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The Mystery of the Missing Sudoku Masters

by

Steve Zio

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THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING SUDOKU MASTERS

by Steve Zio

1. Short take

Solve the puzzles and solve the crime... For the legions of Sudoku fans everywhere, *The Mystery of the Missing Sudoku Masters* blends the suspense of a murder mystery with the fascination of Sudoku itself. Beside immersing themselves in a story of genius, revenge, and redemption, readers of this timely and highly marketable mystery can match their Sudoku wits with the experts in a race against time—and death.

2. Description & Synopsis

Sudoku masters from around the world gather in New York City for the world's richest and ultimate competition sponsored by a major American publisher. Until, that is, the greatest grandmaster of them all goes missing — and winds up murdered after he predicts his fate and leaves clues to the killer and his or her next victims in the form of Sudoku puzzles. Junior editor and one-eyed accident survivor Josh Garner and his twin sister, police-officer Katie, are unlikely and slightly reluctant heroes as they team up to solve the puzzles and murders—as well as come to terms with Josh's hazy but troubled past.

A key feature of the book is the inclusion of seven or eight actual Sudoku puzzles (with answers in the back) that can be done by interested readers at the same time they're being solved by the book's characters. Since these puzzles act as clues as to the location of bodies and the identities of future victims, readers and puzzle aficionados can tackle the puzzles themselves and see if they reach the proper conclusions. Since every Sudoku challenge is eventually solved by the protagonists, however, more traditional mystery fans can skip the puzzle solving and simply read on to discover who's next on the hit list and where the bodies can be found. In summary, *The Mystery of the Missing Sudoku Masters* should appeal to both hands-on Sudoku fans as well as more traditional mystery readers.

The book is planned for 60,000 words. I hope to have the first draft finished by Dec 30, 2006.

3. The Author

Steve Zio (Steve Ziolkowski) is the author of Canada's first iNovel *Hot Springs* (McArthur & Company, Toronto, 2006), a unique combination of paperback book and related website (www.HotSpringsNovel.com). He's also the author or co-author of 5 ESL textbooks and 16 children's books. Other credits include books on the Japanese medical system (as editor) and Japanese business history (translator) and he's also translated from Japanese to English more than a hundred TV documentaries on World Heritage sites.

Steve has worked as the Managing Director for Oxford University Press, Japan, and he's an experienced and energetic entrepreneur and presenter with extensive contacts in the US, Europe, and Asia. He now runs his own educational consulting company in Sidney, BC, where he lives with this wife, the talented Japanese painter, Kimiko, whose work is featured on the Hot Springs website. They have one son.

Born in Montreal, Steve was educated at Loyola High School, the University of Guelph (B.A.) in Ontario, and the School for International Training (M.A.) in Brattleboro, Vt., USA.

4. Five Excellent Reasons to Publish

- a. A Google search of Sudoku produces over 89 million results.
- b. Enter any bookstore in North America or England (and probably many other countries, as well) and you'll encounter huge tables or displays of Sudoku puzzle books. A Sudoku mystery would likely gain high bookstore visibility as shops look for new products to keep fueling this massive publishing phenomenon.
- c. Sudoku's popularity is amazingly international.
- d. Online encyclopedia Wikipedia's Sudoku entry (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sudoku>) is one of its most extensive and most popular. Of particular note is the section titled *Popularity in the media*, which says Sudoku was dubbed by the world media in 2005 as the "fastest growing puzzle in the world."
- e. Amazon.com lists 418 Sudoku books,

5. Competition

Research on the Internet & Amazon.com indicates there are no books or mysteries, in particular, that use Sudoku or Number Place (the original version) puzzles as a central plot device, particularly in terms of giving clues as to the identities of future victims.

Of course, all of Dan Brown's novels — notably, *The Da Vinci Code* — deal with cryptography (indicating the popularity of codes), but none of them include a device of

such widespread popularity that can be done by the readers themselves. Having said that, **The Da Vinci Code** website has run a “Quest” using a variety of puzzles and more info can be found at <http://www.thecryptex.com/node/44?page=2>

Another book, **Paint by Sudoku**, is a paint-by-numbers book using Sudoku, while another (**The Sudoku Code**) offers a code-breaking challenge, whereby the numbers are linked to words (Wordoku), which are instructions. Winners receive a prize. It is not fiction, however. Of all the products I could find, **Mensa Mighty Mystery Puzzles for Kids** is probably closest in conception, but they are one-page mysteries (using a variety of puzzles, not just Sudoku), and most definitely not novels.

Something similar has been done with crossword puzzles, notably the ten-book Nero Blanc series, published by Berkley. I have not read them, nor intend to since I don't want to be influenced by them or be accused of plagiarism. Another series for kids has been done, **Crossword Mysteries** (Helene Chirinian & Neal Yamamoto) and there is even a Nancy Drew book (**The Clue in the Crossword Cypher**) and a number of books dating from the 1980's but, once again, I haven't read them.

Sample material

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
MISSING SUDOKU MASTERS**

A Novel by Steve Zio
(Steve Ziolkowski)

Chapter 1

I ran into Old Bill in front of Charter's Groceries on a weekend in September. As we stood on the solar-drenched sidewalk on that unseasonably warm autumn day, I'm sure we shared that rare but welcome illusion that summer wasn't truly done and that winter was nothing more than a concept. We shot the usual bull – you know, what we'd been up to mixed with sports and politics a sprinkling of local gossip. Although Bill, a retired postal worker, was probably pushing seventy-five, I remember thinking how upright and tall he still was. His physique remained decent and thin white hair seemed his only concession to age. Unlike his peers in our building (he lived one over), Bill also weathered winter well with nary a cold or the flu. Before entering the store for my weekly shopping, I watched Bill move off in that big-legged gait he had. He was exactly the kind of old guy I wanted to be when I reached that age, I thought.

That Saturday was the last time I saw Bill alive. By Monday he was gone, felled by a heart attack as if caught from behind in a game of mortal tag and he was now it. "I'd just talked to him," I kept telling everyone after. "He seemed fine. So normal."

The truth is, I had a hard time getting over Bill's sudden demise. How could someone be so alive, how could things be so usual and then change forever and finitely before you even had time to consider what had happened – let alone make sense of it all?

Unless you've had this experience, I'm not sure you can truly understand it. But if you have then I'm sure you know exactly what I mean. How that emotional vertigo hits you, how a sudden weightlessness overtakes you and then throws you to your knees on the very same floor that's just dropped out from under you.

It's happened to me three times.

Even though I didn't know him that well, I sometimes still think about Bill, years later. But I'm ashamed to admit that my memories aren't so much of Bill, nice guy that he was. They're of the blow, the shock, the big-bang realization.

Despite the lasting reverberations I felt over Bill's death, the second time was bigger. Much bigger and easily the single most traumatic thing that's ever happened to me and probably ever will. The one that still haunts me (if that doesn't sound too melodramatic), the one that half-

blinded me, and – ironically – the one I remember least and know littlest about... But we can put that aside for now because it's this third and newest incident that's most relevant to this story.

I work in New York City for one of America's largest publishing houses. I joined them a couple of years ago, long enough after the accident for me to finally move on and start looking for a job. At least that's what my sister said.

Although the company as a whole produces all manner of magazines and books ranging from popular fiction to serious academic work, I'm in Puzzles and Games. Sure, you can scoff if you want to but it pays okay and, truth be told, it's about all I've felt up to for a while.

I was hired as junior editor mainly because of my language skills. Thanks to my father's job and a decade-long transfer there, I grew up in Japan and speak fluent Japanese; we have a tie-up with a similar Japanese publisher and they needed someone to keep the correspondence and relationship running smoothly. Both firms produce a wide range of Sudoku puzzle books and mags and, according to Patrick, our CEO, they've made us some serious money in a very short time – and if there's anything Patrick Greene's serious about, it's money. There's a downside to such success, however, Patrick says. We now face intense competition and “if we don't innovate, we wither and die like plump grapes on the vine that should've been picked but weren't.”

Patrick's latest thumb-nosing to the competition verges on, if not reaches, the grandiose: to sponsor and organize the world's richest, most prestigious, most flamboyant Sudoku championship ever. It's happening next week and we've invited the biggest names in the Sudoku world to play for the unprecedented winner-take-all prize of an million dollars. Yes, a million dollars. Serious money.

My job on the day in question was a trip to Kennedy to meet, greet, and then chaperone the grandest grandmaster of them all: Japan's legendary Kenichi Senkawa, a mathematician, philosopher, puzzle maker and a bon vivant renowned equally for genius and eccentricity. As his escort during the two weeks of the championship I was to be “at his beck and call, every minute, every tera-second,” said Patrick. “If he sneezes I want you catching the cold.” We'd invited Senkawa as judge and referee for the competition and he'd been instrumental in the design of the contest and the puzzles used for determining the winner. For the next fortnight, he was our VIP of VIPs.

Despite what's gone on the past couple of years, at heart I'm punctual and conscientious and I arrived at the airport with time to spare. I double-checked the itinerary, bought some extra bottles of water and called the driver to make sure the plan was airtight. But, when the time came, although my sign was at the ready, I wasn't. For in no way could I have been fully prepared for the grandeur of Senkawa-Sensei's arrival. Suddenly, the exit doors flew open and he swept through them into the arrival lobby with the speed of an invading army. He compounded my surprise by suddenly stopping and standing – dead still – with arms slightly akimbo like a satisfied maestro just finished his fifth encore. Taller than I imagined, he wore a long charcoal-gray cape with a dark-red silk lining, carried no bags, and – strange as it may seem – he appeared almost aglow with energy and vigor and a life force so strong that it was impossible to imagine it ever being snuffed out. Seeing him like that, I couldn't possibly have guessed that less than twenty-four hours later, Grandmaster Kenichi Senkawa would go missing and change my life forever.

Chapter 2

Sensei (an honorific meaning teacher, or master, or elder) traveled with his personal assistant, an attractive if somewhat severe-looking woman of indeterminate age named Naomi Sugimoto. Naturally, we'd corresponded and her formal tone on paper now came across in person as slightly dour. I'm usually pretty good at reading people and she seemed to me somehow unhappy – although certainly intelligent and well organized with reasonable if hesitant English. I recognized immediately the virtues of making her my ally rather than my enemy, however, although my attempts at small talk weren't terribly successful; even the plentiful gifts I'd readied got me nowhere. I'd have to play things by ear, I decided.

Senkawa Sensei possessed a regal bearing. His carried his head high and you could never really ascertain his focus because his relationship with everything – his environment, with us – was beyond the ordinary. His voice was deep and rich, full of natural authority, and he certainly enjoyed using it. He didn't engage Ms. Sugimoto or me in conversation, though. Everything he said was more lecture than intercourse. But despite his confidence and loquacity, something struck me about his ambience. At first I couldn't quite place it. Only when we'd almost reached the city did the penny drop: I could have been wrong, but I conjectured that a sense of sadness or resignation permeated his mood.

“Look over there, Josh-san,” he said to me. We spoke in Japanese. I tried following his gaze out the tinted limousine window but couldn't immediately ascertain where he was looking or what he saw.

“Every vehicle, every single one of these buildings, every street, every house, every object, as far as you can see. Have you ever thought about them, really thought about them? Have you ever considered the single factor that unites them and assigns them a place in the systems of hierarchies that is life? All of them, each of them, have numbers. Yes, numbers. Number both inside and out. In fact, they're riddled with them. Numbers are everywhere. On doors, on packages, on pipes, bar codes, money – everything and everywhere! Numbers are ubiquitous. Numbers pervade our lives and existence to a far greater degree than the vast majority of people imagine. We have phone numbers, birthdays, birthdates, numbers on your license, Social Security Cards, passports, bank accounts, passwords – I could go on and on ad infinitum And

that's just superficial numbers. Because there are other numbers too, Josh-san, the numbers of fundamental mathematics and the physical world that actually underpin the more superficial numbers assigned to them. Numbers both make up and reveal the pattern of life and the grid of existence. They tell of the past and predict the future. Did you know that? Are you aware?"

"No, sir," I replied politely.

"Then you should be. Because this is the reason puzzles intrigue us so. That is why Sudoku calls us, fascinates us, employs us, and even enslaves some of us. But we should not be surprised. Numbers have controlled all beings from the start because from numbers all things begin. Nature is physics and physics is numbers. Pythagoras knew it as do the numerologists and practitioners of Isopsephy and Gematria. Even the Kabalarians recognize this, albeit in a simplified and – in my view – narrow way."

I found myself struggling to follow Senkawa's discourse. Fluent as I may be and reasonably intelligent and well-read, he was throwing terms at me I'd never even heard in English let alone a language I stopped learning when I was fourteen.

"Many authors have dealt with the issues I raise, that of pattern recognition, although patterns are not necessarily restricted to numbers, of course. Think of Umberto Eco or Nabokov or Gibson. Even that film, *A Beautiful Mind*, although using the search for patterns as a metaphor or symbol of mental disorder, demonstrates that order with reason and outcome can be found in even the most seemingly innocuous, by which I mean random, patterns. Like Sudoku, for example."

"I'm sorry, Sensei," I said. "Please forgive me but I'm having trouble understanding much of this. What do those writers have to do with Sudoku?"

Senkawa laughed. But it wasn't a guffaw or in any way humorous.

"Even people who enjoy them treat these puzzles with a form of intellectual contempt, as if they are nothing more than a mental callisthenic or time-waster or a bit of fun but little else. When in reality, they can convey anything we want them to and, within them, we can find anything and everything we seek. Puzzles are a lost and found. They are supply and demand, they are what's missing and what's found. Because numbers, as I was saying, tell every story. Figures drive every narrative, provide every clue and supply us with the sum that is cause and effect, answer and result – often ones we didn't expect, however. Sudoku does not merely have

to be a puzzle. Seek and you shall find, young Josh-san. Search and you will be rewarded with knowledge, however unnerving.”

And then, with a speed that caught me by surprise, the great Sudoku master brought his large head uncomfortably close to mine and for the first time looked directly at me while gripping my forearm with unexpected and – I thought – unnecessary strength.

“Remember this, Josh-san. Remember this because it could be important to you – and to me – in ways that may surprise you or shock you now, but will become apparent later: that, no matter how innocuous, within each puzzle created are the answers and clues to the deepest and most perplexing of problems, those of guile and guilt, those of pain and punishment – even those of disappearance and death.” As quickly as he’d shot forward Senkawa rebounded, suddenly returned to his original position with back flush against the luxurious leather seat. The only difference was now his arms were folded and his eyes closed. Uncertain what to make of Sensei’s dramatics, I looked to Ms. Sugimoto for guidance but her stone-faced stare out the window relinquished nothing. When I turned again to the Grandmaster, I thought he was frowning and somehow disturbed and perhaps even struggling to keep his expression neutral. I would never find out definitively, however, because we would never speak again.

Chapter 3

The hotel check-in went smoothly and a great fuss was made over our party as Ms. Sugimoto took charge (in Japanese, mind you) and relayed through me to the concierge an array of detailed instructions concerning food, water, lighting, towels, soaps, shampoo, flowers, air flow, temperature, and a dozen others. No, they would dine in their suite tonight. Yes, they had my cell number and, yes, I'd be sure to pick them up in the lobby at 9:00am sharp for the pilgrimage to the office and their meeting with Patrick and other top brass. In tandem with the hotel, we saw to the Grandmaster's every whim and rock star-like requirement. An hour later I was done for the day and heading home.

My mind still reeling from Senkawa's mesmerizing tour-de-force re the meaning and role of numbers, I decided to walk the twenty or so blocks from south Central Park to the small but workable two-bedroom co-op I share with my twin sister, Katie, on 46th and 2nd. Ever since the accident I prefer walking anyway and it gave me time to clear my head. I could process my rather bizarre afternoon and plan for tomorrow.

I wondered if this was typical Senkawa. I hadn't met him on either of my two trips to visit Kensaku Shuppan, our Japanese partners, but tales of his exploits and character abounded. During a night of drinking with Kensaku staff in a tiny bar in Tokyo's Golden Gai area of Shinjuku, their star author and advisor Senkawa was accused several times of "untypical Japanese behavior." At the same time, all of the stories revolved around his gregarious nature and every photo I'd seen of him portrayed a man smiling and cheerful whereas today he'd been anything but. For the most part, his expression had been grim and I couldn't shake the impression of a person shouldering some heavy burden. I couldn't forget how he's stared at me, either, or gripped my arm. On the other hand, maybe I was reading things into the situation, something Katie says I do all too often, particularly since the accident.

She was getting ready for work, buckling on her gun belt, pinning on her badge, when I came in.

“When do you get off?” I asked. I placed my soft-leather briefcase under the cluttered dining table and picked up *The Times*, which I never have time for in the mornings.

“Actually, I don’t start till eleven. I’m just dropping by the station for a meeting and then heading off to dinner and the gym.”

“I don’t how you do it,” I said. “Shift work would kill me. There’s no way I could get up in the middle of the night like you do. No way.” Little did I know that I’d be doing exactly that seven hours later, rushing back to the hotel to confront the unlikely and the unthinkable.

“Well, you’ve always been the more delicate one,” Katie said. For once, I couldn’t tell if she was kidding. Or maybe it was another reference to the accident.

As is common in twins of different genders, Katie and I are fraternal. Our variety’s also known as biovular or, our favorite, dizygotic. In high school we’d labeled ourselves “the dizygos” and used it every chance we got, a sort of “us versus them” identity that we’ve even retained into our early thirties.

We’ve always been close, best friends as well as siblings. Not counting our physical separation during our college years, the only thing that’s ever really threatened to come between us was post-accident, when Katie moved through the stages from supportive sibling to frustrated roommate, aghast at my stubborn and long-term inability to get on with my life and to return to the energetic, curious, funny, friendly, smart, outgoing person I’d been before.

“I can’t even begin to *see* what you’re talking about,” I’d retort to her admonitions. In fact, I’d play up the loss of my eye whenever I could, trying to guilt-trip her into letting me alone. It didn’t work, of course. She’d call me on it every time, as she’s done our whole lives – which I love and hate about her. But it didn’t work from her perspective, either, because she still hasn’t really managed to rescue me from my apathy, my inability to care about work or hobbies or other people – or anything, truly. After near-death experiences, many people find new meaning in life and the minutiae that makes it up. For me it was the opposite. With Melissa gone, my sight damaged forever, my face scarred, and my memory of that night and what happened impaired, what was the point? If life was this random, why bother harboring ambitions or exerting yourself when, in the time it takes for metal to crumble and gasoline to ignite, everything becomes dead or injured or useless? Why should I exist when M. didn’t? Why wasn’t it the other way round?

“That’s exactly why you should be living life to the fullest,” Katie argued. “For Melissa – because she can’t. It’s your responsibility to her to live the life she didn’t get.” But this line of reasoning never worked for me. Or maybe on me, I should say. You can no more live your life for someone else than you can eat for them or breathe for them. Unless you do it yourself it’s ineffective and pointless. So, as you’ve probably guessed, Melissa’s death in a car crash – and yes, I was driving – was the second time I’d been with someone alive and well and happy and animated only to have them die on me, to disappear from my life, in an instant.

The third time was just after three o’clock the next morning.

Chapter 4

The call came on my cell at exactly 3:04 am. The digital numbers on my old clock radio glowed red. The phone felt cold in my hand. Sugimoto-san was on the other end. She sounded slightly disconcerted but with enough control to explain the situation clearly.

I dressed with haste and caught a cab to the hotel, asking the driver to hurry even though speeding cars at night I now find harrowing. I wondered if I should call Mike, my boss, or even Patrick, but decided to wait and find out more first.

Despite the hour, Naomi (as I'd come to think of her) was dressed and had even applied careful makeup. She answered the door at my first knock. We moved to the cream sofa in the center of the spacious living room and sat down.

"Sensei was tired. So he retired to his room just after ten. I know the time because I looked at my watch." An elegant, expensive-looking wafer with a thin gold band decorated her wrist. "Although I was tired, too, I had some work to do. I worked over there." She pointed to a desk backing a wall not far from Senkawa's bedroom. "As you can see, although I was not prying, because of the short distance I could hear Sensei moving about in his room. He had a shower and a bath, and then, after a while, he went to bed and shortly afterward, I could hear him snoring." She paused a moment. "Please forgive me for revealing such personal details," she said.

"Please go on."

"When my work – e-mailing, etc., was done, about 11:30, I went to bed, too. Because of my jet lag, I woke up at about 2:45, and went to get a bottle of water from the refrigerator. When I looked over at Sensei's room, I was surprised to see his door was open. I called to him, but got no answer. I peeked inside his room and called again because I still couldn't see him. He wasn't in his or the other bathrooms, either. I looked out on the balcony but he wasn't there. I waited about ten minutes and then, still no sign of him, I called you."

"What did you do after that? Did you call the manager or the police or anyone else?"

"No, you're the only person I've called."

"Was the door locked?"

"Yes. But the chain was off."

“Could he have gone for a walk or be somewhere else in the hotel?”

“It’s possible. But I doubt it. I have traveled with him for many years and this is the first time something like this has happened.”

“Do you want me to call the police?” I asked. “Or we could check the hotel first and the streets outside, maybe the park.” The thought of Central Park at this hour gave me pause for thought, however.

“What do you recommend? If the police are involved too soon... I don’t want to cause an unnecessary fuss or scandal of any kind.”

“Why don’t I check the hotel first, then outside? If I don’t find anything, then I could talk to the manager.”

“Yes. That sounds sensible,” said Naomi. “I will wait here in case Sensei comes back or calls.”

“Fine. What about Mr. Greene?” I asked. This was Patrick.

“I will leave that to you,” Naomi said. We sat not far apart and I could see her face clearly. She had fine features and clear eyes and might even have been considered beautiful with different, softer makeup, glasses, and hairstyle, I surmised. Her expression certainly spoke of concern, if not worry, and I tried imagining what she must be feeling. Of course, the true nature of her relationship with the unusual Senkawa was unknown to me but if there was ever a moment to speculate, now was it.

Setting off on my mission, phone in hand, I mulled over plausible explanations. None occurred to me.

I drew blanks at the business center, bar, sports club – every logical avenue became a dead end. A few frantic passes outside the hotel, me peering up and down a couple of streets and then distantly into the heavily shadowed park, got me nowhere either. Every passing minute – it was now approaching 4:30 – led me to rehearse my next steps: calling the manager, Patrick, the police.

Head down, preoccupied, I turned back into the hotel and literally ran into somebody.

“Hendrik Timmerman!”

“Pardon me? Do I know you?”

“I’m Josh Rose, of Generalisis House. One of the organizers of the tournament.”

“Yes, of course. How are you? Are you alright?” Timmerman said. My surprise at seeing one of the top championship contenders at this hour outside the hotel, alone, must have been obvious.

“I was just looking for somebody. You weren’t out with Kenichi Senkawa by any chance, were you?”

“Senkawa Sensei? Why no? Is there something wrong?”

I thought of Naomi’s cautionary words – no scandal.

“No, no, not at all. I was just wondering who’s around and who’s not.”

Like many people I’d met from Holland, Timmerman was of imposing height and spoke flawless English (German, French, Spanish, and Italian, as well). He consistently ranked among the top five Sudoku masters in the world and was a prime contender for the million-dollar prize. I remembered he worked in a research institute in Den Haag and that he was known as outspoken and fiery with strong and strongly expressed views about the Sudoku world and the direction it was headed. I also remembered that he and Senkawa had clashed in print and via online forums. Then I wondered where he’d been at this hour, particularly since he was unaccompanied. I couldn’t think how to ask the question, however.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me,” Timmerman said. He seemed in a hurry. I bid him good night but I couldn’t be sure he’d even heard me.

Given my paucity of alternatives, I intended next to visit the hotel manager but called Naomi first. Still no news.

By the time we’d accepted something was seriously out of kilter, the dusty rose of dawn was already peaking through the suite’s curtain cracks. After conferring with Mike, my boss, we elected to call the police.

“Why don’t you phone your sister?” Mike suggested. “Maybe she can keep things quiet, at least at first. You should always go with someone you know.”

Luck was with us. This was Katie’s precinct and she was available. Two hours remained in her shift.

On the one hand, although I understood, accepted, and supported Katie’s decision to enter the police force, on the other I didn’t get it. While I’d gone off to Harvard (English), she’d entered a community college to study criminology.

Even now she claims to love her job despite the danger, the erratic lifestyle of strange hours and bad meals and the distrust on some people's faces as she walks by them on the street or at parties when she tells people what she does. Besides me, almost all her friends are cops and I have to think hard to remember anyone she's dated outside the force. Perhaps it's this close-knit camaraderie she values. But I've stopped asking her to go beyond the superficial and tell me the deep-set reasons for joining because either she chooses not to tell me or doesn't understand it herself on a level she's capable of describing. She always accuses me, with some justification I might add, of over-verbalization, that nothing's real to me unless I say it out loud whereas she – like most women, she contends (and probably with some merit) – understand things in different ways and on more elemental levels.

I wondered if our time in Tokyo played a role in Katie's career choice. Our parents broke up not long after we returned to the States and, as a family, we'd never been closer, never more connected than during our Japan period. It was a time before Katie and I learned the cynicism and sarcasm of adolescence and North American humor. I now know Japan is a place where innocence is more highly valued than here and it was a gift to us as children that I've probably never fully appreciated. I can also recall our sense of shared adventure, the newness of the unfamiliar social context, the safety of Tokyo despite its mammoth size... I can remember how, even then, Katie liked talking to the policemen in the *koban*, a cramped concrete box mini-station on the corner near the entrance to our station. Their amazement at this little blonde-haired girl's fluent Japanese. Do such events, however innocuous at the time, really determine our futures?

Chapter 5

Katie arrived with a male partner and I had to smile at her official appearance and manner. I'd seen it before, of course, but it still amused me to think how even my twin sister owned different selves that she put on like the clothes or uniforms that covered them.

Based on Katie's detailed questioning of Naomi (done in Japanese, which I translated for the astonished Wilkinson, her partner), we determined a number of things. First, that the chain had been locked when she'd gone to bed but was off when she'd awoken. Second, that the usually fastidiously neat Senkawa had left his silk pajamas in a pile and that he was probably dressed in the same clothes he'd traveled in. And, third, that his briefcase and cell phone were missing as was one room key/card, she thought. Naomi hadn't hear a phone ring in the suite but that meant nothing. Of course she'd tried his phone dozens of times but only reached his voice mail.

Katie and Wilkinson asked if we'd touched or moved anything. Next, they undertook a careful assessment of the suite and Senkawa's room, in particular. As they took Naomi through the room a second time, she noted something she'd missed during the first sweep.

The desk to the right of the bed held a hotel phone, writing paper, a hotel services guide and one item that belong obviously to the missing Senkawa: a template used by the Grandmaster for creating one variety of his Sudoku puzzles. The template consisted of A4-sized paper was printed with two blank 9x9 grids, aligned vertically. The top grid remained empty while the bottom one contained penciled-in givens, the clues from which Sudoku puzzles begin. A Japanese pencil lay to the right of the template paper, its tip pointing to the bottom puzzle. At a skewed angle away from the desk, the chair appeared used and then abruptly abandoned.

After perhaps twenty minutes, Katie conferred with Wilkinson and then weighed in: "Well, there're no overt signs of a crime or foul play but, based on what you say about Senkawa Sensei's habits and normal behavior, I have to admit the circumstances are very strange indeed," said Katie. "The timing, just before the start of a big-money tournament is also unusual." She paused. "So, normally we'd file this as a missing person's report at this stage but let me talk to somebody and we'll decide if we want to investigate this further or how to proceed from here." Wilkinson nodded. "I imagine you'd also want to talk to your tournament people." This time I nodded.

We didn't have to wait long or even call. No sooner had Katie finished speaking than we heard a knock on the door. Behind it were a concerned-looking Mike and Patrick.

It's no wonder Patrick Greene got where he is. He defines the Alpha personality. Always the first into any room, he speaks loudly and often. He once said to me that, "I have definite opinions on things I don't even know anything about," and was proud of it. He dresses carefully and coifs endlessly. Despite the early hour, his suit and tie were as crisp as the suite's linen, only more expensive. He wears his shining black hair slicked back and with his sharp features and tall slim frame (earned by a punishing exercise regime) he reminds me of a knife. Certainly several looks he gave me, like I'd lost his prized possession on my watch – were dagger-like in sharpness.

By contrast, Mike is one of the humblest people I know. He's great boss and good person with an admirably understated sense of humor, and he's risen in the corporate world by giving lip service to the expected platitudes – but always with a twinkle in his eye and a tone of slight ridicule detectable to like-minded closet insubordinates.

Katie and I recapped the situation for Patrick and Mike. In typical decisive fashion, Patrick initiated the following: calls to Senkawa's wife, friends, and associates to see if they'd heard from him and to ask the police to launch a formal enquiry – but with ample discretion.

Decisions had to be made about the tournament as well. With Sugimoto's permission, Patrick would release an announcement that Senkawa was temporarily unavailable "for personal reasons," but he'd leave wiggle room for Sensei's reappearance, "when – and not, if – he returns."

Katie and Wilkinson double-checked our statements and then left for the station. Patrick and Mike needed to head back to the office to plan, while Sugimoto would canvass Senkawa's family and wide net of acquaintances to see if they knew his whereabouts. I was assigned to assist Naomi and, if time allowed, to make sure the other Sudoku contestants had arrived, were comfortable, and that the other events of the tournaments were running according to plan. I had to call Kensaku Shuppan as well. Two of their staff were to arrive today and they had to be kept in the loop. They'd originally wanted to accompany Senkawa but – strangely, they later told me – they'd been instructed to travel on a different day.

I can't tell you how many hours we spent collectively on the phone but by the time we were done, my ear was sore and I was sick to death of calling. Part of the reason I'd chosen this job (or it had chosen me) was its relative ease and lack of responsibility. Never had I anticipated

something of this nature. At the same time, though, I felt something stirring. Exactly what I didn't know, however, so I dismissed it and put my mind to things at hand.

I'd been calling from the balcony. Returning inside, I looked for Naomi and found her in Senkawa's room staring at the unfinished Sudoku template on his desk. We hadn't eaten yet so I convinced Ms. Sugimoto that a meal in the coffee shop downstairs was a good idea.

Between bites, I learned from Naomi that no one in Japan had heard from the missing Senkawa either. Despite her cautions to everyone with whom she spoke, all she'd done, she was afraid, was bred uneasiness verging on panic. In particular, Mrs. Senkawa had taken the news badly and planned on asking someone from Kensaku to accompany her for an immediate flight to New York. No sooner had she said this when my phone rang confirming this. I was to expect Mrs. Senkawa and the two Kensaku people tomorrow or the day after. Keeping things under wraps would be harder in Japan than elsewhere, Naomi said. I believed her.

Halfway through the meal I saw Tomas Linden, the Swiss Sudoku champion, enter the restaurant. I'd called his room earlier to ensure he was happy with the facilities but hadn't reached him. I excused myself briefly from Naomi and managed to introduce myself to Linden before he was seated. Like Timmerman the night before, he was alone.

Linden wore glasses and his dark suit was tailored and expensive. A salt and pepper moustache was perhaps the biggest accent on an otherwise ordinary face. In the Sudoku world, he was known for two things: his methodical yet ultra-quick mind and his self-appointed role as the uncompromising champion of Leonhard Euler, the great Swiss mathematician who'd invented Latin Squares, the precursor to Number Place/Sudoku. Linden believed Euler should be given full credit for the invention of Sudoku and that Switzerland was the puzzle's rightful homeland. He and Senkawa (and others) had clashed on this issue both publicly and privately.

"Have you seen any of the other masters," I asked.

"No, and I have no desire to," Linden said in his clipped but excellent English. "We shall see each other over the tables and that is enough. And perhaps I shall see some of my able colleagues at the press conference I am holding on Monday." I suspected I knew the subject of said conference but he told me anyway. "It seems only by repeating my message over and over, that Master Euler is the true founder of Sudoku, can I make any headway into the minds of the misguided

and bamboozled public. I cannot stint on my mission.” Linden expression grew fiercer as he spoke. But he wasn’t finished.

“And I see that Master Senkawa, has arrived,” he said, bowing formally in Ms. Sugimoto’s direction. The Sudoku world is a small one.

“Last night,” I said.

“Please pass on my regards,” Linden replied. Then he excused himself to head to his table.

Naomi spoke almost immediately on my return.

“I’ve been thinking about the puzzle on Senkawa Sensei’s desk,” she said. “Something was bothering me about it, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. But now I think I know.”

“What is it?”

“First of all, Sensei never leaves his puzzles out for anyone to see. He is almost... almost secretive about them. He doesn’t want to open himself up to accusations of impropriety or cheating.”

“I see,” I said, but still not understanding where she was going with this.

“The next thing is, he’s told me, and he’s said this in lectures, he always starts from the top. He writes in a complete puzzle, including the solutions on the top part of the template and then works backwards, if you will, to decide which numbers to leave and which spaces to leave blank.”

“Okay,” I said, still not any further along than I’d been. “Do you think it means anything?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “Right now, I’m not sure about anything.”

Chapter 6

Naturally, I was exhausted. I'd hardly slept the previous night and the day had been stressful, to say the least.

I finally left Naomi after nine and decided again to walk home despite the hour. The fresh air and exercise would help relieve some of the day's tension, I hoped.

Five blocks from the hotel I came across an accident. One car had T-boned another at an intersection, sending the smaller black car up onto the curb and into a lamppost and a phalanx of news boxes. The driver's side of the black car was crushed and the road sprinkled with bits of metal and shards of glass that glinted in the flashing lights of the emergency vehicles. Although the occupants of the car were gone, a dark stain covered much of the driver's seat and the windshield was starred in ways I didn't want to contemplate.

Although far from overpowering, more than anything it was the faint smell of the gasoline that took me back to a time and place I didn't want to go. My account of that night has been pierced together mainly from the police, friends, and family. I remember little. We had been driving upstate on a Friday night like this one. On our way to visit friends for the weekend, for some reason, the car had apparently left the road. One theory suggests I fell asleep at the wheel. Another is that I swerved to avoid an animal on the road. There are several others but I can see no point in discussing them. I can see no point in almost everything about that night.

The narrow winding road had little traffic so late and apparently we'd lain, one of us dead, the other flirting with death, unnoticed for almost four hours. I imagined myself fading in and out of consciousness, my eye bloody and gone, calling M.'s name and getting no response, wondering if help would ever arrive and if I was going to make it or not. The police ruled Melissa's death accidental. Perhaps the powers that be thought I'd suffered enough. And now, back in the present, with visceral evidence of more pain, more carnage, more families devastated beyond comprehension confronting me, I was suffering again.

I can't tell you how good it felt to see Katie in the kitchen, stirring something in a pot while leafing through a magazine on the counter. This thin moment of domesticity calmed me.

We discussed Senkawa's disappearance over Katie's soup.

“So what’s their relationship, do you think?” Katie asked.

“Hard to say.”

“When I looked in her room, the bed was ruffled but it didn’t look slept in, if you know what I mean. And his was, well, a bit of the opposite,” Katie said.

“So are you suggesting that Sugimoto’s holding out on us?”

“I’m just telling you what I observed.”

“But, okay, even assuming they’re lovers, why did he go AWOL. I just don’t get it.”

“Neither do I,” Katie said. “But throw passion into the mix and the mix inevitably gets unpredictable,” Katie said. Then she blew on her soup and I could tell she was thinking.

Unusually sore, my right eye needed attention. This happens when I’m tired, or sometimes it’s the air. Too much grit in the socket, that sort of thing. Of course, strictly speaking I don’t mean the eye itself because I don’t have one. I have a glass eye, colored with great care to match my remaining, natural eye. I used to try and guess who noticed and who didn’t or how quickly some people picked up on it. The scarring on my right cheek and forehead probably give it away, of course, so my disfigurement is two-fold; by that I mean, not only am I half-blind, but those who can see look at me differently. Sometimes it’s pity. Sometimes something less charitably. For some time after the accident, I even gave up using the phrase, “I see.”

As I lay in bed that night, I wondered about the possible motives for Senkawa’s disappearance. Money? A love affair? Mental illness? Escape? Rivalry? All made sense but none did, either. Not really. Also, Sugimoto’s suspicions about the Sudoku puzzle also needed exploring, I decided. That night, I dreamt about photography and painting, everything in vivid color. The next morning, only briefly did I realize that the theme of my dream was sight.

Chapter 7

Saturday. I'd arranged to have brunch with Naomi at the hotel and, during our buffet meal, Katie called to inform me that the police had decided to launch a formal investigation. Apparently, Patrick hadn't liked the idea but finally acquiesced when Lieutenant Mercer pointed out the potential consequences for him and the company if things turned out badly and nothing had been done. "Better safe than sorry," the Lieutenant said. A Detective Lansky was assigned to the case and, because of the Japanese angle, Katie was tipped to help him. Both she and I were thrilled.

After the meal, I had to see to arrangements for a welcome cocktail party we'd planned for all tournament participants, sponsors, and media. I couldn't actually remember when I'd been this busy. With Mrs. Senkawa and the Kensaku team arriving tomorrow on top of minding Naomi and my other tournament duties, I wouldn't have a moment to myself till the championship was over. But, despite the pressure, somehow I didn't mind.

One of the first people I spoke to at the party was Min-Soon Kim, the Korean champion. We had met in Seoul early last year when Mike recommended tagging on a Korean leg to my Japan trip in hopes of finding some business arrangement that might benefit us.

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