

Excerpt from **THE MYSTERY OF CRANEWOOD MANOR** by Theresa M. Moore, ©2018 all rights reserved.

ONE

Laura Hampstead breezed into the reception area with an air of flustered haste, toting her briefcase with her. She was medium tall and pretty, with large brown hazel eyes and brown hair parted in the middle and worn down below her shoulder blades. She wore pale pink lipstick and dark mascara, but no eye shadow. She was dressed as she always did, in a slimming brown pantsuit and a pearl pink blouse with a maroon scarf tie. Her shoes were sensibly flat. The only jewelry she wore was a string of pearls and button earrings. Her sensible professional look matched the expression on her face.

Sarah Chissom, her secretary and receptionist, was chocolate brown with fine features and black eyes, with black hair tied back into a bun. She wore a red and black dress with large hoop earrings. She looked up from sorting the morning mail and smiled. "Good morning, Miss Hampstead," she said.

"Good morning, Sarah" Laura replied. "I'd swear there was a conspiracy to keep me from getting here on time. The freeway turned into a parking lot about halfway between Melrose and Wilshire. Did any calls for me come in?"

"No," Sarah replied. "But there is a new client waiting in Mister Saxon's office. He was already here when I opened up the office. His name is Cadogan." She picked up a white embossed card from her message holder and handed it over.

Laura looked toward the closed door with mild surprise, then down at the card. "Not that Charles Cadogan, of Cadogan Industries?"

Sarah leaned forward and whispered, "the very same. He was very upset Not angry, exactly. More like...distracted. He didn't have an appointment, and insisted on seeing Mister Saxon right away. By the way... where is the boss?"

"I have no idea, but when he comes in let him know where I am, will you?" Laura replied. The tone in her voice betrayed her annoyance. Laura was a stickler for promptness, and her partner's proclivity for wandering in late almost every day chafed at her. By now they were very close friends but there were some things about his life that he refused to share with her, and that made her all the more curious about him.

As a man Valiant Saxon was hard to resist: tall and slim, a well-toned body that all women went for; a head of unruly dark blond hair and grey-blue eyes, a straight nose and generous lips. But even that did not excuse his habit of disappearing, sometimes for days, which played havoc with the smooth management of their cases and clients. Being late only seemed to emphasize the secret life he led.

Saxon seemed to prefer admitting that he was lazier than a hound lounging in the midsummer's heat than revealing the truth. At times he came in dressed to the nines, at others unkempt and unwashed, looking like he had been through World War III. When asked, his only comment was that he did not want to talk about it, and changed the subject any time he could.

The only conclusion Laura had come to was that he was engaged in government work of some kind and was sworn to secrecy. She did not dare entertain the notion that he had resumed his underworld activities. Val had always insisted that this was not the case.

But now is not the time to think about it, Laura said to herself. He is just going to have to explain himself if and when he comes in.

Laura entered his office. Its décor was distinctly masculine, tricked out in wood, beige, black and toned red; her own idea of what a man's office should look like. The mahogany desk which dominated the room was set in front of a bank of picture windows. As with all the tall buildings built after the end of the seventies, the thick panes of tempered glass masked out the sound of the traffic below and were tinted to cut the force of the sunlight. The tan drapes had been pulled back to reveal the peaks and ravines of a grand Los Angeles downtown bathed in morning sunlight, with a view of the old city hall standing downhill and to the left.

Every time Laura looked out the window at it she was reminded of something Val had said about tripod machines with laser beams blasting the bejeezus out of the gold clad pyramid capping the old landmark. She had never actually seen the movie he talked about, but for some reason she could not get the image out of her mind from then on. She shook herself free of it and focused on the present.

A man in his late fifties, heavy set and balding, sat in one of the plush leather visiting chairs close to the desk. He wore a suit of modest cut with a matching tie, and kept his raincoat draped over his arm. He appeared to need a shave, and his brown eyes were rimmed with red, probably from lack of sleep. He appeared to be suffering from a great deal

of pent up stress, manifest in the way he kept fiddling with his tie and rubbing at his broad forehead with an expression of pain on his face.

Laura approached and held out her hand toward him. "Mister Cadogan, I'm pleased to meet you," she said. "I'm Laura Hampstead, Mister Saxon's associate. I am afraid he is running a little late. May I lend some assistance?"

Cadogan rose and returned her handshake with a cool but uncertain hand. As he spoke his voice betrayed a distinct southern drawl. South Carolina, or possibly Georgia. "I would prefer to discuss my problem with Mister Saxon directly, but..." His voice trailed off. "Forgive me for falling back on an outdated habit. It is no reflection on your ability as a private investigator. I do need your help. I've tried other people but they have turned up nothing. Nothing!" He paused to draw a ragged breath. "I am at my wit's end, Miss Hampstead. I had heard of Valiant Saxon from a friend who used his services once before. He assured me that your agency has a reputation for swift and discreet results."

Laura sensed that he was a man used to dealing with the upper echelons wherever he went, but now he looked like a little boy who had lost something. "May I offer you something to drink? Tea? or coffee?"

"Nothing, thank you," Cadogan replied.

She slipped into the large armchair behind the desk and folded her hands on the blotter, all attention. "Please, Mister Cadogan. Begin at the beginning," she said.

Cadogan collapsed back into his chair. "My daughter Elizabeth has disappeared. She is my only child, and the image of her mother, God rest her soul." He drew out a billfold from his coat pocket, extracted a wallet-sized photograph and handed it to Laura.

She saw a young woman, about twenty years of age, with dark blonde hair and brown eyes. She looked intelligent and personable with a mature look in her eyes, and her smile looked genuinely friendly. "She is lovely," Laura said. "May I keep this for identification purposes?"

Cadogan nodded, then continued, "I've exhausted all the usual channels. I went to the police but they said they could do nothing because she was over twenty one. I have notified the FBI, and so far they have not been able to trace her activities after the last month. Her credit cards have not been used since she has gone, and there have been no ransom demands of any kind. It's as if she simply vanished from the face of the earth."

"Perhaps she just ran away from home," Laura suggested. "Was there something in your relationship which would cause her to do that?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "She's always been an independent, headstrong girl, prone to run off and follow one fascination or another..."

"Men?" Laura asked with a professional tone.

"Among other things. But she would never do something so irresponsible as that. If she had an issue with me she never hesitated to let me have it between the eyes. Her mother taught her to be strong and assertive, as a Cadogan should be. And she had me wrapped around her little finger. Perhaps a little too much."

"Then it's a good thing you came to us. We specialize in difficult or unsolvable cases," Laura said. "Tell me the whole story. Leave nothing out. Every detail may be important."

Cadogan moistened his lips, then said, "you see, a few months ago Elizabeth fell in with a strange crowd while at college in Boston. She became hopelessly infatuated with a man she met there, some sort of mystical guru named Darius Crane. She told me he was from an old family in Maine that had been influential in the area but had fallen on hard times, but that he had recently come into some money. She said he collected antiques and was remodeling the family mansion. But when I finally met him there was something about the man himself that I didn't like."

"What about him tipped you off?"

"Elizabeth showed me a photograph of him, and there was a strange look in his eyes. Not hostile, exactly. More like... deranged. I told her what I thought, and she claimed I was reading more into his image than his behavior asked for. That he was sweet and charming and could not hurt a fly. I thought she was a better judge of character than that, but I had not met the man in person so I had to hope she was right."

Laura nodded. "I see. Please, go on."

Cadogan continued. "The last time she called me was just about three weeks before she disappeared. She had been studying for her master's degree in architectural design. She said she was going to quit school and marry Crane. It was quite a surprise to me. She could not have known him long enough to tell what kind of man he was."

"That does sound rather sudden," Laura replied.

The older man shifted nervously in his seat "We argued. I'll admit I was a little upset about her association with Crane in the first place, and I didn't try to see it her way at the time. I told Elizabeth she was making a dreadful mistake, and she insisted that she was going to marry him with or without my blessing. Then she hung up. After a few days I thought better of what I had said, but when I tried calling her back, she did not answer her phone and my call went to voicemail. After I left several messages, her phone went dead. I thought she had left her calling area or was in a dead zone. That is the last time I tried to contact her by phone. Later, I went to the college and asked her friends where she might have gone but no one knew anything but her room mate, who said she had seen Elizabeth leave with Crane. She told me they seemed quite happy together, so she thought things were fine between them."

"It sounds to me like she had made up her mind," Laura said.

Cadogan held up his hand. "Wait, there is more to the story. A week later, I went to Maine to talk to Darius Crane, hoping that Elizabeth was there and that I could talk her out of marrying him, or at least get to know the man. He did have an estate called Cranewood Manor, a huge sprawling castle at the end of a dirt road. At least that much was true. When I asked him about Elizabeth, however, he said that she had mysteriously broken their engagement, and left without saying goodbye. He was not upset that she was gone. Far from it. In fact, he seemed glad to be rid of her."

"Perhaps she made the decision for both of them. Maybe that was why he was so cold about it," Laura replied.

"At the time I thought so, and that Elizabeth was still angry with me for trying to stop her and was too embarrassed by the whole affair to admit she was wrong, but I didn't care about that. I always told her that no matter what she did the door to home would be open. She could have come home and nothing more would have been said about it. But, when I did not hear from her for a week after that was when I thought she had come to harm."

"And how did Darius Crane seem to you?"

"As I said, he seemed cold, even a little hostile. He acted like my concern for Elizabeth was an annoyance. It was then that I decided that he had either killed her or found a way to drive her away."

"If they argued over something important enough to change her affection for him, that in itself could be grounds for suspicion of foul play," Laura said. "But that is all speculation for now. What did you do next, after you saw Crane?"

"I went down into the village to ask if anyone had seen Elizabeth, and no one had. In fact some of the people I met refused to answer my questions or to have anything to do with the affair."

"What's the name of this village?" Laura asked. She reached for a pad and pen from the desk and started to write a few notes.

"It's called Crane Hollow, about thirty miles south of Bangor, Maine. On the coast. It was hard to find, too, not on most of the local maps. I nearly got lost until a couple of kids on bikes pointed the way out for me. The sheriff there, a man named Ryder, was friendly enough to furnish me with most of the information I needed about Crane."

"Which, I take it, was not very much," Laura surmised.

Cadogan replied, "quite the opposite. I was told that Crane was hated and feared by the whole town. Growing up he had been a strange kid. Cold, arrogant, social only when he wanted something. That confirmed my experience and suspicions about him, but there was still no news about my daughter. Ryder suggested that I was not the only father who'd come looking."

Laura paused from writing and looked up at him. "That is very interesting. Did Ryder tell you anything else?"

Cadogan nodded. "Apparently, Crane is something of a party animal. He has a bunch of young people around him from the college on the weekends, members from a group he used to lead on campus."

"Do you know what his group did?"

"Elizabeth only mentioned it once in passing, and did not go into detail. Ryder claimed that he knew nothing about it. I learned later that it was a group devoted to studying mysticism and the occult, based on a sociology course, I think."

"Were drugs involved?" Laura asked.

Cadogan gave her a helpless shrug. "I don't know. I don't think so. Most of the students I talked to did not want to talk about it, and when I checked the directory of student groups Crane's was not on it. It may have been an off-campus group that only held its meetings there. I talked to a graduate monitor who said the student members were social misfits who were into the goth scene, and they mostly talked about things associated with that. He also hinted at devil worship, but said that no one was ever harmed and the sessions were mostly benign."

"What was it called?" Laura asked.

"The Dark Initiative."

"That does sound ominous," she suggested lightly. "But not unusual. Social groups of that type usually search for names which give them cachet and attract the curious."

Cadogan made a strange noise in his throat. "I am an open-minded man, Miss Hampstead, but I am inclined now to think it a deviant cult than a group of kids who pretend to dabble for the social atmosphere. I don't know what made Elizabeth cleave to such a dangerous ideology, but it was not like her. She is made of more sensible stuff than that."

"Did Elizabeth give any indication to you that she believed in it?"

"No, but now I am thinking that this Darius Crane was using it to lure unsuspecting innocents into danger, and that she was one of them, or that her fixation on him was solely from some other motivation. He was not what I expected, certainly." As he spoke, he drew out a checkbook and flipped it open, placed it on the desk, then began writing out a check in a swift fluid hand. Then he tore it out and handed it to Laura. "I'll spare no expense to find out what happened to her, Miss Hampstead. Restore her to me, or find out if she is dead, but I must have closure." His eyes were tired and pleading, close to tears.

Laura stared at the figure on the check, her mouth suddenly dry. "Uh... I can't guarantee that we will find her, under the circumstances you have described, but we will do our best," she replied. "I will take it up with Mister Saxon as soon as he arrives. What you have told me so far is a good basis to begin a full investigation."

"That will be satisfactory," Cadogan said, rising again. He offered her another business card. "Please call me as soon as you have news at any time, day or night."

When he had said his goodbyes and left the office, Laura's resolve to attack a real blood and thunder mystery was bolstered by the notion that it had been entirely too quiet around the agency lately. And as the senior partner of the firm she was entitled to make decisions about their cases with or without Saxon's input.

It'll beat installing yet another security system, she thought. I must be becoming dull with the routine.

The errant partner finally arrived several minutes later, armed with his usual aplomb and an armful of long stemmed roses, which he divided equally between Laura and Sarah. Laura took her share, sniffed the fragrance of one blossom and then declared, "you're late, as usual."

Saxon rocked back on his heels as if he had been struck, his eyebrows creeping upward. "Well, of course I'm late," he replied, in a sexy middle baritone voice tinged with a British accent. "I stopped by the florist on my way. I could not resist picking out a dozen or two for my favorite people." He said it in the way of a man who had bought something expensive on the company card and was trying to bribe his way out before Laura saw the bill.

But by now she knew his game all too well. She smiled up at him. "Would you care to step into my office, Mister Saxon?" she asked as she offered him her other arm.

Saxon gave her a calculating glance and then took it at once. "With pleasure, Miss Hampstead," he replied. "You have something to tell me?"

"I do indeed," Laura replied. "But it's not what you think."

She waved the check under his nose and drew him with her into her office. As the door closed, Sarah heard him utter a long whistle, took a quick sniff at a rose, then sat down quickly and answered the persistent phone.