

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Two Kinds of Italians*

Staten Island, September 8, 1987.

7:12 a.m.

“Yo, Damien Cavalieri!” Tony yelled. “What are you doin’? Reading a fuckin’ book?”

It was the first day of sixth grade. Tony Nocerino and I were making our maiden voyage to a new institution — Intermediate School 420: The Robert Loggia School — on a classic yellow school bus. Standing in the aisle, Tony leaned against the pine green seat in front of me, staring disdainfully down at my copy of Peter Benchley’s *Jaws*. Seated, I looked up at him with irritation, wondering if I could telepathically command him to go away. My fellow eleven-year-old, olive-skinned southern Italian could easily have been my cousin, and yet, the conspicuous difference between our outfits overshadowed our shared ethnicity. I was a nerdy pre-teen in inexpensive dress clothes: a gray, pin-striped suit, purple dress shirt, purple tie, and black leather shoes. Tony was a neighborhood jock in designer athletic wear: a black-and-white tank top, black Z. Cavaricci pants, white Reebok high-tops, and a gold necklace with a Christ head pendant. Mom had paid less for my entire dress ensemble than what Tony’s electrician dad had laid out for his sneakers alone. Having grown up poor in a Brooklyn tenement, Mom lived well below her means even after educating herself into the lower-middle-class and becoming a tenured college composition instructor. Only my cousin’s wedding prodded Mom to buy me a nice suit from London Fog instead of contenting herself with getting something from one of her usual haunts: K-Mart or Ross Dress for Less. The nicest clothes I owned, this suit was definitely the perfect outfit to wear on my first day at a new school. Or so I thought.

When I had boarded the school bus at seven a.m., I quietly chose a seat in a middle row. Tony and his crew of eight raucous Italian American boys sauntered in last, whooping, hollering, and slapping each other five. They filled out the back seats and immediately started blasting Andrew Dice Clay’s dirty nursery rhyme “Hickory Dickory Dock” from a silver boom box, guffawing at every filthy punchline.

When Tony caught my eye and waved at me to join his posse, I demurred. “Thanks, man,” I said. “I’m good here.” That was rude, but I couldn’t help it. My unreliable, ambivert temperament leaned heavily towards introverted today. Crass and operatically misogynist, the Andrew Dice Clay cassette wasn’t encouraging me to join Tony’s group, either. Also, these nine neighborhood toughs who lived one block over from me had always made me uncomfortable. Though we were all eleven, they had moved on to covering the neighborhood in shaving cream and eggs on Halloween three years ago. I remained a guileless trick-or-treater. Two of our memorable interactions involved them covering my body with welts by bombarding me with a tightly packed balls of snow and slush three winters back, and their snatching the Decepticon Soundwave out of my hands and fleeing for the hills eighteen months ago. Since these unkind goofballs were the only Italians I knew who were not blood relations, they made me feel alienated from my own people. I wanted to feel ethnic solidarity with them but did not on any level. Ultimately, we were connected only by a mutual love of cold cuts and shared attraction to fellow Staten Islander Alyssa Milano from *Who’s the Boss?*

I closed my *Jaws* paperback and looked up. Tony was madder than ever at me for twice failing to join his band of Merry Men. *How do I placate him? Aha!* “I dig sitting up here with the cute Thai girls, Tony.” I glimpsed Tuesday Phapant scowling in her seat across the aisle out of the corner of my eye. She turned her red beret and green wool pea coat on me, clutching her black schoolbag to her chest. The bag had a volleyball-sized Donnie Wahlberg pin stuck to it.

Tony snorted at my attempt to change the subject. “Every time I bike past your block, you’re readin’ outside. Was it some girl book last week?”

“*Anne of Avonlea.*”

“Yeah! That’s it! How faggy are you, readin’ that?”

“I saw the *WonderWorks* TV show and wanted to pump Megan Follows, so I thought I’d read the book.” This was my lame attempt to speak the language of the Staten Island philistine.

Tony was unmoved. “Buy her *Playboy* instead of readin’ a book wit’ no pictures!”

Dammit. I had taken liberties with Megan Follows by discussing her in gutter terms and betrayed my cousin Gabriel, who I suspected was gay, by being quick to deny “effeminacy.” Even if Gabriel were not gay, I had betrayed my favorite singer, Elton John. Since Tony was still glowering at me, I had thrown Megan and Elton under the yellow school bus for nothing. “But if I ever meet her in person, I can tell her I read her book and sweep her off her feet!” I smiled crookedly, hoping to come off “evil” to Tony. Did my curly hair and arched, satanic eyebrows give me a “Joker” appearance? No. I flatter myself. My head is too round and mouth too small for me to resemble the pointy-chinned, grotesquely grinning Batman villain. Still, I remained hopeful my gray suit and purple shirt were at least Joker-esque.

Tony shook his head at today’s book. “Now you’re into *Jaws*? Just watch da movie!”

“That movie is *the most awesome movie ever*, so I’m reading the book.” I owned the movie on video disk, the soundtrack on vinyl, an “Amity Means Friendship” t-shirt, a set of trading cards, and an official game where the object was to hook human bones and other detritus out of a plastic Great White’s mouth before it snapped shut on you. Thanks to my love of the shark, the film, Roy Scheider’s heroic Police Chief Martin Brody, and Richard Dreyfus’ marine biologist Matt Hooper, I wanted to grow up to be a marine biologist. At nine, I informed my parents of my intention to spend my life in a shark cage observing my favorite animals: manta rays, seahorses, and hammerhead sharks. My backup career plan involving riding Aquaman’s giant seahorse across the world’s oceans, because how cool was that dang seahorse? I had been a mere seven-years-old when I wandered away from my parents in the department store Korvettes. Since I couldn’t find them, I strode up to the front entrance customer service desk and told a woman nursing a migraine I was lost. My parents were relieved and confused when, a few frantic minutes after misplacing me, they heard her voice over the intercom: “Will the parents of a Chief Martin Brody come to customer service?” Relieved, not angry, my parents retrieved me. They waited until we got to the car to ask why I hadn’t told the lady my real name. “That’s boring!” I declared. “*Anyone else* would do that. Besides, *Chief Brody is awesome!*” I did not tell Tony this Korvettes story. He

was unworthy of this long-cherished family anecdote.

"Readin' is for homework!" Tony yelled. "Who reads for fun?"

"It isn't like I'm reading a calculus textbook to unwind," I groused. "*Jaws* is about *a shark that eats people!* The book is very different. First off, Mayor Vaughn owes the Mafia a ton of money he borrowed to develop Amity real estate. If he closes the beaches, he goes bankrupt. They'll shoot him. He flees town at the end. Might not make it. And Mrs. Brody and Hooper have crazy sex. Didja know vaginas can get wet, open, and soak car passenger seats? I didn't!"

"Just watch the film!"

"Unless you're seeing a version I haven't, there's no wet vaginas in the movie! Okay, sure, the shark is barely in the book, and that makes it boring sometimes. Still, the real villains are Mayor Vaughn, the local business owners, the Mafia, and something called 'the economy.' According to 'the economy,' you gotta leave the beaches open, no matter what — even if the shark eats lots of women and children. God orders the shark to keep killing tourists, and not go away like Hooper expects, to punish the townspeople for worshipping money. And you know the 'bigger boat' scene? In the book, the shark could have taken Brody's head off when it popped up out of the water. Instead, it floats there, grinning at him, like, 'You can't win! I work for God.' Also, the shark 'knows' that Brody wants to close the beaches, so it spares him. Wild."

Tony made his hands imitate me talking. "You talk too much. Yap, yap, yap."

I waved Tony away. "I give up. If Mrs. Brody's wet, open vagina didn't interest you, I don't know why I wasted my time telling you the shark works for God."

The Italians in the back flipped the cassette over in their tape deck and hit play on the ghetto blaster for a second dose of the Diceman's nursery rhymes. One guy with spiked blonde Billy Idol hair met my eyes and flicked his chin at me. Changing subjects with the flipped cassette, Tony pointed at my brass Timex wristwatch, complete with imitation leather band and Roman numerals on its face. "What's with that watch? Why ain't it digital?"

"Digital is ugly, man," I scoffed. "I like pretty shit." *If this watch annoys him, I hope he never sees my brass pocket watch with the 19<sup>th</sup>-*

*century train engraved on the casing.*

Tony shuffled from one foot to the other, embarrassed. "You know how to read hands?"

I stared up at him, incredulous. "You don't?"

"Course not! I only use digital. What's with the hands?"

"It's James Bond stylin', man. Chicks sure dig guys who wear Timex watches." *Unreal. He thinks my formal clothes are more expensive than his, but he's wearing the high-end brands.*

No longer cowed, Tony puffed up his chest again. "You're stylin'? Is that why you're wearin' a fuckin' suit today? With your fancy watch?"

This would be the moment where my friend Mitchell Sherry would suggest I challenge Tony to a fistfight. Mitchell would want me to say, "You wanna fight, Tony? We can do it right here, right now!" Throw a gauntlet and scare the enemy away. The big problem would be, what if Tony called my bluff and I'd have to fight? Then I would have escalated a verbal brawl to a physical one. A red belt in Tae Kwon Do, I took martial arts for the meditation, exercise, and the beautiful-and-deadly Master Yumi Park, who I had a hard-to-make-heads-or-tails-of attraction to. Master Park might not approve of my using Tae Kwon Do against Tony, since it was intended for defensive use only. Also, I had sparred in the dojo often but had never been in a street fight. Instead of escalating the argument, I appealed to Tony's better angels. "I didn't wear this suit just to piss you off. I didn't know I was gonna be the only idiot dressed up."

"You're such a faggot, Damien Cavalieri, with your gray suit and purple shirt. And your watch and your book. Ain't that just like a Jew? Sittin' readin' with his Jew nose in a book?"

Tony amused and irritated me by not realizing I was Italian. Unfortunately, I focused on that when I should have been appalled by his blatant anti-Semitism. "You think I'm Jewish?"

Tony held up his index finger, a gentleman detective in tea cozy mystery novel declaring he knows the murder's identity. "With that nose of yours? What else could you be but Jewish?"

I placed a self-conscious finger on the tip of my nose. Even pre-pubescent and round-faced, I had strong features giving me a distinctive, ethnic appearance: brown eyes, arched eyebrows, a prominent nose,

big ears that did not stick out, and puffed up, dark brown 1980s hair. No wonder Tony couldn't determine my ethnicity. I resembled two screen icons — the Neapolitan American actor Ralph Macchio, who played Daniel LaRusso in *The Karate Kid*, and the Jewish comedian Harold Ramis, who played Egon Spengler in *Ghostbusters*. (I would later learn that I kinda looked like Michael Imperioli as well, but he had yet to achieve fame as Christopher Moltisanti on *The Sopranos* when I was a kid.) The Macchio and Ramis resemblances were oddly appropriate. I had Daniel LaRusso's East Coast accent, feckless charm, angry temperament, and budding interest in girls and martial arts. I had Egon Spengler's bookishness, introversion, over-seriousness, and tendency to monologue at length about arcane interests to a disengaged audience. With slight adjustments to my wardrobe, I could emphasize my resemblance to either actor. If I wore my glasses and a lab coat and held a Twinkie aloft, I could make a mean Egon Spengler on Halloween. If I put in my contact lenses, wore my white Tae Kwon Do uniform, and emphasized my light Brooklyn accent, I could get a big reaction as Daniel LaRusso at another Halloween party. Like Macchio, I was Neapolitan American. Even though I was not Jewish, like Ramis, I grew up living on an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Staten Island and was educated alongside Reformed Jewish students in gifted classrooms in the Willowbrook and New Springville public schools of "the forgotten borough" of New York City. I also immersed myself in Jewish popular culture. I adored the comic books of Will Eisner, Jack Kirby, and Stan Lee, the comedy of Neil Simon, the Marx Brothers, and Henny Youngman, and a broad array of Jewish American movies and literary works. Thanks to this extended cultural engagement, I picked up Jewish speech patterns, mannerisms, and clothing styles, and developed an ersatz Jewish sense of humor. I was "half-Italian" by nature and "half-Jewish" by nurture.

The defining problem of my life — my "fake Italian" background and confused cultural identity — was the natural and unintentional consequence of my childhood not resembling my mother's in any respect. Mom was raised an Italian Catholic in a WWII and post-war era Italian American enclave in Brooklyn. She grew up saturated in the cultural mores of the home country, though her attending public

schools meant she was not sheltered from exposure to children from other ethnic groups. Knowing I would not grow up in an Italian enclave, Mom made a point of raising me as an Italian who was proud of my heritage. She fostered in me an appreciation of Italian food, religion, culture, and history. Irony of ironies, despite growing up a proud Italian American, I cultivated close relationships with *absolutely no Italian Americans. Zero. Nada. Zilch.* One would think that growing up in Staten Island — allegedly the place in the world with the highest concentration of Italians outside of Italy itself — would make it inevitable that I would have dozens of Italian friends and acquaintances throughout the borough. Nope. For whatever reason, I was either not placed in the same classes as other Italians or, if I did come across another Italian, we would either be indifferent or hostile to each other. Instead of knowing Italian kids at school, I knew Jewish kids, Irish kids, and Greek kids. My best friend in kindergarten, first, and second grade was the one Black boy in my class: Doug Brooks. Doug shared my love of LEGO brick medieval castle construction sets and hoped to grow up to be an architect.

Meeting no other Italians my age for my earliest school years, I had no model for how to act like an Italian kid. During my formative years, I “acted Italian” at home and “acted Jewish” when I went to school. At school, I showcased a vaudeville sense of humor influenced by all the Jewish comedians I adored from old radio shows, films, stand-up specials, and Saturday Night Live. I used Jewish exclamations like “Oy vey!”, sang the lyrics to “Hava Nagila” when I was nervous, and dressed in khakis, button-down shirts, and loafers — outfits caricatured as “Jewish.”

Of course, my unconscious talent for mimicry and longing to feel a part of something larger than myself meant that I also picked up interests, tastes, and mannerisms from kids from other ethnic backgrounds as well. Thanks to my Black, Greek, and Irish friends, I learned to become fascinated by Black Power movements and Sidney Poitier films, gyros, Greek history and philosophy, Irish drinking songs, and peace and justice efforts in Northern Ireland. The natural consequence of my soaking up these cultural influences in pre-school, kindergarten, and grades one through five is that, by time I wound

up in the same classes as other Italians in sixth grade, they had no idea what in God's name my ethnicity was. I signaled all sorts of incompatible political, religious, and ethnic affiliations. The harrowing bus conversation on the first day of sixth grade would be the first of many awkward moments when I would greet Italian kids by saying "L'Chaim," "word up!" or "wassup, my nigga?" and they'd look at me and say, "You sure you're Italian? You talk like a Black or a Jew. Fucking fugazi Italian."

The bus struck a pothole and almost bowled Tony over. After he recovered, I said, "First off, don't say stuff like that about Jews. That ain't right. Secondly, I'm Italian." I tensed as Tony's entourage abandoned Andrew Dice Clay to stand beside him.

Tony massaged his jaw. "You shittin' me? You're Italian?"

"My name ends in a vowel!" I didn't roll my eyes. My tone did that for me. "Names that end in a vowel are Italian!"

"Billy Idol" added, in a Brooklyn-professor voice, "Except for 'ski,' which is Polish."

A Sicilian kid with brown hair entered the discussion sounding like a soft-spoken NPR commentator. "What's confusing is 'Shapiro' ends in a vowel, and that one is Jewish."

"Exception that proves the rule," I declared. "My last name is fucking Italian! *Cavalieri*."

Tony couldn't have looked more astonished if he were a cave man who had just discovered the secret of making fire. "Yeah? You can tell what someone is by their last name?"

I waved my arms about, agitated, as I talked. Many Italians literally *conduct* their conversations, but I do it even more than most. "You think Baroness Paula von Gunther is a German? Mr. Patrick O'Donnell is Irish? And what about Hector Ramirez? Where's he from?"

"Billy Idol" belly laughed. "Kathmandu! Tony, everyone knows this shit!"

"I never heard any of this in my life," Tony said defensively. Then he looked at me with fresh, approving eyes. "Wow! You're a paisan! What parta Italy you from?"

"I ain't telling you, stunad! 'Cuz if I wuz Jewish, you wouldn't like me." When I got angry, the Brooklyn undercurrent of my accent got



stronger and I sounded more like the Thing in *The Fantastic Four* — the world's coolest Brooklyn Jewish superhero.

"Aw, come on, man." Tony punched me on the shoulder. "Don't be like that."

I wished I had stood up earlier in the conversation. I was still sitting, like a mook. "I'm Italian and alla sudden we're friends now? Begone. Leave me with *Jaws* and Tuesday Phapant!"

Across the aisle, Tuesday snorted.

Tony slapped himself on the chest, Tarzan introducing himself to Jane. "I'm Sicilian."

"Congratulations." This was the perfect opportunity for me to test-drive an insult I'd heard my grandfather once toss at my pugnacious Aunt Beatrice. "You know what they say, Tony. There's two kinds of Italians: Italians and Sicilians." (*I swear, I had nothing against Sicilians. I just wasn't gonna leave that insult holstered.*)

Tony's smile disappeared. "Where are you from, then? Naples?"

"Good guess."

"Fuck you, ya Neapolitan piece of shit."

I waved him away. "Ah, get outta here, *cafone*."

Tony slapped his hand on a bus seat in frustration. "I don't get you, Damien. You're one of us, yet you make fun of Sicilians, and you're sitting here in a suit readin' like a mameluke."

"You don't read, and I do and *I'm* the mameluke?"

"Not for nuthin', but real men don't read. If you're readin', you're either a fag or a Jew."

Billy Idol sucked his teeth. "Hey, man, my mom is Jewish. Lay off with that, willya?"

Tony gaped. "No way! Does that mean 'Bobby Mammolito' is a Jewish name?"

"No, you idiot. Mammolito is an Italian last name. My dad's name. My mom's maiden name is Ashkenazi. That's Jewish. I'm a pizza bagel." Bobby put his arm around Tony, leading him and the others away.

"Shana Tova!" I yelled. I glanced at Tuesday and smirked. "I think we're alone now."

"Great," she muttered.

*Man, she has a real attitude problem! What turned her against me?*

*The ethnic slurs? Sexist remarks? Cursing? Homophobia?* I may have postponed my first fistfight of the year, but Tuesday's disapproval was the price I paid for my daring escape. "Must be your lucky day."

Tuesday whirled on me. "Is that a crack about my name?"

*Dammit.* "I didn't mean anything by it. I couldn't. It's not Tuesday. It's Monday."

Huffy, Tuesday slouched and crossed her arms against her chest. "Are you going to read me the *Jaws* scene about Mrs. Body's wet vagina?"

I paused. "You don't *really* want me to do that, right?"

She sighed again. "I can't believe you're sitting next to me."

I supposed she had reason to lack sympathy for me, given my crack about cute Thai girls, but she carried her annoyance a bit far, given the verbal beating I'd taken in front of her. Could I say something to mollify her? "May I ask how you got your name?"

"How else? I was born on a Tuesday, jackass!"

"But that's not an answer!" I shot back. "I'm not named 'Thursday.' My uncle's middle name isn't 'Boxing Day'!"

"Oh, do be quiet! Your incessant nonsense talk makes my eardrums hurt."

"Well, I'm sorry!" Now it was my turn to slouch in my chair, cross my arms against my chest, and look huffy. "I guess this just isn't your day."