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Grandkid to the Gangster

Author Chris W. Knight followed his family line back to the notorious Al Capone and lived to tell of it

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Thirteen is a difficult age for anyone. But imagine if your beloved dad drops dead in your arms, leaving you at the mercy of your abusive mother. Then, a few months later, you learn from a phone conversation with your father's best friend that Dad was the son of Al Capone.

Not exactly a "Happy Days" childhood for Chris W. Knight. News that he was a generation removed from the most notorious crime boss in the annals of American history hit him like a St. Valentine's Day special delivery from his grandpa. But he was able to overcome all the trauma and unhappiness to earn an MBA and find success in real estate.

For two decades, the lifelong New Jersey resident wondered whether the tale of his lineage was true -- essentially that Capone had fathered Bill Knight with a woman other than his wife, then somehow hid his identity and had others bring him up. Then Chris Knight decided to find out. *Son of Scarface: A Memoir by the Grandson of Al Capone* recounts his efforts to trace his roots to the criminal mastermind who in the Roaring Twenties was the uncrowned king of Cicero, then Chicago.

Q. *How sure are you at this point that it's true that you are Scarface Al's grandson?*

A. One hundred percent, without a doubt. This kind of thing you just don't make up. For me, my dad died in my arms and told me before he died that he had another identity as a child, that he couldn't talk about it but if he did it would make my head spin. He told me about the house in Florida where he spent some of his childhood.

Q. *Would you be disappointed if you were somehow presented with proof positive that you were not related?*

A. I would have to seriously take into consideration how they came to that conclusion, and I would only believe it if they took the DNA straight from his body right out of the ground and spliced the DNA right in front of me. Anybody can swipe anything when it comes to DNA.

Q. *Are there any developments since the book was published concerning the Capone lineage?*

A. The book's been out a month and a half. I just finished doing the launch in Florida [at Al's vacation home]. The word is out. I've had two conversations with a grandson of my father's brother, Albert Francis, a.k.a. Sonny. His family's been supportive. He said he saw a lot in my story and in me, that there is a strong connection. He's deciding whether to submit to a DNA test. He told me that as long as I didn't reveal his real identity or where he lived, he wouldn't shoot me [laughs].

Q. *Do you see any irony in the fact that your father was the son of such a notorious man, yet your mother was the parent who was emotionally and physically abusive toward you and your sister?*

A. That's something that I was thinking, that my mom is probably on the same level as Al Capone. Sometimes I wonder if she has syphilis [the disease that killed Al and may have been passed on to both Sonny and Bill] because she's very irrational. I can see why it's said that people marry someone who reminds them of their parents. It is ironic to see my mother's behavior is a mirror image of Al's.

Q. *Is it difficult to admit the Capone heritage?*

A. He's definitely a legend in American history. The bad side of Capone was that he was one of America's most notorious mob bosses. But I think my grandfather was also a kind and generous person to a lot of families. He ran soup kitchens during the Depression. People say that if you knew him, he would try to help you.

Q. *Has your relationship with your mother been affected by your quest?*

A. This past Christmas I forced myself to go and visit my mom, and even though she has her moments of irrationalness, she can be serious. She hasn't read the book, but she thought it would be good if I could put a positive twist on it and develop the theme of telling people to use courage and use the pain of my childhood to move forward to continue the search to reconnect with my father.

Q. *You mention a "gay chromosome" and speculate that Al himself may have been gay, as you are. How has that theory been received?*

A. In speaking with a few historians and reading up on Al and looking at myself, I realized that I am very similar to Al, not only in looks but in attitude and friendliness and the generous side of me. A few historians have said there were rumors that he was bisexual or gay. I heard he had a very soft voice like me. He always surrounded himself with 20 very handsome bodyguards. He never lived with his wife, so the thought had crossed my mind that there could have been a gay gene there.