

The Payback

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Extract

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THE SECOND PERIMETER

Prologue

DeMarco looked down at the dead man lying at his feet.

He should have been the one lying there. He should never have made it this far.

He picked up the man's weapon. An Uzi, he thought, but he wasn't sure. He'd never fired a machine gun in his life.

Across the Potomac River he could see lights burning in the Pentagon. He was less than a mile from one of the most secure buildings in the world, a building filled with people who actually knew how to shoot the weapon he was now holding, but none of those people, as close as they were, would be of no help to him or Emma now. This would all be over before anyone could help.

He fumbled for the safety on the Uzi, flipped the mechanism, then looked to see if Emma was still in the same position.

He could see her clearly in the lights of the marina parking lot. And he could see the Asian woman, the automatic in her hand, the gun pointed at Emma's heart. The Asian was the most lethal person that DeMarco had ever known. If he didn't do something in the next few minutes, Emma was going to die.

DeMarco began running through trees. He had to get closer; there was no way he could kill the woman from where he was.

And then the sound of a weapon firing, another machine gun. Who the hell had fired? Goddamnit, how many of them were there? How many were still alive?

After that, it all happened so fast, too fast: a man running down one of the piers, the green and black camouflage paint streaked on his face making him look like something that had escaped from hell; the Asian woman spinning toward the man and firing; the camouflaged man falling; Emma leaping at the Asian woman and wrestling her to the ground.

Emma was trying to get the gun away, but DeMarco could see that she was losing. The other woman was younger and stronger – and insane.

DeMarco burst through the trees. Only fifty more yards. Just hold her, Emma, just hold her. Just hold her five more seconds.

But then the camouflaged man rose up from the boards of the pier. Even beneath the face-paint DeMarco knew who he was – and he wasn't surprised

that the man hadn't been killed. He wasn't sure anything could kill this man.

DeMarco raised the Uzi in his hands and swung it toward the camouflaged man but he knew immediately that he was moving too slowly. He knew the man would beat him.

He knew the Asian woman would beat Emma.
And he was right.

I

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 as if 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'd 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 a 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.

2

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 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 moved 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, 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 that 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.' 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 – *Congressthen* 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 free 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 forty.'

'You lemme see that damn card, Mahoney,' Farris said.