

FLY ME TO THE MORGUE

Uncle Joey never made it as a singer in New York. His chances of making it anywhere else probably weren't so hot, either.

The rest of us knew that times had changed, but Uncle Joey never got the memo. And Purgatory, New Hampshire was hardly the best location for a Sinatra-inspired restaurant and entertainment venue.

Lady Luck hadn't been kind to our family lately. We were all dead broke. A year ago, I would never have imagined I'd be helping my uncle pursue his latest dream of bringing Ol' Blue Eyes to the masses at the end of a broken-bricked block on Main Street.

Uncle Joey wanted to call the place "Frankie's" as a tribute to his idol, but Uncle Carmine, his business partner, put the kibosh on that. The temporary banner, which Uncle Joey hoped to replace with a retro neon sign, said "Romano's." In honor of the family, Uncle Carmine said, but he was probably hedging his bets against the Sinatra deal.

Maybe Uncle Joey didn't sound exactly like Frankie, but he had a nice enough voice. He was good-natured and charming, especially after a few cocktails. The older ladies were flattered by his over-the-top flirting, which didn't seem to bother his fiancée, Angela, who clung to him like marinara on meatballs. The younger women just felt sorry for him. He was "bigger-boned" than Frankie, as he freely admitted, and tended to sweat during his more energetic performances.

But if you closed your eyes as Uncle Joey launched into yet another retro hit, snapping his fingers to the beat, and you really, truly believed, you could feel that cocktail-crooner vibe. I loved Uncle Joey, and I wanted Romano's to be a success. He and Uncle Carmine had gambled the last of their savings on this place.

Officially, my cousin Kara and I shared the title “Co-Hostess,” which included other duties as needed: bartender, server, kitchen assistant, dishwasher, mop girl. The only perks were plenty of leftovers and a decrepit but sunny apartment above the restaurant. None of this mattered, though, because my future was on hold. The community college classes I’d saved for had evaporated in the pandemic like steam off the espresso machine.

“Nikki, hit me up with a round of Limoncellos, would ya?” Uncle Joey dropped heavily onto a slip-covered barstool in front of me, white shirt collar open and bowtie hanging from one side. “Table three needs a little warming up before the show.”

“You got it.” I glanced through the front window to the tables dotting the sidewalk with Campari-branded umbrellas. The two couples seated at Table three did look ticked off. The women were fanning themselves with their menus in the mid-July heat, and one of the men was frowning with his arms crossed. “Or maybe something on tap?”

“Nah. Shots are classier.”

I checked across the room to make sure Uncle Carmine wasn’t looking. Liquor was expensive. Luckily, he was frowning at the reservation book, probably calculating how much money we’d lose tonight. The soft opening hadn’t been a huge success—the ovens wouldn’t heat properly for the wood-fired pizzas, and a Yelp review had called Mom’s signature dish “chicken parm tartare.” I’d plastered announcements all over social media and put a YouTube video on our website of Uncle Joey’s finest performance at a Jersey wedding, but so far, we hadn’t exactly brought in a crowd.

He jumped off his stool when a long, black limo glided along the curb and stopped in front of the door. “Jack for me, okay?” he threw over his shoulder as he headed to greet the new arrivals. “And champagne for my angel.”

In the dark corner nearest to the bar, his angel still had a half bottle of bubbly left, which she poured into her empty glass with a wobbly hand. Usually, she favored nineties-style leopard-print leggings and cleavage-revealing tops, but tonight she wore a halter-style chiffon number with a cubic-zirconia-studded belt. “Break a leg, baby!” she called.

Like something out of a bad movie, a group of four men in sharp suits emerged from the limo, followed by the driver, who rushed to open the door for a small, leathery man who looked older than my nonna.

Uncle Carmine rushed after Uncle Joey. Apparently, they knew these guys. Potential investors, maybe, on the slightly shady side.

I doubted they’d traveled six hours from New York or two from Boston on a gastronomic pilgrimage to Purgatory. Probably up from the dazzling metropolis of Manchester, which the locals called “Manchvegas.”

At the very least, our dinner service was about to pick up.

I quickly poured Limoncello into four shot glasses and dusted the rims with sugar. Then I dumped a half-scoop of crushed ice and a double of Jack in an old-fashioned glass and grabbed another bottle of champagne—the cheapest one—from the mini-fridge. I’d open that later.

Fresh breadbasket in hand, I headed out to Table three with the Limoncellos. My uncles were in some kind of discussion with the newcomers outside the limo.

“We didn’t order those.” The woman in the pink Lake Sunapee T-shirt pointed to her glass of melted ice as I set down the Limoncellos. “I could use another iced tea, though.”

“Compliments of the owner.” I smiled. “Sorry for the delay. Your food will be out soon.”

“But we’ll miss the first show if we’re stuck out here,” the other woman said.

Her husband snorted. “No loss.”

“I’ll see if I can find a table for you inside,” I said.

My uncles passed behind me, leading the investor guys to the front door. “Wait’ll you try the lasagna,” I heard Uncle Carmine say. “Best in New Hampshire, no kidding.”

They’d all want drinks, STAT. Where was Kara? She’d taken Nonna, who was really our great-nonna, to five o’clock Mass. Literally around the corner, and they still weren’t back.

I swept the empty glasses onto my tray and hurried through the front door, just as the bells from the other church across the street chimed six, and Kara and Nonna miraculously materialized.

“What took so long?” I asked my cousin as she settled Nonna across from Angela at the two-top in the corner. Angela greeted her with a red-lipsticked smile, but Nonna wasn’t having it.

She hadn’t been very communicative with anyone lately. Everyone thought it was the dementia, but I suspected she was mad she’d had to leave her canasta friends at the fancy assisted-living place in Bay Ridge.

Kara shrugged. “The priest was slow.”

Dressed all in black, straight up to the lace mantilla—who dressed like sixties-Jackie Kennedy for Saturday night Mass?—I felt Nonna’s silent stare at our backs as we headed toward the kitchen. “Angela, get her some water,” I called back.

“Sure, honey.” Uncle Joey’s fiancée was absorbed in scrolling through her phone.

Mom stood over a steaming pot of pasta, wiping her face with her arm. She looked tired. My younger brother Anthony was screwing everything up as usual as he tried to load a tub of plates, flatware, and glasses into the dishwasher.

“Checking up on the order for Table three,” I said. “And we just got more customers.”

“Pizza oven’s still broken,” Anthony said.

Uncle Joey stuck his head and one broad shoulder through the swinging doors, trying to tie his bow tie at the same time. “We’re pushing up the first show,” he said. “Anthony, I need you on lights and sound. And we gotta move everyone inside. It’s starting to rain.”

My brother exited the kitchen, glad for an escape. Kara grabbed an apron from one of the hooks next to the doors and threw one to me as Mom started firing off directions.

It didn’t take us long to catch up on orders. Mom cooked, Kara plated, and I ran the food out to the tables Anthony had spaced out in the main dining room, with a few spilled over into the lounge. Things were looking good, and even the former Table three seemed in a better mood now that they had their Clams Casino and heaping plates of Shrimp Fra Diavolo. Uncle Carmine was deep in conversation with the Manchvegas party over bottles of our best red wine. A few drops had spilled across the tablecloth, which he tried to hide with a napkin.

Angela was now perched on one of the suit guys' laps, laughing and sipping the drink I'd poured for Uncle Joey. I should have opened that champagne. Kara brought Uncle Joey a fresh martini. A prop for the act, he always said.

The lights dimmed. Uncle Joey was in his element as he stepped into the violet spotlight. After a last back-and-forth with Anthony over the sound, he removed the mic. "Welcome to Romano's!" he greeted the crowd, to semi-enthusiastic applause. "A little piece of Rat Pack heaven on earth. How's everybody doing tonight?"

I could tell that a lot of the people thought he was a joke. But Uncle Joey didn't care. Now he was Frankie.

After a swirl of the martini glass and a less-than-suave swig, he launched into a warm-up joke about three sinners being turned down by St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. I scanned the tables for empty glasses—none—and made my way back to the bar.

Nonna wasn't at her table. I needed to find her because she wasn't supposed to walk by herself. She'd taken a bad fall before she went into the assisted-living place, and as soon as a spot opened up at the nursing home just outside of Purgatory, we'd all feel much better.

As I'd figured, she was in the ladies' room. Her bright red rosary hung over the edge of the sink as she washed her hands. The lacy mantilla lay on the tiled floor, next to her pocketbook. I was horrified to see that she had taken off her black blouse and skirt and was now clad in only her plain, droopy slip and old-lady shoes.

"Nonna, what are you doing?"

No response. She stared into the mirror as if she hadn't heard.

It wasn't easy getting her back into her church finery, because her limbs were stiff, and she refused to cooperate in any way. "Don't you want to watch the show?" I tried.

She didn't, it seemed. I sighed and rescued her rosary from the sink so it wouldn't get wet from the spreading soap slime. Some of the beads were missing, but the string was intact at least. She glared at me, and I quickly dropped it into her purse. "We'll get you a nice new rosary, Nonna," I said.

I escorted her back to her table-for-one as Uncle Joey snapped and sang his way through another B-side forties favorite. At the end, he raised his martini glass in a toast. "To my angel," he said. "There she is, right over there. Isn't she gorgeous? I love you, baby."

The spotlight swept over the audience and landed on Angela. She had stood up from the dapper stranger's lap and was leaning against a table in the front row, clutching her stomach just below the sparkly belt of her dress.

"You're my Marilyn, baby!"

At that, she lurched forward and vomited dramatically onto the black-and-white floor, again and again. A woman who said she was a doctor, and another who was a nurse, rushed to assist her, but Angela continued to hurl.

For a second or two, my uncle stood frozen on the stage, mic by his side as the music for the next song began. Anthony cut it off, and Uncle Joey ran to take his fiancée into his arms.

Angela's skin turned almost blue as she gasped for breath. "We need an ambulance," the doctor said, but I had already called 911.

The fire department arrived first, followed by Purgatory's single part-time cop, an acne-scarred rookie who looked like he was still in high school. Finally, the medics showed up and sped Angela the thirty miles to the nearest hospital. My distraught uncle rode with her in the ambulance, sirens wailing and lights flashing as dusk fell over the mountains.

Angela didn't make it. She slipped into a coma, and a few days later, we found ourselves helping Uncle Joey plan her funeral.

He was inconsolable. "So young," he said between sobs. "So beautiful. Just like Marilyn." For hours he pored over music selections for her Requiem Mass, determined to give her the heavenly sendoff she deserved.

Our family needed to make other plans, too. Romano's was closed, most likely forever. To Mom's horror, the prevailing local gossip was that a diner had succumbed to food poisoning. The toxicology results weren't back yet from the lab, but it was clear Angela had died from some kind of poisoning. The medical examiner even suspected foul play.

Well, that was impossible. Angela hadn't eaten anything that night, as far as I knew. She'd been more focused on the champagne. And I knew exactly what had gone into that drink of Uncle Joey's she'd intercepted because I'd made it myself. Would anyone suspect *me* of murder?

Romano's didn't have security cameras to prove my innocence, or anyone else's guilt—they were expensive, and none of us had seen the need for that kind of investment yet. Anyone could have slipped something into that glass, but why? No one hated Uncle Joey.

If I really stretched things, I supposed, I could come up with possible motives. Uncle Carmine was sure Uncle Joey's act would doom the restaurant to fail. Without Uncle Joey, there

would be no Frank Sinatra performances—just a regular pizza and pasta place in the middle of nowhere. And what about those so-called investors? Maybe Uncle Carmine couldn't bring himself to murder his own brother, and one of those Manchvegas goons had done the deed. But they'd seen Angela tossing the contents of Uncle Joey's glass down the hatch. And who would want her dead? Maybe she wasn't the sharpest card in the deck, but she had a good heart. I felt bad now for those mean things I'd said or thought about her on occasion. And Uncle Joey was devastated. No devoted fiancée, no big singing career, not even a regular boring restaurant.

None of us could afford to just pack up and go back to New York, either. For one thing, the detectives had let us know that we might have to answer more questions for the investigation. Uncle Carmine had already given notice to our landlord that we needed to break the restaurant lease. Uncle Joey was paying for Angela's funeral, and we'd just gotten word that a spot had opened up for Nonna in the memory unit at that nursing home. Mom and my uncles considered keeping her with us, but since Angela's death, she'd been flying into intermittent tantrums and refusing to eat. Maybe Nonna didn't know what was going on, but she definitely sensed that something was wrong.

In part to escape the general gloom and doom, Kara and I offered to deep-clean the restaurant so the building's landlord wouldn't ding us for even more money. The detectives had given us the all-clear as soon as the forensic team had finished.

Kara took the kitchen, and I focused on the dining room and lounge. A lump formed in my throat as I dismantled Uncle Joey's portable stage and took down the silver satin curtain behind it. Then I swept and mopped the bar area and headed to the corner table where Angela had consumed her final bottle of champagne.

When I emptied the dustpan into the garbage, a small, bright red bead caught my eye. It was from Nonna's rosary, which I'd forgotten in all the drama. I'd promised her a new one. I knocked the dust off the bead, which revealed a black spot at one end, and stuck it in my pocket so I could try to match it later. A cheerful new red rosary would be the perfect present to distract Nonna from an unfamiliar nursing home.

Surfing my phone that night, several exact images of my nonna's rosary popped up. I was in luck, with all kinds of variations available from a wide selection of Catholic supply stores. I learned the beads were actually seeds from a plant called the rosary pea, and they were...completely toxic to humans.

Nonna's rosary was *poisonous*? Yes. The seeds contained a natural poison called Abrin.

I read on, my heart skipping and twisting in my chest. The seeds weren't dangerous unless their shells were cracked open, but it only took the contents of a few seeds to kill someone. The rosary on the ladies' room sink had been missing several beads, with the string intact. And when I'd found Nonna, she'd been furiously washing her hands after stripping off her clothes.

Nonna knew Uncle Joey drank black-label Jack, just like his idol. She didn't have dementia. She was a cold-blooded killer who had targeted her own grandson.

She must have reasoned that, with Uncle Joey gone, there would be no Romano's, and we'd all go back to New York. Then she could hang out with her canasta ladies at her old assisted-living place instead of spending her remaining days staring at the wall in freezing New Hampshire.

Poor Angela. And poor Uncle Joey. Nonna wouldn't get away with this. Without a second thought, or even a word to Kara, I slammed out of the apartment and headed straight to Nonna's private room across the hall.

I let myself in with a copy of her key we all carried for emergencies. She looked up from her afghan-draped recliner, seeming unsurprised. Her expression wasn't vacant now, and her eyes looked hard. Her mangled rosary lay on the TV tray beside her, along with a large silver spoon.

I took a deep, steadying breath and produced the red seed from my pocket. "I know what you did, Nonna."

She gave a low, raspy chuckle and raised a tall glass half-filled with fruit punch. "*Salud,*" she said, and chugged it down before I could stop her.

I never told Uncle Joey the truth. He was doubly brokenhearted after the loss of his grandmother, and even the possibility of a cruise ship entertainer job failed to cheer him up—at first.

Nonna was buried beside Angela in a hastily purchased Romano family plot in Purgatory Cemetery. At the joint wake, everyone said she looked at peace, her hands clasping a shiny new black rosary. Just before they closed her coffin, I dropped in the red one.

My nonna wouldn't need to negotiate her sins with St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. She was headed straight from Purgatory to Hell.

THE END