

Chapter 1

My father kicked his legs up onto the desk. He was wearing handmade leather cowboy boots that matched the beige fedora on his head. A brown cigar hung from his mouth.

The desk was thick oak and brimmed with stacks of papers and contracts of the city's power brokers.

"Tell me about the delivery," he said.

My father's eyes creased at the plume of smoke he blew at Monkey, his main shipment guy, sitting across from him. Monkey was bestowed this name because the man's upper body was powerful and broad, with giant swaths of black furry hair that poked out from his back. He was an industrious worker, but no doubt slowed by a crippled intellect. A flash of panic lit Monkey's eyes.

"Listen, Larry, them guys down at Riverside, they mistook the order for the shoes and coats, not us. We went down there with the rig, the whole damn load, and he said turn back with it. He said he didn't order that much."

Monkey struggled to shift his large frame in the chair. I sunk into the depth of the Italian leather couch, tapping a cigarette into an old-school glass ashtray, and braced for my father's reaction.

"You know what?" Larry Lowe started, his middle-aged limbs springing to life, quickly hovering over Monkey. "I'll have your balls!" His hand shot out like a claw and I swear, he grabbed a fistful of Monkey's potatoes in a vice grip until the man screeched. "You never leave a job without my say-so. Got it?"

"Yes, boss. I got it." Monkey's oblong head wobbled up and down.

"Good." The old man released his grip. "Now, how about a hit of cognac, before I hit the road?" He patted Monkey reassuringly on his hulking shoulders.

"Sure thing, Larry," he said, breathing out in sputtered coughs.

My father ambled over to the counter where he kept his bottles, right next to the couch. I nervously shifted and covered the title of a novel I'd just bought, *The Weight of Love*, fearing he'd belittle me in his familiar refrain of how delicate I was. He hadn't bothered to wipe off his black-smudged fingers, filthy from having opened several crates of garments in the adjacent, cavernous warehouse. He opened the seal on a sleek bottle that looked like it was once the treasure of a fifteenth-century French king. In his private office he coveted fine, unique pieces, including a pair of wood-carved elephants, their ivory tusks gleaming.

"I gotta take a leak," he announced, after pouring a glass for him and Monkey.

Monkey and I glanced at each other. He struck me as an oversized boy, yet one who perfected the tip-toe between awe and fear of my father.

"Larry! Assemblyman Norris on line-eight!" It was Betty, his longtime receptionist on speaker. In the late 1990s, before texts and the days of routine emails, she was the only person who could find him, wherever the hell he was.

Larry emerged and sat back in his giant chair. The leather seemed to groan with exasperation, as if asking its occupant to consider a lighter, gentler touch. "Put him through." He set the cigar down, leaving it to smolder in the ashtray, and lit a cigarette in its place. "Norris, how ya doin'?" He popped the phone off the hook. "I remember that. Yes. But the senate wants your vote to confirm the zoning, so stop blubbering about it. Look, this is a big day—my kid got into law school and I gotta run. I'll see you at the brunch tomorrow. Ciao." He stubbed out the smoke he inhaled and knocked back a shot of the exquisite cognac.

"Monkey, get outta here and fix that order. It can't wait. Let's go, little Lowe," he snapped. "Your mother can't wait either."

We always stopped at the office on the way out at night, leaving the shop, as he called it, and my mother always waited in the car. This time we were late to a dinner in my honor. I grabbed my book, stood up from the couch, and tried to smooth all the fresh creases on my suit slacks.

Earlier, I wouldn't even have made it out of the house if not for my mother. "Mom, what do I wear to this thing?" I asked, holding up a black suit for her examination.

"You going on a hit after dessert? How about a little color? Maybe your father's yellow tie?"

"The one I wore to my Bar Mitzvah?" "You do still have the baby face."

She was right about that. At twenty-two, I still got carded for cigarettes and softcore porn. My slight frame did my face no favors. I closed the door to my bedroom and stripped off the towel. I took stock of my naked body in the mirror. I was relieved to find I had any torso at all.

"Let's go!" my father roared from downstairs.

I surveyed the mess of clothes and whipped up an ensemble: black suit, white shirt, black shoes. To hell with the Bar Mitzvah tie. I'd made it through puberty. I often wondered if manhood would be another story.

After we left the shop, my father slid behind the wheel of his big Caddie. My mother and I sat helplessly while he brought its nose to the back bumper of every car in his way.

"Larry, if I go through the windshield, you do not have permission to borrow my car," my mother said calmly, her small fingers gripping the seat handle. This prospect of a gruesome car wreck was so common over the years that my mother learned to tolerate it. She knew Larry liked to direct traffic. But this time, my father slowed the Caddie down.

We arrived at Carmine's late. The revelers were already there, drinking and chatting around the bar. There were no television sets, and Tony Bennett's rendition of Anything Goes played softly. Large antique lamps glowed warmly over round nightclub tables, and crushed velvet curtains provided privacy.

"Larry, Joanna, Delton, get in here!" Uncle Nate called.

He wasn't my real uncle, just an old friend of the Lowe family. A criminal defense attorney, he was often in the papers with his big-time clients. Growing up, I heard him talk about indictments and verdicts, and while I never understood what those things meant, I always wanted to be just like him someday.

"Hey Nate, do you really need another starch binge?" I jabbed at his paunch.

"Need that hand broken, kid?" Nate retorted, gesturing over his shoulder.

I took note of Nate's entourage, a collection of double chinned wise guys talking quietly among themselves, probably debating the preferred means of body removal, be it land or water.

"How about a song, everybody?" A friend of Nate's, a retired judge, took a seat at an old grand piano. She was feeble and wrinkled, but in her prime had hammered guys so hard at sentencing, prisons closed from decay before their stretches were up.

"Once he finishes law school, he'll be ready for my office," I overheard my father say to Nate. "Then, there'll be a Lowe Family Shoe and Apparel business," he added, finishing another Scotch. "That's the reality. As a lawyer, he'll be dangerous enough to do his own deals."

We took our seats in the dining area set up specially for our party, and snappy busboys placed bottles of sparkling water, red wine, and antipasti platters on the table.

Nicky Denetti lit a cigar. He was Nate's client and the most reputed mobster in the city. He sat across from me, and I stuffed my jittering hands into my pockets. It was hard not to stare at the large divot on his forehead, a switchblade cut he famously took as a kid.

"Nicky, I'd like to introduce my nephew, Delton Lowe," Nate said. "And leave a little food, the kid's actually supposed to grow."

Nicky didn't register Nate's wise-crack, his eyes boring into me. There was no question Nicky made me nervous, though I hungered to know more about his life of nefarious activities.

"This kid ever kiss a girl?" he chuckled through a mouthful of stuffed peppers. Before I could react, those black eyes diverted elsewhere.

"Actually, I heard you had a girl over the house recently," Nate said, dabbing his chin with a napkin tucked at his collar.

"How'd you know that?"

"As a lawyer, you have to find things out for yourself," he said. After a couple bites of lasagna, he looked back at me.

"We talking wedding bells?" "Ha. Not exactly."

"You just put accidental kids in the not-happening pile," Mom interjected, and went back to chatting with the retired judge.

"We just watched old episodes of Family Ties in my room," I said, winking at Nate.

"Appreciate the fact that you even have a bedroom," my father spat into my ear. His voice came out of nowhere. It often felt as if he were omnipresent.

"What do you mean?" I asked. My father leaned toward Nicky, ignoring my question, and whispered something.

"Your father and I slept in the street, coming up, so you wouldn't have to. You hear me, Delton?" Nate said.

"I do." Nate could cross-examine a corpse, I thought. "And they often still do, by choice," my mother added, running a hand through her long hair. She never liked the world my father inhabited. "Delton, honey, you'll be different."

I didn't understand their language, what they were really saying. My father never shared his past, or his concerns, with me. I never knew what made him pace ruts into the floor late at night, when I was growing up. I was older, but as ignorant of his daily life as ever before.

"Hey Larry, that piece of shit assembly guy didn't clear this tenant out on Gun Hill Road. This guy doesn't do what he said he was gonna do, I'll have to do it my way," Nicky said, taking off his cream-and-gold-tinted glasses to put a cold eye on my father.

"Nicky, there's no need to be—" Nate interjected. "Counselor, when something concerns you, with respect

to my affairs, you'll be the first to know. I'm trying to have a conversation here," Nicky said.

"Nothing to worry about, Nicky," my father said. "This is a small thing. It's Jimmy K's property and I just took back his bank note, clearing the way to get his tenant out. I spoke with Assemblyman Norris, and he agreed to go along. The tenant will have no legal recourse in court. It's as good as done."

The velvet curtains of our private dining room opened, and snappy busboys returned to clear the table. Right behind them, Rollie, the longtime owner of Carmine's, leaned over and slung a tomato-stained arm around my shoulder. He then kissed me on the scalp and

clapped sharply for a waiter, who brought a cake with candles, bearing my name in grey frosting. My father put his cigar down, stuck two fingers in his mouth and blew a sharp whistle. Everybody cheered and hollered, and the retired judge shouted, "To Delton! To his future!"

I looked at all the expectant faces. There was no turning back.

"Thank you, everybody!" I yelled, and blew out the candles. Uncle Nate produced a gift, which I unwrapped right away.

A large, leather-bound law dictionary. I flipped through the scuffed tome, its frayed margins filled with illegible written notes.

"That was my first law dictionary, kid. Keep it under your pillow every night for a year, and you'll be talking Latin in your sleep," Nate said, kissing my cheek.

I felt the weight of it in my arms. I immediately thought, this is the first ticket I ever had to Nate and my father's respect. I noticed my mother take a rare sip of wine and struggle to light a cigarette; perhaps she sensed the momentum of this train about to start on its track. She smiled at me in a way only I could see. She never drew attention. It occurred to me that unconditional love did not need to announce itself.

"You'll be in charge of it all one day, little Lowe. What a lucky kid. But don't forget," Larry Lowe took the Cuban cigar out of his mouth, and pointed its stub at me. "It's up to you. Do the right thing and put this education to good use."

The dictionary's alien language intimidated me. Did I belong in law school? I'd scarcely agreed to go in the first place. Yet I had no other plan, and my father could be very convincing. A part of me wanted to run away, but knew I wouldn't. This was my chance to belong in my father's world. Besides, how could I refuse to follow this path, painstakingly cut with his own sacrifices? These were my marching orders. But what had he gotten me into?