

Fifteen minutes later Nick strolled in his front door with a plan. “It wasn’t me! Augie Rizzo kept pestering me...asking me questions and stuff. What was I supposed to do? He’s the one that did it...got us in trouble.” Right in the middle of explaining it all, the phone on the kitchen wall rang. Mrs. Castagno spoke into the receiver while eyeing her son:

“I understand, Miss Alice, if he and the Rizzo boy were misbehaving...” She even resorted to calling her neighbor *Miss Alice* to underscore the seriousness of the matter. “If he was acting up, you had every right to keep him. It’s quite all right... I know just what you mean...you can’t leave them alone for two minutes, sometimes. Well, thanks for calling and letting me know.”

Mrs. Castagno hung up the phone and, with a mixture of disappointment and resignation, peered at her son’s face. “When are you going to learn?”

“*What?*”

“Don’t give me *what!* You know damn well what. That was your teacher. Honestly, they ought to give that woman a medal...having to put up with you kids.”

“But everybody in class was talking and stuff.”

“Don’t give me that! She said you and the Rizzo boy were out of your desks. And I don’t care what everybody else was doing. If everybody else jumped off a bridge, would you do it, too?” Mrs. Castagno loved to sling that one around, the sharpest zinger from her arsenal of clichés. “As if I don’t have enough to deal with, now I’m getting calls from your teacher. And what’s that on your shirt?”

Nicky looked down the front of his shirt and pulled at the cloth marked with a small blue stain. His mother leaned in for a closer look. “Is that ink? How did that get on there?”

Nicky shrugged and continued to stare at the stain.

“Well, it didn’t get there by itself! I’m not sure that’ll come out. Now you might need another shirt for school. I swear, Nicky, you’d try the patience of a saint.

“And I better not find dirty clothes all over that bedroom floor,” she shouted as he tried to slink off. “If I have to pick up your clothes *one more time*... Put them in the hamper! Is that too much to ask? I tell you until I’m blue in the face, and it doesn’t make a damn bit of difference.

“Oh, that’s funny, is it? Keep it up, Nicky...you just keep it up. Honest to God, I might as well talk to the wall for all the good it does.”

That one did it.

“OK, Buster! We’ll see how funny it is when your father gets home.”

All of a sudden, a different alarm. “Is that a bug?”

Nick spun around. “Where?”

“There,” –pointing at the floor.

“It’s just a piece of dirt,” Nick reported, happy for the change of subject.

“Are you sure? That better not be an ant. I don’t want bugs in here.”

“It’s just a little piece of dirt,” Nick repeated.

“Well, pick it up and throw it away.”

Nicky tossed the false alarm in the trash and left the kitchen fully aware of the fate awaiting him. Bobby made sure of it. “Boy, are you gonna get it.”

Both brothers were all too familiar with the worst-case scenario. Instead, Nick tried to imagine a best-case scenario. Miracles happen! Maybe he’d get lucky. Maybe Dad would be in a good mood, had a good day, solved a big case. So he raised a little ruckus in school—no big deal. Boys being boys. A few harsh words, a stern warning, that’s all that’s needed. But why try to kid himself? Nick knew the score. That phone call was embarrassing, a humiliation. He’d have to pay a higher price. His father dealt in hard currency.