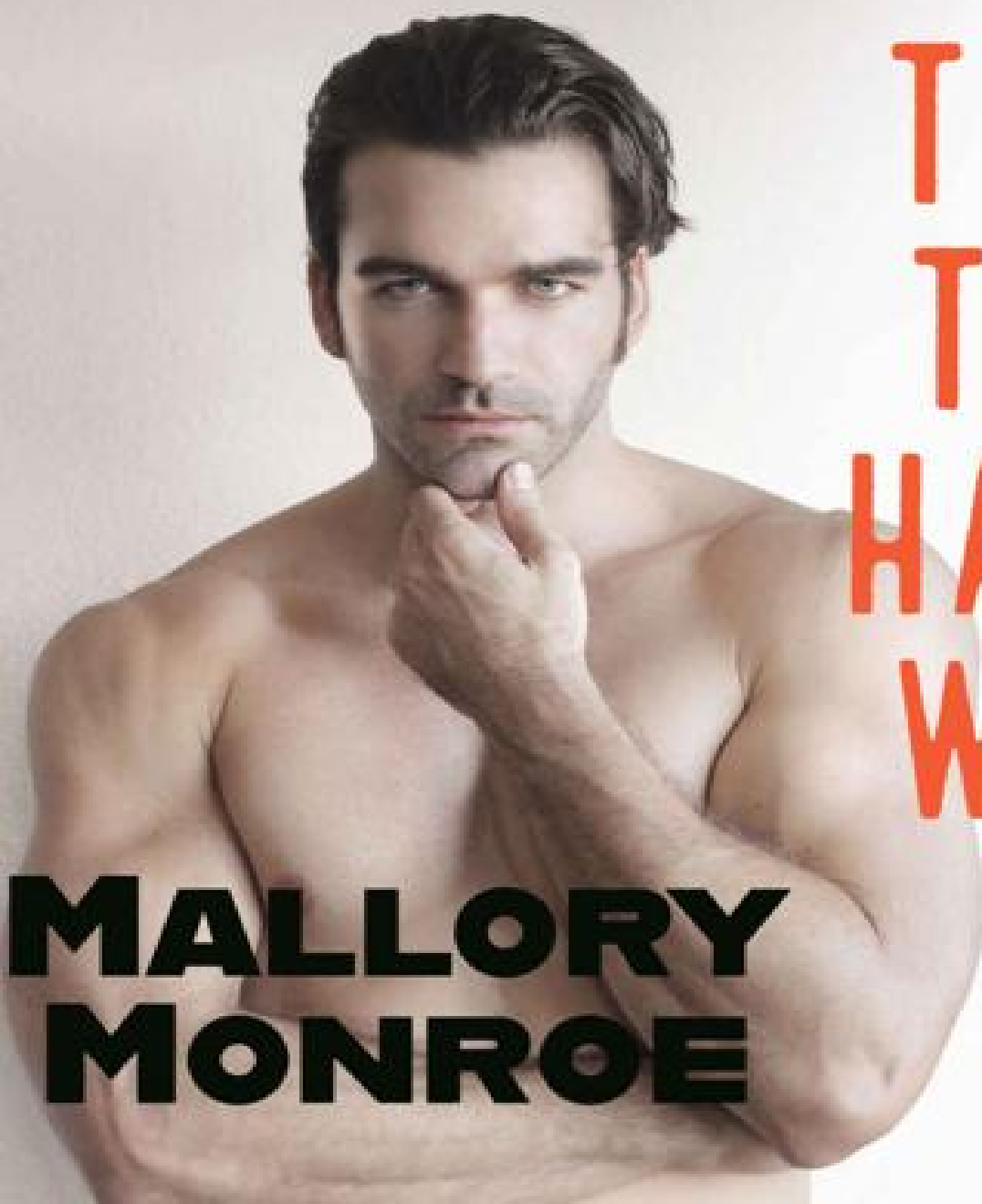


**MICK
SINATRA**



**TWO
THE
HARD
WAY**



**MALLORY
MONROE**

MICK SINATRA:
TWO THE HARD WAY
BY
MALLORY MONROE

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

Years Earlier

Mick Sinatra: Age 25

Off the coast of Tanzania, in the jungles of Burundi, the truck was already waiting when they arrived. Mick Sinatra, along with his partner Corky Demps and their guide Datmoud, hopped out of their own box truck and hurried over to the one they were there to see. Both Americans were in army fatigues and had the straps of their rifles over their shoulders. The natives who got out of the truck and removed the filthy brown tarp off of the merchandise on the back of the truck, thought they were dealing with the American military. Thought they were supplying the military the arsenal they needed to help them fight the rebels. And that was exactly what Mick wanted them to think. He and his partner cut a deal that was as sweetheart as a deal was going to get.

Datmoud turned on the bright flashlight that he carried and aimed it at the bed of the truck. And there it was:

munitions galore. Chemical and conventional. Staring them in the face.

“You count first?” asked the leader of the natives.

But Corky was shaking his head. “No need. We trust you,” he added with a smile.

Mick knew the last thing any human being needed to do was to trust either one of them. “This doesn’t look like the full arsenal we requested,” he said.

“But it is all of it, sir,” said the leader of the natives. “Every kind you asked for.”

“I’m telling you it’s not what we bargained for. This isn’t enough. There will have to be a cut in price.”

Corky looked at Mick and grinned. That bastard would rob a grandma if it would save his ass some money.

“But it is all of it, sir.”

“I told you it’s not. I’m not telling you again. Because I can leave right now.”

The leader was flustered, as if he didn’t know what he should do. “May we confer amongst ourselves?”

Mick thought about it, then nodded his head. The natives moved further away, near the front of the truck.

Corky moved closer to Mick. “Sure you wanna cheat these good folks?”

“These killers? What’s good about them? They as soon slit my throat than deal with me, but they gotta deal with me.”

“They’re warlords, alright, who want the cash to get what they really need for their own tribal battles. I get that. But come on Mick. Their Africans. Don’t you think the white man has pillaged and cheated them long enough?”

But Mick would have none of it. “I’m doing business with business people. This is strictly about business. If they want a social worker they don’t come to me. I want those munitions and I want them at the best price I can get them for. What the fuck I care that it’s Africans. You don’t think they’d pull this same shit on me?”

“You’re a hothead. A young hothead. What are you? Twenty-four? Twenty-five? I got fifteen years on your ass. One day you’re gonna learn you can attract more bees if you buy it with honey rather than with vinegar.”

“Or you can trap those motherfuckers in a box and save your money,” said Mick.

Corky laughed. “You got balls, Micky, I’ll give you that. You got balls!”

Then the natives returned to Mick and Corky. “We knock off an additional ten percent. But that is our bottom line.”

Mick stared at the young warlords. Then he nodded. “Load it up,” he said and the leader nodded at the natives and they began loading up Mick’s truck.

But before they could make it back to their own truck to grab a second load, another native came running down the path with his skinny arms flailing and his voice as high-pitched as a girl’s. “*Kimbieni kwa ajili ya maisha yenu! Kimbieni Kwa ajili ya Maisha yenu!*”

“What’s that fucker saying?” Mick asked anxiously.

“He says to run. To run for your lives!” said Datmoud, and Mick and Corky did not hesitate. They ran to get back into their truck. But the tires were shot out and they were so outgunned that they had no choice but to take off and run deeper into the jungle. The warlords were the first to get

away, Corky got shot in the hip, but Mick was able to pick him up and run with him.

Mick felt as if his back was going to split in two trying to carry such dead weight, but he knew they had to get out of there. “This way!” Datmoud was yelling at them and they ran behind Datmoud.

“Run faster!” Mick said, knowing that if one of those bullets penetrated those munitions, they were all dead men. Datmoud ran faster.

They ran deeper into the jungle. But they could still hear the footsteps of the gunmen running right behind them.

“We got to split up,” said Mick.

“I can run,” said Corky as he got down from Mick’s arms.

“You two get back to the village,” Mick said. “I’ll play decoy.”

Corky looked at Mick. Mick had a reputation for being the kind of man who would never leave you on the battlefield. He was that kind of standup guy. But they did what they were told. Although Corky was limping, he and Datmoud got out of there.

But Mick moved further over, so that the men running after them could see his face. When they saw him, they stopped and began firing. Which was exactly what Mick wanted. He then took off running further down the path, and then he turned left.

The gunmen, realizing their target was on the move again, began the chase again. Led by three white men, the natives had to slow their run for the whites to keep up. But when they turned left, too, and saw no sign of Mick, the white leader of the pack stopped and raised his rifle to stop the pursuit. Then he shushed them. Like a good tracker, he needed to hear the sound of Mick's running. But there was no sound. None whatsoever. But then liquid fell on the side of the white man's face.

"What the," the white man said. He touched the liquid that had fallen on the side of his face, then he looked up where it could have come from. And there, in the big tree, was when he saw Mick. The liquid was Mick's sweat.

"Up there!" the tracker yelled as he attempted to aim his rifle and fire.

But Mick's rifle was already aimed. And he fired before the leader, and anybody else in that party, could get off

a round. All of them: dead.

Mick exhaled a sigh of relief, and then got down from there.

Later that same night, Mick arrived at the hut where they were staying in the Salta village of Burundi and started packing up his ammo. Corky and Datmoud, who had arrived nearly an hour ahead of him, were already packed up.

“How’s that hip?” Mick asked.

“Doc said it was just a flesh wound. He bandaged it and sent me on my way like a good little boy.” Then Corky looked at Mick. “You got those assholes?”

“Every one of ’em.”

“But how did they find us?”

“I don’t know,” Mick said, “but they didn’t shoot those munitions. I know that.”

“Which means they were there for the same thing we were there for.”

“Right,” said Mick. “Only they expected us to pay the tab.”

Hurry up,” Corky said as he grabbed his huge backpack of supplies and limped his way to the Jeep. “I want to get out of here!”

Mick was almost done when Datmoud approached him. “I saw her waiting outside, before you came in,” he said to Mick.

“Yeah,” Mick said as he continued to pack up.

“Did she tell you?”

Mick kept packing, but didn’t immediately answer his guide. “Yes,” he finally said.

“What did you say to her?”

“Now mind your business,” he said. “That’s none of your business.” Then he grabbed his gear, and hurried outside.

Datmoud closed his eyes to calm himself back down, and hurried outside behind them.

He hopped in the Jeep Mick and Corky were already in, and Mick, the driver, sped away.

“The colonizers will not be happy when they find out what happened to their men,” said a worried Datmoud.

“You should know,” said Corky to the biracial Datmoud. “Ain’t your daddy one of those European landgrabbers?”

“My father does not exist in my mind.”

“Oh he exists alright. Your ass damn near white! He exists.”

“I am just saying that the colonizers will attempt to harm the natives if they find out what happened.”

“What you suggest we do about it?” asked Corky.

“Those fuckers came for us,” said Mick. “We didn’t come for them.

“They got what they deserve,” said Corky. “Wasting our time. Now we have to go back emptyhanded because of their asses.”

“Not entirely,” said Mick as he drove the Jeep back into the jungle.

Just a few feet in, they saw the munitions truck.

Corky smiled. “You bought it here?”

“Why the fuck not? We load that shit right onto the chopper. Then we’re out of here,” he added.

Corky laughed. “You’re my hero Mick the Tick! I wanna be just like your ass when I grow up.”

“You got fifteen years on me, remember?”

“Oh yeah,” Corky said with a smile. “I forgot!”

Then they hopped out of the Jeep and waited for the chopper.

It was almost pitch black when the chopper finally arrived. But it stopped on the makeshift helipad and Mick and Corky, along with Datmoud, began loading up as many munitions as they possibly could.

But as they were about to load more, the pilot of the helicopter yelled “*they’re here!*” and Mick, Corky, and Datmoud jumped onto the chopper and the chopper tried to take off. But the men began shooting in the distance and the pilot had to make all kinds of maneuvers just to avoid getting hit.

Mick knew, in that moment, that if they hit the body of that chopper they would all be instantaneously incinerated by the explosives onboard.

“They’re everywhere!” Corky was yelling as they were taking incoming from all sides. “What are we gonna do,

Mick?”

Mick knew he had no choice. It was kill or be killed and he wasn't dying in some jungle thousands of miles always from home. He grabbed one of the bombs, lit it up, and tossed it out of the chopper.

It worked. The bomb blew up all of the gunmen. But it worked too well too because that fire spread like wildfire and within seconds the village attached to that jungle was engulfed in flames too.

Datmoud, who lived in that village himself and had many relatives still there, began wailing in pain when he saw the explosion spread. “No!” he cried. He was bent in pain. “No!” No!” Then he tried to jump out of the military-grade big chopper, but Mick and Corky both had to pull him back in.

“Get out of here!” Mick yelled to the pilot, and the Chopper finally circled one last time to get full altitude, and then took off.

When they were far enough away and Datmoud had calmed back down, Mick leaned his back against the wall of the chopper and closed his weary eyes. It didn't take Datmoud's wailing or the stunned look on Corky's face to remind him of what he'd done. Of what kind of man he was.

Of what kind of check a man like him would someday have to cash.

CHAPTER ONE

Present Time

“This some slow-ass service.”

“As if you have somewhere to be, Miss *Married to a Doctor*.”

“Just because I’m married to a man of some esteem doesn’t mean I should have to endure slow service. I still don’t want these valet people wasting my time. They were real quick to hop into my bad-ass ride and speed away like they own it. Then they need to be real quick bringing it back to me. I don’t have time for this.”

“Don’t have time? Cent please! You’re a housewife with no children. You have more time than Timex, what are you talking about?”

Roz smiled at Pat’s corny joke. Cynthia Johansen and Patricia Langford, her two friends from her Broadway days when they were all struggling actresses trying to get that big break, were always getting into it. How they remained friends all these years was a mystery to Roz.

But once a month all three of them made it their business to get together for lunch and for some *good old days* shop talk and laughs. Just three ordinary sisters having a drink together, although Cynthia and Pat would be quick to point out that Roz was hardly ordinary. She was the wife of the infamous Mick the Tick, for one thing, the man reputed to still be the boss of all mob bosses although they knew it was a subject never to be broached in Roz's presence. For another thing she had that big, burly bodyguard standing right behind her, and many more, it was their understanding, that were there but out of sight, as further evidence of her *more than ordinary* status.

But Roz never discussed her private life with either of them. It wasn't that kind of friendship. But she did, in a rare occasion, agree with Cynthia. "Say what you want," she said, "but Cynthia's right. How long have we been standing out here? This don't make no kind of sense."

"Thank you!" Cynthia was pleased to have their leader validate her complaints. "About time somebody told Pat something. Time is money and it always will be."

"Anywho," said Pat, not willing to give Cynthia any credit but capable of moving on, "what do you think about that

mansion, Roz? When I saw it I said well damn. That's a badass crib. Even for her obnoxious ass."

Roz looked curiously at Pat. She was known for coming out of nowhere with tidbits she found on the internet that she always assumed everybody knew about. "What mansion?" Roz asked her.

"The one your girl's flaunting all over social media," said Pat as she swiped through her phone. "See." She showed Roz the pictures of a big, beautiful home.

Roz took the phone to get a better look. When she saw who the person was, and what Instagram page those pics of that beautiful home were coming from, her heart sank.

"What I don't understand," said Pat, unaware of their leader's distress, "is how in hell her broke ass could afford a crib like that? I thought her business was on the verge of collapse just a few months ago."

"It was," said Cynthia, who had already seen the photos. "But word on the street is that Mick came running to her rescue. *A-gain!*"

"Like he's *her* knight," said Pat.

“At least he’s somebody’s knight,” Cynthia said snidely, motioning her head toward Roz, whom she felt should have divorced Mick’s ass a long time ago. “And I guarantee you he’s the one that bought her that mansion too. I guarantee it! Let my husband pull that shit on me. *Ha*. Not me! If I were you, Roz, I wouldn’t go along with that shit not even for a second.”

“But you’re not me so,” Roz said, hunching her shoulders in that defensive, aggressive way she was known for, as she handed the phone back to Pat.

Pat could now tell, by Roz’s changed demeanor, that she was upset by the news, and she knew how Roz always lashed out when she was upset. Cynthia knew it too. But Cynthia, *being Cynthia*, kept poking the bear. “I’m just saying how I would feel about it,” Cynthia said as the valets began driving up with their cars: a Lexus, an Aston Martin, a Mercedes-Maybach. “I’m just saying what I would do if I were you. That’s all I was saying. But like you said,” she added like a putdown, looking Roz up and down, “I’m not you.”

“Girrl,” Pat said jokingly to end their monthly confab tension-free, “Roz would have killed herself years ago if she

were you!”

It seemed to work. They all laughed.

“Roz knows how to keep that man of hers in line,” Pat added. “Bet that.”

But Cynthia, *being Cynthia*, wouldn’t let it go. “He bought that heifer that mansion,” she said. “Bet that! But if that’s what y’all call keeping your man in line, then okay.”

Pat looked at Roz. “Nice-nasty. That’s Cent.”

“But am I right, Roz? Am I right?”

Roz looked at Cynthia with an irritated look on her face. “Are you right about what?”

“He bought her that house. Didn’t he?”

She went too far. Even Pat saw that. And Roz had had it. “And how in hell is that your business if he did buy that house? What the fuck that got to do with you? Getting all up in my business. What’s wrong with you? You know I don’t play that shit, Cent, so back the fuck up.”

Pat laughed, although it was nervous laughter. More than any of them, Pat needed them to remain friends. They were all she had. “She told your ass,” she said. Then her smile left. “And rightly so.”

Cynthia rolled her eyes. “Whatever. I’m out,” she said as she held up the two-finger peace sign, hopped into her Aston Martin, and sped away.

Pat looked at Roz. “Adulthood?” Then Pat shook her head. “She ain’t ready,” she added, and she and Roz laughed. Then they said their goodbyes with air kisses cheek to cheek, and then Pat hopped into her Lexus and Roz hopped into her Mercedes. Only Roz wasn’t smiling when she got into her car and drove away.

Her bodyguard hopped onto the front passenger seat of the car carrying the rest of her security detail that drove up just behind her car and picked him up, and they sped up behind her. Other security was in the area too, but they were purposely out of sight. But the boss was clear: they were never to interfere with her independence. Riding in the car with her was out of the question. Roz forbade that unless a threat was big enough to require it. Being all up under her was out of the question too. But they had better be within striking distance should anybody try to strike her. And if they failed, as Mick put it himself, it would be the end of them.

But Roz was so accustomed to security following her everywhere she went that she rarely gave Mick’s guys a

second glance. She, instead, pressed Mick's icon on her car's phone screen and called him. But the call, as usual, went to Voice Mail. Which only upset her more. Buying that bitch a house and he wouldn't even pick up the phone for her? She hit her steering wheel with her open hand. Because one thing she knew for certain: she wasn't doing it again. They just came out of that fog. She just let his ass back in her heart. She wasn't going through that shit again.

She sped through those streets of Philly as if those streets themselves were the cause of her distress. Called Mick again. His Voice Mail again. Then she was angry with herself for calling him at all. But despite all of her inward protestations to the contrary, she couldn't dismiss it like she used to. She couldn't let it go like she used to. She called him once again. His voice mail picked up once again.

And just as she was about to try his number yet again, she stopped herself. What was she doing? Repeating the same thing over and over and expecting a different result was insanity. That was what it was. And she wasn't having it. No man was driving her insane.

She forgot Mick's ass, and drove herself to work.

CHAPTER TWO

“Are you sure this the right place?”

“Positive.” Teddy Sinatra was still fuming over what happened. Soon as he got word where that chump was hiding out, he knew he was going to handle it himself.

“Looks like the land that time forgot.” Nikki Sinatra, his wife and underboss, wasn’t about to let him go alone. She loved Paulie too.

“Thought he could hide out the storm he unleashed and nobody could find his ass out here. Planned to stay until the heat was off.”

“Trying to hide from you?” Nikki smiled. “You were born and raised in Philly and everybody knows you.”

“I was born and raised in this bitch,” Teddy agreed. “Ain’t no hiding places from me.”

“But they still think they can get away with it.” Nikki was rechecking her gun load. “They still think they can hit one of our capos and think we’ll what? Look the other way? They think we’re distracted because we just took over? It’s still the Sinatra crime family. Still got Mick Sinatra at the top

of this chain of command. But they still try us.” Nikki shook her head. “Out of their motherfucking minds.”

“I know that’s right,” said Teddy as he kept speeding up the long backroad that led to the abandoned apartment complex at the end of the street. “I remember when this place used to be thriving. Hundreds of cars coming out of here on the daily. Dope Hole Central is what we used to call it. Where all the street pushers found a safe haven. Used to be a tall fence all around it and guards at the gate. You would have thought you was at Pop’s house.”

Nikki smiled. Teddy’s old man was notorious for great ground security to protect his family. Now that Teddy was appointed the day-to-day head of the Sinatra crime family and Nikki was his underboss, and they now had a young daughter in the mix, they were similarly serious about their home security too.

“Before Pop took me under his wings I used to spend many days up in that hole. Mainly getting laid.”

Nikki looked over at Teddy. The ladies loved Teddy T, as they called him, all of his life. But he chose a full-figured woman like her to be his wife when his body type used to always be the slender, sun-kissed surfer girls. But he chose

her. She was still getting over that shit. “You were getting laid,” she asked, “*and* getting high?”

Teddy was shaking his head. “Never touched the stuff. But that didn’t mean I was an angel. I was a part of the problem, that was for damn sure.”

“Does that mean you worked out of this place?”

“Not me, no. But I had a few guys working for me up in that hole, I’m not gonna even lie. Although I was mainly international, I had a command center over here for my local shit. And it was running smoothly for a long time. For me and for everybody else. Including the cops that were on our payrolls. Until the politicians got tired of the murder rate and decided to shut it all down. But they shut it down and forgot about it even though they promised the law-abiding residents that they would get rid of the riffraff, rebuild it, and then they could return with brand new apartments. But they were lying to those poor people to get them out of there. They didn’t rebuild shit. Not another dime went into this place.”

Nikki looked at the dilapidated complex as Teddy’s Camaro drove around back to the last of the numerous buildings the schematics said were filled with ten inside units. None of which were considered inhabitable. Which

confounded Nikki. “And Richie figure this was a good spot to hide from you? An obvious place like this hole?” Nikki shook her head. “When will they ever learn,” she said as Teddy did a drive around, to make sure nobody was lying in wait for their asses, before he stopped at their location.

And then they got out.

Both wore jeans. But Nikki wore Jordans and a tucked-in silk blouse that showed off her flat stomach and big boobs, not to mention her curves, while Teddy wore loafers and a tucked-in polo shirt that showed off his muscular abs. Although Nikki was the gold standard to Teddy and had everything in all the right places to him, she wasn't universally accepted in the mob world at all. There were capos of the Italian persuasion even in their own organization who didn't want some female telling them what to do, let alone one that wasn't even Italian, but was African-American. And she wasn't some fragile little thing either? Some resented her big time. *Big Nick* was what some in the organization derisively called her behind her back. *Fat Ass* was her other name. Nikki was so accustomed to the name-calling that she didn't give a shit.

But Teddy did. He beat the shit out of anybody and everybody that called Nikki out of her name. And he fired them too. He wasn't tolerating any of it. But some of his best lieutenants, made-men every one of them, just couldn't get over the fact that a girl was telling them, the alpha of alpha males in the alpha of alpha crime syndicates, what to do. And that behind-the-back disrespect of Nikki persisted.

But Nikki had never been, and never would be a sensitive weakling. She could take it.

She got out of the car already carrying her assault rifle. Teddy got out and went to the trunk and pulled out his sawed-off shotgun. And then he looked at his wife. He used to hate that she was caught up in his line of work too. But time changed that. Now he felt better having her by his side. He was the appointed leader of the organization, but she was his underboss, his number one. Pops did it, he knew, because nobody alive would have Teddy's back the way Nikki would. And because his old man loved Nikki seemingly more than he even loved Teddy, he also installed Nikki as underboss because nobody would have her back the way he knew Teddy would. They were now a team. And they both were pleased with it.

They headed inside the apartment building where their completely reliable sources told them that Ritchie Belcone, the murderer of their newest capo, was hiding out.

CHAPTER THREE

He was on top of Roz making those guttural sounds he always made when he fucked her. He was making love to her with the ease and masterfulness of a man who was now an icon of lovemaking. He was staring at her high cheekbones. At her gorgeous dark face. At her eyes that were as soft as they were coldblooded. You didn't cross Roz. Mick loved that about her.

But as he fucked her, he knew his masterfulness wasn't going to get him out of the woods completely. For this moment she could look the other way. But he knew, based on all those calls she'd made to his phone alone, she wanted to kick his ass.

Roz was groaning and enjoying every second of how Mick was putting it on her. If she didn't love his penis so much, she wouldn't have allowed his ass within ten feet of her. Not after what Pat showed her was all over social media. Not after she saw that shit. But Mick was sliding his penis all over her vagina, making her feel unlike any man could even dream of making her feel, and she was too weak to resist it.

And when his gyrations increased, and he started groaning even louder too, she forgot all about those pics and was in oneness with him. They were moving together as one.

And when her orgasm ripped through, he started cumming right behind her. Neither one of them could do anything but enjoy the euphoria of the kind of cum Mick's lovemaking laid down on both of them. Mick could forget about those fuckups now growing within the Sinatra Crime syndicate that wouldn't give him a break. Roz could forget about Mick's fuckups that wouldn't give her a break. They forgot their troubles and came. They came for several minutes. Mick kept giving and Roz kept receiving. And those feelings they loved to feel kept Mick just as whipped as they kept Roz.

Until there was nothing else within either one of them, and Mick pulled out and rolled off.

Roz gave it a minute. Mick was breathing so hard like he usually did that she knew it was in her best interest to wait. She'd been with him long enough to know that if she came sideways at him too soon, he'd cuss her ass out. And she'd cuss his ass right back. And that would be that.

After several more minutes, Roz could hold it in no longer. She looked at him. And just asked it outright. “You bought her a mansion?”

But Mick said nothing.

“Is that what we’re doing now? Buying our ex-pieces-of-asses mansions now?”

Mick still said nothing. And then he slid out of bed and sat on the edge of the bed. He began putting back on the shirt that he had thrown off trying to get to Roz’s naked body.

But Roz was not the one. “You’re ignoring me? No your ass not ignoring me. We’re going to discuss this.”

“That’s enough, Rosalind,” Mick said in that condescending tone Roz hated. “There’s nothing to discuss.”

“Then why did you do it when you know I can’t stand that bitch?”

“I’m not going to argue with you. What I did or didn’t do has nothing to do with you.”

“*Nothing to do with me?*” Roz was beside herself with anger. “How can you say that, Mick?”

He stood up. Pulled up his pants. Put on his shoes.

“Mick? Don’t you dare ignore me, Mick! We’re going to deal with this shit.”

Mick looked at her with a look that could whiten coal. “Not tonight we aren’t,” he said to her in that voice even Roz knew was as final as death. Then he grabbed his keys and phone and began heading for the bedroom exit. “I’m out.”

“Then get your ass out of here,” Roz yelled at him. “Ain’t nobody begging your ass to stay up in here. You got the wrong one if you think that!”

When he slammed the double doors behind him, Roz grabbed his pillow and threw it at that door as hard as she could. “Motherfucker!” she yelled out into the silence.

Then she laid back down on her back, still simmering. He was the most infuriating man she’d ever met in her entire life. A man with a heart so cold it chilled even her. But a man with a heart so tender it stunned even her. A man that she loved so much it was beyond hurting her now.

It was scaring her.

She covered her face with her hands. But she refused to cry.

CHAPTER FOUR

Teddy stood on the left side of the door and Nikki stood on the right side. After checking out the flimsy lock, they knew it would be an easy take down. And that was why, when Teddy nodded, it was Nikki who kicked the door in and it was Teddy who entered the apartment with his sawed-off shotgun ready to blow Richie Belcone's brains out if he had to.

Richie made it easy. He was in plain sight, sitting on the broke down couch playing some violent videogame when the door was kicked down. He quickly dropped his controller and was reaching for the gun he kept beside him, but Teddy shot a hole in his hand.

Richie screamed out with a blood-curling scream.

“Shut the fuck up!” Nikki yelled. “You iced a member of the Sinatra syndicate. What you expect was gonna happen to you?”

“What ice?” Richie cried out. “I didn't do nuddin'. I don't know nuddin'!”

Nikki searched through the apartment while Richie continued to scream and voice his willful ignorance. Teddy

just stood there, waiting for the all-clear from Nikki.

When Nikki came back and nodded, Teddy then walked up to Richie.

“What did I do, Teddy T?” he cried out. “I ain’t got no beef with you. What did I do?”

“You know what your ass did, motherfucker,” said Teddy. “Why you ice Paulie though?” Teddy looked as if he was still trying to figure that news out. “You knew he was still wet behind the ears. You knew he didn’t know shit yet! But you took him out anyway. And if you deny it again I’ll end you where you sit!”

“He started it,” Richie said, to defend himself. “He was picking at my shoes in front of everybody. All night he kept picking. What was I supposed to do?”

Nikki could hardly believe it. Teddy couldn’t believe it either. “You killed a man because he was picking at your shoes? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“He wouldn’t let up! He kept telling joke after joke after joke, having all them people laughing at me, so hell yeah I blew that motherfucker’s head off! Hell yeah I did that!”

Teddy was so filled with rage that he dropped his shotgun, lunged at Richie, grabbed him by his shirt, and began beating the shit out of him. He punched him and he punched him. He punched him until his white hand was covered in blood.

But as soon as Teddy went to lift Richie up, to beat him standing up on his feet, Richie slyly took his good hand and grabbed the gun he had tried to grab when they first busted into the apartment.

But Nikki saw him as he aimed it at Teddy, and she didn't hesitate. She fired. As quick a draw as any woman Teddy had ever seen, she beat Richie to the trigger. And Richie fell back dead. Just like that. It was over.

Teddy looked at Nikki. He knew how painful it was when they had to go there. But they had to defend their people. They had to defend their power and position at the top of the chain. Ritchie started it. There was no option for them except finishing it.

“Over fucking shoes,” Teddy said as they began leaving the apartment. They'd have a cleanup crew come over in the morning. Richie was a freelancer. He didn't belong to any syndicate that they knew of. There was no rush.

They left the upstairs apartment and headed for the downstairs exit. But as soon as they opened the door and Nikki was about to step out, Teddy saw the red flash of a rifle scope through the darkness outside, and pulled Nikki back in just as a barrage of gunfire came through that door.

Nikki kicked the door shut with her shoe and they dived for cover. Shots were being fired as if they were surrounded. Any normal couple would call 911. But they would have had to explain that body upstairs. And they were Sinatras. Cops were off the table.

“They just got here?” Nikki asked.

“Apparently,” Teddy said. “We’ve got to preserve our bullets,” he added as he began shooting occasional shots through the one window in that building. For his one shot, ten shots came barreling back through the already shattered glass, forcing them to hunker down once again.

Nikki pulled out her phone. “Calling our guys?” Teddy asked. “No way they’ll get here in time. There’s nobody on watch duty. They’re all over the city.”

“That’s why I’m calling Pops,” Nikki said. “He’ll get here faster.”

But Nikki, knowing Mick was going to be so pissed with them for handling it themselves that he might cuss her out even at a time like this, chickened out when she heard the phone on the other end start to ring. She handed her phone to Teddy. She'd rather be in the line of fire and take over the shooting duties than to talk to an angry Mick the Tick.

Teddy wasn't exactly thrilled to handle the call either. But he knew Nikki was right: Pops would get there faster and with more firepower. And they were going to need an army.

As Nikki tried to shoot back to keep the gunmen at bay, Teddy listened to his father's phone ringing, and steeled himself for that call.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mick was seated in his big, white Cadillac Escalade at the top tip of his circular driveway. He was on the phone with his ex-girlfriend and baby mama Bella Caine. And he didn't mince words. "Why did you put that shit on social media?"

"What shit?"

Mick didn't respond. He knew Bella knew exactly what he was talking about.

"I didn't put it on anything," Bella finally responded. "Gloria put it on her Instagram, and since Roz follows her that must be how she found out. And even Gloria's page said nothing about who bought that house for me. Hell, for all she knew I could have purchased it myself."

"Your ass can't purchase shit and Rosalind knows it." Bella Caine's fashion house was in shambles after a *Me Too* scandal involving her creative director, and it was Mick who had to step in and prop her and her business up. He bought her that house because she had already lost her own home due to financial mismanagement and was too ashamed to tell Mick. Why he kept helping her. Why he kept propping her up. Why

he kept going to the ends of the earth to do for her confounded everybody. Even Mick sometimes. “Tell Gloria to take that shit down and take it down now,” he ordered.

“Okay, Mick, I will,” Bella responded. She was learning how not to agitate her benefactor. “Are you okay, babe?”

Mick ended the call. Because he was not okay. He was still having feelings of dread, as if his life was falling apart and there was nothing he could do about it, and he didn’t know where those feelings were coming from or why he couldn’t just shake them off.

And the fact that he was taking it all out on Roz troubled him. Why would he take it out on the one woman he loved with a love that could not be matched? Just when they were coming back together after their rough breakup, he was tearing them right back apart. And it appalled him. It was as if he sensed something was coming down the pike and he wanted to put a distance between them to protect her. But he knew Roz was his ride or die. He knew there was no way he was going to fall and she wouldn’t lay down her body to catch him. Which was exactly what he didn’t want her to do. He leaned his head back in sheer frustration.

But within seconds, his phone was ringing. When he saw that it was Nikki, he answered right away. “Yes?”

It was Teddy’s voice. And he was hysterical. “We’re under attack, Pop! From all sides we’re under attack!”

Mick sat back up. He could hear the gunfire. He was jerking his gear into Drive and pulling off. “Where?”

“The old abandoned apartment complex off Plum and McCormick. The old dope hole.”

Mick was speeding out of his elongated driveway. “I’m on my way,” he said as his front gate security quickly opened the gate. Mick pressed down his window as he approached their station. “Two units. Plum and McCormick. The old dope hole,” he ordered barely stopping. And he sped away.

His son and apparently his daughter-in-law, too, were in trouble. Was this what he dreaded? Was it happening already?

His heart was nearly pounding out of his chest as he sped to them.

CHAPTER SIX

His men, two cars deep, caught up with him within a mile of his destination. They were speeding right behind Mick's big white Escalade and didn't let up until they were driving to the back of the complex where they were already hearing the gunfire.

When they got there, the gunmen were about to rush inside of the building as Teddy and Nikki's ammunition apparently had been exhausted. And the two cars behind Mick immediately dropped out of single file formation and moved to either side, with the Escalade in the middle. And Mick didn't hesitate. He gunned his SUV like a madman and ran straight toward that building. When the gunmen turned and saw that Escalade, and especially the man behind the wheel, they were stumbling over each other trying to get out of harm's way.

But there was no hiding place with Mick. He ran straight into that building and crushed most of those gunmen with such a crash that his airbags deployed.

And as his men jumped out of their cars and began firing at the other men getting away, Mick was not to be

outdone. He moved the airbag out of his way, backed back up, and mowed down two more gunmen who had run on the opposite side of the building than where his two backup cars were in a gun battle. Then he jumped out and shot three others who were doing all they could to get away from Mick the Tick. They were running for their lives. Until they weren't.

When Mick ran over to the opposite side of the building and saw that his backup crew had it well in hand, he ran into the building that his SUV had disabled. And although it was obvious that Teddy and Nikki had run out of ammo, they had managed to grab a gunman that had come in through a back window and was beating him down. He was gone, but they were making certain. He almost had them dead to rights. They were returning the favor.

But for Mick, seeing them alive and well was the tonic he needed. They were okay. He didn't get there too late! He inwardly sighed relief.

But that didn't mean he wasn't pissed that number one: both of them were there. And, number two, he didn't know anything about this shit going down.

When they finished their assault on that dead man, Mick just stood there. And they, understanding the drill,

walked over to Mick.

“Thanks, Pop,” Teddy said.

“What happened here?” Mick was trying with all he had to withhold his fire.

“Richie Belcone was holed up here,” said Teddy. “He iced Paulie. He iced my new guy.”

Mick knew he didn’t hear that right. And that fixed frown on his face said it all. “Richie iced your new guy and you thought it was a good idea to handle it yourself? The boss handle this shit? And you bring Nikki with your ass? Are you out of your fucking mind?”

Teddy and Nikki expected him to be upset, but not like this. And Teddy felt a need to explain his actions. “He was a good kid, Pop. The best. And Richie took advantage like he knew he was new and we wouldn’t look out for Paulie. He killed him over a pair of fucking shoes, Pop.”

“I don’t care if he killed him over a *gotdamn* penny! The boss of the Sinatra organization do not make low level revenge runs! You will not run my organization like a fucking sideshow. Do I make myself clear?”

“I want the guys to know that I’ll look out for them. That I’ll have their backs. That’s how I roll. And if you don’t like the way I’m running your organization then you can remove me as boss.”

“And me as underboss,” Nikki said defiantly too. And they both looked at Mick as if they were now his equal.

And that riled Mick something terrible. All he went through down through the years to get this organization to the top of that chain and they thought they were *his equal*? Before he knew it he slapped the shit out of Teddy and slapped the shit out of Nikki too. “You’re threatening me?” he yelled at both of them. “Who the fuck are you to tell me what I can do with my own organization? *Who the fuck are you?!?*” He screamed it from the top of his lungs.

Teddy wanted to clock Mick so badly for striking Nikki, but Nikki grabbed hold of his fist before he could even raise it. Because for Nikki, it was nothing more than a searing reminder of the man they were dealing with. What kept her from going after Mick just like Teddy wanted to was because she knew, deep down, his anger was always coming from a place of love. He loved them, and was worried about them, but he never learned how to express it the proper way. She

saw the pain in his eyes. She saw the regret. She knew he didn't want to be a monster. He didn't want to be a tyrant. But a tyrant, Nikki also knew, was exactly what he was.

For Teddy, it was his typical father being the asshole he'd been his whole life. Why did he love this crazy-ass man so much that he put up with this shit year in and year out? And now he had Nikki subjected to it? He wanted to beat Mick's ass for slapping Nikki, and believed he could beat his father if he went buck wild on him. And one day he might. Teddy feared that one day Mick was going to push him to the point of no return. But this wasn't that day. Because for a second, Teddy could see the pain in his father's eyes too. But only for a second.

"Get the fuck out of my face," Mick said to both of them when he finally calmed back down.

Teddy stared at his father with pain of his own. But how could you beat down a man who just saved your life, and your wife's life? He placed his hand on Nikki's back and walked with her out of that building.

Mick exhaled when they left. He opened his suitcoat and leaned his head back. It was a damn close call. A few minutes later and those gunmen could have breached that door

and killed his beloved son and beloved daughter-in-law just like that. How could they not have known they were walking into an ambush? How could they have been so reckless?

And Mick, for the first time since his board of governors agreed that Teddy and Nikki were ready to take the reins, was questioning his own decision.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They rode in silence until they were almost home. Nikki looked at Teddy as Teddy drove. “What a debacle,” she said. “He was so angry with us I could see the veins in his neck. But I think it came from a place of love,” she felt a need to remind Teddy.

“Love my ass,” Teddy responded.

Nikki looked at him. “He loves you, Teddy.”

Teddy started moving around in his seat angrily, as if he wanted to cuss Nikki out for even suggesting such a thing. And Nikki knew he wasn't trying to hear that. So she admitted the truth too. “He seemed disappointed in us though. As if ...”

“As if what?” Teddy asked her. He needed to hear it from her lips.

“As if he was questioning putting us in charge.”

And it was only then, when Nikki finally admitted the obvious, did Teddy agree. “Yeah, I know,” he said. And he said it in a way so filled with regret that Nikki looked at him

again. Disappointing Mick Sinatra was the one thing, she knew, Teddy never ever wanted to do.

They rode the rest of the way home in silence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After totaling his vehicle and having his guys tow it away from the scene of the crime, one of his capos drove him to a warehouse he owned where he stored a fleet of vehicles, including several Escalades, and then he drove over to Dommi's house.

Dominic Gabrini came out in his pjs and sat on the front seat of his uncle's big, black SUV. For him to be at his house that time of night made Dommi well aware that something had gone down. He just didn't know what.

"How is it?" Mick asked him.

Dommi knew what he meant. How was life at the organization now that Teddy was no longer the underboss, but was the official head. "On the surface, it's good."

"Beneath the surface?"

Dommi exhaled. He was pissed when his uncle installed Nikki as underboss instead of him. He was still pissed. He wasn't the best person to ask that question. "Beneath the surface," he answered, "there's some rumblings going on. Some dissatisfaction."

“With?”

“Both of them.”

“Nikki how?”

“The guys don’t want no woman telling them what to do. They love Nikki and they respect her skills, but she’s still a female. And some of the guys can’t get past her gender. And a few of them can’t even get past her race. But I handle those.” Dommi’s father was Italian, but his mother was African-American like Nikki. “But the main dissatisfaction with Nikki is the fact that this woman with limited experience is over all of them when they have massive amounts of experience. They don’t think it’s fair.”

Mick looked at Dommi. “Are you one of the ones dissatisfied with her?”

“Am I still upset that you put her in as underboss and not me? Hell yeah I’m still mad. What she got that I don’t got? What’s she given to this organization that I haven’t given? I’m your nephew, Uncle Mick. I’m your flesh and blood. I felt you should have looked out for me better than you did.”

Mick stared at Dommi, then he looked away from him. Because it was another reminder of how many people he let down in this world. “Teddy how?” he said.

Dommi had to settle himself back down. He knew how his uncle hated weakness. He hated that he had revealed that much of his feelings to a man like Mick. “They’re grumbling about Teddy because they don’t feel he’s looking at the big picture. He won’t expand. He’s suspicious of every new client. He’s just holding on to what you built and not even trying to put his stamp on anything new.”

“And that’s absolutely the way it should be,” Mick said, defending his son. “Do you know how many assholes out there want to take us down right now? They don’t see this handover as a sign of strength, but a sign of weakness. A sign that I lost a step and need my son to step in.”

“Even I know that’s bullshit,” said Dommi.

“Oh they’re asses know it too,” Mick said. “But it’s the right call for Teddy to not take on new clients. You don’t know who the fuck you’re dealing with during transition times. He’s making the right call.”

“Many of the guys don’t think so.”

Mick frowned. "Fuck them! Who are they to think? They work for Teddy. He doesn't work for their asses."

Dommi nodded. "I agree. And I also know that's not why you paid me a visit this time of night." He said this and looked at his uncle.

"Did you know Ted and Nikki went to handle the Paulie situation themselves?"

Dommi hesitated. But lying to his uncle wasn't going to happen. "Yes sir, I knew." Then he became concerned. "Everything alright?"

"Why didn't you give me the heads up, Dominic?"

"Because I can't do that."

Mick stared at him. "You can't do what?"

"I'm not gonna be your snitch bitch, Uncle Mick. I'm not gonna do it. I'll let you know what the guys are grumbling about when it comes to the direction Teddy's taking the organization, because it's your organization and I feel you have a right to know that. But that's it."

Mick continued to stare at Dommi in that unreadable way that in some ways was even more chilling than his cold stares. "Okay," Mick said to him.

Dommi knew it was his way of dismissing him, and he was glad to be out of the fire and dismissed. But as soon as he opened that SUV, got out, and closed the door, Mick was pressing down the window. “And Dom?”

Dommi went back up to the window. “Sir?”

“If Teddy or Nikki ever again go on a revenge run and I find out later that you knew about it and didn’t tell me, it will be the end of you. Your allegiance is to me. Don’t you forget that.”

But Dommi was never one to back down, not even from his most-feared uncle in a family of many feared uncles. “I’m not going to be your snitch bitch, Uncle Mick. That’s not gonna happen. I’m nobody’s snitch. I’m Reno Gabrini’s son. And don’t you forget that.”

And Dommi, feeling triumphant for standing up for himself and not cowering to Uncle Mick the way everybody else did, headed back to his house. He was satisfied.

But just as he turned the knob to open his front door, he felt a sudden jerk on the back of his shirt collar. He turned around to realize that his uncle had jumped out of that SUV and hurried behind him with such rage that all he could now see was his uncle’s massive fist as it punched the shit out of

him. That punch was so vicious that Dommi fell against his front door with a hard thump, causing it to fly open, and then he fell through the door and right onto his ass.

And Mick stood over him like a giant shadow in the night. “And I’m Mick Sinatra motherfucker,” he said to Dommi. “Don’t you forget *that!*”

And then Mick walked away, got back into his SUV, and sped away from there.

Mariah came running out of their bedroom when she heard the commotion. And Dommi, still feeling the sting of that powerful punch, was so angry and so embarrassed that his high-yellow, biracial skin started turning beet red.

CHAPTER NINE

“You slept on the sofa, Mom?”

Roz opened her eyes to see her teenage twins, Jacqueline, called Jackie, and Michello Junior, called Duke, staring down at her. When she realized she had fallen asleep on the sofa waiting up for Mick’s ass, she leaned up on her elbows. “What time is it?” she asked, her voice still hoarse with sleep.

Jackie looked at her Apple watch. “Seven forty-three,” she said.

Roz laid her head back down. She’d been there all night waiting for his return. She felt like a fool.

Jackie and Duke were worried too. Their parents had not that long ago gotten back together after a terrible breakup that had their mother burning their fathers clothes and kicking him out the house and refusing to even talk to him. Now they were at it again? “Daddy’s upstairs?” Jackie asked cautiously.

But Duke already knew that answer. “Of course he’s not upstairs. If he was upstairs Mom wouldn’t have slept

down here all night.” Then Duke scrunched up his face. “Daddy messed up again.”

Jackie looked at her beautiful twin brother, a brother who was also her best friend. “Why you had to say it like that? Why it always got to be Daddy’s fault?”

“Because it always is,” Duke shot back. Then he frowned. His parents’ woes affected him most of all. “Let’s just go,” he said as he grabbed his car keys off of the side table and made his way for the front door.

But their parents’ problems affected Jackie too. “You okay, Mom?” she asked her beloved mother.

Roz grabbed Jackie’s hand. “I’m okay, baby. You just go on to school.”

“Did Daddy come home last night?”

“Jacqueline, it’s okay.”

But Jackie wanted answers. “Did Daddy come home last night?”

Roz exhaled. She wasn’t good at putting on faces even if she tried. “No, his ass didn’t come home last night. And that has nothing to do with you.”

“He’s with another woman?”

That always crossed Roz's mind. But not in front of the children. "No," she said firmly. "Of course not."

"But how do you know that?"

"Because I know it. Just go on to school, baby, and let me worry about your father. Did you guys have breakfast yet?"

"We don't want to go through that again," Jackie said.

Roz rubbed her daughter's arm. "And you won't," she said.

"You promise?" Jackie knew her mother never broke a promise.

Roz felt trapped. She felt as if her life was one continuous trap. She always wanted a happy home and a normal family, but then her ass jumped up and married the most complicated, crazy-ass man on earth. A man who guaranteed her only one thing: that her life would never be normal and only rarely would it be happy. And she took the dive anyway. And the bad news, given all they'd been through? She had a sinking feeling they hadn't even hit rock bottom yet.

But her children had to be protected. “I promise,” she said to Jackie. Jackie smiled, hugged Roz, and left.

But as Roz got up and made her way upstairs, and as she brushed her teeth and bathed her body and began getting ready for work, she still had no clue how she was going to keep her word to her daughter. She had a bad temper. Mick had a horrible temper. And together they sometimes were combustible. Keeping the lid on, with two people like them, was hard.

And it didn't get any easier when Roz arrived at the talent agency she owned and was met outside the building by a client who had just gotten fired from an off-Broadway musical she'd just joined. As she listened to the young lady go on and on about how it was all the director's fault, Roz saw Mick's big black Escalade drive up, further back against the curb, and just sat there. And for some reason that angered the shit out of Roz. Why didn't his ass get out and explain himself? Why did he always wait for her to make the first move? Why was their future always in her hands when she wasn't the one fucking it up?

“Let’s go to my office and talk,” she said to her client as they made their way across the sidewalk. She glanced over at Mick’s SUV to see if he was going to make a move now. When he didn’t, she stopped hesitating and kept on going.

Mick was watching her the entire time. He saw her talking with some girl he assumed was one of her clients. He saw her standing there, looking like perfection in her Prada head to toe, listening to that client with the seriousness he always loved about Roz. She didn’t play games with people. She told people like it was. And if he did anything she didn’t like, she held his feet to the fire. The only woman that ever had. The only woman on earth who could handle him. A trait that made him respect her even more.

But why was he keeping his distance from her? And why couldn’t he shake that feeling of dread whenever he thought about her? He had heightened security on her. She couldn’t see them around because she hated that shit, but they were always there. Mick had already checked out all of their locations around that building and a couple working undercover inside that building before he pulled up to that curb. She was well-protected. But he still couldn’t shake that dread.

And when she and her client walked across that sidewalk to enter the building's lobby, and Roz glanced over at him, he almost wanted to get out and go to her. But he stayed right where he was. Staring at her as she stared at him. And then she went on inside. Which left him feeling empty. But he did nothing to fill it. He drove away.

CHAPTER TEN

Teddy's dick was deep inside of Nikki, fucking her hard as she laid on top of him on the cot in the backroom of their office, and he had her wrapped into his arms. It was their favorite position because it relaxed both of them. And after what went down last night, they needed a break.

Teddy was kissing Nikki, and rubbing her ass, and moaning and groaning as the feelings intensified. His dick was moving inside of her as only he knew how to move it, and she was moaning too and running her hands through his hair. His penis was moving in and almost out, with perfect access, hitting her spot in a way that kept her on the verge.

And when they finally came, they came together with a thunderous cum. Just the two of them. Just like it always was. *Them* against the world. Bonnie and Clyde. Batman and Robin. Boss and underboss.

But because they were in the backroom of the office at the docks, they couldn't just lay there. They had to get up and get at it. Teddy cleaned them both up, and they dressed and went back into the main office. And that momentary reprieve

from the events of last night came back like a tidal wave, and began stressing them all over again.

Both of them felt like shit after what went down last night. Teddy, now seated behind his desk, was throwing a tennis ball against the wall and catching it. His way, Nikki knew, of relieving that returning stress. But Nikki, seated behind her desk, was in complete thought mode. She was trying to figure out how were they ever going to navigate such treacherous waters called the Sinatra syndicate when the big man himself was still swimming deep in those very waters. And his legend always would.

“It almost feel just like it used to feel before he made you the head of the family,” she said to Teddy. “Or maybe a little worse because even the guys feel as if you’re dropping the ball.”

Teddy continued to bounce his tennis ball against the wall and catch it.

“Did you hear me?”

“I heard you.”

“Then what do you have to say about it?”

“That’s Pops, Nikki. That’s how his ass is. He’s gonna lord it over me, you, and everybody else in the family until the day he dies. He’s still the boss in the eyes of the underworld no matter what title they put on me. That’s just the way it is.”

“He doesn’t lord it over Roz,” said Nikki.

“That’s what you think,” Teddy said.

Nikki looked at him. “What do you mean?” she asked as Dommi walked into the office.

“Damn,” said Teddy when he saw Dommi. “What fist said hello to your face?”

“Uncle Mick’s fist,” said Dommi as he plopped down in the chair in front of their desks. “Sometimes I wanna kill that motherfucker!”

Teddy glanced over at Nikki. “When did you see him?” Nikki asked.

“Last night. He came by the house. Was mad that I didn’t tell him that you guys had gone on what he calls your revenge run.”

Teddy caught his ball for the last time and looked at Dom. “Why would he be mad at you about something we did?”

“Because he wants me to be his snitch. That’s why. And when I said I wasn’t going to be anybody’s snitch bitch, and when I reminded him that I wasn’t just some chump working for him but that I was Reno Gabrini’s son and he had better recognize, he didn’t like that shit one bit.”

“What did you say to him?”

“I said I was no snitch. I said I was Reno Gabrini’s son and he’d better not forget that.”

Teddy frowned. “You spoke to Pop like that?”

Dommi hated it now because his face was feeling even worse today than it felt last night. He only nodded.

“Have you taken leave of your senses, *Dummy?*”

“I’m nobody’s snitch.”

“What happened after that?” Nikki asked.

“I walked away,” said Dommi. “And next thing I know, fist met face and I was on my ass. Reminded me who he was. Scared the shit out of Mariah. She just got back from Vegas after another one of our breakups. Now she’s talking about taking the baby and going right back to Vegas. Uncle Mick is bad for relationships.”

“Including his own,” said Teddy.

Nikki and Dommi looked at him. Nikki remembered the little comment he'd made just before Dom walked in. "What's that supposed to mean?" she asked him.

"Duke text me this morning while they were at McDonald's having breakfast before school and told me that Pop stayed out all night and Roz stayed up all night waiting on him. And Ma's pissed."

"Not that again," said Nikki.

"That again," said Teddy. "And now Duke's pissed at Pop, too, for hurting Roz." Then he looked at Dommi. "What did Pop want you to snitch about?"

"About what you guys are up to. He feels that you need to behave like the head of the family and not like the enforcer. Not like the underboss anymore. And he hates anytime you put Nikki in harm's way too. You know how he feels about her. Leave it up to him she wouldn't ever leave the office."

"Yeah, she's his pet," Teddy said with a drip of jealousy in his voice.

"I'm nobody's pet," Nikki responded. She hated when they said that shit.

“You’re nobody’s pet,” said Teddy. “Except mine.”

Nikki looked sideways at him. Teddy and Dommi both laughed.

Then Teddy looked at Dommi. “Any news on who those guys were last night?”

“Nada,” said Dommi. “We took photos of all of the dead guys on the scene before the cleanup crew got their hands on them. And we turned up blanks. We even had the cops on our payroll run background. Still blanks. We don’t know any of those fuckers.”

“Have our guys send the photos to me,” said Teddy. “Just to make sure.”

“Sure thing. But it looks like they were just some friends of Richie’s we didn’t know about.”

“If they were friends of that fucker’s,” said Teddy, “they’d be in our database.”

“And certainly in the cops database,” said Nikki.

Teddy nodded. “Right. Every one of those fuckers would have records a mile long.”

“Well we don’t know who they are. Bottom line.”
Then Dommi stood up. “Unlike you two big wigs,” he said, “I

got work to do.”

“When since your ass cared about work?” asked Teddy.

Although Dommi smiled, that shit wasn't funny to him. Hard as he worked for these fucking Sinatras and he never got a break. Never got an attaboy. Never got a promotion. Just more work. More criticism. More shit shoved down his face while Nikki was sitting pretty. He was getting tired of this shit. He was supposed to be underboss by now, not her. He was supposed to be well on his way when he was still right where he started from. That shit wasn't funny at all.

But just as Dommi was about to walk out of that door, one of their capos was running into the office. “They're fighting, boss. And I don't mean a little bit either. They're gonna kill each other!”

Teddy, Nikki, and Dommi all ran out of the office with their capo and ran across the yard to one of their cargo ships, which had just docked. And the men, all capos, were brawling.

“What the fuck?” Nikki was stunned.

Dommi and the capo were trying to pull the men apart. But Teddy was enraged. He'd never seen this in all the years he was his father's underboss. Never! Now he was just put in charge and it was a free-for-all? He pulled out his revolver and fired it in the air one time. They all looked to see who was shooting, and when they saw it was Teddy, they all stopped. They all feared him. They all knew he was no bluffer.

“What do you think you're doing?” Teddy asked them angrily. “What is this some fucking Cony Island carnival shit? This ain't no fucking Jersey Shore. Cut that shit out!”

“They're upset, Boss,” said one of the more vocal, and longtime capos.

“Upset about what?” Teddy asked them.

“About what happened to young Paulie. They loved the kid. And nobody's doing nothing about that.”

“Nothing?” asked an infuriated Nikki. “What do you mean nothing? Teddy handled that shit. What more do you want him to do? He nearly died handling that shit!”

But it was obvious they were hearing it, but they still wanted more done. As if killing the killer wasn't ever going to

be enough with them.

Teddy and Nikki glanced at each other. Because they knew what this was about. There was dissension in the ranks already, and it was only escalating with every passing day. Their tenure as boss and underboss weren't going too well.

“Get back to work,” Teddy ordered, and then left the ship. Nikki left behind him.

But once outside, Nikki saw that Teddy had slowed his walk so that she could catch up with him. She did.

“Everybody's stressed,” she said to him. “It's hard when they know something's not right when assholes like Ritchie Beltone would come for one of our guys. What does that mean for them? Are they next? That's the feeling.”

“I know. And Pop's lack of faith in my ability to run this shipwreck doesn't help.”

“Not a bit,” agreed Nikki.

Then Teddy exhaled. “Call Ma,” he said, “and see if she can have lunch with us today.”

Nikki looked at him as they walked. “Lunch why? Because he didn't come home last night? You want to eyeball her to see how she's doing?”

“That,” said Teddy. “But also to see how she thinks we’re doing. And most importantly, how Pop thinks we’re doing. We don’t need to keep guessing about this shit. We need to know.”

Nikki studied her husband. “You literally just got installed as boss. It’s only been a few months. Even he knows it’s going to take some time.”

“And any other head of family would give it time. But we’re talking about my old man.” Then Teddy exhaled again. “I need to know if Pop is thinking about making a move.”

“Back in?” Nikki asked.

“And squeezing us out,” said Teddy. “Yeh. It’s possible. Call her.”

Nikki knew like Teddy knew that if anybody was going to give it to them straight, it was going to be Roz. If anybody knew how Mick thought about their leadership of his organization, and what his next moves might be, it was going to be Roz. She gladly made that call.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mick Sinatra made his way up the air steps of his massive jumbo jet and took a seat up front as his flight crew prepared for takeoff. When a text came in, Mick checked it quickly. But was disappointed that it wasn't Roz, but was his New York team requesting his estimated time of arrival so that they could meet his plane. Mick text the time and was about to sit his phone aside, until Roz's face came up on his home screen. And he stared at that gorgeous black woman staring back at him. How could he leave town when he hardly wanted her out of his sight? And to leave after not even bothering to go home last night?

Fuck it, he said to himself, and called her on his phone. But when the phone on her end just rang and rang and then went to Voice Mail, as if her ass wasn't answering his calls just yet, he said *fuck it* again and was about to throw his own phone aside.

But then his phone ring. Hoping it was her, he picked it up quickly. When he saw that it was Teddy he was let down again, but he answered. "Yeh?"

“Before you find out from anybody else, I just wanted you to know that we just had a little brawl on one of the ships.”

Mick frowned. “A brawl?”

“Our guys fighting our guys. But it’s under control now.”

“It should have never been out of control. What the fuck is wrong with you and Nikki?”

“Nothing’s wrong with us, Pop. What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mick wasn’t in the mood to even discuss it. “What about last night?” he asked. “Any read on who they were?”

“We couldn’t get any info on any of those ambushers. Could just be friends of Richie’s.”

“That many? Bullshit. What about the photo runs?”

“Nothing on any of’em. I sent the photos to your phone so you could have a look at’em too. But we got nothing. Even the cops on our payroll couldn’t find criminal records or names or anything.”

Mick thought about that. “Are they foreigners?”

“Good question, Pop. The answer is we don’t know. Nobody was carrying ID. And nobody was alive for us to detect an accent.”

“A couple of those guys looked Eastern European. Check our worldwide database.”

“Okay Pop, I will. I should have thought of that myself.”

“Yes, you should have,” Mick said and hung up in Teddy’s face. Then he exhaled. He knew Ted was just getting started. But he’d been underboss for years. He should have had this shit down right away in Mick’s view. But time would tell. Because right now, he had Rosalind on his mind.

He couldn’t get her off of his mind. And when her face reappeared on his phone’s home screen again, that face he loved more than life itself, he made up his mind.

To the bafflement of his flight crew, he got up, got off the plane, hopped into his Escalade and sped away. The crew looked at each other with the palm of their hands outstretched in shock, and their shoulders hunched in confusion.

But Mick’s longtime pilot, who knew nothing about the boss was ever predictable, stopped the engine and aborted

takeoff, noticing air traffic control, without giving it a second thought.

Further away from that plane was a man seated in a Ford Taurus near a different private jet as if handling his own business at the airfield. As soon as he saw Mick Sinatra hop back into his SUV, he pressed the covert tactical earpiece inside his outer ear. “Subject on the move again. No longer on the plane. I repeat: Subject is no longer on the plane and is on the move. Heading toward B1. Copy that?”

“Copy,” a voice on the other end of the earpiece said.

“B1 copy too,” another voice said.

And then the random car, *the spotter car*, began to slowly follow behind Mick’s SUV and the security detail car that followed the big man everywhere he went. The driver of that spotter car drove slowly. He drove with the ease of knowing that even with this change in plan, they had it all under control.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Roz was behind her desk reviewing the contract stipulations for one of her A-list clients when her office door opened.

She didn't bother to look up. "Didn't I say I didn't want to be disturbed, Tee?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Teegan Salley, Roz's longtime secretary. "But this couldn't be helped."

Roz frowned. "What do you mean it couldn't," she started saying as she looked up. But when she looked up and saw Mick walking past Teegan and entering her office, she understood what she meant. He had left. But he came back? That wasn't like Mick on any day of the week.

And Roz's frown softened. And Teegan, understanding that there was probably more trouble in paradise, stepped back out and closed the door behind her.

Roz just sat there staring at Mick as he made his way to the front of her desk in his pristine Armani suit. He was a gorgeous man with a body she knew women would die to have in their beds, and she also knew he was *her* man. Nobody on

the face of this earth could doubt that. But what his actions was causing her to question once again was whether or not he was somebody else's man too.

Mick placed one hand in his pants pocket as he stood there without saying a word, and was staring at Roz too. His heart still felt that surge of emotion whenever he saw her. Even when he was pissed with her ass. Even, as now, when she was pissed with him. But he just stood there.

One of them had to speak up. It wasn't going to be Roz.

And Mick knew it too. She was as stubborn as a mule when she wanted to be. "I ordered Gloria to take down her social media feed," he finally said.

Roz couldn't believe he went there. "You think that's the problem? Seriously? The fact that Glo had a picture of that big-ass house on her Instagram and was congratulating her mother is what you think is the problem?"

"I bought Bella a house."

"I know your ass bought it. Her broke ass couldn't buy shit. That's not the question either. The question is why, Mick? Why do you keep giving and giving and giving to that

one woman? You don't do all that for Teddy's mother. You never did that for Joey's mother or Adrian's. You never went this far for any of your baby mamas. But you're go to the ends of the earth for Bella Caine. Why? I just have to know why."

"She needed my help."

"Bullshit! That's Gloria's mother. Gloria's married to Oz Drakos, whose brother Alex Drakos, I will remind you, is a billionaire! Glo could have helped her."

"Her child isn't helping her do shit. She's nobody's charity case."

"Except yours," said Roz.

Mick was beginning to get pissed, and Roz could tell it. But she wasn't backing down. And he knew she wasn't.

He exhaled again. "I'm not going to ever allow her to become anybody's charity case. Including our daughter's."

"Why?" Roz asked him again.

"I don't know why."

"I know bullshit when I hear it, Mick. I'm calling bullshit again!"

“If there has to be a reason then I still care about her. That’s why. And I always will.”

Roz wanted to lash out. Not just because of what he said, but because of what it meant. Despite all of his promises to kick her to the curb and no longer have anything to do with her, he still held a soft spot in his heart for her. And, as he finally admitted, always would.

Roz was jealous of Bella.

And she had to lash back. “Are you still fucking that whore?” she asked him without batting an eye. “Was that where you were all night long?”

Mick stood there staring at Roz. He got off his plane, came all the way back, for this shit? He turned and walked out of her office.

Roz knew she had crossed a line. She knew it when she said it. But Mick was just standing there all smug, talking about his love for his baby mama like she was supposed to just accept that shit. And maybe a better woman would have. Roz wasn’t the one.

But he came back. Mick wasn’t the one to come back either. But he took that step. And he didn’t lie to her. He

could have. But he didn't. Instead of feeling triumphant for telling his ass off, she just felt bad. She leaned back in her chair, and had to fight back tears.

Mick didn't feel any better as he stepped off of that elevator and made his way across her busy lobby. Total waste of time. They were no more on the same page than they were when he was sitting on his plane. And he was late as fuck too? He hurried across that lobby and couldn't get out of that building fast enough.

With his bodyguards walking behind him, who had been waiting at the elevators for him to come back down, he made his way out of that building and toward his SUV. But just as he got to his SUV, he heard that voice calling his name.

When he turned and saw Roz running toward him, he was so stunned he had to squint his eyes. *Roz* running to him? Was he dreaming? Was he *that* far gone?

It was no dream. When Roz made her way up to him, running by his shocked bodyguards to get to him, she jumped into his arms. And Mick gladly bear-hugged her and lifted her into his arms. And for several seconds they just held onto each other, both of them with eyes squeezed shut.

The two bodyguards, both high-ranking capos in the Sinatra organization, looked at each other. The idea that *their boss*, the infamous boss of all bosses, would be on a city sidewalk embracing a woman like she was the best thing since slice bread was so crazy to them that they didn't know how to process it. *What the fuck*, both of their expressions seemed to say. Then they smiled and shook their heads: Nobody would believe it!

And when they stopped embracing, and as Mick continued to hold Roz up, she placed both hands on the side of his handsome face. His sleepy eye, an eye she adored, made her smile. She knew why he still took care of Bella Caine. She knew it all along. It was that very trait deep within Mick that drew her to him in the first place. That made him special to her. "You're a good man, Michello," she said to him with all sincerity.

But Mick, incapable of falling too deep into that emotional hole, smiled. "And you're a good liar," he said. "But my liar." And then they kissed.

But when they stopped kissing, Mick's smile was gone. Calling him a good man was the best thing anybody

could have ever said to him. Even though he knew it wasn't true. "Thank you," he said to Roz.

Roz smiled this time and placed her finger in the cleft in his chin. "Don't you have a plane a catch?"

"Always."

"New York, right?"

"Right."

"A stayover or you think you'll be able to come back?" She was getting horny in his arms. She wanted him with her, in bed, that night.

But Mick doubted if he could work out a one-day trip. "Probably an overnigher," he said. "Even after the negotiations with the Malaysians conclude, I've got meetings with my Europe office. They're in New York for a summit that can't be rescheduled and usually lasts late into the night. Tomorrow, they need to meet with me and then get their asses back to Europe. But I should be back before noon tomorrow."

"Call me when you're heading back. I want to meet your plane."

Mick's heart swelled with emotion. But he was not an emotional man. He didn't show it. "Sure thing," he said to

her and sat her back on her own two feet.

She told him to have a safe trip, they kissed one another once again, and as he watched her turn to leave, he couldn't help himself. He slapped her ass as hard as he could.

Roz held onto her now stinging ass and turned back, to make sure he was kidding. He wasn't smiling. "Mine and mine alone," he said to her, and meant it.

She laughed. "Don't you have a plane to catch?" she asked him again. "Although it's easier to drive to New York than to fly there."

"You never know with negotiations. Sometimes you have to take them to a different location to seal the deal. I want that deal sealed. The plane is my just in case."

"Ah face it," Roz said with a smile. "You're just too lazy to drive," she added as she began walking away again.

Mick, so relieved they were in a good place again that he was almost beside himself, couldn't stop watching her as she left. The way she flung those hips. Her weight gain that didn't bother him at all. The way she possessed every inch of his heart. And that tight ass that was so round and perfect, and that he knew so well, had him so aroused he was in tent land.

And he couldn't help it. He hurried over to her, grabbed her by the hand, and walked swiftly with her back into the lobby, his bodyguards barely able to keep up. But Mick wasn't thinking about security. He was thinking about Roz's ass. He continued holding her hand on the elevator, and as they made their way back into her office where he locked the door and then slammed her back against that door.

He stared at her for seconds on end. And she stared at him. And then they kissed a long, passionate kiss. And as they kissed, Mick was lifting the skirt of her Prada suit and pulling down her panties. She lifted one of her stilettos and stepped completely out of one leg of her panties, giving him complete access. And then Mick unbuckled, unzipped, and dropped his pants to his ankles. His dick was so hard it sprang out. And he lifted Roz again, but this time his mouth was between her legs.

They were groaning with love as he did her that way. Her back was moving up and down on that door as if it was as smooth as a slip-n-slide. But it was Mick who was the smooth one. It was Mick who was slipping and sliding all over her vagina.

And when it was becoming critical, he slid her down until they were face to face again. Then he entered her with a thrust that made her wrap her hands around his neck and lean her head back in jubilation. She thought he would go to New York to close his deal, stay days on end at his hotel, and they both would be miserable. But he came back. And he came back making the kind of love to her that no man could touch with a ten-foot pole. And as he buried his penis deep inside of her, he was staring at her.

She could feel the heat of his stare as their bodies moved as if they were joined together. They were on one accord again. They were in sync again. And their moans and groans increased as their blissfulness grew.

And when they came, they almost came together too. But Mick made certain Roz came first. For him, it was all about pleasing her. It was all about showing how much he adored her with his dick alone. Because when he saw her running to him with that look of love he'd never forget, he thought he was going to break down right in front of his guys. It felt just that special to him. And when she jumped into his arms, he almost melted away with love for this woman. Pleasing her was the least he could do for her.

But pleasing her always came with a great reward for him. Because as soon as she started her orgasm, he started cumming too. And it was a momentous cum. So hard and sweet and wonderful and intense that they both started gyrating fast and furious as if they could bottle that feeling and take it with them. They came hard.

And when it was all over, they remained holding onto each other at that office door as if they never wanted to let go.

Roz slung her beautiful hair back and looked at Mick. His sleepy eye was drooped again. And for several seconds they just stared at each other. Then he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against Roz's forehead. And in that moment it was as if they melded together even deeper.

Then Mick leaned back up and looked her into her eyes. Only this time both of his eyes were covered by his naturally long eyelashes and appeared drooped. "Thank you," he said to Roz.

Roz knew he wasn't thanking her for sex. That wasn't his style and Roz would find that gross. But then what? "Thanks for what?" she asked him.

Mick continued to stare into her eyes as if he was sizing her up and approving of what he was seeing. "Thank

you for letting me be me.”

Roz smiled. Sometimes Mick said the most adorable things! She placed both hands on the sides of his face and kissed him. “Anytime baby,” she said with her most charming smile. “Anytime.”

But if she thought he was going to smile back and get his already late butt to the airport, she was sadly mistaken. Because even that kiss was too much for Mick. And his dick, that was still wedged deep inside of her wetness, came to life again with a hardness and expansion that initially hurt Roz it had expanded so big, and then he began fucking her again.

And just like that they were moaning and groaning and moving with a rhythm against that door that was singularly passionate. Two masters at work. As if they were one. As if his penis and her vagina were made for each other.

And when they came this second time, when Mick started pouring into her as if a dam had erupted, they came together. Mick’s open mouth against Roz’s long, elegant neck. Roz’s head leaned back so far that she felt as if she was floating on air. They were in sync. On one accord once again.

She could not have asked for anything more.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The taxi stopped in front of the Carson-Benning hotel, known the world over as simply *The Carson*, and Mick's contract closer Tony Veeti, along with Tony's righthand woman Lauren Mack, stepped out of the cab and made their way across the sidewalk to the lobby of the luxurious Manhattan mainstay.

"Guess who owns this place," Tony said as they walked.

"This hotel? Who?"

"The man himself."

"What man?" Then Lauren looked at Tony. "Are you telling me Mr. Sinatra, that our boss, owns The Carson?"

"Yes ma'am," said Tony. "That's exactly what I'm telling you."

Lauren could hardly believe it as they walked into the grand lobby and made their way toward the elevators. "I heard he was reputed to once have been in the Mafia or something, but I had no idea he owned this hotel too. I could

never even afford to stay in a place like this until I started working for his corporation, and he owns this place?”

“Lock, stock, and barrel.”

Lauren smiled and shook her head. “And here I was considering not taking the job because I didn’t want to be tied up with anybody with mob written all over him. But he’s no mobster. He’s a genius!”

Tony leaned against Lauren and whispered. “I hear he’s mob too though,” he said.

Lauren was confused. “Well if you heard it, and I heard it, why hasn’t the FBI heard it?”

“Oh they heard it loud and clear. They just could never catch his ass because he’s smart. Most mobsters will open small businesses, like dry cleaners or construction companies, but they only act as front companies for their money laundering and other crimes, or just to give them some legitimacy in the eyes of the Feds. It’s just to show where their money is coming from. But Boss didn’t do a runaround that shit, he went straight to the heart of it and opened a Fortune 500 company, a real legit company that doesn’t front for anybody. He went global. Which makes him too big to touch. He’s untouchable. And the Feds know it. And I love

working for him because that makes me untouchable too. Because he's loyal. He looks out for anybody and everybody in his inner circle.”

Lauren said nothing more about it, but as they swiped their IDs, which granted them access onto the penthouse elevator, she took mental note. She needed to take advantage of this opportunity and worm her way into that inner circle. And they were meeting him in his hotel suite too? This might be her one and only chance.

That was why, as the elevator doors opened and they stepped on, she immediately began preparing herself by unzipping and then removing the leather jacket that covered her skimpy, lowcut blouse. And then she unbuttoned that blouse to the point just above the nipples of her massive breasts.

When Tony saw what she was doing, he inwardly laughed. “You’re wasting your time, honey.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Number one,” Tony said, “it’s a well-known fact that Boss actually loves his wife.”

“Yeah, that’s what they all say all the time. ‘I love my wife. I love my wife.’ But their actions say different.”

“And number two,” Tony continued, “it’s an equally well-known fact that Boss is a player alright. I’m not saying he’s not a player. He *is* a player. But he would never play around with one of his lowly employees. And I mean never.”

“They say that too,” said Lauren. “But their actions say different. Trust me I know.”

Tony gave up. She would have to find that out for herself. “Just focus on the job at hand,” he warned her. “If Boss isn’t able to close this deal, they’ll be nobody to blame but us.”

Inside the penthouse suite of The Carson, Mick listened to Tony and Lauren go over the finer details of the monumental deal Mick was set to sign within the hour. Mick sat on the edge of the sofa, with the papers strewn out in front of him, while Tony sat beside him and Lauren sat in a chair within inches of him.

As the meeting progressed and Tony kept giving him the details that could make or break the deal, he noticed more

than once that Lauren's eyes kept moving down toward his midsection, where his penis was of a size that it created an outline that was so large that many women often mistook it for a hard on.

And it didn't help that Lauren, a beautiful woman even by Mick's high standards, was dressed so provocatively that it appeared as if her boobs were one sneeze away from exposing themselves. But he knew why she was dressed that way. That shit still worked on those foreigners who still went nuts for a pretty lady. In case there were last second jitters on Britstone's part, any edge they could gain by her *accidentally* pulling one of those puppies out was better than no edge at all. A beautiful woman at the table never hurt, especially one as sharp as Lauren, who graduated from Harvard business school at the top of her class, but still was willing to play the whore to close a deal. It still worked. And when she leaned back laughing at some joke Tony had just told, and her top button came undone, with the biggest breast Mick had seen in a long time popping on out, it started working on Mick too.

But Tony was mortified. Did she just do what he was seeing she just did? He expected her to flirt, but she went *that* far? He just knew Mick was going to give them both a

dressing down they wouldn't soon forget. Boss didn't play that shit!

But it wasn't lost on Mick that even after the boob was exposed, Lauren didn't immediately put it back in place. That she was still staring at him as if she desperately wanted him to want her. She wanted to fuck Mick Sinatra. But Mick had a fuck partner. And her name wasn't Lauren.

“Save it for Britstone,” was all he said to her.

Which pleased Tony, as he looked at Lauren angry that she still had that breast sticking out in the boss's face. “What are you nuts? Put it back in!”

“Oh,” Lauren said as if she had forgotten. Which was bullshit and Mick knew it. But she put it back in.

And Tony continued explaining the deal. Then he placed even more preliminaries in front of Mick to pre-sign as part of the agreement.

But as soon as Mick finished signing the documents, told them he would meet them downstairs in the conference hall in a few, and they left, his intercom buzzed. But it wasn't, as he had assumed, that Tony and Lauren had forgotten something and needed to come back up.

“Miss Caine is on her way up, sir.”

Mick, who was in the bathroom shaving, frowned.

“Who gave her permission to come up here?”

“You did, sir. She’s still on your list.”

Mick leaned his head back in frustration. He never did take her off the list of those who didn’t need permission to come to his suite. But the last person he wanted to be bothered with today was Bella.

And when he dabbed his face with a towel and went to the door, opening it quickly in accordance with his mood, he was ready to tell her just that.

But she was frantic. “You’ve got to help me, Mick,” she said as she hurried inside. “You’ve got to hide me!”

Mick, frowning and looking out to see that his bodyguards were still on duty and that there was no threat around, then looked at her again. “What’s wrong with you?” he asked her.

“You’ve got to help me,” she said again. She clutched his coat lapel. “You’ve got to hide me, Mick. I have nowhere else to go. You’ve got to hide me. You’ve got to help me!”

And Mick, unable to reconcile the cool character that was always Bella Caine with this out-of-her-mind-with-fear clinging woman that stood before him now, knew he wasn't going to just tell her to take a hike the way he had planned to do. That was out of the question now.

He closed and locked the door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ted and Nikki sat in a window booth and watched as Roz stepped out of her banana-yellow Lamborghini in her dark shades and Versace skirt-suit, looking like that bad bitch who had what it took to be the wife of Mick Sinatra, as she made her way toward the swanky restaurant's entrance.

Nikki smiled. "I didn't know Roz bought herself a Lamborghini, are you kidding me? I thought she still had that Mercedes."

"She still has her Benz. And you know good and well Ma's not going all out like that on no car. Pop bought her that Lambo."

Nikki looked at Teddy. "Really? When?"

"I don't know when. I went by the house one day to drop off our little girl and there it was. Parked in the driveway. I asked who owned that bad ride. First she said, 'your father,' which I knew couldn't be right because Pop will be a Cadillac man until he dies. He doesn't even like those foreign cars. But he knows Ma does. Then she admitted Pop bought it for her."

“Did she have a birthday we forgot about?” Nikki asked.

“Are you kidding me? Remember the last time we forgot her birthday and Pop was all over us? You would have thought we called her out of her name or something. He lit into us like we were firecrackers and he was the match.”

Nikki smiled as she nodded. “I remember.”

“No way will I ever forget that lady’s birthday,” he said as he was still looking out of the window.

Nikki knew what he was looking for. “How’s her security?”

“Oh, Pop’s got her covered.”

“One detail?”

“Three.”

Nikki was shocked. “*Three?* Does he know something we don’t know?”

Teddy hunched his shoulders. “He doesn’t confide in me like that. I don’t know. He just gets overprotective like that sometimes. “Hey, Ma,” Teddy said as Roz arrived at their table. He and Nikki both stood on their feet.

Roz removed her shades and she and Teddy air-kissed each other's cheeks. Then she and Nikki hugged. And then she sat in their booth across from them and leaned back. "What a day it's been already," she said. "What a day!"

"Clients misbehaving?" Teddy asked her.

"Producers. Directors. Other actors in the cast. This *Me Too* shit is driving me insane! Not that I'm against it. I'm not. I'm for it. If anybody mistreats any of my clients, I want them prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. But some of this bullshit my clients coming up with against these men is just ridiculous. I'm sorry. They're taking advantage."

"That's the worst part of it," said Nikki. "It's people like them that makes it hard for the ladies with legitimate complaints."

"Right," Roz said, shaking her pair of shades at Nikki. "That's what I'm talking about! I mean one girl told me it was a hostile work environment because the casting director told her she was too skinny for the role."

The waiter came and took Roz's drink order. When he left, Nikki asked the question: "Was it a role for a skinny girl?"

“The description specifically said the woman needed to be two-hundred pounds or more. But she wanted me to cancel the guy anyway because she said he could have let her wear a fat suit.”

Teddy and Nikki laughed.

“I’m serious! Now remember, this entire play is about body image and how we should be proud about all the different shapes and sizes we come in. Even I can relate to that. I’ve gained weight that I can’t shake no matter how much I try. Which, if I were to be honest, I’m not really trying to shake. But can you imagine the blowback that play will get if they hire a skinny bitch in a fat suit? But that’s what I’m dealing with!”

Nikki laughed and shook her head. But Teddy was gazing at Roz. He knew her. “You look good, Ma,” he said.

“But you can tell I’ve gained weight,” she said and then looked at Teddy. “Can’t you?”

Teddy wasn’t going to lie to his stepmother. “Yeah, I can tell you’ve picked up a few pounds. But so what?”

By the look on Roz’s face, it was a big so what. “What’s wrong, Ma?” Nikki asked.

“You know who is the exact same weight she was when Mick first met her?”

That was an odd question to Teddy and Nikki. “Who?” Nikki asked her.

“Bella Caine,” said Roz. “And do you know how I know she’s the exact same weight she was when Mick first met her?”

“How?” Teddy asked her.

“All those pictures Gloria has on her Instagram that pays homage to her beloved mother. It’s like a trip down memory lane. And Bella hasn’t aged, or gained an ounce, since she was that supermodel Mick fell in love with.”

“I doubt if Pop loved any of our mothers,” said Teddy. “He lust after them. You’re the only one that’s in that love category.”

But Roz wasn’t believing it. “Did you see that house?” she asked him.

“What house?”

“That mansion your father bought Bella.”

Even Nikki was shocked. “He bought Bella Caine a *mansion*?”

Roz nodded. They both could see the sadness in her eyes. “Yep. And it’s gorgeous too.”

“But why?” Teddy asked baffled. “He haven’t been going around buying my mama no mansions.”

“He said he cares about Bella’s broke ass and always will. That’s why he did it.”

Nikki looked at Teddy. But Teddy was worried about Roz. “You think he was with her when he stayed out all night?”

“Before he paid me a visit this morning at my office, it certainly crossed my mind. But no. I don’t think so.”

“But you aren’t sure?”

“How can I be sure? He didn’t invite my ass along. I don’t know where he was last night.” Then she frowned. “I need to stop letting that woman take up space in my head like this. For real though.”

“Pop bought her a mansion,” Teddy said. “You have a right to be concerned.”

“I’m just jealous of her, that’s all. She’s still this beautiful black bombshell. And I’m ever-expanding Roz!”

“Oh, Ma, quit,” said Nikki. “If anybody at this table can talk about expansion, it’s me. And I’m not talking about it,” the full-figured Nikki quipped, and they all laughed.

Then Roz’s drink arrived, she took a sip, and then got down to business. “I know you two didn’t invite me to lunch for the hell of it. What’s on your mind?”

“Pop,” said Teddy.

“Get in line,” said Roz.

“Why is he always up my ass lately? He install me as boss. The board of governors second the motion. It’s settled. But he won’t let me run it the way I see fit. Like last night.”

Roz looked at Teddy. “What about last night?”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“Mick don’t tell me shit. What about last night?” Roz asked again.

“I went on a revenge run after a guy iced one of my capos.”

Roz frowned. “You went on a revenge run?” She leaned forward. “Are you crazy?”

“You sound like Pop now!”

“You’re the boss of the Sinatra syndicate, Teddy!”

“Pop went on revenge runs all the time, and he was the head of the syndicate.”

“He’s still the head of the syndicate,” Roz reminded him. “You’re the boss. But he’s still the head. Don’t get it twisted.”

“And that’s the problem,” said Nikki. “How can the guys respect Teddy as the boss, not the underboss anymore, if Pop is still in charge?”

“You’ll have to figure it out,” said Roz, “because Mick isn’t going anywhere. You know that and I know it. He put you in charge, but remember what he said?”

“That I’m in charge, but he’s in charge of me.”

Roz nodded. “Right. And don’t you forget that.”

But just as she was about to impart more wisdom to the couple, Roz’s security detail began running toward their table from the front and the back of the restaurant. Teddy and Nikki recognized all of them. They knew they were all Mick’s men. But where did they come from? Teddy had seen security outside. He had no clue there was a major contingent of security for Roz inside too!

And some of the men were waving in hysteria with terror on their faces. “Mrs. Sinatra, get down! Mrs. Sinatra, get down!”

And just as Teddy was reaching to knock Nikki down and to grab and knock Roz down too, gunfire blasted through the windows at their booth and forced them all to dive down to avoid a certain hit.

Although Teddy had knocked Nikki out of harm’s way, he wasn’t able to reach Roz before the gunfire erupted. But the bodyguard closest to Roz dived on top of her, placing his body as a shield of protection for her, and knocked her down too.

The restaurant was in pure panic as the screams mixed up with the gunfire and it became a warzone within seconds. Teddy nor any of the bodyguards could even lift their heads to shoot back because of the amount of firepower that was incoming. It was as if an army was firing into that restaurant. All Teddy could do was cover Nikki’s body with his body, and all the bodyguards could do were to cover Roz with their bodies, and wait it out too.

And then, after what seemed like forever and a day, they heard the screeching tires of what sounded like four or

five cars speeding off, and the gunfire ended.

Nikki was about to lift up, but Teddy pushed her back down and carefully leaned up to look out of the window. The bodyguards did the same. The coast was clear. But some of the guards, like many of the restaurant customers and staff, were hit.

“Go find those motherfuckers!” Teddy yelled at the surviving bodyguards and they rushed out of the restaurant like men on fire as Teddy made sure Nikki and Roz were okay. “Are you okay?” he said to Nikki as she began to sit up.

“I’m okay,” Nikki responded. “But what just happened here? I never heard that much gunfire in my entire life!”

But then Teddy saw Roz. And saw that the guard that had knocked Roz down, was now cradling her body as if she was a rag doll. “Ma?” he said confused. “Ma, you can get up now. It’s over now. Ma?” But Roz didn’t move.

Teddy quickly crawled through the glass to his stepmother’s lifeless body. Nikki was crawling to her too. And the bodyguard that had dived onto Roz started crying out with a tortured voice. “Don’t go, Mrs. Sinatra. Don’t leave us, Mrs. Sinatra. Please don’t leave us. Please don’t go!”

Then he looked at Teddy and Nikki who had gotten to Roz's side. "Boss gonna kill us!" he cried out. "Boss gonna kill us, Teddy!"

But Teddy and Nikki wasn't thinking about Boss. They were in a state of pure agony over the boss's wife. Because they could not believe what they were seeing. Roz had been shot. The beloved matriarch of their family was down on that floor shot down like a dog int the streets. And their hearts sank through their shoes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“I need a drink, Mick. Can I at least have a drink?”

“Who’s after you, Belle?”

“I told you I don’t know who. I just need a drink.”

She was in a bad state. Mick had known her for decades, but he’d never seen her in such a state. But he had a meeting to attend. And he wasn’t all that certain that this wasn’t one of her stunts. In his hotel. In his hotel room. He’d seen this movie before. But there was something in her eyes. A terror he’d never seen before. “Tell me what happened. Why do you think somebody’s after you?”

Bella was on the sofa, her small, dark hands rubbing together between her knees. Her knees were shaking. “It was just after you bought me that house. Nobody should have known about it. I hadn’t even told our daughter about it yet. But I start getting these phone calls.”

“From who?”

“I don’t know who. But it was a woman. And she kept asking me if I was your black bitch.”

Mick studied her. “That was all she asked?”

“That was it. Every time she called. And she was calling hour after hour. I blocked one number, she calls on a different number. That lasted for a day. Then it just went away. So I figured she was one of your side pieces that didn’t like the fact that you bought me a house, and I just forgot about it too. I told Gloria about the house and everything. I was, and still is proud of that house. They tried to ruin my business, but I’m back now.” She looked at Mick. “Thanks to you.”

“Why are you talking about they’re after you if that was it?”

“Because that wasn’t it. I was at my fashion house here in New York. I was at the office when you called me last night. But I went home today. But somebody was following me, Mick. And I knew what that was like because you always taught me how to know, remember? So I know they were following me. So I don’t go home. I try to call you, but you weren’t answering my calls. So I try to lose them. And I did. But when I got to the house, and went inside, it was right there in my foyer.”

“What was in your foyer?”

“A life size picture. In a frame. With blood all over it.”

“Blood?”

“Yes. It looked like blood.”

“It was a life size picture of what?”

Tears appeared in Bella’s eyes. Even crying and in distress, Mick noticed, she looked beautiful. “It was a life size picture of ... Of *her*,” she said in a whisper.

Mick didn’t ask who *her* was because he already knew.

“So I ran back out that door, got in my car, and drove straight here. To you. Glo told me you were going to be here in New York for meetings. I knew you’d stay at your hotel.” She grabbed Mick by his lapel again, her voice growing more and more hysterical. “Mick, you can’t let them get me. Why am I always the one to pay? Why is it always me? You got to hide me.”

“Settle down, Bella.”

“You’ve got to help me, Mick!”

“Did I say I wasn’t? Settle down. Just settle your ass down!”

And Bella, knowing Mick all too well, wiped her tears away and settled herself back down.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As sirens could be heard, and those still in the restaurant started attending to the numerous other customers that had been shot or stampeded in the mad dash for the exits, Teddy moved Roz out of the bodyguard's arms and laid her flat onto the floor, where he began administering CPR while Nikki and the guard took belts and torn shirts and attempted to staunch the blood flow. But it all seemed so futile!

And by the time the paramedics rushed in and Nikki and Teddy and the bodyguards yelled for them to come help Roz, that she was in the worst shape of anybody in that room, the panic was almost unbearable. Teddy and Nikki were forced to stand back and watch the medics work tirelessly on Roz as they attempted to revive her before transport.

And when they got her onto the gurney and into the ambulance and was still working feverishly to revive her, Teddy and Nikki began running to Teddy's parked car, their eyes still unable to believe it was happening, their hearts unable to stop pounding.

They hopped into Teddy's car and Teddy sped out of the parking lot as the ambulance was already speeding away. The sirens on that ambulance were blaring louder than they'd ever heard sirens blare, as if even the sirens could sense the urgency, and Teddy drove recklessly to catch up.

He sped around car after car trying to catch up with that ambulance. But as soon as that ambulance turned a corner, something crazy started happening. Three other ambulances flew into the intersection and jumped in front of Teddy's car.

"What the fuck!" Teddy yelled as he was forced to swerve to avoid several collisions, and then had to go around those ambulances to try to keep up with the ambulance carrying Roz.

But just as he was making his way back behind Roz's ambulance, three additional ambulances drove into a different intersection and cut him off again.

"This shit orchestrated!" Nikki said, her gun at the ready, as she was looking around frantically to see what was going on.

But Teddy kept his eyes on that ambulance transporting Roz. Number 381. And he did all he could to

continue following that ambulance. Nikki, for her part, called for reinforcements. And she called 911 too. To alert them that ambulance 381 has a gravely ill patient onboard, Mick Sinatra's wife, and it might be in the process of being highjacked!

But then gunshots started firing from the additional ambulances, and were coming from so many different directions that all four of Teddy's tires were hit at once, and flattened all at once. Teddy kept trying to drive, but he couldn't steer anymore.

"Teddy!" Nikki yelled when he lost total control and ended up sailing across the sidewalk and crashing through the storefront window of a hat shop, landing in the center of that shop's display case. Although the airbags deployed, Teddy nor Nikki, nor anyone inside the shop or on the sidewalk, was harmed.

And by the time they were able to extricate themselves from the wreckage, a carload of Teddy's capos were already on the scene. And Teddy and Nikki commandeered that car to go after ambulance 381.

But it was nowhere to be found. And all of those other six ambulances that blocked their path and allowed number

381 to get away, were nowhere in sight either. Teddy slammed his hands on the steering wheel in rage.

“Go to the hospital,” Nikki suggested. “Maybe number 381 made it there!”

But by the time Teddy drove them to the hospital, and they ran inside in sheer panic, it was clear that no number 381 ambulance had arrived at that hospital and no hospital anywhere in Philly had a record of an incoming gunshot victim named Rosalind Graham-Sinatra. In fact, there was no black female gunshot victim among anybody coming in from the restaurant or anywhere else in Philly that day.

Roz and that ambulance had disappeared in broad daylight.

The wife of Mick Sinatra, the man who would always be known as the boss of all bosses until his dying day, had just been shot, was in critical condition, and was nowhere to be found.

And a stunned Teddy and Nikki, who were running back out of that hospital to see if they could still find that ambulance, and who had already called for every available man to be tracking it too, didn't know much at all. They didn't know who had the balls to order that level hit. They

didn't know who had the balls to actually do that shit. They didn't even know where they took her.

But they both knew one thing for sure when Pops found out: If hell wasn't already in session, it was about to convene.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The deal was done. The Malaysians had agreed to all terms, signed all contracts, and were already gone. Mick's team was already downstairs celebrating with champagne for everyone. And Mick was just walking out of the fifth floor conference hall inside the luxurious hotel he'd owned for years, ready to go down and celebrate with his team. He had just gotten off the phone with his office in Nigeria, who owned half of Britstone along with Malaysia. But they were holding back. They first wanted to see what the Malaysians were going to do. A merger with Nigeria, Mick was hopeful, was next. A merger with Nigeria's half of Britstone would give Mick's corporation controlling interest. It was a big damn deal.

But as soon as he walked out of that door, Charles "Big Daddy" Sinatra, Mick's older brother, and Amelia Sinatra, his half-sister, were just getting off of the elevator. And as soon as Mick saw them, and that look on their faces, he knew instantaneously something had gone horribly wrong.

He stayed where he stood, his hands easing into his pockets, as they walked to him.

And he wanted no bullshit. Just the facts. “Who?” he asked them, his heart waiting to continue beating, or to not beat at all. “The twins?”

Charles shook his head. “No, Mick. The twins are okay.”

“Gloria and Teddy, and Nikki and the babies?”

“They’re all okay too, Mick.”

His heart was squeezing now. Because that only left one more. That only left the one name he didn’t want to say. The only name he dreaded saying. But he had to say it. “Rosalind?” he asked them, his voice a near-whisper. “Is it Rosalind?”

When Charles started rubbing his forehead as if he could hardly bear it himself, Mick looked at Amelia. And for the first time he realized that she and Charles had been crying. Their eyes were bloodshot red.

“Is it Rosalind?” he said out loud, this time with panic in his voice.

And Amelia nodded. “Yes. It’s Roz.”

When Mick heard those words, his heart momentarily stopped beating. When he stumbled back, forcing it to start

again, he let out a harsh exhale. “Where is she?”

“She was at a restaurant with Ted and Nikki,” said Mick’s big brother, his face unable to hide his anguish. “There was a drive-by. A lot of people were hit, and Roz was hit too.”

“She was shot?” It was Mick’s nightmare come true.

“She was shot, yes. Repeatedly from what we understand.”

“Where is she?” Mick asked again. Which hospital was what he was saying. They had better name a hospital and not a morgue! “Where is she?”

“They were working on her. And they put her in the ambulance and took off.”

Mick frowned. “What are you telling me all of that shit for? Where is my wife?”

An anguished look appeared on Charles’s face. “They can’t find the ambulance, Mick.”

Mick frowned again. “Who gives a fuck about the ambulance? What the fuck you keep telling me about some fucking ambulance?” He was panicking now. “Where is she? Where’s my wife *gotdammit*, I don’t give a fuck about the ambulance!”

Charles hurried to him, grabbed both of his huge biceps, and looked him dead in the eye. “You aren’t listening to me, Michello.” He shook him. “You aren’t listening! She’s gone. Whatever group ordered that hit drove that ambulance. They took her, Michello. They took Roz. And we don’t know where the fuck she is.”

Mick couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He just couldn’t believe it. “You don’t know where...” He couldn’t even conceive of it! “What are you saying to me, Charlie? She was shot. You said she was shot.”

“She was.”

“You said they were working on her.”

“They were.”

“Then she has to be at a hospital, what are you talking? We need to check the hospitals!”

“We did, Mick. Every single one of them several times over. We scoured the entire city and every other city around it several times over. We’re getting every footage from every business we can find as I speak to you right now. We’re doing all we can do. But we don’t know where she is, that’s the hard

cold truth of it.” Charles shook Mick again. “We don’t know!”

Mick just stood there. Charles had never seen him look so lost. And Amelia, who always hated the way Mick and Charles stayed in her business and treated her like she was one of their children, now understood why they were so terrified of her going back into that life she supposedly gave up after she married Hammer Reese. It would devastate them if something happened to her. Because Mick was beyond devastation. He wasn’t screaming or throwing things, but to Amelia that would have been more human. Mick, instead, was looking as if he was looking into another world. He was as silent as a lamb.

But Charles knew better. Mick wasn’t silent as any lamb. He was silent as a cobra. He was gathering that silent rage that was as deadly as a cyclone. Somebody had the gall to shoot and kidnap his wife? She was out there somewhere, and he didn’t even know if she was dead or alive or calling for him? He was already preparing himself to strike.

And when Charles and Amelia went to touch him, to comfort him, he snatched away from them with only a taste of the rage to come. He had already steeled himself. He had

already put on that armor that no man was going to unlock.
And he made his way to the elevators.

Amelia looked at their big brother. Charles was always the man with the answers. But not this time.

Charles ran his hands through his hair, leaned his head back saying a silent prayer that this situation didn't go the way it looked as though it was absolutely heading, and then he and Amelia followed behind Mick.

The blind, that day, was leading the blind.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“It’s like a plane convention,” quipped one of the men in the spotter car outside of the gate as plane after plane started arriving at the private Philadelphia airfield. “We got their asses rattled. They’re coming in like they’re coming for a funeral.”

“Everybody’s got planes circling, waiting to land,” said the second man in the spotter car, looking skyward through his binoculars. “Everybody but the man himself. Wonder where his ass went?”

The first man didn’t know either. He kept his own binoculars focused, not to see who hadn’t arrived, but to see who was arriving. And his partner was right: most of the planes were being forced to circle.

Casino mogul and one-time mob boss Reno Gabriini owned one of those planes forced to circle until one particular plane landed. Along with his wife Trina Gabriini, his cousin mob boss Sal Gabriini and Sal’s wife Gemma, they were in a holding pattern.

Also in that holding pattern was the head of the Bonaducci Crime Family, Frankie “The Monk” Paletti, bringing with him Ashley, Charles Sinatra’s adopted daughter. The plane belonging to businessman and CIA operative Trevor Reese, bringing with him Carly, Charles’s other adopted daughter, was also in that holding pattern.

Business mogul and Sal’s older brother Tommy Gabrini, along with Tommy’s wife Grace Gabrini, were also in that holding pattern. They had flown in from Seattle on Tommy’s plane and were just as anxious to land as everybody else.

But Reno, most of all, was pissed. “Making us wait like we’re the fucking B team,” he complained. He owned the largest hotel and casino on the Vegas Strip, voted numerous times the most powerful man in Vegas, and was unaccustomed to not being given priority himself. “It’s got to be Uncle Mick’s plane taking us through this indignity. No other explanation for it. Why else would they make me wait and let a plane behind me land first? That shit ain’t cute. That shit ain’t right. Got to be Uncle Mick.” He was accustomed to airfields giving Mick Sinatra’s jumbo jet priority no matter who was ahead of him.

But Trina was shaking her head. “That don’t look like Uncle Mick’s plane to me,” she said when they actually saw the plane.

“Me either,” Sal agreed. “I don’t know who that motherfucker belongs to.”

Reno pressed the intercom button and got his pilot on the line. “Ron, who does that big-ass jet belong to? Do you know?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Gabrini, I already checked with Air Control. I told them do they realize who I have on my plane. They said they understand I got VIPs too, but that’s Alex Drakos’s plane.”

Everybody nodded when Reno’s pilot said that name, as if it made perfect sense now. Even to Reno. “Alex Drakos. I should have known. I see why they cleared the airspace for his ass. Drakos is like E.F. Hutton,” Reno joked. “When he talks, people listen. Remember that commercial?” he said with a smile. And in normal times they all would have been laughing. But these were not normal times. They could barely muster a smile.

“But,” cautioned Gemma, “just because it’s Alex Drakos’s plane doesn’t mean Alex Drakos is on that plane.”

“True that,” said Trina. “His brother Oz could have borrowed it to bring Glo and the baby home. Or, our assumption may be right and Alex Drakos himself came with them.”

“If I was a gambling man, and I am,” said casino mogul Reno, “my money would be on Drakos coming with them. And you know why? Because we’re talking Roz Sinatra here. Those idiots took the queen. And not just took her, but shot her too! That’s a big motherfucking deal.”

Sal agreed. “I still can’t believe there’s a joker out there still so stupid, in this day and age, after all the legend of Mick the Tick, that he would even dream of harming and kidnapping Uncle Mick’s wife. That’s some twisted shit right there.”

Reno, Trina, and Gemma all nodded. They couldn’t agree with Sal more. And then they all watched Alex Drakos’s plane land as that depressing feeling of dread came over them once again. Their hearts were aching for Roz. Shot? *And kidnapped?* They still could hardly believe it. And just seeing Alex Drakos’s plane, with Alex himself possibly onboard, proved just how surreal, and major, it all was to them.

But because of the extra-security privacy hangar the Drakos plane utilized, it wouldn't be until they all arrived at the Sinatra compound would they discover that the billionaire industrialist Alex Drakos had indeed made the trip alongside his kid brother Oz Drakos and Oz's wife Gloria Sinatra-Drakos. Oz and Gloria's baby girl came too. Although Roz was Gloria's stepmother, she still knew how much Roz loved their baby girl and would love to see her when she came back home. Because nobody was telling Gloria that Roz wasn't coming back home.

All of the Gabrini children were all together in Vegas, on lockdown and under heavy guard, with Dommi dispatched to Vegas to oversee security alongside his older brother and business mogul Jimmy Gabrini. Charles's sons held down the fort for him in Maine. Because of who was snatched, and the sheer gall of it, they were covering all bases.

A convoy of SUVs transported Reno's group, along with Tommy and Grace, Monk Paletti and Ashley, and Trevor Reese and Carly through the high-security, heavily-guarded gate at Mick's mansion. Every one of the guards wore tactical gear and carried fully loaded AK-47s.

And once inside, they all greeted each other happily, but also with that sense of impending doom none of them could shake. They sat around Mick's living room like they were already at a funeral. And although the smaller children were being attended to in the game room downstairs, the twins were right in that living room with the grownups. Waiting for, praying for, begging for word that their beloved mother was alright.

Charles sat between Duke and Jackie on the sofa, and had his arms around his beloved niece and nephew as if they were his responsibility alone. He was just devastated seeing them sitting up there in their little shorts and jerseys, wet tissues in their trembling hands as they awaited any word on anything about their mother. Some said they should be in the game room with the other children. Charles would have none of that.

Neither would their aunt Amelia, who sat beside Jackie as Jackie was just beside herself with grief. Her eyes were nearly swollen she had cried so much.

But Reno was waiting for somebody to address the elephant in the room, but nobody spoke up. "Where's Uncle

Mick?” he finally asked. “I thought you and Amelia went and picked him up from New York, Big Daddy.”

“We did,” Charles responded. “But he said he wanted to take his own plane back and would rather be alone with his thoughts. Which we completely understood. Millie has Hammer’s plane so we rode back on his plane and when we thought Mick was heading back to Philly too, his plane kept on going.”

“Going where?” asked Trina.

“I called him, but all he would tell me was that he had some contacts he needed to check out, and for me and Millie to get back to Philly to take care of his children.”

“Meaning Duke and Jackie only,” said Gloria with a twinge of bitterness in her voice they all were surprised to hear from her. Especially at a time like this. But they all understood it. Mick neglected the shit out of Gloria and Teddy when they were growing up. Would promise to come and see them and would rarely show up. Would shower their mothers with material things to take care of his kids, but would never give his children hardly any of his time. But Roz made him pay attention to her children and, when she had his babies, to

the twins. Roz was the difference. And they were certain Gloria understood that. But it still had to hurt.

“What about Teddy and Nikki?” asked Grace. “Are they here?”

“They’re still searching every corner in this city and everywhere else they can search,” Charles replied. “They’re both in a bad state.”

“You know Uncle Mick is gonna blame their asses,” said Reno. “And I can see why.”

“Don’t start, Reno,” said Trina.

“They were with her, Tree,” Reno started. “How could they let this happen when they were right there with her? Both of their asses?”

“I’m saying,” said Sal. “Reno’s right. They wouldn’t still be working for me, family or no family.”

Amelia looked at Monk Paletti, who had moved down a notch to number four on the crime boss charts, with Mick still number one even though he stepped back from the day-to-day duties. He would always be number one. Number two was still Sal Gabrini as head of the Gabrini Crime Family. But number three, the slot Monk used to occupy, was now

occupied by his best friend Teddy because Teddy was now the day-to-day head of the Sinatra Crime Family. As the head of the Bonaducci Crime Family, Monk still came in high, at number four. And as an alliance, they were now considered the Power Four. The Untouchables. Everybody else were also-rans compared to them. “What about you, Frankie?” Amelia asked Monk. “You blame them too?”

“I’ll have to hear their side of the story first,” said always levelheaded Monk Paletti. He moved his always-present hat further back from his forehead, reminding them of a 1940s-style gangster. “But it doesn’t look good.”

“Doesn’t look good? Fuck that,” Reno said. He knew his position was right. He looked to Tommy for confirmation. “You’d fire their asses regardless of what their side of the story is. Wouldn’t you, Tommy?”

Tommy Gabrini, the man they called Dapper Tom because of his great looks and fashion sense, was also the family’s enforcer. You didn’t cross Dapper Tom. And Tommy had to agree with Reno. “Considering the end result,” he said, “Yes. I’d fire them without hesitation.”

“What about you, Oz?” asked Reno.

“Off with their heads!” said Oz, quoting a line first seen in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part III*, his long hair reminding them of a character out of a Shakespearean play. But when Reno continued to look at him, as if his response wasn’t going to cut it, he was more circumspect. “Monk is right. I, too, would have to hear what they have to say first,” he said.

“Good answer,” said Gloria.

“You young bloods are a trip,” said Reno. “What about you, Trev? Don’t tell me you ascribe to that same *wait and see* bullshit.”

Trevor Reese exhaled. He was thinking about Roz, whom he respected greatly. “Sounds like a firing offense to me,” he said.

Then all eyes turned to Alex Drakos, who was known the world over as a titan of industry. But the family also knew that before he relocated to the United States, he was an enforcer and head of his father’s crime syndicate in his native Greece. He had mob in his veins too. Like Tommy, he could be a cool customer too. Until you crossed him. “What say you, Alex?” asked Amelia.

“If they worked for me and what happened to Roz happened to my wife on their watch,” he said bluntly, “yes, they would be fired. On the spot.”

“Thank you!” said Reno.

But Charles didn't like all this negative talk about Teddy and Nikki. A man known for his ruthlessness in business and the person who taught Mick all of his viciousness, Charles was the undisputed patriarch of the family. “We all have got to band together right now,” he said to all of them. “An attack on one is an attack on all and I don't want any of you fuckers forgetting that. Teddy and Nikki didn't do that shit on purpose. You know they didn't. They'd give their lives for Roz. They both have to be in a terrible space right now. They just took over for a man who will always be the boss of all bosses. Teddy's trying to walk in those shoes. You can't even imagine what kind of pressure he's under. None of your asses can fill Micky's shoes, but Teddy's out there trying to do it. He may have messed up today. Big time. But don't you dare pour gasoline on that fire. Don't you dare. And I'm talking to every last one of you. And that includes your ass too, Alex. Just shut the fuck up!”

Although they all stuck to their beliefs that Teddy had dropped the ball, regardless of whether they would fire him or not, they all understood where Charles was coming from too. And they all, to a person, shut up.

It would be nearly an hour later before they would hear anything at all. All of the men were on their phones getting updates from their men, who were dispatched throughout the entire state and beyond to see what they could find out too. But there was nothing to report. No chatter about anybody snatching the queen of the mob anywhere. It all felt as if they were in a cage of no information, and couldn't get out.

Then the front door opened, and Teddy and Nikki walked in. When they showed their faces in the living room, everybody could see just how devastated and drained they looked. It broke their hearts.

And when the twins jumped up in anticipation, as if they weren't reading Teddy and Nikki's facial expressions at all, it broke their hearts all over again.

But Teddy, seeing the hope on the twins faces, quickly dispelled it. "We didn't find her yet, guys," he said to his

younger half-siblings. “It’s like she disappeared off the face of this earth.”

“What about the video footage from the different businesses?” asked Tommy. “Wasn’t somebody supposed to be reviewing video?”

“We personally reviewed every tape our people could find,” said Nikki.

“Nothing there either?” asked Tommy.

“Nothing,” said Teddy. “It showed that ambulance leaving the restaurant, but when they did the bait and switch on us with all those other ambulances, number 381 got lost in the shuffle. No video picked up their whereabouts after that. Apparently it purposely went a route where there were no cameras.”

“We’ve got men searching that route too,” added Nikki.

“What about a transport truck?” It was Alex Drakos asking the question. Everybody looked at him. “Could be that the ambulance drove up onto a transport truck and was taken wherever it was going undercover.”

Charles was impressed. “It’s possible,” he said.

“We weren’t looking for that, no,” said Teddy, “but if it happened we would have seen it. We would have seen it drive up on that truck. We didn’t see that. But like Nikki said, our guys are checking the routes where there were no cameras and asking around. Maybe it happened on the off-camera route and somebody did see it.”

“I’ll call and tell them to ask about a big truck too,” said Nikki as she moved away to make the call.

“But we’re saying all that to say we’re still at square one,” said Teddy. And then he plopped down in one of two assembled chairs.

He was undone. There was no question about it. But their family were all alpha males who needed answers. Led by Reno, they couldn’t let up.

“What I don’t understand,” said Reno, “is how could this happen when you and Nikki both were right there with Roz. You got to explain that shit to me because you’re gonna have to explain it to your old man. And his ass don’t usually listen to any of our asses. Including yours. Except for Uncle Charles. Big Daddy he listens to. Explain it so that Big Daddy can explain it to Uncle Mick.”

Teddy knew what Reno was saying was true. And he leaned forward, his broad shoulders drooped, his face not even attempting to hide the devastation he felt inside.

Nikki ended her call and sat in the chair beside Teddy's. She was there when it happened. She knew what Teddy was going through. And if any one of those alphas tried to jump all over Teddy, she was coming for them. It was bad enough. For her and Teddy, nobody could make them feel any worst.

But if they expected Teddy to give some flowery reason and excuse his actions like any normal person about to face the wrath of Mick Sinatra would have done, they didn't know Teddy.

"I blew it," he said. They all stared at him. "When I realized what was happening, my instinct was to save my wife. All I could think about was Nikki getting hit and I couldn't let that happen. Then I realized Roz was there too, and she was my responsibility too, so I tried to move her out of the line of fire too. Bottom line, I couldn't save them both. I chose to save my wife." Tears stained his hard eyes. "To my shame, I couldn't save them both."

The air of accusation and finger-pointing deflated and floated right out of that room when they heard Teddy man-up. And they saw that look in his eyes. If they were in his position, and their wives' lives were on the line, they would have saved their wives too. In that moment, they once again understood why Mick chose Teddy as his successor and why they, as members of his board of governors, endorsed that decision unanimously.

Then Charles got up and went to Teddy and Nikki. They stood up out of respect when the patriarch came before them. And he pulled both of them into his big, muscular arms. Then the rest of the family, including the twins, joined in a group hug too. Even Alex Drakos joined it. It was a hellish time to be them, and they all knew it.

But before the hug-fest was over, the front door opened again, and Mick himself walked in.

And if that air of accusation had floated out when Teddy fessed up, it floated right back in when Mick walked in.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Daddy!”

The twins broke away from the group hug and ran to their father. It was their first time seeing him since they got the word about their mother, and they had been worried sick about him, too, the entire time. Now they were in his arms. And he held onto them hard. But everybody else, especially Teddy and Nikki, were waiting for a name, a syndicate, something or somebody Mick could give to them that they could fight against.

But as Mick held onto his young children, who were sobbing in his arms, his steely, cold green eyes looked at them and he shook his head. Which deflated them all over again. Teddy, outdone once again, plopped back down in his chair. Nikki sat back down beside him, holding onto his arm. Making him never forget that he was never alone. But she knew it was little comfort. He was beside himself with inconsolable agony.

But when Mick pulled back and lifted up the chins of his children, so that he could see into their eyes, Gloria

touched Oz's sleeve. She was happy for her half-siblings. To have Mick at home with them. To eat dinner with them and breakfast the next morning. To be devoted to their mother, although she could never be certain he was faithful to Roz. But he adored her, Gloria knew that. Gloria also knew Mick still had unusually strong feelings for her mother, Bella Caine, and if Bella was to be believed there might have been some slipups on Mick's part along the way. But Gloria couldn't attest to any of that. Her mother sometimes was truth-challenged. But slipups or no slipups, it wasn't the same thing. He married Roz. The only baby mama he ever married. That was the difference.

And as the twins pulled back from their father and began peppering him with all kinds of questions about their mother's whereabouts and if she was okay, Mick stared into their beautiful, still terrified eyes and spoke the truth to them. "I don't know," he said to them. "To all of your questions, I do not know. But I will tell you this," he added in a voice that made Teddy and Nikki look at him too, "I will find her. And bring her back home alive. And whoever is responsible for taking her from us will pay for it in a way that will define them."

“We just want her home,” cried Jackie. “We just want mommy home.”

The veins in Mick’s face began to show, aging him by twenty years, as if the words he were about to speak was painful in the extreme. “She will come home,” he said to his two youngest children, knowing he couldn’t guarantee it but he had to guarantee it. “I promise you that.”

Their father never lied to them. Not ever. And they nodded their heads. “Thank you, Daddy,” said Duke, as they both fell back into his arms.

But Mick knew consoling his children wasn’t going to bring their mother back. And even they knew that was the goal.

He pulled back from the children and then looked at the two people he entrusted with his organization and, because they were with Roz, with his wife. “Teddy and Nikki,” he said without raising his voice, “my office.” And then he headed down the hall to his home office.

Teddy and Nikki stood up as if, in standing, they were inhaling and unable to let it back out. And then Teddy placed his hand on Nikki’s back and they made their way to Mick’s office.

“He’ll kill’em, Big Daddy,” said Trina, her terrified voice speaking for all of them.

And Charles knew it too. He hurried behind them to be the buffer they may need. Amelia remained with the twins, who fell into her arms. Gloria hurried over, and held the twins too.

But Reno, Sal, and Tommy, knowing what Mick was capable of and how even a man as big and powerful as Charles might not be able to contain that rage alone, hurried behind Charles.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mick leaned against the front of his desk, his legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles, as Charles, Reno, Tommy and Sal all piled into his office behind Teddy and Nikki. But they knew Teddy and Nikki had to face the music alone. They were there, not to plead Teddy's case, but only should Mick lose it and go hog-wild on him.

But so far so good. But they knew Mick's demeanor could be deceptively calm. They weren't looking at his demeanor. They were looking at his eyes.

And when he didn't speak, Teddy knew that meant he had to. Nikki was shaking she was so scared. Nobody terrified the usually super-cool Nikki the way her own father-in-law did.

"Her bodyguards did all they could," Teddy said. "They all came in and tried to warn us ahead of time. But it all happened so fast."

"Don't give me that shit." When Mick said those words, it was the first time everybody knew his demeanor had

nothing to do with how he felt. “I already took care of all their asses. You give me a reason not to take care of yours.”

The Gabrinis glanced at each other. For the first time they wondered if they needed to draw their guns on Uncle Mick.

But Teddy the Tower was taking it like a man and they loved that about Teddy. He didn't cower, he didn't beg his father for mercy, he stiffened his spine. “The shooting started and I tried to reach for Ma, too, but she was out of reach. Then Manny jumped on top of her, knocking her down just as me and Nikki hit the floor. It was an army out there, Pop. No four or five people. A *gotdamn* army. Whoever did this, they knew what they were doing.”

“They knew what they were doing,” said Mick, “but we didn't know what we were doing. Cut the fucking commentary and tell me what happened to my wife.”

Even Teddy's spine slacked. But he kept going. “The ambulance came quick. Ahead of the cops even. And they were trying to revive her.”

Mick's mouth almost flew open. “Revive her?”

That was the part that scared Teddy the most. “Yes, sir. She coded. They had to revive her.”

Mick jumped up in shock. It was as if it couldn't get any worse, and then it just did. He shook his head, and then he walked behind his desk up to his big window. He stared out of that window that overlooked the Philadelphia skyline, and kept his back to the family. But Charles saw him wipe tears from his eyes. The Gabrinis saw him do it too. The idea that Roz had died and needed to be revived was the first they were hearing of it too. *And her rescuers were her enemy?* It was a toxic double whammy for any man to bear. None of them knew how Mick was even holding on.

Then Mick steeled himself again. “Go on,” he said, his back still to the family.

Teddy had never felt his father's pain the way he did in that moment. And the guilt he felt was ripping him apart. “Then they put her on the gurney and rushed her outside to the ambulance. Me and Nikki rushed out to my car, to follow the ambulance.”

Mick turned around. “Why didn't one of you get in that ambulance with her? Why didn't one of her bodyguards?”

“It happened so fast, Pop, and those people we thought were paramedics were still working on her.”

“There was no room in the ambulance,” Nikki said.

“Did I ask your ass?” Mick snapped at Nikki.

Nikki’s heart fell. “No sir.”

“Then shut the fuck up!” Mick yelled.

Nikki swallowed hard. And the family was always claiming she was Mick’s favorite. Some favorite! “Yes sir.”

Everybody in the room knew Nikki didn’t deserve that. But everybody in that room knew she could handle it. She was the underboss of that man’s syndicate. She had better be able to handle it.

Teddy knew it too. He held her hand to let her know he had her back, but she had to face the music too.

Then Mick looked back at Teddy. “So you let my wife, *MY WIFE*,” he said as he thumped his chest with his fist, “go in that ambulance with strangers, her life in their hands, and nobody thought to bogart their way inside that motherfucker?”

“Nikki’s right, Pop. There wasn’t any room. We didn’t wanna get in anybody’s way.”

“You were being polite,” he said, as he began walking toward them. “You didn’t want to interfere.” Charles and the Gabrini men all began moving closer to Teddy and Nikki even as Mick was moving closer to them in a calm, casual way. “You didn’t want to hurt their feelings.” Then his true nature came blaring out in a screech: “*THEY COULD KILL MY WIFE BUT YOU DIDN’T WANT TO HURT THEIR MOTHERFUCKING FEELINGS?!*” he screamed. And then he went for Teddy’s hard, and Charles and the Gabrini men all went for Mick harder.

And even as they grabbed Mick just as he was lunging for Teddy, he still managed to punch Teddy with a glancing blow that still packed the kind of horrific punch that knocked Teddy flat on his ass.

But Teddy got right back up.

Nikki locked arms with her partner. They would go down together if Mick tried that shit again. But Mick was too busy trying to snatch away from his brother and the Gabrinis. All he saw was red. All he saw was his wife in that ambulance alone, shot and dying, and Teddy and Nikki safe on the other side.

Charles was the only one with the balls to even attempt to talk some sense into him as he continued to struggle to break free of their grasp. “We’ve got to find Roz, Michello. Listen to me man! We’ve got to find Roz. How the fuck is this going to help us find Roz?!”

And it was those words that calmed Mick back down enough that they were able to let go. But they kept their eyes on his eyes.

“Go on,” Mick said to Teddy, and even Teddy could see he had nothing but disdain for him. Teddy had nothing but disdain for himself. “What happened next?” Mick added.

“We were following the ambulance to the hospital. Number 381. But they pulled a bait and switch on us, Pop, and three ambulances that looked just like 381 came out of the blue and cut us off.”

“Those ambulances have 381 on them too?” asked Tommy.

Teddy shook his head. Another blunder. “We don’t know. I think so, but we don’t know.”

“We didn’t have time to look,” said Nikki, daring him to try to punch her too.

But Mick looked at her. Everybody knew Mick loved her. Everybody knew he respected her out of this world or he would not have ever made her, a woman and a relative by marriage only, his organization's underboss. "Go on," he said.

Nikki continued. "We didn't have time to look because, as Teddy had to try and drive around those three ambulances, even more ambulances appeared and cut us off again. And then they shot out all Teddy's tires and we lost control. By the time we hopped into another car, 381 was gone. We looked everywhere, Pop. We left no stone unturned. We called in an all-hands-on-deck and they were looking everywhere too. Ma's guards had even run out of the restaurant to chase after the gunmen, but every one of those cars that launched that attack disappeared too."

"It was orchestrated down to the second, Pop," said Teddy. "Which they knew they had to do to get away with that shit. I've never seen anything like it."

Mick ran his hands through his hair and began to move around his office like a wounded animal. "I'm losing my mind!" he confessed with anguish in his voice as he couldn't stop moving. "Where is she? I just want her home. *Where is she???*"

They had never seen Mick so emasculated. He was even trembling. They could see him trembling. But not even Charles approached him. Because the facts were the facts and the facts weren't on their side. He had to face the music. And the song he had to face was beginning to sound damn awful.

And Mick knew it too. And he couldn't face it even if he tried. Which he didn't. He began heading out of his office.

"Where are you going, Pop?" asked a devastated Teddy.

"To find my wife," said Mick as he left the office.

Teddy looked at Nikki. "I'm going with him," he said and hurried behind his father.

"Good move, Teddy," said Charles, although Teddy was already gone. "Good move."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mick and Teddy, with Teddy as driver, hopped into Mick's Escalade and traveled all over Philadelphia and all of the surrounding suburbs even though Teddy and Nikki had traveled those roads already. They asked everybody they knew, including snitches in the streets, if they'd heard anything. Anything at all. But nobody knew a thing.

Then Mick got behind the wheel and drove them to one more location.

Mick got on his phone to his security detail that followed him everywhere. "Wait here," he said. The detail car pulled over to the side of the road and Mick drove down a long dirt road that seemed to lead to nowhere. Then he turned a corner and there was a high security fence with armed guards and dogs ready to attack.

"Where the fuck is this, Pop?" asked Teddy.

"A high security zone," Mick said.

"*Our* high security zone?"

The guards opened the gate and Mick's Escalade drove on through. "Yes," he said to Teddy.

Teddy looked at his father. “And when did you plan on telling me about this place, Pop?”

“You would learn when you learn,” said Mick. “Nobody handed shit to me. It’s not my job to tell your ass. It’s your job to know.”

Teddy wanted to shake his head in frustration. What kind of bullshit was this? How was he to know about a place when his father had nothing written down? But he wasn’t about to make this about him. It was all about Roz. They had to find Roz!

At the end of the road was a small house. Mick and Teddy got out and made their way to the door. Mick was about to open it, but the door was opened from inside instead. When Teddy saw Bella Caine standing there he couldn’t hold back. “I should have known,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“And hello to you, too, Teddy,” said Bella as Mick and Teddy walked in.

“Hello, Bella. How are you, Bella?”

“I’ve seen better days,” she said, but she was staring at Mick. “Are you alright?” she asked Mick. “You look like

death itself.”

Mick ignored her and took a seat in one of the chairs. Bella closed the door, walked over, and sat down too. Teddy remained standing.

“Is somebody going to tell me what’s going on?”
Teddy asked.

“There’s some people bothering me. Your father was good enough to help me out.”

Teddy frowned. “What people?”

Mick handed Bella his phone. “Do you recognize any of them?”

Bella began thumbing through what Teddy could see from where he was standing were images of different people. He looked at his father. “Who are they?”

“The guys that ambushed you and Nikki.”

“Oh right.” He recognized the photos when his father reminded him of that ambush. But it still was strange. “What would Bella know about that?”

“I don’t know,” said Mick. “Maybe nothing. But it’s all I have.” He then looked at Teddy as if to let him know that he knew he was grasping at straws.

But Teddy nodded. He understood. Straws were better than grasping at nothing.

“Recognize any of ’em, Belle?” Mick asked her again.

“Nope,” she said as she swiped one photo. “Nope,” she said as she swiped another photo. “Nope. Nope. Nope. Nope. No ...” She stopped on that particular photograph.

Teddy and Mick both paid attention. “What is it?” Mick asked her.

“I’ll be damn.”

“What?”

“That’s Frazier Remmi.”

Mick had never heard the name before. “Who’s Frazier Remmi?”

Bella looked at Mick. “Deidra’s brother. Frazier is her brother.”

Mick’s heart gained some life again. Because there was finally something tangible. “Are you certain, Belle?”

“I’m certain this is Frazier’s photo. And I’m certain he’s her brother. Yes! The only reason he didn’t come for me

after what happened to Deidra is because he knew I belonged to you.”

Teddy didn't like the way that came out.

But Mick exhaled. “Where does he live?”

“When I knew him he lived right in Philly with the rest of us.”

“Was he a con or what?”

“Not Frazier. He was a straight arrow from what I can remember. He worked in a bank or something.”

Mick nodded. “Okay,” he said as he took his phone back from Bella.

But Teddy had even more questions now. “Who's Deidra?” he asked. “Who's Frazier? What's going on, Pop?”

“Bella got into it one night with this side chick named Deidra I was bothering with. The girl fell and hit her head. She died. Now all of a sudden Bella's being followed and she finds a life size image of Deidra in her new home.”

“With blood all over it,” said Bella.

“And now all of a sudden you and Nikki get ambushed and one of the gunmen we take out just happens to be the

brother of the woman Bella took out. That's one big-ass coincidence."

"I agree," Teddy said, nodding. "But when did this Deidra die?"

"Years ago. Gloria couldn't have been ten back then."

"She was eight," said Bella. "And what happened that night was an accident, Teddy. I just wanted her to leave Mick alone. I didn't mean for her to die."

"But if that happened all those years ago," said Teddy, "why start acting on it now? And what does that have to do with Ma?"

Mick didn't know. He didn't respond.

But Bella was looking at him. "I knew something was up. You made me stop all communications with Gloria and everybody on the outside when I got here, or Glo would have told me what was going on. So what's with Roz now?"

Mick stood up. "They have Rosalind."

Bella was shocked. "What do you mean they have her? They kidnapped your wife?"

Mick nodded, the anguish in his eyes undeniable.

“But who would be that stupid to kidnap Mick Sinatra’s wife?”

“They think I’m weak because I put Teddy in charge. They think it’s open season. They’re wrong,” said Mick as he began leaving the house.

Teddy looked back at Bella, who looked worried sick now too. How would Mick be in position to help her if Roz was in need of him too? “I’ll tell Gloria you’re safe,” he said to her.

“Thank you, Teddy,” Bella said, and Teddy hurried out of the house.

He and Mick plopped down into Mick’s SUV and took off again. Only this time Mick was calling their forensics team. “I want a full background on a Frazier Remmi. I already sent the photo over from my phone. He was one of the men who ambushed my son and daughter. I want to know if he has any relatives alive or any connections we can look into. Nothing’s off the table. Even if it appears to be of no significance. You tell me anyway.”

“Yes, sir, I will.”

Teddy noticed he forgot to add *in-law* when he mentioned Nikki in that ambush. But he also knew his father didn't see Nikki as his daughter-in-law, but as his daughter. As one of his children through and through.

“And Lou,” Mick added to the man on the phone in a voice Teddy could hear was pained.

“Sir?”

“I want you to send a forensic crew over to Bella Caine's new home and get a sample off of the blood on that life size photo inside her home. Also have them check for any fingerprints.”

“Yes, sir,” said Lou, and Mick ended the call.

Teddy was looking at him. “You think the blood on that photo at Bella's house might be ... It might be Ma's blood?”

Mick lifted his head. He wished to God it wasn't necessary. But it was. “I'm not sure if Roz was snatched before or after they broke into Bella's house. I'm covering bases,” he said as he drove.

But when they arrived back in the city limits and Mick passed by Saint Jude, a Catholic church he must have driven

past a thousand times, he didn't keep on driving this time. This time he slammed on brakes, causing his security detail SUV behind them to slam on brakes too. And then they had to swerve out of the way as Mick started backing up in that super-fast, nearly out of control way they knew he backed up. He stopped in front of the church. They had to turn around and get there too.

Teddy was surprised when his father got out and made his way up the steps of the church. Teddy got out and followed him. When Mick's security detail tried to follow, Teddy ordered them to stay outside. Teddy saw prayer as private. It didn't need an audience. And since Teddy was going in, his father didn't need protection.

Teddy sat on the back pew as his father made his way all the way down to the altar. And then, in what did surprise Teddy, his father got down on his knees at that altar and began silently praying. He could only imagine what a man like him could say to God after all he'd done in his life. Would he acknowledge all the terrible things he had to do just to keep himself and his family alive? Would he lose his pride and understand that only God could help him now? Teddy wondered. But he didn't ponder long. Roz was out there

somewhere, and she was badly injured and she was in the hands of their enemies. He bowed down in prayer too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

After they left the church not a word was spoken as Mick drove them back home. They had prayed because both of them knew they needed divine intervention. It was looking more and more scarier for Roz with every passing second. But they both felt just as bad as they felt when they first left home. No load felt lifted. No burden felt lighter.

Until they drove through the gate and the front door of Mick's home flung open and the family, led by Amelia with a phone in her hand, came running out. The twins and Gloria were right there with Amelia, who was outrunning the men.

Mick and Teddy got out of the car. Teddy wanted to run to see what was going on, but Mick walked slowly to the front of his truck. And then he kind of froze as Amelia was yelling his name.

“Mick! Mick!”

Mick was so nervous he could hardly stand. Was it good news, or was it what he dreaded? He couldn't say a word to his baby sister as she made her way up to him. He had to hear her words first.

And when Amelia said, “They found her, Mick,” her resuscitated his heart.

“Thank you, Jesus!” Teddy said, swiping his fist in the air like a punch.

But Mick was still cautious. “They found her?” he asked, as if he was still in a state of disbelief.

“They found her, Mick. Hammer found her.” Then Amelia handed him her phone.

The twins ran up to their father and held onto him as Mick, still numb, took the phone from his baby sister’s hand. It was already on Speaker. “Hello?” His voice was so meek and mild and cautious that Amelia wanted to melt. She’d never seen her strong brother this way.

“We found her, Mick.” It was Hammer Reese, the former head of the CIA and the current head of Special Ops units within the government. “I had everybody under my power searching for her, and they found her.”

Everybody wanted to rejoice, but Mick wasn’t rejoicing just yet. And they were taking their cues from him. “Where is she?” Mick asked Hammer, still afraid to ask the more urgent question.

“She’s in Mississippi,” said Hammer.

“Mississippi?” Teddy didn’t expect to hear that. What the fuck?”

“She’s in a hospital in Mississippi,” Hammer added.

“Hospital?” Then Mick held that phone with both hands. “Is she alive, Ham?”

They all waited for the answer.

“Yes,” said Hammer. “She’s alive. I can’t tell you her condition because the doctors are still assessing her. But she’s alive.”

And everybody rejoiced and began hugging each other with tears in their eyes. But Mick dropped to his knees. The twins, who had been jumping up and down in jubilation, dropped down with their father and grabbed him in a big bear hug. Teddy and Nikki and Gloria went down with them, and he hugged them too. Mick was thanking God and hugging all of his children.

But he had to get to Roz. He jumped up like the athlete he’d always been, and with his children still clinging to him, he got back into his SUV. After Teddy gave instructions on who should stay back to protect the minor children and the

ladies, he and Nikki hopped into Mick's SUV along with the twins, Amelia, and Gloria, and Mick sped away. Reno, Sal, and Tommy hopped into the other SUV and sped behind them. And they all drove like happy fools. They couldn't get to Mick's plane fast enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was almost midnight when the automatic sliding doors of the Tupelo, Mississippi hospital opened, and Mick and the group all rushed in. In case there was a backdoor attack, it was Teddy's call to keep maximum security on Mick's home front. That was why Charles, along with Monk Paletti, Trevor Reese, and Oz Drakos remained in Philly with the minor children and the rest of the ladies. Alex Drakos, satisfied that Roz was still alive, had to fly back to Florida.

But Mick also ordered a team of doctors to get to Tupelo too, but he wasn't waiting around to escort them. Teddy's plane was flying them in.

"Mr. Sinatra?"

The man was waiting inside the hospital near the entrance. And he was Fed. Mick could smell him a mile away. And even in a time like that, he was cautious. He didn't respond to his name until the guy made it clear who had sent him.

"Mr. Sinatra, I'm Special Agent in Charge Toby Blake. I work for the FBI. My director, on orders from

Director Hamilton Reese himself, ordered me to wait here until you arrived, sir. Hello, Mrs. Reese.”

Amelia nodded her head. Even though she was Hammer’s wife and everybody in the government knew her, she was as gangster as her brothers and was cautious around Fed too. “Hello,” she said dryly.

“Where’s my wife?” Mick asked.

“I just wanted to give you the background—”

“Fuck the background! Where’s my wife?!” Mick yelled at the agent so loud it attracted everybody within earshot.

The agent, unaccustomed to being manhandled, suddenly seemed to realize whom he was dealing with. He might be a special agent in charge and high up on the totem pole in the FBI, but he wasn’t shit to Mick. “Right this way, sir,” he said and escorted them down a long corridor of the smelly hospital. Reno and Sal, who brought up the rear, looked at each other. “What kind of bullshit is this?” Sal asked. “You smell this place?”

“Hell yeah I smell it,” said Reno. “And Mick Sinatra’s wife is in this shithole. I’ll be *gotdamn*.”

The twins were holding their noses the smell was so horrific. But they'd go through fire if it would get them to their mother.

"I left her where we found her, sir," the agent was saying as they walked.

"How did you find her?" Teddy asked him. He and Nikki were right behind his father. Would have been by his side but the twins occupied that space.

"We contacted every hospital in the lower forty-eight. There was a Jane Doe that met her description here in Tupelo. To remain discreet, Director Reese ordered me to leave my post in Columbus and get down here personally to check it out. Imagine my shock when I saw that it was true. But he also ordered me to stand down and not attempt to do anything that would draw attention to the fact that she is who she is. But my team and I have been guarding her, and checking to see if there were any visitors in to see her, while we waited for your arrival."

And then he pushed open the door of what could only be described as the "poor" ward: those with no insurance and nothing much else going for them. And in that section of the hospital there she was: The wife of Mick Sinatra, lying on a

cot of a bed, surrounded by people coughing and throwing up and in all manner of distresses. They could hardly believe their eyes.

But Mick and the twins didn't give a shit about the conditions in that place. Roz was there. And according to Hammer, she was alive. They rushed to her bedside.

She was asleep and hooked up to a machine, but she looked every bit of the wonderful, gorgeous, beloved person they all knew.

But Mick would not be content until he saw her eyes. The twins felt the same way. "Can we wake her up, Daddy?" Jackie anxiously asked him.

Mick looked back. "Get the head doctor in here," he ordered.

"I got it," Reno said, and left. They could hear him asking the charge nurse as only Reno could: "Who's the motherfucker that runs this joint?"

But Mick's entire focus was on Roz. He touched her face and saw no scars there. Then he lifted her bed coverings and, with his head beneath that blanket and sheet he checked out his wife. He looked beneath her hospital gown to see

where the bullet entries were. Where the surgery was performed. If she was being properly cared for. But he saw nothing. He looked between her legs. Smelled between her legs. Ready to be enraged if they violated her. But he smelled nothing. It was all Roz. No violation, at least on preliminary investigation. And, to his confusion, no wounds.

“Daddy, the doctors are here.”

When Mick heard his son’s voice, he removed himself from beneath her coverings. But instead of finding the head of the hospital, it was the team of doctors he had flown in.

“Why on earth is she in this dump?” asked Dr. Walter Embry, a tall black man and world-renowned surgeon and family friend.

Mick stood up. “Hell if I know,” he said. “But I’ll find out. On that you can depend.”

And then the head of the hospital hurried in apologetic. “Mr. Sinatra, sir, please forgive us. We had no idea, sir. We knew nothing of her being your wife, sir, or we would have—”

“Taken better care of her?” asked an angry Duke.

“Treated her like a human being?” asked Jackie.

“We would have notified you, sir,” the doctor said. “I do apologize.”

The only reason Mick wasn't enraged was because he was too relieved to have his wife back and in one piece. But he could not shield his anger. “Move. Her. Now,” he ordered the doctor.

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir. To our finest suite.” The doctor clapped his hands and the nurses hurried to get the necessary personnel.

“Who performed the surgery?” Dr. Embry asked the head doctor.

“Surgery sir? What surgery?”

Everybody looked at the Mississippi doctor. “Are you telling us there was no operation?” Embry asked him.

“Why no, sir. At least none that we performed.”

“Then why is she asleep?” asked Mick.

“She came in sedated, sir. She's still sedated. We haven't touched her. We were monitoring her vitals, which all look good, and were just waiting for her to wake up. Better not to awaken her, but to let her awaken on her own.”

“And nobody examined her?”

“She was examined, yes sir. She seemed okay although ...”

“Although what?”

“We’re a county hospital. We can only do bare minimum care here. Our hands are full.”

Bare minimum. Embry wanted to go off on his colleague. “Who checked her in?”

“Nobody.”

They all looked at the doctor. “What do you mean nobody?” asked Tommy.

“She was left outside of the hospital on a gurney. An ambulance put her out and kept on going. We assumed they had another emergency call and couldn’t wait. That’s not unusual around here. But when they never returned or called in her information, we had no choice but to put her down as a Jane Doe.”

Mick’s doctors looked at each other. The Gabrinis looked at each other too.

“We need to see every minute of video you have in this hospital,” Teddy said.

“Video? I’m afraid, sir, our cameras have been inoperable for weeks. We have them out for repairs.”

Mick looked at Teddy. Teddy looked at the doctors. “Arrange for medical transport to get Mrs. Sinatra back to Philly,” Teddy ordered their team of doctors.

“Yes, sir,” said one of the older doctors. “We’ll get right on it.” And he was pulling out his phone as he and another doctor were leaving to arrange it.

Teddy looked at Nikki. “Arrange security. Highest level.”

“Of course,” said Nikki as she stepped away and was getting on her phone too.

“Had we known she would be able to travel,” said Dr. Embry, “we would have already had it set up. But as it were, we assumed she would be far too injured.”

“That was our thinking too, Doc,” said Teddy.

And when they moved Roz to a private suite which wasn’t up to their standards, either, but was better than that ward downstairs, she began to show some signs.

Mick was seated on the edge of Roz’s bed talking with Dr. Embry, who had examined her thoroughly just in case that

hospital had missed something that needed urgent attention. Jackie was lying on the opposite side of the bed with her still-sedated mother. Duke was seated on the floor between the legs of his father. Everybody else were seated around the walls. But it was Embry's conclusion that confused them all.

“What do you mean she wasn't shot?” asked a stunned Teddy. Everybody was staring at the doctor.

“She wasn't shot,” Embry said confidently. “There are no bullet wounds anywhere on her body. There are no wounds period on her body.”

“But we saw her laying there,” said Nikki.

“We saw the blood,” said Teddy.

“Certainly we'll run every test we can run,” said the doctor. “But they aren't going to turn up any bullet wounds.”

“Then what could have caused that bleeding?” asked Mick.

Dr. Embry was in deep thought, but Mick could tell he had already thought of something. “Just tell me,” Mick said.

“She could have been injected with something powerful enough to knock her out straight away, and powerful

enough to elicit immediate bleeding, but she wasn't shot. That I can tell you right now.”

Mick exhaled. That was his conclusion when he had checked out Roz himself. And he was relieved. And that was when he felt a tug on his suit coat sleeve.

When he turned and saw that it was Roz's small hand, his heart rebounded. And he quickly leaned over to her. “Honey, are you awake?”

Jackie sat up on the bed and Duke got up and stood by his father. Everybody else rushed over to the bed, too, including Dr. Embry.

And when Roz opened her eyes and said *you look tired* to Mick, the entire room erupted in applause and relief.

But Mick was so relieved that all he could do was grab hold of her and hold her. “Oh, Rosalind. Welcome back. Welcome back, sweetheart.” Even Mick was smiling and inwardly thanking God. But then the twins, and Teddy and Nikki, and Gloria, all had to move Mick aside to get to Roz. They couldn't hug her tight enough. Embry had to tell them to take it easy they were holding her so tight. And they did ease up. But they smothered her in their ease.

Mick just stood there and allowed the rest of the family to have her for right now. He'd have her later. Because in that moment, his emotional state was so conflicted it was painful. He was thrilled beyond measure that Roz was back with them. He was worried that there might be lasting damage they didn't even know about. He was enraged at the fuckers who put her through this ordeal. And he was so vengeful he could hardly think straight.

He couldn't begin to wrap his brain around all the intricacies of what might have taken place. And the power reach it may have involved. And, most importantly, who might have ordered it. And what led to them dropping her off at this hospital?

But right now, he was watching Roz. She had their twins in her arms allowing them to talk her to death. And Teddy and Gloria were beside themselves with joy too. He'd never seen his children happier.

Once she was safely back in Philly, at their home, in their bed, then Mick would focus.

Then he'd become the man he was known for.

Then he'd become Mick the Ticking Timebomb they didn't ever want him to become.

And then he'd explode on each and every one of those motherfuckers no matter how far he had to go to detonate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

After Roz returned home and everybody saw that she was going to be just fine, Mick advised the Gabrinis and everybody else to return to their homes and personally secure their respective families should there be any blowback when he did his thing. Gloria didn't want to go back to Florida. It was obvious to Mick that she and Oz were having their usual issues. So he allowed her and the baby to stay. Oz didn't like it. Every time they had their problems, it seemed to him, Gloria ran home to Mick. But he wasn't about to get in any arguments with Mick at a time like this. And besides, as Alex Drakos privately pointed out to his kid brother, even he could see that Oz and Gloria were at it all the time. Even he could see that they needed a break from one another.

Mick also ordered Dommi and his family to remain in Vegas in case something jumped off there. But Teddy and Nikki didn't get off so easily. They were ordered, along with their baby girl, to take up residence at Mick's house until it was all over.

The only person Mick didn't order around was Charles.

Charles did whatever the fuck Charles wanted to do, and Mick knew it. He could stay or he could go. He stayed. He had his powerful sons Brent, their town's police chief, and Bobby, their town's mayor, and Dr. Tony Sinatra, their town's resident prison psychologist, to hold down the fort for him in Maine.

But when the crowd had gone, and all those remaining were in the family room together, Mick was upstairs with Roz finally giving her that long hot bath she had been asking for since she woke up in that hospital.

They were naked in the tub, with Roz sitting in front of Mick between his legs, and Mick bathing Roz with that slow relaxed movement she loved. Her head was back against his broad chest, and she was enjoying every second. And when he took his soap-filled fingers between her legs and was rubbing her vagina, getting that hospital off of her even down there, she moaned. And wanted more. But Mick wouldn't give it to her.

“You're still traumatized,” he said. “Not now.”

But when they got in bed, he was fucking the shit out of her.

“My trauma’s over, hun?” she jokingly said to Mick when he started pounding her from behind. Mick smiled but couldn’t respond. He had her back in his bed again. He had her back in his life again. And although he had every intention of waiting, of giving her time to exhale, he couldn’t do it. As soon as she told him she wanted to cuddle, and they began spooning, it was over. He wrapped his arms around her body, with his hands squeezing her breasts, as he did her. Roz turned him on unlike any woman ever had. And he had to have her. And Roz wanted him to have her more than she ever had.

They came quickly, as Mick wasn’t trying to string it out, and it didn’t take long after that for the events of the last day to overtake Roz once again, and she was soon fast asleep.

Mick eased out of Roz, and then eased out of bed and began heading to the bathroom to pee and clean up. But as soon as he began walking across the floor, he thought he heard movement outside their bedroom door. He slipped on a pair of pants and opened the double doors.

As soon as he opened the doors, he saw the twins sitting out in the hall waiting to see their mother again. Even though the doctors gave her a clean bill of health, he could still

see the terror still in their big, beautiful eyes. “Mom needs her rest,” he said.

“You didn’t give her any rest,” said Duke as he stared at his father straight on. They heard the pounding he had put on Roz, but Duke appeared particularly aggrieved.

Mick knew there had been tension between him and his son ever since he and Roz had that messy breakup, but Roz told him to just give it some time. And he did. But now time was up. “When the fuck did you become me?” he asked Duke. “Are you me?”

Duke knew where that was going. “No, sir.”

“But he’s just like you,” said Jackie.

“Bullshit,” Mick said in Mick fashion. But he didn’t say it because it wasn’t true. He was saying it because the last thing he wanted was for it to be true. He didn’t want any of his children to be like him.

And he softened. “Give her a few hours to get some sleep,” he said, “then you can see her.”

“Yes, sir,” Jackie said as they got up and made their way down the stairs. Mick was staring at his handsome young son. And when his son glanced back at him with that

gorgeous face and chillingly cold eyes, he knew he had a clone on his hands. Teddy was the son that came closest to being like Mick. Duke, he feared, just might surpass Teddy. He closed the doors and went and peed.

Later that evening, after Roz had spent time with the twins and the rest of the family still on the estate, she and Mick retired to the balcony outside of their bedroom with Charles, Amelia, Gloria, and Teddy and Nikki. They were drinking wine and shooting the breeze. But while Teddy and Nikki sat in chairs, and Mick and Charles sat in loungers, Roz was standing against the rail, the wind blowing through her long hair, enjoying the breeze. “Didn’t think I’d able to do this again,” said Roz.

This interested all of them. They wanted to wait until Roz was ready to talk for her to talk. “So you were awake the whole time?” Amelia asked her.

“Not the whole time, no. But when they first gave me that injection and put me in that ambulance, I was kind of in and out.”

“You remember any faces?” asked Teddy.

Roz shook her head. “I could barely see right in front of me. But I heard them talking. And they were talking about where they were going to dump the body.”

Mick’s jaws tightened as he sat on that lounge. All of them, except Roz, glanced at Mick. But Roz didn’t look at him. She’d heard about the state Mick was in. She didn’t want to sound too alarming. “They were serious,” she continued.

“Did you hear any accents or any familiar voices?” Charles asked.

Roz shook her head again. “Nope. No accents. And nothing familiar either. I just remember hearing them talking about dumping the body. But that’s the one and only recollection I have of that entire ordeal.”

Teddy rubbed his forehead. “Still don’t explain why they didn’t kill you, and why they dumped you at a hospital instead.”

“It was like they panicked,” said Nikki.

Charles pointed at Nikki as if he agreed with her.

Mick got up, removed the jacket he wore, and went over to Roz and wrapped it around her. Then he kept his arms

around her as they both looked out over the balcony's rail sipping their glasses of wine. Nikki was always touched at how such a vicious man like Mick could be so loving toward his wife. But Teddy knew he could be just as vicious toward Roz too whenever she defied him. And the way he was always looking out for Bella Caine didn't sit right with him either.

“How's Aunt Jenay?” Teddy decided to ask Charles to change the subject.

Charles ran his hand across his face. “Still not great,” he said. “But she's doing better.”

Mick and Roz turned around and looked at him. He rarely ever spoke of his problems, and for him to even say that much was huge. “I thought she was out of the hospital,” said Roz.

“She was out. Then she starts feeling crappy again and she's right back in.”

“And they still don't know what's wrong?” asked Amelia.

“Still don't know. They run test after test and still nothing. She's healthy as a mule, let them doctors tell it. And

I had them checking everything. I even had them check to see if anybody was poisoning her ass.”

“Were they?” Mick, Amelia, and Teddy all asked that very question at the exact same time. Which gave Nikki pause. Only in the Sinatra family would they suspect poisoning when somebody was ill. If she still held any doubts at all that she had married into the gangster of all gangster families, this conversation removed all doubt.

“The doctors said no,” said Charles. “Even all those experts you had flown in, Mick? None of them could find anything wrong with her either. A few of them even claimed it was all psychosomatic.”

Teddy frowned. “What the fuck that means?”

“It’s that interaction of mind and body,” said Mick, who was a school dropout, but who read more academic books than most college professors.

“It’s all in her head, in other words,” said Charles, making it plain. “But I talked to Tony about that. He called it bullshit right away. But they don’t know what’s going on so they blame it on stress.”

“Is she stressed?” asked Roz.

“No more than the rest of us,” said Charles.

But Mick studied Charles. He had a tendency, like Mick, to view his wife as this unyielding tower of strength when nothing could be further from the truth. And Jenay especially, who had so much on her plate it was ridiculous. “You’re a workaholic,” Mick said to his brother, “same as the rest of us. And you expect Jenay to be a workhorse too. But sometimes even thoroughbreds need some rest.”

Charles looked at Mick. “Are you saying my wife needs to be put out to pasture?”

Everybody on that balcony knew Mick wasn’t suggesting any such thing. But they said nothing. There was more going on with Jenay than Charles was willing to admit, but they weren’t the kind of family to pry too deeply on that personal a level. They left it alone. He would tell them when he was good and ready.

“How’s cousin Donnie?” asked Teddy. “I haven’t seen that rascal in a long time.”

Charles smiled. Talking about his son was apparently a brighter subject. “That rascal isn’t a rascal anymore. Remember that little convenience store and gas station he and Ashley started up?”

“Yeah, I remember it.”

“He’s got a chain of them now.”

Teddy smiled. “Get the fuck out of here! Really?”

“All over Maine. Very successful too. Of all my sons, I thought he would be the last one to follow in my footsteps. But he’s following in my footsteps. He’s turned out to be a very shrewd businessman.”

“How much investment you have in this venture?” asked Mick. “All of it?”

“None of it. Except for the original seed money I gave to him and Ashley. This is all Donald.”

“That’s great, Big Daddy,” said Nikki. Then she smiled. “But I’ll bet he’s still loving on those biker chicks.”

“Those were some rough cookies,” said Teddy, smiling too.

“He isn’t loving on any chicks right now,” said Charles. “I’m telling you he’s changed. He goes to church every Sunday. He’s a changed man. What he needs is a wife. He needs to settle down. But he’s not interested.”

Teddy shook his head. “Your sons are a study in contrast. Except for Brent. Brent being a cop? Yeah, I could

see that right off. He was always a tight ass. But Tony was going to be a priest, and then he became a psychologist? Gangster Tony? And Bobby, your gangster son who I just knew was going to follow in Pop's footsteps, is the mayor of Jericho? Get the fuck out of here," Teddy said again, and they laughed. "Now Donnie's a businessman? Donnie the lover boy? Donnie who once spent time in prison for kicking his own wife's ass?"

"It's where I met Jenay," said Charles. "At Donald's wedding."

"But they all turned out okay," said Nikki. "A testament to your raising them right, Big Daddy."

Charles smiled. He was a sucker for Nikki too, just like Pops, Teddy thought. "Thank you, Nicole. I appreciate that."

Roz looked at Teddy. "Where's that boy of yours?" she asked him. "I haven't seen him at all."

"He's in Belarus," said Teddy, "handling some business for the organization. He's been calling and checking on you. But the negotiations weren't the kind you could put on hold to handle a family emergency."

Roz nodded. “I completely understand,” she said.

“I don’t,” said Mick. “The family have an emergency, the family comes together, I don’t care where the fuck you are or what the fuck you’re doing. Understood?”

Teddy’s jaw tightened. He just didn’t let up! “I understand,” he said with clenched teeth.

Mick seemed ready to say more. But Dommi came out onto the balcony with finally some news.

“We got background on Frazier Remmi,” he said as he walked onto the balcony.

“Okay now, who’s Frazier Remmi?” Roz asked.

They all looked to Mick to explain that one, but Mick didn’t say a word.

“Years ago, before Pop met you,” said Teddy, “Bella Caine—”

“Not her again!” said Roz.

“My sentiments exactly,” said Teddy.

Gloria looked away from them. Bella was her mother. Sometimes they forgot that part.

But Big Daddy didn't forget it. "Be respectful," he said. "But keep going."

"Bella Caine got into a fight with one of Pop's side pieces at the time. Chick named Deidra. The woman apparently fell and hit her head that resulted in her death."

Everybody, except Mick, looked at Gloria. "She told me about it," she said.

"You okay?" Roz asked her.

"I'm good," Gloria said with a smile. She meant it. "I'm a Sinatra remember?" she added, and they laughed.

"Then," Teddy continued, "somebody breaks into her new house and has a life size portrait of Deidra in her foyer. With blood all over it."

"Whoa," said a surprised Charles.

"Bella recognized one of the men whose corpse we photographed at the ambush at that apartment complex. Guy named Frazier Remmi. Frazier, it turned out, was Deidra's brother."

"Oh shit," said Amelia. "A connection."

"You think the people who ambushed you and Nikki might have been the people who grabbed me?" asked Charles.

Teddy nodded. “That’s where it’s leading, yes sir,” he said.

“What have you found out?” Mick asked Dommi.

“Frazier Remmi was not only Deidra’s brother, but guess who his cousin is?”

“Who?” asked Teddy.

“Corky Demps,” Dommi said and as soon as he said it, Mick’s glass of wine dropped from his hand. The glass didn’t shatter, but the wine spilled out. Everybody looked at Mick.

“Who is it?” Roz asked him.

But Mick said nothing.

But Roz continued to pursue it. “Why did you drop your glass, Mick? Who’s Corky Demps?”

“He’s nobody,” said Mick. “And the glass slipped out of my hand, damn. Don’t make a federal case out of it.”

The more Mick changed, the more he stayed the same. But so did Roz. “Didn’t I tell you to stop leaving me out of the loop? And you don’t tell me any of this shit?”

“Why would I tell you anything like that while you’re still recovering, Rosalind?”

“You weren’t worried about my recovery when you were banging the shit out of me four hours ago!”

When Roz went there with Mick, everybody on that balcony knew she was back. But Charles was taken aback. He fucked her already?

“I’m recovered and you know it,” Roz continued. “You just do that shit all the time. And I’m not putting up with it anymore, Mick Sinatra. Everything that’s happening right now concerns me more than it concerns anybody out here. And I’m going to get to the bottom of this right alongside you. Where you go, I go. Until we find those bastards. Now who’s Corky Demps?”

Mick still wasn’t going there. They knew, had it been them talking to Pop that way, they’d all be dead. But Roz could be as hard as Mick if you pushed her. But only if she didn’t push Pop too hard.

But Teddy agreed with her. This was all about her. She had a right to know. “He’s mob,” he said to her. “A munitions guy, but a particularly rough character. But the thing is, we have a longstanding alliance with Cork.” He looked at his father. “Why would Cork have a beef with us?”

“Maybe the fact that he didn’t like Mick’s baby mama offing his cousin’s sister,” said Charles. “Or maybe he didn’t like Mick or you or Nikki offing his cousin at that ambush.”

“The ambush maybe,” said Teddy. “That’s possible. But Deidra’s death happened decades ago. Our alliance doesn’t date back that far. He already knew what happened to Deidra when he got in an alliance with us.”

“Are you sure he knew?” Roz asked Teddy.

“He knew,” said Mick.

“Then it must have been because of the ambush.”

“Corky’s got some sense,” Teddy said. “He wouldn’t risk a war with us over some cousin getting iced for trying to ice us.”

“Unless that cousin was trying to ice us under orders from Corky,” said Nikki.

Teddy exhaled. “There’s that!”

“Argie still works for Cork?” Mick asked.

“Argentine Bosarno? “Yeh he do,” said Teddy. “He’s still Corky’s underboss far as I know. Works out of that tattoo parlor on Reinsdale as his cover. Any shit goes down they have to run it by Argie before it goes up the chain to Cork.”

“We go see him first,” said Mick. “He’s a talker. He’ll talk. Then we pay Cork a visit.”

“Yes, sir,” said Teddy as they all stood up and prepared to leave the balcony.

“I’m going too, Mick,” Roz said.

“Ma,” said Nikki.

“You know you can’t,” said Teddy.

“And why can’t I?” said Roz. “I was kidnapped and sedated and dropped off at a hospital in Missi-fucking-ssippi. That’s all. That’s the full extent of what happened to me.”

“But I wonder why?” Nikki asked, still perplexed by the fact that they didn’t harm her at all. Or keep her for leverage.

“That’s my question too, Nikki,” agreed Mick. Then he looked at his wife. She was daring him to say no. “She can hang,” he said. “She can go. Charlie, you and Millie got the home front. Dom, keep working our sources. Get all the intel you can get.”

“Yes, sir.”

And then Mick left the balcony.

Roz, pleased, hurried behind him. Teddy and Nikki, surprised, hurried behind them.

But Charles shook his head. Wives working right alongside their mob husbands like it was no big deal at all mystified him. It was like him taking Jenay to some of the messiest evictions he had to handle, the ones that always got out of hand and required him to get rid of his tenants at gunpoint. And he'd bring his wife along for the ride? Not happening. Not ever.

Things were changing faster than he would ever abide.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

They were only a few minutes in Mick's Escalade, with Nikki as driver and Teddy on the front passenger seat, and Mick and Roz seated behind them on the second row, when a call came in. Despite their disagreement on the balcony, Roz was sitting close beside Mick and Mick had his arm around her waist when Teddy pressed the phone icon on the screen and answered the call. It was one of their higher-ranking capos. "What up?"

"We just got hit, Boss!" he said excitedly.

Roz could feel Mick tense up.

"We just been hit!" he capo said again.

"Where?" asked Teddy.

"Over at Shark's place. Six of our guys and all of them dead."

"Motherfuck!" yelled Teddy.

"Do we know who was behind it?" asked an equally perturbed Nikki.

“They’re saying Corky Demps was behind this shit, Boss. They’re saying it was Corky Demps’s men!”

Nikki looked at Mick through the rearview. “Go there now,” Mick ordered, and Nikki quickly hung a U-turn that almost had them on two wheels and sped in the direction of Shark’s bar.

When they arrived here, they went in through the back way. It was a spot secluded enough that no cops had been notified by any nosy passersby. All the bodies, all six of them, had been moved into the backroom.

“Motherfuck!” Teddy said again as he looked at their fallen men.

“Some alliance,” said Roz.

Mick opened his suit coat and placed his hands on his hips. If he was as upset as the rest of them, he wasn’t showing it.

Shark came back there. “How many was it, Shark?” Nikki asked him.

“One carload. They didn’t even get out. Just shot up the place. And it was no accident. We’re out in the boonies

on purpose. They were after nobody else but your guys. And your guys didn't stand a chance."

Mick nodded. Stared at his men for several minutes. Then he walked back out. Roz walked out behind him.

The two capos in the room looked at Teddy. "You want us to bury them, or give them a decent burial with family present?"

"Family," said Teddy. "And have the fund take good care of the widows. Nikki will follow up."

"Yes, sir. Do we hit back?"

Teddy started to say it was up to Pop, but he refrained. Although, in the circumstances, he knew it was up to Pop. "Wait to hear from me," he said and he and Nikki left too.

But as they were walking up the alley back to the Escalade, Teddy wanted to know the plan. "Do we hit back now, Pop?"

"No. I want to talk to Argie first," he said, and they all got back into the SUV. Nikki sped them away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The tattoo parlor sat beside two alleys in the heart of the hood. But unlike the other parlors and liquor stores and bars and other shops further up the way, it was quiet around the place. Everybody knew it was a mob hangout, even though Argie was trying to fit right in. The Escalade parked across the street. Mick's security detail, that followed him everywhere, parked further back.

"Roz, you and Nikki wait here," Mick said as he removed his arm from around her and opened the door. "Nikki, stay behind the wheel in case we need a pickup."

"Yes, sir."

And although Roz and Nikki both would rather be closer to the action, they obeyed Mick's command and stayed where they were. Mick and Teddy got out and made their way along the side alley of the tattoo parlor. But looking through a window on the side of the shop, they could see Argentine Bosarno giving one of his guys a tattoo. Teddy shook his head. "A killer like him a tattoo artist. I've seen it all."

“It’s a good cover,” said Mick as they made their way to the back of the parlor.

Teddy went first, to open the door for his father. But when he realized that a door that old wasn’t squeaking, he looked at the hinge. That was when he saw the explosives. And his heart dropped.

“Pop, it’s a trap!” he yelled to Mick even as he pushed Mick back and dived for cover, too, as that parlor exploded with an explosion that almost cradled it, and that rocked Mick’s SUV across the street so violently that it lifted up on two wheels and slammed back down.

When Roz and Nikki first heard and then saw the aftermath of the explosion, they jumped out of the just-landed SUV in full panic mode. “Mick!” Roz was screaming. “Teddy!” Nikki was screaming as they ran toward the building that the survivors inside were running out of.

But Nikki ran ahead of Roz as they both ran around the back of the now burning building.

They saw Mick just getting up, and Roz was relieved as she ran to him. But Nikki still hadn’t seen Teddy. “Where’s Teddy?” she was yelling. “Where’s Teddy?!”

Mick ran to the entrance way that was now nothing but rubble, and began to throw rocks aside. “He’s buried,” he said, panic in his own voice, and Nikki and Roz, along with Mick’s security detail that had run back there too, began throwing rocks aside. Big rocks, little rocks, whatever they could move. And Nikki was calling Teddy’s name the entire time.

It took nearly fifteen minutes before the fire department arrived and Roz ran around front and told them somebody was buried alive around back. The firemen ran around back and began assisting in the recovery effort. Cops came and assisted too. But Mick and Nikki didn’t give an inch. Roz and Mick’s security detail didn’t either. They were still throwing rocks and doing all they could to make some headway. But they weren’t making any.

Until the fire department brought in heavy equipment and removed big chunks of rubble at a time. Mick and Roz, and Nikki and the security detail all just stood there and watched. All they could do was watch.

And then finally, after nearly two hours, they saw a hand. Teddy’s hand. And then they quickly removed the backhoe and began pulling Teddy out. But he was

unconscious and the paramedics were frantically trying to revive him. Mick quickly put his arm around Nikki, who was moving side to side in panic and dread. He held her tightly against him as they all looked on.

Then the medics put Teddy on a stretcher and put him in the ambulance. Nikki moved to get onboard and ride with him, despite the protestations of the medics, but Mick took over. If it was a trap, Nikki was in no condition to thwart it. “Not only is she riding with him,” he said, “I’m riding with him too. Now which one of you motherfuckers is going to stop me?”

The medics, who didn’t know Nikki, but they all knew who Mick was, stopped all protestations and Mick and Nikki got onboard. Mick grabbed Roz’s hand and hoisted her up in there too. The medics were inwardly livid. They barely had room to maneuver. But Mick didn’t give a shit. Nobody was taking his son away and he just let them. Nobody was watching out for his wife and daughter-in-law but himself. Livid or not, all three were going with Teddy. “And if he dies,” Mick warned those medics, “you die.”

The terrified medics, knowing it was Mick’s way or the highway, slammed the ambulance doors shut. And the

ambulance, sirens blaring, too off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

They were at the hospital for over four hours. Oz Drakos, on hearing what had happened, had flown back in from Florida and was at the house with his wife and daughter and the rest of the clan, which allowed Charles and Amelia to get to the hospital too. Mick left shortly after his brother and sister arrived, as they could take over the protector of Roz duties, and neither one of them asked him where he was going. Because they knew he wasn't going to tell. And when he returned, an hour later, he was in full armor: his long white coat, his black trousers and black turtleneck sweater, and that look of vengeance thirst that nothing short of total victory against those assholes was going to be able to quench.

He stood against the wall, his arms folded, and he stood in silence.

“Think we should call Teddy's boy and let him know what's happened to his father?” Amelia asked Charles.

“We don't have anything to report yet,” said Charles.
“Let's get some information first.”

But it would be another half hour before Nikki entered the waiting room.

They all hurried over to her. Even Mick. “How is he, Nikki?” Roz asked anxiously.

“He’s okay. He’s awake. And talking. He’s hurting, but all the tests came back negative. No broken bones, and other than some cuts and bruises, no major injuries.”

Roz pointed upward. “Thank God,” she said.

“Can we see him?” Charles asked.

“The doctors say no. He needs his rest.”

“But?”

“But Teddy told me to fuck the doctors and go get you guys. He wants to know what the plan of attack will be.”

Roz smiled. “That’s Teddy,” she said, and they all followed Nikki into a private suite inside the ICU.

Teddy was lying in bed, with one of his muscular arms behind his head, but they could see the bruises on that same arm from the doorway.

“How are you, son?” Charles asked as they walked over to his bedside.

“How do you feel?” Roz asked him.

“I feel like I’ve been in a fight with a Mack truck, but other than that I’m okay.”

Roz exhaled. “Those bastards,” she said.

“Oh they were waiting on our asses,” said Teddy.
“They knew we’d come around back, didn’t they Pop?”

“Hell yeah they knew it,” said Mick as Nikki’s phone began ringing.

“They were waiting on our asses,” Teddy said again as he looked at Nikki. “Who is it?”

“It’s Stag,” said Nikki. She answered and placed the call on Speaker. “What up, Stag?”

“I called Teddy’s phone but it rang and rang.”

“Teddy’s phone is buried in rubble. What up?”

“Ted okay?”

“I’m fine,” said Teddy and Nikki moved the phone closer to him. “What is it?”

“They hit us again, Boss,” Stag said and everybody was astonished.

“Again?” said Teddy. “You got to be shittin’ me!”

“Where?” asked Mick.

“South Street. Fourteen of our guys this time. It’s a bloodbath over there.”

Mick leaned his head back. The stress, Roz could tell, was killing him.

And that was an understatement. They were under siege, and he didn’t know what for or where from. He had gone to his house to suit up and then had gone back on the scene of that tattoo parlor, hoping that Argie survived and he could get some answers. But Argie was dead. His body was one of the ones laid out. So no answers on that front. And now this? “Any read on who’s behind it?” Mick asked.

“It’s Corky Demps again,” said their capo.

“You certain of that?” asked Teddy.

“We got his guys on videotape. His ass toying with us. It’s like they think we’re weak as fuck just because Big Boss stepped back. When they know your ass the biggest on the stage behind your Pops.”

“We got to put a stop to this shit right now and in a hurry,” said Teddy. “Or it’s gonna be open season.”

Then Dommi entered the room. “We’ll be in touch,” Nikki said into the phone and then ended the call. They all were looking at Dom.

“You look good, Teddy. Considering.”

“What you found out?” asked Mick.

“Lots,” said Dommi. “First off, that injection into Auntie Roz?”

“What about it?” Roz asked Dom.

“The results are back. And it was a powerful sedative alright. It came straight from the African bush.”

Mick went still. He had secrets in Africa.

“They used that shit to sedate elephants,” said Dom.

“Damn,” said Teddy. “And that’s what they gave Ma?”

“That’s what they gave her. But there aren’t known to be any long-lasting effects should humans come into contact with it.”

“That’s good to know,” said Roz relieved.

“The other news,” said Dommi, “is that Argentine Bosarno no longer worked for Corky Demps.”

“Get the fuck out of here,” said Teddy. “Since when?”

“Since recently.”

That surprised Mick too. “And you know this how?”

“Cork’s got a contract out of Argie. He wants his ass dead.”

“A contract?” asked Nikki. Then she looked at Mick. “You think that’s why that parlor blew?”

“Maybe,” said Mick.

“Which would mean it had nothing to do with us,” said Roz.

But Teddy was shaking his head. “I’m not buying it. Not yet. I think Cork’s trying to cover his ass now with this contract bullshit. Argie may have ordered those hits on our guys and he didn’t like it. He may be running scared.”

“You agree, Mick?” Charles asked.

“I do,” said Mick. “I’m not buying it either.”

“And you may have a point,” said Dom and they all looked at him. “I also heard that Argie’s not working for Cork anymore, but that don’t mean he’s freelancing.”

“He’s with another outfit?”

“That’s what I’m hearing,” said Dom.

“Who?” asked Nikki.

“You’re not gonna believe this shit, but I’m hearing Argie is a capo in the Capella crime family.

“Capella?” Mick was floored. He usually knew these things. “Tony Capella is here? In the U.S.?”

“Just got here a few months ago. And already he went to war with two families on the west coast and won. Took over their territories one hundred percent.”

“Damn,” said Teddy.

“Made alliances with many, many more. They’re scared of his ass. But guess who else he has an alliance with?”

“Enough of the guesses, Dom. Just tell us,” ordered Teddy as he winced as pain shot through his body.

“Capella has an alliance with Corky Demps.”

“Motherfucker,” said Teddy. But Mick looked downright distressed. He began rubbing his forehead and moving around that room like a wounded animal.

Even Roz was concerned. “Mick, what’s wrong?” asked Roz. “It’s an alliance, so what? We’re used to that.”

“Yeah Pop. What is it?”

Mick looked at Dommi. “How big is Capella?”

“With the acquisitions and alliances he’s already made, the word I’m getting is that he’s three times bigger than us easy.”

“Three times?” Nikki was floored.

“Get me out of this bed,” said Teddy, wincing as he lifted his body up. “Those fuckers want a war, they got one.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Teddy,” said Roz. “You’re staying right here and Nikki’s staying with you.”

But Mick had a different idea. “Get him up,” he said.

Teddy began getting himself up. But Roz and Nikki and even Dommi were surprised. “Mick, he can’t!” said Roz.

“He’s in pain, Pops,” said Nikki.

“He’ll push through,” said Mick. “Get him up.”

Roz couldn’t believe it. “But why, Mick?”

“Because I need him!” Mick shouted from the top of his lungs. “The Capella Crime family isn’t three times our size. If he’s stateside now, he’s three times plus Italy!” He looked at Dom again. “Contact Sal Gabrini and Monk Paletti.

Tell them we need every man they have available. Tell Reno and Tommy to send all they have over here too.”

“Yes, sir,” Dommi said, excited, and hurried out of the room.

But Teddy and Nikki and Roz and even Charles were confused. “We need that much firepower, Pops?” asked Teddy.

“Who is this Tony Capella?” asked Roz, “and why would you fear him like that?”

“I don’t fear any *gotdamn* body,” Mick shot back.

“Then why this overkill?” Roz asked, not backing down.

Mick ran his hands through his hair.

“What is it, Pop?” asked Nikki.

“What does this guy have on you?” asked Roz, who knew how to get to the meat of the matter with Mick.

And Mick walked around the room one more time, and then sat down in the chair against the wall.

And he told them just why Tony Capella in America was nothing short of Armageddon for them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“I was on a munitions run in Africa,” he said, “when I met this young lady. I slept with her—”

“You *what?*” Teddy was floored. Was his father freely admitting to cheating on Roz? “When was this, Pop?”

“Years ago. I was in my twenties. I was there for like three months because our stash was coming in one shipment at a time. The day I had to get out of there was the day she tells me she’s pregnant.”

There was silence in the room. Everybody, especially Roz, was staring at him. Was his own child behind all of this shit?

Mick kept talking. “My guide was this biracial guy named Datmoud. His father was said to be a white UN specialist who had abandoned him and his family when he was still in diapers. He hated those Europeans. He was glad to be on our side. My partner was Corky Demps,” Mick said and everybody was shocked.

“Cork was with you in Africa?” Teddy asked.

Mick nodded. “Cork was a mercenary back then. He was available to the highest bidder. But he was a good strategist. And you could trust him back then. So I paid him to accompany me on my pick up. But we weren’t the only ones there. There were some Europeans in town, too, who had apparently been spying on our activities the entire time, and they wanted in on the deal. Well nobody was getting in on any deal of mine. So they decided to follow us to the final pick up and a gun battle broke out. We won that battle. But we knew we had to get out of there like right away then. So we loaded the explosives onto the chopper before word got back that their guys didn’t take over our stash. But word got back and they were on our asses once again. So there we were, in a gun battle with explosives on our chopper. I knew we would be blown to smithereens if a bullet penetrated our transportation. I had to do something in that moment. And I did it. I ignited some dynamite and threw it on the gunmen that were gunning for us. It worked. The jungle went up in flames and killed them all. But that fire spread quickly and within seconds the entire surrounding village was consumed. There were no survivors.”

“*Good Lord,*” said Nikki. Roz and Charles could barely stomach it. Even Amelia was upset.

Mick did pause from his almost monotone telling of the story. But then he continued. “The young lady who alleged I had impregnated her was Datmoud’s sister.” Another pause. “She was in that village when it burned to the ground.”

Shock was in that room. Charles stood on his feet, unable to even comprehend what he was hearing. “Are you telling me that the woman who was pregnant with your baby, with your child, was in that village when you ignited that explosive, and you knew she was in that village?”

“But he didn’t know it would burn down the whole village, Big Daddy,” said Teddy, always quick to defend his father.

But Charles wasn’t having it. “How the fuck wouldn’t he know, Teddy? Fire burns down shit. That’s what it does. He wasn’t in Philly. He was in the African bush. You ignite an explosive in a jungle that dense, everything was going to burn down and his ass knew it!” Then he looked at Mick. “But you did it anyway. Didn’t you?”

Mick was a lot of things, they knew, but a liar wasn’t one of them. “Yes,” he said to audible gasps.

And Charles, so beside himself with rage and disappointment, went over to his younger brother, the brother

he raised because of the disqualification of their dysfunctional parents. And he slapped Mick with such force that a lesser man would have fallen from that chair. “You’re too hard, Michello!” he yelled at his brother with the kind of rage they all knew Charles was capable of. “You’re too fucking hard!”

Then he just stood there, trembling with anger, and then left the room. To everybody’s shock, Roz immediately hurried behind him.

Charles was in the hallway, walking back and forth, his hand running through his thick wad of hair. “Where did I go so wrong?” he was saying. “Where did I go so wrong?”

“You didn’t go wrong, Big Daddy. You was a kid raising a kid. You did the best you could do. Mick turned out alright.”

Charles looked at her as if she was insane. “He turned out alright? Did you hear him in there? How can you support that?”

“I’m not supporting shit. But I am supporting Mick. He was in his twenties, Big Daddy.”

“I was in my twenties raising sons!” Charles yelled. “I was a man in my twenties, and so was Mick!”

“What did you want him to do?” Roz asked. “Save that village of strangers and those gunmen, by the way, or save himself?”

“Don’t forget that woman and his unborn child was in that village too,” said Charles.

Roz exhaled. What she loved most about Big Daddy was his moral core. What infuriated her most about Big Daddy was his moral core. He was not transactional with his morals the way they had to be. “He did what he had to do,” she said bluntly.

Charles was not an unreasonable man. He was just a tired man. “I know,” he admitted. “It’s just not what I would have done,” he added. Then he sighed. “I’ll be at the house,” he said, and left.

Roz watched him leave. He was a ruthless sonafabitch who taught Mick how to survive in this world. But she’d never met anybody more committed to doing the right thing, no matter what, than Charles.

When Roz made it back into the room, you could hear a pin drop. “He okay?” Amelia asked her.

“He will be. He’s going back to the house. But what does Africa have to do with what’s going on now? I get that Corky Demps was with you so he apparently knew what to inject somebody with if you wanted them to sleep uninterrupted and you didn’t need a prescription. But other than that, why would your trip to Africa matter now?”

“Datmoud didn’t come to America,” said Mick. “We dropped him off in Sardinia, where he has an uncle on his father’s side who he knew would take him in. Since he was biracial and looked far more white than black, he knew he could pass. So he did. And he changed his name.”

Teddy went still. “Datmoud is Tony Capella?” he asked.

“Datmoud is Capella, yes,” Mick said to audible gasps from the room. They all were shocked.

“So Datmoud’s uncle was mob?” asked Nikki.

Mick nodded. “Yep. Lou Capella. He was small time, but Datmoud built his syndicate up to where he became the most feared in his region. Which was fine. As long as he was in Italy,” said Mick, “I didn’t worry about him. But now he’s here.

“But why did he come?” asked Nikki.

“Because Pop stepped down,” Teddy said. “Tony’s ambitious, I knew that much about him. He wanted all other bosses to accept him as the new king of all bosses, but nobody was cooperating. Pop would always be king in their eyes. Now Tony’s not asking. He’s taking.”

“Damn,” said Amelia.

“He probably figured that after he became untouchable – the boss of all bosses – then he would avenge his sister’s death. But now he gets to kill two birds – his sister’s killer and his number one impediment to the top – with one stone,” said Teddy.

“Pop,” Nikki asked, “why did you say Italy will back him?”

“What happened that day in that jungle is known as the legend of Salta, which is the name of the village that burned. Datmoud made sure the story lived on about how the Americans burned down his entire village, killing his entire family. How Mick the Tick killed an entire village. That’s why when he strikes he has an army of men with him. He’s got all of the mobsters of his region, and beyond, more than happy to help him bring me down. They already anointed him

the head boss over there. He wants to be the head boss everywhere.”

“But I still don’t get it,” said Teddy. “If he wanted to knock you off, why didn’t he keep Ma for leverage?”

“I don’t know the answer to that yet.”

“And what does Deidra have to do with it?” asked Teddy.

“I don’t know the answer to that either. Maybe nothing. But I’ll find out.”

“Get me out of here,” Teddy said as Nikki began helping him put on his shirt. “When do we strike back, Pop?” Teddy asked as he dressed.

“We already are,” said Mick.

Teddy stopped all movement and looked at him. Nikki did too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Four capos, all high-ranking in Corky Demp's outfit, were coming out of a barbershop in Philly laughing and joking around. They were joking so much that they didn't see the car ease up on them. When they did notice it, the car's windows had already been pressed down, the guns were already out of those windows aiming at them, and they were already firing shot after shot after shot before a single one of those Sardinians could pull out a single weapon. They dropped like flies in the middle of that sidewalk. Those that were walking nearby were now running for cover. But it was over in seconds. And the car pressed back up the windows, and sped away.

At the same time, another high-ranking official in Corky's organization was having dinner in a quiet restaurant with his wife and son. The capo heard the door of the restaurant open, because they were always taught to sit near the door. But he was in the middle of another bite of the fabulously juicy steak he was eating and didn't want to be disturbed. By the time he bothered to look up to see who had

entered, it was too late. The gunman pulled out what looked like a machine gun and mowed down the man as if he was mowing down grass. All told fifty shots were fired. All told, he was dead by shot number two.

At the same time, a meeting of the top tier of Corky's syndicate was being held in a warehouse outside of town. His new underboss, Luigi Gunderson, wanted to make clear that their alliance with Capella would only help their cause. He barely got the words out before ten different explosives were lobbed through the windows of that warehouse and it exploded. Blowing Luigi and all of the men who met with him, some forty-nine strong, to smithereens.

Corky still had an organization, but without the power center those men in that warehouse represented, it was weak as fuck.

Less than two hours later, Corky wanted a meeting.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Mick was at home in his office with his own brain trust: Sal Gabrini, Monk Paletti, Oz Drakos, Reno Gabrini, Tommy Gabrini, Teddy and Nikki, and Charles. Roz was there too. Dommi had just brought word that Corky Demps wanted to meet.

“When?” Teddy asked.

“Midnight tonight. Under the Turner bridge.”

“Fucker’s running scared now,” said Sal.

“Damn right he is,” said Teddy. “He now knows nobody can protect his ass like Pop can.”

“Shouldn’t you be saying nobody can protect his ass like you can?” asked Monk Paletti, who was the head of the Bonaducci crime family and Teddy’s best friend. The others laughed. Teddy and Nikki smiled it off, but Nikki understood what Teddy meant. Mick cast a giant shadow. They were only just beginning to get from underneath it.

“Who we need to meet with,” said Reno, “is this Datmoud character. Tony Capella. We got to bring his ass to heel.”

“And we will,” said Mick. “But Corky can provide some answers.”

“Okay, how are we gonna handle it?” asked Sal.

“I want you and your crew westside in case reinforcements try to show up after the fact.”

“You got it,” said Sal.

“And Oz, I want you and your crew handling the eastside for the same reason.”

“We’ll be there,” said Oz.

“Teddy, Oz, and Amelia, I want you guys and our crew handling north and south. Those are long stretches and we have the most men. They can try anything along those miles, and I want eyeballs out there.” Then he looked at Nikki. “That’s also why I want you in the chopper handling the aerial coverage. In case Corky’s got back up.”

“Yes, sir,” said Nikki.

“As for you three businessmen,” Mick said with a smile as he looked at Reno, Tommy, and Big Daddy.

“Fuck you, Uncle Mick,” Reno said to laughter. “I was running a syndicate that would have made yours look like a fucking boy scout troupe once upon a time.”

They laughed.

“That was then,” said Mick, “this is now. You’re running a casino now. I want you, Tommy, and Charles to cover the home front. Just in case I leave and they launch an attack this way I want the kind of firepower here that would repel it in its tracks.”

“And what’s your ass gonna be doing?” asked Reno as Mick’s phone rang.

“I’ll be meeting with Cork,” Mick said as he looked at the Caller ID. When he saw who it was, he hesitated. But he owed him for finding Roz. He answered. “I knew I’d hear from you.”

It was Hammer Reese and he was past ballistic. “What the fuck is going on, Mick?”

“Depends on what you’re talking about.”

“There is no scenario where this government is going to allow mob wars when they got too much shit on their plates as it is!”

“What are you yelling at me for?” Mick fired back. “I didn’t start this shit!”

“But you gotta stop this shit, Mick. We cannot have a mob war! No matter what, that cannot happen!”

“Then you tell those fuckers to leave me and my family alone! They bought that shit to me. They start it, I bury it and their asses right along with it! Fuck the government!” Mick yelled and threw his phone across the room. “Motherfucker!” he yelled.

Nobody dared ask Mick who it was. Just the mention of the government gave them a good idea.

Then Mick stood up, causing all of them to rise too. “Anyway,” he said, calmed back down, “I’m going to handle Corky. I’ll meet with him at midnight and find out what he knows.”

“And I’ll be with him,” said Roz.

They all started objecting to Roz going anywhere near that situation. But Mick shut it down. “And Rosalind will be with me,” he said, which floored every one of them.

“Since when did you become a liberal, Uncle Mick?” asked Tommy.

“I’m saying,” said Reno.

“Since I realized these fuckers out here treat Rosalind as if she’s an extension of me. They come for her now. She has to be prepared to come right back at them. No more coddling. I didn’t marry any shrinking violet, that’s for damn sure. She can handle herself.” And then he left the room.

Roz was loving it. “Any further objections?” she asked. Nobody objected. “Thought so,” she said, and left the room too.

They all looked to Charles. “I could see us pulling that shit,” said Sal. “But Uncle Mick?”

“I can’t abide it either, to tell you the truth. But he has a point. These young bloods out here think they can dance with us. They can’t, but they don’t know that. They try us. Constantly. He’s got a point.”

And they all nodded. Big Daddy, in all of their eyes, was never wrong.

“We’d better get organized,” said Monk.

“And then what?” asked Oz.

“And then we wait,” said Teddy.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Mick was spread eagle on their bed and Roz was between his legs giving him the kind of head he dreamed about. His entire naked body was feeling every touch, every lick, every time she ran her hands up and down his big, thick rod like he was puddy in her capable hands. And he was. Nobody knew how to do him but Roz.

And when she took it all the way in, and all the way down, he almost came. This was the first time in a long time he even allowed her to go down on him like that. But he needed it tonight and she knew how badly he needed it. He was in the fight of his life. He needed it.

But before he came in her mouth, he pulled out, lifted her on top of him, put his rock-hard penis inside of her with a forceful thrust, and began to hug her and move inside of her in such a momentous way that he knew he couldn't last much longer.

Roz was enjoying it too. When Mick didn't stop her from giving him head, that was her sign that he was in a bad place. Relaxing him was her goal. Now fucking her was his

goal and he was doing a masterful job. He was moving slowly. He was taking his time. He was enjoying every moment just as much as she was. Until her vagina squeezed around his penis one time too many, and he had to release that energy somehow. He started pounding her. She was enjoying the pound.

And when he came, she looked into his face with a smile on her face. He looked at her too, his long eyelashes making his eyes appear nearly closed as he looked at her as he came. Her hair nearly covered one of her eyes, making her look sexy as hell to Mick, and it only added to the intensity of his cum. He wrapped her tighter in his arms as he continued to cum.

But Roz was far behind. The heat did it for her and she began to have an intense orgasm too.

“*Oh, Mick,*” she cried out when she erupted in that euphoric place he took her to. And he kept on putting it on her because he wanted her to experience the fullness of her cum. And she did. It nearly killed her it was so intense, but she did.

And when they both were well spent, they remained where they were: Roz on top of Mick, and both of them in

each other's arms.

Roz lifted her head up and looked at him. "Like a tiger," she said to him with a smile.

But he couldn't manage a smile. He was too busy studying that face. Then he asked her. "Why, Roz?"

Roz stared at him. "Why what?"

"You heard Charles in Teddy's hospital room. What he said was true. Why aren't you disgusted with me too?"

Roz found this question preposterous. "Disgusted with you? How could I be, Mick? It was kill or be killed and you made the right choice or you wouldn't be here. We wouldn't have our beautiful family. You would not have been able to make amends with your other children. You made the right choice."

Mick continued to stare at her. "You're my true ride or die, Roz," he said.

Roz smiled. He rarely called her by her nickname. "And I don't go halfway and get off. I'm in it for life, Mick. Good or bad. Right or wrong. I'm in it for life."

Emotions swelled up inside of Mick and he grabbed Roz and held her even tighter, his eyes shut because of how he

felt about this woman. He didn't deserve her. But he could hardly express how glad he was to have her. "I need you so much, Rosalind," he said with a tone of conviction as he held her. "I need you."

Roz could not have heard any greater words. Better than *I love you* to her. "I need you too, Mick," she said. "So stop that nonsense talk about why you didn't let them kill you." She leaned up and looked into his eyes. "You hear me?"

Mick smiled this time. "I hear you, Mama," he said, and Roz laughed.

And then she laid her head back on his chest. This was a tough life. No lie about that. But Mick was worth it. She fell asleep thinking about that lovemaking he'd just put on her. She fell asleep thinking about just how worth it he was.

Three hours later, the intercom buzzed. Mick, waking up first, pressed the button. It was Teddy.

"Pop, it's time," he said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

After confirming that everybody was in place, Roz drove Mick to the Turner bridge location. Mick had his assault rifle at the ready, and a handgun as well because he knew from experience Corky could be tricky. Roz had a handgun in her lap, too, just in case.

She pulled up beside an SUV that was already there. Corky was behind the wheel. He came alone, which Mick suspected he would since he was the one decimated. He was the one who wanted, and needed, a truce. But that didn't mean he wasn't planning a sneak attack. All of that additional firepower out of sight of Corky's eyes was Mick's just in case.

Roz drove up from the opposite direction which placed Mick, who was seated on the passenger seat, beside Corky Demps, who was seated in his own SUV behind the steering wheel. Mick pressed down the window. Roz got out, her gun in her hand, and checked around Corky's vehicle, and then inside his vehicle.

“It's been a long time, Micky,” Corky said.

“Would have been even longer if your ass hadn’t jumped ship.”

Roz got back in the SUV. Mick looked over at her. She nodded. All was clear.

Mick looked at Corky again. “What’s going on, Cork?”

“He’s crazy, Mick.”

“Who’s crazy?”

“You know who. Datmoud. Tony Capella.”

“What he’s crazy about?”

“You. It’s all about you. As soon as word got back to Italy that you were stepping down and making Teddy boss of your syndicate, he just knew it was his moment. The Sardinian Italians were behind him. Why wouldn’t the American Italians be behind him, was how he was thinking. But he was thinking wrong. The Americans weren’t about to put him above you. And he became vengeful.”

“He was already vengeful.”

“True that,” said Corky. “I’d be vengeful too you take out my whole village and my family while you’re at it. But he had no power behind that vengeance. No officiality. So he

decided it was now or never. You're weak now was how he saw you. And he attacked."

"How did he attack?" Roz asked Corky.

She could tell he didn't like her being there. "We got our wives up in this bitch, Mick? Don't look like no Tupperware party to me."

"Tupperware?" Roz shook her head. "Who uses Tupperware as an example anymore? Your ass so dated it's not even funny."

"What the fuck!" Corky was getting angry. He was a boss, who did she think she was? He was accustomed to the traditional mob wives who serviced their husbands and sat silently and kept their traps shut.

But Mick had bigger fish to fry. "Just get on with it," he said. "What was his plan of attack?"

Corky settled back down. "He was all over the map," he said. "First he ordered Richie Veeti to take out one of your capos."

Mick was surprised to hear that. "He ordered that hit on Paulie?"

Corky nodded. “He ordered it. And then he ordered Richie to hide out in Dope Central and put word on the street that that was where Richie was, which he knew Teddy would then take care of.”

“How did he know Teddy would handle it?”

“Because Teddy was a newly installed boss. A capo was iced on his watch. He had to prove to the guys that he’d have their backs. It was how Datmoud thought. He’s a smart dude.”

“Smart my ass. Go on.”

“His whole point was the ambush, not some capo getting iced. He wanted to take Teddy out. How he survived that shit was a shocker to Datmoud. So when that failed, he went to plan B. Which was that mouthy wife of yours.”

Although Roz laughed, Mick looked at Corky. “Do I look like a man who’ll let you talk smack to his wife?”

Corky realized whom he was dealing with. “Sorry about that,” he said.

“Go on,” said Mick.

“He decided to do that hit-and-grab at that restaurant. Had some sedative from fucking Africa to knock her out right

away and long enough for it to work. And once again, he planned it down to the smallest detail. He even used your girlfriend as a distraction.”

Roz looked at Corky. “What girlfriend? He doesn’t have a girlfriend.”

Corky smiled. “Fuck you say!”

Roz looked at Mick. “He’s talking about Bella’s ass,” Mick said as if it was even worth dignifying with a response. “It was Datmoud who planted Deidra’s life size photo in Bella’s house?” he asked Corky.

“He had Argie do it, yeah. And Argie was glad to do it since you and Teddy iced his cousin Frazier Remmi. Argie got Frazier the job as part of the ambush crew. But he wasn’t there because of Paulie or to save Richie Beltone. He was there strictly to avenge Deidra’s death. But he ended up dying.”

“That’s usually how it goes,” said Mick. “Tell me about this distraction.”

“That’s all it was. Argie even put blood all over that photo of Deidra and had one of his side chicks call and harass Bella, knowing she’d run to you. But Argie didn’t give a shit

about Deidra. And you know Datmoud didn't. It was all to keep you distracted while they snatched your wife."

"Why did he take her to that hospital in Mississippi?" Mick asked. "That don't sound like a part of his plan."

"That's because it wasn't. My men were in charge of hiding the body after Datmoud's men did the hit and snatch. But then my men call me panicking that they didn't know it was your wife they were supposed to kill and hide. They were terrified that you'd track them down and kill'em all if you found out." Corky looked at Mick. "Which I understand you've already done."

But Mick was staring at Corky. He'd known him for decades. "What did you do when your men wouldn't carry out a kill order on my wife?" Mick asked.

"What do you think I did? I told them to man the fuck up and shut the fuck up. Kill that bitch and bury her, that's what I told them."

Mick's jaw tightened. Roz's heart sank. She was so close to certain death!

But Corky continued telling his story like it was no big deal to him. Like she wasn't Mick Sinatra's wife but just

another body to bury. “I told them Datmoud had our backs,” he continued, “what was their problem? But they didn’t listen to me. They had families, they said. So they took her to a hospital and dumped her there. I had no idea they took her ass all the way to Mississippi to dump her. But they were just that scared.”

Mick looked forward. His rage building. He couldn’t even look at Corky by this point.

“But that damn Datmoud, Tony Capella or whatever he’s calling himself these days,” Corky continued, “is obsessed with being anointed worldwide king. That’s what he wants more than life itself. He wants to be the man to knock you off of the throne.”

Mick looked at him. “Him knock me off? Get the fuck out of here! Shooting up a restaurant and snatching my wife? What kind of punk-ass knock off would that be?”

“You’ll have to ask him that.”

“But aren’t you his boy now?”

Corky was offended. “I’m nobody’s boy!”

“You’re in an alliance with him.”

“What was I supposed to do? As soon as he hit American soil he took over family after family like it was nothing. The only families not affected by him are the Power Four: the Gabrini/Sinatra alliance with Monk Paletti thrown in by marriage. I had to survive.”

“You were a part of our alliance,” said Mick. “I let you be a part of our alliance. But you decide your survival is based on fucking Datmoud?”

“He’s big, Mick. He’s got the forefathers overseas on his side. All you got is the Legend of Salta.”

“All he’s got?” Roz looked at Corky as if he had lost his mind. “What kind of bullshit is that?”

“Word is,” said Corky, suddenly cocky, “Tony Capella, aka Datmoud, is the future. You Mick? You’re the past.”

Mick’s jaw tightened again. But he held himself in check. He needed answers. “Where is he now?” he asked Corky.

“That half-breed *mulignan* not scared of you. He’s in one of my safe houses. Briarcreek. The one back of that pawn shop on Crestner. All of his top men are in town and they’re providing the security. He’s gonna strike again soon.”

“Strike when and where?”

“He don’t share that kind of detail with me and you know it.”

Mick nodded. Enough of this shit. “You got a choice, Corky,” he said.

“A choice? What choice?”

“Me or Datmoud.”

But Corky was shaking his head. “You took out all of my top people. You annihilated me. I got to start over. I’m not with none of your asses. I’m keeping my options open. That’s my choice.”

Mick looked at him. “Wrong choice,” he said, lifted his assault rifle, and blew Corky’s brains out.

But Mick was still enraged. “Telling your men to kill my wife and dump her body like she was a piece of trash!” He shot him again, the sound of that second shot reverberating across the isolated expanse. It still hurt Roz to just hear those sounds.

Then Mick finally exhaled. “Let’s get out of here,” he said.

Roz, hating that these assholes kept forcing her husband to make these kinds of decisions, gladly left that scene.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The doorbell rang and Goober Leach, the underboss of the Capella crime family, left his wife asleep in bed of their Philadelphia Airbnb and made his way downstairs, stumping his toe on the still-unfamiliar bottom stair.

“*Ouch, goddammit!*” he said in the silence as the doorbell rang again. Now even angrier, he flung the door open ready to chew out whichever capo was bothering him that time of morning. “What the fuck you want?” he yelled.

But he was greeted, not by one of his lieutenants, but by a huge bouquet of roses. He frowned again. “What the fuck?”

The man holding the bouquet removed it from in front of his face. When Goober saw that it was Mick the Tick, he immediately began backing up, knocking over a vase on the foyer table. “Ah shit!” he said, ready to turn tail and run.

But Mick wasn’t interested in running. He took his sawed-off shotgun, cocked it, and shot him in the ass. When Goober turned around, stunned and holding his ass, Mick was happy. Because now he could shoot him man to man. Think

they can come in his backyard and pull this shit? Renting fancy houses and acting like they were his equal? He shot him in the face. He shot him repeatedly.

Goober fell.

And then Mick left.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The death of Corky's entire brain trust, and then Corky's assassination beneath the Turner bridge, stunned the Capella crime family. They knew Mick would strike back, but they assumed it would be on the margins to avoid an out-and-out war. That was usually how it was done.

But he had misjudged him. Mick was the same man who would destroy an entire village to save himself. Mick was a warhorse.

Datmoud ordered the remaining alliance bosses to get together and come up with a plan of retaliation. His highest-ranking capos from Sardinia would run the meeting, but the alliance families knew the lay of the land. He wanted them to come up with the plan.

And that was why, hours after Corky's death, they all found themselves in a warehouse on the outskirts of Chadds Ford Township near the Brandywine creek, some thirty miles outside of Philadelphia. But they hadn't even started the meeting, because they were waiting on Goober Leach, the Capella family underboss, to call it to order. But then the

senior capo's phone rang. And the news was shocking. He ended the call.

“Who this time?” one of the alliance bosses asked.

“Goober Leach,” the number two said, still in shock, and everybody gasped. The bosses, especially, were getting nervous.

“He iced Goober? Who goes that deep in a syndicate to retaliate?”

“We tried to ice his own wife. That ain't deep to you?”

“Fuck no! But to take out a guy's underboss? Now that's deep!”

“They took out Corky's brain trust. What makes us immune?”

“What are we gonna do? Let's stop the bickering and figure that out. How are we going to stop this fucker?”

“I knew we shouldn't have tangled with that fool. You can't win against him.”

“Tony Capella will protect us,” said another one of the alliance bosses.

“He didn’t protect Corky Demps. He didn’t protect Goober Leach! How the hell is he gonna protect us against Mick the Tick?”

“Capella can protect us,” said a third boss. “Just hold on. He can protect us. I’ll bet you any amount of money that Capella will protect us.”

“I’ll take that bet.”

They all heard the voice. They all knew the voice. Panic was already setting in when they turned around and saw Mick the Tick himself standing at the far back of the huge warehouse, his long white coat flowing even though there was no wind blowing.

And there was no delay. They knew revenge was going down and they wanted no parts of it. They took off running in all directions. It was nearly twenty men, all the highest of the high, but not one of them were willing to fire on Mick. They just wanted out.

But they ran straight into brick walls by the name of Sal Gabrini, Monk Paletti, Reno Gabrini, Tommy Gabrini, Oz Drakos. They started backing up then, because they knew they were cornered, and they had no choice.

But they knew Mick didn't come all that way to lose. Mick the Tick didn't come all that way to let them live. They pulled their weapons and began to fire.

But the brick walls fired first. And who they didn't get right away, Mick did.

He decimated Corky's outfit. Now Capella was decimated too.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

After the massacre, they went home. They all sat out back, on Mick's patio, drinking beer and not talking hardly at all. They had nothing to say. All of those deaths for what? Because one man decided he wanted to be king of the mountain. One man who couldn't hold a candle to any one of the men on that very patio.

Roz, Nikki, and Gloria, along with Big Daddy, were out there too. As was Dom, who was turning out to be a very valuable asset to the organization. It was him hitting the streets and getting all of that intel that kept the operation going. Reno was staring at Dommi. His oldest son, Jimmy, was a business mogul now. But Dommi was coming into his own too. Reno was proud of him.

But then the phone rang. And they all sat up taller.

Mick's phone had a cracked screen from that toss he gave it after that phone call with Hammer Reese, but it was still operable. He answered, certain who it was going to be.

And he was right. It was Datmoud.

"I want to meet," he said.

“In three hours,” replied Mick, “at Fairfield Farms.”

There was a hesitation. Datmoud thought he could pick the place. But he knew not to push his luck. “I’ll be there,” said Datmoud, and Mick ended the call. And then stood up. “Let’s go,” he said. “Same crew.”

Everybody except those who had home front duty stood up, but they all were equally confused. “Where are we going?” Teddy asked for all of them.

“Briarcreek,” said Mick.

Teddy frowned. “Briarcreek? What’s in Briarcreek?”

“It’s where Datmoud’s staying. One of Corky’s safe houses. His mighty men are dead. They were at that meeting. But he’s got a small army of men guarding him I’m sure. You guys can take care of them. Roz and I will take care of him.”

Sal smiled. “You got that asshole thinking you’re meeting him in three hours. But you’re actually meeting him, unbeknownst to him, in twenty minutes, and right where he lives?”

“That’s right,” said Mick. “Let’s get this show on the road.” And Mick, along with Roz, walked out.

Sal smiled and shook his head. “Good move, Uncle Mick,” said one mob boss to another one. “Good move.”

And they all of them took off.

But by the time they made it to the woods surrounding that safe house, there were more like a big army of men guarding Datmoud. But it didn't matter.

Mick phoned Oz, who was up above on helicopter duty. “What you got?”

“Attack from the weak side. That's the left end. No guards, no cameras. Probably because there's no known entranceway that way. But we know it is.”

“Right,” said Mick. What Datmoud failed to realize was that Corky had made a truce with Mick, which meant all of his safe houses were under Mick's jurisdiction. Which meant Mick's organization knew how to get in and out of all of them. They all piled out of the SUVs.

“Take no chances,” Mick said. “And use silencers on every one of your guns. I don't want that fucker to know anything is going on out of the ordinary outside of that house.”

“Got cha, Pop,” said Teddy as all of the men: Teddy, Sal, Monk and Nikki made their way around the weak side just as Oz had suggested. But Mick and Roz remained near the SUVs.

“Ready?” he said to her.

“Ready,” she said to him. Mick was still suited up, in his long white coat, black trousers, and black turtleneck. But Roz was suited up too. In all black: her fully-stocked-with-ammunition-and-weapons long black coat, her black slacks, and her black turtleneck. She even wore black combat boots. She was ready.

Their route would be totally different from the others. They had to get to the SUV parked and ready to go in front of the house. But they couldn't make a move until the others had secured the place. Then they'd make their move.

“I like this suit,” said Roz as they waited. “I see why you always suit up. It makes you feel more secure.”

“You're more prepared,” Mick corrected her. “Had Teddy and Nikki had one of these suits of armor on during that ambush, they would have handled it themselves.”

“I’m saying,” said Roz. And they continued to wait until all of the guards were handled.

And then, nearly fifteen minutes later, they got the call from Oz. “Okay guys,” he said. “It’s your turn.”

Mick and Roz entered the property from the left side at an angle so that the driver of the SUV would not be able to see their approach. He was leaned back, his window down, his eyes closed, as he listened to the soft sound of Phil Collins. As if he didn’t have a care in this world. And why should he? He was in a fortified place. He was surrounded by firepower. And he was. But not his own anymore.

Roz walked up to the SUV from the passenger side and quickly revealed herself. “Hey there,” she said, startling the driver. He opened his eyes quickly, looking at her and ready to grab his gun and shoot her on sight. But Mick, coming up from the driver side, did the kill shot himself with his silencer on.

And then Sal, Monk, and Nikki ran over, took off the driver’s hat and coat, giving them to Teddy, and then Sal, Monk, and Nikki took the body of the driver away from the premises. Teddy put on the driver hat and coat, got in behind

the wheel of the SUV, and Mick and Roz got in on the third row.

And they waited. They could have stormed the house, but they weren't sure if any guards were inside. They decided to take the best bet: to wait.

Two hours later Tony Capella, aka Datmoud, came out of the safe house and made his way down the steps to the waiting SUV. Teddy jumped out and opened the door for the boss. Teddy was careful to never look up, as his face was purposely buried by the big cap he wore. Then Datmoud got inside. When the driver got back in behind the wheel, Datmoud gave the order.

“Fairfield Farms,” he said.

“Fairfield Farms?” responded the driver. “Why?”

Datmoud frowned. “What do you mean to question me? You do as I say!”

Teddy quickly turned around and removed that hat. “Says who motherfucker?”

When Datmoud saw Teddy's face, his entire countenance changed. It wasn't possible! He knew he had to

get out. And he tried. He reached frantically for the door handle to open that door once again, but Mick, who Datmoud did not even realize was on the third row, wrapped a thick rope around Datmoud's neck and began choking him to death. Then, with that rope and his Herculean strength, he pulled his nemesis all the way from the second row seat to the third row seat right in between him and Roz.

Roz disarmed Datmoud while Mick continued to choke him and while Datmoud continued to struggle to break free. "You wanna snatch my wife and kill my men? You wanna take over what I built up and be on top? You want to do all that?" Then Mick removed the rope and looked a stunned Datmoud in the eyes for the first time since Africa. "Then beat my ass," he said.

As he said it, Sal, Monk, Teddy and Nikki ran up the steps, kicked the front door in, and aimed their weapons to ensure they had nobody inside that house.

But Datmoud didn't even see it. His entire focus was Mick. And the hatred he held for him was palpable. "You should have let me die in that jungle," he said. "I wanted to jump off that chopper and you should have let me jump. You

killed my sister! You killed your own baby! You killed my entire family!”

“Then beat my ass,” said Mick. “I did all that shit to you and you’re sitting up here talking? Beat my ass you’re so worthy of replacing me. Prove it, motherfucker. Prove it!”

Datmoud, now deranged with rage, punched Mick with a punch that Mick blocked. Then they were at it, wrestling for leverage more than fighting, until Mick had had enough. And he grabbed Datmoud by the collar, flung him onto his back, and with one knee on Datmoud’s chest he began punching the shit out of him. He couldn’t punch him hard enough. Datmoud was fighting back, and was landing blows, but Mick didn’t even feel them. He was in that zone of no return. This fucker tried to take out his wife and his son. He killed Mick’s men when Mick wasn’t even thinking about him. Now he had to pay.

And Mick didn’t finish punching him until he paid forever. Until there was nothing left to punch. Until there was nothing left he could pay.

When it was done, Mick remained where he was, breathing heavily, so tired of this shit that it made him want to

join Datmoud. But he was just finishing what Datmoud started. He was the closer. He was just finishing the job.

Teddy and Nikki and Monk Sal came back out of the house just after it was done. They looked on the third row. “All okay?” asked Teddy, who was staring at his depleted father.

Roz gave the thumb’s up. “All is well,” she said.

And they took the body of Tony Capella and tossed it out of the SUV. Tossed it like the trash they took him for. And it was a shame to Mick as he looked at his nemesis. Had Datmoud stayed in his corner of the world, none of it would have happened. But he became power hungry. And vengeful. But his miscalculation was that he forgot who he wanted power from, and who he wanted revenge from. He knew now, Mick thought as Teddy sat on the passenger seat, Nikki got behind the wheel, and Monk and Sal on the second row. And they drove off.

But Roz, still on the third row with Mick, was so relieved it was over she was giddy. “He tried to take you down,” she said happily to Mick, “but he only made you bigger and stronger. Now you’re no longer the boss of all

bosses. You're the boss of all bosses' motherfucking boss!"

They all laughed.

"You realize that's a difference without a distinction right?" asked Sal.

"But am I wrong?" asked Roz.

"No you're right," agreed Sal. "Your ass right alright."

"That's what that asshole did for Mick," said Roz.

"Now he's the undisputed boss of all bosses's boss. Now he rules every mountain!"

Mick smiled. Monk and Sal laughed. And Teddy and Nikki glanced at each other. They were smiling. They were glad it was all over too, and happy that Roz was not only safe, but giddy about it. And she was right. Those events would only solidify Mick's power in the eyes of the mob world.

But at what cost to them?

EPILOGUE

They all laughed the laugh of friends out having a good time. Patricia and her hubby, Cynthia and her hubby, and Roz were all in the Sportsman club laughing and drinking and having a ball. Although the ladies got together once a month for drinks, they invited their men a few times a year. This was one of those times.

“Look at him, Roz,” said Pat’s husband. “He wants to get next to you so bad.”

“He’d better get in line,” said Cynthia’s husband. “He’s what? Number four?”

“I don’t know about all that,” said Cynthia. “None of them are that attractive anyway.”

Pat looked at Roz. Roz looked at Pat. And they laughed. Jealous Cent at it again!

“Now look at him,” said Cynthia, and everybody looked at her.

Her jealousy was beginning to grate on Pat’s nerves. “It’s not that serious, Cent,” said Pat. “Damn. Just because a few men might like Roz, and you don’t like their looks, so

what? It's not that big a deal. Roz not thinking about those men anyway.”

“Look who just walked into this bitch,” said Cynthia.

They all looked where she was looking. And when they saw Roz's husband walk into that club, they were floored every one of them. They'd been going out as couples for years, but Mick never, not ever, showed up. They used to wonder if Roz even asked him. She used to. For years. But she was not the kind of woman to keep beating a dead horse.

She stared at Mick as the waiter escorted him to their VIP table. Her heart was hammering. Did something happen? She immediately went to bad news.

But when Mick arrived at their table, and the men all stood up and shook his hand, and Mick smiled and was actually polite to them, she relaxed. But was still suspicious.

When he sat beside her, she was still staring at him. “What's wrong?” she asked him.

Mick smiled. “Nothing's wrong. I thought I'd join you guys.”

But Roz was still perplexed. “How did you know we were getting together tonight? How did you know I'd even be

here?”

“I know everywhere you are,” Mick said, and then he looked at her.

The couples all looked at each other and raised their eyebrows. They knew Mick was a corporate giant. That alone gave him elevated status in their group. But they also had heard about who he was reputed to be too. And that alone made them excited. The idea that Mick the Tick was hanging out with them? Priceless!

“It’s good to have you here, Mick,” Pat’s husband said.

“Happy to be here,” said Mick.

And when Pat started loving on the latest tune and wanted to hit the dance floor, her husband invited Roz and Mick to join them. “Let’s show them how it’s done, people,” he said.

But Mick politely declined.

“But you just said you were happy to be here.”

“I am happy to be here,” said Mick. “But I’m not that happy!” And they all laughed. And the two couples got out on the dance floor and had a ball.

But Roz was having her own ball. Just having Mick by her side.

“I know one thing,” she said as Mick placed his arm around her waist.

“What’s that?” he asked her.

“I’m happy too. And you don’t even have to buy me a mansion to make me happy.” Mick laughed. “Just being with you is gift enough.”

Mick looked at her and smiled. “You’re a good woman, Rosalind Sinatra. Anybody ever tell you that?”

“All the time,” she joked.

Then his look turned serious. “Wanna dance?”

Roz couldn’t believe her ears. “Dance? You? Here in public?” He’d danced before in front of the family and maybe a few friends. But she couldn’t recall him ever dancing in such a public place. It would be totally out of his comfort zone, and she knew it.

And that was why she declined. He needed to relax, not prove any more points. “No, I’m good,” she said.

And Mick, relieved, pretended to wipe sweat from his forehead. Roz laughed.

Then he took her glass of wine and lifted it as if making a toast. “From here on out,” he said, “it’s you and me, kid.” And he meant it.

Mick sipped from the glass, and then reached it over to Roz and she sipped from it too.

They weathered the storm together. And just when she thought Mick was reverting back to his old ways, he improved even more. And nights like these, when he outdid himself with such a simple gesture as showing up, made Roz even more certain. She made the right choice. She picked the right man.

And here he was thinking he was the one that was blessed.

They didn’t dance all night. They just laughed and talked. It was the best night-out Roz had had in a long, long time.

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