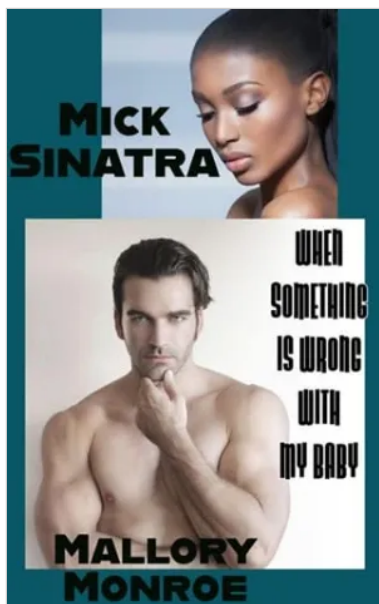




Mick Sinatra: When Something Is Wrong With My Baby

Author: Mallory Monroe

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Legendary boss of all mob bosses Mick “The Tick” Sinatra is a man stretched too thin. Between his powerful syndicate, his Fortune 500 corporation, his children, and his baby mamas, he barely has time to come up for air. But when the women in his life are targeted in unimaginably horrific ways, and when one of them must pay the ultimate price just by being associated with him, Mick and his big brother, Charles “Big Daddy” Sinatra, will stop at nothing until every one of those vermin are stomped through the earth and forever destroyed.

But will the blowback destroy them?

Mick Sinatra: When Something Is Wrong With My Baby is the latest explosive episode in the Mick Sinatra Romantic Suspense Thriller series.

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YEARS EARLIER

“Boss.” He could feel him hitting his arm. “Boss.”

“What?” Vito Costantino’s voice rose an octave. “Don’t you see I’m working here?”

Alfonse Rickie saw him working alright. Working at groping one of the hotties at their table. “I’m trying to tell you he’s in this joint.”

Vito frowned. “What are you talking? Who’s in this joint?”

“That slick bastard that disrespected you the other night. Micky Sinatra. He’s here.”

That name alone got Vito’s attention. He started looking around the busy strip club, his anger rising. “Where that fucker at? Where he at?!”

“Right over there.” Alfonse nodded toward a table in the back.

When Vito saw Mick sitting at that table in his do-rag and leather jacket, gulping beer and watching the strippers perform, his blood boiled. He couldn’t stand that arrogant young punk who thought so highly of himself that he never traveled with an entourage. Who was half Vito’s age but had twice the territory already. How Micky Sinatra got to be so successful so fast baffled Vito. And the way he treated Vito at that bar the other night still enraged him every time he thought about it. He knew he would get Sinatra back and publicly humiliate him the way he humiliated Vito. He just had to pick his moment. This, he now knew, was that moment.

But he also knew he had to play it smart. The weak overreacted, although that was exactly what he planned on doing. The weak yelled and screamed and showed their insecurities, even though something about that look in Mick's chilling green eyes terrified Vito and made him want to yell and scream too. The weak showed their weakness.

But the strong showed their strength. And the Costantinos were all about projecting strength if they weren't about anything else. "Round up the guys," he said to Alfonse. "Then we'll head over there."

Alfonse found it odd that the boss would need an entire crew to confront one man, but he didn't argue with him. He got up and went to search for their guys who had already taken strippers to the private dance rooms.

As Alfonse did the round up, Mick was taking another gulp from his beer mug. He didn't want to be there. The music, some rap shit, was too loud, too incoherent, and was giving him a headache. And although he kept his eyes on all the strippers, only one interested him. The tall slender one. The only black chick in the group on the stage in that moment. That group of strippers appeared to be the opening act, the warm-up routine, because none of them, in Mick's estimation, were all that good at what they were doing.

Although he was on one of those kicks lately where he preferred women with plenty curves, and all the other strippers had plenty-plus, the one his eyes were drawn to wasn't as curvaceous as he would have liked. But she had those perfect boobs that more than made up for her slenderness. And her gorgeous dark face, which seemed flawless from what he could see that far away, did too.

But he wasn't there to gawk at strippers. He wasn't there to enjoy the music either, since he didn't enjoy it at all. He was there to meet with the owner of the club: Jumbo Fourtaine. Mick wanted to run some of his merchandise out of a handful of those

backrooms, but Jumbo wanted a bigger cut than Mick was willing to give.

“If it ain’t Mick the Tick!”

When Mick heard the owner’s voice, he smiled and stood up and the two Italians clasped hands and gave a half-hug with their other hand. “What up, Jumbo?”

“What’s up with you? Imagine my surprise when they told me you were out here to see me. You were supposed to see me a week ago.”

“Was handling business,” Mick said. “What can I say?”

“Business my ass,” Jumbo said and both men laughed. “I know what business your horny ass was handling.” Then they both sat down. “I saw you staring at my ladies. Hot as hell every one of them, aren’t they? Want one?”

“They look like the JV team to me.”

“They aren’t that bad. A few of them could be featured, but I have an embarrassment of riches in the female department. I have too many top-tiers.”

“That music your choice?”

Jumbo was surprised. “What’s wrong with the music? That’s hip-hop. That’s America’s music.”

“I don’t understand a word they’re saying.”

“I don’t either, but so what?”

Mick laughed.

“We want the hip crowd up in here. And the hip crowd don’t wanna hear no Barry Manilow shit. And the hip crowd figure you should go along with the proposal I’ve proposed.”

“The hip crowd don’t know shit about shit if you think I’m giving up thirty percent of my take to any motherfucker.”

“But five percent? Micky, come on! You’re killing me man. What I’m gonna do with five percent?”

“I’ll be running big money through this joint. It’ll be more than any other tittie bar ever dream of getting.”

“We’ve known each other for years already. You can give me at least ten percent.”

“Five.”

“Come on, Micky!”

“Five. Take it or leave it.”

“Okay eight.”

Mick gave Jumbo a look that brook no debate. “Five,” he said so firmly that Jumbo knew the negotiations were closed.

Jumbo didn’t like it. The chances he would be taking were astronomical. But the money would be astronomical too, even at five percent. And besides, he never wanted to be on the wrong side of Mick the Tick. He was young, but he was dangerous as hell. Jumbo smiled and extended his hand. “Five it is,” he said, and they shook.

“How many rooms you’ll need?”

“Three in the beginning. More later. I’ll come by around six tomorrow, before you open, to pick out which ones.”

“That’ll work,” Jumbo said as he began to rise.

But Mick was looking at the strippers again. “What’s her name?”

“Which one?” Jumbo looked at the stage. “Let me guess. The blonde on the right?”

“The black chick on the left.”

Jumbo smiled. “I’m down with the swirl too.”

“Who is she?”

“That’s Bella Caine. Or Bella Fame as the other strippers derisively calls her. She acts like she’s better than the rest of them because she’s prettier. They got the stripper-type body, but she got the looks. Oh, she’s a handful.”

“That’s probably because she’s not a stripper.”

“She’s had so many careers already it makes me dizzy. So many I can’t keep up. But she’s a better stripper than you think. But she’s much better in a bed than on a pole. But her ass can strip. She’s a rising star in the industry.”

A rising stripper. Some industry, Mick thought.

Jumbo looked at him. “You want her?”

Mick didn't want her, but he knew a good lay when he saw one. She could definitely scratch an itch. "How long before her routine is up?"

"A few more minutes."

"Tell her to meet me around back. Red Maserati."

"Will do," Jumbo said and was about to walk away when Vito and Alfonse walked up, along with three of their guys.

"What's this about?" Jumbo asked Vito. "Don't start that bullshit in my club."

Alfonse pushed Jumbo away from his boss. "Get the fuck out of here. We'll start anything we damn well please."

Jumbo knew not to mix it up with the Costantino crew. He stayed in business by minding his business. "You break it, you own it," he said as he straightened his suit coat and left.

Vito stood in front of Mick. "How are you, Micky?"

Mick stared at Vito.

"Don't feel so big and bold now, do you?" Vito said this with no evidence. "Scared now, aren't you?" Still no evidence. But just that nonchalant look on Mick's face cause Vito's temper to flare. "Who the fuck are you to disrespect a man like me?!"

Mick took another gulp of his beer and then slowly stood to his feet. Although the rest of the crew stepped back, Vito held his ground. His heart was hammering. He'd heard about how vicious Mick could get. But he had his men behind him and they had his back. He held his ground.

When Mick stood up, he and Vito were face to face and so close that Mick could smell Vito's hot, onion breath.

"You called me a small-dick punk," Vito said. "Who's got the small dick now asshole? Who's got the small dick now?"

"You do," Mick said without blinking an eye. "Still tiny as a motherfuck."

"Why you !" Vito was so enraged that he lifted his fist to punch Mick in the face. But Mick blocked it easily and then slammed his own fist into Vito's face so hard that it dislocated his jaw. That punch stung Vito so completely that he fell on his butt.

And his men defended his honor. Two of his men grabbed Mick while the third one punched him hard in the face, but Mick was able to break free, knock out one man, and then knock out the other one. Then he grabbed the third one, the one that had punched him, and beat him down to his knees. The man then tried to pull out his gun, but Mick kicked it out of his hand. The man hurried away from Mick.

Then Mick turned to Vito.

Vito, still holding his painful jaw, began backing up on his butt, trying to get away from Mick. He pulled out his gun, Mick would pull out his gun, and they probably both would end up dead. That was why he got up, and ran out.

The man Mick had beaten down ran out behind his boss, even as the two guys Mick had knocked out awakened. When they realized they were left alone with Mick the Tick, they hopped up and took off too.

Jumbo, who was over by the bar watching it all, laughed loudly. "I made a deal with the right one," he told his bartender. "Mick's the real deal," he added, and raised his glass of wine at Mick.

Mick never celebrated winning a fight. Because they always led to more fights. Later in life, experience would teach him to never let a worthy opponent come back for another bite of that apple. But he was a young man then. He thought he was invincible.

The Costantino gang would soon make him realize he wasn't.

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He pumped so hard and with such a sexy ferociousness that Bella Caine thought she was going to explode. She'd never felt so full. But that was how it felt being with this hunk of a guy whose name she'd already forgotten.

Even with a condom it felt good. Which was a first for her. Most of the guys she did it with didn't feel good even in the raw. They were just a part of her job. Something she had to do to get where she was going. They made her feel dirty and immoral. Like she was the lowest of the low doing it with them.

But this Italian-Stallion of a dude was different. This dude knew what he was doing even sheathed up. This dude made her feel good even though she knew he didn't give a damn about her either.

She watched him grunt and groan as he did her. He was handsome, but he had that extra: that something special about him that turned her on to a mystifying degree. He was blunt, and he wasn't at all what she'd call a nice guy, but the charm of the man stunned her. Absolutely floored her. And his body was so big and muscular, and his manhood so incredible, that she wondered why they hadn't hooked up before then.

But she couldn't get over his body. It was so gorgeous that she wondered what gym he worked out in. She wanted to join that bitch! And the pounding he was putting on her didn't bother her the way it usually did with other guys.

But with him, she was enjoying the ride. And by the sounds he was making as he did her, as if he was enjoying it too, gave her a sense of joy that warmed her heart. She couldn't care less when all those other guys were excited to be with her. They were all filthy old men out for a quick bang as far as she was concerned. This guy was

older than her, too, but he was nothing like them.

And to her shock, when he began cumming, she came too. It had never happened to her before, not ever! She faked orgasms all the time, but she never had one. Until now.

She was scratching his back, holding onto his big body with all she had, as she came too. And it was her time to grunt and groan.

For several more minutes he was still pumping and still cumming. His hang time impressed her. But what impressed her more was him. Because when he finally gave out, instead of telling her to beat it, he just laid there. He didn't hurry her out of his bed. He didn't toss money onto the dresser and tell her to lock the door behind her. Or, the way it usually happened, he didn't throw the money at her and told her to get lost. He didn't tell her to call for a cab outside. He did none of those things.

She hated it when guys treated her that way, but what did she expect? She was a stripper who did men on the side. That was why Jumbo told her to go with him. That was why the guy wanted her in the first place. To do her. To get his jollies off and dump her. But this dude didn't brush her aside.

That was why Bella knew her suspicion was right and there was indeed something different about him. And it excited her far more than she knew it should have. But she was totally convinced he was something special. It felt so wonderful to lay beside him that she did something she'd never done before: she laid her head on his broad shoulder. If he rejected her advancement, she was going to be devastated.

But instead of recoiling from her and kicking her out of his apartment, he placed his big arm around her. She was so taken by that simple gesture that she felt emotional. And when he fell asleep and started snoring as he held her, Bella couldn't stop smiling. She was so happy to be with him, to be treated as if she was more than just a

pound of flesh for the first time in her life, that she couldn't sleep if her life depended on it.

For almost an hour they laid there together.

Until he woke up, realized he had fallen asleep, and then got out of bed.

She could tell he didn't like the fact that she was still there. He probably expected her to be gone already. She knew the drill. And had it been anybody else, she would have followed the drill and been gone. But he wasn't anybody else.

"What's your name again?" she found herself asking him when he got out of bed.

He turned and looked at her. "Mick."

He looked like a Mick, she thought. "Can I call you Micky?"

He didn't hesitate. "No."

For some reason, Bella wasn't offended. She smiled.

Mick liked her smile. She was a very beautiful woman. Inside and out, he felt. But he had enough women already. "Put on your clothes and I'll take you home," he said as he began heading for the bathroom.

But Bella was stunned. "You'll. . . what?"

Mick turned around and looked at her.

"Did you say you're going to take me home?" Bella asked him.

“That’s what I said, yes.”

“You aren’t going to tell me catch a bus or call a cab or tell me to get home however way I can get there?”

Mick considered her. She was used to the dogs and thought he had rabies too. And normally he did. “I’m driving you home myself,” he said. “Get dressed.” Then he went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Bella was thrown. It was a wow moment for her. All her life she’d been so disrespected that it was all she was used to. But for him to be willing to drive her to her own home was incredible. It was sad that it was incredible, she knew that too. But it was incredible!

She got out of his bed that smelled just like his wonderful cologne, and gladly got dressed.

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The next evening, Bella arrived early to work. She had given Mick her phone number when he drove her home, and all but begged him to give her a call anytime he wanted to hook up, but she hadn't heard from him at all. She'd had hoped he'd call her later that night, which was fantasyland she knew, or at least that morning or afternoon. She just wanted him to call. That was how much she was digging on him. She really liked him.

"Bella's on time, Boss," the bartender said when Bella walked in. "Is it the end of the world, or what?"

"Very funny, Jace," Bella said as she made her way down the hall. But all the other strippers and waitresses, who knew how notoriously late Bella always was, laughed. The club owner, Jumbo Fourtaine, who was in the corner doing his daily tabulations, didn't bother to look up. Which was fine by Bella.

But as she made her way down the hall and passed by the manager's office, she suddenly heard Mick's name. Not that it was an unusual name, but she'd never heard it uttered in the club before. She walked past as if she was walking on by, but stopped on the side of the door, leaned against the wall, and listened.

She knew one of the men talking was Vito Costantino, a mob guy, and his bodyguard Alfonse. She knew that the other two guys, whose names she never learned, were in the Costantino outfit too. The manager of the club was also in the room with them.

"He'll be here in a few minutes. He and Jumbo have some kind of business arrangement worked out. If Jumbo finds out I'm involved in this shit, that's my job."

“He dislocated my jaw,” Vito said in a voice that sounded as if he was talking through clenched teeth. “He ain’t getting away with what he did to me.”

“How you gonna handle it?” the manager asked.

“The way we handle it,” said Alfonse. “How you think?”

“Just keep it outside of the club,” the manager said. “We don’t want no cops up in here.”

“Don’t worry,” Alfonse said as Bella could hear them standing up. “We’re gonna ice him before he can get out of that cheap-ass Maserati. We’ll meet him on the corner. When we see that car, we’re gonna light up the sky. Surprise the shit out of his cocky ass.”

Bella’s heart dropped. It was her Mick they were talking about killing. It was her Mick!

She tiptoed away from that door, hurried down the hall, dropped her backpack inside the dressing room and then ran straight out of the back door.

If Mick was coming from his apartment, she knew he’d be coming south, so that was the way she ran.

Staying on the backside of the buildings, she ran up a full block. Then, as soon as she made it to the corner, she ran up to the front of a building – a chicken shack – and began looking for that red Maserati. When she looked back and saw Vito Costantino and Alfonse and their two other men coming toward that corner, she began to get worried. But when she saw that Maserati turn onto the street, she ran toward it, both her arms flailing. Mick slammed on brakes when he saw her and pressed down the window.

“It’s an ambush!” she yelled, and as soon as she yelled it gunfire erupted.

“Get in!” Mick yelled, Bella jumped onto the backseat, and she barely had a chance to close the door as Mick flung his car in reverse and began speeding backwards.

Vito and his gang were now running toward Mick’s car and firing as they ran, but Mick was able to swerve the car around, almost losing control, and then flying down a side alley, bullets riddling the side of his car.

But instead of going in the opposite direction of the gunfire, he turned up a back side street and began heading toward the club. Then he slammed on brakes again while he was still on that back street.

“Wait here,” he said to Bella as he got out, opened his trunk, and pulled out two assault rifles. Then he began running up the alleyway that led to the club.

When he turned onto the street where the club was housed and saw Vito and his gang walking back toward the club, he stopped where he stood.

“Eh Vito!” Mick yelled out.

Vito and his men quickly looked where Mick stood. And as soon as they saw him, whom they assumed had turned tail and ran away like they had done the night before, they lifted their guns ready to fire on him again.

But this time, Mick had the element of surprise, and he was already firing on them. From both assault rifles. He gunned down Alfonse and the other two men before they could even lift up their weapons, leaving only Vito Costantino alive.

When Vito realized Mick wasn’t doing him a favor by sparing him, he tried to turn tail and run away.

But Mick shot him in the chest before he turned. And then he finished him off with several more rounds.

He was about to run back to his car, knowing that it would only be a matter of minutes before the cops would be on the scene, but Bella had gotten behind the wheel and sped up to Mick.

Mick tossed his weapons into the trunk and closed it, got in behind the wheel as Bella got on the passenger side, and then he sped away.

Bella looked at him as he sped through the streets of Philly like he owned them. “The club manager was in on it too,” she said. “He knew they were going to do it.”

“What about Jumbo Fournaine?”

Bella shook his head. “The manager said they had to keep it from Jumbo.”

Mick nodded. “Thanks for the info. I’ll handle that manager at a place and time of my choosing.” Then he looked at her. “How did you find out about this ambush?”

“I overheard them talking in the manager’s office. They said you were pulling up in a few minutes, so I ran to let you know.”

“Good looking out, kid,” he said to her as he pressed the phone icon on his car screen and then made a phone call.

Then he stared at her. Somehow he knew she was going to be good for him. When Jumbo Fournaine came on the line, he didn’t hesitate. “Kill the video,” Mick said to him. “The cops ask, tell them the cameras weren’t working.”

“Got it,” Jumbo said without asking questions. He had heard all of that gunfire too.

“Your manager was involved,” Mick added.

“I knew I couldn’t trust that bastard! Want me to handle him?”

Mick never left a job for somebody else to do. “No, I got him,” he said. “Just make sure you erase that video and make sure no other cameras in the area have any up either.”

“They don’t. I already have an arrangement on that front.”

“Good,” Mick said, and ended the call.

Then he looked at Bella again. “Are you okay?”

“Not really. I’m going to have to find another club. In case there’s retaliation.”

“There won’t be. Since Vito’s brother got locked up, the Costantino organization been all bark and no bite. They’ll fold.”

“But still, I’ll be too afraid to go back there. I don’t know who else might be involved.”

Mick drove in silence as he considered what he was going to do with Bella Caine. She saved his life. That was a fact. And he enjoyed her in bed. That was another fact. But he already had baby mamas and too much drama going on with other women as it was.

But as he glanced down her body, he knew she turned him on more than the others. And she was prettier than the others. And again, she saved his bacon. “Is stripping your dream job?” he asked her.

Bella looked at him. “What if it is?”

“Find another dream. You’re off the pole.”

But Bella was practical if she was anything. She never relied on a man before and wasn’t about to start just because he treated her better than the other guys. “The pole is all I have right now. How am I going to support myself?”

“You aren’t,” Mick said, who placed loyalty above all else. Then he looked at her again. “That’s my job.”

Bella smiled. She wasn’t above being some hottie’s kept woman. It was music to her ears!

“I got you,” Mick added to her delight.

But little did he know that he would have her, not for the foreseeable future, but for a lifetime.

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PRESENT DAY

“There she is.”

Sandra Rickie sat upright when she saw Roz Sinatra walk into the restaurant wearing her Prada head to toe and carrying that hell-a-expensive Hermes bag like she owned the company. Sandra smiled. “Roz got swag,” she said with a grin.

But Drayson couldn’t stand Roz. After three months, he’d only gotten one gig. And it wasn’t even a named role! “She was supposed to meet us at eight tonight,” he said. “Now it’s almost nine. She’s our agent. She works for us. But she’s always late. She should have been here waiting on us, not the other way around.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Sandra said. “She’s one of the biggest talent agents on the East Coast. We’d better be glad she took us on as clients.” Then she looked at her boyfriend/colleague. “And don’t forget who she’s married to.”

Drayson squirmed in his seat. Her old man was the only reason he hadn’t cussed her ass out yet and demanded better representation.

“Hiya Roz!” Sandra’s pretty pink face lit up as Roz walked up to their table. “Cold enough for you?”

“Too cold for me,” Roz said as she sat down in her ankle-length green coat and removed her gloves. “I only have a few minutes guys.”

Drayson frowned. “A few minutes?”

Roz looked at him. “Did I stutter?”

Drayson ran his hand through his thick blonde hair and shook his head. “This ain’t right.”

Sandra kicked him under the table, but he was tired of holding back. “You supposed to be our agent,” he said to Roz.

Roz stared at him.

“You work for us, right?”

Roz continued to stare.

“You should have all the time in the world for your clients. But we hardly see you! One role in three months? What I’m supposed to do with that?”

“Shove it up your ass perhaps?” Roz said. Then she leaned forward. “Let’s get one thing straight right now. The only reason I took you on is because of Sandra. Don’t get it twisted. She’s the talent here. You’re the boyfriend. You’d better be glad you got the one role you did get.”

“Man that’s some bullshit,” Drayson said. “With my looks I should be the star of a TV show at least. Everybody says that.”

“Then let everybody represent you. I free you of our contract effective immediately.”

Drayson knew in that moment he had gone too far. Sandra knew it too. She shook her head. And she didn’t try to bail him out either. She was tired of bailing him out.

Drayson angrily stood up and grabbed his jacket. “I’ll be outside, Sandy. You’ll be

out right behind me since your so-called agent can only spare a few minutes of her precious time!” He gave Roz an evil look and then he walked out of the restaurant.

Roz shook her head. “Girl what you doing with that?” she asked her. “You can do better.”

“I could say the same thing about you.”

Roz and Sandra exchanged a glance. They were around the same age and used to hang out when they were both struggling Broadway performers. Roz had made it, and she brought Sandra along. But Sandra, who Roz knew was more talented than she was, wasn’t getting any meaty roles lately.

Sandra respected Roz, but they weren’t close like that. And although Roz never spoke about her private life, it was no secret to Sandra that she and her hubby were rarely on good terms. He still liked the ladies, was what Sandra had heard.

But discussing it with Roz wasn’t something she was comfortable doing. “What did Patrick say?” she asked instead.

“What he always says: no. But I’m still working on it.”

“That role in that play could change my life, Roz. I been at this game so long and with so little results that I’m getting scared. And finally they have a role for a woman older than thirty. And I can knock it out of the park. But they won’t even give me a reading.”

“You’re going to get that role. By hook or by crook, you’re going to get that role. You just have to let me do what I do.”

“But Patrick’s the director and he won’t even give me an audition.”

“Because it’s not up to him. It’s what the producer wants. And I know the producer too. Just be patient and let me handle it.” Roz looked at her Cartier watch. She had another meeting to attend. “Alright?”

“I hear you but . . .”

“But what?”

“But I’m getting scared, Roz. All these years I been getting bit role after bit role and lately not even that. I’m worried.”

“That’s my job,” Roz said and as soon as she said it they could hear loud talking. Both ladies looked across the restaurant and saw a big, burly man yelling at the manager. Then he shoved the manager so hard that his back slammed against a table.

“Oh it’s on now,” Roz said as she looked at that manager. She could tell he wasn’t going to take that laying down.

But just as he was pushing himself back upright and ready to get it on, the big guy pulled out a gun and shot the manager in his stomach. People started screaming and scrambling to leave that it seemed to spook the shooter as he turned his gun on everybody else. The people in that vicinity started scattering like rats.

But as soon as that first shot was fired, and Sandra was getting up to scatter, too, she was shocked to see three men rush up to Roz seemingly from out of nowhere. Two of the men grabbed Roz and began hurrying her out of that restaurant. Where did they come from? And then the third man fired several rounds at the shooter before the shooter could fire at anybody else. The shooter fell back lifeless, his gun flying backwards with him and then skirting across the floor.

Sandra saw the man go down as she was running out of the restaurant with the other

terrified customers. When she made it outside, she saw the two men hurry Roz into an SUV, with yet another man, his gun drawn, as he hit the side of the door as if telling the driver to go. The SUV then sped away.

Sandra hurried up to that man. “That’s my agent. I was having dinner with her. Where are they taking my agent?” she asked him.

“To safety,” the man said, and ran back into the restaurant.

And it was only then did Sandra remember Roz telling her that her husband had bodyguards all over the place wherever she went, and that she rarely could spot them herself. Sandra remembered just who Roz was married to. And if any shooting popped off, the wife of Mick Sinatra wasn’t going to be anybody’s sitting duck. Which made Sandra feel better despite the carnage that shooter tried to unleash. Roz wasn’t just any agent like Drayson said she was. She was an agent with pull. And reach. And if Roz said she was going to get that role, she was going to get that role.

“See how she took off without taking you with her?” It was Drayson, who had been waiting outside. “She’s safe, but she didn’t give a rat’s behind about your safety.”

“Those men snatched her away from there like their lives depended on it. She didn’t have time to say a word to anybody.” Then they could hear sirens coming in the distance. “You can stay if you want,” Sandra said, “but I’m getting out of here.”

Drayson followed her to her car. And although he was still grumbling and complaining about Roz, Sandra had not been more hopeful about her future than she had been in a long, long time. To see those men in action reminded her that Roz’s husband had the kind of pull to get Roz whatever she wanted. Including that role on Broadway for Sandra. Things were looking up, Sandra thought.

But inside the SUV that had sped away, Roz wasn’t optimistic. She was pissed. “Let

me out of here!” she said angrily. “Nobody was shooting at me! Let me out of here!”

But they knew the protocol. It came down, not from Nikki, nor even from Teddy. It came down from the big man himself. If there was any type of disturbance, they were to get his wife away from the scene without delays. They were not to let her out of their sight, nor out of that SUV, until the boss himself gave the clearance.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Nikki Sinatra stood in the upstairs room over her office at the docks. Beppie Gastone, one of their dock supervisors, was seated in the middle of the small room with two capos on either side of him. Another capo was standing next to Nikki, but he was looking out of the window.

One of the capos standing beside Beppie hit him upside his head.

“Don’t hit me again I mean it, Dan! I’m getting tired of this shit.”

“Then tell us the truth,” the first capo said.

“I am telling the truth. I didn’t tell. I didn’t say anything to anybody!”

“Bullshit!”

“I didn’t! I’m telling you I didn’t!”

“Why did our guys pick up all that intercept activity? All three on your line!”

“But I didn’t do it. What do you want from me? I didn’t tell!”

The capo looking out the window stood upright. “He just drove up, Boss,” he said to Nikki.

“Who just drove up?” Beppie asked. “Teddy T?”

“You wish,” the first capo said.

Beppie looked at Nikki, his direct supervisor. He never liked her. He felt an Italian male should be Teddy's underboss when the big man turned the day-to-day over to Teddy. But Teddy instead decided to install his fat-ass wife, a black chick, as his underboss and upended a hundred years of tradition. Beppie didn't like it, but he always treated Nikki with respect. "Why would you tell the boss, Nikki? Why would you expose me like that? I told you I don't know nothing!"

"That's not gonna fly, Bep," Nikki said. "You're the only one who had the plans."

"But I didn't tell!"

"Then you'll have to say that to Boss."

Beppie looked angrily at her. "Teddy T wouldn't have done this to me."

"I'm not Teddy T," said Nikki.

"You sure as hell ain't," said Beppie and the first capo slapped Beppie upside his head again. "Who are you think you are talking to Nikki like that? You'd better put some respect in your voice!"

Then the door opened, and Mick Sinatra walked in.

Nikki stared at her father-in-law as he entered the room. Big, imposing, chillingly hard, he entered that space in his expensive suit like the business titan he was. As head of Sinatra Industries, a Fortune 500 company, he was the shit. No doubt about it. But he was also the biggest, baddest mob boss that ever lived in Nikki's opinion. Too big for even the Feds to try to take down. And although he turned over the day-to-day operations of his syndicate to his oldest living son and Nikki's husband Teddy, he sometimes got personally involved himself when their operation was tittering on disaster.

As soon as Mick walked in, Beppie immediately began pleading his case. “Boss, it wasn’t me,” he said as he could see Mick’s terrifying eyes staring directly at him as he walked toward him. “Somebody’s trying to frame me or something. I would never do anything to harm the organization. You know I wouldn’t, Boss. I’m telling you it wasn’t me!”

When Mick made it up to that chair, he took his big, Ferragamo shoe and kicked Beppie so hard that Beppie flipped over twice. Then Mick angrily tossed the now-vacant chair aside and hurried to Beppie, with the capos getting out of his way too. When the big man was enraged, they knew to stay out of range.

Mick violently grabbed Beppie up and threw him until his back slammed against the wall. Then he hurried up to Beppie, grabbed him by the shirt, and slammed him against that wall again.

And before Mick could say a word, Beppie buckled. “Okay!” He knew what Mick was capable of. “Okay,” he said in a more subdued tone. “I told.”

“What did you tell?” Mick angrily asked him, his hand still holding Beppie by the shirt. “Dock time?”

“No, sir.”

“Unload time?”

Beppie hated to admit it. “Yes, sir.”

“Shit!” Nikki said as she stomped her feet. She wore jeans, a tucked-in white turtleneck shirt that highlighted her huge breasts and voluptuous body, and an open, knee-length coat, as if she was expecting an easy, relaxing day. This was not what she wanted to hear. She was highly upset. All the capos were upset. Because if Beppie

told their unload times, they knew they couldn't risk even docking the vessel.

As the underboss responsible for all shipments in and out of port, Nikki had compartmentalized the dock supervisors duties, making them responsible for a certain number of ships only. The supervisor would only know about the itinerary for their ships and their ships alone. That way, Nikki felt, they could pinpoint any breaches right away.

Mick loved the idea as soon as he heard it. Nikki was his girl for a reason. She had the best analytical mind he'd seen in a long time. Teddy disagreed. He felt that such compartmentalizing was too labor-intensive and too restrictive and as the boss, he denied her request. But Mick overruled him and ordered the implementation of the Nikki Plan, as he called it, as soon as he got wind of it. The fact that Mick would take Nikki's side caused a lot of dissention between Nikki and Teddy. There was still dissention.

Beppie, as a dock supervisor, had three of their biggest ships under his authority.

"You have three ships under your command."

"Yes, sir."

"How many did you rat out? One of them, two of them, or all of them?"

Beppie knew it was his ass now. "All of them," he admitted.

Mick quickly looked at Nikki. She was already pulling out her walkie talkie. "Ground all three, sir?" she asked her father-in-law.

"All three," Mick said.

“Crew 908, 909, and 910 do not proceed. I repeat: Do not proceed. New directions will be forthcoming. Roger me now!”

The crew chief of 908 answered first. “Roger that, Boss.”

The crew chief of 910 answered next. “Roger that, Boss.”

The crew chief of 909 answered last. “Roger that.”

The capos sighed relief. Nikki looked at Mick. “They can’t stay where they are forever.”

Mick looked at Beppie. “Why did you do it?” He’d known Beppie for years. It was a betrayal of the highest order, in Mick’s view, because he knew him so long.

Tears appeared in Beppie’s eyes.

Mick stared at him. “For money ? You betrayed my trust for money when I pay your ass top dollar?”

“It was an offer I couldn’t refuse, Boss.”

Mick frowned. “What do you mean you couldn’t refuse it?”

“How much they offered you?” Nikki asked.

Beppie hesitated. “Four million dollars.”

All of the capos were astounded. They would not have taken the bait, but it would have been tempting.

“Who did it?” Mick asked. It was the most important question.

Mick violently slammed his back against that wall again. “Who?!” he yelled at him.

“The Monk’s guys!” he yelled back.

Everybody stopped. Nobody could believe it. Even Mick showed his shock. “Monk Paletti?” Frankie “The Monk” Paletti was the head of the Bonaducci crime family and in alliance with Mick’s syndicate.

“Yes sir. Under his orders.”

“How do you know it was under his orders?”

“Because I spoke to him myself.”

But Nikki was shaking her head, a fixed frown on her face. “Why would Frankie Paletti want to intercept us? That don’t make no sense.”

But Mick wasn’t so quick to dismiss it. He stared in Beppie’s eyes. He wasn’t lying. That Mick knew.

He looked at his capos. “Keep him here until we verify,” Mick said.

“And after you verify?” asked a now emotional Beppie.

Mick turned to him as if he’d lost his mind. Nikki was thinking the same thing. “You betrayed my trust.”

“They offered me four million dollars, Mick!” Beppie cried out.

Mick lost it. “ I don’t care if they offered you four zillion fucking dollars !” he screamed out. “Nobody betrays me and live! Nobody !”

Mick straightened his suit coat in an effort to calm himself back down. Then he glanced at Nikki, which she knew meant he wanted to talk to her, and then he walked out.

Nikki began hurrying after him. But she looked at Beppie as she was leaving. “If your ass lying on Frankie Paletti or trying to pull some bait and switch shit, you know what’s going to happen,” she warned him.

“I’m not lying,” Beppie said. “It was Monk’s guys. I know those guys. I’m not lying.”

Nikki still didn’t believe it as she hurried out of the upstairs office and began following Mick in the enclosed stairwell.

Mick stopped walking. Nikki made it up to him and stood beside him. “He’s claiming it’s Frankie ?” she said to him. “Teddy’s best friend?” She shook her head. “I’m not buying it, Boss.”

“It’s not for your ass to buy or not to buy,” Mick said in that nasty way that always kept Nikki on pins and needles whenever she was around him. “Look into it,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir. I’ll let Teddy know what’s going on.”

“No you will not,” Mick said. “Keep him out of it.”

Nikki frowned. Teddy was the head of the Sinatra Crime family now. Mick was his boss, but Teddy was everybody else’s boss. And besides, their marriage was having

some serious issues as it was. She didn't want to add secrets to the list. "Why keep Teddy out of the loop?"

Mick gave Nikki a look so chilling she immediately regretted questioning him. "Yes, sir," she said.

Then Mick walked on out of the stairwell and got in his waiting SUV. His driver, Big Ed Bronson, drove him away.

Mick's phone began ringing almost immediately. It was Roz's detail chief. "Yep?"

"There was a shooting, Boss."

Mick's heart dropped. "My wife?"

"Unharmed, sir."

Mick exhaled.

"It appeared to be a disagreement between two men, but we haven't confirmed it yet. But that's what it's looking like."

"Where is she?"

"She's with us."

It was only then that Mick could hear her raised voice cussing out his men.

"Still kicking and screaming," the detail chief noted.

"Fuck her kicks and screams. Take her home. Keep her there until I get there."

“Do you wish to speak with her, sir?”

“That’s her bitching in the background?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then no. I don’t want to hear that shit. Just take her home. Have you made contact with my children?”

They knew by his children , he only meant his two minor children and the only children he had with Roz. “They’re at a house party with some of their schoolmates.”

“Bring them in too,” Mick ordered, although he was fairly certain they weren’t in danger, and then he ended the call.

“Home, sir?” asked Big Ed Bronson, his driver.

Mick gave a nod. And then he plunged into that state of dread where he wouldn’t be able to do anything or concentrate on anything until he saw with his own two eyes that Roz was okay.

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Duke Sinatra was going hard on that video game. He was playing with the party's host, and was beating the crap out of him over and over again. And he wasn't letting up. A small group had surrounded them, egging both young men on, but Duke kept the upper hand. Until his twin sister Jackie came over and tapped him on the shoulder.

He leaned toward her, but he kept his eyes and fingers on the game.

"Time to go," Jackie whispered in his ear.

Duke glanced at her, upset by what she'd said. "On whose orders?"

"Daddy's," Jackie said.

Although Duke was disappointed, he knew there was no getting out of a direct order from their father. "I'm out," he said as tossed the controller aside.

"Then you lose by default, Sinatra," said the party's host.

"Everybody knows I was beating your ass. But you wanna live in that make-believe land of default, help yourself," he added, and everybody laughed.

But when the two teenagers began walking out, two bodyguards who had been inside the house followed them. But when they made it outside and two additional bodyguards surrounded them and put them in an SUV, Duke was concerned. "What about my car?"

“One of our men will drive it home,” said the detail chief, who was seated on the front passenger seat, as Duke and Jackie got in.

Duke and Jackie glanced at each other. Something was wrong. “What happened?” Duke asked him.

“A shooting.”

“Involving?”

“Your mother.”

“What ?” both twins said in unison.

“But she’s fine,” the bodyguard said just as quickly.

Duke and Jackie were still terrified. Jackie leaned forward. “What does fine mean? Was she shot?”

“No. She wasn’t harmed. Your father is taking extra precautions, that’s all.”

“Oh,” Jackie said, and leaned back.

But Duke took his sister’s hand as they rode away from the party. They felt different just because they had to leave a wonderful get-together. But it was times like these, with security cars in front and back of their SUV and many of their schoolmates looking on as if it was the strangest thing they’d ever seen, that reminded them both of just how different they really were.

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While his twins were just leaving the party, Mick was just arriving home. He hurried up the winding staircase to the master bedroom, flung open the double doors, and found his wife in her white silk bathrobe on their white leather lounge sipping tea. When he saw her sitting there as if nothing had happened, he finally relaxed. And walked up to her.

Roz looked at him as he approached her. His suit coat open, his hands in his pants pockets, he looked like a man too exhausted to stand. "Where are the twins?" Roz asked him.

"On their way."

Roz nodded. "Good. "If they have to overreact, I'm glad they're doing so with our children. They didn't have to overreact with me."

"They followed my orders."

"Your orders suck."

"Tough."

"I don't like your orders."

"Tough."

Mick could see a smile appear on her face. "Asshole," she said affectionately.

Mick inwardly smiled too. She was a handful on her best day. Drove him nuts on all her other days. But he also knew he wouldn't trade her for the world.

He leaned down, lifted her up, then sat down and placed her between his legs. She leaned her back against his chest. He kept his arms around her. And for several minutes they remained as they were: she in her bathrobe. He in his suit. Both enjoying doing absolutely nothing for a moment.

Roz loved how patient Mick could be with her when she knew patience didn't come easily for him. But whenever she went through an ordeal, he allowed her to talk about it in her own time.

After several minutes, she talked. "Some guy was arguing with a person I assumed was the restaurant manager. Then he shoved the manager, the manager fell backwards, and we're thinking it's about to go down. They were going to fistfight. Then the next thing I know the guy pulls out a gun and starts shooting. My client and I were about to get up and run, but before I could make any kind of move your guys grabbed me and got me out of there so fast my head was spinning. I was like what the fuck?"

"They did what they were supposed to do," Mick said as he held her.

"But that shooting had nothing to do with me."

"You don't know that."

"I do know it, Mick. I was there. I saw when the fight broke out."

Mick wasn't going to be convinced until he saw the tape. "I'm just glad you weren't harmed."

“Ahh, that’s so sweet,” Roz said with a smile and leaned sideways so that she could turn back and see his face. “For real?”

“Sometimes not so much,” he said, and she laughed. “But this time?” He stared into her sweet eyes. “Yep. I’m glad.”

Roz knew that was as affectionate as she was ever going to get from Mick, and it was light years away from how stone-cold he used to be. She appreciated it. She puckered her sexy lips and Mick leaned down and kissed them. But as soon as he tasted her, he knew a simple kiss wasn’t going to cut it.

They continued kissing as he moved her up, cradling her in his arms, and bore down onto her mouth with a kiss that became even more ferocious the longer they were at it. And when Mick opened her robe and his mouth moved to her breasts, she knew it was not going to be a kissing session only.

After several minutes of massaging her breasts to the point of stiffness, and massaging between her legs to the point of wetness, Mick lifted the bottom part of her robe, unzipped his pants and pulled it out, and positioned her just enough to enter her.

Roz steeled herself for his hard entry, adjusted herself to his unbelievable fullness, and then relaxed as he expertly did to her body what no other man had ever been able to do. Mick knew how to move inside of her.

For nearly twenty minutes they made that wonderful, sweet, relaxing kind of love. Mick pushed in and almost out of her for what seemed like a hundred times. But just being inside of her made him feel so blissfully spellbound that he knew it was Roz, and only Roz, who was able to take him there. In his youth it was what he used to call a once-in-a-blue-moon fuck. But after being with Roz, it was an everyday fuck. It was how she rolled. She never gave him anything short of the best he’d ever had.

It was so good that he found himself cumming before she came.

But not for long. She was right behind him, cumming hard too. Her back leaned harder against his front and his front leaned harder against her back and they both came with a thunderous cum. It reminded them just why they got married in the first place. But it also reminded them just how much farther they still had to go to get back to this level of wonderment in their often tumultuous marriage.

They remained as they were for several more minutes. Mick was still throbbing and Roz was still pulsating, as it took both of them serious time to come back down from that high they'd been on. But just as they were grounding themselves again, they heard the front door open and the sound of the twins calling their names.

As they could hear them running up the staircase, Mick pulled out of Roz and put his still-throbbing penis inside his pants, while Roz closed up her bathrobe and tied it up. Then the twins could be heard hurrying across the landing and then bounding into their parents' bedroom as if they didn't know what boundaries meant.

Mick watched his teenagers as they hurried to their mother to make sure she was okay. They asked her all sorts of questions about what happened and how did she feel about it, and Roz, the kind of mother who never stifled their children, answered every question. They clearly loved her and was concerned about her. They barely gave him a glance.

There was a time when Mick, growing up in the most dysfunctional family ever, at least in his view, did not want kids. But he was around Duke and Jackie's age when he had his first one. Five baby mamas later, they were his last ones.

Jackie looked just like Roz, with that perfect dark skin and bone structure, and an elegance about her even though she was just a teenager.

Duke, like Teddy, didn't just look like his father but he had similar mannerisms and temperament. He could go ballistic if you pushed him too hard. But unlike Teddy, who was built for that mob life, Roz already told Mick that she'd kill him in his sleep if he allowed either one of her children to go anywhere near that life. "I don't care if they're built for it or not, you'd better not even think about it," she warned him with a knife in her hand.

But she was wasting her breath. Mick had already decided that himself. He blew it with his older kids in so many ways. He was too busy living that thuggish life to be bothered with kids. If it wasn't for Roz coming into his life, he doubted if he would have been anything more to his children than their and their mothers' financial support. Although two of his six children were gone, Teddy and Gloria and the twins were still around, and he was fully involved in all of their lives. But that was only because of the woman he still held in his arms. The woman the twins were now listening to with their undivided attention. The glue of their family.

Then his phone rang. He pulled it out and looked at the Caller ID.

"Who is it?" Roz asked.

"Your Detail Chief."

Roz put it on Speaker before Mick could object. He gave her a hard look, which caused the twins to grin, and then he answered. "Yep?"

"It's all-clear, Boss. The shooter had been threatening one of the employees all week. The manager had barred him from coming there, but he decided to show up tonight anyway. But it had nothing to do with Mrs. Sinatra."

"Told you!" Roz said as if that vindicated her belief that they had overreacted.

“Do you have the video?”

“Yes, sir. We got a copy before the cops could take possession.”

“Send it to me,” he said, and ended the call.

“Can we go back to the party now?” Duke asked.

“No,” Roz said.

“But I was kicking everybody’s butt.”

“No,” Roz and Mick said in unison. “I’ve got an additional team running deeper background,” Mick added.

Roz, who was still sitting between his legs, turned and looked at him. “On who?”

“The manager. That shooter. Every employee that ever worked there. That’s who,” Mick said.

Duke stared at his father. He’d always thought of him as the best of everything: the best looking dad in the whole school. The best fighter of any dad around. The best provider. But especially the baddest gangster that ever lived. Not even his brother Teddy or his Uncle Sal could hold a candle to Mick the Tick. And it wasn’t just because he was the toughest, although he was. But to Duke, nobody but his dad would have thought to even dig that deeply. He admired that. Although that other part of his dad, the best lover part and all those women part, including girls at his own school who actually asked Duke to hook them up with his father as if they were insane, he could live without.

“Go take a shower and go to bed,” Roz suggested. “It’s been a long day.”

“Bed?” Jackie asked. “It’s not even eleven yet.” She looked at her brother. “I’ll play you, Duke. Bet you won’t kick my butt.”

“Bet that,” said Duke, and the twins took off, leaving their parents to get back to doing what they could tell they had just finished doing when they first walked in.

When the twins had gone and closed the doors behind them, Roz leaned closer against Mick. “I’m glad they didn’t find anything.”

“So am I.”

“I’m sure all of that other digging isn’t going to find anything either.”

“We’ll see,” Mick said as he untied her robe and began massaging her down below again.

Roz didn’t at first think she was in the same headspace for another long-behind round with Mick. But by the time his massaging had finished, and he was entering her again, she was so there that she refused to let him stop until he was in so deep that he couldn’t go in any further.

It felt so good to Mick, and because he knew it was going to go on even longer than the first time, he pressed the button that locked their bedroom doors. Then he carried her to bed.

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The next morning, Roz, showered and dressed and ready for work, was at the table being served by their chef when Duke and Jackie, dressed for school, came into the dining hall.

“Hey Ma,” Jackie said as she gave Roz a kiss on the cheek.

“Hey Mom,” Duke said as he did the same. “What did Daddy say?”

“About what?”

“Ma! About the deep background check on all those people at that restaurant?”

“Oh. I don’t know. He was still asleep when I got up.”

“I’ll go ask him,” Duke said.

“No,” Roz said, getting up while taking another bite of her croissant. “I’ll ask.” She knew he was still naked from that marathon session they had last night. “You and I eat breakfast.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Duke said as Chef brought them plates of food too.

Upstairs Mick was awake and on the phone, but still in bed. Which was always odd for Roz to see. He ran a massive corporation. He ran the Sinatra Crime Family although Teddy and Nikki ran the day-to-day. And he still had to be the point person for the entire family’s security. How he did it all was a mystery to Roz. But it always kept him going. He rarely slept in. Roz sat beside him on the edge of the bed.

“No knowledge at all?” Mick was speaking on the phone.

It was Nikki on the other end. “No knowledge whatsoever. He was offended that I even asked him about it.”

But Mick still wasn’t ready to dismiss it. He knew Beppie too well. And he had checked it out: four million dollars were indeed deposited in an offshore account owned by Beppie. “Bring him in,” Mick said.

“Bring Monk Paletti in?” Nikki asked as if she couldn’t believe the directive. Behind only Mick himself and Sal Gabrini, Monk Paletti, the head of the Bonaducci Crime Family, was considered the third most powerful mob boss in the world. Nobody handled him. “You want me to order Frankie to come to Philly?”

“You don’t order him to do anything. He’s not going to take an order from you. Tell him I want a face to face. Tell him I’m ordering it.”

“Yes, sir. When sir?”

“Tonight.”

“Where? Here at the docks?”

“No. Bring him to S.I. Ten pm. I should have some time to set aside then.”

“Yes, sir,” Nikki said with a sigh in her voice. It was going to be another long night for her. But Mick never worried about that. It was the nature of their family business and if she or Teddy or anybody else in high office couldn’t handle it, then that was their problem that they had to work out on their own. Mick loved Nikki, but he was nobody’s father confessor. He ended the call.

“Who was that?” Roz asked him.

“Nikki.”

“Who does she have to bring to Sinatra Industries ten tonight?”

Mick hesitated. “It’s a need to know,” he said.

“And I don’t need to know?”

He hesitated again. “That’s right.”

“Okay. Fine. When I start doing my undercover shit, you aren’t gonna need to know either. See how that works out for you.”

Mick looked at her. “Your ass better not have any undercover shit to do.” Then he stared at her. “What undercover shit you got to do?”

“It’s a need to know, and your ass don’t need to know,” Roz said and grinned.

But Mick didn’t crack a smile. He didn’t find it humorous at all. One of the biggest issues he had was worrying if some young stud was going to one day take his wife away from him. She was, after all, younger than Mick. She was, after all, around a lot of hot guys in her profession. She was and always would be, in Mick’s eyes, that girl . But he was the master at hiding his true feelings. “The twins left for school?” he asked her instead.

“They just sat down for breakfast. They wanted to know if you heard anything on deep background yet.”

“I got an all-clear there too. Seems the employee was some waitress the now-

deceased shooter dated. They broke up a week ago, he wanted her back, he believed the manager was her new boyfriend, and yada yada. You weren't the target."

"So the kids are free to hang out with their friends after school today?"

"Yes."

"And I'm free to go to my office today?"

"Yes."

"And I'm right to assume you won't be home any time soon tonight given this late meeting you've scheduled with whomever?"

Mick hesitated once again. "Right," he said. "Now move," he said as he removed the covers off of his naked body. As soon as Roz saw his penis, she wanted him again. But she knew it was too late.

When she hesitated, he looked at her. "What are you doing? Move. I've got to get ready for work."

Roz stood up and watched as Mick got out of bed. Unlike most men, he seemed more virile and even more attractive to her the older he got. And she was becoming more needy for his affection the older she got. So much so that she wanted to hug him and tell him how much she loved him right then and there, but she knew it would be awkward and weird because he would see it more as weakness on her part rather than affection. And he loathe weakness and wasn't all that crazy about affection. That was why she didn't touch him or say any words of love to him. She let him go.

But he stopped his progression when he saw that look in her eyes, which was more than he used to do. "You okay?" he asked her.

She wanted to scream no , she was not okay. But she knew Mick too well. She nodded her head.

He studied her for a moment longer. He knew she wasn't okay. He couldn't remember the last time she was. But he saw it as something she had to work out on her own. And he went into the bathroom, closed the door, and left her standing there.

But once inside the bathroom, and as he stood at the commode peeing long and hard, he leaned his head back thinking about Roz, and wishing he wasn't such an asshole.

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Four a.m. in Paris and Bella Caine was running for her life. The streets were practically empty, but for a few drunks still hanging around, and the car she thought she'd lost two blocks ago came swerving around that corner so fast it ended up on two wheels before slamming back down and heading straight for her.

“Mick !”

She was crying as she ran. She wanted Mick like a child would want her father in a time like this. Because she knew he could handle her monsters. She knew he would look out for her and protect her and take care of her.

But Mick wasn't even in the country. He was in the States, with Roz and his other baby mama and all those other women that needed him too. Why did she move to Paris so far away from him in the first place when she could have remained in New York? When she could have seen him anytime she wanted to see him. Why, why, why ? But she was beating herself up over milk so spilled that it wasn't even milk anymore. And that car was still coming full throttled!

Bella was on the sidewalk running as fast as she could. She had dished her heels when she ditched that car, but she knew she couldn't outrun an automobile even with a two-block lead. She had to get out of his path and the only out she had was a narrow alley about twenty meters in front of her, and she knew it was too narrow for a car to get through.

She had to get to that alley before that car got to her. Once in that alley, she believed she could outrun anybody. She knew she could not outrun a bullet, should they decide to hop out of that car and start firing on her, but she refused to dwell on that horrible

thought. She just had to get to that alley!

But the car was upon her so fast that it caught even her by surprise. And when she looked back, the car flung across the sidewalk determined to take her out, but the driver was too determined and lost control of the vehicle as it ran straight into a storefront within inches of running right into Bella. It shattered the huge display window with a thunderous slam, triggering all kinds of alarms.

Bella turned down that alley and started humping even faster. She never looked back.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Had it been anybody else summoning him to Philly, Nikki knew Frankie “The Monk” Paletti wouldn’t be there. She stood in front of the mammoth Sinatra Industries corporate headquarters building in downtown Philly and watched as the SUV stopped at the curb and his bodyguard hurried out and opened the back door for him. When Monk stepped out, Nikki could tell he was pissed, but he gave her a hug anyway.

“How’s Ashley?” she asked as they hugged.

“A handful. How’s Teddy?”

“A handful,” Nikki said, and they laughed.

Monk considered her. She was a gorgeous girl with a full-figured body and a knack for handling a crisis. He wasn’t so sure if making her underboss was a great idea given the level of alpha males in the Sinatra syndicate, but Nikki earned their respect. She earned Monk’s respect too. “What bullshit you and Teddy got me involved with this time?”

“Don’t put it on us,” Nikki said with a smile. “This is all Pop’s doing.”

Monk looked up at the huge building in front of them. “I hate meeting with that man,” he admitted. “Here I am the head of the third most powerful organization in the world and it still feels like going to the principal’s office ten-x whenever I have to meet with him. I don’t know how you and Teddy make it work on a regular.”

“We don’t make it work,” Nikki said, “we just work and hope he’ll be pleased.”

Monk laughed. "I hear you, sister," he said, and they made their way into the nearly-deserted building.

Nikki really like Monk Paletti, mainly because he was quintessentially Monk all the time. He never changed. He still wore the same style of suit he wore years ago when she first met him. He still wore that hat that made him look like a fifties-style gangster from the movies. He got his nickname because he was different: a mobster with morals, as Teddy put it. A man who didn't chase tail like all those other gangsters did. A man who didn't believe in bloodshed over stupid stuff, like somebody arguing with him or stepping on his shoe or some of the other so-called disrespect "crimes" punishable by death in the mob world. When old man Bonaducci took the reins of power away from Monk's incompetent father and gave it to Monk, everything in that organization changed. And the reverberations, with the constant mutinies by some of his capos still loyal to his old man, were still being felt by Monk. Which, Nikki believed, was probably why her father-in-law felt it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that Monk's men could have tried to intercept Mick's cargo behind their boss's back.

Although they had to wait several minutes before Mick's secretary gave them the go-ahead, they entered his office just as Monk predicted they would: like two students going before the principal. Mick sat behind his desk, leaned back, staring at them.

Monk put on his best smile, although his heart was hammering, and reached over the desk with his hand extended. "How are you, Mick?" he asked him.

Mick shook his hand and then motioned for he and Nikki to have a seat in the chairs in front of his desk. And he didn't mince words. "Which one of your men attempted to intercept my cargo?"

"Like I told Nikki over the phone--"

“I don’t care what you told Nikki over the phone,” Mick interrupted him. “Answer my question.”

Monk wouldn’t take this bullcrap from any other man, but he knew he had to take it from the man seated in front of him. “Even though I knew I was wasting my time, I did look into it.”

“And?” Mick asked.

“And every one of my guys deny any involvement. There was no evidence otherwise. And I did check.”

“Who deposited four million dollars into Beppie’s offshore account?”

That was news to Nikki. Monk too. “Why would you think it’s my guys?”

“Who deposited that money?”

Monk hesitated. “I don’t know anything about any money. I heard Beppie had come into some, but I didn’t know how or what or why and didn’t care to know.”

“Who told you?”

“Some ex-con they call Blue Bear. He’s a freelancer for small mob jobs around Jersey.”

“How does he know Beppie?”

“They were cousins or something.”

“What do you mean were?”

“He died. Gunshot to the forehead.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. But they found him this morning.”

“Who did it?”

“Who knows? He did work for everybody. It could have been anybody.” Then Monk gave Mick a hard look. “Why would you believe I could be involved in doing anything to sabotage my best friend’s father?”

“Your best friend’s father runs the most powerful syndicate in the world. Yours is third on that chain. I used to be in third place when I first started out too. I got tired of third place,” Mick made clear.

“I’m not like you,” Monk was bold enough to say. “I wouldn’t do that to Teddy.”

He had hit a sore spot Nikki could tell. Because Mick didn’t like that response. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You were working for a guy and then you took over that guy’s territory. That’s what it means.”

“You were working for your old man,” Mick fired back, “and then you took over your old man’s entire organization. That’s what you mean?”

Monk stared at Mick. Monk’s old man was an incompetent who was running the Bonaducci crime family into the ground and Mick knew that. But Monk also knew that there was no fighting with the guy. He did not fight fair. When everybody else went low, he went to hell. And would keep going down there until there was nobody

left to oppose him. “ Touche ,” Monk said.

Then the door of Mick’s office opened, and Teddy walked in. “What’s this about, Pop?” he asked him, his hands palms up and open wide.

Mick looked angrily at Nikki. “Didn’t I tell your ass not to discuss this with him?”

“I didn’t discuss it.”

“Why couldn’t she discuss it with me, Pop? Am I or am I not in charge?”

“You’re in charge of my syndicate. I’m in charge of all your asses.”

“I understand that, but ordering another boss to town and not telling me about it?”

“You’re in charge of my syndicate,” Mick repeated himself. “You’re not in charge of me.”

“I understand that --”

“Then shut the fuck up,” Mick said bluntly. “I told my underboss not to discuss this matter with you or anybody else.”

“Stop accusing her. She didn’t tell me anything,” Teddy said.

“I phoned Ted after I got the call from Nikki,” Monk said. “I wanted answers. I figured he’d know more than Nikki knew. But he didn’t know nothing either.”

Teddy was still pissed with his father. “You ordered Frankie to come over from Jersey to meet with you and you don’t bother to clue me in on it? You know Frankie wouldn’t do that shit or order his men to do it either. But why would you believe he

could be involved with that intercept? Not his men, because if it was just his men then you would have ordered me to Jersey to look into that shit myself. But you think it's Frankie. That's the part that don't sit right with me, Pop. I can't trust any mobster in this world. But I trust The Monk. Why do you think he would do something like this?"

Mick stared at his son. What he loved about him was his ability to cut through the bullshit. He was a worthy successor. "I have my reasons," Mick said.

But that didn't sit right with anybody in that room. Especially Monk and Teddy. They were ripping into Mick, demanding details. But Mick wasn't telling and then his phone rang that particular tone that let him know who was phoning him. He looked at his watch. It was after ten at night in Philly, which meant it was after four in the morning in Paris. He answered the call. "Yep?"

It was, as he knew it would be, Bella. "They chased me, Mick."

"Who chased you?"

She sounded out of breath. "It was awful. I was within inches."

"Inches of what?"

"Dying. They nearly killed me, Mick!"

Mick stood up from his chair. Which surprised everybody in the room.

"They're gonna kill me, Mick," Bella continued bellowing. "I told you so. They won't stop until I'm dead. They won't stop, Mick. I tell you they won't!"

"Where are you now?"

“I’m home. I made it home.”

“Stay put. I’ll get some men over there.”

“You’re coming?”

Mick didn’t want to, but he knew he had to. “Yes,” he said, and ended the call. Then he placed a call to his security chief in Europe to get a crew over to Fame, which was his code name for Bella. When she was a stripper back in the day, her coworkers called her Bella Fame instead of Bella Caine. He remembered that.

When he ended that call, he began walking around his desk. Everybody rose to their feet.

“Who’s in trouble, Pop?” Teddy asked him.

But Mick didn’t answer him. He, instead, stopped parallel to Monk. “You’re treading in dangerous waters,” he said to Monk. “Get out while you can.”

“I’m not in,” said Monk, “so I have no reason to get out.”

“Pop, what are you accusing Frankie of? Him being involved in that intercept is off the table.”

“It’s still on the table until facts take it off,” said Mick.

“What are you accusing him of?”

Mick was still staring at Monk. “Hubris,” he said. “Of being tired of playing second fiddle to me and Sal. And you too, Teddy,” Mick added, looking at his son. “So watch your back.”

Then he gave Monk that chillingly all-knowing look, and began heading for the exit.

“Where are you going, Pop?” Teddy’s voice was loaded with frustration. He just told him that his best friend might be planning to stab him in the back, and he gave no details? That was his father! “Where are you going?” he asked him again.

“Paris,” Mick said, and left the office.

Teddy and Nikki exchanged a glance. They knew what that meant.

But Monk was clueless. “Who’s in Paris?” he asked.

Teddy exhaled and opened his suit coat. “I’ll give you one good guess.”

Monk had no clue. But he knew the backstory. He took that guess. “Bella Caine?”

Teddy was staring at that office door as if his father was still there. “Bingo,” he said.

But Nikki had a different thought on her mind. Mick rushing to the aid of Bella Caine was nothing new to her. But Mick accusing Frankie Paletti of some sort of betrayal was a different matter altogether. Especially since she, Teddy, and even Monk himself knew that Mick the Tick never lied. “What did he mean, Frankie?” Nikki asked Monk.

Teddy looked at him too. He was his best friend, a man he knew he could trust. But he had absolute power over the Bonaducci Crime Family now. Money might change ordinary people, but it was power that changed mobsters.

“I haven’t the foggiest idea what he’s talking about,” Monk said.

But Teddy could tell Nikki wasn’t convinced. “What is it, Nikki?”

“The problem I’m having is that Pop don’t pop off like that without a reason.”

“He thinks my guys did an intercept attempt on his shipments,” said Monk. “That’s the reason.”

But even Teddy, who might have had blinders on when it came to Monk, knew that wasn’t true. “Pop don’t accuse without having more than just what one of our capos said. He’s got something else, Frankie. He has to have something else.”

Monk looked exasperatingly at his best friend. “What are you saying, Teddy T? You’re saying I’m betraying you? You’re saying I’m sabotaging your shipments? You think I’d do something like that to you?”

Because Teddy and Nikki knew how highly Mick respected Monk, and how he wouldn’t play games like that, they didn’t speak up.

“I wouldn’t do that to you,” Monk said dispassionately, although inwardly he was infuriated.

Teddy knew he was infuriated too, but in Monk’s big, expressive eyes beneath that big hat he wore, Teddy saw some guilt there. Some regret. It might have been because of Teddy’s lack of confidence in his denial. Or it could have been Monk’s realization that Mick Sinatra, a man you did not toy with, had found out something that Monk very much didn’t want him to ever know.

Whatever the reason, Monk stared at Teddy a few moments longer, his expression turning to sadness, and then he walked out of Mick’s office.

Teddy frowned and ran his hands wildly through his hair.

“It’s not possible,” a puzzled Nikki said and then looked at her husband. “Is it?”

But Teddy was still unable to even grasp it. “But it’s Pop who’s saying something’s wrong,” he said. “Pop don’t say that unless it’s true.”

And Nikki knew it too.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Teddy yelled out.

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When Duke Sinatra stood up at school the next day, the other students sat down. Mainly because they knew, just as surely as they knew his name, that he wasn't about to let some loudmouth cafeteria bully like Cody Butler ridicule him.

He flew across that table so fast that Cody didn't see him coming until it was too late. Duke's fist connected with his face before their bodies connected, causing Cody's long, red hair to jerk wildly as he fell backwards in his chair. Duke jumped on top of him and began punching him so hard and so fast that blood was spilling before the first teacher could get to them.

"Say it again!" Duke was yelling as he kept punching his classmate. "Say it again motherfucker! Say it again!"

When Jackie realized her brother was the one involved in the brawl, she was at his side before any of the other teachers could get there. And as she yelled for her brother to stop, it took three teachers and the school's resource officer to pull Duke off of the now demoralized student. And even then Duke was stomping on Cody as he was pulled away.

Once Cody realized he was no longer being plummeted, he scooted away from Duke and tried to stand up so fast that he fell back down. The resource officer caught him, and then called on his police radio for an ambulance.

Principal Jaworski, who had been talking with a teacher on the other side of the cafeteria when the fight broke out, ran over to the two students just as they were being pulled apart. As his teachers held Duke back, the Principal rushed to the aid of the downed student. "Get the nurse!" he ordered one of the students, and the student

took off running. Then he looked at Duke with nothing but disgust on his face. “To my office, Sinatra!” And then he began walking away. Duke, his fist hurting, snatched away from the teachers and followed behind the principal. Jackie followed behind her twin.

“Why did you do that?” she asked Duke as they hurried behind the long-legged principal. “What did he say?”

Duke handed her his cellphone. She opened the phone and put in his password that she had figured out months before, and that was when she saw where a video was still open. As she pressed the play button and began watching, her walk slowed. And then her beautiful dark face turned anguished. Duke glanced back at her, and she glanced at Duke, as he and the principal walked into the main office.

The school secretary stood from behind the counter when her boss walked in. “What happened?” she asked.

“Call his parents,” the principal ordered without breaking his stride.

But the secretary looked mortified. “Me, sir?”

The principal looked at her. “No, the phone itself. I want the phone to call them. Of course you!”

“But sir.” She looked at Duke as if by looking at him she could remind the principal of whom his parents were. “Couldn’t you do it, sir?”

The principal realized, in that moment, whose kid he was dealing with. “Oh for crying out loud!” He was annoyed, but he understood her reticence. He didn’t force her. He kept on walking to his office. Duke, still nursing his painful fist, followed him.

But the resource officer had no such qualms about who they had on their hands. He hurried into the main office, seemingly gleefully, and made his way to the principal's suite with the unmistakable purpose of arresting Mick Sinatra's son.

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“It’s not up to me, Roz.”

“You said that already.”

“And I’m going to say it again and again. I’d give her a shot if I thought she could carry an entire Broadway production, because that’s what that part calls for. But she can’t.”

“Oh Patrick, give me a break! How many times have you been on Broadway? How many times have you had to carry a show? Well I’ve been there too many times to count. And I’m telling you she’s perfect for the role.”

“You’re a great talent agent, Roz. And you know I love you dearly. But even you can’t convince me that she’s ready for primetime.”

“Give her an audition, Pat. That’s all I’m asking for.”

“It’s not up to me, Roz, how many times do I have to tell you that? I say let’em all audition and fall on their faces. Because she surely will. But it’s not up to me. It’s up to Darryl, and you know how he is.” Then he smiled, looked her up and down. “But if you give me a chance, maybe I can get Darryl to give her a chance.”

“If you don’t get out of my face with that nonsense.”

“I’m serious, Roz!” He looked down at his midsection. “You don’t know what you’re missing baby girl.”

“Baby girl? How old are you?”

“What does age have to do with it?”

“How old are you, Patrick?”

“I’m black. Nobody can deny that. I’m gorgeous. Nobody can deny that. I’m young. Nobody sure as hell can deny that. In sum, I’m everything that so-called husband of yours is not.”

“How old?” Roz asked him again.

“I’m twenty-eight . So what?”

“Boy bye! I have shoes older than you.”

“Now I know you’re lying. Sinatra wouldn’t let you walk out his front door with a pair of twenty-eight-year-old shoes on your beautiful feet to save his life.”

Even Roz had to grin at that as her cellphone began ringing.

“But for real, Roz, why not? I’m in town for a couple more days. My hotel is just a few blocks from here. I’m in town for the Eagles game, and to meet some Broadway investors who are getting skittish about the failure of Darryl’s last production. The Eagles aren’t good this season and those damn investors are already working my nerves. I need some down time for real. Let’s kick it. See where it goes.” He looked at his midsection again, and licked his lips. “You won’t regret it. No woman does.”

Roz was looking at her phone’s Caller ID. “I regret it already. That’s why I’m not doing it.” When she saw that it was the twins’ private school, she answered immediately. “Yes?”

“Mrs. Sinatra?”

“Yes, this is she.”

“This is Principal Jaworski. I’m phoning about Michello.”

Roz frowned. “Mick?” As soon as she said it, she realized her error. They never ever called him by his legal name! “You mean Duke?”

“I’m phoning about Michello Sinatra, Junior. Your son? Now perhaps you call him by another name.”

Roz wanted to cuss him out right then and there. He knew everybody called Junior Duke. But she also knew it wouldn’t help her son’s situation if she lashed out at his principal. “What did he do?” she asked him instead.

“He was in a fight this afternoon.”

“A fight? About what?”

“He won’t tell me.”

“Did anybody die?”

Even Patrick looked at her when she asked that odd question. The principal’s voice inflection changed to indicate he found it odd too. “Did anybody die? No. Of course not! Why would somebody have died?”

Roz was getting seriously ticked. He had to know what kind of family they were. It wasn’t like it was completely out of the realm of possibility. “Is my son alright? Just answer that.”

“Yes. He won the fight. If you want to call it a fight. I don’t. But there are severe ramifications.”

Roz leaned her head back, which caught Patrick’s attention. Her neck was long and elegant.

But Roz wasn’t thinking about Patrick. She just knew that principal was going to expel Duke from the best school in town, she just knew it. But over her dead body! Which brought her right back to Mick. She wasn’t above invoking his name in situations that called for it. “Why y’all always calling me? Did you phone his father? Did you phone Mr. Mick Sinatra?” She knew he didn’t. They never do. But she needed to remind him whose son he was messing with.

“No ma’am, we’re phoning you.”

The principal gave no explanation as to why only her, but it was obvious why. And Roz exhaled. The namedrop didn’t seem to work. At least not yet. “I’m on my way,” she said, and ended the call.

She began standing up. “Gotta go,” she said to Patrick.

“Let’s have dinner tonight.” His voice sounded desperate. “At the restaurant at my hotel. And I promise you I’ll give you a full hearing on behalf of your client.”

Roz knew he thought it would lead to more. But if Sandra could get that role, it would launch her career into the stratosphere, Roz was convinced of it. That role was perfect for her. “I’ll see,” was the most she was willing to say.

“I’ll be waiting. Say eight o’ clock sharp?”

Roz heard the time, but she didn’t wait around to respond to it. She was gone.

And Patrick was smiling. He pulled out his own phone and made the call. “We’re in,” he said.

“She bit?”

“All but.”

“What do you mean all but ? Did she say yes?”

“Ish.”

“Patrick! Did she or did she not say yes?”

“I know the ladies. She’s interested, but she can’t just come out and say it yet. But she’ll show up.”

“What time?”

“Eight tonight. My hotel.”

“I’m not feeling this,” the caller on the other end of the phone said. “That sounds too easy for a woman like her.”

“We know each other. We like each other. Trust me. I know what I’m doing.”

But there were only sighs on the other end of the phone. Then resignation. “You’d better know. Any false move and we’re out.”

“Stop worrying so much. We’re in just like I said. You lived up to your end of the bargain. I’ll live up to mind. With pleasure.”

For the others, it was a whole lot more than just getting in. But for Patrick, it was bed action all the way. Because the way he saw it was simple: If a cat like Mick Sinatra figured she had gold between those legs, he wanted some of it too. Point blank period. This was the easiest assignment he'd ever had!

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Paris was alive that evening as the streets were just beginning to fill with more than just tourists, but with partygoers and young people galore. It was a gorgeous evening. The skies were a bright blue and just beginning to fade to dawn. And the unmistakable shrills and laughter and the sounds of footsteps pounding pavements as they searched out bars and clubs and crooks and crevices to hangout for another memorable night were evident everywhere you turned. Paris was burning with joyful noise. But inside the limousine that was parked in front of the upscale villa in Saint Germain: You could hear a pin drop.

Mick Sinatra sat on one side of the backseat while Bella Caine sat on the other side. Mick's driver, Big Ed Bronson, sat on the front seat while Mick's bodyguard Vincent LaGuardia waited at the passenger side backdoor where Bella sat. But Big Ed kept taking peeps through the rearview. Bella had been crying the entire ride back. Not boo-who-ing, but the tears were slowly trickling down her gorgeous face. She had Mick's handkerchief and were dabbing her eyes, careful not to spoil her makeup, but every few seconds she would cut her eyes at him and only get sadder, or angrier: Big Ed couldn't tell which.

Boss didn't look at her though. Not once. He was looking out the side window in that way that let you know he was looking, but not seeing. His eyes might not have been directed at Bella, but his entire being was. But this had been going on for not just the drive over, but for nearly ten minutes since they parked. Big Ed nor Vincent knew what the problem was between them two, only that every time they were together there seemed to be a problem, and they weren't about to so much as move a muscle until the boss told them to.

After another few minutes, Bella looked at Mick again. This time Mick looked back

at her. And for several seconds, their eyes locked in a knowing look of which only they knew the meaning. And then Bella spoke. “But why, Mick?”

“You know why.”

“But I need you too.”

Big Ed took a quick peep at the boss when Bella said those words.

But if they expected fireworks in that limo, they were rudely mistaken. Mick looked away from Bella again and out of the window. Bella, frustrated, seemed to shrug her shoulders, and then she quickly tapped on the window and Vincent opened the door for her. Bella looked at Mick one more time. But Mick didn’t return her gaze. “You bastard!” she cried out and then got out of the limo, and slammed the door before Vincent could close it. Then she made her way across the sidewalk and up the steps to the front door of her Parisian villa, and then she opened, entered, and slammed the door behind her.

Vincent got back into the limo on the front passenger seat as Big Ed glanced at the boss through the rearview. He was waiting for the signal to drive away.

But the signal never came.

Mick sat there, still in silence against the loudness outside, and then he suddenly, without any warning, opened the back driver side door and got out of the limo.

Vincent, terrified that he was not there to open the door for the boss, scrambled out of the limo, but it was far too late. Mick had already walked up the steps, taking two at a time, unlocked Bella’s door with his own personal key, and was walking on in by the time Vincent made it across the sidewalk.

When that front door slammed shut, Vincent got back into the limo and pounded his fist against the dashboard. "I hate when that shit happens! I thought he was going to leave, not follow her, that's why I got back in the car."

Big Ed smiled. "Eh, Vincent? You let the boss open his own door while you sat lazily on your ass. Sounds like a firing offense to me."

"But I thought he was gonna leave. He wasn't even talking to that dame."

"What did he tell you about making assumptions? Didn't he warn you about that?"

Vincent looked defeated. "Yeah he did," he said. "But I thought he was gonna tell you to take him to the hotel. That's what I thought."

"And that's what you get for thinking. It's not your job to think. Opening and closing a door. Protecting the boss. That's your job."

"Maybe I should go up to the front door and wait on him."

"You idiot. Didn't he tell you that if he goes into a residence you're to wait in the vehicle? Didn't he tell you that too?"

"Yeah." Vincent looked downcast. "I'm just stupid like that. Stupid fuck!"

Big Ed stopped smiling and exhaled. "Get over yourself, kid. Boss is fair. He knew you didn't know what he was gonna do."

"But I should have seen it coming. It's always been strange between the two of them. It's never normal with them two. I should have seen it coming."

"Take it easy. It's no big deal," Big Ed reassured his younger car mate. "I've known

Mick the Tick for years. We used to run hustles all up and down the streets of Philly. Trying to predict what a man like him is gonna do is like trying to predict who'll win the lottery. Just forget about it. He already has."

Vincent did feel better after Ed's reassurance. But when Ed cracked the windows, turned off the car, and then leaned back with his chauffeur's hat down below his forehead, as if he was preparing for the long haul, Vincent was concerned. "What are you doing? He'll be back in a few minutes. You don't want him to catch you slouching on the job, do you?"

"A few minutes my ass," Big Ed said. "More like a few hours."

"Ah man, don't tell me that shit. A few hours ? But he's married!"

Big Ed looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "You can't be serious."

In truth, Vincent wasn't serious. He had been around mobsters his whole life. He knew how questionable their morals were, if they had any at all. And he knew Mick Sinatra was at the top of that mob chain. That was why he was over the moon when Teddy T hired him. "I just figured a man of Boss's status would be slicker about it," he said to Big Ed. "He wouldn't be so obvious about it."

"The bigger they are, the bolder they get," Big Ed said.

And Vincent, who was restless already, couldn't help but agree. Especially since the lady in question was somebody he'd heard Boss had had a very long, twisted, and very complicated relationship with. A woman, some said, he loved. She was, from what he'd heard, one of Boss's baby mamas. Which put her on a whole other level than a regular dame as well.

He exhaled. And hunkered down for the long haul too.

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Jackie saw her mother getting out of her Mercedes dressed to the nines like she usually was in her above-the-knee form-fitting dress and stilettos, with a small, black leather jacket to round out the package. But she didn't like the way the jocks out front, whom the school let them do pretty much anything they wanted, were whistling at her mother. As if everything was sexualized to them. As if everything was based on appearances to them and not on what was inside the package. That was why Jackie started wearing baggy jeans and shirts one side too large with a backwards baseball cap on her long, flowing hair that she kept in a thick braid. She didn't want those guys sniffing around her. They didn't call her names: they were all afraid of Duke. But they gave her looks she knew was just as bad as the name-calling. But she didn't care. Nobody was going to objectify her body.

Her mother hated her dress style. It had no rhyme or reason to Roz. Just clothes thrown together into a baggy mess. Although she appreciated that her daughter didn't like guys gawking at her, and she understood it, she felt as if Jackie was giving them too much power with her dress choices. Ignore them, was Roz's suggestion. But Mick had no problem whatsoever with their daughter's decision to not give those jocks something to gawk about and fantasize over. And he should know. He used to be one of those jocks too.

"Why aren't you in class?" Roz asked her pretty, biracial daughter as soon as she walked up to the front entrance where Jackie was standing.

"I wanted to show you something before you went in to see Jaws."

Roz looked at Jackie. "Jaws?"

“Our new principal. Principal Jaworski. We call him Jaws because he talks so much,” Jackie said as she and Roz walked into the school. They stopped walking just outside of the main office. “Look at this, Ma.” She handed Duke’s phone to Roz. “This is why he fought Cody.”

Roz looked at the video. It was one of those online newsbreaks where Mick was walking with Bella Caine on a red carpet event. “And at Paris Fashion Week earlier this evening,” the announcer said, “Designer Bella Caine had her old beau and benefactor Mick Sinatra on her arm. Are they back together again? Bella’s people are tightlipped. But if I had to say so myself: Their silence is a resounding yes! Mick and Bella – together again!”

Jackie stared at her mother as she watched that video. She was a beautiful woman in her own right, but she wasn’t a young woman like that anymore. And she wasn’t on Bella’s beauty level. That video had to hurt.

But her mother had one of those faces that revealed nothing. Other than her father, she’d never known anyone so difficult to understand. Roz was attempting to hand her back the phone. “Go to class,” she said coolly.

“But what are you going to do about it? They said Dad’s back with Aunt Bella.”

“She’s not your aunt,” Roz said firmly.

It was the first crack in her armor. But Jackie needed more. “Why do you keep putting up with this, Ma? Every other month it’s something about him and Bella Caine. And it’s been that way all my life. If he wants her so bad, let him have her. You’re beautiful too. You don’t have to put up with this.”

“I said go to class.” Roz remained cool. Inwardly she was raging, but outwardly she remained cool.

Jackie rolled her eyes at her mother.

“Roll’em again and you won’t have any,” Roz warned her daughter. “And take this phone.”

“It’s Duke’s,” Jackie said and walked away.

Roz watched her daughter walk away. In a lot of ways she admired Jacqueline. She refused to let these men twist her in the wind. But Roz had been twisting with Mick so long that she didn’t know how to get out of the wind. It was easy for her children and her friends to say leave and let him have her. But she’d been there and done that too. She always came back. Or let him back. It wasn’t the marriage she wanted. It was the marriage she had.

And Bella Caine? She didn’t know where to begin with that woman. It would have been easier had it been some young bombshell Mick was spotted with because she’d know he didn’t love her. It was just a sex thing that Roz could rectify. But with Bella? Mick had some serious love for that woman and Roz knew it, regardless of what he said. He loved Bella Caine. That was the problem.

But right now, Duke was the problem as she entered the main office. The secretary and one of the clerks were talking behind the counter, their backs to the entrance, when Roz walked in.

“And she had the nerve to ask did anybody die,” the secretary said. When Roz heard her say that, her walk slowed.

“Did anybody die?” the clerk asked with astonishment in her voice. “Why would she say that?”

“You know why girl. Don’t forget who her husband is. The apple don’t fall far from

the tree.”

“And neither does a fist up an ass,” Roz said when she heard that putdown.

The secretary and clerk, shocked that they had been overheard, and even shocker by what she’d just said to them, turned quickly. When they saw Roz walking away from the door and further into the main office, looking like the hardhearted woman they’d heard she was, both of their pink faces turned red. “Mrs. Sinatra, hello. Are you here to,” the secretary started saying but Roz ignored her and continued walking down the hall to the principal’s office. It was already a bad day. She wasn’t about to let those silly women make it worse.

When she entered without knocking, Duke stood up from the chair in front of the principal’s desk, but the policeman, their resource officer, sat him back down. Roz frowned. “What’s this about?”

The principal stood up. “Have a seat, Mrs. Sinatra.”

Roz sat beside her son. They hugged, but Duke knew his mother’s energy. She was pissed. “What’s this about?” she asked the principal again.

“Your son beat another young man so severely that we had to call an ambulance.”

“Is the boy alright?”

“We don’t know yet. His parents just arrived at the hospital and he’s still being assessed. Because Michello is a minor, and because of our school policy, we wanted a parent here when he is arrested.”

Roz frowned. “When who’s arrested?”

“Your son, Mrs. Sinatra.”

“For a fight?” Roz was incredulous. “You’re arresting him because he got in a fist fight?”

“It wasn’t a fight, Mrs. Sinatra. It was a beatdown. One boy beating down another boy for no apparent reason. Pure and simple.”

“Nothing’s pure and nothing’s simple. Not up in this bitch,” Roz said. Then she looked at the school’s resource officer. “You’re the one who’s going to arrest him?”

“That’s correct, ma’am,” he said confidently.

Roz hated to do it. It went against everything she knew to be right and decent. But they weren’t locking up her boy. “May I speak with you, privately, in the hall please?”

The young officer seemed reluctant. “Well um. . . um.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Duke said. He had a pretty good idea why his mother wanted to talk to the cop. “Where I’m going with the Principal right here in front of me?”

The officer knew that was true, too, and he also knew he had no choice. He followed Roz out into the hall, closing the office door behind them.

“Yes, may I help you?” he asked her.

“I don’t know if you know this, since you’re very young, but his father is Mick Sinatra.”

The young officer stared at Roz.

“You’ve heard of him?”

“I heard of him, yes.” Boy had he. Many of the teachers already told him to be careful. To tread lightly. To not go overboard. That was why he hadn’t hauled Michello down to be booked the way he would have done any other student. He was playing it strictly by the book.

“You know who he is?”

“I know who he’s reputed to be, yes ma’am.”

Roz hated that word. It was always added on whenever reporters attempted to describe members of her family: Teddy Sinatra, Mick’s oldest child, was the reputed head of Mick Sinatra’s crime syndicate. Business titan Sal Gabrini was reputed to be the second most powerful mob boss in the world, behind only Mick himself. Vegas casino owner Reno Gabrini, once the head of the Gabrini crime syndicate, was reputed to still have numerous mob ties. And Mick? He got the worse of it. He wasn’t just one of the most successful businessmen in the world. And he wasn’t just a mob boss, either. He was the reputed boss of all mob bosses. At least let the press tell it. Roz, like all the women in the family, would never admit the validity of any of it. “All lies,” was the go-to phrase.

But she needed this young upstart cop to believe it. “Who is my husband reputed to be, young man?” she asked him.

The young officer cleared his throat. “He’s reputed to be the boss of all bosses. The head of the Sinatra crime family. The most powerful mob boss in the world.”

If he was all that, why isn’t he locked up , was another one of her go-to lines. She

knew why. The powers that be were afraid of him too. He had gotten too big to touch. His reach was too wide. But she needed the cop to believe what he'd just said himself. "If he's all what you said," she said, "then what are you doing?"

"I'm doing my job. None of that stuff matters to me."

Roz laid down the hammer. "Do your balls matter to you?" she asked him.

The young man didn't realize it, but his mouth had gaped open.

"What about your arms?" Roz continued threatening him. "They matter to you? What about your legs? Your eyes? Your wife?"

The young cop swallowed hard. And Roz could see in his beany eyes that he was getting the picture and getting it in living color.

"You're fucking with the wrong motherfucker," she said as icing on the cake.

It was working. His mind was running through all kinds of scenarios. He'd seen firsthand the horror those mobsters did to their enemies. The sheer brutality of it. That was why nobody wanted to be on their enemies' list. Including him.

He cleared his throat. "Um, ma'am, well, my thought is that I don't think arresting him just yet is necessary," he said. "Since we don't really know the boy's condition yet."

"Right," said Roz.

"But if his condition takes a bad turn," said the officer, "it'll be out of my hands."

He was a coward in the end, a man washing his hands of law and order to save his

life, and she appreciated that. She hated it. But she appreciated it. And she was able to take Duke out of that principal's office with just a two-week suspension. At least for now.

But as soon as they sat down in Roz's Mercedes, she slapped Duke upside his head. "Fighting like some damn thug in the street! Those white folks aren't going to put up with that shit at this kind of prestigious school! What's wrong with you?"

"You saw what Dad and Aunt Bella did?"

"What did they do , Duke? Tell me what did they do ?"

"She was on his arm in Paris."

"So what? They're friends!"

"Ah, Ma, give me a break! They're friends alright. Friends with benefits."

Roz slapped Duke across his face. "That's your father you're talking about!"

"A father who doesn't give a damn about us! Cody was picking at you. That's why I clobbered him. He said y'all had an open marriage and you let him do any woman he wanted to do."

"You know that's not true, Duke."

"I know it's not. And you know it's not. But does Dad know?"

Roz stared at her son. She knew Duke better than any of their children. She knew his heart. She knew that he loved his mother and father so much that it hurt him to think that his father could ever hurt his mother. But he'd seen him hurt her so many times

before. Roz wanted to know why was this time any different?

“Your father and I have had our issues, Duke, and you know that. What makes this time different?”

But Duke didn’t seem to know himself. “I just snapped,” he said. Then he frowned. “What difference does it make?” he said as he began getting out of his mother’s car.

“Where are you going boy?”

“I’ll drive my own car home.”

“I already told you Jackie’s gonna drive your car home.”

“I’ll drive my own car home,” he said again, reminding Roz so much of Mick. He was so much like his father and didn’t realize it!

And she’d had it up to here with both of them. “Whatever,” she said, Duke closed her door, and she sped away.

But tears rolled down her eyes as she drove. What kind of mother was she that her own children felt a need to fight her battles for her? She knew Mick wasn’t going to be the best father, given how he wasn’t there emotionally for any of his grown children when she first met him. Not for Teddy. Not for Gloria. And not for his two now-deceased sons Adrian and Joey either. They all had different mamas. He had different levels of relationships with all of their mamas. But Roz had made it clear to him that she wasn’t going to allow him to do her or her children that way. She made him be available for them. He didn’t do a great job, but he did a better job than he’d done in the past. She knew going in that making Mick a good father would take work. She never dreamed that making Mick a good husband would not only take work, but be damn near impossible to work out. And as hard as she tried to shield her children

from his hurt, he was hurting them by hurting her. And she was allowing it. That was the part the children hated. That she was allowing it.

But what was she allowing? That was what the children didn't understand. They were certain he was cheating on her. Everybody was certain of it. But Roz wasn't. There were always receipts, if you could call that video a receipt, but Roz wasn't buying it. And she could kick Mick's ass for still having that out there. But for her to think that he'd lay down in bed with another woman and fuck her? She couldn't believe it.

He was an asshole. She believed that. But a cheater was another matter.

She pressed her screen and attempted to phone him again. She'd already tried on her way to the school. But once again it went to Voice Mail. Which made no sense. It was like eight at night in Paris. It wasn't late. And she hadn't heard from him since he left to go over there. But she'd be damn if she had to call his driver or his bodyguard just to make sure he was okay. She was far gone with Mick. But she wasn't that far gone.

She ended her call. Wiped her tears with the back of her hand. And took herself back to work.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Big Ed yawned once again.

Mick had been in Bella Caine's Paris residence for nearly two hours. Restless Vincent had gotten out several times and walked around. Had even gotten a couple ladies' phone numbers. But every time he plopped back in the car, he sighed, looked at his watch, and looked at Bella's front door.

"Dang," he said. "What's taking him so long?"

Even Ed found it odd. But he wasn't about to share that with his impatient younger colleague.

Vincent looked at his Rolex yet again, then he looked over at Big Ed, who was yawning yet again. He grinned. "I'll bet a hundred bucks you won't be the one driving Boss back to the hotel tonight."

Big Ed lifted his hat slightly up from his forehead and looked over at him. "How you figure that?"

"You're already sleepy and he ain't coming out no time soon. You'll be out cold by the time he gets back in this limo."

Big Ed dismissed his talk and leaned his head back, closing his eyes. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking game. That's what I'm talking about. I'm talking big game. And Boss got it in spades. I hear he's got some serious hang time too."

Big Ed looked at him. “You hear it from who? Mrs. Sinatra? She’s the only one he’s hanging with. At least as far as we’re concerned.”

“Yeah right,” Vincent said with a laugh. “And I guess Boss been in that house patting her hand and singing lullabies all this time? That what you expect me to believe?”

“I don’t care what you believe. But I know you better knock that shit off, Vinny. Boss is a married man. And Roz Sinatra? She don’t play.”

“He’s a married man in that gorgeous dame’s villa or townhouse or whatever they call it here. And he’s been in there for two straight hours already. It’s eight at night here in Paris. You see any lights up in that bitch? You see any movement? He’s been in there for two straight hours. And he’s still up in there.”

“You wanna keep your job you better keep your trap shut,” Big Ed warned him. “As far as we’re concerned, he’s in a business meeting. And if his wife calls that’s what you better tell her too. Because one day you gonna mouth off to the wrong employee and it gets back to the big man. And that’ll be the end of you. Figuratively and literally.”

Vincent looked at the driver. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

But Big Ed suddenly sat up from his slouched position and straightened his chauffeur’s hat. “He’s coming now.”

Both men looked at the front exit as the door had opened. Bella was at the door and was saying something to Mick.

Vincent smiled. “About time,” he said. “You know his habit right, Big Ed?”

“What habit?”

“If he walks down those steps slowly that means he got some and it was real good, depending on just how slow he walks. But if he’s running down that motherfucker then you know and I know he didn’t get nothing, and he can’t wait to get away from her.”

“I know what your money’s on,” said Big Ed.

“Damn right. All this time? He’d better be crawling down them steps.”

Bella gave Mick a hug as he stood on her stoop. Then he began walking down the steps. Both his driver and his bodyguard looked intensely. Vincent had gotten out of the limo and was walking around to the driver back door to open it when he saw Mick walking slowly down those steps. He grinned and looked at Big Ed through the car’s window. But his smile was fleeting. As soon as the boss hit the bottom step, he opened the limo’s back door and stepped back. Mick got in without a word, the door closed, and Vincent got back in on the front passenger seat. Big Ed waited for the order.

When Mick pointed forward, Big Ed didn’t hesitate. He was as ready as Vincent to get going. He drove away.

But Big Ed could see, through his rearview mirror, Bella Caine closing the door as they drove away. He glanced at the boss. But the boss was quiet, looking out the side window as if he either regretted what he’d just done, or enjoyed it. Ed could never tell with Mick.

Then Mick pulled out his phone and turned it back on. As he was looking and saw that he had missed calls from Roz, his phone began ringing. He answered. It was Teddy.

“Hey Pop.”

“Yep?”

“Duke was in a fight today. A bad one.”

Mick always stiffened when a call was about one of his children or Roz.

“The only reason Duke’s not in jail,” Teddy went on, “is because Ma invoked your name and scared the shit out of the school’s resource officer.”

“Is Junior alright?”

“He’s fine. The other guy is in bad shape though.”

“What’s bad?”

“They just rushed him in for emergency surgery,” said Teddy.

“Shit.”

“That bad,” said Teddy. “And you know what that means, Pop. If that kid dies, then Duke’s looking at a murder rap.”

Mick’s heart sank. He loved all his kids, but he never worried so desperately about his grown children the way he worried about the twins. Maybe because he was there with them throughout the entirety of their lives. Maybe because he was so heavily vested in them that he couldn’t point the finger at their mother, the way he pointed the finger at his other children’s mothers, when they didn’t turn out right. Maybe it was because they came from Roz, the love of his life. “I’m on my way,” he said, and ended the call. “Get me to the airport, Eddie,” he added. “We’re going home. Vincent, alert my pilot and get somebody over to the hotel to retrieve our luggage.”

“Right away, sir,” Vincent said happily. He loved Paris. The energy there turned him on. But there was no place like home.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Mick's jumbo jet landed at the Philadelphia airfield and Nikki, standing in the cool night air, waited outside of her father-in-law's big black Cadillac Escalade as Mick, his driver and his bodyguard, all deplaned. Another SUV was waiting behind the Escalade and Big Ed and Vincent spoke to Nikki, who was the underboss of the Sinatra Crime Syndicate and therefore their boss, and then they got into the second vehicle. Nikki held the front driver side door open for her father-in-law and when Mick walked up to her, he did something he never did with any of his other capos: he stopped. He looked at her. "How are you?" he asked her.

Nikki always felt hyper-nervous around Mick even though everybody and their mamas insisted she was his "favorite." But his favorite what was always Nikki's question. "I'm good, sir."

"Any issues at the docks?"

Nikki shook her head. "None, sir. All the ships are back on schedule."

"And you've been alright?"

Nikki noticed how Mick was looking all over her body, as if he was checking to make sure she was okay and free of injuries. Or something else. She never could figure out his motivations. "Yes, sir, I'm fine."

"Good," he said. Then he nodded as if he was affirming her. "Good," he said again, and then got into his SUV.

Vincent saw and heard the little exchange as he and Big Ed were getting into the

second SUV. The capos in that SUV took a backseat as Big Ed got behind the wheel and Vincent rode shotgun.

He looked at Ed. “Why he always treating her like she’s something special?”

“Maybe because she is,” said one of the capos from the backseat.

“Was I talking to you?” asked Vincent. Unlike the two in the backseat, Vincent was a made man in the organization which gave him a higher rank than both backseat riders. That was why the capo didn’t argue with him.

Nikki walked around to the passenger front seat and got in beside Mick. Mick took off. The second SUV followed.

“How’s the kid?” Mick asked as he drove.

“Duke or Cody?”

“That his name? Cody? How’s he doing?”

“He’s still in surgery last I heard.”

Mick looked at her. She was a full-figured young lady with breasts so huge that Nikki noticed he always looked at them before he looked into her face. But what she’d said surprised him. “It’s been over eight hours since they rushed him into surgery and you’re telling me he’s still in surgery?”

“As far as I know, yes sir. But my last update was about an hour ago. He may be out now.”

But even seven hours was still too long, Mick felt. He exhaled. “How’s Junior?”

“Upset naturally. He said it was like he blacked out because he didn’t realize he had done so much damage.”

Mick exhaled. Duke was a natural. The kind of young man that other young men gravitated to and were terrified of mixing it up with. He was just like his old man was at that age, and Mick wasn’t happy about it. He knew Roz damn sure wasn’t.

And it was beginning to worry Nikki. But for different reasons. “How do you stop it, sir?” she asked him.

Mick looked over at her again. “Stop what?”

Nikki knew she had to be diplomatic about it or Mick would kick her ass, but it had been something she needed to know. “That family trait.”

Mick frowned. “What family trait?”

“The gangster part. The bad temper part. The kick-ass part.” She said it and then she looked at him. “How do you stop it from consuming your child?”

Mick stared at her a moment longer. He realized she was talking about her baby girl: his granddaughter. He looked back at the road ahead of them. “She has your genes too. And you don’t have the bad stuff,” he added.

But that made no sense to Nikki. “Duke has Mrs. Sinatra’s genes,” she said, “but he has that trigger-temper too.”

Mick glanced at her. He knew she only referred to his wife as Mrs. Sinatra when he was around. Otherwise she was just Roz to Nikki and the two of them were thick as thieves.

“Duke has that temper because his mother is as gangster as I am,” Mick said to her. “She just knows how to camouflage it.”

Nikki smiled. “True that.”

There was a pause, then Mick said: “She won’t be like me, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Nikki looked at him. “Will she be like Teddy?”

Mick hesitated. “Probably.”

Nikki knew Mick would be straight with her that was why she brought it up to him. Teddy was temperamental, too, and as gangster as they come, but he controlled it better than most Sinatras.

Mick exhaled. “What caused this fight between Junior and that kid anyway?” he wanted to know.

“Teddy didn’t tell you?”

“No. When I was on the plane, he said Duke and the kid were in a fight and Duke was upset about how badly he injured that kid. That was all he said about it.”

“Duke is upset about Cody’s condition. He’s very upset about that. But I think he’s even more upset about you.”

Mick looked at Nikki. “Me ? What do I have to do with this shit?”

Nikki was angry with Teddy for not telling his father the full story when he talked to him over the phone. “He saw a video of you with Bella Caine on your arm on a Paris

red carpet event. The commentator seemed to suggest that you and Bella were an item again.”

Mick didn't respond to Nikki or suggest that it was nuts. He didn't even look at her or seemed surprised by the revelation. He kept his own counsel and kept on driving. Which was fine by Nikki. She hated getting in the middle of anything involving him, his wife, and whatever side chick of the week they were arguing about.

But it was also instructive, Nikki thought, that he hadn't asked why Roz wasn't at the airfield to meet his plane.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

When Mick and Nikki walked into the house, Charles “Big Daddy” Sinatra, Mick’s older brother and the man who raised him, was already there and sitting in Mick’s favorite living room chair. Anybody else would have quickly gotten up when the big man entered the room, but they both knew Big Daddy didn’t give a shit.

Mick sat on the sofa. Nikki went over and hugged Big Daddy’s neck. She was always amazed at how handsome he was. Everybody always said Tommy Gabrini was the best looking man in their family of very good looking men. But Big Daddy was the best looking in Nikki’s eyes. “It’s been a minute, Big Daddy,” Nikki said as they hugged.

“Teddy still treating you right?” he asked her as he hugged her tightly. She was one of his favorite’s too.

“Yes, he is,” Nikki responded as they stopped embracing. She and Teddy were having their issues, but that wasn’t for public consumption. “When did you get in town?”

“Since about four after I heard what happened.”

“Teddy was out in the field. Has he been by?”

“He just left. Had to go to the docks. He said a ship didn’t come in.”

That surprised Nikki. She looked at Mick. “Did you know that?”

“No. Call him and find out what’s going on.”

“Excuse me,” Nikki said as she pulled out her phone and began heading back outside to avoid Mick hearing her conversation – and taking it over.

Big Daddy looked at Mick. “You look terrible.”

“So do you.”

“Yeah well.” Big Daddy ran his hands across his face. “I look like I feel.”

“Jenay?”

“Among other things, yes.”

“In or out?”

“She’s back in the hospital.”

Mick frowned. “Then what are you doing here?”

“Because your ass wasn’t here,” he said firmly. “Roz was calling me crying.”

“Crying?Over what?”

“Over your ass. What else? And what’s this bullshit I hear about you and Bella Caine?”

“Nothing to hear.”

“That’s what you always say.”

“It’s the truth. How’s Jenay?”

Big Daddy hesitated. “She’s drained of all energy again. They’re running more tests. Experts are flying in. The usual routine. Whatever she’s got is so damn rare that nobody seems to know what it is. She could be fine for months, then bam. We thought we had it figured out. It was the medication they were giving her at the hospital we thought. But then she had another episode and that was that. We keep going back to the drawing board.”

“I thought they said it was Lupus.”

“They said it was a kind of Lupus. Which is another word for saying they don’t know what it is. You know what she told me?”

“What?”

“She said it would be awful to not what she died of.”

“Died? Why is she talking like that?”

“I told her to cut that shit out every time I see her. But she’s just tired of being sick, that’s all.”

Mick hated when Charles was distressed. “What’s the prognosis?”

“I just want her healed. I just want her back. That’s the prognosis. She’s going to be just fine and be herself again.”

Mick stared at the strongest man he’d ever known. “And if that doesn’t happen?”

Big Daddy let out a harsh exhale. “Then it won’t happen. I’m not God. God is God. And the master’s plan will not be altered. But . . . I want her back. I want her to be herself again.”

He said this and looked at Mick. And in that moment Mick realized the writing was on the wall and Charles knew it, but he was still coming to terms with it. “How’s Jenay taking it?”

“Taking what?”

“Her illness.” Mick meant the other thing, but he could tell Charles wasn’t ready to go there.

“She’s taking it better than I am. That’s for damn sure.” Then Big Daddy leaned his head back and closed his eyes momentarily. Then he reopened them and looked at Mick. “What’s this shit about you and Bella Caine?” he asked again.

He and Mick were so alike. They didn’t just sweep the bad stuff under the rug. They swept the bad stuff out of the door. “I told you t’s nothing.”

“Your son beat the crap out of a kid over nothing? Who do you think you’re talking to, Michello?”

Mick exhaled. “Where’s Junior?”

Big Daddy pressed the intercom button on the side table. “Duke, get down here! Your father’s home.”

It took seconds for Mick to hear the sound of running down the staircase and then he saw Duke, along with his partner in crime Jackie, come into the living room. It wasn’t lost on Big Daddy how both twins went straight to the sofa and sat on either side of their father: boxing him in. It was the same way with Teddy and Gloria. They loved their old man to death and had no problem showing it. The ball was in Mick’s court to reciprocate because Charles knew his kid brother loved them as well. But Mick always left that ball sitting there.

“Have you heard anything about Cody?” Jackie asked their uncle.

“I went to the hospital before I came here,” Big Daddy said and even Mick looked at him. “He’s in bad shape. No other way to put it.”

“How bad?” Duke asked him.

“Bad,” Big Daddy said. “What your ass thought was gonna happen the way you punched the daylights out of him?”

“He should have kept his mouth shut.”

“Don’t you dare justify that shit,” Big Daddy said, “or I’ll kick your ass myself.”

Duke said nothing. He rarely said a lot anyway. Like Mick, he usually let his actions speak for him.

“Is he still in surgery?” Mick asked his brother.

“He’s out. He’s in ICU, but he’s out of surgery. It’s touch and go.”

Mick looked at Duke. Then Duke looked at his father. And tears appeared in Duke’s beautiful eyes. “I didn’t mean for it to happen that way. I didn’t mean to put him in no hospital,” he said, and then leaned against his father.

Big Daddy stared intensely at Mick as Jackie wiped tears from her eyes too. When Mick placed his arm around Duke, and then around Jackie too, Big Daddy exhaled. It was about time, he thought.

But if Big Daddy had hoped Mick would offer words of encouragement to his son, that didn’t happen. But it was enough that he at least acknowledged his boy’s pain.

More than he ever did for his grown children. But Big Daddy knew that was Roz's influence over Mick. Unlike the mothers of his grown children, they never had the balls to stand up to Mick the way Roz did. Mick, in Big Daddy's estimation anyway, married the right one.

When both twins stopped leaning on their father and sat upright again, Jackie, who had her mother's spunk, Big Daddy thought, took the handkerchief from her father's suit coat and blew her nose. That made Big Daddy smile. It reminded him of when she used to crawl up on her father when she was a baby and wouldn't let anybody move her.

Then she looked at Mick. "What's gonna happen to Duke if Cody doesn't make it, Daddy?"

"He'll make it," Duke said.

"We have to be realistic, Duke. He might not."

Just like her mother, Big Daddy thought. She was a realist too.

"What's gonna happen to Duke?" Jackie asked again.

"Nothing will happen to him," Mick said.

"Will I get arrested?" Duke asked.

"Did you think about getting arrested when you jumped on that young man?" Mick asked his youngest son.

Duke scrunched up his attractive face. "No sir."

“Then what are you worrying about it now for?” Mick settled back down. “Let me worry about that,” he added.

Duke and Jackie both looked at their father. It seemed to Big Daddy that they were just realizing the burdens Mick carried for them. And that, for them, meant more than a hug or an I love you. It showed the hug and it showed the love. “Yes sir,” Duke said.

“Teddy said you were expelled,” Mick said.

“I would have been if Ma hadn’t talked to that cop. The principal gave me a two-week suspension though.”

“You should have gotten more than that,” Big Daddy said. “Don’t you dare minimize what you did to that kid.”

“Was he smaller than you?” Mick asked Duke.

“Bigger,” said Duke.

“Much bigger,” said Jackie.

Mick nodded. “Good. Your ass better never beat up a kid that can’t fight back.”

“I would never do that,” Duke said. “Cody’s always been a bully. He just can’t bully me.”

Duke and Jackie fist bumped. Big Daddy shook his head.

“Where’s your mother?” Mick asked.

Duke hunched his shoulders. "I don't know. You know, J?"

"She said something about going to a meeting."

"A meeting this time of night?" Mick asked her.

"That's what she said," said Jackie. "She'll knock me through that wall if I question her, just like you would if I question you." Then Jackie said beneath her breath. "Y'all just alike."

Mick cut her a hard look.

"In a good way," she said with a smile, and Duke grinned. His sister was the master politician already, he thought.

"You guys go back upstairs," Big Daddy said. "I want to talk to your father."

They didn't hesitate. They hurried back upstairs.

Big Daddy leaned forward. "Does Roz know about that video?"

"I haven't seen it myself so how should I know?"

"Did she meet your plane?"

Mick hesitated. "No."

"Then she knows about it. And you don't know where she is?"

"No. Do you?"

Big Daddy frowned. “How would I know where she is? I’ve said this before, and I’m gonna say it again: She’s gonna get tired of putting up with your bullshit, Mick. All of this on- again, off-again marriage is ridiculous. And it’s affecting Duke and Jacqueline. It has to.”

“Don’t worry about my marriage. Worry about your wife.”

Big Daddy jumped up so fast and slapped Mick so hard that Mick’s face jerked sideways. “I’ll worry about whoever the fuck I wanna worry about, you cold motherfucker!”

Any other man would have been dead. There was no two ways about it. But Mick just sat there staring at his older brother.

Big Daddy was hard on Mick when Mick was a kid. Wouldn’t let Mick get away with shit. But he was the same way with his four sons. He raised them alone when his first wife left him high and dry. He didn’t let them get away with shit, either, and still didn’t. And they loved Big Daddy to death. He did a great job even Mick had to admit. He was a great man.

That was why Mick’s look softened. “I was out of line,” he said to his brother.

“Yes you were.”

“But if you slap me again,” Mick started saying.

But Big Daddy finished it for him. “If I slap you again you still won’t do shit. So shut the fuck up,” he added, dared Mick to dispute what he said, and then he went and sat back down. It was as close to an apology as Charles was going to get. He was pleased to get that.

Mick continued to give his brother a hard look. Everybody knew how vicious Mick could be. But there were only two people in this entire world that he never struck back: his brother and Roz.

He pulled out his cell phone and called her security detail chief. “Where’s my wife?”

“Right now she’s at the Ritz-Carlton, sir.”

“At a hotel?”

Big Daddy looked at Mick when he said those words.

Mick was still jetlagged because it was a six hour difference between Paris and Philly, an eight-hour flight home, and it all ran together. When he boarded the plane in Paris, it was eight at night and two in the afternoon in Philly. After eight hours in the air and the change in time zones, when he landed it was ten at night in Philly and four in the morning in Paris. It felt like it always felt to Mick when he returned from Europe: as if it was déjà vu all over again. But he still had enough faculties to know that it was late local time. Why would she be at a hotel? “Doing what?” he asked her detail chief.

“They talked for a long time. Now she and the young man are having dinner, sir.”

“How young?”

“He looks to be under thirty.”

Mick exhaled. “Do you know what this meeting is about?”

“No sir. Our mission is not to spy on your wife.”

“You don’t tell me what your mission is,” Mick snapped at him.

“Oh no sir. I didn’t mean it that way, sir.”

Mick ended the call. Then he exhaled again.

Big Daddy watched him just sit there. It took several seconds, but then Mick got up and walked out of his front door.

Big Daddy shook his head. “That’s my kid brother,” he said out loud to no one. “He can do anything he wants. But let Roz try that shit.”

Then he leaned back, thought about his own wife, and gave her a call.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Roz was in the restaurant at the Ritz-Carlton eating dinner. The music that blared over the stereo was Carly Simon's You're So Vain and Roz felt the song amply fit the man sitting across from her as he talked on his phone. She would have gotten up and left had it been anyone else going on and on when he was supposed to be talking with her, but because she knew who was on the other end of that call, she stayed put.

Patrick had only been on the phone a good couple minutes before he was giving Roz the thumbs up. He talked several more minutes and then he ended the call. "That was Darryl Siskind."

"I figured as much. What did he say?"

"Sandra has an audition."

Roz smiled a big smile. "Oh thanks, Patrick. You will not regret it. Who's the casting director?"

"Malcolm, but I'll be there to make sure she gets a good hearing. But Darryl told me to tell you he's only doing it because it's your client, and he's making no promises."

"She doesn't need any. I'm telling you she's really good. She'll do her thing."

"If you come upstairs," Patrick said, "I can give you the script that outlines the audition scene beforehand so that she can be well-rehearsed and have a leg-up on her competitors."

"You're so vain."

You probably think this song is about you.

You're so vain.

I'll bet you think this song is about you.

Don't you?

Don't you?"

Roz was smiling because Carly Simon was singing what Roz was feeling in that moment. "You think very highly of yourself," she said. "Don't you?"

Patrick smiled too. "That may be what it looks like, but I'm for real, Roz. You came to have dinner with me, and I appreciate that. I'm only trying to help your client. Because I'm telling you right now, and Darryl just told me himself, that he's disinclined to give her that role. She doesn't have the gravitas for it, that's his thing. It'll take more than just talent for her to get this gig."

Roz knew it too. "Why don't you go upstairs and bring the script down here to me?"

But Patrick was already shaking his head. "No way Jose. I have no business with it to begin with and you expect me to bring it down here in a public space? No way. Now if you were to go up to my room and happen to take a picture of the few pages with your phone, well that's out of my hand. That has nothing to do with me."

Roz continued eating, but Patrick could tell the wheels of her considerable brain were turning.

"Come on, Roz! I'm doing you a solid by sticking my neck out for an actress I don't even have all that much confidence in. But because I love you, I'm willing to help her

out. Don't treat me like this."

Roz smiled. "What your green ass know about solids?"

Patrick laughed. "More than you think. Believe that!"

"You walked into the party

like you were walking onto a yacht.

Your hat strategically dipped below one eye;

your scarf it was apricot.

You had one eye in the mirror as

you watched yourself gavotte.

And all the girls dreamed

that they'd be your partner.

They'd be your partner and -

You're so vain

You probably think this song is about you.

You're so vain.

I'll bet you think this song is about you.

Don't you?

Don't you?"

Roz couldn't take him seriously with that song in the background. She couldn't stop smiling. But Patrick was dead serious. He went back to begging. "Come on, Roz. You gotta help me out here. I'm trying to give you this gift for your client. A gift, I'm telling you, and you're acting as if I'm . . ." He realized her expression had changed. "What's wrong?"

He looked where Roz was suddenly looking and that was when he saw Mick Sinatra himself at the restaurant's entrance. Roz's heart dropped. So did Patrick's. But for very different reasons.

"What's he doing here?" Patrick asked her.

But Roz could never concentrate on anybody else when Mick entered a room. It had been that way the moment she met him, and it remained that way all those years later. She had butterflies still for him. She hadn't seen him in two days and she missed him terribly. And it angered her that she loved him so much. That he had that kind of hold over her.

But she knew that look on his face. To everybody else, it was a look that was cool as cool could be. But he was looking at Patrick. Roz knew there was nothing cool about it. He was walking, very slowly the way he always did when he was upset, over to the table.

"Want me to tell him to get lost?" Patrick asked her.

Roz looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "What ? That's my husband, you idiot. You don't tell him anything."

“Well good grief, Roz, I was just joking around.”

“And keep your ass out of our business. That’s what you do.”

“For sure!” Patrick was looking as if he had no clue, but he knew better. He was upset that Sinatra had showed up and, unbeknownst to Sinatra, had thwarted his plans.

But as Mick walked slowly toward their table, his entire focus was on the man eating dinner with Roz. He seemed cocky even from across the room. But determined to get what he wanted. Mick saw that too. An attractive man, but that didn’t bother Mick either. He knew he had his share of attributes the ladies liked as well. But he was a young man filled with that youthful vivacity that Roz still had too. Something Mick never had even when he was young himself. That was what bothered Mick the most. How could he ever compete against that?

But he knew he had to keep it together or Roz would show her ass and expose his weakness. That was why, when he made it up to the table, he didn’t lash out at her or at the young man, even though he wanted to lash out at both. He extended his huge hand. “Mick Sinatra,” he said to Patrick.

Patrick was caught off guard by Mick’s civility, given his nasty reputation, but he stood up, smiled, and extended his own huge hand as if two could play that game. “Patrick Donahue at your service. How are you, sir?”

He was a cocky bastard too, Mick thought, who just knew he was going to have his way with the wife of the boss of all bosses. Mick saw it all the time. Confident men who wanted to see what Mick saw in her. Who wanted to know what she had between those legs that all those other women Mick fooled with didn’t have as if that was what it was all about for a vicious mobster like him. Some men only dreamed of finding out, but it showed all over their faces. This kid was no dreamer. He was a

doer. This kid had balls. “What’s this about?” Mick asked him.

Patrick feigned confusion. “Excuse me?”

“You’re not excused. What’s this about?”

“We’re having dinner. A rather late dinner, I’ll grant you that. But we’re having dinner. You can’t possibly have a problem with that. Or can you?”

Roz’s eyebrows raised as she could not believe Patrick would think he could handle her husband. She quickly stood up before Mick knocked him down. “You know what,” she said like she always said when her temper was about to unleash.

But she was too late. Mick had already stepped so far into Patrick’s private space that they were close enough to kiss. And his voice was measured and low, but undeniably hard. “You’re questioning me, motherfucker? You’re questioning me?”

Roz quickly moved between the two men. “Let’s go, Mick,” she said as she grabbed her jacket and pushed Mick back.

But Mick was still staring into Patrick’s face. Patrick’s outward smile was gone. But Mick could sense his inward smirk. That bastard was enjoying this.

But Roz wasn’t about to let it happen. “Let’s go,” she said to Mick again. As she looked into Mick’s eyes, she felt more sad than mad. Like Patrick didn’t even exist. It was all about her and Mick. And why he kept doing everything in his power to ruin their marriage.

But Patrick, being the showoff that he was, couldn’t let it go. “You don’t have to leave, Roz,” he said to her.

Roz couldn't believe it. She turned around and faced Patrick as if he was the problem now, not Mick's appearance. "Didn't I tell you to keep your ass out of my business? Didn't I tell you that?"

Patrick held up his hands and backed slightly up. Then he smiled. "Didn't mean no harm," he said.

Roz realized he was just being Patrick. "I'll call you," she said as she turned to leave. But Mick was still staring at the younger man.

"Mick, let's go," Roz said, as she put on her jacket and began straightening her jacket collar. When she finished, Mick was still staring at Patrick as if he wasn't going to let it go either. But Roz wasn't about to let Mick beat down a good-natured, albeit foolish man like Pat in front of all these white folks. She frowned and pushed Mick. "Let's go!"

Mick gave Patrick one more of his I see you looks, and then he stepped aside to let Roz walk by. And they left.

When they got outside, Big Ed sped Mick's Cadillac Escalade up to the front of the valet station and Vincent got out and opened the back passenger door for the boss and his wife.

But Roz ordered the valet to bring around her Mercedes. Mick looked at her. "One of my men will drive your car home."

"No hell he won't. I'm driving my own car home."

Vincent looked at Mrs. Sinatra when she spoke that defiantly to Boss. He looked at Boss. He'd heard how he let her get away with shit no other human being would ever get away with, but this was his first time witnessing it.

But as soon as that Mercedes drove up to the valet station, Mick's patience was over and he grabbed Roz by the arm and all but threw her into the backseat of his SUV. He pointed his finger so close to her face that it touched her nose. "Don't try me," he warned her.

Roz knew Mick's looks. She knew when she still had rope to pull. She knew when that rope she was pulling could hang her. This was his hanging look. She slid on over, and he got in. Then he ordered Vincent to tell a member of Roz's security detail, the car that had pulled up just behind the Escalade, to drive her vehicle home.

Vincent, pleased that the Boss didn't let that dame get away with her disobedience, inwardly smiled as he closed the door and went to the detail car. After ordering one of the capos to drive Roz's car back to the Sinatra compound, he got into the front passenger seat of the Escalade and Big Ed took off.

For several miles not a word was spoken. Roz had slid all the way over to the other side of the SUV and was looking out of that side window. It was late at night: there was nothing to see. But she was looking anyway. Anything, Big Ed figured, to not look at Mick.

Mick, on the passenger side of the SUV, wasn't looking out of any side window, but was looking out of the front windshield. But Big Ed noticed through the rearview mirror that Boss was also taking peeps at his wife. Deuce McCurry, Mick's retired driver and the closest friend Mick ever had, once told Big Ed that Mick really loved his wife. "Love? Mick the Tick? Sure he does!" But Deuce was serious. It was no joke to him. Big Ed still wasn't as convinced as Deuce was, but Mick did seem to capitulate to her the way he did to his big brother Charles "Big Daddy" Sinatra. And that, in and of itself, said a lot.

And it was Mick, not his wife, Big Ed noticed, who broke the ice. "Who is he?" Mick asked her.

“None of your business,” Roz said.

Vincent glanced at Big Ed with that no that bitch didn’t look on his face. But Big Ed knew better than to show any expression around the boss.

And for good reason. Mick gave Roz a chilling look. “I said,” he said with clenched teeth, “who is he?”

Roz had to compose herself. Even she knew not to go too far with Mick. “He’s a director. A Broadway director. I’m trying to get this major role for a client from my talent agency and he and I were meeting to discuss it.”

“It’s well past eleven at night.”

“So what? It was a long day.”

“It’s not day, it’s night. Late at night. Why did you have to come all this way, at a god damn hotel, to have dinner this late? What the fuck is up with that?”

Roz couldn’t believe his nerve. She looked at him angrily. “Why did you have to go all the way to Paris to be with Bella Caine? What the fuck is up with that ?”

Mick stared at her with that look that said he wanted to slap the shit out of her, but he didn’t go there. He said nothing. And began looking out of the windshield in front of them once again.

“Yeah I thought so,” Roz said, still angry.

But it wouldn’t be until they arrived at the security gate at their home and Big Ed and Vincent were waving at the capos on duty at the booth, before another word would come out of either one of their mouths.

Roz gave Mick a hard, painful look. “You do you, Mick, alright? Do you. I’m going to do me.”

Mick looked at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means what I said.”

“What does it mean, Roz?”

“You do whatever the hell you want. Knock yourself out. And I’m going to do the same.” Then her look turned sad but determined. “And I dare you to question it,” she said so firmly that even Mick believed her.

And it spooked him. He was accustomed to Roz’s fury. But he wasn’t accustomed to her pulling some tit for tat.

And when they rode through the gate up to the main house and Roz was opening the door before Big Ed could come to a complete stop, Mick grabbed her by the arm as if he was going to force her to tell him more.

She looked at him with such a sad but hurtful but angry look that he knew force was not going to force her to do a damn thing. He knew her too well. He released her.

Roz got out of that SUV and went inside, slamming the door behind her.

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By the time Mick made it upstairs, Roz was still in the shower. He removed his clothing and would have just gone to bed and dealt with that shit tomorrow, but when he went into the bathroom to pee and he saw Roz through the shower door slumped against the wall as if she was too exhausted to move, he hurried over and opened the door. When he saw that she was crying, and when she looked up with those sweet, caring eyes, his heart dropped. And he quickly stepped into the shower and pulled her into his arms.

For several seconds Roz held Mick as tightly as Mick was holding her and she sobbed in his arms.

“Why do you keep doing this to us?” she cried as he held her. “Why do you keep doing this?”

Mick wanted to tell her that he hadn’t done anything to them, but he knew that wasn’t entirely true. He just held her.

But when she looked up into his eyes in that way that always broke him, he leaned down and kissed her reassuringly. His words couldn’t reassure her, but his body could. And he knew that. Because that reassuring kiss became a passionate kiss and then both of them were caught up in that way that always revealed itself when they needed it most.

Mick lifted Roz up and slammed her back against the wall. Roz wrapped her legs around his big body. And when he lifted her even higher and moved his face between her legs, she ran her fingers through his hair so intentionally that she could feel every contour of his head. Her own head was lifted upward, as the intensity of how he was

doing her was taking her to that place of euphoria that provided the antidote to her pain.

When he slid her body down that shower wall, he sucked her breasts hard and unrelenting and with an urgency they both were feeling. But it was when he entered her that he knew, in that moment he thrust into her with a hard, stinging thrust, that she was his again. That they were on the same page again. That nobody was ever going to take her away from him, or him from her.

Slapping sounds were all that could be heard in that shower stall as they made love for what seemed like a full hour. And even after they both came, Mick wasn't done. He carried her out of the shower, dried them both off, and then carried her to his bed where he got on top of her and made love to her again.

Roz was squirming in bed, as those feelings overtook her body again, and her pain and Bella Caine and what Duke felt he was forced to do to protect her honor became faint memories as all she could see and think about and experience was Mick. He had that way of taking her there. And he took her even harder than he took her in the shower. He took control of her body until it wasn't even hers anymore. She belonged to him. And she loved it.

When they came, it was Roz who broke loose first. Her orgasm had her wriggling and arching and squeezing and scratching Mick's back so passionately that Mick came too. And as he poured into her, he began kissing her, which only heightened their passion. They came hard. And for such a long time that it didn't seem possible that they were ever going to stop.

Until they stopped.

Until they were so emptied of every ounce of passion they had within them that there was absolutely nothing left. Leaving it all on the court might have been a basketball

phrase, but it was exactly what they had done.

It would take several more minutes before either one of them had the ability to move. And that was when Mick finally pulled out of Roz and laid on his back. That was when Roz cuddled up against him and he placed his arms around her. They remained as they were for several minutes more.

But as the time ticked away, so did their euphoria. And suddenly they were back to reality. Suddenly they were back to who was Patrick and why did Mick have Bella Caine on his arm again.

It was hardest on Roz. She couldn't get over that video image. And the pain she saw, not just on Duke's face, but on Jackie's face too. They loved their parents. It would break their hearts if their parents divorced. Would break Roz's heart too. But she knew it had to be addressed. They were going to slip and fall and break their necks from all the bullshit they swept under rugs.

She wasn't sweeping this one under.

"Mick?"

Mick knew that tone. He steeled himself. "Yes?"

"Did you fuck her?" It was blunt and Roz wasn't going to back down from it. "And if you did," she added, the pain all over her face, "did you use protection?"

Mick felt enraged when she asked him that question. As if he'd do anything to jeopardize her safety. He looked at her. "There was no need for protection," he said to her.

"That's not what I asked you."

Mick's patience, such as it was, left. "That's my answer. Don't ask me a question like that again."

Roz looked at him. "I'll ask you any question I damn well please. Why were you in Paris with Bella Caine? Answer that, motherfucker."

Mick said nothing. To him, he said all that needed to be said.

And that angered Roz even more. "Like I said," she said, "you do you. I'm damn sure gonna start doing me." Then she got her naked body out of that bed, went to the bathroom, and slammed the door.

Mick ran his hands through his hair. You bastard, he said of himself. But he was who he was. And he knew he couldn't change. Because he knew he had to be that bastard to keep his family safe and protected. He had to be that bastard to keep his enemies at bay. And if that bastard ever ceased to be the brutal asshole he was, Mick knew better than anybody alive that he would disintegrate in spectacular fashion, and take Roz and the children straight down with him.

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The next night in the massive game room inside his home, Mick sat on the sofa watching Duke and Jackie go hard at the ping-pong table. With his legs folded as he was casually dressed in a pullover sweater and blue jeans, he watched Duke take a ten-point lead over his twin sister, but Jackie was rallying. That ten-point lead dwindled to four. But Mick wanted Duke to win. Because if he lost it would have meant that he eased up, got cocky, figured he had it in the bag when he didn't have shit in shit. He was staring intensely at his son.

Duke and Jackie knew it too. Every time they took peeps at their father, they saw him staring unyieldingly at Duke. That was why Duke was sweating bullets as he played. He knew he couldn't lose with his father watching him. To his dad, it would be more than just losing a game. It would be losing a game to a girl. Losing a game when he should have won. Losing a game when he was Mick Sinatra's son and no son of Mick the Tick's lost at anything.

That was why Jackie knew she could rally, but she couldn't overtake her beloved brother. She could easily beat him: she always bested Duke at every game they played. But not in front of their dad.

Roz entered the game room decked down, the twins noticed, in a bodycon dress that highlighted every curve of her magnificent physique, and Christian Louboutin boots that were made for marching. With a jacket over her arm and round shades over her eyes, she looked like a movie star to her children.

When Mick saw her, his dick immediately went hard.

"Where are you headed, Ma?" Duke asked after glancing over at her as he and Jackie

continued to battle it out.

“I’m going out,” Roz said as she began putting on gloves. Mick said nothing.

Then Roz looked around the room. “Where’s Big Daddy?”

“He went back to Jericho,” Duke said.

“I thought he wasn’t going back until tomorrow.”

“He said he needed to get back to Auntie Jenay. She’s in the hospital again. Donny says he never leaves her side for too long whenever she’s hospitalized.”

Roz nodded. “Now that’s what I call a great man. A man that loves his children and his wife and takes time out for them even though he’s got a lot going on. That’s why all his children turned out the way they did. He raised them right.”

Duke and Jackie glanced over at their father, who remained motionless. But the twins knew he was a neglectful father to their older siblings before their mother made him shape up and fly right by the time they were born.

“We could learn a lot from Big Daddy,” Roz added.

But just as she said those words, she looked at her children and realized what was happening. They kept taking peeps at Mick. And Duke looked terrified of losing in front of his father, while Jackie looked as if she was holding back her best game to protect her brother. All because of that stern eye of Mick. And Roz didn’t like it. He wasn’t going to turn their children into robots like him. Over her dead body!

“Why are you two playing like you’re in a death match? Stop it. Just stop. Put those paddles down right now and look at me.”

They both feared their mother almost as much as they feared their father and they put down their paddles and looked at her.

“It’s not a competition, you hear me? You’re taking the fun out of a game. And that’s all this is: a game. And guess what you do with a game? You play it. You don’t become it. You play. So stop treating it as if it’s a life or death situation that you have to win.” Then she looked at Jackie. “Or lose,” she added. “All you have to do when you play a game is have fun. You hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” they said almost in unison.

“When you pick back up those paddles just play. Don’t keep score, just play.”

The twins glanced at their father, but a relief came over both of them when they got permission from their mother to have fun. And that was what they did. They stopped keeping score, although they knew their father still would, and they began to just play the game and enjoy playing it the way they did when they weren’t under their father’s gaze.

“That’s better,” Roz said, and then she turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Mick asked her.

Roz looked at him. She slid her shades down her nose so that he could see her eyes. “I said I was going out.” Then she waited, daring him to ask her out where. She dared him to question her the way he refused to let her question his movements.

But oddly enough, a little tinge of hurt came over her when he didn’t bother asking where. “Don’t wait up,” she said, and walked out of the game room.

The twins quickly glanced at their father. They knew he loved their mother, just as

they knew he loved them, but it was always some kind of wall that he constructed himself that kept him from showing how he truly felt the way a normal person would. He just continued to sit there.

Several minutes later, after Roz was long since gone, they watched their father get up. But he didn't go after their mother. He went upstairs.

But what the twins didn't know was that he didn't go upstairs out of indifference. He went upstairs and made a call to the detail chief assigned to his wife.

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Roz and Sandra clang their wine glasses and took sips as they sat across from each other in a restaurant booth.

“On some level it has to hurt, Roz,” Sandra said. Roz was her talent agent for all of her Broadway gigs, and they didn’t exactly fraternize the way they used to, but they’d been friends for a long time.

“It does hurt,” Roz admitted. “On many levels. I mean look at me. Putting on this sexy dress to have dinner with you.” Sandra laughed. “And he hardly glanced at me.”

“That’s how Drayson is too. I tried everything to please that man, but it was never enough.”

“You talk like he’s past tense.”

“He is. As soon as you fired him, he fired me as his girlfriend.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. He was only using me to get ahead. He didn’t give a damn about me. But you know what? I feel lighter, and freer, without him.” Then she looked at Roz. “You will, too, if you get rid of your ball and chain.”

“Girl please. That ball and chain is the father of my children. And I love him so much it’s not even funny.”

“What in the world could you love about him ?” Sandra asked. She’d only met him

twice, and he was unfriendly both times. “He’s got a good look about him,” she added. “And I heard he was great in bed.” Then she realized what she’d just said. “Before he met you, I mean.” That wasn’t what she meant, but Roz dismissed it. Mick was a lot of things, but nobody was going to convince her that he was a cheater.

Roz exhaled. “People don’t believe this,” she said, “but he’s an honorable man.”

Sandra couldn’t help it. She let out a laugh. “Mick Sinatra honorable? Are you serious? Roz, he’s a mobster. I know you can’t admit it to me, but I heard of him before you started dating him. He’s Mafia.”

“All lies,” Roz said, although she knew it wasn’t. “Anyway, I just wanted to let you know I’m still working on getting you that role.”

“Have you met with Darryl yet? He’s the one standing in my way.”

Roz nodded. “Negative. He won’t give me a meeting. At least not to talk about you. And you’re my top priority. This role will win you a Tony, I guarantee it. But Darryl’s being so stubborn.”

“First Patrick told you I had an audition. Then he tells you Darryl won’t allow it. Why is he blackballing me like that?”

“That’s just what he does. Don’t worry about that.” Then she stared at Sandra. “I haven’t seen you since that shooting. How have you been?”

Sandra shook her head. “It was traumatizing, but I’m okay. You?”

“I’m good.”

“Yes, you are.” It was a male’s voice.

Both ladies looked and saw Patrick walking up to their booth. Sandra was excited. Roz was suspicious. "What are you doing here?" she asked him.

"We had some unfinished business I thought. I'm here to get it resolved."

"Sandra has an audition?" asked Roz. "That's the only resolution I'm looking for."

Sandra watched him with anticipation in her eyes. Then Patrick smiled. "Darryl has agreed to a meeting."

Sandra hadn't expected to hear that. Roz either. Sandra smiled. "A meeting to talk about me?" she asked Patrick.

"You're the one Roz wants in his biggest Broadway production in years. So yeah."

Roz looked at Patrick. "When does he want to meet?"

"I'll be honest with you. He doesn't want to meet."

Sandra frowned. "Then why did you say he wanted to meet?"

Roz wanted to hear that answer too.

"He's at my hotel right now," Patrick said to Roz. "He's meeting with a few investors. After that meeting, if you're already there," Patrick added, "I'm certain he'll meet with you. Nobody can make the case for Sandy better than you can, Roz."

"But why should she believe him now? He promised me an audition when he was on the phone with you, then he called it off. But he won't renege on his promise if he makes it directly to you."

Roz knew it too. She began grabbing her gloves. “Let’s do this,” she said as she slid off of the booth seat. “I’ll give you a call after the meeting,” she said to Sandra.

“Please do, Roz. I’m gonna be on pins and needles. Call me whether the news is good or bad.” Then Sandra excitedly hugged her neck. “Good luck,” she said, and Roz and Patrick hurried out of the restaurant.

Patrick glanced back at Sandra. Sandra smiled and nodded her head.

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When they entered his hotel suite, Roz could hear a voice talking in what she assumed to be a back office inside the luxurious suite, and she recognized it as the voice of Darryl Siskind, one of the biggest producers on Broadway.

“I think he’s on the phone,” said Patrick. “Come on back.”

They walked into the back office that actually was a back bedroom, and as soon as they walked in, Roz realized that the voice was indeed that of Darryl Siskind. But he wasn’t there. The voice was coming from a recording device.

Roz frowned. “What kind of bullshit is this?”

Patrick was standing behind her, and just as she was about to turn around to confront him, he grabbed her from behind, attempted to cover her mouth with a roll of duct tape she didn’t know he had picked up, but she managed to bite his hand, forcing him to remove his hand from her mouth. Then she attempted to back-kick him in the balls with her boot, but she kicked his thigh instead. But that thigh kick was enough to bend him over and loosen his grip on her. She started screaming for help from the top of her lungs and tried to run out of the room, but he slung her back onto the bed.

But Roz kept fighting. She threw a vase at him. She threw the lamp at him. She threw the landline phone at him. But Patrick, now enraged that she would deign to fight back, kept coming after her. Much bigger than Roz, he slapped her and then turned her onto her stomach. With that duct tape still in his hand, he managed to lightly wrap the tape around her wrists.

But Roz was still feisty. And still trying to kick him and squirm away from him. But

he finally removed her coat, tossing it to the floor, and then he overpowered her and duct-taped her wrists with much more tape.

“You scream and I’ll kill you,” he said to her.

Roz knew that if she screamed, he would only duct tape her mouth. She remained silent. But her silence in no way meant she was giving up as he straddled her body and then lifted her dress.

When he lifted her dress, he smiled when he saw how sexy her lingerie was. “I heard he liked strippers, and these panties proves that.” He licked his lips. “I’m going to enjoy the hell out of this piece of fine, choice meat.”

With beads of sweat all over his forehead, and his penis throbbing, he slowly pulled down her panties, thrilled by the view, and then happily unzipped his pants.

Panic set in for Roz as she could hear his breathing changing and she knew that sound because it was the same sound Mick made whenever he was about to enter her. But then she could hear his pants unzipping and she knew it was now or never. She knew she had to act. The problem was that she only had one option, and it wasn’t a great one.

It took all she had within her because part of his weight was bearing down on her, but she managed to lift her booted foot and kick backwards as far and as hard as she could. Her kick landed against his back, and he squirmed with surprise and sudden pain and quickly rolled off of her body as if somebody else had kicked him.

As soon as he rolled off of her, Roz rolled off of that bed, scrambled down on the floor as she crawled as fast as she could to her overcoat. She knew her Glock was in her coat pocket. She knew she had to get that gun!

But as she was fumbling to get it out of her coat pocket with both of her wrists duct-taped together, panic tried to overtake her when she realized Patrick had gotten off of the bed and was hurrying to her.

She was now so nervous that she was making mistakes. The gun kept getting caught in the lining of her coat and she couldn't pull it out. But when he hurried to within feet of her, she managed to snatch out that Glock and hold it with both hands with her finger on the trigger, aiming it straight for his forehead. Her wrists were taped, and it limited her movement, but she had control of that gun.

Patrick was shocked that she would have a gun, and he stopped in his tracks.

"What you stopping for?" Roz angrily yelled at the man she thought was her friend. "Why you stopping? Keep coming, you bastard! Keep coming!"

Then they both heard the door of the hotel kick open and the sound of footsteps running to the back room. Mick, along with Roz's security detail, ran into the bedroom where they could still hear Darryl Siskind's voice on that recorder. When Roz saw that it was Mick and her detail crew, she was so relieved that her entire body slumped down.

And while Mick's capos subdued Patrick, Mick ran to Roz and fell to his knees where she sat on the floor.

"I'm okay," she said before he could ask her. "I'm okay."

But when Mick saw the slap mark on her face, and her disheveled hair, and her underwear down around her knees, and the duct tape, his heart dropped. He pulled up her panties immediately, and he pulled down her dress. Then he began removing the duct tape from her wrists. "What did he do to you?"

“He didn’t do shit to me,” Roz said defiantly. “Not that shit anyway. He tried to. That asshole tried to. But this Glock stopped him.”

But behind her bluster, the reality of what could have been brought tears to her eyes. “This Glock stopped him,” she said again as if she knew how close she’d come. And Mick, knowing it too, suddenly turned his entire being from relief that Roz was well to rage that the man who had tried to make her unwell was still alive and well himself.

He hopped to his feet. “Mick wait ,” Roz pleaded, because she knew how otherworldly his temper could get once it was unleashed.

But Mick didn’t even hear her. He hurried to the would-be rapist and threw him across the room so hard that the wall he slammed into dented into the shape of Patrick’s body. And as soon as Patrick hit one wall, Mick grabbed him and threw him against another wall, denting that wall too. Then he hurried to Patrick and began punching him so hard that bones in his face were breaking with every massive blow. He was throwing punch after punch. Beating the man down to the floor. Then he stood him up, slammed him against the wall again, and began punching him even harder.

As his men marveled at how quickly he was hitting that asshole, as if he was a heavyweight championship fighter, and how hard he was hitting him, the legend of Mick the Tick was reborn. Every one of his men knew that their boss packed a punch unlike anybody they knew, but to hear bones breaking in Patrick’s face, and to see blood gushing as he punched so unrelentingly mercilessly was a sight to behold.

But Roz scrambled to her feet and tried to stop Mick.

“We need to know why, Mick,” she said anxiously. “We need to know why!”

But Mick wouldn't let up. Nobody came for his wife and lived to tell the story. Nobody !

But it wasn't until Roz cried out, " He's got to live to tell us why ," did Mick finally understand that Patrick was within seconds of death by his lethal hands. Was it just lust, as Mick had absolutely at first thought, or was Roz's suggestion the right one and there might be more to it than that? Patrick knew who Mick was. Their earlier encounter at that same hotel proved that. Nobody in his right mind, knowing who Mick Sinatra was, would dare to touch his wife unless something else was at stake. Something so major that it was worth such a deadly risk.

And when Mick realized it, too, he stopped his brutal assault.

Patrick, nearly dead, fell to his knees.

"Get up!" Mick ordered. "Get your ass up!"

Patrick hurried to his feet, relying on the wall to aid him, but every part of his face seemed disjointed, and his entire body felt as if it was on fire. There was no way he could stand. He started sliding right back down.

Mick motioned to his capos. They quickly grabbed Patrick and sat him on the bed. When he couldn't even sit up and tried to fall sideways, they held him upright.

Roz walked over and stood in front of Patrick, her arms folded. And although she liked him more than she respected him, she never dreamed in her wildest dreams that he'd be capable of this . She had a look that was as puzzled as it was angry. "Why would you try something like this, Patrick? Why? I've known you for years. We were supposed to be working together. Knowing who my husband is, why would you do something this stupid?"

“I need a doctor,” Patrick said, barely able to speak.

But Mick backhanded him upside his already destroyed face. “Answer my wife!” he ordered.

“They made me do it.”

Mick and his men were interested. Roz was puzzled. “Who made you do it?” she asked him.

“These Mafia guys. I don’t know who they are. They told me I had no choice. They told me I had to do it or it would be me the next time.”

“They told you that you had to rape my wife?” Mick asked.

Patrick nodded. “That’s what they said. I need a doctor,” he cried out, his face still stinging in unbearable pain.

“You’ll need an undertaker if you don’t answer questions,” Mick said. “What mob guys would order you to rape my wife?”

“I don’t know who they are. I don’t have any ties to the mob. But they killed Marvin.”

Mick frowned. “Who’s Marvin?”

“His dog,” Roz said. “He was like his child.”

Mick rolled his eyes. People and these animal attachments baffled him.

“They said the same fate would happen to me if I didn’t do exactly what they said,”

Patrick continued. "That's why I told Roz about this juicy role in this major production at the same time Sandra told her she wanted the part. It was my way in. It was how I would have a legitimate way of getting her up to my room."

"Was that your plan the night I showed up at the hotel?"

Patrick nodded. "Yes. That was the plan."

Mick exhaled. He wanted another round with that motherfucker. But Roz thought of something else. "Sandra was in on this too?" she asked Patrick.

"My first job was to get her in bed, and I did as soon as I hit town. Then I told her about the juicy starring role, but I told her all the actresses had to go through their agents to get an audition. That's when I told her to ask you about the part, but to not mention that we were seeing each other. She thought I was doing her a favor. She didn't know what I was up to."

Then he started crying. "I had no choice, Roz. They said they have worldwide power. They said I can't hide anywhere on this planet. I had no choice."

But Mick wasn't buying it. "You would rape my wife, knowing who I am, because they killed your damn dog and because they claimed to be powerful? What the fuck you think I am? Weak ?!" Mick shook his head. "You're selling that shit, but I'm not buying it."

Roz looked at Mick.

"Tell me the truth," Mick added, "or you'll join that damn dog."

"Okay, I'll tell you the truth," Patrick caved and said. After the beatdown, he had no reason to ever doubt Mick's word that he'd kill him. "They did kill Marvin and

brought him to me. In a box they brought him to me. They did kill him. But . . .”

“But what?” Roz asked him.

“They also offered me money.”

Mick froze. “Money? How much money?”

“I couldn’t turn it down, Roz, I couldn’t. They knew I was divorced and had all this debt riding me. And the gambling.”

“How much did they offer you?” Mick asked impatiently.

Patrick could hardly breath through his broken nose. “Four.”

“Four what?” Roz asked him. “Thousand?”

“Million,” Patrick said.

Roz was floored. “ Four million dollars ?”

But Mick and his capos were stunned. “Boss,” said one of them. “It’s the same thing Beppie said. You think there’s a connection?”

Roz looked at Mick. “A connection to what?”

But Mick was looking at Patrick. “Do you know Beppie Gastone?”

Patrick shook his head. “I don’t know anybody by that name. I told you I wasn’t into that mob world. But I couldn’t turn down that much money. My career was stalling. I had bills to pay. They already put the money in an offshore account in my name. It

was too tempting.”

The capos looked at Mick again. It was the same thing Monk Paletti had supposedly done for Beppie.

Mick pulled out his cellphone, googled Frankie “The Monk” Paletti, and clicked on a photograph of him. He showed that picture to Patrick. “Was this the man you met with?”

Patrick shook his head. “That guy right there looks like a gangster from a Humphrey Bogart movie.”

“Is he the one?” asked Mick.

“No. I never saw him before. The guy that came to my hotel room was different. And more muscular.”

“You said they had already put four million dollars in your bank account?” Roz asked.

“In an offshore account in my name. To access it, I just had to do what they told me to do.”

“What did they tell you to do?”

“Rape her for every million dollars in that account. If I raped her two times, I’d get two million. Three times, three million. And so on.”

Roz was still baffled. “But why would somebody tell you to rape me? How would that help them?”

Patrick hunched his shoulders. "Revenge maybe. I don't know. But I had to do it exactly the way they told me to do it."

"How would they know?"

"They put a camera up so they could witness it."

"A camera?" Mick asked as he and Roz both were floored. "Where?"

Patrick pointed to a clock on the dresser.

"That the only one?" Mick asked as he hurried to the dresser.

Patrick nodded.

Mick went over, grabbed a Kleenex from a box on the dresser, and then used the tissue to keep his fingerprints off of the clock as he disassembled it in a way that no more recordings could take place.

"Get a plastic bag," he ordered one of his capos. "I want our forensic guys to run the prints."

"Yes, sir," the capo said as he left the room.

"Where did you meet these people?" Mick asked Patrick. "And how many was it?"

"I only met one. He came to my hotel room. With Marvin's body in a box. But they said they were an organization."

"When they come?"

“Four nights ago.”

“What time?” Mick asked.

“I need a doctor!”

Roz’s detail chief slapped Patrick upside his head. “What time, you prick? Answer the boss.”

“Around eleven that night,” Patrick said, his pain seemingly getting worse.

“You’re certain it was four nights ago?”

“Yeah, I’m certain. They killed my dog and had him in a box. How can I forget that day?”

Mick looked at the detail chief. “Tell the hotel manager I want the video,” he said.

“I’m on it personally, Boss,” the detail chief said and hurried out of the room.

“Keep him here,” Mick ordered his other capo, “until you hear from me.”

“But what about a doctor?” Patrick asked.

Roz took her booted foot and kicked him in the face, causing him to scream out in pain. “There’s your doctor,” she said.

Then Mick got her out of there.

But they didn’t leave the hotel.

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When Mick and Roz got into the Escalade, Big Ed sat behind the steering wheel while Vincent, riding shotgun, sat on the front passenger seat. Mick and Roz sat on the middle row. “Who’s Beppie Gastone?” she asked.

“One of my dock supervisors. He claims Frankie gave him four million dollars in exchange for our unload time. They wanted to intercept three of my largest ships.”

Roz could not believe her ears. “Frankie Paletti? Are you telling me The Monk turned on you?”

Mick shook his head. “That hasn’t been established.”

“But you think it’s Monk Paletti?”

“That’s what Gastone said, but I don’t know that yet.”

“But you think the same guy that gave your capo four million dollars also gave four million to Patrick?”

“It’s looking like it, although your so-called friend said it wasn’t Monk who met with him.”

Roz leaned her head back. “This is getting wild. Got damn.” Then she looked at Mick. “Your timing was perfect. Thank you.”

But Mick had a nagging question. “Why would you go to his hotel room?”

“To meet Darryl Siskind. A producer I needed to see. That was his voice on that recorder you were hearing. Patrick was supposedly bringing me up to his room to meet with Darryl. Or at least I thought that was what we were going to do before I found out it was all a scheme. But what kind of scheme I still I don’t understand.”

Mick continued to stare at Roz.

“What?” she asked him.

“Had that been me in some woman’s hotel room with that kind of lame excuse, you’d be all over me.”

“Damn right I would because you’re the one with the past. I’m not. You don’t have shit on me. I have binders full of shit on your ass. So don’t even go there,” she added.

Then she exhaled. “I just want to know why somebody would want Patrick to abuse me like that.”

“If he’s telling the truth.”

“And if he is?”

“Whether he is or isn’t won’t change his fate. He’s a useful idiot to me right now in case I need to get more intel from him. But once his usefulness is over, he’s over.”

Roz looked at Mick.

Mick looked at her. “He tried to rape you. What did you expect was going to happen to him? I pat him on the back and send him on his way?”

“You already nearly killed him.”

“And the job will be finished. I let these fuckers out here do something like that to you then it’s open season. Whosoever will will come for me, you, and the children.”

“Over my dead body,” Roz said.

“No,” Mick corrected her. “Over theirs.”

Roz nodded her agreement. She was still a little pissed with Mick, but there was no denying he’d do anything for her.

Roz’s detail chief knocked on the window and then Vincent got out and let him sit in.

“That was quick,” Roz said as he turned to them.

“Once I saw who it was,” the detail chief said, “I knew what we had.”

“Who is it?” Roz asked.

“Hate to tell you this, Boss. I know he’s married to your brother’s adopted daughter.”

Mick exhaled. She and Roz both knew Monk was married to Big Daddy’s adopted daughter Ashley. They both hated to hear that. “So it was Frankie Paletti after all?” Mick asked.

“The Monk?” The detail chief shook his head. “No, sir. I’m not talking about Ashley’s old man. I’m talking about Carly’s old man. It was Trevor Reese.”

Mick and Roz both were floored. Roz placed her hands on the sides of her face in disbelief. “Trevor?”

“Show me,” Mick ordered.

The detail chief quickly pulled up the video he had recorded from the hotel security cameras and handed his phone to Mick. And there it was: Trevor Reese knocking on Patrick's door four nights ago right around eleven that night. And he had a box in his hand that was big enough to carry the body of a dog.

Roz looked at her baffled husband. "Trevor Reese would order him to rape me?" She was dumbstruck. "What in the world is going on, Mick?"

But Mick leaned back. He was as in the dark as she was.

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That night, Roz was lying in bed after bathing three separate times. She got the filth off her, but not the memories. She couldn't stop thinking about what Patrick was willing to do to her for money. For money ! She knew he was vain and flirtatious, but she always viewed him as harmless in the end. She never dreamed he was capable of something that heinous.

She looked across the bedroom at Mick. He had gotten in the tub and bathe her himself the first time, and then he put on his bathrobe and made tons of phone calls. He was still on the phone pacing the floor and talking. He didn't have it on Speaker, but she could hear Teddy's loud voice.

"They ran the prints on that camera."

"Let me guess: nothing."

"Not a thing. Need me to do anything about it?"

"Nothing can be done, so no. You just focus on your assignment. I want you to handle that personally."

"Don't worry. I know he's gonna bitch and moan being forced to come all this way. Which safe house you want me to take him to, Pop?"

"None. Bring him here first thing tomorrow. Bring him to me. Frankie too."

"Monk's not gonna like it either. He's already pissed you dragged him to your office. Neither one of them are gonna like it."

“You think I like what that bastard so-called director tried to do to my wife? I don’t give a fuck what they like and don’t like. Bring their asses here as fast as you can get them here.”

“Yes, sir.” Then she heard Teddy say: “It’s just so bizarre, Pop. Why would Trev do that? And why would Beppie say Monk’s guys tried to intercept our cargo? Monk’s got absolute control over the Bonaducci family now. He wouldn’t allow his guys to do that.”

“I told you to trust no one but your family. And sometimes you can’t even trust those motherfuckers. Bring them in,” Mick ordered, and ended the call.

Then he paced a little longer, made more phone calls to Reno, Sal, and Tommy Gabrini to put them on alert, and then he called his security chief.

Mick stepped out of the room to talk with his security chief. “Pull up Monk Paletti’s recent contacts,” he said. Monk’s syndicate was under Mick’s protection, but Mick made it his business to keep tabs on everybody he was in alliance with. He had an inside guy keeping watch over each organization to make sure they weren’t plotting against his.

After a minute or so, the chief spoke up. “It was only a handful of people.”

“Name them.”

The security chief began naming the people Monk had been doing business with lately.

But one name stood out to Mick. “Carlton Rickie? Did you say Carlton Rickie?”

“That’s right. He now works for The Monk.”

Mick frowned. "I thought his ass was still locked up."

"He just got out."

"When?"

The chief had to check the date. "A couple months ago."

"Find out where he is," Mick said. "Text me as soon as you locate him. And call Nikki and tell her I want her on standby."

"Yes, sir," the chief said, and Mick ended the call. Carlton Rickie, got damn, he thought. He was out? And this shit at the docks and with his wife and even with Bella Caine was suddenly popping off? No way Mick was going to believe that was a coincidence.

"Mick?"

It was Roz. He reentered their bedroom.

"You need to get some rest," she said to him.

"I told you to stop worrying about me."

"I told you to stop worrying about me. Has that stopped you?"

"No."

"Then it's not going to stop me," Roz said, "now come to bed."

Mick smiled. If any other woman even thought about talking to him the way Roz did,

he'd be out of there. But she knew his bravado was full of shit when it came to her.

He removed his bathrobe, his naked body as perfect as it was the day Roz met him, and he lifted his body over her and got in bed behind her.

When she felt his arm encircle her own naked body as he spooned her, she intertwined her hand with his hand. She could feel his other hand between her legs, massaging her. They weren't on great terms before that ordeal at the hotel, but they were, at least for now, on the same page again.

But she was confused. "I know we saw Trevor Reese showing up at Patrick's hotel room, but what does Monk Paletti have to do with Patrick?"

"I don't know that he does. It's the money that's the connection. The offshore account is the connection too. Whoever is behind this seems to be going after guys who they know will take the money and run."

"But Monk denied any involvement with your cargo, right?"

"They always deny it. That don't mean shit to me."

Roz liked that Mick took nothing at face value. "I want to be there tomorrow when you meet with them."

"You will."

Roz was surprised to hear him give in without a fight. "Really?"

Mick had his eyes closed. He was drained. "Really."

"Why?"

“I won’t hear the last of it if I forbid you from being there. That’s why,” he said.

“In that case,” a happy Roz said as she pushed her butt closer against his penis, “you’ve earned the right to have at it.”

A small smile escaped Mick’s hard face, but he hesitated. “After what happened tonight are you sure?”

Roz frowned. “Hell yeah I’m sure. I’m not letting that bastard stop my life. Besides, my boot and that Glock stopped him.”

“In that case,” Mick said with a smile of his own. Then both of their smiles turned into satisfied looks as he entered her and began moving inside of her with slow, easy strokes. So slow and so easy that Roz fell asleep. Which was exactly Mick’s goal. He knew she was more emotionally spent than she was letting on, and she was the one who needed to rest.

He had hoped to pull out once she dozed off, because he was drained too, but he didn’t have the willpower to do so. He kept stroking and stroking her until he came. Hard. He couldn’t stop himself.

But then, after that release, he dozed off too.

A little over an hour later, he was still awake when the text from his security chief came through. After reading it, he eased his penis out of a peacefully sleeping Roz, then he eased his body out of bed. And then he suited up.

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Nikki was leaned against her car outside of their office at the docks as Mick's big black Cadillac Escalade drove up. She didn't know what it was about. She just knew it was late, she was sleepy, and Teddy was on assignment handling the Monk and Trevor issue for his father. The only good news was that she didn't have to worry about their daughter: she was already spending the night at her grandfather's house with the twins, who, at their young age, were her aunt and uncle.

Mick saw Nikki standing there in her jeans and blazer, her hair long and flowing in a style that made her look badass to Mick. Every time he saw her his heart was pleased. She had what it took. Whatever it was, she had it. And truth be told, Mick knew that had she been Italian, and had she been male, she would have given Teddy a run for his money to become boss of Mick's entire outfit.

She hopped up on the front passenger seat of his SUV. When she saw that he was suited up in his long, tricked-out white coat, his black trousers and black turtleneck, she knew this wasn't going to be a simple assignment. "Hey."

"How are you?" Mick asked as he began driving away.

"I'd be better if I knew what this is about."

"I need to pay a visit to somebody I thought was still locked up."

Nikki waited for more details, but he didn't give them and she didn't have the nerve to ask. She was a tough cookie. She knew she could hold her own against anybody on this planet. But when she was around Mick, it was a different story. He was a hard man to please and an easy man to piss off. It was like walking on eggshells around

him. Even Teddy, who was tougher than she'd ever be, felt that way too. And he was his father! They rode in silence all the way there.

He drove down a wet, mold-infested back alley on the southside of Philly. Mick parked his SUV about fifteen feet away from a door in which two bodyguards stood beside. And although Mick got out of the SUV and made his way to that door without giving Nikki any instruction, she knew instinctively that he didn't bring her there to follow him around. But to back him up. She immediately moved her body from the front passenger seat to the driver seat and got behind the steering wheel. When one of the guards opened the steel door and allowed Mick passage through, Nikki drove the SUV further into the alley, to see where the exits were, and to find another door.

Inside the door Mick had entered, the sound of loud, festive club goers could be heard upfront. But Mick made his way to the back where the private rooms were. And when he turned a corner, he could see the man he came to see in one of those rooms, sitting alone on a couch. His body was bent over the coffee table in front of the couch, as he snorted a line of cocaine. When it went up his nose he leaned back and closed his eyes: to take it all in.

"Carlton Rickie in the flesh," said Mick. "You did your dirt and disappeared. I thought they had you in the witness protection program."

When Carlton opened his getting-high eyes and saw a man talking to him, his reflexes were slowing. But when he finally realized that it was Mick the Tick, who hadn't changed in decades, his eyes stretched in horror. "Motherfuck!" he yelled out, and then immediately jumped up to run away.

But Mick hurried into that room and grabbed Carlton and tried to punch him hard, but Carlton was a fighter too. He blocked Mick's punch and instead punched him in the gut. It nearly took Mick's breath away, but it enraged him too. He grabbed Carlton by the neck, kneed him in the chin, and then had the leverage to begin a flurry of

punches that connected every time. It was blow after blow. It was devastating. Carlton was throwing punches too, as hard as he could, but he was only connecting with air.

Now Carlton wasn't trying to fight anymore, because he knew he couldn't win. He was trying to get away.

But every time he tried, Mick threw him against a wall and started punching him even more. When he hit the floor, Mick was kicking him like he was a dog and stomping on him. But he saw a baseball bat when he hit that floor and he grabbed it, turned onto his back, and hit Mick hard on his leg.

The pain shot through Mick's body so completely that it gave Carlton just enough time to get up and run out of the back door.

Mick grimaced because of the excruciating pain, and then he limped out of the back door too. As soon as he hurried out, he saw Carlton running across the alley just as Nikki sped up in his Escalade and knocked Carlton down. And that was why he always preferred her as his backup: she knew what to do and where to be.

He hurried over, grabbed Carlton up from the ground, and then threw him onto the middle row of his SUV. He got in behind him, slamming the door. Nikki sped away.

But Mick didn't waste any time. He gave him another beating that dislocated Carlton's eye socket. A move Mick knew would force Carlton to willingly give up intel.

"Why did you hire that bastard to rape my wife?" he asked him angrily.

Nikki glanced at Mick through the rearview mirror. Teddy told her about the attempted rape. Mick was talking as if it had actually happened. But she remembered

who was involved. Mick didn't play when it came to any of the family, but especially when it came to Roz. An attempt in Mick's eyes, whenever it concerned Roz, was just as bad as the real thing.

But Carlton Rickie, who was holding his eye in excruciating pain, wasn't willing to go that far. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you lie to me!" Mick yelled as he punched him again.

Carlton knew then that he was going to get his other eye socket dislocated if he didn't come clean. "I didn't hire him," he blurted out, but before Mick could strike him again he quickly added: "But I know who did."

Nikki looked at him through the rearview.

"Who?" Mick asked.

Mick could tell Carlton didn't want to give up the name, but he gave it up. "Hammer Reese's kid brother. Trevor Reese," he said.

Nikki's already big eyes stretched wider. She knew that was insane, just like she knew it was crazy when Monk Paletti was implicated in the intercept scheme.

But Mick was staring at Carlton. "How do you know it was Trevor?"

"I was in the room when it was decided."

"In what room?"

"A hotel room. They had the guy to do it. Some arrogant Broadway director. But they needed to figure out what they wanted done to her."

“To my wife?”

“Right.”

“And what did they decide?”

“Rape. Four million bucks for four rapes back to back to back to back. They wanted it just like that.”

Then Mick asked the question he never asked right away: “Who’s they? Who else was in that room?”

“It was me, Trevor Reese, and Monk Paletti,” Carlton said.

Nikki looked at Mick through the rearview when Carlton named those names. Mick looked deflated.

“But why?” Nikki blurted out. She couldn’t help it.

But Carlton wouldn’t answer her. “You let your help interrupt your conversation?” he asked Mick.

Mick gut-punched him. “Answer her question,” he ordered.

“Why they chose that Broadway producer? Because he and your wife were flirty with each other. They knew each other. Which meant easier access to your heavily guarded wife. And he was a terrible gambler who owed too many people big bucks. He needed the money.”

“Not why they hired him,” Nikki said, “but why would Trevor Reese and Frankie Paletti want Mrs. Sinatra harmed?”

Carlton looked at Mick with his one good eye. “Because she was a good target. The Monk is a powerful man now. He’s consolidated all of the Bonaducci fractions around his leadership. Now he’s not satisfied anymore. He wants to move up that mountain. You’re standing in his way. But needed to get you distracted before he came after you.”

Nikki wanted to ask more questions, but she could see that Mick was thinking it through as he continued to stare at Carlton. Then Mick spoke. “What’s your relationship with Monk Paletti?”

“I want to help him dethrone you,” Carlton said honestly and easily. “You know the routine: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Because I’ll never forget what your ass did to Alfonse,” he added.

And as soon as she said it, a knife blade appeared from inside Carlton’s shirt sleeve. And as he was saying those words and had Mick paying attention to those words, he tried to slash Mick’s stomach with that blade.

But at the last second, Mick saw the flash of the knife and grabbed Carlton’s wrist.

Nikki quickly pulled over to the side of the road as the two men tussled for control of that knife. Mick was attempting to keep the knife away from his stomach while also attempting to turn it toward Carlton’s stomach, while Carlton was keeping the knife within an inch of slicing Mick. It was a battle of brute force.

But in the end, Mick had more brute. He not only kept the knife away from his stomach, but he turned it toward Carlton’s stomach and sliced it until he nearly sliced it in two.

Nikki was amazed when she turned and saw Carlton stunned by how deep Mick went in on him. And then, as if his shock was enough, he slumped over dead.

Nikki looked at Mick as if her eyes were asking if he had to be that brutal.

But she didn't know the backstory. It was payback for Mick. From a long, long time ago.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

The security detail Mick ordered to blanket Bella Caine pulled up to the curb outside of her villa and opened the back passenger door for her. When she got out, one of the capos walked her to her front door.

“Good night, ma’am,” the capo said as she unlocked her door.

“Night, sweetie,” Bella said with a smile and a sweep of her hand as she entered into her big, quiet home and closed and locked the door behind her. Her security guy walked down the steps back to the car grinning at her inebriated state, and the other capo waiting at the car laughed too. It was five-thirty in the morning, Paris time, and she had just left the club after partying all night long with celebrities and spoiled rich kids, giving her security fits trying to keep up with her as they wondered why the boss even cared. But he did, or they would not have been ordered to blanket her.

Inside her home, Bella couldn’t get to her bed fast enough. She didn’t view herself as drunk, but she knew she was getting there, because she knew she couldn’t stand upright for much longer.

She stood at the bedroom door and smiled when she saw her big poster bed awaiting her. She pushed off from the doorjamb and began making her way to the bed.

But as soon as she did, in her dresser mirror she saw the face of a masked man as he was coming up behind her. She screamed and attempted to run away, but he grabbed her from behind and overpowered her and covered her mouth with duct tape. Then he turned her around and began to beat her brutally until she was bloodied.

As she screamed her muffled screams, and as she wiggled and beat on him trying to

get away, another masked male came into her bedroom and helped the first assailant get her onto her bed. She was still fighting as one of them tried to hold her down and the other one, the bigger one, stripped her naked and did the very same thing Patrick had tried to do to Roz.

They took turns four times, a total of four brutal assaults. And when they had finished, the bigger one pulled out a knife and was about to slit Bella's face. But the smaller one stopped him. "Non. C'est un trop beau visage pour le detruire. On nous a ordonné de faire uniquement ce qu'on nous disait de faire." "(No. It's too beautiful a face to destroy. We were ordered to do only what we were told to do)."

The big man didn't like it, but he put his knife away. Then he angrily lifted Bella's small body and threw her against the wall as if she was discarded trash. Then he and the smaller one hurried through the back entrance they had entered into.

Bella was barely conscious as she used the wall to stand upright, trying with all she had to get herself some help. But before she could even push herself away from that wall, her legs buckled, and she lost all ability to do anything at all.

"Mick," she cried. "Mick."

But she was still duct-taped. It was a silent scream.

And then she slid down that wall to the floor, with a heavy trail of blood sliding down that wall right along with her.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Around nine a.m., Philadelphia time, they met in the nicely-appointed basement at Mick's house. Trevor Reese and his wife Carly Sinatra, and Frankie "The Monk" Paletti and his wife Ashley Sinatra, and Teddy and Nikki were waiting downstairs. It wasn't lost on Mick as he and Roz entered the basement, that the two men mentioned in the events of the last few days were both married to biological sisters who also happened to be Big Daddy's adopted daughters. Was there a connection there too, he wondered.

"What's this about, Uncle Mick?" Ashley asked him.

"Everybody sit down," Mick ordered and both couples sat on the sofa together while Teddy and Nikki sat in the chairs. Mick and Roz sat on the second sofa.

"Why are we in the basement?" Ashley wanted to know.

"Privacy," said Mick.

"I told you my guys had nothing to do with that intercept scheme," Monk said. "This is a waste of my time and yours too."

Mick stared at Monk, but then he nodded to Teddy.

Teddy handed Trevor his cell phone. "Play the video," he said.

Monk and Ashley leaned over and watched it, too, as Trevor and Carly watched. Mick and Roz were watching Trevor intensely. So was Teddy and Nikki.

Even Trevor was spooked by the similarities of the man on the video. He looked just like him! “Damn,” he said.

“Were you at the Ritz-Carlton four days ago?” Mick asked him.

“No.”

“Were you in town four days ago?” Teddy asked him.

“Come on, Teddy T. You know I’m not coming to Philly without hitting up one of y’all.”

As they talked, Carly was staring unblinkingly at that figure in the video and was rewinding and relooking and rewinding and relooking. Until she realized what was wrong. “That’s not Trevor,” she blurted out.

Mick looked at his Harvard-educated, African-American niece. She was a sweet young lady he greatly respected and had hoped to have her working for him instead of where she landed: working for and then married to Trevor. Everybody was looking at Carly.

“What do you mean it’s not him?” Roz asked.

“The face is his face. But the physical features aren’t.”

Roz frowned. “What you talking about, Carly?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but Trevor has an extra step in his walk, and his butt is bigger than that.”

Ashley grinned. “His butt?”

Monk looked at his young wife. Although Carly was even younger, she was by far more mature than Ashley. Ashley's immaturity and the fact that she was going back to her partying ways were beginning to cause dissension in her marriage to Monk. And a lot of gossip among his capos.

Mick took the phone from Carly and put the video up on the television screen. They all looked at that video again. "Get up and walk, Trevor," Roz said to him.

"This is so stupid," said Ashley. "It's obviously Trev."

But Trevor knew the backstory about what almost happened to Roz. Mick had informed Trevor's big brother, former CIA Director Hammer Reese, and his brother told him. Understanding the seriousness of it, and anxious to clear his own name, he got up and walked.

And just as Carly had said, Trevor did have a kind of extra step, or skip in his walk. And his butt was larger! He was more muscular, too, than the man in that video.

Mick exhaled. "Smart girl," he said of Carly.

Ashley glanced at her much-hyped baby sister and felt wanting like she always did. As if she was never good enough, and Carly was always better than good. Monk, knowing her insecurity, placed his arm around Ashley.

"But it's Trevor's face," said Roz. "How can that be?"

"It has to be A.I.," Carly said.

But Ashley frowned. "What's A.I.?"

Although some in the room seemed exasperated by Ashley's lack of knowledge,

Monk was always very patient with her. “Artificial Intelligence,” he said to her. “It’s a way to take one image and overlay another image on top of it.”

“They found a guy who they thought fit Trevor’s body build precisely,” Carly said to the group, “and then they used computer technology to place his face over the face of that guy. It’s Artificial Intelligence. It has to be because that is definitely not Trevor’s body.”

“But it still doesn’t answer the question as to why would Patrick use Trevor’s name when he has no involvement?” Roz asked.

Trevor shook his head. “I have no idea,” he said as he sat back down.

“I have no idea why I was summoned to Philly again either,” said Monk, “when I for damn sure have no involvement in that.”

Mick looked at Monk. “How’s Carlton Rickie working out for you?”

When Mick said that name, everybody could see a change in Monk’s demeanor.

“Who’s Carlton Rickie?” Ashley asked Monk.

“What about him?” Monk said to Mick.

“You’re in an alliance with him.”

“The Bonaducci family is, yes.”

Mick exploded. “You’re the head of the Bonaducci family. You’re the Bonaducci family. Don’t you dare play games with me, Frankie!”

“But who is he? Who’s Carlton Rickie?” asked Teddy. “I’ve never heard of him. Who is he, Pop?”

“He’s a man that tried to kill me,” Mick said, and everybody looked at him.

It was news to Monk. “He tried to kill you?”

“When?” Roz asked.

“A long time ago. Years. After I killed his brother.”

Monk and everybody else were surprised to hear that. “You killed his brother?”

“Who was his brother?” Teddy asked.

“Alfonse Rickie. He was a made man in the Costantino crime family back in the day when I was first starting out. He and his guys planned an ambush. I got a beforehand notice within seconds of the shit popping off and I was able to get out of there. And double back and take them all out. Carlton tracked me down about a year later and tried to take me out, but he failed. And got away. Then he went to prison for decades on unrelated racketeering shit. He just got out.”

“He just got out?” Teddy asked with surprise in his voice.

“And suddenly Frankie wants that pile of shit in his camp,” Mick added.

“How was I to know that history, Uncle Mick?” He was not Monk’s uncle, but that was the title of respect everybody gave to him. “You’re the one who knows everything, and we’re supposed to be in an alliance too, but you don’t tell me a thing.”

“Why did you align with Carlton Rickie?” Mick asked him.

“Is he hooked up with the Costantino family still?” Teddy asked.

“Who knows?” Mick said. “He just got out of the joint after decades in and Frankie go sweep him up into his organization like he’s as desperate as his old man was.”

Monk stood up when Mick denigrated his father. It wasn’t unfounded, but it was still wrong in Monk’s eyes. “Say it again, motherfucker,” Monk said to the man he feared, and to the amazement of everybody in that room. Roz looked at Monk as if he had some nerve talking to Mick like that. Nikki was looking at him that way too.

But Teddy, scared for his best friend, quickly stood up. “Let’s cut out the insults, Pop. Frankie don’t deserve the insults. Let’s just focus on what we need to focus on so we can find out what the hell is going on.”

Everybody looked at Mick because they knew the ball was in his court. But Mick was staring unblinkingly at Monk. He could tear him apart with his own bare hands. Even Monk knew that. But Frankie Paletti was a man Mick respected to the highest level. He would not have expected a lesser response from him.

And Monk, realizing Mick was a fair man, after all, sat back down.

“But Pop makes a good point, Frankie,” Teddy said as he sat down too. “What would possess you to hook up with some ex-con with no power? How does he help your crew?”

“He has power,” Monk said.

“What power that pile of shit has?” Mick asked.

“While he was locked up, his son runs the police department. That’s how he got out.”

When Monk made that declaration, Mick and everybody else in the room were surprised.

“I put him under my protection, get him to do stuff that’ll get him locked right back up, and I get the son in my pocket too.”

Teddy grinned. “That’s Frankie. Always a step ahead.”

But Nikki was floored. She looked at Mick. “You didn’t know Carlton Rickie’s son was a big shot in the Police?”

They all assumed Mick miraculously knew everything about everything. “No,” he admitted.

“But what’s the connection?” Roz asked. “Why did they pretend that Trevor was doing their dirty work, whoever they are. And why implicate Monk?”

“Who’s implicating me in this?” asked Monk. “I had nothing to do with what happened to you. I still don’t know why I’m here.”

“Carlton said you were in the room with Trevor when he was plotting to harm my wife.”

Monk was shocked. “He told you that? That’s a lie!”

“I know it and you know it,” said Trevor. “I wasn’t in any room with him either. But that’s what he’s telling.”

“And it takes us right back to where we started from,” said Roz. “Why? Who’s

behind this? What point are they trying to prove?”

“And why is Carlton Rickie lying on us,” added Monk. “I’ll talk to his ass about it.”

“No you won’t. Carlton Rickie is no more,” said Mick as he looked at Monk. “That alliance is over. He had a check that had to be cashed. He had old shit to pay for.”

Monk exhaled. “You could have told me all of that, Uncle Mick. All you had to do was communicate that to me,” he added as Mick’s phone rang that certain tone that let Mick know it was Bella Caine. Roz looked at him. She knew what that tone meant too.

Mick answered the phone. “What is it, Bella?”

“It’s not her, sir. I’m using her phone.”

It was her detail chief.

“What happened?”

“She’s being rushed to the hospital as we speak. We just found her in her villa, sir.”

“Found her?” Mick’s heart began to pound. “What do you mean you found her?”

Everybody stared at Mick. They knew what that usually meant.

“She wasn’t answering her doorbell,” her detail chief said. “She wasn’t answering her cell phone. We had no way to reach her. So we broke in and found her badly beaten, sir.”

Mick’s heart began to pound. “How bad?”

“Very bad, sir. She’s clinging to life. And she was sexually assaulted, too, from what I could see.”

Mick stood to his feet when he heard those words, and all of them stood up too. “Keep men around-the-clock outside of her hospital room.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m on my way,” he added, and ended the call.

Mick barked out orders, including ordering Teddy to stay at the compound with everybody on lockdown until he could assess the situation. Nikki, he said, was going with him. Their daughter, like Trevor and Carly’s daughter, were already at the house with the twins, and they would be protected. But first an attack on Roz, and then an attack on Bella? Mick knew there had to be a connection.

Then he looked at Monk and Trevor. “I don’t care what you do, Frankie, or what you do, Trevor, but Ashley and Carly are staying at my house until I get more intel.”

Trevor and Monk hated it when Mick and Big Daddy took over their wives’ security as if Carly and Ashley were still children and they had every right to do so, but they understood the concern. Although their wives didn’t know it, but both men knew about Roz getting attacked too. He was just being overly-cautious the way he always was when something odd went down.

Mick looked at both men, who were alpha males and powerful in their own right. And he respected both of them. But he also needed to make certain that they understood he didn’t give a fuck about their power when it came to his family. Whatever he said goes. Period.

They understood.

“Yes, sir,” said Trevor.

“I hear ya,” said Monk.

“I’m headed to Paris. I’ll keep you in the loop,” Mick said as he turned to leave.

“I’m going with you,” Roz said to Mick.

Mick looked at her as if that was already a foregone conclusion. “Who said you wasn’t?”

Everybody in that room knew that Mick rarely ever allowed Roz to go on any trips with him that might entail any level of danger. But Roz didn’t call him out on it. She was going with him. That was enough for her.

Mick made his way out of the basement with everybody following him.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

The eight-hour flight to Paris was three hours old when Mick finally made it to the back of the plane where Roz was seated. She had been on the phone during those three hours as she talked with various producers and casting directors in an effort to line up as many jobs as she could for her clients. She also spoke with Darryl Siskind. He denied ever discussing any role in any of his plays with Patrick. It was all a ruse. All lies.

Mick sat beside her.

“What have you been doing?” Roz asked him.

“Getting the full story from Bella’s detail chief.”

“She had security?”

Mick hesitated. “Yes. I couldn’t understand how the hell anybody could have gotten into her villa when they were supposed to have men on post around the clock. They said our guy was on post, but he was around front and the perp got in around the back. I safe-housed their asses and brought in a new crew.”

“You think it’s an inside job?”

“I don’t know that yet. But I’m not giving them an opportunity to get lost if they are involved. What have you been doing?”

But Roz had a question for him. “Why did Bella need security?”

Mick didn't want to get into it, but he knew he had to. "She'd been getting postcards."

"Postcards? From whom?"

"We don't know."

"What did they say?"

"Every card was about killing her, with a different method with each card."

"Was beating her up one of the methods?"

Mick nodded. "Yes. Violently raping her was another one."

Roz stared at Mick. "She was raped too?"

Mick looked out of the window. A stern look appeared on his face. "Yes."

"Ah man!" Roz didn't like Bella, but she didn't want to hear that! "Does Gloria know?"

"Yes. I told her."

"I know she took it hard."

"She took the rape part harder than the beating part," said Mick.

"I understand that," said Roz, nodding her head. "But it only makes it clear that there's a definite connection between what Patrick tried to do to me and what the guy in Paris did to Bella."

“It’s all connected,” said Mick.

“And it’s all about you,” said Roz. “We just don’t know what version of you they’re after: the businessman. The mob boss. The husband. The baby daddy. It’s crazy.”

Mick nodded. “Yes, it is.”

“I called and talked with Gloria too. She’s on her way on Alex Drakos’s plane. Alex and Kari are keeping her little girl. I wanted to ask where Oz’s ass was, but I didn’t. Glo was too devastated about her mother.”

“Oz is in Greece,” Mick said.

“Again?”

“Again.”

“He’s going to meet her in Paris?”

Mick shook his head. “She’s not telling him. I don’t think she wants him to meet her anywhere.”

“But you’re going to tell him. Aren’t you?”

“He’s her husband. Greece is only three-and-a-half hours from Paris. He has a right to know and to be there for his wife.”

Then Mick leaned his head back. All of them had fucked-up marriages. Even Teddy and Nikki were having issues.

“Was that why you were with Bella at Paris Fashion Week?” Roz asked. “Because of

those postcards?”

Mick nodded. “It was such a wide-open event, and she had just gotten another card. She was very scared. She wanted me to stay with her until I could find out who was threatening her, but I told her I had to go home.”

“Why couldn’t you just tell me all of that, Mick? I would understand if you communicated with me. But you don’t talk. You don’t tell me anything. And Duke getting in a fight over something I could have explained to him? But how can I explain it if I don’t know myself?”

Mick placed an arm around her and pulled her against him. She leaned her head on his shoulder and allowed it, although he said nothing more. He never did.

That was why she pulled away and looked him in his eyes. “We’ve got to do better, Mick. You’ve got to do better. I’m tired of our family members and my friends looking at me as if they pity me because they’re convinced you’re out here cheating on me with Bella and everybody else when I know you aren’t.”

Then she corrected herself. “I don’t know shit. What they believe could be true and you could very well be sleeping with every woman moving. But I don’t believe that.”

She waited for him to reassure her. But, as usual, he didn’t.

And she didn’t push it. She could tell he was worried about Bella. They were close: there was just no way around that. And she also knew he had enough on his plate than to have a nagging wife on it too. She leaned back on his shoulder. And he held her again.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

The new detail chief, the man Mick put in charge after he safe-housed the capos that were on duty during the attack on Bella, met the convoy of SUVs as Mick, Roz, and Nikki arrived at the Paris hospital.

“Any news?” Mick asked as soon as they stepped out. He was putting on his suitcoat.

“Yes, sir,” the detail chief announced. “We found her attackers, sir.

“Who?”

”Two Frenchmen with ties to local gangs.”

Roz was impressed. “You’ve found them already?”

“Yes, ma’am. And nice to meet you, Mrs. Sinatra.”

“Nice to meet you. And that’s excellent news,” Roz said.

But Mick knew that wasn’t the only news. “But?” he said, his green eyes trained on the detail chief.

“But they were found dead, sir. Both had a single gunshot wound to the head.”

“A mob hit,” Nikki said affirmatively.

The chief nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Probably local, but we’re working on that aspect.”

“But how can you be so certain it was the attackers and not somebody else?” Roz asked the chief.

“They were caught on security video outside Bella’s home,” Nikki said. “Before they put on their masks.”

“It was a positive identification,” the chief added.

“Update Nikki on any other developments and I’ll get with you later,” Mick said.

“Yes, sir.”

As Nikki remained outside to discuss further findings, Mick placed his hand on Roz’s lower back and they entered the Paris hospital and made their way through the double doors of the ICU. Two of Mick’s men from the new detail were on duty outside of one of the rooms and Gloria Drakos was standing just beyond the guards on her phone. With her back against the wall, she talked quietly. As soon as Mick saw his daughter his heart squeezed. Even from the other end of the hall he could feel his child’s pain.

When Gloria heard footsteps she glanced toward the elevators. When she saw her father and stepmother walking to her, she ended her phone call and started running to them.

Mick walked faster, hurrying to her, and Gloria ran into his arms. She began sobbing as soon as she felt her father’s touch.

Roz rubbed her stepdaughter’s back and fought back tears herself as Gloria sobbed. Bella was Glo’s mother, and they were extremely close, and it broke Roz’s heart to see someone she loved so anguished.

When Gloria's sobbing eased and she finally released her father, she took his handkerchief out of his suitcoat pocket and dabbed her eyes. "Hey Ma."

"Hey baby," Roz said as she gave Gloria a hug too. "How is she?"

Gloria shook her head. "Not good." They could see the devastation all over her beautiful brown face. "She's in really bad shape."

Mick hated to hear that, and he dreaded seeing a strong woman like Bella in such a weakened state, but it couldn't be helped. "Let's go," he said as he placed one hand on Roz's lower back and his other hand on Gloria's lower back. He and Gloria became especially close when she started confiding in Mick about Oz. But before they could get to the room, they heard a male's voice cry out Gloria! and they all turned.

And there was Oz.

A force of nature himself, Odysseus "Oz" Drakos, flanked by two bodyguards, with his long hair and long overcoat flowing as he walked, was hurrying to his wife. Although Gloria had indicated to her father and stepmother that she wasn't interested in seeing Oz right now, as soon as she saw her husband she ran to him. Oz grabbed her small body and lifted her off her feet as he held her. Mick and Roz could see his eyes squeezed shut as he held her. Like seemingly every marriage in the family except for maybe Tommy Gabrini's and Big Daddy's, their marriage was on shaky ground too. Many believed Gloria and Oz's union were the least likely of all the marriages to succeed.

When they stopped embracing, Oz put Gloria back on her own two feet and they walked over to Mick and Roz. Oz hugged Roz and shook Mick's hand. Mick had serious issues with Oz because he knew through his sources that Oz was once again the head of the Greek Mafia, but he put that aside for now.

“How’s Bella?” Oz asked the group.

Gloria was once again dabbing her eyes and shaking her head.

“We haven’t seen her yet,” Roz said.

“Okay,” Oz said as he steeled himself. He loved his mother-in-law although she scolded him every time she saw him. And they all went into Bella’s room.

Bella was worse than even Mick had imagined. Her beautiful face was swollen twice its normal size. The bruising was horrific. The fact that her leg was broken and in a cast surprised them. The tubes everywhere and the sound of all those machines just made it a difficult scene. Even Roz’s heart ached for Bella. She was a sight to behold.

Roz looked at Mick. He was standing there, his suit coat open and his hands on his hips, staring at Bella. At the brutality of that beating she took. And she was raped too? Of all of them in that room, Mick was shaken the most. Because he was convinced this happened to her, not because of her own affiliations, but because of her connection to him.

“ I didn’t expect this ,” Oz said with pain in his voice as he looked at his mother-in-law. He was summing it up for all of them.

Gloria looked at her father whom she believed was the only person in this world, other than herself, that truly loved her mother. “What are we going to do, Daddy?” she asked him. “You can’t leave her here like this.”

It wasn’t lost on Roz that Gloria seemed to think Bella was Mick’s responsibility. But that was probably because Mick acted as if she were. But in this case, Roz agreed with Gloria. Mick couldn’t leave her here when the United States had the best doctors and hospitals in the world.

“I’ve already arranged to airlift her back to the States on my plane,” he announced, to Roz’s surprise.

But Gloria was so grateful she hugged him. “Thanks, Daddy.”

“Whoever did this didn’t give a damn about Belle,” Mick said. “It’s me they’re after. She was just a convenient target.”

“Like I was,” Roz said.

Mick nodded and placed an arm around Roz. “Like you were, yes,” he said regrettably.

He stared at Bella for a few seconds longer, his face unable to shield his pain, and then he left out of the room to find the doctor.

Gloria looked at Roz as if to apologize to her. She knew Roz and her mother didn’t get along. She knew Roz didn’t want Bella in their lives any more than she would want some girlfriend from Oz’s past in her life. But Roz hugged Gloria. “Don’t worry, baby,” she said. “I’m all in. Your father will get her back home for the best care she can get. Despite our differences, and we sure as hell have differences, I would have never wished this on Bella. Your father will see to it that those bastards that did this to her will pay. They’re messing with the wrong family now,” Roz made clear.

Gloria hugged her stepmother tighter. Only a strong woman like Roz could put her own feelings aside and understand. That was why she loved Roz so much.

But Roz wasn’t going to pretend to be thrilled to have her rival in close proximity to her husband once again. But it was just another burden she had to suck up and bear. It was just another day in the life of being married to a man that everybody depended on

until they drained him dry. Then they expected Roz to pick up the pieces and refuel the tank, only for them to drain him again.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

The convoy arrived at the Philadelphia airfield amid heightened security as Mick personally supervised the stretcher carrying Bella Caine to the waiting ambulance. Gloria got in the ambulance with her mother, and Mick ordered Nikki to ride shotgun to protect Gloria. Then Mick put Roz on the passenger seat of his Escalade and continued to check out every aspect of the security that would be a part of their convoy to the house.

Roz sat in that SUV and watched her husband work. He was barking out orders, double-checking the ambulance, doing all he could to make certain security was tight and right. And he was checking to make sure Bella was comfortable too.

But Roz didn't mind that either. Because it could have been her. Because Mick cared enough to actually leave the house and check on her, even though it was to make sure she wasn't cheating on him, that move alone saved her from the fate that engulfed Bella. Which only made Roz feel worse for Bella. She had what Bella wanted. She had the man a lot of women wanted. And as Roz watched him, she was grateful to have him.

But that didn't mean she was going to put up with Bella's or Mick's or anybody else's bullshit.

Mick finally got in behind the steering wheel of the Escalade and waited for the ambulance to pull off.

Roz watched him as he sat behind the wheel looking straight ahead, as if he was thinking about a whole lot more than getting everybody safely home.

Then he spoke words that stunned Roz. “She saved my life.”

Roz stared at him for a few seconds, unable to even comprehend that statement. “Bella saved your life?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Remember I told you about those men that ambushed me in front of that strip joint years ago when I was just starting out?”

Roz nodded. “I remember.”

“Bella worked at that club.”

“Bella? Is that how you two met?”

Mick nodded. “Yep.”

But Roz thought somebody told her they met a different way. But that was beside the point. She wanted to hear how Bella could have possibly saved his life.

“She overheard a group of guys plotting to kill me and instead of just walking away, she ran and stopped me from driving to my death.” He looked at Roz. “I never forgot that. That’s why I can’t just kick her aside.”

But Roz wasn’t buying it. “I’m sure that’s what you tell yourself,” she said.

Mick didn’t expect her to say those words. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That’s not why you’re doing all of this, Mick. Come on now. That’s part of it. A big part of it. But that’s not the main reason.

“She’s Gloria’s mother.”

“That’s part of it too.”

“I care about her.”

“You love her,” Roz said bluntly.

But Mick wasn’t going to be told what he felt. “I care about her. I love you.”

“Both things can be true at the same time, Mick. You can love her and love me too.”

Mick ran his hands through his hair and then looked at Roz. “You don’t get it, do you?”

Roz frowned. “Get what? That you love Bella? Oh I get that shit.”

“That nobody, and I mean nobody,” Mick emphasized, “means more to me than you do. I may not show it,” he added.

“And that’s why I may not believe it,” Roz responded with brutal honesty, and they stared at each other with a hard, glaring, sad stare.

Then Mick said words that shocked Roz again. “Some bargain you got being with me.”

Roz actually smiled. Because it was the truth. “I’m no bargain either,” she said, and Mick managed to smile.

“You’re the glue of our family, Roz.”

“You’re the glue of our family, Mick.”

“You know what that means?”

“What?”

“If we’re both the glue, which is odd as fuck,” he said and Roz laughed. “But if we’re both the glue, then that must mean we’re stuck together.”

Roz had never thought of it that way. “I guess we are,” she said as the ambulance and the large contingent of security vehicles began driving off.

Mick, regaining his no-nonsense face, drove off too.

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The ambulance carrying Bella, along with Gloria and Nikki, drove around to the backside of Mick's estate where the makeshift hospital in one of his huge guest houses was located. A massive contingent of security personnel in three additional SUVs followed the ambulance in. But Mick, along with one of the security SUVs, didn't go around back. He pulled into the circular driveway at the main house instead. But it didn't matter which entrance anyone took. Security was so tight all around the vast property that it appeared to be an army of capos protecting it.

"Damn, Mick," Roz said when she saw just how many men were onsite, and a helicopter was buzzing above.

But just as they were getting out of the Escalade, Teddy, in jeans and a sweatshirt, was running out of the house with Trevor Reese, in his usual suit, rushing behind him.

Roz's heart dropped. "Is it the children?" she asked the two men frantically.

"It's my mom," Teddy said as he was running toward his Corvette.

"What about your mother?" Mick asked.

"I can't reach her. When I called her earlier, she told me she had just gotten back in town and was turning into her driveway. She said she'd call me back as soon as she got in the house, but she didn't call and I haven't been able to reach her. Now I'm panicking."

"Well hold on, Ted," Roz said. "Maybe she stopped to talk to a neighbor."

But Teddy was shaking his head. “That’s not what this feels like. That’s not what this feels like at all!”

“Where’s Frankie?” Mick asked Trevor.

“He had to go back to Jersey to handle syndicate business. But he followed your orders. Ashley’s still here.”

“Keep her here,” Mick said as he began hurrying to Teddy’s Corvette too. “You’re in charge. Including of my wife,” Mick added, knowing how feisty Roz could get with anybody telling her what to do, and how reluctant everybody was to tell her to do anything. “Everybody on lockdown,” he also said as he hopped into the Corvette where Teddy was already behind the steering wheel buckling up.

“Be careful,” Roz yelled out, as Teddy and his father sped away.

Trevor motioned to the SUV that drove up behind Mick’s Escalade to follow them, and Big Ed Bronson, the driver, along with Vincent LaGuardia riding shotgun, swerved around the other parked cars and took off behind the Corvette. Trevor wasn’t mob: he owned an international marketing firm in Boston. But everybody in the Sinatra circles knew he was a longtime government assassin who did special ops missions for his brother, former head of the CIA Hammer Reese, and was not a man to trifle with. Mick didn’t leave lightweights in charge of his wife.

Trevor opened his suit coat and placed his hands in his pants pockets. And he shook his head as they watched Teddy’s Corvette speed out of the security gate before it could open all the way. “What in the world is going on, Roz?”

Roz shook her head too. “Damn if I know, Trevor. Damn if I know!” Then she looked up at that helicopter that was hovering, under Mick’s orders, as air support security for their estate. Which meant Mick knew this was getting out of hand too.

Which was beginning to scare even Roz. “Let’s get inside,” she said, and Trevor followed her in.

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“I don’t see her car,” Teddy said nervously when they arrived at the big, beautiful home that Mick purchased for Teddy’s mother. The same kind of home he purchased for all of his baby mamas. “I don’t see her car, Pop!”

“Probably in the garage,” Mick replied to help keep his son calm as they got out of the Corvette. Mick gave a stay put motion to Big Ed and Vincent in the security SUV as he and Teddy hurried to the front door.

When they approached the door and could hear screams coming from inside the house, Teddy kicked the door in and, with their weapons drawn, they hurried inside.

The screaming was coming from the downstairs bedroom, which Teddy knew was his mother’s bedroom, and they both ran down the hall to that room.

When they got to the room, they saw Teddy’s mom, Ursula Mastriano, naked on the bed, bleeding profusely, as a man was wiping the blood off of the knife as if he’d just finished what he came to do and was preparing to leave.

Teddy jumped on that guy, knocking him down and dislodging the knife from his hand, and began beating the hell out of him with such force that the perp was bleeding profusely himself.

But Mick quickly took charge of the perp so that Teddy could tend to his terribly injured mother. With one hand, Mick grabbed the perp by his shirt and easily immobilized him by putting his knee on his chest. With his free hand he pulled out his phone and called 911. Even he could see the urgency. Even he could see that Ursula, a woman who, unlike Bella Caine, he almost never had any contact with, was

in dire trouble. Teddy immediately began taking off his shirt, grabbing whatever he could, to staunch the blood.

When Mick finished speaking with the 911 dispatcher, he tossed his phone aside and lifted the perp just enough so that they were face to face. But instead of beating him down the way Teddy had, Mick had to have answers. All they had were questions. He needed concrete answers!

“What’s your name?”

He was in pain so his answers were more like mutterings. “Pock.”

“Pock what, motherfucker?”

Pock McCanns.”

“Who do you work for?”

“I don’t work for nobody. I do my own thing.”

“For the mob?”

Pock didn’t respond. Mick normally would have already kicked his ass, but he needed answers.

“Who hired you?”

“I was so close.”

Mick frowned. “Close to what?”

“He already put the money in an offshore account in my name. I checked myself. Four million dollars just sitting there waiting for me to collect after I do the job. And I was done. All I had to do was leave. But then you showed up.”

“What job?”

“The job he paid me to do. To rape and stab your baby mama,” the perp said as if he was saying it was his job to wash cars or lay pipes. “But you know what? I enjoyed the stabbing more than the rape. She ain’t all that. You gotta step up your game, Sinatra.”

Teddy heard what the perp had said and wanted to jump on that clown and kill him with his own bare hands, but he had to keep that pressure on his mothers’ wounds. But Mick had had it himself and began punching the perp until he drew blood.

Mick packed a punch unlike any punch the perp had ever felt. “Okay, I’ll talk. I’ll talk!” he cried out, as the pain overtook his bravado. “Just don’t hit me anymore.”

“Who hired you to do this?” Mick asked him again.

But the perp was shaking his head. “I was so close,” he said again.

“Tell me who hired you, motherfucker,” Mick yelled, “or I’ll kill your ass! Who?”

“The one man on the face of this earth that even you are afraid of. Your brother!” the perp screamed out. “Charles ‘Big Daddy’ Sinatra. That’s who !”

When Mick and Teddy heard that name the room seemed to turn sideways. The idea that somebody would even dare to implicate Charles in this craziness confounded Mick. His enemies knew better. They knew Charles was as lethal as Mick was, if not more so. They knew better.

Which led Mick to wonder if it was an enemy after all.

He and Teddy looked at each other.

What the fuck , both of their faces seemed to say as sirens could be heard getting closer and closer.

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Big Daddy watched Jenay try her best to eat some soup. They were in the cafeteria at the hospital in Jericho, Maine, and the sunlight for a change was shining through the tall windows. They'd had lunch in that cafeteria many times before. It had become a family tradition given the many times Jenay had been hospitalized there. They thought they had it figured out when a smart young doctor, Doc Martin, realized the medicine the hospital was giving Jenay was making her sick. But that was only a part of the story. Now they were claiming it was Lupus.

"Or it's not Lupus," Big Daddy said to his wife. "I can't keep up with all these experts and all their different diagnosis."

"It's Lupus-like, they said. And extremely rare," Jenay corrected her husband. "That's why it's so hard to diagnose. But that's the consensus now."

Big Daddy shook his head. "Having to have a consensus to tell you what's wrong with you rather than an ironclad diagnosis is infuriating."

"I agree," Jenay said as she spoon-sipped a little more soup. Then she smiled. "It'll be a shame to not know what you died of."

Big Daddy hated when she made light of her situation. "That's not funny."

"It's funny to me," Jenay said, still grinning.

But then she considered her husband. He was a man who knew how to handle stress better than any human being she'd ever known. But he was so worried about her that he could hardly function. And that was worrying her.

Her smile left, and her look turned sincere. She felt horrible. She always felt horrible lately. But she had to project strength around him or he'd never leave her side. "Charles, you have to promise me something," she said to him.

"Don't start that again, Jenay."

"Promise me, when I'm gone, you'll find somebody to love."

"Stop that talk," Big Daddy said angrily. "Now I mean it!"

But Jenay knew she had to give him permission or he'd be alone for the rest of his life. That was the kind of man he was. When his first wife walked out on him and left him with four young sons to raise alone, he did a great job raising his children. But he neglected his own wants and needs. She didn't want that to happen again.

But she knew it would if he wasn't mindful. Because he also happened to be so handsome and so damn sexy, she thought, she was certain women would start circling him like vultures as soon as she hit the grave. But she also knew that Charles was a big time womanizer before he met her, and she didn't want him to get sucked back into that women for sex only kind of behavior. He needed a good woman he could love, and that the children could respect. "I know you don't want to hear it, Charles. I don't want to have to say it. But it has to be said. I want you to fall in love again. Promise me you won't dismiss it like you're doing now. Please, Charles, promise me."

But Big Daddy frowned. "Are you nuts? You think I'm worried about some other dame at a time like this? I'm worried about you, and nobody else. So cut that shit out, Jenay, I mean it!"

But a drained look came over Jenay's face. "I'm tired, Charlie."

Charles looked at her.

“I’ve been sick so long, I’m tired. I need you to let me go.”

Big Daddy’s heart sunk. And he placed her hands in his hands. “You’ll get better, Jenay. Fuck them doctors. You’ll get better just watch and see. You can’t give up.”

Jenay knew she wasn’t giving up. She was being realistic. “You’ve got to let me go, Charlie.”

Big Daddy knew his wife didn’t have long on this earth. The doctors had already told him so. And not just one or two, but every doctor they consulted. Her disease was extremely rare, extremely incurable, and extremely progressive. Extreme. That was their diagnosis.

“Please let me go, Charlie,” Jenay pleaded with him again.

But tears welled up in Big Daddy’s hard, green eyes. “I can’t, ” he blurted out so painfully that it broke Jenay’s heart.

But she knew she had to soldier on. “Please, Charlie. You have to let me go in order to be able to be there for Bonita and Carly and Ashley and the boys. They’re going to need you.”

Then she smiled. I’m going to be absolutely fine. Don’t you worry about me. I’ve accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior. I know where I’m going. And I’m glad to go.”

Big Daddy looked at her. “You’re going to get out of this hospital and you’re going home with me. That’s where you’re going.”

“I’m going home,” Jenay said, “but not with you. You’re still needed here. To take care of our children. And the rest of the family that so much depend on your wisdom and strength. And Mick needs you,” she added with a smile.

Even a smile escaped Big Daddy’s mouth when she threw Mick in the mix. But he wasn’t trying to hear the rest of it. Not right now.

“Let’s get you back to your room,” he said, “before those nurses claim I kidnapped you.”

Jenay smiled at that too. It wasn’t as fruitful a lunch as she had hoped it would be, but she was going to keep working on him.

But as soon as he helped her out of her chair and they were about to leave, Big Daddy’s phone began ringing. He pulled it out and looked at the Caller ID. “Speaking of the devil,” he said. “It’s Mick.”

“Probably about Bella,” Jenay said.

“Hey Mick, what’s up?” Big Daddy said as he answered the call. “Bella okay?”

“It’s not about Bella,” Mick said over the phone. “They attacked Ursula too.”

Big Daddy frowned, but he didn’t want Jenay to hear any bad news. “Okay.”

“They did a number on her, Charles. They did her worse than they did Bella.”

“Damn. Did you catch the guy?”

“We caught him, but we had to turn him over to the cops because we had to call 911 for Ursula. But you won’t believe what that clown said.”

“What did he say?”

“He said you’re the one that hired him to attack Ursula.”

Big Daddy could not believe it. “ Me ?”

“That’s what he said.”

“Who the fuck is he?”

As Big Daddy got more details from Mick, Jenay noticed a figure from out of the corner of her eyes. When she looked, she saw that he was pulling out a gun and hurrying straight for Charles, who was distracted on his phone.

“Charlie,” Jenay said in a voice that amplified her terror, and in a voice so low that he didn’t hear her.

When she saw the man lift his gun and aimed it at her husband, she screamed out Charlie! and did the only thing she knew to do. She jumped on Big Daddy with every ounce of strength she still had and knocked him down into the booth seat, with her body falling on top of him. But the gunman was already firing. He fired shot after shot as innocent bystanders began screaming and running. Then the gunman ran out too.

But Big Daddy was in a state of shock. He had his arms around Jenay when he realized she had fallen on top of him, but he wasn’t just feeling her. He felt what seemed like thick liquid. When he lifted up his hands from her back and saw that his palms were covered with her blood, his heart nearly stopped.

Rallying, he eased his big body from beneath her small body and that was when he saw the bullet holes in her back. “No, God, no,” he said as he got down on his knees

and held his wife's lifeless body.

"Jenay," he cried out. "Jenay, please don't go! Jenay, come back. Just come on back. Jenay, come back!"

He was begging her hysterically, and Mick's hysterical voice could be heard calling his brother's name over the cellphone. "Charles, what's happening? Charles, what's wrong? Charlie?"

But they both knew what time it was.

It was time to say goodbye.

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Private jumbo jet after private jumbo jet landed at the Jericho, Maine airfield and nearly drove to the breaking point the small staff that had never seen anything like it. Sal Gabrini's plane from Vegas. Tommy Gabrini's plane from Seattle. Reno Gabrini, who had been in Mexico, flew in on his plane. Alex Drakos's plane from Florida. Hammer Reese's plane, with Amelia Sinatra, from Montreal. Trevor Reese's plane. Monk Paletti's plane. Donald Sinatra, Big Daddy's youngest son and a business juggernaut of his own, flew in on his private plane. And although Nikki stayed in Philly with Teddy as they waited while Ursula was in surgery for the third time in a week, and Gloria and Oz stayed back to oversee Bella's recovery, Mick and Roz, along with Teddy and Nikki's daughter and the twins all flew in on Mick's plane the same day Mick realized what was happening in Jericho. Hearing those gunshots and then hearing his brother's agonizing cries nearly gave him a heart attack. It was an awful day.

The funeral was held at Jenay's favorite church and everybody in the town seemed to pack inside. Big Daddy sat on the front pew with Mick and Amelia seated on either side of him. Big Daddy's children were seated on that same pew with Roz with Mick's children, Hammer Reese, and the Gabrinis seated on the pew right behind them. Not a dry eye was in that church. Donald Sinatra, Big Daddy's youngest son, gave the eulogy.

"She brought out the best in all of us. That was her gift. Before she came into our lives, we were just existing. Our mother left our father, and he had to raise his four sons at that time all on his own. But children need that mother's touch. And we didn't have it. We were just going about our lives the best we could. Dad was a lonely gigolo," he said to laughter from the packed crowd. Even Big Daddy found a way to smile. "I mean me and my brothers couldn't get to the honeys for the honeys trying to

get to our dad.” More laughter.

“My big brother Brent Sinatra was a too-tough police chief who never gave anybody the benefit of the doubt. He thought he was our father too,” Donald added to laughter from the audience.

Mick smiled at that one. Brent was such a by-the-book lawman that a part of Mick naturally despised him. But it was Donald that impressed him. He couldn’t get over how much he’d changed. From a troubled young man who couldn’t keep himself out of trouble to a titan of industry. His great idea to build restaurants and bars and housing developments that catered exclusively to the biker crowd made him a multi-millionaire. Now he was giving his old man a run for his money, which pleased Big Daddy and Jenay no end. They knew Donnie had it in him. It amazed Mick.

“My second oldest brother, Dr. Anthony “Tony” Sinatra, was restless, unable to stick to anything for too long. Not even his relationships with women,” he added to some chuckles. “He was all over the map, and Dad was worried about him. And then there’s my America-the-Beautiful brother Robert “Bobby” Sinatra, who was a wannabe thug,” he said to great laughter and applause. “That’s right, folks, your beloved mayor used to be a thug.”

The laughter continued for longer than Bobby thought was necessary, but he grinned and took it. He was going to kill Donnie later.

“Dad was really worried about him,” Donald added. “But I’m the one that kept him up nights. Because then there was me. The youngest son. The worst of all. I was a mess y’all. I was a biker-chick-loving walking streak of mess.” Another round of laughter.

“Then Ma showed up. Jenay. She believed in me, she hired me, she taught me, she loved me, she helped me turn my life around. Now I’m more successful than Dad.

Just kidding,” he quickly added as the laughter crescendo grew.

“And then she gave us Bonita, who isn’t just her and Dad’s baby, but our baby too.” Bonita lowered her head in shame as her friends giggled. “I’m nobody’s baby,” she muttered under her breath.

“And she gave us Ashley, my best friend and partner-in-crime to this day.” Laughter as party girl Ashley started pumping one fist in the air to prove how little she’d changed. Many people felt Monk Paletti needed to rein her in. Monk felt he needed to let Ashley be Ashley and eventually she’d rein herself in.

Donald continued the eulogy. “And she gave us Carly, whom Ashley and I thought was just too perfect for existence.” Laughter. “But we are Jenay’s legacy.”

Big Daddy started nodding his head as tears welled up in his eyes again.

“We are her children,” Donald said. “We were her world.”

But Then Donald’s look turned somber. “But Ma, it’s you who meant the world to us.” Great applause from the audience.

Then tears began to fall from Donald’s large eyes. “We love you, Ma.” His voice breaking. “We miss you, Ma. You gave us love, joy, and peace. You turned our house into a home. But now it’s your time to go home. It’s your time to have peace. It’s your time to take your rest. Rest in peace, Ma. Rest in peace.” Then Donald left the podium and made his way back to his seat.

As he approached his father, Big Daddy stood up and hugged his son. Even Mick, Roz noticed, was wiping away tears.

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After the funeral, and after the repast that was held at Jenay's hotel ballroom, they all gathered at Big Daddy's house. All of the young people, except for Carly and Ashley, were in the back game room. But everybody else were right there. And although the huge room was filled with family, you could hear a pin drop.

When Mick sat on one of the two sofas in the living room, Roz sat on one side of him with her arm interlocked with his arm, Jackie sat on the other side of him with her head on his shoulder, and Duke sat on the floor between his legs with both of his arms around both of Mick's legs. They were clinging to him. They all knew that Jenay had been in and out of hospitals for a long time, and was therefore ill, but nobody expected her end to come this way. It was jarring.

Especially for her only biological daughter Bonita Sinatra. Big Daddy was especially concerned about his youngest child and as he sat on the second sofa in the room, she sat beside him. He had his arm around her and around Carly, his adopted daughter and the second youngest in the family, as she sat on the other side of their father. Amelia Sinatra, Mick and Big Daddy's African-American half-sister, sat on the arm of the sofa beside her big brother while her husband, Hamilton "Hammer" Reese, the former head of the CIA and the current head of all special ops for the entire U.S. government, was seated at the bar in the back of the room reviewing text messages.

Monk Paletti sat in one of the four chairs in the room while Ashley, his wife and Carly's older sister, sat on his lap. Brent Sinatra, Big Daddy's oldest son, sat on the arm of the second chair while his wife Makayla sat in the chair itself. Bobby Sinatra, the town's mayor, and his older brother Tony Sinatra, the only psychologist in the family, sat in the other two chairs. Their significant others were in the game room with the younger members of the families and were helping to oversee the children

from the various households. But Donald Sinatra, the moodiest of all of Big Daddy's seven children, stood off from everybody else in a corner. Even inside the house he wore shades. He and Jenay were especially close.

Reno and Trina Gabrini, Sal and Gemma Gabrini, Tommy and Grace Gabrini, Billionaire Industrialist Alex Drakos and his wife Kari, and everybody else sat in chairs brought in from the dining hall. But they all could see the same thing: Charles Sinatra was so devastated that he didn't look like himself anymore. He spoke like himself. Tried to continue to carry on the way he always did. But he was destroyed by what happened to his beloved wife.

"Why isn't your fiancé here?" Big Daddy asked Bonita. "My wife's death isn't important enough for him to show up?"

"He did show up, Daddy," a confused Bonita said to her father. "He's here, remember? He's outside on the phone taking care of some business."

Big Daddy had forgotten he'd arrived. He ran his hands across his face. "All she asked me to do was let her go," he said to no one and everyone. "She said she was tired and she needed me to let her go. But I couldn't even do that. Then she saved my life. Mine!"

Charles leaned forward. Everybody in the room could feel his pain, and they were in pain too.

"They never could come up with a clear diagnosis for her illness," Big Daddy continued talking. "They kept saying it was Lupus, then it wasn't Lupus, then it was a rare form of something like Lupus. A lot of bullshit."

Mick was staring especially hard at his brother. It was taking all Mick had within him not to cry. The strongest man he'd ever known reduced to this kind of pain infuriated

him. And he knew without them ever discussing it that Charles wanted revenge, and would have it.

“She told me it’ll be a shame to die and not know what you died from,” Big Daddy continued talking. “At least now she knows what she died from,” he said as his voice cracked and he couldn’t bear it any longer. He quickly got up and hurried out of the room.

Bonita, Carly, and Ashley, along with Bobby and Tony all stood up and attempted to follow him, but their oldest brother Brent stopped them. “He’ll be okay,” he said. “Give him some space.”

To the girls, Brent was like a second father to them. They all sat back down.

But stubborn Bobby looked to his older brother Tony, who as a clinical psychologist would know about these things. But Tony agreed with Brent. “He’s right,” Tony said as he sat down too. “He needs his space right now.”

It was only then did Bobby sit back down.

But Amelia wasn’t under Brent’s orders, nor Tony’s. She got up and left the room.

She found Big Daddy upstairs in his bedroom. He was seated in the middle of his king-sized bed with his back against the high headboard. One of his fingers were picking at an apparent hair on his chin as he seemed to be looking into nothingness. Just staring straight ahead. Amelia walked in, got on the bed, and sat beside him with her back against the headboard too.

No words for the longest time. Then Big Daddy spoke. “I never liked this bed.”

Amelia found that such an odd thing to say that she smiled. “No?”

“Hated it. It makes me feel like I’m sleeping in a carriage.”

Amelia laughed. “Then why did you keep it?”

“Jenay wanted it. She thought it was so pretty. I said I’m a man, what the fuck I care about pretty? But I gave in. I always gave in to her.” Then he scrunched up his face. “Except when she needed me, when she begged me to let her go.”

Amelia placed her arm around his arm.

“I’m not ready to let her go, Millie.”

Amelia laid her head on his shoulder. “You was never going to be, Charlie. She knew that. That’s why she kept asking.”

“I miss her already.”

“You always will. It won’t get any better.”

“Well damn.” Big Daddy looked at his younger half-sibling. “You’re a ray of sunshine, aren’t you?”

Amelia had to laugh at that. “Just keeping it real,” she said. Then her smile diminished. “You’ve got to eventually move on, Charlie.”

Big Daddy nodded. “I know.”

“She’s gone and she’s not coming back.”

Big Daddy frowned. “I know that too. I’m not God. I can’t bring her back. The master’s plan will not be altered. I understand that.”

“Do you have a plan for your life without Jenay?”

Big Daddy exhaled. “One day at a time,” he said. “One day at a time.”

“I saw where you had a lot of flowers from the various single ladies around town. Including many of the ladies from your country club.”

But Big Daddy shook his head. “They’re wasting their time. I’m not thinking about those women.”

“But they’re thinking about you. You’re rich. You’re great looking. You’re strong. They want you, brother. They want you bad.”

Big Daddy ran his hands across his face. “That’s ridiculous. My wife just died. I don’t give a fuck about any of them.”

“Not now you don’t. That’s understandable. But Jenay also told you she didn’t want you alone. She wants you to fall in love again.”

But Big Daddy was already shaking his head. “No way. I’m not going through this pain again. I’ll never fall in love again.”

“You say that now, Charles.”

“And I’ll say it tomorrow.”

“So a still-extremely virile man like yourself is never going to be with a woman again?”

“Oh I’ll be with plenty women. Whenever I need bed action, I’ll be with a woman. But I’ll never fall in love with one again. In lust? All the time. In love? Never.”

“You were the same way when your first wife left you and broke your heart.”

“That’s right.”

“You would have never met Jenay if you kept that attitude.”

“I met her. She’s gone. And that’s that in my life. I’m not going through this kind of pain ever again. My heart can’t take it,” he said, his voice cracking, and Amelia pulled him into her arms.

Less than fifteen minutes later, all of Big Daddy’s children made their way upstairs, got on the bed, and surrounded him. Even Mick came up. And although he sat in a chair away from the bed, he was there too. And it seemed right to him. Because in many ways, Big Daddy was as much Mick and Amelia’s father as he was his own children’s. They always relied on him. It was time for him to rely on them.

The children fell asleep on their father’s bed. Amelia fell asleep on that bed too. Mick fell asleep in the chair.

But Big Daddy, still stunned by his new reality, was wide awake.

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Two days after the funeral, everybody returned to their respective lives. Mick, Roz, and the twins returned to Philly, and Big Daddy decided to go with them. He told his children that a change of scenery would do him good. But they all knew, like Mick and Roz knew, that Big Daddy wanted revenge. Big Daddy wanted in.

Bonita, Carly, and Ashley, along with Tony Sinatra, followed their father to Philly, although their significant others had to return home to run their businesses or handle other matters. Bobby, as mayor, had to run the town, and Brent, as police chief, had to police the town, so they remained in Jericho. Donald Sinatra had business overseas.

After arriving in Philly, Big Daddy spent almost all of the day out back on the patio with Mick. Both men sat quietly, their legs crossed, their eyes staring out at the great expanse. They did not talk, nor wanted to talk, for hours on end. On the orders of Roz, nobody bothered the two brothers. Not even Roz herself. She could tell Big Daddy loved not only sitting there with Mick, doing nothing because nothing was required of him to do, but the quietness too.

That next morning, Big Daddy and his children, along with the twins, were eating breakfast in the dining hall when Reno and Sal arrived at Mick's estate.

"How you doing, Big Daddy?" Reno walked around to the head of the table and gave Charles a hug. "You're looking good."

"You're gaining weight," Big Daddy responded as they stopped embracing.

"What weight?" Reno buttoned his getting-too-tight suitcoat. "I'm as fit as a man half

my age.”

“In your dreams,” said Sal as he gave Big Daddy a half-handshake/half-hug. “Got you some good rest, Pops?”

Big Daddy was not a man who would lie. He shrugged his shoulders. It was going to take him considerable time to reacquaint himself with good rest. Even before Jenay passed, her constant hospitalizations robbed him of anything that could be considered restfulness. Restlessness, but not restfulness.

“I don’t know how you can sit upright,” Sal said, and Big Daddy looked at him. Of all the men in the family, Sal, though tough as tough could get, had the biggest heart. Big Daddy, like Jenay, loved him dearly.

“Had that been Gemma,” Sal added, shaking his head, “they would have had to bury me right along with her.”

“Now that’s a good idea,” Reno said, and the others giggled.

Except for Sal and Big Daddy. “Not funny, Reno,” Big Daddy admonished him.

“But think about what he’s saying, Charles. He’s saying he’d rather leave his children without a mother and a father and die too, as if the kids don’t count. Children always come first,” Reno preached.

Sal and Big Daddy glanced at each other. There was a time when Reno had to choose between saving his wife’s life or sacrificing one of his children. He chose to sacrifice his son Jimmy to save Trina’s life. Jimmy survived, but just barely. But neither man had the heart to remind Reno of his hypocrisy.

“You have to always put the children first.”

“Ah shut up, Reno,” Sal said. “I was just trying to be nice to Big Daddy. I was just trying to show some empathy over here.”

“He don’t need that kind of empathy,” Reno said, and the two men kept going at it. Everybody else were grinning. Especially the twins. They loved when Uncle Reno and Uncle Sal got into it.

“Where’s Uncle Tommy?” Jackie asked. Everybody in the family knew she had a monster crush on “Dapper Tom” Tommy Gabrini.

“He’s in Vegas making certain our families are okay,” said Reno. “At least until me and Sal get back.”

“I sure hope you guys find out who did that to Auntie Jenay,” Duke said. “I miss her already.”

Everybody looked at Big Daddy. But Big Daddy, like their father, always had that look of steel in the face of adversity. You could never penetrate their emotions. “You guys better get to class,” he said to them.

“Class?” Sal asked. “They aren’t on lockdown?”

“I’m going to tutor them here at the house, Uncle Sal,” Carly said as she and the twins rose from their seats. “They have midterms coming up and Auntie Roz just want to make sure they don’t slip up. Perfect grades are needed to get into the best schools you know.”

“And Roz isn’t about to let the twins go anywhere else but to the best schools in America you know,” Ashley said sarcastically.

“That’s Aunt Roz to you, young lady,” her father corrected her.

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Daddy, I’m a married woman. Married to one of the most powerful mob bosses in the country, in fact. I’m married to the mob. I’m not a kid anymore.”

“That’s Aunt Roz to you,” Big Daddy said again firmly.

“And don’t you ever admit to being married to no mob,” Sal admonished her.

Ashley hopped up angrily and decided to go with her kid sister and the twins rather than try to prove to her father that she wasn’t a kid anymore.

“Monk needs to tame that girl,” Sal said, “or she’s gonna puff up at the wrong one.”

“He feels the world gives her a raw deal,” Big Daddy said. “He looks out for her. He knows what he’s doing.”

“I hope he does,” said Reno. “That Ashley’s gonna always be a handful. I hear she’s been tipping out on Monk Paletti.”

Big Daddy looked at Reno. “Tipping out?”

“That’s what I heard.”

“Bullshit,” said Big Daddy. “Ashley had a reputation as a party girl before she met Frankie. But she’s been turning that around.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re right,” Reno said, although he wasn’t so sure at all. “Where’s Bonita?”

Big Daddy exhaled. “She flew out early this morning. She had to handle some business for Clark.”

“What about Gloria, and Teddy and Nikki. And the babies?”

“Gloria’s in the guest house with her mother. The babies are with her. Ursula can’t be moved just yet, so Ted’s staying at the hospital with her. Nikki’s at the docks making sure the ships run on time and whatever else Mick has her doing. She’s his right-hand man you know.”

“Which don’t make no sense to me at all,” said Sal. “Teddy T is the best in the business. He knows how to run an outfit, even Uncle Mick’s massive outfit. But Uncle Mick acts as if the sun don’t shine until Nikki gets up.”

Big Daddy actually laughed. “He trusts her, what can I say? You can’t help who you trust.”

“I thought you can’t help who you love, Big Daddy.”

“Same difference to me,” Big Daddy said.

Then Sal frowned as they began hearing what sounded like something bouncing upstairs. “What the fuck is that?” He looked up at the ceiling.

But Big Daddy and Reno understood what it was right away. They glanced at each other and smiled. “Don’t mind Sal Luca, Big Daddy,” Reno said. “He’s slow. The short bus said he was too slow for them.”

“Ah fuck you, Reno,” Sal said, and Big Daddy laughed.

But upstairs in their bedroom, Mick and Roz were still bumping and grinding and escalating the noise. Mick was on top. Roz was on the bottom. And they were so deeply in the throes of their passion for one another that they were unable to even consider that they could be heard. Mick was grunting as he moved inside of her. Roz

was groaning as she felt every inch of him deep inside of her. They both were sweating and breathing heavily as they released all the stress and tension and even sadness of the past few weeks as if they were releasing everything they had within them.

And when they finally came, it felt as if the dam of their emotions broke free and flooded them with so many different feelings that it took several more minutes of cumming to feel them all.

Until Mick finally joined Roz and collapsed too.

When he slowly pulled out and then rolled off of her, she looked over at him, still unable to ease her heavy breathing. “You’re trying to kill us,” she said as Mick smiled. “That’s what it is. You are trying to kill us.”

Then her look turned serious. “We’ve got to find those bastards, Mick. For Jenay, we have got to find the mastermind.”

Mick ran a hand across his face. “We will,” he said. “Charles won’t rest until we do.”

Roz didn’t expect to hear him say that. “You’re going to allow him to go with you?”

“Allow him ? It’s more like he’s allowing me to go with him . Nobody bosses the boss.” Mick used to call Big Daddy the boss even when they were kids.

“In any event,” said Mick, “there’s nowhere to go yet.They’re coming to us.”

Roz was puzzled. “Who’s coming to us?”

“Your Patrick Donahue and my Beppie Gastone. They’re both lying. I need to know the source of those lies. They still think they’re going to collect that four million

bucks and it's in their interest to keep the lie going. I've got to disabuse them of that notion once and for all. I ordered my guys to put them in the basement late last night."

"They're here? Under heavy guard I hope."

Mick looked at her without dignifying that with a response.

Roz knew it was a stupid question too. "And if they don't know the source themselves?" she asked.

"They know something. When Ursula's attacker blurted out Charles's name, I knew somebody ordered them to use the names of members of our family. Today I find out who. This shit's been going on too long."

Roz nodded. "I can agree with you on that."

Then he slapped her bare butt as he began getting out of bed. "Get up. We've got work to do," he said, and they both got up.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Patrick Donahue and Beppie Gastone sat in the middle of the basement with guards on both sides. Mick, Roz, and Big Daddy stood in front of them. Reno was on one side of the room and Sal was on the other side, and both were watching the two prisoners intensely. For the longest time you could hear a pin drop as the two men, who both looked terrified, stared from one face to another face. But nobody said a word.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Mick pulled out his revolver and shot both men in the knees.

Both men screamed out in pain, with Patrick so overcome that he fell out of his chair holding his knee. But the guard grabbed him and sat him back in his seat.

“You shot me!” Patrick said as if it never occurred to him that such could be the outcome. He was already so badly beaten he could hardly see.

“Boss, please,” Beppie said, begging for his life.

But Mick didn’t want to hear it. “Here’s the deal,” he said. “If you tell any more lies to me you will be shot until you are dead. I won’t give you a warning. I won’t ask you to brace yourself. I’ll load your asses up with bullets until it’s over. Now who was it that ordered you to claim Monk Paletti and Trevor Reese met with you? And I know that A.I. video is bullshit, so don’t mention it,” he warned Patrick. “Who ordered those names to be used?”

They both looked even more defeated than they did when the Sinatras and Gabrinis first entered that basement. And Beppie, who knew Mick never lied, gave up the

game first. “Carlton Rickie,” he said. “He had just gotten out of the joint. He said Junno was giving him rope.”

Roz frowned. “Rope?”

“That means he could freelance,” Mick said.

“Who’s Junno?” Big Daddy asked.

“He runs the Costantino crime family,” said Mick. “The assholes that tried to ambush me years ago.”

“When Bella saved your life?” Roz asked.

Mick nodded. “That ambush, yes.”

Big Daddy and the Gabrinis looked at him. Bella saved his life? That was news to them.

“Was Junno involved?” Mick asked Beppie.

“I don’t know. He didn’t tell me none of that.”

Then Mick looked at Patrick.

“Don’t lie, Patrick,” Roz warned him. “You will die if you lie.”

Patrick exhaled. “Carlton Rickie hired me too. He said he had the mob behind him, but he didn’t say which mob. He was the one that paid some guy to pretend to be Trevor Reese coming to my hotel room.”

“Did you ever meet with Trevor? Or with Monk Paletti?”

“No. Just Rickie. Nobody else.”

Then the door opened, and Nikki peeped in. She looked at Mick. “A moment?”

Everybody knew Nikki would not disturb Mick like that unless it was vital. Mick and Roz, along with Reno and Sal, went out of the room.

“What is it?” Mick asked her.

“One of our guys, a corrections officer, got Pock McCanns talking.”

“Who’s Pock McCanns?” Roz asked.

“The man that attacked Ursula. What did he say?” Mick asked.

“He said he lied about Big Daddy being involved. He said he was ordered to lie.”

“Ordered by who?”

“Carlton Rickie.”

Reno nodded. “So now we know it was Rickie doing the dirty work. Everybody’s pointing in the same direction.”

“He wasn’t doing that shit alone,” said Mick. “Forget the money. He didn’t have the reach.”

“Unless it was the Costantino crew,” said Sal. “They ain’t much, but they got reach.”

“He also said,” Nikki continued, “that he knows who shot Mrs. Jenay.”

When they heard that, everybody went still. “Who?” Big Daddy asked her.

“A guy named Sugar Rossi.”

“Rossi?”

Everybody looked at Sal. “You know him?” Big Daddy asked him.

Sal nodded. “Yeah I know Sugar Rossi. He used to run hookers for the Costantino family. But that was back in the day.”

“But like Carlton Rickie,” said Reno, “he was tied to the Costantinos too.”

But Mick was looking at Nikki. “There’s more,” he said.

“Yes, sir. Pock McCanns claim to know where we can find Sugar Rossi. All he asks in return is protection in prison.”

“After what he did to Teddy’s mother?” asked Reno. “Oh he’ll get protection alright.”

“Where did he say we can find him?” Mick asked.

“The Alberdeen projects. Apartment 169. Ground floor.”

But Roz was worried. “It could be a setup, Mick.”

“He’s in custody,” Sal said. “He set us up he’s dead. Why would he do that?”

“Sal’s right,” said Reno. “He’s a mob guy. He knows better.”

“Reno and Sal, you stay here with the family,” Mick ordered. “Nikki, you come with Charles and me.”

“Nikki?” Sal asked, surprised. “I’m pulling rank here. What the fuck Nikki can do that I can’t do?”

Mick gave Sal a look that brook no debate. And Sal raised his hands. “Alright already. I’ll play the nursemaid. The third most powerful mob boss in the world, but I’ll play the nursemaid.”

But Reno looked at him. “I thought you said you wasn’t in the mob at all,” he said, reminding Sal that he always denied any mob ties whatsoever, even though they all knew it wasn’t true.

“Kiss my ass, Reno,” was all Sal could think to say. “Kiss my ass.”

Roz gave Mick a kiss, instead, and begged him to be careful.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Alberdeen Arms was an apartment complex on the outskirts of Philly. One-half boarded up and the other half dilapidated and all but abandoned too, it seemed like an unlikely hideout for a man that would dare to target Charles Sinatra and, in so doing, kill his wife. Which made it, in Mick's view, a brilliant hideout.

Mick was behind the wheel of his Escalade. Big Daddy was on the front passenger seat. Nikki was on the middle row as they made their way to the very back of the complex.

Mick glance over at his brother. "How do you want to play this?"

"I thought we already decided."

"Not that."

Big Daddy let out a long exhale. "If what that guy said was true, that means I'm about to come face to face with the man that murdered my wife. The cafeteria had no cameras, and the hospital cameras were too hazy to make out any features. And he had that baseball cap down on his forehead. I don't know what that fucker looks like. He knew where those cameras were and didn't look up at them not once. Now I may just see him."

"What will you do when you see him?" Nikki asked.

Big Daddy hesitated. "You don't wanna know, young lady," Big Daddy responded. But Nikki already knew. And they arrived at apartment 169.

They got out, went around to the trunk, and Mick pulled out a battering ram for himself and one for Nikki. Then they headed to the ground floor apartment.

Mick and Big Daddy went to the front door, while Nikki went further over - to the front window. Once they all were positioned, Big Daddy used his fingers to count to three. The goal: confuse their target.

On the silent count of three, Mick violently slammed his battering ram into the front door as Nikki, further away but able to see Big Daddy's count, slammed her battering ram through the front window. The front door flung open, the window shattered, and Mick and Big Daddy, firearms in hand, ran inside.

Just as they had hoped, Sugar Rossi was spotted standing in the middle of the room as if trying to decide which threat to respond to first: the front door kicking open, on the front window shattering. But it only gave them a second because he didn't respond to either threat: he took off running toward the back of the big apartment. Mick fired a warning shot but they wanted him alive. He and Big Daddy ran after him.

But as soon as they hit the hallway, a flurry of gunshots rang out, forcing them to retreat.

"Back up!" Mick yelled out as he pulled Big Daddy backwards and back around the wall.

"I'm shot, Micky, I'm shot," Big Daddy cried out.

"So am I," cried Mick.

And the shooting stopped.

"Can you move?" Mick asked his big brother.

“No, can you?”

“No! We need backup.

And that was when they heard the sound of footsteps running toward them. their estimation based on the sound: Three gunmen were coming to finish them off.

As soon as the gunmen eased their way around that corner where they believed Mick and Big Daddy were laid out from bullet wounds, Mick on his butt and Big Daddy on his butt, too, fired in rapid succession before the men could realize they had been had and neither Mick nor Big Daddy had been hit. And all three gunmen sustained numerous bullets and dropped dead.

Then they heard a voice. “Did you get those motherfuckers?”

The voice had apparently assumed the gunfire had come from his men, which was exactly what Mick and Big Daddy wanted him to assume.

“Yeah,” Big Daddy yelled back in a deep voice as they stepped over the downed gunmen and positioned themselves in the hall. When Sugar Rossi stepped out of the backroom, he was met with Mick and Big Daddy aiming squarely at him. “Don’t even try it,” Mick said, but Sugar ran back into the room and attempted to slam the door shut.

But Big Daddy stunned Mick by how fast he ran down that hall and then lunged himself at that door. But it had already slammed shut. But that didn’t stop Big Daddy. He lunged himself violently against that door and shouldered it so hard that the lock broke, and it flung open.

But as soon as it opened, they saw the man they assumed was their target run out of a back door. They ran after him.

But as soon as Sugar Rossi ran down the steps, he stopped in his tracks when he saw Nikki standing there, her gun aimed squarely at him. “Drop your weapon now!” she yelled at him.

Sugar immediately dropped his gun and placed his hands in the air. Mick and then Big Daddy ran outside and then down the steps too. And that was when Big Daddy grabbed Sugar by his collar, pushed him violently against a broken down car.

“I didn’t shoot her!” Sugar Rossi cried out and as soon as he did, they all heard a loud, single gunshot that slammed through Sugar Rossi’s head, jerking it back violently.

Mick knocked Big Daddy and Nikki to the ground as Sugar Rossi fell face first into the dirt.

But no other gunshot was fired.

Mick, Big Daddy, and Nikki were looking around frantically. But they saw no one. They heard nothing. They got up.

Nikki quickly checked Sugar's pulse. He didn't have one.

“They could be in any of these buildings,” Mick said. “Or miles away from here. Let's go.”

They hurried to the Escalade and hopped in, with Mick behind the wheel. “Damn!” he said angrily as he punched the dashboard, and then he sped away from that apartment complex.

“They all claim they didn’t do shit,” said Big Daddy as Mick was about to turn onto the highway. “But I don’t know,” he added. “Something seems wrong. Something

seems off.”

And as soon as he said it, Mick slammed on brakes. And he started looking around at his surroundings, and at that complex behind him.

“What is it, Boss?” Nikki asked him.

“Just two blocks away,” Mick realized.

“What’s two blocks away?” Big Daddy asked him.

“I’ll be damn.”

“What is it, Mick?”

“When they show you who they are, believe them.”

Nikki frowned. It was weird to hear her boss quoting Maya Angelou.

“He was showing me all this time.”

“Who was showing you?” Big Daddy asked. “What was he showing you?” he asked when Mick didn’t answer his first question.

“They raped Bella four times.”

“Right,” said Nikki.

“They stabbed Ursula four times.”

“Jenay was shot four times,” Big Daddy said, although he had no idea where Mick

was going with it.

“And they put four million dollars into those offshore accounts,” said Nikki. “But what does four stand for?”

“Jumbo Fourtaine,” said Mick. “Four -taine,” he added, as if he was still working it out in his mind too.

“Who’s Jumbo Fourtaine?” Big Daddy asked.

“He owned a strip joint Bella used to work at. I was driving into an ambush when Bella warned me.”

“The ambush by Vito Costantino and his guys?” Big Daddy asked.

Mick nodded. “Yeah. I plotted and planned it inside Jumbo’s strip joint. A strip joint that’s two blocks from this apartment complex. That’s what made me think about it again.”

“You think he was leaving his calling card by ordering those guys to do everything in fours?” Nikki asked.

Mick nodded. “That’s exactly what he was doing. He was showing me who he was, but I didn’t put two and two together.”

“Why not?”

“Because I never had a beef with Jumbo. We were supposed to do business together, but after that ambush I never went back. We never did business.”

“Could that be his motive?” Big Daddy asked.

But Mick was shaking his head. “Jumbo was doing well. He would have survived just fine without my business.”

“Then what’s the motive?”

“I don’t know,” Mick said irritably. “But I’m about to find out,” he added as he looked both ways and then sped out onto the busy highway.

Big Daddy glanced back at Nikki. It seemed like a weak connection to him if they weren’t beefing, but it was better than nothing. The way Nikki looked back at Big Daddy told him that she knew it too.

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The strip club that was once bustling with excitement was now a boarded up old community theater building. Mick pulled to the side of the curb, and they all looked at it.

“Damn, Mick,” said Big Daddy. “How long ago was this?”

“Before Gloria was born.” But Mick looked up, remembered that it had three floors. “The shot that killed Sugar Rossi came from here,” Mick said as he began getting out of his SUV.

“How do you know that?” Big Daddy asked as he and Nikki scrambled to get out too. But Mick, with his weapon drawn, was already walking across the sidewalk.

Big Daddy hurried up to him. “We could be walking into an ambush, Mick. Don’t you think we need to come up with a plan?”

“He could have killed us at that apartment complex. There won’t be any ambush. He wants to have his say.”

“And you’re going to just give it to him?”

Mick looked at Big Daddy. “Do you or do you not want to know why Jenay was killed, and why you were targeted?”

Big Daddy stared at Mick. And nodded his head.

“I’m sure it’s locked,” Nikki said as Mick went to pull open the door.

“I’m sure it’s not,” Mick said as he pulled, and the door opened.

“He’s waiting on our asses,” Big Daddy said as they slowly walked into the otherwise old, decrepit, boarded up building.

The place was musky from being closed up for so long, but the lights were on as they walked through the lobby and straight ahead where the actual theater was located. They had to walk up a flight of stairs to get to the door.

Nikki was walking in front of the two men. It was her role, as underboss, to act as bodyguard whenever the boss was around, but before she could open the door of the actual theater for him, Mick took her by the arm and pulled her back. “Stay behind us,” he ordered her.

Nikki didn’t like it. She knew she could handle the situation in front of her. But Mick always did that to her. Always. She also knew he’d stomp her through that floor if she ever complained.

When Mick opened the door and they walked in, the room was lit, albeit dimly, and what sounded to Nikki like some type of classical music was playing.

“What kind of shit is this?” Big Daddy said under his breath.

“Stravinsky,” Mick replied. “Rite of Spring.”

Big Daddy and Nikki both looked at Mick. His wealth of knowledge never ceased to amaze either one of them.

“Look,” Nikki said, and they looked where her head had motioned. And that was when they realized somebody was sitting near the front of the theater.

Led by Mick, they slowly walked down the steps toward the front of the theater. The man sitting in the seat wore a hat and an overcoat, which meant to them that he might have only just arrived in that room himself. Maybe he didn't expect Mick to have figured it out this soon, they wondered.

But Mick didn't hesitate. As soon as he was parallel with the man in the seat, he reached over and grabbed him by his coat collar and stood him up. When Mick realized he was standing up, not a man, but a skeleton, he quickly released it and backed up. Big Daddy and Nikki were floored too.

"Who the fuck is that?!" a stunned Big Daddy asked.

"That's my father," a voice could be heard behind the curtains up on the stage. "Drop your guns and put your hands where I can see them or I will unleash hell on each and every one of you."

They all placed their guns on the floor and put their hands in the air.

"Now," said the voice, "grab your backup weaponry and place them on the floor too."

They all pulled out their backup pistols and put them down too.

"Put those hands back up where I can see them," the voice said, and they did as he said.

Then, a few seconds later, a man Big Daddy figured was a little younger than Mick walked from behind the curtain and made his way down the steps of the stage. He walked over to them with an AK-47 rifle pointed at them.

"Who was your father?"

“Jumbo Fourtaine,” the gunman said without hesitation. “Remember him?”

Mick said nothing. He had expected to see Jumbo himself. Not Jumbo’s skeleton and a son Mick didn’t even know he had.

“I’m Parker Fourtaine. His only child. His only anything really. Because you took away from him everything he loved and held dear.”

Mick frowned. “I didn’t take shit away from your father. We were friends.”

“Liar!” Parker yelled out angrily. “You are a liar! My father thought of you as a son. You didn’t give a damn about my father except to take everything you could from him!”

“What did I take from your father?”

“You killed the head of the Costantino crime family right in front of his club.”

“After the head of that family plotted, in that club, to kill me.”

“But they didn’t blame you. They were afraid of you. They blamed my father. They burned down the club he loved and that he had worked so hard to build up, and then they framed him for murders they committed themselves.”

Big Daddy looked at Mick. It was clear to him by Mick’s expression that he had no idea his friend had suffered such a fate. But Mick was young and focused on his own shit back then.

“The DA dropped some of the charges, but not all of them. My father was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. For crimes he didn’t even commit. And the only woman he ever loved was in love with you.”

Mick frowned again. “What are you talking about? What woman he loved?”

“Bella Caine,” Parker said loudly and Nikki wanted to shake her head. What was it about Bella Caine and these men loving her so deeply, she wondered.

“He loved her,” Parker said.

“That’s bullshit. He was the one who hooked me up with Bella.”

“But she always came back to him. But the night of that ambush she left with you and never came back to him. That destroyed him too. And then he lost his club on top of that, and then went to prison for life on top of that .”

Parker waited, as if it was still too painful for him to recite. And that was when Mick and Big Daddy took advantage of his weakness and began inching closer to Parker without Parker realizing they had even moved. Nikki saw what they were doing, and slowly kept pace too.

“He died in prison two months ago,” Parker said. “They released his body to me, and I knew exactly what I was going to do. I bought this place sight unseen and brought my father’s body here, to the place that he once loved. That once was his. Because I realized something I hadn’t even thought about before. I realized that it was you, Mr. High and Mighty Mick the Tick, who destroyed everything my father loved. It was you that caused him to lose his club. It was you that took away the love of his life. It was you who caused him to rot in prison and you wouldn’t even return his phone calls.”

“He never phoned me.”

“I phoned you! To beg you to use your influence and help my father. But you wouldn’t even take my calls.”

“I didn’t know your ass!”

“But I knew yours! And I was going to make sure you suffered if it was the last thing you ever did.”

“By doing what?”

“Carlton Rickie got out of prison around the same time my old man died. And he had a stake in poking the bear too. So I hired him. Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you. I’m rich. Almost as rich as your ass. Only my money is legit. I could afford to pay for services.”

“Who did you pay?”

“I hired Carlton to pay everybody.”

“Who’s everybody?”

“Patrick Donahue rings a bell?” Parker grinned. “If you hadn’t shown up Patrick was ready, willing, and able to bang the shit out of that bitch. He was glad to do it.”

Nikki looked at her boss. His jaw tightened, she knew he wanted to kick that guy’s ass, but he maintained his cool.

“Carlton paid a couple Frenchmen to take care of Bella Caine. Four times was their order. And they did it four wonderful times. I saw it on video while they did her. I wasn’t missing that show.”

“Why four times?” Big Daddy asked Parker to see if Mick’s theory held water.

“Because I knew Sinatra would eventually put two and two together. I hate his guts,

but everybody knew he was always smarter than your average thug.”

“What about Ursula?” Mick asked.

“That job went to Pock McCanns.”

Mick stared at Parker. Was the cargo intercept a part of his scheme too? “Why throw in Monk Paletti?” Mick asked.

Parker smiled. “That was Carlton’s idea. He knew all the players and he thought it would be neat to watch you blame those closest to you. We started off with that cargo intercept and used Beppie Gastone to give us the dock times. We weren’t thinking about your cargo, but it got you up in arms.”

“Why did Pock McCanns decide to use my name?” Big Daddy asked. “For the same reason?”

“No. We knew we were about to go big or go home when I myself went to that hospital cafeteria in Jericho, Maine and killed your wife.”

Big Daddy’s blood began to boil. Mick and Nikki could see his expression change.

“You were my target, but she got in the way,” Parker continued. “But either way, I killed the bitch. I knew it was going to hurt Mick to his core.”

All three of them wanted a piece of Carlton Rickie for the way he spoke of Jenay. But they knew they needed all the answers answered first.

“What did Sugar Rossi have to do with this?” Mick asked.

“Nothing whatsoever. That was the beauty of it. I ordered Pock to tell your inside

guys that it was Sugar who killed your sister-in-law. Then I told Sugar that you blamed him and were looking for him. I told him to be prepared, but his ass was so scared he couldn't find his way out of a paper bag. But I had to kill him. He was going to mention my name to save his skin, and I couldn't have that. I was right upstairs in this very building when you arrived at that complex. I could shoot and kill at that far a distance and you would have never known a thing. I easily took out Rossi. Could have gotten your asses too, including your fat-ass side piece Nikki, had I wanted to right then."

Nikki wanted to kick his ass personally, but she knew she had to maintain her cool too.

"I think," said Mick, "you should have taken us out while you could."

They could tell he was confused.

"You know why?" Mick asked him.

"Why?"

Nikki, knowing it was a cue, flung herself sideways onto the theater seats beside her and Parker quickly turned and fired at her. But as he did, Mick had already inched close enough to lift his long, muscular leg and kick that rifle out of Parker's hand. Big Daddy caught the rifle as it sailed in the air. Mick looked at Nikki. She had ducked and was fine.

Parker, realizing how helpless he now was, tried to run away. But Big Daddy tossed that rifle to Mick and was able to easily run him down and throw him against that stage. And that was when Big Daddy lost it. He thought about Jenay and how flippantly he spoke of her death. And he started raining down blow after blow after blow on Parker's frail body. Parker was screaming, but he was wasting his breath. All

the pain he caused their family, no way was Mick nor Nikki willing to so much as lift a finger to help him.

But as Big Daddy continued to brutalize him, his punches suddenly began to move slower and slower. Because he realized it wasn't going to bring Jenay back. He realized he was taking the law into his own hands. He realized he was doing exactly what he taught his children to never do.

He stopped punching Parker Fourtaine. And just stood there.

Even Parker was confused.

"Nikki?" Big Daddy's voice was nearly breathless.

Nikki quickly stepped forward. "Sir?"

"Call 911."

911 ? Nikki looked at Mick. Mick looked at his brother. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," Mick said.

"You aren't me," Big Daddy said. "I told you I'm not God, and I'm not going to play Him either."

As Mick continued to stare at him, Big Daddy looked at Nikki. "Do what I told you to do, Nikki, and do it now."

"Yes, sir," Nikki said. Even she knew Big Daddy trumped Mick when it came down to it. She did as she was told.

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The backyard was loaded with family. All the Sinatras. All the Gabrinis. All the adjacent by marriage or friendship of the family. The younger ones were in the pool or on the basketball courts or on the soccer field. The older ones were on the tennis courts, the golf course, or playing croquet. They were laughing and loud and unbridled in their joy.

Mick and Roz were on the patio relaxing in a lounge together, while Big Daddy and his kid sister Amelia were sitting right next to them relaxing in a second lounge together. They all had been drinking, but Amelia had hit the sauce heavily. She still had a glass of wine in her hand. But even she could enjoy the view. It was enough for them to see everybody for the first time in months, together again and happy.

Big Daddy even smiled. "Jenay would have loved this," he said.

"Yes, she would have," Roz agreed. "Knowing her, she would have been out there on that basketball court with Duke and his friends."

Big Daddy chuckled. "Yes, she would have."

"I'm just glad y'all caught that asshole that masterminded all of that madness," Amelia said. "And for him to blame Mick for shit Mick didn't even do."

"I'm glad Bella and Ursula recovered and were able to go on with their lives," Big Daddy said. "Especially Ursula." He shook his head. "She was in bad shape."

"It took a toll on Teddy, I'll tell you that," Roz said. "But he wouldn't leave his mother's bedside. That's says something right there."

“What it say?” Amelia asked.

“It says he’s a good man.”

“It says he’s been neglecting that woman for years and that guilt was kicking his butt. That’s what it says,” said Amelia. “But enough about Ursula. I never liked her. Where’s Bella’s ass? I’m surprised she didn’t invite herself.”

“Bella don’t be the one crossing those boundaries,” Roz said. “That be Mick.”

“That is so true,” Amelia said as she burped. “She calls him with her crocodile tears and he goes running.”

“Like hell,” Mick said.

“It’s the truth and you know it,” Amelia said, wasting a little bit of her wine as she pointed at him with the glass in her hand.

“I’m glad everybody involved is in prison now,” Roz said. “Patrick got twenty years, although I would have preferred him getting forty. Beppie Gastone got a beat down that blinded him. Pock McCanns got Life. And that fucker Parker got the death penalty. He did all that shit and had the nerve to brag about what he did to Jenay. That asshole.”

Big Daddy nodded his agreement.

Then Roz looked at him. “What’s next for you, Charles? Found somebody yet?”

“Hell no,” he said and they laughed. “And I’m not looking for somebody either.”

“But I’ll bet they’re looking for you,” Roz said.

“They are,” said Amelia. “Good looking as my brother is? And he’s rich too? Child please. He has to beat’em back with a broom.”

“Quit lying,” Big Daddy said. “The only people I’ve had to beat back are you and my children.” He looked at Roz. “They take turns spending the night with me as if it’s a sin to be alone.”

“It is,” Amelia said.

“That’s why you ended up with Hammer Reese again,” said Mick.

“You just don’t like Hammer because he’s a lawman and you’re . . . not,” she added and they laughed. “And the way he lays it down in bed? I could do a whole lot worse than the Hammer,” Amelia added, and she and Roz laughed and clasped their hands together.

Then Jackie ran over. “Big Daddy, I forgot to tell you.”

Everybody looked at her as if it was about to be bad news. “Tell me what?”

“My English teacher asked for your phone number.”

They laughed as Big Daddy jumped up from the lounge. “I can’t,” he said. “These women done lost their damn minds!”

“Invite her over, J,” Amelia said to her niece.

“Don’t you dare call that woman, Jacqueline,” Big Daddy warned.

But Jackie, grinning, was already pressing her teacher’s phone number. “I’m calling her now.”

Big Daddy tried to snatch that phone from his niece, but Jackie ran away. Big Daddy ran after her.

Mick nodded his head. “Yep. He’s back,” he said.

“Thank God,” Roz said as Big Daddy managed to catch up to Jackie, carry her to the pool, and throw her and her phone into it.

Mick held Roz tight as they all laughed.

Family , Mick thought, as he held Roz even closer. It was a word that used to baffle him after living through the dysfunctional parenting of his youth. But this was different. As he watched the laughter and the joy all mixed up with acceptance and loyalty and love, he could feel the differentness. This was real family. And real family where the heart was king? He was just beginning to realize there was truly nothing better.