

CHAPTER ONE

When Aunt Carmen died, dignitaries came from all over the country to pay their final respects: Don Carlo from Philadelphia, Don Riccio from Brooklyn, even Don Julius from Cicero, who by that time had half of one lung and a pacemaker. They came in stretch limos and Lincoln Town cars; in Caddies and Chryslers and Pontiacs; spacious sedans with white wall tires, V-8 engines and tinted windows; relics from the past riding in relics from the past; each vehicle polished to a high gleam like the black patent leather shoes that I wore to Sunday mass before my first communion. A long solemn procession gliding silently through the gates of St. Michael's Cemetery, winding along the blacktop road, past Madonnas crying rust colored tears, past alabaster angels with soot covered wings, past a statue of Saint Michael, the Archangel, his face pock-marked by decades of acid rain.

The casket was poised for burial when the gas guzzlers began pulling up, one by one, disgorging the contents of their all leather, quiet-ride, climate controlled, surround-sound interiors; aging strong men, with spider veins, hiatal hernias and swollen ankles, each accompanied by a full compliment of swaggering capos; the next generation of goombas, handsome Italian twenty-somethings with big shoulders and small brains, drop-outs from the school of life, condemned by tradition to follow blindly in their Godfather's footsteps.

My sisters and I had already arrived. We were seated graveside, in folding chairs: first the Twins, holding hands and sniffing quietly into damp wads of Kleenex; next in line, Frances Marie, her face streaked by the tracks of

her tears. Teresa sits on my left, quietly reciting the rosary. She doesn't get all the words right, but I figure the Holy Virgin won't hold it against her. And then there's me, last in the line-up by virtue of age, Zoey, the oldest of the five DeCrescenzo girls; the one most likely to follow in Aunt Carmen's footsteps. So there we sat; five pairs of dark eyes brimming with tears, five pairs of dark eyes gazing in shock at the ostentatious platinum casket that Aunt Carmen picked out for herself a few weeks before she passed.

Uncle Julius is last among the many to exit his vehicle. Weighing in at just under three hundred pounds, he needs all his strength, plus an assist from a particularly muscular meat head, to heave himself out of his El Dorado. I watch impassively as Don Julius plods toward me trailing a portable oxygen tank. Of course, he isn't really my uncle, or my father's uncle or my mother's uncle, or even an uncle-in-law, but uncle sounded better than Godfather on the wire taps, and the name stuck.

"Zoey," he wheezes.

"Uncle Julius."

"You're all grown up."

"No thanks to you."

Uncle Julius shrugs. "Business is business. Your Aunt Carmen, God rest her soul, she understood that."

"She had you by the short hairs, and you knew it. By the way, these are my sisters," I gesture to the four dark-haired twenty-somethings sitting to my

left. “The ones you threatened to whack back when they were still in Brownies.”

My sisters blink back tears and gaze bug-eyed as this enormous old man pulls a filthy handkerchief out of his pocket and blows his bulbous nose.

“Why bring up old wounds? Why today of all days?” wheezes Uncle Julius. “Zoey, you’re young, you got your whole life ahead ‘a you. Why not let by-gones be by-gones?”

In an unexpected show of emotion, Don Julius begins to blub like the porcelain bubbler on the playground at St. Cecilia’s Primary School. My sisters are confused, especially The Twins. They were barely out of diapers when my father was arrested. Teresa and Frances Marie remember the trial, but they don’t know anything about Uncle Julius, or the cannolis, which my Aunt, my mother and I delivered to Cicero that fateful day; the day that was the end of everything that came before, and the beginning of everything that came after.

Suddenly, there’s a lump in my throat, and I have the strongest urge to embrace this scrofulous old man, who is not my uncle but to whom I owe my life, and the lives of my sisters; one of the first to acknowledge how truly magnificent my Aunt Carmen could be when the chips were down. But I resist the temptation because the press is out in force, and I have a multinational food corporation to run. Photographs of me, hugging an aging Mafia Don, who spent twenty of the last thirty years in prison, wouldn’t be good for international trade, except in Italy, but Italy’s broke, along with Greece and

Portugal, so we've moved most of our business to the emerging economies. Instead I reach out, calmly and coolly, with a gloved hand, and shake the trembling, liver-spotted paw of the man who terrified me when I was a child, but who holds no fear for me now.

“Thank you for coming, Uncle Julius. I know Carmen would be pleased.”

Uncle Julius dabs his leaking eyes as he shuffles off trailing his oxygen tank. The goomba assigned to make sure he gets where he's going leans over and whispers into the hairs sprouting from the old man's wax clogged ears, “So, who was this Carmen we gotta come all the way from Cicero for?”

“Smartest broad I ever met,” wheezes Uncle Julius, and then he perks up as a fleeting recollection warms his aged loins, “Nice jugs too.”

I smile as I survey the assembled mourners and I think, too bad Aunt Carmen isn't here, I mean in body and mind, not just in spirit. She'd get a big kick out of this. Aged Godfathers, in mirrored sunglasses, standing shoulder to shoulder with the fine upstanding citizens of Indiana.

Just then Father Clementi catches my eye. I nod to indicate that we're ready to proceed. As he begins intoning the burial ceremony in Latin, it occurs to me that all these powerful men, and formerly powerful men, including the aforementioned Dons, the Mayor of Hammond, the Governor of Indiana, two Congressmen, one Senator, and assorted members of the Chamber of Commerce, are all here today to pay homage to my Aunt Carmen, while secretly thanking God that she was the only one of her kind.

The only “person of interest” who isn’t here is my dad... our dad... Donny DeCrescenzo, the father of the five DeCrescenzo girls, but that isn’t surprising considering our complex family history. It all started more than thirty years ago when Carmen Bonaventura, single, buxom and sassy, moved to Hammond to start her own *panaficio*. For those of you who are not of the Italian persuasion, *panaficio* means bakery.

My Aunt Carmen learned the bakery business the old fashioned way, by doing it. She had uncommon common sense and a knack for making money. Motherless since the age of twelve, Carmen did all the baking for her family. While still in high school, in Brooklyn, she won a bake-off sponsored by the Ladies Auxiliary of the Bed-Sty Chapter of the Knights of Columbus. After graduation she parlayed her bake-off win into a job at the Grimaldi bakery.

By the time she was twenty-five Carmen was managing Grimaldi’s; by thirty she saved enough money to open her own shop. When Carmen announced her intentions, old man Grimaldi pinched her bottom, and gave her an extra ten grand to clear out of Brooklyn.

Hammond, Indiana, a scrappy blue-collar town, twenty-two miles southeast of Chicago, was a perfect fit for Carmen, a young woman with ambition, know-how and a nice set of knockers. Hammond was close enough to Lake Michigan to catch the occasional summer breeze, but not close enough to smell the annual Alewife die-off. Back then the term rust-belt hadn’t been coined; the foundries were belching smoke and fire twenty-four hours a day,

seven days a week, providing steel for Detroit and an endless stream of hungry customers for Carmen.

The Bonaventure Bakery opened on June thirtieth, 1970, in a storefront just off the main drag. Aunt Carmen served her first customer, a second shift steel worker, just after eight in the morning. Wearing a short skirt, a low cut blouse and a bouffant hair-do, Carmen delivered steaming Italian Roast coffee, in an over-sized mug, with complimentary pastry on the side.

“Here we go, one coffee and one almond biscotti.”

“What’d you call that thing?”

“Biscotti. Goes good with coffee.”

Prior to my Aunt’s arrival in Hammond, Krispy Creme was the only game in town. The steel worker looks skeptical. He picks up the biscotti wedge and taps it on the table. “Don’t seem too fresh.”

“It’s supposed to be hard,” Carmen smiles seductively, then leans over the table revealing an ample amount of cleavage. “Of course, you don’t like it hard... you can always dunk it.”

Carmen dips the biscotti in the coffee, then slips the dripping cake into the steel worker’s mouth. The taste, the smell, her bosom, it’s magic. Carmen smiles as she saunters off, mentally calculating the size of the tip. Of course, it wasn’t biscotti that made my Aunt Carmen famous, it was cannolis, but that came later.

In 1970, my father was also an independent entrepreneur. Donny

DeCrescenzo, the oldest of the three DeCrescenzo boys, was born and raised in a small wood frame house, with faded asbestos siding, and peeling paint, located downwind from the smelting plant. As long as Donny could remember, his father came home from work, when he came home from work, covered with grime. After cussing out his wife and kids, he'd cough up rust colored phlegm, then pass out on the sofa with the TV blasting. No way Donny De was going follow in his father's footsteps; Donny De was determined to make something of himself. After carefully considering his options, Donny dropped out of high school and went into business for himself. He ran some numbers, put together a string of skanky hookers, and started providing protection for the merchants of Hammond.

Eventually Donny's activities caught the attention of Don Julius Aiuppa, Godfather of Cicero, Illinois. Fifteen miles north of Hammond, Cicero grew like a cancer on the southwest hip of Chicago. In the 1920s Al Capone moved his operation to Cicero to escape the scrutiny of the Chicago police; Cicero's fate was sealed. In the 1960s, Cicero boasted 190 commercial establishments that served liquor, all of which paid protection to the Aiuppa syndicate, so Donny was understandably pumped when Uncle Julius took an interest in him, never mind said interest had more to do with geography than with any particular virtue that Donny had acquired or displayed.

Situated just off the southwest corner of Lake Michigan, within spitting distance of the state line, Hammond lies smack dab between Interstate 80 and the Tri-State Tollway, making it a major crossroads for commercial traffic

heading north, south, east or west. With so many eighteen-wheelers thundering past twenty-four seven, it was inevitable that a certain amount of inventory would fall off the back of the trucks. Don Julius needed a local rep to divert said inventory to Cicero. Although my Dad wasn't a made-man, and he wasn't a blood relation, he nonetheless became an unofficial extension of the Aiuppa Family, which greatly expanded Donny's estimation of himself. In the end, this relationship proved to be his undoing.

A couple of years after Donny went into business with Don Julius, his younger brothers, Vinny and Gino, got kicked out of Saint Michael's High School for robbing the collection box while waiting in line to make their Maundy Thursday confession. In the DeCrescenzo family, family is family no matter what, so naturally Vinny and Gino went to work for Donny, but Donny's business wasn't exactly flourishing, and splitting the take three ways meant that the brothers DeCrescenzo were always scuffling, even with the extra income from Cicero, so when the grand opening sign went up over the Bonaventure Bakery, Donny, Vinny and Gino made a point of getting there before the competition.

Carmen was perched on a step ladder, behind the glass display case, hanging up a hand-painted banner that read, "Try Carmen's Cannolis," when she heard the bell on the front door ring.

"Gimme a minute," she mumbled, as clear as she could, with several nails in her mouth. "I'll be with ya in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

Carmen's short skirt hiked up even higher as she reached out to give the last nail a few final taps. Donny, Vinny and Gino, generally garrulous to a fault, were rendered speechless by the view from below, which included more than of glimpse Carmen's lacy petti-pants.

"I figured I'd have some free time before the lunch rush, but I guess somebody always needs to be fed. There, that should do it."

Carmen finished hammering, then turned to find three Italian stallions gazing up at her, each slightly slack-jawed, but she only had eyes for the one in the middle. Donny may not have been blessed with top quality gray matter, but he was first in line when masculine beauty was handed out; curly black hair set off smoldering eyes. His jaw, almost perpetually blue with five o'clock shadow, was chiseled like a movie star. Even his shabby fake leather jacket couldn't hide his broad shoulders and rock hard abs. Carmen took Donny in from his head to his toes, and then she smiled - real slow.

It was equally obvious that Donny also liked what he saw, and why not? Carmen was no slouch herself. Her skin was moist and glistening, her bosom flushed from the heat of the kitchen. A lock of hair had fallen loose over her forehead. She brushed it away with the back of her hand, "So what can I do for you boys?"

Donny takes a few steps closer. "Question is, what can we do for you?" He holds out a business card.

Carmen cocks her head, then steps down off the ladder. She puts the hammer back in the tool box, wipes her hands on her apron, then plucks the

card from Donny's fingers and reads it out loud, "The Brothers DeCrescenzo. Your safety is our bizness."

Carmen raises an eyebrow, "Bizness...? Spelled wid a z?"

"What're you some kinda nun?"

Carmen shifts her weight and puts a hand on her hip, "Do I look like a nun?"

Donny's eyes deviate to the plunging neckline of her blouse, "Not with those cream puffs."

Carmen smiles. Donny smiles back. This conversation is going nowhere fast. Gino rolls his eyes. Vinny's out of patience.

"Donny, you may wanna tell the Little Lady why we're here."

Before Donny can speak, Carmen comes to her senses. Donny De was cute, no question, but Carmen wasn't born yesterday; plus she made her bones working a cash register in Brooklyn, the very crucible of organized crime. Carmen had no trouble recognizing extortion when it walked through the door.

"The thing is, Mr. DeCrescenzo..."

"Please, call me Donny. By the way, this here is my brother Vinny, and that there is my little brother Gino. We provide security for some 'a the fine bizness establishments right here in downtown Hammond."

At this point Vinny and Gino fan out, it's part of their well rehearsed intimidation technique. Gino takes a peek through the doorway that leads into the kitchen. "So... you do all your own bakin'?"

“Would I call ‘em Carmen’s cannolis if I didn’t?”

Vinny, hoping to appear nonchalant yet menacing, sucks on a toothpick he keeps in his pocket for just such occasions, “Most likely you do it late at night, after the shop closes. Am I right?”

Carmen shrugs, “I’m waitin’ tables all day.”

“Not a very safe situation,” says Donny, shaking his head. “You could get burgled or even worse.”

“What’s worse?” asks Carmen, like she doesn’t know.

“Say somebody... with a baseball bat... comes in, busts up the tables, breaks all the windows.”

“Somebody like who?”

“Vandals and such,” answers Gino.

“Lotta low lives right here in Hammond,” adds Vinny.

“But you got no need to worry, ‘cause a modest monthly fee, say five hunnert, will absolutely guarantee your security.”

Carmen looks from one DeCrescenzo brother to the next, then says, real sweet, as if butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth, “Thanks, guys. But I got all the protection I need.” She reaches under the cash register and pulls out a thirty-eight. She levels it at Donny, who raises his hands and pedals backwards.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. What’s wid the hardware?”

“I don’t like bein’ strong armed.”

“Strong armed? Vinny, was we strong-armin’ the Little Lady?”

“Certainly not. We was simply assessin’ her potential for risk.

Donny smiles, and shrugs, “Last thing we want is anything bad to happen to you. So, Miss Bonaventure, we got a deal?”

“Yeah, here’s the deal,” Carmen releases the safety and lowers the picture sight, aiming the muzzle of the thirty-eight just below Donny’s belt. “You don’t bust up my shop, I won’t blow off your balls.”

Donny looks down at his private parts, then up into Carmen’s eyes. For a moment Donny’s face darkens... and then, unaccountably, he grins.

So that’s how they met, my father and my Aunt. It was pretty much love at first sight. That night, after the shop closed, Donny had his first taste of Carmen’s cannolis.

The shades are drawn, the lights are out. Donny sits at the café table near the window, his thumbs hooked in his belt, one leg tapping nervously under the red checkered table cloth. He looks around, takes in the decor, then calls out toward the kitchen, “Look, if this ain’t a good time...”

Carmen calls back, “Keep your pants on.”

Wax from a guttering candle, stuck in a Chianti bottle, runs down the side and pools on the table. Donny pokes at it, then sucks in his cheeks as the hot wax burns his sensitive finger. Suddenly Carmen sweeps in from the kitchen carrying a platter piled high with handmade cannolis. Donny sits up straighter, his nostrils flare as the fragrance of the fresh pastry fires up the nerve endings in his basal ganglia. Carmen places the platter on the table.

“Didn’t your ma teach you good things are worth waitin’ for?”

“Mostly my ma didn’t teach me nothin’.”

“It’s never too late to learn.”

Food is a sure-fire way to soften the heart of almost any Italian man, and Carmen had an abundance of culinary weapons at her disposal, in this case, vanilla cannolis made with fresh ground vanilla beans, chocolate cannolis made with imported cocoa and coconut, and the house specialty, pitashio with amaretto liqueur.

“So, tell me, Donny, how you like your cannolis?”

“Same way I like my women. Crisp and crunchy outside, soft and creamy inside.”

Carmen smiles, “Looks like you scored a double bull’s eye tonight.”

Carmen pulls out a chair. She sits down next to Donny, crossing her long shapely legs. Using a knife and fork as if they were tongs, Carmen selects one perfectly golden cannoli from the top of the pile. She transfers it to Donny’s plate, then cuts into it. The tender crust gives way at the first touch of steel, emitting a slight, sensuous crackle. The creamy filling, cooled to exactly 46 degrees Fahrenheit, maintains its integrity as the blade slices cleanly through both filling and shell. Carmen impales the bite-sized chunk, then holds the fork poised in front of Donny’s face, “Open Sesame.”

Like a penitent awaiting a communion wafer from a parish priest, Donny opens his mouth. He leans forward, closing his lips around the fork. Carmen withdraws the utensil, transferring possession of the sweet creamy lump. Donny chews slowly at first, allowing his taste buds time to deliver the good news to his brain; then faster, and faster, as the full impact of the flavor

releases a flood of dopamine into his cerebral cortex. As he chews, Donny's eyes close and he emits small groans of pleasure, "Oh, God. Oh, my God! Dis is fuckin' amazin'. I never, in my life, had a cannoli like this."

"That's 'cause you never had Carmen's Cannolis."

Compelled by insatiable desire, Donny forks a whole vanilla cannoli and takes a bite from one end of the cylindrical shell. The pastry collapses under the force of his jaw, causing the creamy filling to ooze out the back end of the tube. Carmen reaches out and catches the vanilla emission before it hits the table. Donny grabs her wrist and licks it off her fingers. As he savors the complex flavors, the sweetness of cream, the richness of fresh ground vanilla, a series of images flash through his brain: Carmen's lips pressing against his, her nipples erect, red like maraschino cherries, her long legs thrashing the air as their hips slam together in the slam dance of love.

Now, I realize this may seem kind of odd. One minute Donny's eating cannolis, then suddenly he's thinking about sex. Actually, there's a perfectly rational explanation. My father suffers from synesthesia; a neurologically-based condition in which stimulation of one sensory pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experience in a second sensory pathway. People who have this condition are known as synesthetes.

Most of the time synesthesia is associated with autism. In one well recognized case, a man, who couldn't tie his shoes, or manage the drive-thru at McDonald's, but who could play Mozart backwards, while reciting the New York City phone book, reported seeing colors dancing before his mind's eye

whenever he heard music. Another well known synesthete conceived smells as black and white graphs that resembled the skyline of Manhattan. In ordinal linguistic synesthesia, numbers evoke personalities.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that my dad was any kind of savant, but his sensory wiring was definitely unique - every time my father tasted my Aunt Carmen's cannolis, he got hard. Donny DeCrescenzo may have been the first recorded case in medical history of gustatory sexual synesthesia. So, in view of this, it's probably not surprising that while licking the creamy vanilla filling off my Aunt Carmen's fingers, my father suddenly had the urge to throw her onto the café table. But the table was small and not very sturdy, so instead he pulls Carmen onto his lap, then rams his tongue down her throat; reaching under her blouse, he unhooks her bra, his thumbs find her nipples, firm and round like gumballs.

Donny groans as Carmen unbuckles his belt. She slides her sticky fingers down his belly, and takes holds of his throbbing member, in size and shape so like the cannoli that Donny devoured.

"I live over the shop," gasps Carmen between kisses. "The stairs are in the back of the kitchen."

Carmen starts to climb off Donny's lap, but the separation seems unendurable. Unwilling to break the carnal connection, Donny staggers to his feet, Carmen's legs lock around his waist, their lips glue into a sugary kiss.

As he heads through the kitchen, Donny careens into the oven, rattling baking pans and muffin tins, then slams into a storage rack, over-turning a

bag of baking flour that rains down on them like snow. Finally he stumbles into the baking table. Desperate to get on with it, Donny frees one arm, sending mixing bowls and measuring cups crashing to the floor.

Without bothering to take off their clothes, Donny and Carmen have sweet, sticky sex, on the stainless steel table, where Carmen rolled out the dough for the cannolis that worked on Donny like an aphrodisiac. Outside the Bonaventure Bakery, a red neon sign over the entrance blinks cheerfully on and off, “Come again, Come again, Come again.”

Less than ten hours after she threatened to blow off his balls, Carmen Bonaventura knew she had met the one great love of her life. Eleven years later, when I was nine, I saw the proof with my own eyes; my father and my Aunt Carmen, older and wiser, but still deeply in love, gazing at each other, over the top of the same glass display case that stood between them at the moment they met. Anyone who saw the look that I saw would know, as I knew even then, that Carmen Bonaventura and Donny DeCrescenzo were a match made in heaven. The great tragedy of my father’s life, perhaps in all of our lives, was that he temporarily lost sight of that fact.