

## TWO

A BURST OF COOL AIR CHILLED CRAIG STONE'S FACE AS HE SPUN through the brass revolving door of the Washington, D.C., office building and marched toward the elevator. His longtime friend and colleague, Mike Kingston, held the elevator door open for him. Craig's pretty-boy face was neatly shaved, and his cropped, chestnut hair was fashionably textured with styling wax.

"What's up, Bro," Craig said in a gravelly morning voice.

"Hey," Mike responded, appearing distracted.

The elevator chimed as it passed each successive floor.

"Thanks again for dinner Saturday night," Craig said. "You obviously didn't marry Helen for her beauty alone."

"Sure."

Craig studied his friend for a clue to his unusual agitation. "Partnership Committee meets Wednesday, huh?"

"Yeah, I'm nervous because I've been getting a lot of heat on the Kidz Play case."

"I guess you're under just a little bit of pressure," Craig said as the elevator slowed its ascent.

"It's a nightmare."

The elevator stopped on the top floor, and the doors opened onto the offices of the venerable Washington, D.C., law firm, Baker, Williams & Levine, which had hired Craig and Mike fresh out of law school seven years earlier. "BW" was a small, conservative K Street law firm stacked with elite Washington power brokers and founded by Warren Baker, Abraham Williams, and Ira Levine.

Mike and Craig stepped off the elevator and into the BW office, opulently trimmed to receive the daily procession of Washington

royalty and corporate executives. A congressman, waiting to meet Abe, perused the morning edition of *The Post* while resting comfortably on an Italian-leather sofa.

Perched behind the elegant reception desk was Diane Stratton, the firm's twenty-seven-year-old receptionist, whose beauty and style perfectly complemented the rich decor. With her slender figure and designer clothes, she could easily be mistaken for one of the models in the *Glamour* magazine in her handbag. Diane had been with the firm for only a few months—just long enough for all of the single men in the firm to strike out with her.

“Good-morning, Diane,” the attorneys greeted her together. Craig, one of the strikeout victims, sported a determined grin.

“Good-morning, *Michael*.” Diane flashed her perfect white teeth at Mike and eyed his tall masculine frame, dark complexion, and wavy brown hair. She twirled her long blonde locks around manicured fingertips. “How's Victoria?”

“She's growing so fast,” Mike responded. “Last night she said I was her ‘favorite boy.’ It melted my heart.”

“She calls ‘Uncle Craig’ her ‘boyfriend,’” Craig interjected.

“That's so adorable,” Diane gushed at Mike. “You need to bring her to the office, so I can meet her.”

“Great idea, Mike,” Craig said. “Have *your wife* bring Victoria in.”

“You're so sweet, Diane.” Mike gave the receptionist a knowing smile and sauntered toward his office.

Craig sneered at his buddy and wandered down the hall. *Mike didn't seem anxious about the partnership vote, Craig thought, while he was flirting with the receptionist. I'm sure he does it just to spite me because I know how deeply he loves Helen. And why is Diane wasting energy on the married guy when the total package is right in front of her?*

The hallways of the firm were arranged in a horseshoe from the reception area. The library, staff offices, and secretary carrels were on the interior, and the attorney's offices were on the exterior. The named partners had spacious offices with views of K Street. The associates had views of the alleys. The corridors were adorned with

classic Washington scenes—oil paintings commissioned of renowned international artists.

Mike greeted all the staff and attorneys by name as he followed the hallway around to his office located near the bottom right of the horseshoe. Mike's secretary, Grace Reed, flagged him down as he arrived at his office door. Grace was a plump, middle-aged, African-American woman from South Carolina.

"Hey, Big Mike," Grace said with a Southern accent undimmed by her decades in Washington. "Randy's been trackin' you like a hound dog since 7:30."

"Kingston," Randall McKenzie bellowed from down the hall.

Grace took Mike's briefcase and pushed him toward the senior partner's office on the K Street side.

Mike worked his way through a maze of bankers boxes stacked four high and found Randy editing a brief with his feet up on a cluttered desk, covered with a flurry of papers and old Styrofoam coffee cups.

"Warren's on his way to discuss the Kidz Play case," Randy said. He kept his head down and took a bite from a chocolate doughnut.

Mike winced. Warren Baker had reprimanded him before about the firm's costs on Mike's contingent-fee case. And it was a bad sign that this was on the managing partner's mind during the week of Mike's partnership vote.

"He's very protective of the firm's reputation," Randy continued. "And he's concerned about the publicity you've been generating since the medical malpractice case you tried for the city's legal clinic last year."

"The Perez case?" Mike asked. He reflected on the chain-smoking Latina immigrant who got second-degree burns when she mistook her doctor's advice to use Vaseline to moisturize her severely chapped lips. She used "gasoline" and lit a cigarette. "I figured all that time I volunteered and all the press we got winning that pro bono case would help my partnership chances."

The silver-haired named partner strode into the office, and Mike and Randy snapped to attention.

“When are we going to see some progress in this toy case?” Warren asked. “The firm already has over a hundred thousand dollars invested in this litigation.”

“I’ve got six kids with permanent disfigurements,” Mike began.

“Let’s be honest, Mike,” Warren interrupted. “They cut their fingers. Baker, Williams & Levine represents Fortune 500 companies. Show some good judgment and leave the hurt kids to the ambulance chasers.”

“Hurt kids deserve good attorneys too,” Mike said. He was shocked by his own boldness, and Randy’s eyebrows were raised too. “Besides, Kidz Play made last-minute design changes that made the toy dangerous. After I depose their design engineer tomorrow, we could be looking at six figures per child.”

“You’ve done a lot of good work for this firm,” Warren said. “Are you sure you want to risk your future on a defective toy?”

Mike took a deep breath and considered whether it was worth potentially derailing his career to keep the promise he’d made to zealously represent his young clients. “Yes, sir,” he finally answered.

“So be it. We’ll give you a *little* more leash. Randy, I want you to closely monitor the costs on this case.”

Randy nodded his head and said, “I have complete confidence in Mike.”

“Then let’s tear these toy makers apart,” Warren said, and marched away.

Randy brushed the crumbs from his brief. “I don’t think I need to explain,” he said, “how important it is to make something happen before the partnership vote on Wednesday.”

“Thanks for your support, Randy. I’ll make you proud,” Mike said, and showed himself out.

Mike had been obsessing about the partnership vote for months. He generally thought his exceptional academic history—fourth in his class at George Washington University Law School and a degree in Classics and English from Oxford—combined with the seventy-hour weeks he’d worked for the last seven years made him a strong candidate. And he’d risen so far from his humble beginnings as a farm boy in rural Utah to become a young star of the D.C. Bar. But pondering Randy’s comments as he walked back

to his office made him think the partners would only be asking themselves, “What’ve you done for me lately?”

Dutifully, Mike settled into his high-backed leather chair to continue preparing for the deposition of Kidz Play’s engineer the next day. He turned the power on to boot up his laptop and played an old Pink Floyd CD in the background. He reached for his favorite pen in the holder next to his phone, but it wasn’t there. He checked his top drawer. Nothing.

The pen was a sleek black Montblanc ballpoint, a gift from his dad for passing the bar. It wasn’t expensive, by K Street standards, but to him it was invaluable as a daily reminder of his late father.

“Grace, have you seen my pen? You know, the one from my dad.”

“Your pen?” his secretary called back to him. “I have a hard enough time minding your work, time sheets, and calendar, and now you want me to keep track of your pens too. You are one goose short of a gaggle this morning.”

Mike chuckled. “A simple no would suffice.” He wrinkled his face, made a mental note to search for his pen later, grabbed an inferior ballpoint, and went to work tagging deposition exhibits.

Kidz Play was the manufacturer of the Samurobot, one of the top-selling electronic toys last Christmas. The Samurobot was a fifteen-inch-tall, battery-operated, plastic robot that looked like a samurai warrior with red, illuminated eyes and a plastic sword. Its arms could swing in any direction in combination with a torso that could rotate 180 degrees.

The Samurobot was special, however. Its optical sensors could identify roadblocks and walk around them. It also could pursue an object “tagged” with a small adhesive transmitter moving in front of it. But the toy was such a hit because its radio receiver could detect when another Samurobot was within three feet. The two would then engage in combat, swinging their swords and twisting their bodies until one of them knocked the other down.

Parents snatched them up in pairs despite their \$150 price tag. Kidz Play couldn’t keep up with the demand, and they ultimately sold over four million before the hysteria ended.

About two weeks after Christmas, Mike began to hear about injuries caused by the toy. The daughter of a friend grabbed her flailing Samurobot from behind, and it clamped down on her thumb. The Samurobot would not release or shut off but kept ratcheting down on her hand until she smashed the toy on the ground. The impact lacerated the tip of her thumb and crushed her fingernail. Six Washington-area families with children who had been permanently disfigured by the toy joined in hiring Mike to sue Kidz Play. Mike convinced the firm to let him take the case on a contingent-fee basis, and he quickly filed a products-liability lawsuit against Kidz Play in D.C. federal court.

Three other national law firms subsequently filed class-action lawsuits against Kidz Play and were competing to certify a nationwide class. Mike had not yet been able to convince the BW partnership that the case was valuable enough for them to compete to be class counsel. And he faced a steep hurdle because such a class action, with an estimated two thousand class members, could cost several million dollars to pursue.

Mike took a stack of documents from a bankers box on his worktable and continued searching for potential deposition exhibits. This was the last of twenty-seven boxes of engineering reports, design plans, and accounting statements that he'd spent the last two weeks examining. He sat back into his chair, put his feet up on his desk, and tried to review some financial statements. But the haunting image of his hands around his wife's throat tormented him. He turned up the music to distract his possessed mind.

Laura Ashton, an attractive but tomboyish paralegal with short ash-blond hair, appeared in Mike's doorway. "Wish you were here," she announced.

"Huh?" Mike started. "Oh, Pink Floyd."

"Is this the last box?" she asked. Laura had spent two months indexing the documents and could appreciate Mike's efforts more than anyone.

"Finally." Mike sighed. "I can't figure out what they're trying to bury with all this garbage."

Laura grinned. "Time for lunch today?"

“On a weekday, when the staff might see us?” Mike smirked at the paralegal.

“You know what I think about the office gossip,” Laura said.

“I would if I were ready for this deposition. Later this week?”

“Don’t keep me waiting too long.” She waved her finger at him as she wandered out the door.

Mike laughed and went back to work.

Detective Frank Jarek scowled as the jury reentered the Northern Virginia courtroom. He clenched his thick fingers and eyed the accused, an arrogant George Mason University student accused of sexually assaulting a blind girl in the bathroom at the campus aquatic center. The suspect and his public defender arose at the judge’s command and faced the jury.

Karen Davis, the golden-haired prosecutor from the Fairfax County Commonwealth’s Attorney’s office, stood confidently behind the prosecutor’s table on the left. Detective Jarek watched her make eye contact with each juror and smile gratefully when they returned a unanimous guilty verdict for her.

The student winked at Karen as the bailiff cuffed his wrists. “I guess I’m going away for a little while,” he said to the prosecutor and peeked down her silky white blouse. “Maybe I’ll give you a call when I get out, and we can go get a drink or something.”

“Get some help,” Karen said, and brushed past the man on her way to the jury box, where she thanked each juror by name.

Detective Jarek stood behind the bar and looked on with his arms folded across his bulky chest. “Good work, councilor,” he said when Karen returned to collect her bag.

She turned on the detective with fury in her sapphire eyes. “Your coerced confession almost ruined my perfect record.”

Jarek didn’t flinch. “We got the guy off the street, and that’s what matters.”

“You’re lucky I found that geotag on the cell phone picture he took of the victim just before the attack, so we could place him at the scene.”

“And now we’ve put another moron behind bars.”

“One of these days you’re going to encounter a smart perp,” Karen snarled, “and your lazy, bullying tactics will let him get away with murder.”

“No criminal ever has or ever will outsmart me,” Jarek blustered, as the prosecutor stormed past him.

Hours expired as Mike sat studying the documents, carefully poring over every page. At times the tedious review seemed like a waste of energy. But he frequently reminded himself of his young injured clients and recaptured the inspiration to push forward.

Just before noon, Craig stuck his head through the door. “The word around the firm is that you stood up to Baker. The junior associates are calling you a hero.”

“We should wait to see if I destroyed my career before you erect a bronze statue,” Mike said. “And how does word get out on a private meeting like that?”

Craig shrugged his shoulders. “Are you lunching?”

“I’m still in document purgatory,” Mike said, “and I have to finish my deposition prep. Warren essentially said my partnership election is riding on getting a big settlement by Wednesday. So I’d better eat at my desk today.”

“Your loss,” Craig said. “I was going to introduce you to this cute little White House intern I met last night in Georgetown.”

“Is she a keeper?” Mike asked.

“You know I’m a sport fisherman, strictly catch and release.”

“Did you ever think that you weren’t actually the one who was doing the releasing?”

“Hey,” Craig responded with a nervous laugh.

After a short pause, Mike said, “Can I talk to you for a minute? Come in and close the door.”

Craig pulled the door closed and flopped onto Mike’s leather sofa. “What’s up?”

“I’ve been having these nightmares lately,” Mike said.

“Are they the ones where Helen finally realizes she chose the wrong classmate and runs off with me?”

Mike ignored the comment and continued. “Last night I dreamed I was being chased through the jungle by a huge dark

monster. The thing chased me over the edge of a cliff. I thought I grabbed hold of a tree root to stop from falling.” Mike took a deep breath and looked directly at Craig. “Then I woke up with my hands around Helen’s neck.”

“Ooh. What’d Helen do?”

“She got angry and kicked me out of the bedroom.”

“It sounds like I may get my shot at her sooner than I thought.” Craig smirked.

“I’m serious,” Mike insisted. “We’ve had some trouble lately, but I can’t imagine that she thinks I would intentionally hurt her. I’ve had graphic nightmares before, and I walk in my sleep a lot—totally unconscious with no control over my actions. But I’ve never harmed anyone—at least not until last night. What should I do?”

Craig thought for a moment. “Do you know what’s been causing your nightmares?”

“Probably the stress from the Kidz Play case or making partner. I don’t think Helen’s going to be satisfied with the lifestyle an associate salary can provide much longer.” Mike swallowed hard. “What if I really hurt her?”

“Maybe you’d better see somebody. I dated this shrink for a couple of weeks. She dumped me, but I still have her number.”

“If she dumped you, then she must have good judgment. Send me her number, and I’ll give her a call. Thanks, Craig. And please don’t tell anybody about this. I doubt BW would want to make a lunatic partner.”

“Fair enough,” Craig said as he got up to leave, “as long as you don’t tell anybody the psychiatrist dumped me.”

“I’m sure that could really screw up your reputation,” Mike said. Craig snickered and hustled away.

Alone again with his documents, Mike took a deep breath to brace for the homestretch. He glanced around his office at the mosaic of family photographs and Victoria’s drawings he’d posted on the walls to remind himself of the reason he worked so hard. That afternoon the pictures were just painful reminders of how little time he’d spent with his wife and daughter recently. *After I make partner, I’ll have plenty of time with my family*, he said to himself.

Hours passed as Mike pored over the documents, polished his deposition outline, and organized his exhibits. He had identified several documents that showed Kidz Play rushed the product to market for the Christmas shopping season and had not properly tested the toy. The company's stock was also faltering from poor sales, so they needed a big Christmas hit. But Mike did not yet find the solid incriminating evidence that would make a jury want to punish the company. He kept track of time only by changing his music every hour—*Dark Side of the Moon*, *Slow Hand*, *Abbey Road*, *Who's Next*, *Rumours*.

Finally, Mike's determination paid off. Stapled within a 175-page SEC filing, no doubt placed there "inadvertently," Mike found the smoking gun.

When Mike finally arrived home at their Oakton, Virginia, residence, Helen and their next-door neighbor, Nadine Tolbert, were in the kitchen talking. Mike came through the garage door and announced, "I'm home." The women fell silent, and Mike studied their innocent expressions as he set his briefcase next to the kitchen counter.

"Hi, Nadine," he said, and discerned from Helen's distant gaze and casual fingers caressing her neck that his neighbor already knew about his nightmare and probably the lipstick incident.

"Good luck on your promotion," the forty-seven-year-old divorcée responded.

Mike smiled and held up his crossed fingers.

"I didn't expect to see you tonight," Helen said with a pensive smile, and presented her lips for a quick peck.

Mike yawned and checked his watch. "I don't want to be rude, but I'd better get some sleep. I have a 7:00 a.m. flight to New York."

"I can take you to the airport if you want?" Helen said.

"You and Victoria need your sleep," Mike said. "I'll take a cab."

"By the way," Helen said, "your Mormon friend stopped by again tonight."

"The bishop?"

“Yeah. He said he was just in the neighborhood and wanted to say hi.”

“That was nice. It’d be great to chat with him again when I’m not so busy.” Mike yawned again. “Well, good-night ladies.”

The women’s voices grew faint as Mike dragged himself up the stairs. He took a quick peek at his daughter, then got ready for bed and crashed onto the mattress.

Despite his utter exhaustion, sleep was elusive. He squinted at the clock on his nightstand. It was almost midnight, and he could still hear the soft hum of the girl talk downstairs in the kitchen. He wondered what Helen and Nadine could be discussing so late into the night and finally drifted restlessly off to sleep.

Mike flips the burgers on his grill and surveys the hundreds of friends and neighbors who are packed into the backyard for his Labor Day barbecue. The swelling crowd is dancing and singing to the classic rock tunes spun by the DJ. Mike notices Helen and his buddy Craig at the back dancing close and kissing. He rubs his eyes and looks again, but they have vanished.

A bloodcurdling scream comes from inside the house. Mike spins around to see his daughter standing at the patio door holding the Samurobot in her hand, and he is panic-stricken.

“Daddy!” Victoria cries again, blood dripping from her elbow as the toy ratchets down on her hand. Her terrified face is pressed against the glass.

Mike darts toward her in terror. He yanks on the patio door, but the handle is locked. “Open the door, honey,” he begs and points to the knob. Lurking in the shadows behind Victoria are two glowing orbs faintly illuminating the hulking shape of the familiar black beast. “Open the door!” he yells in horror, and bangs on the glass so hard it cracks the seal.

“Michael.” Helen’s voice calls from a distance. “You’re disturbing the neighbors.”

“It’ll be okay, Victoria.” He forces a calm voice while eyeing the advancing monster. “Just open the door.” He tugs helplessly on the handle.



“Michael. Wake up!” Helen shouted from the bedroom window down to Mike who was standing on the patio outside in his pajamas.

Mike suddenly startled back to consciousness. He gazed around the dim backyard in wonder. His chest was pounding, and his face was dripping with sweat. He was alone and confused. *Another nightmare*, he thought. He walked back in the unlocked patio door, and when he was safe inside, Helen went back to bed.

As he negotiated the kitchen table in the dark, Mike began to recall his latest dream and replayed the disturbing images. *Victoria!* His heart pounded. He ran up the stairs and sped down the hall to his daughter’s room. She was sleeping peacefully in her crib, snuggling her soft blanket against her cherubic face. Mike carefully pulled back the covers to check her hands. She was fine. He tucked her in and rubbed his eyes. *It seemed so real.* He pursed his lips and exhaled a long slow breath, feeling relieved that it was only a dream and, even more, that he hadn’t hurt anyone.