief as they read the untouched note:

I was in your neighborhood and needed a playmate.
One million dollars wired to account 230-17647865 in
Zurich within 36 hours and *absolutely* no contact with
the police will ensure her safe return. You can trust me.

I will trust you. Call 337-9690 immediately to accept this outstanding offer.

Catherine began to cry. She sat down at the kitchen table and buried her face in her arms, crying without reserve or shame. “If only we were poor,” escaped her lips more than once.

Stuart was relieved she was crying, and not screaming, as he picked up the phone. He had already pressed 337-96 before Catherine looked up and screamed.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she yelled.

“Accepting,” Stuart said calmly, but was prevented from doing so by Catherine’s quick rush to the phone. She had terminated the call before he could shield the phone from her assault.

“I thought you were calling 911,” she said coldly, “until I realized—”

The rest of her sentence hung in the air as a silent reproach.

“We can’t call the police, Cath. Didn’t you read the note?” Stuart was excited, but his acceptance seemed so obvious a course of action that he had not imagined his wife would think otherwise, and he was slow to comprehend that she did.

“Were you just going to accept without even discussing it with me?” she asked.

“We have no choice.”

“But we do. We can call the police and have them find out where this phone, 337 whatever, is located, and then—”

“And if Ashley is with her? Then what?”

“Then—her?”

“Whoever! What you don’t seem to understand, Cath, is that this lunatic must know we can get him the funds. Must know. Why else would he use 36 hours, and not 48, or something more reasonable for a weekend?”

“What?”

“36 hours from the time this note was left is about 4:15 Monday morning, but that’s already 10:15 in Zurich. The banks will be open. The wire can be made in time. And he must know I can make it.”

“Are you telling me we have a million dollars sitting around just waiting for this to happen! And that someone else knows that and I don’t!”

“No. Of course not, Cath,” Stuart said after a moment. He tried to be reassuring, but his pause had been slightly too long to succeed. “But you are forgetting Mohadi Sukemi. We are always transferring money in and out of his Swiss bank accounts. Whoever planned this must know that.”

Stuart thought a moment longer. “Maybe it’s that legal assistant I had fired last year,” he said, but he was actually thinking of his discovery last summer that a woman in night steno was certifiably crazy. She had been the substitute for his regular secretary, Christine Lava, while Christine was on her annual Wilderness Club vacation.

The moment Stuart had finished reading the note he had remembered what’s-her-name, quite a crazy name which he couldn’t recall. He was sure she was responsible for this outrage. She knew his Scarsdale address, had had access to all his personal information, and had even worked on a Swiss wire transfer for his client Mohadi Sukemi. And that one word, “outstanding”, had convinced him that he was dealing with a lunatic.

But he hesitated to tell Catherine. He didn’t want her to know that a crazy woman had kidnapped Ashley. It was better for her to think it was simply someone after money. That could be dealt with more easily.

“Why did you have him fired?” Catherine asked, seeking clues as to why this particular form of revenge had been sought by a former legal assistant.

“Total incompetence,” Stuart said quickly. “But that’s irrelevant now. We can solve this problem with money. We have the money. And we are going to solve it that way. We can think about pursuing the jerk later, after Ashley has been returned.”

“And if he doesn’t return her?”

“He will. He will. He’ll have a million dollars, won’t he? What more could he want?”

“But the police—”

“Ashley’s not the police’s daughter. She’s mine.”

“But—”

“Monday afternoon will be soon enough to tell the police if the money does not succeed. Anyway, Grandpa trusted the police, and look where it got him. I’m not willing to take that chance with Ashley.”

Catherine gave up. She unconsciously folded her hands in her lap and squeezed them tightly together. She had seen Stuart like this many times before. He made decisions quickly and stuck to them. And most often he was right.

In any case, his reference to Grandpa had made it perfectly clear that he would not be shaken from his decision, that it had become a matter of principle and family tradition.

On a cold November night in 1920, Stuart’s grandfather had relied on the police. The textile factory Stuart Emerson Craxton had owned in Massachusetts was being unionized against his will and he had attended a workers’ meeting to plead his cause. Mr. Craxton had been a relatively generous employer and was confident that he could sway the group. But he had also accepted a police escort due to the threat of violence which had been made by one of the union organizers. As Mr. Craxton had stepped onto the platform to speak, a small bomb had exploded.

Several days later, when his oldest son, Stuart E. Craxton, Jr., investigated the incident, he discovered that only his father had been affected by the blast. No one else had been close enough to the platform, not even his father’s police escort, to have been even slightly hurt. But Stuart Emerson Craxton, then 47 years old, had been killed instantly by the blast.

Stuart Junior, then 22 years old, had quickly decided to sell the factory, had accepted an all-cash offer for 85 percent of its value, and had left Massachusetts with his mother, a younger brother and two younger sisters without looking back or ever returning.

Stuart Junior was not indecisive. He had never once regretted that he had not gotten in on the boom of the ‘20s, and was pleased

that the Depression had proved him right. When the crash came in 1929, Stuart E. Craxton, Jr. was already a rising young corporate lawyer at Tilden & Hayes in New York. And in 1938, the same year his wife Anne gave birth to their only child, Stuart E. Craxton III, Stuart Junior was appointed Managing Partner of the white shoe firm.

Over the years Stuart Junior had expanded his hatred of unions until it included all Democrats. He had never once voted for Roosevelt, even during the war, and then stopped voting completely when Truman upset Dewey in 1948.

And in 1963, long before such retirement at age 65 would have been mandatory under the firm's partnership agreement, Stuart Junior had retired as Managing Partner of Tilden & Hayes so that his son could join the firm upon graduation from law school.

Stuart Junior had never regretted his relatively early retirement either. He had taken up golf, conquered the game and continued to play to a four handicap until his death of a heart attack, on a Florida course, on March 15, 1974.

His name, career choice and hatred of Massachusetts, unions and Democrats were among the legacies Stuart Craxton's father had passed on to him. But even more obvious to Catherine was his decisiveness. Twenty-three years of marriage to Stuart had made that abundantly clear.

Stuart hesitated a moment, choosing carefully what to reveal, and then explained his plan to Catherine.

"I will call Sukemi tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow?" Catherine interrupted.

"It is a dead certainty he will agree. There is no advantage to disturbing him in the middle of the night in Jakarta."

"Oh."

"Cath, listen, I'm certain we can transfer one million dollars out of one of his accounts as soon as the Zurich banks open on Monday. Then I'll sell a few of our investments over the next few weeks and pay him back. It will not be difficult."

Catherine was aware that between their two inheritances, and

savings from Stuart's annual income, they had over \$5 million invested, but she was still astounded at the ease with which her husband spoke about huge sums of money. Her own father had also been rich, but he had never been at ease with money. The difference, though, was not based on character so much as on habit. Multimillion dollar transfers had been part of Stuart's job for 28 years.

"It's that simple?" Catherine asked.

"That simple," Stuart said, and tried to smile reassuringly. This time he was more successful.

"All right. Go ahead," she agreed, realizing that argument was futile with Stuart once he had reached this level of detail in one of his plans.

Stuart picked up the phone and pressed 337-9690. The phone rang 12 times before someone picked it up and waited in silence for Stuart to speak.

"I accept," Stuart said as firmly as he could. There was another moment of silence and then the line went dead.