



Brent Sinatra: Heat of the Night

Author: Mallory Monroe

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: When the love of his life is accused of a scandalously horrific crime, and when the criminal justice system he has always believed in begins to work against her because of his Sinatra pedigree, tortured police chief Brent Sinatra finds himself caught between doing the right thing and allowing them to railroad his wife, or fighting back the Sinatra way: All gangster. All the time.

But when the true nature of the crime is uncovered, and when his wife's role in that crime is fully revealed, it is the Sinatra family that feels left in the dark. And when that light is turned on, the family will never be the same again.

Brent Sinatra: Heat of the Night is the second explosive book in the Brent Sinatra Romantic Suspense Thriller series.

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MaKayla Sinatra, the District Attorney for Jericho County, stopped her Maserati Quattroporte at the sudden red light and quickly grabbed her iPad to check her notes. Her office had so many informants on so many different cases that she often had to remind herself which was which. She swiped through until she found the right one: The Ellison case. Jake Dalenti was the informant. Relatively new on their rolls, he had been giving them great intel. Jake was the man she was going to see.

She dropped her iPad on the passenger seat when the light turned green again and drove on through. Glancing at her reflection in the rearview mirror, she saw dark circles forming under her eyes. She was working too hard again. Not getting enough sleep again.

Like now. It was ten-forty at night. It was way too late to still be on the clock, but when she got the call she knew she had to go. Darren McGuire, her lead prosecutor assigned to the Ellison case, was laid up in the hospital with an appendicitis eruption. He and she were the only ones who were allowed to know about the DA's informants. When Jake called Darren with intel, and Darren called her, she knew she had no choice but to go and find out everything Jake knew.

But she couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

Something was wrong.

Then her phone rang.

When she looked at the name on her car screen, she gave out an exacerbated sigh and then answered. She was at dinner with Brent and his family when Darren phoned her,

and she told the family she had to leave. She knew he was going to be bitching about why this time of night.

“Hey.”

“Where are you?”

“I told you I have a meeting I need to attend.”

“A meeting, Kayla?”

“Brent, don’t start. I told you it can’t be helped. That new factory hit town with its eighteen thousand brand new employees from wherever they came from, mostly earning just above minimum wage in this high-dollar town, and now Jericho’s growing by leaps and bounds and the crime wave is too. And everybody’s feeling it. Including your office!” Brent Sinatra was the chief of the Jericho, Maine police department. After the new people arrived, swelling the city ranks by nearly a fifth, crime skyrocketed. “My office is prosecuting more cases than we ever have,” she added.

“I know it’s straining all of us. Did I say it wasn’t?” Brent’s voice was always tortured to Makayla. Too stern. Like his father’s. “All I’m questioning is another meeting this late at night. A meeting ? Are you kidding me?”

Makayla couldn’t believe he said that. “What’s that supposed to mean? Hun? What the hell is that supposed to mean, Brent? You think I’m lying ?”

“All of these late-night meetings are getting old, Kayla. That’s all I’m saying. Every other day you’ve got some late-night meeting.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is true. It is true!” Then he exhaled. “Who is this judge anyway?”

Makayla frowned. “What judge ?”

“That Alvin Clayton they hired a few months back to help with the court’s backlog. Pop says you and he have been chummy .” Brent saw their chumminess with his own two eyes, too, but because he knew MaKayla so well he wasn’t ready to take it as far as the rumor mill was trying to take it.

Makayla had heard the ridiculous rumors too. And although she loved her father-in-law to death, she also felt that Big Daddy knew way too much about her business than she would ever be comfortable with. He kept tabs on her just like he kept tabs on his own children, all of whom were grown too. He was an involved father, she’d give him that. Before he married Jenay, he had been a single parent who raised his boys right. But damn . “We aren’t chummy . We work together. Just like you and all those females at JPD. Do you ever hear me complaining about them?”

“Yes.Hell yes!”

Makayla had to smile at his response as she pulled into the parking lot of the Hayton Hotel that was located on the outer edges of Jericho. She did feel some kind of way about all those beautiful females always up in Brent’s face, but her situation was vastly different. Men would give her assessing looks all the time, and some of them would try to be bold about it, but once they knew who she belonged to they always backed off. The Sinatra name carried serious weight in Jericho. Criminal weight if you rubbed them wrong. More weight than nearly any other name in the entire state of Maine. And Brent had a hardnosed reputation, almost as ruthless and unyielding as his father’s. No sane man wanted to ruffle his feathers.

But going in circles with Brent wasn’t getting them anywhere either. After parking her car, she told him she had to go. She waited to see if he would say that he loved

her, something that had become nearly nonexistent on his lips of late. When he said nothing, she shook her head. Why did she keep expecting something different to come out of that man's mouth? Then she said out loud, "I'll talk to you later," and ended the call before he could say another word.

She tossed her iPad in her briefcase as she grabbed the briefcase, got out, and headed for the entrance.

She entered the hotel's lobby and made her way to the elevators. When The Hayton first hit the scene, everybody assumed it would be a natural rival to her in-laws' hotel. But it never rose anywhere near to that level. It was nice enough. The lobby was decent enough. But there was always that undercurrent of raunchiness to it too. As if it was ghetto-fabulous more than luxurious. And it reeked. It always had a pesky, hard-to-place odor that was as uninviting as the stains on the elevator carpet she now stood upon.

Three men got onto the elevator with her and when one got off on the second floor and the other two stayed on, she knew the bullshit was coming.

And it came.

"Hey there pretty lady," said the shorter one, a white guy. "I heard big girls like you know how to get down." He was grinning. "I ain't never been with no big girls, just skinny ones. But that's what I heard. That the truth?"

MaKayla ignored him.

But that didn't stop him. "Anybody ever tell you that you have the most beautiful of skin? And your high cheekbones and that gorgeous face is nice to look at," he added, causing the taller one, an African American like MaKayla, to laugh. "What's your name, sweetheart?" the short guy asked. "You got a name?"

MaKayla didn't dignify his question with a response. But then the black guy got on the bandwagon too. "I don't need to know your name. You know why? Cause you fine as wine, baby girl. Got some serious curves going on right there, yes ma'am you do. A real brother can do a lot with that right there. But only if he's a real brother," he added, looking at his friend and laughing as both men continued to look down the length of her body.

Makayla used to be self-conscious about her full figure even though guys were always going on about it. She always chalked up that sexy talk to guys just trying to get some and any willing woman would do. But when Brent came along helping her rather than trying to use her, and when he reminded her how her curves fell into perfect place in a magical way, elevating her body to a voluptuousness women envied and men actually did want, she got over herself and embraced her curves. But what she didn't do was flirt around with guys. She had too many cases of guys stalking ladies, raining down pure hell on those ladies' lives, just because they were nice to them.

She stepped off the elevator onto the fourteenth floor, with the guys still going on about her body until the elevator door closed them in, and she made her way around corridors until she was standing at room number 1498. It was a suite Darren had set up for them to meet privately with their various informants and she pulled out her keycard, swiped it, and entered the room.

Expecting to find Jake seated on the sofa ready to talk, but finding no one there, she yelled out. "Jake? Where are you?"

"Jake?"

"I'm back here!"

She couldn't say if it was Jake Dalenti's voice or not because her contact with him

had been minimal, but something stopped her in her tracks. Her hackles went up and she sensed again within herself that something was off. Something was wrong. And instead of going to the back where he had no business being, everything within her screamed for her to turn tail and get out of there.

She got out of there.

At least she tried to.

Because as soon as she turned to leave, a wall of a body, a huge man, stood in front of her and tried to force a wet rag into her face. Certain it was chloroform that would knock her out, she fought with all she had, snatching that rag away from her nose before it could take any effect. She scratched and clawed her attacker and kicked him in his groin and tried to scream but the rag was still covering her mouth and muffling the sound.

They fell to the floor wrestling, but she kept fighting. She was scratching him. She tried to poke his eyes out. She knew she had to fight for her life.

And within seconds she was beginning to pull away from him. He was big but he wasn't strong. He was big but he wasn't agile. Her body was on that floor circling around in her Prada dress and heels, wiggling away from him as if he was a vortex trying to suck the life out of her and she wasn't having it. She was winning the fight.

Until the man from the back room, who had yelled out when she called Jake's name, hurried over and grabbed her uncooperative arms and legs just enough for his partner to press that wet cloth up to her nose until she was woozy. Until she no longer had any control of her body whatsoever.

“ Brent .” She thought she was crying out at the top of her lungs. “ Brent !” But her voice was barely a whisper.

She cried out Brent's name once again, this time with even more feeling and with all she had, but it wasn't even a whisper anymore. But she kept crying out for him. She kept crying out. Until she was unable to do even that.

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TWO DAYS EARLIER

MaKayla sat in the back of the courtroom as her lead prosecutor finished his closing arguments. Deliberation instructions would be handed down first thing in the morning, and the case would then be in the hands of the jury. MaKayla usually felt relieved by this time in the process. At least their case in chief was over and they gave all they had to give. But after a string of defeats on cases with far more direct evidence than this one ever had, she wasn't counting on victory. Which would be another blow to the DA's office and specifically to her, as the head of that office.

She took her briefcase and made her way out of the courtroom before the gavel came down. Her goal was to grab a latte and then head back to her office before anybody noticed her. She was able to drop by Starbucks inside the courthouse and grab the latte, alright, but she couldn't quite make it across the atrium to the exit doors before she was accosted.

"Well hello there, MaKayla!"

Almost got away, she thought, as she turned to the sound. But when she saw that it was Alvin Clayton, the newly appointed judge in her district, she smiled. Why wouldn't she? He was African American like her, which was a rarity in Jericho as blacks made up only three percent of the population, and even less in the judiciary. And he was all the rave among the ladies' circles. He was what they all considered, and MaKayla agreed, the total package: very tall, very dark, very smart, very handsome. "Alvin hi. How are you?"

Alvin Clayton gave MaKayla that perusal he gave all women. Although she was a

little thicker than he was used to, as most of his girlfriends had been skinny white women, he loved her vibe and her face. Gorgeous face! But he was more intrigued by her body than attracted to it.

He'd heard from other brothers in town how hot she was beneath the sheets. They'd never been with her, they admitted. That bastard Brent Sinatra guarded that ass like it was the nuclear codes. But they knew it had to be smoking. They were convinced of it. Which convinced Alvin. "I'm doing great! Couldn't be better. Were you in court this morning?"

"Just sitting in for closing arguments."

"How did it go?"

She swiped her hair away from her forehead, a move that seemed to captivate the good-looking judge. "Not great," she said.

"Your prediction?"

"Truthfully? A hung jury is about the best we can hope for."

"That's not good."

"I agree." Then she smiled that smile that made him want her beneath him that very moment. "But I think it's realistic," she added.

"Hope for the best, but expect the worse?"

"Exactly!"

He smiled too. But then he perused her body again, something she was never

comfortable with. “Listen, why don’t you and I go to lunch this afternoon? You don’t have a case on the docket then, do you?”

She didn’t.

“I’ve only been in town a few months. I’m really looking forward to getting to know you better.”

He knew she was married to the police chief. He’d met Brent on several occasions. But to her he still behaved as if she was as free as he was. And that bothered her. “Actually, no, I have so much to do. But thanks for the invite. See you around,” she said and left before he could get a word in edgewise. She and Brent had their share of problems. Lord knows they did. But her tipping out with a player like Alvin Clayton was never going to be one of them.

Alvin watched her leave as his smile evaporated and turned into something far more sinister. “You’ll heel to my will, bitch,” he said beneath his breath. “Just as all the others who thought they were better than me did too. You’ll heel.”

And if you don’t heel, and if you don’t happily bend to my will, he thought as he began walking away too, I’ll just have to bend you myself.

Then he grinned. “Oh this is going to be so much fun,” he said out loud as he rubbed his hands together and made his way to his chambers. He spoke to everybody on his way: from the janitor to another judge. And everybody agreed: What a nice man he was. What a wonderful addition to the Jericho judicial family he was turning out to be. What a lovely guy.

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“The same time I had a minute ago when you asked me: six-thirty-two.”

“Chief needs to bring his ass on.”

“Says who?”

“Says me!”

“Says you ?” The veteran cop looked at the young blonde rookie as the rookie sat behind the wheel on the driver’s seat impatiently strumming his fingers. “Say it to his face.”

“I ain’t that crazy,” the rookie said, and they both laughed. “But you know what I mean bro! I don’t see why he have to be here anyway. We can handle this.”

“Spoken like a dumbbell with zero experience.”

“But come on now. Am I right or am I right? It’s just an eviction serve.”

They were parked in their patrol car in front of a dilapidated house on the southside. The rookie had four months under his belt. The veteran had seventeen years under his. “One thing you’re gonna learn about this here town is that there’s two ways of doing things: The right way, and the Sinatra way.”

The rookie grinned. “Are you trying to tell me that our chief is a my way kind of

guy? He does it his way, like Frank Sinatra?”

“ They do it their way, like Big Daddy Sinatra, the head of that family. And whenever there’s an eviction involving Big Daddy’s properties, which is practically every rental property in this whole county, then Chief wants to be onsite.”

“But why?”

“He wants to make sure everything is done by the book.”

“Again why?”

“Because the Sinatras are always on the hot seat. A lot of people in this town believe it’s not right that one family should have the kind of power they wield. There’s a concerted effort to do something about it.”

“What they gonna do? Money talk bro. All that complaining about how rich and powerful they are don’t amount to a hill of beans.”

A big Ram Big Horn pickup truck, with that glossy dark maroon color, flung into the driveway and Brent Sinatra, the chief of the Jericho County Police Department, stepped out in his big Cowboy hat and jeans. He began grabbing his corduroy blazer off of the backseat and began putting it on.

The rookie grinned as they began getting out of their patrol car. “Chief got style, you hear me? Even for a man his age.”

The veteran found that an odd thing to say. “What age?”

“ His age. He’s got to at least be in his late thirties. Maybe even his early forties.”

“And that’s old to you?”

“Damn right it’s old! It’s ancient to me. Although my girlfriend says he’s so fine. Every time she sees him, she says that to me.”

“What you say to her?”

“I say barf .”

The veteran smiled and shook his head. “You need help boy!”

The rookie laughed out loud as the two uniformed officers made their way up the driveway to their chief.

“An asshole lives here,” Brent warned them as he grabbed his long gun from the back of his truck. He was no-nonsense and they knew it. “He’s gonna call you everything but a child of God. Gonna spew out all kinds of conspiracy theories because that’s what he does. But you treat that man with respect,” Brent added, looking specifically at the rookie, a cop he still wasn’t certain had what it took to pass the yearlong probation Brent slapped on all rookies.

“Don’t worry, sir,” the cocky kid said. “We got this.”

Brent looked at the older officer, who shook his head. “Young and dumb, sir. Forgive him.”

Although the rookie smiled at his partner’s assessment of him, it was too serious for Brent to take lightly, even on an everyday run like this one. He allowed his second-in-command to do the hiring this time around because of the massive rise in crime, which meant the need for more cops increased overnight too, and because Brent already had too much on his plate as it was. But he saw now that he had to reclaim

that responsibility.

They made their way toward the front porch of the house whose windows all were painted black. Old cars and food trash littered both sides of the house, and two pit bulls tied up to a big oak tree were already barking ferociously. Brent looked at the lock, saw that it had been changed to something homemade the way everything around that place appeared to be, so he knocked with hard bangs on the door. “Noah Lamm, this is Brent Sinatra. You know why I’m here. Open up!”

No response.

Brent knocked even harder. The rookie glanced at his partner with that why don’t he just kick it down quizzical look on his face. His partner ignored him.

“Noah Lamm, I’m giving you one more chance. Open this door!”

But before Brent could get that last word out, a shotgun blast tore through that door and slammed into the rookie, causing him to slide across the porch and crash into the post.

“Good God!” his partner yelled out as he raced to him and began dragging him off of the porch. The kid was looking at the hole in his chest and looking at his partner as if he couldn’t believe he’d just been shot, and Brent began firing his own shotgun blasts into that house. He peppered that place with gunshots, determined to take that bastard out, but when there was no return fire, he kicked the door in and raced inside.

The house was so dark Brent could barely see, and it reeked of so many different smells, from urine to body odor to wet clothes, that he almost wanted to gag. But he didn’t. He put the light on his shotgun and immediately saw what appeared to be the faint outline of a man racing from the front room to the kitchen in a rushed getaway. But Brent wasn’t about to let that happen. He ran after him.

Noah Lamm, the tenant, a straggly-haired white man in his thirties, ran through the back door, jumped off the back porch, and headed straight for the woods in back of his house.

He had a head start on Brent, but Brent was much faster. He ran through those woods after Noah, easily gaining ground, but he quickly realized with the advancing darkness around him and the thickness of those woods, that he was out of his depth.

But he wasn't about to give up on that asshole. He just shot a cop! He beat back bush after bush after ever loving bush, until he could hear that he was gaining ground.

But Noah turned around and decided to shoot his shot one more time. Brent knew better than to run parallel to him anyway, and the bullet whizzed right past him. But it slowed down his momentum. That was why Brent fired his own shot, to slow Noah down too.

It slowed him, but didn't stop him. Brent knew then he had to redouble his efforts, despite being unable to see in front of him, if he ever hoped to capture the suspect.

But fate intervened and Noah Lamm tripped over a log, causing his shotgun to dislodge from his hand. And Brent was right on him. He grabbed him up, slammed him, face first, against the bark of a tree. "You shot my rookie, you bastard!" He pulled out his cuffs.

"He had it coming!" Noah yelled back as Brent began cuffing him. "We all got it coming. Especially you. You and your family. You got it coming too, Brent. They got your number. They tried to kill me."

"If you don't shut up, I'm not gonna try, I'm gonna do it right now!"

"Better get ready, Brent. They coming for you." He started crying. "They coming for

all of us!”

“Let’s go!” Brent said after cuffing Noah’s hands behind his back. He flung him away and began escorting him back to the house.

Sirens could be heard, many sirens because an officer was down and their chief was gone too. That should have given Brent some sense of comfort as he fought his way through the dark and the bushes to the light.

But for some reason the hairs on the back of his neck were up. As if he was believing that paranoid bullshit Noah was always spouting. He never believed it before, and Noah had been a conspiracy theorist all his adult life. Why was Brent even entertaining it now? But he was.

As if he didn’t know what was wrong.

But he knew something wasn’t right .

CHAPTER TWO

“What time you got?”

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It was nearly two a.m. when MaKayla finally made it home, showered, and then crawled into bed.

Brent slept behind her, and appeared to be fast asleep when she arrived, but when he felt her naked body against his naked body he turned off of his back and onto his side toward her, placing his ever-expanding penis against her butt. He wrapped his arm around her.

Although MaKayla was dog tired, and upset with him for leaving without saying a word to her, she loved his touch too much to resist. And when he turned her to him and began kissing her violently on the lips, as if he was starved for her, she returned his passion. He kissed her all over. He massaged her all over. And then he pulled her on top of him, kissed her again, and then finally entered her.

What she absolutely adored about Brent was how he never rushed it. Even though they both were in the throes of high passion, he still entered her with deference, as if it was never just an itch in need of a scratch. It meant something special to him every time. And then he took it slow, and he took it easy.

For nearly forty minutes they rocked together on that bed. All of the Sinatra children were still in New Jersey with their aunt Ashley and Monk Paletti, during their spring break, and the silence of the home gave way to their grunts and groans and active bedsprings.

Until they came. Not together. But a mere seconds apart.

And after he had poured all he had into her, and her pulsations eased, they remained

where they were. MaKayla on top of Brent. Brent's arms wrapped around MaKayla. And still inside of her, warm and protected, as if he wasn't ready to leave.

He wanted to tell her about the rookie and what happened on that eviction run.

She wanted to tell him how hurt she was when Calana told her that he had been there but left without even saying hello to his own wife.

But neither said a word.

They were too tired.

They were too invested in keeping the peace.

They were too scared to rock a boat that even their friends and family could see was already unmoored.

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The next day, Brent made his way to the courthouse. She was fast asleep when he left that morning, sleeping like his angel, and he didn't have the heart to wake her up. Not that he wanted to anyway. He knew it would only turn into an argument about last night and why he didn't show up or, if Pop or somebody else told her he did show up, why he left the way he did. What was he going to say? I saw you with that great-looking black guy and was jealous? He would never reveal his insecurities that way, not even to MaKayla. But it would have been the truth.

But by noon he was missing her something awful. He just wanted to see her face and make sure she was going to be okay. He was at the hospital earlier with his rookie, and he was grateful to God the kid was going to pull through. But that whole night still left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He went by her office first. When her secretary told him she was still in court, he made his way to the courthouse. But when he found out she was trying a case in Judge Clayton's courtroom, he couldn't get up those stairs fast enough. He wasn't a kid anymore. He couldn't fly up those stairs with ease like he used to. But he still made it to the fourth floor in near-record time.

But the trial had just ended and although other members of the prosecution team were still muddling around in the courtroom, MaKayla was nowhere to be found.

"Hey Brent." It was one of the assistant DAs.

Although they attended the same high school, he couldn't recall her name. "Hey there. My wife still around here?"

“Yes, she is, matter of fact. She’s in Judge Clayton’s chambers.”

“Is there a group meeting or something?”

“No, just her and the judge.”

Brent found that odd, considering none of the other prosecutors were in there with her. And it was, of all the judges’ chambers in that courthouse, Alvin Clayton’s chambers. He thanked her, played it cool, but his heart was pounding as he made his way to Clayton’s office.

Although he was certain MaKayla would never cheat on him because she wasn’t and would never be that kind of girl, he always wondered if that would remain true if the right man, the man of her dreams ever entered her orbit. And ever since Alvin Clayton hit town, and he saw for himself how chummy they were becoming, he wondered if Alvin could be that one man that could change her. That could take her away from him.

He didn’t know if it was truth or bullshit, but he’d always heard how black guys preferred a full-figured woman with a body like MaKayla’s. How they even craved that kind of woman. Would do anything to have her. And MaKayla had the gorgeous face to match that body too? For all he knew Alvin Clayton could be obsessed with his wife!

That was why he didn’t knock. He barged right on in as if he wanted to catch them in the act. And what he saw stopped him in his tracks.

Alvin was seated behind his desk and MaKayla was standing beside him, leaning down and showing him something in a file folder. But what Brent saw before the judge’s eyes could divert or MaKayla could stand erect, was that Alvin was staring down her blouse and their arms were touching each other as MaKayla stood there.

But as soon as they heard that door open, Alvin looked up and MaKayla stood up.

“Brent,” she said, “what are you doing here? Did Ash call?”

Brent was still staring at Clayton. “Everybody’s fine.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” he said to her, although his eyes remained fixated on the judge.

“I’m having an in-camera with Judge Clayton to see if some confidential evidence can be used in one of my cases.”

Then the judge smiled a smile that seemed totally fake to Brent. “In-camera means in private,” he said as if Brent hadn’t been in law enforcement most of his adult life. He knew what in-camera meant. “But beyond that point,” Alvin added, “has anyone ever told you it’s impolite enter an office without knocking, or for a man to wear a hat inside a building?”

“Has anybody ever told you to mind your own fucking business?” Brent shot back.

Although Alvin continued to smile, MaKayla was shocked. Where did that kind of hostility come from? “You’re out of line, Brent, way out. And you know it.”

Brent settled down. He knew it. “Can I talk to you?”

He could see hesitancy in MaKayla’s eyes, but she agreed and followed him out of the judge’s chambers.

Once in the corridor, they stood beside each other at the railing that overlooked the

courthouse atrium. It was a beautiful view, but neither one of them noticed it. “You okay?” Even though he was a naturally broody man, MaKayla knew when it was a normal broodiness or more than normal. She could tell it was more than normal.

But like always he kept it buried within and said he was fine.

“I found out this morning, when I got to work, about the shooting last night at Noah Lamm’s. One of the ADAs handled it last night but didn’t bother to notify me until this morning. But he said one of your rookies were shot?”

“He was, yes. But thank God he’s going to pull through.”

“Thank God!”

Then silence ensued.

MaKayla hated to break the mood, but as DA she had a ton of work to get to. “So what’s up?”

“I wanted to see you.”

MaKayla smiled. “I always want to see you,” she said and gave him a hug.

But as they held each other, a sense of sadness overtook them both. They didn’t want their relationship to be where it was. It was as if they had fallen into a funk and couldn’t get out of it. So they kind of stopped trying.

Brent’s eyes squeezed shut as he held MaKayla. He loved everything about her: from her heart and character to her sweet scent, her radiant face, and her so-smooth dark skin, to her voluptuous body. She had a body type he didn’t think turned him on at all. He’d been around thin, hipless, small butt women most of his life and assumed

that to be the definition of beauty. Until he met MaKayla. Until he felt her in his arms and made love to her. His entire idea of beauty and grace and sophistication completely changed after he met MaKayla.

And the older he became, the more she turned him on. The more he wanted her. The more he needed her. But also the more he kept his true feelings tucked away from her to protect his heart.

When they stopped embracing (it was MaKayla who pulled away first), he told her about what his father had phoned and told him that morning. “Pop’s invited us to dinner tonight with him, Jenay, and Tony. At Rita Lynn’s.”

MaKayla saw Big Daddy last night, at Peg’s retirement party, but she hadn’t seen Jenay in a minute. “I’d love to have dinner with them. What time?”

“He says eight. Says we’d better be on time too.”

MaKayla laughed. “That sounds like Big Daddy. I’ll be there.”

“Want me to pick you up or meet you there?”

“Better meet me there. If you have a call out, I want to have my own car to get home.”

Brent said nothing, but she could tell inwardly he was saying okay.

And then they just stood there. So much to say. Too much to say. But MaKayla was not like Brent. She couldn’t just lock her emotions away. She spoke up. “I missed you last night.” Then she added casually, as if it didn’t bother her at all, when it bothered her greatly: “I heard you were there too.” The fact that he had been in a shooting that same night, before he arrived, lessened her anger about his appearance and then

disappearance. But it still stung. She could have comforted him!

“I was there briefly.”

“Why didn’t you come say hey?”

Brent looked around. That broodiness, which kind of went hand in hand with stressfulness, was heightened. “I just didn’t.”

They looked at each other in quick-release glances, as if they were peeping rather than looking. And it was a shame because MaKayla didn’t think she could love any man as much as she loved Brent, and Brent knew he could never love any woman as much as he loved MaKayla. And the thought of their marriage failing because of their inability to admit the problem, to tackle the problem, and to learn from the problem was beginning to consume both of them. And another thought too: Was it worth it to them? Was that the real problem?

“I’d better let you get back to work,” he said in his usual sweep it under the rug fashion.

And she was his enabler. “Yeah, I’ve got a trial this afternoon to prepare for. See you tonight.”

Brent leaned in, kissed her on the lips, wishing to linger there but knowing they both had work to do. He pulled away.

She watched him as he began walking away. With that strongman persona, and those thick thighs and physique women loved, she knew she was up against it with a lot of females that wanted Brent too. And she knew many of them felt they were better suited for him with their tiny bodies and their big blonde hair - real or bleached - and their big, blue eyes - real or contacts - but she also knew who Brent wanted to be with

wasn't up to them. It was up to Brent. And he made his choice.

She just wondered, sometimes, if he regretted the choice.

But as she moved to go back into chambers, she remembered something else.
“Brent!”

He turned around too.

“All the kids are asking if they could stay a few days longer with Ashley and Frankie. They said their parents will go along with it if you do. I told them it's a no if you object.”

He had hoped she had stopped him to say that she loved him. “They must be enjoying themselves.”

“They are. Your sister is a girl who knows how to have fun. And she and June have been close for a long time.”

“That's true.” He gave a weak smile that disappeared as quickly as he revealed it. Although he preferred to have his family under the same roof. The way MaKayla was always working so late, the house felt empty. But he was not a selfish man. “I don't object,” he said.

“They'll be happy to hear it.”

Then they stared at each other a few seconds longer, said their goodbyes once more, and then they both turned away and went back to their seemingly separate lives.

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To call it a dump would be generous. It was more like a flophouse for losers masquerading as a dump, or a nightclub as it was officially known. But whatever it was, it was exactly the spot he needed. Because he was certain that not one face that frequented a club like this would have any idea who he was. None.

He took another drag on his cigarette and glanced at his watch again. It wasn't that the guy was late, but that he was early. He was always early. But he wanted to get this shit over with.

He tapped off the ash onto the filthy table and waited another fifteen minutes before the man he'd been waiting for finally arrived. All the way to the back he walked, like he fit right in. Then he plopped down on the booth seat and sat directly in front of him.

"What you got?"

"What you need?"

"I need what we discussed."

The man took over the glass of beer on the table and took a long swig.

"That's what I need. What we discussed."

"I heard you the first time."

"Then what's the problem? You're having second thoughts?"

“I don’t have second thoughts. Are you having second thoughts?”

“None whatsoever.” If anything he was more certain of his decision. He took another drag on his cigarette. “I want no improvising. I want no last-minute change of plans. I want it handled exactly the way we discussed.”

“It will be.”

“When?”

“Tonight. We go tonight.”

He nodded. “That’s good. That’s what I want. Let’s get this shit done. But remember the goal,” he said as he pointed his cigarette at his guest. “Suffering is the goal. That’s why you stick to the plan and don’t deviate. I want that asshole to suffer and everybody associated with that asshole to suffer. Those Sinatra bastards will get a taste of their own medicine. Once and for all.”

“So this is a one-and-done situation?”

“Hell no! This is just the beginning. You can call this the test drive. Because this tonight? Child’s play compared to what’s to come. They ain’t seen nothing yet.” Then he looked at his guest. “Sure you’re on board for the long haul?”

“You keep that money flowing, then I’m on board. But you do understand the wrinkle in all of this?”

“What wrinkle?”

“This ain’t just some family. You’re talking Mick the Tick’s family. I’ve been around many moons. Never met a man more vicious in my life. You’re sure you wanna take

that monster on?”

He smiled. “That’s why I’m on this side of the table and you’re over there. Because when I get finished, Mick Sinatra ain’t gonna be coming for nobody but his own. Turn them inside out and victory is in your grasp.”

His guest smiled too, raised the glass of beer in an imaginary toast, and took another long swig. “That what you want? To turn them against each other?”

But he didn’t respond. It wasn’t his business what he wanted. It was his business to make certain he did what he was told. Because if he did that, the outcome couldn’t be anything but perfection. But only if he did what he was told.

He stood up. Tossed some cash on the table. Gave the man a hard look. “I know who you are. I know where you live. I know where every member of your family lives too. Don’t so much as think about two-timing me.”

Another hard stare. And then he left.

The man he left behind gave a hard, harsh exhale. There was a time when a guy like him wouldn’t have the nerve to come at him like that. It would never happen. But time had not been kind. He was not flying high anymore. He had to take what he could get.

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Later that same night, Brent Sinatra swung his big Ram truck into the driveway of his lakefront home. MaKayla's Maserati, a gift from Brent, was parked in a crooked slant, as if she had been in a super-hurry when she made it home, which could account for the fact that she (and now he) was super-late. He hopped out of his truck and went inside.

The silence of their home hit him like a ton of bricks when he walked inside. All of the younger Sinatra children were spending their spring break with Ashley and her husband Frankie "The Monk" Paletti. Although Frankie was a major mob boss who ruled with an iron fist, everybody knew the young people would be safe with him. He was almost as feared as Mick Sinatra and Sal Gabrini. Nobody fucked with Frankie. He had zero concern that the children would ever be in danger with Monk in charge of their safety.

He went upstairs looking for MaKayla. Tony had phoned and said she hadn't shown up yet and it was already eight, the time they were supposed to be there, so he decided to drop by the house, rather than call her, to make sure she was okay.

She was okay. By the time he got on the second-floor landing, he could hear water running. She was in the shower.

In the shower, he thought. It was already eight and she's still in the shower? Brent hurried into their bedroom.

Makayla, in the shower, leaned her head down and allowed the water to drain over her stiff neck. A lot was going on. Between the outright acquittal today of that rapist, and the three other high-profile cases her office unsuccessfully prosecuted last week,

she was losing credibility in the community fast. What kind of District Attorney, the news media was beginning to ask, would allow her office to lose so many cases and nobody's been fired?

The kind that followed the facts wherever they led and if those facts exonerated the defendant she always directed her attorneys to tell the judge and the defense attorneys the truth. It was their job. It didn't endear her to the city elites and voting public that wanted criminals behind bars, even if they didn't commit the particular crime they were accused of, but she didn't play that game. And she slept good at night. Except with one case. The Ellison case. It did the opposite: it kept her up nights.

"Kayla?"

It was Brent. Another problem. "I'm in the bathroom!"

He went into the bathroom and slung open the shower door ready to dress her down for not being ready to go. Didn't she realize it was after eight already and they were supposed to be there by eight?

But when he saw her gorgeous face, and those soulful eyes that always melted his heart, he softened. And when he saw her sweet, brown, and very curvaceous body that sometimes took his breath away, he got hard. So hard that although he knew they were late, he tossed off his big hat, took off every stitch of his clothing he had on, and got in that shower with her.

Makayla had no intention of going there with Brent right now. She knew they were late too. But when his hard, green eyes looked down her body, and when he undressed and that rod she called Mister Happy sprung out, there was no way she could resist.

As heavy-handed in romance as he was in his daily living, he slammed her back

against the shower wall and began kissing her hard. So hard that she nearly matched his intensity. And when he moved down to her breasts and then, after doing her there, all the way down, her breath was caught in her throat and she let out a guttural sound that excited him even more as he did her. Then he placed his big hands beneath her thighs and lifted them up to his midsection, and entered her hard too, which caused her to arch.

“We’re late.” She was barely able to speak as he pumped into her. The sounds of slapping flesh and running water filled the shower stall. “We are so late.”

“Want me to stop?” he asked her. He was breathless too.

But she was already shaking her head. “No. Don’t. Hell no,” she said.

Brent grinned. But then those feelings overtook them both and they began moaning. She held both hands around his neck as he did her, and he lifted her even higher for deeper penetration.

Until neither could hold on any longer. And they came.

It was one of those quickies, something they rarely did, but it satiated them just as much as their long matings did. And when it was over, they both collapsed against each other.

For several seconds, neither could speak. They were still breathing heavily. It was MaKayla who finally spoke up. “Going in separate cars?” she asked him.

He was still attempting to settle back down. “It’s been a busy week. Those new recruits haven’t been the best. And the crime rate is off the charts. I may get a call out.” Brent, as police chief, was always on the clock. Especially now with the boom in population. But it had always been that way. A fact Makayla was so accustomed to

that it stopped bothering her long ago. “I thought we already decided we were going to take separate cars anyway.”

“That’s right. I forgot. It’s been crazy in my office too.” Then she looked at him. “We are so late.”

He smiled at her. Something about her eyes soothed him. “That goes without saying at this point.”

“We’d better shower and get to it. I can see Big Daddy’s disapproving look right now.”

Brent could see it too. The one person nobody in the Sinatra nor Gabrini families wanted to ever disappoint was his father. He pulled out, they uncoupled, kissed again, and then they got to it.

They had their issues alright. But their sex life had never been one of them.

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The same flophouse masquerading as a nightclub and he was seated in a back booth again. Only this time a woman walked in and joined him. She kept herself together well, he thought, for a drug addict.

“You’re as beautiful as he said you’d be,” he said when she sat in his booth across from him.

“Just give me the money and I’ll do the job.”

He slid a thick envelope across the table. When she reached for it, he placed his hand on top of it: stopping her from taking it. “No drugs until the job is done. You know what you gotta do?”

“Yeah, yeah I know.”

“Get him to take you to the hospital. You have to be alone with him in his truck. That’s the only way it can work.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Just pay me the rest after I do it.”

“You’ll get the rest when the job is done.”

“What if I can’t get him to take me to the hospital?”

“Then you won’t get any more money. And you want more money, don’t you? This envelope will be gone after one good night of drugs. And you know you’ll want more drugs than just a night’s worth.”

She looked at him. “I don’t like you.”

“The feeling is mutual. Just do your job.”

She snatched the envelope, tossed it in her purse, and left.

He took another drag on his cigarette. And smiled. All the pieces were coming together for him. Each and every one of them.

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Tony Sinatra watched his father and stepmother enter the restaurant and he couldn't help but smile. Although his father in his blue business suit and his stepmother in her above-the-knee, form-fitting dress looked like any other couple in Jericho, the fact that his stepmother had a thirty-thousand dollar Prada bag on her arm, and his father had on Versace shades and a ten thousand dollar pair of Ferragamo's on his feet, gave it all away. They were rich as fuck and everybody in Jericho knew it. But you had to look awfully close to see it. First glance rarely did it. Unless you were Tony, whose job it was to look closer. To look deeper in.

It was also his job, because his sessions always were on the clock, to keep time. He looked at his watch as his father and stepmother made their way to his booth.

"Hey baby," Jenay Sinatra said as she moved around and gave her stepson a big hug.

"You're only what?" He looked at his watch again as his parents sat across from him.
"Thirty-nine minutes late?"

"Who do you think you are to keep tabs on us?" Charles looked sideways at his son.
"I know you aren't keeping tabs on me and my wife."

"Just stating a fact, Pop. You're late."

"Says who? You? Who had you?"

"My mother."

Jenay burst into that throaty laugh Tony loved. Even Charles smiled. "Although I

wish I'd never met her," Charles said about his first wife and their disastrous marriage, "her ass didn't have you by herself. And I know that's right."

"Brent and Makayla not here yet?" Jenay asked.

"Nope. They're late too."

"No surprise there," said Charles. "Those two are going to be late for their own funerals."

"Don't mention funerals," said Jenay. "Some of these heifers around this town are still angry at me for coming back to life, as they call it, after my funeral. They thought my ass was gone for good and they had the inside track to your heart."

Tony laughed. "That is so true!"

"One or two of them might have stood a chance," Charles said nonchalantly.

But Jenay leaned back and looked at her handsome husband as if he'd just lost his mind.

"Don't believe him Ma. He was cussing those same ladies out left and right for even trying to take your place. He was a mess."

Jenay smiled. "That's more like it!"

Charles looked at her. "What's more like it? That I was a mess? You'd rather I be sad and a mess if you die before I do?"

"Absolutely!"

Tony was laughing heartily. Charles could not believe she said that. “Shame on you, Jenay.”

“Hear me out. You should be a mess at least until you can find a good woman that’s not after your money like these heifers around here, or just want you because you’re cute and got that big-ass willy.”

Tony hit his forehead. “Ma, too much information thank you very much! That’s my dad over there you’re jabbering about!”

Both parents laughed. Tony grinned.

Then the waiter arrived at their booth. “What would you care to drink, sir, madam?” Tony was already drinking tea.

“Two gins and tonics,” Charles said to the waiter before Jenay could say a word.

Tony looked at his stepmother. She had confided in him, a licensed clinical psychologist, that his father had become super-possessive of late. Annoyingly so. Tony reminded her that Big Daddy was still getting over that trauma of believing he had lost her when he actually had not, and that it would take some time for him to return to normal. Be patient with him was his advice. And he could tell she was adhering to it. That was why, when Charles didn’t bother to ask what she wanted to drink before ordering for her, she let it stand.

“Speaking of a good woman,” Charles said to Tony after the waiter left, “where’s Samantha? And why haven’t you gotten off your rear, went to wherever she and Myles are, and brought them back to Jericho?”

“We’re talking, Pop.”

“Talking? What’s there to talk about?”

“What it will take to bring her back home.”

Charles frowned. “What do you mean what it’ll take? It’ll take marriage, that’s what it’ll take. Nobody wants to be some old lady still waiting for you to make up your mind. She’s ready to get married while you, on the other hand, still have cold feet like always.”

“I don’t want to rush into anything.”

“Rush? What rush? When your baby sister Bonita got engaged – that was a rush. But you and Sam? That’s more like a turtle walk.”

Jenay laughed.

“Ain’t no rushing nowhere near that,” Charles added.

Tony looked up and was happy for the reprieve. “Big Brother and Makayla have finally arrived,” he said. “Looking like Bonnie and Clyde,” he added as they all looked over at the entrance and saw Brent and Makayla walking in. Tony jokingly referred to his oldest brother as Big Brother because of his mini-me relationship with their father, whom the town derisively called Big Daddy because of his heavy-handedness and ruthlessness and wealth. But years after that term was first coined, Big Daddy became a term of endearment inside the family.

Although Brent wore his customary jeans and polo shirt and blazer, along with his big cowboy hat, Charles’s eyes were on Makayla, who wore a light-green Prada dress that highlighted her exceptional curves. She was one of those women with that look. That sweet, smooth, just great-looking dark-brown face. And unlike some of those full-figured gals, at least in Charles’s view, Makayla had every single curve in every

single perfect location. It was as if she had been chiseled. That was how fine she was to Charles. She was just gorgeous to him.

After just being elected to a new term as the town's district attorney, she helped solidify the Sinatra stronghold on every area of local government: Bobby Sinatra was mayor. Brent was police chief. Makayla was DA. But that unchecked power all in one family only added to the envy and rancor many townspeople felt for that family. But all three were voted in. The elections were legit, despite some who claimed otherwise. They earned the right to be where they were.

After hugs and kisses, Brent and Makayla sat on the booth seat beside Tony, with Makayla in the middle.

"What were you two up to?" Charles asked.

"Look who's keeping tabs," said Tony with a grin.

"We ran a little late," said Brent as he removed his hat, revealing a very neat haircut, and sat it on the booth seat beside him.

"A little?" said Jenay. "We were a little late. We were what they call fashionably late. But you guys?"

"Thirty-nine minutes late is fashionable now?" asked Tony. "I didn't know that."

Makayla laughed. "Neither did I!"

And then they all laughed and talked and ate and talked some more until Makayla got a phone call that she couldn't ignore. She excused herself and went outside.

When she returned, it was as Brent had suspected it would be. "Sorry to break up the

party,” she said, “but I’ve got to run.”

Brent looked at her. “Run where?”

“I have a meeting. Hand me my purse.”

“A meeting this time of night, Kayla?” Brent asked her.

Charles’s face asked the same question.

“It’s almost eleven,” Brent added.

“I know what time it is. Will you please hand me my purse?”

Brent was upset, but he stood up and handed her the purse.

“Don’t you need your briefcase?” asked Jenay.

“It’s in my car,” Makayla said as she hugged her in-laws and gave Tony an air-kiss. She then hugged Brent, whom, his family noticed, had his eyes squeezed shut as they hugged, as if it pained him that she was leaving. And then she broke away from him and left. They all could see the men assessing her uniquely fine body as she walked out of the upscale space.

Brent sat back down. And Charles didn’t waste any time. “She say anything about that new judge?”

Brent frowned. “Why would she, Pop?”

“I hear he’s taken to her quite a bit. I hear they’re quite chummy.”

“And?”

“Keep your eyes open,” Charles said. “That’s all. Smart, talented girl like Makayla is a great catch to these thirsty men out here. Just keep that in mind.”

“I do.”

“And what are you doing about it?”

Brent was stressed enough on his job. He didn’t need it at home too. “What do you want me to do about it, Pop? Tackle her and tell her don’t go?”

“Tackle her? No. But tell her don’t go? Absolutely!”

Brent shook his head. “I’m not doing that.”

“And why not?”

“Because he’s stubborn just like you,” said Jenay. “Let me out. I need to go to the little girls’ room.”

“Why not the ladies’ room?” asked Charles as he stood up from his booth seat to let her out. “You’re a little past your little girl days, don’t you think?”

“You’re not past getting a mallet up your ass. Don’t you think?” Jenay asked as she left their booth. Tony burst into laughter.

“Very funny,” Charles said as he watched his wife leave. Like Makayla, she was African American too. And like with Makayla, certain members of the elites didn’t like it. And he knew that look they gave her. He watched to see if any of them gave her that look to his face. A few tried, but when they looked over and saw that he was

glaring at them, they quickly looked away and back at their own wives or girlfriends or mistresses: whichever applied. And Charles sat back down.

But Brent's phone rang and he answered quickly before his father could continue on about his personal life. It was Sergeant Doke Pyles, the nightshift supervisor. Brent had to be informed whenever there was a violent crime reported. "Yep?"

"We got a DV on Norris."

"How's manpower?"

"Light. Most are on calls already."

"I'm not far away," Brent said, standing up. "I'll take it."

"Thanks Chief," Doke said. "I'll try to get a uniform over there too. But I have to warn you."

"About what?"

"The alleged victim is Zepena."

Brent frowned. "Who the hell is Zepena?"

"You know, Chief. Zibby. From high school?"

"Oh!" He hadn't heard that name in years. They used to fool around, but it was never that big a deal. But that only redoubled his resolve. "I'm on my way," he said again, and ended the call. He didn't like men that got their kicks knocking women around.

"I've got to run," he said as he grabbed his cowboy hat and began sliding across the

booth seat. "I'll see you guys later," he added as he got up and turned to leave.

"Brent?"

He looked at his father.

"Keep your eyes open. That's all I'm saying."

Brent studied his father. "I trust Makayla."

"So do I," said Charles. "Trust her with my life. But how many of these motherfuckers out here eyeing her do you trust?"

Brent stared at his father. As usual, he hit the nail on the head. Because the answer was obvious. "See you later, Tony. Pop," he said in a voice that could not hide his frustration with his increasingly stressful job and the fact that he and Makayla already weren't on the best of terms. And now some judge had the hots for her too? A great-looking black guy with designs on his wife? It was getting to be too much. He put on his hat and left.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

Makayla woke up to what she thought were banging sounds. When her eyes were able to focus, she realized she was still in that hotel suite at The Hayton after leaving Brent and his family at that restaurant. She remembered walking into that suite, finding nobody in there, and then yelling out Jake Dalenti's name, who happened to be a DA informant she was meeting in that hotel room. She remembered Jake yelling back that he was in the back room when she knew he had no business being back there, and then suddenly she was attacked from behind. She remembered fighting for her life with all she had within her. But then somebody else intervened, and not on her behalf. She remembered calling Brent's name. Crying for Brent. But that was the last thing she remembered.

Now she was seated on the sofa. She looked down. Her clothes didn't appear touched. A little wrinkled from the struggle, but nothing that noticeable at all. Everything was still intact. Even her briefcase was sitting by her side. What happened to her?

And that banging wouldn't quit. Until she heard the doorknob turning. And then the hotel's manager, two uniformed policemen, and one plainclothes detective from the JPD walked in. She knew Phil Baronski and knew the faces of the uniforms. All three had testified at some point in cases her office were involved with. And all three were just as shocked to see their boss's wife, the county's district attorney no less, sitting in that hotel suite as she was to see them.

"MaKayla?" Phil asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Who called you?" she asked them.

Which was strange too. “Excuse me?”

“I was attacked. Brutally attacked. I fought for my life. But I don’t recall phoning the police. We nearly tore this room apart.”

All three cops and the manager looked around the suite. Nothing, not even a piece of paper, was out of place. Then the two uniforms glanced at the sergeant before looking at Makayla again. The sergeant motioned for one of the two uniforms to look around.

As he did, Phil addressed Makayla again. “You said you fought for your life?”

“Yes! I think he drugged me. That’s why I don’t remember how I got on this sofa or how . . . I just don’t remember.”

“Who attacked you?”

But MaKayla was already shaking her head. “I don’t know. He came from behind. I almost got the better of him, but he had a partner that helped him. They . . . I don’t even know what they did, but I know I fought for my life.”

It sounded crazy to the sergeant given the look at least in the front of the suite. But then he heard a loud call. “Sarge! Sarge! Back here!”

Phil ordered the other uniformed officer and the manager to remain up front with MaKayla as he hurried to the bedroom.

When he walked into the bedroom, he immediately saw why his officer’s voice sounded hysterical. There was a man, a big black man, naked and lying on his side in the bed. Although he was lying on top of the sheets, the covers were in a bunch on the opposite side of the bed. A pool of blood was around the back of his head as if he’d been struck back there, or shot. “Is he alive?” Sarge asked as he hurried to the bed.

“I took his pulse,” said one of the two uniformed officers, “but I didn’t feel anything.”

Sarge quickly took his pulse too. He felt nothing either.

“Isn’t that Judge Clayton, Sarge?” another one of the cops asked.

The sergeant opened his suit coat and placed his hands on his hips. He didn’t know the judge that well, but he recognized him. “That’s him,” he said. “Got dammit.”

“Who would wanna harm a nice guy like him?” the officer asked. Then he looked at his sergeant again. “You know there’s been rumors.”

The sergeant looked at his officer. “Rumors about what?”

“About Chief’s wife and the judge.”

Phil had heard those rumors too, but it was just gossip to him.

“You’re gonna tell the chief?” the uniform asked him.

Phil frowned. “No, you are! What do you think?” Then he exhaled. “Just call an ambulance and Forensics and shut the fuck up.”

The officer didn’t like his tone, but he understood it. Even he knew this was a major scandal. Even he knew their department was going to be under the microscope once again. He did as he was told.

And the sergeant exhaled again. Looking at all the blood on the wall and all over those sheets was crazy to him. He couldn’t wrap his brain around what could have happened here. But with the chief’s wife sitting up front acting as if she was some

innocent when all the evidence pointed to her being everything but, he knew the chief wasn't going to like it no matter what the scenario was. That much he knew.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

Brent's Ram pickup truck pulled up at the small house on Norris Avenue and he got out just as a patrol car pulled up too.

"Lieutenant Pyles told me to meet you here, sir," the officer said as he got out of the patrol car. "I thought I was gonna be too late, but looks like my timing is perfect."

But as soon as he said those words, they heard a woman screaming inside the house. They both ran as fast as they could up onto the porch. When Brent saw that the door was locked, he kicked it with his boot so hard that the door not only opened, but fell from its hinges. Brent and his officer, their guns

drawn, ran inside.

The screams were coming from the bedroom. Brent ran ahead of his officer until they both were in the master bedroom. A man was standing over the bed, his hand closed into a fist and lifted up as if he was about to hit the woman that was lying on the bed. Brent ran and grabbed his hand and flung him away from the bed, throwing him against the wall. Then he slammed the man's face into the wall and placed his arms behind his back.

"What are you doing in my house?" the man was yelling. "This is a private residence! What are you doing in my house?"

"I'm stopping you from beating your wife!"

"That bitch ain't my wife!"

The young officer looked at the victim, who was clad in nothing but an open bathrobe, and she didn't seem offended at all. And she didn't bother to close her bathrobe, which was odd to the young officer.

"That bitch ain't nothing to me!" the perp continued yelling.

Brent slammed his face against that wall again. "Call her a bitch one more time!" He slammed his face again. "Go on and do it. You're the big man. You're the bad man. Go on a do it!" He kept slamming his face and slamming it.

The man was crying out. "I didn't mean it that way, Chief. I didn't mean it that way!"

The young officer wasn't surprised that the chief was brutalizing the man. It was the way he operated on thugs like that and everybody in the department knew it. But it was still shocking to see. Especially when Brent kept doing it even as the man was begging him to stop.

"She was begging you to stop too," yelled Brent. "But did you stop? Did you stop? Did you stop?" The man was bleeding as Brent kept slamming his face into that wall.

"I won't do it again, I promise. Chief please! I promise!"

And finally, Brent stopped. Then he flung the man onto the floor. "Cuff him and frisk him," he ordered his officer, "and haul him downtown." The officer gladly took charge of the man before his boss killed him.

As soon as Brent released the perpetrator, the sobbing woman jumped up from the bed and ran to Brent, throwing herself into his arms. Showing emotion, the officer noticed, for the first time since they ran into that bedroom. "Oh Brent, it was awful what he did to me. Just awful." She was crying in Brent's arms.

Brent remembered her only when he saw her. He knew who she was. He knew it was Zibby Palance. They went out a few times in high school: the quarterback and the head cheerleader. It was all fun and games for him back then. But from what he'd heard years later, it wasn't fun and games for her. She was serious about him.

"I told him to stop but he wouldn't." She looked up at Brent, her big blue eyes sobbing. "But he wouldn't, Brent. He wouldn't."

She held onto her looks, which was more than a lot of the girls around Jericho could boast about. She didn't crack at all, he noticed. "Are you okay?" he asked her.

Zibby nodded her head. Then she scrunched up her face and began crying again. "Not really."

"Where did he hurt you?"

"All over," she said, opening her bathrobe wide to reveal her naked body. "I need to go to the hospital."

Brent saw her naked body, which, he noticed, held up well too, but he quickly closed her bathrobe and tied it shut. He didn't see any bruises on her, but that didn't mean she hadn't been brutalized.

"Should I request an ambulance for her, sir?" the officer asked him.

"Her ? I'm the one need an ambulance after what the chief done to me," the perp yelled out.

"Shut up!" the officer yelled back at him.

"I don't wanna go in any ambulance," Zibby quickly said. Then she looked those big

blues up at Brent again. "Can you take me, Brent? Please?"

Since all the Sinatra young people were in New Jersey with his kid sister Ashley, and he was certain MaKayla wouldn't be home yet, the idea of being home alone depressed him. And he wasn't going to be able to get any good sleep until his wife was home safe and sound. Why not take Zibby to the hospital?

"I hate ambulances," Zibby pleaded with Brent. "Please take me."

Brent nodded his head. "Okay," he said and her face, the officer noticed, beamed. Brent noticed it, too, but he seemed more taken by the beauty of the beam than by the obvious manipulative nature of it. It was as if she hadn't aged a day since high school.

But by the time they all made it outside and Brent and his officer were putting the perp in the patrol car, another call came in. Which meant they were having a particularly violent night. "Another one?"

"Yes sir." It was Doke again. "Bad situation at The Hayton, Chief."

"What this time?"

"Judge Clayton is dead."

Brent stopped all movement. "Dead ? Was it natural?"

"No sir. It's a homicide."

"Damn!" He could hardly believe it. "Damn! Who's on the case?"

"Right now Phil is. We thought it was a simple disturbance call. He likes to take

those. We had no clue it was going to be this high profile, or a dead body involved.”

Brent knew it was a case he had to take. “I’ll get over there,” he said.

“There’s more, sir.”

The brand-new judge in town was just murdered and there was more ? “What?”

“Mrs. Sinatra was found there too.”

Brent frowned. “Who?” Then it registered what he was saying. “My wife ? Was found where?”

When he said the name wife, Zibby and the officer looked at him.

“She’s okay, but she was inside his hotel suite, sir. She was there when the manager let Phil and a couple uniforms inside.”

Brent was stupefied. He didn’t even know how to process that kind of information. She was supposed to be at a meeting, not inside somebody’s hotel room. Least of which Judge Clayton’s! What on earth was happening? “But you say she’s okay?”

“Yes, sir, she’s definitely okay. I made certain to check on that before I called you. But yeah, she was in that hotel suite with Judge Clayton.”

When Doke said it that way, Brent understood the implication. And he didn’t like it one bit. “What’s the number?”

“1498. I have an officer stationed at the door.”

“I’m on my way,” Brent said. But then he added: “Keep it internal. No leaks. And

when I say none, I mean none.”

“Yes sir.”

And Brent ended the call.

He forgot all about Zibby as he hurried to his truck, hopped in, and sped away.

But the officer noticed that instead of Zibby being angry that he left her standing there as if she was nothing to him, she seemed enraged. Infuriated even. As if that ride to the hospital wasn't going to be just a ride to the hospital, but so much more. She went back into that house and slammed the door.

The man in the back of the patrol car grinned. “She ain't pressing no charges now,” he said. Then he laughed out loud.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

Brent's big, shiny, maroon-colored pickup truck came barreling to a quick stop directly in front of the hotel's entrance and he hopped out and hurried inside.

But one of the younger valets hurried over to him. "You can't park there, sir," he said just as the head valet hurried to his younger subordinate and elbowed him.

"Hello Chief," the older man said with a smile on his face as Brent ignored them both and hurried into the hotel. The head valet looked at his colleague. "That's the chief of police you moron!"

"How was I supposed to know he was the police chief? I've never been in trouble before."

"But have you ever watched the local news at least once in your entire miserable life? His name is mentioned every single night."

When the kid hunched his shoulders as if he never had, the older man shook his head. "And you're the future of this country. Great. Just great." He went back to his post.

Brent took the stairs two at a time to the fourteenth floor, hurried around corridors until he saw one of his officers standing at the door to room 1498. The officer opened the door, and he walked on in.

As soon as he saw MaKayla seated at the table with Phil Baronski, his heart swelled with emotion. He was worried sick about her. That was his first and overriding emotion. Was she truly alright? Was she here when it happened like Doke said?

But his second emotion was harder to identify. Because she was in a hotel suite. Late at night. The same suite as Alvin Clayton's body when she told him she had to go to a meeting, not to a hotel room. And the fact that his father specifically mentioned the judge when she left their booth, as if those rumors swirling around about their chumminess had some merit to them. And now this? He couldn't ignore the fact that it didn't bother him, because it did. But her well-being, in that moment, mattered more. Much more. But that didn't negate the fact that he had questions.

MaKayla had questions too. But all of them centered on why Phil seemed convinced she was the perp rather than a victim too? Why was he even going down that road with her? No longer woozy, she was now wide awake and fully alert. And she was losing her patience with him fast. "Why do you keep asking me that over and over again, Phil? I told you what happened. I've told you repeatedly."

"But it's not adding up, Makayla."

"What's not adding up?" Brent asked, and both of them looked in his direction.

When Makayla saw him standing there, her heart soared. "Brent," she said with rare emotion in her voice as she got up and hurried to him.

He could see the stress and strain in her eyes as she fell into his arms. He closed his own eyes as he held her tightly. He knew there was a forensics team all over that suite. He knew some uniforms were there too. But he didn't care. He held her tightly. He didn't want to let her go. No matter what the story, he didn't want to let her go.

She pulled away first. "This is like a nightmare," she said to him. "And all these questions."

"But are you okay? Were you hurt at all?" When she seemed too flustered to respond, he pulled her further back to look over her entire body for himself. "Are you okay?"

But it was already obvious that she was not. “No,” she admitted. “Phil keeps asking all these questions and acting as if . . . As if . . .”

“As if what, Kayla? As if what?” But when she just shook her head and tears began to drop down her gorgeous face, he looked angrily at Phil. “What are you accusing her of?”

Phil got up and began walking over to Brent. He knew he was his boss, but there was a serious investigation that had to be conducted. “It’s not adding up, Brent.”

“What’s not adding up?”

Phil knew going up against that powerful Sinatra machine was career suicide, but he had a job to do. He was already facing resistance. Some of the officers were already giving him push back and trying to avoid any contact with those Sinatras to protect their own careers. But he did his job. “Her story doesn’t add up, Chief. It doesn’t add up in any way, shape, or form.”

Brent’s heart began to pound. He knew Phil was a straight shooter. He was no rogue cop. He called balls and strikes. “What part of her story is an issue?”

“She said she came here to meet an informant by the name of Jake Dalenti.”

“I did come here to meet Jake,” MaKayla said. “I don’t know why you’re acting as if I’m being untruthful about that. I came to meet Jake.”

“Have you forgotten she’s the DA?” Brent asked. “Informants work with the DA’s office all the time.”

“I know that. But she claims only two people knew about this informant: her and Deputy DA Darren McGuire. But we called McGuire, who’s in the hospital by the

way, and he said he never heard of any Jake Dalenti.”

“That’s a lie,” MaKayla said. “I don’t know why Jake told you that lie.”

“Furthermore,” Phil continued, “McGuire said he never called her and told her to meet anybody anywhere tonight when she claimed he did.”

“I did get a call,” Makayla insisted. “Brent was sitting right beside me when I got that call.”

Phil waited for Brent to agree to that, but he instead said nothing. Mainly because Brent had no clue who she was talking to on that phone. And because of their lack of communication, she didn’t say who she was talking to. Never told him where she was going or whom she was going to meet up with either. And she sure as hell never mentioned Alvin Clayton.

“Based on what McGuire told me,” said Phil, “what she’s saying doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t add up.”

“McGuire is hospitalized after major surgery,” said Brent, although he knew he was making a weak argument. “He’s under serious medication. I wouldn’t put too much stock in what Darren is saying.”

“And he knows that too,” said Makayla. “Phil, you know I didn’t kill that man!”

“But I’m not basing my assessments only on what McGurie said.”

Brent looked at him. “What else are you basing it on?”

“Makayla said--”

“That’s Mrs. Sinatra to you,” Brent interrupted him firmly as he looked his sergeant squarely in the eyes. “You’re questioning my wife as if she’s a suspect. My wife !” He said it so firmly and with so much emotion that others in the room looked his way. “If we’re going to stand on ceremony,” Brent continued, “then we’re standing on that motherfucker. Keep it professional!”

Phil stiffened his spine. Here we go, he thought. The wheels of that machine were already beginning to turn just as he suspected they would. Brent’s little comment was enough to remind him of that Sinatra minefield he was wading into. But the facts were the facts. “ Mrs. Sinatra said that when she first walked in here a guy attacked her viciously and she had to fight for her life.”

Brent’s heart dropped. “Fight?” He looked at Makayla. “There was a struggle?”

Makayla nodded. Just the thought of what could have happened still gave her palpitations. “It was awful, Brent. He grabbed me from behind and I was just trying to stay alive. That’s all I was trying to do.”

“Who grabbed you from behind?” Judge Clayton , he wanted to ask her.

“I don’t know who it was. I never saw him. It was awful.” Then she looked angrily at the sergeant. “But Phil doesn’t believe me. He thinks I made it all up.”

“Not a scratch on her, sir. Not a hair out of place. She said they tore up the room during the fight. But when we got here, there was nothing torn up. Nothing out of place at all. She was sitting on the sofa with her briefcase by her side like nothing never happened. And although she’d been attacked viciously according to her, she hadn’t even bothered to call 911. It was another guest that called us when she heard a loud sound from this room, like a gunshot she said.”

“Or somebody being attacked,” said Makayla, “because that’s what was happening. I

was being attacked. I was either drugged or passed out. That's why I couldn't call anybody. They heard me being attacked."

"Or she heard somebody being murdered," said Phil, "because that's what the evidence shows. Not an attack, but a murder. Because we've got a victim at this very moment naked in bed and bludgeoned to death back there."

Naked ? In bed ? That was the first Brent had heard that Judge Clayton was found naked and in bed. He'd seen that judge with MaKayla. He'd seen how that judge looked at his wife. And now he was naked and dead in a hotel suite, and she was found in that suite with him ? What the hell happened here?

"And the way the body was positioned," Phil continued, "makes it that much more tragic. It was as if that mild-mannered man that nobody has ever had anything harsh to say about was asleep when he was violently attacked. But she's claiming she didn't know he was even in the suite."

"I didn't know who was in here!" Makayla fired back at Phil. Then she looked at Brent. "I didn't know, Brent. I don't even know who's back there."

That surprised Brent too. "You don't know?"

"No! They won't tell me anything and Phil won't let me go back there. I'm assuming it's Jake, my informant. But I could be wrong. Am I?"

Brent shook his head. "It's not your informant. Whoever he is." Then he looked at her with that hard gaze he used on suspects when he needed to memorialize their reaction. "It's Judge Clayton, MaKayla."

When he said that name, her entire expression changed. "It's Alvin ? He's dead ?"

Brent was concerned about her response. But it could have just been a human reaction. Even he was upset when he heard the news. He nodded his head. “I’m afraid so, yes. He’s the decedent.”

MaKayla was crushed. “But it can’t be. How can you say that? I was just . . . It can’t be !”

Her gorgeous face cracked before Brent’s very eyes, as if she’d aged ten years in ten seconds. And she stumbled back unsteadily, looking for a place to sit, as if she’d just been hit by a sledgehammer. Brent took her arm as he motioned for the uniformed officer near them to hurry and get her a chair.

When Brent sat her down, Phil continued to stare at her. Because he had been assessing her reaction too. He knew she and the judge were colleagues. She’d tried numerous cases in his courtroom since he’d been in town. But that reaction had more than just colleagues written all over it. That reaction didn’t bode well for her at all. Not at all.

Brent knew it too. That was why he and Phil exchanged a glance. Then he let out a harsh exhale. “Where’s the body?”

“In the room to the right,” Phil said, motioning down the hall.

But when Brent turned to head in that direction and Makayla tried to get up to follow him, Phil touched her by the arm to stop her movement. “Sir?”

Brent turned around.

“Sir, she can’t go back there.”

Brent didn’t realize she had attempted to. She knew better than that! That was why

one look from him was all it took. She sat back down. Besides, she was still grieving the judge. He went into the back bedroom alone.

Some members of the forensics team were up front collecting evidence, but there were more of them in the back collecting evidence on and around the body when Brent walked in. Out of deference to him, they all backed off and let him take a look. They all knew his wife was the suspect. And had it been any other police chief, they would have expected him to order them to cover up this piece of evidence or that piece of evidence. But it wasn't any other police chief. It was Chief Sinatra. And every one of them in that room knew he was by the book no matter what. Even when he could show compassion for a suspect, he wouldn't. Cold as a fish like his father. Vicious as a gangster like his uncle. He was a Sinatra to his core. But he was also a lawman to the depths of his soul.

"Keep working," Brent ordered the team when they stepped aside, and they appreciated that. They didn't like being around somebody so violently killed either. They wanted out too. They continued their work.

When Brent stood there and saw the nature of the crime, first, and then the man, that sense of dread overtook him again. The man he knew as Judge Alvin Clayton was lying naked on his side with a gash in the back of his head that undoubtedly led to his demise. But when he saw the blood all up the walls as evidence of how severe a blow to the head it was, or blows to the head, he knew the public outcry would be enormous if those photos were ever released. Makayla wasn't going to be able to talk her way out of this one. He wasn't going to be able to use his muscle and clout to get her out of this one. The Sinatra name was going to hurt her, not help her. Because this was horrific. There was no other way to describe it. This was as bad as it could get.

He watched his subordinates painstakingly collect their evidence, with each one of them taking sly peeps at him every chance they got, as if they were upset and wanted him to react to the fact that his wife did such a terrible thing to that fine man. But no

reaction came. He was trained since birth to keep his emotions under strict control, with the exception of rage. For some reason he nor any Sinatra or Gabrini alive could keep their rage, or more often their out rage, under wraps. But other than that emotion: Brent displayed nothing. That was how he lived his life. That was how he did his job.

Until he walked around to the opposite side of the bed, to get a better look at the back of Alvin's head. And that was when he noticed something on the floor, nearly underneath the bed. He, at first, thought it was part of the bedding: the top sheet that was halfway off the bed. But on closer inspection, he saw that it was clothing. Women's clothing. A pair of purple bikini underwear to be exact. A pair of MaKayla's purple bikini underwear to be absolute precise. He'd know them anywhere. He was the one who bought them for her!

His heart was hammering. What in the world was her panties doing on the floor in a hotel room at a murder scene???

He continued to look at Alvin's bludgeoned body rather than down where he needed to look. It was a testament to the situation that a man's dead body was preferable to view than what was on that floor, nearly under the bed, inside that suite. He wanted to kick it further under the bed, but he knew his forensics team would eventually get to that side of the room and find them there.

He had no choice.

For MaKayla's sake, he had no choice.

He pulled out his phone, as if to answer a text, and fumbled with it until it fell to the floor at his feet. He leaned all the way down, as if he had to get down on his knees to retrieve it, and he first picked up those panties and stuffed them into the pocket of his blazer. And then he grabbed his phone and stood back up. He could see that the guys

were still hard at work without any of them paying him any attention. Which he was relieved to see because he was ashamed of his behavior.

But he'd be ashamed a million times before he allowed anybody to pin this murder on MaKayla.

He pretended to check his text message again, and then he left the room. He stood in the hall, waiting to hear if any conversation around his dropped phone would occur, or if anybody saw him pick up those underwear. But no such conversation happened. He went back up front.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

When Brent left the bedroom and returned back up front, Makayla was still seated in a chair and a uniformed officer was standing over her as if she was a common criminal plotting an escape. Which caused that outrage to bubble back up inside of him and he almost lashed out at the young officer. But he had to beat back his anger because he knew the poor guy was only doing his job. Unlike his chief, he was doing what he was supposed to do.

Brent looked at Makayla. What if this was exactly what it appeared to be? What if she and Alvin had a tryst at this hotel that got out of hand? But he dismissed such outrageousness out of hand! MaKayla wasn't capable of anything like this. She was set up. He knew it in his heart of hearts as soon as he saw her face again. But she was in trouble. Severe trouble. He knew that too.

She was slicing her hair from off of her forehead and was leaned back. She still looked anguished and distressed, but he could see a sense of serenity too, as if she was coming to terms with the death. As if she knew Brent would work it out. As if she had no idea the level of trouble she was in. From what he saw back there, her office would undoubtedly file it as a murder one. Which meant she could be facing life in prison without the possibility of parole. It was a bad situation.

But he'd be damned if his sweet wife, who never broke the law in her life, would be the first member of a family of mobsters and killers to ever serve long, hard time. He'd be damned if that was going to happen.

But he also knew all eyes would be on him and Makayla and their duties as public servants that the citizens of Jericho voted for. Everything had to be tight and right and by the book. He had to be tight and right and by the book, even though he'd already

failed that test by tampering with evidence. Major evidence. But he was damned if he did, and damned if he didn't. He would be raked over the coals by the family if he didn't choose MaKayla over the law, and he would be castigated by the public if he didn't choose the law over MaKayla. But it was a brutal business when he signed up for it years ago, and that brutality didn't stop just because a family member was involved.

That was why, when she saw him and jumped up to come to him and the officer pushed her back into that seat, he didn't lash out.

Makayla looked at that policeman as if he'd lost his mind touching her that way, and then she looked at Brent fully expecting him to reprimand his officer. But no reprimand came. And Makayla sadly knew, in that instant, that Brent had his police chief hat on, and he wasn't taking it off. Not even for her. It kind of broke her heart.

"Kayla, it's time to go," Brent said. "Go to the bathroom and freshen up."

MaKayla didn't give a damn about freshening up, but she did need a break from all those accusatory eyes. She went to the bathroom that was just off from the living area.

After a few moments of silence, Phil spoke up. "Poor guy," he said. "I liked him from the moment I met him. And he was a good judge too."

Brent didn't want to hear that shit. His wife was being accused of killing that good judge. He couldn't hear that. "I'm going to check on my wife," he said and went into the bathroom with MaKayla.

It wasn't the escape he planned to make, but he knew he had to find an excuse to get in that bathroom with her.

She was at the mirror fingering her hair. When he closed the door behind him, he reached into his pocket, pulled out her panties, and showed them to her. “Put these back on,” he said to her.

When MaKayla saw those underwear in his hand, she was shocked. And it was in that very instant that she realized she wasn’t wearing any. She’d been so traumatized by the events of that night that she didn’t even realize it earlier. “Where did you get those?” she asked him.

“In the bedroom near the body.”

She couldn’t believe it. “But I was never in that bedroom.”

“I know,” he said, even if he technically didn’t. “Put them on. We don’t have much time.”

She knew they belonged to her, mainly because they were brand new, Brent had purchased them for her, and she was not wearing them when she was wearing them when she first walked into that suite.

She also knew what it took for Brent, a law-and-order man to his core, to retrieve those underwear. “Thank you,” she said, and then quickly put them on.

But before she pulled them all the way up, he moved up to her and placed fingers deep inside her vagina. She was dry. There had been no rape. At least not from what he could tell.

“I wasn’t raped,” she made clear. “I think I would have felt something if that would have happened.”

He agreed. She finished dressing. And then they left the bathroom.

But it didn't take long for Phil to go right back to the obvious: They had to make a decision.

"What decision?" Brent asked him. "She said she didn't do it."

"I understand what she said, sir. But I ask you this: If she was anybody else in this entire world, where nothing she's saying is checking out, and with this kind of evidence before you, what would you do, Chief? Let her go, or arrest her on suspicion of murder?"

Brent frowned. "Arrest her? Are you out of your mind? Nobody's arresting my wife!"

"Sir, she has to be arrested. She has to be."

Brent knew it too. But the very thought of it was paining him.

Phil knew, in the end, it would come to this. Brent was by the book, but even he had weaknesses. And everybody knew he loved his wife. She was his weakness. He stiffened his back. "I followed protocol, sir," he said.

Brent and Makayla both looked at him. "What protocol?"

"Whenever a direct family member of any officer of the Jericho Police Department is under suspicion of any major crime, the Maine Bureau of Investigation has to be contacted and they have to assume the investigatory lead."

Brent was floored. "Are you telling me you've already contacted MBI?"

Phil hesitated, but he answered. "Yes, sir. That's what I'm telling you."

Brent frowned. “Under whose authority ?” he bellowed out.

Phil swallowed hard. “Under my authority, sir, as an officer of the law. Under doing the right thing no matter who the perp is.” But Phil said it in such a sanctimonious way that before he could get another word out edgewise, that outrage overtook Brent and he punched Phil so hard that Phil fell on his ass. The officers in the room were shocked.

Now Phil’s rage was unleashed on his boss and he went for Brent like a bull going for red. He charged at him and rammed his head into Brent’s stomach, forcing him backwards and against the wall. But Brent, the stronger man, was able to push off of that wall and the fight was on. Instead of passing licks, they were struggling for dominance. To get the upper hand. To annihilate the other one.

It took MaKayla begging Brent to stop and all of the officers and half of the forensic techs to pull the two big men apart.

Brent snatched away from his employees when they separated the two. Then Brent and Phil both calmed back down.

And as MaKayla and Brent exchanged a look of inevitability that staggered them both, MaKayla knew there was no other way.

She stood up and held out her wrists. “Cuff me, frisk me, and take me downtown, Phil,” she said to the sergeant.

“That’s not necessary,” Brent said to her.

“Cuff me, frisk me, and take me downtown, Phil!” Her eyes were filled with unshed tears and it broke even Phil’s hard heart. He looked at Brent, a man he’d known for over a decade.

But Brent couldn't allow it. "You're not arresting her."

"He has to, Brent," MaKayla said, and everybody looked at her. "Don't you understand? If MBI comes here and finds that there's been any favoritism, they will have the authority to not only take over this investigation, but to take over the entire police department. And then the governor will have the discretion to remove you as chief, install whomsoever he wants to install, and take over permanently. The citizens of this town deserve better than that. You deserve better than that. Let Phil arrest me. We have no choice."

It was the same sentiment Brent had when he retrieved the evidence. It was difficult for him to do it, but he knew she was right. They had no choice.

It took him several more seconds to get there, but he eventually nodded his head. And Phil, relieved that the chief was finally doing the right thing, personally cuffed Mrs. Sinatra and led her out of the hotel suite. He also purposefully did not read her Miranda rights in case they needed that technicality later.

Brent picked up his hat that had fallen to the floor in the melee, and he looked at his officers in that suite. "I apologize for my behavior," he said, and then he hurried behind Phil and MaKayla.

When he walked out of that suite, everybody in it sighed relief. They'd never seen the chief so unhinged. But they understood it. To a man they understood it.

On the elevator, MaKayla and Phil had to convince Brent that the perp walk was necessary as a public display of no favoritism, although Brent was inwardly hotly opposed to it. Fuck the public, he wanted to scream out. But he knew they were right. He held his tongue.

They expected a reporter or two would have gotten a beforehand notice that

something was going on at The Hayton, that was why squad cars were out front, and they would be hanging around to see what was up. But what none of them expected was that the entire regional press corps was outside waiting. They already knew the DA was involved. They already knew the chief of police was involved. It was a gigantic story.

They hurled questions at the threesome and flashed cameras in their faces as soon as they walked outside, and Brent angrily took over at that point. He pushed reporters aside as he shielded MaKayla from the ruckus and hurriedly placed her in the backseat of the patrol car waiting to escort her downtown. And he got in the backseat beside her. Phil got on the front passenger seat and the officer was ordered to speed away. He nearly hit several reporters, but he got them away from there.

“Hand me your key,” Brent ordered Phil.

After Phil handed him his key, Brent removed the handcuffs from his wife’s wrists. After she rubbed her wrists from the pain those cuffs had caused her, Brent attempted to hold her hand. But she resisted. She looked him in the eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said to him.

Sorry for what ? he wanted to ask her. Don’t say you’re sorry. Only guilty people said they were sorry !

But tears welled up in her eyes, and she said it again. He pulled her into his arms.

She was in trouble.

Their marriage was in trouble.

Brent, whose poker face was legendary, was tumbling toward meltdown.

“Your boy did what ?”

“He arrested her.”

Reno Gabrini heard a lot of things in his life, but this one took the cake. He was in a booth at a lounge inside his hotel and casino on the Vegas Strip with his wife Trina, his cousin Sal, and Sal’s old lady Gemma Jones-Gabrini. “You mean to tell me that that son-of-a-bitch Brent Sinatra arrested his own wife ?”

“That’s what Ashley told Sophie,” Trina said. “Soph told me just before I walked into this lounge. She said it just happened.”

“But how would Ashley know so fast? She’s all the way in Jersey.”

“All of the younger Sinatra kids are spending spring break with her and Monk Paletti. Tony called Frankie and clued him in.”

Gemma shook her head. “But why did they arrest her? That’s what I want to know. What are they alleging she did?”

Trina shook her head. “Sophie didn’t know none of that yet. But I’m sure she’ll find out.”

“Knowing Brent’s ass,” said Reno, “Kayla was probably jaywalking.”

Trina and Gemma laughed. “Knowing him,” Trina agreed as Gemma’s phone rang.

When Gemma pulled it out and looked at the Caller ID, she answered quickly. “Hey Brent.”

Trina began gesturing for Gemma to put the call on Speaker, but Gemma wasn’t sure if the call involved the arrest, so she opted not to place the call on Speaker. “Yes. Yes, I just heard. Yes, of course.” She pulled a yellow legal pad out of her briefcase, grabbed a pen, placed the tip cover in her mouth and pulled the pin away, leaving the tip cover in her mouth. “Un-hun. Wow. Un-hun.” Then she removed the tip cover out of her mouth, tossed it on the table, and began writing vigorously with the pen. “When is it scheduled? Right. No, I agree. Okay. I’ll tie up some loose ends here and be there first thing. No, Sal’s here. I should be able to take his plane.”

She looked at Sal. Sal gave her the thumbs up. “How’s she doing?” Gemma asked Brent. “Oh, I’m sure. Tell her not to worry, we’ll figure this out. No trouble at all, Brent. Yes, I’ll be there. Okay. You too now.” And she ended the call.

“What was that about?” Trina asked her.

Gemma closed her pad. “Brent wants me to represent MaKayla.”

Sal frowned. “For jaywalking?”

Gemma exhaled. “For murder.”

Both Sal, Reno, and Trina were shocked. “Murder ?”

“Her bond hearing is tomorrow morning. Ten a.m.” She looked at her watch. “It’s after nine pm here in Vegas, so that means it’s after midnight in Jericho. Which means I need to fly out of here in the next couple hours to be there Jericho time tomorrow.” She began standing up.

“Wish I could go,” Trina said, “but with Gem gone, one of us will need to be here for the field directors’ meetings.”

“I’ll keep you in the loop,” Gemma assured her. “Don’t worry.”

“And if Sal needs his plane, you can always take Reno’s,” Trina volunteered. “He’s not going anywhere.”

“Oh yes I am,” said Reno as he stood up. “I’m going with Gemma. Kayla’s been falsely accused of murder. Which means Brent and Big Daddy will lean into letting the legal process play out. She’ll rot in jail waiting on the process to play out.”

“For the first time in a long time, I agree with Reno,” said Sal. “I’m going too,” he added, as he stood up too.

“Alright now,” said Trina, “don’t you two get your asses locked up trying to pull that strongarm mob shit in Jericho.”

“Tell’em, Tree,” Gemma said, “because they aren’t gonna listen to me. They don’t play that in Jericho.”

“Who cares what they play?” said Sal. “We need to get her out of the clutches of that barracuda they call the criminal justice system. That’s why we’re going. After that? We’re out of there.”

“That’s it,” Reno agreed.

Gemma shook her head. “Bye Trina,” she said as the two best friends hugged. “I’ll keep you up-to-date.”

“Thanks hon.”

Then Reno reached over and kissed Trina, but Trina pulled him back. “And your ass better behave.”

Reno frowned. “What you talking behave?”

“Don’t make me come across another table, Reno,” Trina said in jest, although her face wasn’t smiling. “That’s all I got to say.” Gemma and Sal were laughing.

But tough guy Reno didn’t find it funny at all. “What table?” he asked, although he remembered full well during Big Daddy’s couples’ retreat when Trina grabbed him by his shirt and nearly dragged him across a table. By all indications, she beat his ass. “I don’t know what table you’re talking about.”

“Sure you don’t.” She pointed at him. “You better behave.”

“Fuck you, Trina!” Reno said with irritation in his voice. Then he looked into her hazel eyes. She was the love of his life and the bane of his existence all at once. He also knew she had to beat back men trying to get next to her too. “Your ass the one better behave,” he said to her. “Let’s talk about your ass for a change.”

Trina didn’t even entertain his accusation. “Boy bye.”

But Reno learned a little from that couples’ retreat. He leaned down to her and kissed her again. “I love your mean ass,” he whispered to her.

She smiled. “I love your mean ass too.”

Then he began leaving behind Gemma and Sal.

Trina continued to smile. Sal wore those double-breasted suits that made him look like the mob boss he was rather than the businessman he was trying to project.

Whereas Reno had businessman vibes all over him, mainly because he was first and last a business mogul despite his extensive mob background, and he wore the most expensive suits around. But they always ended up wrinkled and hanging off of him like he'd just stepped out of bed. And his thick hair was always unruly too.

But even with all his flaws, Reno was still the sexiest man alive to Trina. He still had it in spades. And when he looked back at her just as he was about to leave out of the exit door, they didn't so much as smile at each other. But their hearts sang. Because their connection was strong as ever despite how often they got on each other's nerves. Especially for Trina. Many days she wanted to bury Reno in concrete and walk all over his butt. But other days she just wanted to cuddle with him and be with him and love him tenderly.

But those days, she also knew as he raised his hand in a wave to her and she waved back at him, were getting fewer and far between. But it had been that way their entire marriage. And they still had work to do.

But Trina's thoughts were on MaKayla as she took a final sip of her wine, got up, and left the lounge too.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

The officers in Booking were nervous as hell as their chief sat in a chair against the wall and watched with unblinking attention as they processed his wife into the Jericho County jail. But what they didn't know was that Brent wasn't watching them at all. He was watching MaKayla.

She was scared. He hadn't seen that emotion on her face until they arrived at JPD and walked her downstairs. He even saw quivering in her lower lip when the officer took each one of her fingers and thumbs and pressed them into the fingerprint ink. She'd worked her whole life to be the best she could be. She never took a dime from anyone – she earned everything she had. And that was saying a lot considering her profession. Considering she rose all the way up to District Attorney in a lily-white, sometimes super-unenlightened town like Jericho. But she won them over with her hard work, her intellect, her tenacity. Now all of that was at risk, or maybe even already tossed away, because of that craziness in that hotel suite.

Sergeant Doke Pyles, the nightshift supervisor, who'd known Brent since grade school, came downstairs and sat in the chair beside the boss. He folded his arms and stared at MaKayla too. "This some bullshit," he said. "You know that." But then he looked at Brent, who never gave anybody a break whenever they were accused of breaking the law. "Right?"

"Yes, I know," Brent said matter-of-factly, still staring unblinkingly at his wife.

Then Doke shook his head. "Who would do this to MaKayla of all people? That gal's an even straighter shooter than you are. Who would want to do her this level of harm?"

It was the million-dollar question to Brent, the very one he couldn't stop thinking about. "Could be somebody she put in prison. Could be someone she offended. Could be somebody so off the radar that it's not even possible to know. I have no idea at this point."

"I'll bet your family's gonna have plenty ideas," Doke said with a smile. "Especially Big Daddy. Everybody knows he and MaKayla are real close."

Brent knew it too. "He was devastated when I called him. He wanted to come down here too. I told him no. The MBI has already been contacted."

"I can't believe Phil called them without your permission."

"He knew I wasn't going to give it. He did his job, much as I hate to say it." Then he exhaled. "The MBI is involved and there's nothing we can do about it now. And the last thing they'll need to see are a bunch of Sinatras running around."

"You got that right," Doke said. "Because let's face it: The MBI, like most every other authority in this state, hate the Sinatras' guts. It'll do them a world of good to see one of your kind fall. They'll love to see a member of your family fall."

"They'll keep waiting because she's not going to fall," Brent said bluntly as an officer began to walk MaKayla down the hall toward the cells. Brent quickly stood up. "Get back to work," he ordered Doke as he hurried behind the officer.

Another cop, a twenty-year vet, stepped out of the booking booth and walked over to Doke. They both were watching Brent follow his wife and the booking officer. "Never seen the chief like this, and I've known him almost as long as you have. You know what he made us do?"

"What?"

“He made us scrub down the cell we’re going to put her in.”

Doke looked at him. “You’re shitting me.”

“He ordered us to do it. And we did it! Even though he knows MBI is coming. Even though he knows they’re gonna ask us all kinds of questions about favoritism and all that crap. It’s like he don’t give a damn about keeping his job.”

“He gives a damn,” said Doke. “He just gives a damn about his wife more than his job.” Then he looked at the officer like that should have gone without saying, and then he headed back upstairs to his own job.

The young booking officer unlocked the freshly scrubbed cell and MaKayla walked inside. But just as he was about to close her in, the chief walked in behind her. “Lock it,” he said to his officer.

The officer was dumbstruck. “Sir?”

“Lock the cell.”

“But sir you’re in it.”

Brent gave him a look that made clear he wasn’t just talking just to talk. And fear suddenly gripped the young officer. “Yes sir,” he said quickly and promptly locked the cell. Then he stood there a moment longer, which caused Brent to look at him again. Then he realized he was missing the point altogether and hurried out of the cell area.

Brent watched as MaKayla walked around in the cell. He could tell she already felt like a caged-in animal. But he knew what she was doing. She was trying to make the best of a horrific situation. Trying to find whatever positives she could in the interim.

Because that was what she did. She never cowered or gave up. She always fought back.

But right now, he saw more fear in her than fight.

That was why he wasn't leaving her side.

That was why, when she finally sat on the bed with her back against the wall, he sat on that bed beside her with his back against the wall too. And there they sat: shoulder to shoulder. As if what was happening to MaKayla was Brent's burden to bear too. He took her hand, sat it on his lap, and held it there. Then he pulled her onto his lap and held her too.

She laid her head against his chest as he held her. And the tears began to return. "I've worked all my life to never be a statistic. To never do anything around these white folks that would make my people ashamed of me." She wiped tears from her eyes. "But it didn't work," she said and began to sob.

Brent held her without saying words that he knew would be meaningless. And MaKayla appreciated that. Because Brent was not the kind of man that talked about doing something, he did something. Action always spoke louder than words to him. She knew that was why he was in that cell with her, rather than just telling her everything was going to be alright. He showed that everything would be alright because he was by her side. She loved him even more for that.

But although she was terrified of spending the night alone in a jail cell, she also knew he could get in trouble if an MBI agent caught him in that cell. "You can go on home, Brent," she said. "You don't have to stay here, Brent. I'll be okay," she added, even though she didn't mean it. "You can go on home."

But Brent meant it. "When I go home," he said, "you're going with me."

She looked up and into his deep green eyes. “You’re planning on staying in this cell with me all night?”

Brent looked down at her sweet, beautiful, big bright teary eyes. And his heart just melted. He pulled her closer. “That’s my plan, yes.”

“But what about the Bureau? They’ll probably be here by morning. At least promise me you’ll be out of here before they arrive.”

“I’m not promising you that. I leave when you leave.”

“But Brent --”

“Don’t but Brent me, MaKayla! There is no way I’m leaving my wife in this hellhole alone. No way. These bastards will be thrilled to crucify you. What you want me to do? Let’em ?” He looked deep into MaKayla’s sultry eyes. “I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

MaKayla stared at him for several seconds, her huge eyes filled with unshed tears. “You saw my underwear in that bedroom. You heard Phil say how nothing I was telling him was adding up. You heard about Darren saying he never called me and never heard of that informant.”

“Your point?”

“Why do you believe in my innocence when everything is stacked against me? When everything is pointing to my guilt?”

Brent considered her. She was anguished by all that was stacked against her. She was afraid, in time, that he would turn against her too. “I know you, MaKayla. I know what you’re capable of. I know what you’re not capable of. You wouldn’t hurt a flea.

And I mean a flea.” She smiled. But Brent remained dead serious. “There’s no way in hell you killed Judge Clayton. There’s no way.”

“They’re implying I had an affair with him.”

She waited for him to knock that down too, but he didn’t. She had so much more she wanted to tell him, so much more , but when he didn’t defend her regarding those nasty rumors, she knew she had better be glad he was still sticking it out with her and shut her mouth too. Just be grateful he hadn’t deserted her like Darren did. Like Phil did. Like so many more would soon do.

She placed her hand on the side of his face and kissed him long and hard. “Your faith in me will never be proven wrong,” she said. “I promise you that.”

Brent smiled and kissed her too. And he held her closer still.

But despite their oneness and brave faces, both of them were inwardly terrified.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

The next morning Teddy Sinatra, the head of the Sinatra Crime family, along with his underboss and wife Nikki, sat at the center island in the kitchen of his father's house. They had only been there a few minutes, but they were already unable to shield their ears from the bouncing bed upstairs that sounded like his father making love to Roz. They could barely hear it when they first arrived, and they paid it little attention. But the bouncing increased to such an extent that they couldn't help but pay it complete attention. Now it sounded to Teddy as if they were going to fall through the ceiling if his father didn't let up.

"Damn!" Teddy said when his father didn't let up. "Does Pop ever get enough? You'd think he'd get tired of that shit as much as he has to have it."

Nikki gave Teddy a sidelong look. "I know you're not talking about what Boss has to have when you have to have it twenty-four-seven-three-sixty-five."

"Don't even try that, Nikki. Pop's got me beat by leaps and bounds. And bedsprings too," he added, and they laughed.

And then the bouncing became even louder. "Well damn!" Teddy said, looking up at the ceiling.

"Think maybe we should wait outside?"

"Maybe Pop should ease the hell up! That's what he should do. I hope he don't be this bad when the twins are here."

"Where are they anyway?" Nikki asked.

“They’re spending Spring Break in Florida with Gloria,” Teddy said. Then more hard bouncing upstairs. “Damn, damn, damn!” Teddy said again and Nikki laughed. “It’s a wonder Roz can walk half the time!”

“He probably forgot he told us to be here at 8am sharp.”

“His ass don’t forget nothing,” Teddy said. “I asked if it could wait until this afternoon, but he said no. He wanted us here first thing this morning. So we’re here. And he’s still at it. But that’s Pop. The world revolves around him. Or so he thinks.”

But it would be another ten minutes before the bed bouncing eased and then completely stopped. It would be another eight minutes before Mick Sinatra and Roz, Teddy’s stepmother, made their way downstairs and into the kitchen too.

Roz wore a bathrobe. She wasn’t trying to pretend it wasn’t what it was, and Mick wore a pair of pants and a pullover shirt. It felt strange to Nikki to see her father-in-law dressed so casually. It almost never happened!

They all sat at the kitchen table.

“What’s the final number?” Mick asked Teddy.

“Fourteen. But it could get as high as twenty. We just don’t know yet.”

“How did it happen?”

“Still don’t know that either. It can be as simple as some asshole clicking on an email link they got fooled into clicking on, and they assessed data that way. Or it could be more sophisticated than that. Nikki’s been on it all night. We’ll both be on it all day. But we got nothing so far. All we know for certain is that the cargo due in to the Port of Spain is missing. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Fourteen up to twenty

shipments potentially may either be missing, too, or at risk of going missing. We're backtracking to find out which is which."

Mick exhaled as Teddy's phone rang. Assuming it was one of their capos with new intel, Teddy answered without checking the Caller ID.

"Oh hey, Frankie," Teddy said as Mick gave him the hand swipes across the neck, shut it down motion. "Listen, I need to call you back. I'm meeting with Pop." But then Frankie "The Monk" Paletti said something that Teddy couldn't dismiss. "He what?"

When Teddy, who was not a histrionic guy, showed that level of drama, they knew it was something big. "You got to be shitting me! What for? Ah man. Right. What about June? He's at your house too? Oh good. Okay, Frankie. Yeah, you do that," he added, and then ended the call.

"What was that about?" Roz asked him.

"Brent arrested MaKayla."

Roz and Nikki both looked at Teddy strangely. "He arrested her?" asked Nikki. "What for?"

"That's the even crazier part. They're saying she killed a judge."

"Whaaat?" Nikki was floored.

"That's some bullshit right there," said Roz. "I don't believe it for a second."

"Neither do I," said Nikki.

“Neither do I,” said Teddy. “MaKayla of all people? That’s nuts! I’ll probably need to go to Jericho to see what’s going on.”

“I’ll go with you,” Roz said.

“So will I,” said Nikki.

“No you won’t,” Mick said bluntly. “None of you are going anywhere near Jericho. You and Teddy,” he said to Nikki, “are keeping your asses right here in Philly to find out what the fuck is going on with my shipments.”

Teddy despised the way his father spoke to Nikki. There was something inside of him that made him know it was a matter of time before he and his father would have an explosive confrontation about that very issue. But he also knew Nikki was the underboss of his father’s syndicate, and he was the boss. He had to take his father’s lashes, and so did she. But it was just a matter of time, even though this was not that time. He held his peace.

“If they can’t go,” said Roz, “I’ll go and see what’s going on.”

“You aren’t going anywhere near Jericho either,” Mick said. “You have a Broadway show in two weeks. You’re in deep rehearsals. Deuce will continue to drive you to New York for your rehearsals, and you’ll continue to focus on that.”

“But what about MaKayla?” Roz asked.

“You can call her. You can encourage her. But you aren’t going there. If they need help of any kind, Charles and Brent both know how to pick up a phone and give me a call.”

That sounded callous even to a tough broad like Roz. “They shouldn’t have to pick up

a damn phone to call you,” she said. “You should be calling them!”

But then she realized that wasn’t like Mick at all. She stared at him. “You already knew MaKayla had been arrested. Didn’t you?”

Mick didn’t respond, which let everybody know he already knew.

“Damn, Pop,” Teddy said, “why didn’t you just say that?”

But Roz knew Mick all too well. “They already have help,” Roz said. “Don’t they, Mick?”

Mick nodded his head. “Yes. Gemma’s been asked to represent MaKayla. Reno and Sal are going with her. They’re expected in Jericho this morning.”

Nikki smiled. Nothing got past that man!

But Teddy and Roz were pissed. “You could have just told us that,” said Teddy.

“You need to cut that shit out,” said Roz.

Mick looked at her. “What shit?”

“Noncommunication,” Roz said as she took a finger and pushed it against his forehead. “That’s what shit!”

Then Roz shook her head. “That poor girl,” she said. “And Brent! Arresting her. But it’s so Brent. He’s just like Big Daddy. I can just kick his ass.”

“He’s a lawman,” said Mick. “And he’s that rare one that’s not corrupt. What do you expect?”

“Family first,” said Roz. “That’s what she expects.”

“There ya go, Ma,” Teddy said, pointing at Roz in agreement. “That’s it.”

But Mick was already standing up, which prompted all of them, except Roz, to stand too. “You and Nikki get to work,” he said to Teddy. “I want to know where every single one of my shipments are and I want to know by close of business today.” Then he looked at Roz. “Deuce will be here soon. Get dressed.”

“And what are you going to do?” asked Nikki with a smile.

“None of your got damn business,” Mick responded, not smiling at all.

Which angered Teddy. “Kiss my ass, Pop! Don’t you talk to my wife like that!”

Teddy was saying what Nikki wanted to say, and they both waited anxiously for Mick’s retort.

But Roz didn’t fret it. She knew Mick respected anybody with the balls to stand up to his ornery ass. And Teddy T had plenty balls. Mick respected that. He respected Nikki, too, or neither one of them would have any power whatsoever in his syndicate. And they both knew it. That was why Mick didn’t lash back at his son, and his son and daughter-in-law didn’t take it there either. They both left.

Roz looked at Mick. “Keep that shit up and you’ll die a lonely old man. Your children will all desert you.”

Mick stared at her. “Will you?”

Roz stared at him. “No. But keep it up. That can change on a dime,” she added, and headed back upstairs.

Mick exhaled. He then called the security detail he kept in Jericho and ordered them to assist Reno and Sal in any way they needed assistance. And also to keep him posted too. He felt bad for MaKayla. She didn't deserve to be raked over the coals like they were doing to her. And although Brent was a good man who believed in the rule of law, he also was a family man who believed in his wife. He was going to play it cool for now. But when that coolness wasn't enough, Mick knew that he knew who to call.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

Seven planes were in a holding pattern over the Jericho airfield as Sal Gabrini's plane was cleared to land. Many of the pilots were incensed. Gabrini's plane was like the last plane in the queue, but they had to wait for him to arrive and land before any further movement. And they all knew it was because of who he was. It was so unfair and everybody knew it.

Even Donnie Sinatra, whose plane was forced to circle, too, was especially incensed. "Why Uncle Sal gets to go first?" He was on the phone talking to his older brother Tony. "He just got here!"

"They go by clout at those smaller airfields," Tony responded over the phone. "And Sal Gabrini has a lot of clout. It matters to some people."

"Not to me it doesn't," Donnie said.

But when Donnie's plane was cleared to land after Sal's although he was near the back of the group of planes too, he smiled. "Now we're talking," he said as his plane began to descend.

"How did you get to be next?" Tony asked. "You just got there too."

"I'm a top dog and they know it," Donnie boasted. "I got clout too. What can I say?"

"I know what I can say," Tony said. "I can say hypocrite with a capital H," he said, and both brothers laughed.

But when Donnie and Reno and Sal Gabrini made their way to Big Daddy's house,

there were plenty of complaints to go around. Mainly about why on earth would Brent let them arrest MaKayla. Anthony “Bobby” Sinatra, the mayor of Jericho and Brent’s younger brother, drove up nine minutes after they had gone inside. He hopped out of his Porsche and ran inside too.

Once Bobby walked into the kitchen and saw his kid brother Donnie, along with his older brother Tony, and Reno and Sal, and his father and stepmother, his mouth was off to the races. “Tell me I heard it wrong. Tell me that editor that called me for a comment this morning didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. Please tell me that somebody. Please tell me my sister-in-law hasn’t been accused of killing Judge Alvin Clayton, and my big brother did not haul off and arrest my sister-in-law, who also happens to be his own wife!” Bobby shook his whole body when he said those words. “Tell me I’m dreaming. Somebody please tell me it’s all a dream.”

“You are so melodramatic,” said Tony. “Is that why all the ladies love you? Is that why you won reelection?”

“Is it true?” Bobby asked again.

Tony exhaled and then nodded his head. “It’s true,” he said.

Bobby leaned his head back. This was going to be a media circus!

Then Jenay looked around. “Where’s Gemma? I just realized she’s not here. I was told she’s supposed to represent Kayla.”

“She’s at the jail meeting with her as we speak,” said Sal. “We dropped her off there on our way in.”

“So Gemma’s representing Kayla?” asked Bobby. “I didn’t know that either. I didn’t know any of this shit.”

“Why would we know all the way in Vegas,” asked Reno, “when you, the pretty boy mayor of this punk ass town, just finding out?”

“Stop calling my town punk ass,” Bobby shot back.

“But you called it right, Reno,” said Donnie as he grabbed another slice of bacon from the warming tray. “He’s the pretty boy prima donna mayor that’s too glamorous to answer his phone late at night.”

“And for good reason,” Jenay said. “If he answered that phone late night, he’ll be answering it all night long. That’s how much these people expect from him. They pull him in all directions. He had to put some boundaries up or he wouldn’t get a moment’s rest.”

“Thank you, Ma,” Bobby said happily to his stepmother. “Prima donna my ass,” he added, as he looked at Donnie. Bobby Sinatra used to be a gangster himself. There was nothing prima donna about him and everybody in the family knew it.

“I’m the one who told him to keep that phone turned off after midnight,” Jenay continued. “Don’t blame him, blame me. His city emergency phone will ring if it’s that level of importance. Otherwise, no phone calls after midnight. Everything else can wait till morning.”

“And I still say that’s a bad idea,” said Charles. “A family emergency shouldn’t have to wait until morning.”

“But is all of it true?” Bobby asked again. “Is the murder charge true? Is that judge actually dead? And did Brent arrest MaKayla knowing full well she couldn’t have done something like that?”

“It’s true,” said Jenay. “It’s all true.”

“Ain’t that something?” said Reno. “He arrested his own wife. I’m still getting over that shit. It’s like me arresting Trina. Man, the firestorm that would cause!”

“An earth-shattering firestorm,” said Donald. “She’ll grab you across that table and whoop your ass again, Uncle Reno.” Everybody tried not to laugh.

“Very funny,” Reno said. “I had bumps and bruises for weeks behind that woman’s rage!”

Most of them couldn’t help it. They burst into laughter.

But their laughter quickly ceased when Bonita Sinatra, Big Daddy’s youngest child and the only child he had with Jenay, could be heard yelling for her parents.

Everybody jumped up and ran to see what was distressing her. But Donald grabbed another slice of bacon and eased his way into the living room. He was a man who took his time nowadays, a direct contrast from the impulsiveness of his youth. In his dark-blue Valentino suit with its Vlogo signature embroidery and his thousand-dollar haircut, he wore his newfound wealth and gravitas well.

When he walked into the living room, the family and Bonita were gathered around staring at the television set as a commercial was ending and the newscast that had teased new news about the DA’s arrest was just coming back on.

“Breaking news about the arrest of District Attorney MaKayla Sinatra,” the female anchor said. “Morning Eight has just obtained footage of Mrs. Sinatra’s husband, Police Chief Brent Sinatra, and how he spent his night after he arrested her, an arrest that sent shockwaves throughout the community.”

“Oh Lord,” said Reno. “How did he spend his night? Don’t tell me it was with another woman.”

Everybody looked at Reno as if he was insane. “ Another woman ?” asked Charles. “His wife is in jail and you think my boy spent the night with another woman , Reno?”

“I’m just saying,” said Reno.

“He’s just saying because that’s the kind of shit he’d pull,” said Sal. “Brent’s not you, Reno.”

“Ah fuck you, Sal,” Reno said, and Donald laughed. And then they all listened to the reporter as the anchorwoman turned it over to their man in the field.

“We’re outside of the Jericho Police Department,” the field reporter said into the camera, “but we’ve just received exclusive footage documenting what our chief of police has been up to after he arrested his own wife on suspicion of murdering Judge Alvin Clayton. This is where Chief Sinatra spent his night, ladies and gentlemen,” the young reporter said as the camera switched to a video of Brent and MaKayla seated on the jail bed with MaKayla on his lap and both of them fast asleep. “He spent his night with his wife in her jail cell. You heard it right folks. The chief of police spent the night in jail alongside his wife. A spokesman for the chief’s office confirmed the accuracy of the footage but said the chief strongly believes his wife is innocent of all charges and he therefore did not want her to spend all night alone in a cell. Although some in the community are saying that she’s only getting what she dishes out. Her bond hearing has been set for later this morning. Ben Enick reporting live for Morning Eight Jericho.”

As they moved on to other news, Bonita took the remote and turned off the TV. “This is big news, Daddy. It even made CNN because of her last name.”

“But at least this family can stop blaming Brent for doing his job,” said Jenay. “Because now everybody knows where he was all night. He was with MaKayla!”

“Yeah, Jenay, I hear you. But he still arrested her,” said Reno. “That shit ain’t never gonna sit right with me. Her ass wouldn’t be in no jail cell if he hadn’t arrested her.”

“Do facts not mean anything to you, Reno?” Tony asked him. “She was at the scene of the crime. He had no choice.”

“I don’t give a fuck where she was. Family doesn’t arrest family. Period!”

“Spoken like a man who never bothered to uphold the law a day in his life,” said Donald with a smile. He enjoyed pushing Reno’s buttons almost as much as Sal Gabrini did.

But he was no Sal Gabrini in Reno’s eyes. No matter how much money he had or power he’d earned or how bulked-up his body now was, he would always be the little kid cousin to Reno. That was why Reno gave him a look that let him know he was going too far. “Kid got money so he got more mouth now,” Reno said. Then he pointed at Donald as a warning. “Watch yourself. I’m still Reno fucking Gabrini to you.”

Donald lifted his hands in the air in surrender. He realized he had gone too far too. “It’s your world, Reno. I’m just dropping by.”

“Let’s get to the courthouse,” said Charles. “I want this over with and Kayla back home where she belongs.”

“Amen to that,” said Jenay as they all prepared to leave.

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They all sat in the jam-packed courtroom gallery as close to the front row as they could get. They sat behind the bar that separated them from the counsel table, where Gemma Gabrini sat for the defense.

When MaKayla was escorted in from the holding cell by the court's bailiff, they were at least relieved to see that she was in her regular clothes and was not in shackles. They knew it was Brent's doing. They also knew he was going to take flack for granting her that favor too. But they were glad he did it. She was innocent. There wasn't a criminal bone in MaKayla's body. They were all convinced of it.

Brent came into the courtroom behind the prisoner and then made his way into the gallery too. Charles and the rest of the family scooted over and Brent sat beside his father at the beginning of the row. Charles placed an arm around his oldest child. Nobody else could see it, but Charles could see the agony in Brent's eyes.

"How's she handling it?" he asked him.

"Not great."

Charles looked at his handsome son who looked worn-out himself. "How are you handling it?"

"Not great," Brent admitted.

Charles squeezed his broad shoulder. "It'll work out eventually." But getting to eventually, they both knew, was the problem.

And then the judge was announced and everybody stood to their feet as a big, burly white man sat on the bench. And the proceedings began.

“Before we address the matter at hand,” the judge said to the State, “has a special prosecutor been appointed to oversee this case?”

A woman nobody in the family recognized stood up. “Yes, Your Honor. I was appointed last night.”

“Your name for the record?”

“Cindy Termaine, sir.”

“Alright Miss Termaine. Welcome to Jericho.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Mrs. Gabrini, hello.”

Gemma and MaKayla stood up. “Good morning, Your Honor,” Gemma said.

“Good morning. And good morning to you, too, Mrs. Sinatra.”

“Good morning, Your Honor.”

“I must say it is quite troubling to see you on the other side of this courtroom. Quite troubling indeed.”

MaKayla wanted to spout out her innocence in that moment. She wanted to yell it from the rooftop. But she knew not to say a word. She knew anything she said would only work against her.

“Does your client wish to enter a plea at this time, Mrs. Gabrini?”

“Yes, Your Honor. She wishes to enter a plea of a thousand percent not guilty, sir.”

Her add-on irritated the judge. “Those theatrics are not going to be tolerated in my courtroom. You hear me, Mrs. Gabrini? I don’t know how they do it in Vegas, but here in Jericho we adhere to norms. Do I make myself clear?”

Reno and Teddy looked at each other. The nerve of him!

But Gemma wasn’t playing to the judge when she made that statement. She was playing to the public from whence a jury would be seated. “Yes, Your Honor,” she said.

The judge then turned to the Prosecution. “Does the State wish to be heard regarding bail in this matter?”

“We do, Your Honor.” Termaine then leaned down and conferred with the two other prosecutors at her table, as if she wanted to be absolutely sure that they wanted to proceed a certain way. Which concerned both Gemma and MaKayla. What were they up to? Why would she need to confer on the bond amount when it was a standard amount for first time offenders in the DA’s office?

“Mrs. Termaine, I don’t have all day,” the judge said.

Then the special prosecutor addressed him again. “I apologize, sir. I just got the case late last night. But the State request that bail be denied in total, Your Honor.”

The family could not believe it. “They got to be kidding me,” Sal whispered to Reno, whom he sat beside.

“She’s a Sinatra,” Reno whispered back. “They aren’t kidding.”

The judge seemed taken aback too. “This is highly irregular, Miss Termaine, considering this is her first offense. I could at least understand a high bail given her position in the community, but no bail at all?”

“We have reasons, Your Honor.”

“And what reasons are that?” the judge asked as everybody in the packed courtroom, especially the Sinatra and Gabrini clan, looked at the special prosecutor.

“We ask that you deny bail in total, sir, because we believe Mrs. Sinatra to be a flight risk. The evidence against her is daunting to say the least, and she married into a family that boasts, not one, not two, but last I counted at least six private jets at her disposal. And those don’t include the family corporate jets, not their private use ones. They could get her out of the country without breaking a sweat, sir.”

Gemma jumped up. “I object, Your Honor! Just because her in-laws are wealthy doesn’t mean she will break the laws when she never has before.”

“It’s not just her in-laws, sir. Her own husband is a very wealthy man as well.”

“That is irrelevant to the matter of bail,” an exasperated Gemma pointed out. “I object, Your Honor!”

“Objection overruled,” the judge said, and Gemma reluctantly sat down.

“Also,” Termaine continued, “while Mrs. Sinatra was still at the scene of the crime, she telephoned our witness who is prepared to testify under oath that she asked him to find somebody that could smuggle her out of the country for cash, and that these rich in-laws would pay him for his services too.”

“Your Honor I object!” Gemma yelled out.

“If you grant her bail, we’ll never see her again!” Termaine yelled back.

And the two ladies were talking over each other as the judge was banging his gavel. Brent couldn’t believe it. This was like a nightmare!

“Your Honor,” Gemma angrily shouted out, “the prosecution knows better than this. She made that statement for public consumption only. She made that statement to prejudice the jury pool against my client!”

“What is your request?”

“The Defense requests that every word the prosecutor just spoken be stricken from the record and she be sanctioned for such a horrific act. We have not been informed about any witness. We know nothing about this person. There was no proffer given whatsoever. At this early, arraignment stage such a witness statement would be far more prejudicial than probative on its face! This is highly improper, Your Honor!”

“I agree,” the judge said angrily as he looked at the special prosecutor. “Prosecution and Defense in my chambers now!” He then gaveled a temporary halt to proceedings, left the bench as everybody rose to their feet, and then Gemma Gabrini and Cindy Termaine made their way to the judge’s chambers.

The family moved over to a side wall and huddled. “What was that about?” Reno asked.

“Who’s this Termaine chick anyway?” asked Sal. “We need intel on her.”

Brent, however, was only concerned about MaKayla’s well-being. He went over to the defense table and spoke softly with her.

But it wasn't a very long break at all. The judge and the lawyers returned to the courtroom within ten minutes of their absence. Brent asked Gemma if everything was okay, but she could only shake her head no. Brent's heart squeezed in anxiety.

Court resumed, everybody sat back down, and the judge made his decision known. "After further consideration of all the facts in this matter, and because of the witness involved, the unusual circumstance cannot be ignored. Bail is denied."

Gasps in the courtroom, especially from the family.

"Objection, Your Honor," Gemma stood and said. But her voice was a defeated voice.

"Objection noted."

"We will make an emergency appeal for a single justice review," Gemma added.

"Noted," the judge said, and then adjourned as he gaveled the proceedings to a official close and left the bench.

MaKayla looked back at the family with a look of bewilderment none of them had ever seen on her face before. And it gave them all pause. If they didn't know her like they knew her, they'd declare she was guilty as sin. But they knew her. That was why it was all so painful to every one of them.

After MaKayla was escorted out of the courtroom, and after Brent told her not to worry and that he'll take care of it, the family quickly hurried over to the defense table. "What happened, Gemma?" Charles asked her. "Why no bail?"

"There's a witness willing to testify under oath to what Cindy Termaine said in court."

“And the judge bought that shit lock, stock and barrel just like that?” asked Reno.

“He did, yes.”

“But why?” asked Jenay.

Gemma exhaled. “Because of who the witness is.”

“Who is it?” Brent asked.

Gemma exhaled again. “The Deputy District Attorney Darren McGuire.”

When they heard the position first and then the name, a silent chill overtook the family. They understood what that meant.

“That asshole!” Brent said.

“And that’s not all,” Gemma said.

“What else could there be?” asked Sal.

“McGuire is willing to also testify that he knows for a fact that MaKayla was in a sexual relationship with Alvin Clayton.”

Everybody was stunned.

“That’s bullshit,” said Brent.

“And he has the video to prove it,” added Gemma.

Another silent chill came over the family.

“Video?” asked Charles.

Gemma reluctantly nodded her head as she began to gather up her papers and stuff them in her briefcase. Her slumped demeanor said it all.

“Did you see the video?” Jenay asked her.

Gemma nodded again. “A snippet of it, yes.”

“What did you see?”

“I’m not at liberty to say at this time.”

“But it was bad?” asked Charles.

Gemma looked at Big Daddy. “Yes.”

They all looked at each other and then over at Brent.

“Maybe they manipulated it,” Brent said, grasping at straws. “Maybe they used A.I. and made it look like it was MaKayla,” he was saying, but Gemma put a stop to that fast.

“It was no A.I. It was MaKayla on that tape. It was her. I’m sorry, but it was her.” Then she swung her briefcase off of the table and stood erect. “Let me go talk with her and explain to her everything that’s transpired. I’m going to initiate the appeal right away.”

“How does that work?” Charles asked.

“One justice on the Supreme Judicial Court will hear the case and determine if an

error has occurred and bail should have been granted. If we win, and I still believe we will, then she'll be granted bail, probably a very high one so be prepared, and then she'll be home free for now."

"How long does this appeal process take?"

"We can get a ruling as early as today. But more likely tomorrow."

Brent didn't like it, but he knew there was nothing to be done about it now. "Thanks, Gemma," he said, Gemma squeezed his arm and looked at him with the kind of pity Brent despised but understood, and then she and Sal hugged before she left.

But they were all worried sick. They looked at each other. Then they all looked at Brent.

But Brent was looking at Reno and Sal. "MaKayla was not in any sexual relationship with anybody," he made clear.

"I know you love your wife," said Reno. "But you can't say that."

"I'm saying it, Reno."

Reno and Brent stared at each other. And Reno knew, had it been Trina, he would have been saying the same thing. "Understood," he said.

"They aren't interested in doing this right and playing this down-the-middle fair," Brent said. "If Darren McGuire's willing to lie on her and fabricate evidence I don't care what that video shows, that proves it. They aren't interested in justice. Are they?"

"No," said Sal, the most powerful mob boss in the world behind Mick Sinatra. And

he said it bluntly and without reservation.

“Then we can’t play fair either,” Brent said bluntly, too, shocking his parents.

“Oh don’t worry,” said Reno. “We weren’t going to anyway. These bastards messing with one of us? Get the fuck out of here! All’s fair and nothing’s fair up in this bitch from here on out.”

“I know that’s right,” said Sal.

And for once, given what MaKayla was up against, even Charles couldn’t disagree.

But as they continued to gather around, a tall Hispanic man in a dark suit made his way into the courtroom and over to where the family was gathered. “Chief Sinatra?”

Everybody looked when they heard Brent’s name. Nobody recognized the man. “Yes?”

The man extended his hand to Brent. “My name is Juan Rivera. I’m the senior agent in charge with the Maine Bureau of Investigations. How are you, sir?”

Brent didn’t shake his hand. He knew why he was there. “How can I help you?”

The agent smiled as he removed his hand. “I wanted to let you formally know that the MBI will be the agency in charge of the investigation into the death of Judge Alvin Clayton. The Jericho Police Department will be relieved of all of their duties regarding that case forthwith.”

Reno and Sal wanted to kick his ass. Any man that used forthwith deserved an ass-kicking in their view.

Brent wanted to do the same, but he knew how easily that one man could make it horrible for MaKayla.

“Have I made myself clear, Chief?” Agent Rivera asked.

“I heard what you said, yes.”

“I must admit we found it odd that one of your officers, rather than you as police chief, contacted us.”

Brent wasn't about to dignify that comment with a response because he knew that same agent would not have contacted them either had it been his wife accused of a crime. At least if he loved his wife.

“Anyway,” the agent said, still smiling, still looking at the family members as if he already knew of them, “you folks have a nice day.” And then he turned to leave.

But he turned right back again. “By the by,” he said, which further annoyed Reno and Sal, “there's another issue. No member of the JPD is allowed to go into or spend the night inside of any cell that houses any prisoner while we are in charge of investigations. Do I make myself clear?”

Brent stared him down. “Crystal.”

The agent smiled as if he was actually in charge, and then he laughed. “Alrighty then.” And then he walked back out of the courtroom.

Reno and Sal looked at Brent. “You gonna let that cocksucker handle you like that?”

Brent looked at Reno as if he had no clue the balancing act he had to perform just to keep MaKayla safe, and then he walked away.

Reno shook his head. “He’s blood. Brent’s one of us. But that guy I don’t get.”

“Neither do I,” said Sal. “And never have.”

“What’s not to get about him?” asked Charles. “Brent knows what he’s doing. Because of this family and their gangsterism, he’s had to walk on eggshells his entire career. They come, they make demands, and Brent’s going to do whatever the hell he wants. That’s what you need to understand about my son,” Charles reminded them.

But Reno and Sal, who were accustomed to getting their way with acid rather than rain, had to see more than what they were seeing from a man like Brent who always was too gun-ho law and order for their tastes anyway. They remained unconvinced.

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After that unceremonious edict from MBI, Brent did not spend that night in the jail cell with MaKayla. But he stayed the night outside of her cell, seated on the floor, his long legs outstretched, his back to the bars. MaKayla was seated on the floor inside of the cell with her back jammed up against the bars too. They were on different sides of the lock, but they were effectively back-to-back. Brent's men were both astonished by their boss's actions. They always viewed their chief as a coldhearted lawman first. They were shocked by the depths of his love for his wife.

"Who do you think took that video?" MaKayla asked him.

But that was an odd question to Brent. Why would she put it that way? "You make it sound as if the video is real."

MaKayla hesitated. "Gemma said it was."

But her hesitation didn't sit right with Brent. "Did she tell you what was on it?"

"No."

But Brent knew his wife. "Did you ask?"

"No." Then MaKayla frowned. "Why should I? It's not the truth. I don't want to hear any more lies. I'm just tired of this, Brent. I can't understand why this is happening to me. I just don't understand it."

Brent leaned his head back. He felt her pain. "It'll work out eventually."

“But when is eventually? That’s what scares me.”

That was what was scaring Brent too, although he wasn’t going to admit it. “What I don’t understand is why Darren McGuire would be willing to lie under oath like that? What’s in it for him? Your position maybe?”

“Maybe,” said MaKayla.

“Is he ambitious like that?”

“Not the Darren I know. I’ve always viewed him as a good team player. I had no problems with him whatsoever. That’s why I promoted him to my deputy.”

“You’ve got some problems with him now.”

MaKayla nodded as a sad look came over her face. “Yes, I do.”

Brent pushed harder against those bars. “Don’t worry, babe. I will get you out of this mess they’ve gotten you into if it’s the last thing I do.”

“I appreciate it. You don’t know how much. But please go home and get some rest, Brent. It makes no sense for both of us to be suffering.”

“I told you I’m going home when you go home. I still mean that.”

“But you said MBI is already here. And they’ve issued a warning already.”

“I’m not in your cell. I’m outside of it. And as the duly elected chief of this police department I can stay here all night long if I want to. And I want to. And they can’t say a damn thing about it.”

MaKayla smiled. They had their issues, but he was always a man she could depend on. “Thank you, Brent. To be honest, I’d be terrified without you here with me. To be honest.”

Brent knew it too. That was the main reason he was there. “We’ll work it out,” he said. And neither one of them was sure if he meant her situation, their marriage, or both.

“What about June? We’ve got to at the very least tell him something.”

“Not yet,” said Brent. “Not until you get out of this mess. Frankie and Ash are doing a great job keeping all the young people away from their social media or phone calls from friends. They even took their cellphones. Which they didn’t mind because they’re having a ball with Ashley. She’s keeping them plenty busy.”

MaKayla smiled. “That’s Ash. All the kids in the family just love her. To them she’s a kid too. She’s a wonderful aunt to them.”

“I’m hoping you’ll be completely exonerated before we have to tell June anything,” said Brent. “I also hope those rumors about her stepping out on Monk aren’t true.”

“I heard them, too, but I don’t believe ’em,” said MaKayla. “Ashley loves Frankie too much.”

“Yeah, but that sister of mine has always been a handful. I’ve had to bail her out of situations you would not believe. She was hooking up with the worst guys imaginable. I just hope she’s changed like you and Pop seems to think she has.”

“She has,” MaKayla said firmly. “It’ll break Monk’s heart if she’s cheating on him. Ash wouldn’t do that to him.”

Brent had too many crazy experiences with Ashley to rule anything out with that kid sister of his.

But then MaKayla exhaled again as her own situation came back into focus.

“I’m going to get you out of this mess. I promise you that,” Brent assured her again, and MaKayla accepted his reassurance.

But it would be nearly seventeen more hours of waiting before they would get word that Gemma’s appeal was successful, MaKayla was granted an excessively high half-a-million-dollar bail, and she was free to go.

For now.

Brent easily put up the bail and the family wanted to celebrate. But Brent and MaKayla just wanted to go home.

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After a long, hot bath together they laid in bed naked, arm-in-arm and face-to-face as they made long, slow, passionate love.

For the longest time they didn't speak. They just held onto each other and allowed Brent's penis to do all the talking for them. They knew they had a job ahead of them proving her innocence, and they knew nothing would be easy about it, but they also knew they needed to relax, and unwind, to forget about the trauma of the last two days.

And Brent was taking it so slow and so easy that it felt as if they could go on forever that way. All of their emotions were lost into that moment in time where all they felt were good feelings. Feelings of jubilation and sensuality and a calmness that defied their true situation.

Nobody could calm MaKayla the way Brent could, and he had her nearly asleep with affection. Which was his entire goal.

And when he took her and laid her on top of him and engulfed her with his big arms, she began crying. Not tears of pain or hurt. But tears of love.

Brent understood her. "I know, honey," he said as his penis continued stroking her slow and easy. As he continued to hold her tightly. As he continued to caress her with his manhood. "Sweetie, I know," he said to her.

And the more he caressed, the less she cried. Until both of them felt that change as their orgasms filled each other.

They came hard. They couldn't help it. It was as if they were releasing everything negative and harmful and bad completely out of themselves.

It took everything out of them when they finally stopped all movement and collapsed.

But Brent remained inside of MaKayla and kept her on top of him: holding her tenderly.

But less than an hour later, Brent's phone rang. When he grabbed it from the nightstand and saw who it was, he was surprised. He showed MaKayla the Caller ID.

Then he answered his phone with that surprise in his voice. "Uncle Mick?"

"Get outside," Mick ordered.

And Brent and MaKayla, knowing that Mick Sinatra never made a casual visit to their home ever, didn't ask questions. They got out of bed, dressed quickly, and hurried outside.

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MaKayla had thrown on a pair of shorts and one of Brent's dress shirts, and Brent had on his jeans and a t-shirt as they made their way up to the big, black Cadillac Escalade that was parked on the driveway of their lakefront home. It was nightfall, just after eight and breezy, but they both felt a sense of forebodingness that rendered them chilly as they made their way to the SUV.

Mick Sinatra was the driver. No one was on the passenger seat. "It took you that long to walk outside?"

"We were . . ." Brent had to catch himself, to MaKayla's relief. "We were indisposed," he said which, to MaKayla, amounted to the exact same thing he had caught himself from saying.

But Mick always seemed to know everything to her anyway. By their hurried appearance, he'd probably already figured out what they had been up to.

"What's up, Uncle Mick?" MaKayla asked him.

Mick looked her up and down in that unnerving way of his. "How are you?"

She was surprised that he would bother to ask. "I'm out of jail," she said, "so I'm great right now."

"Out of jail but not out of the woods."

She nodded, that sobering look returning to her face. She folded her arms. "Right."

“Brenton treating you well?”

Another surprise. “Yes sir. More than I could have ever hoped for.”

Mick looked at Brent. “Even though you arrested her ass,” he said. “And don’t hand me that I was doing my job bullshit. That’s your wife.”

“I know who she is,” Brent said. “You don’t have to tell me who she is. You worry about your house, and I’ll worry about mine.”

MaKayla’s heart began to pound. Brent was hard like that. He got it from his father. But coming at Mick the Tick with that hardness might be a serious error in judgement. She held her breath for the backlash.

But it didn’t come. Mick gave Brent the stare down, alright, and MaKayla saw that flash of anger in his eyes that chilled her to the bone. But she also saw respect for Brent in his eyes too. It was no secret in the family that Mick never liked the fact that Brent was a cop: he hated cops. But he always had respect and love for his nephew. MaKayla saw that every time he came around. Which wasn’t that often. Which made her wonder why he was around now. “What brings you to our neck of the woods, Uncle Mick?” she decided to ask him, not only to quell the sudden tension, but to find out the reason for his visit.

Mick and Brent continued to exchange a longer-than-usual stare down, but neither man blinked. And Mick looked away first. He looked at MaKayla. “That informant you went to that hotel to see.”

“Jake Dalenti, yes sir. What about him?”

“Get in the backseat.”

MaKayla looked at Brent. Did he find Jake and take him to one of his safe houses he kept in Jericho? Those safe houses were supposedly a secret, and they didn't know where they were, but they both knew they existed. That was why Brent nodded and they both got onto the middle row of Mick's big SUV. They wanted all the intel they could get. And nobody had more than Mick the Tick.

But when they got inside the SUV, they were astounded to see that not only had Mick located Jake Dalenti, but Jake was seated in the middle of the back row. And he was in bad shape. Both eyes nearly swollen shut. Blood on his shirt in his chest area. His hands tied behind his back.

"Jake?" MaKayla could hardly believe it. "What happened to you?" she blurted out before she knew it. Because she and Brent both knew what happened to him was their Uncle Mick.

But this was an opportunity to confirm MaKayla's side of the story. And Brent got down to business. "Were you at the Hayton Hotel when my wife got there?" Brent asked him.

"I wasn't nowhere near that."

"You grabbed me from behind," MaKayla said.

"I didn't. I swear! I wasn't there."

"Then why did you have Deputy DA McGuire call me and tell me you were waiting at the Hayton to give me information?" MaKayla asked him.

"I didn't tell him to call you. I never talked to him that day."

But MaKayla wasn't buying it. "You're lying, Jake. I can tell when you're lying."

“Okay, I talked to him. But that was days ago when I told him to warn the chief about Noah Lamm.”

Brent frowned. “Noah Lamm? What about him?”

“He was running off the mouth about how you were gonna evict him, but that he was gonna blow your brains out if you tried.” He looked at MaKayla. “I called and told McGuire to tell you to warn your husband.”

Brent and MaKayla looked at each other because Noah Lamm did keep his promise and attempt to assassinate Brent. But he only managed to shoot a hole in a young rookie doing his job. The rookie was recovering well, and Lamm was in jail facing serious time, but it still left a bitter taste in Brent’s mouth.

Brent looked at MaKayla. “Did McGuire tell you about Noah Lamm?”

MaKayla shook her head. “No. Of course not. I would have told you if he had.”

“But that’s the only information I had to give him,” Jake said. “I had nothing to do with what happened at The Hayton.”

MaKayla believed him. She knew when he was telling the truth. She looked at Brent. “He’s telling the truth. He’s not involved.”

She was a little hasty for Brent’s taste, but MaKayla was good like that. It was her job to call out liars. Or believe them when they told the truth.

But Brent asked Jake several more questions he knew nothing about, and then they got out of the SUV. Brent went up to the driver’s side window and looked at his uncle. “Why would you beat the guy senseless like that without knowing the full story?”

“I told him I wanted to talk to him and his ass ran. He made me chase him. I don’t chase some punk-ass snitch just to hold a conversation with him. We’ll talk. But he’s getting his ass kicked too.” Then Mick looked at Brent hard, as if he couldn’t understand why Brent didn’t understand the family code. “You got a problem with that?”

Brent knew his status as a police officer kept him as the outside man in his larger family of gangsters, but he didn’t think his concern was unreasonable. “I do have a problem with it matter of fact. But thank you for bringing him. Will you at least take him to the hospital?” Brent would himself, but the questions surrounding that drop off would get MaKayla into even deeper trouble.

Mick knew it too. “I’m gonna drop his ass off where I found it. And don’t worry,” Mick added when he saw that look in their eyes. “He won’t say a word.” Mick looked into his rearview mirror at Jake Dalenti. “Will you?”

“I ain’t saying nothing to nobody!” Jake yelled out. “I just wanna go home.”

Brent nor MaKayla had any sympathy for Jake. Brent knew snitches like him were crooked as a curve and MaKayla knew what kind of unsavory character Jake truly was. But MaKayla was an officer of the court and Brent was an officer of the law. Mick’s ways were not their ways and never would be. At least not before MaKayla’s very freedom was put to the test.

And MaKayla knew Mick rounded him up to help her. “Thanks Uncle Mick,” she said and reached into the window and gave him a hug.

Brent braced himself. Mick had better not disrespect his wife. But when Mick reached out and hugged her back, Brent was floored.

But like Big Daddy, Mick had a soft spot for MaKayla too. “Take care of yourself,”

he said to her when they quickly unembraced.

MaKayla smiled. “I will. Thanks.”

Then Mick pressed a button that closed off the third row of his tricked-out SUV with a soundproof partition, and then he looked at Brent. “A van will be here at nine tonight to pick you up.”

“What’s happening then?”

“You’ll find out,” Mick said, put his car in reverse, and sped away.

MaKayla looked at her phone. “It’s almost eight-fifteen now. We’d better get ready.”

She began to head back toward the house, but Brent pulled her back. “We ? What do you mean we ?”

“I mean you and I. We work together, Brent. That’s the way it’s got to be. If anybody has any intel that could aid in my freedom, I want to hear it straight from them. I’ll know what questions to ask.”

What Brent always loved about MaKayla was her toughness. He knew she could take care of herself in any situation. And he usually allowed her to handle her own problems and situations. But he also knew her vulnerable side. And that was considerable too. But she was right: she’d know what questions to ask. He still didn’t want his wife in that position. But she was in it. They had no choice.

He removed his objection, and they hurried inside to get fully clothed.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

A van pulled up to a shuddered train depot on the southside of Jericho and stopped beside an SUV already there. A man got out of the passenger seat of the van as two men got out of the SUV. The two men opened the backdoor, grabbed a third man, a short black guy, and walked him to the back of the van where the van passenger opened the van's back double doors. The black man was thrown inside the van.

Inside the van, Brent, MaKayla, and Reno and Sal were seated and waiting.

"Darren McGuire I presume," Sal said.

"That's that bastard," said Brent.

Sal nodded and one of the men that had tossed Darren inside of the van grabbed him and sat him on a seat that faced the seat across from it. Then the man stepped out and closed the van door.

But Darren was looking at his boss. "I just got out of the hospital and I'm being treated this way? MaKayla, what is the meaning of this? It's a kidnapping, I know you realize that."

"I thought you didn't know the meaning of it," said Reno. "But you were mighty quick to give it a bad name."

"I know who you are," Darren said to Reno forcefully.

Reno smiled. "Oh do you now?"

“Both of you,” Darren added, looking at Sal too. “I know who you are.”

“And who am I?” Sal asked.

“You’re Salvatore Luciano Gabrini. The second most powerful mobster in the world.” Then he looked at Reno. “And you’re Dominic Gabrini, Senior, better known as Reno Gabrini, the owner of the largest and most successful hotel and casino on the Vegas Strip. Mister Vegas, they call you. But I knew about you when you were your father’s enforcer, and then the head of your old man’s entire syndicate. That’s who you two are.”

“Wrong,” said Reno. “We’re your worst nightmare if you lie to us.”

“That’s who we are,” added Sal.

Darren knew these men were not frivolous people. They were killers in his eyes, the worst of the worst. The press always made them out to be the kind of men that never started the fight, but only finished it, but he wasn’t buying what they were selling. They were vicious in their own right, no matter who started what. “What do you want from me?”

“Why did you lie about that phone call you made to me?” MaKayla asked him.

“I didn’t make any phone call to you, and you know it. If your husband had bothered to check the records, you’d see that the call you received didn’t come from me or even the hospital where I was located at the time. I never called you and you know it.”

Reno and Sal looked at Brent. “Did you check it out?” Reno asked him.

“My office got the records, yes.”

“Were you able to trace the call?”

“We traced it back to a burner phone,” said Brent. Then he looked at Darren. “Of which his ass could have easily been the owner.”

“Right,” said Sal.

“I don’t own burner phones,” Darren said. “I have no reason to.”

“Why did you tell the judge that I asked you to find somebody to get me out of the country, and why did you lie about Alvin Clayton and me?”

“They aren’t lies. It’s all true. And you know it,” Darren said again.

“So you don’t know Jake Dalenti?” asked Sal. “That’s what you’re telling us?”

“I know him quite well. He’s an informant for the DA’s office. Specifically for my office. I never said I didn’t know him. But I will say all day long that I never received a call from him asking MaKayla to meet him at The Hayton Hotel, and I never phoned MaKayla and told her to meet him there. And she knows it.”

“Say that one more time and I’ll put my shoe up your ass,” warned Brent.

Darren stiffened his back. “I’m not gonna lie for nobody,” he said. “She promoted me to her deputy. Two black people running the entire district attorney’s office in this vastly white city was a wonderful thing to see.” Then he looked MaKayla in the eyes. “But I’m not lying for anybody.”

“Did I ever ask you to lie for me, Darren?” asked a now angry MaKayla. “Did I ever once ask you to lie for me about anything?”

Darren didn't respond to that. Brent noticed he stopped looking at her.

"What about that dead judge and MaKayla?" asked Reno. "Why did you claim they had a sexual relationship?"

"I didn't claim anything. I saw it with my own two eyes."

"Quick lying, Darren!" MaKayla was livid. "You know that's not true."

"Were you or were you not at The Hayton hotel hugged up with Alvin Clayton and allowing that man to kiss all over you? And didn't you, after that, go up to his hotel room with him where you stayed up there for hours? Answer that, MaKayla. You're so full of answers. Answer that!"

Brent angrily grabbed Darren and slammed his face against the side of the van wall. "You're a liar! You know it's all lies!" Brent screamed at him.

It took Reno and Sal, with MaKayla giving a verbal assist, to pull Brent away from Darren. "Cool it, Brent," said Sal. "We need answers."

Brent snatched away from them, but he sat back down. Everybody else sat back down too.

But Sal sat next to Darren. Then he pulled out a gun and pointed it at Darren's balls. "You said you know who I am," Sal said.

Darren was staring at that pistol.

"Now we get down to business," said Sal. "Why are you telling these lies on your boss? What's your motivation?"

“I’m not lying,” Darren insisted, still staring at that gun. “You can shoot off my balls, yes, you have that power, but I’m not lying.”

The nerve of the man caught them all off guard. Reno and Sal glanced at each other. Men didn’t usually stick to the lie under that kind of pressure. Unless it wasn’t a lie.

“Corroborate it,” Reno said to Darren. “You got all this intel on Kayla, who else knows about her affair with the judge? Can’t just be you. Who else knows?”

They all looked at Darren. And he didn’t skip a beat. “Her brother-in-law knows.”

Brent frowned. “Her brother-in-law? One of my brothers?”

“Yes.”

“Which one?” asked Sal.

“His baby brother. Donald Sinatra knows,” said Darren.

They were all shocked.

“That’s some bullshit,” said Brent. “Donnie don’t know squat about what he’s saying.”

“I have an undoubtedly loaded gun pointed at my balls,” said Darren. “Why would I lie?”

It was a good question to Reno and Sal. But Brent wasn’t buying it. “I don’t know why you’re lying yet,” he said, “but I know you’re lying. And I’m going to find out why.”

“Begin with your brother. He knows.”

Brent seemed a little shaken by Darren’s insistence. Reno and Sal might not have seen it, but MaKayla did.

Sal knocked on the van door with the butt of his gun. The back double doors opened. The two men that had escorted Darren in the SUV were standing at the door.

“Get him to the safe house,” Sal ordered. “When he’s ready to change his tune, contact us. If he’s still singing the same song, you help him change that tune.”

“Yes sir,” the taller man said as they grabbed Darren and took him out of the van.

But just as he was stepping out, gunfire rang out. Brent dived on MaKayla, protecting her, while Reno and Sal pulled out their weapons to fire back. Darren was shot several times in the chest before the men could react, and they began firing back at what was now the fleeing getaway car.

They hopped into the SUV and sped off after the car while Reno and Sal grabbed Darren’s lifeless body, pulled it into the van, and Brent, taking over the driving from their man behind the wheel, sped off behind the SUV.

All three vehicles raced down the back roads of Jericho as the getaway car seemed to destined to get away. They turned corner after corner, driving down winding roads that dipped and rose, and that car still held the advantage. They turned even more corners in their mad dash up and down those back roads.

“Those bastards are getting away!” Sal decried. “This big-ass boat too slow!”

But Brent was driving that van as fast as he could safely drive it. The SUV was doing the best it could to keep up too. But the muscle car they were chasing was just too

fast.

Until the driver of the getaway car made one major miscalculation. Turning yet another corner, this one far steeper than any of the other ones, he gassed it instead of slowing down and ended up losing control and then traction, and then the getaway car was flipping multiple times, with each drop down crashing it into the pavement so violently that on its final crash it burst into flames.

Brent had to swerve the van to avoid the fire. The SUV nearly overturned swerving too.

They all came to a standstill on that deserted stretch of backroad while MaKayla was finally able to check Darren's pulse. But it was obvious to everyone that he was already deceased.

MaKayla sat back. They all sat back. Until Sal ordered his men to put Darren McGuire in the SUV and lose him. And then Brent, going against everything he knew to be right and in order, drove them and that van away from there. But he kept taking peeps, through the rearview, at his devastated wife. Reno and Sal might have been well-accustomed to this kind of deadly action, but she wasn't. And Brent never wanted her to become accustomed to this. But there were so many unanswered questions that he was devastated too. So many questions. And now Darren McGuire, perhaps the only man that could have answered some of the more pressing ones, was dead.

Brent moved his head from side to side. Why would McGuire even mention his kid brother's name? Donnie wasn't involved in this. How could he be? What was McGuire up to?

They were going fast, but it was beginning to feel as if they were going backwards fast.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

Big Daddy and Jenay, along with Gemma, were in the kitchen at Big Daddy's house when they all arrived.

"MaKayla, I'm glad you're with them," Gemma said as she stood up and went over to her client. "Let's go in Big Daddy's office and talk. We need to begin to plot our trial strategy."

MaKayla was glad to get a respite from the reality of her circumstance. Gemma would give her a reality check, but without all the drama. But she needed to find out what was going on with Donnie. "I need to talk to Donnie first," she said.

"Is he still here?" Brent asked his father. "Where's Donnie?"

"He's out back on a conference call with his office. Why?"

But Brent didn't answer that question. He and Sal, along with MaKayla and Gemma, hurried toward the back patio. Reno was heading that way, too, but Charles stopped him. "What's this about?"

"We met with Darren McGuire."

"Did he admit his lies?"

"No," said Reno. "Not even with a gun to his balls."

Charles glanced at Jenay. He didn't like her hearing anything about their "methods."
"What does Donald have to do with it?"

“McGuire named him as somebody who knows what’s going on.”

Charles and Jenay frowned. “ Our Donnie ?” asked Jenay. Donnie was her stepson, but he was closest to her than all of the other children. He was closer to her than even Bonita, her biological child with Charles.

“What would Donald know about it?” asked Charles.

“McGuire said he knows,” said Reno. “And he wasn’t taking it back.”

“Where’s McGuire now? At one of Mick’s--”

But before Charles could finish his sentence, Reno was already shaking his head. And he gave Charles a hard look. He didn’t want to say it in front of Jenay. And Charles immediately understood why.

And as Reno headed out back, Charles stopped Jenay from following them. “Wait here,” he said to her, and went out back too.

Donald was out on the back patio pacing the floor as he talked on the phone with one of his corporation’s senior VPs when his brother, sister-in-law, and cousin made their way outside. “I’m not interested if it’s not ahead of schedule and below budget. If they can do that then I’m interested. If not, we stick with Reiner.”

“We need to talk, Donnie,” Brent said. “Hang up the phone.”

But Donnie kept on talking. He had grown unaccustomed to anybody other than their father telling him what to do.

But by the time their father, stepmother, and Reno made it out back, Brent had had it with his kid brother. He snatched the phone from his hand and ended the call himself.

Donnie couldn't believe it. "What do you think you're doing, Brent?"

"I told you we need to talk."

Donnie snatched his phone back from his oldest sibling. "Talk about what?"

"Darren McGuire says you know something about MaKayla and Alvin Clayton. Is that true?"

When Donnie cut his eyes at MaKayla, as if he didn't want to spill the beans on her, everybody tensed up.

"Is it true, Donald?" asked Charles.

"Nothing major. I mean I've seen them at the club when I was in town, or out to dinner. That's all."

"That was nothing," said MaKayla.

"But you've been on dates with the guy?" Reno asked.

"It wasn't a date. We were just kicking it. He was new in town and I was just giving him some pointers."

"Pointers?" asked Sal. "What kind of pointers you need to give a major judge like him?"

"Not judicial pointers. But as a black man navigating a nearly all-white town. That's all we discussed."

"Look like he'd be used to being the only black in the room all the time," said Reno.

“I don’t see where he would need any pointers from you.”

“You don’t see it, Reno, but she does.” Brent was defensive.

“You need to take that bass out of your voice,” Reno warned.

“You need to take those accusations out of your mouth,” Brent warned.

“Okay, that’s enough!” Charles ordered. Then he looked at his son. “Anything else you know about this, Donald?”

“I just thought the timing didn’t make no sense.”

“What do you mean?” asked MaKayla.

“You and Brent were like separated when you were hanging out with Alvin Clayton.”

“Separated?” asked Brent. “We were never separated.”

“You were spending the night at Ma and Pop’s. That’s what I call separated.”

Brent and MaKayla glanced at each other. They’d had arguments where Brent would stay a night or two with his parents. But nothing more than that.

“Seemed like odd behavior to me,” Donnie added.

Brent frowned. “What’s odd about it, Donnie? She had dinner with a colleague. What’s the big damn deal?”

“It was odd. I’m sorry, but it was.”

“Like your ass don’t do nothing odd.”

“This isn’t about me.”

“Then what exactly is your little sly comments about, Donnie?”

“It’s about MaKayla being found in a hotel room with a man she’s been seen around town with, and that man was murdered in that same hotel room she was found in. It’s about your wife looking guilty as sin. That’s what it’s about!”

But before Donnie could finish what he was saying, Brent grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him against the chair. “Don’t you dare spread those lies about my wife!”

“What lies?”

“The lies you’re telling!”

“What have I lied about, Brent? What have I lied about? Don’t get mad at me because you can’t satisfy her the way she needs to be satisfied!”

As soon as he made that nasty reply, Brent punched Donnie so hard that Donnie fell backwards over the chair, crashing to the floor along with the chair. And then Brent jumped down on his kid brother and the two men started fighting.

Reno, Sal, and a frantic MaKayla all tried to pull them off of each other but they wouldn’t separate until Charles got into the fray and grabbed Brent and threw him off of Donnie, and then grabbed up Donnie and threw him against the wall. “Pass a lick again I dare you!” Charles yelled at his sons. “I dare you!”

And because his sons were eternally respectful and equally afraid of their father, that

was the end of the fight. A fight that had gotten so loud and crushing that Jenay had run outside to see what the commotion was about.

“What on earth is going on back here?” she asked.

But nobody was talking. And then Brent walked away from the crowd into the blackness of the huge backyard.

MaKayla started to follow him, but an already exhausted Charles stopped her. “I’ll go,” he said, and followed his son out back.

But Donnie was still upset. “Just because I told the truth, Pop gonna slam me against a wall and Brent gonna punch me? He didn’t have to punch me.”

“You were insinuating he wasn’t getting it up for his wife,” said Reno. “What the fuck you expected him to do? Give you flowers? I would have punched your ass too.”

“Violence,” said Jenay angrily. “Everything always handled with violence. Is this all this family knows?!”

Since it was, nobody answered her.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

By the time Charles made it to the koi pond on the backside of his property, Brent had lit up and was smoking a cigarette, something he rarely did except when he was extremely stressed.

But Charles would have none of it. As soon as he walked up and saw what Brent was doing, he snatched that cigarette out of his mouth and threw it in the pond. “What do you think you’re doing? Killing yourself with those cancer sticks? Punching your own baby brother. What’s wrong with you?”

That quiet, tough-as-nails shell that often defined Brent’s brooding, sometimes melancholy personality was on full display.

“Donnie was out of line talking about your marriage the way he did,” Charles continued. “He’s just a hothead doing what Donnie does. He never wants anybody to get anything over on him. He’s just like every one of my seven children, except for maybe Tony. And you all got it from me. But Donald’s no liar. You know it and I know it. So don’t you dare act as if he was making that shit up.”

“MaKayla’s in trouble, Pop.”

When Brent said those words so heartfelt, Charles’s heart dropped. He stared at Brent. “What are you not telling me?”

Brent looked down and then up and then he leaned his head back.

“Tell me, Brenton.”

“I found something, evidence, in the hotel room where Alvin Clayton was murdered.”

Charles braced himself. “What did you find?”

“MaKayla’s panties on the side of the bed.”

Charles was shocked. “Her panties ? You mean a pair of panties that could have been hers?”

“They were hers, Pop. She didn’t have any on when the police arrived. I purchased them for her. They were hers.”

Charles leaned his head back too. Then he ran his hands through his hair and looked at his son. “What did you do with this evidence?”

“I hid it until she was able to put them back on.”

“But how did they get in that bedroom? I thought she said she never went back there.”

“That’s what she said. She said she was attacked up front and then drugged. All she remembers after passing out is waking up on the sofa.”

“But what got to me,” said Charles, “was when Reno said Darren wouldn’t admit to his lies even with a gun pointed at his dick. That got to me. And Donnie saying he saw Kayla with his own two eyes all hugged up with that judge just as many people were saying in this town. And now you tell me about these underwear.”

Brent looked at his father. “What are you saying?”

“It’s adding up.”

Brent frowned. “What’s adding up?”

“I love MaKayla, you know I do. But at some point we have got to face the truth.”

“And what is that, Pop?”

“What it always has been, son. Kayla’s saying a lot. But a lot’s being said too.”

Brent stared at his father. “You calling her a liar?”

“I’m calling it like I see it. And I’m telling you whether you want to hear it or not: shit’s adding up!”

“Okay fine.”

Charles frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t want my wife’s shit to add up and blow back on you. That’s what it means!” he said angrily, and headed back toward the house.

Brent’s rage was still bubbling when he entered the house and without saying a word made his way first to the kitchen area and then to the living room area and then to his father’s home office where Gemma and MaKayla, lawyer and client, were having a confab.

“Let’s go, MaKayla,” Brent said to her and MaKayla, seeing that look in his eyes, didn’t hesitate. She got up, took his hand, and they left.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

The front door of their home flung open and Brent and MaKayla entered arguing.

“They were asking questions, Brent. That’s all.”

“They were making accusations, MaKayla. And I don’t wanna hear that shit! I’m tired of hearing it! I don’t wanna hear it anymore.”

“Why not, Brent? Because you’re afraid you’ll start questioning me too?”

Brent stared at his wife. And the truth was as clear as the bright light they stood beneath. “Yes,” he admitted.

MaKayla moved up closer to him. She was disappointed, he could see it in her eyes. But she wasn’t surprised. “Most men would have left as soon as they saw those panties. But you didn’t. You have every right to question me. I don’t mind that.”

Brent put his arms around her waist and pulled her against him. “I know for an absolute fact that you didn’t do what you’re being accused of doing. Somebody’s out to get you. I know that too. And with or without my family, I’m going to find out who that person is. They were willing to kill Darren to silence him. They aren’t going to silence you.”

“Did you see that car that followed us home?”

“I saw it.”

“Was that a cop car assigned to me?”

Brent shook his head. “Reno and Sal didn’t think that was a good idea. If Darren could turn on you, they weren’t so sure if my officers could be trusted too. Those guys are Sal’s guys. He has them in the front and the back of our house. They’re a security detail. They’re looking out for you.”

“Even though Sal and Reno have serious doubts about me.”

Brent nodded. “That’s how they are. Always family first. The details later.”

MaKayla smiled. “That’s the most wonderful thing, and the scariest thing about your family,” she said, and even Brent had to laugh at that.

But before day that next morning, Brent woke up to find MaKayla on the floor of their bedroom with what looked like a hundred sheets of papers around her. Brent got out of bed. She wore one of his big dress shirts. He wore nothing.

He towered over her. “What are you doing?”

MaKayla didn’t even realize he had awakened and gotten out of bed. She looked up, at his fine specimen of a body, at his still huge and dangling penis that had put it on her again before they went to sleep, and then she looked into his face. “I printed out all of my cases that ended in convictions dating back years. Especially the messiest ones. And three cases rose to the top of the list and stayed there.”

Brent knelt down. “What three?”

MaKayla handed him one sheet of paper. “Jerome Lewandowski.” She handed him a second paper. “Eric Jackson.” She handed him a third sheet of paper. “And Peter Zackery.”

“What were they accused of?”

“Rape and murder, all three.”

“Together or separately?”

“Separately, but I always had a suspicion that they were working together. I couldn’t prove it, so we chose not to go down that road at trial, but I always felt that was the case.”

Brent stared at his wife. She had an excellent mind. Somebody who knew how to keep the background noise in the background. “Why did all three rise to the top of your list? Because you felt they were connected?”

“Because of the way they committed their crimes. All three happened in a hotel. Not in The Hayton, but smaller ones around the county. All three involved rape and murder. And remarkably, all three tried to pin the crime on a woman.”

“That’s unusual.”

“Right yeah?”

“Don’t tell me it was the same woman?”

“Not the same woman, no,” MaKayla made clear. “But a woman. Which was bogus. But my case seems eerily similar. No rape was involved. At least I don’t think so. I haven’t been privy to the evidence and Gemma said the special prosecutor has been slow to give her anything. But the fact that somebody killed Alvin Clayton and are trying to pin it on me matches those cases. There’s a connection there. It may be a coincidental one, but something’s there.”

“Are they all still in prison?”

“They’re all out. All released within the last year.”

“They must have gotten pretty light sentences.”

“They did. Jerome Lewandowski served the longest time, and he only got eight years. Everybody else got five and four. But they may hold the key, Brent. I think first thing in the morning, we need to start with them.”

Brent reviewed the three sheets of paper again. Like MaKayla, he was methodical too. And then he nodded his head. “I agree,” he said.

And when he looked those bright green eyes over at MaKayla, she smiled. She felt as if they were at least making a start. Which was huge. Brent was on her side. Which was even better.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

Sal was still deep inside of Gemma, and they both were asleep in one of Big Daddy's guest houses on his property, when the call came in from Brent and MaKayla. His head was still too foggy with sleep to understand details, but he told Brent to call his underboss Robby Yale, give him the names, and he would make sure the guys were picked up and placed inside a safe house. MaKayla had their parole officers' info, which would allow Sal's men to find out where they were currently staying. "If they're still banging around Jericho," Sal said, "then Robby will have them at that safe house in a matter of hours."

Brent and MaKayla doubted that even Robby Yale, whom Sal and the family put a lot of faith in, could be that good.

But when they woke up later that same morning, their doubts proved misplaced. Robby Yale was apparently that good because he had all three men in one of Mick's safe houses before they could sit down to breakfast.

Reno and Sal hurried over in Big Daddy's Mercedes, scooped up Brent and MaKayla, and all four made their way to the safe house.

Reno, who was driving, looked through the rearview at MaKayla. "How you holding up?"

"Better now that we have somewhere to start. Especially after what happened to Darren."

"I can't get over that guy. A Glock to his balls and he still stuck to his lies? He's a piece of work. At least he was," Reno added, and that addition put a pit in MaKayla's

stomach.

“He doesn’t have a family and he was supposed to still be home recovering, so nobody’s asking about his whereabouts just yet. But they will,” MaKayla said.

“By then I hope we have the real perpetrator,” said Reno. “But other than this situation, how are you doing?”

MaKayla exhaled. “I’m doing as well as I can,” MaKayla said. “I’ve been talking to June especially ever since I got out of jail and that’s been major. I’m so happy he’s having a ball with Ash and Monk.”

“What’s the deal with them anyway?” Sal asked. “Last I heard The Monk had all the Sinatra young people at his house. How’s that working out?”

“Just great. Ash and June were already thick as thieves. She won’t let none of the kids get on social media at all, or talk with their friends just yet. It can’t last for long, but at least for now it’s a great help. Hopefully I can clear my name before we have to tell June anything. He’s the one I’m most worried about.”

Reno and Sal glanced at each other. “I hate to break this to you,” Reno said, “but those kids probably already know. Including June. You may as well just tell him the truth.”

“I have to disagree with you on that, Reno,” MaKayla said. “You don’t know Ashley like we know Ashley. If she says they’re watching zero social media or talking zero on the telephone, I’m telling you that’s exactly the way it is. They absolutely adore Ashley. They’d rather be with her than anybody else on earth.”

“Us included,” Brent added, and everybody laughed.

They sobered up when they arrived at one of Mick's safe houses in Jericho. They didn't expect it to look so ordinary, but it did. It was a plain, clapboard house in a wooded, rural area that would have drawn the attention of no one. From Sal's count, Mick had nearly twenty of those houses set up around town should Big Daddy and the family need a fast, protected hideaway until Mick or Teddy, or Sal, Reno, or Tommy Gabrini, or Monk Paletti or some other "skilled" member of the family could get to the area.

Brent used to view it as dramatic overkill, all of those safe houses, and also how his Uncle Mick had those big, tricked-out Cadillac Escalades in every single city he visited on a regular basis too. A man some in the family said was an actual billionaire, Mick, to Brent, was just throwing away money like it was water. But now that MaKayla's freedom, not to mention her very life was in jeopardy, he understood why he put so much money and effort behind what ifs . Although he and Mick clashed more often than he would like, he loved his uncle even more for his great looking out. He was a good man that had to do a lot of bad things just to keep himself and his extensive family safe. Sometimes he went too far, like beating up Jake Dalenti to within inches of his life without knowing Jake's true role in anything. But most times his Uncle Mick just helped out everybody in the family and never asked for anything in return. Not even a thank you.

When they walked into the safe house, all three men, their faces covered with over-the-head masks, were seated in a row of chairs. Two of Sal's armed men were standing on either side of the three chairs. The masks were utilized mainly to protect the identities of Reno and Sal, even though the men would probably figure out Brent and MaKayla's voices. Which was okay by Brent and MaKayla.

The foursome that had just walked in sat down in the chairs in front of the three masked men. MaKayla took it from there. "When I call your name," she said, "raise your hand."

“Eric Jackson.” The man in the middle, the only black guy in the group, raised his hand. “Jerome Lewandowski.” The man to the left raised his hand. “And Pete Zackery.” The man to the right raised his hand.

“Why are we here?” Pete asked.

“Because we know your asses are involved in this shit,” said Reno.

“What shit?” asked Eric. “I keep my nose clean these days. What shit are you talking about?”

“My shit,” said MaKayla. “So don’t play games with us. These men that are with me do not play. Please understand that. Now answer my questions.” She exhaled. “What did Darren McGuire threaten you with to get you to set me up in that hotel room?”

Nobody answered that question.

Sal had had it. “Take off those fucking masks,” he ordered. “We need to see faces.”

But Brent held out his hand, holding the capos off. “You sure?” he asked Sal.

“Hell yeah I’m sure. We know how to prevent assholes from talking when they leave here. Besides, who says they’re ever leaving here?”

The men sat up straight when they heard that question, and then Sal nodded and his men removed the masks.

When all three men, crooks and convicts from way back, saw that Sal Gabrini and Reno Gabrini were also in that room, Brent could see an immediate shift in their sense of safety. All three were now terrified. They knew who those two men were, and what those two men were absolutely capable of doing to them.

Sal recognized their terror too. “Now your asses ready to talk?”

They all nodded their heads. They were ready.

“Ask your question again,” Reno said to MaKayla.

“What did Deputy DA McGuire threaten you with to set me up in that hotel room?”

“We never had no contact with McGuire,” said Eric.

“But you’ve had contact with each other?”

All three looked at each other. “Yeah,” said Jerome.

MaKayla wanted to say just like you had contact with each other when you were raping and killing those women and blaming it on those innocent females , but she didn’t go there. “What was your role in what happened to Alvin Clayton?”

Again they looked at each other. Then they looked at Reno and Sal. When they looked at each other again, they all nodded their heads. “We were approached, and offered big bucks,” Eric said, “to take out Judge Clayton.”

“What do you call big bucks?” Reno asked.

“A quarter of a million a piece,” said Eric.

Reno nodded. “Yup. That’s big bucks,” he said.

“Who offered you that kind of money?” asked Brent.

“That’s what I wanna know,” said Sal. “Families around here are wealthy, I’ll

give'em that, but ain't nobody around here but Big Daddy that's got dough like that to toss around. Who the fuck gonna give y'all that kind of money to off some nobody judge?"

Again they looked at each other as if they were still partners in crime.

"Was it Deputy DA McGuire?" MaKayla asked them again. Who else, she wondered, would have assumed that they had a connection to each other unless it was somebody in the DA's office? Somebody with intricate knowledge of the similarities of their three separate cases?

But that wasn't the name they gave. "Donald Sinatra approached us," said Pete Zackery.

When MaKayla and Brent and Reno and Sal heard that name again , they all paid attention.

"Why would my brother pay you to kill a judge he barely knows?" Brent asked them.

"What he told us," said Jerome, "was that Judge Clayton was fooling around with his brother's wife and he wanted him out of the picture."

Reno and Sal looked at MaKayla. But Brent was staring at the three men. "Why didn't you take the money?"

"Us kill a judge?" asked Eric. "We weren't trying to go out like that. We told him to take a hike."

"Sure you did," said Sal.

"If I'm lying I'm flying," said Eric. "We told him to take a hike!"

“That’s what we told him,” agreed Jerome.

“That’s what we said,” agreed Peter.

MaKayla was lost. She didn’t know what to believe herself anymore. She looked at Reno and Sal.

Brent stood up. MaKayla, Reno, and Sal stood up too. Brent looked at his two cousins. “Keep’em here,” he said. “Unharmmed,” he added, “until we talk to my brother.”

Sal looked at his men and nodded his head. And then he, Reno, Brent and MaKayla left.

They stood outside of the house.

“You believe those motherfuckers?” Sal asked Brent.

“That Donnie told them to kill somebody because he thought my wife was cheating on me? Hell no. Donnie didn’t tell them that.”

“But?” said Reno, who was staring at Brent.

“But Donnie’s involved. Not like these guys are saying he is, but somebody’s telling them to say his name. His name isn’t coming up like that for no reason.”

“Then let’s get our asses back in there and find out who’s telling them to say that name,” said Sal.

Brent didn’t want it to turn into a violence they couldn’t come back from. “Let me handle it, Sal. Reno,” he said.

“Then go handle it,” Reno said.

Brent went back inside the safe house and walked up to the one he viewed as the weakest link: Peter Zackery. He grabbed him, put the mask back over his head and face to avoid him seeing any details of where they were, and then he all but dragged him outside.

Reno, Sal, and MaKayla gathered around him so that he could see nothing but them, and then the mask was removed. “You have one shot at telling us the unvarnished truth,” Brent said to Peter. “You lie, and I’ll turn you over to these very dangerous men. You understand me?”

“I told you the--”

Brent quickly placed two fingers over Peter’s mouth. “You didn’t hear me clearly enough. And keep in mind, we have intel. We didn’t just round you up for a shot in the dark. So let me be clearer: If your ass wants to live, you had better tell us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and tell it to us now.”

They all stared at Peter. Sal and Reno opened their suit coats, displaying their hardware. Peter swallowed hard. Tears filled his eyes. “I know you don’t wanna believe us, Chief, but we told you the truth. Your brother was the one that approached us. It was Donnie.”

Reno and Sal glanced at each other. But Brent remained unconvinced. “My brother didn’t offer to pay you money to kill anybody for any reason. That is not true!”

Peter was crying. “But it is true. It is true.”

“Where’s your family?” Sal asked Peter.

Peter looked at him. “My family?” He wiped away his tears. “What does my family have to do with this?”

“Are they alright?” asked Reno. “Is anybody holding them hostage and ordering you to tell us that fairytale?”

“No! It’s not a fairytale. It’s the truth. I swear to you on my own children’s lives it’s the truth!”

Brent quickly pulled out his revolver and placed it against Peter’s skull. “I’ll kill you right now if you don’t stop telling us lies and tell us the truth!”

“I’m telling you the truth,” said Peter as snot ran from his nose. “It was your brother. I know your brother. We went to high school together. It was Donnie!”

With a gun to his skull and he still stuck to his story? Brent removed his revolver from Peter’s head.

But as soon as he did, Reno and Sal placed their own revolvers up to his penis for Sal and his head for Reno. “Just in case you thought Brent the good cop wouldn’t pull that trigger, you’re now face to face with the bad cops,” said Sal.

“And we pull triggers for a living,” said Reno. “No more lies or I’ll splatter your brains all over this dirt!”

Peter recoiled from both men, but he still would not change his story. “On my children,” he said, “it was Donnie. And we turned him down.”

Now even Reno and Sal were convinced. They put their guns away, too, and stood back.

Reno opened the door and motioned for one of the capos to come and get Peter.

“Keep those assholes right here until you hear from us,” said Sal. “No exceptions.”

“Yes sir, Boss,” the capo said and dragged Peter back inside of the safe house.

“Donnie still in town?” MaKayla asked.

“He’s still in town,” said Sal. “Said he was going to spend the day with Jenay over at the hotel.”

“Let’s get over there,” Brent said, and they headed for his father’s car. Only this time Brent got behind the wheel and sped all the way to the Gabrini hotel.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

“Where’s Donnie?” Brent asked as he and MaKayla and Reno and Sal walked into Jenay’s office at the hotel Big Daddy gave to her to run. Sitting behind her desk, she looked at them over her half-moon reading glasses as if they were the rudest people. “And good morning to all of you too,” she said.

“Good morning, Ma,” said Brent. “We saw Donnie’s car out front. We need to talk to him.”

“About the case?”

“Yes.”

“But I thought that was resolved last night.”

“It’s something else.”

“His name came up again,” said MaKayla.

“Again?” Jenay shook her head. “Somebody’s trying to tear this family apart. I hope you realize that, Brent.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but I need to talk to Donnie.”

“I haven’t seen him. If he’s here, he’s probably out front with the clerks.” Jenay picked up her phone and phoned the front desk. “Martha, come here,” she said and ended the call.

Within seconds, the front desk supervisor walked into Jenay's office. "Good morning." They all spoke. "You wanted to see me, ma'am?"

"Have you seen Donald around here this morning?"

"Donnie? No ma'am. He hasn't been here or we would have seen him up front. It's been really slow this morning, and I've been behind the desk since four a.m."

"But his car's out front," said Reno. "Maybe he's bumping around outside."

"If he was here, he would have come and saw me first," said Jenay. "I've been here since late last night. We had a rowdy convention we had to get back under control."

"Then where is he?" asked MaKayla. "Because that lime-colored mustang he keeps here in town to drive around in whenever he's back home is parked out front. That's Donnie's car."

"Did you call his cell?"

"On the way over here, I called him three times," said MaKayla. "No answer."

"I tried to call him too," said Reno.

Now Jenay was getting worried. She phoned Charles. When she ended that call, they all were concerned. "He told Charles he was coming over here to spend some time with me. Charles hasn't seen him since."

They all were worried now. "I'll have the girls check every floor," said Martha, and she left the office.

Jenay phoned her grounds supervisor, who had not seen Donnie either. But the

maintenance supervisor said he saw Donnie park his car a couple hours ago and then he got in a van with somebody.

“A van?” asked Jenay.

“Yes ma’am,” the supervisor said over the phone.

Jenay ended that call, and Brent went to her computer.

“What are you doing now?” asked Reno.

“He’s pulling up surveillance cameras to see what they might have captured,” said MaKayla.

Everybody gathered around Brent as he pulled up the numerous cameras on site. By the time he went through most of the footage, Charles and Gemma had arrived in the office. “You found him?” he asked.

But Jenay shook her head.

“Something’s wrong,” said Charles. “He came here to see you, and you haven’t seen him at all? And his car’s out front? Something’s wrong.

“Eddie said he got in a van,” Jenay said.

“A van?”

“Here he is!” Brent said after finally seeing Donald’s mustang drive into the parking lot.

Charles, Jenay, and Gemma hurried over to the computer screen, too, as they all

watched Donnie drive up, and sit in his car on his phone. And then he finally got out.

But as soon as he did, a van pulled up, blocking his car in, and a tall white guy got out of the van and started talking with Donnie. There was nothing suspicious about it on its face, but they were all looking beyond the surface. Donnie and the guy even looked under the hood of the Mustang briefly, conversing with each other the whole time. But then the man said something that changed the expression on Donnie's face. And then Donnie, still looking diligently at the man, pulled down the hood, locked his car, and then got in the back of the van with the guy, seemingly voluntarily. And the van drove away.

"Anybody know that guy?" Reno asked.

Nobody knew him.

"It wasn't no kidnapping," said Reno. "Looked like he willingly went with that guy to me."

"Not to me," Charles said with a frown on his face, and everybody looked at him.

"What did you see, Big Daddy?" asked Reno.

"That changed expression on his face."

"He looked like he was all into the conversation."

Charles shook his head. "I know my children. That was fear on Don's face. They gave him an offer he couldn't refuse. He either had to go with them, or face consequences beyond that van. Look," Charles said as he leaned over Brent and rewound that video to show his son's changed expression. What everybody else missed, except for Charles, was how Donald's eyes glanced to his far left. But he did

it so quickly that it was easily missed. “Did you see the way his eyes cut away from that guy and looked over to his left?”

They only saw it when Charles showed it to them. “Is there a camera over in the left side from where Donald was parked, Nay?”

Jenay shook her head. “Not over in that area, no.”

“Which means they knew there was no camera over there,” said Brent. Then he fast-forwarded the camera to where his brother got in that van and the van took off.

They waited for about ten seconds and then a green-and-gray Dodge Charger appeared on camera from that far left corner of the parking lot and then followed the van. “You’re right, Pop,” Brent said. “Somebody in that car either had a gun aimed at Don, or somebody was in that car Donnie cares about, and a gun was aimed at them.”

“Rewind it again,” Charles said. “Let’s see if anybody else is in that Dodge.”

Brent rewound it as MaKayla’s phone began to ring. They couldn’t make out who it was because the tint was too deep, but they did see that a second person was on the passenger seat.

“It’s Donnie!” MaKayla exclaimed when she looked at her ringing phone’s Caller ID.

“Put it on Speaker,” Brent told her as he quickly stood up and she answered the phone on Speaker. “Donnie, where are you?”

“Tell the truth, MaKayla, or they’re going to kill me.”

Everybody stiffened. “Who’s going to kill you?”

“You have to tell them the whole truth.”

“Tell who the truth?”

“They won’t let me go until you tell it and tell it all.”

MaKayla was getting frantic now. “Tell what all? What all are you talking about, Donnie?”

Charles snatched the phone from MaKayla. “Put them on the phone, Donald,” he ordered his son.

“They won’t come to the phone. She has to tell the whole truth, Daddy, or they’ll kill me. This is not a drill! They’re serious. You gotta make her talk and get me out of here. It’s scary here. This is a scary place. Please, Daddy. She’s got to tell the whole truth or they’ll kill me.”

“Hang up!” a male’s voice yelled out in the background.

“When will you call us back?” Charles asked desperately.

“In an hour,” said the voice in the background.

“I’ll call back in an hour. But you got to tell it all, MaKayla,” Donnie said again, and then the call abruptly ended.

“Good Lord, what’s happening?” a terrified Jenay asked.

“What’s the whole truth, MaKayla?” asked an equally terrified Charles.

“I don’t know what he’s talking about! I’ve been telling the whole truth all along, Big

Daddy.”

“This shit getting crazier and crazier,” said Reno.

“My boy’s life is at stake,” Charles said to his daughter-in-law. “You’ve got to tell us everything!”

“I told you everything I know!”

“Not everything,” Gemma said in that cool way she was known for, and they all looked at her.

“What do you mean?” MaKayla asked her. “I’ve told everything I know about what happened in that hotel suite the day Judge Clayton was murdered. I told everything.”

“Maybe he’s not talking about that day,” said Gemma.

An odd look appeared on MaKayla’s face. On Brent’s face too. “What do you mean?”

It was obvious Gemma didn’t want to reveal it, but Donnie was in danger. All had to be revealed. “I met with the special prosecutor this morning. The MBI turned over tapes to her that showed MaKayla and the judge spending hours together in a hotel suite the night of Peg Newton’s retirement party.”

Everyone was floored. Especially Brent. “MaKayla, is that true?”

But when MaKayla responded by saying “It was nothing,” the room erupted.

“Nothing?” asked an exacerbad Reno.

“Are you shitting me?” asked Sal.

But Brent wasn't histrionic at all. He was staring at his wife. “It's true?” he asked her.

“But it wasn't what they're making it out to be, Brent.”

Brent's impatience was beginning to surface. “Did you or did you not go to that hotel with Judge Clayton the night of Peg's retirement party?”

“It was nothing!”

“Did you go there?” Charles yelled out. “Did your ass go there?!”

“Yes!” MaKayla bellowed out. “I went there!”

A silence fell over the room. “I'll be damn,” said Sal.

“Ain't this some bull?” asked Reno.

But everyone else was just hurt and baffled. “Why didn't you just tell us that, Kayla?” Jenay asked.

“There was nothing to tell. Nothing happened. I told you we use that suite at The Hayton to meet with informants.”

“Are you telling me it was the same suite where the judge was later found murdered?” asked an amazed Reno.

MaKayla nodded. “Yes.”

“So you went over there to meet with an informant?” Brent asked her.

“Not an informant, no.”

Now Reno was baffled. “But you just said it was set up for your office to meet with informants.”

“It was, Reno. But Judge Clayton told me about this young lady who was alleging that an ADA in my office was harassing her to the point of stalking her. So I used my digital key to let her in the suite, and we went over there to meet with her.”

“Why would a judge need to go with you to meet some nobody girl?”

Reno asked the question everybody else wanted to know too. “Because she came to him initially,” said MaKayla. “She trusted him. It was all work-related. That’s why I never brought it up.”

“Was she there when you and lover boy got there?” Reno asked her. “I’m sure I already know the answer, but give us your best shot.”

MaKayla hated to admit it because she knew how it would appear to them. But she knew she had to put it all on the line now. “No,” she said. “She left before we got there.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Watch it, Reno,” said Brent, warning him about his tone.

“So since the girl wasn’t there,” asked a skeptical Reno, “you left too, right?”

“Eventually yes.”

“You left,” said Gemma, “but according to the prosecution, you left three hours

later.”

“ Three hours ?” asked Charles. “What on earth were you doing in a hotel room with that man for three hours, MaKayla?”

“Talking, Big Daddy.” MaKayla’s once bellowing voice was now deflated. “That’s all we were doing.”

“Ain’t that much talking in this world,” said Reno.

“What were you talking about?” asked Brent.

“You,” said MaKayla. “And how you left the party without saying a word to me. I was hurt when I found out you had been there.”

“And lover boy was right by your side, in a hotel room of all places, to comfort you.”

“It wasn’t like that, Reno.”

“Sure it wasn’t.” Reno was no longer Team MaKayla. He was off that island.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Jenay asked again.

“There was nothing to tell.”

“Why didn’t you tell me ?” asked Brent. “Forget them. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want . . . I knew that if I . . . I knew it would look bad. I knew it could be the last straw for you.”

“You figure?” said Reno snidely.

“How could you hold that back from Brent?” asked Charles. “I’m not liking this, MaKayla. I’m very disappointed in you.”

MaKayla’s heart dropped. “Nothing happened. Nothing was ever going to happen, I promise you that, Big Daddy. I would never have allowed it.”

“You had no business being there!” Brent yelled out. “Your ass had no business being there!”

MaKayla could tell his anger wasn’t because she was in a suite with a man, but because it was going to hurt her case significantly. She could tell he was terrified for her.

“We need to focus,” said Charles. “Is this what Donnie means about telling the whole truth?”

“That’s the question,” said Gemma.

“Because why would his kidnappers care about some tryst in some hotel suite?”

“Unless it’s all about making her look bad in the eyes of the family,” said Jenay. “Whoever’s behind this is trying to tear this family apart.” Then she looked at Reno. “And it just might be working.”

They all fell into an uncomfortable silence. Until Charles frowned. “I’ll be damn.”

They all looked at him. “What, Big Daddy?” asked Sal.

“I’ll be damn.”

“What is it, Charles?” asked Jenay.

“He said scary.” Charles said.

But nobody knew what he meant.

“Donnie said where they had him captive was scary. That it was a scary place.”

“So?”

“When he and Ashley owned that gas station off the highway, he said it was so isolated out there most of the time that it was scary. He used to call it the scary place. ‘I’ll be working at the scary place tonight,’ he would tell me.”

“You think he’s out there?”

“He was dropping a clue. He was giving us a clue!” And Big Daddy no longer was talking, he was running for the exit. Brent and MaKayla were right behind him.

But Brent stopped and pulled her back. “You’re staying here,” he said to her. “And I don’t wanna hear any lip about it.” Then he looked at his cousin. “Reno, you stay here with the ladies in case there’s any sneak attacks planned for this location. Sal, you come with us.”

Reno nor Sal was accustomed to anybody ordering them around, but it seemed like a good plan to them. Sal took off with Charles and Brent, while Reno remained back with MaKayla, Jenay, and Gemma.

“I pray Donnie’s alright. I pray they’re able to get him out of there alive.” Then tears appeared in her eyes. “What have I done?” she asked, pacing and rubbing her forehead. “What have I done?”

But Jenay and Gemma went over and hugged her. “Don’t beat yourself up like that,”

said Jenay. “You haven’t done anything. I said it before and I’ll say it again: Whoever’s pulling the strings are trying to tear this family apart. But over my dead body,” she said proudly.

When she said it, MaKayla and Gemma pulled back and looked at her. Jenay was, not that long ago, thought to be actually dead before the truth was revealed. And they both laughed.

But then they thought about Donnie, and their levity didn’t last.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

They ditched the security detail Sal had in place for Brent and MaKayla so that they could have a light footprint when they made it to the gas station. But it still required strategy. That was why Brent, the driver of his father's Mercedes, decided to get off of the interstate one exit early and then drive up country roads until they came to the shuddered gas station. Parking three streets behind it, they got out and hurried along the narrow alleyways until they were in the very back of the station.

When they saw that the back entrance had been bricked in, along with the windows that used to be back there, they knew they had to go around the front.

"I'll take the right side," Brent whispered. "Pop, you and Sal take the left side."

They all agreed and split up. But as soon as they began walking along the sides of the building, gunfire erupted from around front, forcing them to run back to the back of the building to take shelter. Then they began returning fire. Sal ran to one end of the building firing back, while Charles held down the other end.

"I'm climbing up," Brent said. He knew they needed a view of where the threats were coming from, and the only way to get it was to go up.

"Be careful," Charles warned his son as he and Sal took shots at the gunmen up front, then went back to their positions as the gunmen returned fire right back at them.

Brent hoisted himself up on the first tier of the three-story roof as gunfire continued to rang out. But just as he was attempting to hoist himself up to the highest level for a better view, the foot of someone on the top of the roof slammed onto his hand, causing him to clench his teeth in pain and to snatch his other hand away before that

hand was incapacitated too. He was dangling by the captured hand, almost dropping the Glock he held in his free hand.

But when he saw a rifle appear from the top of the roof even before the face of the person holding the rifle appeared, he found the strength to lift up his gun and began shooting, forcing the gunman to back up.

But the gunman quickly regrouped and leaned his body over to get his kill shot. Brent knew, if he allowed him to get even one shot off, he was doomed. That was why, as soon as he saw the gunman's face lean over the higher roof, he began firing round after round. His first shot got the gunman in the face. But he had to be sure that he was dead. There was no room for error.

He didn't know what the status of the gunman was until the gunman stood straight up, as if he was determined to live, and then he fell over. He just missed Brent's dangling body as he fell down onto the second-level roof. There was no question he was dead.

The gunfire suddenly stopped around the front of the building, too, and Sal motioned for Charles to run along the side of the building where he was stationed, and Sal would run along the side of the building where he was stationed. As they were doing so, Brent jumped off of the rooftop altogether and ran up front to assist them.

When they all got up front, they saw that van and that same two-tone Dodge Charger speeding out of the parking lot. The Charger was gone in a flash: there was no catching it. But the van wasn't so lucky.

While Sal and Brent made a run for the van, shooting as they ran, Charles ran inside of the gas station.

"Donnie?" he cried out. "Donald?"

He began running from aisle to aisle inside of the torn apart gas station, looking for his son.

Outside, Sal and Brent were able to fire enough shots into that van that the driver was hit. The van slung right, then left, and then flipped over. They ran up to the van, only to discover that the two occupants, the driver and a passenger, were both dead.

Upset that they couldn't manage to have a survivor they could get intel from, they then ran back to the gas station.

When they entered the gas station, Charles was attempting to kick down the door to the back room. They ran back there to assist him.

But the door gave way just as they got back there, and it flew open. Inside of the room was Donnie and a woman, both seated in chairs, both tied up with their mouths covered with duct tape.

Charles quickly removed the tape from off of his son's mouth. "You okay?"

"How did you find us?"

"Your scary clue."

Brent untied Donnie while Sal untied the woman. And as soon as Donnie was free, he jumped up and hugged his father. "I didn't think you would get it. I used to call this place a scary place, but I didn't know if you were listening to me back then."

"I always listen to my children," said Charles.

"Who are you?" Sal asked the woman when he removed her duct tape.

“They kidnapped her first and threatened to kill her if I didn’t get in that van at Jenay’s hotel. She’s a friend of mine,” Donnie said.

“Friend ?” The woman was offended. “I’m his girlfriend, thank you very much.”

With her straggly blonde hair and tats, it was obvious to them that she was one of those biker chicks Donnie always went for. He was rich now. Was way out of her league now. But he apparently still liked what he liked.

“I’ll go up front in case those assholes try to make a comeback,” said Sal as he hurried back up front.

“Did you recognize any of them, Donnie?” Brent asked his kid brother.

“I only saw one of’em, and I never seen him before. As soon as they placed me in that van, they covered my face. They didn’t uncover it until they put us back here. That’s when I knew we were at my old gas station.”

“What about you?” Charles asked the woman.

“I don’t know none of them,” the biker said. “The one driving that Charger was a big man, almost my same complexion just less tan than I got. His skin was ruddy-looking and he had the most terrifying pop eyes I’ve ever seen, and was always breathing hard like he has asthma or emphysema or something. That’s all I know about him.”

“Did he say what he wanted from us?” asked Brent.

Donnie shook his head. “He didn’t say nothing. The guy that told me to get in that van at the hotel was the only one that did any talking. He was the only one I saw.”

They had him on video. They knew what he looked like. He was now dead in that

van.

Charles was just glad to have his boy back. He hugged him again. “Ready to go home?” he asked him.

“I been ready!” Donnie said.

Charles and Brent looked at each other. They were still at square one with MaKayla’s case, which was frustratingly painful for Brent, but at least they had Donnie back. At least there wasn’t going to be another casualty of this ghost war in which they found themselves completely entangled.

“That’s him now.”

“Where was he?”

MaKayla was on the phone with Gemma. “He was called out on a domestic violence case. One of his friends from high school is apparently the victim.”

“A female?”

MaKayla was upstairs in the master bedroom. She stood in the doorjamb of the open French doors that led onto the balcony and allowed the night air to slink through Brent’s thin dress shirt she wore. “From what I heard, and I wasn’t listening to his phone conversation like that, I think I assumed it was a female. Somebody named Zippy or Zibby or some nickname like that.”

“How’s he handling everything, Kayla? With you I mean.”

MaKayla could hear the front door open and close and then Brent walking up the stairs. “I honestly don’t think he’s handling it at all. I think he’s just trying to find a way to get me out of it. Then he’d deal with it later.”

“Sounds Gabrini men familiar,” said Gemma.

“Sinatra men familiar too,” MaKayla said as Brent entered their bedroom. “Hey, babe,” she said to him.

“Hey,” he responded with no feeling behind the word, which wasn’t all that unusual

for Brent, and he proceeded into the bathroom.

“He didn’t sound very thrilled to be home,” Gemma said over the phone.

“Nothing to be thrilled about these days,” MaKayla responded as Brent turned on the shower water.

“MaKayla, come here!” he yelled out over the sound of water.

“Okay!” MaKayla yelled back. “Listen, Gem, I’ve got to go. But I just want to thank you and Sal and Reno again for putting your own lives and businesses on hold to come up here and help me. Brent and I truly appreciate it.”

“You’re thanking Reno too?”

MaKayla laughed. “Yes, I am. He’s extra. And Trina’s probably the only woman in the world that can take him in large doses. But he looks out for family. He looks out for his own. I can’t disrespect a man who does that.”

“I agree,” said Gemma, and they ended the call.

MaKayla made her way into the bathroom. “What’s up?” she asked. But when she saw that Brent was already under the water tap, and had opened the shower door for her to join him, she didn’t hesitate. She sat her phone on the vanity, removed the shirt she wore, and got in the shower with him.

He closed the door, wrapped her in his arms, and began kissing her in that hard, desperate way she understood. The stress they both were carrying around was daunting, and she knew Brent was bearing the bulk of her burdens too. Even the way he massaged her between her legs, though sensual in its stress-relieving, was hard too.

But when he slammed her front against the shower wall and entered her with an unusually fierce thrust that made her cry out, and when he began pounding her with an unusual amount of ferociousness, a hard lovemaking session began to turn hardcore.

It was sexy to MaKayla, and it felt good because it was Brent doing her. But it felt painful too. Because she knew it was too aggressive, as if he needed to get everything negative out of his system all at once by pounding it out and into her. No love was in their coupling. No affection. Just a massive itch that needed to be scratched and her body was the scratcher he chose to do the job.

It didn't last very long. That kind of lovemaking never did. And within a few minutes, Brent was cumming hard. He lifted her butt cheeks, to pound her even harder, as he grunted and groaned his way through those last seconds.

But as soon as he poured out, and before he could lean against her, she forced him out of her by getting out of that shower.

She cleaned up at the sink, grabbed her phone, and took herself to bed.

Tears dropped from her eyes as she laid there, but she refused to let him see her cry. She wiped those tears away and wouldn't allow them to return by the time he made it out of the bathroom and got in bed beside her.

Both were on their backs. Both were staring up at the high ceiling. And after several minutes, MaKayla spoke.

She could be forgiving because she knew he was going through hell, especially when he discovered she had met with Alvin Clayton in that hotel suite before his murder. It was innocent and completely work-related, and she was certain Brent knew that, but the fact that she hung out with him in that suite to talk about their marriage still had to

hurt. “How did the DV case turn out?”

“Messy,” Brent said. “But listen, MaKayla, I shouldn’t have . . . I didn’t mean to be so aggressive in that shower.”

“Yes, you did,” MaKayla responded. “But I understood why.”

Brent turned on his side and looked at her. She turned on her side and looked at him. “That’s not you. That’s why I didn’t stop you. I knew you needed to get that out of your system, and was going to get it out one way or another. It may as well have been through me. But because I understood what you were doing, that doesn’t mean it was a good reason for you to do that.”

Brent’s heart swelled with emotion. “I’m so sorry. You’re the last person on earth I want to hurt. There’s no excuse.”

“I agree,” she said as she ran her hand through his thick hair. “And like I said, that wasn’t you. But try that shit again and I’ll kick your ass into your throat.”

Her sense of humor caught Brent so off guard that he couldn’t help but smile that rare smile. MaKayla, loving and knowing that Brent, smiled too. And she ran her hand through his hair again. “Even saints aren’t perfect,” she said.

Then her look turned serious. “I want to apologize for staying in that hotel suite with Alvin longer than I should have. The girl wasn’t there when we got there. I should have left as soon as I knew she wasn’t there.”

“You were upset, Kayla. You needed somebody to talk to.”

“Had I known what was going to happen the very next day, I would never have---”

“I know you wouldn’t have. I know,” he said and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her forehead, and they held onto each other.

Like seemingly all of the Sinatra and Gabrini marriages, love was mighty in their marriage. And turmoil was mighty in it too.

“What about that domestic violence call? You said it was messy. What was messy about it?”

Brent didn’t want to tell MaKayla. He felt she had enough to worry about. But it was related to her situation too. “It was the second DV call I handled this week involving the same house on Norris Avenue.”

“I heard Doke say something about your friend from high school was involved. Zippy or--”

“Zibby,” said Brent. “Zepena Palance is her name, but everybody calls her Zibby. So I went over there. Her boyfriend was trying to beat her up, but we stopped him in the act again. But this time it just seemed staged to me because he was just about to hit her when I bust into the house the same way it happened the first time I was called over there. So I called them out on it. She didn’t press charges before. What was going on here? The guy immediately caved, which forced Zibby to admit the truth too. Some guy promised to feed their drug habit if Zibby could get me in my truck long enough so that she could claim I raped her.”

MaKayla was shocked. “What ? She didn’t do it?”

“No. She never got in my truck. Besides, two patrolmen were there, too, with their body cams on and recording, when they made their confessions. They both were arrested for lying to an officer on the DV matter, but more charges could be pending.”

“But did she say who the guy that was feeding their drug habit was or what he looked like?”

Brent shook his head. “She said he looked like a regular guy to her. White, tall, big. She couldn’t give any firm details. She just wanted the money, she said. She didn’t care what he looked like.”

MaKayla shook her head. “Whoever’s behind this is pulling out all the stops. But why?”

“The zillion dollar question,” Brent said, and then he pulled her closer and kissed her again. And the conversation ended there.

But a half-hour later, as they both were dozing off, MaKayla’s phone began ringing. Because it could be Gemma with some court news or case strategy news, Makayla didn’t bother to look at the Caller ID. But it was only Ashley.

She put the call on Speaker. “Hey Ash. Getting tired of those kids?”

“Never,” Ashley said. “I was just checking on you. Carly said she talked with you earlier tonight and you didn’t sound so great. And then I talked with Donnie and he told me what happened with him. I said whoa. This shit getting real.”

It was already real for MaKayla and Brent. That was why Brent rolled his eyes. Leave it to Ashley to find everything lighthearted.

“Thanks for calling, Ash,” MaKayla said. “But I’m doing great. Just wish I’d never been anywhere near 1498. That’s for damn sure.”

“1498?”

“Oh, I forgot. You aren’t intrinsically involved in this craziness the way we have to be. But it’s the room number at The Hayton Hotel where Judge Clayton was found murdered, and where I was found with the body.”

“Wow. That’s weird.”

“Weird isn’t the word I’d use. Horrifying is the word.”

“No I mean the number.”

“What about the number?”

“It’s weird because that was me and Donnie’s apartment number.”

Brent and MaKayla looked at each other. “Your apartment number?” Brent asked.

“Yeah. You guys never came to visit us because we didn’t stay there very long. But 1498 was our apartment number. It’s weird because they kidnapped Donnie, and Donnie lived in 1498 with me. And now you’re saying 1498 was the suite number when that judge was found. And where you were found with that judge.”

“Are you certain it was 1498?” MaKayla asked her.

“I’m positive,” said Ashley. “I remember my apartment number. You can ask Donnie.”

Brent snatched the phone from MaKayla. “Is Frankie there?”

“Yes, he’s home.”

“Put him on the phone.”

“Okay, hold on.”

While they waited, they looked at each other. “That’s a hell of a coincidence,” MaKayla said. “Judge Clayton killed in room 1498. I’m attacked in room 1498. Donnie and Ash shared apartment 1498. That’s a lot.”

Mob boss Frankie “The Monk” Paletti, Ashley’s husband, came on the phone. “What up, Brent?”

“Put everybody on lockdown, Frankie. No exceptions.”

“Why?What’s wrong?”

“There may be a connection between what’s happening here in Jericho and Ashley. They’ve already roped Donnie in it. And usually where there’s Donnie, Ashley isn’t far behind.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Two peas in a pod. But don’t worry on this end. I’m locking all this shit down right now.”

“It may be nothing,” said Brent, “but it just might bust this situation wide open. I’ll let you know,” he added, and they ended the call.

Brent and MaKayla both began getting out of bed. “Where to?” MaKayla asked.

“Call Donnie. Tell him we’re on our way to pick him up.”

MaKayla was on it before Brent finished talking. She was excited. She felt hopeful for the first time since her ordeal began.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

Brent, MaKayla, and Donnie, along with Reno and Sal, arrived at the small Adobee apartments on the westside of Jericho, where only four apartments, two up and two downstairs, existed. What they didn't realize when they were talking to Ashley was that the entire complex was number 1498, not specifically their apartment. But it was only four apartments. It still stood to reason that that particular suite at the Hayton was chosen because of its number and because the perp wanted to draw a connection to Donnie and Ashley.

"Is this where you and Ashley actually lived?" Reno asked as he looked at the rundown area.

"Yes, Uncle Reno," Donnie said to his older cousin, although he wasn't technically his uncle. But in their culture, it was a sign of respect. "Everybody's not bougie like you and Uncle Sal."

"What bougie? If we're bougie, your old man's bougie," said Sal. "He's richer than us! And your ass right on our trail, so don't even try that."

"But back then I wasn't hitting a lick with a stick," Donnie said. "Ash wasn't either. And Pop's not gonna just take care of you. You have to work for it in his world."

"What you mean in his world?" asked Reno. "In everybody's world. None of my children are sitting around getting trust fund checks either."

"Which apartment is yours, Donnie?" MaKayla asked. She and Brent were singularly focused.

“The top one to the left,” he said. “Number three.”

“Reno and Sal, you come with me,” Brent ordered. Reno and Sal looked at each other. Then Brent handed MaKayla a gun. “You and Donnie wait here.”

But when he looked back at Donnie, Donnie smiled. “What you looking at me for? I’m Big Daddy’s son. I’m Mick the Tick’s nephew. I keep my own piece.” Then he pulled out his fully loaded Glock.

Brent, Reno and Sal got out of Brent’s Big Ram four-door truck. But as soon as they got out, Reno pulled him back. “Who do you think you are ordering us around?”

“You forgot who we are?” asked Sal.

“I know who your asses are,” Brent responded. He was always a hothead to them, and stubborn just like them. “But this is my wife’s life at stake. My baby brother and kid sister are getting roped into this too. I know who your asses are,” Brent said again, “but I’m in charge of this.” Then he led the charge up the stairs.

Reno and Sal looked at each other again. “Just like his daddy,” Reno said, as they made their way upstairs too.

Brent used the butt of his gun to knock on the door. But he got no answer. “Police, open up,” he said out loud as he knocked again.

Again, no answer.

“Break that fucker down,” Sal said. But Brent was already there. He backed up and kicked the door so hard that it easily flew open.

When the three men went inside, the place was in total darkness. They had to search

around for the lights, and that was when Reno found them on the side of the wall.

“Somebody’s been living here,” said Sal. “The lights are on.”

“Donnie said utilities are included in the rent,” said Brent.

And the apartment, though a furnished apartment, didn’t look lived-in at all to them. Until Brent noticed a sheet of paper on the badly-scarred coffee table. He picked it up.

When he saw Boom! written on the note and nothing else, he didn’t hesitate. He frantically grabbed Reno and Sal. “Everybody out!” he yelled. “It’s a bomb!”

Brent, Reno, and Sal ran for their lives out of that apartment and all three jumped over that second-floor railing just as a bomb exploded inside the apartment, tearing that apartment to shreds.

MaKayla and Donnie were shocked when they saw the three men sailing over that railing, especially when they saw the apartment explode right behind them. It was as if they only had had seconds to get out of there alive.

Although Brent and Sal landed on the ground and rolled to safety, Reno slammed down onto the hood of a car, causing the alarm to sound. Nearly broke his back, but he was okay too.

MaKayla and Donnie jumped out of Brent’s truck and joined the three men as they looked at the burning apartment. The rest of the residents had run outside as soon as they heard the explosion, and were standing there staring at the wreckage too. Even with the fire sirens heard in the distance, it was amazing to everyone involved that no one was killed. Especially the three men.

Brent and MaKayla looked at each other. Ashley said it was getting real to her. But it was getting beyond real, surreal , to them.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

Mick Sinatra arrived at Brent and MaKayla's after word spread about the explosion. Everybody else in the family wanted to come to Jericho, too, but they were ordered by Charles to stay put and stay on lockdown. They didn't know what was happening, but the stakes were getting higher and higher.

Charles and Jenay, Mick and Donald, and Brent and MaKayla, along with Reno, Sal, and Gemma, were all at the dining room table trying to make sense of what was happening.

"All we know so far is that the apartment was rented a week and a half ago," Brent said, "to a guy named William Benjamin Goode."

"Who the fuck is that?" Reno asked.

"We couldn't find anything on him," said Mick. "As soon as I got the name, I ordered a deep background. Nothing turned up."

"Damn," said Charles.

"Somebody's toying with us," said Jenay.

"But why toy with my children?" asked Charles. "Why toy with Donnie and Ashley?"

"They aren't toying with her yet," said Donnie. "That apartment number reference could be because I lived there, not because I lived there with Ash. Maybe I'm the one they're really after."

“They would have killed you when they had you,” said Brent. “The fact that the guy got away without taking you out makes it more likely you weren’t his target, just somebody he could use as a bargaining chip.”

“That’s still bad,” said Charles.

Then MaKayla leaned back. “Wait a minute.”

Everybody looked at her. “What?” asked Brent.

“William Benjamin Goode.”

“That’s the guy that rented the apartment Donnie and Ash once lived in, yes.”

“The one with the same address as that hotel suite,” added Donnie. “Why?”

“That’s what he said.”

“That’s what who said?”

MaKayla got up and hurried into the kitchen. They all got up and followed her.

“That’s what who said, Kayla?” Brent was asking her.

“I need my laptop. My laptop is at my office. But I think it’s on my tablet too,” MaKayla said as she opened her tablet that was lying on the center island.

“What are you looking for?” Reno asked her.

“My old convictions’ list.”

“What about it?”

But she was too busy strolling down a long list of names to answer any questions. Until she found it. “There he is!”

“MaKayla, tell us what’s going on?” Charles was as anxious to know as the rest of the family.

“That’s what he wrote.”

“That’s what who wrote?”

“Hank Logan.”

Donnie frowned. “Hank? What does he have to do with this?”

“We convicted him on a double homicide. I didn’t personally try the case though. Darren McGuire tried the case.”

“Darren?” asked Brent. “Maybe that’s why he was roped into this.”

“Yeah, they knew he was a crooked deputy DA who would gladly take a bribe,” said Reno. “Maybe that gunshot that took him out wasn’t because he was talking to us. Maybe it was by design all along.”

“That’s what I’m thinking,” said Sal. “But I still don’t get what he supposedly wrote has to do with anything.”

“His case went up on appeal,” said MaKayla, “and I remember how he wrote a letter to the judge begging for mercy. I don’t hardly ever pay attention to these letters because I just don’t have the time, but the reason I remembered his letter was because

he kept saying how he would be a better man and be good, but he kept leaving out the letter I.”

“Make yourself plain, Kayla,” said Charles.

“He kept saying will be good . Not I will be good. He kept saying if you overturn my conviction or show me mercy or whatever the letter said, he always said will be good . Will be a better man . He kept leaving out the I will be good. Or I will be a better man.”

“Okay,” said Jenay, although they still weren’t putting two and two together.

Except for Brent. “William Benjamin Goode. Will B. Goode.”

MaKayla nodded. “Right!”

“That’s some slick shit right there,” said Sal. “So you think this Hank Logan is involved in all of this? But all you’re basing it on is that name somebody used to rent that apartment, and the fact that he said will be good in a letter he wrote? I can see a loose connection. But that’s all you got?”

“There’s more,” said MaKayla.”

“Has to be for this to make any sense to me,” said Sal.

“The appellate court judge on his case made a note of how he never said I in his letters. And he wrote more than one. But it was as if Hank Logan refused to take responsibility for what he’d done. It was a death knell for his appeal. But here’s the kicker,” said MaKayla. “The appellate court judge that turned down his appeal was Alvin Clayton.”

They were all floored. “Oh wow,” said Gemma.

“That’s what I call a connection,” said Reno.

“Did you know Clayton back then?” Charles asked MaKayla.

“Only that he was on the appellate court for a short period of time. Since that case originated out of my office, I had to know that much. But that’s all I knew about him. I didn’t even remember he was the judge on that case until I saw his name in this file.”

“Well somebody remembered it,” said Jenay. “That’s why he’s dead.”

“There’s more,” said Brent, studying his wife. “Isn’t there?”

MaKayla nodded. “The two witnesses in the case, the two that testified under oath that Hank did not spend the night at their apartment as he claimed he did, but he left their apartment before nine on the night of those murders, was Donnie and Ashley.”

Everybody was astounded. They all looked at Donnie.

“And the apartment we lived in at the time,” said Donnie, “the apartment Hank lied and said he spent the night at, was 1498 Jasper Road. That same apartment that went up in flames tonight.”

Everybody now understood, without a doubt, the connections.

“So Hank Logan is the missing link,” said Brent.

“He wanted us to alibi him and lie for him,” said Donnie, “but we knew Daddy would skin us alive if we did something like that. We didn’t want to testify, either, because

we were friends with Hank, but MaKayla's office subpoenaed us. When we swore to tell the truth so help us God, we knew we had to tell the truth."

"After he lost the appeal," said Sal, "what happened to him?"

"He eventually lost all of his appeals, including a last-ditch appeal to the Supreme Court," said MaKayla. "He was executed two years ago."

"Two years ago?" Reno couldn't believe it. "If he was executed two years ago, what they bringing that shit up now for?"

"I don't know. But there's got to be a reason."

Mick and Sal both stood up and got on their phones to see what they could find out about Hank Logan's background, and Brent made a call to his office.

While the men paced around the kitchen on their respective phones, Donnie and Gemma remained at the center island while MaKayla continued checking the files she had on her tablet to see if she could find any intel on Hank herself. Jenay went to the frig to see what she would whip up for the family to eat.

For several long minutes it was just phone conversations after phone conversations. Until Reno, Sal, and Brent ended their calls with little results. But Mick was still on the phone. He was still getting intel.

But as Reno and Sal talked quietly with Brent, and while MaKayla continued to search her own records for any mention of Hank's next of kin or relatives, Gemma looked at Donnie, who looked flustered to her. "You okay, Don?"

Donnie exhaled. "I hadn't thought about Hank Logan since his execution. That was a hard day for me and Ash both."

“It was a hard day because you guys were once his friends?”

Donnie nodded as Jenay gave him a can of beer. “Thanks, Ma. What was hard about it was that we didn’t think he was the kind of dude to do something like that, you know? We still find it hard to believe.”

“So you could see how one of his family members would still believe in his innocence and want to, in their view anyway, get the bastards who got him?”

“I can see a lot of people still believing in his innocence,” said Donnie. “A lot of people think he was railroaded.”

“Did they say why?” Gemma asked him.

But Donnie was shaking his head. “Just a feeling. They had no proof.”

“But we did,” said MaKayla. “We had reams of it. Mountains of it.” Then MaKayla looked at Donnie. “Did you know any of his family members?”

“I knew of a brother.”

The ladies all stopped all movement and looked at Donnie. “A brother?” asked MaKayla. “He had a brother?”

“Sort of kind of,” said Donnie. “Hank told us once that they were actually father and son, but he said it was on the downlow so they told people they were brothers.”

“Why would it be on the downlow? What do you mean?”

“Hank said his father had a whole other family and couldn’t claim him. So they said they were brothers. But I don’t know if there was any truth to that. Might have been

Hank just running his mouth because he saw the relationship Ash and I had with our father. Cause what he was saying didn't make much sense to me."

"But if it was true, that'll warp somebody's mind for sure. A father doesn't want people to know you were his son?" Jenay shook her head. "That's serious."

"What was this brother-slash-father's name?" asked Gemma.

But Donnie shook his head. "I didn't know him like that. I've never even seen him before. It was just Hank talking about him. I don't recall Hank ever saying his name at all really."

"I know his name," said Mick as he was ending his call.

Although Mick said it with his usual nonchalance, it sounded earth shattering to everybody else.

"You know his name?" asked Reno. "Well damn, Uncle Mick, what you waiting for? Tell us! And tell us where his ass been hiding so we can go get him."

"He hasn't been hiding anywhere," replied Mick. "He's being living in plain sight right here in Jericho."

That surprised all of them. "Who?" Charles asked.

"Sergeant Dokery Pyles."

Brent frowned. "Doke ? My sergeant is Hank Logan's brother?"

"That's not his brother. But that's his father, yes."

“So it was true,” said Donnie. “Hank was telling the truth. But Sergeant Pyles? I can’t believe it!”

Although Reno and Sal had no clue who Doke Pyles was, the Jericho crew knew exactly who he was. He’d been on the force for years. And they all looked at Brent.

But Brent could not believe it either. He was floored too. “Even during Hank Logan’s trial, Doke never once showed any interest in it at all. He never . . .”

MaKayla went over to Brent and pulled him into her arms. Then she looked up at him as she held him. “It doesn’t mean anything yet. Just that they were related.”

But MaKayla the attorney had to admit, for Doke Pyles’ sake, it didn’t look good.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

The Jericho Police Department was relocated years ago to a larger building that was fronted by a country road and backed by a busy highway. Most law-abiding citizens didn't even know where it had moved to. But MaKayla, as DA and the wife of the chief, knew exactly where it was.

The double doors at the entrance of the JPD opened and MaKayla, along with her father-in-law, walked on in. Although it was a busy lobby, with cops processing in crooks and other cops lollygagging with each other, everybody seemed to stop what they were doing to take a look at the newest arrivals. Specifically at MaKayla, whom they all viewed as their disgraced DA. But Juan Rivera, the agent in charge from the MBI, didn't just look. He hurried over.

"What are you doing here, Madam District Attorney?"

"Where's Sergeant Pyles?"

"You aren't supposed to be in this building, Madam District Attorney."

"Says who? You ? I may be under investigation, but I'm still DA. I still have a duty to perform. Now where is Sergeant Dokery Pyles?"

Rivera didn't say anything, but the desk sergeant did. He knew what kind of power the Sinatras had in Jericho County. "He's in the file room, ma'am," he said.

"Thanks, Earl," MaKayla responded.

But Rivera was looking at Charles. "Who are you?" he asked him.

Charles knew good-and-well that that cop knew who he was. But he played along with it anyway. "I'm her bodyguard. You got a problem with that?"

"Let's go," MaKayla said to Charles before things got even more complicated, and then they made their way to the file room.

But as they were heading down the hall, the door to the file room opened and Doke Pyles was about to walk out with two files in his hand. But as soon as he saw MaKayla and Big Daddy Sinatra heading his way with that we got the bastard now look on their faces, he suddenly dropped those files, hurried back into the file room, and closed and locked the door.

Charles rushed up to the room and with his shoulder he broke the lock and forced the door open. When it flung open, they could just see the tail end of Doke Pyles hopping out of the window.

But outside, as soon as he jumped out of that window and began running toward the side of the building that would lead to where he parked his car, Brent's big Ram truck came around the corner of that building and stopped him in his tracks. Then Doke pulled his weapon and began firing on the truck, causing Brent the driver to duck, and then Doke turned to run in the opposite direction.

But when he turned, he realized that a gunman, Reno Gabrini, was waiting for him with his weapon drawn too. "That weapon goes down," Reno yelled, "or you go down. Pick your choice!" He was the backup. They also had Mick upfront just in case everything went south in the back.

But it didn't go south. Doke Pyles tried to get away. But as soon as he turned around and saw that Brent was getting out of his truck with his long gun in his hand, he knew it was no use. He quickly dropped his weapon.

Brent got out of his truck just as Charles and MaKayla, along with Juan Rivera and two other cops that heard the gunfire, ran around to the back of the police station.

Brent went up to Doke and slammed him against the wall, with the side of Doke's face smashed to the wall.

"What's this about?" asked Rivera.

Brent cuffed Doke and then turned him around, slamming Doke's back against the wall.

"What's this about?" Rivera asked again. "Sergeant? Chief?"

"This is the man that killed Judge Clayton," Brent said. "Ask him what it's about, Doke."

But Doke was already shaking his head.

"What that headshake mean?" asked Rivera. "You didn't kill him?"

"I had to." Tears appeared in Doke's eyes.

But Rivera was frowning. "What do you mean you had to?"

"They claim my boy killed those two women. He wouldn't do anything like that and everybody knew it." Then he looked at MaKayla. "But you and your boyfriend number one prosecuted him anyway. And your boyfriend number two upheld your prosecution. And I got tired of it!"

"Tired of what?"

“Seeing them blacks taking over everything. And them people like you,” he added, referring to Rivera’s Hispanic heritage. “Everywhere I look, y’all taking over.”

“Taking over?” MaKayla was offended. “Everything we go through on a daily just to be in these positions and you have the nerve to say we’re taking over? What the fuck we taking over?”

“Everything!” exclaimed Doke. “Everywhere I turn. My boy is dead for something he didn’t do behind you blacks with all the power.”

Charles rolled his eyes. MaKayla did too. But Brent wanted answers. “Is that why you killed Darren McGuire?”

“He prosecuted my boy. He was the lead prosecutor. Him and that witch right there were in charge.”

But Brent wanted it all on the record so there could be no doubts about his guilt later. “Is that why you killed Judge Clayton?”

“He was on the appellate court when they refused to overturn what Makayla and Darren had done. He was just as guilty as they were. Had the gall to say my boy was guilty because he didn’t use I in a letter. I couldn’t believe it. But I knew MaKayla was smart. I knew she was going to figure it out. I knew she would lead y’all to Donald and Ashley’s old apartment. And I was gonna blow all you black-women-loving race traitors up! All of y’all!”

“So you’re William Benjamin Goode?” Rivera asked him. He had no clue that they had already solved that riddle.

“Will B. Goode. Yes, that’s me. That’s what my boy wrote in that letter. That he will be good if they had mercy on him. But nobody had mercy.”

He shook his head as the tears flowed freely. “I wasn’t a good father. I couldn’t even acknowledge him in public because of my sins. But he didn’t deserve what he got. He didn’t!”

“What about my wife?” asked Brent. “Were you the one that attacked her in that hotel suite?”

“I hired two nobodies to do it. I paid Darren all that money, a full third of my life savings, to lure MaKayla to that hotel suite where those two men attacked her, knocked her out with chloroform, and then sat her up on that sofa. I also got them to put her panties in the bedroom.”

Rivera looked at Brent. He never recalled seeing any evidence of that nature in the files.

“But to what end?” a still befuddled Charles asked. “Why did you do all of that?”

“Because of what she did to my boy! Don’t you see that? I got tired of seeing all those people that ruined his life going on with their lives like he never existed. I wanted her to go to prison for a murder she didn’t commit just like my boy went to prison for a murder he didn’t commit.”

“You keep saying he didn’t commit murder,” said MaKayla, “but he did.”

“He didn’t!”

“He did, Doke. We had a mountain of evidence. He even tried to get Donnie and Ash to lie for him. We even had his DNA at the crime scene!”

“It wasn’t his DNA. It was mine!” Doke yelled out.

Everybody was shocked. “Yours?” asked Charles.

MaKayla nearly stumbled. “It was Hank’s.”

“It was mine! I loved Teena from afar for so many years. Since high school. So one day I went to see her. Just to tell her how I felt about her. But she and her sister started laughing at me. They said I was too ugly for her. They cussed me out and tried to kick me out of their house.” Then he hung his head. “And I lost it. I beat Teena to death and strangled her sister. Then I called Hank to come and help me clean up the crime scene. He was over to Donald and Ash’s apartment when I called him. That’s why he asked them to alibi him. That’s why you found DNA that matched his DNA under the fingernails of those two women. Because it was my DNA. He was my son. We shared similar DNA.”

Everyone looked at MaKayla. MaKayla was devastated. But Brent was angry. “If you knew it wasn’t your son that killed those girls,” he said, “why didn’t you say so? Why would you let him go to the gas chamber when you knew he was innocent?”

Doke shook his head again. “I was married. I had two small children. I couldn’t put that shame on them.”

“But you could put death on your son?” asked Charles. “More like you couldn’t face the consequences of your action and would be glad to let your son take the fall. Because it doesn’t make sense. Why didn’t Hank say something? If what you’re saying is true, he could have told the authorities what happened.”

“He loved me!” Doke yelled out with agony in his voice. “Just like your boys love you. Would they tell on you, Charles? Would they turn on you?”

Everybody knew the answer to that question was no. Even Brent knew it.

“He loved me,” Doke said again. “He kept telling y’all he was innocent, but he would never turn on me. And he never did. I told you I was not a good father to that boy. But he was the best son I could have ever hoped to have.”

Charles spat on Doke. “You disgust me!” he said with clenched teeth. Rivera moved Charles away from their brand-new suspect.

“And why didn’t you go after me?” asked Brent. “I was chief when they arrested your boy.”

“But you’re also white,” Reno said. “His cowardly racist ass didn’t go after the whites.”

But as soon as Reno said those words, a rifle shot was heard and the bullet tore into Doke Pyles’ body with such ferociousness that Doke slumped down dead on impact.

Everybody frantically aimed their guns again as they looked in the direction of the sound of the shot. They all saw what looked like a man with a rifle standing all the way across the busy highway. Then he started running toward what appeared to be his parked car.

Brent and MaKayla and Reno and Charles all made a run for Brent’s truck. But Mick, who had been the backstop out front in case they didn’t contain Doke around back, came flying to the back in his big Cadillac Escalade as soon as he heard that blast, picked up Brent and MaKayla and Reno and Charles and took off after the driver. Juan Rivera and the two officers hopped into a patrol car around back and took off after the Escalade.

Inside the Escalade, everyone was baffled. They could hardly believe it. “That shit crazy,” said Reno. “What was that about?” Doke Pyles was supposed to be their man. He confessed to everything. Why would somebody murder him???

“Did Hank Logan have any other family members, Uncle Mick?” MaKayla asked.

“None that we could find. His mother died before he was arrested for that double homicide. Did Doke confess?”

“To everything,” Brent said. “That’s why this is so baffling.”

“What’s baffling?” asked Mick.

“That somebody would want to take Doke out when he confessed.”

Mick found it baffling, too, but that didn’t stop his speed. He flew up that highway after the getaway car.

But when the patrol car turned on its sirens, as if it was warning Mick about his excessive speed, Mick slowed down enough for the patrol car to take the lead. Then he stayed on that cop car’s tail.

They chased that gunman, who was driving a beat-up-looking Buick, for nearly eight blocks. Mick knew he could go much faster. His Escalades were custom-made that way. He knew he could easily capture that guy if that damn cop car wasn’t in the way. But it was in the way. And as long as the getaway car was in his sights, he was going to maintain his cool and let it play out.

But when the cop car tried a PIT maneuver that failed miserably, he’d had enough.

“Floor this motherfucker, Mick,” Charles yelled out just as Mick was flooring it anyway. Mick dashed around what he viewed as that slow-ass patrol car and went forcefully toward that bucket of a rundown Buick and did his own version of a PIT maneuver. Only his version forced that Buick to spin and spin until it came to a stop nearly a hundred-and-fifty yards further up the street.

Then everybody in the Escalade and Rivera and the two cops in the patrol car all hurried to the Buick.

When they saw who the driver of that getaway car was, nearly all of them were stunned. The driver of the Buick was none other than Noah Lamm, the evicted tenant who shot Brent's rookie officer and tried to kill Brent.

"How did you get out of jail?" Brent asked him angrily.

"McGuire made them release me. Lack of evidence, he said."

"Lack of evidence? My rookie is still in the hospital and you're talking about a lack of evidence?" Brent grabbed Noah from out of that car and slammed him against it. "What do you have to do with this?" he asked him.

"With what?"

"I'll handle this, Chief," Rivera said. "Why did you kill Doke Pyles?" he asked Noah.

"I wasn't trying to kill no Doke Pyles," Noah yelled at Brent. "He was in the way. I was trying to kill you!" Noah was looking at Brent. "That other fella was in the way. My eyesight ain't what it used to be."

Nobody could believe it. "It's like a free-for-all around here," Rivera said. "You're executing people that didn't commit the crime. You're letting people go free for years that did commit the crime. And you've got this idiot right here running around doing whatever the hell he wants. What kind of town is this?"

"The kind that can kick your ass," said Reno.

And although the cops didn't find it funny, the Sinatras found it hilarious. They

laughed the laugh of a people who finally felt as if they were going to make it to the other side. Not because it was fun and games. But because it wasn't life and death anymore.

Brent placed his arm around MaKayla. They were laughing too. But too many close calls for their blood for their laughter to last. They were just grateful and relieved that it was finally over. And they could exhale for the first time since their ordeal began. It was over. That was all that mattered to them.

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Two weeks later, after MaKayla was completely and publicly exonerated of all charges and MBI had packed up and gone back to where they came from, they sat at a small table at a rooftop nightclub and watched the Paris lights flame brightly around them. The breeze caused MaKayla's long dark hair to blow sweetly in the wind and Brent sat there mesmerized. Beautiful inside and out. The total package in his view. "How do you feel?" he asked her.

"Like I have a new lease on life. Like I can enjoy this long-needed vacation without a cloud hanging over my head. I felt fabulous, Brent. Just wonderful."

"You look fabulous," Brent said. But he also noticed, whenever she was at her happiest, that a small spark of something else would appear in her eyes. Like now. "What's that about?" he asked her.

She leaned her head back and then looked at him. "I know I wasn't the prosecutor on the case, but I was in charge of the DA's office when he was convicted and sentenced to Death. Had we looked further. Had we asked more questions. Had we--"

"Stop, Kayla. Don't you dare do that. We don't even know if what he said was even true. It seems to me he was more blinded by racial jealousy than by any interest in justice for his boy. Don't you dare. The evidence led where the evidence led and there was nothing you could do about that. A jury found him guilty. Don't second guess anything. It won't do anybody any good. Just be grateful to be free."

MaKayla smiled. Because that was it, wasn't it? Freedom.

But when the music changed from some French singer singing some beloved French

tune to Wild Cherry, a band Brent loved, he stood up and walked over to MaKayla's chair. "May I have this dance, my lady?" he asked her.

That kind of language and gesture was so not Brent that it made her laugh. But it was so much so the new Brent that it made her heart sing. And she placed her hand in his hand, got up, and allowed him to lead her all over that dance floor. She couldn't believe it. That white boy could dance! And Wild Cherry, one of his favorite bands, made him dance even harder:

"Play that funky music white boy.

Play that funky music play.

Play that funky music white boy.

Lay down that boogie,

and play that funky music till you die.

Till you die!"

And that was exactly what Brent and MaKayla planned to do. They decided to forget all the troubles of their past and to enjoy life for a change. To embrace the present. To just play.

They laughed as he dipped her, brought her back up into his arms, and then they kept on dancing to the music, all kinds of music, all night long.