

MIKE LAWSON

From the author of *The Inside Ring*

THE SECOND PERIMETER

"A deadly and suspenseful war of attack and reprisal." —Thomas Perry, author of *Nightlife*



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PROLOGUE

From his office window Norton could see a Los Angeles class attack submarine moored at one of the piers. He was too far away to read the sub's hull number but he thought it was the USS *Asheville*, SSN 758. He had worked on the *Asheville* last year, spent a lot of time drinking with some of the chiefs. He stared at the sub a minute longer, then realizing he was just stalling, turned the rod and closed the venetian blinds. It was unlikely that anyone would be able to see what he was doing through a fourth-floor window but he couldn't take that chance.

Norton turned away from the window and peered over the partitions that enclosed his cubicle. It was lunchtime. There were four guys playing cribbage two cubicles over, and near the door, a secretary buffing her nails. There wasn't anybody else in the office that he could see. He had sent Mulherin up to bullshit with the secretary. Mulherin was good at bullshit. If anyone started to come down the aisle in Norton's direction, Mulherin would slow the person down and say something to warn him.

Having no further reason to delay, Norton pulled the chessboard out of his backpack. The board was thirteen inches square and an inch and a quarter thick, a little thicker than most chessboards. He pressed down on one side of the chessboard and a thin door popped open and a dozen chess pieces spilled out onto his desk. He then tipped the chessboard downward and a slim laptop computer slid out of the hollow space between the top and bottom of the chessboard.

The chessboard had been Carmody's idea.

After he used the laptop, Norton would slide it back into the hidden compartment in the chessboard, put the chessboard on top of his file cabinet, and arrange some pieces on the board to make it look like he was playing a game with Mulherin. What a joke that was: Mulherin playing chess.

Getting the laptop into the shipyard was the riskiest part of the whole operation. Norton only needed to use it a few minutes a day, and when he did, he'd do like he was doing now— use it at lunchtime with Mulherin standing guard. But he'd been worried about bringing it in. In fact he'd been sweating so hard he was surprised one of the jarheads at the gate hadn't noticed.

Personal computers were prohibited inside the facility— only government-issue equipment was allowed— and if the marines guarding the gates had picked him that morning for one of their random security checks, and if by some chance they had discovered the laptop hidden in the chessboard, he would have been screwed. Absolutely screwed.

But the likelihood of that happening had been small. If the terrorist threat level was high, the marines searched everything coming through the gates. Cars, knapsacks, purses, lunch boxes. Everything. But Norton had brought the laptop in when the threat level was normal and he had waited until there was no backup at the gate, a lot of people bitching that they needed to get to work, which tended to make the marines rush their searches. That had been Carmody's idea too, going in when the line was long. Carmody was a smart bastard.

Norton realized at that moment that it wasn't the marines that he'd been worried about. It was

Carmody. Carmody scared the hell out of him.

DeMarco pulled his car into a parking space at the Goose Creek Golf Club in Leesburg, Virginia. He got out of the car, shut the door, and had walked twenty yards before he remembered that he hadn't locked the car. He went back to the car, *jammed* down the knob to lock the door, then slammed the door harder than necessary. It bugged him, particularly this morning, that his Volvo was so damn old that it didn't have one of those cool little beeper things to lock the doors.

On his way into work DeMarco had taken a detour to a used car dealership in Arlington. He'd passed by the place a couple of days ago and had seen a silver BMW Z3 sitting on the corner of the lot, posed like a work of art. The car had sixty-four thousand miles on the odometer, the leather seats were sun-faded, and DeMarco wasn't sure he could afford it—but he wanted a convertible and he was sick to death of his Swedish box on wheels. He had just started to dicker with the salesman when Mahoney's secretary called and told him that Mahoney wanted him down at Goose Creek before he teed off at nine.

He found Mahoney on the practice green, about to attempt an eight-foot putt. DeMarco watched in silence as Mahoney squared his big body over the ball, took in a breath, and stroked the ball. He hit it straight but too hard, and the ball rimmed the cup and shot off perpendicular to its original vector.

"Son of a bitch," Mahoney muttered. "Greens're fast today."

Yeah right, DeMarco thought, *like they waxed the grass just before you got here.*

Mahoney was almost six feet tall and broad across the chest and back and butt. A substantial, hard gut gave balance to his body. He was in his sixties; his hair was white and full; his features all large and well formed; and his eyes were the watery, red-veined blue of a heavy drinker. He dropped another ball onto the grass.

"The guy I want you to meet," Mahoney said, looking down at the ball, "will be here in a minute. He just went up to the clubhouse to get us some beer." Mahoney stroked the ball smoothly and this one dropped in. "Now that's better," he said.

DeMarco knew Mahoney had been a fair athlete in high school—football, basketball, and baseball. He hadn't competed in college because he went into the marines at seventeen, and when he was discharged, his right knee shredded by shrapnel, the only sports he played had involved beer steins and coeds. But even in his sixties he exhibited the hand-eye coordination of an athlete, and in spite of his size, moved lightly on his feet.

"Here he comes now," Mahoney said, dropping a third ball onto the practice green, this one about ten feet from the cup.

Walking toward the green, carrying a small cooler designed to fit in the basket behind the seat of a golf cart, was a man about Mahoney's age. He was five eight, stocky, and had a round head with a flat

nose and short gray hair. As he got closer, DeMarco could see his eyes: bright blue and surrounded by a million crow's feet from squinting into the sun. He had the eyes of a fighter pilot—which he'd once been. The man was the Secretary of the Navy, Frank Hathaway.

Hathaway, in turn, studied DeMarco, probably wondering what a hard-looking guy in a suit was doing standing on the practice green. DeMarco was five eleven and had broad shoulders, big arms, and a heavy chest. He was a good-looking man— full dark hair, a strong nose, a dimple in a big chin, and blue eyes— but he looked tough, tougher than he really was. A friend had once said that DeMarco looked like a guy you'd see on *The Sopranos*, a guy standing behind Tony while Tony hit someone with a bat. DeMarco hadn't thought that funny.

Hathaway acknowledged DeMarco with a nod then said to Mahoney, "Al's in the parking lot, talking on his cell phone. He'll meet us on the first tee. Andy won't be able to make it though. His secretary called and said there's a fire drill in progress, two Saudis they caught trying to cross in from Canada up near Buffalo." Hathaway put the cooler on the ground near the golf cart and added, "I wouldn't have Andy's job for all the tea in China."

Andy, DeMarco knew, was General Andrew Banks, Secretary of Homeland Security.

Mahoney stroked the ball toward the hole. It dropped in. "Oh, yeah," Mahoney said. Gesturing with his putter at DeMarco, Mahoney said, "Frank, this is Joe DeMarco, the guy I was telling you about."

Hathaway stuck out a small, hard hand and DeMarco shook it.

"John says you do odd jobs for Congress," Hathaway said to DeMarco.

"Yes, sir," DeMarco said.

John was John Fitzpatrick Mahoney, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, and DeMarco worked for him— although no organizational chart showed this to be the case. DeMarco had a small office in the subbasement of the Capitol and he performed for Mahoney those tasks that the Speaker preferred not to dole out to his legitimate staff. DeMarco liked to think of himself as Mahoney's personal troubleshooter— but odd-jobs guy was accurate enough.

"There's Al," Mahoney said, pointing his blunt chin at a golf cart driven by a man so tall that his head almost touched the canvas roof of the cart. DeMarco recognized him too: Albert Farris, a onetime forward for the Portland Trail Blazers and currently the senior senator from Oregon.

Just four guys playing a round of golf: a United States senator, the Speaker of the House, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Secretary of the Navy. The fact that it was a weekday morning could mean that something more was going on than a game of golf— or it could mean they all just felt like playing. You never knew.

"Joe, do you golf?" Hathaway said.

“Uh, well...,” DeMarco said.

“Yeah, he plays,” Mahoney said as he pulled a can of beer from the cooler and popped the top.

“Well since Andy can’t make it, why don’t you play the front nine with us?” Hathaway said. “You ride with me and I’ll tell you what I need while we’re playing.”

Meaning Hathaway didn’t want to delay his game talking to DeMarco about whatever this odd job was.

“I’m not exactly dressed for it,” DeMarco said, gesturing at his clothes. DeMarco was wearing a freshly dry-cleaned suit, a white shirt, and his favorite tie. “And I don’t have any clubs,” he added already knowing that the only excuse that would work was polio.

“Aw, just take off your jacket,” Mahoney said. “It’s fuckin’ golf, not football. And you can share Frank’s clubs. Let’s get goin’.”

Shit. *And* he was wearing brand-new loafers and they’d cost him a hundred and fifty bucks on sale.

“Yeah, sounds great,” DeMarco said. He removed his tie, folded it carefully, and put it in the inside pocket of his suit jacket. He then took off his suit jacket and placed it neatly in the little basket on the golf cart. Immediately after he did so, Mahoney put the beer cooler in the basket, squashing down his jacket.

At the first tee he was introduced to Senator Farris. Farris was six foot seven. He had no excess fat on his body and his arms still looked strong enough to rip a rebound out of an opponent’s hands. During his playing days he’d been the team enforcer, the guy they sent into the game to cripple the opposition’s star. Farris’s best shot had been an elbow to the ribs. He had short dark hair with a small bald spot on the top of his head, big ears, a beaky nose, and an expression on his face that seemed far too serious for someone about to play a friendly game of golf.

Hathaway told Farris that Banks wouldn’t be coming and that DeMarco would be riding with him. “That’s good,” Farris said, “because I want Mahoney with me so I can keep an eye on him.”

“Who’s up?” Mahoney said, ignoring Farris’s comment.

“I mean it, Mahoney,” Farris said. “We’re playing by the rules today. No mulligans, no gimme putts and no, I repeat *no*, free kicks outta the rough.”

“Aw,” Mahoney said, “you’re just sore ’cause I kicked your ass last time.”

“You didn’t kick my ass!” Farris yelled, then immediately looked around to make sure no one had heard him. Lowering his voice he said, “You won by one friggin’ stroke and I still think you move your ball on the tenth hole.”

“Pure bullshit,” Mahoney said. “Now get your skinny butt up there and tee off.”

Jesus, DeMarco was thinking. And these guys actually run the damn country.

Farris’s drive found the left side of the fairway two hundred and forty yards from the tee. Mahoney’s tee shot was slightly longer, also ending up on the left edge of the fairway. Hathaway, who didn’t have the bulk of the other two men, hit his shot a respectable two ten and it landed square in the middle of the fairway, as if the Titleist was a wire-guided missile.

This wasn’t good.

DeMarco took a couple of practice swings with the driver he’d selected from Hathaway’s bag. The grip on the club didn’t feel right; it was too small for his hand, or something. “Uh, you know, I haven’t played in a couple of months,” DeMarco said.

“Yeah, yeah, come on, come on, take your shot,” Mahoney said.

Mahoney was rushing the game and DeMarco suspected that this was a tactic to defeat Farris. Mahoney was never in a hurry. Ever. He did whatever he was doing at a pace that suited him. At his level, the next meeting didn’t start until he got there.

DeMarco swung. He made good contact. It felt good. It sounded good. And the ball sliced so far to the right that it ended up on the adjacent fairway.

“Christ, Joe,” Mahoney said. “You play that way, we’ll be here all day.”

As Hathaway drove the golf cart over to find DeMarco’s ball, he said, “It’s my nephew, my sister’s kid. He’s an engineer and he works at this navy shipyard. The thing is, he thinks some guys out there are committing fraud.”

“What kind of fraud?”

“I’m not too clear on that,” Hathaway said. “Something to do with some kind of bogus study and the people doing it overcharging the government. Dave, my nephew, he tried to tell his bosses what was going on, but according to my sister, they blew him off. Which is why she called me, all pissed off, demanding I do something. Where the hell’d your ball go, Joe? I know it’s in these trees somewhere.”

DeMarco topped the ball on his next shot and it went about twenty yards. It was Hathaway’s midget-sized irons, that’s what the problem was. He hit a third shot and he was finally on the fairway—the right fairway.

“So anyway,” Hathaway said, when they were back in the cart, “I’d just like you to check the kid’s story out and tell me if he’s really onto something. John says you’ve done stuff like this before and I wouldn’t think this would be all that hard.”

“I’ve been involved with whistle-blowers before but, well...”

“Yes, Joe?”

“Well, why don’t you just call up somebody who works for you and ask them to look into it?”

Before Hathaway could respond there was a commotion across the fairway. Farris was yelling at Mahoney, pointing a long finger at something on the ground at Mahoney’s feet. Mahoney had probably claimed that his ball was on the concrete cart path and the rules allowed him to move it. Whether his ball had actually been on the cart path was most likely Farris’s issue.

“Jesus,” Hathaway said, shaking his head. “Those guys are so damn competitive they take the fun out of the game. And Mahoney, well, I think he does bend the rules a bit.”

No shit, DeMarco thought.

“You were asking why I didn’t have somebody in my chain of command investigate this thing,” Hathaway said. “The problem is, I’m the Secretary of the Navy, Joe. If I told my people to look into it, even if I told them to be discreet, in two hours there’d be twenty NCIS agents running around the shipyard questioning every swinging dick who works there. I don’t want to cause that kind of ruckus based on a phone call from my sister. And, well, to tell you the truth, there’s something else bothering me. Hathaway turned and looked away for a moment as if telling the truth bothered him. “You see, both my sister *and* her kid— it must be genetic— they both tend to be a little, ah, dramatic.”

Now this was starting to make sense. Hathaway didn’t trust his nephew and if he launched an official investigation based on a tip from a relative and the relative turned out to be wrong, Hathaway would be doubly embarrassed.

“I see,” DeMarco said.

“So just check this out quietly. Okay?” Hathaway said. “Go talk to my nephew and see what he says. Interview these guys he’s complaining about. If it turns out that there’s something to what he’s saying, I’ll have facts from an independent source— Congress— and *then* I’ll have it officially investigated.”

“Okay,” DeMarco said, not that he really had a choice.

On the sixth hole, Mahoney’s and DeMarco’s balls were both in the rough, approximately twenty yards apart. Farris was on the other side of the fairway looking for his ball and Hathaway, as usual, was in the center of the fairway.

Mahoney looked down at his ball— it was behind a small tree— then he looked over to where Farris was standing. “C’mere a minute,” Mahoney said to DeMarco. DeMarco figured Mahoney wanted to know what he and Hathaway had been talking about.

As DeMarco approached Mahoney, he heard Farris yell, “Hey, Mahoney! What the hell are you doing?”

over there, Mahoney?”

DeMarco looked over at Farris, and when he turned back toward Mahoney, Mahoney's ball was no longer behind the tree. Mahoney had used DeMarco to block Farris's view.

On the putting green, Farris said, “DeMarco, what did Mahoney do back there? Did he kick his ball out?”

“No, sir,” DeMarco said.

“Don't you dare lie to me, DeMarco. I'm a United States senator and that fat son of a bitch is only a congressman. Now tell me the truth, son. Did he move his ball?”

“Come on, come on, let's get goin' here,” Mahoney said. “And as usual, you're away, Farris.”

Farris's ball was about six feet from the cup. As Farris took his putter from his bag, Mahoney said to Hathaway, “Frank, I'll betcha a beer Farris two-putts this hole. Just like when he choked on that first throw in the playoffs in Chicago.”

DeMarco saw the senator's face flush crimson but he didn't say anything. Farris took his position over his ball, adjusted his feet, took in a breath, and stroked the ball. He hit the ball on line, but too hard, and it hit the back of the cup, popped up, and came to rest two feet from the hole. Farris's lips moved in a silent curse and he glared at Mahoney. Mahoney smiled and cleaned off the head of his putter with a grass-stained towel.

When they arrived at the clubhouse after the ninth hole, DeMarco took his rumpled suit jacket out of the golf cart basket. His shirt was soaked through with sweat, there were grass stains on the cuffs of his pants, and his new shoes were scuffed and filled with sand.

“I'll give you a call as soon as I know something, Mr. Secretary,” DeMarco said to Hathaway as he tried to smooth the wrinkles out of his jacket.

“Yeah, sure,” Hathaway said. He wasn't listening; he was adding up his score. DeMarco could tell that Hathaway wasn't really all that concerned about fraudulent activities taking place at some shipyard. What he had wanted was a way to get his sister off his back, and now, thanks to Mahoney, he had one. Joe DeMarco, hotshot investigator from Congress.

Mahoney, his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth, was also adding up his and Farris's score on the front nine. “You shot a forty-one, Farris,” Mahoney said. He paused a minute then said, “I got a forty.”

“You lemme see that damn card, Mahoney,” Farris said.

Emma and Christine were sitting in white wicker chairs on Emma's patio drinking mimosas and reading the morning papers. They were a portrait of domestic contentment. Beyond the patio was Emma's English garden. DeMarco knew it was an English garden because Emma had told him so, and an English garden, as far as he could tell, was one in which the gardener planted a thousand long-stemmed flowers in no discernible pattern, all clustered together.

Emma was wearing white linen pants and a blouse that DeMarco thought of as Mexican—an off-the-shoulder number embroidered with small red-and-orange flowers. Christine, a thirty-something blonde who played cello for the National Symphony, wore a tank top and shorts. Christine had the most beautiful legs that DeMarco had ever seen, but since Christine was Emma's lover he made a point of not staring at them. In fact, his eyeballs were getting cramps from the strain of not staring.

Emma was tall and slim. She had regal features and short hair that was either gray or blond, depending on the light. She was at least ten years older than DeMarco but in much better condition. She looked over the top of her newspaper as DeMarco approached. Her eyes were the color of the water in a Norwegian fjord—and usually just as warm. “Well, you're a mess, Joseph,” she said when she saw the condition of his clothes. “What on earth have you been doing?”

“Golfing with the leaders of the free world,” DeMarco said.

“Yes, that makes sense,” Emma said. “Would you like something to drink? Mimosa, perhaps?”

“Orange juice would be great. No bubbly.”

DeMarco took a seat next to Emma at the patio table, a seat where Emma blocked his view of Christine's legs. He thought this seating arrangement most prudent. He and Christine exchanged how-are-yous, then Christine went back to reading her paper, ignoring DeMarco as she usually did. Maybe if he played an oboe she'd find him more interesting.

“What do you know about the navy, Emma?” DeMarco asked.

“A lot, most of which I'd just as soon forget,” Emma said.

DeMarco had known this before he asked the question. Although she never discussed it, Emma had worked for the Defense Intelligence Agency and she had worked at a level where the word “classified” didn't come close to defining the degree of secrecy that had applied to her activities. She claimed to have retired from the agency a few years ago, but DeMarco wasn't certain that this was really the case. Emma was the most enigmatic person he'd ever encountered—and she delighted in being so.

“How 'bout navy shipyards?” DeMarco asked.

“A little,” Emma said. “Now would you like to tell me why you're asking silly questions?”

DeMarco told her about Frank Hathaway's problem and asked her a few questions about shipyards and the people who worked in them.

"I didn't know the navy had its own shipyards," DeMarco said.

"The navy operates four major shipyards in this country," Emma said in her most pedantic tone. "Most of the employees are civil service and their primary function is to overhaul and refuel nuclear powered warships."

"Well I'll be damned," DeMarco said.

"Most assuredly," Emma muttered and poured another mimosa for herself and Christine. These girls were going to have a pretty good buzz on by lunchtime, DeMarco was thinking.

"Why's Mahoney loaning you to Hathaway for this thing anyway?" Emma asked as she handed Christine a glass.

"I dunno," DeMarco said. "He plays golf with the guy; maybe they're pals. But more than likely he wants something out of the navy for his district and figures doing Hathaway a favor can't hurt. With Mahoney, you never know. A man who drinks beer at nine in the morning is hard to predict."

"Humph," Emma said, the sound reflecting her opinion of Mahoney. "What shipyard does the engineer work at, by the way? The one in Norfolk?"

"No," DeMarco said. "One out in someplace called Bremerton, near Seattle."

When DeMarco said "Seattle," Christine's pretty blond head popped up from behind the newspaper she'd been reading. "Seattle," she said to Emma. There was a twinkle in her eyes and DeMarco could imagine what she had looked like at the age of twelve, tormenting her younger brother.

Emma smiled at her lover then said to DeMarco, "Joe, considering my vast knowledge of all things military and your limited knowledge of all things in general, I believe I should go to Bremerton with you."

DeMarco met Emma a few years ago by saving her life. Luck and timing had more to do with the outcome of the event than any heroics on DeMarco's part, but since that day she occasionally helped DeMarco with his assignments. She would provide advice, and if needed, access to various illicit experts—hackers, electronic eavesdroppers, and, once, a safecracker—all people connected in some way to the shadow world of the DIA. On rare occasions she'd personally assist him, but DeMarco usually had to grovel a bit before she'd help—and yet here she was volunteering.

"What's going on?" DeMarco said.

"It just so happens that Christine's symphony is playing in Seattle for a couple of days, starting the

day after tomorrow,” Emma said, patting one of Christine’s perfect thighs.

“Ah,” DeMarco said, understanding immediately. If Emma helped DeMarco, the Speaker’s budget would pick up the tab for her trip to Seattle. Emma was fairly wealthy but she was also a bit of cheapskate. Maybe that’s why she was wealthy.

Carmody was at the rendezvous point at exactly eight p.m. This time the woman had picked a little used lakeside picnic area fifteen miles from Bremerton. She picked a different place every time they met.

He knew he'd have to wait at least twenty minutes, maybe longer. She was already here, somewhere, but she'd be watching to make sure Carmody hadn't been followed. Half an hour later he saw her. She materialized out of a small stand of trees on his right-hand side and began to walk toward him. She was dressed in black— black jeans, a long-sleeved black T-shirt, black Nikes— and carried a shoulder bag. She was tall and lithe and she moved quickly but gracefully. When she entered his car, she didn't greet Carmody. She unzipped the shoulder bag, took out a laptop computer, and turned it on.

The woman's hair was dark, cut short and spiky, the style as edgy as her personality. Carmody figured she was about forty, though it was hard to be certain. She didn't have a single wrinkle on her face and the reason for this, Carmody believed, was because she was the most unemotional person he had ever encountered. Her face never changed expression. He had never, ever seen her smile.

The laptop ready, she finally spoke to Carmody. "Give them to me," she said.

Carmody reached beneath the driver's seat and took out a flat plastic case holding an unlabeled compact disc. He handed it to her.

"Just one?" she said.

"Yeah."

She started to say something but checked herself. She put the CD into the laptop's drive. When the document opened, she scrolled down a few pages, stopped and read the words on the screen, then scrolled down a few more pages. She did this for about ten minutes, never speaking. She didn't examine the entire document, that would have taken too long, but she looked at enough of it to satisfy herself. She finally shut down the laptop and returned it to her shoulder bag.

"You have to do better than this, Carmody," she said. "In a month, you've only delivered seven items."

"We have to be careful," Carmody said. "And sometimes the material you want just isn't available because somebody else is using it, so we have to wait."

The woman's eyes locked on to Carmody's. Her eyes were black and they were the coldest, most lifeless eyes that Carmody had ever seen in either a man or a woman, eyes completely devoid of warmth and humor and humanity. Carmody doubted that she had been born with eyes like that, something in her life had caused them to be that way.

“Carmody, do you understand what’s at stake here?” she said.

That wasn’t really a question— it was a threat.

“Yeah, I understand,” Carmody said. His big hands were gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles were white. And she noticed.

Carmody watched as she walked across the grass and disappeared once again into the trees, back into the night she had come from.

Emma caught her flight to Seattle out of Dulles International Airport. She chose this airport not only so she could fly with Christine and the orchestra but also because from Dulles you could get a nonstop flight to Seattle. DeMarco didn't like flying out of Dulles because the airport was thirty miles from his house. Reagan National, on the other hand, was just a ten-minute cab ride away. He would have to change planes in Chicago and his flight would take an hour longer than Emma's, but if you added up total travel time, *door-to-door* travel time, his arithmetic said he was making the wiser choice.

He didn't.

His flight boarded right on schedule at nine a.m. then sat on the runway for two hours awaiting the installation of some malfunctioning part. DeMarco didn't know anything about airplanes but when the pilot explained the purpose of the part, it didn't sound terribly significant—like it was the redundant backup gizmo to the backup gizmo, the aeronautical equivalent of the seat belt indicator in your car not working.

Naturally, since his flight left Washington two hours behind schedule, he missed his connecting flight in Chicago and arrived in Seattle at three a.m. instead of five that evening as originally planned. He then had to drive another hour to reach Bremerton. Consequently he was tired and not in the best of moods the next day as he and Emma waited for Dave Whitfield, Frank Hathaway's nephew.

Whitfield had agreed to meet them in the bar of the motel where DeMarco was staying, a place that overlooked a quiet, tree-lined inlet called Oyster Bay. Emma was staying in a much more expensive establishment in Seattle with Christine. While they waited for Whitfield, Emma informed DeMarco that her trip from the East Coast had been delightful: an upgrade to first class, a good movie, and nothing but tailwinds all the way. Emma annoyed him.

Dave Whitfield entered the bar as Emma was talking. Frank Hathaway had referred to his nephew as a "kid" but Whitfield appeared to be in his late thirties, a kid only from Hathaway's perspective. He was a tall, loose-jointed man; his hair was wispy blond and already fleeing his head; and he wore wire-rimmed glasses with square frames over intense brown eyes.

Whitfield was impressed with DeMarco's congressional identification. He was impressed—but he wasn't happy. "Man, I can't believe you're talking to me," he said. "I mean I didn't want *this* to happen. I just thought my uncle would, you know, call a few people."

"Your uncle is the Secretary of the Navy," DeMarco said.

"Yeah, I know, but sheesh. I could get in trouble for this. You guys should be talking to shipyard management, not me."

"Relax, Dave," Emma said. "We just want a little background information from you so that when we do talk to management we'll have something specific to ask. We won't even mention your name."

Before Whitfield could say anything else, Emma said, "Would you like a beer?"

"Yeah, sure, I guess," Whitfield said, surprised that a government investigator would offer him a drink.

After Whitfield had gotten his beer, Emma eased him along by saying, "Why don't you tell us what you do. Let's start there."

"I'm an instructor," Whitfield said. "I—"

"Your uncle said you were an engineer," DeMarco said.

"I am. I'm a nuclear engineer. And I'm an instructor. Basically what I do is teach the new engineers how the reactor plants in the ships work."

"That's good," Emma said. "So now why don't you tell us about these concerns you have." Emma kept speaking to Whitfield in this low, soothing voice, as if he was some skittish, balding horse. DeMarco found her talking this way unnatural; Emma rarely tried to soothe.

"Okay," Whitfield said, "because somebody needs to look into this thing. Nobody at the shipyard believes me."

"So what's the problem?" DeMarco said impatiently.

"It's these two guys I used to work with. They worked at the shipyard about twenty-five years and then they took an early out— meaning they retired when they were fifty-two or fifty-three instead of fifty-five. People don't normally do that because they lose a percentage of their retirement pay. Anyway, as soon as they retired, they were hired by this company to do a study on how we train our engineers. For some of the jobs, the training takes about two years."

"Two years!" DeMarco said.

"We're talking about *reactor plants*," Whitfield said, glaring at DeMarco. "We don't let some kid right out of college run around a nuclear submarine unless he knows what he's doing. Anyway, the company these guys went to work for told the navy— I don't know who— that they could figure out a way to complete the training in half the time for half the cost. Sounds like total bullshit to me, but somebody bought their story."

In other words, DeMarco was thinking, this company had been hired to figure out a way to do Whitfield's job better than he was doing it, meaning Whitfield was probably more than a little biased.

"But the thing is," Whitfield said, "these two guys are a couple of losers."

"Are you saying they're not *qualified* to do this study, and you think this is fraudulent?" Emma said.

“No,” Whitfield said. “They’re qualified, I guess. They’re ex-navy, they were reactor operators on subs, and like I said they worked in the shipyard for more than twenty years. So on paper, they’re qualified. But they’re just...I don’t know. *Incompetent*. Before they retired they were always in trouble for something, not paying attention to details, doing sloppy work, not showing up on time. Like I said, losers. It’s hard to believe somebody would hire them.”

“I’m confused, Dave,” Emma said. “What exactly is it that you think they’re doing that’s illegal.”

“I’m not sure.”

“What!” DeMarco said.

“Go on, Dave,” Emma said, giving DeMarco a settle-down look.

“You see,” Whitfield said, “all of a sudden these guys have got gobs of money. One of them just bought a new fishing boat and the other guy, I heard him talking about getting a home-entertainment system that’s worth ten grand. And one day I asked one of them how much he was getting paid for working for this company. He beats around the bush for a while, but he finally tells me he’s getting about twice what he used to make working for the government.”

“So that’s it?” DeMarco said. “You don’t think these two guys oughta be doing this study and they’re making more money than you.”

“No, damn it, that’s not what I’m saying,” Whitfield snapped. “I’m saying there’s something *funny* going on here. These guys just shouldn’t be getting all this money for what they’re doing. Something’s wrong. And that’s not all.”

“Yeah?” DeMarco said. “What else is there?”

“They don’t *act* like they’re reviewing our training program. They ought to be gathering data on class sizes and training costs and reviewing curriculums, that kinda thing. But they don’t seem to be doing that. They just seem to sit around a lot, bullshitting, and looking at the reactor plant manuals.”

“What are those?” DeMarco said.

“They’re manuals that tell you how navy reactor plants work. You understand?”

By now DeMarco thought he had a pretty good sense of Whitfield. He was the type who was *always* outraged by something; he probably called up the mayor’s office and wrote passionate letters to the editor every time something got his goat.

“So,” DeMarco said, “let me see if I got all this straight. You got a couple of guys you don’t think are very good, who have come into some money recently that you can’t explain, and they’re going about this study all wrong. Is that it?”

“Yeah,” Whitfield said. “Something stinks.”

* * *

“CAN YOU BELIEVE that guy?” DeMarco said to Emma after Whitfield had left. “No wonder Hathaway didn’t want NCIS talking to him. I mean, did you hear one damn thing that sounded like fraud to you? Anything?”

“Take it easy, Joe,” Emma said. “You’re in a beautiful part of the country. Take a walk. Go for a drive. Tomorrow we’ll meet these two people, talk to the company they work for, and get their side of the story. And we’ll talk to somebody in shipyard management who’s more objective than Whitfield.”

Christine was going to be in Seattle for another day with the symphony and DeMarco could tell that Emma—the new, laid-back, take-it-easy Emma—had decided that torturing consultants and shipyard managers would be more fun than sitting around doing nothing.

Emma rose from her chair and said, “I have to get going. I need to catch the next ferry to Seattle to meet Christine in time for dinner.”

“And after we question these guys tomorrow and don’t find anything illegal going on, then what?” DeMarco said.

“Then you tell Hathaway to tell his sister to tell her son to quit being such a damn crybaby.”

* * *

AFTER EMMA LEFT, DeMarco sat sipping his beer, thinking a little more about Whitfield. He still thought the guy was a whiny flake but Emma was right: he’d worry about Whitfield tomorrow. He looked around the bar. Other than the bartender, he was the only one there. On the television set, a baseball game was playing: the Seattle Mariners versus the Toronto Blue Jays, both teams at the bottom of their respective divisions. Professional bowling was more exciting.

He walked to a supermarket two blocks from the motel, bought half a dozen car magazines, and returned to the motel bar. He’d research the auto market, become an informed consumer. He probably still get screwed if he bought the Beemer convertible but he could console himself with that thought that he’d done his homework. He ordered another beer—it must have been his fourth and he was starting to feel like a bloated sumo wrestler—and began to read his magazines.

He concluded that the smart thing to do—the practical thing—would be to buy a Honda or a Toyota. Last year’s model. These cars were rated top of the line in terms of quality and gas mileage and resale value, and if he could find last year’s model with less than thirty thousand miles on it, he’d be getting a *practically* brand-new car and shave four or five thousand off the price of a *really* brand-new car. Yeah, that made sense. That would be smart.

The problem was he couldn’t tell the difference between a Honda and a Toyota. They looked like

they'd been designed by a computer based solely on data from wind-tunnel tests. They were about as sexy as an old lady's bloomers. ~~Beemer Z3. Jaguar. Mercedes coupe. Porsche.~~ Those cars had vroom. They had sex appeal. They were created by *artists*, not some pencil-necked engineer trying to squeeze one more mile per gallon out of a friggin' four-cylinder engine.

"Well, hello there," a very sultry voice said.

Thank you, Jesus, DeMarco thought, and looked up from his magazine. The lady who had spoken looked *hard*. The expression "forty miles of bad road" came immediately to mind. She had crammed a size fourteen body into a size eight dress, wore a blond wig that didn't match the dark mustache over her upper lip, and her makeup looked as if it had been applied with a trowel.

DeMarco mumbled something inarticulate, scooped up his magazines, and headed back to his room. Why did he always have such bad luck with women? Why couldn't the old hooker have been a Swedish stewardess or foxy young businesswoman looking for some fun? Why didn't those sorts of fantasies ever come true for him?

Because he drove a Volvo, that's why.

The offices of Carmody and Associates were in Bremerton on the corner of Pacific and Burwell, on the ground floor of a building that housed three other small enterprises: an independent insurance agent, a tax consultant, and a beauty shop with no customers. Emma knocked once on the door, the door immediately opened it without waiting for an answer. Two men— sitting at a card table, drinking beer and playing gin— looked up in surprise.

Both men were in their early fifties, and both wore blue jeans and short-sleeved shirts. Pretty casual attire for consultants, DeMarco thought. One of the men was tall, had gray-brown hair in need of a trim, a scraggly mustache, skinny arms, skinny legs, and a small potbelly. The other man was shorter, almost bald, and had a much larger potbelly. The bald guy also had an anchor tattoo on his right forearm.

Maybe it was the tattoo, but DeMarco had the immediate impression that if these two had been born two hundred years earlier they would have been pirates.

“You need something?” the tall one said.

“Yes,” Emma said. “We’re doing a review for Congress. We called earlier to set up an appointment but no one returned our phone call. I guess you were just too busy,” she said, looking down at the card table.

The tall man looked over at the short man. The short man made eye contact with Emma, a touch of insolence in his eyes, then turned his head toward a partially open door behind him and yelled, “Hello boss!”

The man who came through the door was big and good-looking: six three, broad shouldered, maybe two hundred and twenty pounds. He wore gray slacks and a blue polo shirt, and his chest and biceps strained against the material of the shirt. The guy worked out. His dark hair was cut short and he had a small scar on his chin. He struck DeMarco as being tough and competent, but more like a cop or a soldier than someone you’d hire to study a navy training program.

“It’s that lady who called this morning,” the bald man said.

The big guy was silent for a moment as he sized up DeMarco and Emma, then he relaxed and smiled. He had an engaging smile. “I’m Phil Carmody,” he said, and shook hands with them. “I’m in charge of this little zoo. That’s Bill Norton,” he said pointing at the short, bald guy. “And that’s Ned Mulherin.” Mulherin nodded like a friendly puppy; Norton glared.

Carmody didn’t invite DeMarco and Emma into his office, which DeMarco found odd. Instead he told Norton to grab a couple of chairs from the office and directed Mulherin to clear the cards and bottles off the card table. DeMarco noticed the way he spoke to his employees, giving curt orders, not bothering to say “please” or “thank you,” having no doubt he’d be obeyed immediately. DeMarco had

the impression that if Carmody had told his two guys to eat their playing cards, they'd start chewing.

“And in case you’re wondering,” Carmody said as Mulherin removed the beer bottles from the table. “we only bill the government for the hours we work, and these two were not on the clock.”

“Right,” Emma said, not bothering to hide her disbelief. DeMarco expected Carmody to protest but he didn't. He just shrugged, obviously not overly concerned about her perception of his billing practices.

When the extra chairs were in place, Carmody said, “You want anything to drink? Coke? Bottled water? Coffee?”

“No,” Emma said.

“Okay, then,” Carmody said. “So how 'bout showing me some ID.”

DeMarco passed Carmody his congressional identification. Emma stared into Carmody's eyes for a moment, then pulled a library card from her wallet and held it up for Carmody to see. She didn't hand him the card. Emma was screwing with Carmody and DeMarco waited for his reaction, but all Carmody did was smile, his lips twitching in amusement. Unlike most people, Carmody wasn't intimidated by Emma; he seemed tickled by her attitude.

“So what can I do for you?” Carmody said.

Before DeMarco could say anything, Emma responded to Carmody's question. Emma had a tendency to assume command whenever she and DeMarco worked together. “A congressman,” Emma said, “received a complaint from one of his constituents regarding how much you're charging the navy for the work you're doing.”

“You flew out here because of one complaint?” Carmody said. He seemed to find that both astounding and amusing.

Emma ignored the question. “We'd like to understand what you're doing, how much you're billing, how long it will take, that sort of thing.”

“That fuckin' Whitfield,” Mulherin muttered.

“What did you say?” Carmody said sharply to Mulherin.

“Oh, there's this guy I used to work with and he keeps bitching about how much I'm making. I betcha he caused this. I mean, I explained to him—”

“That's enough,” Carmody said. DeMarco knew that after they left Carmody was going to have a pointed discussion with Mr. Mulherin. To DeMarco and Emma, Carmody said, “As you probably already know, we're doing a review to streamline a shipyard training program. The current program is expensive and I have, we have, some ideas for how to improve it. Get the book, Norton.”

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