

The Curse of Frank Sinatra

BETH SMASHED A LAMP AGAINST THE LIVING ROOM WALL, cursing the jagged pieces of porcelain as if they had betrayed her. Stewart sat on the sofa threading an eight-millimeter projector with a newly discovered home movie, amused by the crackhead logic of his little sister thinking she would discover bundles of \$100 bills hidden inside a lamp.

Beth trashed closets and ripped up carpet, positive there was treasure hidden somewhere in their dead father's house. Convinced by the memory of that certain Christmas when they were kids, when their mother had secretly traded in the old man's Buick for a new one. Then like in the car ads on television, Christmas morning saw a shiny new sedan parked in the driveway wrapped in ribbon and bow. But unlike television, the old man created an ugly scene as he bullied the car dealer away from his family and managed to undo the deal. By noon the old Buick was back in the garage where the old man unscrewed the interior

panel of the driver-side door, then blew out a tremendous sigh of relief. The \$197,000 in cash was still there.

For decades the old man earned a middle-class living blowing his trumpet in showroom orchestras on the Las Vegas Strip. Raised his family in a modest beige stucco house just like every other beige stucco house on the block. So where did a working stiff get \$197,000 in cash? That was the question their mother had asked. Good luck at the dice tables was his answer. Didn't want to raise a red flag with the IRS by putting it in the bank. After she died, the old man joined the country club and traveled annually to New Orleans and Newport for the jazz festivals. High living for a retired trumpet player, making his straight-laced thirty-year-old son certain the money had been long ago spent. But Beth was not so easily convinced. Her long blond hair and killer body had made it easy to tease up whatever drugs she wanted from the L.A. club kids who flocked in legion to Las Vegas every weekend. But too much was never enough and it wasn't long before she spiraled out of control, twice facing hard time for grand larceny. Avoiding prison required a pricy lawyer, and both times the old man had paid. Beth vowed to find his money if she had to vandalize the house to its foundation.

Stewart closed the curtains, then sat on the sofa and switched on the projector. A square of light flashed on the plaster wall, then the grainy black-and-white image of a big-haired brunette standing with a young man in a duded-up cowboy shirt. The film

had no sound but the action was easy to follow. She kissed him. He was shy. She reached behind and unzipped her dress, which fell to the floor.

“It’s just a fucking porno,” Beth scoffed as she ripped the stuffing from the cushion of an easy chair.

“A porno Dad kept hidden under a floor board for maybe forty years. He must have had a reason.”

So they watched the film, various items in the room identifying the scene as the Six Palms Motel. The brunette maneuvered the cowboy out of his clothes and kissed his chest. Worked her tongue south. Beth sat beside her brother as they saw the young cowboy’s eyes roll back as the brunette went down on him in grainy black and white. As the camera changed position they caught a glimpse of three men in tuxedos standing at the end of the bed cheering the action with a bottle of Jack Daniel’s.

“That’s Sinatra!” Stewart called out. “That’s Frank Sinatra!”

“You’re nuts.”

“Of course it’s Sinatra. Why else would Dad have kept the film hidden all these years?” Stewart studied the face of the man next to him. “That’s Peter Lawford.”

“The Rat Pack?”

“Who’s the third guy? The one behind Lawford.” Stewart squinted, trying to squeeze focus from the grainy image, then the camera moved and caught the third man dead on.

“Teddy Maxx!” they called out in unison. There was no doubt.

Teddy Maxx was a baby-faced singer who had a couple of Top 40 hits in the early '60s. Instead of reinventing himself to compete in the far-out '70s, he decided to stick with the Las Vegas showrooms, which were still forking over big bucks to has-been crooners with name recognition.

Stewart was a freelance writer who in the past year had stepped himself up in class with a couple of features in *Esquire*. He was ambitious. Always on the lookout for that career-making story that would dominate front pages from here to everywhere and make his name as big as the people he wrote about. And there it was right in front of him. Flickering on the wall of the very living room in which he had grown up. A Rat Pack porno, served up on a silver platter with Teddy Maxx as the garnish. He and Beth both leaned forward on the sofa, focused on the naked brunette straddling the cowboy as he thrust powerfully inside her. Then watched as she took hold of a hunting knife concealed beneath the pillow and, in one graphically painful swipe, sliced the cowboy's cock off at the root.

Stewart and Beth were struck dumb with shock. No way was this sleight of hand or special effect. The mutilation was too vivid. The horror of the pain too excruciating. The camera caught glimpses of Sinatra, Lawford and Maxx. All visibly sickened as the brunette arched her back and grasped the severed flesh that was still hard inside her. She thrust it in and out several times, then put it in her mouth. Licking the flavor of sex as she now stood

over the cowboy who laid helpless in a pool of his own blood, then put him out of his misery by slashing his throat. The Rat Pack porno had become a Rat Pack murder.

A square of light again bleached the wall as the film end flapped around the reel. Stewart stopped the projector.

Beth got up and opened the curtains. "Teddy Maxx has fame and money. What does a man like that fear losing the most?"

"His health."

"His reputation."

Stewart did not like the sound of where this was going.

"Where do you think Dad got all the money he was throwing around?"

"It's not possible."

"He was blackmailing Sinatra, Lawford. All of them."

"No way." Stewart was nothing if not pragmatic. "Nobody had balls big enough to blackmail Frank Sinatra. All those guys had major mob connections. A trumpet player like Dad wouldn't have lasted five seconds."

"But he did." Beth's greed was working overtime. "Sinatra and Lawford may be dead, but Teddy Maxx is very much alive."

"You plan to just knock on his door and tell him the meter's still running?"

"Why not?"

"Because he'll call the police."

“After paying off all these years? No chance. Besides, cops don’t scare me.”

“Because Dad bought you out of every jam.”

“With money he got from Sinatra, Lawford and our new best friend Teddy Maxx.” It was a slam dunk. She didn’t understand his reluctance. “You afraid of getting rich?”

Afraid of getting rich without getting famous was more to the point. Stewart’s plan was to sell a tabloid story to the highest bidder, then write a best seller and auction the movie rights. He wanted to meet with Maxx all right, but not for a shakedown. He wanted an interview. He called an editor at *Esquire* who called Teddy Maxx’s agent. Two afternoons later, Stewart and Beth stood at the door of a sprawling ’50s ranch-style house in an exclusive enclave a shout west of downtown.

The Scotch 80s. A neighborhood built on old money, in the only city in America where mid-century success could be defined as old money. A quiet neighborhood that made you forget you were in the desert, lush with greenery and sheltered by the shade of mature landscape. Homes large and architecturally pleasing. Individual with character. Diametrically opposite the beige stucco cookie cutter with the ripped-up floorboards in which Stewart and Beth had grown up.

It was April and the trees were near full bloom, cushioning against the noise pollution of bordering thoroughfares. The soothing perfume of honeysuckle wafted through the

neighborhood, which still stood proud even after many of Las Vegas' first families had traded up to opulent golf course mansions in newly fabricated suburbs. Colossal displays of pomposity landscaped with sterile rock and dotted with saplings that figured as an 8/5 underdog that they would mature to provide shade for the next generation.

These new communities had status, but lacked the class and character of the Scotch 80s. Even the roof rats that had found their way to these new suburbs inside truckloads of transplanted palm trees were not in the same league as the football-sized vermin that had earlier colonized the Scotch 80s. Feasting on the fallen fruit of backyard pomegranate and apricot trees and rotted bits of gourmet delight culled from the trash. Fat and sassy amid the lush foliage, these rats were living large. An aspiration of the two people standing at Teddy Maxx's front door, though these rats each had a decidedly different agenda of how they were going to hit the jackpot.

A housekeeper showed Stewart and Beth into the den. Dark leather furniture and a stone fireplace that burned despite the early spring. Window to the pool. Oak-paneled walls adorned with framed memories of half a century in Las Vegas. Photographs of Maxx with movie stars and mobsters. Presidents and kings. Proclamations of gratitude from a dozen charities and community organizations.

Teddy Maxx energized the room with a show biz sincerity as he entered and shook Stewart's hand. "Stewart Crane. A pleasure to meet you," the singer smiled through teeth that were better than perfect. Hair dyed jet black and a silver medallion hanging from his neck. Cued by his agent to lay just the right compliment on the interviewer. "I absolutely loved that piece you did a few months back about hip hop on Wall Street."

"My sister, Beth. She's a big fan. I hope you don't mind that I brought her along."

Again the smile as Maxx checked out the clinging mini-dress under Beth's open biker jacket. He kissed her hand.

What a suck-up, Stewart thought as he sat opposite the man who clung to false hope in a town where dinosaurs in black tie had been long ago replaced by slick production shows and hot young stars of the moment. But it wasn't too far into their conversation that Stewart changed his opinion of Teddy Maxx, as beneath the veneer he found the singer to be a regular guy.

He clicked on his recorder and listened with fascination as Maxx reminisced about his early days on the Strip. Of how he was just a teenager when he opened for Danny Thomas at the Sands. For Jack Benny at the Flamingo. For Ernie Kovacs at the Tropicana. Lost his virginity to an aging but still sexy Marlene Dietrich in her suite at the Riviera, then a week later deflowered a young Ann-Margret in the rain on the fourth green of the Desert Inn Country Club.

Stewart was enrapt as he listened to Maxx paint an intimate portrait of a Las Vegas before his time, but he had not forgotten that he was there for a reason. “What do you know about a place called the Six Palms Motel?”

“Never heard of it.”

“You made a snuff film there, you fucking pervert!” Beth had no patience for this tap dance. She removed a vial of cocaine from the pocket of her jacket and snuck a quick blast.

“Stewart Crane.” Maxx leaned back in his chair, annoyed with himself for not figuring the shakedown angle sooner. “Son of that bloodsucker Davy Crane.”

“Don’t mean to interrupt,” called the cheery voice of Bunny Maxx as she walked into the den. Pushing seventy. Still pretty with a happy smile. Red hair sprayed into place. “Can I get you folks some lemonade? I just made a pitcher for the kids.”

Maxx looked out the window with pride at his grandchildren splashing in the pool. Even for all his show business accomplishments he had never put career ahead of family, and he and Bunny had a good life. Married forty-eight years and they were still in love. He stood up and offered to give her a hand.

A moment later Maxx returned alone with the lemonade and a plate of cookies. “People today can be pretty forgiving. Look at that Hugh Grant fellow. Caught in the act and all the public did was make him a movie star.” He sat down. Took a sip of lemonade.

“It sure would be nice to be back working on the Strip. Maybe a good scandal is just what I need.”

“We don’t buy the bluff, old man.” Beth’s patience was wearing thin. “And besides, Hugh Grant didn’t kill anybody.”

“Neither did I.”

Stewart was through wasting time as well. “You know we have the film. Let’s have the story.”

“The Six Palms was out near the end of the Strip across from McCarran Field. It was a whorehouse run by a fellow named Charlie Crane, your uncle, who pimped out teenagers fresh off the bus with the promise that he could get them jobs as showgirls. When they wanted out, he kept them in his stable by threatening to tell their families back home that they were prostitutes. He had hidden cameras in some of the rooms, which made it a slick blackmail set-up. He liked to film weird sex acts. Sometimes with celebrities.”

“Like Sinatra and Lawford.”

“Those guys were never out there.”

“I’ve got them on film.”

“That’s the curse of Frank Sinatra. He got credit for everything, but he also got blamed for everything.”

“He’s on the film.”

“Look closer. That was me with two guys from the orchestra at the Dunes. Top names like Frank had all the crazy broads they

could handle at the hotel. He never went near a creep like Charlie Crane.”

Stewart’s story had lost the Rat Pack angle, but he still had Maxx. Tried to piece together the big picture. “How was our dad involved?”

“Your Uncle Charlie tried to blackmail a popular young singer with that film, but certain guys from Cleveland had an interest in my future so they dug him a hole in the desert.”

“Fuck that!” Beth tapped some blow into the cap of the vial and snorted deeply into each nostril. “As long as we have the film, I’m not afraid of you or anybody else.”

“That’s exactly what your dad said. Even after Charlie was whacked, Davy had the balls to walk right up to me one night at the Sands and tell me the score. The Cleveland crew wanted to plant him next to Charlie, but I was worried that maybe he’d given the film to someone else to hold for him. He wasn’t asking for a lot, so I paid. Years later, he even had the nerve to make me sponsor him for membership in the country club.”

Beth pointed to the framed accolades that crowded the wall of Maxx’s den, a straight-up challenge to the fading star who still had so much to lose. “You’re gonna pay again. And this time it *will* be a lot.”

Maxx looked out the window at his grandchildren playing in the pool. “Bunny and I have a good life. Don’t underestimate how far I’d go to protect it.”

“The only way you can do that is with cash.”

Maxx looked at the recorder. At Stewart. “Didn’t you explain to your sister that if you write this story, she’ll have nothing to blackmail me with?”

Stewart needed to close this deal fast. “You’re right about the public being forgiving. But that’s only with people who are forthcoming, not looking for sympathy after they get caught. Let me write this story from your point of view and I guarantee you’ll be back headlining on the Strip.”

“By telling the world you’re a pervert.” Beth was not about to let her brother double cross her out of the inheritance to which she was entitled. “You want those kids out there to know what a sick fuck their grandfather is? I want a million dollars! Now and in cash! And a hundred grand every month ’til you die!”

“Your dad never asked for that kind of money.”

“And he died broke. I want cash. Now.”

Maxx looked at Stewart. “Is that what you say?”

“Pay her or don’t pay her. I’m going to write this story either way.”

Contention hit the brakes as they heard footsteps coming down the hall. It was Bunny. She walked into the den and handed her husband the film shot so many years ago at the Six Palms Motel.

Maxx unwound a couple feet of film and held it up to the window, confirming it to be the genuine article. “I figured that

if you two amateurs had this, odds were it was somewhere in Davy Crane's house. Bunny made one call. The boys found it in five minutes."

Stewart glanced at his recorder. "It doesn't matter. I've got all I need right here."

"There's no sound on this film, but you can still feel the chilling terror of the cowboy's screams as the sharp steel slices through his flesh." Maxx stood over Stewart, eyes glaring black with hate at the man who threatened to take away all he held dear. "You write one word and I guarantee you'll spend the rest of your life pissing through a tube."

Stewart ejected the flashdrive from his recorder.

Beth was terrified as she knew that this time it was no bluff. In fear for her life she tried to back away but Maxx slammed her hard against the wall. Pinned her wrists to the oak, his blood cold as he leaned his face against hers. "And mutilation is a walk in the park compared to the obscenity the boys will inflict on you. They'll chain you up like an animal and violate that hot little body in ways more disgusting than you could ever imagine. So vile and hideous that you'll be begging for a bullet in the head."

Beth struggled to get away, but no matter how hard she fought could not free herself. She raised her leg and tried to knee him in the balls, but the unrelenting Maxx grabbed her face like a melon and smashed her skull against the wall. Dazed and defenseless, she prayed for the knockout punch that would end her horror.

But the man whose life she had threatened to ruin was satisfied that his message had been delivered. He backed off and allowed Beth to escape his grasp. Rubber legged she fell to the floor, then quickly scrambled to her feet and ran out the door, her brother right behind her.

Teddy Maxx tossed the film and the flashdrive onto the fire, then put his arm around his wife of forty-eight years and walked out to the pool. Tossed a beach ball to his youngest grandson. He and Bunny had a good life.