

THE LAST RAFT

BY
JOHN H. CUNNINGHAM

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THE PUNGENT AROMAS of cigars and cigarettes made it clear that the Capital Grille cared little for the political correctness in vogue in most restaurants. Dinners were for social affairs, but noon in Washington, DC is where power lunches earned their name.

Tuxedoed waiters scurried about to serve important men in dark suits that whispered over fat slabs of meat. Terri Turner was one of a few women in the room on this particular afternoon, and upon her arrival nearly every head turned to watch her navigate between the tables. Her tall, slender physique, dark hair and pencil skirt cut a chic swath through the dark pinstripe suits. She saw Spinelli eye her up and down as she approached but she had long ago grown numb to those kinds of looks from men like him.

She ordered what appeared to be the only piece of fish on the premises, a huge chunk of Copper River salmon that barely fit on the plate. She picked at it as Senator Spinelli rattled on about the situation he had inadvertently created and how he was the only one who could save the president from what had become a national crisis.

“It’s not just Florida that’s at risk, it’s a national emergency. Fifty thousand refugees have been holed up in tents for over a month now. What the hell’s Winslow doing?”

Turner’s dark eyes bore into Spinelli’s without retreat. Her chin-length hair framed her face, and as a relatively new commodity on the Washington political scene she was easily taken for a gracefully aging model—certainly not the chief bulldog and negotiator to the president of the United States.

“It’s a complicated situation, Senator, you know that. The Migration Accords prohibit—”

“Don’t start with that hogwash, Terri. We’re both Republicans here.”

“That didn’t matter when you went on Cuban TV and disgraced Castro, did it? If you and Dunleavy had stuck to the plan, to the *Republican* agenda of our *Republican* president, we wouldn’t have all those people stuck in tents, would we?”

“That was a month ago. How was I supposed to know what was going to happen? It doesn’t matter now anyway.”

“Of course it matters. Ever since our embassies were bombed in Nairobi and Rwanda—”

“After which I helped Clinton get the missile strikes approved against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan—”

“Afghanistan’s a powder keg,” she said. “Al Qaeda is on the rise, the Taliban can’t be trusted, so the initiative with Cuba was intended to improve America’s reputation.”

Spinelli cocked his head at an angle. “So this is about popularity?”

“No, Senator, the president is concerned about terrorism closer to home—”

“Never happen—our intelligence network is too good. We’ll never get attacked on our soil—at least any kind of significant attack.”

Turner glanced around and leaned in closer. “It’s 2001. The embargo has been in place for forty-two years and is a total failure. We want to eliminate the potential for Cuba to again invite in hostile nation states or terrorist organizations, and to disprove the international coalition’s assertion that we’re pushing an imperialist agenda. The stage was set. The president trusted you to stick to the script, but your grandstanding knocked the plan to weaken terrorism back on its heels.”

Spinelli’s bald dome began to glisten. “The coalition needs to mind its own business and stay focused on the Middle East. Winslow just wants to add another foreign policy notch to his belt. He doesn’t know squat about Cuba, aside from them having good cigars.”

“He’s learning fast now, thanks to you and Dunleavy.”

Spinelli snorted a laugh and launched a chunk of New York strip at Turner. “He can call me in fifteen years when he’s spent as much time battling Castro as I have.” The ruby on his pinky ring caught the light as he smoothed his palm over the few strands of long hair shellacked to his scalp.

“To get Cuba off the terrorist watch list was an important step to make the Western Hemisphere safer.”

“Castro’s so full of shit you can smell his ass when he breathes. We went to Havana with open minds and every intention to stick to Winslow’s script, but after we saw the human rights situation, we had to speak out.”

“Speak out?” Turner said. “Dunleavy’s a Democrat, we might have expected him to sandbag us—but not you. The president trusted you and all he got was a knife in the back.”

“I did exactly what he asked me to. Now Dunleavy, on the other hand, well, I can’t speak for him. But the fact remains that Castro still has dissidents imprisoned, free speech is suppressed, and he refuses to play ball.” Spinelli leaned in closer. “Frankly, I think it’s because the Cubans haven’t suffered enough yet.”

Turner took a long sip of her iced tea. *What’s your game, Spinelli? What was so urgent that you had to see the president today?*

“Our hemisphere’s fine, Terri. Winslow doesn’t need to bother with Cuba. Anyway, a big-shot Texas oilman like him must have plenty of supporters who lost property when Castro took our wells and refineries. They can’t be happy about his wanting to soften the embargo.”

“You’re right, we both know lots of people who had their oil wells and plants nationalized there,” she said. “But you know what? They’ve moved on with their lives. When will you allow the country to do the same?”

“Castro’s only goal to have us there was to give his people some eye candy, make them think he was open to change. He used us as pawns, that’s why we stuck it to him and called for demonstrations in support of democracy when the fool put us on TV.”

“The press reports didn’t spin it that way. You and Dunleavy were all but sainted for going into the lion’s den and coming out unscathed. I even saw a cartoon that made you out to be a pair of modern-day gladiators.”

Spinelli smiled. “I had that one framed for my office.”

“Of course you did.”

“Look, I understand Winslow’s foreign policy plans have bogged down and he needs a win to get back on track, but this isn’t the one. I’ve made a career out of battling for change in Cuba, and my Cuban-American constituents support our policies.”

“You mean starving the Cuban people through legislation like the Cuban Democracy Act and Helms-Burton?”

“If that’s what it takes to get rid of the old bastard, then yes. All we can do is continue to turn the screws until he breaks.”

“The president recognizes that Castro’s record on human rights is abysmal. He’s an evil dictator who has used the embargo to abuse the eleven million Cuban people for four-plus decades. The president’s belief is that the sooner we change what has been a failed policy, the faster it will bring about the change we want—and prevent additional abuse because it will empower the Cuban people.”

Spinelli pursed his lips and shook his head. Turner balled her fists under the table and awaited what she knew would be a pedantic retort.

“When your boss has more foreign policy experience, he’ll realize a concept like that is just wishful thinking.”

Turner had had enough. She knew there was no benefit in arguing policy anyway.

“Why don’t you just get to the point, Senator?”

“It’s more of a warning, really. The president should have given me just a few—”

“Warning? “Turner said. “About what? The disastrous results of *your* latest twist of the screw on Castro? I think it’s a little late for that.”

Spinelli leaned across the table and dropped his voice to a low growl. “You’ve got a lot of nerve, missy.”

“You created this problem, and now you expect the president to bail you out? Is New Jersey willing to pay its pro rata share to house, feed and attend those fifty thousand Cubans sitting in tents in Miami who heeded your call? And what about the thousands of others who died trying to get here?”

“You Texas people may have made a fortune wildcatting oil, but don’t expect to roll into Washington and start wildcatting foreign policy. I’ve worked on this issue since Winslow’s daddy was stomping around Mexico with a divining rod.”

Turner felt a charge of anger flush through her veins.

“Do you have a seventy-eight percent approval rating? Are you the one who’s faced with the potential for yet another Mariel boatlift if we don’t honor the Migration Accords?”

“We’re all in this together, Terri. And your boss should enjoy his approval rating while he can, because I’m here to tell you, it’s about to drop like a rock.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that Florida’s up to its neck and the situation’s spinning out of control. Tensions are near the breaking point, and since the president hasn’t done anything about it, Congress will.”

Turner’s stomach turned over. *Here it comes.*

“Care to be more specific?”

Spinelli cleared his throat, stuck a finger down his shirt collar and pulled it away from his Adam’s apple.

“We’ve called for an emergency session to authorize federal funds and to appropriate military bases to redistribute the refugees. Forget about the Migration Accords. Those fears are hypothetical, the riots brewing in Florida are reality.”

You bastards!

“We’ve been more than patient, but someone’s got to take responsibility for what’s happening—in our hemisphere,” Spinelli continued. “You can tell your boss he’s got three days to come to his senses. I hate to do this to a fellow Republican, but with Florida in utter disarray, you can rest assured that Dunleavy’s chomping at the bit to make this a PR nightmare for you guys—and the Republican Party.”

She could just imagine the headlines. The press would have a bloody field day.

Spinelli wiped his mouth with a napkin and tossed it on the table. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have the business of the great state of New Jersey to attend to.”

He stood to leave but reached over and held three fingers in front of her nose. “Remember, three days.” He put on his overcoat, wrapped a silk scarf around his neck then bent down for a last word.

“If your boss won’t cover the cost of the lunch, send me the bill, okay? I’ll make sure that New Jersey pays its pro rata share.”

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