

CHAPTER 1

12:00 a.m. Monday, 29th October

Herrick's final end hadn't come in the hour of aimlessly waiting in the Corvette. Tetro's men never materialized from the shadows to avenge their employer. The imagined dangers that had plagued his mind had swiftly evaporated over time. He sat in the serene sanctuary and painful silence of the Corvette with his driver. The two men simply idled at the base of Shawangunk Ridge in the Witch's Hole state park, waiting for the potential tail from New York City, which never came. They were back on the road again within the hour, heading east to Herrick's final destination, which was broadly disclosed to him as New England. Herrick was still delirious from the tainted blood coursing through his system as the last of the cocaine charged his nerves.

"We're here,"

"Where?" Asked Herrick.

"Does it matter?"

Herrick searched his surroundings as the car continued along the quiet and dark roads. With a momentary flash of the Corvette's headlights, Herrick made out the cursive writing of a swiftly passing sign.

Mill Willow, Connecticut.

Home of the Melville Factory: population – 3,122

Herrick tried to make out the lay of the land, which was hidden by the soft light of the shrouded moon that only weakly illuminated the tops of distant trees. He was far from any city.

The black Corvette pulled up to what seemed like a construction site in the middle of nowhere. Panic rose in Herrick's chest at the sight of the desolate property. The large carpark was empty. There wasn't a single neighboring building in the area. As his eyes gradually adjusted, the oblong profile of a shadowy deserted hotel came into view against the gloomy sky. The further he stared, the more detail and protrusions came into view. The hefty, red-bricked building was wrapped and braced in scaffolding toward the far end of the two-story structure. The entire building was shaped like the letter "L" tipped on its side. The half-constructed building rested in front of a rocky ridge, positioned so close it seemed like it was being swallowed by the modest mountain.

"Where the hell is this?" Herrick scoffed and turned to face his driver. "*What* the hell is this?"

The driver wore a look of complete indifference as he casually stooped his head down to get a view of the hotel out of Herrick's passenger-side window. "Looks like they got some maintenance work going on."

The driver leaned back in his seat and tucked his hand into the side compartment of the driver-side door. Anticipating the worst, Herrick was surprised to be presented not with the barrel end of a gun, but with his own wallet.

"What's this?" Herrick asked, staring between his driver and the leather wallet.

"You ask a lot of questions."

"And you haven't answered one properly since we left Manhattan."

"It's your wallet."

“How did you...?” Herrick patted down his empty jacket pockets. “Where’s my phone, and my gun?”

“No phones, no calls, no gun. And no fun. Your boss’s orders.” “Tetro?” Herrick asked in quiet disbelief.

“Calvor.” The driver narrowed his eyes, his expression confused.

Before the awkward silence could grow any further, the driver broke the tension. He was eager to wrap up his trip. “This is where you’ll be staying, so keep your head down and your nose clean and you should be out of here in no time.”

Herrick stared at his driver with a dumbfounded expression.

“Oh, and your wallet’s carrying a bit more weight too. Compliments of your captain.”

Herrick struggled to take in all this new information as he climbed out onto the gravel driveway. The Corvette drove off, the moment the passenger door shut.

The powerful growl of the 8-cylinder engine was quickly lost in the distance, leaving Herrick’s thumping heart, unsteady breath, and the crunching gravel beneath his shifting feet amplified to the near-impregnable silence. The gentle yawn of the countryside breeze reminded Herrick of the pulse of the Atlantic Ocean. The thought scared him. He turned and made his way toward the dark edifice, still unsure of the danger the shadows might hold. Following the warm light at the base of the scaffolded tower, Herrick entered through the front doors and into the hotel lobby.

For all the crude desolation and industrial clutter outside, the inside had the workings of a charming, almost regal hotel. Mounted along the walls and beside the boldly framed doorways were elegantly carved golden-brass lamps. A large chandelier hung in the center of the high ceiling, suspended over a tall A-frame ladder. Its teardrop crystals poked out from under a hoary tarp. In the distant corner of

the large room, old plastic fixtures and cheap cosmetic décor remained in a sad pile, ready for the dump. Herrick walked across the foyer toward the reception. The desk had thin paper taped to its edges and was speckled with paint. The walls on the right side of the front desk were half-painted with a fresh coat of rich merlot red that dried over neutralizing white. To the left, the old coat of harsh arctic blue remained patchy and chipped. Herrick rang the silver bell resting on the reception counter, aimlessly searching for life in the derelict building. From behind the foggy back-office window, a blurry figure stood up sharply and made its way to the desk. A middle-aged woman emerged from the nook. She seemed to be truly caught off-guard—in more ways than one. The top half of the woman’s appearance was vibrant and loud. She had high blond hair and wore a tight spaghetti-strapped top that hugged her heavy cleavage and wide hips. Jangly gold jewelry dangled from her ears and wrists. On the bottom half, she wore oversized sweatpants and fluffy pink slippers. She approached the desk and straightened up. She took in Herrick’s dizzying height as she got closer to him.

“Mister Herrick?” the middle-aged woman asked in a sunny west-coast accent.

Herrick was thrown off by the fact the woman somehow knew his name—or because he still wasn’t comfortable hearing it spoken out loud. “That’s right.”

“Welcome,” she replied swiftly, looking over his tired expression and scarred face. Herrick could tell she was trying her best not to judge his skeezy appearance, as she swiftly moved her gaze to the old beaten-down computer to her left and manically began pecking at the bulky keyboard. “Now, you’ll be staying with us till the weekend. Is that right?”

“Sure, that works for me.”

“Now before you say anything, I apologize for the mess. I wasn’t expecting any guests for another two months. But in your case, I was willing to make an exception. I’m not one to be a stick in the mud, and the sheriff has already been so nice and welcoming . . .”

“The sheriff?” Herrick interrupted. “The reservation was for Kurt Herrick, right?”

The woman nodded, humming agreeably. Herrick opened his mouth to respond, but before he could say anything she cut him off with a cheery introduction. “My name is Joan Telson.” She playfully placed the back of her right hand against the left side of her mouth. “That’s Miss Telson, but don’t tell my son-of-a-bitch ex-husband—” she winked, “—and this is my hotel.” She rolled her eyes. “Well, soon-to-be hotel.” She held her hand proudly out to the half-finished lobby. “Welcome to the Rock Hollow Hotel, Mister Herrick.”

Herrick didn’t know whether to laugh at the comically out-of-place hotel owner or run out screaming. Her sunny and clearly rehearsed spiel was fit for a kid’s birthday party, but her dress sense would be more suited to some cheap Vegas Motel 6, not a charming Georgian-style hotel in New England. The surreal interaction seemed threatening to Herrick. His heart, still eagerly pumping the eight-ball through his body, caused his mind to race with pointless thoughts that demanded more attention. His jaw locked up into an underbite and produced a strained smile. His eyes fluctuated between wide open and narrowing to a squint.

“You okay, darling?” Miss Telson asked, angling her head to one side. The low ceiling lights revealed, what seemed like, faint bruising around her right cheekbone, which she’d covered up with a thick layer of foundation.

“Are *you* okay?” Herrick replied, trying his best not to stare too much, like she’d done with him when he first walked in looking like Frankenstein’s monster.

“I’m hunky-dory and tickled pink, darling. Now, you’re in room 4D on the third floor.” She offered him a room key and an envelope from the back wall’s numbered grid of cubbyholes and hooks. “Here’s your key and your welcome letter. Breakfast will be ready for you in the morning from six thirty till nine. Sorry for the earliness, I have work to do tomorrow with the builders. And as I said, I wasn’t expecting guests yet. But I managed to find some Canadian bacon, fresh OJ, and a waffle iron just in time for you.”

Herrick mirrored the middle-aged woman’s forced smile and took his cue to leave. Still, they kept eye contact for an uncomfortable moment as he walked off.

“And, darling!” Telson called out, causing Herrick to half-turn at the foot of the carpeted staircase. “If you need anything else from me tonight, please don’t hesitate to call. I can be up to your room in a jiffy.”

Herrick nodded politely, using the welcome envelope to wave “thanks” before turning to ascend the stairs. The walls of the staircase were a dark vermillion with strips of gold arabesque patterns running horizontally and leading up the staircase. The occasional black-and-white picture hung in his eye-line. They were like small windows into the past. The framed photographs were of men and women rigidly posed at different factories, farms, and fishing docks. They all wore sober expressions. Each person displayed the same surly blank expression of a prison mugshot or passport photo.

As Herrick reached the third floor, he began to count his way down each numbered door until he arrived outside his room at the end of the Persian-carpeted corridor. He unlocked the door and pushed it

wide open. After apprehensive scrutiny of the pitch-black room. He quickly collected the courage to step inside, close the door behind him, and briskly stride into the dark room. Trying to avoid the stream of soft moonlight spilling in from the street, he extended his arm as far as he could and closed the blinds from his hidden position. The room was suddenly cast into further darkness. He retraced his footsteps back to the front door and blindly probed the wall for the light switch. As the room instantly filled with a warm amber glow, he strode back to the window and tossed the key and envelope on the bed. Herrick gently peeled open a crack in the shaggy curtains and peered out into the cold night through the murky windowpane. It was a haunting evening. Herrick had a perfect vantage point from his room. The front driveway and entrance were clearly seen from his position. Parallel with the hotel was the long road he came in on, and both ends faded into blackness on his east and west. If Tetro's men came, he'd see them coming a mile away, literally. He turned back to the warmth of the room, pinching the bridge of his nose, and releasing a shaky breath.

He picked up the welcome letter resting with the key on the mattress, presuming the envelope would simply be filled with leaflets of local advertisements, restaurants, and recreational activities for vacationing families. But the cursive writing on paper caught his eye. Wincing at the title in confusion, he rested his heavy weight on the bed, opened the envelope, and began to read.

Detective Herrick.

I extend to you my warmest welcome to Mill Willow. Justin speaks very highly of you. I'm looking forward to having your help on this case. If you need anything at all please feel free to call me personally.

Sheriff Gabe Gavi

Herrick looked up from the welcome note, craning his head to the side in thought and trying to process the last hour of strange interactions. His personal driver's secretive attitude. The half-constructed, empty hotel. *The perfect place for hiding a body in the cement foundation.* Miss Telson's contradictory sunny yet depressed demeanor. *What's she hiding?* And now a welcome note from the sheriff of Mill Willow. *Wherever that is.*

Suddenly, the soft scrape of a slow footstep scratched against the carpet behind him. Herrick instantly jumped to his feet, with his back to the window, and faced the sudden sound of the intruder. It wasn't one of Tetro's men as he'd anticipated, but Lucio Tetro's daughter, Patience.

Pattycake.

The six-year-old girl raised her head in a slow delayed motion. Herrick stared in disbelief at the small girl. She was wearing the same violet summer dress he'd last seen her in, but the color had faded to a dreary grayish hue. Its fabric was sprinkled with droplets of drying blood. Herrick's breathing became urgent and unsteady. His heartbeat thumped hard against the walls of his chest. His breathing stopped as she turned from the wall to face him head-on. It wasn't what was revealed to Herrick that lodged his heart in his throat, but what wasn't. The entire left side of the girl's face was missing. Exposed wet flesh and brains hung out the small chasm of torn bone and split cartilage on the side of her skull. Both her hands were wet and dripping with blood. Her hair was singed, with only a few thin strands hanging pathetically over the bloodied hole. Her right eye was heavily bruised and forced shut. They both stared at each other in silence. The energy

of the room suddenly shifted as the right side of the mutilated little girl's face slowly constricted and the corner of her lip arched into a crooked smile.

Silence.

She blasted toward Herrick with her arms held out. Smashing his back into the wall, Herrick pushed himself forward with his arms held high, trying desperately to keep out of the little girl's reach. He awkwardly hopped across the mattress as she fell into the wall where he'd once stood. She propelled herself back toward him on the other side of the room. Herrick frantically reached out and caught hold of the door handle, pulling it open and slamming it shut. He ran at full speed down the stairs, through the lobby, and out into the frigid, cold night.