


W THE VEGAS LEGACY



A NOVEL

Ovid Demaris

By the Author of THE LAST MAFIOSO

THE

VEGAS
LEGACY

A NOVEL

OVID DEMARIS



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THE

VEGAS

LEGACY

BOOKS BY OVID DEMARIS

THE VEGAS LEGACY
THE LAST MAFIOSO
BROTHERS IN BLOOD
THE DIRECTOR
DIRTY BUSINESS
THE OVERLORD
POSO DEL MUNDO
AMERICA THE VIOLENT
JACK RUBY
(*with Garry Wills*)
CAPTIVE CITY
THE GREEN FELT JUNGLE
(*with Ed Reid*)

For My Attorney

Richard C. Leonard

whose friendship and wisdom I deeply value

I
TODAY

CHAPTER

1

The city faced an invasion. It started with a trickle in midweek and by Sunday it was a flood. For the first time in its history, the Grand Old Party was staging a convention carnival, its quadrennial, in Las Vegas and the delegates had come to do bloody battle in its searing July heat.

Sixteen hotel-casinos, along with two dozen motels, had set aside thirty thousand rooms to accommodate the onslaught of Republicans determined to have fun in sin city. They sported buttons that asked, "Who Says Republicans Don't Have Fun?" and they wore funny hats and carried horns and noisemakers to prove it. They attacked Las Vegas with the determination to dispel forever all rumors that Republicans were dull.

Ten thousand out-of-town prostitutes converged on the Strip and Glitter Gulch, the city's downtown neon jungle, and the police, used to protecting their own hookers, tried to control the "floaters" by asking them to abstain from propositioning delegates when they were with their wives. None of the floaters were permitted to work inside any of the casinos, which were the exclusive preserve of the local hookers.

The city fathers saw the convention as a golden opportunity to sell the world on the virtues of Las Vegas as a God-fearing town, no different from Des Moines—in fact, with far more churches per capita. Gambling, they suggested, was like any other business providing a service. Compared to the other forty-nine states, Nevada was a bastion of freedom. It permitted its citizens to enjoy life with a minimum of taxes, regulations, and irritation. It was the last free state in the Union.

The vicious propaganda that the so-called Mafia was skimming gambling profits was curtly dismissed as ancient history. Part of the gambling mecca's mythology. To use the favorite cliché of the publicists, the town was clean as a whistle.

In its own way, Las Vegas was the ideal convention city. The con-

venient cluster of its Strip and Glitter Gulch hotels and motels made it possible for the delegates to huddle together without having to travel great distances. They could whisper and gossip, wheel and deal in fancy restaurants and cocktail lounges, and while away the long dead hours at the gaming tables. When the urge struck them, at whatever the hour, all they had to do was crook a finger to get serviced by the world's greatest professionals.

The Monarch II, which was to serve as the nerve center of the convention, claimed to be the world's largest resort hotel, and its 150,000-square-foot casino, the size of three football fields, was likewise the world's largest. It had the world's finest restaurant, the world's largest swimming pool, the world's biggest jackpot, the world's largest display sign—all of it proclaimed in indelible neon. It was the perfect place for the world's greatest political party to meet to select the most powerful leader of the world's greatest nation. Somehow it all seemed to blend in raucous harmony.

2

Aboard Air Force One, President Truman Abbott looked grim as he read the latest polls gathered by Pat Daley, his political consultant. Abbott's rating had tumbled eighteen points in the past four months, but there was nothing mysterious about it.

The persistent challenge of Hamilton Foote, a former governor of California and the chief spokesman for the ultraconservative wing of the party, who had waged internecine warfare through twenty-eight primaries and caucuses, had been rewarded, according to his count, with enough delegates to prevent Abbott from getting a solid lock on the convention. Coupled with that were the machinations of the backers of Senator Randolph Godwin, who had entered Godwin's name in several primaries, allegedly against his wishes, to test the political waters. The results had been surprisingly promising. Abbott knew that Senator Godwin's so-called secret forces were controlled by his father, Henry Godwin, and his grandfather, Rufus Boutwell, the wealthiest and most powerful man in Nevada history.

It was a tribute to Boutwell's national clout that Las Vegas had been chosen as the site of the convention. It was the first time that a political party had dared come here to select its Presidential candidate on national television. The seven-member site selection committee for the Republican National Committee had unanimously picked Las Vegas and Abbott hadn't exercised his veto power. Later, when he learned that the committee had been wined and dined in questionable fashion by Rufus Boutwell, it had been too late for him to do anything about it without causing a scandal.

Abbott carefully filed the report in his briefcase, which he kept on a table at his side. He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. At fifty-six, Abbott was completing a successful first term as the nation's chief executive, having reduced taxes, inflation, and unemployment in a

peacetime economy, and his chances for reelection seemed assured if he could again secure his party's nomination.

"Mr. President, Joe Alcorn would like to see you," Pat Daley said. "We thought you might spare him a few minutes to keep him happy. He's pretty thick with Godwin, but still he's going to write his book with or without our cooperation."

Abbott looked out the window, the glare of sunlight accentuating the deep furrows etched around his eyes and mouth. "Yes, Pat, I suppose one must respect the wishes of an institution." A twinkle came into his hazel eyes. "Joseph Alcorn is a self-made institution, the first of its kind, the instant historian. He ranks with fast-food artists like Colonel Sanders as a modern innovator." He paused, his expression turning serious. "Give me about ten minutes, then send him in."

Joseph Alcorn was the dean of political convention coverage. Every four years he wrote a ponderous tome entitled *The Election Process in Action*, followed by the appropriate date, in which all the rumors, gossip, scuttlebutt, and hallowed words spoken by candidates and high priests of television journalism were recorded for posterity.

It was his life's work and he loved the money and prestige that flowed from it. At convention time he became the resident oracle for National Television Network (NTN). Staring straight into the camera, he pontificated at great length on the importance of rumors that floated up to his television booth from the chaotic convention floor. Though he was tall, with a whiplike body, his high cheekbones and sunken cheeks gave his face a certain ascetic flair that concealed a gargantuan appetite for all the good things in life.

When Pat Daley tapped him on the shoulder, Alcorn quickly closed his steno notebook and stood up. He was one of the few journalists left who preferred taking shorthand to using a tape recorder.

Escorted into the President's presence, he bowed his head, coming down so low that for a moment Abbott thought he was going to kiss his hand.

"Ah, Mr. President, how kind of you to allow me a few moments of your precious time. I realize you have many weighty matters on your mind and I'm doubly grateful for the audience."

Abbott waved him to a chair facing him. "Joe, it's always a pleasure to see you. I presume, as in former years, you'll be in the NTN booth analyzing things as we Republicans fumble along with the business of selecting the next President of the United States."

Alcorn smiled as he opened his notebook and poised his ball-point pen over an empty page. "Yes, I've been retained again as a consultant-commentator. I must say I look forward to it. It's an exciting challenge. Mr. President, if I may, sir, I would like to start by asking if you have the nomination locked up."

Abbott gazed out the window and wondered idly what the people directly under his airplane were doing at this moment. "Joe, we said some ten days ago that we had eleven hundred and forty-two delegates, and nothing, as far as we can see, has changed the tally."

"Mr. President, are you speaking of committed delegates? Is that a hard count?"

"It's a count that to a substantial degree was confirmed by objective tallies. We had it ten days ago and we think we have it now. That gives us a bonus of twelve delegates. So I think that's as locked up as one can have it at this point in time."

Alcorn coughed politely. "You know, Mr. President, there are those who will regard your arrival in Las Vegas on Sunday as an expression of weakness. An incumbent President usually stays in Washington until after his nomination is tendered by his party."

"Well, Joe, I've never been too interested in the habits of other Presidents. As you know, I'm a take-charge kind of leader, especially in areas that personally concern me."

"There's some talk you may be planning to meet with Hamilton Foote's delegates at the convention in an effort to unify the party. Is that your plan?"

Abbott smiled thinly. "Joe, I'm going off the record on this one. It's a distinct possibility. I plan to press flesh and make the necessary symbolic gestures wherever I find softness among Foote delegates."

Alcorn chuckled softly. "Ah, Mr. President, it will be an historic convention. As for Senator Godwin, have you assessed his situation?"

The President decided it was time to play the game. "To some extent, Joe, but I'm still uncertain as to what actually took place there. What have you heard about it? Have you had an opportunity to speak with Godwin?"

Alcorn grinned in anticipation. He knew the President was strictly a quid-pro-quo man. He never gave information without expecting some in return. But this was part of Alcorn's plan. This was the opportunity he needed to do his number for Randolph Godwin. Besides, it meant he'd have more time to bask in the Presidential glow. He knew the

other correspondents on the plane were clocking him, and it was these small victories that marked him as the supreme chronicler of Presidential elections.

"Ah, yes, Mr. President, I did indeed interview Senator Godwin last week. He professes—in eloquent terms, I might add—to be one of your most loyal supporters, no doubt realizing I would transmit this information to you. I, for one, am a little dubious, Mr. President. He claims to know nothing about the people who entered his name in the primaries, but"—and Alcorn paused here for effect—"I have it from a reliable source that his grandfather, Rufus Boutwell, engineered the whole scheme with some of his associates in the Eastern financial establishment. Boutwell has powerful banking contacts on Wall Street. For a rube from Nevada, a man without any formal education, he's managed to climb up in the world of high finance to a dizzying height. Most men would get a nosebleed halfway up there." Alcorn smiled, pleased with what he considered a clever analogy. "My information is that Boutwell wants his grandson on the ticket in the Vice-President slot."

The President pursed his lips, his eyes narrowing. "My response to that one, Joe, is that Boutwell wasted his money. Orville Fowler has been a popular Veep, loyal to the bone. There's no man I'd trust more a heartbeat away from the Presidency than Orville Fowler. He has my total support, and rank will have its privileges, I assure you, at this convention."

"In other words, you're not going to leave the choice to the convention?"

Abbott smiled. "Again I must go off the record, Joe. As to your question, not on your life. Rufus Boutwell got his way in getting us to meet in Las Vegas, but that's the limit to what his money will buy him this week."

Alcorn stuck his tongue in his cheek and gave Abbott a sly look. It was time for some solid body blows. "Now, Mr. President, this may be just scuttlebutt, but I hear that Boutwell's battle plan is to attack you with one ideological challenge after another on the party platform, to confront you with alternatives you can't accept, and force you into an untenable position. His supporters' passions burn hot, and they're hoping to ignite the convention floor. It's been done before. They believe there are enough uncommitted delegates and 'soft' supporters supposedly committed to you to turn the convention around. If they

flame their emotions, they can block your nomination on a first ballot. After that they feel it's their ball game."

The President casually looked at his watch. "Well, Joe, you haven't disappointed me. You always do your homework. What are your personal feelings about Senator Godwin?"

Abbott watched carefully as Alcorn's dark eyes narrowed in concentration. "I quite like the man. He's been a decent senator. Works hard for his state, and he's not afraid to stand firm on controversial issues. I could think of a worse Vice-Presidential running mate."

There was a hissing sound from the President's chair. "Senator Randolph Godwin is the last man in this country, or any other country, for that matter, that I'd want on the same ticket with me. And don't ask me to elaborate. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get on to other pressing matters."

Alcorn pocketed his pen, closed his notebook, and stood up, leaning perilously forward from the waist, and thanked the President for the interview. He bowed out of the small compartment and went back to his seat. He couldn't wait for the plane to land so he could report to Randolph what the President had said about him.

CHAPTER

3

He stepped into the headquarters tent and the General handed him the sealed message to be delivered to General Robert E. Lee, who was marching toward Gettysburg. The mission was the most important of the war, the General told him. The fate of Vicksburg was in his hands.

First on horseback, until his horse died under him from exhaustion, then on foot, he climbed mountains, swam rivers, crawled across enemy camps, and ran through forests, the leather pouch with the sealed message slapping against his hip.

Suddenly it was night and he was mired down in a sea of mud, his feet making sucking sounds as he struggled to lift them, but he was sinking deeper into the mud, until finally it was waist high. He knew he had to push on—the General had placed the fate of the South in his hands—but the fear of drowning rooted him to the spot. Hours later the first rays of sunlight broke on the horizon and he found himself trapped in a sea of blood and gore, of dismembered arms and legs, of mutilated torsos and faceless, decapitated heads.

Henry Godwin awoke in a cold sweat, his arms and legs twitching, his eyes searching the darkness of his room. He rolled over and sat on the edge of the bed, his hand reaching blindly for his cigarettes and lighter. The red digital numbers of his radio-clock showed that it was a few minutes before five.

How long had it been since he'd had that nightmare? He lit a cigarette and filled his lungs with the smoke, exhaling slowly, trying to get himself under control. Gradually it was coming back to him and he stood up, shaking his head. He didn't want to think about it. That was another place, another time, and another person had been there. He extinguished the cigarette and reached for a pair of jeans on a chair and a light wool shirt. Walking barefoot on the cool terrazzo tile of the

hallway, he made his way to the kitchen to make coffee and smoke his first cigar of the day. In a few minutes daylight would break on the horizon and he'd go for a horseback ride in the foothills on the outskirts of Carson City before the July sun turned them into an inferno. Later in the morning he would fly to Las Vegas and get ready for the struggle ahead. But, for the moment, he would enjoy his coffee in the large kitchen that he'd loved for so many years.

The nightmare had taken him back to his youth in Vicksburg and the Godwin plantation. It seemed a million years away.

He got up to refill his cup, and when he turned he found his granddaughter, Alicia, standing in the arched doorway smiling at him, the first rays of sunlight glinting on her strong white teeth.

She came forward and kissed him. "I heard you moving around and thought I'd ride with you this morning, Gramps."

He patted her shoulder. "Have some coffee. I'm not ready yet."

She poured herself a cup and lit a cigarette. "Even for you, isn't this kind of early?" she said, sitting next to him at the table.

She was beautiful and he loved her. She had strawberry-blond hair that covered her head in tight curls. Blacks called it an Afro, but it reminded Henry of Ingrid Bergman in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. She had the limpid green eyes of her mother and the same sweet disposition, though she could be tough at times. A graduate of Berkeley, she was a liberated woman. Her twin sister, Eileen, was Radcliffe and more feminine than feminist, and she was her daddy's girl. In personality the twins were total opposites. It was as though they both were determined to break the mold.

"You feeling all right, Gramps?" Alicia asked, leaning forward to peer more closely at him in the dim light.

He smiled. "Just had a disturbing dream. Kind of shook me up."

"Want to tell me about it? I love to hear the dreams of others, but I hate to talk about my own. They're mostly X rated."

Henry shrugged. "It was about the General. The same nightmare I had on my thirteenth birthday. It was precise in every detail. Nightmares have a way of shaking you up. They bring back memories best forgotten. Did your father talk much about your great-great-grandfather?"

"Not really. He never knew him and I don't think he cares all that much. All I know is what you told us when we'd visit the ranch here as kids. I used to love those stories. You made the Civil War come alive."

Henry smiled tolerantly. "The War Between the States, darling,