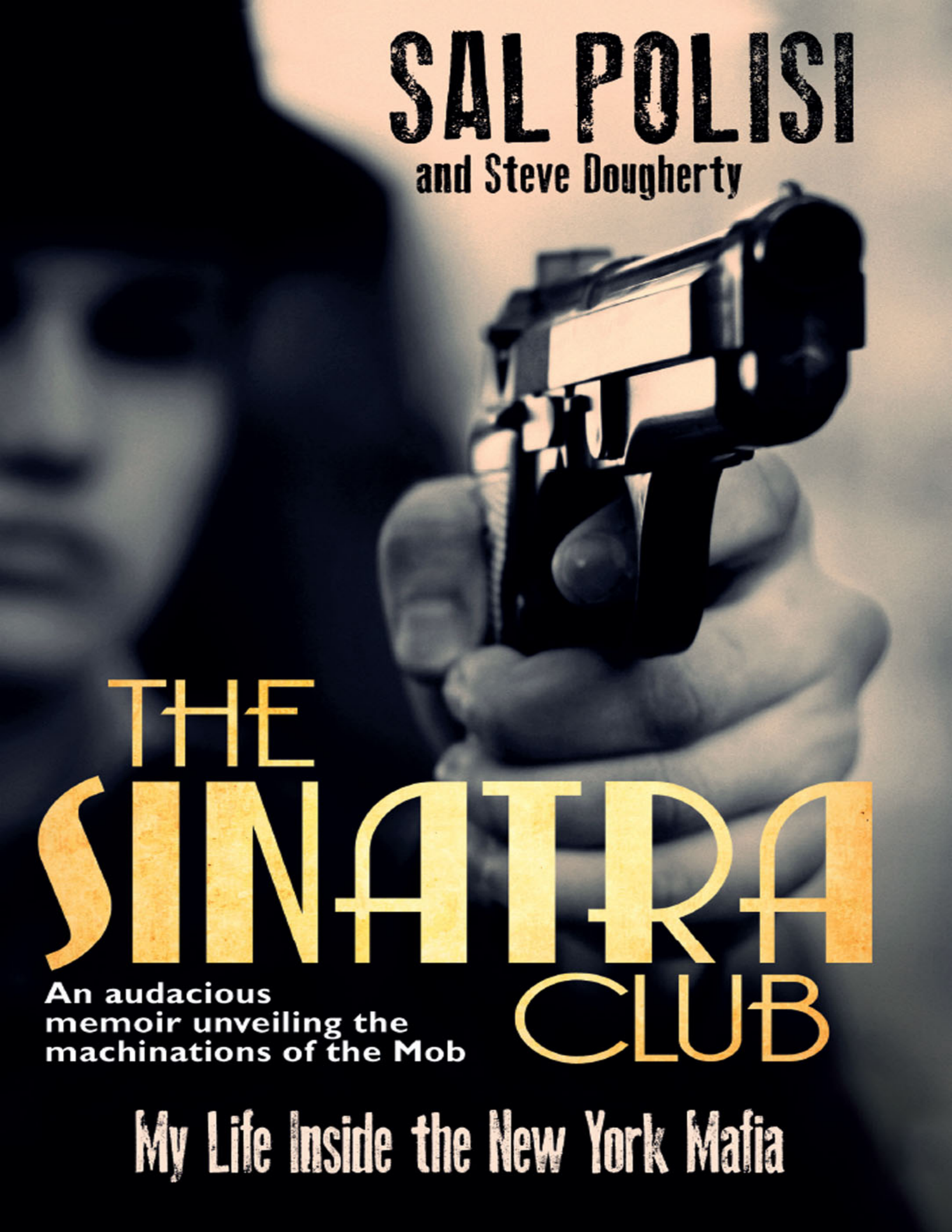
SAL POLISI
and Steve Dougherty
THE SINATRA CLUB
An audacious memoir unveiling the machinations of the Mob
My Life Inside the New York Mafia

Contents

THE SINATRA CLUB

My Life Inside the New York Mafia

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

Such was the rule of the sanctuary. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained the office till he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier. The post which he held by this precarious tenure carried with it the title of king; but surely no crowned head ever lay uneasier, or was visited by more evil dreams, than his.

—Sir James George Frazer, The Golden Bough, 1922

To my sister, Rose Marie, who died at twenty-one in 1965. I loved her dearly.

—Sal Polisi

To my father, Dick Dougherty (1920–2008), a lifelong newspaperman who despised in equal measure wiseguys and the public officials who let them get away with murder.

And to Ray Filiberti, a proud Italian who loathed the glorification of the Mob and cheers its fall.

—Steve Dougherty

THE SETTING

The Sinatra Club. The after-hours gambling joint I ran in Ozone Park, Queens, New York, from 1971, when that Life of ours was in its glory, to 1974, when death took over and we all started on the long highway to hell.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MY FAMILY TIES

Frank Polisi. My father. He bootlegged whiskey with his brother Tony for Joe Profaci's gang during Prohibition but left that Life for honest work in the legitimate world.

Rose Belviso. My mother. She was a former showgirl who hoofed it out of my life when I was two years old. She split because she loved the Life.

Rose Marie Polisi. My beloved sister and guardian angel. She urged me to find happiness in the legitimate world; it didn't do her any good and I didn't listen.

Tony Polisi. My uncle, a flamboyant gambler and Profaci-Colombo Family gangster in whose footsteps I gladly followed into a career of crime.

Angela Polisi. The sweet and caring woman who made the biggest mistake of her life when she married me and became the last thing a woman like her should ever be—a Mob wife.

Sal Jr. and Joseph Polisi. Angela's and my two sons, the kids I neglected to live the Life.

Jane Parker. The beautiful, wild-hearted whore who became my *goomada* and mistress. When our lust turned to love, my two worlds—the criminal Life I shared with Jane and my home life with Angela—collided. The results weren't pretty.

Ronald "Foxy" Jerothe. No relation, but he was my brother in crime. The Fox would get trapped in a blood feud that—like the Life itself—became a dance with death.

COLOMBOS

Dominic Cataldo. My boss, business partner, and mentor in the Colombo Family.

Ervolino Cataldo. Dom's grandmother, a bootlegger and loan shark who groomed her son and grandson to become gangsters.

Sammy Cataldo. Dom's father. He grew up with my father and uncle, and became a made man and capo in the Profaci Family.

Joseph "Joey" Cataldo. Dom's younger brother, who was only peripherally involved in Mob business. He was my good friend and godfather to my younger son, Joseph.

Louise Anastasia Cataldo. Joey's wife and godmother to my son Joseph. She was the niece of the powerful Brooklyn

waterfront boss Tough Tony Anastasio and of Albert Anastasia, the Mob godfather who was murdered in the Park Sheraton Hotel's Grazie barbershop in 1957.

Joe "the Wop" Cataldo. Dom's cousin and a powerful Mob figure who ran Family-owned casinos in Havana in the '50s. His ties with Jack Ruby—both in Cuba and as the Dallas mobster and strip club owner's contact in New York—ensnared him in the Warren Commission investigation into the Kennedy assassination.

Joe Profaci. One of the original godfathers of the New York Mob's Five Families. He was also a legitimate businessman who owned the Mama Mia company, the largest olive oil–importing business in the United States.

Joe Colombo. Profaci's underboss, who was installed as head of the Family by Carlo Gambino in 1965. In 1970, Colombo led the so-called Italian civil rights movement that culminated with a rally in Columbus Circle that drew more than fifty thousand supporters.

The Gallo Brothers. Larry, Crazy Joe, and Albert "Kid Blast" Gallo were Profaci Family soldiers who, along with gang mate Carmine "Snake" Persico, formed the "Barbershop Quartet" that carried out the contract to assassinate Albert Anastasia in 1957. Four years later, the four launched a rebellion against Profaci that resulted in the bloody decade-long power struggle known as the Gallo Wars.

Carmine Persico. He got his nickname "the Snake" when he switched sides in the Gallo Wars. He later led the Colombo Family faction that included my boss, Dominic Cataldo.

Freddie “No Nose” DeLucia. A Profaci-Colombo hit man who was in on a botched hit during the Gallo Wars that became the model for a famous scene in the film *Godfather II.* He helped school me when Dom first brought me into the Colombo Family.

Pegleg Brancato. Dominic Cataldo’s boss and a Colombo Family capo who became temporary boss of the Family in the early 1970s.

Jackie Donnelly. Dominic’s business and crime partner. His friendship with a corrupt Irish State Supreme Court judge gave us something priceless that *could* be bought—justice.

Eddie Pravato and Joe Dellamura. Career bank robbers and close friends of my uncle Tony’s. They taught me all I needed to know about how to empty a jug.

GAMBINOS

John “Johnny Boy” Gotti. The charismatic Gambino soldier who became my friend and who rose to be the most famous boss in the Mafia.

Gene Gotti. John’s younger brother. Genie introduced me to Fox Jerothe, the young Gambino soldier who would become my best friend.

Carlo Gambino. Godfather of the largest and wealthiest of the Five Families. He ruled the Commission, the Mob’s board of directors, and until his death in 1976 was the single most powerful Mafia don in the nation.

Charlie Fatico. A longtime Anastasia-Gambino Family capo who ran the Family’s largest crew from his headquarters, the Bergin Hunt and Fish Club in Ozone Park.

Neil Dellacroce. Carlo Gambino's underboss and heir apparent. He ran operations at the Family's Ravenite Social Club on Mulberry Street in Little Italy.

Manny Gambino. Carlo Gambino's nephew. He ran a Family loansharking business and hung out with his mistress at a favorite haunt of mine.

Angelo "Quack" Ruggiero. John Gotti's wing man, a nephew of Neil Dellacroce.

Willie Boy Johnson. Son of a full-blooded Mohawk and a Sicilian mother, he was one of the Bergin crew's most feared and loyal warriors.

John and Charles Carneglia. Brothers who formed a dandy two-man hit squad—John whacked guys and Charles vanished them.

Tony "Roach" Rampino. A scary hit man who was a great guy to have on your side in a softball game.

Paul Castellano. Carlo Gambino's first cousin, brother-in-law, and successor. He would be locked in a lethal power struggle with John Gotti.

Dave Iacovetti. A Gambino capo who ran Family operations in Florida and was close friends with the patron saint of the Sinatra Club—Old Blue Eyes himself. Dave befriended me in prison and taught me things about the Life that led to my salvation.

FRIENDS OF OURS

Mike "the Mouthpiece" Coiro. A former cop and Waterfront Commission investigator who flipped to our side and became a well-connected Mob lawyer. One of the

Sinatra Club's best customers, he represented Dom and me as well as John Gotti and other Bergin crew members and friends of ours like Jimmy Burke and Henry Hill.

Roy Cohn. A longtime acquaintance of Mike Coiro, he was the famous attorney who made his name prosecuting the Rosenbergs and his fortune representing mobsters like Carlo Gambino and John Gotti.

Tommy "Two Guns" DeSimone. Fox and my hijacking partner and the notorious killer immortalized by Joe Pesci in Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas.* Long-simmering tensions between Fox and Tommy would one day explode in violence.

Jimmy Burke. The murderous Irish businessman who elevated truck hijacking to a fine art. He was the best—and winningest—card player at the Sinatra Club. Robert De Niro played a character based on him in *GoodFellas.*

Henry Hill. Like Tommy and Jimmy, he was connected to the Lucchese Family. Ray Liotta played him in *GoodFellas*, which was based on *Wiseguy*, Nick Pileggi's best seller about Henry.

Paul Vario. The Lucchese Family capo who got a taste of everything Tommy, Jimmy, and Henry stole.

MOB NEMESES

Diane Giacalone. An Ozone Park girl who grew up to become an assistant U.S. attorney. Her investigation of an armored car heist by a couple of thugs who stole cars for me put her on a trail that led to a Brooklyn courthouse where she prosecuted John Gotti, by then boss of the Gambino Family, for racketeering in 1986.

John Gleeson. Giacalone's assistant in Gotti's 1986 trail. He got a second crack at the Teflon Don six years later as lead prosecutor in the case that proved that the New York Mob wasn't too big to fail after all.

Remo Franceschini. That once rarest of beasts, an honest cop. He went after the Mob back in the days when most of his brethren in blue were either out to lunch or on the take.

Dan Russo and Ed McDonald. Eight years after the Mob's protector, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, died and the feds declared open season on the Families, these two flipped Henry Hill and got him in the Witness Protection Program. After that it was easy to see that the Mob was a sinking ship—all you had to do was count the rats.

Prologue

WE WERE AT a joint called the Fireplace in Ozone Park, Queens, when I first heard Johnny Boy's name. It was the summer of 1968, not long after Bobby Kennedy got whacked. I knew better than to ask my boss, Dominic, who I was with that night and who was a hit man himself, about Bobby, but I assumed it was a Mob job like his brother. Nobody ever heard of any of the Families using an Arab button man, but crazier shit happened that year. Race riots, student riots, police riots, whole cities on fire, Chicago cops busting heads on TV—it looked like the whole country was going up in flames. Maybe that's why it seemed like pyromaniacs named all the Mob joints we hung out in back then.

The Fireplace had a cage over the bar with a couple of go-go dancers shaking it to Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild" and "Good Lovin'" by the Rascals. They didn't normally play hippie music in there, but the Rascals were Italians, and "Born to Be Wild" was a great song to crank up after a score.

Dom was busy telling a story about a guy in our crew named "Big Funzi" Tarricone. Funzi was with the Colombo Family, like us. Everybody called him Funzi because his name was Alphonse; they called him *Big* Funzi because what else can you call a guy who is six foot four? Funzi was a gorilla, but not exactly what you'd call a high-wattage kind of guy.

The year before, my uncle Tony and another friend of ours named Sonny were going away for bank robbery. Before

Sonny went in, he sold one of his Cadillacs. “Funzi gets a call and he’s told that Sonny’s got car trouble,” Dom says. “Funzi goes, ‘So find a mechanic.’ He’s not bein’ a smart-ass. He really thinks you got car trouble, get a mechanic. Turns out the dealership Sonny sold his car to did what dealers do: They turned around and sold it to somebody else. Trouble is the car salesman tells the new buyer to have the Caddy swept for bugs because it belonged to ‘a hoodlum named Sonny Franzese.’ No shit. He calls Sonny a hoodlum. The dumb prick doesn’t know that the buyer is connected. The buyer makes a call, and next thing, Big Funzi’s on his way to give the used-car salesman a talking-to. Funz was hanging out with a couple of Gambino guys from Fatico’s crew that day. So he takes these two bruisers with him—the Indian, Willie Boy, and this kid Johnny Boy, who thinks he’s Al Capone—he does his shylock work with a baseball bat. That fuckin’ salesman had to sell cars from a wheelchair after that.”

A week later, Dom and I were at the Flame, another bar named in honor of the wiseguy’s favorite problem solver—arson. The Flame was a Gambino joint on the Brooklyn-Queens line, and some of that Family’s guys were in there. Dom pointed out one of them and said that’s the guy who’s got the swing like Capone, Johnny Boy. From where I stood at the bar, I couldn’t make out much about him except that he looked like a typical tough guy with linebacker shoulders and his hair swept up and back like a hood from the ’50s. The next I heard he was in the can on a federal rap for hijacking. After that, nothing; if his name came up, I didn’t notice. I didn’t give Johnny Boy a second thought.

In the summer of ’68 I was twenty-three and already a career criminal with an arrest record dating back to high school, but I was still a rookie outfielder with the Colombo Family. A few years would pass before I earned my Mob name, Sally Ubatz—Crazy Sally. Ubatz is Brooklynese for *upazzo*, “crazy” in Italian.

How I got it is a wild story I'll get to later. But back then, if Dominic or anybody else told me that this guy Johnny Boy, a low-level Gambino with a Capone fixation, would one day not only become boss of that Family and the most powerful Mafia leader in the country but would also rewrite the history of the Mob and become world famous in the process, I would have thought they were the ones who were *upazzo.*

I would have known for sure if anybody had predicted that when Johnny Boy skyrocketed to power and flamed out in equally spectacular fashion, I would have a front-row seat and that he and I would be bound together in a personal drama, one that began the day he got out of prison in 1972 and didn't end until thirty years later, when he was back in stir for life but where he met an early death instead.

I got to know John Gotti four years after that night at the Flame. That's when he started hanging out at the Sinatra Club, the new gambling joint in Ozone Park I owned with the Cataldos, Dominic and his little brother Joey.

John and I spent a lot of time together because we both had a big-time jones for gambling. Even though he loved playing cards, he was a lousy poker player and he hardly ever hit a winner at the track—but he was great at board games. John and me and Foxy Jerothe—a young guy who'd been with John since he was a kid and who became my best friend and crime partner—used to spend hours playing at my club and at the Gambinos' own place nearby, the Bergin Hunt and Fish Club. We played marathon games of Scrabble and Monopoly. We bet on those games, and John won a lot of them. He was pretty good at chess too. Once we got to know each other, Johnny and I hung out together outside my club and our other regular haunts. We went to the track, we went to ball games and barbeques, we played softball at his crew's annual picnics. When our kids got older, they played on the same Pop Warner football teams.

Despite the fact that Johnny and I were with different Families, we planned scores together. That's something that would never have happened in the old days, but thanks in part to the Sinatra Club, the strict lines between Mob Families were beginning to blur. The club was a place where guys from all the different Families hung out together regularly, another thing that the bosses never would have allowed just a few years earlier.

John and I talked a lot about the Mob and how it was in the old days and how things were changing. He grew up in the same neighborhood where I was born—in East New York, Brooklyn. That's where John's heroes Al Capone and Albert Anastasia were from and where the Murder Incorporated headquarters—Midnight Rose's candy store—was. John loved all the stories about the Mob in those days, and I was full of them thanks to my uncle Tony. Uncle Tony was an old-school gangster who came up under Joe Profaci, and he raised me on his stories about what it was like running booze during Prohibition and how guys like Profaci and Lucky Luciano and Frank Costello and, before all of them, Arnold Rothstein, the guy who fixed the World Series, ruled New York and lived like kings.

John and I both grew up with the same dream to become part of that world my uncle Tony told me about when I was a kid. John was five years older than me and already a soldier in his Gambino capo Charlie Fatico's crew. I was twenty-six by then and still trying to prove myself. But we both had the same goal—to join the brotherhood of hoodlums and become made members of our respective Mafia Families.

By any measure of the New York Mob's wealth and power and popularity, it was at an all-time high when John Gotti and I became friends in 1972. That was a watershed year, when a new generation of Mob leaders began their ascendancy and the old structures that had been in place

for decades began to crumble. It was a year of big changes, not the least of which was the public's perception of the Mob's might and influence. That happened in large part thanks to *The Godfather*, which was released that March. Every connected guy alive loved that movie because it turned us into romantic heroes. Women all over town wanted to bang a gangster once they saw it. My best friend, Fox Jerothe, and our hijacking partner Tommy DeSimone and I saw the picture together that spring. We left the theater so juiced up, we went out and committed a major felony in celebration of the Life we'd just seen played out on the big screen.

Most legitimate people had no idea how big and powerful the Mob really was until they saw that film or read the best-selling novel by Mario Puzo that it was based on. The year before the movie came out, another book—Gay Talese's *Honor Thy Father*, about Joe Bananas, the boss of the Bonanno Family—laid out the true facts behind the fiction.

"We're bigger than U.S. Steel." That's one of the lines everybody remembered from *The Godfather.* The guy who says it is the film's Meyer Lansky character, Hyman Roth. Lansky was the Jewish gangster who was the brains behind Lucky Luciano, the Mafia's *capo di tutti capi* in the old days. What Lansky actually said was—in a bugged conversation with his wife—"We're bigger than General Motors."

Truth was, the Mob was bigger than both those outfits put together, along with most of the rest of the Top Ten Fortune 500 at the time. According to Talese, the American Mafia—including twenty-four Families scattered around the country, with the five centered in New York City by far the richest and strongest—was raking in $40 billion a year by the early '70s. That was more than the earnings of General Motors, U.S. Steel, Standard Oil, Chrysler, Ford, IBM, AT&T, RCA, and General Electric *combined.*

The Mob wasn't just big business—it was the biggest business in America. And like its legit corporate cousins

today, it operated with little or no government regulation and paid zero taxes.

The only fees the Mob paid on all its profit came in the form of payoffs to friends of the Families in high places and low. It took some hefty sums to grease all the politicians and government officials, judges, lawyers, prosecutors, police brass, investigators, detectives, and cops on the job who were also on the take.

But thanks to the greed and corruption of the same people taxpayers paid to serve and protect them, the Mafia's enormous gang of criminals were able to commit the most brazen acts of thievery and violence imaginable—from back-alley serial killings to public executions, including the most blatant whacking of all time, the assassination of a president—and get rich in the process. The so-called good guys gave us the greatest gift any small-time hoodlum or Mafia don could ask for: They let us get away with it.

In 1972, no Mafia CEO reaped more of the rewards or presided over a larger empire and ruled it more ruthlessly than the man Johnny Boy Gotti would one day succeed.

If the movie's producers had set out to portray the *real* godfather, they never would have cast Marlon Brando as Don Corleone. They would have found an obscure character actor nobody ever heard of to play Carlo Gambino, a short and unintimidating seventy-year-old man who looked like he couldn't fight his way out of the old folks' home.

Despite all his wealth and power, the Gambino Family father was modest and unassuming in every way. Unlike some of his predecessors who lived in lavish party palace penthouses overlooking Central Park and country estates that were like feudal manors, Gambino resided with his wife and kids in a tiny-for-a-crime-lord house on an average-size lot on an ordinary cul-de-sac in the nothing-special middle-class town of Massapequa, New York, off Sunrise Highway, a

few miles east of Jones Beach Parkway. Every day he was driven from his modest home to his modest office in a nondescript brick building on Ocean Parkway in South Brooklyn, in a car no Caddy- or Lincoln-loving wiseguy would be caught dead in—a fucking Oldsmobile.

If you happened to see Gambino on the street, you'd never give him a second look. His only distinguishing features were his bent beak nose and the little porkpie hat and enigmatic Mona Lisa smile he always wore. Joe Bonanno wrote that Gambino was "a squirrel of a man, a servile and cringing individual."[1] Of course he waited until Gambino was already safely tucked away in his grave before he said it out loud in a book.

For a penniless illegal immigrant who washed ashore in 1921 at age nineteen, Gambino did all right for himself. By 1972 he commanded an army of four thousand made men and associates; he ran a business enterprise whose holdings rivaled those of any modern-day hedge fund; his earnings from the waterfront shipping, air freight, trucking, construction, garment, and waste disposal industries and the unions under his control rivaled the enormous cash flow funneled to him by the twenty-four capos who ran the Gambino Family's gambling, loan-sharking, and extortion operations, and whose street crews carried out the robberies, inflicted the beatings, and committed the murders and other crimes that made headlines. But thanks to the protection provided by public servants, little if any punishment resulted for the perps.

The Gambino criminal enterprise that became more profitable than all the rest was narcotics. Despite what Brando's Don Corleone said about the drug trade being too dirty a business for bosses who ran their Families by strict codes of honor and respect, the real godfather started importing heroin into the United States by the freighter load in 1948; that's when he and Lucky Luciano established the

Turkey-to-Sicily-to-Marseilles-to-New-York smuggling operation known as the French Connection.

Throughout the following decade, demand for hard drugs was pretty much limited to lowlifes, bohemians, and ghetto-crushed blacks. That changed in the 1960s when the Vietnam War created a mass market for the stuff. By 1972, more than fifty-five thousand American kids had been killed, a quarter of a million wounded, and countless survivors had been so severely traumatized that they were happy to pay $100 for a gram of smack to kill the pain.

The Mob hadn’t seen a cash cow like it since 1933 when Prohibition ended. Booze was a golden fountain of cash and goodwill. It was the ultimate crime, the perfect illegal business. The product was a magic elixir that everybody wanted. There was no top to the demand; the Mob controlled the entire supply, paid off the cops to reduce the risk, and kept all the profits. Plus, everybody—the legitimate public, their elected officials, and even the cops—loved bootleggers because they kept the beer taps flowing and their liquor cabinets full.

Prohibition was the golden goose that made the Mob. Narcotics was the poison that killed it. Legitimate slobs wanted no part of soul-killers like heroin. You never saw Bogart or Cagney or Edward G. make a movie about the glamorous life of drug traffickers. Pushers were the worst kind of scum, and they brought the worst kind of heat—the kind that couldn’t be bought. That’s why Gambino and the rest of the dons distributed the product from the French Connection pipeline through surrogate non-Mafia gangs—and why they kept their involvement in trafficking a secret from all but the very top echelon of their own Families.

The bosses never shared their profits with the guys in the bottom tiers of the Family hierarchy. The Mob was a trickle-up organization; all cash flowed up from the street crews to the capos and from there to the top guys and, finally, to the boss, never the other way around. The Mob’s CEOs figured

that the less the rank and file knew about the wealth that was not trickling down to them, the better.

In 1956, Congress passed legislation establishing mandatory sentences of twenty years in prison, with no chance of parole, for anyone convicted of selling narcotics. That's when the bosses got panicky. They realized that when faced with the prospect of spending a third of their adult lifetime in the paint, even their most loyal soldiers would forget their vows of silence—*omertà*—and turn rat on their Fathers.

The next year, the Commission, the national crime organization's board of directors, called an emergency meeting of Mob leaders from across the country to discuss the new drug-sentencing law. They held the big sit-down in the town of Apalachin, New York, near Binghamton. Carlo Gambino, the Commission's newest member thanks to his whacking of his own godfather, Albert Anastasia, in a celebrated hit a few weeks before, proposed a simple solution to the problems posed by the feds' new narcotics laws: capital punishment—Mob style.

This meant that any made member of a Family caught dealing drugs would be executed by lethal injection—he'd get a bullet right in the coconut.

At the time of the Apalachin conference, narcotics weren't even on the average Mob soldier's radar. But fifteen years later they were—and big time. I know because that's when I got into the *babania* trade myself. And as soon as I went all in, the government upped the ante. The Dangerous Drug Acts of 1972 included mandatory sentencing provisions that meant if I got caught dealing just four ounces of the stuff—a fraction of the kilos we were moving—I'd be looking at twenty-five years to life in prison.

When that happened, Carlo Gambino, who by then was the most powerful don on the Commission, countered with a mandatory sentencing act of his own: From now on, he decreed, not only made guys but anybody even vaguely

associated with any Mob Family who dealt the smack got the whack. (The dons themselves as well as top lieutenants involved in the godfathers' own huge drug-importing business were of course excluded.)

On top of that, Gambino announced a new Mafia Code of Honor: It was the responsibility of middle management—Family captains and crew chiefs—to locate and confront any and all drug-dealing underlings and act accordingly. Failure to do so meant the violator's superior faced the same mandatory sentence—execution without trial. Thanks to the diminutive Don Carlo's brilliant use of force and persuasion, Gambino not only ran the Commission and the Mob's entire national organization; he was, by the time our story begins, the de facto boss of all the other New York Families except one—my own, the Colombos.

By means of marriage (Lucchese), muscle (Bonanno), and *morte* (Genovese), Gambino had installed puppet bosses beholden to him in each of those three Families. The fourth Family, the Colombos, formerly run by my uncle Tony's old don, Joe Profaci, and torn apart by a bloody civil war fought between a rebel faction led by the Gallo brothers and family loyalists led by Carmine "the Snake" Persico, had caused terrible problems for Gambino and the entire New York Mob for more than a decade.

Gambino thought he had solved them and ended the so-called Gallo Wars by installing Joe Colombo in 1965. But even after Larry Gallo's death and his brother Joe's imprisonment, the bloodshed continued intermittently until 1969, when two friends of my boss Dominic were rubbed out in what everybody thought was the war's final skirmish.

But then, in the spring of 1971, Crazy Joe Gallo came home from prison, and that's when tensions began to build until it looked like there was going to be all-out war all over again.

There were other forces at work in 1972 that made Gambino's position of wealth and power—and that of the Mob itself—not quite as unassailable as it seemed. The whole country was about to go through major convulsions that nobody foresaw when a crew of bungling burglars blew the Watergate break-in that June. For the Mob, the seemingly unrelated event that caused a catastrophe happened a month before the fiasco at the Watergate, in May 1972, when J. Edgar Hoover croaked.

People can be forgiven for assuming that the death of the famous G-man who had run the FBI for the past half century would have caused rejoicing in the Families. But the truth was that J. Edgar Hoover, the Justice Department's chief crime fighter, was the best friend the Mafia ever had. Hoover's ties to the Mob went back decades, and that was the main reason why the Families prospered the way they did for so long without the feds doing squat about it. The nation's top cop was closely associated with two of the Mob's most prominent players: Frank Costello, who used his knowledge of Hoover's secret gambling addiction and his closeted life as a homosexual to intimidate and control him; and Roy Cohn, the infamous Mob lawyer who helped Hoover wage war on Communists and the Left instead of on Cohn's clients, who were a far more real danger to the republic than any civil rights leader or peace demonstrator ever was.

Throughout the decades he ran the bureau, Hoover insisted publicly that the Mafia was a bugaboo that didn't exist. Privately, when his agents presented him with solid proof that it not only existed but in fact was the engine that drove 99 percent of organized criminal activity in the United States, he suppressed the reports and shitcanned the agents who filed them.

Instead of going after the Mob and its honchos, Hoover chased headlines and the bank robbers and kidnappers and mad bombers who made them. Those were the bad guys Hoover put on his famous Ten Most Wanted lists—never the

mobsters who committed more serial killings and torture murders and stole more money and abused the laws of the land far more brazenly than lone gun freelancers like John Dillinger and Machine Gun Kelly possibly could.

When the Kennedy brothers got in office and ordered Hoover to go after the Mob, the FBI finally turned up the heat. But Hoover's brief and belated war on the Mafia ended with one genius hit in Dallas. And when J. Edgar led the Warren Commission investigation into the Kennedy assassination, he suppressed all evidence that pointed to the true culprits behind the plot.

Before he died on May 2, 1972, Hoover performed one last service for the Mafia. He instructed Roy Cohn to deliver a deathbed warning to Cohn's client Carlo Gambino. There was, Cohn told the godfather immediately after Hoover's demise, a rat in the Gambino Family's largest crew. An unnamed source inside Charlie Fatico's Bergin Hunt and Fish Club had been feeding information directly to Hoover since 1966. As long as J. Edgar was on the job, the top secret "director's-eyes-only" reports filed by the rat's contact agent were placed where they could do no harm—in Hoover's office shredder. The FBI's new director was sure to see to it that the Bergin spy ratted in vain no longer—which meant serious trouble ahead for Don Carlo Gambino, his Family's entire organization, and the New York Mob itself.

There was something more about the death of the Mob's Great Protector that must have kept the lights burning late in Massapequa. The year before Hoover died, Congress passed a law specifically calibrated to destroy the Mafia. The Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act was diabolically simple: It basically made it a crime to run a Mob Family. Carlo Gambino recognized that the RICO Act was more than a sick joke—the lawyer who came up with it named it after Rico Bandello, every Mob guy's favorite movie gangster played by Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar.* Gambino knew that RICO meant it was open season

on the Mob, and without Hoover's shield to protect him the government would finally go after the country's real public enemy number 1—Don Carlo Gambino himself.

With threats looming all around—from government regulators on the outside and from his own wiseguys within—Gambino purged the ranks of deadwood, dealers, and traitors. He also began to lay the groundwork for a total reorganization of the Mob's Family structure. The first step was to find new blood to replace the old. To do so he spread the word that he would soon reopen his Family's membership rolls to proven young men who would take the place of its aged or eliminated made members.

But pinning buttons on worthy new soldiers was easier said than done. The sad fact was that the talent pool was running dry. The city that once teemed with native and first-generation Italians had turned into a melting pot full of mutts. Gambino could still find guys who were 100 percent Italian but few who were steeped in the traditions of the ancient secret societies of Sicily or the old-school Family values of their Americanized offspring, the New York Mob.

One who did honor the old customs and traditions and who eventually caught Gambino's eye was my friend Johnny Boy Gotti.

I was always a street guy. I was into robbing and stealing and gambling and loan sharking. I wasn't involved in the big-money sit-downs, the labor racketeering and construction company shakedowns, the Garment District and garbage and cement company kickbacks. As for the Mob's control of the Teamsters, all I did was hijack the trucks.

For guys like me and Fox, my blood brother and crime partner, the thing we loved about being in that life was the action, the excitement. All we wanted was the chance to pull robberies, heists, and hijackings. We were in it for the

money, sure. But it was the danger, the thrills that made the life of crime something special. Talk about a rush? Forget about it. There's no rush like pulling a robbery. It's like sex. I couldn't get enough.

A guy like John Gotti was different. He was far more ambitious than me and Fox. He wasn't in it just for the rush and the riches. He wanted the power and the glory.

John Gotti's tragedy, if you can call it that, was that he was born too late for the old-school gangster crown that he craved. He began his rise as the Mob was beginning to crumble; by the time he got to the top, the bottom had dropped out.

From the beginning, John was charismatic and smart. He just wasn't cut out to be godfather. Once he became boss, he drove the bus right off the bridge. Or maybe it was the bus that drove him. Either way, I watched him go.

Here's how it all happened.

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1 Joseph Bonanno, *A Man of Honor: The Autobiography of Joseph Bonanno*. St. Martin's Press, New York, 2003.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

A Star Is Born

JANUARY 1972

HE MADE HIS ENTRANCE on a frigid night about three weeks after New Year's. He was dressed like a street guy in a leather jacket, but he walked and talked like a king. And he got treated like one. Even my boss, Little Dom Cataldo, showed him respect that first night. "Wait 'til you meet this guy," my new friend Foxy Jerothe had told me. "Johnny's a real gangster."

I hadn't seen John Gotti since that summer in the Flame. He was thirty-one now, but he still wore his hair swept back '50s style like most of us did back then. He had thick sideburns, and his widow's peak was more pronounced that it had been in '68; it looked like he was combing it into a fall in front like Dion, but that might just have been the way his hair grew.

I remembered he looked like a linebacker when I saw him three years before, but now he was bulked up from pumping prison iron and was built more powerful, like a nose guard or a tackle; he had a barrel chest with massive shoulders and thick arms, kind of like Rocky Marciano, only better looking.

He didn't need the expensive silk suits and the Chesterfield coats he took to wearing later to make an impression. He walked into the club like there was a force

field around him; he had that kind of charisma, a presence that commanded instant respect. It was strange. You could tell by looking at him that he didn't have two nickels to rub together, but guys were drawn to him. He had a kind of body language, a swagger that everybody liked.

It was like Fox said: He was a gangster's gangster.

Johnny was barely out of the cuffs and leg chains when he arrived. He'd been bused in from Lewisburg, the federal penitentiary in Pennsylvania, and processed out at the West Street lockup that afternoon. Before he went home to see his wife and kids, he checked in with his Gambino Family boss at the Bergin Hunt and Fish Club, about ten blocks away from our joint on Atlantic Avenue in Ozone Park. The Bergin was the new headquarters of Charlie Fatico, boss of the largest and strongest crews in Don Carlo Gambino's entire organization. Charlie had a couple hundred soldiers under him; he was number three in the Family behind Neil Dellacroce, Don Carlo's underboss and heir apparent who worked out of the Ravenite Social Club in Little Italy.

After his welcome home sit-down with Charlie, Gotti went to spend some time with his other family, his wife, Victoria, and their five children. Itching for some action after three years in the cement, John got one of his guys to pick him up and bring him over to the Sinatra Club, where his crew from the Bergin—along with made guys and associate members of Dom and my Colombo Family and even some Luccheses from Paul Vario's crew in Brooklyn—were gathered to greet him.

All five of the Families that made up the New York Mob were as touchy about their turf as Indian tribes in the Old West. Guys from different Families didn't work together without permission from their bosses, and as a rule they didn't hang out at each other's social clubs. The exceptions were the floating craps and card games that most of the bosses ran on certain nights of the week that were open to all connected guys.