

CHAPTER ONE

Come Fly with Me

"This is Special Agent Joaquin M. Garcia of the FBI, and I'm consenting to record my conversation with Greg DePalma and others as-yet unknown . . ."

Then I turn the music up loud and sing along. I usually pick arias from operas like Puccini's "Nessun Dorma," or some Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin classics, or maybe a little Tony Bennett. I sing to get myself in the mood and also to entertain the poor bastards back at FBI headquarters who have to transcribe every word of these conversations.

I've been an undercover agent in the FBI for more than a quarter of a century, and I've put hundreds and hundreds of bad guys in jail: dopers, terrorists, bad cops, dirty politicians, you name it. The difference between most agents and me is that I work multiple major cases simultaneously as an undercover, sometimes juggling five or six different identities and roles. I did this for approximately twenty-four years out of my twenty-six years of service, working an FBI record of forty-five long-term major undercover investigations and countless short-term undercover operations.

Each day I speak these introductory words into the recording device strapped to my body with which I will pick up the conversations among Greg DePalma and others in his world.

Greg suffers from every serious ailment under the sun, from heart disease to lung cancer to who knows what else. But in just a few months out of prison, this man, whom both the Mob hierarchy and the FBI considered nothing more than a washed-up old brokester, a complete has-been, has reasserted his authority within his crime family. He has taken back control of the loan sharking, extortion, and gambling enterprises that once were his and is currently fighting like a bastard to resolve the issue of a hit he ordered on another wiseguy.

Every week I see the "tribute" envelopes full of cash passed to him by the members of his crew and the construction company owners and other business owners to whom he provides protection. I estimate that Greg DePalma is pulling down at least a quarter of a million dollars a year, all of it tax-free. This is not to mention the sports memorabilia, art, jewelry, watches, and everything else that he steals and sells. Greg, like the rest of the modern Mafia, is all about the money. He's spent his life in and out of prison because he has rarely taken a plea, never ratted anyone out, always went to trial, and never, ever allocuted (the legal term for admitting) to his membership in La Cosa Nostra. He never betrayed the Mob by acknowledging its existence in court. That's why I call him a stand-up mobster of the old school.

He is also among the most cautious, careful, and colorful of Mafiosi ever to grace the streets of New York. You don't get to be seventy-three and a wiseguy by making mistakes or trusting the wrong people.

Indeed, Greg DePalma has only made one serious mistake when it came to whom he trusted, whom he let into his confidence, whom he admitted to his world.

Me.

I'm on my way to meet Greg right now, for another day of eating, meetings, and the planning of beatings. It's just another day in the Mafia, just another day building a case against "Greg DePalma and others as yet unknown."

I couldn't be happier. As Sinatra sings, "Come fly with me."

CHAPTER TWO

Serpico Sent Me

When I was a kid, the last thing I ever imagined was that I'd be an undercover agent of the FBI. I was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1952 into an affluent home with nannies, housekeepers, and a government chauffeur for my father, who was an important official in the Cuban Treasury Department. My mother was an opera singer who would perform "Ave Maria" at almost every high society wedding in Havana. I had an older brother and a younger sister, and we were a tight-knit, loving family, living in a beautiful home in an elegant neighborhood. My father was six feet four inches tall and weighed 240 pounds. I always remember him working hard at the huge home office he maintained in addition to his magisterial government office. It's hard to recall him without a cigar—he would smoke at least ten a day. In Cuba he was known as Señor Garcia, and everyone loved him. He was a great guy, and my mother was an angel.

In 1959 Fidel Castro began his revolution and tossed out the Batista government, in the name of eliminating corruption from the island nation. My father, fearing for his life, contacted his counterparts at the U.S. Embassy in Havana. One night in 1959 he awakened us, kissed us good-bye, and was escorted out by the FBI attaché in Cuba. The next day Castro's

militia came looking for him, but he was already gone. Had he stayed one more night, he might well have been taken out and killed.

My father had to work three jobs in Manhattan in order to raise enough money to get the rest of the family out of Cuba. He worked the midnight shift as a bookkeeper in a hotel and took backbreaking, menial jobs during the day. He took anything that he could get, working around the clock for a year to raise the money to get us out. In Havana, feelings about Castro divided families. Whenever my father called, he and my mother talked in code, because they knew that the calls to and from the United States were being tapped. It cost a fortune for us to call the United States, so we waited for my father to call from New York. The phone calls, always monitored, were disconnected if my parents' conversation ventured into territory that was considered too controversial by the Cuban censors.

My father eventually put enough aside so that my mother, my brother, my sister, and I could make the short flight from Havana to Miami, where our father escorted us to New York. I'll never forget that as a nine-year-old, I was strip-searched for contraband at the Havana Airport by Castro's soldiers. The irony is that the FBI, for many years during the 1960s and '70s and even into the early '80s, was wary of taking on Cuban-born individuals as Special Agents, fearing that we might be moles planted by Castro's regime. In fact, the opposite was the case. Just about anyone who left Havana in those years hated Castro with an abiding passion, because of the way he divided families, destroyed livelihoods, and imprisoned and killed so many people. I was appointed as a Special Agent of the FBI in 1980, only the second Cuban to achieve this honor.

I was always an outgoing person, even as a kid. So I quickly learned English, American culture, how to make friends, and all about American life. My given name, spelled Joaquin and pronounced Wakeen, was too hard for most of the Americans I met, so they called me Jock because I loved to play sports. Remember, Joaquin Phoenix was not even born yet!

The 1960s was a time when people wanted to assimilate, instead of keeping out of the mainstream and identifying primarily with their ethnic origin, as is the case today for many. Back then I was embarrassed by my

accent. I would say “choos” for shoes or “shins” for chins, or “jello” for yellow, and my friends would make fun of me. To this day, if I get overly excited or immersed in a Spanish-speaking setting, my accent will come out. My wife will laugh at me and call me Ricky Ricardo.

My father eventually established his own successful accounting firm and was like the godfather of the community—everybody loved “Mr. G,” as he came to be known in New York. He walked the streets with his big cigar and helped people solve their problems—with taxes, with accounting issues in their own small businesses, with whatever they needed. He even wrote a book called *El Income Tax y Usted* (Income Tax and You) to help the Hispanic community understand the American tax system. He was a great man and everybody loved him. I’m sure I derived my sense of community service from the way he went about his business.

I became a typical teenager and cared most about football. At six four and 240 pounds, I was built for the game and loved being part of a team. I played on a championship team in high school and was voted All-Conference. As a result, I got a lot of scholarship offers to play football. I have to admit that my grades were poor, something that really angered my parents, and the best of the schools from an academic perspective was one in Texas. Now, that was an eye-opening experience for a Cuban boy from the Bronx, let me tell you! The school was in the middle of nowhere, and it offered me my first real experiences with prejudice and bias.

I would tell people, “I’m Cuban.”

They would respond, “No, you’re Mexican. Your name is Garcia, so you must be a Mexican.”

I tried to explain that there were Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, and Mexicans, each with our own different culture, but nobody cared or understood. If you had a last name like Garcia, you were Mexican, and that was the end of the discussion. I think what kept me sane was playing football and the many friends on the team. That’s how it was in the Panhandle of Texas in 1970.

After a successful freshman year, I decided to move back home and transfer to a junior college in New York that won a national championship, where I also played football. I then received a full football scholarship to a powerhouse school in Virginia, where I played football and from

which I graduated. About this time, two events conspired to make me start thinking about the FBI. First, two brothers who played ball with me in Virginia had a father who was an FBI agent. So that got me thinking about it. And then the movie *Serpico* came out, and that changed everything for me. Al Pacino played a New York City undercover cop named Frank Serpico, who infiltrated the world of drug dealers and other criminals going under the name Paco. He had long hair and a real tough, cool-guy attitude, and I couldn't get enough of that movie.

After my experience as a child with the lawlessness of Castro's Cuba, I had developed a visceral hatred of crime and corruption in all forms. In *Serpico* I saw a guy who had the ability to go inside the barricades, to mingle with the criminal element, catch them breaking the law, and put them in jail. I loved *Serpico*! It was one of those moments where I suddenly saw my whole future, what I was meant to do with my life. And if I'm going to be in law enforcement, let me shoot for the stars and be part of the most prestigious law enforcement agency in the world: the FBI. So that became my life's goal.

I applied for the FBI but I heard nothing for a long time. One day I was watching Spanish-language TV and the FBI was advertising for Spanish-speaking agents. That's bizarre! Here I am, a Spanish-speaking applicant in good standing who met all of the Special Agent requirements, and I hadn't heard anything! So I called the FBI recruiter.

"How come I haven't heard anything regarding my application?" I asked.

His answer was very simple.

"You aren't a citizen," he told me.

I couldn't believe it! Okay, I'll go and immediately file my application for naturalization! I'd love to be an American citizen! I'd lived here practically all my life, so I already felt as though I was an American, although I was proud and remain proud of my Cuban roots. So I took the test, passed, and was on my way to be sworn in. I'll never forget when I went down to Newark, New Jersey, to raise my right hand along with hundreds of other immigrants from around the world who were also becoming U.S. citizens during the 1976 celebration of the nation's Bicentennial. The scene was comical, and I swear it happened just the way it does in the

movies. We were given small American flags and the official swearing us in told us to raise our right hands and repeat after him. "I" . . . and we all said "I" . . . and then he said, "State your name," and sure enough, everybody responded, "State your name!"

I shook my head, looked around, and thought, Oh my God. Did I just hear that right?

With my citizenship in place, I contacted the FBI, and they scheduled me for the battery of entrance exams. These were really tough tests with a lot of hard-core math. I'm no genius at math and I wasn't the greatest student. When I finished the math part, I thought to myself, Well, there goes *that* career. What else could I do? But I'm a believer in destiny, and it turned out that I did very well on the test. I guessed at a lot of the questions, but I somehow got good scores.

That brought me to the next level of the application process to become an FBI agent—panel interviews with other agents. They reviewed my accomplishments, the opportunities I had created for myself, and my goals. I could tell from their expressions that they were impressed, and I later learned their input elevated my total score. As a result, in February 1980 I was admitted to an FBI training class and headed off to Quantico, Virginia, for sixteen weeks of training at the FBI Academy.

My parents were not thrilled by my career choice. They were hoping that I might become an accountant or an attorney, like my siblings. My mother expressed her concern that I could be injured or killed while working the streets. My father had been in law enforcement early in his career in Havana, but he didn't especially want me to follow the same career path. Yet they somewhat reluctantly gave their blessing to my decision. Their attitude was, This isn't what we would have wanted for him, but at least he's doing what makes him happy.

I had received some law enforcement training while working briefly at the Union County, New Jersey, Prosecutor's Office as an investigator. At Quantico, they told us, "Whatever you know about law enforcement from past experience, forget about it. We're going to teach you the FBI way—in forensics, in firearms training, in everything. And just because you are admitted to the sixteen-week program doesn't mean you're automatically appointed to the FBI. You can be called out of your classroom at any time

and cut from the program—for any reason. “You’re gone, just like that.” So we were always on our toes.

The physical aspect of the training—running, push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups—did not present a problem. I was out of shape when I arrived, but I knew from my football experience that I could quickly round into shape. Firearms—not a problem. The FBI prides itself on the ability of its agents to shoot, but I was decent even before I got to the academy. I’d gone to the range with my buddies on occasion over the years, and I had received some firearms training with the Union County Prosecutor’s Office. A passing grade in firearms at Quantico was 85; my scores were consistently in the low 90s. By FBI standards, I was a good shot if not a great one.

My real weakness was academics, so I found some smart guys in the class to help me out, tutor me. When I was in college playing ball, I was just out there having fun. I never took schoolwork seriously. My parents stressed education, but I never did. So now I really had to hit the books. What’s the Bill of Rights? What’s search and seizure? By the time the tests came, I was prepared, and I did well. This was the first time in my life I had to study, and that didn’t come easily for me.

Unfortunately, an assistant director at Quantico took an instant dislike to me because of my appearance. At the time, the FBI placed a lot of emphasis on looking like Director J. Edgar Hoover’s ideal image of the G-man—in great shape, well dressed, the whole thing. The assistant director running our group told me that I was overweight. Well, that wasn’t exactly news to me! According to the medical charts, as an individual six feet four inches tall, I should have weighed 210 pounds. Hey, I had never weighed 210 pounds in my life, except maybe when I was fifteen years old!

Two weeks after arriving in Quantico, this supervisor pulled me out of class.

“You’ve got to resign,” he told me flatly, “because of your weight. If you don’t resign, you’ll be fired with no possibility of being reinstated. If you do resign, you can drop the weight and get into the next training class.”

I was outraged! How come nobody told me this ahead of time? I’d already had a going-away party at my former job, and now I faced unem-

ployment! I was faster and stronger than some of the other agent trainees in my class who weighed much less than me. But I had no choice. I resigned and went home, embarrassed and depressed.

My class counselor, Special Agent Jim Pledger, got in touch with me.

"You got screwed," he told me. "Lose the weight, get back here, and prove them wrong."

My depression vanished, and suddenly I turned into Rocky. I lost forty pounds in two months, got weighed in, and then was sworn in again as an FBI trainee in May 1980. I even walked up to the assistant director and said, "See, I told you I could have done this. There was no need for you to do this to me."

He couldn't look me in the eye. Typical bureaucracy. But no matter. I passed Quantico with flying colors, with the constant tutoring of my best friend, T. J. Murray, who, sadly, has since passed away. I helped him with firearms and he helped me with academics. I was admitted to the FBI. I was on my way.