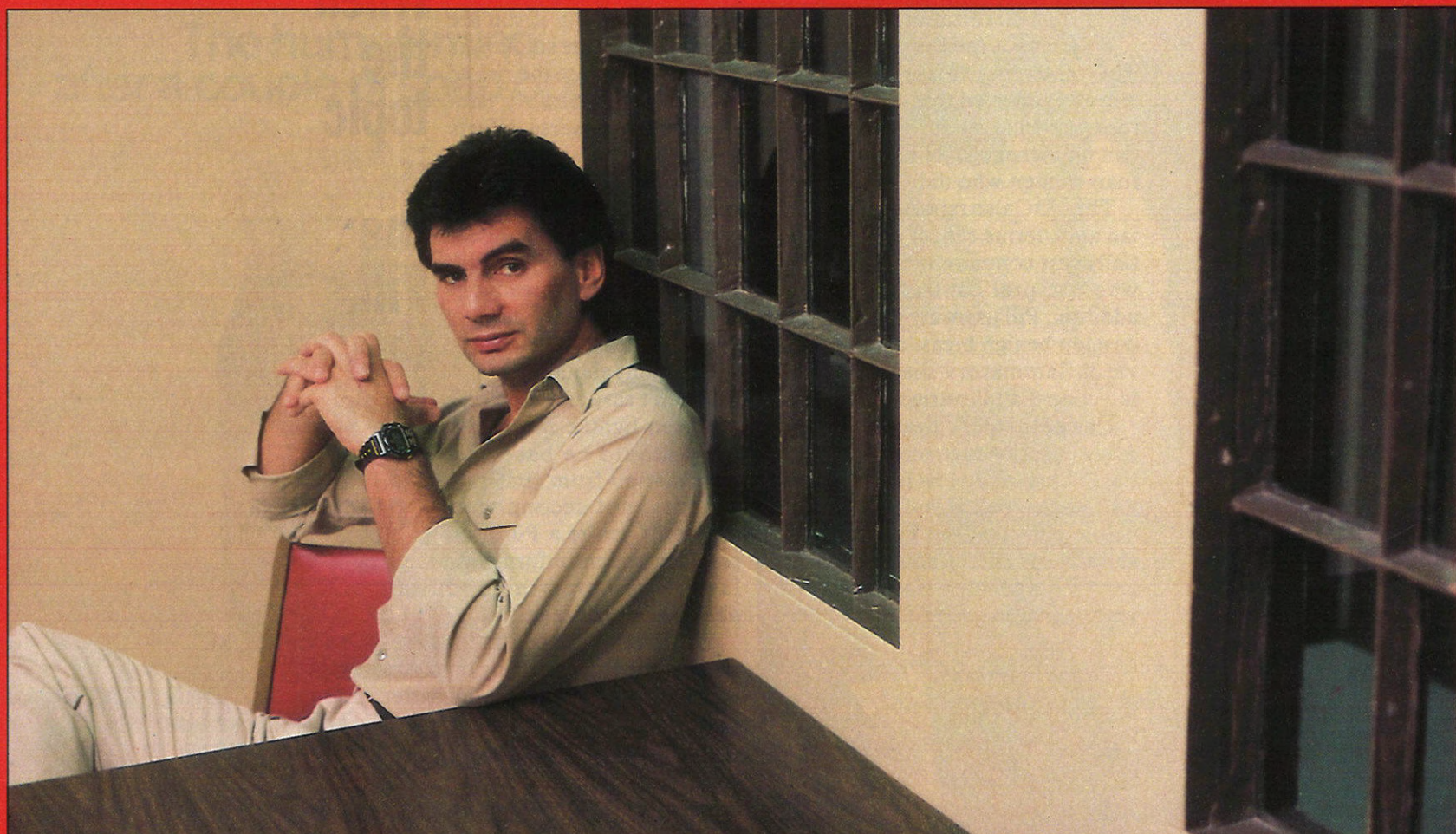


QUITTING the MAFIA

THE MOB'S
YOUNG GENIUS
SAYS HE
WANTS OUT



ALEX WEBB/MAGNUM

Far from the plush offices and nightclubs he's accustomed to, Franzese conducts his business in a barren interview room at a federal prison in Los Angeles. "Especially after *The Godfather* came out," he says, "I had more deals than I knew what to do with. People came to me and figured they could use my power or my influence."

by Edward Barnes and William Shebar

I have only one choice. I have to get out and get away. This "thing" is on its way out. I definitely believe that. The government has made a decision that they are going to bury organized crime. They are going to bury any alleged Mafia guys. I'm finished as far as I'm concerned. I became too high-profile. If they are going to get me, they are going to destroy me.

There's an old saying that the only way to leave the Mafia is in a coffin. Members are pledged to a lifetime of secrecy, and to quit would be to arouse suspicion that you are cooperating with the police or federal agents. Such breaches of faith the mob punishes with death.

Michael Franzese says he's willing to take that risk. He will not betray his former crime associates and then disappear into the federal witness protection program. Franzese, currently in prison in California, expects to be paroled in a year or two. If he holds to what he has promised in exclusive interviews with LIFE, it will mark the first time that a high-ranking member of the Mafia will publicly walk away from his past.

While most law enforcement officials are cautious about Franzese's vow to go straight, they agree that it can be seen as one more sign of the unraveling of the Mafia under pressure. Ronald Goldstock, the director of the New York State Organized Crime Task Force, says, "Each time something like this happens, it's significant: The first time somebody admits the existence of the mob, the first time somebody turns state's evidence, the first time somebody wears a wire, the first time somebody says publicly it's over—they're all important. You might say each one is a nail in the coffin."

At 34 years old, Michael Franzese has often been compared to Michael Corleone, the fictional character so brilliantly portrayed by Al Pacino in *The Godfather*. However, his character is real; his story is true; his life is filled with all of the intrigue, glamour and suspense that made *The Godfather* such a huge success.

Michael Franzese has captured the attention of the media throughout the country. He is alleged to be part of a lifestyle that has become American folklore. LIFE is currently preparing a story on his life, a fascinating story that needs to be told.

—from a packet of background material prepared by Franzese's accountant in Los Angeles.

It is true that the story of Michael Franzese is fascinating, but the full truth of the story is impossible to tell. One thing is certain: These

pages will be included in Franzese's self-promoting packet. His clippings quote prosecutors identifying him as a "capo in the Colombo family," the "heir apparent" in the organized crime hierarchy or, more aptly, the "Yuppie boss" typical of the "new breed" of mobster. But even as he cultivates the publicity, Michael disputes these characterizations. He admits to a life of crime—white-collar crime, not Mafia crime. And Michael's accountant explains the thick file of press stories as simply a means to help Franzese reestablish himself as a legitimate Hollywood producer and a script consultant for movies on the Mafia.

Franzese has reason to consider a career move. He was indicted five times between 1973 and 1984, escaping conviction each time, but in 1986 he pleaded guilty to racketeering. His sentence was 10 years. Celebrated gangbuster Rudolph Giuliani, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern Dis-

'I AM WILLING TO ADMIT CERTAIN THINGS, BUT I'M NOT INTERESTED IN POINTING FINGERS'

trict of New York, was one of those chasing Franzese. "The Mafia is a thing of the past," Giuliani says. "A lot of people within the Mafia don't realize it. Maybe he realized it."

Indeed, the government's successes on the mob front have been conspicuous in the 1980s. Thanks to electronic surveillance, willing informants and a battery of new legal tools, most of the heads of New York's crime families are presently in jail. The membership is aging, and discipline has broken down as untried mobsters seek to move into the leadership vacuum. Asians and South Americans, with their high-powered drug operations, are grabbing the greater share of the criminal trade.

Michael Franzese once seemed to represent the future of the Mafia in America. His education (three years of college), his financial acumen, his urbane manner and good looks made him a natural for white-collar crime. Engaging bankers and corporate executives in a wide variety of financial scams, he pioneered new areas of influence for the mob: financial services, movies, the gasoline industry. By the age of 33, he was believed to be one of the biggest money earners in the history of the Mafia, bringing in millions of dollars a week. He wasn't a muscle guy. Franzese used

the aura of the mob to get what he wanted from the business world, and he used the profits of the business world to rise within the mob. He had the dubious distinction of being the youngest capo on *Fortune* magazine's 1986 chart of "The 50 Biggest Mafia Bosses."

The fact that Michael comes from the modern generation—an underworld baby boomer—is not enough to explain his apostasy. He idolizes his father John "Sonny" Franzese, reputedly a durable and powerful member of the Colombo crime family. As an adopted stepson, Michael seemed to have been driven to emulate Sonny all the more passionately. But lately a more powerful force may be helping to pull Franzese away from the mob: love. His 1985 marriage to Cammy Garcia, a born-again Christian now 24, has clearly affected his view of the future. In a sense there are two Michaels—Sonny's boy and Cammy's man—each

struggling to get the upper hand.

For the last year Franzese has been mulling things over at the Terminal Island penitentiary, a medium-security facility near Los Angeles. He describes his cell as "twelve square feet, smaller than my closet at home." The cell is actually a room in the honor wing, so the door is never locked—a reward for his good behavior. "We make the best prisoners," he says, with a shrug.

Michael has business-length brown hair, cold eyes, a chin that suggests vulnerability. He is always well groomed and keeps himself in good physical shape by exercising in the prison weight room. He works as head clerk in the prison training office for 38 cents an hour, a rate about \$5,000 less than he's used to. But he has hardly lost his drive. He spends a great deal of time planning movie deals and figuring out how to pay the U.S. government the unprecedented \$15 million restitution he agreed to in his plea bargain. Franzese's name is frequently blared over the prison loudspeaker to announce a visit from a lawyer or accountant.

Nurture rather than nature seems to have been responsible for Michael's criminality. His real father, a man named Frank Grillo, was not known to be associated with organized crime. Franzese's mother di-

vorced him when Michael was an infant and married Sonny Franzese, the alleged "enforcer" of New York's Colombo crime family. Sonny is said by prosecutors to have committed dozens of murders, though they were able to jail him only for conspiring to rob banks. While Sonny was in prison (he has been behind bars for 11 of the last 17 years), a Colombo associate rumored to be seeing Michael's mother, Tina, was found murdered—his genitals stuffed in his mouth. (Tina herself was recently arrested and charged with credit card fraud.)

In Michael's childhood memories FBI agents and police are constantly parked in cars outside his Roslyn, L.I., home, waiting to follow his family wherever it went.

One time we were playing ball in the street, and the ball rolled down by the car of a Nassau County detective. I went to pick it up, and he pointed to his gun and said, "I just want you to know that this is going to be for your father if he gets out of line." Crazy guy.

Sonny evidently doted on Michael, favoring him over his two natural sons. When Michael was in his teens, his father began taking him to the Copacabana nightclub in New York City, where the elder Franzese met friends and conducted business.

We always had a ringside table. He would know most of the acts that were playing, and they would come and sit with us: Dionne Warwick, Don Rickles, Tom Jones, Bobby Darin. We never had to order food—they'd just bring out a little bit of everything. It was royal treatment all the way.

Both parents, Michael says, tried to discourage him from a career in crime. He would go to school and become a doctor, they hoped. But during Michael's sophomore year at college on Long Island, Sonny began a 50-year prison term, and Michael took it upon himself to get his father released. He tracked down witnesses he believed had framed Sonny under coercion from the FBI and tried to convince them to recant. Almost every day for six months he picketed the FBI building in New York with other members of the newly formed Italian-American Civil Rights League. He carried a sign that read: "I am a victim of FBI gestapo tactics. My father was framed for 50 years." In 1970 Michael was arrested, for the first time, for scuffling with policemen who he says taunted him during a demonstration. College seemed increasingly irrelevant. Finally, he visited his father in prison to seek his approval for a different career.

I sat down and I told him, "Look, I have to make some money. I got to try to help you." And he said, "Well, I didn't know how long you were going to last in school because I seen that spirit in you." He said, "As long as you are going to be

on the street and things like that, well, you might as well know certain things and know my friends."

Sonny's boy was no ordinary soldier. He turned his brains to scams and swindles, using two auto dealerships he acquired in the mid-'70s as a base of operations. He defrauded the Beneficial Commercial Corporation of \$580,000 worth of "floor plan loans," which auto dealers obtain to buy new cars from manufacturers. Once he got the cars, Franzese sold them and kept the money instead of repaying Beneficial. He succeeded in getting loan after loan because he had the collaboration of a Beneficial vice president named Gerard Nocera. This was to be Michael's modus operandi: conspire with a corrupt insider to bleed a company or a union.

Beginning in the early 1980s, he and Anthony Tomasso, the president of a security guards' union, misappropriated over a half million dollars from its health and welfare fund and took thousands in kickbacks from the guards' employers. Franzese bilked large corporations, too, including General Motors and Citicorp. Jerry Bernstein, a former prosecutor with the Justice Department's Organized Crime Strike Force in Brooklyn, who made a specialty of pursuing Franzese, says, "Michael's real brilliance was that he was able to attract busi-

nessmen who played on the edge."

As his reputation grew, Franzese gathered a crew of about 40 underlings. Bernstein recalls that Franzese closed down the Casablanca restaurant in Syosset, L.I., every Monday night to hold court. At the time, Bernstein says, the fashion among the gang was to wear crushed velvet jogging suits and gold chains. Anthony Tomasso showed up wearing the same burgundy-colored jogging suit as the boss. Franzese took him aside and admonished him: "I'm not going to send you home tonight—but next time you're going to have to change."

In his biggest scam of all, Franzese teamed up with Lawrence Iorizzo, president of a company called Vantage Petroleum. The pair cheated federal, state and local authorities out of an estimated \$1 billion in gasoline excise taxes from 1981 to 1985. Iorizzo would supply gasoline wholesale, while Michael supplied the men to run independent gas stations and sell the rest of the fuel to established retailers. The gas was cheap, so nobody complained. And it could not be tracked, for the books showed a daisy chain of dummy companies, each making a paper sale to the next one in the chain, until the entire tax bill for the fuel had been transferred to a "burnout" company. This consisted of no more than an empty office; an

unwitting "corporate principal," usually an illegal alien, had been paid to sign the incorporation papers. By the time tax agents arrived, the company would have been declared bankrupt and a new daisy chain formed.

I remember the first time Iorizzo comes in with three boxes, these little crates. He says, "It's a couple weeks' take—about \$270,000 or \$280,000." All the money smelled like gasoline. You know, I used to say to him, "Get this cleaned up for me." And as a matter of fact, I tried it a few times myself. I washed it just to see if I could get the odor off of it. And once or twice I put it in the refrigerator next to some baking soda just to see if that would do it. Really, we had some experiences. There was a lot of cash laundered.

Iorizzo, a man of grotesque appetite, weighed more than 400 pounds and could down nine pizzas at a sitting. In 1984, after being convicted on a related gas-fraud charge, he fled to Panama. Captured and returned ("I guess I forgot to pay somebody," he later said), he agreed to testify against Franzese. The case would eventually put Michael in prison. Iorizzo is hiding in the witness protection program, living somewhere with a new identity. Michael is scornful of informers like Iorizzo; he says the program encourages them to lie in exchange for favors.

I think Iorizzo is going to live the rest of his life in fear. He'll have to pay for this in his own mind. I believe he was very upset that I only got ten years, because Iorizzo was really a punk as far as anything inside of him. He feels that when I get out, he might have a problem.

In 1980 Franzese began using his Mafia profits to become involved in the movie industry. He has produced four B movies, the last being *Knights of the City*, a 1986 gang musical described as a break-dance version of *West Side Story*. When Franzese's company, Miami Gold, set up shop in south Florida to make the film, Miami Beach gave Franzese the key to the city and made him an honorary policeman. Church officials gave him a Bible blessed by the Pope. Both church and state were shocked when it was revealed that Franzese had been indicted for loan-sharking in New York.

If *Knights of the City* was the final scene of Franzese's criminal career, it was the opening chapter of his love story with cast dancer Cammy Garcia. At the time, Franzese was married, with three children on Long Island. (Because of the jealousies involved, Franzese will say no more than this about his first wife.)

Sitting in their spacious two-bedroom condo on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, Cammy bears no resemblance to the dutiful wife in →

'THE POINT IS,
WHATEVER LIFE I
LIVED IN THE PAST
I'M LEAVING
BEHIND ME'



JIM PEPLER/NEWSDAY

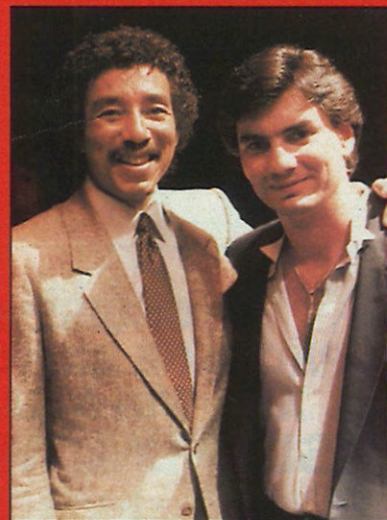
At 22, Michael was arrested for extortion. Charges were later reduced.



Cammy and Michael cuddle during a break on the set of *Knights of the City*.



Michael's wedding—300 people were there—was "small by our standards."

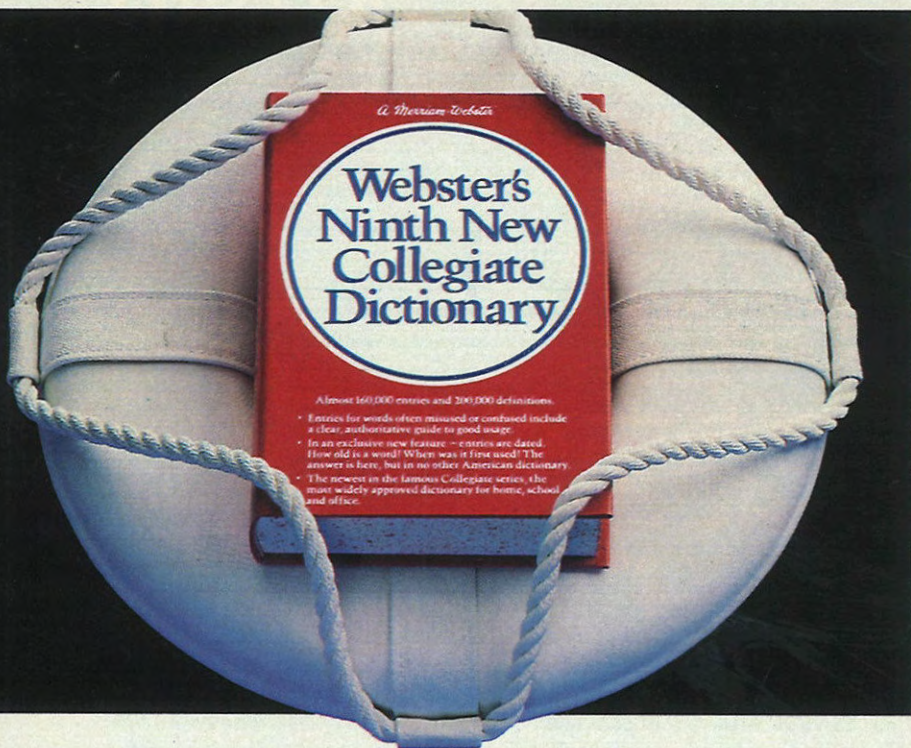


Singer Smokey Robinson hosted a talent contest in *Knights of the City*.



NEWSDAY

Parents John and Christina Franzese leave Michael's 1985 bail hearing.



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Mafia movies. She is a strong-willed figure, confident of her ability to influence Michael. Federal agents say they have seen the mob boss turn into a pussycat in her presence. "He would do anything for me," she says proudly.

The apartment has a room with parquet floors and mirrors on the walls so that Cammy can practice her jazz dancing and ballet. Except for going to dance classes, she spends her days taking care of two-year-old Miguella, who has Michael's eyes and oval face, and nine-month-old Amanda, who looks more like her mother.

The daughter of a building contractor and a bilingual schoolteacher, Cammy grew up in Anaheim, south of Los Angeles. In 1982 she enrolled at California State University in Fullerton but left in the middle of her sophomore year to join Dance Machine, the group that was hired to perform in *Knights of the City*.

Of their courtship Cammy remembers that at first she ignored "King Michael," as she called him. "Who did this guy think he was?" But one night at a club, she says, "Michael rearranged everybody at the table so he could sit next to me. We have been together ever since. He tells me if I had talked to him earlier, I could have had a better part in the movie."

Cammy loved the favors and attention she received as Michael's girlfriend but was uneasy. "Always there was something about him I wanted to know. Sometimes he would just stare into space. I would say, 'What's wrong?' He would answer, 'I can't say.'" She recalls that when they watched *The Godfather* together on their VCR, "Michael explained why some of the things in the movie happened and why other things were never done."

In January 1985 the two were

married in the chapel of the Circus Circus casino in Las Vegas. The wedding was hasty, for **Franzese** was fighting a loan-sharking charge brought by Rudy Giuliani in New York. After he was acquitted, Cammy and Michael celebrated by holding the ceremony again, this time for scores of relatives.

Settled now in Los Angeles, **Franzese** resumed his "business" contacts. Cammy became frightened by the late-night calls summoning him to meetings. "People are supposed to start work at nine a.m., not at three in the morning," Cammy says. "Once in Florida we went to Disney World and he used every pay phone in the park." Finally, **Franzese's** new wife laid down the law: Either he would quit his criminal dealings or she would leave him.

Although **Franzese** was indicted again that December, he had every reason to be confident. None of his prior legal scrapes had ended in conviction. From the start this case was different. Special prosecutor Jerry Bernstein had stayed with the Brooklyn strike force three years longer than he had intended in order to get **Franzese**.

"It was my encounter with the Great White Whale," says Bernstein, now in private practice. His office walls are decorated with courtroom sketches of **Franzese** and he facing each other. Bernstein's first coup was to have **Franzese** held without bail. Michael was remanded to the Metropolitan Correctional Center as pretrial motions were argued. It was his first experience behind bars with no possibility of bail. The leading figures of the five major **Mafia** families of New York were in the same prison, awaiting trials of their own.

I had more friends at MCC than I had on the streets. And seeing what everybody was going through, seeing ➔

'MICHAEL TOOK THE PLEA FOR ME'



Cammy says she finally gave her husband an ultimatum. "I love you but I'm going crazy. If this is how our life together is going to be, I can't do it."

ALEX WEBB/MAGNUM

Two Of A Kind



Three Of A Kind



Full House



Las Vegas

The American Way To Play

the sentences that were being handed down, the witnesses, starting to turn over and become informants, I had to say, "What do I need this for? Why do I constantly have to be living with the law hanging over my back?"

Michael says Cammy's love gave him the final push he needed to turn away from the mob. When Cammy says, "No, God gave him that strength," Franzese's reply is: "Then, he knew a good way to go about it."

Franzese struck his bargain with Bernstein. He accepted the sentence and the \$15 million restitution. In exchange he won immunity from prosecution on crimes that might be revealed by ongoing investigations in seven other jurisdictions. The one exception was murder, but the government stipulated that "this office does not now have evidence" of Michael Franzese's involvement in any such crime.

As part of the agreement, Michael was able to serve his time near his new home. For two months in 1986 he stayed in a federal halfway house; the condition was that he pay the cost of the federal marshals assigned to watch him. Cammy recalls this period as their happiest time, for Michael could see her and the baby regularly. But then Franzese bounced the marshals' check, and the judge, annoyed that Michael's name and face were showing up in the papers and on TV when he was supposed to be dealing with his lawyers, ordered him to the penitentiary.

How Michael is to pay what he owes is still being negotiated. He will forfeit real estate holdings, including a Long Island mansion, that are worth \$4.7 million, and he has turned over his residuals from *Knights of the City*. He hopes the government will settle for a percentage of his future earnings in Hollywood until the rest of his debt is paid. While he has sworn under oath that he has no other money stashed away, "Even my own family doesn't believe me," he admits.

Is Michael Franzese still a mafioso? Yes and no. He defends the "people I share a lifestyle with." He argues that the Mafia can be a constructive force for family values, perhaps even a political force. "Maybe we could be a party of our own, run for the presidency," he says in all earnestness. Yet he still believes in the Mafia code that murder is justified on a "point of honor."

If somebody were to dishonor my wife or my child, I would view it as something that I had to take into my own hands. I don't see why I have to go to the police. As a man, I would feel that it was an obligation that I had to take care of. And I would have to be prepared in my own mind to kill this guy. This is a basic principle.

Cammy is apprehensive. She

knows there will be temptations for Michael to go back to his old life when he is free. "If I had the choice of having him out of jail in New York or in jail here [California], I'd choose here. I've told him that. He says, "Yeah, you aren't the one in jail." "

If a friend comes out and wants to talk to me and meet for dinner or something, I would do it. I'm not going to turn my back on friends—I don't think the government or anybody has the right to tell somebody to do that. If I see a friendly nature in guys that are invited down from New York and if I can help them in any way and there are no problems involved, I'm going to do that. But as far as getting involved in any business or any activities, I just won't. And people are going to have to understand that. If they don't and something more comes out of it, I'll have to deal with it, that's all.

It is not hard to find those that doubt Franzese's pledge to stay clean. Bernstein is one. Edward McDonald, Bernstein's ex-boss on the federal Organized Crime Strike Force in Brooklyn, sees a ploy. "If he is able to persuade people in law enforcement or government that he is sincere," says McDonald, "he could get favorable treatment from parole authorities and be released from prison sooner. If and when he is released, the amount of scrutiny might be reduced. There will be less pressure."

On the other hand, Rudy Giuliani thinks his defection might be sincere. "You should take it at face value," he advises, "and hope that it is true. If it isn't, we are going to find out about it." Giuliani points out that if Michael's announcement is a ruse, it is one that is not likely to go over well with the mob. "Even if it is being done for some complex purposes, these people are not complex enough to understand it. I think essentially it is a rejection of their rules. And they are not going to be happy about it." One former FBI agent who followed Franzese's early career offers a more blunt prediction: "He will get whacked."

Then again, maybe not, argues prosecutor Ronald Goldstock. "If the mob is smart, it will leave him alone," he says. "For their own self-preservation they should let a person like that walk away. If they don't let him do it, if they threaten him, he's forced to go into the witness protection program. Which means he'll give other people up. So I would suspect he'll succeed with whatever he's doing."

Finally, this possibility: Michael himself does not know his intentions. He is Cammy's husband, but he's Sonny's boy. Sonny is still in prison, scheduled for release in 1994. We asked Franzese whether he would be drawn back into the underworld if his father were to be killed. "I don't know," he said. "I'd really have to sit down and think about it." □