



**MICK
SINATRA**

**PIECES
OF MY
HEART**

**MALLORY
MONROE**

MICK SINATRA
PIECES OF MY HEART
BY
MALLORY MONROE

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PROLOGUE

Smoking. He never thought in a million years he'd pick back up that filthy habit. But there he was: smoking. Away from the prying eyes of the family because they'd go in on his ass so hard that he would have to go in on them just to shut'em up. And that would be the last thing Uncle Mick needed.

But powerful mob boss Sal Gabrini kept on smoking. In his double-breasted suit, with his Ferragamo shoes beating down against the pavement, he kept walking around Mick's courtyard as even more grounds security arrived to help protect that humungous estate. Many of the men were high-ranking capos from Mick's organization who were trusted to protect the family at all costs. But Sal knew the Gabrini and Sinatra men were the family's true protectors. They didn't need all that shit. But he understood it. All of the families were gathered together at Uncle Mick's compound and Teddy T, who Mick appointed boss of his syndicate, was taking no chances.

Sal watched the men hurry to their posts, their rifles and shotguns visible, as he continued to take drag after drag on

his cigarette. This shit was getting too real for him. That could have been his boy they snatched. Or his baby or Marie. Or his *wife* even. What if it had been Gemma? He remembered how he felt when Lucky, when he was a newborn, was snatched. Thought he was going to die then too. But he was a younger man then. He could deal with shit better then. Now it was just too damn much.

And who in their right mind would snatch Mick Sinatra's kid anyway, Sal kept wondering. That was some ballsy-ass shit right there. It was comparable to the Lindbergh baby kidnapping in gangster land. It shook everybody's foundation. Nobody could believe it.

“Sal? Sal!”

Sal turned quickly. His cousin was standing at the side entrance door. “They called?”

“Text.”

Sal frowned. “Text? What kidnapper texts? Saying what?”

“That they'll be phoning in a few with their demands. Uncle Mick wants you in the room too.”

Sal dropped his cigarette, squashed it beneath the sole of his expensive shoe, and then buttoned his suit as he ran as fast as he could back into the house. He and his cousin, Vegas casino mogul and former mob boss Reno Gabrini, ran down the long and winding corridor until they were in Mick's massive home office again.

Standing behind his desk leaned over his cell phone, Mick Sinatra wore black trousers and a black turtleneck, his customized white overcoat hanging behind him as if he was ready for war, as they all waited for that phone to ring. His wife Roz stood by his side, her arms folded, her demeanor just as intense as Mick's. The strain on both of their faces was so anguished that it was breaking everybody's hearts.

Although Mick's home was filled with family members that rushed to Philadelphia when the news broke, only the big seven was in his office: Business mogul and Mick's big brother Charles "Big Daddy" Sinatra. Mick and Big Daddy's younger half-sister, former drug queen-pin Amelia Sinatra. Mob enforcer and corporate titan Tommy "Dapper Tom" Gabrini. Mick's oldest son Teddy T Sinatra, alongside the first African-American underboss in mob history, his wife Nikki Sinatra. And Reno and Sal.

To the outside world everybody in that room were business juggernauts who ran Fortune 500 companies as well as any could be run. But to the underworld they were ruthless killers, as vicious as vicious could get. Nobody crossed the Gabrinis. Nobody crossed the Sinatras.

But somebody had just done the unthinkable. And they were waiting for answers.

Sal's big brother Tommy Gabrini was talking when Sal and Reno walked in. "If it's money they're after," he was saying, "then we'll at least have that questioned answered."

Roz looked at Tommy. "What question?"

"That it wasn't mob that abducted Duke."

That puzzled Roz. "What does money have to do with it, Tommy?"

"Because no mobster alive would knowingly snatch Mick the Tick's son for cash," said Reno. "There's no way. It has to run deeper than that."

"But if it's not mob," said Tommy, "then it gets complicated. It goes sideways because then it could be anybody. Then it'll be a needle in a haystack situation."

“*Dear Lord,*” said Roz with a voice so anguished it tore everybody up. “This is too much!”

Mick, who was anguished too, attempted to place an arm around her, but Roz moved away from his grasp and went over to Big Daddy. Big Daddy pulled her into his arms.

Reno and Sal glanced at each other. They had heard about the infamous video that showed Mick in an extremely compromising position, and they knew how Roz had reacted to it. It was still a very raw subject. But then Duke was snatched and all of that drama had to take a backseat. Duke came first. They just wanted their boy back!

“If it’s not mob it’ll be a disaster,” said Amelia Sinatra as she stood there decked down in her stilettos and waist-length chinchilla coat. “Let’s hope it’s mob. I’d rather deal with mobsters any day of the week. We know their asses.”

But Big Daddy, who was closest to Mick of all the family members, was staring at his younger brother. He knew Mick’s relationship with Roz was in the toilet before this happened, and he also knew Mick was having a tough time dealing with that. Now this happened. Now some asshole kidnapped his youngest son. He wondered how much more could the man take. Big Daddy knew his kid brother was

hard. There was no doubt about that. Nobody was ever going to confuse Mick the Tick with anything resembling softness. He was hard as steel. But Big Daddy also knew that even steel, in the right situation, could bend and break. Nothing, and nobody, was unbreakable. Not even *Mick the Ticking* time bomb.

And then the phone rang and everybody jumped.

Roz quickly stood in front of Big Daddy. Big Daddy kept an arm around her waist to keep her from falling.

Mick pressed the button on his cell phone and then placed the call on Speaker. “This is Mick.”

“This is the call you have been waiting for.” The voice seemed distorted. Mick couldn’t recognize it. “We have your son.”

“Show him to me,” Mick said.

“In due course, you will see him.”

“Due course my ass. Show him now. Put him on video now.”

“You will see your son after our demands are met.”

“I need proof of life now. Before any agreement can be entertained. Before we even talk about demands I want to see

and hear my son. How the fuck I know you got him? Just because you're telling me? Show me my son."

"After our demands are met!" the kidnapper said with force.

And his insistence seemed to rile Mick. This wasn't a horse trade for a horse. This was a horse trade for his son's life! And that spooked him. He looked at Big Daddy, the only man on earth that Mick gave deference to. Which meant everybody looked at Big Daddy Sinatra too. But Big Daddy was already shaking his head. *No way*, he mouthed.

Mick leaned back down to his phone. "No deal. I have to see my boy first."

There was the sound of scrambling over the phone. Roz covered her mouth with her hand, afraid she would cry out. She was worried sick that that scrambling could be them harming Duke.

But Mick knew what was happening. He pressed a button on his desk and the doors to what looked like a TV cabin on his wall opened, and a big screen appeared. Mick pressed several more buttons and his phone screen appeared on the big screen. Everybody watched. And then suddenly

Michello Sinatra, Junior, better known as Duke, appeared on the big screen.

Roz leaned back against Big Daddy for support when she saw her beloved teenage son on that screen. Her heart was hammering. Her hand was trembling so hard against her mouth that Amelia went over and held Roz's hand to steady her.

Mick was unsteady, too, when he saw his youngest child. He clutched the desk for support. Everybody in that room tensed up.

Duke, the handsome young man who was the spitting image of his father, looked unharmed as he sat in a chair, his black-rimmed glasses on his face with nothing but whiteness as the backdrop behind him. It was a massive board, Mick and others in the room assumed, so that the kidnappers could eliminate anyway for them to figure out where Duke might be in hiding.

“Say your name,” the kidnapper could be heard saying off camera.

The kidnappers were apparently right in front of Duke because he looked straight ahead when he spoke. “Mick Sinatra, Junior.”

“Are we for real, Mick Sinatra, Junior?”

Duke didn't respond to that.

“Tell your father we're for real. Tell your father who we are.”

“You're ravin' lunatic assholes. That's who you are,” said Duke.

And as soon as he said it, the brunt of a rifle hit him upside his head.

Everybody in the room, especially Roz, wanted to jump through that screen and knock sense into Duke. “Answer his question!” Roz screamed. “Do whatever they tell you to do or I'll kick your ass, Duke, you hear me?!”

“Stop being so *gotdamn* flip!” Big Daddy yelled as well.

Roz might have been animated, and everybody else in that room, too, but Mick, surprisingly, said nothing. Which shocked the Gabrinis. A word from Mick would put the kind of fear into Duke that would force him to straighten his ass up. What was wrong with him anyway?

“Now answer me correctly this time,” said the kidnapper off camera. “Who are we?”

Even after the blow to his head, Duke continued to stare at those kidnapers. But this time he responded, not flippantly, but with their rehearsed answer. “You are my father’s worst nightmare,” Duke said.

Laughter could be heard in the background. “That is correct,” said the kidnapper, and then the phone’s video ended.

The voice of the kidnapper came back onto the phone. “As you saw, there is no doubt we have custody of your son.”

“What do you want?” Mick asked, prolonging it no longer.

“We want one for one,” said the kidnapper. “You get Mick Sinatra, Junior, or Duke as you call him. We get Mrs. Rosalind Sinatra.”

The room went still. Seeing Duke terrified them. Their demand terrified them even more. Because they all knew Mick. He wasn’t putting his precious Roz in any danger. That was why they all looked, not at Roz, but at Mick.

But Roz was ready. She snatched away from Big Daddy and was moving toward the phone on Mick’s desk. She’d give her life to free her son any day of the week every week of every day. “Where and when?” she said anxiously.

But Mick wasn't about to let them take his wife. No way. No day. Ever. "That's off the table," he said bluntly to the man on the phone. "Come up with another plan."

"You think you're running this? You aren't running this, you hear me? That is our demand. There is no other plan."

"My wife is off the table," Mick said again.

"Tell me where and when," Roz demanded.

"Shut the fuck up!" Mick yelled at her so violently that it shook the room. Then he spoke to the kidnapper. "Take me. Why can't it be me in exchange for my son?"

"You heard our demand. Take it or leave it."

"Take me!" Mick yelled again. "I'm the biggest dog in this world. Take me, motherfucker. Return my son and take me. Because you aren't getting my wife."

"We want Mrs. Sinatra. That is it. Your wife for your son. Bring her behind the Belzer glass factory within half an hour or you will never see Duke again. And it goes without saying: no cops. No capos either." And the call ended.

Big Daddy looked at his younger brother. "They mean it, Mick. It's got to be Roz or they may kill that boy."

Mick began fumbling with buttons on his desk. “No way,” he said.

“They mean it, Uncle Mick,” said Sal, anxious too.

Mick shot an angry look at Sal. “Would you give ’em your wife?” he yelled. “Would you give ’em Gemma?”

Sal stood there frozen.

But Roz didn’t. She took off running out of that room.

“Roz!” Mick yelled as he hurried from behind his desk to chase after her. But the Gabrini men all hurried over to stop Mick. They knew there was no other way. Teddy and Nikki, and Big Daddy and Amelia ran out after Roz. Somebody had to go with her. They had to organize this!

But Mick was fighting against every one of those men that held him in their grasp. “Roz, don’t!” he was yelling as he fought. “*Roz!*”

But she was gone. And he was subdued by too many big, powerful men.

Until he took on Herculean strength, the kind only terror could unleash in Mick, and it became a battle royale that Mick won.

No way were those kidnappers taking Roz too. No way.

CHAPTER ONE

Three Days Earlier

The Mercedes S-class drove under the restaurant's portico and stopped at the curb. The valet hurried over to the driver's side. But the driver inside remained where she was. With her head staring forward as if she was in a trance, and her sunglasses so dark, the valet had no way of knowing if she was okay or not. But because he knew she was Mick Sinatra's wife, he dared not knock on the window and ask her.

Roz Sinatra wasn't going to be answering any questions anyway. She just needed a moment. As the female lead in the Broadway revival of August Wilson's *Fences*, this was the first week she had off since opening night. And did Mister Wonderful make time for her knowing she would be off this week? Not a chance. She barely saw him. Tonight, three nights into her week off, would be the first night they would have dinner together. Which was a shame. *On her!*

At least that was how she saw it. When she kicked him out of the house and burned everything associated with him,

she could have moved the hell on then. But he begged and pleaded and did all the right things and her stupid ass let him right back into the center of her existence. Now he was right back being Mick again.

But it wasn't so cut and dry anymore. Their history together was so long and twisted that leaving it all behind wasn't realistic. They'd been through too much together. And now the added complication of Fredrick in her life: a man who was giving her those butterfly feelings every time he walked into a room the way Mick used to give her. Not *used to*, she corrected herself. Mick still gave her butterflies. That was the damn problem! But Fredrick, the Tony award-winning director, gave her more attention by accident than Mick had been giving her on purpose.

She always declared how she would never let a man take her for granted, but that was exactly what she felt like she was doing. But it was complicated. Feelings and emotions were never as simple as people made them out to be. But why was she sitting in her car dealing with it now? She was done dealing with that shit tonight. This was fun night. She just wanted to cut loose and have some fun!

She got out of that car and high-stepped her way inside the luxurious restaurant. Dressed like the most sophisticated of ladies, she bedazzled in her Paris-imported bodycon dress Mick had designed for her, a dress that hung in diamonds just below her knees and that were accompanied by red stilettos so high and sharp that even Beyonce would have had trouble finding her footing inside a pair. But Roz was moving effortlessly. Her hair on point. Her makeup highlighting her high cheekbones with pure perfection. She lit up a room whenever she walked into it. Because despite their issues, she was still Mick the Tick's woman. And everybody recognized.

Including the general manager, who had been alerted by Mick's office that he and his wife would be making an appearance that night. As soon as she entered the restaurant, he hurried over to her so fast that Roz wondered if he had been standing there waiting for her.

“Mrs. Sinatra, welcome back, ma'am.”

“Thank you.” She used to know his name easily. That was how often Mick used to bring her there. But she hadn't been there in so long that she couldn't recall his name to save her life.

“Right this way, please.” Although there was a long line waiting to be seated, the GM was moving Roz past the line and into the dining hall. “Your stepson is already here,” he pointed out.

That surprised Roz. Not that Teddy was there. He and Nikki had been invited too. But where was Mick? “Is my husband here?”

“Not yet, no ma’am.”

Roz shook her head. She was fashionably late on purpose, and he was still going to make her wait on his ass. She smiled. She couldn’t make this shit up!

Teddy stood up when Roz made her way to his table. “Don’t you look fab.” He and his stepmother hugged cheek to cheek.

Roz sat next to Teddy, said she’s drinking whatever he’s drinking, and the GM left. “You’ve been here long?” She removed her shades and sat them on top of her hair.

Nobody, Teddy thought, styled like Roz styled. “Not long. I arrived a few minutes ago.”

“Where’s Nikki? Don’t tell me she couldn’t make it.”

“She’s coming. Pop had her doing some work for him today.”

“*For* him,” Roz asked, “or *with* him?”

“With him. For him,” said Teddy. “What’s the difference?”

“But they’re together?”

“Yes.” Then he studied Roz. “Why you want to know that?”

“I want to know everything.”

But Teddy knew better. “There’s been a lot of issues at the docks lately, so I think he wants to take her under his wings again and school her some more.”

“Why aren’t you schooling her?” The waiter arrived and sat down her drink. “Thank you.”

“Are you ready to order, Mrs. Sinatra? Sir?”

“Not yet,” said Teddy. “We’re waiting for two more people.”

“Yes, sir.” The waiter bowed and left.

Roz sipped from her drink.

“I school her when I can,” said Teddy, in answer to Roz’s question. “But I’m in the field, remember? Pop put Nikki in charge of the docks. And since Dommi’s no longer onboard and is working back in Vegas for Uncle Reno, I’ve got my hands full as it is.”

But Roz was enjoying her drink too much to even hear Teddy. “I needed that,” she said after she took another sip.

“How’s the play going? Opening night was *fantastico*.”

They all showed up for opening night the way they usually did. Not one of them had been back since. As if starring in a big Broadway production was nothing to them. And in a way, it probably wasn’t. Roz had been a Broadway star for years. “It’s going well,” she said. “Critics seem to think we’ll dominate the Tony nominations. Whether we win any? That’s another story.”

“When are the nominations announced?”

“May of next year.”

“And they’re crowning you guys already?”

“That’s what they do. Until the next big thing comes along and they forget all about us.”

Teddy smiled. Then his look turned hesitant, as if he wanted to ask her something but knew he had to tread carefully. Because Roz was no joke. She could be as vicious as Pop if you came at her the wrong way. But he asked it anyway. “How’s Fredrick?”

Roz was surprised he knew his name. She looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“He’s your director, right?”

“That’s right. And?”

“And I noticed him. He seems like an interesting guy.”

Roz stared down at her drink. “Yes, he’s interesting.”

“Interesting,” said Teddy, “and *interested* in you.”

Roz continued to stare down at her drink. But because she didn’t object to what Teddy had said, he plowed ahead. “He seemed quite infatuated with you when I saw him in your dressing room opening night. At least that was my impression of him. He couldn’t stop singing your praises.”

“That’s what directors do, Ted.”

“Yes, they love their leading ladies. But none seems to love you as *verbally* as he seems to love you.”

Roz looked at Teddy. “Don’t pull that shit with me. If you’re gonna say something, say it. What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything. I’m just telling the truth: you have an admirer.”

Roz frowned. “And what am I supposed to do about it? Stop the man from admiring me? Take out a restraining order because he admires me? I don’t go out like that and you know it.”

“That wasn’t what I meant, but okay.” He knew not to bring that touchy subject up again. Which, he was certain, was Roz’s aim anyway: She didn’t want to talk about it. She didn’t want to think about it. She and Pop were experts at sweeping their “entanglements” under rugs.

But when Teddy looked up, he had his own entanglement to worry about. “There they are,” he said.

Roz looked toward the entrance, too, as Mick and Nikki walked in. What Roz noticed was how big and sexy and so damn handsome Mick still looked whenever he entered her space, as if he was the alpha dog of the alpha dogs and every man within eyeshot ceded that ground to him. And how those butterflies in Roz’s stomach ceded it too.

She also noticed how he had his hand on Nikki's lower back. A possessive move if ever there was one. Although she viewed it as probably an innocent gesture on his part, since Nikki was his son's wife, it still made her wonder if there was some other woman out there he was touching, and that particular touching wasn't innocent at all. "I'm in bad shape, Teddy," she admitted.

Teddy looked at her. "In what way?"

"I'm sitting up here jealous of Nikki. Of my own daughter-in-law. Can you believe that shit?"

"I can believe it," said Teddy. "I'm sitting up here jealous of Pop."

Roz looked at him and smiled. "Really?"

"Pop and Nikki seem to have a bond. A bond I've never had with him."

Roz looked back at Mick and Nikki as the owner of the restaurant hurried over to Mick, shook his hand, and then began escorting them to the booth. "Bonding with a man like Mick? Don't count on it."

"Watch Pop make me get up because I'm sitting next to you."

Roz was puzzled. “Why would he do that?”

“Because you know how he is about you. He puts you on this pedestal so nobody can touch you. In this world, no man sits next to you but him. Forget that he wines and dines women and do whatever he pleases all day long. But let a man sit next to you and he wants to go all ape on somebody.”

But Roz heard something different. “Who has he been wining and dining?” she asked Teddy.

“Hey guys,” Teddy said as Mick and Nikki were upon them. He stood up and gave Nikki a kiss.

“Hello Ma,” Nikki said as she leaned over and hugged Roz.

Teddy would have loved to hug his father. He did have great affection for the man. But Mick wasn’t an affectionate father on any day of the week. “Move,” he said to Teddy instead.

Teddy smiled, glanced at Roz with that *I told you so* smirk on his face, and moved away from his chosen seat. Nikki slid onto the booth seat until she was next to the window and directly across from Roz. Teddy sat beside her. Mick sat beside Roz.

Teddy waited to see if he would at least hug his wife. But of course he didn't. He sat beside her staring at her, looking her up and down, as if he was admiring her too. But even Teddy could tell she wanted more than his admiration.

“How long have you been here?” Mick asked her.

“Too long,” said Roz. “Where your ass been?”

Teddy smiled at how Roz always kept it real, and how she spoke to his very dangerous father as if she was his equal.

But the waiter came over and took Mick and Nikki's drink orders. Roz continued to stare at Mick, waiting for her answer.

“I had to handle some issues at the dock.”

“Isn't that Nikki's job?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Nikki said, “but I—”

“I'm not talking to you,” Roz interrupted her in that blunt way that was every bit as stone cold as Mick's responses. And although Nikki was the underboss of Mick's entire syndicate, number two only to Teddy, she was still uncomfortable around both of her explosive in-laws. She was still walking on eggshells.

Teddy knew the feeling. Nikki was new to the game Teddy had been in all his life. He placed his hand on top of hers and squeezed it.

Roz meant no disrespect of Nikki, but she was singularly focused on the one man on earth that possessed so much power over her that it astounded her still. He had her heart, her mind, her body so wrapped around his finger that even her friends were shocked they were still together. Because everybody knew that nobody controlled Roz Graham-Sinatra. Nobody, they came to understand, except Mick. “Isn’t that Nikki’s job?” Roz asked him again.

Mick looked at her as if his look alone was making it clear that he had answered that question and wasn’t answering it again. He was done with that.

Roz knew what that look meant too. It was one of those things she sometimes hated about him. Her friends loved to wonder why she didn’t just leave him. And she could leave. If she was willing to leave her heart behind. Because despite all that shit he put her through, year in and year out, Mick was still her heartbeat. He was still that mountain among men in her eyes. There was no *just leaving* him.

But that didn't mean she took his crap lying down. Like when he ignored her question. She was about to tell him about his ass when Teddy interrupted her, to ease the tension.

“How's the show been going, Ma?” he asked Roz. “I heard it's been getting rave reviews.”

“No thanks to us,” said Nikki, always ready to assist her husband in whatever mission he was on. “That's why we plan to attend again when you return from your vacation.”

“Some vacation,” Roz said, causing Mick to look at her as she sipped from her glass of wine. Mick knew she meant it as a jab at him.

The waiter returned to their table with Mick and Nikki's drinks, and took their dinner orders. But when Mick ordered for Roz without asking her what she wanted, Teddy and Nikki quickly looked at her. But Roz didn't say a word. Primarily because he had ordered exactly what she wanted (they used to come there often and she always ordered the same thing). She was impressed that he remembered. But she also maintained her silence because she knew how to pick her battles with Mick. And she wasn't planting her flag at the foot of any food order. She had bigger fish to fry than that.

But issues were still bothering her. Specifically what Teddy said about how Mick had been wining and dining other women. And the way Mick always seemed to have more pep in his step whenever he was around Nikki. And the cold fact that Roz was on vacation, and he never once thought to take some time out to be with her.

She always used to think that she'd be the one to call it quits with Mick since he was almost always the one responsible for their marital problems. But now, as she grew older, she was beginning to wonder if she had it all wrong and it was Mick who just might be the one to leave her! And leave her for a younger, more full-figured woman like Nikki. Not that Roz wasn't fine. She had plenty curves herself. She was no *Skinny Winnie* by any stretch of the imagination. But Nikki's curves doubled Roz's size.

“What's going on at the docks, Nikki?” Roz asked her.

Nikki almost glanced at Mick before answering, but she didn't. She had a great relationship with Roz. She loved her as if she was her own mother, not just her mother-in-law. Besides, Roz would slap the fire out of her if she tried to ignore her question the way Mick ignored her question. Nikki was a big deal in the underworld as the first African-American

woman to be an underboss, and she was the underboss of the most powerful syndicate in the world. She knew Roz, as an African-American woman herself, respected that. But Nikki also knew she was no Mick Sinatra. And the good old boys she supervised knew it too. “There’s been some dissension in the ranks that had to be addressed at Mr. Sinatra’s level.”

Roz found knew Nikki wouldn’t have an easy road. “What are they opposing? Your leadership?”

“Some are. Most are very supportive. Surprisingly supportive. But there’s a few wise guys who’d been there before I ever met Teddy, and they just can’t get over taking orders from a female. They don’t like it. I was handling it, with Teddy’s help, until it started going too far.”

“What’s too far?” Roz asked.

“Sabotage,” said Teddy. “They were creating issues at the docks that would make Nick look bad in Pop’s eyes. I fired all of those assholes responsible, but it started up again this week. And since Pop had me in the field dealing with that data breach over at S.I. that some of his executives were trying to tie to the syndicate, I had my hands full. Pop don’t allow any spill over like that, but he still wanted me to look into it.”

“Have you found anything?”

“Nothing so far,” said Teddy. “Probably foreign actors stealing data like they do to all the big companies. It goes with the territory. But you can’t tell that to Pop’s Harvard-educated executives. Fucking nerds.”

Nikki started moving her body happily as Drake’s *One Dance* started playing over the restaurant’s stereo system. Couples and singles-looking-to-mingle were already on the dance floor, and others were joining when the song started. When Nikki said, “*that’s my song*,” Teddy knew what that meant. “Wanna dance?” he asked her.

“You know I do,” Nikki said happily and she and Teddy got up and got on the dance floor.

Roz watched Mick as he stopped checking his text messages and stared at Nikki. Roz already knew the answer, but she decided to try him anyway. “Wanna dance?” she asked him.

Mick looked at her. She knew better than that. “No.”

“Figures,” Roz said. “Move!” She pushed him.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m getting on the dance floor.”

“I said I don’t want to dance, Rosalind.”

“Then don’t dance. But I want to. And I’m going to. Move!” She pushed Mick again.

Mick reluctantly got up and sat back down as his wife made her way onto the dance floor. And as soon as stylish Roz hit that floor, the single guys began circling her. Didn’t matter their age either. They knew she was a cut above too.

But it was bothering Mick. He didn’t like that shit. Why was it that every time he turned around some joker was trying to hit on his wife? Didn’t their punk asses know who she belonged to?

He realized that they wouldn’t know squat about him unless they were corporate giants or mobsters. But those guys? They were just horny bastards looking to get laid.

Not with his wife, Mick thought, as he got up and went on the dance floor too.

CHAPTER TWO

Teddy motioned to Nikki as they danced, forcing her to look where he was looking as Mick was actually on the dance floor and was walking over to Roz. A slower song was playing over the restaurant's stereo system, and Mick had no idea what the name of that song was or who was singing it. But he moved Roz away from one of the guys who had managed to pull her into his arms, and he took over. He pulled her into his arms. And they danced.

Teddy and Nikki could see Roz closing her eyes as they danced. And when Roz lifted her head up from his broad shoulder, they stared into each other's eyes in the most sensual way imaginable. Mick knew Roz loved dancing. He knew this was exactly how she wanted him to behave. But there was always something in his personality that didn't know how to bring it down to that level. He always had to be the tough guy. Not just in his syndicate, where it was life or death, but in the corporate world too, where staying on top was no easy task. He had to be ruthless and cut throat in that world too. All his life he was that way, from when he had to deal with his fucked-up parents, to when he left home as a teenager and had

to deal with the craziness on the streets. He was always the alpha of the alphas. He was always the one they tried and tested and hounded as if they could make their name by destroying his name. Which was never going to happen. But all of those years of fighting to prove his mettle and to stay on top damaged Mick enormously. He was nothing more than a shell of a man when it came down to that emotional place where Roz wanted him to be. That place was a tougher place than a battlefield for Mick.

Roz loved the way Mick held her against him. She loved that he came out on the dance floor to dance with her. She knew it was because of the guys giving her attention. Had nobody come near her, Mick would have continued checking his messages and ignoring the hell out of her. But because competition came along, he showed up. Roz wanted him to show up just because she wanted him to. Just because she needed him to. But she knew in every fiber of her being that Mick wasn't built that way. But lately she'd been wondering more than a little bit if she could live with a man who wasn't emotionally available for her the way she desperately needed him to be. She wanted to grow old with a companion. Mick was horrible at companionship.

As they danced, Mick could see the disappointment and even regret in Roz's soft, beautiful eyes. And he was sorry he wasn't a better man for her. He loved her so much that sometimes he considered letting her go, just out-and-out leaving her, so that she could be with the kind of man she deserved. But his love for her was selfish. No woman made him feel the way Roz made him feel and he couldn't give her up. Because, if the truth was ever told, Mick knew he needed Roz far more than she could ever need him.

But when Teddy and Nikki made it back to the booth just after Mick and Roz had finished dancing and took their seats, Teddy was hopeful for his father and stepmother. Seeing Pop dance with Roz gave him hope. But he realized his hope was misplaced when he sat down just as Roz was asking Mick a question that was destined to ignite the fireworks.

“What women have you been wining and dining lately?” Roz asked Mick.

Teddy leaned his head back because he knew he caused that fiasco when he made that statement to Roz before Mick and Nikki arrived. It wasn't meant to be sinister. Mick had many major female associates in the corporate world that he

had to deal with on a daily basis. And sometimes he did wine and dine them. But Roz was as jealous of Mick as Mick was of her. And she wasn't the type to let it go.

Mick looked at Roz. "What are you talking about?"

"You had dinner with a certain lady. Or am I wrong?"

Teddy knew Roz was fishing, but he also knew she was concerned. She loved his father with an undying love, and the idea that his affections could be elsewhere too was hard for Roz to deal with. Teddy understood that. But every time any member of the family tried to fish with Mick, it was Mick who always ended up reeling *them* in. He was worried for Roz.

"Prove me wrong, Mick. Did you or did you not have dinner with a certain lady? Am I wrong?"

Mick frowned. "What lady?"

"You know what lady," Roz said with fire in her voice. "Prove me wrong."

"I'm not proving shit to you," Mick responded with anger of his own, which caused Teddy and Nikki to brace themselves. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"I'm not going to continue to take your shit," Roz fired back. "That's who I am! And don't you talk to me like that."

Teddy could hear the pain in Roz's voice.

But Mick was too combative to hear anything. "I'll talk to you any way I damn well please. You don't handle me!"

Roz was so hurt that she almost wanted to cry. Mick spoke to her like she was nothing to him. And it was too much.

She slipped her shades down over her eyes as she began to move out of the booth. "Get out of my way," she said to Mick.

"Ma, don't leave," Teddy urged her. "Don't let him run you away."

"Ain't nobody running me away," Roz fired back at Teddy. "Move your ass out of my way!" she fired at Mick.

Mick stared at her. She looked like she could kill him in that moment. Teddy and Nikki felt that way too, although they knew it was driven more by pain than by hatred.

"*Move!*" she yelled even louder at Mick as she pushed his muscular frame even harder. People near their table began looking over at them.

Teddy and Nikki both were astonished that Mick didn't turn around and slap Roz. He had that kind of temper. But he did something equally astonishing: he backed off. "Okay, Roz, settle your ass down."

But Roz wasn't cooperating. The fire had been lit under her feet and she had to go. "You don't handle me either," she said. "Now move Mick and I mean it, or I'll show my black ass, I declare I will. *Move!*"

She meant it. Even Mick could see the fire in her big, gorgeous eyes. He stood up and she slung herself so quickly out of that booth that her ass juttled against his penis so hard that it made him wince.

But when he didn't sit back down but followed her out, Teddy began hopping up too, tossing a few hundred dollar bills onto the table. "Let's get out there before they kill each other," he said, and he and Nikki hurried behind them.

But Roz wasn't trying to kill anybody. Fighting back tears with her sunglasses covering her eyes, she just wanted to get away from Mick.

But Mick wasn't cooperating. He stood beside her, both hands in the pants pockets of his tailored suit, as she waited for the valet to bring her car. He didn't compound the

problem with some sly remark about how she was overreacting or even some lame apology. He just stood there.

But when her car arrived, Mick opened the passenger door for Roz, as if he was going to drive her car. Nikki looked over at Teddy. They both knew that Mick purchased that two-hundred-thousand-dollar Mercedes for Roz. But even he should have known she wasn't going for that.

And she wasn't. She snatched away from him so that she could go around to the driver side, but Mick grabbed her by her arm and slammed her so hard back against him that Ted and Nikki felt the impact themselves. Even the valets felt it. It was so hard that Roz's sunglasses fell off her face and she had to catch them with her hands. That look in Mick's eyes was as terrifying as it was familiar. "Does it look like I'm playing with your ass?" he angrily asked her.

Roz was a strong woman. And Teddy began moving toward them in case she tried to sky on Mick. But Roz still felt those butterflies for that man. Just his nearness had her fighting back tears rather than fighting back. Their eyes met. And it was that pain he saw in her eyes, that deep, searing pain, that cut him to his core. He loved this woman. More than life itself, he loved her. But he just kept fucking it up.

Because he could not bear being the source of her pain, he released her from his grasp and backed away.

Even the valets were standing back and out of the way as Roz slammed her passenger side door and then walked around to her driver side door. She got in and sped away.

Teddy moved closer to Mick. “Want me to follow her, Pop?”

“No,” Mick responded. “Leave her alone. She can take care of herself,” he added, and then walked back into the restaurant.

The valets and the people inside the restaurant’s foyer, including the GM and owner, had seen the whole show. And those who knew who Mick was were amazed that Mick the Tick didn’t kick that black lady’s ass.

The only person not amazed was Mick.

He sat back down, and along with Teddy and Nikki ordered dinner and ate it. He ate, although he didn’t taste a thing.

Three hours later, the door to the fancy Manhattan apartment opened, and Fredrick Campion, the award-winning

director of the show Roz was currently starring in on Broadway, could not believe his good fortune. “Oh how refreshing,” he said as soon as he saw her beautiful face. “You have finally come to your senses I hope.”

“Don’t start, Fred.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll stop beating that dead horse. But I’m at least glad you phoned and accepted my invitation to drop by. Come on in!”

But Roz, who had driven all the way to New York just to get away from Mick, moved her shades down to expose her tepid eyes. “Am I interrupting anything?”

“Absolutely nothing,” he said happily. He had a woman in his bed when Roz phoned. He got rid of that chick so fast he impressed himself. “Absolutely nothing,” he said again, and stepped aside as Roz walked on in.

Fred looked out of his front door, to the left and to the right, and then he closed the door with the one human being he considered to be the prize among prizes right where he wanted her to be. He locked both locks without hesitation.

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning the twins sat at the kitchen table texting and eating breakfast. Jackie was eating a croissant, while her brother Duke was huffing down a big bowl of cereal. But Duke's phone kept ringing every two minutes.

Which kept interrupting Jackie's text string. "Well dang, Duke," she said. "That many calls early in the morning? How many females are you dipping into?"

"Do I look like Boo-Boo the fool? I'm not dipping into anybody. Them girls running me down. I just be chillin'."

"And encouraging them every chance you get with all of your compliments and smiles."

"So I can't compliment a girl? For real?"

"Just make sure you tell them to vote for me for class president."

Duke pushed his eyeglasses up on his face. He usually wore contacts. But whenever his eyes were irritated, like they were when he first got up, he just opted to wear glasses. He thought the girls at his school would hate him in glasses. But

they were digging him even in specs. Which surprised him. But what his twin had just told him floored him more. “*Class president?* Since when, J?”

“Since last night. I’ve been thinking about it for weeks. But last night I made up my mind. Some of my friends have been recruiting me to run. If I win, I’ll be the first African-American girl at our school to ever hold the position.”

“But I was thinking about running too. I wanted to be the first African-American boy to hold the position.”

Jackie smiled.

“What’s so funny?”

“You’re whiter than daddy, that’s what. Nobody’s going to view you as the first African-American anything.”

Intellectually, Duke understood what his sister meant. Although they were twins, Duke came out looking just like their white father, while Jackie came out looking just like their black mother. Which meant Jackie was more accepted in the black community than he was. He had to interject himself into the black kids’ cliques until they had no choice but to accept him as one of their own too. Now he didn’t have to work for

it. But it still made him wish his skin color wasn't so obvious one way or the other.

Then they heard the front door open. Duke got up and looked out of the big window.

“Who is it?” asked Jackie.

“Dad.”

“Just dad?”

“Yep.”

“Where's Ma?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Hey Daddy,” Jackie said as Mick entered the kitchen. It was obvious to both of them that he had been up all night. With his stubble and his wrinkled suit and his tired eyes, he looked exhausted.

But as he looked around and didn't see Roz in the kitchen, he was baffled. But Duke, who had been getting bolder and bolder with his father ever since he witnessed his parents' messy break up that he blamed completely on his father, spoke up. “May I ask you a question, sir?”

Mick looked at him. The answer was no, but Roz had gotten on his case about not allowing their children to express their true feelings to him. So he didn't say anything.

Which Duke knew was the best he was going to get. "Why are you just getting home? I mean, you run a Fortune 500 corporation. And Teddy and Nikki run your syndicate. Why would the CEO of a corporation need to be out and about all night long?"

"Because he's still Mick the Tick," said Jackie. "He's still the boss of all bosses. People expect him to do their bidding still. It's a never-ending job. That's why."

Mick inwardly smiled. Of all of his children, Jackie was his hands-down favorite. She was the one after his own heart. Although Duke, he knew, was going to turn out to be most like him.

"Or," said Duke, "it could be that same kind of shit he was pulling that almost cost him his marriage not all that long ago."

Jackie was stunned Duke had gone there. Mick gave him a hard stare. But he didn't back down. "I'm just saying," Duke said.

Mick was too tired to deal with that boy in that moment. He turned to head upstairs.

“Where’s Ma?” Jackie asked as he turned to leave.

He turned right back.

“Did she spend the night with Nikki and Teddy?” Jackie asked.

Mick was confused. “Your mother didn’t come home last night?”

Now Jackie was confused. “No, sir. I thought she was having dinner with you last night. We assumed she was with you.”

Mick’s heart began to pound.

“Maybe she’s not here because she’s the boss of all bosses too,” said Duke. “People rely on her still too. She has a never-ending job too.”

“Quit Duke, that’s not funny!” declared Jackie.

“I didn’t say it was. But what’s good for the goose...”

Mick had already pulled out his cell phone and was calling his wife. But her phone went straight to Voice Mail.

Then Mick quickly phoned Teddy. He and Roz were always close. But Teddy had not seen nor heard from her either. “Are you telling me you haven’t heard from her since last night? Pop, where have you been?”

But Mick pulled out a second phone and called Roz’s security detail. They were not allowed to “spy” on her, but if they felt she was in any sort of danger they were to intervene and phone him directly. He hadn’t received a phone call which kept him from losing it.

“Where is she?” Mick asked when Gregory “Pax” Paxon, her detail chief, answered the call.

“She’s in Manhattan, sir.”

“At the theater?”

“No, sir. An apartment.”

Mick owned one of the most luxurious hotels in New York. He couldn’t understand why she would be at somebody’s apartment. “Whose?”

“Fredrick Campion’s.”

“Her director?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mick's heart dropped. He knew the guy had a thing for Roz. It was obvious on opening night the way he doted on Roz. But so did every other director that worked with her in the past. "Did she spend the night there?"

Pax didn't immediately respond. Mick knew why. Everybody on Roz's detail loved her. They felt a sense of loyalty to her. But Mick was the boss. And they feared him. Their loyalties had better lay with him. "Yes, sir," Pax said.

Mick closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. All he needed! "Is she still there now?"

"No, sir. They just met up at a café not far from his apartment."

Mick frowned. "Met up? I thought you said she stayed the night at his place."

Duke and Jackie glanced at each other when they heard their father say those words.

"Truth is, sir," responded Pax, "she must have given us the slip sometime early this morning. When Campion left his apartment, he was alone. So we split up. Half stayed at the apartment waiting for Mrs. Sinatra to come out. The other half followed Campion. He went to this café and then, to our

shock, she showed up there too. I still don't know how she could have given us the slip like that.”

Mick's jaw tightened. But he'd deal with Pax later. “Text me the address. I'm on my way,” Mick said, and ended the call.

“Where is she, Pop?” Teddy asked, who was still waiting on his first phone.

“Manhattan.”

“At an apartment?”

“She was, yes.”

“Owned by Fred Campion?”

Mick hesitated. “Yes.”

“Damn.”

It was a whispered word that Teddy had said, but Mick heard it. “What is it?” he asked his heir.

“Campion seems to like her.”

“How would you know that?”

“Because I know it, Pop. Because I pay attention to what's going on with the people I care about.”

Mick's temper flared. “*And I don't, motherfucker?*”

Duke and Jackie glanced at each other. They always felt fear when their father lost his cool.

Teddy, even more accustomed to Mick's rage than the twins would ever be, didn't respond to that particular question.

Mick exhaled. He didn't mean for his temper to rise, but it always did. He had a question to ask his son, but his twins were staring down his throat.

"Mom's okay?" Jackie asked him.

"Your mother's fine," he said to them. "Now go on to school. Both of you."

They both wanted more details. Their mother was their rock. But they knew their father. They grabbed their bookbags, both walked over and gave their father a hug that he didn't return, and then they left.

Mick meant to hug them. He would have loved to: he loved all of his children with a deep, undying love. But something always stopped him from showing that level of affection. It was an unnatural display for him and too damn hard. Which, he knew, said a lot about how fucked up he truly was.

When the twins left, he got down to business: “Is she fucking the guy?”

“What? No, Pop! How could you ... She’s not like that. She’s not like you.”

Mick’s temper almost flared again. But he kept it in check. “If there’s nothing going on, why would you bring him up?”

“I just know the guy likes her. He admires her. And she became defensive when I mentioned him to her last night. As if she ...”

“As if she what?”

“As if she *could* like him if she wasn’t saddled with you.”

Mick’s heart dropped. That was one of his greatest fears: that Roz would leave him for a young, good-looking stud who didn’t have half the baggage he had. “I’ll talk to you later,” he said as he ended the call even as Teddy was asking him to not leap to any conclusions.

But Mick was beyond leaping. He was calling his pilot and ordering him to get the helicopter ready that sat idle on the helipad in the back of Mick’s estate. Driving would get him to

Manhattan in two-and-a-half hours. He'd get there in half-an-hour on his chopper. Because he had to get there. Because it was one thing for Roz to be angry with him. It was another thing altogether for Roz to be angry with him *while with another man*. An admirer, as Teddy called him.

But by the time Mick made it out back and onto his chopper, he was fuming. If that man so much as touch a hair on her head, even if she wanted him to, he was going to show him what the perils of admiration truly looked like.

But mostly he just wanted his wife back. He just wanted to do better by her. And by his children too: young and old.

CHAPTER FOUR

Class. That's what he had. Class. Fredrick David Champion, award winning producer and director, sat in front of Roz as they ate breakfast at a Manhattan café. Tall, very dark-skinned, fine as pure wine, great white smile that made his dark skin pop. He wore a beautiful tan suit with an ascot scarf around his neck instead of a tie. Class was the only word she could think to describe the man.

"Your understudy has been nothing short of brilliant," Fredrick said. "My advice to you? Get back to work as soon as possible or she may take your role."

Roz smiled. "I'm not worried."

Fred pointed his fork that had a small sausage on it. "There was a time when you were," he said and ate his sausage.

"Yes, there was," Roz agreed. "Long ago and far away. We both were struggling then. Couldn't get that big break no matter how hard we tried."

"But you were an acting coach. You had a gig on the side. And still do with that talent agency of yours. All I had

to fall back on was waiting tables.”

They both smiled. But then Roz’s smile became more circumspect. “Was it worth it, Fred? The climb I mean. The hustle?”

Fred chewed his sausage. Then he exhaled. “I didn’t think so for years. But now I do. Absolutely. What about you?”

Roz just sat there. She didn’t answer him.

He stared at her. At her flawless dark skin. At her gorgeous high cheekbones. At the way she wore that skintight dress on that smoking hot body of hers. How many dreams had he had about that body! At her smile that melted his heart. And she had a good heart too? She was his gold standard. She was eleven years his senior, but man was she the woman he wanted more than life itself. From the moment he signed as director of the *Fences* revival, was the moment he knew Roz Graham would be his leading lady. Hopefully on *and off* stage.

But there was that one complication. She wasn’t a Graham anymore. She was a Sinatra now. Roz Graham-Sinatra. And if there was one man on earth not to be trifled with: it was Mick Sinatra.

“Why did you accept my invitation, Roz?” he asked her.

“I didn’t plan on accepting anything. But I was driving and I wasn’t ready to go home. So I called you up. I figured you wouldn’t mind a nightcap before you called it a day.”

He was in bed with a woman when she phoned. He got rid of that chick so fast it made his own head spin, spruced up the place, and welcomed Roz with open arms. They drank, and talked, until before day that next morning. But what was compelling to Fred was that she never would let them talk about what drove her to his apartment in the first place.

“Oh he’s gorgeous,” they both heard a young woman say at the table behind them, and as she and her girlfriend giggled, Roz and Fred looked toward the entrance. And just as they both somehow expected, those ladies were talking about Roz’s husband. Mick had entered the café.

To Fred, he looked like the *always well put together* titan of industry he was. Some said he was worth billions. Some also declared he was the most powerful mob boss in the world. Although Roz would deny to everybody’s face that her husband had any mob connections whatsoever, and the idea that he was the boss of all bosses was out of the question

altogether. And many believed her. Fred wasn't so sure. Because although Mick Sinatra presented himself as this well-polished businessman, Fred, a man who had to deal with wise guys back in the day just to get a foothold into show business, saw mob written all over him. He braced himself for the onslaught.

Mick looked cool as a cucumber as he made his way to their table. But Roz saw beyond the cool. She saw how his stone-cold green eyes weren't even looking at Fred. But they were staring daggers at her. Many men always got it wrong when they saw their wives with another man. They always went for the man. They always blamed the man. But Mick didn't give a shit about Fred. He was blaming Roz. She and he both knew that she was the only human being on earth that could hurt him just by her actions alone. Which, they also knew, was probably why she ended up at Fred Champion's place to begin with.

Fred didn't want a scene in such a public space, as it could adversely affect his Broadway show, but he'd do anything for Roz. Including standing up to that big bully of a husband of hers.

But Mick only had eyes for Roz. And his patience, though veiled, was wearing thin. He was already dead on his feet but had to come all this way to get her ass. He wasn't in a pleasant mood.

And he didn't stutter. "Let's go," he said to her as soon as he made it to their table. The women at the table behind Roz's table, the ones that had been admiring Mick's good looks and body, were surprised that the lady he came to get had been sitting right in front of them. They were equally surprised when she didn't get up and go. A man that looked like him could order them around all day long.

But they weren't Roz. And nobody ordered Roz around. She remained where she sat.

"Rosalind, I said let's go."

"Look Pal," Fred said, "she doesn't want to go with you. So I suggest you leave her alone."

"Fred, stay out of this," Roz said.

"No way. Nobody's mistreating you."

Roz's heart dropped. "Stay out of it," she said angrily. Didn't he realize who he was dealing with?

But it was already too late. The idea that this punk considered him *mistreating* his own wife after his wife spent nearly all night with that joker was too much. Mick's anger unleashed. He grabbed Fred by his ascot, lifted him up on his feet, and then slammed his slender body against the wall. Those around them were astonished.

"Mick don't!" Roz was saying, but Mick wasn't hearing her.

"Do I look like somebody you should fuck with?" he asked Fred, then slammed him harder against the wall. "Do I?!" he yelled.

But Fred considered himself an important man too, and he wasn't about to cower.

But Mick's muscular frame was manhandling him and he slammed him against that wall yet again, but this time he pulled him close and whispered in his ear. "No more overnights with my wife or your bed won't be soft, but of a concrete mixture. Do I make myself clear?"

Mick's chilling green eyes left Fred shaken. "Yes, I understand," he said.

Mick continued to stare at him, knowing that that man wasn't his real problem. That woman was.

He released his grasp on Fred with a push, which caused Fred to lose his balance and fall back against his chair. Any other man and Fred would have bounced right back up ready to fight. He was much younger than Mick: he could take him on. But Mick's chilling words had just proven to him that he was who they said he was. Fred remained in his chair.

And Mick returned his attention to his real problem. "I said let's go," he said to her again.

But Roz was as stubborn as a mule too. "I'll leave when I'm ready to leave," she responded to him. "I'm not ready yet."

But when she took a sip of her latte, as if she was the boss, that did it for Mick. He slapped that drink out of her hand, grabbed her by the arm, and flung her up on her feet.

Fred jumped up then, ready to defend her honor. But Roz quickly told him no. "It's okay," she said to Fred. "I can take care of myself."

Then she looked at Mick with her own brand of terror. "Let me go," she said to him in no uncertain terms.

But Mick didn't let her go. And she knew he wasn't going to. They stared at each other like two gladiators preparing for battle. A part of Fred wanted to intervene on her behalf, but the wiser part of him knew he'd be insane to interfere with those two giants. He stayed out of it.

But as Mick and Roz stood at that table, they both knew that one of them would have to cave. They both knew Roz had been caving to Mick their entire marriage, and she was tired of it. And since Mick knew he was the one that had the most to lose, he released his grasp on her. Which shocked Fred. He always thought of Mick Sinatra as a man who didn't give a damn about Roz or anybody else. As a man who showed up on her opening night and sat in a corner of her dressing room watching her like a laser beam rather than doting on her and praising her triumphant performance the way everybody else was praising Roz. Fred didn't even see the man hug his wife once. Not once! But that was who she seemed glad to go home with.

But this time, Roz didn't let that man run roughshod over her. This time, she was just as strong as he was. Which, Fred knew, took a lot of courage. A man who would threaten to bury you in cement just for having breakfast with his wife

was a man you had better tread carefully with. By Roz standing up to the bully the way she had, Fred could only see hope for himself in the very near future.

Roz wasn't thinking about Fred or the future. She just wanted the pain to end. She picked up her purse from off of the table that barely missed the latte spillage. And then she looked at Fred. "Thanks," she said.

"You okay?" Fred asked.

Roz managed to smile, but even Mick could see that it was to ease Fred's mind rather than to demonstrate her true state of affairs. "Yes," she said. "I'm fine." Then she left without Mick having to drag her out, which he was perfectly willing to do if it came to that. He was glad it didn't come to that. He gave Fred another chilling look, and then walked out behind his wife.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mick opened the passenger door of Roz's own Mercedes, waited for her to get in on the front passenger side, and then he closed the door and got in behind the wheel. He might have caved in that café, but the fact that she was leaving with him made it clear who was still the boss of their union. Which was never in doubt to Roz. She wanted him to be the head of their family. But she wasn't going to allow him to be disrespectful to her she didn't care who he was.

She was looking at him as he drove away. She could tell the man was exhausted. Her little escapade didn't help him at all. But it wasn't about him. "How did you get here?"

"My chopper."

"You landed it at the airfield?"

"At my hotel. And if you ever have to spend the night in Manhattan," he added, "that's where your ass better stay too." He looked at her. "Understood?"

Roz looked out of the window as a mist of rain began to fall, and she didn't respond to him. What he didn't know, and what his security guys apparently failed to notice too, was

that she had briefly been to his penthouse at the top of his hotel. Before day that morning, she left Fred's apartment, drove over to the penthouse where she showered and changed into one of the numerous outfits she kept there, and then she met Fred in the café for breakfast before she planned to drive back to Philly. She wanted to thank Fred for just being there for her last night when she needed a nonjudgmental, listening ear. Fred was a great listener. Mick, on the other hand, was barely ever around to listen.

No other words were spoken as Mick drove them to The Carson-Benning hotel, his luxurious hotel in Manhattan he owned long before he ever met Roz. She thought he brought them there to take them upstairs to the helipad, get on his chopper, and fly back home. She knew he'd have one of his security guys drive her car back to Philly.

But she was mistaken. When the chief valet quickly opened the car door for the boss, and Mick walked around and opened the door for Roz, he did indeed escort her into his hotel, where so many of his top employees kept hurrying over to see if he needed any assistance, and then they rode his private elevator up to the top floor. But not to the roof where the helipad was located. The elevator opened into his

penthouse apartment. The very apartment he had told her she was to stay in whenever she needed to stay the night in New York. Not at Fred's apartment. Not at anybody else's apartment. But at his place.

When they entered the penthouse, Roz began to make her way toward the sofa. But instead Mick placed his hand on her lower back and began escorting her up the winding staircase to his bedroom. He was suddenly so horny he could hardly contain himself.

As soon as they made it into his bedroom, he slammed the double doors shut, pushed her back against the door, and began kissing her with a kiss that immediately plunged her right back into that place of love that Mick and Mick alone had in her heart. Tears were in her eyes as they kissed so passionately. She'd loved this man through so much drama and pain and for so long that she knew leaving him for good was damn near an impossibility. He was the man she wanted. There was none other that could compare. That was the problem.

Mick removed the panties beneath her dress, lifted her up and wrapped her legs around his big body, and carried her to his bed even as he continued kissing her.

And as he made passionate love to her, tears continued to fill her eyes. Not because it wasn't good. It was always great in bed with Mick. But because she knew it wouldn't last. He'd give her all of this love and attention, and then he'd go right back to being Mick. And it was that *being Mick* part that she wasn't certain she could continue to live with. And the problem with that reality was that she knew he wasn't going to change from being who he was. She either had to accept him the way he was with no promises of *I'll change for you, baby* because he wasn't going to, or leave him. She left him before too. Had every intention of divorcing his ass. But that didn't work either.

He was pumping and sweating and panting and by the time they came and finished, they both were beyond exhausted. It was midmorning. But Mick rolled off of her, pulled her into his arms, and they fell asleep as if it was the beginning of night.

Mick was already awake when Roz finally woke up. He was lying on his side watching her. She was lying on her back. But then she turned onto her side and they were face to face.

She removed a strand of hair from his face. “Thanks for coming and getting me,” she said.

Mick gave that smile he reserved for Roz’s eyes only and then it was gone. She was used to that too.

But Mick had Fred on his brain. Because he knew, it wasn’t just a lovemaking session he had just had with his wife: he was branding her again. He was reminding her that he was her man, and he would not tolerate anything other than absolute fidelity from her.

He placed one of his huge hands on the side of her face. “Do I need to worry about that guy?” he asked her.

Roz thought about her answer. “Not yet,” she said honestly.

Mick hadn’t expected to hear her put it that way.

“Is there somebody I need to worry about?” Roz asked him, to see if he would have the same level of honesty she had.

But Mick was going to be Mick. “You’re my wife,” he said.

But Roz shook her head. “Not good enough, Mick. Is there somebody out there I need to worry about?”

Mick hesitated, but he answered her. “No,” he said. Then he stared at her. “Do I need to worry about Champion?”

Roz hesitated, too. “No,” she said to him.

That was the only answer Mick would accept. Roz knew it too, that was why she told him what he wanted to hear. But that still didn’t change the fact that they had work to do.

But when he pulled her into his arms and kissed her again, all of those questions and even all of their problems faded into the background. And they made long, passionate love once again.

CHAPTER SIX

The next day, back in Philly, Mick was at the Graham Talent Agency. He took the elevator to Roz's office as her secretary, like everybody else in that building, seemed shocked to see him.

"Mr. Sinatra."

"Is she in, Teegan?"

"No sir. I mean yes sir." Teegan Salley was seated behind her desk just outside of Roz's office. She'd been Roz's secretary for years. But she was still a bundle of nerves around Roz's husband. "She's downstairs in the cafeteria."

Mick had hoped to take her to lunch. But his timing, as usual, was off. He made his way downstairs.

When he got to the cafeteria, he could see Roz near the back chatting it up with two young people: her clients no doubt. They were probably in danger of being fired from some acting gig from the look on their faces and Roz, as their agent, was trying to figure out ways to make it right. She was a genius at making things right, in Mick's opinion. She was the glue that held their family together.

He made his way over to their table as more than a few people in that cafeteria elbows each other or whispered in each other's ear. Mick "The Tick" Sinatra was a known figure around The Graham Agency. And not just because he was Roz's husband. But because he was reputed to be Roz's husband, the boss of all mob bosses. To sensitive actors and actresses like themselves, it didn't get any scarier than that.

Although Mick saw the whispers and elbow jabs, he didn't give any of them a second thought. His entire focus was on Roz. The way they made love last night was epic. He was still coming down from that high. And just seeing her again as she sat up there in her skintight dress and heels, looking so professional even in a cafeteria, made him proud to be her man. And made him want her again.

Roz didn't see him until one of her clients, the young lady, looked away from Roz and was staring. Then her other client, a young man, looked and stared too. Only then did Roz turn around to see what on earth had caught their attention. When she saw Mick heading her way, she was as surprised as they were. It had been months since Mick dawned the door of her agency.

“Well hello there.” She was pleased to see him, although she wasn’t comfortable yet to so easily show it. Mick was exactly like a box of chocolates. You never knew what you were going to get. But, she thought as her eyes roamed down to his midsection, by the way he put it on her last night she wouldn’t mind getting some more. “What brings you to my spot?”

“Thought I’d take you to lunch.”

Typical Mick, Roz thought. All the man had to do was call and ask her, and she would have gladly obliged him. But not him. He just shows up. And he showed up after she’d already started eating her lunch!

She looked at her clients. “Why don’t you two run some errands and meet me back here in a couple hours. That’ll give me a chance to give Jerry a call.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the young lady.

“You really think he’ll take us back?” asked the young man.

“I don’t know what he’ll do. All I can do is ask.”

The young man looked deflated.

“But,” Roz added, after seeing how dejected he looked, “Jerry and I have a very longstanding relationship. He usually do what I ask.”

The young man smiled. Hopeful again. “Yes, ma’am,” he said happily and he and his female companion got up and left.

Mick sat down next to Roz. When he put his arm around her waist and squeezed, and she could smell the richness of his cologne as he sat so close to her, all of those great feelings from last night came flooding back to her. She looked into his glassy green eyes that scared many people, but turned her on. They were mere inches apart. “How are you?” she asked him.

Mick’s face moved side to side, as if to say okay, but he never verbalized a thing. He, instead, picked up her fork and began eating the big antipasto salad she still had on her plate. “How about you?”

Roz moved her face side to side too. When she didn’t respond to him, he looked at her. “You didn’t hear my question?”

“Did you hear mine?” Roz shot back.

“Of course I heard it,” he said as he chewed her food.

“Why would you ask me that?”

“Because I responded to your question the exact same way you responded to mine. But you still don’t get it, do you?”

Mick didn’t come there to argue with her. They did enough of that every day of the year. “You aren’t me,” he said as he kept on eating. “And I don’t want you becoming me either.”

Roz smiled. She was touched by his words. “Sometimes you could be so adorable,” she said. “But all those other times? Lord have mercy!”

Her response caught him so off guard that he nearly choked on her food as he laughed. She realized that he had moved her closer against him.

“Hey Roz.”

Roz looked and saw that it was Peg, one of the agents that worked for her. As usual half of her massive breasts were falling out of her blouse. And as usual, she was making sure Mick got a ringside view.

Roz was so used to her antics that they bored her.

“Hey Meg.”

“I hear Jerry fired two of our people last night. Was that them?”

Roz didn't respond to that. Which suited Meg just fine. She was already looking at Mick. “Hello, Mick.”

Roz gave her a hard look. “That's Mister Sinatra to you.”

Meg blushed. Mick could tell she was pissed, but she smiled and played it off. “I forgot. Hello, Mr. Sinatra.”

Mick nodded. “Hello.”

“You look strong and handsome today,” Meg had the nerve to say.

Roz gave her another hard look. Mick smiled at her. “So do you,” he said.

Meg, apparently refusing to take his comment for the putdown it actually was, laughed out loud. “You are such a card,” she said as if he was playing with her. “Anyway, I won't interrupt you two any further. Have a nice lunch,” she added and then glanced adoringly at Mick as she walked away, making sure to sling her considerable hips as she did.

Roz could see Mick watching her every sling. She rolled her eyes, took her plate of food away from him, and began finishing her lunch.

Mick watched her eat. “She’s a handful I’ll bet.”

“She is. But she’s a good agent.”

Then Mick continued staring at Roz. “Heard from Fred Champion?”

Roz continued to chew her food as she looked over at him. “We aren’t doing that today,” she said bluntly. “You don’t let me micromanage you. You aren’t going to micromanage me.”

“You do realize nobody talks to me that way,” said Mick. “Right?”

“You do realize I’m your wife,” Roz shot back. “Right?” Then she frowned. “I can talk to you any way I damn well please.”

“Oh yeah?” Mick asked, taking back over her plate of food and eating more of it. “Says who?”

“Says me. That’s who.”

“Don’t push it.” Mick looked at her. “My pushback can get nasty.”

“So can mine.”

Mick smiled. Because he knew that was one of the main reasons he chose her over all the hundreds of women he could have chosen to be his one and only wife. Roz didn't let him get away with shit. She fought back. But even she was realizing her best fight was no match for his. And he wasn't sure if she was going to continue to live with that.

“You know what I'm thinking about?” he asked as she continued to finish her food.

Roz looked at him as she chewed. His sleepy eye was even droopier than normal. Roz knew what that meant.

“I'm thinking you need to finish that salad and then take your ass upstairs so that I can pound on it again.”

Although Roz was dark-skinned, his bluntness caused her to blush. And she could feel the heat too.

She pushed that plate away. “It's not that good anyway,” she said, Mick laughed, and then they both got up and made their way out of the cafeteria.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They were staring at each other as they rode up the elevator to Roz's office. Mick's suit coat was unbuttoned and Roz could easily see his manhood expanding at a rapid rate. Mick could see the sensualness in Roz's beautiful eyes. They had both eaten that salad, but they were both starving.

And then the doors opened and they made their way, at a steady but deliberate pace, to Roz's office.

"Oh boss, I was just gonna call you," Teegan said as they walked up.

"Call me about what?" Roz asked, although they did not break their stride.

"Les Heard phoned. He said he can meet with you by three."

Roz's eyes lit up. "Really? Did he say why?"

"Didn't have to. Everybody knows his agent died over the weekend. He's looking for a new one. You're on the list."

"Now that'll be our biggest catch. Thanks, Tee," Roz added.

“And your mail came,” Teegan said as she handed Roz a small stack of mail that included letters, one letter-size vanilla envelope and one smaller vanilla envelope. She took it all and then she and Mick went into her office, locking the door behind them.

Teegan smiled when she heard that door lock. She saw Mick’s expansion too. But when she heard a loud slam against that door, she jumped up and went to the door, just to be sure her boss was okay.

As she leaned her ear against the door, she began to hear heavy breathing and what sounded like clothes being lifted up or taken all the way off, she wasn’t sure. But she was sure they were getting busy. And when it sounded as if Mr. Sinatra had lifted Roz into his arms and had slammed her even harder against that door, Teegan listened even harder. But then her phone rang, which disappointed her mightily, but she knew Boss didn’t play when it came down to her business. Teegan hurried back behind her desk and answered the call.

Behind that door Teegan found so fascinating, Roz and Mick were in a hurry too. Her dress lifted up, her panties on the floor, she had her legs and arms wrapped around him as he pounded away. They both were panting heavily as they let

loose those feelings they always felt for each other whenever they came together as one.

And for nearly twenty minutes they were together. By the time Mick was through, and they both had climaxed to those heights they were accustomed to taking each other, Roz was completely naked, Mick was naked from his midsection down, and Roz was so sore, top and bottom, that she worried if she was good for anything else the rest of the day.

As Mick continued to hold her, and as they tried to get control of their heavy breathing, Mick looked Roz in her eyes. “Tell Fred Champion to kiss your ass,” he said to her. “You will never be available to him or any other man as long as I live.”

Roz smiled. “Don’t give him any ideas.”

When she said that, Mick couldn’t help but laugh. But then his smile turned into that hard look he was known for. “Make it clear to him.” Then he added, to Roz’s shock: “Please.”

Roz stared at Mick. “Why are you so worried about him?”

Mick didn’t hold back. It was just him and Roz. He needed her to understand. “He’s younger than I am.”

“So?”

“He’s better-looking than I am.”

“So?”

Mick hesitated, but he knew he had to say it. “He’s a better man than I am.”

Roz’s heart dropped when he said those words. Because she knew he meant them. She placed her hands on the sides of his hard face. “I don’t know if he’s a better man than you are or not. I don’t know him like that. But I know who you are.” Then her look changed too. “You’re not a good man. You’re not.”

Mick stared at her. That was Roz. She always gave it to him straight.

“But what you are is a strong man. A man who protects his family. A man who will lay down his life for his family. You love your children. But you can do so much better by them, Mick. And that’s my frustration with you. You do better for a small time, and then you revert right back to same ole *too busy* Mick. And I’m getting tired of it. You’re still your children’s hero. There is no man they look up to

more than you. Even Teddy still looks up to you. But one day they're going to get tired of it too."

Mick steeled his heart before he asked this question: "Are you going to leave me?"

Roz could feel the pain in those words. But she wasn't going to sugar coat it. "I've always saw myself as your ride or die, Mick. But I'm not riding and dying for a man who's not riding and dying for me. You've got to do better by me too. Or this time I'll leave. And if I leave, I'm not coming back."

Mick's heart sank. But he nodded his head. He knew he had work to do. He pulled her into his arms, his eyes squeezing shut.

Roz's eyes were shut too. Because being with this man was so hard that she wondered if she still had the energy. But she loved him so much. She knew she would leave half or more of herself if she ever left Mick. That was the problem.

"I've got a meeting," Mick said when they finally stopped embracing. He sat Roz back on her feet and they both began dressing again.

"What's the meeting about?"

"A data breach."

“Sounds exciting.”

“Very,” Mick said as he zipped up his pants and buckled his belt.

Mick waited and watched while Roz finished dressing. And then they stared into each other’s eyes. Mick wanted to promise her that he’d do better, but he didn’t do it. She wanted action, not words.

He leaned over and kissed her goodbye. Even in his kiss, he wanted more of her. But he could tell she was ready to move on. They both had work to do.

“I’ll call you later,” he said to her.

“Remember the game tonight,” she said to him.

Mick was about to ask what game, and then he remembered that it was Friday and Duke had a football game that night. He was the team’s quarterback. Mick couldn’t recall the last time he took the time to see his son play.

He was going to make it his business this time. “I’ll be there,” he said. And then he left.

After he left, Roz went and sat behind her desk. She was exhausted. Not so much physically as she was emotionally. Mick exhausted her. But as she grabbed her

phone and looked at the numerous text messages Fred Champion had left her, she wasn't so exhausted that she could even consider being with another man. Not after being with Mick again. Not after the way he exposed his heart to her. He was the strongest man she'd ever known. He never flinched in the face of danger, especially when his family was in jeopardy. But he was as insecure about their future together as she was. And that, oddly, pleased her.

But that didn't mean she wasn't tired. She was. She laid her head down on her desk and took what became a two-hour nap.

It was Teegan who had awakened her. "Sorry to bother you, Boss," she said as she came into the office, "but Kim and Roger are here to see you. They said you were going to talk to Jerry about their situation."

Roz yawned and stretched.

"And you left your mail on the floor by the door," added Teegan as she handed the mail to Roz.

Roz knew her ass heard them go at it, or she wouldn't have that smirk on her face. But Roz ignored her. "Thanks," she said and began going through her mail. "Tell them to give me a few minutes and I'll be with them."

“Yes, ma’am,” Teegan said and left the office.

Roz put a call in to Jerry as she looked over her mail. “Hey, Barb, it’s Roz Graham. Is he in? Ten minutes? Okay, tell him to call me as soon as he gets this message. Alright, Barb, have a good one.”

She ended the call just as she was opening the small vanilla envelope. When she saw that a phone was inside, she frowned. Who would send her a phone? She figured it was probably some struggling actor who wanted her agency to represent him and tried to be creative about it. But then the black screen woke up, as if it did so by contact, and a video screen appeared. And when she pressed the arrow and saw who was on that video, her heart sank. But when she saw *who else* was on that video, her heart broke. And her anger rose. She could hardly believe it. It couldn’t be true! But she’d know that mark on his back anywhere. And she knew *her* too.

She was out of that office so fast that she forgot all about the A-list star that was on his way to see her. Forgot all about Kate and Roger waiting for word about Jerry’s decision. They were calling after her, but she ignored it all. Because that didn’t mean shit to her anymore. Not now.

She didn't stop running until she was in and out of her lobby, and then in her Mercedes flying like a bat out of hell to get to Mick.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At Sinatra Industries, Mick was at the head of one end of the table, and Teddy was at the head of the other end. All eyes were on Teddy as he stood up. He knew Pop didn't like to mix his corporate business with his syndicate, but they both knew it had to be done. Many of the biggest names on the board of S.I. were complaining that their recent data breach had been traced back to Mick's shipping empire, and that something had to be done. What they didn't know, but what Teddy and Mick knew, was that Mick's shipping empire was nothing more than a front company for Mick's syndicate operations. Operations that Teddy was the boss of. Operations that had no business being a part of anybody's complaints. Especially his father's very legit board at Sinatra Industries.

“My cyber guys spoke at length with Pop's entire cybersecurity team here at S.I.,” Teddy said, “and my guys were adamant that that breach was not caused by any failures at the docks.”

“But what did our guys here at S.I. say to that?” asked one of the board members.

“Some of them agreed after they saw all of the evidence. Some disagreed. They wanted more evidence.”

“And what do you say to that?”

“It’s not our job to solve a data breach that didn’t happen under my watch, or my team’s watch,” said Teddy. “That happened under your watch,” he said, looking at the board. “Under your team’s watch. Get your own damn evidence. That’s what I say to that.”

Teddy could see the board members glancing at his father, as if they wanted him to jump in and set his hotheaded son straight. But Teddy knew better than that. Mick already told him to unlink the two entities by whatever means necessary. And he aimed to do just that.

But the board had other ideas. The questions kept coming fast and furious. And Mick continued to stay silent as Teddy was getting more and more annoyed. But what Mick loved about his son was his ability to take the heat. He stood there like a man and took it. And answered every question without blowing a fuse the way Mick would have done.

When Mick made him the boss of his syndicate, it was one of the hardest decisions he had to make. But he couldn’t run both organizations the way they needed to be run. And

Teddy, he believed, was capable. Now, watching him work in the corporate side of things, made him certain he was more than capable. Not just to run his syndicate, but someday to be a great consigliere to Duke and Jackie when the twins took over S. I.

But while Teddy was on the hot seat in the same building, Roz entered that building with fire under her feet. Although the chief of the building's lobby security hurried over to her as soon as word got out that Mr. Sinatra's wife had arrived, she didn't stop until she was at Mick's private elevator. By the time the chief made it up to that same elevator, Roz had swiped her card, gotten on, the doors had closed her in, and she was on her way to the top floor.

When she got up to the top, she hurried to Mick's suite of offices. One of his assistants was sitting at her desk just outside of his office.

She stood on her feet. It was just that rare to see Roz at Mick's office. "Mrs. Sinatra?"

"Is he in?" Roz was heading straight for his office door.

"No ma'am. But perhaps I can help you?"

“Where is he?”

“Downstairs. In the boardroom.”

Roz began hurrying toward the suite’s exit doors.

“But he says he doesn’t want to be disturbed,” the assistant yelled after her. Roz ignored her, hurried out of that door, and made her way around corridors until she was opening the double doors of the boardroom on the top floor.

And when she walked in, you could hear a pin drop. A board member had just asked Teddy another pointed question, and Teddy was about to answer. He stopped mid word when he not only saw Roz, but saw her body language as well.

She went straight up to the boss and tossed that phone in front of him. “What’s this shit?” she asked him. Then she angrily slapped him upside his head. “What’s this shit about, Mick?!” she yelled at him.

Teddy, fearing that Mick was going to sky right back on her, quickly acted. “Everybody out,” he said to his father’s board of directors that he held no authority over.

But they didn’t hesitate. They saw that slap too. Nobody, but nobody touched Mick Sinatra that way and they

knew it. His temper, not just in the underworld but even at S.I., was legendary. They got up and got out.

And then there was Mick, Roz, and Teddy as referee.

Mick had already picked up the phone and was watching the video Roz had seen at her office on that same delivered phone. And she was watching Mick like a hawk.

But even when Mick sat the phone down, as if he'd seen enough, that small movement seemed to trigger even more anger in Roz. "And don't tell me that's not you," she said, "because it's you. There's no damn doubt about that. It's you!" Then she furiously slapped him upside his head again.

"Ma don't!" Teddy said as he hurried to her side. He was certain Mick was going to knock her through that wall. But to his shock, Mick didn't so much as lift a finger to her.

He, instead, looked at her. "Who sent you this?"

Roz frowned. "Who the hell cares who sent it?" Then pain appeared in her eyes. "All that talk about how much you favor Nikki. How Nikki can do no wrong in your eyes. I see why!"

What? Nikki? Why was she bringing up Nikki? Teddy was confused. "What's this about, Roz?" he asked her.

Roz snatched the phone from where Mick had laid it down and handed it to Teddy.

And then it was Teddy's time to watch the video. And he got an eyeful. It was Mick, naked and on top of a naked woman, making love. But when the apparently hidden camera panned away from Mick's back to the woman beneath him, and Teddy saw that it was his wife Nikki naked and beneath Mick, *making love*, his heart nearly stopped. He had to blink before he continued watching it. Because it couldn't be true. It just couldn't! But it was true. That was Nikki's face. That was the tattoo on her upper arm. It was true!

And Teddy's anger turned to instantaneous rage. "Pop, how could you?" he said with anger in his voice, and then he jumped over that table, grabbed Mick by his collar, and flung him up and ran with him until Mick's back slammed against the wall.

And then they were fighting. Two titans trying to beat the shit out of each other.

And Roz took sides. "Beat his ass, Teddy!" she yelled. "Beat his motherfucking ass!"

But as the fight wore on, it was Mick who was beating ass. They had fallen to the floor and Mick's strength was too

much and Mick had turned Teddy onto his back. Now Mick was beating the shit out of Teddy. So much so that he was able to get up with Teddy and then slam Teddy's back against the wall.

He stood there, holding his oldest living son. And he was enraged too. "You think I'm capable of that?" he yelled at Teddy.

But Teddy didn't respond. He wasn't just physically exhausted from fighting the man that always sapped every ounce of his strength. But he was emotionally exhausted too. It wasn't just that it was his wife, whom he adored. But it was his father, whom he loved so much that it hurt.

But Mick wasn't about to let him off the hook. He slammed his back against that wall again. "Do you?!" he yelled at him.

But when it was clear that Teddy was in no position to respond, Mick looked over at Roz. "Do you?" he asked her.

But Roz, unlike Teddy, was more than willing to respond. "Yes!" she responded. "Hell yes! All this shit you put me through? Yes!"

Mick stared at her with a cold stare. That was enough for him. And he released his grasp on Teddy and walked out of his boardroom as if they were strangers to him. He slammed that door so hard that it fell off its hinges, causing even Roz to wince.

But as she stood there, tears began to fall. Teddy hurried over to her and held her. She was his stepmother, but no two people could have been closer. He was as hurt and confused as she was.

CHAPTER NINE

Another long day at the docks. Nikki was in her office, going over inventory sheets that the accountants said were not adding up, when Teddy walked through the door.

She leaned back in her chair, glad for the break. “Hey.” But she quickly saw that Teddy was in a mood. “What’s happened now?”

Teddy was staring at her as he walked over to her desk. And he didn’t mix words. “What’s with you and Pop?”

“What do you mean what’s with us?”

Teddy just stood there. Staring at her. But he didn’t answer her back.

And in that silence, she spoke again. “He’s my boss. I do whatever he tells me to do.”

“I’m your boss.”

“And he’s yours,” Nikki responded. “So that makes him mine too.”

“So it’s true then?”

Nikki wondered if they were talking about the same thing. “What’s true?”

Teddy pulled out that phone and tossed it on Nikki’s desk. Nikki picked it up and watched it. Teddy could see her skin flush. “Where did you get this?” she asked him.

Wrong answer. Because Teddy went ballistic. “Who the fuck cares where I got it from? What does that matter, Nikki? What matters is the shit on that video, not where it came from! That’s you and Pop on that video. That’s my wife and my father on that video!”

Then he stared at her as she was staring at that video. “Did that happen, Nick?” He had pain in his voice. “Is that true? The way he favors you. The way he’s always taking you on ‘jobs’ with him. Is that shit true? Roz believes it.”

Nikki looked at Teddy. “Ma saw this?”

Teddy frowned again. “Why are you asking me questions like that? Did it happen? That’s all I wanna know. This it happen, Nick?”

It was as if that video had so traumatized Nikki that she was just hearing his question. “Are you crazy, no! No, it didn’t happen.”

“But it’s Pop. That mark on his back is Pop. And that’s you too.”

“It must be some of that A.I. stuff or something,” Nikki said.

But Teddy was already shaking his head. “Nall, Nick. You gotta do better than that though.” He was ready to shoot that artificial intelligence explanation down like a missile. But that was when they both heard a blast so loud that it rocked the office. It knocked Teddy off his feet.

“What the fuck!” he said as he got up and began running out of the office.

Nikki dropped that phone onto her desk, jumped up, and ran behind Teddy as they both ran to the docks. One of their massive ships was on fire. Their dockhands were still running off of the ship, as the flames intensified and Teddy and Nikki both hurried to help with the evacuations.

But within minutes it was too late. The blast was in charge. They stood on the docks looking at the burning ship alongside those they were able to help rescue. It was horrifying to see. The entire day, as far as Teddy was concerned, had been nothing more than a collage of horror.

CHAPTER TEN

“I got the indigestion.” Mob boss Vito Lanza belched again. “What’s with all the onions today?”

“That’s how they make it, Vito. You didn’t say to hold no onions.”

“Shouldn’t have to say it,” said Vito as he opened the men’s restroom door on the other side of the diner’s bar. “That wasn’t a pastrami sandwich, it was an onion sandwich.” His capos sitting around the bar laughed, and he went into the restroom.

He belched again as he unzipped his pants and stood at the urinal.

When he heard a toilet flush behind him and then heard the stall door open and footsteps heading for the door, without washing his hands he thought, he didn’t think anything else of it. He was too busy farting and peeing and relieving himself. Then he finally finished and was zipping up. But when he went over to wash his hands and he heard what sounded like the door locking instead of opening, he turned to see who would be locking the door.

But as he was turning, he suddenly saw a huge figure come up on him so quickly that he was able to grab him violently and sling him back to the urinal. When he realized it was Mick the Tick, his heart stopped. And when Mick began shoving his face into that urinal over and over and over again, he cried out. “It wasn’t me, Mick, I declare it wasn’t!”

“Then who was it?” Mick yelled as he continued to dunk.

“I don’t,” Vito started saying, but Mick dunked him even deeper down.

“It was Mobe!” Vito cried out.

It was enough for Mick to give him a reprieve. Because it was shocking news. “Moby?”

Vito, a mob boss of considerable reach although he was small potatoes compared to Mick, was pissed as he shook his wet, pissy head. “Yes. Dammit!”

“Why would Moby Giancarna pull that kind of shit on me?”

“He wants in.”

Mick frowned. “Into what? My turf?”

“Your head. He told me he wants to live rent free in your head.”

“Rent free? What the fuck is that? That sound like some school girl shit. What’s he talking about?”

“Don’t ask me. What you asking me for? Don’t ask me none of that shit. Mobe’s crazy. You know how crazy that fucker is.”

Mick released Vito. “Where is he now?”

“How should I know? Nobody knows. He shows up when he wanna show up. I don’t know what he did that brought you to me, but I knew he was up to something. That I knew after the way he was talking the last time I saw him.”

“How long ago?”

“Had to be three-four weeks ago.”

Mick knew Vito was a straight shooter. He was no liar. But that didn’t mean he was taking him off of his radar. “You see that motherfucker again, you bring him to me.”

“I got you, Michello. What I look like trying to be an enemy of yours?”

“You wasn’t trying to be a friend of mine, either, or you would have told me what Moby told you.”

Vito didn't try to make an excuse. He knew that would only rile Mick up again. Then Mick left the restroom. Vito grabbed paper towels and began frantically removing the piss off of his face and out of his hair. "Sleepy-eyed bastard!" he said out loud. Then, as if spooked, he quickly jumped and looked over his shoulder. Few men terrified him like Mick the Tick.

After Mick walked out of Vito's diner, a front for Vito's illegal activities, his driver/bodyguard opened the passenger door of his Escalade. "Call just came in from the docks, Boss."

"What about?"

"There's been an explosion. One of your mainline ships."

Mick was shocked to hear that. "Go there now," he ordered as he got inside of the SUV. His driver closed the door, hopped in behind the wheel, and sped away.

Mick leaned his head back against the headrest. Was Moby behind this explosion too? And why would his crazy ass want to pick a fight with a man like Mick who could crush

him like a cockroach? He was already having issues with his wife, with his board of directors. Now this too? All he needed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Forty minutes after the ship blew up in flames, the fire department was still putting out the blaze. Teddy and Nikki were helpless to do anything but watch the ship burn. But when Mick's big black Escalade drove up and stayed back, near the office, keeping his distance from the docks and the cops that populated the area, both Teddy and Nikki tensed up. But Teddy didn't make his usual move.

Nikki looked at him. Why wasn't he moving? He knew how his father was. "He expects you to tell him what's going on, Teddy. What's your problem?"

But Teddy glanced over at his father's big SUV, and then glanced at Nikki, and he walked further over where his dockhands were assembled. Which meant Mick was going to chew out her ass if she didn't go and give him the details. She used to rely on Teddy as her front man for Mick. Because she still was uneasy around the man. He was the only person on earth she always had trouble being herself around. He always demanded so much excellence from her that there was no way she could ever measure up to his expectations of her.

But she had no choice. She was dock supervisor. It was all on her. She walked over to Mick's SUV.

He had a driver so she moved over to the passenger window. Mick pressed it down.

"Hey."

"How many?" Mick asked her.

"No deaths, thank God. But we had ten that were injured and taken to the hospital.

Mick looked at her.

"But none of the injuries are life-threatening," Nikki added.

Mick looked back at the fire. "What's the prelim?"

"An engine exploded. They can't rule arson in or out at this point."

Mick looked at her again. "What's your gut telling you?"

Nikki never liked to speculate around Mick because he usually tore her ideas to shreds. But he'd tear *her* to shreds if she didn't answer his question. "Our ships are serviced on a regular basis. For an engine to blow in the magnitude of that

explosion would mean there was just a total collapse of that engine. That just doesn't add up to me."

Mick seemed to appreciate her answer. "What is Teddy's gut telling him?"

They both knew the answer to that. "He's not sharing that information with me," Nikki said.

Mick glanced down at her breasts, which Nikki believed was his way of keeping her uncomfortable and on edge around him rather than any sex signals. Although everybody else would declare, and did declare, that Mick's constant appraising of her full-figured body was purely sexual.

But Nikki was worried about that other issue. "About that video," she said.

Mick looked at her with that look that made her want to hide in a hole. "What about it?"

"What are we going to do about it?"

Mick went to see Vito because of that video. And all he got was the name of a small-potatoes mobster he would not have believed in a million years would pull that shit on him. He had no answers for her. "Nothing about it," he answered

her question. “Just do your job.” And then he motioned for his driver to leave. And just like that, they started driving off.

“What an asshole!” Nikki said so loud and so angrily that the Escalade slammed on brakes. And to her horror, it backed back up to where she was standing.

Mick’s window was still down. “Talking to me, Nicole?”

Nikki froze. Teddy always told her to deny everything whenever Pop confronted her like that. But she was never that girl. “Yes, sir,” she said to him.

He stared at her. Looked down at her breasts again. But when she didn’t flinch, or show the least uncomfortableness, she could see a change in his eyes. As if there was some respect there. Some concern and care. But he still gave her nothing.

He nodded again to his driver, and his big, black Escalade was gone for good.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mick walked into the ballpark at the high school football game and saw Roz and Jackie before either of them saw him. They were seated in the bleachers, with Roz looking youthful and gorgeous, he thought, in her white slacks and yellow sleeveless blouse and that colorful scarf around her neck. She easily stood out among the parents in those bleachers. Not only because she was one of only a handful of black parents in the stands, but she had a sophisticated look that was second to none, and that Mick loved about her. Her sophistication alone made her stand out in every crowd.

But he was also checking out her security as he made his way toward her. The seen security, which was a bodyguard posted just behind her and Jackie, and the unseen security: bodyguards at the top of the bleachers and at the bottom too. Bodyguards at the entrance into the park. Even Roz wasn't aware of those men.

But it was Jackie, who sat beside her mother looking exactly how Mick envisioned Roz looking when she was a high-schooler, who saw him first. "Is that Daddy?"

When Roz heard that word, she looked toward the entrance. And there was Mick, making his way up the bleachers to where they were seated.

Jackie smiled. “Everybody’s dressed casually,” she said. “Daddy shows up in a suit.”

Roz knew it was because he had no time to go home.

“And to show up when the game is almost over is ridiculous,” Jackie added. “What’s wrong with him?”

Roz could ask that question, but no child of hers was going to ask it. “There’s nothing wrong with him,” she barked out. “He’s busy trying to keep that fancy roof over ours heads and those fancy cars we like driving around in and all the other shit he’s responsible for. He’s entitled to be late.”

Jackie knew her mother made good money herself, and didn’t need her father to take care of her like that, but she would always go hard for him no matter what. Mick wore the pants in their family, and Roz made certain that every child, including her stepchildren, understood that.

“I guess we should be glad he showed up at all,” said Jackie.

Roz hated to hear her child say such a thing, but she always felt caught in the middle with Mick. His ass deserved every barb and arrow Jackie threw at him. But Roz was so protective of Mick. The only person on earth who protected him. And she just couldn't allow anybody else to tell him about his ass. She knew it was dysfunction on top of dysfunction, but downing Mick was her exclusive wheelhouse.

But Jackie wasn't too far behind. Despite her criticisms, she went hard for her father too. She loved Mick deeply and always smiled whenever he came around. Which wasn't all that often. "Hey Daddy!"

"Hey." Mick didn't smile, but he didn't frown at her either. He sat next to Roz. And looked at her. He always loved the smell of her. Sometimes, when he was in a horrific situation, he would remember her sweet scent to help calm down. "Hey."

Roz didn't say a word to him. She continued to stare at the football field as Duke, as quarterback, threw a pass that was almost intercepted.

Mick knew Roz was still pissed with his ass, and wasn't about to discuss anything with him in that public space, so he turned his attention to the ballgame too.

Duke looked like a man among boys out on that field. He was barking out orders and moving his team down the field. And he threw some pretty darn good passes. He had gotten bigger and better since the last time Mick saw him playing any of the various sports he played. He was surprised at how muscular he had gotten, and how good he was.

But the clock ran out on the team and Duke wasn't able to score. To Mick's disappointment, the game was over within minutes of his arrival. And after the game was over, Roz and Jackie hurried down the steps to where Duke was coming toward them. Mick watched to see what her well-paid security detail did. They inconspicuously built a proverbial security fence around Mick's family, which was what they were supposed to do.

"You played real good, Duke," said Jackie.

"You lost," said Roz. "You played good but you lost. Nothing to celebrate about that."

"Yes, ma'am," Duke said. His mother was hard on him. She always told him she wasn't raising no soft man. And he agreed with her.

But then he looked beyond her as he saw a familiar figure walking down the bleachers. He was shocked. "That's

Daddy?"

Jackie smiled. "He came to see your game."

"Wow."

Neither Jackie nor Roz mentioned that he'd just shown up, but Duke already knew that. He'd been watching his family all game. They gave him inspiration. He never once saw Dad beside them.

When Mick stepped down, he could tell Duke was a little confounded to see him there. He had missed so many of his games in every different sport Duke played that it wasn't even funny. "Hey Daddy."

"Hey Duke. Almost got there, hun?"

"Yeah but almost isn't the same as winning. I lost. And I know how you hate losers."

Roz looked at Mick to see how he responded to his son. It was obvious that Duke needed his reassurance. He craved it. But Mick didn't say *you aren't a loser if you played your best*. He didn't say *losing a game doesn't make you a loser*. Nothing like that. Roz was the bad cop that went hard on their son. She had hoped Mick would be the good cop that would show their son some grace. But he didn't say a word.

Which just angered Roz. Even with that video over his head, he didn't even try to do better! And she'd had it. She hugged her son. "Sorry you lost," she said. "I'll see you at the house." And then she left.

"Roz?" Mick said to her as if she was the only thing that mattered to him. But Roz kept on walking.

"Ma?" Jackie said. And she hurried behind her.

When Mick looked back at his son, his son was staring at him. Of all of Mick's children, Duke and Teddy came at him the hardest. "What did you do now?" he asked him.

But that didn't mean Mick allowed it. "Don't you talk to me in that tone."

"She's gonna leave you one of these days and never take you back. Then where will you be?"

Mick knew it was coming from a place of love and concern from Duke. And after being unable to just dismiss his concern, he displayed a little of his own. "Lost," he said to Duke.

Duke was stunned to hear him say that. He was ready to be combative with his father for the way he treated his

mother. Forget how he treated his children. But Mick had shocked him.

But from the corner of Mick's eyes, he saw what looked like a gun to him. And when he turned and saw what he thought he saw, he didn't hesitate. He knocked Duke down even as he was pulling out his own gun firing on the gunman as the gunman was firing toward them. The bullet hit Mick in the arm, but it didn't touch Duke, and the gunman, although injured by Mick too, was able to run away. Some of the security teams began surrounding Mick and Duke.

But Mick was yelling for them to get that gunman. "Get him!" he yelled. "Stop that bastard!"

Some of the bodyguards ran after the gunman. Then Mick ordered the other to check on his wife and daughter. But just as he removed his body from on top of Duke and was getting back up, a sudden burst of what seemed like tens of cans of teargas were ignited within all corners of the bleacher area and turned the entire space into thick smoke.

"Duke!" Mick yelled, getting on his feet. He couldn't see anything through that amount of smoke and was overcome with coughing too. But he kept reaching for his son. "*Duke!*"

Roz and Jackie, who were on the outside of the gate, had turned to run back in when they heard the gunfire. “Mick! Duke!” Roz cried out as they ran. The security team around them tried to stop them, but Roz broke free. “Get Jackie out of here!” she ordered as she ran. The team was able to wrangle Jackie and carry her to her father’s Escalade.

People were running out of the gate hysterical, with so many screams of fear from those gunshots and the tear gas too that Roz could hardly hear her own voice. It was mayhem in that park.

But when Roz saw the smoke of the teargas cannisters, she panicked. “Mick!” she screamed out and ran toward the bleachers. She could barely see. “Duke!” she cried even louder as her heart pounded. She and her security were tossing people aside just to get by. The only hope she had was that Mick was with their child. The only hope she had was that Mick wouldn’t let anything happen to their child. But she was worried about Mick too! “*Mick!*”

But even Security was having trouble seeing the boss. And when the smoke finally cleared, Roz saw Mick even before his bodyguards did, and she ran to him.

“Mick!” Roz cried. “Are you alright?”

Mick was holding his arm.

Roz was mortified. “You got shot?”

“Boss, they shot you?”

“Birdshot,” Mick said, although that didn’t lessen the pain of the pellet as he continued looking around. “Where’s Duke?”

Roz and Security were confused. “He’s with you,” said Roz. Then panic set in. “*He’s not with you?*”

“No,” Mick said and Roz and all of the security surrounding them began running around all over that park searching for Duke. “Get a crew on the streets now!” Mick ordered, in case Duke was taken, and a couple of Roz’s guys ran for the exit. But all of it was futile. Duke was nowhere to be found.

“Mick, what’s happening?” a terrified Roz asked. “Where’s our child?”

Mick put his unharmed arm around her. He could see the fear in her eyes. But they kept running around searching for Duke in the mayhem. They both were yelling his name, with their voices sounding more and more alarmed as the seconds ticked by.

But when he saw a car speeding away from the backside of the ballpark's gymnasium, he took off in that direction. "Get my wife out of here!" he yelled to Security as he ran.

But Roz wasn't about to stay back. "I dare you to touch me!" she screamed out at Security as she ran behind Mick. And Security, almost as scared of her as they were of Mick, dared not touch her. They ran behind her.

Mick pulled out his weapon, and began shooting at the wheels of that speeding car. He knew a getaway car when he saw one. But his shot was too unsteady to hit any tire.

When he got on that road behind the gym, he could see that his son was in that car. He could see the back of his head in that backseat. And he could also see a gun to Duke's head.

Mick took off running back across the field. He grabbed Roz by the hand and darted past Security so fast that they had to turn around on a dime and chase after him.

Roz herself could barely keep up with Mick as he was calling Pax on the phone and giving him a description of the black-and-tan Lincoln he was certain Duke was in. Roz wanted to ask Mick if he saw Duke, but she followed his lead. In situations like that, Mick was always the one and only boss.

Jackie was locked inside of Mick's Escalade with four of his men standing guard outside of the vehicle when they ran toward it. Mick hopped behind the steering wheel of his Escalade, forcing his driver/bodyguard to move over to the front passenger seat, as Roz and Security hopped into the backseats. Roz pulled a terrified Jackie into her arms. She was a nervous wreck too. She was useless too. Mick floored that big SUV as only Mick could and took off after that car.

But it was a wasted attempt. Although he and his men covered the waterfront, that car was nowhere in sight.

When Mick screamed out *dammit* and began pounding on his steering wheel, it was only then did Jackie and Roz realize that Duke was gone. That there wasn't going to be any happy reunion tonight. Mick looked at Roz through his rearview mirror. And the look on her face broke his heart. They could see the fear in each other's eyes.

Then Mick's phone rang. Everybody in that SUV, including security, jumped. Mick answered quickly. "Yes?"

"We have your son."

Those words put a chill in the souls of everybody in that vehicle. Mick had to pull over to the side of the road. "What do you want?" he asked the kidnapper.

“Go home. He is no longer in your custody and you no longer run this. Instructions will be delivered, by phone, at exactly eight am tomorrow morning.” And the call ended.

“What does that mean, Daddy?” Jackie asked him anxiously.

“They’ve got Junior.”

“*Nooo!*” Jackie cried out and fell into her mother’s arms.

But Roz was just as unhinged. “Who’s they? Who has him?” Roz asked Mick.

The most anguished look came over Mick’s face. It was as if he had suddenly aged ten years in one second. “I don’t know,” he said. He tried to recognize the voice. “I don’t know.”

And that look on Mick’s face said it all to Roz. This was bad. There was no beating around that bush. This was their worst nightmare come true.

Mick got Pax on the phone again. “I want Vito Lanza and Moby Giancarina at my house tonight. If they’re lost, find them. I want to see both of those bastards tonight.” Then he ended the call.

Then he began to make another call.

“Who are you phoning now?” asked Roz.

Mick glanced at her again through the rearview.

“Everybody,” he said, as he drove them home.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They were trying too hard and Reno Gabrini knew it. He and his son Dominic sat on the raised platform inside his casino and watched them do all they could to flirt their asses off. Three girls in all. All blonde, none of them Reno's cup of tea, but all three certain they were gifts to men. One of them, the boldest of the three, even zipped down her blouse to expose even more of her already exposed cleavage. It was pathetic and Reno and Dommi both knew it. But neither one of them were exactly looking away, or admonishing any of them.

"What's your name?" one of them asked Dominic.

"Dommi," he said.

"You work here too?"

"Yup."

"He's your boss then?"

"And my father, yes."

All three girls looked at Dommi differently. They had been throwing most of their flirtations Reno's way because

they knew he owned the PaLargio hotel and casino, the largest on the Vegas Strip. They figured Dommi was just an employee. “You’re cute,” the girl quickly said, to get a head start on her friends.

“Why aren’t you answering your phone?”

The sound of Trina Gabrini’s voice caught her husband and her son off guard. And they quickly looked toward her.

But the girls, who had been interrupted, weren’t amused. “Who’s she?” asked the ballsy one. “Your secretary?”

Trina looked at that girl with daggers in her eyes. “I got your secretary up my ass, alright? Now beat it little girl.”

The girls, upset, nonetheless saw that look on Trina, knew she was out of their league, and they left. They beat it.

Reno grinned. “They’re just kids having fun, Trina, damn.”

“Yeah I’ll bet how much *fun* their having. And I can see how much *fun* they were having on you.” She was looking down at her husband’s aroused midsection.

He sat erect, to cover his error, and frowned. “What your ass want anyway?”

“Uncle Mick just called after he couldn’t get through to you.”

“So Uncle Mick called. What’s the big damn deal?”

“They snatched Duke tonight.”

When Reno heard those words, he jumped out of his chair. Dommi did too. “Does he know who?” Dom asked.

“No.” Trina began heading toward the exit with Reno and Dommi hurrying alongside her. “He don’t know anything yet. But he wants you in Philly tonight. He says Roz is a nervous wreck. I’m going with you to check on Roz.”

“Damn right you’re going.”

“I’ll stay here, Pop, and make sure everybody’s safe here.”

“Call Jimmy and tell him to round up everybody,” Reno ordered. “Including Sal’s kids.” Then he looked at Dommi. “Jimmy’s in charge.”

Dom stopped walking and frowned. “Jimmy?”

“Yes, Jimmy. Now do what I said!” And then Reno and Trina began running out of their casino. Dommi didn’t like it, but he did what his father said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sal Gabrini was on top of Gemma Gabrini, pumping hard, when the call came in. He refused to stop to answer any ringing phone, too far into the feeling of being with her to even acknowledge that his phone was ringing. Although Gemma was deep into it too, she was an attorney who was hard-press to let a phone ring without answering it. It could be one of her clients. It could be the prosecution ready to cut a deal.

When she realized it wasn't her phone ringing, but Sal's, she grabbed it off of the nightstand anyway and looked at the Caller ID. When she saw who was phoning, she didn't hesitate. "Stop, Sal. Stop! It's Uncle Mick."

Sal was surprised. He looked at Gemma, although he was still stroking away. "What he calling me for?"

Gemma was still reaching it out to him. "Answer it and find out."

Sal was pissed. "*God*dammit!" Although he stayed inside of Gemma, he stopped stroking her and answered the call. "Hey, Uncle Mick. Your timing is terrible."

But when Mick told him the reason for the call, Sal said *motherfuck*, quickly pulled out of Gemma and got off of her. Gemma sat up on her elbows.

When Sal ended the call, Gemma could see the worry on his face. “What’s happened?” she asked him.

“Some asshole snatched Duke,” he said as he began putting on his pants.

“*What?*” Gemma was as shocked as Sal and hopped out of the bed too. “Who would kidnap Mick Sinatra’s son?”

“Hell if I know,” said Sal. “Get dressed. I’ll tell Marie and Lucky. We’ll leave them and the baby at Reno’s place. Mick said Jimmy and Dommi’s staying in town.”

“What about Tommy’s kids?” Gemma was putting on clothes too. “Is he going to bring them to Vegas to stay at the PaLargio too?”

“No way. He’s not about to let Grace and those kids out of his sight. If he’s going to Philly, I’m certain they’re going too.”

But then Sal shook his head. “I knew it was too good to be true.”

“What was too good to be true?” Gemma was putting on her clothes too.

“All of this peace. I don’t have no shit going on. Tommy and Reno don’t have no shit going on. Then that video shit. Then I just heard early today about somebody blowing up one of Uncle Mick’s ships. Now they snatch his boy too? When it rains it pours up in this bitch. Get ready,” he said as he pressed a button on his phone. “I’ll call Reno so we can fly out together.” Then Sal shook his head as he waited for Reno to answer. Somebody snatched Duke? He still couldn’t believe it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Just when the movie was about to reveal the killer, Tommy Gabrini's cell phone began ringing.

"Ah Dad, turn that thing off," admonished his son TJ. He was sitting beside his big sister Destiny and their baby sister Gianna, called GG, inside the movie theater room of their home. Their parents sat behind them. The movie, a psychological thriller, was just getting good. "You're ruining the movie for the rest of us."

But their mother, Grace Gabrini, paused the movie and looked back at their teenage son. "The advantage of movie night at home," she said with a grin.

Although Destiny and Gianna grinned back, TJ still wasn't satisfied. "Do you have to answer it, Dad?"

Tommy looked at his Caller ID. "Yes," he said and answered the call. When Mick told him the reason for the call, he looked at Grace. "I take it we know nothing so far?" Another listening session. "Okay, Uncle Mick. We're on our way."

When Tommy said Mick's name, all three children looked at their father. Tommy ended the call and stood up.

"What's happened?" Grace asked.

Tommy had to take a moment to digest the news himself. Then he looked at his wife. "Somebody has kidnapped Duke."

"Somebody's got Duke?" TJ was floored as he, his mother, and his siblings all jumped to their feet.

"Tommy, is he alright?" Grace asked anxiously.

"We don't know yet. We don't know anything at this point. Des, you and GG pack a bag. TJ you do too. You guys are coming with us."

"Do we have to?" asked Destiny. "I'm scared of Uncle Mick."

"Everybody's scared of Uncle Mick," said Tommy. "That's no excuse."

"But you can drop us off in Vegas. Jimmy will look after us. And Carmine will try to lord it over us so much that we won't be able to get into any trouble."

"The answer is no," said Tommy. "In a situation like this, my family goes where I go unless I have to handle a

situation. We stick together. Right?”

Destiny nodded. “Yes, sir. And I’m sorry for being so selfish. I should have known better.”

“Yes, you should have,” said TJ. “Because you were speaking for yourself. I was going with Mom and Dad no matter what you said.”

“So was I,” said little GG.

“I need to know Duke’s okay,” added TJ.

Destiny agreed. “Let’s get packed,” she said, and with her and TJ each putting their baby sister’s hands in their hands, they left the room. It warmed Tommy’s heart to know that his family was that close. It was the goal of his life to keep it that way.

Grace watched him as he phoned his pilot and ordered him to prep his plane. *Dapper Tom* was his nickname, because of his unusual beauty and how well-groomed and pristine he always looked. She remembered how everybody thought she was too much of a plain jane to win the heart of a super-gorgeous man like Tommy Gabrini. But despite the odds and who the world felt he should have, she was the woman he wanted to be his one-and-only wife and the one-and-only

mother of his children. They nearly lost each other when she asked for a divorce and was granted one. For that brief period, it seemed hopeless. Both had gone on with their lives. But they got back together, remarried, and was now holding strong.

“I didn’t want to say this in front of the children,” Tommy said. “But they also shot Uncle Mick.”

Grace was floored. “Is he alright?”

“According to him it was nothing. A birdshot. Said he was fine. It didn’t penetrate his skin.” Tommy’s face turned into a look of puzzlement. “But for them to even try that is amazing. Who the hell would have the balls?”

Grace looked extremely worried too. “Poor Roz,” she said. “She has to be in a dark space. I could only imagine how I would feel if that was one of our children.”

Tommy nodded, and pulled her into his arms. Then they headed out of their movie theater to catch a plane.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Amelia wasn't taking it anymore. After Hammer slammed the front door behind him, she raced up the stairs, ran to the closet, and quickly took a pile of Hammer's clothing and threw them out of the upstairs window. Hammer Reese was angrily heading to his car when he saw his own clothes flying out of Amelia's bedroom window as if his expensive threads were garbage. He didn't live at her house in Baltimore full time. He had his own home in Montreal. But he had plenty of clothes there.

He knew what she wanted. She wanted him to rush back in and continue arguing with her ass. Because she thrived on drama. Dramaville was her middle name. But she'd worn him down. Year in and year out with all of her shit had worn him down. He'd never met anybody like Amelia Sinatra. He was the former director of the CIA for crying out loud. He was the current head of all the government's elite special ops programs. But it was Millie who kept him up at night. It was Millie who had him walking on eggshells just trying to keep her legit and out of that gangster shit she loved so much. All he asked was that she obey the laws of the land

the way any woman married to a lawman of his esteem would happily do.

But not Millie. She had gangster in her blood. At least the white side, the Sinatra side of her, had that background. The black side of her was sweet and kind and caring and gorgeous. It was that side he wanted her to always be. But she was both. In equal measures. And that was the problem. She just couldn't leave that gangster lifestyle behind to save her life.

And Hammer Reese was done. His bright blue eyes were filled with frustration. He was done trying to make a grown-ass woman do the right thing. He got in his lambo and sped away.

Upstairs, Amelia stood at her master bedroom window watching him leave. She loved that man so much, but that love was hurting her too much. Because all they did was clash. All he did was complain about the fact that her private eye agency was, in his view anyway, a front company for the mob. She did mob work. She wasn't going to lie about that. Even her brothers didn't know she was still dabbling in the mob side of life. But it wasn't a front company. It was legit. But Hammer didn't want to hear it.

She knew what she was doing. She didn't question his questionable tactics when he had to order the assassination of world leaders and all that crazy shit he was into. Why was he questioning her?

But what got her going tonight was when she angrily blurted out, "*I want a divorce,*" and he didn't tell her *no, you don't*, or *we aren't getting any divorce* like he always did whenever she went there. But this time he didn't say a word. As if he might want one too!

Which scared her.

And whenever Amelia Sinatra was scared, she lashed out.

She went back to her closet and was about to throw more of his clothes out of her window when her cell phone began ringing. Hoping it was Hammer, she dropped the clothes and hurried over to her dressing table. She grabbed her phone and answered without checking the Caller ID. "Yes?"

But it wasn't Hammer. It was her older half-brother Mick. Who, like Big Daddy, thought he was *her* daddy with the way they loved to order her around. "Oh hey Mick."

“Somebody took my son.”

Amelia frowned. “Teddy?”

“Duke.”

When Amelia realized it was Junior, she plopped down on her dressing table bench. “When?”

“Just now.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“Want me to hit the streets?”

“No. I got that covered.”

“I’m coming to Philly then.”

“Where’s Hannibal?”

“He lives in Montreal now. With his father. But he’s fine. Because of Hammer’s position in the government, he always has Secret Service protection. Which means Junior does too.”

“You’re Hammer’s wife. What about you?”

“I turned it down. Nobody was following me everywhere I went. Hammer knows I don’t tolerate that shit.”

“That’s why your ass better not tell Hammer about any of this. I don’t want any cops involved, and especially no Feds.”

Amelia frowned. “Your ass know I know that. Who do you think you’re talking to, Mick?”

“Just get your ass here,” Mick ordered, and ended the call.

Amelia chalked it up to his anguish over his son’s kidnapping, or she would have told his ass a thing or two for talking to her like that. But she just sat there a few moments longer. A part of her still wished she never discovered, as a grown woman, that she was a Sinatra. The Sinatra side of her was the drama side of her. But the bigger part of her was glad she did find out. She was a one-woman band before she found out that Mick and Big Daddy were her half-brothers on their mother’s side. Now she had grounding. A family. People who actually cared about her, even if they got on her last damn nerve.

But being a Sinatra came at a dangerous price. And now sweet Duke was in the crosshairs. She got up, and hurriedly packed a suitcase.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mick's big brother Charles "Big Daddy" Sinatra, flying in from Maine, was the first to arrive. Roz was seated on the sofa, with Jackie and Teddy on either side of her. Nikki was standing at the window looking out. She knew she wasn't Roz's favorite person after that videotape. She was keeping her distance.

When Big Daddy arrived, Roz immediately stood up and went to him. With his arms wide open, he pulled his sister-in-law into his arms. As with everybody else in the family, Big Daddy was like a father to Roz too. He had moral authority in the family. Even Mick humbled himself when Big Daddy was around.

He pulled Roz back, to get a look at her. And his honesty remained. "Jenay sends her love. You look awful."

"It's like I'm going to explode, Charlie. They won't even tell us anything until tomorrow morning. Who does that? I don't know if my baby's alright, I don't know if they're feeding him."

"Roz," said Big Daddy, holding her by both her arms.

But Roz kept going. “Are they treating him right? Are they beating on him because of who his father is? Are they—”

“Roz, just stop,” Big Daddy said firmly, “You’re torturing yourself. You’ve got to be strong for Jackie.”

Roz stopped, took a deep breath, and then nodded her head. She knew he spoke the truth. “You’re right,” she said.

Then Big Daddy exhaled himself. “How is he?” he asked her.

“Worse than I am, I think. But he’ll never show it.”

“Where is he?”

“In his office.”

“I’ll be back,” Big Daddy said and went to Mick’s office.

He already knew Mick was in bad shape. Which any parent would be under such horrific circumstances. But Big Daddy knew it took everybody else down when their leader was down too. Even strong Roz couldn’t see the forest for the trees. Which wasn’t like her normally. But having her baby snatched wasn’t normal either. He went into Mick’s office.

Mick was standing at his back window, staring out over his vast property, and didn’t look back when Big Daddy

walked in. And for a few seconds Big Daddy just stood there. Because in a weird way, he felt as if he'd been a nursemaid to his kid brother Mick's whole life. He was always so hard. Used to want to kick their father's ass when he was just four years old. Their old man was terrified of him before he was even ten. Because Mick held grudges even as a kid. He never let any shit go. Big Daddy had to keep him grounded. Human. He tried with all he had to get Mick to see that there was more to life than settling scores. But Mick never saw it. Big Daddy wasn't sure if he ever could.

He stood next to his younger brother. Both men wore suits. Both men had their hands in their pants pockets. Both men viewed the other as the most powerful man they'd ever known.

Big Daddy also knew to wait it out. Mick would speak when he was good and ready to speak.

While they were standing there, staring out of the big man's big window with such intensity, and so in tune with each other that Roz was able to ease her way into the office without either man noticing. She stood by the door.

But it wasn't until several moments later that Mick finally spoke up. And the agony in his voice was telling. "I

ruined Teddy's life, I ruined Gloria's life, and I can't even deal with what happened to Adrian and Joey's lives. Four children from four different women. I neglected the hell out of them. Then I met Rosalind. And we had the twins. I promised her that I wasn't going to do the same to Duke and Jackie what I did to my other set of children. But I did it anyway. And now Duke's been kidnapped, taken like his old man was some punk, and I can't help wondering if it's all my fault."

"Ain't no wonder in it," said Big Daddy. "It is your fault. I begged your ass not to go down that road, but you went anyway. You always figured you were smarter than everybody else and knew what you were doing. Well here it is, smart guy. This mob shit is the lifestyle you chose. This is the lifestyle you get."

"But how can I protect my children?" Mick asked as if he was confounded by it all. "You protected your children, and your ass meaner than me. Bobby's a mayor. Brent's a police chief. Tony's a psychologist. Carly graduated from Harvard and married well. Ashley married mob, but Frankie Paletti knows how to separate that shit. And even your problem child Donald is now a business mogul following right in your footsteps. All of your kids turned out right. But my

children? Teddy's mob. Joey was mob. Adrian was mob. Gloria married mob." Mick looked at his older brother with anguish in his eyes. "What did you do right, and I did wrong?" Although Roz was the biological mother of only the twins, she could feel Mick's anguish concerning his older children. She folded her arms.

Big Daddy could feel his anguish too. But the truth was still going to be the truth: "Your lifestyle fucked-up your kids," he said.

"I tried to shield them from my lifestyle. That's why I tried not to be around them when they were growing up. But they still went down that road. But yours never did. What's the difference, Charlie?" Mick had to know.

Bobby Sinatra, who rose to become their hometown's mayor, went down that road for a minute until Big Daddy yanked him back. But that wasn't the issue. Mick was. And although Big Daddy didn't want to have to go there, he knew he had to. "I refused to let my children see any example of me that wasn't ethical and right," Big Daddy said. "All of that eye-for-an-eye bullshit you and your mobster friends live by only creates more eye-for-an-eye revenge until that's all you see. And that's all your children saw."

Mick knew it too. He ran his hands over his anguished face. “What am I going to do? They snatch Duke and then their asses won’t even communicate with me until tomorrow morning? I want to split them in half with my bare hands just for putting his mother through this bullshit!”

“Not to mention putting his father through it.”

Mick nodded his head. “Exactly.”

“And you have no clue who it could be?”

Mick shook his head. “I ordered my guys to pick up Moby Giancarina and Vito Lanza, but I’m grappling at straws even with that.”

“I never heard of either one of those guys. They’re on your level?”

Mick looked at Big Daddy as if he knew better. “Nobody’s on my level.”

“You know what I mean. Are they close to your level?”

“No. Nowhere near it.”

“Are they high enough to be in your alliance of families?”

“No. Nowhere near it.”

Big Daddy exhaled. “I don’t see somebody that low-level with the balls to pull off this shit. Have you talked to either one of them since Duke got snatched?”

“No. They’re nowhere to be found. At least not around Philly. We believe they both skipped town.”

“That could mean something,” said Big Daddy. “Why are they suddenly off the radar?”

“Because Moby knows I’m looking for him concerning another matter. And I had an encounter with Vito earlier today regarding that same matter.”

“That videotape of you and Nikki?”

Roz looked at Mick. It was the first she was hearing of Mick confronting somebody over that video. Mick looked at Big Daddy. “How did you know about that?” he asked his brother.

“Your ass think you know everything that goes on in this family. I know more,” said Big Daddy. Then he exhaled again. The stress was getting to him too. “Roz called me crying over your ass. Again.”

Mick waited. Then he looked at his brother once more. “You aren’t going to ask me if that video is true?”

“Hell no,” said Big Daddy. “Even you have lines you won’t cross. I happen to be the only person on earth who knows what those lines are because I saw you draw them when you were a kid. Hurting somebody you truly love with all your heart is a line you won’t cross. You can never hurt me unless I’m hurting somebody you love more. The same for your children. And especially for Roz. You’d never hurt her like that. That’s a line you won’t cross. Sleeping with your son’s wife is another line.”

Mick had regret in his eyes. “Roz used to have that kind of confidence in me.”

“Maybe she doesn’t anymore because of all the shit you’re always up to. And instead of explaining to her what you’re doing, you tell her nothing. You expect her to just trust you or figure it out for herself. It don’t work like that, Mick. How many times do I have to tell your ass that?”

Mick let out a harsh exhale and leaned his head back, his sleepy eye almost closed. “How can I be so successful in my chosen professions, and so fucking clueless where it

matters most to me?" Then Mick shook his head. "I don't have God's favor."

Roz's heart dropped, and her face became a mask of despair.

But Big Daddy became combative. "That's a dirty lie," he said to his brother. "What do you mean you don't have His favor?"

"Because I don't," Mick shot back, not backing down. "I'm not lucky, or blessed, or whatever they call it. I'm just not. I knew that all my life."

"You knew it hun? So you're the genius that knew it, hun? So tell me this, genius: Who woke you up this morning? You? Who kept you in great health all these years even with all that craziness you been up to? You? And here you are running around thinking you're a self-made man when there's no such thing. You're a God-made man just like the rest of us. He gave us life. If we blow the life He gave us? That ain't on Him. That's on us."

Mick stared at his brother. He knew he spoke the truth, but he'd never tell him that in a million years. A billion. "You're a ray of sunshine, you know that?"

Big Daddy had to smile. “I got your sunshine right here,” he said, gesturing. But then both of them realized why they had come together, and the mood sank again.

And that was when Roz pushed away from the door she stood in front of and made her way to her husband.

Mick and Big Daddy turned when they saw her coming. Neither had heard her even enter the office. But Mick turned all the way around when she walked up to him. He looked at her. She stared at him. And as she stared with that knowing, loving look nobody else had ever given to Mick, tears began to appear in his eyes. Which shocked even Big Daddy. And Roz pulled him into her arms. She held onto him. He held onto her. And they grieved for their baby. They grieved for Michello Sinatra, Junior. Their Duke.

Until a knock was heard on the office door, and the door was quickly opened by Teddy and Nikki.

Mick and Roz stopped embracing and Mick turned his back to Teddy as he wiped away tears.

Teddy was pleased to see his mother and stepmother hugging it out, considering how everything shook out earlier that day. But he still had to handle the business at hand. “They bosses are here, Pop,” he said.

“The bosses?” asked Big Daddy as Mick turned around. “Who are the bosses?”

“The heads of the East Coast families in an alliance with us. They heard the news. I put them in the main guest house.”

“Which ones are back there?” asked Mick.

Teddy was still getting over it himself. “All of them,” he said.

Mick was shocked. “*All* of them?”

“Every single one, Pop. Even Monk Paletti up in there. Somebody snatch Mick the Tick’s kid is like an affront to them too. Because if they could do that shit to you, what would they do to them? They wanna help.”

Mick wasn’t turning down any help when it came to getting his son back home. He was about to leave, but Roz grabbed his arm. “One of them could be the kidnapper hiding in plain sight,” she said. “I’m going with you.”

Mick wouldn’t normally let Roz do any such thing. She might have been on the very secretive board of governors of his syndicate, but that was as far as he allowed her involvement in that aspect of his life. But in Mick’s eyes

nobody was a better judge of character than Roz, except for maybe Mick himself. He left the room without responding to her. But all of them knew what that meant. If Mick didn't nix the idea, then the idea was accepted by him. Roz, along with Big Daddy and Teddy and Nikki too, followed behind him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mick, Roz, Teddy, Nikki and Big Daddy stood in front of the room. And Teddy was right: all the heads of the East Coast families were there. And they were led by Frankie “The Monk” Paletti, who ruled Jersey and was nicknamed Monk because, compared to the other bosses, he tried to live a clean life. He was a part of the Sinatra family because his wife was Big Daddy’s adopted daughter Ashley, and his best friend was Teddy T.

Sitting next to Monk was Moby Giancarna, who was too low level to be in that kind of meeting, but word on the street was that Mick was looking for him. Monk found him and brought him along.

Then there were the top three of the bosses: Hank “the Dean” Montiglio, Tony Pinzarno, and Fritz Bellarmo. Mick had known all three of them for decades. He was touched by their presence. Although he was still staring at Moby.

“Any news yet, Micky?” asked Tony Pinzarno. He and Tony used to run a shakedown racket in west Philadelphia back in the day.

“No news,” Mick said. “They said they’d get in contact tomorrow morning. 8 a.m..”

“Those fuckers making you wait all night for news about your child?” asked Fritz Bellarmo, the hotheaded boss Mick used to rely on for muscle back in the day. “Who they think they’re dealing with? Bruno the Clown? That’s some cold-ass shit right there.”

“No, the cold-ass shit was snatching his boy to begin with,” said Monk Paletti. “That’s when the shit got cold.”

The bosses echoed with *amens*. One took his hand to make a sign of the cross across his upper body.

“We just wanted to come and let you know we have all our guys on the streets searching for Junior,” said the Dean. “And when I say all, I mean all, Micky. We will leave no stone unturned to bring your boy back safe and sound, and to crush those monsters wherever we find them. A hit on you is a hit on all of us, and it will always be that way.”

The other bosses echoed the Dean.

“We wanted to come here personally to let you know we’re doing all we can.”

“But no leads?” asked Mick.

Teddy had expected Pop to say thank you. So did every other boss in that room. But they all knew he wasn't that kind of man. The Dean shook their head. "Sadly no leads," he said.

"There ain't even no talk about who it might be," said Tony Pinzarno. "Nobody don't know nothing on the streets."

"Somebody knows something," said Teddy. "That's a fact. Their asses just not telling what they know."

"I see it like Teddy T sees it," said Fritz Bellarmo. "Somebody got to know something. We been leaning hard on our snitches. But they lean back with nothing."

Monk looked at Mick. "I heard you got shot when they snatched Duke, Uncle Mick. You okay?"

Big Daddy looked at his brother. He hadn't heard that! "That true?"

"It didn't penetrate my skin," Mick said as if it was nothing. "They weren't trying to kill me. Just slow me down."

"They must not be as foolish as we think they are," said Pinzarno. "They would be writing their own death

certificate if they iced the fucking king of the fucking mountain.”

“What are you nuts, Tony?” asked an irritated Mick. “They wrote their own death certificates when they snatched my son. Those bastards are gonna wish they had killed me when I get my hands on them.”

Roz didn't like hearing Mick talk like that. Teddy didn't either. But they both agreed with him. They both had vengeance on their minds too. But Duke coming home safe trumped all else.

“We just wanted you to know that we got your back, Boss,” said Pinzarno. “We're gonna bring your boy home safe. You can take that shit to the bank.”

“Thank you,” Roz said even if Mick couldn't pull himself to say it. Because Mick was staring at Moby. He still wasn't convinced there was no tie-in. “Been hiding from me, Mobe?” he asked him.

But Moby just sat there, slumped down, like he knew his ass was on the grill. Monk Paletti looked at him. “What are you crazy? Got a fucking death wish? The Don talking to you. And your ass ignoring him?”

“He gonna kill me for something I didn’t do. He’s gonna kill me!”

“Ain’t nobody killing nobody,” said Teddy, and Moby looked up at him. “Especially if you didn’t do anything. Just tell him what you know.”

He took some comfort in knowing that Teddy T, whom everybody in the mob world respected and knew was the most powerful boss now that Mick turned the Sinatra crime family over to him, took his demise off the table. But Mick hadn’t taken it off, and Mick was still the boss of all bosses.

But he knew Frankie was right too. He had to speak up. “I was just talking bullshit about you, Boss,” said Moby. “But it wasn’t me who was pulling any strings. I was just going around running my mouth. That’s all I did.”

“What were you running your mouth about?” asked Teddy.

“That thing. That video. But not that other thing. I don’t know nothing about who snatched your boy.”

“What about that video?” asked Roz. She and Teddy had a vested interest in knowing the truth.

“Was it A.I.?” asked Teddy.

Moby frowned. “What the fuck is A.I.?”

“Was that tape doctored?” asked Roz.

“Oh. Yeah it was.”

“How?” asked Teddy. “Beavis and Butthead smarter than your ass, but you was able to doctor video? How?”

“It wasn’t me. I’m telling you it wasn’t me.”

“Just tell us how,” said Bellarmo. All of the bosses had heard about that video too. “Forget who did it. Just tell us how it was done.”

“They filmed Mick in a hotel room one time. With a woman. Only they replaced her with your old lady, Teddy. With Nikki.”

Roz steeled herself. “How long ago was he filmed in this hotel room with some woman?”

“I don’t know. Years ago.”

“Before he met his wife?” asked Teddy. Nikki was off the hood, but he wanted Pop off it too.

But Moby was no help. “I don’t know about none of that. I just know it was years and years ago and whoever he

was fucking they managed to make it look like it was your old lady. That's all I know how it was done."

"Who doctored it, Moby?" asked Mick, who didn't seem to care if he was off the hook or not. In his mind, he had no business being on the hood.

When Moby didn't want to answer, Monk elbowed him again. "You got a death wish? Answer the Don's question!"

"Vito," Moby said. "Vito Lanza had it doctored and sent to your wife. He ordered your ship blown up too."

Mick frowned. "Vito?"

"How the hell Vito Lanza got the reach to blow up a Mick Sinatra boat?" asked Sal.

But Mick was still getting over the who. "Why would Vito do all of that?" he asked Moby.

"How should I know? He's crazy like that."

Mick stared at him. It was the same answer Vito had said about Moby. Now Moby was saying it about Vito? Something stank. "That's all you got to say?"

"That's all I know!" declared Moby.

Mick pulled out his Magnum and pressed it against Moby's forehead. "That's all you go to say?"

Everybody froze. They knew Mick wouldn't hesitate to use it if he thought Moby was jerking his chain. But Moby was too small potatoes to waste a bullet on. But nobody dared say that to Mick.

But it worked. Moby suddenly had a little more to say. "It's all about the territory. He's tired of being everybody's floormat. He wants in with the big boys. With all of you. That's why he did it."

Roz frowned. "That's why he doctored a video?"

"That's why he blew up that ship. I don't know why he did that video. I just know he did it. He's crazy like that."

Mick stared at Moby a moment longer. Then he withdrew his gun from the man's forehead. And he looked at Teddy. "Safe house his ass, with torture, until he gets a better memory."

"Yes, sir," Teddy said. "Come on, Mobe," he added as he and Nikki grabbed Moby by the arm and escorted him out of the house.

Then Mick looked at the bosses. “Keep your guys on the streets. Let me personally know if they turn up any talk or anything else regarding my son. And I mean anything.”

The bosses all agreed to do just that, and then they got up and one by one paid homage to Mick by kissing his hand. They shook Nikki and Roz’s hands. But Big Daddy stayed further back. He knew how those guys made a living. He wanted no parts of them.

Except for his son-in-law Monk Paletti. “How you doing, Frankie?” he asked when Monk went over to him. They embraced, Big Daddy asked how his daughter Ashley was faring, and they walked out together. And then all of the bosses were gone. That left Mick and Roz.

“They weren’t very helpful, were they?” Roz asked.

“Nope,” Mick agreed.

“And you think Moby knows where Duke might be?”

“If I thought that he wouldn’t have left my side. He doesn’t know much. But he knows more than he’s telling because he probably helped Vito Lanza blow up my ship, or send you that video. His hands aren’t clean.”

Then Roz exhaled and looked at her husband. “I should have believed you, Mick,” she said heartfelt.

He knew she was talking about that video. “You should have believed me, or your lying eyes?” Then he nodded. “Yes, you should have believed me. I don’t care what you see. You gotta know it’s me. Not the monster the world says I am. But me. The man you know I am. And not because of what that liar Moby Giancarna is saying either. But because of what I said.” Then he ran his hand across his face. It was obvious even to Roz that that he didn’t give a shit about that video. And right now, with Duke still gone and nobody knowing a damn thing, neither did she.

He put both arms around her and pulled her against him. She put her arms around him, too, and they stood there for several minutes. Then they slowly walked back to the house to await that phone call: that infamous call the kidnappers promised would come tomorrow morning.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Overnight, everybody had arrived.

Tommy Gabrini brought along his wife and three children: his entire family. But it was expected. They always traveled in a pack.

Reno and Trina and Sal and Gemma flew in together on Reno's plane. With Jimmy and Dominic holding it down in Vegas with the children, they didn't want any distractions. Amelia were there too. When asked where was Hammer, she gave her stock answer: wherever he wanted to be.

Oz Drakos and Gloria Sinatra-Drakos arrived too, with their young child. Oz's big brother, billionaire Alex Drakos, would have been there too, but he was out of the country on business. Oz would represent the family. Marco, Teddy's grown son from a different woman, also made an appearance.

They all hung out in the dining room, the kitchen, and the living room just catching up, but mainly just trying to make sense of why somebody would think it made good sense to kidnap Mick's son. They also fielded numerous calls from

everybody else in the vast network of family who wasn't there, but wanted to stay in the loop.

And then, at eight am that next morning, the Gabrini men, along with Mick, Big Daddy, Roz and Amelia, all waited in Mick's office. Even a knife couldn't slice the thick tension that filled the room. And it they didn't know before that they were on a war footing, they knew it when they saw Mick that morning decked down in his war clothes: his long, white, customized overcoat, his black trousers, his black turtleneck. Mick was ready.

But when no phone call came at eight, nor at eight-ten, eight-fifteen, eight-twenty, everybody started getting so antsy that Sal excused himself and went out to Mick's courtyard to take a cigarette break.

And then, at eight-thirty-two, a text message came over Mick's phone stating that they would phone shortly with their demands.

"Why are they torturing us like this?" asked a bewildered Roz as she stood beside Mick behind his desk.

"Get Sal," Mick ordered Reno. Behind Mick's syndicate headed by Teddy, Sal was the head of the second

most powerful syndicate in the land. “I want him in the room when this call comes through.”

Reno went and got Sal, who stood on Mick’s outside in Mick’s courtyard smoking, which surprised Reno. He thought Sal quit smoking decades ago. But Sal squashed that cigarette and came running back inside.

And now, with all of the heads of the families in his office, the call came in. Mick urged the kidnappers to show him proof of life or no deal would be made. And they showed him. Mick placed the now video call on his big screen. And they all saw Duke, sitting in a chair where even his glasses couldn’t hide his fear as he got flippant with the kidnappers, calling them *ravin’ lunatic assholes*, and received a hit upside his head. Roz and everybody else in that room screamed for Duke to shut the hell up and to do whatever those kidnappers told him to do. Everybody yelled. Except Mick. He was too distressed to say a word.

And then the demand came: They wanted Roz in exchange for Duke.

Mick wasn’t about to make any exchanges unless it was him for his son. “Take me,” Mick yelled at the kidnappers. But his son’s captors were adamant. They didn’t

want the most powerful mobster on earth: they wanted that mobster's wife. As if they wanted to break him down piece by piece. And they wanted her delivered to them behind an old shuttered glass factory off of Drysdale. And she had thirty minutes to get there or she would never see her son again. Mick begged them to take him instead. He was the king of the mountain. He'd give his life for his son. But the kidnappers still refused. Roz for Duke. Period. Then they ended the call.

When Mick balked at the idea of his beloved wife risking her life, everybody, led by Roz herself, jumped on his case. She had to do it. They had no choice. Their baby's life was at stake!

But when Mick continued to refuse to even entertain the idea, as he tried to come up with a better solution, Roz panicked and took off running. They didn't have all day. They only had thirty minutes. Mick tried to stop her. It took Reno, Sal, and Tommy to try and stop Mick from running after Roz. Because there was no choice. There was no better solution. The kidnappers wanted her and her only and she had to get their child.

But there was no way Mick was going to let Roz go in captivity too. He fought off each one of those Gabrini men as

if he was in a battle royale, broke free, and ran out of that office. No way was he going to let those assholes have his son *and* his wife too. No way.

By the time Mick made it up front, Roz was heading for the exit with Teddy, Nikki, Amelia and Big Daddy running behind her. Jackie was watching too. She was terrified. Grace and Gemma grabbed her and took her to the back. She didn't need to see all of that drama.

As they took Jackie away, Mick pushed everybody aside and grabbed Roz just as she was opening the front door. He slammed the door back shut and flung her against the wall.

“What did I tell you?” he yelled. He was scared out of his mind. “You aren't going!”

But Roz was equally terrified. “They'll kill Duke if I don't go, Mick. I have to go.”

“I'm going. I told you I'm doing it.”

“But they don't want you. They already told you that. They want me.”

“They can't have you.”

“Why are you acting like this? You know I have to go. You know I can handle it.”

“But I can’t!” Mick yelled out from the top of his lungs, stunning everybody in that foyer. Including Roz.

But Mick wasn’t backing down. He was breathing heavily, as if he was on the verge of collapse himself. But he was still in charge. “You are not going. I’m handling it. End of discussion!”

“But if they don’t see a woman, it’s over for Duke. They won’t even entertain seeing you.” Roz had a plea in her voice. “They have to see a woman.”

“They’ll see me,” said Amelia.

Everybody looked at her. Big Daddy frowned. “What are you saying, Millie?”

“Roz and I are about the same size. From a distance nobody’s gonna notice my complexion is a little lighter. Especially white fuckers who think we all look alike. I put on her clothes and carry myself in that bougie way Roz carries herself, I’ll be able to disguise myself enough to be convincing.”

But her brothers weren’t convinced. “No way,” said Mick.

“No,” said Big Daddy.

“Y’all know I can handle those fuckers better than any woman in this house,” added Amelia. “And that includes you, too, Roz. Because you’re right. A woman has to be in that SUV. It has to be me.”

“She’s right.”

Everybody turned. It was Reno. “There’s no getting around it. She’s right. I know Millie’s your precious little sister, but let’s keep it real. Her ass as gangster as any man I’ve ever known. For real though.”

But Roz wasn’t trying to put her son’s life into anybody’s hands but hers and Mick’s. “Let me do it, Mick,” she pleaded. “I don’t want anything to go wrong.”

Mick was anguished. He knew Amelia could handle it the best should they need to improvise. But she was his baby sister!

“We’re running out of time, Uncle Mick,” said Sal. “Reno’s right. Millie’s the best person for the job.”

“What’s wrong with you people?” asked a flustered Roz. “Millie can put it all on the line, but I can’t?”

“I can handle it better than you can,” said Amelia. “I’m just saying. I can handle it.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Yes, she can.”

When they heard Big Daddy’s voice, they all looked at him. They knew he and Amelia were extremely close. They could see the anguish in his bright green eyes too. “I hate to admit it, but it’s true. It has to be a woman there. It’s got to be Amelia. We have no choice.”

Mick knew it too. And he made up his mind. “Exchange clothes,” he said to Amelia and Roz. But Roz just stood there. “Now!” he yelled.

And as Roz and Amelia exchanged outer garments, everybody turned their backs. All except Mick and Big Daddy, who were working out the details. “You’re taking one of your tricked out Escalades I presume.”

Mick didn’t have to answer that. He knew he was.

“Who’ll be in the bottom compartment?”

“Sal and Reno, you come with me,” said Mick. “Teddy, I want you and Nikki to get in my chopper and do aerial surveillance. But use the scope and keep your distance. Slap a news channel logo on the side just in case they spy you

out. Tommy, you and Charles will stay here to hold down the home front.”

“Just be careful, Uncle Mick,” Tommy said as his gorgeous eyes seemed as worried as Roz. “We don’t know who we’re dealing with yet.”

Mick nodded. Tommy was his favorite nephew, even though he’d never admit it. But Tommy had been through hell and back because of his great looks. He’d been abused and mistreated throughout the whole of his childhood. But Tommy still grew up to be a man’s man. Tougher in a lot of ways than tough guys Reno and Sal. Had Mick known what he was going through at the time, he would have killed any bastard that mistreated him. He and Tommy had a bond.

But as Roz changed clothes with Amelia, she was looking at Mick the whole time, her eyes beyond worried now. They looked devastated. “What if they know it’s not me and they won’t give Duke back? What are you going to do then, Mick?”

Mick hated to be questioned. “Improvise,” he said.

But it was that kind of arrogant response that angered Roz no end. If Duke’s life wasn’t at stake, she would have

slapped the shit out of Mick. But her baby's life was at stake. And they had no time to lose.

But Mick saw her anguish, and answered more thoughtfully. "They'll have to turn him over before Millie gets out of my SUV," he said to Roz.

"I'm ready," Amelia said. And they were all impressed at how much she did favor Roz dressed like her. But only if you looked at her body and not her face. They were nothing alike in the face.

Mick looked at Big Daddy. "Charles," he said, "Roz isn't going to listen to anybody but you. Don't let her leave this house. Her ass has to piss, you go in that bathroom with her. Do not let her out of your sight I don't care how much she complains. She'll give you the slip if you aren't careful."

"Don't worry about her." Big Daddy gave Roz a hard look. "She's not going anywhere."

Then Mick, satisfied, was about to take off, with Amelia right behind him. But Roz grabbed him by the arm. He stopped and looked at her. "Bring our boy back home, Mick," she pleaded.

Mick's heart went out to her. He truly loved that one particular lady. And he broke down that wall he always kept erected whenever prying eyes were near, and hugged her. Reno and Sal even glanced at each other when he did. Tommy and Big Daddy glanced at each other, too, with a hopeful nod.

But it was a very momentary knockdown. Because as quickly as Mick had dropped his defenses and hugged the love of his life, those defenses returned. He looked hard again. Old. And then he was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The drive to the shuttered glass factory should have taken fifteen minutes. By the way Mick flew in his big Cadillac Escalade, one of a fleet of his customized Escalades that he owned all across the country, he was on pace to get there in less than five. Philly cops would often attempt to go after that speeding tank of an SUV, but whenever they saw that tag they never did. Because they all knew that tag. It was customized and simple: MS-1.

Amelia sat shotgun on the front passenger seat. She was checking her weapons furiously given the short amount of time she knew Mick's speeding would give her.

Mick glanced at her. He hated that she was there for him to worry about too, but if anybody could handle themselves, he knew she could. But she could be gun-ho too. "Your ass better follow my directions," he said to her. "No false move. Do what I tell you to do and nothing more."

"This isn't my first rodeo, pal," Amelia reminded Mick. Back in the day, she was a drug queen pin who evoked terror in the hearts of anybody that crossed her. She didn't

even know she was a Sinatra at the time, but she was a Sinatra through and through. The good, the bad, the ugly. “I’m not trying to rock the boat. I just want my nephew home safe and sound same as everybody else.”

Mick knew it too. He was fortunate to have her with him. Which made him think of Reno and Sal. “You two okay underneath?” he yelled out at them.

Reno and Sal were in a compartment that was underneath the customized Escalade. Although it was roomy enough for them to lay there comfortably, it wasn’t ideal by any stretch. “We’re okay,” said Sal, “but slow your ass down, Uncle Mick. We can feel every bump.”

“You drive like a fool,” added Reno. “Don’t wreck this *gotdamn* tank!”

Amelia laughed. “We oughta make you bounce, Reno.”

“I got your bounce, Millie,” Reno shot back. “I got your bounce!”

And although Amelia laughed again, it quickly died by the weight of why they were going to that factory to begin with.

And within six minutes of leaving the house, Mick pulled up behind the old Belzer's glass factory, a company that ceased operations years ago. Now it was just one of many abandoned buildings around the city.

Mick pressed Teddy's icon on the vehicle's screen. After a couple rings, Teddy answered. "What up, Pop?"

"Where are you?"

"A few blocks over to the southwest."

Mick looked in that direction. "I still don't see you."

"I see you," said Teddy. "If we see shit jumping off we'll be there."

Mick wanted to ask if Nikki was okay, but he didn't want to play into the family folklore of him favoring her and all that other shit. He loved her, there was no doubt about that. He liked the way she handled herself. But people took it too far. He ended the call.

And they waited. The thirty minutes came and went. Then another fifteen minutes. But nobody came. Nobody called.

"These are the tardiest motherfuckers I've ever seen," said Amelia. "They're never on time."

But that was just Amelia's anxiousness. She volunteered for the assignment, but that didn't mean it was easy for her. She was terrified. And she knew Hammer would kill her and try to kill Mick if he knew she was there. But Hammer was another conversation altogether.

"What the fuck?"

Amelia quickly looked at Mick. "What?" Then she looked where Mick was looking. And sure enough, on the top floor of that factory, they saw what had to be an army of rifles pointing out of those windows. "*Shit!*" Amelia yelled just as Mick knocked her head down, slung his car's gear into Reverse, and began speeding backwards as the bullets began to sail from those rifles.

"Siri, phone Teddy!" Mick yelled and *Siri* phoned Teddy.

"What the fuck is going on, Uncle Mick?" yelled Reno.

"Don't come up here!" Mick decried as he was speeding backwards so fast that his tank of an SUV was swerving away more than it was moving in a straight line.

"*Gotdamn, Pop,*" said Teddy. "What's going on?"

“Don’t come in this area! We’re no match. Don’t come in that area!”

Bullets could be heard pounding against the metal of the armored SUV as Mick sped backwards to get himself and his team out of harm’s way. Even the windows were loaded with bullets that couldn’t penetrate the customization, but Mick was taking no chances just in case one did. And then he flung his Escalade around as if it was a sportscar, almost flipping it, and then he sped away as the bullets continued to pepper his armored vehicle as if it was open season. Nearly three hundred rounds hit his Escalade, but not one single bullet penetrated. It was a new addition to Mick’s personal vehicle customization. Just in time.

Reno and Sal came up from the bottom compartment when they could hear that Mick was out of gunfire range. “What the fuck!” said Reno. “I heard bullets ricocheting off of this tank like it was rain!”

But Mick wasn’t done yet. He slammed on brakes just as he drove beyond the front of that factory, flung his gear into Park, and got out of his SUV.

Everybody was shocked. “What are you doing?” decried Reno.

“Get back in this car, Uncle Mick!” decried Sal.

“He’s crazy!” said a terrified Amelia.

But Mick was crazy like a fox. As he was running toward the front entrance of that factory, he pulled out a pipe bomb from his white coat, unpinned it, and then tossed it through an upstairs window.

It blew before Mick could run back to his SUV, causing him to dive for cover, and it even rocked his big Escalade. Reno and Sal hopped out, to help Mick, but he was already getting up and running toward them. They all got in and Mick sped away, even as the entire factory was engulfed in flames.

“That’s how you do that shit!” Reno proclaimed.

But as Mick was driving away, he kept angrily hitting the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. Because he knew they never intended to give him Duke. They just wanted to kill.

“They didn’t have the balls to take you out at that football game,” said Reno, “but their asses had no problem with it this time. And they thought they were taking out Roz too? They just up the motherfucking stakes, Uncle Mick.”

“And we still don’t have Duke,” said a worried Amelia.

The thought crossed all of their minds that Duke could have been in that factory too, but Mick was certain he wasn’t before he launched the bomb. They would have shown Duke before they showed their weapons if Duke was there. Duke would have been their trump card. The fact that he wasn’t with them, made Mick certain it wasn’t about a kidnapping. It was about something far more sinister. He just didn’t know what.

“Maybe Millie needs to call in Hammer Reese,” said a concerned Sal. His heart was bleeding for Duke.

“I did that already,” Amelia responded. “I did that when I first got the word.”

Mick looked at her angrily. “I thought I told you no cops, Amelia.”

“He’s no cop. He’s my husband. He knows what this family is about.”

“What did he say when you called him?” asked Sal.

“Nothing. He doesn’t answer my calls these days.”

“I’ll bet he’ll answer Uncle Mick’s,” said Reno.

“Damn right,” said Sal.

Then Mick’s phone began to ring. He pressed the button quickly. “What?”

“Not very smart.” It was the kidnapper.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” yelled an angry Mick. “Your ass tried to kill me and my wife!”

“Don’t you mean your sister?”

Amelia’s heart dropped.

“Where’s my son?” Mick asked anxiously.

“You run everything. At least you think you do. You aren’t running this.” And then the call went dead.

“*Goddammit!*” Mick yelled out angrily. He was so enraged that he took his fist and violently smashed his car screen.

“Damn, Uncle Mick,” said Sal. “Just cuss like the rest of us. That’ll help the situation better than destroying everything.”

And that was when it clicked. Mick quickly looked at Sal through the rearview. “What did you say?” he asked him.

Even Sal hesitated before continuing. Mick had that look about him that gave even a hard man like Sal some pause. “I said just cuss. It’ll help the situation better.”

Mick knew it was something he was missing. And that was it! He put the pedal to the metal and sped so fast that everybody in the car, including Mick, jerked forward.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The double doors to Mick's house flew open and Mick, Amelia, and Reno and Sal hurried in. Roz, Tommy, and Big Daddy, along with Trina, Grace, and Gemma were waiting at the door. Teddy and Nikki had just arrived ahead of the team and they were at the door too. All were anxiously waiting to hear what happened. They already knew something had gone horribly wrong. Teddy and Nikki told them that. But what went wrong?

“Mick, where's Duke?” Roz was the first to ask when they walked in. “Where's my baby?”

Mick looked at her with a look so distressed that she knew he had no idea where their son was. And her heart just sank.

But Mick didn't break his stride. He couldn't. As others were asking questions, too, he was hurrying to his office. Everybody followed behind him as he sat behind his desk, pressed buttons that opened that TV cabinet on the wall and revealed that huge TV screen again. Then he played back

the video of Duke they had seen when Mick demanded proof of life.

“What is it, Mick?” Roz asked, her eyes, like everybody else’s, glued to that video.

“I knew it was something I was missing,” said Mick, “but I had too much in my head. And too much fear,” he admitted. Then the part came up that he was waiting to hear. It was when Duke cussed at his captors. But it was Duke’s glasses that held Mick’s attention. “That’s why he used that profanity.”

“Why?” asked Tommy.

“To prolong the view. To help the situation,” he added, remembering the way Sal had put it when Mick had punched out his SUV’s screen.

Big Daddy frowned. “But what view are you talking about?”

“The view in his glasses,” said Mick as he zoomed into Duke’s glasses. “That was why he kept his eyes on the kidnapers. That was why he used profanity, because he knew it would prolong his time on screen. There it is.”

“What?” asked an anxious Roz.

“That view,” Mick said when he zoomed in even tighter to see the reflection in Duke’s eyeglasses.

But when he saw who was in that reflection, he jumped to his feet.

“I’ll be *gotdamn*,” said Sal when he saw who it was too.

“Those were the guys that were here earlier,” said a shocked Roz. “Those are the very same mob bosses that came to kiss your ring and declare how they were going to help you find our son.”

“When they were the kidnapers all along,” said Teddy as they watched on screen as Hank “the dean” Montiglio and Tony Pinzarno and Fritz Bellarmo stood in the background as one of their capos questioned Duke. Those were Mick’s friends. They went back decades. Everybody was shocked.

But Mick was enraged.

“I told you it could have been one of them. But I was just talking,” said a flustered Roz. “What do we do now?” She looked at Mick.

Mick looked at his brother. “Contact Frankie,” Mick said.

“What’s Monk Paletti got to do with this?” asked Teddy. “He’s not in on it.”

“I know that,” said Mick. “But he left around the same time those fuckers did.” Mick looked at Big Daddy again. “Find out if he knows where their asses went.”

“Got it,” Big Daddy said as he walked out of earshot to get his son-in-law on the phone.

“Wait a minute,” Roz said.

Everybody looked at her. “What is it, Ma?” Teddy asked her.

“Mick, go back to when Duke cussed them out.”

Mick quickly rewound the video to the conversation. “Right there,” Roz said. And they listened:

“Tell your father who we are,” the kidnapper said.

“You’re ravin’ lunatic assholes, that’s who you are,” said Duke.

And then the brunt of a rifle hit Duke upside his head.

“That’s it,” said Roz as Mick stopped the recording.

“What’s it?” asked Reno’s wife Trina.

“That word. *Ravin*’. I’ve never heard Duke use that word before ever.”

“Me either.”

When they heard that voice, they all turned toward the office door. And there was Duke’s twin, standing in the doorway. Looking lost. “He doesn’t talk like that,” Jackie added.

Mick went over to his distraught youngest child and pulled her into his arms. “It’s going to be alright,” he said to her. “We’re bring him back home.”

Jackie was crying. “I know you will, Daddy.”

Mick walked back over to his desk with Jackie still in his arms.

“Let one of the ladies take her out of here,” said Reno. “She doesn’t need to hear this.”

“Yes, she does,” said Mick. “It’s her brother. Her twin. No more excluding her.”

“Thanks, Daddy,” said Jackie.

Roz had rewind it again while Mick was taking care of Jackie.

“What are you hearing?” Mick asked Roz.

“That he went off script to say words that doesn’t even sound like his words.”

“Which means?” asked Reno.

“That he’s trying to tell us something,” said Tommy.

“It has to be that,” agreed Roz.

“Ravin’ lunatic? What is that?” asked Reno.

“What is he telling us?” asked a frustrated Teddy.

Then Mick realized what. “Baltimore,” he said.

They all looked at him. “Baltimore?” asked a confused Teddy who spoke for all them.

“Why Baltimore?” asked Roz.

“The Ravens,” said Nikki. “The Baltimore Ravens football team.” She looked at all of them. “He called them *ravin*’ assholes to let us know he’s being held in Baltimore.”

“I’ll be *gotdamn*!” said Reno. “That shit makes sense!”

“Who runs Baltimore?” asked Tommy.

“I do,” said Amelia, whose home base was Baltimore, Maryland.

“Your ass got no business running anything,” said Big Daddy.

“The Dean, Hank Montiglio, runs most of the territory over there,” said Sal.

“You’re right,” Mick said. “And he lives there.”

“I’ll be damn,” said Teddy. “The Dean masterminding this whole kidnapping? I never would have believed it.”

Big Daddy, who was listening to the others while he spoke with Monk Paletti, ended his call.

“What did Frankie say?” Teddy asked him.

“Monk flew over on his own plane. But he said everybody else flew over on, get this: Hank Montiglio’s plane.”

Mick nodded. “They all were on the Dean’s plane. Which meant they all met up on his turf. That confirms it. Duke’s in Baltimore. Good thinking, Nikki,” he added, because she was the one who figured it out. He didn’t care what others thought.

“His ass was probably never being held in Philly anyway,” said Teddy. “They got him off of your turf as fast as they got him away from that ballpark.”

“You and Nikki get the chopper ready,” Mick said to his son. “The big one,” he added.

“Should we contact our guys on the ground in Baltimore?”

“Contact Pax only,” said Mick. “Fill him in. The Baltimore team is already on high alert just like every team I have in every city on the east coast. Tell him to order the team to find the Dean’s location, but don’t tell them why. I don’t want the Dean’s guys hearing shit about what we know.”

“Got it,” said Teddy, and he and Nikki took off.

Mick looked at Grace. She nodded her head and began walking toward Jackie. Then he looked at Jackie, who was clinging to him like an item of clothing. “I want you to go with Aunt Grace,” he said to his youngest.

Jackie didn’t want to leave his side. She felt safe beside him. But Roz went to her and put her arm around her. “It’s okay, J. Daddy’s gonna bring Duke home, okay? But you’ve got to let him get to work.”

Jackie understood that. “Yes, ma’am,” she said with tear-stained eyes, and Grace went to her, placed her arm around her, and was escorting her out of the office. But Jackie

broke free and went back to Roz and threw her arms around her, sobbing.

As Roz comforted Jackie some more, Mick had no choice. He hurried over to what looked like a wall, but he entered a code and the wall opened. It was packed with weaponry.

“This what I’m talking about,” said Reno as he rubbed his hands together and then began grabbing what he felt he needed. Sal did the same.

“How many guys you think you’ll need?” asked Big Daddy. “Teddy said there was an army of men at that factory ambushing you.”

“He’s right. But Millie, you stay back with Charles to protect the home front. I need Reno, Sal, and Tommy with me.”

Grace’s heart sank when she heard Tommy’s name, but she knew they had to get Duke back.

Tommy could feel her anxiety. He wasn’t as steeped into that life as the rest of them were. Although Dapper Tom had no issue with becoming Backdoor Tommy when he had to be, it was no longer an everyday thing. Grace and their

children had grown used to him as business mogul, father, and husband only. But they knew he was a Gabrini. He sometimes had to put on that other hat too. This was one of those times.

Tommy went to Grace and gave her a hug and a squeeze. The men in the family always got on his case for coddling Grace too much, but it was the only way he knew how to love. She and the kids were his life, not all that other shit. “It’ll be okay,” he whispered to her as he kissed her, and then he went over to the gun closet and loaded up too.

Roz was able to calm Jackie back down enough so that Grace could get her out of there. When Grace escorted Jackie out of the office, Mick looked at Roz. He already knew what she was going to say. But this time, he agreed with her. And to her ever-loving gratitude, he didn’t make her beg. “You’re going too, babe,” he said to her. “Load up.”

Everybody was surprised. Mick used to never let Roz do shit when it came to assignments. Not that she couldn’t handle it. They all knew she could. But Mick used to never let her even try.

Roz didn’t have to be told twice. To Amelia and Big Daddy’s shock, she bogarted her way into that closet before

Mick changed his mind, and loaded up even more than anybody else was loading.

Reno looked at Roz and then looked at Mick. “Of all the women in this world who would have given body parts to be with you; of all the sweet, kind, innocent beautiful ladies: you married a gangster, Uncle Mick.”

They all chuckled. But Mick and Roz, with their baby boy in what they knew was grave danger, couldn't bring themselves to do even that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The big chopper landed in an open field on the outskirts of Baltimore, and Mick and Roz, and Reno, Sal, and Tommy, and Teddy and Nikki all hopped off and made their way to the big white Escalade waiting with the driver by its side.

“Is there any city in this country where you don’t have one of these big-ass tanks, Uncle Mick?” asked Reno. They heard that Mick was a billionaire, but with all the toys he had to have just to exist on a daily basis and fight off the terrorists that were always seeking to terrorize their family, they were beginning to understand just how mega-rich he truly was to be able to maintain what he had to maintain.

But Mick didn’t discuss his fortune with anybody. That was his business.

“Wait with the chopper,” Mick ordered the driver of the Escalade as he opened the front passenger door for Roz, helped her in, and then got in behind the steering wheel. As soon as he sat down, his cell phone rang. He answered the call.

While he was talking on his phone, Reno, Sal, and Tommy got in on the middle row of the SUV, while Teddy and Nikki sat on the back row.

“Something is wrong with this picture,” Teddy said as soon as they all sat down.

“What’s wrong with it?” asked Sal.

“I can understand Pop and Roz on the front seat. They’re the heads of the family. But here I am the head of the most powerful syndicate in the world, not just in the country but in the world, and Nikki’s my underboss, and we’re still bringing up the rear?”

All three of the Gabrinis turned around and looked at him. “Who you think was gonna bring it up?” asked Sal. “Us?”

“You might be the top dog in the top echelon of the mob world,” said Reno, “but in the top echelon of this family you and Nikki ass dead last.” Teddy and Nikki smiled because they knew Reno would have tons to say about it.

And Reno kept talking. “We were at the top of the mob before your asses knew what a mob was. Now Tommy’s a billionaire business mogul. Sal’s only the number two mob

boss because Uncle Mick still runs Uncle Mick's outfit and don't you forget it Teddy T."

"Okay, I hear you, Reno," said Teddy. "But all you told me about was Sal and Tommy. What about you? Why your ass ahead of us?"

"Because I'm the king of Vegas. Because my ass will stomp your ass like a roach you disrespect me. Because I'm Reno motherfucking Gabrini, who was big before anybody else in this tank was big. Except for Uncle Mick. That's why, motherfucker!"

Teddy and Nikki laughed. That was Reno. But Sal, who had his fill of Reno, faced front again.

"They like pushing your buttons, Reno," said Tommy as he faced front again, "and you, *being you*, always fall right into their trap and let them."

"They better be glad they're in the same atmosphere with the likes of me," Reno added before he turned back around and faced the front too.

Sal turned back and looked at the two youngest people in the SUV. "Him crazy," he said of Reno, and everybody, except Mick and Roz, laughed.

When Mick ended his phone call, he began to drive away.

“Who was on the phone, Uncle Mick?” Tommy asked him.

“Greg Paxon.”

“Pax?”

“Yeah.”

“What did Pax want?” asked Teddy.

“The Baltimore crew got a read on the Dean.”

“They know where he at?” asked Reno.

“They know. We’re heading there now.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” said Reno. “Uncle Mick knows how to do this shit. We hit the ground running.”

And that was exactly how it felt when Mick got on the highway and sped his way toward Baltimore.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Hank “the Dean” Montiglio, along with his bodyguard, entered the Baltimore diner and was immediately escorted by the waiter to his private dining room in the back.

“Nothing like a good breakfast after a trying morning,” said the Dean as he entered the room.

“Your usual, sir?”

“Always,” said the Dean as his bodyguard remained outside and closed the door. The waiter hurried off to notify the kitchen staff.

Just as the waiter was leaving, Mick’s Escalade drove up outside and he and his team got out.

“This dump is where the Dean hangs out?” asked a surprised Reno.

Mick said nothing as he walked up alongside Roz and placed his hand on her lower back. “You two wait here,” he said to Reno and Sal as he led Roz, Nikki, Tommy and Teddy into the diner. Reno and Sal stayed outside at the door.

They looked at each other. “Powerful as we are,” said Reno. “He makes us the *gotdamn* lookouts.”

“Only for Uncle Mick and Duke,” said Sal. “This shit ain’t funny.”

It wasn’t funny to Mick either as he entered the diner where there was actually less than a handful of people dining, but he moved in front of his team just in case there was more than meets the eye. The waiter hurried over to them too. He knew Mob when he saw it. “Good morning, sir,” he said to the leader of the pack.

Mick pulled out a couple hundred dollars. “The Dean. Where is he?”

The waiter was eager to accept the money. “Straight back,” he whispered without hesitation, “then turn left and you’re see his private dining room.” He took the money.

Tommy remained on the inside front door just in case somebody inside the diner tried to make a move as Mick and Roz and Teddy and Nikki made their way to the back of the diner.

As soon as they turned left, they encountered the Dean’s bodyguard standing at his door. Only he was busy

texting on his cell phone. But as soon as he looked up and saw that Mick the Tick was upon him, he dropped his phone and attempted to pull out his weapon. But Teddy moved past his father, grabbed the guy, lifted him and dropped him down onto the booth seat next to the door. Teddy began punching him so hard that it sounded like he was beating raw meat. The guard was unconscious, with a dislocated nose, within seconds.

Then Mick opened the door, and they walked in. Teddy remained outside in case anybody else was lurking around the back.

When the door opened, the Dean smiled. “That was fast,” he said as he closed the newspaper they always had waiting for him. “Good thing too: I’m starved.”

But when he looked up and saw that it wasn’t a waiter with a tray filled with goodies, but was Mick the Tick filled with rage walking toward him, he tried to stand up so quickly that he ended up falling backwards in his chair.

“Get your ass up,” Mick ordered, and the Dean took his large frame and quickly stood up. Nikki went over and stood his chair back up, too, and then pushed him down by the shoulder into that chair.

Mick pulled out a chair for Roz, and then he and she sat down in front of the man Mick had respected and had been in an alliance with for decades.

“Didn’t expect to see you in Baltimore, Micky. Good to see you. And you, too, Mrs. Sinatra.” The Dean knew that Mick wouldn’t let even his oldest acquaintances call Roz anything but Mrs. Sinatra. Which he never thought she deserved. “Any news on Duke?” he asked as if he was as innocent as the driven snow.

Nikki looked at the boss when she heard the Dean playing dumb. She could tell Mick was seething inside. But he knew how to keep his cool above any man she’d ever known. “When did you get the impression that I was a fool?” Mick asked the Dean.

Roz could see the color drain from the Dean’s fat face. He knew he was busted, but he knew Mick would take him out instantaneously if he admitted it. Gonna kidnap *their* child? She’d be cheering Mick on.

“Who in their right mind would think you’re a fool?” the Dean responded. “I know I don’t.”

“You have our son. We want him back. And we want him back now.”

“I have your son?” the Dean actually tried to smile. He looked constipated to Roz. “Are you fucking kidding me? I don’t have Duke. How could you accuse me of such an unmentionable thing, Michello? What are you talking? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Mick’s rage suddenly unleashed, another thing he did faster than any man Nikki had ever known, and he jumped up and began banging the Dean’s head into the table until blood was flowing. Roz jumped up too, ready to assist him if she had to.

But Mick needed no assistance. He lifted the Dean’s now bloody head by the catch of his short hair and yanked. “Know what I’m talking about now, motherfucker?” Mick yelled. “Know what I’m talking about now? Where’s my son?!”

“Mick, you can’t ... It’s not ... Mick, I don’t ...” It was as if the Dean was afraid to take a lane and stand by it. Because all of those lanes, as far as Roz was concerned, were loaded with lies.

“Where’s my son?” Mick asked him, but Roz and Nikki both could hear the plea in his voice. “I want my son back and I want him back now!”

But as soon as Mick said those words, the sound of gunfire could be heard outside. Mick quickly released the Dean. “Roz, stay here and keep a weapon on him,” he said as he was pulling out his weapon and running toward the door. “Nikki, you cover my wife!”

And as Roz pulled out her Glock and pointed it at the Dean, Mick ran out of the door. Teddy was already running up front.

And as soon as they got up front, they could see Tommy hitting the deck and Reno and Sal coming inside and along with Tommy were crawling on their bellies as a barrage of bullets were shooting out every window in that diner. “There’s a *gotdamn* army out there!” Sal yelled as he, Tommy and Reno went over to the windows and began firing back, ducking, and then firing some more.

Teddy hit the ground on his belly, too, and crawled over to the window and began firing back alongside his cousins. But Mick didn’t hit any ground. With his wife’s safety in mind, he, instead, ran down that back hall again until he found the diner’s back door. But just as he was about to open it, his instincts told him to stop. And he stopped. Moved

to the side, his weapon ready, as the door was suddenly kicked open from outside.

When it was kicked open, Mick showed himself and began firing his weapon as he did. There were four gunmen at that door and he shot all four within a second of showing himself. Then he peeped out, saw that no one else was back there, and then he ran out of the diner.

He ran up the left side of the building toward the front. And when he saw that the men had rode up in a big passenger van and were shooting out and then taking shelter in that van, he quickly reached into his customized white coat, pulled out another pipe bomb, unpinned it, and then threw it onto that van. The van exploded on contact, with some of the men managing to get out of the van before they exploded too.

But as soon as Mick saw the bewildered gunmen stagger out, he pulled out a second weapon and began running toward that van and shooting at every single one of those men. Reno, Sal, and Tommy and Teddy saw what Mick was doing when he exploded the van, and they ran out too, firing at the ones fortunate enough to escape the fire, but not fortunate enough to escape their wrath. They all fell. Between the van

explosion and the gun battle, not one of them who came to ambush Mick the Tick survived.

But Mick knew his time was limited. The cops were undoubtedly already on their way. He ran back into the diner, hurried into the private dining hall, and didn't stop running until he had grabbed the Dean and ran with him until he slammed him against the wall. "You got two seconds before your brains leave your body," Mick yelled. "Where's my son?!"

Mick could tell Roz had worked him over too. He was barely breathing. And now that he knew his last refuge of hope was gone and the gun battle was won by Mick, he finally caved. "Fritz made the call," the Dean said. "I just went along with it."

Mick frowned. "Why?"

"Why do you think? Everybody hates your guts. At the top for decades. We hate you," the Dean said with hatred in his half-swollen eyes.

Although Roz could see that such words affected Mick, he kept his eyes on the prize. "Where does Fritz have Duke?"

“At this bar I own on Lester, in the backroom. Tony and Fritz are there now, standing guard.” Then he grinned. “They asked me to put him in my bar because they thought I would be the last person on earth you suspected. When I was the first. So just go on and kill me. Take me out of my misery.”

Who did these people think he was? Mick’s rage unleashed and he tripped the Dean down onto his stomach, and then got down, placed his knee on the Dean’s back, and with the weight and muscle of his entire body he lifted the Dean’s upper body upward. The Dean screamed out in agony as he could hear his spine cracking. When Mick was certain it was severed and he’d never walk again, he then pulled out a knife, opened its formulated blade, and angrily sliced off both of the man’s arms and threw both arms against the wall. Nikki and even Roz were shocked by the sheer violence of it. But he had to know better. You don’t fuck around with Mick the Tick and expect no retribution. You just don’t.

And as the Dean cried out in unbearable pain, Mick leaned down to him with a warning. “Tell somebody,” he warned. And then he, Roz, and Nikki hurried out of that room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Mick's bullet-riddled Escalade sped away from the scene only a couple minutes ahead of the cops, with everybody back in their respective seats.

“What are the chances of Fritz and Tony still being where the Dean said they were?” asked Nikki.

“Low,” said Mick. “But that’s all we got.”

And he nearly doubled his speed. They didn’t think it was possible.

But as he drove to Lester Street on a long backroad, he looked over at Roz. She looked uneasy to him. “What’s the matter?”

Roz said nothing. But everybody in that SUV knew what she wanted to say. They were told what happened at that diner. They wanted to say it, too, but didn’t have the balls.

But being with complicated Mick? Roz had grown a pair. And she spoke up. “You’re a brutal man,” she said as if she was trying to come to terms with it herself. It had been a long time since she’d seen Mick in action. “Anybody ever tell you that?” When she said it, she looked at him.

Mick looked away from her. Then his anger flared and he looked at her again. “What do you want from me? Somebody snatch my son and I’m supposed to do what? Walk away? Turn them over to the cops so some fancy lawyer can get them off scot-free?” Then his voice rose. “If I don’t handle my business hard, then they’ll come hard for my family. You would have all been dead by now if they didn’t fear my ass. I didn’t ask for this shit,” he yelled and slammed his hand on the steering wheel. “I didn’t come for them, they came for me! They start, I finish. That’s how this shit works. And if your ass can’t take it then get the fuck out of my life!”

When he said those harsh words to Roz, the Gabrini men and Teddy and Nikki heard nothing but rage in his voice. But all Roz heard was pain. The weight of the entire Sinatra and Gabrini families were on Mick’s shoulders. And had been for a long time. What man was going to carry that gracefully?

Instead of lashing back at Mick the way everybody else in that SUV expected her to do, she reached out, grabbed Mick’s hand, and held it. “Your ass ain’t getting rid of me that easily,” she said and looked away from him.

Mick stared at her. And nobody else in that SUV knew it, but he squeezed her hand lovingly. She was his woman.

He was her man. End of discussion.

Then he picked up even more speed.

To everybody's surprise, he didn't go straight to the bar on Lester. He, instead, went back to the helipad on the outskirts of town. They hopped onto the chopper as Mick ordered the original driver of the now bullet-riddled SUV to drive near the bar on Lester, but keep a distance until he got word from Mick. Then Mick got onboard, too, and the chopper pilot took off.

Within minutes they were in the vicinity of the bar. From the air, they could see that the bar was as rundown looking as the diner, but Mick knew he couldn't just drive up on the place. The chopper stopped two streets behind the building in an open field surrounded by woods. The entire area was extremely isolated. That was the very reason why that bar was selected as the hiding place to begin with, Mick was certain.

“Reno, you and Sal keep left toward the building,” he ordered as he handed them tactical recon walkie talkie watches. “Teddy, you and Nikki keep right.” He handed them the same watches too. “Wait for my signal to enter,” he continued, as they all, including Mick, put on the watches.

“I’ll handle the bad guys. The four of you search for my son. I don’t care what gunfire you hear, you find my son and get him out of there.”

“We got you, Uncle Mick,” said Reno defiantly.

Mick nodded. They were family. He knew he could trust them to get the job done. Then he looked at Tommy, whom he trusted the most. “You stay on this chopper and guard my wife with your life. You hear me, Tommy?”

Tommy nodded. “Yes, sir.”

But Roz was about to object. Everybody waited for her objection. But after what happened in that diner, Roz had an increased awareness of Mick’s responsibilities and the burdens he carried, not just for her and their children, but for everybody. She held her peace. He was in charge. The only way they were going to get their son back, she was convinced, was if she let him lead the way.

When Roz lobbed no objection, Mick felt a sense of relief. He was tired of fighting with her.

He turned to his pilot. “Stay put in case we need you. But get the hell out of here and get out fast if there’s any sense of danger. My wife is on this chopper.”

The pilot swallowed hard, as if he understood the gravity of those words. “Yes, sir, Boss. Don’t you worry, Boss.”

Then Mick looked at his wife. At the love of his life. He didn’t realize he was holding her hand until he squeezed it. They looked into each other’s eyes with nothing but love and affection. “Be careful, Mick. Please.”

Mick nodded. “I will,” he promised her. But then his look turned hard. Because it had to. And then he, Reno and Sal, and Teddy and Nikki got out of the chopper and took off toward the Dean’s bar.

Roz felt some kind of way when Mick left her side. It was as if a loneliness suddenly overtook her. And she realized anew just how scared she was, not only for her son, but for Mick too. And she couldn’t help it. She began to sob. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed. Tommy hurried over to her, and pulled her into his arms. He was as worried as she was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Reno and Sal made it to the left side of the closed bar and waited at the door, just as Teddy and Nikki made it to the right side of the bar and waited at that door. Mick ran up the middle to the back door of the bar and when he said the word *Now* into his tactical watch, all three doors were kicked in at the same time.

Mick saw Tony Pinzarno run into the hall to see what the commotion was about. As soon as he saw Mick and their eyes met, he disappeared out of sight. Mick took off running after him, his gun ready to fire.

While Mick chased after Tony Pinzarno, Reno and Sal and Teddy and Nikki were going from room to room in search of Duke. They left no room unchecked.

But when Mick ran up front where Pinzarno had run, he stopped abruptly just as he was about to enter the front of the bar. He then pulled a baseball from his customized white coat and tossed it up front. As soon as that ball hit the floor, gunfire erupted. But Mick didn't return fire. He pulled out a second gun and waited for the barrage of bullets to stop

sailing. But not until the shooting stopped and he heard footsteps, did he show himself and fired with both barrels blazing. There were three gunmen in all. He took out all three.

But then he saw that Tony Pinzarno and Fritz Bellarmo, who were undoubtedly shooters too, were running out of the front of the bar toward a parked car. Sal and Reno and Teddy and Nikki ran up front, too, as Mick ran out of the front door. By the time they got outside, Pinzarno and Bellarmo had hopped into a car and was speeding away. When Mick looked at Teddy and he shook his head to signify that Duke had not been found, Mick started shooting at the tires of the getaway car to preserve the lives of the men who undoubtedly knew where his son was hidden. They all ran behind Mick, shooting at the tires too, but as soon as the car turned onto the street in front of the bar, a huge GMC Sierra Denali pickup truck sped up and slammed into the side of the car like it was a toy and dragged it until the car started flipping wildly. Then the big truck took off as the car finally stopped flipping and landed upside down.

Mick and his team, all horrified, ran as fast as they could across that street, with Mick outrunning the entire

group. When they made it to the car, it took all the strength they had to pry open the wrecked doors.

But it was no use. Tony Pinzarno and Fritz Bellarmo were dead.

Mick, mortified, looked at his team. “No sign of Duke in that building?”

“None,” said Teddy, near tears for his baby brother. “He’s not in there, Pop.”

“Search again,” Mick ordered. While Reno and Sal knew Duke wasn’t in there, they nonetheless hurried back inside to search again. But this time even more thoroughly.

Then Mick exhaled and steeled himself as he walked around to the trunk of that vehicle, and with Teddy and Nikki’s help that took some time, they were finally able to pry the trunk open. But there was no sign of Duke inside of that trunk either.

Reno and Sal ran back outside. “No dice,” said Reno. “The boy’s not there.”

Mick was by now beside himself.

“Who the fuck was in that truck?” Teddy asked. “It couldn’t have been our guys because they wouldn’t have left.

Who was in that truck?”

“It wasn’t our guys,” said Teddy.

“I don’t know who was in it,” said Nikki, “but I got a photo of the plate.”

When Mick heard her say that, he snatched her phone from her and looked at the photo. It was a clear image. And a New York plate. Send it in,” he ordered Nikki. “I want the name of the owner yesterday.”

“Yes, sir,” Nikki said and got on it.

Then Mick grabbed her arm. “Good job, Nikki,” he said. Nikki smiled and then called in the plate.

But Teddy was puzzled. “Why would they be holed up in the Dean’s bar if Duke’s not here?”

But then they heard gunfire erupting behind the bar where Mick’s helicopter was waiting.

They all took off running as the gunfire intensified. But as they were running, they all saw the chopper lift up, as if it was attempting to take off. But to their horror, it was shot down.

“Roz!” Mick cried out as he ran even faster, outrunning even Teddy.

By the time they made it the three streets over through those thick woods, they saw the same GMC truck that had taken out Pinzarno and Fritz, back up and take off from the chopper site. Reno and Nikki started shooting at the truck, attempting to disable the tires, but Mick, Teddy, and Sal ran to the downed chopper. Mick's wife was on that chopper. Sal's big brother was on that chopper. And the big GMC truck got away unscathed.

They had to force open the helicopter's door, but as soon as they did they saw that the pilot was dead of a gunshot wound to the head. Tommy had knocked Roz to the floor, covering her with his body, and was just getting off of her. Although they both were dazed, they were not injured. Tommy had managed to get some rounds off himself, even as he covered Roz.

Nikki was on the phone to the driver of the Escalade, ordering him to get to the scene now, knowing that they needed to get out of the area and to get out of there fast. While she made that call, Teddy checked on the pilot to make certain he had no pulse. Reno and Sal aided Tommy.

Mick grabbed Roz up and out of that chopper and then pulled her into his arms. But she was more concerned about

their child. “Where’s Duke?” she asked Mick.

Mick’s petrified face said it all to her.

“What about Fritz Bellarmo? Did you find him?”

“He’s dead. Tony Pinzarno too.”

“But where’s Duke?” Roz cried out. “Where did they take Duke?”

Mick pulled her into his arms again. He had no answers for her.

Then they stopped embracing and everybody just stood there unsure what their next move could be. “Maybe the Dean knows more than he said,” said Reno.

“He’s not in any position to talk even if he did,” said Teddy. “Pop saw to that.”

Mick and Teddy exchange a hard look. There was still tension between them two even though Moby confirmed that the video was doctored. But Mick knew it wasn’t the video. It was the fact that Teddy, like everybody else, blamed him for Duke’s abduction. But it was par for the course for Mick. He blamed himself too.

But then he thought about something. Roz noticed his changed look first. “What is it?” she asked him.

“That ambush at the diner.”

“What about it?” Sal asked.

“Who tipped them off?” Mick asked. “There’s no way a busload of gunmen just happened upon the scene unless they were tipped off in advance so they could mobilize. Who tipped them off?”

“Who knew we were even in town?” asked Reno.

“Pax knew,” said Roz.

“Isn’t he one of your security chiefs, Uncle Mick? Isn’t he in charge of Roz’s security detail? And you think it could Pax tipped them off?”

“Who else could it be?” asked Mick.

“*Ah shit,*” said Reno.

“Why would you figure it’s Pax, though, Pop?” asked Teddy.

“Who else knew we were coming to town, Teddy? Who else? Pax knew. And he was ordered to keep it under wraps. Even our Baltimore guys didn’t know we were coming to town. They knew to find the Dean, notify Pax, and then get out of the area. That was all they were supposed to know.”

“But if Pax is crooked,” said Sal, “all bets are off.”

“Right,” said Mick. “Which means we trust no one. Not even my driver. When he comes with that Escalade, I want him safe-housed until we clear his name. We’ll go back to Philly and I’ll pick Pax’s ass up personally. I don’t want anybody but us in this loop.”

“I’m not leaving Baltimore, Mick.”

Everybody looked at Roz. “What do you mean you aren’t leaving?” Mick asked her.

“I can’t leave. What if our son is here? Duke gave us the clue. What if he’s still here?”

Mick took some solace in hearing those words. Then he looked at his son. “Teddy, you and Reno drive back to Philly and bring Pax to me.”

“Where will you be?” asked Reno.

“At Amelia’s house,” Mick said as his Cadillac Escalade drove up. “Drop us off and then you and Nikki head back. We’ll safe-house the driver on Millie’s property.”

“Does Millie’s grounds security know you’re coming?” asked Teddy.

Mick frowned. “What the fuck they need to know that? That’s my sister’s house. My coming and going is none of their business.” Then he helped Roz in, got in behind the steering wheel as he ordered his driver to take a seat in the back. He also ordered him to give him his cell phone, which the driver did and which Mick immediately turned off. The driver ended up on the third row, right alongside Teddy and Nikki.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Security at the gate of Amelia's estate knew that Mick Sinatra had *carte blanche* to get onto her property without question. He immediately released the gate. But Mick pressed down his window.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Sinatra?"

"I have a passenger I want safe-housed on this property. Guest house number three. Full guard twenty-four-seven. Have them meet me at the main house."

"Yes, sir," the guard responded as he got on the phone. Mick's Escalade drove on through the gate and up the long driveway to the main house. But as they approached the house, Roz was already pointing toward the lawn.

"What's all of that?" she asked.

"Clothes," said Nikki. "Men's clothing."

"Hammer's clothes no doubt," said Reno. "What's up with those two?"

"What's always up with them," said Teddy. "Drama and more drama. Aunt Millie does her own thing and

Hammer Reese blows a gasket.”

“With his Fed ass,” said Reno. “Of all the crooked lawmen in this country, he had to be one of the straight ones. Just our luck,” he added as Mick put his SUV in Park. Two guards were hurrying over.

After they all got out, Teddy got behind the wheel, Reno got on the front passenger seat, and they took off. Mick looked at his driver. “Until this is over,” he said, “you’ll have to be under guard.”

“I understand, sir,” said the driver, although his face said differently, as he left with two of Millie’s grounds security.

“Tommy, make the rounds to make sure Millie’s guys are adequate. Sal you assist him.”

Sal was pleased to have a few moments alone with his big brother, just so they both could both decompress. They gladly went to check out the security that surrounded the house. Then Mick put in a code to enter Amelia’s house, and they went inside.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Later that day, after they had discussed strategies until they all were exhausted, Roz made her way out onto the back patio. Nikki went outside and sat with her.

For several minutes, not a word was spoken. Then Nikki looked at her mother-in-law. “I’m sorry about that video,” she said. “I don’t know who doctored it, but I never would have done anything like that.”

Roz nodded. “I know, Nikki.” She took her hand. “I know.”

“Teddy was ready to declare it was true,” Nikki said. “That shocked me. How could he think that I would do something like that?”

“Because we saw it with our own two eyes,” said Roz. “I thought the same way. I don’t put shit past nobody, and neither does Teddy. And you better not either. I just wish I knew who would have tried something like that.”

“Whatever they were trying it almost worked had Moby Giancarlo not told us the truth. Or at least what we think is the truth.”

Roz nodded.

Nikki stared at her. She and Roz used to talk about everything. She wanted that relationship back. “You aren’t worried that that video of Boss might have been taken since you’ve been with him?”

“Hell yeah it worries me. But Mick don’t even remember when it was taken, let alone who he was with. He’d been with plenty of women before me.”

“And none since?”

Roz didn’t respond to that. She had no idea. Plus it was none of Nikki’s business. And then Mick came out onto the patio.

Nikki stood up to leave as soon as he walked out there. Roz used to wonder why she was always so antsy around Mick. Did they have something going on? But she was more and more beginning to figure she was just scared of his ass.

“I’ll see you inside, Ma,” Nikki said as she made her way back inside. Mick held the door for her.

“She’s scared of you,” Roz said to him as he approached her lounge.

“Everybody’s scared of me.”

“What everybody? I know you don’t include me in that number.”

“Move,” Mick said.

Roz got up, Mick sat down, and then he sat her down on his lap, her ass right where he needed it to be. They reclined on that lounge together.

“What were you and Nikki talking about?”

“That video.”

Mick exhaled. “The infamous video.”

“Why would somebody film you in a hotel with another woman?”

“It used to be the thing back in the day. More than likely the woman set it up and then her or her boyfriend or whomever sold it to the highest bidder.”

“But that had to be so long ago,” said Roz. Then she looked at him. “Right?”

Mick didn’t respond.

“Right, Mick?”

Mick frowned. “Hell yeah it was long ago, Rosalind. Why are you asking me that?”

Roz wasn't going to argue with him about it. She wanted more info. Way more. But he wasn't going to give it to her. So she didn't ask. She tried her best to de-stress.

"I talked to Jacqueline," Mick said.

Roz looked at him. "She okay?"

"She's fine. Destiny's there to keep her company. She's just worried about her twin, and the rest of us too."

"She's a worrier. Duke's the opposite."

Mick nodded. He agreed. Then he looked at Roz. "I'm worried about you."

She looked into his big green eyes, his sleepy eye almost closed. She rubbed the cleft in his chin. "I'm okay. You've got enough on your plate."

"I won't rest, Roz, until I get our son back home. He's coming back." Then Mick exhaled. "We got a read on the license plate on that truck."

Roz nearly sat upright. "Who owns it?"

"It's apparently a company truck. Brightstone. It's out of upstate New York. Ever hear of it?"

Roz shook her head. "No. You?"

“No. But I’ve got a crew in New York checking it out as we speak. It’s not coming up through normal channels.”

Roz shook her head. “Nothing about this ordeal is easy.”

Then she leaned back down against him. She could feel him getting aroused beneath her, and she knew he needed that release of the tension she could just feel all over him.

She needed it too.

She stood up and reached out her hand. “Let’s go,” she said.

Mick was nearly tented so he knew where she meant they were going. He got up, took her hand, and followed her back inside the house, up the stairs, and into Amelia’s bedroom. Where they closed and locked the door.

Three hours later and they were at it again.

They had fallen asleep after their first round of lovemaking. But as soon as Mick woke up and saw Roz naked and on top of him, he became aroused and entered her again. Roz woke up happy that he was inside again and she leaned her head back as Mick did her as only Mick could. It was

joyous. They were never going to forget about why they were even in Millie's bedroom. But they had to release that tension. They had to release that stress. For nearly half an hour they went at it. Releasing and releasing. Not even the horniest of teenagers had anything on Mick and Roz.

But then knocks were heard on the bedroom door. Although they would have liked to go to completion again, neither one of them were disappointed. For anybody to bother them when they knew what they were up to, meant something was up.

“Yes?” Mick yelled out.

“Pax is here, Uncle Mick.” It was Tommy. Probably the only one with the balls to interrupt them.

“Give us a minute,” Mick said as he and Roz could be heard scrambling to get out of bed, and to get dressed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Pax was seated in the living room with Ted, Nikki, and the Gabrinis by the time Mick and Roz made it downstairs. Mick was without his coat, but wore his black trousers and a t-shirt. Roz wore her jeans and 76ers jersey. She and Mick sat on the sofa across from Pax.

“Why am I being dragged down here, Boss?” he asked Mick.

“We have a breach. I need to make sure it’s not you.”

Pax seemed genuinely surprised. “Me, sir? I’d never do anything like that.”

Mick studied him. “What about your guys?”

“They wouldn’t either. Every one of them came highly recommended. Because they were going to be on your wife’s detail, you signed off on every one of them.”

“Who are they?” Sal asked.

“The same guys. My crew.”

Sal was annoyed. “I don’t know your crew, motherfucker. Who are they? Give me names.”

Pax looked at Mick as if he didn't have to answer to Sal Gabrini. But Mick gave him a look that made clear he did.

And Pax named names. "Ronnie Capelli. Yuri Lusako. Denny Grimes. Joey DeConcini and a few others. But I'm telling you they wouldn't breach security. They're elite guys."

But Roz realized something. "Lusako?" she asked.

Everybody looked at her. "Yuri Lusako," said Pax. "Yes, ma'am, that's his name."

Mick was staring at Roz. "What about Lusako?"

"I know that name."

"He's in your detail, Ma," said Teddy. "You could have heard Pax call his name."

But Roz was shaking her head. "I know somebody who has a brother with that last name. Lusako. Yuri Lusako. I was introduced to him a few months back."

They all were surprised. Especially Mick. "Who introduced you?" he asked her.

Roz looked at Mick. "Fred. Fredrick Champion."

Teddy frowned. "Your director?"

“Yes.”

“The guy that’s got the hots for you?” asked Reno. He was at opening night too. He saw the inordinate amount of adoring attention Fred heaped on Roz. Even Trina, who was used to Reno’s flirtatious ways, said that guy needed to get a grip.

“I remember that name,” said Roz. “Fred said he was his brother. I remember that name..”

Mick looked at Pax. “How long has Lusaka been on your crew?”

“About a couple months. Harpo died from what we heard was a drug overdose and we needed a new guy. Lusako came highly recommended.”

“By whom?” Mick asked.

“By Tony Pinzarno and Fritz B.”

“I’ll be damn,” said Reno.

“Even the Dean put in his two cents supporting him too. And you signed off on him, Boss.”

But everybody already knew this Lusako character had to be involved, given the people who recommended him all

were caught up in this mess. “Where is he now?” Mick asked Pax.

“He’s off since Mrs. Sinatra was out of town. The guys usually just go home. See their families.”

“Where’s Lusako’s home?”

“Buffalo,” said Pax.

Teddy looked at his father. “Upstate New York,” he reminded him. It was the same location of the tag on that GMC pickup truck that killed Pinzarno and Fritz at that bar.

“Ever hear of Brightstone?” Mick asked Pax.

Pax shook his head. “No, Boss.”

“Get Lusako’s address and give it to Teddy. Teddy, put him with my driver until we get more answers.”

“Will do,” Teddy said as he grabbed Pax up from his seat. They left out of the house.

Roz looked at Mick. “What do we do now? We go see Lusako?”

“We go see Fred Champion first,” said Mick. “Sounds like Lusako might be working for him.”

Roz could hardly believe it. Fred would be involved with kidnapping her son? It seemed highly unlikely to her. But she didn't put anything past anybody.

"I've got to get to New York. And you can't stay here without me," Mick said. "We aren't going to find Duke just hanging in Baltimore. We have no more leads here."

But Roz was ahead of him. "I know," she said.

"If Duke is in this town, we'll be back to get him. But with an exact location this time."

"Let's go then," Roz said urgently. They had no time to waste. And with Teddy back from the guest house depositing Pax, and with Mick dressed once again in his full regalia of white coat, black trousers and black turtleneck, all customized for the task at hand, they all took off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

They waited outside of Fred Campion's apartment until a resident came out. Roz quickly caught the closing door and held it for Mick and the crew to walk on in. Then they rode up the elevator to the twenty-second floor.

Mick watched Roz the entire ride up as everybody else watched Mick. They knew he was worried about Campion's attraction to Roz and Roz's possible attraction to Campion. They knew that she went to see him in New York when she was on vacation from Broadway.

For Teddy, it was endearing and sad too. His father never loved his mother, or Joey's mother, or Adrian's mother either for that matter, the way he loved Roz. The only woman that ever came close to Roz was Gloria's mother Bella Caine. Pop went out of his way to take care of her. But even Bella was nowhere near Roz's level.

The elevator doors opened and they stepped off. It was Roz who knocked on Fred's door while the rest of them stood aside.

Fred answered the door happily. “Hey Roz! I didn’t expect to see you back so soon. Come on in!”

As she walked in, to Fred’s surprise Mick and all the others followed her. “What’s this?” he asked as they came in like intruders.

But as soon as Teddy closed the door behind them, Roz got to the point. “Where’s my son, Fred?”

“Your son? How should I know?”

“Where’s your brother?” Mick asked him.

“My brother? I don’t have a brother.”

Roz looked at Fred. “Lusako? Yuri Lusako? Remember?”

Fred frowned. “My brother-in-law?”

Roz frowned. “What brother-in-law? You told me he was your brother.”

“Yes, I told you that.”

“Why would you lie?”

Fred stared at her. Mick did too. And when she realized why, she was floored. “You’re *married*?”

“Yes,” Fred admitted. “Am I a cad? Yes. But what does any of this have to do with your son?”

“We think Lusako had something to do with his abduction,” said Mick.

Fred was shocked. “Your son was abducted?” He looked at Roz. “Roz, I am so sorry!”

“What about your brother-in-law?” asked Teddy.

“And we already know the spiel,” said Reno. “He’s a saint. He could never do such a thing. Not possible.”

“He’s no saint,” said Fred, “and it’s quite possible.”

They all looked at Fred.

“Why do you say that?” asked Mick.

“My father-in-law. He’s a Russian Oligarch.”

“Which is a cute name for a Russian gangster,” said Sal.

Fred nodded. “That is correct.”

“But what with this Lusako? That’s not Russian.”

“The real name is Lusakov,” said Fred. “Yuri dropped the v.”

“Why would he have something to do with our son’s kidnapping?” asked Roz.

Fred shook his head. “I have no idea.”

“Where do we find this jackass?” asked Reno. “In Russia?”

“No, he’s here. At Brightstone.”

They all remembered that name. “What’s Brightstone?” Roz asked him.

“It’s the name of his father’s mansion. In upstate New York.”

“Where’s your wife?” asked Mick.

“She’s there too. It’s the family home. We’re separated.”

“Yeah, right,” said Reno, not believing that for a second. “Aren’t we all?”

“Let’s go,” Mick said to Fred.

“Me?”

“Oh yeah. You’re getting us in the door. Let’s go,” he said again, and they all left.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Teddy got behind the steering wheel of the Mercedes Sprinter passenger van as the family piled in at the Buffalo airfield where their plane landed. There seemed to be an air of guarded optimism. They felt as if they were finally getting somewhere. But the connection to Duke's abduction and a Russian Oligarch still made no sense to Mick. Did he have a connection to this guy?

It was a long drive down a dark road that led to a mansion straight out of a horror movie. Not a light seemed to be on anywhere. Mick, who sat next to Roz with his arm around her waist the entire drive, felt uneasy with her coming to a place like this. But it was done now. He had to focus.

But Reno was incredulous. "Who the fuck lives in a spooky-ass place like this?" he asked as the van approached the gate.

"It's the family home," said Fred. "Not my family. My wife's. This is how they roll."

Mick looked at Fred. "This is how we roll: Fuck with us when we get inside that house, and you're dead. You do

everything we tell you to do, and you live.”

“Now wait a minute,” the big shot Broadway director announced. “You can’t just go up into these people’s house like some gangster barging in. Piers Lusakov is a billionaire.”

“So is Uncle Mick,” said Reno. “Fuck Lusako or Lusakov or whatever the hell his name is. He ain’t got nothing on Mick the Tick.”

Fred grew silent. Roz could tell he was remembering who he was dealing with. And it was scaring him.

The van rode up to the speaker just outside of the electronic gate. Fred had to go up front and reach over Teddy to press the button. The butler answered. “Yes?”

“It’s Freddy Champion, Jules,” Fred said and the gate immediately opened. Teddy drove on through.

“What’s security like?” Mick asked Fred.

“There is no security. Piers says he and his boy can protect what’s theirs better than any strangers ever would. I know,” added Fred. “He’s arrogant like that.”

“Who all lives here?”

“Yuri, his father, and my wife whenever she chooses. And they have a butler, of course.”

“Of course,” said Reno to Sal and they both rolled their eyes.

Once they got out of the van, Reno and Sal remained outside while Fred, along with Mick and Roz and Tommy, and Teddy and Nikki, went inside. Piers Lusakov was seated in his living room reading a newspaper. His son, Yuri Lusako/Lusakov was seated in a chair with his head buried in his phone. Neither looked up when Fred and group entered the living room space.

“She’s upstairs,” Piers said to Fred without looking up. He assumed Fred was there to see his wife.

“Now that we know where his wife is,” said Mick, “where’s my son?”

Piers and Yuri quickly looked up when they heard a stranger’s voice. But when Yuri saw who that stranger was, he jumped up and began running away. Teddy and Nikki took off after him.

“What is the meaning of this?” asked an exasperated Piers. But what Mick and Roz noticed was that he did not find it strange that his son ran away.

And where Yuri ran was straight for the kitchen. He pushed the butler out of his way and grabbed a butcher's knife out of the knife rack as he attempted to run out of the back door.

As soon as Teddy and Nikki ran in the kitchen and saw him, Teddy hurried over to him, grabbed him by the back of collar, and dragged him back into the house. But they didn't realize he had grabbed a knife. And as soon as Yuri turned, Nikki saw it. "He's got a knife!" she yelled at Teddy and Teddy was able to move his body back even as Yuri slashed at him. He came within an inch of slashing Teddy.

Nikki hurried over and kicked that knife out of Yuri's hand. And then a now-angry Teddy took his fist and did what he do: he beat Yuri down. Not as bad as that guard in that diner because they needed Yuri conscious to get intel from his ass, but bad enough. And then Teddy grabbed Yuri and Nikki grabbed the butler and they pulled both of them back into the living room.

When Piers saw the condition of his son, he stood on his feet. "What did you do to my son?" Then he looked at Fred. "Why did you bring these people here? What is the meaning of this?"

But Mick was studying Piers. He could see the terror in his eyes. He could smell the fear. “You know who I am?” he asked him.

Piers finally locked eyes with Mick. “What are you doing in my home, Mick the Tick?”

The fact that he used Mick’s nickname spoke volumes to everybody in that room. He knew exactly why they were there.

“What on earth is all of this commotion about?”

They all turned to the sound of a female’s voice and saw a tall white woman coming down the staircase. Mick and his team didn’t know who she was, but Fred Campion did. It was Esmeralda Lusakov-Campion: his wife. But when she saw who all was in the living room, she stopped in her tracks. What Mick noticed was that her eyes were glued on Roz. And despite the danger she had to know they posed, she began high-stepping it down those stairs as if she was Gloria Swanson ready for her close up. Mick knew in that second that she was the reason they didn’t have their son. That she was the cause.

It took all Mick had to contain his rage as she made her way down to where they stood. “What are you doing here?”

she asked Fred.

“I’m here because your foolish brother has done something horrible to these people.” He looked at his beaten-up brother-in-law. “Haven’t you, Yuri?”

When Esmeralda saw the condition of her brother, she hurried to his side. “Who did this to you?” she asked.

“Who the fuck cares?” Roz asked angrily. She was impatient now. “Where’s my child?”

Esmeralda turned to Roz. Mick could see the jealousy all over her face. “So you’re Freddy’s whore?” she asked Roz.

But Roz wasn’t about to get into it with that heifer. “Where’s my son?” she asked her again.

“Does it look like I know where your son is?”

“Oh, you know alright,” said Mick. “You’re the reason he was snatched.”

She was the reason? Tommy was surprised to hear Mick say those words. Teddy and Nikki were too. They knew her brother had a connection. He was on Roz’s detail. He was undoubtedly the driver of that GMC pickup that killed Tony Pinzarno and Fritz Bellarmo. Then he hightailed his ass back

home like nothing never happened. But Fred's wife could be involved too?

But Esmeralda seemed as confused as they were. "*I'm* the reason somebody snatched, as you put it, your son? Don't be ridiculous. I don't even know you!"

"But you know my wife," Mick said. "And you knew she had what it took to take your husband away from you. And you couldn't bear it. You knew how infatuated he'd been with my wife. You knew you was going to lose him if you didn't do something about it. You did something about it when you kidnapped my son."

"You knew it too," Esmeralda shot back. "You knew your wife was infatuated with my husband. I don't see you kidnapping any teenagers too."

"How would you know he's a teenager?" Roz asked.

Fred found what his wife said curious too. And he looked differently at her.

Mick glanced at Teddy and Teddy, knowing exactly what that look meant, immediately pulled out his Glock, grabbed Yuri by the hair, and pressed his gun against Yuri's penis. "Where's my brother?" he angrily asked him.

“What are you doing?” a horrified Esmeralda asked.

“Shut up, bitch!” yelled an exasperated Roz.

“Don’t harm my son,” said an equally horrified Piers.

“You got three seconds,” Teddy said to a mortified Yuri. “Where’s my baby brother?”

“I don’t know,” Yuri said nervously.

But as soon as he said it, Teddy cocked his trigger, ready to pull it. And that was all it took. Yuri heard the sound of that gun ready to deprive him of his crown jewels and he began singing like a canary. “Vito Lanza took him,” he said quickly.

That name again, Mick thought. “Where did he take him to?”

“I don’t know. He never told me that.”

“Was that you driving that GMC pickup truck in Baltimore?” Teddy asked him.

Yuri nodded reluctantly.

“Then your ass know more than what you’re saying. Where’s Vito now?”

“I don’t know where he is.”

Teddy pressed his gun harder.

“But he’s been holed up at the Red Carpet Inn,” Yuri added.

“Here in Buffalo?”

“Orchard Park, just outside of Buffalo.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“An hour ago.”

“Was my brother with him?”

“Yes.”

Teddy, shocked to hear that, removed his weapon from Yuri and looked at his father. But Mick wasn’t even looking at Yuri anymore. He was staring at Piers.

“Pop, you heard that?” asked Teddy. “You heard what he just said?”

“I heard it,” Mick said.

“Then let’s get to that motel,” urged Roz.

But Mick didn’t share their sense of urgency. He was convinced the answer wasn’t at any Red Carpet Inn. He was staring the answer right in the face. “I’m going to ask you one time and one time only,” he said to Piers. “Give me a bullshit

answer like your son just gave us and you will regret it with a bitter regret. You have my son. Where do you have him?"

But Piers was looking back at Mick with equal certainty. "I don't have your son," he said.

Mick pulled out his Magnum and aimed it squarely at Yuri, and to everybody's shock and without a moment's hesitation, he shot Yuri straight through the forehead.

Esmeralda screamed and dropped to the floor with her brother. Piers's piercing eyes grew so large with disbelief that they looked like pop eyes. Nobody in that room expected that. Fred had his hands on his head. He was traumatized.

And Reno and Sal, hearing the gunshot, ran into the house, their weapons drawn.

And they saw that Mick was enraged. "Your daughter's next!" Mick was yelling at Piers. "You think I'm fucking with you? You think you're gonna bring harm to Mick the Tick's family and expect no payback? I'm tired of y'all asses fucking around with me. Where's my son?!"

"Upstairs!" Piers cried out suddenly. "He's upstairs with Vito!"

Mick was shocked. “Vito Lanza is here now? With my boy?”

“I don’t know if the boy is still there or not. He was there.”

“Where upstairs?” Roz asked anxiously. She was already moving in that direction.

“The third floor. Only one room up there. Just leave us alone!” Piers cried as he hurried over to his son.

But Mick and Roz and Teddy took off running upstairs.

“Reno, you and Sal go with them,” Tommy said.

“Nikki and I can hold it down here.”

As Reno and Sal joined the Sinatras in their run up the staircase, Tommy and Nikki kept their guns trained on the Lusakovs and their butler. And on Fred Champion, too, whom Tommy was certain wasn’t involved, but whom he also noticed never once bothered to comfort his wife.

But as Mick and Roz and the team neared the third-floor landing, Mick pulled Roz back. He turned around.

“Sal?”

Sal knew what that meant. He immediately took Roz’s arm and held her behind the pack with him. But Roz made

certain they stayed with the pack. If her son was up those stairs, she could take care of him while Mick and the others took care of the bad guys.

But Mick stopped when he thought about what they tried at that ballpark. And he reached into the largest inside coat pocket of his tricked-out coat and pulled out respirator masks and goggles and handed them to all of those behind him. Although the Gabrinis didn't understand why, and Teddy and Roz were only vaguely aware, none of them questioned it. They followed the leader and put on their masks and goggles just as Mick was putting on his. And then they kept on walking.

But as soon as they stepped foot on the third-floor landing, Mick's instinct proved right. Tear gas cannisters were suddenly tossed from the only room on that floor. Then they heard the door of that room slam shut as the tear gas filled the landing with smoke as quickly as the cannisters were dispersed. Had they not been prepared, they would have been turned back easily. But they were able to press forward, toward that room, their guns ready even if they could hardly see through the billowing smoke.

And then shots started firing from that room and Mick and the team quickly slammed their bodies against the side of the wall. Mick looked back toward Roz even as Sal had grabbed Roz and slammed her body, behind his, against that wall too.

As soon as Mick knew Roz was safe, he didn't hesitate. He hurried to that closed door, leaned back and with his huge shoe he kicked that door in with that Herculean strength he always acquired when it was all on the line. Then he fell back against the side wall as more shots were fired from that room. He didn't want them to have time enough to use Duke as their human shield. That was why he didn't wait for the shooting to stop. He pulled out a tear gas cannister of his own and threw it into that room.

And as he could hear the person inside coughing, he and his team stormed the room. The cougher ran into the bathroom and slammed the door. Mick could hardly see that door, but Teddy saw enough to kick that door in too. And there he was: Vito Lanza. His hands in the air in surrender, with the gun still in his hand.

Teddy took the gun from him and tossed it aside. And then he grabbed Vito and slammed him against the wall.

“Where’s my brother?” he yelled at him. “Where’s my brother?!”

“I don’t have him,” a terrified Vito yelled out.

Mick and Roz were livid. Mick and Roz hurried over to Vito too and Mick knocked him in the head with the butt of his rifle. “What do you mean you don’t have him? Where’s my son, Vito?! I’m not fucking with you!”

“I don’t have him. I’m not lying, Mick. I don’t have him!”

“Then who has him?” Roz asked frantically.

“Yuri,” Vito said.

Everybody froze.

“Why would Yuri have my son?”

“He was in charge of that.”

“Who put him in charge?”

“Fritz did.”

“Where did Yuri take my son?” Roz asked.

“I don’t know! He didn’t tell anybody.”

They hearts of Mick and Roz fell. And they looked at each other. Vito was dead. And Mick had killed him. Mick

had killed the only man who just might know where they
could find their son.

An assassin's bullet would not have hurt Mick more.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

While Mick was still recovering from the shock of the news that Yuri was the only person who knew where Duke was hidden, and Yuri was dead, Sal took charge. “Let’s tear this motherfucker apart,” he yelled to Teddy and Reno. “If he’s here, we’ll find him.”

They didn’t hesitate. Sal, Reno and Teddy all hurried downstairs to search the other rooms. Roz began searching the third-floor room, calling Duke’s name as she anxiously searched and prayed, prayed and searched.

But Mick was still staring at Vito. He had to know the why before he could formulate a plan. And he had to recover from the shock that they might never see their boy again. “Who ordered the kidnapping?” he asked Vito.

When Vito hesitated, Mick was about to go in with another gun butt. But he wised up and answered quickly. “Piers did.”

Mick frowned. “Who the fuck is Piers? The father?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would he want to kidnap my son?”

“He was doing it for his daughter. For Esmeralda. She begged him to help her.”

Mick knew she was involved. “Why?”

“Because she viewed Mrs. Sinatra as a clear and present danger to her already suffering marriage. They have an open marriage. She doesn’t give a damn who he sleeps with. But she does give a damn who he falls in love with. He was falling for Roz. She had to get rid of her.”

“By kidnapping my son?”

“By destroying her. She told me about it.”

“How would you know a dame like that?” Mick asked him.

“I told you they had an open relationship and she invited me in sometimes. She wanted me to ice your wife. But I told her there’s no way in hell I’m doing that shit. Then she took it to her old man. To Piers. And he had the money to bankroll it. All I had to do was get the right people in place. The people who hated your guts and wanted you out of the picture too. Kidnapping Duke was what would keep us alive if you were smart enough to suspect the shit dripped this way. You were apparently smart enough.”

But it wasn't all adding up to Mick. "What about the ship bombing, and that doctored video?"

"While I was in charge of the kind of money Piers put behind this effort, I ordered that ship bombing. The Dean told me he once took video of you with some woman in a Paris hotel when he was a part of a crew that tried to dethrone you before. He said he could get guys to doctor it and put your daughter-in-law in the place of that woman. Both of those things were the distractions. We didn't think we could pull it off if you weren't distracted."

"Why didn't your boys take me out at that ballpark when you snatched Duke? That would have permanently distracted me."

"Word was you never attended your boy's games. We were shocked you were there. We came with birdshot bullets and tear gas to confuse the scene when we took Duke. We knew your wife would be an issue, and her security, but we never expected to encounter you."

"Mick, he's not in here!" a frantic Roz started crying out.

Mick looked everywhere possible in that bathroom, but there was no hiding place in there. Then he grabbed Vito and

hurried him out of the bathroom and into the adjacent bedroom. Then Mick, with Vito in his clutches, followed Roz out of that torn apart bedroom and down the stairs.

By the time they made it back into the living room, the rest of the team had torn the second and first floors apart. There was no sign of Duke anywhere.

Mick was now so enraged and so fearful for his son that he couldn't contain himself. He let go of Vito, whom Sal quickly took possession of, and he hurried over to Piers and Esmeralda, who were on the floor comforting Yuri. Teddy saw the rage on his father's face and hurried by his side.

"We need answers, Pop, not another dead body," Teddy urged.

Mick went up to Esmeralda, grabbed her by her blouse and pulled her up with one hand. He then shoved his gun against her forehead. She screamed. "Don't hurt me. Daddy tell him not to hurt me! Fred tell him!"

"Keep me out of this shit," Fred said loudly and clearly. He wanted no parts of this madness.

"Where's my son?" Mick said to Esmeralda. "Tell me the truth or I will blow your motherfucking brains out!"

“He was with Vito,” she responded. “Why are you asking me? Ask Vito!”

Then a distraught Piers spoke up. “She don’t know nothing. She just begged me to bankroll all this nonsense so she could keep that fool from falling in love with your wife. And Yuri, always her protector, took over. That boy was with Yuri,” he said.

It was confirmed. They all looked at Piers.

“Yuri removed him from our house after he shot down that helicopter in Baltimore and hopped my plane and returned home,” Piers continued saying. “Where he took the boy, nobody knows.” Then he looked Mick dead in the eye. “Nobody cares. Because you killed my boy.” Tears came in his eyes. “You killed the only thing I ever loved in this world! You killed my son. And my son was the only person who knows where your son is.”

And just as Mick was digesting the news that the one person who knew where Duke could be was dead, Piers pulled out a gun.

“Mick, watch out!” cried Roz.

But Piers had already fired a shot at his daughter just as Tommy was firing a shot into him. Both father and daughter dropped dead.

Fred had backed all the way against the wall. He was beyond mortification.

Roz was too. She was beside herself with grief. But not for those two dead fools. For her boy. “Mick, what are we gonna do? Nobody knows where he put him.”

Mick went to the butler, who was as terrified as Fred. “Do you know where they took my son?”

“I know they had somebody in Baltimore,” the butler volunteered. “But when Yuri came back, he had a young man with him. A teenager.”

“Describe him?” Nikki said.

“A white kid with dark hair and green eyes I think. Well built.”

Although Duke was biracial, he looked white. It sounded like Duke.

“I heard Yuri tell Mr. Piers that the boy was tied down and taped up inside that pickup truck he used to kill Fritz Bellarmo and Tony Pinzarno. But then he grabbed the boy

and bought him inside. That's when I saw the kid with my own two eyes. Then Yuri and Mr. Piers and Esmeralda talked about what to do next, and then Yuri and the boy left. When he walked out that door, I don't know where he took him. But when Yuri came back in this house, he was alone."

Roz were in tears. So were everybody else in that house. Even Fred Campion was grieving for Roz's son.

"Good Lord," Roz cried out. She couldn't take it.
"Good Lord!"

Mick pulled her into his arms, but he kept questioning the butler. "Are there any trap doors in this house?"

"No sir," the butler said.

"Are there any doors that look like walls?"

"No sir."

Mick was beside himself with fear. "Tear up this house again," he ordered. "Room by room. I don't care what this butler said, you search for any wall that might be a door. Any rug you move that might lead to something else."

"We got you, Uncle Mick," said Reno and the Gabrini men and Teddy and Nikki got to it.

"Is there a basement?" Mick asked the butler.

“Yes, sir,” said the butler.

Roz was hopeful. “Take me to it,” Mick said, and Roz and Tommy followed as the butler lead them down the stairs.

They tore the place apart, but there was no sign of Duke there, or ever being there. It seemed true that Duke had only been in that house for a minute, and then Yuri took him away.

When they returned upstairs, there was no joy up there either. Nobody found any sign of Duke.

Roz felt as if she was going to die where she stood. Mick placed his arm around her again even as he was barking out an order to Nikki. He knew Yuri wasn’t in town long enough to take Duke anywhere outside of Buffalo. “I need every man to get to Buffalo to search for my son,” he ordered. “Pile them on my plane and get them here. And every man we already have in this region, get them here too.”

“Yes, sir,” said Nikki as she pulled out her phone.

Mick looked at the butler. “Are there any guesthouses outside?”

“No sir.”

“What’s outside?”

“The garage is all.”

Mick looked at Reno and Sal. They took off out of the front door to search the garage and anywhere else on that property.

Mick looked at Teddy. “Tie up Campion and the butler, too.”

“Not in this house,” Fred begged. “I cannot be in a house where dead bodies are peppered. In the garage or anywhere else but in this house.”

Mick knew all along that Campion had nothing to do with it. He also knew he wasn't accustomed to this kind of violence on any day. He nodded at Teddy. Teddy and Nikki grabbed Campion and the butler and took them out toward the garage too.

Mick looked at Vito. “Why are you still at this house if Duke wasn't?”

“I planned to hide out here until the dust cleared.”

Mick's entire demeanor changed. “You mean until you killed my family?”

Vito didn't deny it.

Mick looked at him with a searing look. He'd known that man for a very long time. He knew Fritz and Tony and the Dean even longer. He hated, absolutely despised, disloyalty. "If you know more, you better tell me now."

Vito looked like an already condemned man. Like a man who wished he'd never gotten himself involved with ever even thinking he could dethrone Mick the Tick. He knew his seconds were numbered. "I don't have any more to tell," he confessed.

Mick nodded toward Tommy. Terrified that his son might never be found, he didn't have the energy to even pull a trigger. He walked out of the house with Roz. Tommy remained inside. "I need a drink," Vito said.

"You need more than that," said super-calm Tommy.

After Mick and Roz made it outside, three gunshots were heard in succession. Then Tommy came out too. He stood alongside Mick and Roz in the cold Buffalo night air. Where on earth did they even begin in a city none of them knew that well?

Then Roz, just standing there and thinking about her child, lost it. She cried out Duke's name with a pain that cut

Mick to his core. “Duke?” she started crying. “Duke? Duke, don’t leave me, Duke!”

Mick was already feeling guilty as hell for living a lifestyle that put his family in this position. He now felt even worse for killing Yuri before he had the intel they came to get. He had calculated that Piers knew everything. He had miscalculated to Duke’s detriment. And it was tearing him apart inside. He was grabbing at Roz, who was falling like a rag doll, and he lifted her up and pulled her into his arms.

But as she sobbed, and as Mick slowly walked her to the van, they both suddenly stopped walking and froze in place.

“What the matter?” asked Tommy, who was walking behind them wiping away his own tears.

“I heard him,” said Roz.

“I did too,” said Mick.

Tommy didn’t hear a thing. In their grief, were they delusional? But he remained silent.

And that was when he heard it too. “Ma.”

They all started turning around. It was Duke’s voice! They knew it was Duke’s voice. But where was it coming

from?

“Ma.”

And that was when Roz looked up. And that was when she saw it. Over by the edge of the property, surrounded by big oak trees. Mick looked up too. And so did Tommy. And that was when they saw what Roz had just discovered: a treehouse high up in the trees.

“Reno! Sal! Teddy and Nikki!” Tommy yelled, and they all came running out of that garage.

“What the fuck?” Reno said as they all saw Mick climbing a tree.

“Pop, what are you doing?” asked a confused Teddy. Until they looked up further and saw the treehouse too.

“We heard Duke’s voice,” said Tommy. “We heard him!”

When Teddy heard that, he took off and climbed the tree behind his father.

The rest of them waited on the ground as Mick and Teddy made it to the top of the tree. Roz was praying out loud and praying privately and couldn’t stop praying. It was as if her child was within her grasp, but he still seemed so far away.

The door to the treehouse was bolted shut. This was no child's toy. Mick had to force it open with all the strength he had. Teddy was able to join him and use all of his strength too. When they finally opened it, they went inside.

"Is he there?" Roz cried out, but they didn't hear her. Because when Mick saw his son, he pulled him into his arms. Mick was crying like a baby. He couldn't hear anything.

Teddy leaned out of the treehouse with a thumbs up. He was too emotionally spent to say any words. But when Roz saw that thumbs up, she began trying to climb up that tree too.

"No, Ma," said Nikki, grabbing her. Tommy grabbed her too. "They'll bring him down."

"Sure they will, Roz," said a happy Reno. "They got him now."

But Sal was looking around. He was making sure there was no hidden attack.

Roz wasn't going to exhale until she saw her boy again. What was taking them so long, she wondered?

Mick and Teddy were untying Duke's hands and legs and removing what remained of the tape on his mouth.

“It took me hours,” Duke said breathlessly, “but I had just chewed off enough to be able to speak out. And then I heard Ma crying and calling my name. That’s when I called out her name with all I had.” But his voice was low. He was exhausted.

Mick pulled him into his arms again and was nearly smothering him. “You done good, boy,” he said with tears of joy in his eyes. “You done good.”

“Are you able to climb down?” a happy Teddy asked his baby brother.

Duke nodded. “They didn’t harm me,” said Duke. “I can climb down all day long.”

“Just get your ass down,” Teddy said with joy in his eyes too. He ruffled his baby brother’s hair.

And when Roz saw Duke coming down, she dropped to her knees praising God. Everybody was crying. Everybody was happy.

And when Duke jumped down the last rung and ran to his mother, and when Roz stood up and pulled him into her arms, even Mick, ice cold Mick the Tick, was finally able to smile.

EPILOGUE

“I don’t believe this,” said Jackie.

“I still don’t believe it,” said Duke.

But it was true. Mick and Roz, along with all of their children and grands, were at Disney World. The disbelief was that Mick was with them.

It was a joy for Roz to watch as Mick ate cotton candy with Teddy and Nikki, their baby, and Teddy’s grown son Marco. And with Gloria and Oz Drakos and their little girl too. And with Duke and Jackie. Ever since that night in Buffalo, Mick was a changed man.

Everything changed after that ordeal. If Duke had a game, Mick was there. If Jackie had a recital, Mick was there. Of course Roz remembered how dutiful Mick was when she kicked him out of the house not that long ago. But this time, she believed, was different. His miscalculation and his compulsion to shoot first almost cost him his son’s life. That changed him. He even went to every one of Roz’s Broadway performances, and actually had a bearable relationship with her director, Fred Campion, too. When the cops questioned

Campion, he put none of the blame at the feet of the Sinatras or the Gabrinis. Mick respected that. That butler didn't either. Pax and the driver were set free, and Moby was roughed up for running his mouth, but nothing else seemed to point a finger at him.

Mick closed that horrid chapter of his life and opened a new one. He was a new man to his family. He was willing to do whatever they wanted to do, and he made the time to do it.

But he drew the line on those carnival rides at Disney.

"Ah come on, Dad!" said a happy Duke as he grabbed Mick's hand and tried to force him to move. But Mick was unmovable. "You'll love it," Duke added.

"He must be scared," said Marco as he held his baby sister's hand. Mick's grandchild giggled.

Roz grinned too. "That's what it is," she said. "That's what it is!"

Mick looked at Roz as they walked hand in hand through the theme park. "I don't see your ass getting on any rides," he said.

Roz truly was scared. "No, I'm good."

“Ah, come on, Ma,” said Duke, laughing. “Don’t tell me we got punk-ass parents? He’ll get on one if you get on one.”

“Won’t you, Daddy?” added Jackie.

Everybody looked at Mick. Mick calculated that Roz wasn’t about to get on any ride. “If your mother gets on a ride,” he said, “I’ll gladly get on one with her.”

Roz was scared, but that never stopped her before. “You’re on!” she said happily, knowing that Mick knew her fear and had gambled she wouldn’t go for it. But that was all she needed to go for it.

“That one looks good,” Roz said.

When Mick saw that monstrosity, his heart sank. “We don’t have tickets for that thang,” he said.

“Here you are, grandpa,” said Marco. He was grinning too. “I purchased the tickets in advance.”

Mick wanted to kick his ass. It sounded like a setup to him! Especially when Roz snatched the tickets from Marco happily, took Mick’s arm, and all but dragged him to the ride line. And they went and got on the ride that was billed as a

thrill a second. Mick's life was a series of thrills. What he looked like searching for some on vacation?

But there he was, being strapped into a ride that he didn't even know how it quite worked. Roz was strapped in right beside him. Duke and Marco were strapped in behind them. Teddy and Oz behind them. Gloria and Nikki decided to keep their babies on firm ground and waited it out. Jackie hated rides and wasn't about to get on one.

At first, Mick was okay. The ride went all the way up to the top without any craziness. He felt he could deal with this. It wasn't that bad!

But when it started plunging down in a freefall that left Mick's heart at the top, he started screaming for his life. They had never heard Mick scream so loud. Three cars back and Teddy and Oz were hearing the screams.

And they all laughed. They couldn't stop laughing because Mick couldn't stop screaming. He was screaming so hard that he sounded like a woman. He was screaming so loud and so much like a woman that they thought he was going to lose his voice. Roz was laughing so hard that she wasn't even scared anymore.

And when it kept going up and then plunging back down again, up Mick was screaming all over again. “Stop this motherfucker!” he started yelling even as kids were on the ride. Only it sounded like a woman was yelling it out, which made Roz laugh even harder. She thought she was going to pee she was laughing so hard.

When the ride finally stopped, Mick’s hair was all over his head and his pride was so wounded that he wanted to crawl somewhere and hide. He’d never been more humiliated in his life. Had the wise guys in his organization seen him, they would have taken away his swag card.

And then they all got back on firm ground, and everybody, knowing how upset Mick was, did all they could to hold in their laughter.

But Roz couldn’t pull it off. “You should become an opera singer, Mick,” she joked, and Mick grabbed for her as everybody laughed. But Roz ran. Mick ran after her as she ducked in and out of the crowds of people at the busiest park on earth. She’d never laughed more in her entire life.

Duke and Jackie and Teddy and Gloria watched their parents run around that park with nothing but joy in their hearts. Their parents were like kids again. Which made them

proud to be their children. Because they all knew there had to be hope in this life, even though they bore the burden of the Sinatra brand, because there was hope in their parents. And by the way their parents were running through that park, and even Mick was laughing too, there was plenty of hope to go around.

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