

## Chapter One

### 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’.”

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?”

“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.”

“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.”

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 45<sup>th</sup> Street, and go west on 45<sup>th</sup> to Lamar Boulevard, then south to 38<sup>th</sup> Street. Seton will be a few blocks down on your right.”

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

“45<sup>th</sup> to Lamar to 38<sup>th</sup>.”

“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.”

“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?”

“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 her 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 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?"

"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.”

A wheeled trolley was rolled up on the opposite side of the bed. Several nurses and orderlies crowded around. He was lifted quickly onto the mobile bed and whisked away. She stood, unbelieving, as the bed disappeared through the doors. There was a touch at her elbow. She was being steered out the doors. It was Robert. She sat down on a blue chair and continued to stare vacantly at the doors. After a few moments she stood in the center of the corridor. She turned to her right and gazed into the distance; in the other direction, there was also nothing: only the oppressive quiet and dim lighting.

She sat down again. *I don't know what they're going to do to him, or how long it will take. He's had a stroke. What can they do? I guess they'll try to find the clot and remove it. Very dangerous. Probably not much time.*

“What?” She was suddenly aware that she was not alone.

Robert said, “The nurse told us that Doctor Banerjee will come to see us after the surgery.”

She nodded.

“Do you want to go to the chapel?”

“The chapel?”

“I thought we might say a prayer.”

She considered this for some time. Then she nodded.

He took her arm and guided her along.

The chapel had no windows, but it was lighted by hidden daylight fluorescents. Against the front wall was a shelf on which there was a crucifix and two electric candles. Two rows of three wooden benches occupied the small space. Mary Jo sat at one end of a middle bench and gazed at an artificial stained glass window in the front wall.

Robert knelt beside her, his arms resting on the back of the bench in front. Then he sat back, his hands clasped in his lap.

“What did you pray?”

“I prayed that your father will make it through the surgery OK.”

“Do you think your prayer will make any difference?”

“It makes a difference for me and maybe it'll make a difference for your father.”

“For you?”

“Yes. There isn't much I can do for your father, but at least I can offer a prayer for him.”

“Why bother?”

“Because I think the two of you – given the time – could be more like a normal father and daughter.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I think that beneath all the negative stuff there's a trace of mutual admiration.”

She gave a derisive snort. “And what difference will it make for him?”

“It would give him time to make amends.”

There was another snort; she said, “No, I meant about your prayer: do you think there’s a God, and if there is, was He listening, and if He was, will Doctor Banerjee remove the clot?”

“I think there is a God and that He was listening. I’m not so sure about Doctor Banerjee.”

“Why, in your mind, is there a disconnect between God and Doctor Banerjee?”

“There could be a lot of reasons. For example: maybe God has other plans.”

“What kind of other plans?”

“If we knew that, there wouldn’t be room for any atheists.”

She gave a little laugh, and turned her gaze on him. “You’re such a sweet guy.”

For several minutes, she sat, her attention on the ‘stained glass’ again. Then she knelt. They sat in silence for a long time.

“I think we ought to go and wait for Doctor Banerjee,” she said.

Their chairs were drawn up next to one another: her head on his shoulder, his head on hers; they slept.

The sound of a chair scraping on the floor woke him. He looked up to see a tall, thin, coffee-skinned man, with dark, attentive eyes. Robert nudged her gently. “Mary Jo.”

“Miss Mignot?”

“Yes.” She sat upright instantly.

“I’m Doctor Banerjee.” He sat down opposite her, palms together at his waist. He shook his head. “I’m very sorry. The clot was just too deep. By the time we located it, his heart had stopped and we were not able to get it restarted. I’m very sorry.”

She bit her lip. Silent tears began to spill down her cheeks. She nodded. “I guess he wasn’t in any pain.”

“No. I’m sure there was no pain.”

She stood and offered him her hand. “Thank you for trying, Doctor.”

He rose, gave a partial bow, turned and strode down the corridor.

She put a hand on Robert’s shoulder and lowered her head to his other shoulder. He drew her against him, and for some minutes they stood silently, two figures surrounded by blue plastic chairs.

“I guess there was a disconnect after all,” she said.

“Yes, there was, but we don’t know what it was.”

“I ought to call Aunt Barbara.” She looked at her watch. “No. Wait a few hours. It’s only five twenty-five there. I could call Marty and Jeff.”

“Where are they?” Robert asked.

“Marty’s in Atlanta; Jeff’s in Miami.”

She sat down and began to examine her cell phone. Then she poked it decisively with her forefinger and put it to her ear. “Hi, Marty, this is MJ. I’m OK. I’m at a hospital in Austin, Texas. Dad’s just passed away. No. He had a heart attack and then a stroke. Well, the heart attack apparently resulted in a clot which went to his brain. No, she’s in San Diego; I’ll call her later. I’ll call Jeff. What do you think about a funeral? (There was a long pause.)

OK, Marty, I’ve got to call Jeff now.” She speared the phone again with her index finger and looked over at Robert. “He said he wants nothing to do with a funeral: ‘if the

Army wants to bury him, that's their business. As far as I'm concerned, my father died a long time ago'. So that's the view of brother number one."

Mary Jo called her brother Jeff and left a message for him to call her. The bereavement office at the hospital told her that her father's body would be transferred later that day to Fort Hood. "You should consult with them about the funeral and burial arrangements."

She turned to Robert. "Let's go have breakfast and check out."

Over breakfast, she called Aunt Barbara, and told her of her brother's death. "What do you think about the funeral, Barbara? Marty says he's not coming; I haven't reached Jeff yet." (There was a listening pause.) "OK. Yes, we're still coming to see you. It'll be in a couple of days. David Dawson's son is with me. Yes, he's very kind."

She turned to Robert. "She said that the Army was his life, and that he ought to have whatever funeral they decide to give him. She'll say a prayer for him, which is more than he would expect. She's not coming."

Her phone rang. She looked at the screen. "Hi, Jeff. Oh, you talked to Marty. What do you think about a funeral? No, I'm here; I might as well take care of it. Oh, I hadn't thought about that. I'll have to ask at Fort Hood. Do you want anything? Maybe something for the kids? No? OK, Jeff, 'bye now."

She put the phone down and gazed at it thoughtfully. "He says I'm 'a saint to bury that old bastard'." She gave a snort. "He said his personal effects need to be cleared out." She looked up at Robert. "And he doesn't want anything – even for his boys. But he doesn't know what Dad had."

"Well," Robert said, "I guess we're going to find out."

At Fort Hood, they found the duty officer of the First Cavalry Division. "I'm not really sure how to handle a situation like this. I'll have to check and get back to you." He wrote down her phone number.

"What about his personal effects?" she asked.

The captain stroked his moustache while consulting his monitor. "Colonel Mignot's residence is at Pueblo Court – number eight." His printer whirred into operation. He handed the sheet of paper to Mary Jo. "We're here." He marked the map with his pen. "And Pueblo Court is here. Let me see if Residential Services can let you in."

A small man in an Army uniform got out of a dusty green van and approached them. He had a noticeable limp, but his sergeant's trousers with their dark green stripe were neatly pressed. "Are you Miss Mignot?" She nodded. "May I see some identification?"

He scrutinized both her driver's license and her Barnegat Services ID. "Sorry to hear about your father. He was a good officer: tough but fair. I served under him in Iraq." The sergeant looked up at her. "We were wounded at the same time." He patted his leg. "Damned suicide bomber."

He examined a confused collection of keys and approached the door of number eight.

They stepped inside. The place seemed bare: no carpets, no pictures on the walls, modest, ordinary wooden furniture.

With two sweeping gestures, the sergeant explained, “There are two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs; living room, dining room, kitchen downstairs. The furnishings are all Army issue, but you’ll want to take the clothing and personal effects.”

Mary Jo walked through to the kitchen; she opened the refrigerator. There was beer, bread, eggs, mayonnaise and bacon. Coffee, sugar, salt and two varieties of cereal were on a shelf. She opened the cabinets and drawers. “I don’t think we’ll want anything here.”

“You can take the toaster and the small oven, ma’am.”

She shook her head.

In the dining room were a collection of plain white china and eight place settings of stainless steel cutlery.

There were two shelves of books, mostly military histories and what looked like complete collections of Frederick Forsythe, John Le Carre’, and Ken Follett.

“The television was his, ma’am.”

“I don’t think we want it.”

One bedroom was equipped with an exer-cycle, a rowing machine, an exercise mat and an ironing board. Bed linen and towels were in the closet.

The medicine cabinet in the bathroom had two vials of prescription pills and a large assortment of vitamins and health supplements.

In the master bedroom, the general’s uniforms were arrayed in seasonal order in the closet, alongside civilian jackets, trousers and shirts.

On top of the dresser were four eight-by-ten color photographs in silver frames. One was of Mary Jo, age seventeen, receiving her high school diploma; another was of Mary Jo, age twenty-one, receiving her degree at Berkeley, and a third was of Mary Jo in her Air Force officer’s uniform. She was smiling happily for the camera in each picture. The fourth photograph was of a blonde woman, about fifty-five, with hazel eyes and parted pink lips. It was head and shoulders, only: there was no clothing in the picture.

Mary Jo picked up the picture. “Not my mother.” She examined the back. “I don’t know who she is.”

“I believe she was a friend of his,” the sergeant offered. “She used to stay here on weekends.”

“Do you know her name or where she lives?”

“I believe her name is Mrs. Donovan, ma’am, and I think she lives in Austin.”

“Sergeant, do you think she knows that my father is dead?”

“I couldn’t say, ma’am.”

“Do you know where my father’s phone is, sergeant?”

“It doesn’t seem to be here, ma’am. I suppose he had it with him.”

“OK. I’ll check with the duty officer. Sergeant, I don’t think we want anything here, and . . . .”

“Just a minute,” Robert interrupted. “I’d like to have the pictures of the general’s daughter.”

She turned, ready to remonstrate with him, but he gave her an ‘oh, come on’ look.

“OK,” she conceded, “there’s no point in putting them in the trash. I’ll take Mrs. Donovan.”

The sergeant suggested, “I suppose you’ll be wanting to take his decorations.” When she gave him a puzzled glance, he added, “You know, his Silver Star and his Purple Heart from Iraq, and all the rest.”

“Oh. Where are they?”

“I suppose they’re in this chest, ma’am.”

Mary Jo opened the top drawer and removed a polished wooden jewelry case. Inside the case were three neat rows of military medals attached to colorfully striped ribbons. She ran her admiring fingers over them. “But . . . but what am I going to do with them?” She paused. “I suppose I could sell them.”

Robert protested, “No, Mary Jo! You should keep them!”

She looked at him and raised her shoulders, palms up.

“OK,” he said, “I’ll tell you what I would do. I’d mount them on a white velvet background with a black frame. I’d put a brass plate on the frame with his name, rank, birth and death dates, and inside the frame I’d put a key to what each medal was for.”

“So I could have a little shrine, like a Russian icon.” There was a sour tone in her voice.

“Mary Jo, don’t be so cynical. He was your father. It’s obvious that he cared about you. And taken together, these decorations say that this man was an extraordinary soldier. Even if you aren’t impressed, your grandchildren will be very impressed.”

In spite of herself, she conceded a suppressed giggle. “So I should do this for my grandchildren?”

“Yes.”

“All right, then.” She looked around the room. “Sergeant, what can be done about the rest of his personal effects?”

“I suppose, ma’am, they could be offered at the base’s garage sale. What shall we do with the proceeds?”

“Why don’t you take fifteen or twenty percent for your trouble and give the rest to charity?”

“To the Heart Foundation?”

“Yes, to the Heart Foundation.”

The duty officer said, “Your father is eligible for burial in Arlington National Cemetery, Miss Mignot.”

“I suppose that is what he would have wanted.” Her lack of enthusiasm was evident.

“It’s a great honor to be buried in Arlington.”

“Yes, I know. But does that mean that there would have to be a funeral service there?”

“No, it could just be interment. We’re planning a brief service of remembrance at the base chapel, day after tomorrow. It’s scheduled for three pm. I hope that’s all right. Can you let us know how many will be attending?”

Mary Jo glanced at Robert. He nodded. “Two.”

The duty officer tried to conceal his surprise. “I’m sure we can fit you in.” He looked around, trying to remember something. “Oh, yes. I have his personal effects which were returned from the hospital.” He bent down and retrieved a manila envelope. “In this one we have his billfold, his keys, his cell phone and one dollar seventy-four in coins. If you will just sign this receipt.” She did. “And in this one, we have a pair of pajamas and a pair of bedroom slippers.”

“Do you mind passing this package on to the sergeant? He’s going to take care of the rest of my father’s effects.”

“Yes, of course, ma’am. Oh, and there is just one other thing.” He glanced down at his desk, as if he would find the script there. “With respect to Arlington . . .”

“Yes?”

“How would you prefer him to be interred?”

“Well, whatever is standard should be fine.”

“I mean . . .” He searched for the words. “I mean . . . do you want his body or his ashes to be buried?”

“Oh, he can be cremated.”

“Thank you very much, ma’am. I’m sorry about your father.” He offered her his hand.

They checked into the Hilton Garden Inn in Killeen, not far from the base and dependent on military visitors for its custom, it was newly clean, functional and characterless. Mary Jo pulled her suitcase up to the end of a lobby sofa, put the photograph of Mrs. Donovan on the low table in front of her, and patted the seat next to her for Robert. She reached into her handbag and drew out her father’s cell phone. “Let’s see. D. Daniels . . . Donovan . . . Judith . . . no photo . . . Is area code 512 Austin?” She looked at him.

“Maybe reception knows.”

She sat down again. “Yes.” She put the phone on the table, and turned to look searchingly at him.

“You want to call this woman?”

“Yes. I want to meet her.”

“Call her then.”

She turned to face the table and slowly picked up the phone. She took a deep breath, touched the screen and raised the phone to her ear. He could hear it ringing and a tenor woman’s voice. “No, this is his daughter, Mary Jo. I’m afraid I have some bad news: my father has died.”

Robert watched and listened as Mary Jo’s emotive voice and body language engaged with this remote woman, and he could hear the distress in the woman’s voice. “His body has been brought back to Fort Hood. I . . . I went to his house to attend to his personal effects, and I saw your picture. One of my father’s colleagues told me who you are. I’m sorry to call you like this, but I thought you’d like to know.” There were murmurings of gratitude and thanks. “The base is planning a memorial service the day after tomorrow at three in the afternoon. Would you like to join us? I’m here with a friend, Robert Dawson. Perhaps we could have lunch together. That’s good; I’m afraid I don’t know of a good restaurant in Killeen. If you can suggest one I’ll make a reservation. OK, we’ll see you there. Yes, I’m sure we’ll recognize each other.”

She put the phone down and continued to gaze at the photograph. “She was pretty upset, and she didn’t know.” She glanced over at Robert. “She sounded like a nice, normal lady. I wonder what she saw in him.”

“She said it was the best in town.” Mary Jo was glancing around, doubtfully, at the kitschy Thai décor: small gold Buddhas, lotus leaves and plastic flowers. In the dining room, the tables were set with leaf motif place mats, and the staff all seemed to be Orientals. “Shall we go to the table, or should we wait here?” She was chewing the inside of her cheek.

Robert said, "I think it's better if we wait for her here. She'll be along soon, Mary Jo. Shall we sit over there?"

"No."

For perhaps ten minutes Mary Jo, full of nervous energy, stood facing the entrance. She sprang forward. "Oh, hello, Judith, I'm Mary Jo."

The older woman nodded, held out her hand, and, head to one side, took in Mary Jo. "Hello, Mary Jo. I'm glad to finally meet you." She turned her attention to Robert.

"Yes, and this is my friend, Robert Dawson."

"Hello, Mrs. Donovan."

She shook her head. "No, please call me Judith. May I call you Robert?"

"Yes. Robert, or Rob is fine."

The old Oriental owner bowed. "May I take you to your table, Mrs. Donovan?"

"I believe the reservation is in the name of Mignot."

"Of course. The colonel."

"No. His daughter made the reservation."

The man bowed nervously and hurried over to the reservations desk. "Ah, yes, your table is ready."

Mrs. Donovan was wearing a dark blue silk suit. Her hair was drawn back into a tight bun, but her face was pleasantly calm. She toyed with a strand of pearls at her neck. *I'll bet they're real*, Mary Jo thought; she noticed the plain gold band on her left hand. *Were they married?*

Mrs. Donovan spread a napkin in her lap. "You came down from Washington a few days ago, I guess."

Mary Jo briefly explained the chronology.

"I've been away from Austin for a few days," Mrs. Donovan rested her chin on her hand, "but your father was not a great communicator." There was a note of sadness in her voice.

Mary Jo nodded. "How long have you known my father?"

Mrs. Donovan looked into the distance to her right. "Well . . . I guess it's been twenty-five . . . no twenty-six years . . . since he was a captain."

"I see."

There was a pause. "I don't think you do." There was kindness in her voice. "We both know that Jerry wasn't the greatest communicator."

Mary Jo nodded.

The trace of a smile crept over Mrs. Donovan's face. "If I were Mary Jo Mignot, and if I was sitting where you are, trying to understand this old battleaxe of a woman sitting where I am, I might be inclined to say, 'I would like to know the nature of your relationship with my father.' But I suspect that you are much too polite to ask."

Mary Jo was chewing the inside of her lip. "I'm sorry, Judith, I could never ask something like that."

There was a nod of agreement. "What I would like to know is how you came to be so polite when your father was so damn direct."

"I don't know. I guess my aunt Barbara taught me."

"Ah, your aunt Barbara."

"Have you met her?"

"No. Jerry is the only member of his family I've ever met – until today."

There was a moment of reflection at the table. “So,” Robert asked, “are you going to tell us the answer to the question you proposed?”

She turned her attention to Robert. “And what do you do for a living, Rob?”

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

She smiled. “So you’re quite comfortable asking people embarrassing questions.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“And what, may I ask, is your relationship with Mary Jo?”

“I am her friend; she is my very good friend.”

“I see.”

“No, I don’t think you do.”

“Touché!” She paused, looking from one to the other. “OK. Let’s order, and then we’ll have confession time. I’ll go first.”

She beckoned the owner.

“Yes, Mrs. Donovan.”

“I’d like the crab Rangoon and the Panang curry with shrimp. Mary Jo?”

“I’d like the spring rolls, and . . . is the Panang curry very hot?”

“No, dear, it’s quite mild.”

“I’ll have the Panang chicken curry.”

“Rob?”

“I’ll have the crab Rangoon also, but I’d like a hot shrimp curry.”

“That will be our red curry, sir.”

“And to drink?”

“I’ll have a beer,” Robert volunteered.

Mary Jo added, “For me a glass of Chablis.”

“And, I’ll have a Beefeater on the rocks. I’m going to need it this afternoon.” She held up her finger to the owner. “And tell your son, ‘no vermouth!’”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now then,” Mrs. Donovan began, “I’ve known your father for about twenty-six years. We met at a dance at the officer’s club. Your mother was there.” She inclined her head. “She was an attractive woman, very nicely dressed. Unfortunately, she had been drinking rather too much. So she wasn’t keeping Jerry on a leash as she should have. I don’t know whether she didn’t care any longer, or, more likely, she didn’t have the courage to snap the leash on. Your father, as you know, was not particularly fond of being kept on a leash. Anyway, your father spotted me sitting at a table, and he asked me to dance. He was a remarkably good dancer, and he knew what he wanted: he wanted me. I was rather flattered. He was a very good-looking man.” She toyed with her pearls as she considered. “He had a commanding presence, and I thought, *This man is going to go far in the Army.*”

Rob asked, “Were you married at the time?”

“Yes, of course. My husband is a very kind man. We were high school sweethearts, and we got married when he was a junior at Ohio State. He was in the officer candidate program and selected the First Cavalry Division, where he was assigned to Jerry’s company.”

“So my father was your husband’s commanding officer.”

“Yes, exactly.” She took a tentative sip of her Beefeater and nodded her approval to the hovering owner. “So things heated up after that. Bertie and I saw a lot of your father and mother. Whenever Jerry had an opportunity, he would whisper a not-so-subtle invitation in my ear. I kept saying, ‘Jerry, you know I can’t’, but I was sorely tempted. As I say, my

husband is a kind man, but this man Jerry was exciting! And I was bored enough to want some excitement. This tension went on for about a year, and both of our spouses were aware of it. I don't know what your mother may have said, but Bertie said, 'You know, Judith, that Jerry has the hots for you'. I admitted that I knew it, and he asked, 'What are you going to do about it?' I said, 'Bertie, he's your commanding officer, I can't very well tell him off. You've just got to let me handle it'."

Mary Jo could no longer wait for the outcome. "So what finally happened?"

"I think you know what finally happened, but it wasn't what I expected." Judith took a deliberate sip of her Beefeater. "Bertie and I had been trying to have children for several years. We finally went to a fertility clinic and the finding was that Bertie wasn't . . ." She paused. "Well, you can guess what he wasn't. But Bertie wanted a child more than anything. He ruled out adoption; he said, 'I want a little one who is you and me, and if I can't have any me, I'll have you.' So we started looking for a donor. But then, everything fell apart--or fell into place, depending on how you look at it."

She took a deep breath, countering an upsurge of emotion. "We were playing bridge at the officer's club, when Bertie mentioned that we were looking for a donor. 'Well,' your father said, 'if you want a child, we could let you have Marty or Jeff.' He turned and winked at me. 'For a price.' Your mother was horrified, and Bertie, bless his heart, tried to make light of it. He laughed and said, 'I think I'd prefer Mary Jo.' And your father said, 'Oh, hell no! You couldn't afford Mary Jo.'"

Mary Jo was staring open-mouthed at Judith as the story continued. "When Bertie and I got home, he was in a serious mood. He sat me down in the living room, and said, 'Let's think about it, Judith. We could ask Jerry to be our donor. He'd be a good donor. He's intelligent and good looking. His kids have those traits. He'd probably be willing.' We finally agreed that he would ask Jerry." She paused to look at her spell-bound audience. "Jerry said 'no'. He said he would consider it only if he could be 'personally involved'." She made quotation marks in the air with her fingers. "I have to confess that I liked the idea. I saw it as a way to end the cat-and-mouse game, but I suppose that secretly, my libido came into play. Bertie wanted one condition: 'You have to promise me, Judith, that you'll never leave me.' I agreed."

Mary Jo uttered a gust of disbelief. "Oh, my God!"

"And so, Jerry and I got started. He was insistent that if we wanted to get results, we had to work on the project daily. I was utterly mesmerized by this new lover, and three months later I was pregnant. Bertie was overjoyed, and . . ."

Mary Jo interrupted, "Did you have a boy or a girl?"

"Sadly, I had a miscarriage. Jerry and I went back to work, and I got pregnant again, and miscarried again. In the space of five years, I had three miscarriages, and then . . ." She looked up at the ceiling, her eyes brimming with tears. "I had to have a hysterectomy."

"Oh God!"

Judith nodded. "Oh God is right." She wiped her eyes. "But of course, that wasn't the end of it. I was in love with Jerry and he was in love with me. I was still very fond of Bertie, and I was mindful of my promise to him. He was still in love with me, and he understood the emotional hurricane I went through to bear a child for him." She returned her napkin to her lap and smoothed it into place. "Bertie and I evolved an amendment to our basic agreement: that I could spend weekends with Jerry when he was on base. . . As you know, Mary Jo, he was away a lot."

A waiter, following the instructions of the owner, set their first course plates in front of them.

Mary Jo asked, "Does your husband know that my father is dead?"

"Yes. He's not coming this afternoon; he's hoping that, in time, we can make a new start."

Mary Jo was toying with her spring rolls. "Judith, there's something I don't understand. You said that you were in love with him, and you seem like a very nice lady. . . I always thought that my father was domineering and rude."

"He could be, and so can I." Judith put her fork down for a moment. "I suppose that's the point. We thoroughly respected each other, and we almost never had an argument." She looked at Mary Jo. "You sound as if you feel hurt by him."

"Yes, I do."

"I have to confess that I didn't really understand his relationships with his kids. I know he was disappointed with the boys; he felt they lacked discipline and ambition. Probably he didn't handle them very well. My impression was that he thought you were special, Mary Jo, but that he felt you lacked courage. I remember that when you joined the Air Force, he said, 'Mary Jo's going to be all right now'."

"Maybe it is true that when I was younger, I lacked courage – or perhaps it was self-confidence – but how was I going to be more self-confident when my own father kept putting me down?"

"Perhaps he felt that you would learn to fight back. I don't really know, Mary Jo. I can only tell you that your father cared a lot about you, and that he also wished for a better relationship."

Mary Jo shook her head slightly and tears began to spill down her cheeks. "Oh shit! Now I find out!"

Judith reached out and put her hand on Mary Jo's. "Haven't you at least suspected, deep down, that your father cared about you?"

"I don't know. It's complicated. I kept hoping, but I kept getting pushed back."

"So you gave up."

Mary Jo nodded.

"Mary Jo, you have to learn never to give up."

She looked forlornly at Judith. "It's too late now."

"And it's never too late. You can begin making peace with your father this afternoon, and in the years ahead."

The waiter, closely supervised by the owner, brought their main dishes.

"Judith," Robert asked, "why did you decide to tell us all this?" She looked at him quizzically. "I mean, it's very personal."

Judith heaped a spoonful of rice onto her curry. "I wasn't planning to. I thought we'd have lunch and skirt around any sensitive issues." Robert gave a chuckle. "Don't laugh. That was my plan, but when I saw Mary Jo, I thought, *Oh, she's lovely. Jerry was right. I can't leave her in the dark.*"

"I'm glad you didn't."

"All right," Judith sat back in her chair, and looked from one to the other. "Your turn."

Robert glanced at Mary Jo, who was paying close attention to her curry.

"Well," Robert began, "Mary Jo and I are good friends but, as you've guessed, there's a little more to it than that. Mary Jo is potentially my stepmother."

Judith leaned forward, looking carefully at both of them. “You mean to tell me that Mary Jo is going to marry your father?”

“Exactly.”

“And how old is your father, Rob?”

“He’s fifty-seven.”

“And Mary Jo, you’re thirty- . . . ?”

“Six.”

“Umm. And how come the potential bride groom isn’t here?”

“He’s in prison in Iran.”

“Of course. And how did he get there?”

Robert said, “He was convicted of having top secret Iranian documents in his possession.”

“So, he’s with the CIA?”

“No. He’s a retired Army major general and he was working for the International Atomic Energy Agency. Somehow, he got his hands on some pretty sensitive documents.”

“An Army major general. . . Does he remind you of your father, Mary Jo?”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Tell me about him, Mary Jo.”

“Well, he’s very bright, he has a great presence, and a lot of military decorations, and he’s very kind to me.”

“How did you meet him?”

Mary Jo tossed her head. “I met him at work.”

“And you do some kind of secret work for the Defense Department?”

“Yes.” Her irritation at the rapid fire questions was starting to show.

“How long have you known him?”

“A little less than a year.”

“What are the prospects for getting General Dawson out of the Iranian prison?”

“Well,” Robert responded, “the US government is working on some kind of a deal – like a promise not to disclose publicly what my father found or some kind of exchange.”

“And how do you happen to be here, Rob?”

“Mary Jo told me that her father was very ill and that she was going to see him and her aunt Barbara, so I asked to come along.”

“I thought you were a field agent with the DEA.”

“I am. I’m just back from Afghanistan, and I’m waiting re-assignment.”

Judith smiled faintly. “How can I put this politely? . . . No . . . I can’t. . . . Do I sense a father-son competition here?”

Mary Jo was indignant. “No!”

“Rob?”

“Not a competition as such. If Dad and Mary Jo decide to get married, that’s their decision, and I’ll support it. I just want her to know that I like her a lot, and right now she needs some help.”

“Are you in love with her?”

Mary Jo was suddenly paying close attention.

Robert shrugged. “It’s a little early to say, Judith. I only met her three times before this trip.”

“How is everything?” It was the hovering owner.

“I’d like another beer, please.”

“I’d like another glass of Chablis.”

Judith added, “I’ll have one, too. . . This afternoon won’t be so difficult, after all.”

“Is your husband retired, now, Judith?” Robert asked.

“Yes, he retired some years ago, and then he joined a security company where he is a manager.” She reached into her handbag and retrieved her iPhone. “Bertie has a kind of hobby. He’s a sculptor. Here’s a picture of a bust he did of me.” She passed the phone to Mary Jo.

“Oh, my gosh! This is really good! It looks just like you.”

Robert asked, “Did he study art at Ohio State?”

“No, he joined a sculpture class in Austin about five years ago, after he retired from the Army. He said he had to have an interesting distraction when I was away.”

“And he ruled out other women?”

“I ruled them out, and I was there for him – at least most of the time.”

“I think,” Robert offered, “he ought to consider doing commissioned work.”

“He’s done some pieces for friends, and I guess you’re right, he could make a business of it.”

Mary Jo had been gazing at Judith with a mixture of disbelief and admiration. “What about you, Judith?”

“You mean what am I going to do now that I no longer have my very interesting distraction?” Mary Jo nodded.

“I don’t know. . . I’ve done some substitute teaching because I like kids, but what I really like to do is act. I’ve taken some small parts with the Austin Theater Company when Jerry was away, but it just frustrated me not to be able to take larger, longer-running parts.” She beckoned the owner. “I’d like some coffee, please.”

“Would madam care for some dessert?”

“No thanks. Well . . . on second thought, yes.” In an aside to Mary Jo, she said, “Your father always wanted me to be ‘slender’”

Mary Jo said, “Well, it’s all settled then.”

“What is, dear, my waistline?”

“No, I mean you’re going to be an actress.”

Judith scanned the dessert menu, then she put it to one side and gazed pensively into the distance. “You know, Mary Jo, when I was about twelve, I was going to be an actress. I acted in every play in school and in college. Sometimes they were great parts; sometimes they were silly bit parts. I didn’t care. I thought, *Some day, I’m going to act on Broadway*. That was my dream--not to have my name in lights; I didn’t care about that. What I saw was a drama on the big stage where I had a lead role, and at the end, I got a standing ovation.” She nodded at the memory and her eyes filled with tears. “But I guess it’s too late now.”

“Didn’t you tell me a little while ago that it’s never too late?”

“I did, didn’t I? . . .” She lapsed into a soliloquy. “I ought to learn to take my own advice. I always thought that other people’s free advice was worth what you paid for it, but that my advice was priceless. I don’t know. . . Maybe . . . If I got a part in Houston or Dallas, and it ran for five or six months . . . six nights and two matinees . . . Bertie and I could

get an apartment . . . He would have a theatre pass and his tools and his clay, and me, of course . . . and then maybe . . . sometime . . . New York.”

Mary Jo nodded.

They ordered dessert. “I have the impression,” Robert suggested, “that you are profoundly sorry that Jerry is gone, but also relieved as you look ahead.”

Judith sipped her coffee. “If you think about it, I wasn’t the only one suffering from internal battles – an emotional hurricane, I called it – but think about Bertie, these more than twenty years, and your father, Mary Jo. I wouldn’t marry him as he so desperately wanted. Instead, he could only have me two or three dozen days a year. And yet, almost no one knew about this secret trauma.”

The coffin was draped with the American flag. An Army chaplain stood at the podium near the altar. The chapel was filled with olive green uniforms. Judith, Mary Jo and Robert were seated in the second row. Mary Jo had her head on Judith’s shoulder, and she was silently weeping.