

## ***Blood of My Brother***

### Prologue

*10:00 AM, July 12, 1967, Newark*

In July of 1967, Jay Cassio, who would be turning five in September, started a pre-kindergarten program at St. Lucy's School on Sheffield Street in Newark, New Jersey's oldest, largest and about to be most turbulent city. At the time, St. Lucy's church and grammar school were at the spiritual and cultural center of the city's First Ward, an enclave of Southern Italians that for sixty years had stubbornly clung to the customs and values of Italy's Campagnia region from whence they and their parents came in the great migration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The school, housed in a nondescript but sturdy brick building next to the beautiful gothic church, started teaching grades K through six to the children of the first wave of Italian immigrants in 1906. Now it drew equal numbers of black and Hispanic boys and girls, their parents looking to the Sisters of Charity as sources of discipline and respect in the ghetto that, as a direct consequence of the mindless placement of a massive public housing project in its midst, the First Ward was fast becoming. An only child, with no cousins, Jay was slow to socialize. Taller than the other boys, he had not been picked on, or challenged; but shy, an involuntary air of isolation about him, neither had he been approached in friendship.

Jay lived a half block from the school, on Seventh Avenue, on the fourth floor of a four story tenement, with

his parents, A.J. and Carmella. The first floor was taken up by his father's bakery, Cassio's, founded by his great-grandfather in 1903. He was not lonely or afraid at school, but if he needed comfort ever, he had only to look down the short half-block of Sheffield Street to where it formed a T with Seventh Avenue. There, directly in sight at all times were Cassio's large, old fashioned plate glass windows, through which, if he stared long enough, he could spot his father at work. Sometimes, A.J., in his white baker's apron, his thick black hair dusty with flour, would catch his eye, smile and wave. On either side of the Cassio's tenement were similar four and five story buildings with stores below and apartments above. If he was unable to see his father, the familiar faces of the women and small children who spent so much of their lives on the stoops and sidewalks in front of these tenements were always a delight to Jay, who, handsome, his large gray eyes set perfectly below a clear brow and long, silky lashes, was a favorite in the neighborhood.

In the summer of 1967, when week-long spasms of destruction called race riots swept the country's major ghettos, Newark's eruption was arguably the worst. A second tier city with virtually no national identity, its angry blacks were fueled to even more furious and mindless violence by their seeming invisibility compared to the attention given to Harlem and Watts. There was no Park Avenue or Rodeo Drive in Newark, no story of fabulous wealth threatened by mobs; only a series of bleak and poor neighborhoods made exponentially bleaker and poorer by six days of mayhem and death.

On the day the Newark riots started, in July, Jay went at the morning recess with a group of children to the ice cream truck on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Sheffield Street. The day was warm and balmy, not oppressively hot. Sirens could be heard blaring along Broad Street, about ten blocks away, the main artery leading from the First Ward to Newark's slowly dying downtown. These were a common enough sound in the neighborhood. A hearse and three limousines, black and gleaming in the mid-morning sun, were parked in front of St. Lucy's. On the opposite side of Sheffield Street, directly across from the church, were Buildings D and E of the Columbus Homes, eight, twelve-story, featureless "apartment" buildings erected by the federal government in 1955.

The First Ward was poor now, and bleak, but the *projects*, as they were universally called, were poorer and bleaker, a no-man's land teeming with drug addicts and the forerunners of today's gangbangers. This gaunt 'housing project,' surrounded by an aura of despair and menace, marked off a boundary keenly observed by the remnants—like the Cassios—of the old Italian-American community who were clinging to a last hope that the neighborhood would survive. There were no trees on Seventh Avenue or on Sheffield Street, nothing to block Jay's view of his small piece of the world, or to soften its hard and grimy edges.

Jay paid for his Eskimo Pie, peeled off its silver wrapper and drifted over to the cyclone fence that surrounded the school yard. There, as he did every day, he would eat it while watching the doings of his classmates, absorbed in these creatures called other children, like him

and not like him. When he reached the fence he heard a loud pop coming from the direction of the projects. He gazed that way, and then his attention was drawn to the front of the church, about fifty feet away, to his right, where a man in a black suit was kneeling, holding his arm, and where a bronze coffin had fallen with a loud clang to the sidewalk. Immediately there were two more pops, and a motorcycle policeman who was one of two that were about to lead the funeral procession to the cemetery, was toppling from his seat, and the mourners, dressed in black, were pointing up to the roof of Building E and scrambling for cover along the sides of the hearse and the limos.

Jay watched, amazed, his ice cream forgotten, as the second cop dragged his fallen comrade to the sidewalk side of the hearse, then pulled his two-way radio from his belt, and began shouting into it. The two nuns who had brought the children out to the street, one an old crone straight from Italy's Potenza Province, hated and feared by the entire class, the other a young Irish beauty with a mesmerizing, lilting accent, swung swiftly and forcefully into action, herding the group through the gate in the cyclone fence and harrying them like border collies toward the school. Jay, out of sight of the nuns, was about to join his classmates when a boy whom he knew to be named Danny—a brash, stockily built boy, with big eyes wide apart and a shock of black hair—grabbed his arm, and said, "We won't see anything from in there. Follow me!"

Jay did. He dropped his ice cream and followed Danny as he ran down Sheffield Street, darting past the mourners and policemen huddled behind the limousines, up the wide

imported stone steps of the church, whose massive wooden doors stood open to the summer day. Then, once inside, up more steps at the side of the vestibule to the bell tower, where large open-air arches gave a perfect panoramic view of the scene below, as well as across the street to the roof of Building E.

"Look!" said Danny, pointing up.

Kneeling at the parapet was a black man of indeterminate age, shirtless, his muscles rippling, a rifle cradled in his arms. In silhouette, the sun behind him, there was a stillness, an ease, to this figure, as if he had been manning this rooftop, waiting to shoot white people, for years. Directly below, the coffin squatted on the sidewalk, forlorn, while the pall bearers and other family and friends of the deceased tried their best to attend to the two injured men in the shelter of the limos. The cop was bleeding from a chest wound, a deep maroon stain spreading across his pale blue shirt. Sirens were screaming close by.

Looking toward Seventh Avenue, the boys saw an ambulance and four police cars round the corner and hurtle toward the church. The man on the roof took careful aim at the lead car. When it stopped and the policemen in it jumped out, he fired off three shots—*pop, pop, pop*—then he ducked and was seen no more. The boys ducked too. When they looked up a second later, there were cops running toward the entrance of Building E, and others were lined up behind their cars, firing rifles up at the parapet. The ambulance attendants, one black, one white, jumped out and began working on the cop with the chest wound. The firing

stopped and all was still and quiet except for a harsh static from the radio of the lead patrol car. There were no other injured cops on the ground.

"I know that cop," said Jay.

"Which one?"

"The one bleeding."

"Who is he?"

"He comes in the bakery."

"What bakery?"

"My dad's, Cassio's."

Jay pointed to the bakery, and was astonished, as he did, to see his father running out of the front door, unwrapping his apron as he went, heading for the entrance to the school. He wove through a gathering crowd of people, white from Seventh Avenue, black from the projects, but was stopped at the foot of Sheffield Street by two cops who were manning a hastily thrown up road block. A.J. Cassio, bulky and muscled from years of making bread by hand, and not past his prime at thirty-three, went chest to chest with one of the cops, shouting something and pointing toward the school. The second cop took hold of A.J.'s arm, and quieted him down, then turned and headed into the schoolyard.

"That's my dad," said Jay.

"He's looking for you."

Jay said nothing, his gaze fixed on his father, who was staring intently toward the school entrance. The first cop, who had kept his composure throughout, was now carefully steering A.J. away from the roadblock. The wounded cop directly below was now on a stretcher and being

lifted into the ambulance, while cops in flak jackets were leading the mourners back into the church.

"Does he hit you?" Danny asked.

"No."

"That's good, but remember, we came to the church to say a prayer."

Jay turned and looked Dan fully in the face for the first time. On that face was a combination of beguiling innocence and sly defiance—the dark brown eyes laughing at some inner joke—that Jay was to encounter in joy and exasperation times without number in the years to come.