

THE SPORTING CLUB

JANUARY 3, 1996

MICKEY ALO TIPPED THE SEAT BACK BUT DIDN'T SLEEP. HE looked out the window of the Lear-55 at the blue-green reef fifteen thousand feet below. His father's pilot, Milo Duleo, had just announced that they were about to make their descent into Grand Bahama island. Mickey rubbed the stubble on his chin and wondered what the hell Paul Arquette was trying to pull. The call had been screwy. Paul's voice screeched at him through fifteen hundred miles of Atlantic Bell cable.

"I can't tell you on the phone . . . but it's important. You can land at the deserted military field at Sand Dollar Beach. You won't have to clear customs or immigration. Nobody will ever know you're down here."

In the two rear seats of the plane, New York Tony Demarco and Little Pussy Bono were snoring contentedly. New York Tony had been Mickey's bodyguard since he was at Harvard back in the late seven-

ties; now he was his capo, or right hand. Tony was short and muscular with a head as big as a truck tire and a complexion like lunar lava. Little Pussy Bono had gotten his name and reputation as a cat burglar in New York, but now he handled special assignments for the Alo family. He had been working mostly for Mickey, now that Joseph Alo was sick. Little Pussy was slender and hawk-faced. Like most cat burglars, God had designed him for air-conditioning vents and small openings.

The pressure in the rich gray and burl-wood cabin changed as New York Tony and Little Pussy sat up and rubbed their eyes.

Two minutes later, the plane touched down at the end of the apron and taxied to a stop. Mickey turned to face the two men in the seats behind him. "I don't know what's going on. Get a map of this fucking place and line up a car, don't rent it, steal something, and stay handy. In case I need you, I want you ready to move. No phone calls, no contact with anyone, no record we were ever here." Mickey didn't quite know why, but he sensed impending disaster.

"Right," New York Tony said, stretching out his stumpy legs.

When Milo got the jet door open, Mickey was hit by a wall of heat and humidity. A blue English Ford was parked under a shade tree. It pulled out onto the field, stopping near the door. Mickey looked down at the car. A handsome young man got out. He was dressed in tennis shorts and a teal-blue polo shirt. "Mr. Alo, welcome to the Bahamas." The young man smiled.

"Who the fuck are you?" Mickey said, disdain crawling up in his throat.

"Warren Sacks. I'm Senator Arquette's media consultant."

Mickey turned back to Tony and Little Pussy in the cabin. "This is fucked. What happened to all the secrecy? We go to all this trouble to stay off the immigration sheet and Paul sends some dipshit to drive me." Mickey didn't wait for them to answer. He moved down the steps carrying his sport coat and got into the blue Ford. Warren put it in gear and pulled off the tarmac.

"The air conditioner doesn't get much better than that, I'm afraid," Warren said pleasantly.

"Where's Paul?"

"The senator's at the club. We're having media planning sessions. He said I should drop you at his bungalow." And then Warren flashed

Mickey a dazzling smile that seemed to say, "Don't worry, I'm in on the secret."

The Sporting Club had originally been a haven for blue-water fishermen, but it now mostly catered to conventions and vacationers. The clubhouse was a large stone building with a tile roof that faced the water. Palm trees and red hibiscus vibrated in a strong, offshore breeze. There was a picturesque wooden wharf where three 30-foot sport-fishing boats with outriggers for trolling were tied. Warren drove the car past the clubhouse and down a shell road lined by dense mango plants. He pulled to a stop in front of a secluded bungalow.

"The afternoon conference should be breaking up soon. I'm sorry there's no cooler place to wait, but the senator said you'd understand."

"I'll see you," Mickey said, dismissing the man whom he had taken an unreasonable dislike to.

Warren put the Ford in gear and zipped off, gunning the engine unnecessarily.

The bungalow had a wood plaque on the door announcing it as the FLAMINGO SUITE. The front door was locked, so Mickey walked around to the back, where there was a louvered glass door next to an outdoor shower. Also locked. A window air conditioner had been cut into the wall, and it growled ominously. He cursed under his breath, then kicked a louver out with his foot, breaking a glass pane by the handle. He reached through the shards and opened the door.

The Flamingo Suite was small and neat. He looked around the living room, which was decorated with flamingo-pink wicker furniture, then moved into the bedroom and looked at the king-size bed, covered by a red and white floral bedspread.

Mickey began a thorough search of the room.

He found some Polaroid pictures in Paul's shaving kit in the bottom dresser drawer. Six shots of Warren and Paul and a young girl who couldn't have been older than sixteen. They were disgustingly pornographic but didn't surprise him. They confirmed what he already suspected . . . Paul Arquette was a big mistake.

When Paul entered the Flamingo Suite twenty minutes later, he found Mickey stretched out on the pink sofa, his stockinged feet up

on the armrest. Paul was in white tennis shorts and a Sporting Club T-shirt. At sixty-seven, he was still handsome and fit. The tropical sun had turned him a rich, deep shade of brown. Paul smiled at the little fat man. At five-four, his head and toes barely reached both ends of the couch.

"You got down here fast."

"You call, I come, Senator." Mickey sat up and slipped his feet back into tasseled loafers.

Paul thought Mickey hadn't gotten any better looking over the two decades he'd known him. He was still round and oily . . . a medicine ball in pants.

Mickey got to his feet as Paul moved to the minibar. "Something cold?"

"Why don't you tell me what's on your mind, then I'll be outta here before somebody else sees me."

"Else?" Paul sounded alarmed.

"Yeah, you sent some guy to pick me up. Nobody is supposed to know you have connections with our family. You're only six weeks from the Iowa presidential primary."

"Oh, you mean Warren . . ." he said, the frown evaporating. "Warren knows everything. We can trust Warren."

"We can?" Mickey asked, his voice rough as hemp.

"Yes, we can. And don't use that tone with me, Mickey, 'cause I'm not gonna take it from you or your father." Paul had grown accustomed to having things his own way. He'd had limited contact with the Alos over the years. He wasn't used to being challenged. He had forgotten the duck hunt twenty years before and Mickey's strange smile when Rex was murdered.

"What's going on? You said you had something important," Mickey said.

"Yes, I do . . . very important. I think it answers all our questions." He paused, then plunged on. "I have been contacted by Harlan Ellis at the Democratic National Committee. As a matter of fact, I spent two days with him down here. He left two DNC pollsters behind. We've been going over strategies for the past two days. They've done some tracking polls and some demographic projections, and I'm scor-

ing huge in the West and Midwest. I should get fifty percent in Iowa.”

“Yeah . . . I know. That’s ’cause we’ve had you on UBC-TV’s national news every night for a month. I hope you didn’t bring me down here to tell me that.”

“The Democratic National Committee wants *me* to be their candidate. They want to throw all the party resources behind me.” His voice couldn’t contain his excitement.

“Then we all want the same thing. Tell ’em to get off the field and we’ll make it happen.”

“But if the DNC is pushing me and financing me, I don’t think it’s necessary for you and your father to stay involved.”

“You’re kidding me, no?”

“Mickey, it doesn’t change anything. You know there’s a big risk using offshore laundered cash to run my campaign. What if somebody finds out?”

“You mean like maybe Warren?”

“The DNC has a huge campaign war chest. They have a preexisting staff . . . media consultants, polling experts, issue experts, advertising and media buyers, stature strategists . . . the whole setup. Plus, they can put pressure on other candidates to get out of the race.”

“Forget it.”

“I’m not going to forget it. I’m gonna take it.”

“Uncle Pauly.” Mickey used his boyhood form of address sarcastically. “Lemme get this straight. . . . My dad and Meyer buy a TV network and use it to get you a national profile; use it to get you a U.S. Senate seat; get you on the Ways and Means Committee and make you a political front-runner, and then, when these fucks at DNC decide to poach on our deal, you think you can invite me down here, keep me waiting in this pink wet dream, and then kick a board up my ass?”

“That isn’t what I’m doing.”

“I’m gonna do you a huge favor, Paul. . . . I’m gonna tell my father that you felt lonely and missed me and that’s why you asked me down here. Then you’re gonna tell these assholes at the DNC to get the fuck outta our way, and if anything like this ever comes up again, I’m gonna personally empty a dustpan full a’ glass into your head.”

Paul and Mickey were a few feet apart, but Paul could feel an almost ungodly warmth coming off the little man, as if he were standing in front of an electric heater.

Paul took a step back, then held his ground. "You're threatening me?"

"Fucking-A. Glad you recognize it."

"I will not be threatened. I'm a U.S. senator. You can't possibly think I'll put up with a threat from you or anybody else. The DNC picks one candidate every four years. It virtually guarantees me the Democratic nomination. And I've already said yes."

"Do you really know what you're doing, Paul?" Mickey asked, his voice even and cold.

"That's why I called you down. I don't want to have any further involvement with your family or your money. It's too dangerous. Now I have to get back to a political strategy-planning session."

Mickey picked up his sport jacket, with the Polaroid photos in the pocket, and folded it over his arm. "You're making a mistake."

"I don't think so, Mickey. Everybody agrees, taking this offer is the right thing to do."

"When everybody agrees on something, Pauly, you can always bet it's wrong." Mickey didn't say good-bye as he closed the door of the Flamingo Suite behind him. Warren Sacks was waiting in the blue Ford. Mickey got in and sat next to the media consultant. They headed back to the deserted airfield.

"Nice place," Mickey said, smiling at Warren. "Boy that suite of Paul's is nifty. Are they all that good?"

"Pretty much the same. Mine's the Seafoam Suite, all done in green, really restful."

"If I get back down here, I'll ask for it. Is it on the beach?"

"Just one road down from Paul's, right on the sand," Warren said, helping to seal his own awful fate.

After they took off, Mickey sat in the back of the Lear-55 in a chair facing Little Pussy and New York Tony. "Tony, go up and tell Milo t' put this call on the scrambler."

Mickey waited for the three tinny-sounding beeps that indicated

T H E P L A N

the voice scrambler was on, then dialed. In a few minutes, he had his father on the phone in New Jersey.

"Yes," Joseph said to his only son, who was now circling at ten thousand feet over the Great Bahama Bank. Joseph Alo's voice sounded hollow through the scrambler. His emphysema was getting worse. Fluid in his lungs gargled when he spoke.

"We're on the scrambler, Pop. I wouldn't call you from the air, but we got a problem."

"Gimme."

"Pauly's had a brain fart. The DNC offered him the nomination. He's going to take it. . . . Wants us to go away."

"Change his mind," the old man said softly.

"It's blown, Pop. He's already said yes. Beyond that, he's risking security. He basically told me to take a hike."

"Whatta you suggesting?" the old man wheezed.

"I wanna send him over. I got Tony and Little Pussy here with me. We can make it look right."

"I ain't gonna be here much longer, Mickey, maybe a couple a' months, a year at the most. After I'm gone, this is your business. You know what's at stake. You know how hard we worked, how difficult it will be to replace Paul. You make the decision, you're gonna have to live with the result."

"I'll be home tomorrow." Mickey hung up and looked at Tony.

"Tell Milo to hang around out here for an hour till dark, then we go back and land without lights."