

CHAPTER 1

In none of his fantasies did Louie Fiore ever see himself as the owner of a shoe repair store on Cropsey Avenue in Brooklyn, not Louis Fiore, no sir; he had big dreams! What happened, Louie? What happened? he asks himself. Here he is, fifty-five years old, fixing shoes. What happened? Louie ponders the question again this day.

He gazes now at a distorted image of himself in the cracked, time speckled mirror hanging on the wall over the sink in the tiny, smelly lavatory at the rear of his shoe store. His fingers explore the tiny crows' feet beginning to appear in the corners of his eyes. He examines the gray hairs showing at his temples. With an audible sigh he makes his way to the front of the dusty shop through cluttered aisles of discarded cobbler paraphernalia and numerous pairs of repaired but abandoned shoes. .

Up front, a young man works at the noisy shoe lathe, guiding a size 12 men's Oxford over the grinding and then the polishing wheel. He applies brown dye to the leather edge of the sole, then gives it a final polish. It is apparent he is related to Louie, although younger and better looking. It is as if Louie is the rough mold, and this young man the

completed model. He is a dark, wiry and almost handsome young man of twenty-five. Frankie Fiore is the older of Louie's two sons.

Generally speaking, Frankie does a good job in the store and Louie knows and appreciates the help his son gives him when he needs it. Occasionally though, when he isn't paying attention to the work at hand, or perhaps paying too much attention to some cute female passing the store window, Frankie pays the price by scorching a finger or two on one of the polishing wheels. Louie dons his apron as he moves behind the counter. Above the noise of the machines he mutters to Frankie, "How long has he been here?" indicating a man sitting, reading a newspaper at one of the three shoe-shine stations facing the counter. "He just came in. Why?"

"Nothin', nothin'. I haven't seen him in a while, I just wonder what he wants?"

Frankie shrugs and continues working on the shoes.

Louie is about to address the man, when a customer enters the store.

"Hello, Louie," she greets him. "Are my shoes ready?"

"I've got 'em right here, Mrs. Frantangelo." He takes a pair of lady's pumps from a shelf and places them in a recycled supermarket bag.

"A pair of lifts. That's seven fifty."

He takes the ten-dollar bill the woman hands him, counts out her change, and watches her exit the store. He then turns his attention to the man seated at the shoe shine station.

"What d'ya say, Jimmy? Long time no see," he calls out above the din of the machine.

Ignoring the greeting, Jimmy Provitera tosses down the paper.

"Them fuckin Mets ain't worth a shit," he says.

"What'd they beat ya for?" Louie asks.

"Naw, nothin' much, a few bucks. That's not the point. They just stink like shit this year."

Jimmy steps down from the shoe shine stand and moves closer to the counter where Frankie is working. "What's the sense in havin' these shoe shine stands here if you don't have nobody to shine shoes?" he says.

"They were here when I bought the store," says Louie, sounding irritated. "Hey Frankie," Jimmy calls out over the noise. "Come on over here and shine my shoes."

"My son doesn't shine shoes, Jimmy! What are you doin'?" asks Louie, the color rising in his face.

"I'm just messin' with ya, Louie. Calm down." Then turning to Frankie he says, "Frankie, turn off the machine for a minute, there's somethin' I wanna ask ya."

Frankie looks to his father for acquiescence. Louie nods. Frankie hits the button and the machine begins its whining slowdown.

"Ah, that's better," says Jimmy. "Look, I thought ya might wanna make a few bucks - that is, if it's OK with the Old Man," he says, looking toward Louie.

Louie stops what he's doing. "What's he gotta do?" he asks.

"Look, look, the Old Man is getting' all fuckin' nervous. It's nothin'. I just want'im to make a delivery for me, that's all." Jimmy puts a hand on Louie's shoulder. "Don't get your balls in a tangle, Louie."

"What kind of delivery?" Louie persists.

Frankie wipes the shoe dye from his hands and steps around the counter.

"C'mon, Pop, what're you doin'? This ain't the first time I've worked for Jimmy."

"Dat's right," Jimmy chimes in. "Besides, don't ya think he's old enough to make up his own mind? For Chris' sake, Louie, I'm his Cumpare. Ya think I'm gonna hurt the kid? How old are ya now, Frankie?"

"Twenty five."

"Twenty five," Jimmy repeats. "He ain't no fuckin' kid anymore. Use your head and don't worry so much, Louie, you'll have a stroke." Jimmy buttons his jacket and straightens his tie.

"I gotta get goin'," he says as he turns to Frankie. "If the Old Man'll let ya, come by the club this afternoon and I'll fill ya in. I'll catch you guys later," he says as he goes out the door.

Frankie hits the switch on the shoe lathe and goes back to repairing shoes. Glancing over he can't help noticing Louie fidgeting nearby, busying himself by sorting customers' shoes

while mouthing obscenities under his breath. Unable to contain himself, he walks over to his father.

"What's up, Pop?" Frankie asks.

"I know you're a grown man, Frankie and you can make your own decisions, but please, I don't want ya to get involved with Jimmy, he's trouble."

"Why? What do you mean? Didn't you and him grow up together? I always thought you two were pals."

"We grew up together, but we were never pals. We went to the same school, but that was it. We hardly ran into each other." Realizing they were shouting over the roar of the shoe lathe, Frankie shuts down the machine.

"He's my Godfather. How come?" asks Frankie.

"I don't have a good answer. To this day, I don't know why. When the time came for you to be baptized, he told me he'd like to be your Godfather. I guess I didn't know how to say no. Your mother was pissed."

Frankie cocks his head and raises a brow. "I don't get it. What is so bad about having Jimmy as my Godfather?"

"He's not the kind of guy we wanted you to look up to, that's what."

"I hardly ever saw him," Frankie says.

"And were real happy about that," Louie says.

"I ain't stupid, Pop, I can take care of myself."

"I know you can, kid," Louie says. "You're very intelligent. I only wish you woulda finished school. Look how

good your brother Ray's doin', God bless him. Next week he takes the Bar Exam. Would ya believe it? A lawyer in the family."

"Ray's different - For me, school was boring, but you don't have to worry about me, Pop, I'll be okay."

Louie sighs, "I hope so, Frankie, I hope so."