

Chapter 1

A Home in Hell

Nicky exits the Long Island mansion and quickly turns his collar up against the harsh March wind. A scowl carves his face but not from the cold outside, it's the bitterness that is eating through his soul this morning. He pulls the door to the Cadillac with enough force to almost unhinge it and dives into the back seat to the cheerful voice of his driver Rocky,

"Good morning, Boss. Looks like plenty of sunshine today, a great day for a ride. Don't ya think?"

"Who the fuck asked for a fucking weather report?" snarls Nicky. "Drive the Goddamn fucking car. I want to get Sal and get this Goddamn thing over with. Fucking great day for a Mother Fucking drive. Are you shitting me?"

"Well, I'd say you just found out somebody been kicking your dog. But I know you don't have a dog, not as a pet anyway. So, what got your nuts all twisted this morning, you miserable fuck," Pauley says, shifting in the back seat next to Nicky. He gives a nod and wink to the young driver through the rear-view mirror and the car speeds up the driveway.

"I just got the final bill on the thing," Nicky throws his hands up, "fucking crooks, every goddamn one of them. Three fucking mil, can you believe that?"

"I've seen it," Pauley says in a serene voice. He opens the bar built into the back of the driver's seat, shuffles the two .45s automatic to the side, and takes out two glasses. "Here, hold these."

"I don't want a drink!"

"Well, I do. It's fucking early. So, hold the fucking glasses and stop being a prick."

"Look, Uncle Pauley, stop trying to treat me like a kid. I ain't no kid anymore!"

"Then stop acting like one," Pauley's face is hard now. His snow-white hair barely covers his head, which is why he always has his fedora on, except in the car. He pours two stiff drinks and takes back one glass. He has put on weight in all the wrong places, his daily regimen of boxing three rounds obviously a losing battle. Strong hands and arms don't make up for a bulging mid-section. Still, he commands respect. "Look, you did a good thing. Italian marble all the way, not that cheap crushed façade stuff. It is going to make Sal happy. You know he's fucking miserable in that fucking nut house."

"I know." Nicky shoots down the drink and opens the compartment behind the passenger's seat. A mirrored tray extends, and he pulls out a glass medicine vial and a silver straw. Removing the glass stopper from the vial, he dumps a pile of white powder on the mirror. With one finger, he closes the left nostril and snorts the powder through the silver straw into his right. Then he holds his glass up for another pour of Absolut. "But what am I supposed to do with him now? It's been six months and not a word about it. Somebody got to him..."

"You know that's crazy," Pauley sips his drink like a gentleman, "I've known you boys all your lives, nobody could talk to Sal but you and your father. And Sal never left the farmhouse except for his doctor's visits. And I was with him for most of those. And your father or mother, it's just impossible..." He pours a drink for Nicky and takes the silver straw. He inhales a good amount of the powder from the mirror and shoots back in his seat. "Is this stuff pure?"

"Only the best!"

"You know your father wouldn't approve of you doing drugs like this."

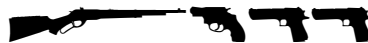
"Such hypocrisy," Nicky fakes, "youse guys drink ninety percent of the time and you're not alcoholics. I take a little bump as an eye-opener and I'm a drug addict."

"Hey, it's nothing like that. Just take it easy with the drugs. I've seen, and you have too, it can take people to some dark places." Pauley snorts again into the other nostril, a little less enthusiastically, and passes the straw back to Nicky who finishes off the pile of cocaine. "Back to Sal, whatever happened at the farm is locked inside his head."

"That's why he's at St. Joseph Hospital. And let me tell you, those fucking guys..." Nicky shoots down his second drink like he forgot he was holding it. He shudders and blows hard as this shot burns more than the first. "...no one can spend the money like the Catholics. I'll give you that."

"I did like you asked and checked out the doctor. He was handpicked by your father, and you know how thorough he was about things like this," Pauley sounds apologetic. He wants to tell Nicky something good, but this is not going to make him feel better. "The doctor is clean. He has more money than God, so no one could have paid him off. No evidence of coercion either. He said it could have been the medication. Maybe they gave him too much, or Sal stopped taking it. You remember the chickens... There is just no way of knowing what was going on inside Sal's head."

The rest of the short drive out to St. Joseph was quiet.



The hospital complex was about ten miles from Angelo's mansion, which Nicky now occupied fulltime since Elizabeth and Maria had moved to the Greek Islands with MoJo. It had always been the seat of power for the Family, even when his father ran things they would meet out on the Island, not at the farm Upstate. When he took over from his dad, everyone knew he would run things from there.

The car turned up the driveway of St. Joseph, each of the white brick buildings separated by immaculate green lawns the size of a football field. They passed three edifices before turning down another driveway towards the biggest one. It was five stories, made from massive granite stones, and the only building in the complex surrounded by a six-foot tall iron fence. The black rods came straight up and out of the ground too close together to even get an arm through. Every window had the same black iron rods. The place looked more like a prison than a hospital.

It had been a military prison during the Civil War. In the mid-nineteen-hundreds the Jesuits bought it from the state and added two more buildings. And now, there were five, thanks to Nicky's generosity.

Nicky laughs. "Is it just me or does this place gets bigger each time we come here?"

"We haven't been here in what... a month? But I would say so. You want I should come in with you?"

"No, I'm gonna talk to the fucking priest for a minute before Sal comes down."

The gate rolls back slowly as something that size does and then the black caddy with blacked-out windows drives straight to the front door. A very old priest, Fr. Sheridan, steps out of a crack in the huge oak doors.

Rocky, the driver, says, "you think the old guy has the cojones to open that door? Or are there like a dozen old guys back there with him?"

They laugh. As Nicky exits the car, Pauley grabs his arm, "I have to tell you something later. Don't let me forget. It's important."

"Tell me now."

"No, it can wait. Just don't let me forget. You know how us old guys are," Pauley looks into the rear-view with a twisted grin.

"I wasn't talking about you, Mr. Pauley," Rocky says with a slight shrill. He is less than half Pauley's size no matter how you measure him. And is probably not much in the ring either, "I know you got the balls for anything."

"Relax, kid. Maybe one day, when you're ready to become a man, I'll let you borrow them."

Nicky laughs, "You should be thankful your momma sucks good head, Marrone!"

Nicky takes the stairs quickly, shakes the priest's hand, and disappears into the hospital. They walk down the marbled hall, their footsteps echoing loudly in the spacious interior. It's dark with drapes and tapestries, pictures of Jesuits hang everywhere, a few are smiling, very few. Nicky hates this place. From the prison look outside to the austerity of the atmosphere within, it embodies everything he hates about his religion. Putting Sal in here was a bad idea, but he felt if anyone could get through to him, these priests would.

They reach the office, and he takes a seat. "So, tell me, Father, has he said anything about what happened? You know... has he made his confession?"

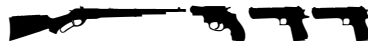
"Confession?" the old priest leans back in his high back chair covered in plush red velvet. "He was very agitated this month. With you not coming for your weekly outing. He does not confess to anything per se, but he does... and again, he got extremely emotional when you didn't show for the second weekend in a row. He started talking about killing bananas and Old Joe. Ah, I don't know how to put this, so here's the thing. Was he involved in any other killings? A witness or a..."

"Hey, I'm not interested in any other killings!" Nicky explodes. "I brought him to you, so you can get the truth out of him about one thing and that's it. Youse guys have been taking my money for years and now you want to get all holier than thou on me?"

“Mr. Rocci, this place may look like a medieval castle,” Fr. Sheridan, his slim body almost invisible enveloped in the black robes of his order, says firmly but calmly, “but we don’t practice any inquisition tactics here. We do not preform exorcisms or cast any magical spells. The priests here are trained psychologist and psychiatrist, not mind readers. Let me give you a little advice.”

Nicky squirms in his plush chair and sinks a little deeper. He has hated the clergy for as long as he can remember and almost feels the sting of his mother’s slap on the back of his neck just as when they used to be called into the office for something or other. He pretends to listen.

“There are three people you should never lie to,” cautions the priest. “Your lawyer because he holds your freedom. Your doctor because he holds your life. And your priest because he holds you for eternity. We might be better able to help your brother and get the answers you seek if we knew more about what went on at the farm. What Sal was exposed to and what was kept hidden. And as a doctor, like a confession, anything you tell me is confidential information. Think about it. Meanwhile, I’ll have Sal brought down.”



Sal sits between Nicky and Pauley and every five minutes asks where they are going, but Nicky hasn’t said a word since leaving St. Joseph.

As they cross the Throgs Neck Bridge into the Bronx, Sal squeals, “You are taking me home to Mommy and Daddy!”

Pauley looks at Nicky and shrugs.

Nicky shakes his head slowly, “Sal, you know where we’re going. But I have a big surprise. I built Mom and Dad a house just like the farmhouse.”

The car pulls into St. Peter Cemetery. Sal starts rocking and bouncing in the back of the car. As the car turns up a winding road, Sal’s arms flail wildly. Nicky, who daily gets in the ring with Pauley, grabs Sal’s wrists with one hand and pins them to his lap.

“No. No. No. Nicky, you are supposed to take me to Mommy and Daddy. Not here. Mommy and Daddy are in Heaven. Daddy said you will take me to Heaven with them. I’ve been good. I’ve been a good boy, Nicky. I promise.” He starts to cry.

“Well, there go three million dollars down the drain,” Nicky says angrily. “Get the fuck out the car, Sal. Let’s go look at this fucking mausoleum I built for you.”

They walk up the hill—a hard climb as the path is steep—to reach the marble farmhouse at the top. Nicky had to buy all the gravesites around his family plot to build the mausoleum. He recalls the picture on the office wall of St. Peter, maybe a hundred years or more in the past, the view from the cemetery was of apple blossoms, white trees, and quaint little homes spread out across the valley. Now, the view is blocked on three sides by high-rises fifteen stories and more, the only clear view a sliver of the river to the north.

Although no one had been buried in the graves around his family plot in more than a century, they still charged him over a million dollars to acquire the land. And of course, he could not move the graves, there had to be a small plaque in the ground alongside the mausoleum with the

names of those it covered up, state law. It covered thirty-two gravesites. The farmhouse replica was built to scale, 25 feet long, ten feet wide, and seven feet in height. It had rose-colored marble insets for the windows and black marble for the roof. The main doors in the center were hung on gold hinges, guaranteed not to rust.

I must have been pretty stoned when I okayed this monstrosity. I got to tell Pauley to send some boys over to that contractor to break his arms and legs. The last time he had been here, it was to bury some aunt he barely knew, fifteen years before he had to lay his mother and father to rest last winter.

"NO. NO. NO. I DON'T WANT TO BE HERE. DADDY SAID I WOULD GO TO HEAVEN WITH HIM AND MOMMY. HE PROMISED ME. I'VE BEEN A GOOD BOY."

Sal was becoming hyper, turning in circles, not knowing where to go. Nicky grabs his arm and gives him a yank. Sal is both taller and huskier than Nicky, but meek and submissive.

Nicky places both hands on his shoulders, "I don't know what you're talking about, Sal. You can't go to heaven if you're still alive. And even when you do, God knows you'll be the only one in this family to make it in, I sure as hell won't bet on Papa being there. Mom, yeah, she'll be there. But if you see Dad, you took the wrong elevator."

Sal pulls away, standing in front of the marble structure mumbling incoherently.

"What are you saying? Look, why don't we go inside? You can see Mom's and Dad's urns. I got them those real nice gold vases you said you liked. And their wedding picture is in there too. Maybe say a little prayer. Tell them YOU ARE SORRY FOR SMOTHERING THEM... YOU FUCKING RETARD."

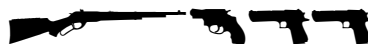
"Mommy said you are not supposed to call me that," Sal says. "Father Sheridan said God knows everything. The why and the how, He forgives all that we do."

Well, thank you Father Sheridan. At least you are not just taking my money and fucking me up the ass.

Sal drops to his knees in front of the mausoleum door.

Nicky yells, "If you are crying, I am gonna kick your ass!"

Sal falls face down on the mount. Nicky sees a wide blood spot on the back of his head. Then, nothing.



"So, what do you think?"

Pauley lights a cigar, "What do I think about what, Rocky?"

"Do you think Nicky is going to off his brother? I mean... the word is Sal killed his parents," Rocky remarks. He puffs on a cigarette and tries to blow smoke rings in the air. He leans one elbow on the front fender of the caddy, "I mean, if it were my mother and father, I'd off him. Even if he is my own brother. Nicky must want to whack him. Maybe not personally but get someone to take care of him. Nicky seems to be on the edge of crazy."

“Shut the fuck up! Are you fucking crazy? If Nicky hears you talking like that... fuck it! Nobody touches Sal, understand me. NOBODY. If you ever say anything like that again I’ll...” Pauley is about to take a swing at him when he notices Sal and Nicky lying in front of the marble farmhouse. He starts running up the hill, dodging headstones as he goes.

Rocky takes the path and being younger beat him to Sal’s side.

Pauley arrives a second later and quickly accesses the situation, “Leave him! Sal is dead. Help me get Nicky to the car.”

Rocky had Nicky under the arms and carefully pulls him into the back seat.

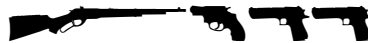
Pauley takes off his jacket and then his shirt. “Here! Use my shirt and keep pressure on the wound. I’ll drive.”

Pauley floors the gas pedal and the caddy roars through the cemetery. He hits the street, heading for Our Lady of Mercy Hospital not far in the northern section of the Bronx. The car weaves in and out of traffic. The vehicle swings across the double yellow lines, dodges oncoming cars before swinging back to the right lane, then blows through red lights. His experience as a get-away driver kicks in; never hitting the breaks, he races through the streets. Four police cars fail to stop him until he’s at the hospital’s emergency entrance. The police look in the back seat and run inside to get help.

A doctor throws up his hand and stops Pauley from entering, “Sir, you have to ditch the cigar.”

Pauley looks at his right hand, the fat stogie is lodged between his index and pointer fingers still smoldering. He tosses the cigar into the street and follows the doctors, Rocky, and Nicky on a gurney with his fedora neatly on his head, but bare chested.

Two police officers, one on each side of him, shout questions at him.



Sitting at the pool under the hot and high sun, Yana looks out from under her wide brim straw hat at the servant’s legs approaching. *What the hell does she want now?*

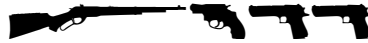
The young Greek girl bends over her, “Miss Yana, there is a long distance call for you. From America.”

“Why didn’t you bring the extension with you?”

“It is on the line in the study.” The girl steps back to give her room to stand then leaves her, having done her job.

Yana stretches lazily, swings her feet from the lounge chair, and stretches again. *More gossip from the girls. I don’t care what Nicky Nails is up to, I’m not telling Morris. He is not running off to America on some wild adventure Nicky has cooked up.*

Before she can say a word after hello, Cherry Bomb is frantically telling her Nicky is near death. She tries to console her between the sobbing and crying that pours out of the receiver. An eternity passes before Rosalina is calm enough to comprehend what Yana is saying. “It’s going to be okay. I don’t know where Morris is right now, probably in town, so I’m sending someone to get him. We will be there by tomorrow. It’s going to be okay.”



Morris rushes into the bedroom and sees Yana, Elizabeth, and Gisella packing bags. "What's all this?" he asks.

"We are going to New York with you," Yana says, acting as the spokeswoman for the group. It has been her role since Morris returned to her life.

"No, you're not," he replies. "Elizabeth, you have to look after Maria. Or did you just forget about her?"

"The servants can get her off to school like they do every day."

Morris casts her an angry eye and she shrinks away from the baggage. "This is probably nothing," he says. "Just another crazy scheme of Nicky's. Besides, I'll be flying on a military jet, can't exactly bring along three hotties, can I?"

"If this is nothing, why the military jet?" Questions Gisella.

"You know I'm not exactly welcomed in the U.S.," Morris laughs, "but if this turns out to be anything at all, I need to travel incognito. I can't be seen arriving in New York every time a mobster bites one, even if he is my friend. And a NATO jet will have me there in half the time."

"Well, I'm coming with you," demands Yana.

"Oh, yeah, like you wouldn't be recognized. A movie star, known worldwide, travelling on a military jet wouldn't raise anyone's suspicions?"

"Okay, then I'm going," Gisella insists, "I'll be your military aide. No one knows me."

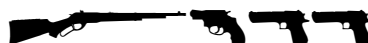
Morris studies the three women, trying to figure a way out of this situation.

They stare back, ready for his next argument.

"If Nicky's been shot what makes you think I would let you three get mixed up in this mess? And since when do I need a babysitter?"

"You probably always needed a babysitter," Gisella tells him, and slams shut her suitcase as if to say the matter is settled.

"Military aides don't travel with Gucci," Morris admits defeat as graciously as he can. "I have my bugout bag ready, go get a duffle bag from the storage room and meet me at the car. You have five minutes and then I leave without you."



Gisella was amazed when Morris produced fake ID badges for her, because for a spur of the moment trip, he had planned an unwelcome inconvenience well in advance. She had now been living with him for two years and he still managed to surprise her every day.

Morris appeared at the base in full uniform, presenting credentials that the guard at the gate took one look at and waved him ahead. He played the part well, saluting on cue, barking orders to the grounds crew, even putting one man on report when he queried about Gisella.

The flight crew got the plane ready quickly, none wanting to spend more time than they had to with the surly officer. He was having a bad day, and no one wanted to make it worse. Gisella would have chalked it up to an act, but she saw beneath the façade. Morris was having a bad day.

She was right to insist on going. More than once she felt he was close to killing someone, for nothing more than a poorly chosen word.

The sleek jet, a cross between a military and luxury aircraft with wings long and tapered thin, took off from the NATO base in Thessaloniki. She had never seen such a craft.

Seeing her interest, he told her. "It's an updated model of the U2 spy plane. Built for high altitude, high speed flights. It will get us to New York in a third of the time any conventional plane would. But I had all the spy gear ripped out, so it's really nice inside."

When they entered the plane, she noticed a spacious although narrow cabin. There were four lounge chairs that swiveled and reclined all the way to a bed. A small bar ran along one wall and a small bathroom with a shower was at the back of the plane. "This can't be a military plane, can it?"

"What? You didn't know this day would come. I told you, in my world, I have to be ready for everything all the time. The U.S. military has the best aircraft in all sorts of configurations."

"Is the pilot in the Air Force?"

Morris filled her glass with champagne, "He is in the Greek Air Force and as far as he knows I'm Major Nelson, Anthony Nelson." Morris laughed, knowing she didn't get the reference to the popular TV show. The pilot didn't connect the name either. "Before we land, you will have to put on the uniform in the back. And no matter what, you don't say a word. You just carry the bags, OK?"

"Why a Major? Why not a General?"

"Too many questions," he said, "a Major is high enough not to be stopped by some Airman at the base we are going to. Don't worry, I'm sure this is going to turn out to be a whole lot of nothing. I know Nicky."

"I don't know, Morris. Yana said Rosalina was hysterical on the phone. This may be more than what you think."

It was more than a year after they had left Argentina before Morris reappeared in her life and she didn't know much about him other than that he was involved in crime. His name never came up in news stories, but the way he acted, including back then, definitely pointed to him being a crime boss. She should have told him to keep going, but he was true to his word and come back for her. She had already fallen in love with him back in the jungle, so she followed her heart and him to Greece.

It was somewhat of an idyllic situation, even if he had two other wives already, but she felt like she was the only one that mattered when he was with her. She could see the pain he was in now and wanted to ease his burden, but as soon as the plane took off, he withdrew to a place she could not reach.

Morris didn't want to say it, but he was concerned this time. Last time he got a call about Nicky being shot, he had rushed to New York from Aruba, been much closer then, only a couple of hours. This trip would take six hours at supersonic speed.

Way too much time, Nails could be dead by the time I land.