

The First Two Pages of “Fly Me to the Morgue” by Lisa Q. Mathews
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An Essay by Lisa Q. Mathews

When I wrote “Fly Me to the Morgue,” the world was in lockdown. I hoped to entertain readers with a lighthearted mystery involving a Frank Sinatra impersonator from New York City who opens an Italian restaurant-slash-lounge in rural New Hampshire (think Grover’s Corners in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, but present-day). I didn’t initially realize that the story of Joey Romano and his family, narrated by his college-age niece Nikki, included a shadowy character I hadn’t invited to the party. Perhaps the title of the anthology in which it appears, *Mystery Most Diabolical*, had something to do with that.

The story opens with obvious nods (nothing about Uncle Joey is subtle) to the songs “New York, New York” and “Luck be a Lady.” The changing times to which Nikki refers could be long-faded musical memories, the new societal landscape, or our post-pandemic lives—possibly all three:

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 ideal 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.

We soon learn that Uncle Joey and his brother Carmine strongly disagree on the theme of their new venture:

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.

Practical Nikki remains above the growing chaos. She is a keen observer of both events and people, especially her eccentric family members. Here is her frank but affectionate description of her uncle:

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.

Nikki isn’t bitter about her new life, even though she’s the one holding everything together for both the restaurant and her family:

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."

Nikki drops another mention of stingy Uncle Carmine, who is the picture of a moustache-twirling silent movie villain, and hints that her mother isn't much of a chef. Romano's is clearly in dire straits. Could the arrival of a limo from the dazzling metropolis of Manchester, NH—"Manchvegas" to the locals—lead to Uncle Joey's big break?

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.

The characters and crises continue to build—by the end of Page Two we still haven’t met the entire Romano family yet—until a horrifying murder brings Uncle Joey’s big performance to an abrupt halt. Of course it is up to Nikki to solve the crime and pick up the pieces for her family. But there may be two killers in “Fly Me to the Morgue”—and one of them kills dreams.

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Lisa Q. Mathews is the author of the *Ladies Smythe & Westin Mysteries* (Carina Press/Harlequin). A former Nancy Drew editor and Executive Editor at Random House, she also wrote many pseudonymous books for children and young adults, including the *Lizzie McGuire Mysteries*. She is a founding member of the Chicks on the Case blog and also a member of Sisters in Crime, Mystery Writers of America and International Thriller Writers. Lisa lives with her family in New Hampshire. Please visit her website at LisaQMathews.com.