

THE ELECTION

Staples Center, Los Angeles

Edward Burke sat confidently in the Green Room, waiting for his cue to go on stage. *Green is an odd way of describing the room*, he thought. The walls were linen white, and the tightly woven, crushed carpet was slightly darker. Even though he would only be using the room during the Democratic National Convention, he had demanded that it be completely renovated with new furniture. After all, the vice president of the United States expected certain comforts.

Every corner of the room was filled with campaign advisors, aides, and Secret Service agents. Some hoped to ride his coattails, Ed knew. Others genuinely believed in the Democratic party's mission. Whatever their motivations, each person was essential to Ed's presidential campaign—at least that was the way he'd made them feel.

Several aides were speaking on cell phones to other campaign workers who were not fortunate enough to attend the convention. Others huddled in groups of three or four and argued over office space in the future Burke White House.

Ed ignored the bustling activity. *Compartmentalization* was the psychiatric term for his gift. Reclining on a Corinthian leather sofa against the back wall, he felt calm, confident. As he scanned the speech he would deliver, his lips moved slightly with each word. Although the text would be fed to him through teleprompters positioned on both sides of the podium, he didn't want to make any mistakes. Tonight was too important.

His anticipation of the night's events was almost agonizing. He was like a child on Christmas Eve who couldn't wait to open his presents the next morning. Ed wasn't scheduled to make his appearance for at least another hour, but he couldn't relax. He had to see what was happening on the convention floor.

Handing his speech to one of his aides—he didn't know her name—he wove his way through the crowd toward the door to the corridor.

"Mr. Vice President, where are you going?" asked Ed's campaign manager, Benjamin Tobias. The slightly balding Ben always wore a calm expression. But in spite of his outward appearance—short, a little thick in the middle—he was a man who always got things done. The kind of man Ed liked.

"I've got to see what's happening, Ben," Ed replied. "Be back in a minute."

With that, Ed exited the Green Room into the wide, white-tiled corridor. Two Secret Service agents followed like obedient puppies. As Ed entered the hallway, he could hear the roar from the convention hall. As he drew closer, the noise grew louder. Several security guards and convention staffers loitered behind the stage but came to attention as Ed approached. He waved his hand to set them at ease and smiled broadly.

"This is exciting, isn't it?" Ed said to a female intern who appeared nervous.

"Yes, sir," she replied, eyes downcast.

Ed brushed by her with an affectionate pat on the shoulder and climbed the eight metal steps that

led to the back of the stage. He peeked through the curtains at the sea of red, white, and blue that covered the convention floor. He had been to every Democratic National Convention since 1980, but this one was different. This year he was the main attraction.

The scene was chaotic. Riotous. It looked like utter confusion. But Ed reveled in it. He inhaled deeply, as if he were smelling the fragrance of a rose, and studied the activity in the convention hall. He saw hats of different shapes, sizes, designs, and colors. He quickly decided his favorite were the straw hats with Burke for President on the bands. Campaign buttons that would one day be collectors' items covered the lapels of the conventioners. Affixed to wooden handles, large posters with his picture were being waved by thousands of the party's faithful. So many faces he did not know, nor did he care to know.

The DNC and Los Angeles had spared no expense in preparing for this August convention. It had cost \$100 million. But Ed thought that was a small price to pay with all the world watching. Everything had to be perfect. A Jumbotron had been installed above the stage. Red, white, and blue bunting was draped from the walls. As he peered through the curtains, Ed saw the vertical signs with the names of all fifty states scattered throughout the crowd. The signs were used to section off the convention floor, and this year the delegation from Tennessee, his home state, commanded the area immediately in front of the stage.

Satellite hookups from every major television network consumed the corporate skyboxes that lined the upper rim of the hall. The news anchors sat with their backs to the convention stage, bright lights in their faces, and talked into television cameras three feet away. Ed knew they were attempting to predict the content of his speech. Most were not even close on their predictions. But a few—those chosen by Ed's campaign to receive the skinny on Ed's speech—would be reasonably accurate.

Immediately below the media skyboxes was the section reserved for the Democratic party dignitaries. Ed scanned the crowd and was pleased to see that every seat was occupied. He would receive a report later from one of his aides, telling him who was actually in attendance, but he wanted to see for himself. Those who failed to attend the convention, *his* convention, would be reminded of that failure. Ed also saw his wife, Millie, sitting on the front row in the middle of the upper section. Ed and Millie had worked their entire lives for the presidency.

As the roll call of states began, Ed stepped away from the curtain and headed back toward the Green Room. Soon he would garner enough votes to receive the nomination for president. Some last-minute preparations were needed before he appeared at the podium for his acceptance speech.

The crowd inside the Green Room glanced up at his return but quickly focused their attention on a television against the back wall as the delegates' votes were counted. Ed watched, too, and listened as a representative from each state announced the delegation's vote. A chill ran along his spine as representative after representative repeated a phrase he had longed for years to hear.

"Mr. Chairman, I am pleased and honored to announce that we cast all our votes for the next president of the United States, Edward Burke."

The roll call continued until Ed's vote tally neared the total needed to win the nomination. With less than ten votes needed to secure the nomination, the Michigan delegation yielded its turn to the delegation from Tennessee. A robust, gray-haired man, who served as the chairman of the Tennessee delegation, strode to a microphone. He paused to allow all the news networks an opportunity to focus their cameras on him before beginning to speak.

"Mr. Chairman," he began. His voice boomed through the sound system with a slightly exaggerated Southern drawl. "The great state of Tennessee is proud to cast all its votes for its native

son, Edward Burke.”

The horde in the Staples Center erupted into thunderous celebration. Balloons trapped near the ceiling by large nylon nets were released and fell like huge red, white, and blue raindrops. Confetti and streamers cluttered the airspace. Ear-damaging music burst from the mountains of speakers on both sides of the stage.

“Mr. Vice President!” screamed a female aide with a two-way radio in her hand.

Ed could barely hear her above the celebration in the Green Room but liked her determination.

“Mr. Vice President!” she screamed again. “It’s time to go.”

Ed took one last look in a mirror near the door to make sure his patriotic red tie was straight. This time when he left the room, he had a larger escort. From the top of his black hair to the bottom of his patent-leather shoes, Ed looked presidential—and he knew it. He buttoned the top two buttons of his navy blue suit as he walked briskly toward the ever-escalating roar. The sound drew him much the way the sirens’ song lured mariners of Greek mythology to their destruction. His pace quickened, causing his entourage to scramble to keep up. He bolted up the same steps he had tiptoed up earlier and was ready to burst onto the stage when a familiar voice stopped him.

“Not yet, Ed,” the voice said calmly. It was Ben. “Just another moment.”

The entire convention was scripted down to the very second. Ed’s campaign staff knew exactly when the maximum amount of the American population would be watching the convention on CNN or NBC or FOX. Everything had to go according to the script. Everything.

Ben placed his right hand on Ed’s shoulder. “Almost.” He stared at the synchronized watch on his left wrist and started the countdown. “Three, two, one. Now, Ed. Now,” Ben said at the precise second in the script for Ed’s appearance. Ben patted Ed on the shoulder, and Ed resumed his march toward the nomination.

The exultation on the convention floor was reaching its climax when Ed finally appeared on stage. The delegates greeted him like he was a conquering hero returning from battle. Ed waved triumphantly to the crowd with both hands and pointed to a few people on the floor, pretending to recognize them. He tried in vain to clap along with the music—but knew he was off beat—and embraced everyone on the platform as he made his way toward the podium to deliver his speech.

The nomination was really nothing more than a formality following the Super Tuesday primaries. The other candidates were out of issues and out of money. Ed had outspent all of them by a cumulative ten-to-one margin. It was impossible for anyone to compete with a vice president who had \$50 million in his war chest before the campaign began. There had been ample time for Ed’s team to prepare the perfect acceptance speech.

At just the right instant in the script, Ed moved to the podium and motioned with both arms for the crowd to quiet down. Silence quickly descended. Ed smiled. It was as if his audience anticipated the very voice of God. And right now Ed felt close to delivering just that.

Ed began his eloquent speech, prepared by a team of the best writers money could buy. The speech touched on affirmative action, immigration, health care, and the rights of women. Ed talked about saving social security and improving schools. He reached out to the minority voters with his promise of increased urban revitalization. He even highlighted four different people in the audience and explained how their lives were better because of programs implemented by the current Democratic administration. Resounding cheers greeted practically every phrase Ed uttered. His speech was interrupted more times for ovations than any other acceptance speech in the history of the Democratic National Convention.

“Thank you. God bless you, and God bless America,” Ed shouted into the microphone as he

completed his speech.

He stepped away from the podium and again raised his arms in triumph. The celebration resumed, and the crowd roared with approval, chanting his name for five minutes after the speech ended. On cue, his wife, Millie, moved onto the stage. The two stood proudly, arm in arm, waving to the thousands of supporters they did not know, packed into the Staples Center.

This was their coronation, and nothing was going to stand in their way to the White House.

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Hyatt Regency hotel, Miami

The presidential suite had been converted into a makeshift war room. Economic data, poll results, and campaign-contribution reports cluttered every table as Shepard Taylor, the chief campaign strategist for the top Republican candidate, pored over the latest polling data from California.

Just two weeks earlier, in late July, Mackenzie Foster—Mac to his friends—stood on a stage in Philadelphia and accepted the Republican nomination to challenge Vice President Edward Burke in November. Shep knew he'd never forget the climax of that night. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced in all his years in politics, and he was certain the ultimate victory would be theirs. But Ed Burke would be a formidable opponent, and Shep searched through the campaign data for any glimmer of hope. He had known Mac a long time—had served as Mac's chief of staff during his current tenure as Senate majority leader. Now Shep was heading up Mac's bid for the presidency.

But the march through the primaries had been considerably more difficult for Mac Foster than for Vice President Burke. Mac's campaign funds had been substantially depleted by the time he'd reached the Republican National Convention in July. Pollsters had begun pitting Mac against Ed Burke as soon as it was clear that each man would clinch his respective party's nomination. Shep knew that the results hadn't looked promising for Mac from the very first poll, and he trailed by 10 percentage points even before the Democratic National Convention. With the momentum the vice president would receive from the convention, it was naive to think that Mac could win California's fifty-four electoral votes. So Shep, Mac, and the rest of the campaign team had decided to focus instead on Florida, Pennsylvania, New York, and Texas.

The war room in Miami this warm August night was far from the jubilation in Los Angeles. Mac had asked for it to be that way. The Hyatt would be their headquarters for a few days as Mac campaigned in Florida.

Since it was late, most of the campaign staff had retired for the night. Only Mac and his top two advisors still remained. Following completion of the vice president's speech, they all looked despondent.

"Where is he getting all his money?" asked Jack Bennett, Mac's running mate from Texas. He rubbed his tired eyes under his glasses and fretfully scratched his head through his white hair. Shep could see that the eldest member of the group was exhausted and frustrated.

All of them, and especially Shep, knew Edward Burke would be hard to beat, but no one said it. The economy was strong, and that meant the American people would likely vote to maintain the status quo. Burke was also pro-choice, and unfortunately for Mac, a large segment of the voters agreed with him. Shep knew that the biggest problem, however, was money, or the lack of it. The vice president had it. Mac didn't.

Shep loosened his tie, propped his feet on the glass-topped coffee table, and stared at the ceiling.

“He’s spending millions and millions on television and radio ads, and it never seems to run out,” he mused. “How is that possible?”

“Aside from the campaign funds, the soft money continues to pile up. At this pace he’ll have three hundred million to our two hundred million,” responded Jack.

Shep listened as Mac and Jack further discussed the vice president’s fund-raising prowess. He heard the concern in their voices. Mac was trailing in the polls, but Shep wasn’t about to concede defeat. And he knew Mac well enough to know that Mac wasn’t about to either. There were still three months until the general election, and anything could happen.

“The other Democratic primary candidates claimed Burke was receiving money illegally, but they could never prove it,” Mac began as he paced the room. He stretched his arms over the top of his six-foot-two frame, as if trying to chase the soreness from his muscles, then clasped his hands together on top of his salt-and-pepper hair. “The media likes him, so they’re not going to start turning over stones.”

He stopped his pacing and turned toward the night skyline just outside the glass doors of the balcony. “Somebody’s financing him. That’s the only answer. But we’ll never be able to prove it. The American people would turn against him if they found out he was selling the presidency to the highest bidder. I’m certain of it from what we’ve seen and tracked, but how can we prove it?” He shook his head in frustration and pivoted back toward his advisors.

Shep leaned forward in his chair, listening intently. He noticed that Jack followed suit.

“Perhaps we could get a congressional inquiry started,” suggested Jack, his brow furrowed in thought. “At least that would create some media interest, and we could put some spin on it after it breaks.”

Shep was surprised but pleased when Mac nodded slowly. Shep had worked with Mac a long time and knew that Mac rarely, if ever, authorized the investigation of an opponent. And he always refused to allow an opponent’s personal life to become the center of the campaign, no matter how devious his sins. Mac didn’t play dirty. He was a straight shooter. Honest. Hardworking. That’s why Shep was working day and night to get the man elected to the White House.

“I’ll call a couple of friends on the House Judiciary Committee,” Jack said.

“I can call in a few favors in the Senate,” Mac added.

All three agreed that something had to be done, and soon. They were getting ready to go head-to-head with a vice president with seemingly unlimited financial resources, and there was no way they could compete.

Shep studied Mac. He saw resolve in his strong, firm jaw and a fiery determination—a determination Shep shared—in his rich brown eyes.

“We can’t give up,” Mac commented, running a hand through his hair. “I firmly believe that God has placed us here, at this point in history, for a purpose. We must win. There is no other alternative.”

Shep didn’t verbalize his thoughts, but he, too, was convinced that Mac Foster had to win the presidency. After seeing the other option on television tonight, he abhorred even more the idea of Ed Burke winning. He glanced at his watch. Sleep was a rare commodity, and Shep could tell by the faces of his colleagues that they all needed it.

“We have a big day tomorrow. And if we’re going to catch Burke, we all need our rest. Let’s finish this discussion over breakfast,” Shep suggested.

Mac’s two advisers filed out of the presidential suite. Shep suspected that Jack would lie awake, wondering if Mac had any chance of winning. But Shep had other ideas. Even Republican

pollsters were reporting that Mac was 10 percentage points behind the vice president. Doubts were beginning to creep in. Mac and his campaign staff needed something big to happen by mid-October, or they had no chance at victory.

And victory, Shep thought, is crucial. Especially right now. He loathed the thought of four more years of a Democratic White House. The country's defenses would be depleted, and the United States would be vulnerable to nuclear-missile attacks from as far away as Asia. The probability existed that one or more Supreme Court justices would retire during the next administration, and Burke's liberal appointments would shape the Court for the next thirty years. Shep just couldn't let that happen. The hearts, minds, and souls of the next generation were at stake in this election.

Even so, Mac would not approve of what Shep was about to do.

Shep closed the door to his modest hotel room and hung his suit coat in the closet. It had been a long day and a longer night, and his body felt it. Every muscle ached. He splashed a handful of cold water on his face from the bathroom sink to rejuvenate himself and peered into the mirror. A tired face stared back at him. His once-parted sandy blond hair was now mussed from a hectic day of campaigning. His hazel eyes drooped from exhaustion, and he could feel the rough stubble on his face when he rubbed his eyes to keep them open for a few more minutes.

The clock on the nightstand read 2:00, but it didn't matter to Shep. He had to make the call. He was convinced that the entire campaign hinged on what could be discovered about Ed Burke's campaign fund-raising. He scrolled through his PDA until he found the phone number he needed.

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Washington DC

The first ring was intertwined into Dalton Miller's recurring dream of being chased by the DC police through the streets of downtown Washington. The second ring jolted him from deep sleep, and he knocked his wireless phone from its resting place. It fell from the nightstand and landed loudly on the floor. His bedmate, the fourth in as many weeks, never flinched.

"Hello," Dalton muttered after retrieving the phone from the floor and opening the lid.

"Dalton," an anxious voice said, "this is Shep Taylor. I'm sorry to call at this hour."

"That's OK," Dalton responded. His brain felt half asleep, and he had already returned to a horizontal position on the bed. But when he recognized the caller and heard the urgency in Shep's voice, Dalton's interest was immediately piqued. Something with a large fee was on the horizon, particularly if Shep Taylor was calling at this hour.

Dalton shook the sleep from his voice. "What can I do for you?"

There was a pause, then Shep admitted, "I need your help."

Dalton smiled. He was known to be the best private investigator in Washington, DC. If information could be found, Dalton was confident he would find it. He could follow an unfaithful spouse and never be noticed. He knew dirt on more senators and representatives than anybody else, and he was proud of it.

"What kind of help?" Dalton asked.

Again a pause. "It involves the vice president and the election."

Dalton sat up. Shep Taylor sounded desperate. Dalton knew the Foster campaign was behind in the polls, but were things really that bad?

“Can you help us?” Shep asked again.

Dalton glanced at the woman lying with her back to him on the other side of the bed. For the life of him, he couldn’t recall her name. “Hold on,” he added in a voice barely above a whisper. “I need to change rooms.”

Dalton left the warmth of his bed and stumbled through the darkness to a small office adjacent to the kitchen. “You realize it’s going to be expensive,” Dalton informed Shep when he was safely out of earshot of the woman in his bedroom.

“How much?” Shep inquired.

Dalton smiled again. The amount really didn’t matter, since his fees were always met. But it was logical to ask the question. “One million, plus expenses.”

“Agreed,” Shep responded without hesitation.

“I’ll also need protection. I am not taking a fall for your guy.”

“I’ll work on that.”

Was there hesitancy in Shep Taylor’s voice on that demand? Dalton wondered. But he wouldn’t let that issue stand in the way of a large payday.

“Anything else?” Shep asked.

“That’s it. Tell me what the job is.”

As Shep talked about their suspicions regarding the vice president’s fund-raising, the picture became clear to Dalton. Mac Foster’s staff needed to know who was funding Ed Burke’s campaign, and they needed to know quickly. Dalton was to communicate with Shep, and only Shep. Dalton could not tell anyone who employed him.

“This is important,” Shep urged. “I need you to give this top priority.”

“I’ll get started first thing this morning,” Dalton promised.

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Hyatt Regency hotel, Miami

After Shep hung up the phone, he was more than ready for bed. His sleep tonight would finally be restful. The best he’d had since Mac clinched the Republican nomination in the April primaries.