

HIDDEN BATTLEFIELDS



WILLIAM PEACE

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William Peace



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Chapter 1

Fort Hood

“There were two documents,” she confided, her eyes fixed on his across the table. “Two documents that got him convicted.”

Robert nodded, urging her to continue.

She said, “Nobody testified against him, apparently.”

“What were the documents, Mary Jo?”

She sat back and folded her arms across her chest. She was wearing a pale blue cardigan with pearl buttons; only the top button was undone. “Well . . .” she began and paused.

“I mean . . .” It was his turn to lean forward. He looked around the busy Olive Tree restaurant that she had selected: it was near her work in Alexandria, Virginia. No one seemed to be paying attention. “Can you give me an unclassified version?”

“Well,” she said quietly, “one was a diagram of a centrifuge cascade.”

“A centrifuge cascade that’s used to make weapons-grade nuclear material?”

She nodded.

“How could that diagram get him convicted?”

“Because it had the actual levels of . . .” She picked up her menu and seemed to be looking for the waitress. To her menu, she confided, “. . . uranium enrichment on it.”

“Oh, I see, and the levels . . .” He paused. “. . . were much higher than anything the Iranians have announced.”

She nodded again, her lips compressed in anxiety.

“Have you seen a copy of it?” She shook her head. “And the other document?”

“Let’s just say it was an electrical drawing . . .” The menu came into play again. “. . . of a weapon.”

“I suppose it is the kind of drawing that my father’s old employer, the Defense Intelligence Agency, would find interesting?”

“Yes.”

He shifted slightly in his chair. “How did you . . . come into contact . . . with the items?”

She shrugged. “I have access to sources.”

“Like, for example, the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency)?” She gave a brief nod.

Robert paused to consider this young woman he hadn’t seen in almost two years: his father’s girlfriend. The last time he had seen her, she had been wearing an immodest red bikini and, when his father had left the party, they had shared life stories over gin and tonics. And he had made a pass at her. The answer had been ‘no’, but he liked to think of it as a reluctant ‘no’.

“What do you know,” he asked, “about the murder he was charged with?”

She grimaced, smoothing her napkin. “The State Department says he was charged with the murder of a Republican Guard general in Zahedan, eastern Iran. He was accused of using a sticky bomb placed from a motorcycle onto the general’s car – a man named Khorhoushi.”

“Khorhoushi! I know him! He was The Scorpion’s enforcer!”

“I’ve read the syndicated story in the *Washington Post*,” she said. “Tell me about The Scorpion.”

“I’ll tell you later, Mary Jo. Can you explain why my father was not convicted of the murder? He apparently understood, wrongly, that I had been executed on The Scorpion’s orders. There’s a theory that he tried to kill The Scorpion in revenge, but that he mistook Khorhoushi for The Scorpion.”

She nodded. “Could be. I’ve heard that your father may have left Tehran without authorization shortly after he believed you’d been executed. I was able to reach David’s lawyer after the trial. He said that the evidence against David on the murder charge was circumstantial, and that the prosecutor was confused by two people named ‘Dawson’.”

Robert smiled and gave the table a slap. “So! The prosecutor’s theory was that I, having escaped from prison, killed Khorhoushi in revenge for my torture, imprisonment and unjust death sentence.”

“Probably.”

“What did the lawyer say about the chances of getting my father released from prison?”

“He said that it’s basically a political situation, not a legal matter. He said it would be a waste of time and money to appeal the verdict.”

“Why can’t the IAEA just negotiate with Iran for his release? After all, he was working for the IAEA as a weapons inspector at the time. The fact that the documents were found in his possession is interesting, but his job was to deal with documents like that.”

“Except that the documents in question were top-secret Iranian documents. He was not supposed to have them. Where did he get them? Who gave them to him? The Iranians would like to know! At his trial, he said that he didn’t know the person. His cell phone had several local Tehran numbers on it, but the prosecution could get no response from them. It must have been a very skilled operator who has a serious hatred of the Iranian regime.”

“Have you any thoughts on who this operator might be, Mary Jo?”

She shook her head. “Our human-int on the ground in Iran is almost non-existent. There is an Israeli agent who obtained some oral intelligence, but we’ve never before laid our hands on actual, top-secret Iranian documents.”

“Let’s think, Mary Jo. How long had Dad been in Tehran when he obtained the documents?”

“Less than a week.”

“Is there any possibility that, one way or another, Dad had the operator’s contact info when he arrived in Tehran?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Do you believe there is any possibility that Dad didn’t know he was taking a major risk accepting top-secret Iranian documents?”

She gave a derisive chuckle. “He’s been in intelligence too long. He knew what he was doing.”

“Which suggests to me that there had to be something in it for him, apart from the pleasure of watching Iran squirm and a pat on the back from IAEA.”

“What are you suggesting, Rob?”

“I’m suggesting that the operator was a woman. A young woman who was on the lookout for an attractive, older, lonely IAEA weapons inspector.”

Mary Jo leaned forward angrily. “He wasn’t lonely! He and I were planning to get married!”

Robert leaned forward in response. “Who proposed?”

“Well,” Mary Jo temporized defensively, “well . . . I suggested it and he agreed.”

“How much do you know about Dad’s history with women, Mary Jo?”

“I know he’s no saint!” she shot back.

“Look, Mary Jo, I like you a lot. You know that. And I care about my Dad. He has a lot of good qualities; I don’t want to bad mouth him to his fiancée. But I suggest that before you tie the knot, you have a chat with my mother.”

Her hands gripped the table. “What would she say?” she demanded.

He paused for several seconds. “She would say he’s promiscuous. That’s the word I should have used: ‘promiscuous’, not ‘lonely’.”

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Mary Jo inclined her head and bit the inside of her lip. “Actually, I think he is lonely. I think he needs someone like me.”

He gave a concessionary shrug. “Maybe, but how are we going to get him out of Evin Prison? I understand it’s even worse than Zahedan Prison, where I spent some time.”

“Yes, I know. I tried to get a visa to go and see David. When I told the Iranians that my fiancée was in Evin Prison, they immediately rejected my application. I think Evin is used for the worst enemies of Iran.” She paused, giving Robert a forlorn look. “There are a lot of agencies and a lot of people working on it, Rob. We’ve just got to keep the pressure on.”

A waitress approached them, pen in hand. “We’d better order, Rob. I’ve got to get back to work.”

“Is your office near here?”

“It’s just a couple of blocks away.”

“Can you show me where you work after lunch?”

She had failed to notice his teasing smile. “Sorry, Rob. No!”

He was grinning outright. “Well, I don’t have top secret clearance and the need to know, but I’ve been cleared for confidential and I have the desire to know. Would that be good enough?”

She suppressed a giggle. “What are you having for lunch, Rob?”

“What do you recommend?”

“I don’t come here very often, but the pasta is good. I usually have a salad.”

The waitress had just set their plates down.

Robert asked, “Could you bring some Parmesan, please?”

“Rob! You don’t put Parmesan on pasta with seafood!”

He glanced at her. “I’m not Italian, and I find that spaghetti likes being sprinkled with a little Parmesan, and the scampi don’t particularly mind.”

For a few moments, he sat looking at her. He remembered that she had been a rootless Army brat. Now, she was pretty

in a Midwestern country girl way: large blue-gray eyes; plump cheeks with a dusting of tiny freckles; small, elfin nose; and dark brown hair framing her face with a cascade of curls. But her mouth was her special feature: small, glossy and sensuous: he thought it made you want to kiss her. One would have guessed her to be in her late twenties, but based on what he knew of her history, he was reasonably sure she was about thirty-six. After all, she had served as an Air Force officer, worked at Sandia Labs, and now for Barnegat Services, a military intelligence subcontractor: she was bright and she was aware.

She felt his gaze on her and glanced up from her salad. “What?” she asked.

“I just want to understand the lady who wants to be my stepmother.”

She put down her fork. “Rob . . . I’m not interested in being your stepmother. I just want to be your father’s wife.”

“Don’t they kind of go together?”

“Not in my mind.”

“So, are we to be like stepsister and stepbrother?”

“I like that idea. Yes.”

“OK.” He remembered their age difference--he was two or three years younger--and then a year-old image of them flashed into consciousness: her bikini was adrift; they were kissing, and his fingers had found her intimacy. ‘No, Rob, we can’t,’ she had protested.

He came back to reality. “Well, I never had a sister, and I can’t think of a better one.”

She was pleased. “I think I told you that my brothers were both older. So I’ve never had a brother I could . . .” She paused to think of a phrase.

“. . . have as a friend?” he suggested.

“Yes! Exactly!”

They ate in companionable silence for a time. Then, she asked, “What are you going to be doing now that your adventures in the Middle East are over?”

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“This seems to be the big question at the Agency (Drug Enforcement Agency). My boss, who’s in Dubai, would like to use me in Pakistan. The assignment would be similar to what I did in Afghanistan: developing strategies to stop the flow of heroin through the country. But. . .”

“Rob!” she interrupted, “you did more than develop strategies. You were working undercover in enforcement!”

“Well, yes, but that’s the problem. The *Washington Post* article was great publicity for the Agency, but it also put my name and face into the public domain. I can’t possibly work in Afghanistan again. What I found was an acute embarrassment to the Counter-Narcotics people there. They will definitely not want me around, and neither will the Pakistanis. In fact, the Agency has decided not to place me in the Middle East again.”

“Does that mean Texas? Maybe with a promotion?”

“No. I think it probably means Latin America – with long hair, dark glasses and a moustache.”

She laughed. “OK, gringo man, where are you going?”

“Probably Peru, but they haven’t decided yet, and I’m in no hurry.”

“Not Columbia?”

“The production in Columbia is down. The world’s number one producer of cocaine is Peru now.”

Mary Jo was pensive. “Rob, is the Agency going to provide you with more backup? As I understand it, you were totally on your own in Afghanistan.”

“I was at first, but then I made some local contacts. The right local contacts are more valuable than a whole squad of foreign agents, because with the locals it’s possible to blend in, whereas the foreign agents just attract attention.”

“Don’t you get lonely on your own, and isn’t it dangerous?”

“I had the right local contacts and I didn’t get lonely.”

She smiled. “You’ll have to tell me about her. Was she the *Washington Post* journalist?”

He ignored the question. “The only time it really gets dicey is when somebody gets impatient and pulls out a gun.”

“Don’t you carry a gun, Rob?”

“No. When you’re alone, you’re always in the minority, so having a gun isn’t an advantage. Besides, guys in the drug business will rarely shoot an unarmed man – of course, they may do bad things to him later, but not right away.”

She leaned forward. “Rob?”

“Yes?”

“Tell me about the journalist. I seem to remember her by-line photo: attractive and a little older.”

“Yes, she is.”

“How much older?”

“Mid-forties.”

“Oh.”

“Well, you like older men; I happen to like this older woman.”

“A Demi Moore type?”

“Sort of, but brighter.”

“Where is she now?”

“She’s still in Kabul.”

“That’s a hell of a place for a single woman in her forties.”

“I know.”

She set down her coffee cup. “I’m going to take some leave.”

“Where are you going, Mary Jo?”

“I’m going down to Texas to see my father. Aunt Barbara says he’s pretty ill.”

“Isn’t she the lady who brought you up?”

“Yes. She’s my father’s sister and she, unlike me, is still in touch with him.”

“When was the last time you saw your father?”

She paused to think. “Ten or twelve years ago – for about an hour.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s stationed at Fort Hood in Texas. He’s in the hospital there.”

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“Do you know anything about his illness?”

She shook her head. “Aunt Barbara wasn’t able to find out – except that it’s serious – and she suggested I go see him.”

He nodded.

“And while I’m on the road, I thought I’d go see Aunt Barbara in San Diego. I haven’t seen her for a couple of years.”

She sat staring at her coffee cup and chewing the inside of her lip.

“Mind if I come with you, Mary Jo?”

She looked up at him. “Why would you want to come with me, Rob?”

“It sounds like an important trip.” She nodded dumbly. “And stressful,” he added.

“Texas will be stressful.”

“Well, isn’t that what brothers are for: to be there for a sister?”

For a moment, her lips trembled. She regained control. “But what about the Agency?”

“I’m on paid leave until they figure out what they want to do with me. So I’m at your disposal.”

Mary Jo was waiting near the United check-in desks at Baltimore-Washington Airport. There was a light blue carry-on suitcase beside her. “Got your boarding pass?” she asked.

“I checked in online.”

“OK. Let’s go.”

They made their way through security to gate 76, where United Flight 1204 was due to depart at 0739.

He looked at his watch. “We’ve got just over an hour. Do you want some coffee?”

“Sure. There’s a Costa Coffee down there.”

He took the top off his cappuccino, stirred it tentatively and glanced at her. Her face looked pale and drawn. *She probably didn’t sleep well last night*, he thought. “Any news?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I’ve got a rental car at the airport. It’s about an hour’s drive to Fort Hood.”

“Have you been there before?”

“Yes, but I don’t remember it very well. I was about nine. My dad was probably a captain then. We had a house – not very nice - on the base.”

“Did you ever think, when you were nine, *someday I’ll be coming back here as a grown-up woman with an important job – coming back to look after my father?*”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “No. I never had a thought like that. In fact, I wouldn’t have dared to think something like that.”

She drove the Ford Focus north from Austin on Interstate 35 toward Waco. At Belton, they turned west on Texas 190, and to the left, in the distance, they could see Stillhouse Hollow Lake, shimmering blue-green. They passed through Killeen, and at the first ‘Fort Hood Entrance’ sign they turned off onto T J Mills Boulevard. A white-gloved sentry with a holstered .45 pistol waved for her to stop.

“I’m here to see my father, Colonel Mignot, First Cavalry Division. He’s in the hospital.” She handed the sentry her Barnegat Services ID and driver’s license. He rubbed his thumb over the US government eagle. “What kind of work do you do, ma’am?”

“We’re consultants to the Defense Intelligence Agency.”

The young sentry nodded and returned her IDs deferentially. “This your husband, ma’am?” He gestured at Rob.

“No, he’s my brother.”

Rob reached across Mary Jo to hand over his Drug Enforcement Agency ID and driver’s license. The sentry considered the DEA ID carefully, as if might be a forgery. “You an agent, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Based south of here?”

“At one time I was, but I’m just back from Afghanistan.”

“Pretty rough time?”

“I wouldn’t particularly recommend it.”

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The sentry nodded and handed back the IDs. “Ma’am, you’ll have to go to the Army Medical Center. Take your first left onto Tank Destroyer Boulevard, and your first left again onto Wratten Drive. You’ll see a big parking lot on your left, and the medical center is across the street, behind the Post Exchange.”

Inside the medical center there was an Army nurse sitting at a desk. Apparently, she was updating a database; she wore a lieutenant’s single silver bar on her shoulder.

“Excuse me,” Mary Jo offered, “I’m here to see my father, Colonel Mignot. I understand he’s here in the hospital. He’s in the First Cavalry Division.”

The nurse looked up briefly at the two visitors; she nodded. “Let me see.” For a long minute she consulted her PC. “He’s been transferred to the Seton Medical Center in Austin, ma’am.”

“Oh! I thought he was here.”

“We haven’t the facilities to deal with heart attacks, ma’am. Seton is very good.” She glanced at her monitor. “He’s in intensive care there.”

The color drained from Mary Jo’s face. “When . . . When did he have the heart attack? Do you know?”

“I can’t say, ma’am. He was brought in here at five-ten Sunday morning. That was four days ago. He was medicated and transferred by ambulance to Seton at ten-fifteen am the same day.”

“Where . . . I don’t know the area at all. Can you tell me where Seton is?”

“Yes, of course. You’ll need to go down the I-35, and when you get into Austin, get off at 45th Street, and go west on 45th to Lamar Boulevard, then south to 38th Street. Seton will be a few blocks down on your right.”

Mary Jo turned to Robert. “Have you got that?”

“45th to Lamar to 38th.”

“Do you want me to drive, Mary Jo?”

“Yes.”

When they were on the I-35, he set the cruise control at 80.

“Can’t you go a little faster?” she asked.

“I’m already ten miles over the speed limit, Mary Jo. The Texas Highway Patrol can be unreasonable at times. I’ve had colleagues get locked up for going 85.”

“Sorry. I forgot you used to work in this state.”

He glanced over at her. She was sitting rigidly, eyes straight ahead, jaw muscles flexing in her pale cheeks. *I’ve got to get her talking*, he thought. “Tell me about your father, Mary Jo.”

“He’s a bastard.”

“Is that because he wasn’t much of a father?”

“Not only that. He was just impossible to please.”

“But you tried hard to please.”

“Yes! I did!”

“And you felt that he didn’t love you?”

“True.” She hesitated. “Except . . . sometimes . . . I thought, *Maybe he does.*”

“When was that, Mary Jo?”

“I don’t know. Just sometimes.” She put her head to one side. “He’d be gone for a couple of months. He’d come back. And he’d bring me a present.”

“What kind of a present?”

“One time he brought me a little white bear. I still have it, but one of its black eyes has come off.”

“So he thought of you, but he expected too much of you?”

She nodded. “I was a shy, awkward kid. Kind of a C student, not many friends, didn’t go for sports.”

“Until you moved in with your aunt in San Diego.”

“Yeah, but that was later. My dad used to be on my case all the time: ‘Why don’t you get better grades? You ought to have more friends! Why don’t you take up tennis?’ I felt like a real loser.”

“No hugs? No heart-to-heart talks?”

“No way! Are you kidding me? He was a real disciplinarian! The perfect Army officer: command and control!”

“That sounds familiar.”

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“OK. But your father is different. He cares about you.” She thought for a moment. “Let me put it this way, Rob. If I had been locked up in Iran and my dad was in Tehran working for the IAEA, do you think he would have traveled into eastern Iran to assassinate the man he thought he had executed me? No way! He would have said, ‘That stupid girl has gone and gotten herself killed! Too bad! But she never listened to me!’”

“I think you’ve been listening to your dad for the last fifteen years, Mary Jo.”

She turned a look of censure on Rob. “What are you talking about? I haven’t even seen the man for at least ten years!”

“What I mean is that in the last fifteen years you’ve accomplished a lot: degree in nuclear physics from Berkeley, four years as an Air Force officer, a good job at Sandia National Labs, then an even better job in Washington, and you’ve even bagged an Army general. Besides, I haven’t mentioned yet that you were an over-the-line fielding star.”

She laughed. “But I did that on my own – with some encouragement from Aunt Barbara.”

“I’m just saying that, without him being there to nag you, you found your confidence and you heard the echoes of his advice: ‘You can do better, Mary Jo’.”

“I still think he’s a bastard.”

The intensive care ward at Seton had a hushed air of technology at work. There were nurses in gray and white uniforms moving about like ghosts, but they seemed to be as attentive to the softly pinging machines as they were to the inert humanity in the beds.

“I’m here to see Colonel Mignot,” Mary Jo whispered.

“He’s next to the end on the left. Please don’t stay longer than fifteen minutes. He needs to rest.”

Slowly, Mary Jo made her way to her father’s bed; her eyes were fixed on the gray head. Robert followed, casting furtive glances at the patients on either side. She stopped at the bed, by his shoulder. “Dad.”

The man turned his head toward her voice; his eyes were open now. His face had a mottled, waxy look, which accentuated his age. The sweeping gray eyebrows and slit of a mouth seemed out of place. “Oh, it’s you, Mary Jo.” He spoke in a hoarse, deliberate voice, barely louder than a whisper.

“How are you, Dad?”

“Been better. What are you doing here? I thought you were in Washington.”

“I came to see you, Dad.”

“First time in about ten years.”

“You haven’t been ill before, Dad.”

“I was wounded in Iraq.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know, Mary Jo.” She nodded. “You still working for that DIA contractor?”

“Yes.”

“What do they pay you?”

“They pay me pretty well.”

“How much is ‘pretty well’?”

She tossed her head; there was an angry bite to her voice. “I’m paid about sixty percent more than an O6 (colonel) with thirty-five years’ service.”

“Trying to show up your old man, huh? But you don’t do much to protect America.”

“How do you know?”

He gave a soft chuckle and lifted his head slightly. “What’s happened to your general?”

“What general?”

“The one that Barbara says you’re going to marry.”

“He couldn’t make it.”

“Who’s that, then?”

“This is Robert Dawson, the general’s son.”

“Is he as useless as most general officers’ kids?”

“You haven’t the slightest idea who Robert Dawson is. How can you imply he’s useless?”

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“OK, boy, speak up. What do you do?”

“I’m a field agent with the Drug Enforcement Agency.”

“A ‘field agent’. That means you sit on the north bank of the Rio Grande and count the wetbacks through binoculars?”

“No, Dad, he’s just back from Afghanistan.”

“You drive a desk in Kabul?”

“No, I went undercover as an Afghan field hand.”

“You speak the lingo?”

“Yes, I speak Pashto and Farsi.”

“So what did you actually do?”

“Dad, he went into Iran and busted the biggest Iranian drug dealer. The story was written up in the *Washington Post*.”

Colonel Mignot glanced back and forth at Robert and Mary Jo. “You got designs on my daughter, boy?”

“Dad!”

“Probably, yes.”

Mary Jo held up a hand. “No, you don’t!”

Robert shrugged.

The colonel began to cough: a dry, feeble cough. When it subsided, he said, “Mary Jo, you’re wasting your time working for that DIA contractor. You ought to be in politics. Talk to the Democrats about a run for Congress. You’ve got a pretty fair education, a military background, you’re old enough, intelligent, have a pretty face and a nice pair of tits. All the men would vote for you!”

“I hate politics; it’s completely dishonest!”

The colonel gave a barely perceptible shrug. “You can’t be squeamish if you want to get ahead in life!” He turned away and pressed a button that was hanging over the side of his bed.

A nurse approached. “What is it, Colonel?”

His voice was strained now. “I have that pain again.”

“I’ll call the doctor.”

Mary Jo said, “We’ll wait outside, but could you ask the doctor to come and speak with us when he’s available?”

“Yes, ma’am, of course.”

They sat on the hard, blue plastic chairs which were scattered around an alcove outside intensive care. Mary Jo was staring angrily at the doors.

Robert said, "Your father is a bit of a bully."

"That's putting it kindly."

"I think you handled him very well, considering that he's your father, sick and disagreeable."

"He's always been disagreeable, and probably a little sick." She turned to face Robert. Her face was distorted with inner pain. She exhaled heavily. "I'm a wreck inside. How can he do this to me? How can I let it happen? Asking 'where is your general?' Telling me I have 'a nice pair of tits!' What kind of a way is that to talk to your daughter?"

She looked searchingly at Robert.

"Did he treat your brothers that way, and your mother?"

She considered for a moment. "My brothers are older – three and five years older. He bullied them, too, but it was more direct, less insidious, and they fought back. I remember he had physical fights with each of them. He'd win, of course, and when he was home, they made themselves very scarce. When my older brother was seventeen, he had a serious punch-up with my dad. I think they really hurt each other. My brother left and joined the Marine Corps out of spite. After that, my father was civil to Jeff, my younger brother, but two years later, he joined the Marines, too. When my brothers left, my father took his frustration out on my mother and me."

"How did she deal with it?"

"She was his doormat. In a way, it was good that he was distracted by his affairs. When he came home she was either drunk or asleep."

"I guess that made it even worse for you."

"I don't know which was worse: being harassed by my father or watching my mother drink herself to death."

Robert shook his head in wonder. "You are amazing!" She gave him a skeptical look. "I mean," he continued, "you

could have ended up on welfare in Rolando - East San Diego - with four little kids, no husband, no job, and a serious drug problem.”

She gave a brief laugh. “I know what you mean. I don’t know what set me right. Most of it was Aunt Barbara, some was Berkeley, and a lot was the Air Force.”

“And maybe a tiny bit was the echo of ‘You can do better, Mary Jo!’”

She glared at him. “What are you trying to do? Defend my bastard of a father?”

“Well, you have to admit that he never wrote you off. He kept trying – in his own very offensive way - to get you to achieve the potential he saw in you.”

She looked at him for a long moment. “That’s your theory,” she said quietly.

“I’m looking for Colonel Mignot’s daughter.” It was a sandy-haired man – about fifty – with a ginger moustache. He was wearing baggy gray trousers and a rumpled white jacket.

“I’m Mary Jo Mignot.”

“Hello. I’m Doctor McCarthy. Your father has been assigned to my care.”

“Oh, thank you. I guess my father’s had a heart attack.”

Doctor McCarthy sat opposite Mary Jo. “Yes. As far as we know it was his first heart attack. And it is quite serious, but what we’re concerned about at the moment is the risk of a thrombosis in his heart.”

“A thrombosis is a blood clot, right?”

“Yes. What happens with some patients is that during a heart attack they can get into atrial fibrillation. This is rapid, ineffective beating of the heart: palpitations. When this occurs, the atrium is not pumping blood properly, and, over time, a clot can form. The concern is that the clot, or a portion of it, can leave the heart and get lodged somewhere in the body.”

“You mean like a deep vein thrombosis?”

“What we may have is an arterial thrombosis. This is more serious, because, if it gets lodged somewhere in the body, it can cut off the supply of oxygen to the affected area.”

“Can’t you give him anti-coagulants?”

“Yes, of course. We are doing that, but one has to be careful of strong anti-coagulants, because they can cause internal bleeding.”

“Can you operate on him to remove the clot?”

“First of all, we’re not sure that there is a clot. The only indication we have is a slight abnormality in the electrical wave from his left atrium. There could be other causes for this.”

“Isn’t the pain he is experiencing an indicator?”

“No. His pain is quite generalized. Going back to your question about surgery, it would have to be open heart surgery, which would be risky for a man of his age. Moreover, one has to bear in mind that he’s just had a heart attack, so his heart muscle is weakened. Then there’s the question of dealing with the thrombosis. In looking for it, and trying to remove it, one has to be extremely careful not to dislodge it.”

Mary Jo chewed he lip pensively. “If he doesn’t have a clot, or if you’re able to dissolve it, what is the outlook, doctor?”

“I would say his outlook is quite good. He should have a bypass operation, and I think the military will want him to retire, but other than that . . .”

There was a moment of reflective silence.

Robert asked, “I guess you’re a heart specialist, Doctor McCarthy.”

“Yes, I’m a cardiovascular surgeon.”

Mary Jo asked, “Will you let us know if there’s any significant change, Doctor?”

“Yes, of course. Would you just leave your phone number with the nurses?”

Mary Jo left her cell phone number with one of the nurses. “I’m sorry I can’t tell you yet where we’re staying. We had a reservation in Killeen, because I thought my father was in the

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hospital in Fort Hood. Do you have any suggestions about where to stay in Austin?"

"Have you been to Austin before?"

"No, I haven't. Have you been here, Rob?"

He shook his head.

"Well, ma'am, there is the Radisson right on the Colorado River and it's very nice, but kind of expensive. There's also a Hilton at the Convention Center. I think it's a little less. You can see it from the interstate going south."

Mary Jo went to the check-in desk at the Hilton. Robert sauntered over to the concierge's desk. *I don't want her to think I'm expecting us to share a room. So I'll check in after she's finished.*

She came over to the concierge's desk. "Rob, I'm in room 814. Shall we meet down here for dinner?"

"Yes. He recommends Eddie V's restaurant on Fifth Street. Short walk; very good seafood. Shall we make a reservation?"

"Sure. Seven-thirty?"

"OK. See you at seven-fifteen."

His phone was ringing; Robert struggled into consciousness and onto his elbows. It was his cell phone on the bedside table. Mary Jo's name on the screen didn't quite register. "Hello."

Her words tumbled frantically into his ear. "Rob, the hospital called. My father's having some kind of attack. I need to go right away."

"OK. I'll meet you in the lobby in five minutes."

He switched on a light and glanced at his watch. Three-thirteen. Two minutes later, he was dressed and headed for the elevators.

Mary Jo was at the ground floor elevators, disoriented and distraught. He steered her toward the garage elevators. "What did they say, Mary Jo?"

"They said, 'Your father's having an attack. I recommend you come right away'."

"That was it?"

William Peace

“Yes.”

The muted gloom of intensive care was relieved only by the glow and periodic beep of monitors.

“Miss Mignot, your father is having a cerebrovascular event. Doctor McCarthy has recommended surgery. You’ll need to sign this consent form.”

“You mean he’s having a stroke.”

“Yes. It’s quite urgent that we get him to OR.”

“Is Doctor McCarthy going to operate?”

“No. Doctor Banerjee is on his way in. He’s a neurosurgeon.”

“I want to see my father.”

“Yes, of course.”

Her father’s mouth was open and he was staring fixedly at the ceiling. She thought, at first, *He’s dead*. But then she saw his chest moving – almost imperceptibly. *He’s breathing*.

“Dad. Dad?” She reached out and touched his shoulder. There was warmth, but no response. “Dad, it’s Mary Jo. Can you hear me?”

“I’m afraid he’s not conscious, Miss Mignot. You’ll have to excuse us.”

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