



Teddy Sinatra: Go Your Own Way

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: When no-nonsense elite boss Teddy Sinatra makes decisions that nearly destroys all that he and Nikki have built up, and when outside forces seek to take advantage of the chaos, the family decide they can either stand together or fall apart. Until the reasons for the attacks are revealed and they all get caught in a maze of retribution that rips off the Band-Aid and exposes every weakness. They all must face hard truths about themselves and their part in the destruction. But will those truths destroy them?

Teddy Sinatra: Go Your Own Way is the latest pulse-pounding addition to the Teddy Sinatra Romantic Suspense series.

Total Pages (Source): 33

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:46 am

It didn't take long for Teddy Sinatra to find the person he came to see in the sea of people inside the midtown bar. For one thing he wore an old-fashioned three-piece suit in the mostly hip, thirtysomething crowd, and for another thing he was smoking some Cuban shit most in that joint would have viewed as beneath their more urbane tastes. But mainly, Teddy noticed as he made his way to the table, the guy he was there to see looked as if he was going to piss in his pants.

“Hey good looking.”

Teddy glanced back at the woman as she walked by, and she gave him that I'm interested if you're interested grin, but he didn't return her smile. The last thing on his mind was some random female. He was in a bar, but he was in that bar to handle business.

Jerry “Bugs” Cartelli was there for business, too, as he straightened his coat lapel on his three-piece polyester suit and kept squirming in his chair. He hated meetings like these. Especially with an asshole like Teddy T, which supposedly meant Tower of Strength , as if Teddy was this towering figure while Bugs, who hated his own nickname, was a bug on that tower.

But Teddy T was nothing more than a showoff if you asked Bugs, as he rode around town in a Bugatti like he was Sal fucking Gabrini. Whose muscles always strained the suits he wore and whose good looks he went out of his way to make sure got the attention of every woman in the room, including Bugs' old lady once upon a time. And he had the nerve to be rich and powerful too? And flaunted it every chance he could? Bugs couldn't stand the sight of the man.

But he was nobody's fool. He knew Teddy hated everything about him, too, from the fact that he was a former cop kicked off the force years ago, to how he had to make his living now. Wiseguys like Teddy used to be his pleasure to take down. Now he needed him, and needed to keep propping him up.

"If it ain't Teddy T in the flesh." Teddy had arrived at the table. "How you doing? You looking more and more like your old man every day. Anybody ever tell you that? Have a seat, my friend. Have a seat."

They weren't friends and never would be. Teddy despised snitches. Especially ex-cop snitches like Bugs Cartelli. But he needed intel. He sat down. "What you got for me, Bugs?"

Bugs knew it was coming, but still hated it. "Why you keep calling me that, Teddy? How many times I got to tell you I don't like that name?"

"When did I care what you like? You're a fucking snitch, who gives a shit? Just tell me what you got."

"I'm an informant, not a snitch," Bugs corrected him as he took a drag on his cigar. "There's a difference. I'm trying to help your organization over here, not hurt it. Don't I deserve some respect for that?" Then he glanced over at the two bodyguards that had entered the bar with Teddy. Although they sat at different tables nearby, as if they weren't with Teddy at all, Bugs had been around that mob life long enough to know security when he saw it. He also knew Teddy T never went anywhere with bodyguards unless problems and situations were going on. "And from what I'm seeing," Bugs added, "you need the help I'm here to give or you'd be flying solo."

Teddy hated bodyguards. He hated that two of his capos had to follow him around like he was some fucking starlet. But it was on his old man's orders and nobody disobeyed the old man's orders. Teddy ran the Sinatra crime family with ironclad

rule, and everybody respected that. But his old man ran him.

But Bugs wasn't wrong. Teddy needed his help. He needed more intel before he gave the final go to his men. They had a target already, and was planning a strike, but his gut kept telling him it might not be the right target, or the right strike, or both. And nine times out of ten Bugs Cartelli, as despicable a human being as he absolutely was, always gave good intel. "What you got for me? Don't waste my time."

Bugs hesitated as if he was regretting his decision to snitch on Sinatra's behalf already. But he needed the money. And nobody paid better than Teddy T. "It's not who you think it is," he said.

Teddy stared at Bugs. "How do you know what I think?"

Bugs didn't respond. He could tell by the changed look on Teddy's tortured face that he had struck a chord.

And he had. He hit the nail on the head. Teddy needed to know he had the right target. Bugs was telling him he didn't. Bugs was telling him more than the normal street chatter he expected to hear from him.

But before he could respond, the waiter came to their table and placed two whiskey mugs in front of them. Bugs, being the asshole Teddy knew him to be, had already ordered before Teddy arrived, and had ordered for Teddy too.

"Anything else?" the waiter asked them.

"No, we're good," said Bugs with a smile, and the waiter left.

"If I'm on the wrong track, who's the right track?" Teddy tried to sound as if it was a throwaway question, although it was the million dollar question, as he picked up his

mug and smelled the whiskey.

Bugs was unbothered by Teddy's sudden casualness. He knew he had that bastard exactly where he wanted him. "It's Potter Rarsi," he said.

Teddy, who was about to take a swig of his whiskey, stopped his mug at the tip of his bottom lip when he heard that name. Then he sat the mug back on the table altogether.

Bugs knew it was going to be a hard sell. He knew the relationship Rarsi had with the Sinatra family. "I know you don't wanna hear that, but I'm not fucking with you. I'm telling you it's Rarsi."

"Potter Rarsi? Bullshit!"

"Why would I lie, Teddy? Think about it. You got three capos dead. One after the other one: bam, bam, bam. All three were made men. All three supposedly died by suicide, according to the cops, which we both know is the real bullshit. But all three got one thing in common. You know what that is?"

"Hell yeah I know what it is. They all worked for me."

"And Rarsi," said Bugs.

Teddy didn't expect to hear that. "They what?"

"All three were on Rarsi's payroll too."

"Are you trying to tell me that my guys, my capos, were two-timing me?"

"That's what I'm telling you, yes."

“They wouldn’t dare. And neither would Rarsi go along with something that whacked. You gotta give me more than that, Bugs.”

“I’m telling you what I know. Not what I think. What I know.”

“How you know it?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Yeah right.”

“But I’m telling you the truth. My intel is the best intel in this town and you can’t tell me it’s not. That’s why you keep coming back for more.”

“Okay, hotshot, answer this,” said Teddy. “What Rarsi had to offer them? You tell me that. They were making fifty times what his capos make. They were with the biggest and most powerful organization in the underworld. They were dead men walking if they two-timed me and they knew it. What Rarsi had to offer them?”

Bugs didn’t hesitate. “Revenge.”

Teddy frowned. “What revenge? What are you talking?”

“Revenge against you and your old man. That’s what Rarsi could give to them. And it was an easy buy. They feed him intel on the what and the where with shipments from your various ports of call, and he keeps their double-dealing undercover while Rarsi works his destruction.”

“What’s he trying to destroy?”

Bugs smiled. “Obviously you and your old man.”

“Why would a man that’s been my father’s friend for decades suddenly want to destroy him?”

“I don’t know that yet. But whatever it is, it’s big.”

Teddy had a gruff look on his face. But even Bugs could tell it was more out of frustration by what he just heard than anger toward him: the messenger. But Teddy was thrown. There was no getting around it. “What you expect me to do with news like that?” he asked Bugs.

“Believe it. I wouldn’t put my reputation on the line, not to mention my life on the line, by coming up in your face telling you a lie. I need the money too bad. And I actually like my life.” Then Bugs took a long swig of his whiskey and then sat the mug down. “I’ll get more intel soon enough. More precise intel. But I already gave you way more than you already had.”

That was a fact. But Teddy needed more. There was no way he could go up in Rarsi’s face based on what? Some ex crooked cop spilling tea? He had to have more.

“But how much more intel I’m willing to risk my neck over,” said Bugs, “is entirely dependent on how much you’re willing to pay for what I’ve already given. Which would be a good indicator to me of what I can expect once I get more intel and give it to you.”

It was a no-brainer that Teddy was going big. He needed that intel and Bugs seemed to be the only one with some. “Twenty-five grand. Triple that when you bring me more.”

Bugs smiled. It was more than he could have hoped for. “That’s why I like working for you, Teddy T. You look out for your people.”

“Number one, you don’t work for me. Number two, your kind will never be my people. This is a business transaction. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

Bugs knew he was scum. He knew he was a crooked ex-cop that did a lot of crooked shit in his day. But he hated the way Teddy never let him forget it. The way Teddy always treated him like he was slime. But the money made him smile. “Glad doing business with you,” he said. Then he stood up and made his way toward the restrooms where the actual transaction would take place.

Teddy motioned for one of his capos to come over to him. When the capo arrived, he leaned down to the boss. “Twenty-five grand,” Teddy whispered to him. “And pace-make his ass.” Which meant the capo was to plant a bug on Bugs while he was handing him the cash.

“Got it,” the capo said, and headed for the restroom to handle the transaction.

But the money was the least thing on Teddy’s mind. Because that news had blown him away. It was like he had said Sal Gabrini or Monk Paletti was double-crossing Pop. That was how close Potter Rarsi was to the Sinatra family. Their organizations never had an issue with one another ever. But if what Bugs said was true and Rarsi’s syndicate did have footprints in his syndicate, then Teddy knew he had bigger trouble than some idiot offing three of his capos and making it look like suicide.

But what if Bugs was full of shit and had another agenda? Or was purposely dishing out disinformation? The fact that Teddy had ordered his capo to place a bug on Bugs would help them get an idea where he was getting his intel from. But as a demonstration of how seriously Teddy was taking the intel, he text his third in line and ordered him to put a tail on Cartelli. They needed all they could get.

“I thought that was you!”

Teddy looked up and saw a blast from the past standing near his table. His bodyguard had stood up and stopped her from completely approaching him, but it was undeniable who she was: A gorgeous lady he used to know intimately, and one he had actually considered marrying, if he was ever to marry at all, before he met Nikki.

But there she was, in every ounce of her gorgeous flesh, after all these years.

As if he didn't have enough shit on his plate already.

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“Did you see him?”

“See who?” Quinnesa “Quinn” Crawford was looking around her friend to see who she meant.

Andie Daniels had just entered the bar and was now sitting at Quinn’s table. “You mean to tell me you’ve been here waiting all this time and you don’t see him?”

“See who, Ann? Who? It would help if you told me who I’m supposed to have seen.”

“Teddy child.” Andie slung her long blonde hair behind her back. “Teddy is in this bar. That’s who!”

“Teddy? What’s he doing here? Is Nikki with him?”

Ann gave Quinn a hard look. “Why would I be so concerned about Teddy being in this place if Nikki was with him? What’s wrong with you, Quinn?”

“I’m tired for one thing. I had a long day. Are you trying to say Teddy’s here with another woman? Is that what you mean?”

“Finally she gets it!”

Now Quinn was intrigued. “Where girl?” She was looking around everywhere.

Ann nodded her head in a direction that was across the restaurant. When Quinn saw Teddy seated at a table with a woman standing beside him, and they seemed in a deep

conversation, her eyes stretched. “I don’t know her. You know her?”

“No I don’t know that heifer.”

“Stop being so rude. Maybe Nikki knows her,” Quinn said.

“I doubt that. And look at how cozy they are with one another. Nikki don’t know that woman.”

But Teddy knew her. He knew her well. He even waved his bodyguard off and stood up to greet her, another point that Quinn and Ann noticed too. “He never stood up for us,” Ann said.

“He stands up for Nikki though.”

“That’s his wife. He’s supposed to stand up for her. But who’s that chick?”

Her name was Caitlan Downs and Teddy was so surprised to see her that before he knew it they were hugging, which caused Quinn and Ann to stare even harder.

Teddy couldn’t believe how little she had changed. “Haven’t changed a bit,” he said to her.

“But you have,” she said to him. “Looking even more burdened down than you used to. I don’t know why you let your father work you so hard.”

She thought he was a shipping magnate who worked his father’s massive import/export business. She had no idea, just like many of the previous women he dated, what he truly did for a living.

“Mind if I sit down?”

He did mind, because he needed to leave, but they had split on good terms. He wanted to keep it cordial with her. And it actually felt good to see her again. “Sure.”

Although he didn’t assist her with her chair the way she was accustomed to, she was at least glad he allowed her a few minutes of what was obviously his busy schedule. “What’s with the bodyguard?” she asked him as they sat down and the bodyguard went back to his own table.

“Nothing at all. Just work. How have you been, Cait?”

“Good.” Then her forced smile left and her hard blue eyes turned sad. “Not so good.”

“Is it Bruno?”

“Bruno? Please. We divorced before that year was out.”

Teddy hadn’t heard that part. All he knew was that she had gotten married. When he left a woman, he left for good. Wasn’t interested in her backstory. Although he did, just once, inquire about Cait. “Sorry to hear that.”

“I’m not sorry. He was a world-class cheater. Worse than you.”

Teddy took a swig of his whiskey. He actually was never a cheater, because he was never in any exclusive relationships with anybody but Nikki. But he always got accused of being one after he stopped fooling around with his lady friends.

Caitlan smiled at him as if she didn’t mean to shade him. Because she really did need him. Because Teddy had that special sauce. He was no perfect little pretty boy by any means, but he had that rugged man-ness, that gorgeous sexiness in such a muscular, masculine way, that men dreamed of being like him and women dreamed of being with him. Teddy was a protector. A strong man. She missed that. She needed that.

“If Bruno’s not the problem,” Teddy said, “then what’s the problem?”

“Not Bruno, but another man. Which is the story of my life. But I’m worried about this one, Teddy.”

Teddy stared at her. He already knew her sudden appearance in his life could be staged. His antennae was already up. But Caitlan, like Nikki, had always been a straight shooter. Then he caught himself for comparing her to Nikki. “What’s his problem? Why are you so worried about him?”

“His violent outbursts used to be so infrequent that it was manageable. I mean, at least I could manage it.”

“But?”

“But now that shit’s happening every week.” She looked Teddy dead in the eyes. “He’s gonna kill me, Teddy, if I don’t do something.”

“Then leave his ass. What’s the problem?”

A look of distress crossed her pretty face. “May I?”

Teddy thought it unusual, but he slid his mug over to her and she took a long swig of his whiskey. Nikki’s friends at the table further over were beside themselves. If drinking behind somebody wasn’t an intimate move, they didn’t know what was.

Teddy would have agreed with them as he watched her swig it down. Cait was always a tough broad too. Like Nikki. Then he caught himself. There he go again!

“I need your help,” she said. “I need you, Teddy.”

She said it in a way that was so heartfelt that Teddy felt it. But he was Teddy Sinatra, not Joe Blow. He knew she could have changed from the girl he remembered, and it could all be a con.

But they split on decent terms. He used to like her a lot. He still was digging her vibe. “Text me his name and address. Will he be at home tonight?”

Her eyes lit up. “Yes. All night. He never wants to go anywhere. Does that mean you’re going to take care of it?”

“Me? No. But I’ll send a couple guys over. Give him a taste of his own medicine. When they finish with him, you won’t have any more trouble out of him.”

It wasn’t what she had hoped to hear. She wanted him to handle it. But it got her back on his radar. She was back in the game.

That was why she placed her hand on his hand and leaned toward him. “Thank you so much, Teddy. Thank you.”

Before Teddy realized it, she had leaned in so far that she had kissed him on the lips. He quickly removed his hand from beneath hers and frowned. “Cut that shit out,” he said to her. “Your ass may be divorced, but I’m still a married man.”

Caitlan hadn’t expected him to still be going hard for Nikki Tarver. He never went hard for her like that! But most married men pretended to be all in love with their wives the first time she came onto them. Because they knew that was expected of them. But they’d rarely met anybody as great looking and as great in bed as she was. And they always remembered that particular trait of hers. They always caved.

“Sorry,” she said. Then she smiled. “Not sorry.”

Teddy smiled as well. She was always good for a laugh too. But he wasn't playing with her ass. He stood up.

"You still have the same number?" she asked him, although she knew he had.

"It's the same number."

"I'll text you his information."

"You do that." Then she saw him look down her body. "Stay out the rest of the night. Don't go home till morning. Give him a chance to sober up after they kick his ass."

But she saw his gorgeously green eyes peruse her body, which she knew meant he was remembering just how good it used to be. Which was exactly the reaction she was after. "See you around, Teddy," she said as if she was dismissing him.

Since he wanted to be dismissed, he didn't give a shit. He left. His bodyguard gave her a glance. She was just that beautiful. And he left too.

But Quinn and Ann were beside themselves. "I'm a white woman," said Ann, "and I'll be honest with you: I don't like seeing all these white men with all these black women all of a sudden when you used to hardly ever see that."

"I'm a black woman," said Quinn, "and I used to hate seeing all those white women with all our black men. But I'm sure you had no problem with that particular scenario."

"None whatsoever," said Ann as if that way was the normal order of things. "But now every time you turn around you see black women with white men as if that way is trying to become as common as black men with white women. But even somebody like me don't like seeing that white chick with Teddy. That's Nikki's man. I'm not

down with that.”

“Well damn, Ann, I hope not. Since Nikki is supposed to be your friend too.”

But Ann looked at Quinn. “One of us have got to tell her. They kissed, Quinn.”

“I know what they did.”

“I can’t believe it, but he actually kissed that bitch.”

“I said I know that, Ann, why you keep beating that dead horse? I know it.”

Quinn was distressed by what she witnessed and the fact that she was the only logical one of the two to tell Nikki. Especially since diplomacy and tact were not particular traits of Ann’s.

“But we have to tell her,” said Ann. “Just like we would want her to tell us if she discovered that our men were no good too.”

“There you go making a mountain out of a molehill.”

“He kissed her on the lips, Quinn! What molehill?”

Quinn knew it too. But if any couple in their friend group was going to make it, she had her money on Ted and Nikki. This was no joke for her. This was no opportunity to gossip for her. It hurt.

“I’ll tell her,” Quinn said, but she said it as if it was the last thing on earth she wanted to do.

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He looked at his watch again. “He don’t believe in punctuality once again.”

“That ain’t his strong suit, Boss. But everything else is.” Then his driver looked through the rearview mirror at the boss in the backseat. “But will he agree to do it is the question. We got everything riding on him saying yes.”

There was a hard exhale. “If I can’t make it happen, Claudio will be done with me. No more excuses. He told me so already. And you know what that means.”

“Hell yeah I know what it means. It means Denny takes over.”

The boss was about to exhale again when the Bugatti sped onto the backlot of an old, abandoned, boarded-up strip mall and stopped beside his limo. His driver got out and opened the back driver side door as Teddy hopped out of his Bugatti and made his way toward the limo. “What up, Teddy T?”

“What up?” Teddy said as he got into the limo. The driver closed the door and stood beside it.

“I thought Mick ordered bodyguards on you and Nikki after shipments went missing.”

“He did.”

The boss smiled. “You don’t give a fuck, do you?”

Teddy gave a half-smile. “Something like that.”

“You’re a handful. You and Nikki both. I don’t know how Mick does it.”

“Are we here to talk about Pop, or about your shit?”

“Whatever my shit is.”

“Right.”

“We’re really here to make a deal. A deal I thought was a big deal to you too.”

“Who said it wasn’t?”

“Your actions are saying it. Do you realize we’ve met six times in the last three months and you have never been on time for any of those meetings?”

“I’m a busy man, what can I say?”

“You can say yes.”

Teddy knew his answer was long overdue. But he also knew that answer would be monumental.

“Are you there yet, Teddy? And if not, why not? This is the chance of a lifetime for you. For me too. I need this to work as much as you do. What can I do to get you to yes?”

Teddy had his arms folded and was rubbing his chin. The boss stared at him. Always thinking, that one was. Always one step ahead. But never impulsive. Never quick to make decisions that he wasn’t ready to make. Which could make for an infuriating partnership. But he was just like his old man, the boss thought.

Then Teddy made a decision. But it wasn't what the boss wanted to hear. "Give me another week."

"A week, Teddy?"

"Too much shit going on right now. I'll let you know in a week."

"That's what you told me last week."

Teddy looked at him. "Your ass came to me. Now if your ass can't wait on me then move the hell on."

Nobody spoke to him that way. Nobody. But Teddy wasn't exactly his equal. In the scheme of things, he knew he wasn't even in Teddy's league. Which meant he was about to blow it big time if he didn't course-correct. That was why he smiled. "However long it takes," he said. "You're worth waiting for."

Teddy knew that was bullshit, but he was too tired to argue. He gave a knock and the driver opened the door for him.

The driver smiled as Teddy got out. "I thought they said you wasn't riding solo these days. Where your bodyguards at, Teddy T?"

"Wherever they wanna be," Teddy said, the driver laughed, and Teddy hopped into his car and sped away.

The driver's smile left. "Asshole," he said out loud, and got back behind the wheel of the limo.

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“Mommy, where’s Daddy? Mommy? Mommy, where’s Daddy?”

Nikki Sinatra slowly opened her eyes. Her biracial toddler was standing beside her bed looking adorable with her big green eyes like her father’s and her smooth brown skin like her mother’s and her long, curly hair like a combination of both her parents. She was still sleepy, but she smiled. Angela Sinatra, called Kimmie , always made her smile. “Hey sweetie.”

“Mommy, where’s Daddy?”

Nikki grabbed her phone from the nightstand and looked at the time. She was still having trouble focusing her sleepy eyes, but she could easily see that it was 11:21pm. Late.

She sat the phone down, grabbed her daughter that stood in her pjs on the side of her bed, and she laid her on the bed beside her. “Where’s Nanny?”

“I waited until she went to sleep. Then I came to your room.”

Nikki shook her head. Another gangster in the family, she thought. “Daddy’s out working, baby. He’s at work.”

“But it’s bedtime. Why Daddy not in bed?”

Nikki rubbed her hair. Both of her parents were smart people and she inherited that gene too. Even as a toddler, she was nobody’s pushover. She was not going to take stupid answers as if they made sense. And Nikki wasn’t trying to make her take them.

But she wasn't about to explain anything about her parents' complicated work life this time of night either. "Go to sleep. He'll be home soon."

"I don't see him much anymore. I want Daddy."

"I know, baby girl. It's just tough times at work. But he'll be here soon."

"With bells and whistles on?"

Nikki smiled. It was the way she used to describe Teddy's entrance whenever he would come home, and it would make Kimmie laugh. "With bells and whistles on," she said. And that seemed to be enough for Kimmie. She cuddled against her mother and, within minutes, was fast asleep.

But Nikki was wide awake. They had problems at the docks. A series of threats they couldn't trace were decimating their bottom line and ships were unable to sail because of those threats. And then, just a couple days ago, three of their capos supposedly committed suicide. That was a farce and everybody in the organization knew it. But it all went down while Mick and Roz were on vacation out of the country with the twins, who were going away to college after the trip.

But Mick's absence made it look as if she and Teddy, who ran his entire syndicate, didn't have their acts together, and it was all falling apart under their watch.

In that climate, there was no way she was going to fault Teddy for working his ass off to get to the bottom of what was going down. She was working her ass off, too, trying to find answers. But one of them had to be there for Kimmie. And since Teddy was the boss and she was his underboss, she was the logical choice.

Kimmie had a live-in nanny around-the-clock and a security details too, but none of them could substitute for her parents. Nikki was there for breakfast every morning

and dinner every night no matter what was going on. As for Teddy at breakfast and dinner? He was there whenever he could manage to get away, which of late was rarely ever. But they both were still going to feel the wrath of Mick when he returned no matter what they did. Which was a lifestyle that was getting unsustainable to Nikki. It was like they were killing themselves for what? His ungrateful ass?

Not that she didn't love and respect Mick Sinatra. She had nothing but love and respect for him. But his heavy-handed presence in their lives was so overwhelming that he was getting to be too much. It was getting to the outside of too much.

She tried to forget all of that craziness that surrounded them and tried to go back to sleep. But just as she was getting there, her phone rang. When she looked at the Caller ID and saw that it was Quinn, she almost didn't answer it. But Quinn was her girl. Maybe her best friend outside of Roz and Teddy's kid sister Gloria. She answered.

"Hey, Quinn, what's up?"

"I hope I didn't wake you."

"No I was . . . What's up?"

"You know I'm no gossip girl."

She was, but Nikki needed to know what she wanted. "Okay."

"And you know I hate telling the news."

"Quinn, what is it?"

"Is Teddy home?"

Nikki's heart dropped. Somehow she knew it was going to be about Teddy. "No. Why?"

"I saw him at this bar tonight."

"At a bar?"

"Yeah. Ann and I went out for drinks to talk about maybe getting a couple's trip together for later this month."

There was no way Nikki and Teddy were going to be able to go on any trips any time soon, but Nikki needed to know what she saw. "And?"

"And we saw Teddy girl. With a girl. Or should I say a very attractive woman."

Nikki's previous anxiety had already factored in that it would be a woman involved. "Okay."

"I wouldn't have mentioned it because I know Teddy has to deal with many women in the import/export business he's in."

Nikki's friends knew the rumors about Teddy being named the boss of his father's crime syndicate and Nikki the underboss, but they all pretended as if it was just bad rumors and they actually were one hundred percent legit down at the docks. "You would not have mentioned it," Nikki said, "but you're mentioning it because why?"

"Because she drank from his same glass."

That did surprise Nikki. But she knew Quinn. That could have waited until tomorrow. "And?" Nikki asked.

“And he kissed her, Nikki. He kissed her on the lips!”

That did throw Nikki for a loop. And her heart did drop again, if that was even possible. “He kissed her?”

“On the lips, yes.”

“Or did she kiss him?”

“Oh come on, Nick! Don’t tell me you’re now that making excuses for your man’s bad behavior girl too. What’s the difference? They kissed each other. He, a very married man, allowed a woman to kiss him or he kissed her. Either way it’s bad.”

Nikki knew it too. But what did she want her to say? “Did they leave the bar together?”

“No, thank goodness. He left first. She stuck around, drinking the last of his drink, talking to some other guy who tried to hit on her but it didn’t work, and then she finally left.”

“Okay thanks, Quinn.”

“That’s it? Thanks Quinn?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“That you’re gonna leave his ass, that’s what! You can’t let him get away with this, Nikki.”

“I’m not trying to let him get away with shit. But what I’m not going to do is discuss my marriage with you or Ann or anybody else. Yes, I appreciate you telling me what

you saw. You made the right call. But everything after that is between Teddy and me. I know that sounds harsh but that's just the way it is."

"It doesn't sound harsh, girl. It sounds like you. You went from bartending to getting all the way up in the good graces of a bougie man like Mick Sinatra. And you married his son, who all these bitches in Philly wanted to marry but he wasn't interested. And I'm willing to bet those Sinatras saw in you what I see in you: You don't bend, you don't break. You just keep pressing on. Because if it had been my man, or Ann's man, we'd have his clothes out on the lawn before he made it home. For real though. But I doubt seriously if you even mention it to him. You have no insecurities Nikki. That's what we respect most about you. You aren't like us."

Then Quinn laughed. But Nikki didn't find it funny at all. No insecurities? Was she kidding? Nikki had tons of insecurities. And her marriage to Teddy, because he was and still remained in such high demand, was at the top of that list. The fact that she was full-figured and not some skinny girl like the women he used to prefer, was up there too.

"Anyway, I don't want to wake Kimmie. I'll call you tomorrow," Nikki said, they said their goodbyes, and she ended the call.

But it would be hours, and still no Teddy, before Nikki finally fell asleep.

And hours still before Teddy made it home.

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Teddy sped his Bugatti through the security gate of his home, waving at the detail at the gate, and drove all the way down the winding driveway and stopped beside Nikki's Porsche. He sat behind the wheel for a few seconds amazed that it was almost daybreak already and he'd been working all night. Again. He was so tired he didn't feel like walking in the house. But he got his second wind, like he always did, and walked on in.

He went to the nursery first. The nanny was already up and preparing the lesson plans for that day, so Teddy tiptoed over to his daughter's bed. He wanted to wake her up as he stood there staring at her, but he was too tired to even engage her. He was going to make it his business to spend time with her that day. His old man was a deadbeat dad, as far as emotional support growing up, and he was determined to never be like his old man. But deep down, he knew he was too much like him already.

That was why, to the delight of her nanny who knew how much she missed her father, he sat on the edge of the bed and awakened Kimmie anyway. As soon as Kimmie opened her large green eyes and saw her father sitting there, she flew into his arms. "Daddy!" she said happily. And it warmed and alarmed Teddy at the same time. This little human being depended so much on him. He didn't feel worthy of her.

But he closed his eyes tight and held on to her dearly. He eventually laid her back down, but she insisted on telling him all about what she did all week and what she planned to do that day. And Teddy, exhausted though he might be, sat there and listened. He loved seeing her so happy and so full of life. He just loved it.

By the time she had run out of things to say, he kissed her on the forehead and made his way upstairs. It was Nikki he wanted.

But she was in the shower. Which was exactly where he needed to be. He walked into the bathroom, took off all his clothes, and was opening the shower door before Nikki even knew he had made it home. When they eyed each other, and specifically each other's nakedness, all of Teddy's exhaustion and all of Nikki's concerns about that other woman, melted away.

Teddy went up to Nikki, slammed his body against her body as the water careened over both of them, and he began kissing her with a roughness and a desperateness that took their breath away. And that was only the beginning.

They kissed so hard and for so long that Teddy kept breaking away, but kept coming right back in for more. He was massaging and kissing her all at once until neither one of them could bear it any longer.

He entered her, forcing both of them to slow down, and then they settled into a rhythm that only lasted a matter of minutes, but that gave them both everything they were looking for. Teddy needed the warmth inside of Nikki to calm him down again. Nikki needed the security of Teddy's big arms around her to remind her that he loved her and would never hurt her like the news of that other woman seemed to suggest. They moved to that rhythm of need as if they invented every gyration.

Nikki's back was against the shower wall. He was holding her up by her thighs, penetrating deeper and deeper. She was running her fingers through his hair as he continued to kiss her as he did her, and as they were unable to stop those feelings that had overtaken them both.

Slapping sounds could be heard throughout that shower that morning. Hard slaps of their wet bodies that started increasing again the longer they held on. Until they couldn't hold on another second.

They were grunting so hard that it felt as if they were going to explode if they didn't

cum. They came. With a thunderous slap, Teddy took them over and they came hard.

It took several more minutes for those feelings to ease up enough for them to ease up too.

When their orgasms finally waned, they were breathing so heavily that they thought they were going to pass out from the sheer emotion of it all. It was the hardest cum they'd had in a long, long time.

Teddy was leaned against Nikki, breathing harder than she was, when their realities returned and she couldn't hold it in a second longer. She knew he was tired. He had to be: he'd worked all night. Or at least did something all night. But she was nobody's fool. She didn't sweep shit under rugs.

"Who was that woman you kissed at the bar last night?"

Although he remained leaned against her body, she could feel his own body stiffen when she asked that question. Then he leaned back and looked her dead in the eyes, which she appreciated. "She was somebody I used to know who needed help."

"What kind of help?"

"Her boyfriend is abusive. That kind of help."

Nikki didn't know what she expected him to say, but it wasn't that. "So you agreed to help her?"

"I agreed to send some of our guys over there to help her, yes. She's an old friend."

"Friend," asked Nikki, "or lover?"

Teddy didn't hesitate. "Both," he admitted.

"When was the last time?"

"Years ago. Before I met you."

Nikki continued to stare at him. He was no natural liar, but he was still a man. She still had to keep her guard up. But in this instance, she believed him. To a point. "What you will never get me to understand," she said, "is that you had time to have drinks with an old friend-slash-lover, but you haven't had time all week to have dinner with me and your daughter." She shook her head. "I tolerate a lot of shit from you, Teddy Sinatra. Lots of shit because I know you're out there doing what you need to do. But I'm not tolerating that shit. I'm never tolerating that shit. Remember that," she said, and then moved away from him, forcing his penis to slide out of her. And then she left the shower.

Teddy leaned his forehead against the wall she just vacated and closed his eyes. Because he did feel some sense of guilt. Seeing Caitlan again reminded him of his days when he was free as a bird. Could come and go when he pleased. Was working for himself and had no responsibilities whatsoever. Didn't have his old man breathing down his neck like he was some child he had to manage. And a part of him, a growing part of him, missed those days.

But those days were long gone, and he knew it.

He changed the water from hot to cold, and took a long, cold shower.

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Later that morning and Teddy sped onto the docks and stopped at the main office. Renardo Strickland, his dock supervisor, was waiting for him.

“We got another one, Boss.”

Teddy got out of his car. “Same shit?”

“Same, yes sir. But it’s still a threat.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Teddy said. “All week we’ve been getting these threats and all week our ships have been sitting like sitting ducks. I want those buckets out today.”

“Which ones?”

“What do you mean which ones? All of them! No more delays. If that shit was gonna happen, that shit would have happened by now. We sail today. Every ship. This is Mick fucking Sinatra’s outfit. Who the fuck they think they’re dealing with? I’m tired of this shit. We move today!”

“Yes sir, Boss.”

“Get crews onboard already here and call crews in that aren’t here yet. Pop has already lost millions with these delays. He’s gonna have my ass when he gets back in the country. These ships have got to move.”

“Bugs didn’t have any intel?”

“He had some shit to tell. But nothing actionable.” Then Teddy exhaled at just the thought that Potter Rarsi might be involved and how complicated that would be. “At least not yet. We’re working on it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we’ve got the person he claims might be involved under surveillance. It means we don’t strike the target we had until we make sure the target Bugs put out there is right. I doubt it, but we’ll see. But forget all of that. We sail today. Get it done,” Teddy said and began heading to the office.

“Yes sir,” Renardo said, and began hurrying for the docks.

Then Teddy stopped and looked over at Renardo. “Where’s my wife?”

Renardo stopped his progression and looked at the boss. “Nikki? I haven’t seen her all morning. Maybe she’s with your kid.”

Teddy knew that wasn’t true. The nanny was with Kimmie when he left home that morning. But that wasn’t Renardo’s business. “Yeah maybe,” he said, and went into the office.

“You heard the boss,” Renardo said to the capos hanging around. “Let’s sail!”

The men cheered as they hurried to the docks with Renardo.

Inside, Teddy removed his suit coat and placed it over his desk chair, untightened his tie, and sat behind the desk, cocked both feet on top, and leaned all the way back. He began rocking. He got three hours sleep tops after getting out of that shower. Just three hours. Now he felt dead on his feet.

And where the hell was Nikki? He closed his eyes thinking about her, and how wonderful it felt to be inside of her before she left the house. It was amazing to him how much he still desired her. It amazed him still how not one woman he saw, and he saw plenty in his line of work, could compare.

But seeing Caitlan again awoken something inside of him. That used to be . Those times when life was his for the taking and he could have any woman he desired. But now he was so saddled with responsibility that he could hardly think straight. And if he didn't have this shit figured out when Pop got back in town, he thought, he was going to have hell to pay. But what could he do about it now? He was doing all he could think to do. Until he couldn't think at all and his eyes began getting heavier. And his chin was slowly lobbing downward toward his chest. Before he knew it, in the span of mere minutes, he had fallen asleep in his chair.

Until several minutes later.

“Boss? Hey boss?”

“Yeah?” Teddy quickly responded even as he was opening his eyes and lifting his chin back up.

For his bodyguard that stood inside the office door, he knew the boss was tired and needed his sleep. But he couldn't let it slide. “I just got a phone call from Nikki.”

Teddy started rocking in his chair again, waiting for more information.

“She told me to shoot her a photo.”

That didn't seem like a big deal to Teddy. Maybe she was checking out something that seemed odd to her. “So what are you telling me for? She's your boss. Shoot her the photo.”

“I did. But . . .”

“But what?”

“It’s my job to snap a photo of anybody who approaches you that I don’t know outright.”

“So?”

“So I snapped a photo of that lady,” the guard said.

Teddy frowned. “What lady?”

“The lady from the bar last night.”

Teddy stopped rocking. “She wanted a photo of her ?”

“Yes sir.”

Teddy’s voice elevated. “ And you sent it to her ?”

“Like you said, she’s my boss.”

“And I’m her boss! Why didn’t you run it by me first?”

His bodyguard was frustrated. “You’re the one keep telling us to treat Nikki with the full respect of our underboss. If the underboss gives me an order, I don’t be running it by anybody. I do what I’m told.”

Teddy knew that was true. He rubbed his forehead. “You’re right. So you sent her the photo?”

“Yes sir.”

“So where is she? Is she here?”

“No sir.”

Teddy knew there was more. “What? Tell me.”

“She also wanted her address.”

Another lilt to his voice. “ And you gave it to her ?”

“She’s my boss.”

“ Got dammit!” Teddy quickly removed his shoes from the desk and stood up, grabbing his suit coat from off the back of his chair. “Any security with her?”

“No sir. I checked after I sent the address. She told them to stand down.”

“Let me guess: They stood down?”

“Yes sir. She’s their boss too.”

Teddy could not believe it. “Fucking idiots!” he yelled as he took off. His capo/guard took off behind him.

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It only took one phone call to one of the capos assigned to Teddy's security last night for Nikki to get a photo of Caitlan Downs. It was always their job to photograph anybody that came near Teddy that they didn't know outright, and one of the capos had done just that. He text the photo and, since Teddy had ordered him to get two men to her address last night to rough up the male that lived there, he sent her the address too.

She sat in her sleek Porsche Panamera looking at the photo. A beautiful woman with short red hair and small eyes. And skinny as a rail just like Teddy used to like them. That wasn't his preference anymore. Nikki was full-figured and she noticed him checking out full-figured girls far more than he checked out the slender ones. Quinn and Ann said it was because they reminded him of Nikki. Although Nikki didn't know if that was true, she did know he was far more down with the swirl now than he used to be, based on which ladies his eyes roamed to the most. It was a different day for Teddy.

But it was that kiss that concerned Nikki, a kiss he didn't deny when she brought it up. And the fact that he allowed some woman he supposedly hadn't seen in years to drink from his drink like she was still his woman. That bothered her too.

So much so that now that she had the woman's address she put her car in gear and took off. She decided to pay her a visit. Not because she was scared of losing Teddy to her or anything that serious. She knew Teddy loved her deeply and it would take far more than some female batting her pretty eyes at him to take him away from his wife and daughter. But that woman did provoke something inside of Teddy. She saw it in his eyes after they made love in the shower and she confronted him. She had to find out for herself what that provocation was, and if this woman meant him (or their

marriage) any harm. Her motto nowadays? Nip shit in the bud before shit had a chance to come out. She wanted a face to face with this bitch.

Based on the address, Caitlan lived on the Main Line in suburban Philadelphia and Nikki found her residence with ease. A nice home, although modest by Sinatra standards, Nikki parked on the street in front of the house, but further back from the driveway as if she was just somebody parked on the street or somebody visiting the next door neighbor.

But once she got to her destination she wondered if it was a good idea to be there after all. What could be gained by confronting this woman? She'd come off like some pathetic wife afraid of losing her man, which would give the other woman instant credibility. As if she was actually Nikki's rival for Teddy's affections. As if she stood a chance with Nikki's man. But Nikki saw that look in Teddy's eyes. She had to know what pull that woman had on him.

But it still wasn't a slam dunk for Nikki. She still had her reservations about this bold stroke of genius, or insanity, of hers. In the past, when she heard rumors of some woman showing interest in Teddy, she'd just let it play itself out. What was the change now? Was it only that look she saw in Teddy's eyes? Or was it Nikki getting older, and wiser, and knowing firsthand that females nowadays would burn down the whole house if they couldn't have the man inside of it.

While she was contemplating her decision, a car sped past her and turned into the driveway at Caitlan Downs' home. Nikki sat and watched as the woman she recognized from the photo as Caitlan got out of the car and began to head toward the front door. Based on the club-type clothing she was wearing, it appeared as if she had been out all night. She hadn't been with Teddy because Teddy was fast asleep in bed when Nikki left the house to go check out a few leads on who might be sending threats of retaliation that had their dockside ships on standby all week. Teddy had leads. She had leads. And a strike against a likely target was being planned. But

neither Teddy nor Nikki were one hundred percent comfortable that they had the right target.

After she checked out the leads that led nowhere, she thought about that woman from last night and decided to get what info she could get on her. And that led to this: Nikki parked outside the woman's home watching the woman walk toward her front door. She looked even better than her photo. Which didn't help Nikki's state at all. But it was what it was. She unbuckled her seatbelt. Now, she felt, would be a good time to introduce herself.

But before she could open her car door, the front door of Caitlan's house flew open and a man, who appeared to be badly beaten himself, came rushing out of the house. He grabbed Caitlan by her bone-thin arm, yelling at her, and flung her inside the house. But when Nikki saw him slap Caitlan to the floor as he was slamming the door shut, she grabbed her gun out of her glove compartment, hopped out of her car, and in her slacks and tucked-in sleeveless blouse and heels, she ran across the lawn to the front door.

Even though she knew Teddy was going to kick her ass, she'd seen too many attacks in her lifetime to know a domestic situation that could become a homicide situation in a heartbeat. And although it felt strange that she would be running to the rescue of a woman who just might want to upend her life with Teddy, she couldn't sit by and let it happen. Homewrecking was bad, but it was no capital offense.

The front door had been slammed so hard by that man that it had slightly bounced back open. That was why, as soon as Nikki ran up to the door, she could hear a woman's voice screaming from inside. It was a shockingly scary scream.

With her weapon by her side, she flung the door all the way open and immediately saw the man lift Caitlan in the air and then body-slammed her to the floor. She screamed out in pain. He immediately picked up a bat as if he was about to finish her

off.

“Drop it right now!” Nikki yelled out at the man as she hurried toward him, her Glock aimed directly at him.

Surprised, he turned around quickly, saw Nikki, and then before she could react he took that bat and knocked that gun out of her hand, causing the gun to scurry across the floor and underneath the sofa. And he kept coming for her.

Nikki grabbed hold of that bat, too, and they struggled for control. But when Nikki realized he was far stronger than her and would eventually take control of that bat, she decided to hold onto him, lift him up, and then she did as he had done to Caitlan and body-slammed him to the floor.

As he writhe in pain, she straddled his body by sitting on top of him, grabbed that bat, and slammed it against his neck, effectively choking him. Caitlan, seeing her chance to flee, ran out of the house.

The man struggled, moving his body side to side as he fought to break free and to remove that bat from his neck.

He was strong enough and scared enough to remove the bat, and then he knocked Nikki off of him and attempted to get on top of her. But she was fast of foot, much faster than he was, and she was able to get on her feet and with that positioning take back that bat and beat him down.

At first it was still a struggle as he continued to try to get up and take that bat away from her, but the more she beat on him the less of a threat he became. But she didn't let up. Now she was angry at his ass, and was screaming at him, and she wasn't going to stop beating on him until he had no fight left in him.

By the time Teddy and his bodyguard had arrived at the house and ran inside, the man was unconscious.

“Nikki!” Teddy called out and ran to her. She was standing there, breathing heavily, as Teddy took the now-bloody bat from her and tossed it aside. His bodyguard checked the man’s pulse. It was still strong.

Nikki, now exhausted, plopped down on the coffee table. That was when Teddy saw the blood on her.

“You’re bleeding,” he said to her as he lifted her chin and realized it was a nosebleed. “Hold your head back,” he ordered her.

“I’m okay.”

“Like hell you are. Hold your head back,” Teddy ordered again as he pulled out his handkerchief and pressed it against her nose. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to talk to her.”

“Talk about what? And didn’t I say hold your head back?”

Nikki leaned her head back as far as it could go. “I wanted to introduce myself.”

“Why? What the fuck you need to introduce yourself to her for? I told you it was nothing.”

“You also told me our guys were going to handle him.”

“They did handle him.”

“They did a lousy job,” she said, her head leaning forward and Teddy pushing it back.

“Hold your head back!” he yelled at her again. Then he exhaled as she held her head back once again. “When I heard you screaming when I was running up to this house, I thought I was going to have a heart attack. You scared the shit out of me.” Then he began rubbing her back with one hand as he nursed her bloody nose with his other hand. “You scared the shit out of me,” he said again as if he was coming to the realization himself that his wife in the field was spooking him more, not less, as time went by.

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Teddy drove Nikki to the docks while his bodyguard drove her car behind them. But the drive was mostly silent as if he was allowing Nikki time to decompress. But when they arrived at the dock office, and they went inside, Teddy couldn't hold back any longer. He unleashed on her.

“That was some dumbass, backwards-ass shit you pulled, Nikki.”

“That man was attacking her,” Nikki said as she leaned her back against the wall.

“What was I supposed to do?”

“Mind your own fucking business, that's what!” Teddy fired back as he went behind the desk. “You shouldn't have been there. What you looking her up for with all this work we got to do?”

“You act as if this was some elaborate plan. I was no plan at all. I was wanted a face to face with her, that's all.”

“But why? What you need to see her face for? I told you she needed a favor and I gave her one. End of story!”

“You say.”

Teddy looked at her. “And your ass better say it too.”

“That may not be what she says, is what I mean.”

“Who gives a shit what she says? You're my responsibility, not her!” Then he

frowned even deeper. “Why would you even go there when I told you she was having trouble with her old man?”

“I wasn’t thinking like that. I just wanted to size her up, that’s all. I never dreamed I’d pull up and there she was being manhandled by that man. He slapped her down as soon as she walked in that house. I couldn’t let that stand.”

“Wait a minute. What do you mean? She was there?”

“Yes, she was there. She ran out not long before you came up.”

Teddy couldn’t believe it. “And she left my wife to fight him off by yourself?”

“I honestly don’t think she knew who I was. She just saw that he and I were fighting and she took that opportunity to get out of there. It was self-preservation.”

“At least somebody cared about themselves up in that motherfucker.”

Nikki leaned her head back against the wall. Teddy watched her. She had thick, full hair that she always wore in a perfect hairstyle that hung just below her neck. Her face could rival the most beautiful girl’s in the world. But she looked troubled to him. “Nikki, what is it?”

“The way you respond to me in the field is the very reason I’m still not fully accepted by the guys. They see how you baby me. How you’re terrified every time I’m in any kind of scuffle like I can’t take care of myself.”

“Scuffle my ass. He could have killed you!”

“Ah come on, Teddy. We deal with guys far worse than him every week.”

“You don’t.”

“I’m the number two in the largest syndicate in the world. If I can’t handle some woman-beating scum like him, then what are we doing? Playing at this shit? Your father wouldn’t have signed off on me becoming your number two if I didn’t have what it takes.”

“Who said you didn’t have what it takes? I never said that. What I’m saying is that you’re my wife too. The mother of my child. And I can’t pretend you aren’t.”

Nikki exhaled as the office phone began to ring.

“And the next time you ditch your security when Pop ordered security for both of us before he left the country, then I’m telling him about it. I’m gonna let him deal with your disobedient ass,” he said as he pressed Speaker on the desk phone and answered the call. “What?”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

The voice was unfamiliar. Teddy glanced at Nikki. Nikki stood away from the wall and looked too. They had been getting those same menacing phone calls all week that grounded their fleet.

“You wouldn’t do what if you were me?” Teddy asked over the phone.

“Sail.”

Sail? Who was sailing, Nikki wondered. All of their ships, the ones dockside anyway, were in a holding pattern.

“Why wouldn’t you sail?” Teddy asked the caller.

“Because it isn’t the wise thing to do.”

“What you know about wisdom?”

“I know who I am. And who I am not.”

Teddy frowned. “Who is this?”

“Do you know who I am not?”

“No. But I’m sure you’re gonna tell me.”

“I’m not the Unabomber. You know why?”

“Why?”

“Because, unlike him, I’ll never get caught. I sail away. Just like your men are about to do.”

“Who are you?” Teddy asked again.

“I’m the man that didn’t have to get onboard.”

Teddy frowned again. “What?”

“Beneath the boat is as good a place as above it.”

When he said those words, Teddy’s heart dropped. He understood exactly what he meant.

“Tar-tar,” the man said with a laugh in his voice as he ended the call. But Teddy had

already dropped the phone and was running out of that office.

“Teddy, what’s wrong?” Nikki was hurrying behind him. “Teddy what is it?”

But Teddy was running toward the docks yelling as he ran. “Abandon ship!” he was crying out. “Abandon ship!” He was flailing his arms as he ran. He was running as fast as he could. “Abandon ship! Get everybody off! Get everybody off!”

But before he could get that last yell out, an explosion could be heard that knocked Teddy off of his feet and nearly knocked Nikki off of her feet further behind him. And the largest boat in the harbor went up in smoke and fire too.

Teddy fell, but he quickly got back up and looked at the harbor. And not one, not two, but three of his ships had been rocked by the explosion. Two were inflames. The other one had split in two. The bodies that were now floating in the water, those poor souls that were onboard and didn’t stand a chance when the explosion happened, were so numerous it looked like a sea of bodies.

Nikki finally ran up to Teddy. She had so many questions. But the most prevalent questions were the obvious ones: Why were so many men onboard those ships when they were on standby? When they were in a holding pattern? When they had been ordered by her and Teddy to wait?

But when Nikki saw Teddy’s face and that look of guilt and regret in his eyes she knew it was not the time nor place.

Especially when he ran and jumped into the water to see if there was anybody still alive that he could save, even though everybody could see there was no way there could have been survivors. But Teddy was just that devastated.

Nikki was devastated too. And a little pissed with Teddy for making a decision that

monumental without consulting her first. But that was the way he rolled lately. He was doing it his way and he didn't give a damn what she thought. But watching the carnage left her almost numb, and watching Teddy fruitlessly search and search for anybody with a pulse in that water, staggered her too. It was unbelievable.

But as the men that were not on board run away from the consuming fires, and as Nikki jumped into the water to make sure Teddy wasn't so distraught that he took himself under with all those dead men, she also knew that one order of business could not wait. They had already kept all the craziness from him, hoping shit wouldn't hit the fan before his return. But the fan had been hit, shit was now flying everywhere, and it could not be put off any longer. He had to know.

And the question would be a straightforward one: Was Teddy going to phone him, or was she?

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“No cheating,” Duke said. “And that goes for you too, Ma.”

“Just blow the whistle boy and stop telling grown folks what to do.” Roz was most anxious of all, given her competitiveness, as she, Mick, and Jackie were at the frontend of the pool waiting to swim to the backend of the pool in a race that was supposed to settle once and for all who was the fastest of them all.

They were at Mick’s vacation home on the French Riviera, a home Roz nor the kids knew he even owned until he flew them there a week ago. Only to find out he’d owned it for decades.

Roz tried to get upset about it, but once she saw the place she couldn’t even front. It was too spectacular to her.

With breathtaking views and with the infinity pool overlooking the French Alps in a view so picturesque that it bordered on incredible, it was spectacular to the twins as well as Duke and Jackie posted over a thousand pics on their widely-followed social media accounts. They had become influencers, an actual lucrative job, although their parents found it ludicrous and made clear, influencers or not, they were going to college. Since their mother had drilled that very fact into them since they were babies, both were looking forward to college, and to the next phase of their lives.

“On your march,” Duke said.

“I don’t know why we’re doing this,” Jackie said with a grin. “Everybody knows Daddy’s going to win.”

“I don’t know that,” Roz said defiantly, “and you don’t either. Just do your best.”

“Get set,” said Duke.

They all had their arms outstretched: ready to swim.

Then Duke blew the whistle and his father, mother, and twin sister were off.

At first it seemed as if Roz was right, as she and Jackie took a decisive early lead. But Duke knew that was just his father’s way. He was lulling them into a false sense of victory, and then he’d shove in the dagger.

And sure enough, midway in the massive, Olympic-size pool, Mick began swimming harder and harder until he easily overtook his wife and daughter and touched the backend of the pool’s wall with seconds to spare. Jackie came in second. Roz brought up the rear.

“He cheated,” Roz proclaimed.

“Cheated my ass,” a jubilant Mick said. “Your old ass just slow!”

He was much older than Roz, but she let that slide. They were having fun. That was all that mattered to her.

But after she and Mick got out of the pool, dried off, put on their bathrobes, and relaxed in side-by-side loungers as Mick’s butler served them wine and cheese and then left, a moroseness overcame both of them.

“They’re growing up so fast,” Roz said as they watched Duke and Jackie race each other, with Jackie winning every time and Duke insisting if she only raced him one more time he’d win. “Before you know it they’ll be gone far away and we’ll be

empty nesters.”

“Duke’s not going that far. He’s too much like me.”

Roz looked at Mick. “You’re talking about the corporate you, right? Not the gangster you.”

Mick didn’t respond.

“Mick?”

“It can’t be helped, Roz. It’s not something you can turn on or off. He’s got too much of me in him and not enough of you. That’s just the truth. He’s just like me. He’ll try to do his own thing, but he’ll stick around to stay around me.”

“Like Teddy did,” Roz said.

A look of regret crossed Mick’s often unreadable eyes. “Yep, like Teddy,” he said.

“What about Jackie? She kisses the ground you walk on. My money’s on her sticking around.”

But Mick was shaking his head. “Not Jacqueline. She’s going to take the world by storm. She’s going places. She’s more like you. She’ll be back though. She’ll end up running the corporate side of our empire someday. But Duke,” Mick said, shaking his head. “He’s too much like me.”

Roz found it to be a stinging indictment against Duke. Who would want to be like a man with the weight of the most powerful syndicate in the world on his shoulders? And on top of that, a man who heads a corporation in the top one percent of corporations in the world? Who would want all that responsibility? Roz certainly

didn't want it for her only biological son. But she knew, deep down, Mick was calling it exactly right. Duke was his father through and through. "Is that why you allowed him to carry your name?"

Duke's real name was Michello Sinatra, Junior, an honor Mick didn't give to his deceased oldest son Adrian, nor to Teddy, his second oldest, or even to his deceased son Joey. But he gave that honor to the son he had with Rosalyn. A fact that Roz knew stung Teddy to this day.

But Mick, being Mick, didn't answer that question. And then his phone was ringing and that was that.

Mick had a special ringtone for Teddy and Nikki, so he knew it had to be one of them. He answered the phone. "Yeah?"

It was Teddy. "We've got problems, Pop."

Mick didn't like the plural-ness of it. He waited for Teddy to continue.

"There's been an explosion."

Mick frowned. "What did they hit?"

Roz looked at Mick.

"The Panther."

Mick frowned. The Panther was his largest cargo ship. "Any fatalities?"

"Thirty-three so far and counting."

“Damn,” said Mick. “Where was it hit? Was it still in Brazil?”

There was a pause on Teddy’s end, which Mick knew meant he wasn’t telling him the full story. “Where was it, Theodore?”

“It was still dockside. All the ships have been dockside all week.”

Mick leaned up, his face a mask of anger. “What the fuck are you talking about? What do you mean all of my ships have been docked all week?”

Roz knew it was big by Mick’s reaction alone. “What happened?” she asked him.

But he was singularly focused on that phone call. “The Panther should have been in Brazil packing up my most expensive shit. And you mean to tell me it never left the port?”

“We’d been getting threats all week, Pop. And I’m not talking willy nilly stuff. Serious threats. I made the call to put them in a holding pattern until we could investigate.”

“And your ass didn’t think to let me know about this? You’ve got me over here vacationing while I’m losing twenty million dollars a day?!”

Mick spoke so loud that Duke and Jackie heard him and stopped their cavorting in the pool and watched their father.

But Teddy, on the other end, was offended. “I told you we’ve been hit, and that we have casualties, and all you’re worried about is money? Fuck you!” Teddy yelled out over the phone.

Mick was so enraged that had they been face to face it would have been a fight to the

death. “You, Nikki, at my house ten tonight,” Mick said, and angrily ended the call.

Mick sat there momentarily, attempting to recompose himself, and Roz didn’t interfere. Teddy had said the F word so loud to his father that Roz heard it even though Mick’s phone wasn’t on Speaker. Nobody but Roz spoke to Mick that way. And even she knew when not to speak to Mick that way. Him enraged that he was losing twenty million dollars a day for multiple days would have been one of those times.

Mick got up. “Let’s go,” he said to Roz and the twins.

“Go where?” Duke asked.

“Home,” Mick said without turning around as he began heading toward the main house.

Jackie was upset. “But Daddy, we just got here!”

“We haven’t had a vacation in years,” Duke argued too.

“What if we wanna stay and you can go?” Jackie asked.

When Mick stopped, turned around, and began hurrying back toward them, his anger unleashed again, Roz stood up as the barrier between him and their children. “What did you just say?” Mick asked his daughter.

Duke nudged Jackie not to speak, but Jackie wasn’t built that way. “I said why don’t you go back to Philly and let us stay a little longer.”

Roz could see the regret come over Mick’s eyes. But the rage was still there too. “There is no world where I’m going to leave my wife and my children in a foreign

country without me with them. I said let's go!"

And this time, they both knew the drill. "Yes sir," Duke said.

"Yes sir," said Jackie.

Mick hated interrupting their first family vacation in such a long time, but when duty called a Sinatra had to answer. They were Sinatras. They knew better. He turned back around and headed to the house.

Jackie and Duke looked at each other, and both of them were upset, but they knew their father did not play, not even a little bit, when he gave an order. And if their mother wasn't objecting, and she was the only one that could, they knew their feelings didn't mean a thing. They got out of the pool.

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After the carnage they had witnessed and that phone call with Mick, Ted and Nikki made it their business to have dinner with their daughter before going anywhere. Now Kimmie was sitting on Teddy's lap at the dinner table and talking nonstop about all that was going on in her young life. But she missed those moments with her father and wanted to fill him in. Although both Teddy and Nikki were subdued because they knew that storm called Mick the Tick was on its way, they appreciated the lightheartedness of the moment. And how happy their child was just to be in their presence.

But then it was getting late and the Nanny came to take her away. "It's bath time," she said to Kimmie.

"Daddy, do I have to?"

"Yes, you have to," Teddy said.

"But when will I see you again?"

"How about in the morning at breakfast?"

"You mean it?"

Teddy smiled, although Nikki could see the strain in his eyes. "I mean it."

Kimmie kissed him, got down and went and kissed her mother, and then the Nanny took her away to her nighttime rituals of bathing, reading, and bed. Then Ted and Nikki ate in silence.

Until Nikki couldn't hold out any longer. "Teddy?"

Here we go, Teddy thought. He was waiting for Nikki's twenty questions. "Yes?"

"Why did you order those ships to sail when we still didn't know if those threats were credible or not?"

"I was losing Pop millions of dollars and I knew how he was going to react to that. You heard him on that phone. Even with all those men dead, his main concern was the money."

"You don't know if that was his main concern. He was concerned about it, as he should be since it's his money, but he also asked if there were any fatalities too." Teddy's phone had been on Speaker when he spoke to his father and Nikki heard the entire conversation.

She exhaled. "Now we've been summoned."

Teddy shook his head. He was still annoyed. "Yeah. Like I wanna hear his shit tonight."

"You have no choice."

"I know that. Did I say I didn't know that?"

He was being snippy with Nikki, but she knew it was just his anxiety. And the fact that it was his call that led to all those men dying. Guilt was kicking his ass even more than his father could kick it. "Teddy, look at me."

He didn't want to be cuddled, but he looked at her.

“We’ll get through this,” she said.

It was that look in Nikki’s beautiful, sympathetic eyes that did him in. He dropped his fork, leaned back, and covered his face with his hands. “All those men,” he said. “All those men because of my dumb ass!”

Nikki quickly got up, removed his hands, got on his lap, and held him. “We’ll get through this, Teddy,” she said again. “We’re get through this.”

As she held him, she knew he was fighting back tears. And Teddy, like his father, always won that fight. But even though he wasn’t crying outwardly, she knew he was balling inside. He was beyond devastation.

But what he loved about Nikki was that she didn’t sell him a bill of goods just to make him feel better about the situation. She didn’t say it wasn’t his fault and that he didn’t do anything wrong. Because she knew it was his fault and he did plenty wrong. But she refused to lie to him. That was one of the main reasons why she was his choice.

They held onto each other for nearly ten minutes, just allowing each other processing time and time to take the strain of the day out of the room. And it appeared to be working. Until Teddy’s phone began ringing.

It was sitting on the dinner table so Nikki picked it up and looked at the Caller ID. She exhaled. All they need. “It’s her,” she said.

Teddy frowned. “Who? Ma?”

“Caitlan Downs.”

Teddy frowned. “What she want?”

Nikki couldn't answer his question, so she handed him his phone.

"Yes?" he said into the phone. To his credit, Nikki thought, he did place the call on Speaker.

"Josh is in the hospital after what your wife did to him."

What the fuck I care about Josh, Teddy wanted to say. But something else caught his attention. "So you knew that was my wife?"

Nikki could tell there was a hesitation on Caitlan's end, as if she had said something she knew could go to her motive for coming up on Teddy at that bar in the first place.

But like most homewreckers, Nikki thought, she rolled with the punches. "Of course I knew who she was."

"Why didn't you help her if you knew she was my wife?"

"I was scared of Josh! What did you expect me to do? And what I wanna know is why was your wife inside my house?"

That angered Teddy. "Why?"

"Yes why! Why was she, uninvited, inside my house?"

"She was trying to save your ungrateful ass," Teddy yelled back. "That's why, bitch!" And he ended the call. Then he took his phone and threw it violently across the room. It crashed against the fireplace mantel.

Nikki knew his rage had something to do with Caitlan Downs and her ungratefulness, but everything else to do with what happened at the docks. It was getting to be too

much for him.

He calmed back down, but he was still wound too tight. “Don’t you ever pull a stunt like that again,” he said to Nikki.

Nikki could have argued with him all day long about why it was no big deal that turned into a big deal because of Caitlan’s boyfriend’s abusiveness. But the time was not that time. “I won’t,” she said.

It was enough. Teddy wrapped her in his arms again, and held her even tighter. In that hour of his greatest need, she provided him with her support, not her judgement nor any arguments or counterarguments. Her support. Her love. Her stability .

He needed her.

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Roz's plan was a simple one. She had to relieve some of that stress Mick had bottled up inside of him before his face to face with Teddy and Nikki or it could be world war three up in their house tonight.

That was why, when he got out of the shower and did as he usually did and laid across the bed to air dry, she got out of the tub. But instead of drying off and dressing, she went to him, got on top of him as he laid across their bed, and began kissing him with a passion she knew he couldn't resist. And when he returned her passion and wrapped her in his arms, she knew she had him right where she needed him to be.

They kissed and groaned and Mick rubbed and massaged her for several minutes as if they were making love with their mouths and his hands alone, until they both needed more.

Mick turned Roz onto her back, passionately brutalized her breasts, and then went down on her hard. She moved around and allowed him to go down on her even harder. Until he needed even more than that.

And that was when he entered her.

For nearly half an hour they gave each other that release nobody else could give to them. Roz was all about Mick's release, but he was all about her release, and the combination was electrifying.

And when they came, they came together like a mature married couple with no more points to prove. They came long, and they came hard. So hard that when he had

poured out of himself all he had to give to her, and when she had felt the last of those pulsations that were ripping through her slender body, they just laid there for several more minutes still.

But then reality sat in, as it always did when the whole point was to eclipse it if for only a little while, and they both knew it was time to face the music.

They both knew there was no telling if it was going to be a well-thought-out song they all could get on the same page and sing, or a wild freestyle they all were going to mangle up and regret.

As Mick pulled out of Roz and finally got off of her, she was placing her bet, unfortunately, on the freestyle. Because she could tell, by Mick's body language alone, that the stress her move had taken off of him was already coming back.

She looked at him. He was on his back, staring seemingly into a place he never invited anyone to visit. It was his refuge. It was where he made decisions. It was where he withdrew to whenever he knew he was at a crossroad.

Roz knew to let him take his time. He would speak when he was good and ready, and she never forced it.

Although it took much longer than she had anticipated it would, given the events of the day, he finally spoke. "Reno, Tommy, and Sal called," Mick said, "and Alex Drakos and his brother. And Amelia and Hammer and Trevor Reese."

"They offered their thoughts and prayers?"

"And help, yes. But I didn't know what to tell them. I don't know what the fuck is going on myself."

Then he frowned, shut down again, and went back to his private contemplation. Just like that. And they went through another long period of silence.

Until he spoke again. "I tried to give it a chance," he said.

Talk about out of left field. Roz didn't know what he was talking about. "You decided to give what a chance?"

"A real vacation. I hadn't had one in a so long, and neither did you and the twins, so I thought it was long overdue. That's why I didn't check in. I let my corporate guys run my corporation without my input, and they did a good job of it. They held it down for me like they usually did. I let Teddy and Nikki run my syndicate without my input, and look what happened. All hell broke loose. I'm on vacation playing around in a fucking pool while my entire organization was burning to the ground thanks to those two. And they didn't bother to notify me until today ?"

He tried to calm himself back down, but couldn't. "And you keep asking me when am I going to step aside and turn my syndicate completely over to Teddy. When am I going to turn an organization that took me a lifetime to build up over to his sorry ass. You expect me to just hand it over when I couldn't be away one solid week without all this insanity going down under his watch. And I'm supposed to be okay with that? How am I ever going to be able to walk away from all this shit when I can't even go on a vacation for one damn week?"

Then he shook his head. Got dammit!" he said angrily, loudly, and with clenched teeth, as if knowing he would be in the game forever was getting too real again. He got out of bed.

Roz closed her eyes and shook her head too. So much for relieving his stress. It lasted only as long as he was inside of her.

But she agreed with everything he was saying. She was as angry with Teddy as Mick was.

She got out of bed right behind him. She wanted answers too.

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As soon as the door opened and Kimmie saw Jackie walking up the foyer, she ran to her. But Jackie began laughing and running away from her niece. Kimmie started laughing that innocent childhood laugh and began running behind her young aunt. First around the massive foyer, around the waterfall statue in the middle of the foyer, and then down the hall to the game room. It was how Jackie always welcomed her favorite relative, and her favorite relative just loved it.

But Duke, who had opened the door, shook his head. “Women,” he said. But when Teddy nor Nikki laughed the way they usually would have, he knew something more was at work than his half-brother and sister-in-law coming over to meet with Dad. “What’s with you two?”

“Is Pop at home?” Teddy asked as Duke closed the door. Teddy just wanted to get this over with.

“Yeah he’s home. We got back a few hours ago. What’s up?”

“Tough meeting ahead,” Nikki said.

“I figured that much when Pop cut our vacation short. Did you know he had this massive mansion on the French Riviera?” he asked Teddy.

But he didn’t wait for a response. “And then Big Daddy showed up. And then Uncle Frankie. I knew then something big was up.”

Although Frankie “The Monk” Paletti was kin to the Sinatras only by marriage, and was Teddy’s best friend, there was such an age gap between Teddy and his half-

siblings that Duke and Jackie viewed Teddy more as a second dad than as a brother, and they viewed Monk more as their uncle than their cousin-in-law.

But Nikki was still trying to decipher what Duke had just said. “Monk Paletti’s here?” she asked him.

“He sure is. He showed up just after Big Daddy got here.”

Nikki looked at Teddy. “I knew Big Daddy would be here as a mediator. Roz already told me she was going to call him in. But why would Monk be here?”

“I asked him to come,” said Teddy. “We need somebody on our side. Big Daddy always takes Pop’s side in the end.”

“That’s not true and you know it. He takes the right side as he sees it. He gets on your father’s case all the time.”

“But I still felt we needed somebody who would understand our side of this situation. Somebody Pop and Big Daddy respects. That’s why I wanted him here too.”

Nikki felt as if this was getting out of hand. Because once again he was making decisions without bothering to so much as mention them to her until he had to. That had to change.

“Where are they?” Teddy asked Duke.

“In Daddy’s office,” Duke said.

But the way Duke said Daddy only demonstrated to Nikki the kind of intimate relationship he and Jackie had with Mick that Mick never accorded his older children like Teddy. She knew it was because all of Mick’s adult children had different

mothers that never lived with Mick. Roz not only lived with him but managed against all odds to get him to put a ring on her finger. And on top of that, Roz was a tough broad who wasn't going to let Mick neglect her two children the way he neglected his older children. That was the main reason. But Nikki knew the intimacy Mick had with Duke and that Teddy never experienced with Mick had to hurt.

Teddy looked at Nikki. "Ready?" he asked her. But his eyes showed doubt that he himself was ready.

But Nikki nodded her head. "I'm ready," she said, and they made their down the corridor to Mick's office.

When Teddy opened the door and they walked in, a somberness slapped them in the face like a sledgehammer. Mick was leaned against the front of the desk, his big arms folded, while Roz was seated on the front of the desk beside him. Teddy could tell they'd been fucking by the way Roz held her legs tightly shut. As if Mick had put another hurting on her. As if he had no clue how to finesse even that, and she was still feeling the sting. But over the years, it was always a tell-tell sign to Teddy that Roz had tried to de-stress Mick before their meeting. To make it easier all around. But from the look on his father's face, it didn't work.

Charles "Big Daddy" Sinatra, Mick's big brother, was seated in a chair beside the desk: Already on Pop's side, in Teddy's estimation.

Frankie "The Monk" Paletti, who ran the Bonaducci crime family and elevated it to the third most powerful syndicate in the world behind Mick and Teddy's outfit, and Sal Gabrini's, was seated in one of the three chairs positioned to face the desk. Or to face the firing squad, if you asked Nikki. He wore his standard business suit and gentleman's hat: always styled like a gangster straight from the Humphrey Bogart/Jimmy Cagney era. But that was Monk Paletti: One of a kind.

He left his busy schedule and came from Jersey to be there for them, and they appreciated that. But when they walked around and sat down in those other two chairs beside Monk, neither one of them bothered to speak or greet Monk or anybody else. The tension was just that heavy in the room.

Teddy waited for his father, or at least his uncle, to ask him questions, but he could tell they both were too pissed off to speak. They wanted him to tell it to them. Even his stepmother Roz seemed pissed. And rightly so: It was his bad decisions that forced Mick to cut their long overdue vacation short and return to Philly.

Teddy glanced at Nikki. Nikki's eyes agreed that he should begin, and he did. "I gave the order for the ships to sail," he started saying, but he was quickly cut off.

"Don't you dare start at the end," Big Daddy said. "Start at the beginning. What's been going on at those docks that was apparently so insignificant that you didn't think Mick needed to know, but then all this death and destruction happens?" He was looking from Teddy to Nikki and back to Teddy. "You got to explain that to me."

Teddy still felt he needed to remind the family constantly that he, not Mick, was running the day-to-day operations of Mick's syndicate, and that his power was supposed to be absolute. "Pop made me the undisputed boss of the Sinatra syndicate," he began.

But Roz cut him off this time. "And Mick made himself the undisputed boss of you. And of you too Nikki. So don't even go there. What the fuck happened, Teddy? Cut the bullshit and just tell us, from the beginning like Charles said, what happened."

Teddy knew it was bad if Roz was going for the jugular too. She was usually an ally. She was usually the one that tempered Pop's anger against him.

But Nikki saw Roz's aggression differently. She believed Roz, and Big Daddy too, to

a certain extent, were going hard at Teddy to try and prevent Mick from going after him as hard as he might have gone. They were running interference that would redound to Ted's benefit in the end.

But Nikki kept taking peeps at her father-in-law. And based on what she was seeing there was no way anybody was going to stop Mick's temper tonight. His arms were folded and one of his thumbs was stroking that cleft in his chin, which was usually his calm before the storm. It was taking all he had not to beat the shit out of both of them in that moment, Nikki could see it in his darting eyes. He was already in fight mode.

Monk Paletti didn't like being in this position, but he understood why Teddy wanted him to be there. He could feel his best friend's anxiety rising. Who wouldn't be terrified if Mick the Tick had their ass on the grill? He wanted to look at Teddy and encourage him to tell it all and hold nothing back, no matter how horrific, but he dared not interfere just yet. The only reason he was allowed to be in that room at all was because Mick, Big Daddy, and Roz all knew him to be a straight shooter. He called it like he saw it. He was there to support Teddy and Nikki, there was no doubt about that, but they knew he wasn't going to support even their bullshit.

And from what Monk knew of how Teddy handled the matter, even he was concerned that some serious mistakes were made.

But with all of them united against Teddy, or at least that was how it felt, Teddy decided to tell the whole truth. Which was going to make it worse, not better. Which was going to make Pop angrier, not calmer. But he knew he had to do it.

"We were having issues even before Pop went on vacation."

"What issues?" asked Roz. "I thought some cargo went missing, which isn't unusual."

“But they were brazen about it. They usually would hit us on foreign soil or even out of town soil. They were hitting us in our own backyard.”

“So that’s why Mick ordered you and Nikki to have some security guys with you,” Roz said.

Teddy nodded. “Right. But then we started getting these text messages. They started like three weeks ago, but they seemed to be the usual nonsense about burning it all down and ships are made for destruction and a bunch of random threats that we, and every major shipping outfit, get all the time.”

“But there was an escalation?” asked Big Daddy.

“In tone, no. It was the same shit day in and day out. But then . . .” A distressed look appeared in Teddy’s eyes.

“But then what?” Roz asked, and Teddy and Nikki both saw Mick look at Teddy too.

“But then the suicides happened.”

Mick, Roz, and Big Daddy stared at Teddy. “Suicides?” Mick frowned. “What suicides?”

“Three of our capos were found dead at different locations. The cops ruled all three deaths as suicides and unrelated, but we checked out all three scenes. All three were staged as suicides, but they had enough mob-markers to let us know that suicide was the last thing that went on at those scenes. The cops couldn’t see it, but we could.”

Even Monk was staring at Teddy. He couldn’t believe he would have withheld that kind of information from his father. Then he looked at Mick. He could see his jaw tightening. He was a man who could control himself better than any man Monk knew.

Until he couldn't control himself at all.

"Name them," Mick said to Teddy.

Teddy named their three deceased lieutenants. All three were made guys. All three were at the top of the chain. Mick could hardly believe he wasn't notified as soon as it happened.

Big Daddy couldn't believe Teddy withheld that kind of major information from Mick too. "You think those deaths had something to do with the threats you were getting?"

"We didn't know, but I decided to treat it as if there was a relationship. Whoever did it wanted us to know they did it. They left that particular calling card, but didn't bother to leave their name."

"Which family do you suspect it was?" Big Daddy asked. He was a businessman. He was no gangster. But he could be more ruthless than any gangster alive if you crossed him. "What syndicate did you figure was involved?"

"We weren't sure," Nikki answered for Teddy. "We were leaning toward Jace Denardo's gang, since he was the last crew we beefed with, but we weren't certain. We had no concrete evidence."

"And then I have this meeting with Jerry Cartelli," said Teddy.

"With Bugs?" asked Mick. "What the fuck he got to do with this?"

"Most times he have good intel, Pop. He said we had the wrong syndicate. According to him, it wasn't Denardo's outfit."

“Then whose outfit was it?”

“According to Bugs, it was Potter Rarsi’s outfit.”

For the first time, they all could see Mick disarmed. He even unfolded his arms. “Rarsi ? Get the fuck out of here!”

“That’s the name he gave me.”

“Did you investigate it?”

“Of course I did Pop.”

“And?”

“And I found nothing yet. I just got the word from Bugs last night. But I’ve got a team on it trying to find any connection at all between Rarsi’s organization and the three capos that died.”

“And I added an additional team to make sure there were no connections between any of our other capos, either, and Rarsi,” said Nikki. “I didn’t want us to just focus on the ones that died.”

Mick nodded for the first time, as if he approved of her overreach. Nikki was Mick’s favorite no matter how much Nikki denied it. Teddy knew the truth.

And that was mainly why his jaw tightened when his father nodded his assent. Teddy would not have approved an additional team when he needed every available man to find out who was really behind those threats to their shipments, which he was convinced wasn’t going to be Rarsi. There was no way he was going to believe Rarsi was behind it. But anything was possible.

But to his surprise, Mick agreed with his assessment. “Rarsi isn’t behind this. Bugs is full of shit if that’s his intel. But somebody paid him to make that claim.”

“That’s why I have a detail on his ass too. But nothing so far on that end either.”

Nikki was surprised that both Mick and Teddy would be so dismissive of any involvement of Potter Rarsi. But she was getting used to being left out of the history. They let her in only when necessary. And they wondered why many of their men were still not accepting of a woman, and a non-Italian one at that , as their underboss.

Mick exhaled. “Why, if you didn’t know who were behind the threats, did you suddenly decide to launch those ships?”

Everybody looked at Teddy. Including Nikki and Monk. A pained look came over Teddy. “I decided it was long enough. We weren’t getting anywhere and we needed to get back on the seas. It was my call. I made the call.”

“And it backfired spectacularly,” said Mick.

“So I was damned if I let them go and damned if I let them stay,” said Teddy.

“Your ass was damned by letting them stay in the first place!” Mick nearly screamed it out. He was unleashed. “What’s wrong with you? My syndicate does not kowtow to anybody, you stupid fuck! As soon as that first threat came you should have launched. You should have got bomb experts in there to make sure it was free of explosives and then you hit the seas in a show of force that would have been the end of it!”

“I did get experts in.”

“But you stayed put even after they cleared the vessels? Why, Teddy?”

“Because his gut was telling him that explosives were on those ships and the experts were missing them,” said Nikki. “And guess what? His gut was right.”

“So what happened to his gut today? Why did he overlook his gut today if he was so right?”

Teddy leaned his head back. “I was tired. I made a decision when I was too tired.”

Everybody knew how hard Teddy worked. Mick knew it too. But that was no excuse to him. He worked his ass off too.

Then Teddy looked at his father. “It was the wrong decision, but you act like I did it on purpose. I had been thinking about launching for days. So I made the call. But I had been thinking about it all along. It wasn’t some impulse. I don’t operate like that and you know it. What do you take me for?”

“You’re a motherfucking fuck-up, that’s what I take your ass for!” Mick yelled at Teddy. “All those men dead. All of my top ships destroyed, including my biggest one. Thank goodness no pick-ups had occurred when it happened or my ass would have been in jail!”

“Mick, settle down,” Roz said.

But Mick wasn’t about to. “Leaving my ships dockside for an entire week like we’re scared of those motherfuckers! I don’t kowtow to anybody and your ass knows that. By my count, and I obviously don’t know the full extent of your shit yet, but by my count I’ve already lost a hundred million dollars from your refusing-to-sail bullshit decision alone. As if I would bend to anybody on the face of this earth! But your ass been bending all week! And you didn’t bother to consult me about this shit? Three of my top lieutenants dead and I’m a fucking afterthought to you? And you have the nerve to ask me what do I take you for ?”

“Okay Mick settle down,” Big Daddy intervened. “It’s done now. We can’t unbreak this shit, it’s broke. We need to find out what’s happening and how to put a stop to it before more happens. So stop with the personal attacks. Teddy don’t deserve that.”

“Fuck Teddy!” Mick yelled.

“Fuck you!” Teddy yelled back, nearly jumping up from his seat. “I work for you like I’m your got damn slave. Day in and day out, when I can hardly stand up, but I still work. Ten men can’t do what I’m doing, but I’m a fuck-up? You wanna work twenty hours a day running the largest syndicate in the world, then you be my guest. Knock yourself out.”

“I’ve been running my syndicate since before you were born, boy, who do you think you’re talking to? You fucked up! Three of my top men are dead because of your ass. You killed those men just as surely as you would have put a gun to their heads and fired! You killed them!”

When Mick said those words, Teddy couldn’t take it. And as Roz and Big Daddy and even Monk were telling Mick he was going too far, Teddy had jumped up from his seat and jumped on his father with such force, and with all the power of his big body, that they both flipped over the desk and landed on the backside.

Monk and Big Daddy and even Nikki hurried behind that desk to pull the two titans apart, but the fight was already on. They were back on their feet and wrestling each other for dominance as if their lives depended on it. They were knocking over cabinets and crashing into curio sets and shattering vases and everything else their two muscular bodies came into contact with. Big Daddy and Monk were doing everything they could to separate the two men, but there was no separation. It got so bad that Roz had to hurry over and pull Nikki away from the chaos. Even Monk got knocked down. It was just that epic.

And they fought and they wrestled all around that office. Teddy was holding his own. He was going toe-to-toe with Mick. Until both men flung each other against the closed office door so violently that the door snatched off of its hinges and broke loose. And they fell out into the corridor. And kept on fighting.

When Duke heard the commotion he ran downstairs to help Big Daddy and Monk separate the two men.

“Daddy stop!” Duke was crying. “Daddy stop !”

It took the voice of his beloved youngest son, and the fact that he was actually battling with his beloved oldest living son, did Mick finally come back to himself and let up on Teddy. Duke and Big Daddy kept Mick back. Monk, who realized that was the real reason he needed to be there, kept Teddy back. Nikki hurried to Teddy’s side too. And it was finally a truce.

But Mick was still enraged. “You’re fired!” he yelled at Teddy. “You will never run my syndicate ever again. You’re fired!”

Roz, now concerned that they were going down a road they could not come back from, hurried over to Teddy. “Get out of here, Ted, and go now. Don’t say a word, just get out. Nikki, Frankie, get him out of here.”

Monk and Nikki began hurrying Teddy toward the front door before he could get into a verbal altercation with his angry father. Because he was still enraged himself. He snatched away from Monk and Nikki, but he didn’t say a word to his father. He glanced back at him, and Mick was staring at him, and Nikki and Monk could see the regret in their eyes. But they saw the defiance too, as if Mick meant every word he said and Teddy was going to hold him to those words.

Teddy left his father’s house with fire under his feet.

But Mick's voice stopped Nikki from following after him. "We need to talk, Nicole!"

Roz looked at Nikki as Nikki turned and looked at Mick. He stood there as if he was more than willing to elevate her to boss and actually kick Teddy out. Many of their men didn't want to accept her as underboss as it was, but he was going to make her boss? And over Teddy of all people, who wasn't just her husband but who was the most respected boss, behind Mick and Sal Gabrini, in the world? That was insanity to her.

But she knew what Mick was doing. He was testing her. He wanted her to chose sides and chose them right smack in the heat of the battle. He was testing her meddle. Was she what he thought she was, and did she have what it took to command his organization? It was a test and she knew it. But he picked the wrong one to test. "I've got to check on my husband," she said, to Roz's delight, and then she hurried behind Teddy.

Roz looked at Mick. "Why did you even go there?"

But Mick knew what he was doing. Had Nikki stayed to talk with him, and left Teddy to lick his wounds alone, he never would have trusted her as far as he could throw her. He knew exactly what he was doing.

But as Nikki left out of that house to go to Teddy, she knew her husband, when he was enraged, never wanted to be bothered. He never made it easy for Nikki when he was in that zone. That was why she was not surprised at all when she made it outside and saw that he had already hopped into his Bugatti and was speeding away, leaving Monk, her, and their daughter , in the dust.

Nikki exhaled as she stood beside Monk in the chill of the night. "What is wrong with him?" she said with anger in her voice.

“He’s got to work off some steam,” Monk said as they watched Teddy leave. “He told me to take you and Kimmie home.”

Then he shook his head. “Mick and Teddy. I told him from the beginning it wasn’t a great idea to work for his old man. I worked for mine and that was a disaster too. But with Mick and Teddy? It was a disaster on steroids. There was always going to be heavy contention between those two.”

Nikki looked at Monk. “Why would you say that?”

Monk lifted his hat slightly, revealing that beautiful soft hair he had but rarely showed. “I’ve never met two people more hellbent on destroying each other before in my life,” he said, and Nikki looked at him as if he couldn’t be serious.

But it wasn’t as if she never thought the exact same thing.

Just that it felt jarring, and far more tragic, to hear it affirmed by somebody else.

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It was well after two a.m. when Nikki finally heard their front door open and close and Teddy ascending the stairs. She could only imagine where he'd been all this time, but she was more concerned about him than where he'd been. She was lying in bed, on her back, but she hadn't slept a wink.

When he walked into the bedroom, he saw that she was awake. But he didn't say a word. He went into the bathroom, removed his clothes and keys and phone, and took a shower. Nikki was a little disappointed that he didn't bother to at least say hey to her even after he saw she was wide awake, but that was just Teddy being Teddy. He wasn't a moody man, but he was a broody man. And his broodiness, his inability to get out of his own head, was perhaps his greatest weakness.

That was why Nikki waited patiently. She didn't just love the good side of Teddy. She loved him in his flaws too. She wished he was the kind of man that would include her in his moments of deep contemplations, but he wasn't that kind of man. He had to figure it out for himself. He was a loner by nature and wasn't interested in changing.

After he showered and dried off, he didn't bother to put on any pajamas as he got in bed beside her. Although she wore a gown, it took him all of two seconds to lift that completely off of her and toss it aside. And although he still hadn't said a word to her, not one word, he began kissing her with a desperateness that made her know he needed a release right then and there or he was going to explode. And given what happened at his father's house, she was more than willing to accommodate him. That scene, and the events of that week, had her uptight too. She needed a release almost as much as he did.

That was why she was ready for his entry from their kissing alone. But he went down on her anyway, which only fired up their bodies even more, and by the time he moved back up and entered her they were both near their breaking points.

He started out doing her hard and it only got harder from there. He didn't let up. They were rocking it out from the sheer fierceness of his pounding, and neither one of them wanted to slow-walk their passion. They sped. That adrenalin pumped harder as he continued to take her there. For several long minutes they were locked together, arm in arm, banging. They didn't want to ease up.

Because it felt exactly the way they needed it to feel. It felt as if they were riding to the top of the rollercoaster's peak, but never quite going over. Over and over they teetered on falling back down, but they stayed at the peak.

And when it was time for that rollercoaster to make its descent downward, and that snatch occurred that left their hearts still at the top as the coaster flew down, was what it felt like when they came. As hard as they could cum, they came. Teddy was still pumping and Nikki was still receiving until he had poured out every single ounce he had within him.

When he was poured out, and when Nikki's sensations had ebbed, he got off of her and collapsed. She had already collapsed before he even moved.

It took many more minutes before either one could say a word. Their hearts were still catching back up to their bodies.

It was Teddy who finally spoke. "Frankie drove you and Kimmie home?"

"He said you told him to. We would have preferred to ride home with you."

"I had some thinking to do."

It was his way. “I know.”

Then more silence.

“What did Pop discuss with you?”

“He didn’t discuss anything with me.”

“Frankie said when I stormed out of his house he was telling you to stay back, that he needed to talk to you.”

“That’s what he said, but I told him I was going with you. Although you left me.” But she understood why. “After you left I got the baby, and Monk took us home.”

Teddy glanced at her. But she could tell he wasn’t satisfied even with that answer. “What is it?” she asked him.

He looked away from her. “Pop knows.”

Did she miss something? “Pop knows what?”

“That I’ve been meeting with Rarsi. That’s why he fired me.”

Nikki frowned. Something wasn’t computing. “Wait a minute. Hold up. Why would you have been meeting with Rarsi?”

Teddy continued to just lay there.

Nikki turned her body onto her side, to get a full look at him. He wasn’t pulling that silent shit on her now. This she had to hear. “Why would you be meeting with Potter Rarsi, Teddy?”

“He gave me an offer that I would have been crazy not to consider.”

Nikki’s eyes widened. “An offer? An offer to do what?”

“He wants to make me the head of the Bengino crime family.”

Nikki was hoping what she was hearing wasn’t true. “But he’s the head of the Bengino syndicate.”

“He’s looking to retire,” Teddy said, and then he looked at her. “And Pop knows he wants me.”

That news took it to a whole other level. “How would he know that? You told him?”

“Hell no. I wouldn’t tell him something like that. He would have fired me on the spot just for mentioning it.”

“Then how does he know?”

“Rarsi undoubtedly told him. He wouldn’t go behind Pop’s back. But he’s certain I’m a better fit for his organization than Pop’s. I think that’s why Pop went on vacation with no spies to tell him what was going on for a change.”

“But what would his going on vacation help? He needed time to think about it? I don’t get it.”

“He wanted to test me. He wanted to see if I was worth fighting for. But I proved I wasn’t.”

Nikki stared at Teddy. “What do you mean you proved it?”

A sadness came over Teddy's face. "After the week I've had, I proved I wasn't worth a damn, let alone worth fighting for. Rarsi can have me, is probably what he's thinking now."

This was some heavy news for Nikki to take. "Is that why neither one of you believed Rarsi was involved in what happened with our capos and our ships?"

Teddy nodded. "That and the fact that he's a standup guy. He doesn't play games. If he wants to take you down, he'll tell you so."

But Nikki was distressed. "Why did you keep all of that from me, Teddy? I thought we were partners in every aspect of our lives. Why couldn't you have told me what was going on?"

"Because it's a decision I have to make for myself. I wanted no interference."

Nikki was offended. "Interference? What you decide with affect me too. And Kimmie!"

Teddy rubbed his forehead. "I know it will. You don't think I know that? But Rarsi is right. Even Frankie tried to warn me before I went to work for Pop. Because me and him? We're like oil and water. We never mixed and we never will."

Nikki was afraid to ask it. "So does that mean you're leaving Mick and going to work for Rarsi? Is that what you're telling me?"

Teddy was afraid to say it. "Seems like," he said. Then he looked at Nikki.

But Nikki didn't know what to say either. Until she thought about it. "If you take over the Bengino syndicate, where does that leave me? It's one thing for me to be the underboss of the Sinatra family because at least by marriage I'm a Sinatra. The

Bengino family isn't about to let me have anything near a leadership role in their organization, let alone be your underboss. There's no way. If you make this move, where does that leave me, Teddy?"

It was a major question. One Teddy had been processing too. But he knew his answer wasn't going to be a satisfactory one. But it was something he'd been thinking about for a long, long time. "You'll either be the new boss of the Sinatra crime family," he said, "or you'll be my wife."

Nikki stared at him with shock in her eyes. Did she hear what she thought she just heard? Was he giving her an ultimatum ?

"Did you say or ?" she asked him.

Teddy couldn't believe he had said it either. But he had. And he meant it. "Yes," he said to her, although he knew as soon as he said it that if she remained with Mick and he departed, the chances of their union surviving such a seismic separation would be a resounding zero.

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Duke and Jackie were seated at the breakfast table picking around their food rather than eating it while Roz, in her bathrobe and seated at the table too, was drinking coffee. She normally didn't get up this early, but she knew what went down last night had affected her children and she wanted to make sure they were okay. Especially Duke. He and Teddy were close. He was extremely distressed last night.

But tactfulness was never Roz's best quality. "Quit peeping up at me," she said to her son, "and just say what you want to say."

"I wanna go see Teddy."

Roz stared at him. "Why?"

"What do you mean why? You saw what Daddy did to him last night."

"And I saw what he did to Daddy last night."

"But he didn't start it."

"How the hell do you know that, Duke?" Roz didn't give a nickel to any foolishness. Not even her own children's. "You wasn't in that office when it happened. Or are you just assuming something you have no business assuming?"

"That's what I told him," said Jackie. "He always blames Daddy."

"Because I know how he is," Duke replied. "Teddy works his butt off for him, but he never gives him any thanks whatsoever. He just dogs him out."

“First of all,” said Roz, “nobody dogs out Teddy Sinatra, okay? So let’s put that fantasy to bed right now. And second of all, he started that shit last night. Did Daddy have harsh words for Ted? Yes he did. And he deserved it too. But he never laid a hand on him until he laid a hand on Daddy. Teddy started that shit and Mick finished it. So you pump your brakes with all of this blaming Daddy shit, you hear me, Duke? Pump your brakes.”

“I say both of them are at fault,” said Jackie. “Neither one of them can control themselves.”

“Well welcome to the world of Sinatra men, young lady,” said Roz. “When it’s time for you to search for a husband, think about Sinatra men and find the exact opposite kind of man.”

Jackie laughed. Duke rolled his eyes.

And then Mick, showered and refreshed-looking in his Armani suit, entered the breakfast room. Jackie smiled. “Hey Daddy.”

Roz noticed how Mick, being Mick , didn’t return her greeting. No hey baby, or hey Jacqueline . Nothing. She’d gotten on his case many times about it. But Mick, based on his actions after all those conversations, essentially told her to kiss his ass.

She was about to grab the bell and ring for the chef to bring Mick some breakfast, but Mick touched her hand. “No need. I’ve got to get going.”

Roz wanted to discuss something with him before he left, but not in front of the children. “And you two need to get going too,” she said.

Very obedient children, or at least very scared of what their parents would do to them if they weren’t obedient, they both got up and grabbed their bookbags.

“Bye Mom,” Jackie said as she and Duke kissed Roz. “Bye Daddy,” Jackie added as she kissed Mick.

But Duke, still pissed with his father, didn’t say a word to Mick. He walked right past him.

But Mick grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him back beside him.

Roz stared at them. She was ready to intervene if Mick got too crazy with their son.

But Mick knew how close Duke was with his big brother. He just wanted to reassure him. “Teddy can take care of himself. Got it?”

Duke always thought of his father as so contradictory. On the one hand, he was the meanest dog in the pound. On the other hand, whenever he and his father locked eyes, Duke found him to be the warmest, sweetest person on earth. Duke knew his father loved him and his mother and sister. But him showing his love for them, except for snatches here and there, was the problem.

But he knew Mick was right. Teddy didn’t need him fighting any battles for him. “Yes sir,” he said in answer to Mick. Then that kind look in Mick’s deep-green eyes caused Duke to feel affection for his father. And he hugged him, knowing his father wasn’t about to hug him back. “Bye Daddy,” he said.

Mick was about to pat him on his back when he hugged him, but Duke had already extricated himself from his father and left the room.

But Roz had seen the almost-gesture. “You’re getting better with them,” she said.

“But no cigar?”

“Not yet, no. Jackie said good morning to you and you said nothing. If she didn’t know your ass as well as she knew it, that could have hurt her.”

Mick frowned. “If whether or not somebody speaks to her hurts her, then she deserves to be hurt.”

“Not somebody, Mick. You. Her father.”

“Yeah but that’s what you say.”

Roz frowned. “Meaning?”

“I know what they say. And they say mama’s baby, but papa’s maybe.”

Roz picked up that bell and was about to throw it at him. He knew she didn’t play that. But she smiled, too, when she realized he was smiling. “Your stupid ass,” she said.

Then he was about to get up to leave. “Where do we go from here?” she asked him.

“I know they’re my children.”

“Not that, dumbass.”

Mick grinned. Then he returned to his usual serious self. “I’m headed to the docks. I’ve got to find out who’s been targeting my shipments and my syndicate, and why.”

“I meant Teddy. What about Teddy?”

“Not you too. Teddy can take care of himself.”

“What about Teddy, Mick?”

Mick sat there for a moment which, Roz knew, meant that it was weighing heavily on him. “Ted’s been talking with Potter Rarsi for months.”

“Really? Talking to him about what?”

There was a definite anguish that came over Mick’s face. But Roz couldn’t decipher if it was anger or sadness. “Leaving me,” Mick said.

It was probably both, Roz thought, until she realized what he had actually said. And her already large eyes stretched. “Leaving you ? Teddy was already looking to leave?”

“Yep.”

“But leave you to do what? To work for him? For Rarsi?”

“That’s what Rarsi told me, yes.”

“He told you? He didn’t keep it undercover?”

“That’s not how Rarsi works. He’s an upfront guy. It’s how Teddy’s ass works. But not Rarsi.”

“But he tried leaving you before and it blew up in his face.”

“Yeah but Rarsi runs a tighter ship. It’s a better fit for Ted. Even I know that.”

Roz continued to stare at Mick. He never played checkers. He was a chest master. But so was Roz. “That’s why you took us on vacation. Not because we hadn’t had one in

a long time, or because the twins were going away to college soon. It was so you could see how Teddy would handle the usual flare ups without your spies reporting back to you the way they usually did. Am I right?"

Mick was never one-dimensional. Two things could be true at the same time for him and almost always was. "Yes, you're right," he said. "But I didn't expect all hell to break loose and for him to not bother to so much as mention it to me."

"And you did it," Roz continued, still figuring it out, "so that you could decide if you were going to what? To fight to keep Teddy? Was that the plan?"

Roz's ability to decode him always impressed him. "That was the plan, yes."

Roz stared at him. She wasn't sure if she wanted the answer. "What's the verdict? Is he worth fighting for?"

"A part of me want to say hell no. Especially after last night. But . . . Hell yes. He's worth it."

Roz was inwardly pleased to hear that. But it was so out of character for slash-and-burn Mick that she needed to know more. "What made you come to that conclusion? Especially after last night? I know Teddy's the best boss in this country if you ask me, and other than this recent screwup, he's been nothing but valuable to you. But even you just implied you aren't the right fit for him and Rarsi is. Why would you still be willing to fight to keep Teddy with you if he's the wrong fit?"

Mick swallowed hard. What he was about to say would never be easy for him. But he said it. "Because he's my son," he said, "and nobody's going to take care of him like I will."

"And like you always have," Roz proudly added. "Despite last night."

Mick looked at her. She was his ally. His biggest and loudest champion. He got up, leaned over and kissed her on the lips, which brought her to her feet. He untied her robe, revealing her naked body. Then he slipped his arms inside her robe and pulled her against him, holding her tightly. Massaging her ass.

As he stared into her eyes, a part of him wanted to say what he felt about her, but the bigger part of him wasn't going there. Because with Roz he knew words didn't mean shit to her. Anybody can say anything , was how she always put it. He had to show her. During the entirety of their long marriage, he always had to show her. She was an exhausting bitch the way she didn't take any half-gestures from him. But she was his bitch, he thought. She was his .

And by just holding her so lovingly, and steadily pressing his body even harder against her body to make her feel his arousal, and to make her understand how he felt about her through the comfort of his big body alone, was showing her everything she needed to see.

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After Nikki got up, showered and dressed and made it downstairs, Teddy was seated on the sofa in his suit and tie, looking his usual stern self as his thumb and finger gently rubbed his chin. But he looked anguished to her too. As if he was still processing every single moment of the week they'd had. As if he was feeling everything and overthinking it. But she was almost numb. She didn't know what to feel.

She stood momentarily on the bottom step of their staircase and continued to stare at him. How could he have said what he said to her last night? It was as if she had been blindsided by what he'd said. One minute they were doing all they could to make their marriage life and work life balance out better, and the next minute he was telling her if she remained in what was now her many years' profession that he'd leave her? He gave her an ultimatum as if he could easily walk away from their marriage based on her decision alone, which would put the breakup of their marriage at her feet. Was that what he was doing to her?

Last night he didn't explain himself, and she was too stunned to ask for an explanation. Because it was all so bizarre to her. She knew he was tired and she was tired and they might have said things they couldn't come back from. Between what happened at the docks and that fight at Mick and Roz's, it had been too much of an emotional whirlwind as it was. She wasn't trying to add any more fuel to that fire.

Although Teddy already had.

She walked across the room toward him.

It was only when she began walking toward Teddy did he realize she had come

downstairs. With her hair snatched perfectly, her makeup flawless, and as she wore one of her power pantsuits that had boss written all over it and that accentuated her curves in every right way, he suddenly felt a sense of dread. She looked as if she had made up her mind already and was going to stay with Pop, their marriage be damned. But it was the outcome he wanted, wasn't it? To be free of all of that responsibility that he felt was cratering him?

But as soon as Nikki sat beside him, he knew the truth. How would he make it without Nikki in his life? What on earth was he thinking? He couldn't lose her and Kimmie, freedom be damned!

"Kimmie still sleep?" he asked her. "I checked on her before I came down."

Nikki nodded. "She's still asleep."

Teddy was staring at her now. "What about you? You okay?" He could tell she was still distressed by that wayward look in her dramatic eyes. On top of all that shit he pulled all week, his words last night had to have hurt her too, which that was never his intention. He put his arm around her waist and leaned her against him. She put her head on his shoulders, which, he felt ironically, comforted him .

"It was a tough night," he said to her. "I knew Pop was going to be angry and would go hard. Hell I was angry at myself. But the way he called me a fuck up as if I didn't give every ounce I have to give in service to his ass just did something to me. It broke something inside of me and I had to lash out at him. I wanted to . . . I wanted him to feel my pain. But his ass didn't feel anything. Not a god damn thing. He's the coldest motherfucker I've ever known."

And you're just like him , Nikki wanted to say, but didn't. "Was he the one that called you before day this morning?" She was half-asleep at the time, but she remembered Teddy's phone rang and how he grabbed it and went into the bathroom.

“Are you asking if Pop called me? That would have been too much like what a human being would have done for him to do it. Big Daddy called me. He’s still in town, which only highlights how bad things are in the family. He told me to make no decisions, regardless of what Pop said, until I had a chance to cool down.”

Sounded like good advice to Nikki. “Have you cooled down?”

Teddy sighed a hard sigh. “Yes I have.” Then his arm tightened around her waist. “I wasn’t myself last night, Nick. I wasn’t myself at all.”

“But what does that mean Teddy?” She leaned up and looked at him. “After what you said? You got to explain that to me.”

“I didn’t want to hold you back if you wanted to stay with Pop. And I won’t hold you back.”

“But at what cost? Our marriage? Because that’s what you said.”

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

“But you didn’t mean it?”

“I meant it at that time. Like I said I wasn’t myself. Because there’s no way I’m giving you up for anything or anybody. If you stay with Pop or go with me, we’ll still be a team. We’ll still be together.”

But Nikki was a practical girl. Words mattered to her. And just like she heard what he said last night, she heard what he was saying this morning. “When you say go with you, does that mean you’re going? Does that mean you’ve decided to become the boss of the Bengino crime family?”

“Yes. And no . I haven’t decided anything. I go back and forth.” Then he looked at her. “But I don’t go back and forth about us. We’re partners, Nikki. We’re a team. But even if the team have different jobs, that will have no bearing on our marriage. I won’t let it.”

Nikki felt reassured. “I won’t either,” she said, and Teddy’s stern face smiled. It felt as if that burden had lifted from him. But he had about ninety-nine more.

But then his cell phone rang. Teddy looked at the Caller ID. “Who is it?” Nikki asked him.

“Renardo,” he said to her.

Although Nikki was Renardo’s direct supervisor and he should have been calling her instead of the boss, she let it slide. They weren’t in normal times. Nothing was normal anymore.

“What up, Nardo?” Teddy said on the phone. Then he frowned. And that burden that had lifted seemed to return on his face in a more pronounced form. “Damn,” he said and leaned his head down. “Damn, damn, damn.” Then he continued to listen. Then he ended the call.

Nikki’s heart was already pounding. “What happened now?”

“More bodies were found overnight,” Teddy said. “More got damn bodies, Nikki,” he said with pain in his voice, and then he jumped up from the sofa.

“Teddy wait,” Nikki employed, grabbing for him and getting up too, but he was already hurrying for the exit.

“Where are you going?” she yelled after him, but Teddy being Teddy, didn’t say a

word. He hurried out and slammed the door behind him.

Nikki plopped back down on the sofa. That man ! she wanted to scream. Why was she still putting up with all his shit? Now she had to call Renardo to get the new body count when Teddy could have told her himself. Which was going to make it look as if the boss and underboss didn't have their act together, which they didn't.

But that was Teddy. And his ass was always on his old man's case. Always downing his old man's peculiar ways. As if he had no clue that he was his father's son through and through.

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Even though Nikki might have been fed up with Teddy's ways, that would never mean she was fed up with Teddy.

That was why, as soon as she got to the docks that morning, she searched for him. Because instinctively she knew, even though he was supposedly fired, he'd be there.

And there he was. Sitting on the dock of the bay watching the wreckage still being hoisted out of the water. Their men, those who survived or weren't there at all when the explosion occurred, were out in force, too, as they helped with the cleanup. But their faces were no longer the faces of cocky wise guys who'd seen it all and done it all, but they all looked spooked. As if they'd never seen anything like this and couldn't even imagine doing the shit to another syndicate that had been done to them.

When Nikki walked over to Teddy, she sat on the dock beside him. He still had that spooked look, too, only his face wasn't laced in terror like the faces of their men. It was guilt that was spooking him.

How could she be worrying about their marriage when her man was falling apart? But she also knew that was when bad decisions bred worse decisions. If she remained silent, his momentary anguish could become the end of them.

She spoke up. "Is it your father?"

Teddy looked at her. She always had that look of supreme confidence, as if no tragedy was going to turn her inside out. But that was exactly how Teddy felt: Inside out. Like everything about him was being exposed when he wanted nothing exposed. He felt bare.

But Nikki had already gotten herself up, brushed herself off, and was back in the saddle again. He admired her for that, even if he was nowhere near there yet. “Is what my father?”

“The way you’ve been acting. The fact that he fired you, even though you’re back on the job like you always are, and he never appreciates it.”

“Sixty-one of our men died, Nikki.”

“Lord have mercy,” Nikki said. Last night it was in the thirties.

“Sixty-one good men, Nikki. That’s the death toll now. How do you expect me to act after hearing how many more of our men perished?”

“I expect you to act like Teddy T. That tower of strength you are. We got hit. And it was a horrific hit, no doubt about it. But what do we do about it, Teddy? That’s how I expect you to act. I expect you to act on it, not just feel it. That’s why I’m wondering if it’s those daddy issues you still have that’s driving you. Because you’re the one who taught me to face tragedy head on, and then move the hell on.”

Teddy stared at her. His old man said she had nerves of steel, and she did. And she was perceptive too. Because she was right. Something within him shattered when Frankie told him that his father said he wanted to talk to Nikki after Teddy left the house. “When he asked to talk with you, as if he was going to offer you my job on the spot, that hurt me, Nikki,” Teddy admitted.

Nikki was struck by his admission. It was so rare for him to go down that deep that it was like an event whenever he did.

“It felt like a twist of the knife,” Teddy continued. “It felt as if he couldn’t wait to get rid of me. After all I did for that man and he was willing to get rid of me so easily?”

But then I hear the new death toll, and come out here and see the look on the faces of my men, and I can completely understand why he would want me out. I'd want me out, too, if I was the boss."

"You are the boss, Teddy, and not of any Bengino crime family, either. But of our family. The Sinatra family."

But Teddy was shaking his head. "As long as Pop is around, I'll never be anything but his flunky. You know it and I know it." Then he exhaled. "I just didn't want him to use you too."

"It wasn't about him using me. That's why you gave me that ultimatum last night. It was about you making sure he didn't have me without you. That's what that was about," Nikki said bluntly. "So let's keep this shit real."

Teddy knew she spoke the truth. "I'm fucked up, Nikki, that's just the way it is."

Nikki looked at him. "Don't say that."

"Let's keep it real, remember? Well that's the real. I'm fucked up! Ever since I was a kid I've been kowtowing to this man and it's got to stop. Do you realize I live in Philly to this day because I wanted to be close to him? I had my own thing going. I could have lived anywhere. But I kept my ass right here in Philly. And for what? To be trampled on by him? I don't allow anybody to treat me the way he treats me. Why do I do this shit to myself?"

"You love your father, and want to please him. That's human nature, Teddy. That's not a weakness or a crime."

Then Teddy frowned. "Ah shit!"

Now what , Nikki thought. “What is it?” she asked.

Teddy motioned toward the office. When Nikki looked, she saw Mick’s big white Cadillac Escalade speed onto the property and keep driving past the office all the way to the dock. Then he got out and made his way toward them.

Both of them were staring at Mick as he walked over. Teddy noticed that he, like Nikki, was well put together in his Armani suit. As if he was over it already too. Teddy just showered and threw on whatever suit was at hand. He didn’t give a shit if he was matching or looked good or any of that. He just wanted the pain of his screwup to go away.

Mick stood beside Teddy and Nikki and opened his suitcoat, placed his hands on his hips, and stared out at the wreckage too. For several seconds not a word passed between any of them.

Until Mick spoke. “What’s the final count?”

Nikki knew the number now that Teddy told her. But she felt Teddy should be the one to tell his old man. That Teddy needed to be the one. “Sixty-one.”

Mick leaned his head back. It was a massive number. “Damn,” was all he could say.

Then he looked at Nikki. “Any leads?”

“No sir. We’re waiting on forensics, but those assholes were under water. They planted that bomb underwater. I don’t see how they could find anything usable in that case.”

“Me either,” Mick said. But Nikki noticed how Mick continued to stare at Teddy although he was talking to her. Then he sat down beside Teddy, putting Teddy in

between Mick and Nikki.

“How are you?” Mick asked him.

It shocked Teddy and Nikki both. That was not Mick’s kind of question ever.

But Mick was genuinely concerned about his son’s mental health. Because despite their differences, he knew Teddy better than anyone alive. He knew how a tragedy on this scale was affecting him.

“I’ve been better,” was Teddy’s answer.

“You made a call. It didn’t work out. Move the hell on.”

Now that was the Mick they knew and even loved. He didn’t mince words. You knew exactly where he stood. But when he added, “ This wasn’t your fault ,” they both were shocked.

Teddy looked hard at his father. “What do you mean it wasn’t my fault? I made the call. How could it not be my fault?”

“You didn’t plant that bomb. Your error was stopping those ships from sailing to begin with. Yes, that was an error. At least you can look at it that way. But I don’t anymore.”

Teddy and Nikki felt some weird energy coming from Mick. Just last night he was castigating Teddy for letting those ships sit. Now he was claiming the fact that he didn’t let them sail was no big deal at all?

“You’re talking through both sides of your mouth, Pop,” Teddy said boldly. He was the only member of the family, other than Roz and Big Daddy, to talk to Mick that

way.

But Mick didn't lash back. "You shouldn't have let them sit. That's the truth. But I guarantee you that bomb was already there. Had you sailed a week ago, the same thing would have happened. There would have been an explosion, only sooner."

Teddy seemed to take some solace in what Mick was saying. "You think so, Pop?"

"I know so. I spoke with our sonar guys. They actually looked into it after that phone call you received that suggested the bomb was planted beneath the boat. There was activity in these waters, serious activity right around our largest ship, and it was happening the same night, right around the same time, that our three capos were murdered. They undoubtedly planted that bomb then and there. There probably would have been a full roster here that night, ready to set sail, which would have been triple the casualties. Your delay saved lives, Teddy. Not the other way around."

Nikki stared at Mick. Was this some ploy to appease his son? But everything about him wouldn't do that. He was telling the truth.

But it was going to take more than words to convince Teddy. "What are you saying Pop? That I didn't fuck up?"

"Oh you fucked up. You fucked up when you decided not to rope me in. But would that have saved more lives? No. It wouldn't have."

Teddy was still staring at his father. Because it made sense to him. Or he needed something to hang his hat on, and the one man that could give it to him had given it to him. That deep affection he had for his father, Teddy suddenly realized, was still there.

That was when Mick's look changed. "Does Nikki know?"

Nikki looked at Mick.

“About?” asked Teddy.

“Rarsi,” said Mick.

“Yes. Do you know?”

“Rarsi told me that you’ve been meeting with him, yes.”

“I was weighing my options, Pop. I meant no disrespect.”

Mick frowned. Nikki and Teddy both thought he was about unload on Teddy. But he did the exact opposite. “My actions were running you away. I know that,” he said.

Teddy just sat there. But Nikki knew this was their opportunity for this shit to get resolved once and for all.

That was why she spoke up. “Why were you running him away?” she asked Mick.

Teddy’s jaw tightened. He and Pop would brawl again if he laid a hand on Nikki.

But it didn’t go down like that. “Because I’m the one they’re all gunning for,” Mick said. “It’s dangerous working for me. I was pissed when Rarsi first told me about it, but that didn’t last long. Because I knew, if he went with Rarsi, he’d be in a safer place.”

“But why would you want to put Nikki in my spot, if it’s so dangerous?”

Mick was puzzled. “What are you talking about?”

“When you wanted to talk with Nikki last night. We assumed, well, I assumed that it was because you was going to make her boss of the family.”

Mick frowned. “Make her boss? Half of our men don’t even respect her as underboss, but you expect me to elevate her to boss?”

Nikki knew it too.

But Teddy had a different take. “Then why would you want her to stay back last night if you wasn’t going to elevate her?”

“I wanted to see where her heart was. The best tests are those given in the heat of the moment. I wanted to see if she was more about being the top of the food chain, or being with you. I saw what she was made of.”

“A blind man could have seen that,” said Nikki. Although she understood his rationale, she still didn’t like it. “You didn’t need to test my loyalty. I’m loyal to Teddy.”

“And I knew you would go wherever Teddy went,” said Mick.

“But that doesn’t explain why you would let our men dictate who ran your syndicate. They would either accept her as boss or hit the road, is what I think,” Teddy said.

“That’s because you’re thinking with your heart and not your head,” said Mick. “Or you’re thinking with the wrong head.”

Nikki almost laughed, but she knew Teddy would take it the wrong way.

“Say what you want, “Teddy said, “but that’s how I see it.”

“I don’t see it that way,” said Mick bluntly. “She’s capable. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying she’s not capable. But there’s no way I’m destabilizing my entire organization just to elevate her. There’s no way.”

When Teddy stared at him as if he couldn’t disagree more, he decided to explain himself. “There are only six people on the face of this planet that I would make boss of my organization. Only six. Myself, Reno, Tommy, and Sal Gabrini, Monk Paletti, and you. I would make Charles the boss of all of us, but he’s already got that title,” he added, and Nikki and even Teddy laughed. It was a welcomed respite from the tension.

But Mick didn’t smile. His look, in fact, became even more stern. “I’m a hard man to work for, to say the least. It takes a special person to do it. A very special person. And it’s dangerous assignment on top of that. You go with Rarsi, it probably won’t be so dangerous. But you won’t have the guardrails that being with me affords you either. Because it takes a real motherfucker to come after me and mine. Lesser guys will try to come after Rarsi’s outfit, and I believe those attempts will increase substantially if your name gets attached to that organization. Because you’re my son. Because,” he said as he looked deep into Teddy’s soulful green eyes, “you’re me and they know it.”

It was the kind of admission Nikki was pleased to hear. But Teddy was still digesting it.

“You’re my son,” Mick said, “and your ass may want to go everywhere to get away from me, and I don’t blame you, but you aren’t going anywhere. I’m fighting to keep your ass right here. Because I can protect you and Nikki better than anybody else can. And because you’re my son,” he added, heartfelt.

Teddy felt his heart. He felt it as if it was his heart too. And emotions welled up inside of him. He didn’t know what to say. They didn’t have that kind of relationship

ever. “I don’t know what to say, Pop,” he said honestly.

“Say you’re staying with me,” Mick said.

Nikki’s heart was ready to soar. Unless Teddy blew it.

Teddy knew nothing was going to change. He knew, after this kumbaya moment, everything would get back to normal.

But normal sounded great to him. He extended his hand. “It’ll be my honor to stay with you, Pop,” he said. And Mick shook that hand.

He didn’t blow it.

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They had stopped for breakfast, now they were on their way to school and the mustang was driving unusually fast as Duke turned another corner with a turn so sharp that Jackie had to lean sideways. “Slow your butt down, Duke. Why do you always have to fly? We’ll get there when we get there.” She sat back upright. “Dang.”

Duke smiled. He liked getting a rise out of her. “Sorry.”

She rolled her eyes rather than accept his fake apology and got back on her phone. She was on social media, strolling messages, but all she could think about was the end of the school year. “Our last day can’t get here fast enough,” she said.

Duke glanced over at her. “So you’re in a rush now? You’re the one can’t wait to go to college. Won’t even take a gap year. College is still school.”

“It’s not the same at all,” said Jackie. “Besides, Ma won’t let us take any gap years. She already said so.”

“When you’re grown your parents can’t tell you what to do,” Duke said as he glanced out of his rearview mirror to see if their security detail in the car behind them was keeping up.

“They can if they’re paying for it.”

“They can’t make us have security either.”

“Sure buddy. And what you’re gonna say if Daddy says you have to have security for the rest of your life?”

An annoyed look came across Duke's handsome face. "Don't even mention that man's name to me."

Jackie looked at him. "Didn't Ma tell you Daddy didn't start that fight last night?"

"Yeah, but he didn't try to stop it either. What father beats on his own son like that?"

"Daddy," Jackie said without hesitation. "He'll knock us through a wall if we disobey him. He's already knocked you through a few walls."

"Yeah but I was mouthing off and acting stupid. But Teddy works his butt off for Daddy. He and Nikki both. And what do they get in return? Nothing."

"What do you mean nothing? They're running the most powerful organization in the underworld."

"Which you aren't supposed to ever mention," Duke said, correcting her. "So cut it out, J."

"I'm just saying we know what time it is. They're getting something out of working for Daddy. They're getting power out of it."

"Teddy can get power anywhere he wants to get it. He doesn't need Daddy for power."

Jackie was staring at her brother.

Duke glanced at her once, and then again when he stopped at a red light. "What are you staring at me for?"

"You confuse me. You're downing Daddy every chance you get, but yet in still

you're the one wanna be all up under him all the time."

Duke frowned. "What be up under? That is such a lie."

"Oh yeah? Then why won't you apply for any schools outside of Philly? And why don't you wanna stay in a dorm? Why would you prefer to stay home?"

"Because I do. So what?"

Jackie continued to stare at him. All the men in their family were just alike. Mick was just like Big Daddy. Teddy was just like Mick. Duke was just like Teddy. And they all never wanted to be too far from each other. It was a co-dependency unlike she'd ever seen. But you could never tell any of them that. But her cousin Tony Sinatra, who was a renowned psychologist, agreed with her. He saw it too.

Duke frowned. "What was that?" he asked as soon as they both heard what sounded like a big rock ricocheting off their windshield. But when they didn't see a crack in their window, but began to hear the definite sound of gunfire, Duke quickly looked in his rearview.

And that was when he saw the car containing his security detail under fire. "Get down!" he yelled at his sister as he pushed her head down and hit on the gas pedal. He was taught by his father himself how to maneuver if they ever came under attack, and the main point was always the main point: get out of the area and get out of the area as fast as he could get out. And press the customized-by-his-father distress button.

He sped out of the area while he was pressing the distress button.

But the problem was that the attack wasn't only on their security detail, but on them too, and a car began speeding behind them, firing at them as it drove.

Duke was speeding so fast, and turning corners so wildly that Jackie, down on the floor, just knew he was going to lose control and crash.

But Duke maintained control as he swerved side to side to avoid as much of the incoming fire as he possibly could. His Mustang was riddled with bullet holes. And no matter how fast he went or how sharply he turned every corner, that car was still on his tail.

But when the shooters in the car behind them shattered their back window with a volley of bullets that seemed never-ending, and when he saw that he was coming to a warehouse at the end of the street that would become a dead end, he had no choice but to turn offroad and fly through the woods.

His car was coughing up dirt and bouncing over heavy brush as he fought with all he had to control his car and avoid incoming bullets too. He sped and sped and sped so fast that no man could control that kind of speed.

He was going so fast, and bouncing over so much brush, that his car hit one big branch too many and lost all traction. Then it flipped and ended up on its roof, sliding through those woods, until it came to a stop with the wheels still spinning.

The chase car driver swerved, to avoid killing himself and his crew in what would have been a massive collision, but the driver swerved too recklessly and ended up slamming into a tree. The car hit so hard that it exploded on impact.

The sound of the crash sent shockwaves through the woods as birds flew away from trees with loud sounds of distress, dogs were barking furiously, and every manner of creature scurried for cover. But the sound of the explosion after the crash silenced the noise. Every wildlife in those woods had been screaming out all at once in a unified terror of sounds.

And then, as if they knew something horrific had just occurred, there were no sounds at all.

“Boss! Boss!”

Mick, Teddy, and Nikki were still sitting on the dock of the bay when they heard Renardo’s voice. They all turned and saw their dock supervisor running across the plank toward them.

Teddy was especially agitated. “What is it?” he was yelling even before Renardo made it to them.

“I just got a call from Tech-quarters.” It was their technical team’s headquarters. “They tried to call you guys but nobody was answering.”

Teddy had broken his phone in a fit of rage the day before, Nikki’s phone was still turned off, and Mick had left his phone in his Escalade. “What do they want?” he asked.

“They just got a distress signal, sir.”

Everybody flew to their feet. “From whom?” Teddy asked anxiously.

“From Duke’s detail,” said Renardo. “And they weren’t able to reach any of the team members, nor Duke or Jackie by phone either. They also got a distress signal from Duke’s Mustang.”

Mick’s heart slammed through his shoe as he, Teddy, and Nikki were already running. “Where?”

“Over on Copperfield. They were running so fast that Renardo couldn’t keep up. “The nine thousand block,” he added as he gave up and let them run.

All three hopped into Mick’s Escalade and Mick sped away as Nikki was on the phone trying to reach Jackie and Teddy was trying to reach Duke. They couldn’t get there fast enough as all of them were thinking the exact same thing: That real motherfucker Mick had spoken about had come for the very ones he was certain they wouldn’t come for: his children.

He was turning corners on two wheels as he raced to the scene.

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Even before they made it to Copperfield Road, there were police cars and ambulances and cordoned off spaces blocks away. It was what they assumed was where it all began as Mick's Escalade drove passed the twins' security detail car, which was being processed with all three deceased bodyguards still inside. The car was so mangled that it was almost unrecognizable. Mick, Teddy, and Nikki all froze in fear.

But the main crime scene was much farther away and Mick kept on speeding. That was when he arrived at the nine thousand block of Copperfield Road where bumpers and tire tread and other car parts sprawled across the road like litter, and the damage continued into the woods.

The man in charge, Captain Andrews, knew the Sinatras well. That was why he was out there. He also happened to be crooked as the road and on Mick's payroll.

"Where's my children?" Mick asked frantically as they hurried toward the Captain and the Captain hurried to them.

"Their Mustang ran off the road," the captain said, "and went into the woods. It flipped over, Mick."

"Lord have mercy!" Nikki cried out.

"They're trying to get them out now," the captain added, but Mick and Teddy were already running into those woods and Nikki was right behind them.

When they saw the car that had slammed into that tree and exploded, their hearts began hammering in fear. But when they realized it wasn't Duke's car, they kept

running. They saw a small group of cops attempting to make contact with Duke, and figure out a way to pull him out with the car upside down, but that wasn't going to be enough for them.

Mick and Teddy got a grip and began to use every ounce of strength they had to lift that Mustang and flip it over. The cops out there, when they realized first that it was Mick the Tick and Teddy T, and that those fools were actually going to try to lift a car, all lent a hand. And the car actually did flip over and back on its four wheels.

Then Nikki grabbed the jaws of life from one of the cops and pried open the driver side door. And that was when they saw Jackie.

"Daddy!" she cried out when she saw her father's face. "Duke," she was saying too. "Duke."

Duke was still behind the wheel, but his face was buried in the blood-stained deployed airbag, and he was lifeless.

"Get a stretcher back here now!" Nikki was yelling hysterically, and the cops were calling for a stretcher. "We need paramedics back here now!" She didn't even know if Duke was still breathing, but that wasn't going to stop them from pulling out all the stops.

Mick grabbed the jaws of life, went around to the passenger side of the car, pried that door open, lifted his daughter out of there, and kept her in his arms. She was crying like a baby. Duke was unconscious and bleeding profusely as Ted and Nikki sought to staunch his blood flow.

And Mick was in another world of rage. He hadn't been so overwhelmed since the time when the twins were still babies and he, Roz, and the babies were all under attack. He looked at Duke as he held onto his hysterical daughter. These children

were his heartbeat, what were these assholes thinking? They came for his children ? For Mick the Tick's children ? Were these fuckers insane ???

Teddy was beside himself with grief and the kind of rage he could hardly contain too. He held that tourniquet tightly against his kid brother's body as he could hardly believe that somebody had the gall to come for them like this. They came for their business and their men, which was brazen enough. Now they were coming for their family ?

There would be no peace on the face of this earth until he stomped every one of those motherfuckers through the ground. His bad decisions might have started this shitshow, but his rage was going to finish it.

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Roz was in her office at the Graham Talent Agency, the agency she founded and kept under her maiden name. She'd just arrived at work and already was trying to convince a Broadway producer to give her client another chance.

"She admitted she was wrong, Will. She admitted it to your face. What more you want from her?"

"I don't want anything from her. I want her gone and she's gone. I'm not taking her back."

"She's the best actress you'll ever get to play that role and you know it," Roz said. "Just give her another chance. On my word she'll never pull those stunts again."

"I know she won't pull'em because she won't be here. I love you, Roz, but you're out of line on this one. She wants to play the diva, she can play the diva. But not in my play!" he yelled definitively, and ended the call.

Roz looked at her desk phone and then slammed the receiver on the hook.

"She's cooked, Boss." It was Teegan, Roz's longtime secretary. "She brought it all on herself."

"I know that and you know that. Her problem is that Will knows it, too, and he's not going to not know it anytime soon. Tell her there's nothing more we can do. We'll try to find her another gig, but if she pull that diva shit again she's out of this agency. Got it?"

“Yes ma’am,” Teegan said and was just about to turn to leave when Mick walked through the office door. “Mr. Sinatra?”

Mick showed up every now and then to Roz’s office, but it was extremely unusual. And from the look on his face, it was no drop by. It was for a very definite reason.

Roz saw it too. “That’ll be all, Tee,” she said, and Teegan hurried out of the office, closing the door behind her.

Roz looked at Mick. “What happened?”

She knew it was bad because Mick kept walking around her desk until he was at her side.

“Tell me, Mick, what is it?”

Mick still was distressed and couldn’t hide it. “It’s our babies, Rosalyn. There’s been an accident.”

Roz stood up as if she was coming out of her own skin. Her heart was pounding and sinking all at the same time. “Are they alright? Tell me they’re alright, Mick.” She grabbed his arms. “Are they alright, Mick? Are they alright ?”

“Yes,” he said, finally able to get a word out through Roz’s hysteria, as he held her arms. “Jackie’s fine.”

Roz sighed relief. “Thank God!”

But then she waited for him to say Duke was fine too. “What about our son? What about Duke? He’s alright, too, isn’t he?”

“He’s . . . going to be, yes.”

Roz frowned. “What does that mean? He’s not alright?”

“He’s in surgery, Roz. They have him in surgery.”

“ Surgery ?” Roz’s knees buckled and Mick had to hold her up. That was why he didn’t send Nikki to retrieve her, or even Teddy. He came himself.

“Get me to my babies,” Roz was crying. “Get me to my babies.”

And Mick, holding her up lest she fall face first, got her to their babies.

“Ready for some action?”

“Depends on what kind.”

“We’ve got oodles and oodles of high dollar traffic coming in today. How about that kind?”

“Sounds good to me.” They were in the traffic control tower of a small airfield in northeast Philly as the new recruit looked at the seasoned air traffic controller who was teaching him the ropes. “Anybody I know?”

“Reno Gabrini’s plane is heading our way.”

“Reno Gabrini? Who the heck is Reno Gabrini?”

“Ever been to Vegas?”

“Many times. So what? He’s one of those showbiz guys that takes up residence there?”

“He’s a flamboyant guy that owns the PaLargio Hotel and Casino on the Strip. His old man used to be big time mob, and they say Gabrini may still be too. He’s voted the King of Vegas year after year.”

The newbie was shaking his head. “I still don’t know him. But I know his hotel, I just never knew who owned it. I always wondered what it would be like to stay in a place like the PaLargio.”

“Sal Gabrini’s plane is on its way as well. He’s one of those mob guys out of Vegas, too, only he’s coming in from Chicago. And his brother Tommy Gabrini, a business tycoon, a guy they call Dapper Tom which is his mob name because he’s said to be mob too, is coming in from Seattle.”

“Why all of these big deals coming all at once, and why are they choosing to land at our modest little airfield?”

“I can’t say for sure,” said the veteran controller, “but their mob ties might have something to do with it. They wanna come in, but not at the big airports. They wanna fly under the radar. We get that with celebrities sometimes too.”

“They’re all Gabrinis. Are they all related?”

“Nope, just a coincidence. Didn’t I just tell you Tommy Gabrini was Sal Gabrini’s big brother? Of course they’re all related! How many Gabrinis do you know?”

The younger man frowned. “It’s not that serious,” he said.

“And they’re all related to Mick Sinatra,” the veteran added.

The newbie was interested now. Everybody in Philly knew who Mick Sinatra was. “Maybe that’s why they’re coming. There was some breaking news about Sinatra’s kids getting shot because of some drug deal gone bad that Teddy Sinatra was involved in, or something like that.”

“I didn’t hear anything about no drugs, but I heard they were ambushed. Which is probably why Hammer Reese and his wife are flying in too.”

The newbie frowned. “Hammer Reese? The CIA guy? What he’s got to do with Mick Sinatra?”

“He’s married to Sinatra’s half-sister Amelia Sinatra, at least last I heard they were still married. They have loads of issues in their marriage, according to the tabloids. So he might be here to help solve the case, I don’t know. I just know his plane is on the screen of incomings too. Somebody tries to off Mick Sinatra’s kids is a big damn deal.”

“I was wondering why all those SUVs started showing up out front. They must be security for all these big shots on their way.”

The veteran nodded. “That was my conclusion too. So get you some coffee and buckle up. We’re in for a long day today.”

The newbie got up excitedly. His second day on the job and already he’s going to see mobsters and billionaires? He was thrilled to buckle up.

But as they drank their coffee and supervised the first arrival, they were surprised by the name. Because the first plane that landed wasn’t a Gabrini nor a Reese. It was a Sinatra. A Marco Sinatra.

“I didn’t know there was a Marco Sinatra. Who’s Marco Sinatra?”

“I have no idea either,” the veteran controller said. “Maybe a distant cousin or somebody.”

But when five of those SUVs sped across the tarmac and over to the plane as soon as it landed, and big, burly bodyguards got out of those SUVs as if to make a wall of protection around this Marco person, the controllers were even more convinced that he wasn’t just a distant cousin or any remote person like that. By the reaction of the security alone, they knew he had to be a very relevant, very significant mainline Sinatra.

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Nikki had fallen asleep. Teddy's half-sister Gloria Sinatra-Drakos, who had flown into town on her husband's plane, had fallen asleep. And both of them sat in between Mick with their heads laying on his shoulders. Big Daddy, who sat next to Mick, was leaned forward, his head down. Kimmie was playing in the attached makeshift nursery inside the suite under the supervision of her nanny. Teddy, leaned against the wall and staring at his family, hadn't seen his father look that stricken in a long, long time. And Roz, who couldn't be still for more than a few minutes at a time as she moved around the room like a wounded animal, just looked numb.

They were inside Jackie's hospital suite after all tests confirmed she had no internal injuries but would remain hospitalized overnight for observation. Unnervingly quiet, the only sound in the room was of Jackie lying in bed and punching keys on her iPad as she distracted herself with her social media friends.

Although two large TVs on the walls across from each other had both been turned on and were tuned to the 24-hour news channels, their sound had been muted. But seemingly every few minutes, on CNN's scroll at the bottom of the screen, and on MSNBC's scroll as well, was the banner headline: The two youngest children of billionaire industrialist and reputed mob boss Mick Sinatra ambushed in Philadelphia .

It was a continuous loop. But nobody in that hospital suite tried to turn either one of the TVs off. It was as if they wanted the world to know of this injustice. It was as if they wanted their enemies to have that constant reminder, like a scroll in their brains, that there was no way in hell the Sinatras were going to let this stand.

Nerves were shot. The tension was thick. Teddy had already left the room numerous

times to check on security inside and outside of the hospital. Mick went to the bathroom three times in an hour. And Roz went from curling up on bed with Jackie, to pacing the floor, to sitting in various chairs around the room, and was pacing once again. This entire week had already been a nightmare for the family with what happened at the docks and with those three capos. Now this? Teddy leaned his head back. He knew there was going to be hell to pay.

“Marco!”

Nikki and Gloria quickly woke up and sat up as everybody looked at Jackie, who had sat upright in bed and was beaming from ear to ear. When they looked where she was looking, they were all pleased to see Teddy’s son, along with another young man in his early twenties too, walking through the door.

“Hello everybody,” Marco said in his usual jovial way as he gave Roz a hug and Nikki a hug and Gloria a hug and Big Daddy a handshake and hug.

Then he got to Mick. “Hello Sir,” he said as they shook hands. That was what he took to calling his grandfather: Sir or Boss . Both names lacked warmth because their relationship, if they had one at all, was on that surface level too.

Then he got to his father, a man he not that long ago learned was his father, and all he could do was nod his head. “Hey Pops.”

It sounded like a warm greeting, but everybody looking at the two men knew it wasn’t.

And Teddy’s response to his son proved it. “Where your ass been?” he asked him with a sharp tone. “Nikki called you as soon as this shit went down. You should have hopped on your plane right then and there.”

“I did. But remember I live in Cali.”

“I know where you live. And I also know your ass wasn’t in California. You were in Jersey.”

Marco was shocked his father was keeping tabs on him. He didn’t think he cared. But Marco was proficient at getting out of rough situations. “I knew you guys would be holding it down long enough for me to finish my business and then get here as fast as I could.”

Teddy gave him a hard look. “You’re still selling that poison, aren’t you?”

“I don’t sell anything. I do business. I get crated cargo from point A to point B, no questions asked. That’s my business. What they do with that cargo is their business.”

“Answer my question.”

Marco exhaled. “No, sir. I do not sell drugs anymore.”

Teddy continued to stare at him. Mick glared at him. “You changed your name to my name. To Sinatra. You’re a Sinatra,” he said. “Your ass better never forget that.”

“He hasn’t forgotten it,” said Big Daddy. “Have you, Marco?”

“Not for a second,” Marco replied with a smile. Big Daddy kept in constant contact with Marco. They were very close.

But Nikki could see the pain in Marco’s big eyes as those eyes looked, once again, at Teddy. It was as if he wanted his father to make that affirmative step of standing up and hugging him, or at least show some affection towards him. But it wasn’t happening and Marco, a survivor if he was anything, moved on too.

He hurried over to the bed to fall into Jackie's arms that had been extended and waiting impatiently for him as soon as he entered the room. They hugged vigorously.

"Let me look at you," Marco said as he pulled back. "Damn girl. You don't look too bad at all."

"Some bruises, but I'm okay." Then her face turned anguished. "But Duke isn't."

"He's still in surgery?" Marco asked, looking over at his father and grandfather, both of whom were staring at the handsome young man smartly dressed in his Tom Ford suit. He got the Gabrini/Sinatra memo that every man in the Sinatra/Gabrini orbit had etched on their brains: Even if you're a lowdown dirty dog of a thug, dress like a businessman. People, and cops especially, will treat you the way they perceive you. Marco, though they all knew was thuggish to the core, lived that memo too.

When neither man answered Marco's question, Nikki spoke up. "He's still in surgery. But we hope to hear something soon."

"They shot at us and everything, Marco," Jackie said. "Then Duke crashed the car, but only because he was trying to get away from all those bullets. Oh Marco !" She hugged him again. "I still can't believe they hurt my brother like that."

"You know what I still can't believe?" said Marco, attempting to ease her anxiety.

Jackie pulled back. "What?"

"That you're my auntie."

At first it seemed so out of nowhere that Jackie didn't know how to take it, but then Marco smiled that charming smile she adored and she began laughing too.

“That’s your auntie?” the young man with him asked with a grin on his face. “She’s younger than you are, Markie.”

“I know, right?” Marco stood upright. “Ain’t that some bull?”

“You must be Vivian.”

Marco and the young man with him turned toward the sound of Teddy’s voice. “Yes sir,” the young man said. “And you must be Teddy T.”

Mick leaned his head back and gave the young man a hard look as if he should know better than to disrespect the head of the Sinatra syndicate.

Vivian realized he was referring to Teddy the way Marco referred to him when he wasn’t in Teddy’s presence. “I mean you must be Mr. Sinatra,” he corrected himself. “Nice to meet you, sir. Sorry about the circumstances though.”

“And who are you?” Roz asked with that accusatory tone she was known for.

“My bad, Ma,” Marco said. “Let me introduce you to my family, Viv. You met my dad. This man right here is my grandfather.”

“I know who he is,” Vivian said, grinning again. “Very nice to meet you, Mr. Sinatra, sir. I heard nothing but amazing things about you.”

“Amazing?” Mick was frowning as if the word itself was insulting. “What’s amazing about me?”

Vivian lifted his eyebrows in a deer-in-headlights moment as he realized he had put his foot in it again.

“They’re a tough crowd,” Marco said to Vivian. “Just remember that. And that old broad over there,” Marco said with a grin of his own as he motioned toward Roz. Jackie and Nikki and Gloria couldn’t help it. They burst into laughter. Even Roz smiled, which was hard to do in those circumstances. But Marco was always good for a laugh.

“That’s my granddad’s wife,” Marco continued his introductions. “I would call her my step-grandma, but she’s too young and restless and bold and beautiful for that.”

“Child bye,” said Roz, dismissing her step-grandson. “What kind of name is that for a boy?” she asked Vivian.

“I was named after my dad. It’s a family name.”

“But beyond her sassiness,” Marco continued, which got Nikki and Jackie and Gloria laughing again, “she’s not too bad.”

Mick spoke up. “Careful,” he said, although there was no malice in his voice.

“I’m just joking, Sir. I know not to disrespect your wife. I know it’ll be my body print through wall if I was to be that crazy.” Then Marco’s look changed. He turned serious. “Which brings us to Duke and Jackie’s ambush. Who could be that crazy?”

The Sinatras weren’t about to speak of anything related to the family with a stranger in the room.

That was why Nikki changed the subject. “When you would call and talk about Vivian,” Nikki said, “I wasn’t sure if he was your friend or worked for you.”

“He’s both. He’s my best friend and he works for me. He’s my righthand man. He’s my underboss.”

“Your ass don’t have an underboss,” Teddy said.

“You do,” Marco replied.

“You aren’t me,” Teddy fired back.

“Yes I am,” Marco fired back, and Mick gave him a hard look. Because he knew that young man was, in a lot of ways, just like Teddy. And he knew they were both, in a lot of ways, just like him.

When Teddy didn’t continue the no you’re not, yes I am conversation, Marco continued his introductions. “And that big guy over there is Charles “Big Daddy” Sinatra, the patriarch of our family. You don’t wanna fuck with him, trust and believe.”

Vivian laughed. “Nice to meet you, sir.”

“Likewise,” said Big Daddy.

“And that gorgeous young lady right there is Gloria, my Dad’s sister and another one of my aunties if you can believe it.”

“I can’t,” said a still-grinning Vivian.

“And this bombshell over here is Nikki. My father’s righthand man and wife and one dame you don’t want to trifle with. She can kick ass. For real.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Sinatra,” Vivian said with a nod. He knew where to draw the playful line seemingly better than Marco did. But then the head of security for highly-sensitive matters in Mick’s entire syndicate knocked and then peeped in.

“Come on in, Bo,” Mick said, and Johnny Boreau walked on in. He was about to speak until he saw an unfamiliar face.

“Vivian, wait outside,” Teddy ordered.

Marco frowned. “What for, Pop? I told you he was my righthand man.”

“But he ain’t mine,” said Teddy. “Outside,” he said to Vivian.

By his facial expression alone, it was obvious that Vivian wasn’t accustomed to being dismissed from rooms. But it was also obvious that he’d never been in a room with heavyweights like Mick the Tick and Teddy T. “No worries,” he said, and left the room. The capo in the hallway guarding the door of Jackie’s suite closed the door after he walked out and eyed him suspiciously as he was trained to do.

When the door closed, Teddy looked at Bo. “What you got?”

But Marco was still offended. “That wasn’t necessary, Pop. You didn’t have to hurt Viv’s feelings.”

Teddy frowned. “What is he your girlfriend? What the fuck I care about Viv?”

“What you got?” Mick said to Bo.

“We weren’t able to ID anybody in the car that took on Duke and Jackie. They were burned beyond recognition.”

Marco glanced at Jackie, who recoiled at the thought. He sat on the bed beside her.

“As for the three men that was in the gunfight with the twins’ security detail, we’ve been working nonstop, and it’s been difficult to work without drawing police

attention. But we have our first positive ID on one of the three men.”

“Anybody we know?” Teddy asked.

“Ever hear of Mel Janantoni?”

“Janantoni? Never heard of him. You Pop?”

“No.”

But Marco looked at Boreau. “Is it Mel or is it Hal?”

“It’s Mel like I said.” Boreau opened the folder he had in his hand. “Oh no. Excuse me, you’re right. It’s Hal Janantoni.”

Everybody was looking at Marco. “You know him?” Nikki asked him.

“He used to make runs to South America for some guys I knew.”

They all understood what that meant. He made runs for Marco.

“But when I moved my enterprise to California,” Marco continued, “we lost touch. Last I heard he was a lieutenant in an outfit around this area.”

This interested all of them. “Which one?” Teddy asked.

“The Bengino crime family is what I heard.”

They were all shocked. “Bengino?” Nikki asked.

“But for which Bengino?” Teddy said. “For the old man? For Denny? Or for Potter

Rarsi?”

Marco shook his head. “I don’t know the dynamics like that. I just know he went to work for the Bengino family. That’s all I know.”

Teddy and Nikki looked at each other. Then they looked at Mick.

“What am I missing?” Marco asked as he looked at all three.

“Potter Rarsi has been recruiting your father,” Nikki said.

“Recruiting him? To do what?”

“To head the Bengino crime family.”

Marco frowned. “Shit! I heard about the explosions and the suicides. I knew shit was going down. But Pop, why would you wanna leave the family?”

“And leave the family,” Nikki added, “to work with a guy like Potter Rarsi that Bugs Cartelli said was behind those suicides from jump. But we didn’t believe him.”

“Bugs is a despicable human being,” Marco pointed out. “But he gives good intel. Why wouldn’t you believe him, Pop?”

“Because he trusts Potter Rarsi,” said Nikki.

Marco smiled. “You trust him? Since when do you trust anybody but Nikki?”

“It’s more than that,” said Teddy.

Nikki and Marco looked at him, waiting for an explanation. But Roz jumped up

angrily. “Who gives a shit? My son could be dying on that operating table and you’re worrying about who’s behind it? Worry about my son!” she yelled out.

“It’s okay, Mommy,” Jackie said, and Roz went over by the window and turned her back to everyone. It was obvious that she was quietly crying.

But to everybody’s shock, it was Mick who got up, went over to Roz, turned her around and pulled her into his arms. She sobbed in his arms.

Teddy ran his hands through his hair. He knew none of this would have happened had he done his job at the level it demanded. It was all his fault, and he was having a hard time coming to grips with that hard, cold truth.

Nikki went to him, and stood beside him, but there was no comforting him on that front. To her credit and Teddy’s relief, she didn’t try.

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But despite Roz's understandable emotional outburst, Marco still didn't understand his father. It made no sense.

"Pops, I don't get it," he said. "Why would you, Mister Cautious, trust a mobster like Potter Rarsi? That don't sit right with me."

"Me either," Nikki admitted.

"Why this blind faith in a character like that?" Marco added.

Teddy didn't respond. He didn't have the energy. But Big Daddy finally spoke up. "A long time ago, your father and grandfather were in a turf war with the Bengino family. They were in a shootout inside some old building on the top floor, which was three floors high. Well the floor collapsed beneath their feet and everybody from both gangs dropped three flights and pancaked down to the bottom floor. Most of them died instantly, but Potter Rarsi was able to get himself out from beneath the rubble. But Mick and Teddy had bricks that had them unable to move at all. They were stuck and bricks were steadily piling on them threatening to bury them alive."

"Damn," said Marco. Nikki was in disbelief too.

"Everybody that was able to get out, which was only a few guys from the Bengino gang because they had been running up to the third floor when the collapse happened, ran out of that building because it was still unstable. And like I said, big bricks were still falling. And Potter Rarsi, once he got from out of the rubble, ran too. But then he came back."

Roz looked over at Big Daddy when he said Rarsi came back.

“Mick was too proud to ask for help,” Big Daddy continued, “but that’s your grandfather. But Rarsi still came back and pulled Mick out of the rubble. And then he helped Mick pull Teddy, who was even deeper buried, out too. They looked at each other, and didn’t say a word. And then Rarsi left.”

“Wow,” said Marco.

“When Old Man Bengino retired, he made Potter Rarsi boss. He sidestepped his own son Denny and gave it to Rarsi. That’s was years ago. Although Rarsi is looking to retire now himself, and wanted Teddy to take over his outfit, he made a truce with Mick’s syndicate the moment he became boss that has never been broken. That’s why Mick and Teddy, and me as well, trust Potter Rarsi.”

It was one of those ah-ha moments for Nikki and Marco and everybody else in that room that would never again have them questioning that blind trust Mick and Teddy had in that particular mobster. Although a small part of Nikki still felt it was too blind because people were capable of changing over time. But she trusted Teddy and Mick with her life, and they trusted Potter Rarsi.

“But make no mistake,” Mick spoke up and said, “if we find out that his ass is involved in what happened to my children and our capos, he will be dealt with.”

Nikki nodded. And looked at Teddy. But Teddy was still too worried about Duke and too guilt-ridden to so much as nod his agreement.

Nikki spoke for him. She looked at Boreau. “Find out which leader in the Bengino family hired Hal Janantoni. We’ve got to have concrete proof before we approach anybody over there because if we get this wrong it could be world war three.”

“Right,” agreed Mick.

“They’ve got serious reach,” Nikki reminded Bo. “Nowhere near our reach. But serious enough to cause a lot of damage. We’ve got to be certain.”

“I’ll get right on it, Nikki,” Bo said, glanced over at a still-flustered Teddy, and then left the room.

As soon as Bo left, an eerie silence took over the suite.

And they waited.

Mick had calmed Roz back down, and they took seats side by side with his arm still around her, as they continued to wait.

Sal Gabrini, and then Reno Gabrini, and then Tommy Gabrini all arrived within a few hours of each other.

And they still waited.

Ameila Sinatra-Reese arrived, but without the man they expected to be with her. “Where’s Hammer?” Her big brother, Big Daddy, asked her.

“Don’t ask,” Amelia said and Big Daddy shook his head. Amelia and Hammer Reese. Always drama with those two!

And they waited some more.

Until, ten hours after Duke first went into surgery, the surgical team, along with the Sinatras’ personal physician, entered the suite. Instead of jumping up and bombarding them with questions, they sat there with bated breath. Nobody moved a muscle.

“The surgery went as expected,” the chief of surgery said.

Roz frowned. Her voice, though not that loud, sounded hysterical. “What do you mean as expected ? Tell us what that means. He’s alive, but he’s paralyzed? He’s alive, but he’s a vegetable? He’s dead? Tell us what that means!”

Their personal physician quickly moved in front of the renowned surgeons, many of whom that had been flown in from John Hopkins. Bedside manners were not their forte. “What it means, Mrs. Sinatra,” he said, “is that barring any infections or anything of that nature, Duke is expected to fully recover with no lasting issues whatsoever.”

He was talking a language their worried souls could understand and they immediately jumped to their feet with cheers and applause and high-fives. Even Teddy was relieved and smiling as Marco hurried over, grabbed his shoulders, and began massaging them in pure joy.

But Roz fell to her knees thanking Jesus. And shockingly, Mick fell on his knees too, and kept his arm around her. It was just the news they had been praying for.

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Two days later and Duke Sinatra was transported from the hospital, under the heaviest security, to his father's vast compound for in-home medical care under the supervision of their family physician and his staff. Even while he was still in the hospital he had been recovering well above expectations. He was thrilled to be back home, and the whole family was thrilled to have him back.

While all of the other young people were gathered together in his room laughing and talking with him, and while Vivian was allowed out back on the basketball courts under the watchful eye of grounds security, Marco was in Mick's office with the other heads of the family: The Gabrinis, Big Daddy, Nikki and Teddy, and Roz and Amelia. Marco gladly joined the conversation.

Mick was seated behind the desk. Roz was seated on the arm of his desk chair. Since Duke and Jackie were back home where they belonged, there was an air of lightness to Roz again. She was still worried because the perps had to be caught, which was always dangerous, but she was at least no longer worried about her kids.

Big Daddy, Amelia, Tommy, Reno, and Sal and Nikki and Marco were all seated in front of the desk. Teddy was leaned against the wall, the back of his shoe pressed against it too, as he folded his arms. He wanted those fuckers even worse than his father did.

"What about Denardo?" asked Sal Gabrini. He was a mob boss too. He understood the stakes better than most. "Teddy told me he was on the radar for fake-suiciding your three capos even before that explosion happened. Why haven't we gone after that outfit?"

“Same reason we’re still waiting on intel to go after Bengino’s outfit,” said Teddy.
“We need more proof.”

“I can understand about Bengino’s syndicate,” said Reno. The Gabrinis had been briefed on why they didn’t just tear that syndicate down first and ask questions later.
“But Denardo’s gang isn’t in that league. We can take them out in an afternoon.”

“Yeah but once you start taking out bad guys that might not have been involved with this shit,” said Teddy, “then you know what that becomes.”

“What it already is,” said Sal. “A shitshow. Led by you, Teddy. And you Nikki. Because your asses dropped the ball.” Sal frowned. “You didn’t tell Uncle Mick about those so-called suicides? On what planet was that okay? Had that been my guys I would have fired every one of them on the spot.”

“Pop did fire me,” Teddy said.

“And rightly so,” said Reno.

“Was that why Potts was recruiting you?” asked Sal.

“Nope,” said Mick. “He was recruiting Teddy before any of this happened.”

“Behind your back?” asked Reno. “And you still trust that motherfucker?”

“It wasn’t behind my back,” said Mick. “Potts told me about it before he approached Teddy.”

“And you allowed it?”

Mick hesitated. “Yes. I’m not making him stay where he doesn’t want to be.”

Reno shook his head. "I love you, Uncle Mick, but you're a stubborn fucker. Not counting you or me or Tommy, but Teddy is the best leader of men I've ever seen."

"Better than me?" asked Sal.

"I don't know how to break this to you," said Reno to Sal, "but Peewee Herman would have been better than you."

Those in the room laughed. "Ah fuck you, Reno!" Sal proclaimed.

Mick's desk intercom buzzed. He pressed the button. "Yeah?"

"Johnny Boreau is here at the gate, sir. He asks to be admitted in."

"Send him through," Mick said and leaned back.

And within a couple minutes, Boreau was entering the office. With news.

"It's been confirmed, sir," he said, "that Hal Janantoni did work for the Bengino gang. And that's a hard confirm."

"What about Potter Rarsi?" asked Nikki. "Was he the one who hired him?"

"That we haven't been able to establish. Nobody's talking over there. Their outfit is about as closed as Mr. Sinatra's syndicate. Which meant we had to go elsewhere to get answers, which means all we got is a bunch of speculation. Was he recruited by Denny Bengino or Potter Rarsi or even Old Man Bengino? We flat don't know yet."

"Potts is boss over there, not Denny," said Teddy, "and Claudio Bengino hasn't hired anybody in years. If Janantoni worked there, then it was Potts that hired him or allowed him to be hired. Potts would have had to approve it."

Mick and Teddy looked at each other. And Teddy knew what that meant. He pulled out his cellphone and waited for Potter Rarsi to answer. Teddy had the call on Speaker.

“Teddy T, how you be? I heard about what happened. How’s everybody doing over there? Everybody okay? The twins okay?”

“I don’t know about okay,” Teddy responded, “but they survived.”

“At least that’s good news.”

“I need your help, Potts.”

“Anything I can do.”

“Pops is going nuts over here after what happened, as you can imagine.”

“Knowing your father? Yes, I can imagine.”

Mick’s eyes hardened, but he said nothing.

“He wants me to hit Denardo,” Teddy continued, “but I keep telling him I don’t have enough intel to hit anybody. But you know how he is.”

Teddy, and everybody else in that room, glanced at Mick again. Mick remained expressionless.

“Can we meet?” Teddy asked.

“Will I be wasting my time again?”

“The way Pop’s blaming me for all this shit? Hell no.”

“Now you’re singing my tune. Where and when?”

“Same place. And now. I’m on my way.” He ended the call.

Teddy held the phone in his hands momentarily, as if he knew this could go sideways, but then he began to leave.

“Ted?”

It was Mick’s voice. He turned around.

“Keep it under control. We have questions. We have no answers. I want answers. No more fuck-ups.”

“Well damn,” Marco said.

Everybody could see that Teddy was offended. “I’ll get you answers,” he said.

But Mick saw that rage in Teddy’s eyes. He had too many points to prove, which could cause him to go off on Rarsi if Rarsi wasn’t giving it to him straight. But now was not the time. “Take Nikki with you,” he ordered.

Teddy frowned. “What are you talking, Pop? I always meet him alone. I have to meet him alone or he’ll know something’s up.”

“He already knows something’s up. My got damn kids were ambushed, that’s what’s up! Nikki, go with him.”

Nikki immediately rose to her feet. She wanted to back Teddy up anyway.

But Teddy didn't want his wife in any line of danger. Not after what happened to the twins. "I'm going alone, Pop. That's how we've always met."

"Tell him Nikki's onboard too. Tell him he get one, he gets the other one. You're a tag team. Whatever the fuck you have to tell him, you tell him. He'll understand that. Go."

Teddy still didn't like it, but he'd rather have Nikki with him than anybody else. They began to leave.

"I'll go too," Marco said.

"No hell you won't," said Teddy.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know your ass like that. Out there in California doing whoknowswhat while I'm around here worrying about your ass. Yet you think I'm taking you on a run with me?" Everybody was staring at Teddy. Nikki knew Teddy didn't realize how much he was revealing in those few words he spoke. "You won't even pick up a phone and give me a call, but yet you wanna run with me?"

"How many phones have you picked up to call me?" Marco fired back.

Teddy and Marco stared at each other. Mick stared at them both. It was a cycle so vicious that it made his stomach churn. Because he knew he started that cycle.

"Let's go, Nikki," Teddy said firmly, stared at his son a moment longer, and then left the office.

Nikki glanced at Marco, too, but hurried behind Teddy.

Mick got up as soon as they walked out and went to his arms cabinet. Opening it, Marco was amazed by the amount of firepower he saw. Mick began to load up. The Gabrinis, without being told a thing, began to load up with weaponry too.

Marco was lost. “What’s going on?”

“They’re going to be backup for Teddy and Nikki,” Ameila said calmly.

“Back up? But does he even know where they’re going to meet?”

Amelia looked at Marco with that sidelong, you got to be kidding look.

“What was I thinking? You’re right. Boss knows,” Marco said, and Amelia laughed. But it was no laughing matter to Roz.

Mick glanced at her after he loaded up and was about to leave. She had nothing to say to him. She was tired of all these strikes then retribution, strikes then retribution. Another vicious cycle Mick started.

And since Mick was tired of it too, but said nothing to her, either, as he left.

It was understood without a word being spoken that Big Daddy, Amelia, and Marco would stay back to protect the home front as Reno, Sal, and Tommy Gabrini followed Mick.

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Teddy drove his Bugatti to the usual meeting place: the back parking lot of an abandoned, boarded-up strip mall. Already waiting, in his limo, was Potter Rarsi and his driver.

“We got company, Boss,” the driver said as Teddy drove up.

“Teddy and who?”

The driver watched as Nikki got out of the Bugatti. “It’s Nikki.”

“Oh.” Rarsi sat back again. “I’m surprised she didn’t come with him sooner. Everybody knows whenever there’s mess going on they fly together.”

The driver got out and opened the back door of the limousine. “What up, Nick. What up, Teddy T,” he said as first Nikki and then Teddy spoke and got onto the backseat. The driver remained outside at the door as he closed the pair in.

Rarsi smiled. “Hello Nikki. Looking beautiful as ever. I haven’t seen you in a month of Sundays.”

“How’s it going, Potts?”

“It’s gone better. I’m looking to retire, which is never easy.” Then he looked next to her. “My condolences, Ted. That was a punk-ass move to take out that many guys all at once. And to go after Mick’s kids?” Rarsi shook his head. “Even I’m not that crazy.”

“No?”

Rarsi stared at Teddy. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Since you know better than to go after Pop’s kids, then why was one of your men in one of the cars that ambushed them?”

Rarsi looked genuinely floored. “One of my men? What are you talking? Which one of mine was in that car?”

“Hal Janantoni.”

“What ? HJ was in that car?”

“Along with two other men, yes.”

“You hired him right?” asked Nikki.

“No,” said Rarsi. “Denny hired him while I was out of the country. The old man gave his approval, so what could I do about it? But that was a while back. What beef HJ got with Mick?”

“More likely with me,” said Teddy.

“What do you mean?”

“If he’s Denny’s guy, and Denny knows you’re conspiring with the old man to put me in charge when you retire, then why wouldn’t Denny want to discredit me in the eyes of Old Man Bengino so that he won’t approve my ascension.”

Rarsi laughed. “It’s nice to see a man who truly underestimates his worth. You, my

friend, could fuck up beyond fuck ups and every syndicate from here to Rome will still want you as their leader. Discrediting you won't work in the eyes of Bengino or me or anybody else with a brain. Which Denny does not have. Which means you may have a point."

Then Rarsi thought about it. "However," he said.

Teddy stared at him. "However what?"

"Have you considered your son Marco's friend?"

Nikki looked at Teddy. Teddy was staring at Rarsi. "What friend?"

"Guy with a girl's name. They call him Vivian. Have you considered him as a possibility?"

Teddy could feel his heartbeat quicken. "Why would I consider him?"

"It's not public knowledge, and there's been no reason for me to bring it up to you because nothing became of it."

"Potts, what are you going on about? Break it down."

"Vivian lives in Cali now, and there's been no action that I know of. Until this happened. Until you had the nerve to tell me that one of my men was in that car that ambushed Mick the Tick's kids. And that man was one of Denny's guys. I figure it could be."

Teddy frowned. "What are you saying? How is Vivian connected to Denny?"

"He used to do odd jobs for him before he moved out west with Marco."

Teddy's heart squeezed. Nikki's did too. "Marco knew Vivian did jobs for Denny?" Teddy asked him.

Rarsi shook his head. "I doubt it. It was before Viv and Marco became friends I think. After he hooked up with Marco, I did look into it for your sake. I saw no jobs on the books with his name attached to them."

"Since you knew he started working for Teddy's son," Nikki said, "did you ever ask Denny what Vivian was doing for him?"

"No need to. I knew what he was up to."

"Drugs?" said Nikki.

Rarsi nodded. "And plenty of them too."

Teddy exhaled. "Damn," he said. "Marco claimed to be out of that shit."

"He might be. Vivian works for him, but he's always done his own side jobs too."

And Nikki made the call. "Everything you say is well and good, Potts," she said, "but you'll have to come with us anyway."

"Come with you? What the fuck for?" He looked at Teddy. "You better rein her back in or I'll have to."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Potts. She's still Nikki, she's still my underboss, and you will still respect that."

"But what did I do to deserve her disrespect? Telling me I'm coming with you like I'm nothing. Who does she think she is?"

“I told you who she was. And until we can figure this out,” said Teddy, “she’s right. You will have to come with us.”

“Like hell,” Rarsi said, which Teddy expected him to say. That was why, as soon as he said it, Teddy, who already had the tiny J-frame pistol in his hand, shot Rarsi in his side. Only it was a silent shot.

But Rarsi’s eyes widened as if he could not believe that Teddy would betray him. He even grabbed Teddy’s arm. But then his grip loosened, and he slumped over.

Nikki was stunned too. “You shot him?”

“Tranquilizer,” said Teddy. “I knew he wouldn’t go willingly. Get behind the wheel.”

Nikki didn’t ask any questions. The Teddy who always ended up five steps ahead of everybody else was back. She climbed onto the driver seat and got behind the steering wheel.

“As soon as I say go,” Teddy said, “I want you to fly because shots will be fired.”

“From where?”

“I don’t know where from, but I know Rarsi didn’t come unarmed after what happened with the twins. That’s why he had all that info. He knew he was on our radar. When I say go, you sail this boat.”

“Got it,” Nikki said nervously as she put the limo in Drive and looked at Teddy through the rearview. And then Teddy knocked once and Rarsi’s driver, thinking Teddy was knocking to get out, opened the back door.

But as soon as the driver opened the door, Teddy shot him, too, with the same tiny J-

frame tranquilizer gun he used on Rarsi. The driver fell and gunfire, just as Teddy predicted, rang out. “Go!” he yelled at Nikki, but Nikki, just as Teddy ordered, had already floored it and was speeding away.

The shots were being fired from one of the windows in the second floor rooms of the abandoned strip mall.

Nikki drove in defensive, swerving motions, rocking that limo from side to side as windows were blown out and shattered, and the sounds of bullets were hitting metal everywhere, but she kept on speeding. Teddy was firing back and ducking, as Nikki was dodging every way she could, and they were making it out of that parking lot.

But as soon as they got around the front side of the abandoned location, a big Cyber truck appeared and slammed into the front of the limo, easily pushing them backwards as if they were in a toy. Mick was firing on the truck and Nikki was trying to steer away from the massive truck, but it was no use. They were pushed back so far that the limo didn’t stop its backward slide until it slammed into a concrete barrier on the backside of the parking lot. They were right back where they started from.

Then the men inside the truck jumped out with guns blazing.

But when the men jumped out and Nikki and Teddy both were firing back, help suddenly appeared as Mick’s big black Escalade jumped the curb, flew across the parking lot in that crazy speed that only Mick could manage, and hurried to the back where the gunfire could be heard. Reno, Sal, and Tommy were firing as they were coming and managed to take out the rest of the gunmen Teddy and Nikki hadn’t already iced.

But gunfire was still coming from that second floor window and Mick hopped out and threw a grenade inside that upstairs window that caused the building to explode.

Teddy and Nikki grabbed Rarsi and hopped out of the wrecked limo as the Gabrinis, their guns still drawn, gave cover and watched for any sign of anymore gunmen. Teddy and Nikki placed Rarsi in the Escalade, got in along with the Gabrinis, and Mick took off.

“Ugly-ass truck!” Mick yelled and tossed another grenade inside the cyber truck as he sped away. The truck exploded too.

But the Gabrinis were stunned. “I didn’t expect all this shit,” said Sal.

“How did you figure you could handle all this alone?” Reno asked Teddy.

“I knew I couldn’t,” Teddy admitted. “But I also knew Pop would show up.”

“How did you know that?”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

Reno shook his head. “Why wouldn’t he, he asks. Like a job this layered didn’t need to be plotted out and planned. You Sinatras are not like us Gabrinis. You use sign language and nonverbal clues and puzzles and shit to communicate. We just straight up say what it’s gonna be and get it done. Not the masters of the dramatic Sinatras. Oh no, not them,” he added and they all laughed.

But Teddy looked at his father through the rearview and Mick looked at his son. Rarsi was still unconscious, but what if it was proven that he was involved? It didn’t seem possible. But then why would he bring this much firepower with him if he wasn’t involved? Everything was possible and Teddy knew it. And then that other matter.

“He gave me a name,” Teddy said.

Mick glanced at him again. “Who?”

“Vivian.”

“ Vivian ?” asked Tommy Gabrini. “Marco’s friend?”

Nikki looked at Teddy and could see the distress all over his tortured face. Because that fact alone, that Vivian did jobs for Denny Bengino, who just might be behind the attempted assassination of the twins, had to have led Teddy to wonder if Marco was involved. And just whose side Marco was truly on.

“That’s the one,” he said.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:46 am

Marco and Vivian were in Mick's massive backyard playing out on the basketball courts when Teddy and Nikki made their way across the lawn.

"They're back," Marco said as he dropped the ball and began hurrying toward them. Vivian hurried behind him.

"How did it go?" Marco asked them.

But Teddy was in no mood for discussions out there. "You and you," he said, pointing at both young men, "come with me."

Nikki fell in line behind both of them as they followed Teddy inside.

Marco was confused, but he didn't say anything. One thing he knew for sure about his father was that he didn't play. Something had happened. And that something involved his best friend, he was willing to bet on it. But what was it?

And the fact that Vivian didn't put up any resistance nor asked any questions, concerned Marco, too, as they followed his father across the lawn to one of the guest houses in the far east corner of the property.

Inside the guest house waiting were the family heads: Mick and Big Daddy, and Reno, Sal, and Tommy. They were all standing in a line. Two chairs were in front of them. Teddy plopped Vivian down in the chair. Marco sat down beside him. Then Teddy and Nikki went and stood in front of the chairs too.

"What happened?" Marco asked them.

“When did you plan on telling us that you worked for the Bengino family too?” Mick asked Vivian.

Marco was floored. “He what ?” Then he looked at Vivian. “You worked for the Bengino crew?”

“I did a few jobs for Denny before I left Philly. That’s all.”

“What kind of jobs?”

“I ran product to South America. But that’s all I did. I don’t know nothing about no ambush or no explosions. I wasn’t involved in any of that shit.”

But Marco was suspicious now too. “Sure about that?”

“I’m positive. How would I know about how to explode a big cargo freighter? I can’t even swim, but yet I’m gonna plant a bomb beneath a boat? It’s not possible!”

Everybody looked at each other. Even Marco saw the problem.

“That’s the thing, Vivian,” Teddy said. “How would you know where that bomb was planted?”

Marco stared at his friend.

“It was never made public,” Nikki added.

“But somehow you knew about it,” said Reno. “How could that be, Vivian?”

Vivian suddenly had nothing to say. But Marco was livid. He angrily grabbed Vivian up by his shirt and ran with him until he slammed him against the wall. “You mean to

tell me you were plotting against my family?"

"I didn't do nothing though!" Vivian proclaimed. "They wanted me to, but I didn't do nothing though!"

"Who wanted you to?" Mick asked him. "Who?"

"My brother roped me in."

Teddy frowned. "Who's your brother?"

Vivian didn't want to snitch on his own blood, but he knew he had no choice. "Your dock supervisor. Renardo."

As soon as Nikki heard the name, her heart dropped. "Renardo?"

"Renardo is your brother?" asked an astounded Teddy.

"Same father, different mothers. He's the one that recruited me to do it."

"To do what?" Marco asked him. Mick could tell he was still floored by the news too.

"He recruited me to help Denny Bengino take out three of your old man's capos. He didn't care which ones. Just as long as they were made-men and high up in the pecking order. We were instructed to make all three look like separate suicides."

Mick's jaw tightened, and so did Teddy's, but they held their peace. They needed answers. Then they'd get their reward.

"Renardo was behind it?" Nikki asked.

“He paid us after the job was finished. He paid Denny, anyway, and Denny paid me.”

“How much?” Marco asked.

“Not as much as he promised.”

Marco slammed his back against the wall. “How much?!”

“A hundred grand a piece,” said Vivian, wincing from the pain.

Marco exhaled, and looked at his father and uncles.

“That ain’t chump change,” Reno said.

“After he paid you,” Teddy said, “what else he asked you to do?”

“Nothing.”

Marco slammed him again.

“He told me to keep an eye on Marco. That’s all!”

“Marco? Why?” asked Teddy. “Was he your next target?”

Vivian shook his head. “I don’t know. It wouldn’t have been that simple.”

“Damn right it wouldn’t have been,” said an angry Marco.

“I mean they didn’t tell me the plans. They just gave me that one assignment, paid me, and that was that.”

“You were successful,” said Teddy. “There’s no way they’re going to get rid of you. Now what was your next job?”

“I’m telling you I didn’t have one yet.”

“Not yet hun?” asked Nikki.

Vivian was beside himself. He was not supposed to be exposed!

Teddy began heading for Vivian. “What was your next job, asshole?” he asked him.

“I didn’t have one,” Vivian yelled out quickly. “Renardo told me to wait and see.”

“When did he tell you that?” Teddy asked him.

“A couple days ago.”

Marco stared at his two-timing friend. “Is that why you were so insistent on coming with me to Philly? Was that the reason, Viv?”

Vivian looked Marco dead in the eyes, with regret in his eyes. “That was the reason. Yes.”

Rage engulfed Marco and he leaned back and began punching his friend. Nobody stopped him as he beat him down to his knees.

“Kick his ass,” Mick said. He deserved it after what he did to their capos.

But Marco needed no encouragement. It was betrayal of the highest order for him. He beat his friend all the way down to the floor.

But then Teddy stepped in when Vivian, now in a fetal position on the floor, started coughing up blood. “Don’t kill him,” he said and pulled his son up and away from him. “We may need him later.”

Then Teddy looked at Mick. “What you think, Pop?”

“Stonegate,” Mick said. Stonegate was one of Mick’s most isolated safe houses.

“But Rarsi’s over there. You want him in the same house as Potts?”

Mick looked at Teddy with his infamous I said what I said look.

It was an odd decision to Teddy, but he didn’t argue with it. His judgement all week so far was shot. He had to rely on his old man’s. Teddy nodded to the two capos in the room and they stood up Vivian and dragged him out of the guest house.

But Mick looked at Teddy and Nikki. “Which one of you made Renardo supervisor?”

“I did.” Teddy knew the fallout. He spoke up before Nikki could.

But Nikki wasn’t about to let him take the fall for her. “I did,” she said.

“You again,” said Reno. “If it’s not you screwing up, it’s Teddy. What’s the matter with the two of you all of a sudden? Better get your acts together. That’s what you better do.”

“For real,” Sal agreed.

“You work people to exhaustion,” said Tommy, “and that’s what happens. They screw up.”

Dapper Tom was right, and everybody in that room knew it, but Teddy and Nikki were accustomed to the Gabrinis being tough on them even when they didn't screw up. The Gabrinis were just old-school that way. But they did screw up. They took the criticisms because they had it coming to them.

"Why didn't you send Renardo's name over to Tech-quarters to run a background, Nikki?" Mick asked her. "They cross-check for connections, that's the point of a background. Because Vivian is affiliated with Marco, Marco's name would have come up. And we would have had Vivian's ass dead to rights before he pulled this shit."

"When I promoted him, he was already working at the docks," Nikki said. "He already had background completed."

Mick frowned. "You always run a new one before promotions. You know that, Nikki!"

"I didn't know it," Nikki said defensively, "or I would have done it."

"You did know it."

"I didn't."

Mick was incense. "If your ass didn't know to run a new background on a promoted dock hand, then what are you doing as my underboss?"

"I'm not your underboss, I'm Teddy's," Nikki fired back.

But that only added fuel to Mick's fire. "What the fuck that's supposed to mean? What syndicate Teddy owns? Which one? Where is it? Answer that, motherfucker!"

“Okay, Pop, that’s enough!” Teddy stepped in before it got violent. “What’s done, is done. It’s done now.”

Mick was floored by that too. “What the fuck you mean it’s done now? My children could have been killed!”

“I know that. You think Nikki doesn’t know that too? But you will not put all that at Nikki’s feet. This shit ain’t Nikki’s fault.”

“Then whose fault is it?” Sal asked.

“It’s mine!” Teddy yelled so loud that it felt like pure pain. Nikki placed her arm around his waist.

“But Nikki should have done a deep background before she promoted the guy,” said Marco. “That’s just the truth.”

Teddy looked at him angrily. “What do you mean she should have done a deep background when your ass didn’t do it before you brought Vivian around our family!”

“How was I to know he would do something like that? I’ve known him for years.”

“And Nikki’s known Renardo for years. So don’t try to put that shit all on her.”

“I’ll put it on anybody I wanna put it on,” Marco shot back. “If she would have done her job, we wouldn’t be in this situation. Period! The twins would have never been in that ambush.”

“Don’t you dare!” Teddy said as he grabbed Marco and both men were going for each other. Teddy grabbed Marco’s shirt. Marco grabbed Teddy’s shirt and tried to

wrestle with him, too, but the men fought to keep them apart. Even Nikki was yelling for Teddy to let go.

But he wouldn't. And Marco wouldn't. And all of them fell over a table and ended up on the floor. Teddy was still holding onto his son, Marco was still holding onto his father, and everybody else was still trying to tear them apart.

Everybody except Mick.

It looked to Nikki that he wanted them to fight it out the way he and Teddy had fought. But she was looking at it wrong. Mick didn't want them to fight at all. He was immobile because that guilt was weighing him down. Because Teddy had the same strained, anguished relationship with Marco that Mick had with Teddy. That no child of Mick's represented his successes, and great failures, the way Teddy did.

But Big Daddy and the Gabrinis were finally able to wrestle control when they managed to pry Marco's hands from Teddy and Teddy's hands from Marco. And they all were able to stand back up.

"Everybody settle down," Big Daddy said. "And I mean everybody!" Then he settled down himself. "Mick, put in the call to bring Renardo in. Teddy, you and Nikki get out of here. Go to bed. Tommy's right. You two look like you're dead on your feet. And Marco you stay away from them. At least for now. We'll figure this out after everybody's had some rest. Now get out of here!"

Nikki took Teddy and hurriedly left. She didn't want her husband fighting with his son because she knew Teddy. He wasn't like Mick in that regard. He couldn't just brush that shit off. That would devastate him. And Big Daddy was right: they could barely stand up. She gladly got her husband out of there.

And Marco, who couldn't believe he was ready to fight his own father, got out of

there as well. His best friend betrayed him? He needed air.

And the Gabrinis, who rarely seen drama like the Sinatras laid it down, left too.

But Mick stayed back. After making the call to bring Renardo in, he looked at Big Daddy. To Big Daddy, Mick looked lost. His trademark defiant look was gone. “It’s my fault. Isn’t it?”

Big Daddy had to take a moment to exhale. “What part of it?”

“All of it.”

“Let’s look at that. The fact that you’ve been working Teddy and Nikki as if they were Hebrew slaves isn’t in question. The fact that you’ve been setting them up to make all kinds of errors and display all kinds of poor judgement because their asses are always too exhausted isn’t in question either. The fact that I’ve told you time and time again to ease up on those two, and to force Teddy to delegate more, then yes. It’s absolutely your fault. Who else’s fault can it be?”

Mick knew Charles would tell it to him straight like Roz would. But that didn’t mean he wanted to hear it.

“But the real question is,” Big Daddy said, “what are you going to do about it?”

Mick didn’t have to think long. Or at all. “After we catch every one of the assholes that tried to kill my children, I’ll deal with it then. But right now? I don’t give a fuck.”

Mick left the guesthouse too.

Big Daddy watched Mick leave. He had to raise him and their now-deceased sister

because of their dysfunctional parents. And because of that influence, he knew Mick got a lot of his ways from him. But Mick took it to another level. So much so that it made Big Daddy feel a chill down his spine just watching him. He'd never, not in all his years on earth, seen a colder human being than he saw in the eyes of his own kid brother. But yet, he'd go through fire for his family. He'd die for them. It was a chasm of contradiction unlike any Big Daddy had ever seen. He'd never known anybody like Mick.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:46 am

Teddy was already in bed when Nikki, in her bathrobe, came back into the room.

“How’s Duke?” he asked her.

“Still running his mouth. You’d think nothing ever happened to him the way he’s going at it. I remember the days when you would have to stay in the hospital for weeks after surgery. Now he’s out in two days and acting like he’s completely healed.”

“He isn’t though.”

“I know that. But he doesn’t. He’s resilient.”

“And young and dumb,” Teddy added.

Nikki smiled. “I’m just happy he’s doing so well.”

Teddy nodded. “Me too. What about our ball and chain? How she’s doing?”

“She’s sleep. I was talking with her nanny. She doesn’t feel anything that’s happened has affected her in any way. But I’ll keep making certain she stays away from it as much as possible.”

“I’ll do the same,” Teddy said as he watched Nikki remove her bathrobe, revealing a naked body of curves, and got in bed beside him. By the time they were both laying on their sides and face to face, he was already hard.

But he knew she was still troubled. He could see it in her dramatic eyes. But Nikki, being Nikki, he thought, was more worried about others. “You’re hard on Marco, Teddy.”

“I didn’t like the way he came for you.”

“He was hurt that his friend betrayed him. And hurt people hurt people. That’s the way it is. That’s why Mick lashed out at me too. I’m a big girl, I can take it.”

Teddy knew it too. He pulled her naked body closer to his naked body.

“But you haven’t answered my question.”

“What’s the question?”

“Is it because he kicked you to the curb?”

Teddy hesitated, and then answered. “I accepted him as my son.”

“DNA proved he was your son.”

“What I mean is that I accepted him into my heart. And my family accepted him too. And he can’t call me every once in a while? Or return my calls?”

“I knew I was calling and checking on him, and he always answers. I didn’t know you were calling him too.”

“Many times,” admitted Teddy. “I was worried about him. Pop wasn’t getting bad reports about him, but he wasn’t getting good ones either. But he rarely ever returned my calls.”

“You think he’s still in the drug trade?”

Teddy shook his head. “I doubt it. Does he ship suspicious cargo overseas? Hell yeah. But I don’t think it’s drugs. I think he’s into the art forgery business.”

Nikki was surprised. “Art forgery? That sounds sophisticated.”

“It is. But that’s Marco.”

“I hear he likes older women.”

Teddy looked at her. “Who told you that?”

“He told me that. He says he’s dating an older woman.”

“How older?”

“I think he said she’s forty.”

Teddy leaned back. “Get outta here. Really?”

“That’s what he told me.”

Teddy shook his head. “He’s a different ball of wax, that’s for damn sure.”

“You don’t have a problem with it?”

“No. Not at all. I’ve had my share of older women in my day. What I have a problem with is his secrecy and lack of communication. I know we’re a new family to him, but we’re still family. We’ll remain new until he takes some effort to get more involved with us.”

But after a moment of reflecting on what kind of son he actually had, Teddy realized Nikki had stopped talking. He looked at her. And saw that anguish in her eyes. “It’s not your fault, Nicole.”

“I know that. But when I went to check on Duke I saw Uncle Sal. I asked if they found Renardo yet, but he said they haven’t. They still can’t find him. Which only confirms his involvement. Otherwise he would have been checking in. I haven’t heard from him since the ambush.”

Then she shook her head. “That’s how they were able to plant that bomb, Teddy. That’s how they were able to kill three of our men and set it up as suicides. That’s how they knew who Duke and Jackie’s security detail would be. Everybody trusted Renardo because he was in management. And my dumb behind didn’t bother to do a deep dive on him when I put him in management.”

Teddy pulled her into his arms. “Stop blaming yourself. You didn’t know what you didn’t know.”

“But I should have known just like Pop said. I should have known to deep dive anyway. To take no chances. Why did I overlook that?”

“Just like Marco overlooked Vivian. Just like I overlooked the risk I was taking when I ordered those ships to sail. Just like Pop overlooked updating the threat assessment on the twins after he found out about the issues in the syndicate. We’re human. We get tired. We cut corners. We make bad decisions. It was like the perfect storm this week for us.”

“Yes it was,” agreed Nikki.

And then she looked at Teddy. “But thanks for having my back when Pop was coming hard for me. That man still scares the shit out of me,” she added, and Teddy

laughed. “For real though.”

But then they were still staring into each other’s eyes. “Are you still thinking about jumping ship?” Nikki asked him.

“Working for Pop has never been good for my health or yours.”

“That’s so true.”

“But if I leave him, it’ll feel like I’m actually leaving him , not just his organization. And I don’t know if I can do that again. I have always felt, my whole life, as if I’m attached to that crazy-ass man and can’t break myself free from him. And I don’t know why that is.”

“Father. Son. Hello? You’re your father’s son. That’s all. That’s it. That’s powerful, Teddy.”

Teddy nodded, but it didn’t feel that way. It felt needy and clingy to him. But not him needing Mick, but Mick needing him. He felt as if he was his father’s protector just like his father, he believed, was his protector. But that was their own personal struggle. He wasn’t going down that deep with anyone.

But then they continued to stare at each other. And Teddy kissed Nikki. And Nikki returned his kiss. And before they knew it, they were hugging tightly and kissing harder and massaging each other and then coupling.

Teddy entered her. And they were in that bed making love in a deliberate way that was more relaxing than earth-shattering. That was more to ease tension than to release it. That took nearly an hour of pure pleasure before they came. And then they came and they went from slow and easy to hard. They came in a delicious dose of pounding, ejaculation, and pulsations that overtook them. They both throbbed with

orgasm.

But as Teddy was still pouring into her, and as she was still feeling those sensations, knocks were heard on their bedroom door announcing another major problem.

“Teddy, Nikki, get up!” It was Sal Gabrini pounding on the door. “Stonegate has been breached. Stonegate has been breached!”

Teddy pulled out of Nikki so fast that he spilled on her. But their anxiousness overtook their cautiousness and they both hopped out of bed throwing on clothes. All they could think about was their prisoners escaping. All they could think about was starting from zero all over again.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:46 am

Tommy, Big Daddy, and Amelia stayed back at the compound, while Mick, Reno, Sal and Marco, and Teddy and Nikki, along with four additional capos in a separate SUV, all arrived to find carnage at Stonegate. Deep in the woods didn't prevent its breach and all six capos that were guarding the outer perimeter were dead. Inside, the three capos that had been guarding the prisoners were also dead. But Potter Rarsi, though shot numerous times, was still alive.

"Who the fuck could have gotten this deep into your security, Uncle Mick?" a befuddled Reno was asking when they walked in.

"Renardo," said Sal, which only reminded Nikki of her screwup. Teddy placed his arm around her waist as they hurried over to Rarsi while Reno and Sal began searching the entirety of the property inside and out to ensure no additional sneak attacks. Teddy got on his knees. Nikki crouched down beside him. Mick stood over all of them.

But Marco was confused. "Where's Vivian?" he asked.

Mick looked at him. But they remained by Rarsi. If anybody was going to have that answer, it was going to be Rarsi.

"What happened, Potts?" Teddy asked the mobster. "Who did this?"

Rarsi spoke, but they couldn't understand him. Teddy got down even closer. "Who did this to you, Potts?"

He clutched Teddy's shirt. "D," he said.

“D? Who’s D?” Then Teddy realized who. “Denardo? You’re saying Denardo’s gang did this to you?”

“They took Vivian. They took . . .” But Rarsi’s grip on Teddy’s shirt lessened, and then he passed out.

“Is he dead?” Nikki asked anxiously.

Teddy listened to his heartbeat. “Not yet.”

“Nikki, call Doc,” said Mick. “Get him over here now.”

Since the doctor was at the compound monitoring Duke, Nikki immediately called Tommy Gabrini to get the doctor to the safe house.

Then Reno and Sal came back up front too. “It’s clear,” said Sal.

“He’s dead?” asked Reno.

“Not yet. Doc’s on the way,” said Nikki.

“Did he say anything?”

“He said D’s involved. We assume he means Denardo.”

“Denardo?” asked Reno. “Isn’t that who you thought was involved all along?”

Teddy nodded. “Yup.”

“Then let’s go get his ass,” said Reno. “It’s past time we hit Denardo anyway.”

“But not his full outfit,” said Nikki. “We can’t risk war until we get answers.”

“Right,” Mick agreed.

“But why would Denardo take Vivian?” Marco asked. “Why didn’t he just kill him like he thought he killed Rarsi?”

“Let’s go find out,” Teddy said. “Marco, you stay here and wait for Doc to get here.”

Marco was upset. “Come on, Pops!”

“You heard me. You stay! The capos that came with us will stand guard on the exterior just in case they try to double back.”

But Mick was looking at Potter’s grave condition and remembering how he came back and rescued him and his son. “Reno, you stay too,” Mick said. “I don’t want Potts dying alone.”

Marco frowned. “I wouldn’t do that, Sir. I wouldn’t leave him.”

“I’ll stay,” said Reno. “Let’s get these pricks and be done with this.”

Satisfied that Potts was in good hands, Mick and Teddy, and Sal and Nikki left.

Marco looked at Reno. “I wouldn’t leave him like that, Uncle Reno.”

“Start coming around more and let them get to know you better, then maybe they’ll believe it. But they don’t know your ass like that yet.”

“But it’s like they don’t trust me.”

“They don’t know you.”

“So they’re scared of me because they don’t know me?” A frustrated Marco ran his hands through his hair. The way Teddy always did, Reno noticed.

Then Marco, who always looked on the bright side, looked at Reno and smiled. “Are you scared of me, too, Uncle Reno?”

Reno frowned. “ Me scared of you ? I eat punks like you for breakfast boy, what are you talking? I was gangster before gangster was cool. Scared of you. Yeah, I’m scared of you alright. Woo I’m so scared. I got your scared right here.” He grabbed his balls. “I got it right here!” Marco laughed.

But then they looked at Potter Rarsi’s lifeless body, and the gaiety ended.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:46 am

Mick stopped his black Escalade in front of the mob diner Denardo owned. Mick, Teddy, and Sal got out. Nikki got on the seat Mick vacated and got behind the wheel. She watched through the diner's full-front window as the three men went inside.

Inside, Jace Denardo was seated all the way down the aisle at the last table in the small, sparsely populated place. When they walked up to him, he continued to eat his massive bowl of spaghetti and ignored their presence.

Teddy, impatient and angry just knowing Denardo might be involved, flipped the bowl of pasta onto Denardo's shirt, causing him to slide his chair back and knock the hot food off of him. "What the fuck?" he said, finally looking up at Teddy.

"You see us now, motherfucker?" Teddy angrily asked.

Denardo was about to respond angrily too, but he realized it wasn't just Teddy T, but his father and Sal Gabrini standing at his table. "Mick the Tick? And Sal Gabrini? I'm not used to seeing heavy-hitters like the two of you in my midst. I thought Teddy T was the biggest asshole I'd ever have the pleasure of pissing off. But you two? I have arrived," he said with a smile so fake it fooled none of them.

"Who attacked my children?" Mick asked him.

"I have no idea."

"Who fake-suicide our three men?" Teddy asked him.

"No idea."

“Who planted those explosives at the docks?”

“No idea.”

“Who breached our safe house and tried to kill Potter Rarsi?”

“Who’s that?”

Teddy grabbed his shirt. “Why you!” he yelled out as Sal grabbed Teddy to stop him from going too far with the guy.

But from outside looking in, Nikki saw two men in the front of the aisle get up from their tables and began hurrying for the back. When they pulled out guns and were about to aim and fire at Teddy and the others, Nikki didn’t hesitate. She slung that gear into Drive, pressed on that gas pedal and jumped the curb, sped across the sidewalk, and sped up even faster as she rammed Mick’s SUV through the glass window, shattering it to pieces and knocking both men off of their feet and trapping them against the wall.

When Teddy, Mick, and Sal saw the destruction, Sal hurried over to make sure the men weren’t still breathing. Teddy grabbed Denardo’s shirt again, but this time he put his own gun to Denardo’s head. “Got an idea now?” he asked him.

Denardo was stunned by the SUV’s checkmate move, and lifted his hands in surrender. “I was hired to do a job, that’s all,” he said quickly.

“What job? To blow up our ship?”

“No. Your dock supervisor, that Renardo guy, handled that. He needed me to handle the other thing.”

“What other thing?” Teddy asked.

Denardo didn’t want to say it.

“What other thing?” Mick asked.

“To pull a team together to take out your children,” Denardo admitted.

Mick was ready to skin him alive, but Teddy quickly asked another question while he could. “Who did you pull together?”

“Denny Bengino provided Hal Janantoni and Vivian. And I provided the rest of the guys.”

“Your capos?”

Denardo nodded. “Yes.”

They had the guy that facilitated the ambush. They’d get the others later, but they had one of the main links right in front of them. And that was all Mick needed to know. Teddy too.

But before Teddy could make another move, Mick moved past him, grabbed up Denardo, and began punching him with such force that his big, hard fist sounded like a mallet to meat. He punched him and punched him as blood spewed from Denardo’s face and flew up onto the shards of window next to his table. He punched and punched him as he thought about the horrors his children went through because of this asshole. He punched and punched until his arms were as heavy as lead. And Jace Denardo, unrecognizable, was no longer a viable human being.

But when sirens were heard in the distance, it still took Teddy to pull his father away

from Denardo. Mick, breathing heavily, walked over to his SUV and got inside.

“Let’s get out of here,” Sal said to a stunned Teddy, who was still standing there amazed. Seeing his father’s rage was a scary sight to behold. Did he have that kind of rage in him too? And then Teddy got in the SUV as well.

Sal looked at the only other person in the joint: the bartender. “Kill the video,” he said to him.

“What video?” the bartender said. “Ain’t no video around here.”

Sal nodded to the bartender that he was satisfied with that answer, got in quickly, and Nikki sped backwards out of the diner, swerved around, and took off.

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Teddy and Nikki were out on Mick's back patio with Big Daddy and Tommy Gabrini. Mick and an army of men decided to take out Denardo's entire organization. Teddy and Nikki wanted a piece of the action, but Mick wouldn't allow it. The twins were his children. Denardo's gang tried to kill his children. This was his job. Reno and Sal were his backup. But he did agree to let Marco ride with them. To see what he was made of, Mick said.

Teddy was on the phone, giving his best friend Monk Paletti an update, when Roz came outside and sat at the table with them. "Kimmie finally fell asleep," she said.

"What about Duke?" Nikki asked.

"Still running his mouth nonstop. Even Jackie's tired of him," she added, and they laughed. "Gloria and Amelia left town because they got tired of him too." Then Roz smiled. "He's recovering well, thank God. That's what matters most."

"Yes indeed," Big Daddy said.

Then Roz looked at Tommy. "I'm surprised you're still here." Tommy was away from his family, something he rarely did. "I'm not used to seeing you solo this long."

"I'm pulling out soon too. I just want to make sure they take out Denardo's gang. But I don't know how Uncle Mick does it, Roz. He never stops."

"We told him his lieutenants could handle Denardo's gang," said Big Daddy. "Anybody else would have been cool with it. Not my brother. He has to do it himself."

“And I can understand why,” said Roz, always ready to defend him. “They came for our babies. Now he’s coming for them.”

Tommy and Teddy glanced at each other. They knew taking out an entire syndicate was best handled at the capo level because of the usual casualties that would be involved, but they also knew Roz was right. They came for his babies. He wasn’t contracting that revenge out to anybody. Not even his own men.

“What about you two?” Roz asked. “Did you find Renardo?”

That was Teddy and Nikki’s job: to find their dock supervisor and take care of him. But somebody had beat them to the punch. “We found him,” said Nikki, “with a gunshot to the head.”

Roz was surprised. “Somebody killed him? Or he killed himself?”

“No, it wasn’t suicide,” Nikki said, “and they didn’t try to make it look that way. Whoever did it apparently knew that their shit is unraveling and they needed to silence Renardo. So they did.”

Roz shook his head. “I liked the guy. I never would have thought.”

“That’s why you don’t think,” said Tommy, “you do. You background him no matter what.”

Nikki knew Dapper Tom was directing his comment to her, and she accepted it. He was always a straightshooter who didn’t talk as much as Reno or get involved as much as Sal, but when he spoke the family listened. He was, above all of them, a family man to his core.

Then the French doors opened and Marco came outside, a bottle of beer in his hand.

“You guys are back?” Roz asked.

“We’re back,” a happy Marco said.’

“How did it go?” asked Teddy.

“Piece of cake. We took out that outfit in three separate hits, all timed to begin at the same time so there wouldn’t be any pre-warnings. We got’em all.”

“Any of our guys fell?”

“Three were injured. None were killed.”

Everybody at that table sighed relief.

“Where’s Mick?” Roz asked.

“He went upstairs. I think he needs a nap.”

“Oh he needs more than that,” Roz said as she got up and began heading back inside the house. As soon as she left, they laughed.

“They fuck more than rabbits,” Marco said.

“I don’t know where they get the energy,” said Big Daddy.

But Teddy and Nikki said nothing. Their energy was right up there with Pops and Roz, they thought.

But after more conversation, as Reno and Sal joined them, too, the crowd eventually thinned to just Teddy, Nikki, and Marco. And Marco took another sip of his beer and

then looked at his father and his stepmother. "I apologize," he said.

"It's not an apology if we don't know what for," Nikki said.

"For not staying in touch with you guys like I should have. For being caught in my own feelings and figuring Pops didn't wanna be bothered with me so why should I bother him. That didn't work out so well for me."

Nikki smiled. Teddy just sat there. But Nikki knew him. After a few moments of silence, he spoke up. "I'm not trying to hurt you. I want to help you. I'm your father," he said and then looked at Marco. "I take that role seriously."

Marco appreciated that. "Yes sir."

"You're a member of this family, but you've got to act like it. We're tightknit. We come together no matter what. Look how long the Gabrinis stayed around here. Look at Big Daddy. Monk Paletti's ready to come if we need him. Brent and Bobby and Tony and Donald and Ashley and Carly, and Bonita: All of Big Daddy's children are ready to come if they were needed too. That's the kind of family we are. Even me and my old man get into it more than most. But we come together too. Pop is the first person there when I need him and the last person to leave. I want to be that person for you. But you've got to let me."

Marco was touched. "I will, Pops. I will."

Then he stood up, and Teddy stood up, and they hugged each other. Nikki was touched.

"Now apologize to my wife for throwing her under the bus," Teddy said.

Nikki and Marco laughed. But Teddy didn't crack a smile. Which made Marco

realize he wasn't kidding. "Yes, sir," he said. And looked at his father's wife. "I apologize, Nikki, for throwing you under the bus. Although in truth, I don't think it was that serious. I think I threw you under a car a little bit, but definitely not a bus."

Nikki shook her head. And then she and Teddy both laughed too.

But then Mick opened the French door. "I thought you were sleep," Teddy said.

"We got eyes on Denny Bengino," Mick said. And he didn't have to say anymore. Teddy, Nikki, and Marco took off behind him.

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“Turning a corner on two wheels in this tank? Really Uncle Mick ?”

They were in another one of Mick’s big Escalades, this one pearl-white, and he was speeding down long stretches of rural highway outside of Philadelphia trying with all his might to catch up to the elusive Denny Bengino. Denny was in an SUV, too, and had been spotted by some of their guys, but he lost them. Mick was able to track him based on where his guys said they last saw him, and the chopper Mick put in the air were providing the aerial views that kept him in close proximity to Denny’s Infiniti SUV.

But Reno Gabrini was fit to be tied. He was on the front seat, beside Mick, and he saw up close and personal how just on the verge of total out of control Mick was driving. And he was driving with one hand.

“Are you nuts?” Reno was blaring out as Teddy, Nikki, Sal, and Marco, all seated on the second and third rows, were laughing. “You’re gonna kill us if you don’t slow your ass down, Uncle Mick!”

“I know what I’m doing, Reno,” Mick said, still driving with one hand even as he turned those wildly sharp corners. “I’ve been driving since I was eight. I haven’t wrecked yet.”

“That’s a got damn lie,” Teddy said. “All those wrecks you’ve had, Pop!”

“See, you have had wrecks!” Reno blared.

Mick laughed.

“Just slow down, Mick, okay?” Reno was still insisting. “You’ve got visuals on the man. That chopper won’t lose him. What are you risking our lives for?”

“Ah shut your trap, Reno,” Sal said. “That’s what you get for wanting to be the big man by sitting up front with Uncle Mick. And for that arrogance your ass is going through the windshield first. Your ass gonna soften the blow when our asses fly through.”

Reno looked back at Sal as they were laughing. “You know how ridiculous you sound?”

“You know how ridiculous you sound?” Sal shot back at him.

“There’s that motherfucker,” Mick said, and they all looked out of that windshield. And there it was, that dark grey Infiniti QX60 SUV, speeding around another corner. But Mick was right on his tail and sped around that corner too, forcing Reno to complain some more. But they had him.

And when he ran into a dead end street and turned into what looked like an old, abandoned restaurant parking lot, Mick sped right behind him, hoping to trap him in.

But as soon as Mick drove around back, he suddenly realized he was the one being trapped and it was all a part of Bengino’s plan. Because as soon as he drove back there, a group of capos came out of the back of the building and began firing on the Escalade. But to their shock, Mick didn’t cower and began backing back trying to get away from there. He, instead, floored the gas pedal and ran right into the men. Some of them he was able to knock into the air and then run them over, while Teddy, Nikki, and Marco, and Reno and Sal turned their attention to the remaining gunmen as they began firing on the men at every angle.

And when Denny, seemingly realizing his scheme had backfired, tried to turn his

SUV around and get out of the back of that building, Mick would have none of that. He floored his Escalade again and ran dead smack into the Infiniti, causing it to slide sideways until it crashed into a side wall and stalled.

As Denny and Vivian began climbing out of the SUV's windows, Mick, Teddy, and Marco got out of the Escalade and began running for the two perps since they were who they wanted. Nikki and the Gabrinis were all still shooting it out with the remaining gunmen, providing cover as the others ran down Denny and Vivian.

Vivian and Denny made a hard run for it, but Vivian made the mistake of stopping, and then turning around ready to fire. Marco was closest to him, and would have had to kill his best friend or be killed, but Teddy, seeing it, fired first. Teddy took Vivian out for Marco.

Marco looked back at his father and stumbled, but he knew the job wasn't finished. He stepped over Vivian, purposely stomping him as he did, and ran after Denny.

Denny was still running hard, and he managed to get as far as the front of the old building, but Marco was younger and stronger and ran him down. When he made that last leap at Denny, he knocked him down and fell on top of him. Then he rolled him over, Teddy ran up and straddled Denny with his body, and put a gun to his temple. Then Mick made it up to the three younger men.

Mick knelt down beside Marco as Teddy questioned Denny. "We wouldn't be here if we didn't know everything that's already happened," Teddy said. "Now I need to hear it from you. Why did you do it?"

When Denny went to open his mouth, Mick sat his shoe on it. "One lie and I'll shove my foot up your mouth and your ass. And then I'll really get to work on you." Then Mick removed his shoe.

By now, Nikki and the Gabrinis had finished off the gunmen and ran around front to assist Mick and Teddy. But when they saw Vivian dead and Denny pinned to the ground, it was clear they needed no assistance.

“Why?” Teddy asked Denny again.

“Money. Big money. Millions.”

“What you so starved for money for? I never heard of Bengino’s organization in financial trouble.”

“But I am.”

“What’s your poison?”

“Drugs. I sold plenty last year for this cartel, but I came up short this year when I used as many as I sold. And I couldn’t get the money turned over fast enough to risk my death by cartel. So I went to my supplier. He wouldn’t give me drugs, but he’d give me money if I did a job for him.”

“What job?” Mick asked.

“Provide the men to take out your kids,” Denny said. “I got with Denardo, and he took it from there.”

“How much was this supplier willing to pay to take out my children?”

“Twenty five million dollars.”

“Damn!” said Marco.

“All after the job is completed.”

“And when you didn’t complete the job?” asked Teddy.

“I had to try and try again. But all my guys had been killed that I relied on, and then you started picking off the ones that were helping me coordinate.”

“Including Potter Rarsi?” Nikki asked. She needed to know once and for all if he was involved.

A look of hatred came into Denny’s eyes. “He was a has-been that my old man had all this faith in. I should have been boss. But he conned my old man into elevating him. Then he tried to con my old man into elevating Teddy. But I knew, if I took out his siblings, my old man wouldn’t trust him to run his hair dryer.”

“I thought you said you did it for the money?”

“I did. And to discredit Teddy too. That’s why the guy came to me. He knew I hated the Sinatras.”

“Was Potter Rarsi involved?” Nikki asked again.

“No,” Denny said. “I wouldn’t let him in on something that good. Besides, he liked the Sinatras. We were never on the same page. When Renardo gave us the blueprint to attack your safe house, we took Vivian, in case we needed his services again, and we took Potter Rarsi out. I did that part.”

Marco frowned. “What do you mean you took him out? He survived.”

Denny seemed genuinely surprised.

“Potts was shot,” said Teddy, “but Doc says he’s gonna make it.”

“That’s how you found me? Rarsi told you?”

“When Potts said D,” Teddy said, “we assumed he meant Denardo. But it didn’t matter. Both of your asses were involved. Denardo brought us to you.”

“And you’re going to take us to the money man,” said Mick. “Who is he?”

“I never met him. I only worked through his middleman.”

“Who’s that?”

“Josh Lingus.

They all looked at each other. “Never heard of him,” said Mick.

“Wait a minute,” said Teddy, and they all looked at him. “Does this Josh have a woman?”

“Yeah. Caitlan somebody. Why?”

Nikki looked at Denny. “Caitlan Downs?”

“Yeah, that’s the name. Her old man’s the middleman. They live in this regular house in the suburbs like their ordinary people. Ordinary hell.”

“That’s why she bumped into you at the bar,” said Nikki. “They probably were going to try to take you down then.”

Teddy nodded. “Maybe so,” he said.

“Who are these people?” Sal asked.

But Teddy needed to be sure. “Give us the address,” he said, Denny did, and then Teddy stood up. “I know’em,” he said.

Then it was Mick’s time.

Denny was the point man to murder his children.

There was no getting out that alive.

But Denny wanted no parts of Mick’s brand of justice. He adroitly grabbed Marco’s gun and turned it on himself. But Mick shot him before he could shoot himself. Mick shot him until he emptied every bullet. It was overkill and even Mick knew it. But in his mind, Denny Bengino deserved every shot. He came for Mick’s children. He brought it all on himself.

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They didn't play nice. As soon as they arrived at Josh Lingus and Caitlan Downs' residence, they bust the front door down with a battering ram. Josh, who was seated on the sofa, immediately grabbed his gun and attempted to fire. But Teddy fired first and took him out. Mick finished him off.

Then Caitlan, who was in the kitchen, quickly ran out of the kitchen and began running down the hall.

"There she is!" Nikki said as she, Teddy, and Mick took off down the hall too.

But as soon as Caitlan made it the door of the room at the end of the hall, presumably the master bedroom, a gunshot blast sounded that hit Caitlan in her stomach so violently that she sailed backwards.

"Shit!" Teddy said as he pulled Nikki back and they and Mick took cover in one of the side rooms. They wait for more shots to come, but none came. Mick and Teddy look at each other.

"We're going in," Teddy whisper to Nikki. "Cover us."

Nikki nodded. But when Teddy looked toward the front of the hall and saw Marco and the Gabrinis heading their way, he waved for them to wait. They could be the backup if all went wrong. Marco nodded. And then Teddy and Mick gingerly made their way to the open door at the end of the hall.

Teddy moved to the left side, and Mick moved to the right side with their guns ready to fire. Teddy used his fingers to make the count. And on three, they moved into

position, with Teddy stooped down and Mick standing upright.

But when they jumped into the doorway ready to shoot, all they saw was an old man in a wheelchair with a shotgun sitting across his lap.

“Drop it!” Teddy yelled out as Mick looked around to make sure nobody else was in that room. “Drop it, old man, drop it!”

“You don’t have to yell. I’m not deaf.” Then the old man tossed the shotgun onto the bed. “She wasn’t worth the bullet anyway.”

When the others saw that Teddy and Mick had taken control of the room, Reno and Sal checked the remaining rooms and everywhere in the house just in case. But Nikki and Marco made their way toward the room at the end of the hall too.

“Who are you?” Teddy asked the old man.

“Whoever you want me to be.”

“I don’t want your ass to be anything. I just wanna know what your involvement was with Josh Lingus and Caitlan Downs.”

“They work for me.”

Mick stared at him. “For you? Who the fuck are you?”

But when Nikki and Marco made it into the room, too, Marco stopped in his tracks. “Poppi ?”

They all looked at Marco. “You know him?” Teddy asked.

“That’s Ma’s great granddad. I told you about him.”

Teddy was floored. He looked at the old man. “You’re Dee’s grandfather?”

“Who’s Dee?” Mick asked.

“My mother Delores,” said Marco. “She’s dead.”

“He killed her,” said the old man. “She ain’t deceased by her own will. Teddy Sinatra killed her.”

“How many times I had to tell you Poppi that that’s not true. One of his capos at the time killed Ma when she tried to kill my dad’s child. My dad didn’t pull that trigger.”

“That’s what you say.”

“That’s what I know, Poppi. Ma shot me, remember? I was there!”

But the old man began coughing. It was obvious he was a very frail, very sick individual. “Teddy was the reason she died. What difference does it make who pulled the trigger?”

It made every difference in the world to Marco.

“Are you saying you were behind everything that happened?” Mick asked. “You tried to kill my children, and killed over forty of my men, and three more in that fake-suicide shit, because you thought my son killed your granddaughter?”

“I didn’t think nothing. I know he did it. She would still be alive if it wasn’t for him. If it wasn’t for you,” he added, looking Teddy dead in the eyes. “That’s why I was willing to spend every dime of my considerable fortune to see it through. I found the

greedy folks. That dock supervisor. That mobster who wants to take over his daddy's syndicate but Teddy T was standing in his way. The mob boss that had bad debts he had to pay, and also couldn't stand the sight of you either. And they recruited the rest. But I bankrolled it all. Them doctors gave me three weeks to live three weeks ago. I wasn't dying until I destroyed you first."

"Apparently your plan didn't work because I'm still here," Teddy said.

"That's what you think," the old man said. "This whole house is about to go up right along with you."

When he said those words they all stiffened. Then the old man lifted his hand and they realized a tiny remote control was in it and his thumb was on the button. "Every one of you Sinatras are going to die! Everybody's dead!" he yelled as he was pressing the button.

As soon as he said those words and was pressing that button, Teddy pushed Nikki and Marco out of the room, and Mick shoved Teddy out of the room, and they all began running up the hall. They ran so fast they were all on the verge of stumbling over each other.

But by the time they made it up front, they realized something remarkable. The house was still standing. That bedroom was still intact. They were still standing.

"Didn't he press that button?" Teddy said.

"He absolutely did," said Nikki.

"He might have pressed it," Reno said as he and Sal came in from the room on the other side of the house. "But his stupid ass had an electrical bomb. It was plugged in and hooked to the wi-fi. We found it and unplugged it before he pressed that button."

Nikki's knees buckled, and Mick knelt down, as all of them attempted to regain composure. They thought for certain they were in the kind of trouble they weren't going to be able to get out of.

But then they realized the mastermind was still alive too.

"Everybody wait outside just in case he has another trick up his sleeves," Teddy said as they all began moving outside. "You too, Nikki," Teddy said as he grabbed her and turned her away from the hall. She left, but reluctantly.

But when Teddy tried to turn Marco away, Marco refused. "That's my great grandfather. He was willing to blow me to smithereens too. No way am I sitting this one out."

Teddy and Mick looked at him. Then they tacitly agreed, and all three Sinatras made their way back down that hall, their guns drawn.

"He's still got that shotgun," Mick said. "Remember that."

But as soon as they got to the door, the old man was in tears with that shotgun in his hands. He cocked it, ready to fire, but before he could get a shot off, Teddy, Mick, and Marco started firing. They all took him out. They all made certain that his kind of hate wasn't coming anywhere near their family again.

Marco stared as the old man fell from his wheelchair dead. But he didn't feel anything for him but shame. All that carnage, all that pain, because of misinformation. Because of believing a lie and sticking to it. And all for what? Somebody that didn't give a damn about him anyway? Because Marco knew she didn't. She didn't give a damn about her own son, why would she give a damn about him?

He knelt down, tired of this shit, and dropped his weapon too.

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“What’s Pop doing here?”

Teddy and Nikki drove to the docks and saw Mick’s dark red Escalade in front of the office.

“What did we do wrong this time?” Nikki asked as they got out of Teddy’s Bugatti.

Teddy couldn’t say, but he knew his father didn’t show up at the docks for the fun of it. They went inside.

But not only was Mick in the office, but Roz was there, too, and Marco. Marco was seated behind the desk. Did something happen?

“What’s wrong?” Teddy asked.

“Nothing’s wrong,” said Mick. “You two are leaving.”

Nikki frowned. “What did we do?”

“Too much,” said Roz.

“Way too much,” said Marco.

“Who told you to sit behind Nikki’s desk?” asked Teddy. “Get your ass up.”

Marco held out his arms. “I’m just sitting, dang.”

“Could you please tell us what specifically we got wrong this time?” a worried Nikki asked them.

“You’ve been out in the field,” said Mick.

Teddy nodded. “Like always, that’s right.”

“And you’ve been managing the docks.”

“Like always,” Nikki said. “Yes.”

“And the nanny’s raising Kimmie,” said Roz.

But both Teddy and Nikki jumped defensive and declared up and down that nobody was raising their daughter but them.

“When was the last time the three of you had dinner together?” Roz asked them.

Teddy looked at Nikki, and Nikki looked at Teddy. They couldn’t remember the last time. They only knew it was months ago, before all of that craziness went down.

Then they both looked at Roz. “If we did something wrong,” Teddy said, “just tell us. You don’t have to drag us down as parents. We’re doing the best we can do, on top of everything else. Just tell us.”

Roz handed Teddy a folder.

“What’s this?” Teddy asked as he opened it, and he and Nikki looked inside.

“Those are boarding passes,” said Roz. “You two, and Kimmie, have a worldwide cruise you have to get to that is scheduled to leave today and return in about three months.”

Teddy and Nikki stared at Roz in disbelief, and then they looked at Mick. Was this some kind of prank? They couldn't take it all in. "What do you mean?" Nikki asked. "A cruise?"

"Around the world, yes," Roz said. "With your daughter."

"But what about this place?" asked Teddy. "There's no way we can leave it for three months."

"Yes it is," said Mick.

"But who's gonna run it? You Pop, when you've got your hands full with your corporation?"

"Meet your new consigliere and chief capo," said Mick as he nodded toward Marco.

Marco smiled and waved. "Hello good people," he said.

Teddy frowned. "Marco is going to run the entire syndicate?"

"With me as backup, yes," said Mick. "And when you return, you and Nikki will continue to unload your workload on him. He's young, he's smart, and he's a member of this family. I saw him in action. I know he can do it."

Teddy nodded. "I agree with you."

"So did I," said a hopeful Nikki. The idea of a months' long vacation was like music to her ears. She was exhausted and Teddy was too. And Kimmie will be with them? It was heavenly to her. If it was true.

"He can do it," Teddy added, "but will he do it is the question."

“I’m here,” said Marco. “And I’m ready. And if I fail, I won’t only have Boss’s foot up my ass, but Ma’s foot, Nikki’s foot, and your foot too. So I thought about that. I can give this my all, or suffer foot-in-ass pain for the rest of my life.” He smiled. “I decided to give it my all. Why not?”

“But what about your operation in California?” Teddy asked him.

“I shut all that shit down,” said Mick. “There is no longer any operation in California.”

“With my blessing, he shut it down,” Marco said. “I’ll admit, my blessing came after I was presented with the option to either accept it or, once again, get foot in ass. So I accepted it. Why not?”

Nikki and Teddy smiled and shook their heads. That was so Marco!

Then they looked at those boarding passes again. It seemed too good to be true. And then they looked at each other.

“Do you accept the terms of Marco as your new chief capo?” Roz asked them.

“I do wholeheartedly,” Nikki said, smiling at Marco.

“Thank you, Nikki.”

Teddy stared at his son. Then he smiled and nodded too. “I do too,” he said.

“Ah thanks, Pop,” said Marco.

“Do you accept the offer of a three-month vacation?” Roz asked.

Nikki grinned. “With bells and whistles,” she said.

Teddy smiled, knowing that was the term Nikki used to let Kimmie know that her father was on his way. He looked at his son, and nodded his head. “With bells and whistles,” he said, “we accept the offer.”

And he and Nikki, feeling unburdened by excessive work for the first time in a long time, hugged each other vigorously, and then Roz and even Mick. And Marco too. They could hardly express their gratitude.

And then they hopped into Teddy’s Bugatti and took off so comically fast, just in case Mick changed his mind, that even Mick found himself laughing too.