

SUNDAY AFTERNOON DINNER

Salvatore Esposito, Anthony Albanese and Christopher Cameron were more than best friends. The seventeen-year-old, high school seniors were distant cousins who had christened themselves the Columbus Avenue Boys as soon as they could speak. They were inseparable.

Their families had lived within spitting distance to each other since before they were born. While Chris Cameron's father was "off the boat Irish," his mother's maiden name was Scallo. Maria was a traditional, Italian-American woman who loved to cook, cherished her children, and adored her husband. Her cousin, Dina had moved to Tuckahoe after her marriage to Gregorio Esposito. Rita Albanese was a cousin of Maria and Dina. Her family had lived in town the longest of the three.

For the better part of three decades, a late afternoon, Sunday meal was the norm. Rectangular tables were set through the dining and living rooms of the Albanese's quaint home, which they had shared with Rita's parents. With fifteen family members feasting on platters of fried veal cutlets, roasted potatoes, escarole and broccoli a carnivore's delight was upon them. The growing teens attempted to outdo each other. Today they were betting on who could put away the most veal cutlets in one sitting.

"Maybe when you're not hung over Cee; today...no chance. Nine cutlets, and I coulda' had four more if I hadn't had three servings of roasted potatoes." Tony, in a black Billy Joel concert T-shirt, raised his arms in a championship gesture.

"Next week, I'll take my title back. No more hard liquor for me." Before he answered, the hung-over teen had waited for his mother and the rest of the women to leave the room, as they cleaned dishes and prepared dessert. "How the heck do people drink eighty proof crap?" Chris inquired of his father and the rest of the men at the table.

Mike Cameron snickered and debriefed Tony and Chris's grandfathers of the events of the prior evening. "Seems my boy thinks he's a big shot. Bit off, or should I say drank off a wee bit more than he could chew, er' swig."

"Being drunk don't make you a man son, only makes boys who think they're men act stupid," Grandpa Joe interjected from the end of the table.

"Hey Chris, you know what we did to galoops who were shitfaced when I was back in Brooklyn?" Gregorio scooped a healthy portion of salad onto his plate. "We'd follow them like a cheetah hunts a wounded animal...Don't be a mark. Be the hunter, not the prey."

Vincent, who was called Poppy, gave a final bit of worldly advice, "Christopher, consider yourself lucky. I hope this was one of those life lessons." He met Joe and Mike's eyes before turning back to Chris. "Don't let this happen again. Besides, if you pull this crap in when you are away at college, you could get a big ass redneck to whip your hide. Sal and Tony won't be by your side."

These weekly dinners had become the setting for therapy sessions, interrogations, judgment and jury for any punishment. No secrets or off-limit topics was the rule. Chris knew he had to get his act together. School and sports had come easy for him, yet he had always been defensive and uncomfortable out of his inner circle. He was a popular student and respected son of Mike and Maria, yet he rarely socialized, budgeted his schedule to the minute with sports, school, homework and making a buck anyway he could. His temper was as ferocious as Sal and Tony's and usually ignited when he had been slighted due to his lack of money, good clothes and other luxuries the kids who lived farther away from the train tracks seemed to have in abundance.

The Columbus Avenue Boys galvanized wherever they went. They shared the same beliefs. The volcanic trio could be dormant or active and steering clear made perfect sense unless they invited you into their private discussions. Many in school had to proceed with caution whenever they were near. One minute, Sal could be telling a joke to a bunch of kids, but if he sensed mocking or skepticism in his direction, watch out. His demeanor would be commanding confronting the poor soul. Tony was perpetually short of cash. For a frugal person, he could not quell his thirst for collecting record albums and thus emptying his pockets of cash. He was hooked on the *Columbia House* record club. After the enticing deal of ten records for one dollar, he had added to his collection of musical artists at a breathtaking pace. To offset the outflow of cash for music, he rabidly chased down delinquent customers who owed him betting sheet.