

THE RIDE



A Short Story by William Bungeroth

THE RIDE

By

William Bungeroth

“Careful what you hunt, lest you catch it.”

Lev Grossman, *The Magician King*

A cornucopia of sights, sounds, and bright colors, the Italian Market on Ninth Street in South Philly is a throwback to another era. Unlike the fluorescent aisles of a modern supermarket, this open-air bazaar sits underneath the metal framework of more than a hundred canvas awnings, each tent extending from the curb of the crowded street to the entrance of an old row house. The vendors carry only the freshest of the fresh in produce, fish, and meat, and at some ten blocks long, it stretches from Fitzwater Street on the north down to Wharton Street on the south. It’s a food circus for adults, a street carnival without the rides, and it has a terrifically fun vibe.

With the twenty-fifth closing in, Nicky arrived at the market around three in the afternoon with a beat-up Santa hat atop his head. In the spirit of the season, he greeted the various passersby with a “Ho, Ho, Ho!” or a “Naughty or Nice,” depending on the gender.

Looking up and down 9th Street, he saw a sea of humanity. Holiday shoppers march to their own beat, yet collectively propel their fellow food enthusiasts down the thoroughfare in pursuit of their unique shopping goals. Meanwhile, overworked merchants already weary of “The Season to be Jolly” struggled to keep abreast of their customers' purchases.

“Nice hat, Santa! Here you go, one single-shot non-fat latte. Need any water for the reindeer?” offered the grinning barista at an open-air stand called Marissa’s Espresso.

“No, but thanks for asking. I left my reindeer at a North Pole Pub. They’re experimenting with beer hydration. It should improve their high altitude urination. Oh, in case you were wondering, it’s coal for you this year.”

Reaching for the third of his three-cup-a-day addiction, he raised the dark brew into the air and proposed a toast, “Merry Christmas to all my fellow junkies!” Which was spontaneously met with a mixture of “Happy Holiday’s, Merry Xmas, Buon Natale, and Feliz Navidad” among others from the equally devoted coffee loving patrons.

Turning from inside the outdoor cafe toward the street, his senses sent out a nonholiday greeting, ending the frivolity as his jovial manner dissipated in direct correlation to the rising hairs on the back of his neck. The actor in him aroused, nonchalantly he waddled over to the condiments bar and patiently waited his turn while rigorously scanning his surroundings. He saw nothing, yet he knew someone was adjusting the clicks and increments of their human riflescope, placing him squarely in the crosshairs.

Undeterred, Nicky left Marissa's and resumed his culinary route and ordered a box of cannolis and a tiramisu cake from Serpentine's, then continued on foot to three different locations: Antonio's Meats, Lola's Queen of Cheese, and DiNatale's Produce. Preordering for a Saturday pickup, his shopping was more fruitful than his detecting, because not a single face stood out, nor did he see the same person reappear twice at any of the other stops. Yet, he somehow knew someone was out there and they knew what they were doing—the perfect tail, invisible to his watchful eyes.

The day's final and favored destination was the famous red, white, and green broad awning that hung over the sidewalk and onto the street, emblazoned with "Tonelli Bros. Famous Fish." Before entering, he stopped at a burn barrel and rubbed his hands over the fire. The temperature was dropping, and they were due for more snow.

Taking another opportunity to casually look around, his effort went unrewarded, so he scooted under the canopy to join a standing room only crowd, where they were shucking oysters, steaming clams, and serving shrimp cocktail, complemented perfectly by adult beverages.

With difficulty, he squeezed his way past the food revelers and walked into Tonelli's. Greeting him was an incredible array of fresh fish and shellfish on ice. The holiday season was in full force because every nook and cranny in the store was filled with seafood-related items.

"Yo, that salmon ain't comin to life, you wanna look at it or buy it?" barked the rotund fishmonger, wearing a white apron over a red and black plaid shirt, topped off with a green Eagles football cap. The business had been started by his great-grandfather and has been handed down ever since from father to son. A fourth generation Italian American, he was South Philly born and bred, who knew all his regular customers by name. He was "The Great Tonelli, " a 9th Street fixture, a *davvero un bel tipo*, and quite a character.

"I'm deciding on whether I should buy the salmon or a new car, they're priced about the same," came Nicky's swift counterpunch. The verbal joust was on.

"Cuz, it's you!" Tonelli blurted out. "Nice hat. I almost didn't recognize ya. Word of advice, Santa, lay off the Xmas Cookies. You've put on a few."

Nicky couldn't help, but laugh—then regaining his composure, he retorted, “Let me talk to, Chooch, the mortgage broker, to see if I can get a second on my house, then I'll buy it.”

Putting his large hands out to his sides, palms up, Tonelli capitulated, “*Tregua*... Truce... It's the holidays, I gotta make a living!”

“Put it in a Tiffany box and it's sold!” Nicky quipped, having trouble keeping a straight face.

The Fishmonger laughed, then they shook hands and kibitzed about family, before Nicky ordered some fresh crab for a later date. Given that he hadn't eaten since breakfast, he stepped outside the store to become part of the sidewalk madness, downed a dozen oysters, threw back two Yuengling Lagers, and called it a day.

Dusk was falling rapidly when he left the market. Glancing at his wrist, he realized that his watch was still on the dresser, so he looked toward the darkened sky and estimated it to be close to five. Surreptitiously scoping his surroundings, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. He appeared to be on his own.

With a waddling gait, he was a shadow among shadows as he made his way down a narrow side street with nearly identical row homes on either side. Awaiting nightfall with an array of Christmas lights hung ornately from each house, Bella Vista, a tree-lined neighborhood, was doing its part to celebrate the holidays. The street lamp timers and the preprogrammed festival of lights were not due to come on for another ten minutes. It was here they approached him.

Ahead of him, a silhouette morphed into a man. He was bent over on the sidewalk near the curb, trying to catch his breath.

“I can't breathe. I can't breathe,” he gasped as he conveniently shielded his head and face from view.

In the spirit of the season, Nicky short stepped over to help. “Are you okay?”

The first thing he saw when he turned around was his red ski mask.

Showtime!

“He's fine. You're not,” growled a second man who materialized beside him.

The green woolen ski mask, similar to his partner's, also hid his features. The difference between the two men was that he was holding a gun, which he immediately thrust into Nicky's ribs as he growled, “Nice hat, Santa. Do as I say and you won't get hurt?”

Turning toward his assailant, Nicky smiled and said, “Wait a minute. I have to get back to the North Pole.”

“Where you’re going, it’s a lot colder,” the second man said menacingly. “Get in the car, Fat Boy!”

Having no choice, Nicky got into the back of the black Mercedes SUV, with tinted windows, that slithered up to the curb. They immediately threw a hood over his head and tied his hands. From start to finish, the deception and capture took less than ninety seconds---they were Pros.

Wedged between his assailants, Nicky heard a phone ring to his right. “Yeah, we got him. No, no one saw us. Yeah, I’m positive. What do you want us to do? Uh huh. Yeah, we’ll do whatever you want. We square? Okay,” said the man to his right, who was a New Yorker—probably from Queens.

Visualizing him again, Nicky closed his eyes, even though he didn’t have to. First, there was the gun. No matter what anyone tells you, you always see the gun barrel first, and his was old school—a Smith & Wesson six-shot revolver—a weapon from a different time.

Height? Even though the snatch happened fast, Nicky paused to guess Queens was an inch taller than him, which would have made him a little over six feet one. Clothes? In one word, expensive—make that two, *Very Expensive*. He wore a black designer ski jacket over a grey turtleneck sweater, complemented by black woolen slacks with a sharp crease down the front and cuffs at the bottom. Every clothing detail seemed important to the New Yorker, including his Italian, custom made, black, Bestetti snow boots. Sniffing the air inside the car, Nicky’s nose picked up the slightest hint of a woody fragrance—Nicky guessed Armani.

Queens' ski mask, the only thing that was off the rack, covered his head, but even though his face was concealed, his cold-blooded personality was revealed through the eye slits. Staring out of the eyeholes were fierce, dark brown, soulless eyes that were a warning of his capabilities. He was the most dangerous of the three abductors.

As soon as Queens signed off, a voice from his left in a thick Brooklyn accent, asked, “Everything okay?”

A trace of concern crept into Brooklyn's voice, which was confirmed when he quickly asked another question, “Can we work things out?”

Brooklyn was the “curb decoy” Nicky tried to help, and based on the interaction between his backseat companions, the follower. When he had stood up from his ruse, he saw that he was shorter than Nicky—five feet five would have been his rough guess. Of the two, he was Mutt to the other man’s Jeff, thick in the chest, with short arms and no neck. He reminded him of a middle linebacker with a physically strong build, though the extra

weight he carried would counterbalance his strength in a fight. Nicky's eyes remained shut as he recalled Brooklyn's lackluster appearance. Dressed in a large dark blue, full-zip hooded jacket with baggy black pants, he rounded off his stealth-like apparel with scuffed, cheap brown snow boots that were in desperate need of being replaced. He was the opposite of his GQ partner—a discounteer's delight. Though the ski mask hid his face, it didn't disguise the shape of his head, which was oval and out of proportion to the rest of his body.

"Not now. We'll talk when we get to the cabin," was Queen's measured response to Brooklyn.

There was a momentary lull in the conversation that was soon followed by a series of nervous coughs that finally led to a clearing of the throat. The third abductor, the Driver, was about to make his presence felt.

"Look, I got a call saying a couple of big shots from New York needed a driver for Pick Up and Delivery." Another nervous cough, "'No problem,' the Driver declared. 'I'm your boy, but that's it. P&D, no more, no less.'"

Amid the Driver's soliloquy, there was a sudden movement on Nicky's right, followed by an explosion in his right ear. "P&D my ass. You're paid to drive, so keep your fuckin' mouth shut and your eyes on the road! I got a fucking driver's license, too. *Capice?*"

Silence, then five seconds later came the driver's timid response in an unsteady and subdued voice, "Understood."

Among the three assailants, a chain of command had now been established, if it had ever really been in doubt.

Nicky's quietness confirmed to his fellow passengers that he knew why they had seized him, since he didn't protest or ask where they were headed.

It's funny, Nicky thought, but when you cross "The Family," you can never make things right. You think you can, but you can't. Loyalty to *La Famiglia* is not to be taken lightly. You know the rules going in, and if you decide to break the unwritten code, chances are you'll wind up in a car like this one. It's better to accept your fate rather than to agonize over it or run from it. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and tried to relax.

If not for the circumstances, the next twenty minutes were almost comical as the crowded sleigh slid all over the icy roads. Four men—three of them squeezed into the back like clowns in a Shriner's car, escorted by a petulant driver who was in over his head, all sharing the same stagnant air as they sped toward a destiny that only one of them could have anticipated.

From Nicky's right, "You know why we picked you up?" asked Queens.

Nicky chose to remain silent.

“Answer him, Wise-Ass,” grunted Brooklyn, “if you know what’s good for you.”

Nicky then mumbled something unintelligible from under his hood.

A pain immediately shot up Nicky’s right leg from the smash of the butt of a gun against his kneecap.

“Look, Fat Boy, I can do this the easy way, or the hard way when we get to the cabin. It don’t matter to me. All we want to know is...have you been talking to the Feds?” Queens lightly tapped Nicky again on his right knee.

“I bet the rat squealed. He looks like the kind, a real weasel,” Brooklyn chimed in.

To avoid another shot to his anatomy, Nicky answered, “No.”

“No? You sure?” Queens said. “Okay, so why did we drive down from New York if you’re not talking to the Feds? We’ll see. Before the night is over I’ll know how much you told them and whether or not you were wearing a wire. I have ways of finding things out. You’ll see.”

Brooklyn nudged Nicky with his right elbow and said gleefully, “You’ll see. You’ll see.”

Nicky again took his time before stating, “Angelo can’t trust anyone. It’s obvious.”

“Huh...what are you talking about?” asked Queens.

Nicky ignored the question and continued talking, “They claimed I was skimming cash,” pausing to let his words sink in. Then, turning the tables, he asked his backseat travellers, “Did you ever skim money?”

Though he couldn’t see it, he could feel both Queens and Brooklyn lean forward in their seats, pressing him in the process.

Ignoring the question, Queens then leaned back in his seat and continued questioning Nicky, “How much you skim?”

“Supposedly a couple of mil, give or take a mil,” Nicky admitted, though the number could be a lot higher, according to Angelo, that is, if I was actually doing it.”

The pace and intensity of Queen’s questions picked up: “How’d they catch you?”

“They didn’t—at least they couldn’t prove I did it. A guy they claimed was my associate got caught in a non-Fed sting operation in Atlantic City.” Queens and Brooklyn both

knew what he meant. “This asshole was leaving AC, where he was running a sports bookmaking ring inside the Tecadra Hotel & Casino poker room when they grabbed him.

“Keep going,” Queens urged him.

Listening to Nicky, Queens was now trying to figure out why a *Capo* like him from New York and the top guy in his crew, Brooklyn, had been picked for this out of state assignment. The Philly scheme that Nicky was describing started to ring a familiar bell for the New Yorker.

Nicky, on the other hand, was enjoying his storytelling as he continued the narrative. “Apparently, he had been set up from the start. How or why he was under surveillance, I have no idea, but they caught him with two stashes of cash—one for Angelo and one supposedly for me. At first, he tried to explain his way out. Then, I’m sure with a little persuasion, he cracked.”

“What did he tell ‘em?” Brooklyn quickly asked.

“Sal told them...”

“What’s his name? Queens interjected.

“Salvatore. Sal told them that I was the mastermind behind an elaborate scheme to rip off The Family. He didn’t know the names of anyone else involved. He claimed his instructions came straight from me.”

“Keep talkin’.”

“Bottom line, Sal pointed the finger at me, saying I was siphoning off money from Angelo, but it was his word against mine.

Brooklyn cut in, “What happened to him?”

“What else did he tell them?” Queens demanded in a tone that prioritized which question should be answered first.

“Besides skimming money from known gambling operations, he told them that I had set up a series of schemes outside The Family where the take was coming directly to my phantom organization.”

The hood made Nicky feel like he was conducting a conversation with bedcovers over his head, and the moisture from his mouth continued to build up on the front of the cloth, making it difficult for him to speak.

“What happened to him?” Brooklyn asked again, anxious to hear the answer.

“They got the info they wanted, then somewhere between AC and Philly, when the car was doing ninety, Sal exited—road kill!”

“And you?” Queen’s body remained tense, waiting for the answer.

“Long and the short of it, Angelo’s convinced there’s a skim ring in Philly called *Prendo* and I’m the supposed brains behind it. Problem is, he can’t prove it.”

“You shittin’ me,” exclaimed Brooklyn.

“No...Of course, I denied everything, but with Angelo, when it comes to money, you’re guilty until proven innocent. Supposedly, once a month, I use a couple of ‘Young Turks’ to distribute the cash to my faceless outfit.”

Queen’s aggressiveness in asking questions had waned. This wasn’t what he had expected. He knew of another skim ring in New York where a man called Salvatore had recently gone missing. His forehead was suddenly damp with perspiration.

“Hmmm...So they thought you were skimming money from everything, but couldn’t prove it,” Queens said. Then he whistled and added, “Yet they didn’t try to...you know...ermm...grind it out of you. Why?”

Nicky continued, “First I denied the beef, then I told them that since they’d never know if I had been skimming or not, as a good faith gesture I’d come up with an elaborate scheme to replace the money they thought was skimmed.”

Oddly enough, Queens had heard this plan before when he had personally delivered the same offer to the heads of the Five New York Families without Brooklyn’s knowledge, last week.

“Santa you’re a cocky bastard,” Brooklyn acknowledged. “You could have skimmed more money from your bosses and paid them with that, and they’d be none the wiser. Fucking sweet. Got to hand it to you. You got balls, Fat Man, I’ll give you that.”

“So you’re telling me that Angelo suspected you of skimming money from all his operations, yet he did nothing, and let you walk,” Queens stated, followed by an incredulous shake of the head.

“No proof.” A fuck you attitude was starting to emanate from under the hood of the deceptive “Good Fella.”

“Still?” Queens pondered, not quite comprehending the circumstances.

Nicky then chuckled and said, “You ever heard of Rocco Delmonte?”

“The Sandman. Who hasn’t? He’s Angelo’s right-hand man, the "Philly Enforcer" who puts people to sleep,” answered Queens. “What about him?”

“I’m Angelo’s big earner, not his muscle. I’m known for pulling off elaborate schemes that have made Angelo and his boys, including Rocco, a lot of money. You’ve no doubt heard of the Aer Lingus diamond heist at Philly International. Well, you’re lookin’ at the brains behind it. I run the most profitable crew in Philly.”

“Even so,” Queens added thoughtfully.

Nicky had a smirk on his face, though Queens and Brooklyn couldn’t see it under his hood. “That and the fact that 'The Sandman' has a daughter, Nancy, who is his pride and joy. And guess who she’s married to? I’ll give you a hint. He’s sitting right here in this car, between you two *gavones*.”

He heard a curse, followed by another smack of the gun against his kneecap.

Son of a bitch Nicky thought, but didn’t say anything as he rubbed his knee. Gaining his composure, he forcefully stated, “No one would dare try anything in Philly without Rocco signing off on it, even Angelo, especially if it involves family. But Angelo wants answers, and he doesn’t know who he can trust within his organization, not even Rocco. So he calls in a New York favor and *Bada Bing*, you two show up with no ties to Philly and take me for a ride.”

As silence filled the air, Nicky turned toward Queens and said, “I take it that you two talked directly to Angelo. Makes sense, though this ain’t about the Feds. It’s about a rogue organization operating below the surface in Philly. Someone’s a modern day Moriarty, but it ain’t me.”

With Nicky’s last statement, the inquisition was abruptly suspended, and the only sound in the Mercedes came from Queens and Brooklyn as they shifted in their seats. If Nicky had been a mind reader, it would have been the perfect time for telepathic communication as the two capturers sat there trying to figure out the validity of what they’d just heard. Was Nicky lying or telling the truth? It was an enigma that left the two New Yorkers in a quandary.

Finally, reengaging Nicky with a couple of soft gun taps to his sore kneecap, Queens recapped what Nicky said out loud to the occupants in the car, “So Angelo lied to us about the Feds. A skim ring, you say. An interesting story...almost believable." Then with a tinge of sarcasm, Queens said, “You know you don’t look smart enough to be a mastermind of anything, unless your schemes had to do with food. Then I’d believe you, Fat Boy!”

“Yeah, especially if there was a widespread shortage of pasta and gravy in Philly,” added Brooklyn.

Both their bodies shook with laughter at the joke, but it was fleeting. An emotional release from what the two New Yorkers had just heard. After a brief pause, Queens decided to restart the dialogue. "Let me get this straight. You didn't talk to the Feds, right?"

"I didn't say that," came the toned down response from under the hood. The Feds sniff around me all the time. They know who I am and how I'm connected, and somehow they heard I had a problem with Angelo.

"So?"

"I'm a stand-up guy, so I told them to shove it, though considering my current state of affairs, maybe I should have tested the water. Oh, well...fuck it." Nicky paused for the desired effect, and then asked, "Why did you guys get chosen for this job. Did you fuck up?"

Grabbing Nicky by his jacket and pulling him toward him, Queens uttered in a low, menacing voice, "Hey, asshole, I ask the questions, not you. *Capice?*"

Through clenched teeth, his spittle projecting through the cloth, Nicky explained in no uncertain terms, "There's a skim ring somewhere, but I'm not part of it. I know the consequences."

Queens released him and then pushed him back into the leather upholstery before continuing, "We'll talk some more once we get to the cabin. I need to figure out what's going on."

"I'm sure you will, and when you do, let me know," Nicky said, resting his rope-tied hands next to his belt buckle, leaning back his head, and closing his eyes.

Unlike Queens and Brooklyn, who were trying to figure out where this was all heading, Nicky was content to let things play out.

Another 45 minutes or so passed as the car was buffeted by the howling winter winds. Nicky could feel the car occasionally skidding on snowy roads, making the journey more hazardous than it already was.

"I need to take a piss," Nicky stated. Drank too much beer. If I try to hold it much longer, I'll piss in the car."

Nicky's bladder *was* full, but the Mercedes also reeked of garlic, smoke, cologne, and body odor, and he desperately needed some fresh air.

"Jesus Christ. Pull over. I gotta take a piss, too," Queens chimed in.

After the driver had pulled over, Nicky was yanked out of the vehicle and pushed in an unknown direction. He said, “Hey, how about taking the hood off, so I don’t piss on myself? It don’t matter if I see your faces. I can barely hold my dick with these ropes.”

“What do you say?” Brooklyn offered, looking at Queens.

“Leave him be,” Queens barked. “He doesn’t see any of our faces or know who we are until we sort this thing out. The hood stays put. If he pisses on himself, we’ll throw him in the trunk. Now, hurry it up! It’s freezing out here.”

His gambit having failed, Nicky concentrated on the task at hand, pulling his zipper down and taking care of business. Over the last fifteen minutes, the ride had gone from smooth to bumpy, meaning that they were travelling on rural roads—that and the fact that the driver was able to pull the car over quickly told Nicky they were in the boonies.

His feet told him there was more snow on the ground. He listened for anything that would give him a clue as to their current location, but outside of the shuffling of boots on slush mixed with road salt and gravel, and piss hitting the snow there were no other sounds. As soon as Nicky was done, a hand grabbed his shoulder, steered him back to the SUV, and shoved him inside.

“Hold up,” Queens said, stopping Brooklyn from reentering the Mercedes. Motioning him towards him, he asked Brooklyn, “What do you think? His story sounds way too familiar. Something’s wrong.”

It was only last week that Queens and Brooklyn had been accused of running the same type of skim ring that had happened to Angelo, by the Five Families in New York. But no action had been taken, because there was no proof that the two of them had actually done it.

Ignoring the falling snow and the cold, Brooklyn whispered to Queens, “Two skim rings, an hour and a half apart, one in New York and the other in Philly, both run the same way? No fucking way and I don’t believe in coincidences.

Queens and Brooklyn walked further away from the vehicle, but Nicky still managed to pick out “Cash out and into the wind” from their conversation.

The Driver who hadn’t spoken since the trip started turned towards Nicky, now seated in the backseat, while still keeping an eye on the two New Yorkers talking outside his car, and said, “Santa, I checked these guys out. They’re some bad dudes. Tell them what they want.”

The Driver didn’t tell Nicky anything that he didn’t already know. Nicky was playing a deadly game of chicken, and he knew what the consequences would be for whoever blinked first.

Finally, they were all back inside the SUV. The motor hesitated at first, then turned over as they resumed their journey. The Mercedes gradually started up a steep incline with lots of twists and turns, jostling the three of them in the backseat.

Nicky, seeking distraction from the monotony of the ride, leaned forward and suggested to the driver. “Hey, how about turning on the radio? Let’s have some Xmas music for this sleigh ride.” Silence. “Come on. How about some holiday tunes?”

Unexpectedly from his right came a surprise response, Xmas spirit from Queens, “What the fuck. Turn it on.”

Festive music drowned out everything except the small-town DJ who constantly interrupted the music by announcing the ongoing results of a “Toys for Tots” fundraising drive. At the top of the hour, the DJ didn’t fail Nicky, identifying the station’s call letters and city of license. Now Nicky knew approximately where they were; somewhere within the range of an FM radio station in Easton, Pennsylvania, headed towards the Poconos.

The DJ, apparently in love with his voice, talked over the intro of every song. Being an ex jock himself, Nicky winced every time he did it. “We’re up to 5,000 dollars,” the DJ chirped, “and here’s another holiday favorite to put you in the Christmas spirit—Nat King Cole, singing ‘Have Yourself...’”

Nicky hummed along, aware of the sound of the other passenger’s hands wiping the foggy windows in a futile attempt to see into the blackness. The Driver cursed the defroster for only working intermittently and mumbled under his breath about being a fool for taking the job in the first place. They were disparate riders in a four-passenger Santa sleigh with everyone left to their own thoughts amid the voices of Bing, Frank, Celine, and the Vienna Boys Choir. Fortunately for Nicky, he didn’t have anything to do except relax and enjoy the music. Being a captive had its advantages. Besides, he knew that nothing significant would happen until they reached their destination.

The SUV continued to struggle through the unpaved, snow laden, rural road when suddenly, Nicky stopped listening to the music. He could sense they were close to their destination.

Showtime!

“How much further?” Queens asked, his impatience beginning to show.

The Driver replied, “About two miles, I think.”

“Is the cabin heated?” wondered Brooklyn from Nicky’s left.

“They told me there’s a generator for power, a fireplace, and a couple of cords of wood. We should be okay for the night,” Queens disclosed, his mind elsewhere.

As the SUV slowed, the Driver turned off the radio before heading up another incline. Nicky felt the vehicle make a couple of tight turns before it abruptly stopped.

“All right, Santa, get out,” commanded Brooklyn.

“Come on, Fat Boy, move it!” Queens snarled, prodding him with his gun as Nicky slid out the other side.

Nicky aimlessly tromped through the snow. He shivered, thinking it must be below zero out here as his exposed skin reacted to the mountain air.

“Over this way.” Brooklyn grabbed Nicky’s arm and stuck a gun in his back, then he steered Santa toward the cabin and pushed him inside.

Upon entering Queens, turned to Brooklyn and said, “Christ, it’s cold. You stay with Santa. I’ll turn on the generator.”

“What do you want me to do?” the Driver asked insolently.

“Get the food and gear out of the truck,” came the brusque reply.

Now that two of Nicky’s travel companions were gone on errands, he decided to revisit his earlier inquiry. “Any chance I can take this hood off and you guys put your masks back on?”

A slight chuckle was Brooklyn’s only reply as he steered Nicky across the room and led him to a chair, shoving him in it.

“What’s your back door?” Nicky asked mockingly as he sat back in the chair.

“Huh?” was Brooklyn’s uninformed response.

“Escape plan. The best schemes always have one. What’s yours?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Brooklyn responded in an irritated voice.

“Too bad. Maybe your partner has one and he’s not sharing it with you. Maybe it doesn’t include you,” Nicky said sarcastically.

“Fuck you,” Brooklyn yelled, kicking the chair and nearly knocking Nicky over.

At that moment, Nicky heard the sound of an engine revving up outside the cabin. “You stay here,” threatened Brooklyn. Nicky then heard him flip on a switch somewhere in the cabin, and a moment later, he sensed a change in lighting from under his hood.

“That’s better,” Brooklyn said as he returned to where Nicky was sitting.

“Not bad for a safe house,” Queens declared as the cabin door opened, and he walked back into the room.

Nicky already knew the dimensions of the space, confirming his location in it by the number of heavy footsteps it took for Brooklyn to reach his chair.

The front door reopened, chilling the room again. As soon as the Driver entered the log cabin, he dropped the gear near the door and proclaimed, “I’m done,” as if the long drive and his recent physical labor justified his statement.

“What a loser,” Nicky thought, and a coward to boot.

Ignoring the Driver, Queens told Brooklyn, “I’ll let them know we’re here and see what’s up.”

“Can you get a signal here?” Brooklyn asked.

“Yeah, they told me no problem,” Queens replied. “Must be a cell tower nearby.”

In a loud, obnoxious voice, Nicky stated the obvious, “This cabin’s freezing. How about some heat?”

To aggravate the Driver, before making his call, Queens told the P&D boy, “Hey, why don’t you go to the shed and bring in some wood, so we can start a fire.”

“Shit. Why don’t he help me?” the Driver fired back, pointing directly at Brooklyn. “I brought all the crap in.”

Queens didn’t answer; instead, he just looked menacingly at the Driver. Finally, after a few seconds, the Driver conceded and in a whiny voice said, “Okay, okay.” Just as he reached for the log carrier, he turned back towards Queens and asked, “What about Santa? He could use the exercise.”

“Yeah, put Santa to work,” Brooklyn added eagerly, not wanting to face the elements himself.

Queens didn’t say a word instead; he weighed his risk/reward options before coming to a decision. “Okay, but keep a gun on him. If he runs, shoot him in his fat ass.”

“You got it,” the Driver stated, pulling Nicky up from his chair, then shoving a cloth log carrier into his hands while sticking a small handgun into his back. “Okay, Santa, move it. You’re going to work off some of that lard.”

Queens watched Nicky head for the log cabin door, and before he went through it, Queens cautioned, “When you get back, Santa, you and I are going to have a serious conversation about that skimming story and how you came up with it. *Capice?*”

The shed was some distance from the log cabin, each step giving Nicky a chance to think as he trudged through the snow. Funny, but when you’re obese, people underestimate you because of your weight. Growing up, his mom told him that fat people were excellent dancers because they were light on their feet. He wasn’t sure if that was true, but this faux fat boy (who had extra Santa padding under his sweater and jacket) knew all the dance steps. The razor-sharp underside of his belt buckle finally completed its task as they neared the woodshed. His hands were free. The Driver’s breath on his neck confirmed that they were both the same height.

“How do you want to do this?” Nicky shouted through the hood. “I’m tied up and I can’t see a damn thing.”

“I don’t give a shit,” the Driver answered as Nicky, without warning, whirled around and brushed his captor’s small handgun aside with his right arm while slamming the Drivers’ windpipe with his left, immediately immobilizing and sending him to the ground. He then ripped off the heavy burlap hood, as his Santa hat fell to the ground, and in a cat-like move, slammed his boot on top of the Driver’s right wrist, forcing his hand to open and release his grip on the small handgun.

The Driver, writhing in pain, gasping for air, tried to get up. “Stay down!” Nicky snarled, now holding the Driver’s 22 caliber Ruger pocket pistol in his hand. “Not a word. Naughty or nice—it’s your choice.”

A few moments later, their roles reversed, they continued toward the dilapidated shed with the Driver now leading the way. When they arrived, Nicky got rid of the extra padding, took a plastic bag from under the logs, opened it, and put a pair of gloves on before taking a M9 Beretta with a sound suppressor out of its plastic container. It was just one of five similar weapons strategically stashed in and around the cabin that he had placed there the week before. He balanced the weapon in his left hand, happy to be united with an old friend.

The Driver’s green eyes were wide eyed as he watched Nicky, ignoring the cold, strip off his clothes.

“Your turn,” Nicky gestured towards his clothing. Then the Driver did as ordered, stripping down before putting on Nicky’s old garb. Nicky completed the masquerade by changing into the Driver’s clothes.

Queens called multiple times, each dial failing to get through. He stared at the cell phone in his hand as if the answer lay there. Then he made a decision and slowly put it back in his pocket. Hesitating, he reached for a smoke from inside his ski jacket then he plopped

himself down on a beat up leather chair. He had vowed to give them up, but always carried a spare pack for an emergency.

Queens watched Brooklyn circumnavigate the room. In a pensive mood, he finished his last drag, blowing the smoke out of the right side of his mouth. Sitting stoically, he waited patiently until Brooklyn crossed his bow. "Stop pacing. New York knows."

Brooklyn stopped in his tracks. "How? They only have Salvatore's word against ours and he's probably dead. You denied everything last week, right?" Brooklyn jabbered. Then, ignoring Queens' request, he continued to walk in circles from the front of the cabin to the back. He had no escape plan, and he knew it.

"Yeah, I denied everything. They know they can't prove it, but it don't matter. They know," Queens said, shrugging his shoulders. "The 'Philly' skim ring that Santa is talking about is bull shit. I doubt there's one in Philly. But there is one in New York---ours.

Brooklyn kept wringing his hands and walking, "We never should have done it," knowing that he was now powerless to change a predetermined course.

"But we did. New York told me if we picked up Santa, it would square things away. It won't. We were double-crossed. I'm surprised we didn't have a welcoming party waiting for us when we arrived. However, I don't plan to stick around to meet one." On alert, he pulled his Smith & Wesson out of his jacket.

Reenergized, Queens sprang from his chair, "Time to cash out. Disappear into the wind...*Scompaiono nel vento*. Besides, we had a great five year run. They have no idea how much money we 'really' skimmed. I hope you did what I told you and put the cash in an offshore account," knowing that Brooklyn probably hid it in close proximity to his house, most likely the backyard.

"Nah, it's where I can get my hands on it...fast." Then as a second thought entered his head, Brooklyn stopped and turned towards Queens, "Shit...What about Santa, where does he fit in?"

Gearing up, Queens was once again a man of action as he looked at the cabin doorway. Turning back towards Brooklyn, he relit another cig, chain-smoking once again, and shook his head. "That Bullshit Artist...I have no idea, a pawn on the chessboard to be discarded after we find out from him how much time we have, before New York makes its move."

"What about the Driver?" asked Brooklyn as he also looked towards the cabin doorway.

"That idiot. Mr. P&D, Fuck Him. They're both dead. We'll ice them and then motor out of here." Queens' eyes remained focused on the front door of the cabin as he said it.

Brooklyn continued talking, "I've got a wife and two kids."

Fortunately for Queens, he had planned for this day. He thought it would have come sooner. Addressing Brooklyn's concern, "I'd say you have a choice to make, I've already made mine..." but Queens' attention shifted from their conversation to his watch, "How long's it take to get logs?" as he flicked his half lit cigarette into the empty fireplace.

Brooklyn didn't answer, he darted to the nearest window to look for the log carriers. He couldn't see far as it was starting to snow.

Queens restated his question, "How long?"

From the front cabin window looking out came Brooklyn's terse reply, "Not this long. That's for damn sure."

Large snowflakes were starting to fall as they headed back the same way they came toward the cabin. Walking slowly through the white pine forest, Nicky saw the cabin lights come into view. Made from hemlock logs and mortar in the thirties, it had been a hunting lodge in its day. Under its new owners, he could only guess what was buried on the premises, but he knew it wasn't game.

Nicky stopped the Driver before they entered the final clearing. "We're almost there," he said menacingly. "Put the hood and Santa hat over your head. If you do exactly as I say, you might live through this."

Then they plunged forward, the new Santa, wearing the padding beneath the old Santa's sweater and jacket with the hood pulled over his head.

It didn't take long for the cabin door to burst open and for Queens and Brooklyn to come running out in search of Santa and the Driver. In their hands pointed at them for a warm welcome, a .38 Special carried by Queens, and a semi automatic 9 millimeter Glock held by Brooklyn.

The snow, limited moonlight, and a change in lighting from the log cabin to the night sky all aided Nicky's deception.

"What took you so long...where's the Driver?" shouted Queens, his breath visible in the night air as he pointed the .38 at Santa and squinted past him in search of the Driver. Brooklyn, slower a foot than Queens, was about six steps back.

Pfft, Pfft...two muffled thuds and the sound of gas quietly emitting from just behind the parked Mercedes answered his query, two shots to the chest for the kill as Queens' gun flew out of his hand while his body violently spun around before hitting the snow.

“Shit,” had barely left Brooklyn’s mouth, the word most used in unexpected deaths, when once again the sound of Pfft, Pfft cut through the still night air as Brooklyn fell backward hitting the frozen ground.

The Driver dropped the logs and turned in the direction of the muffled sounds. A thud and hiss from the M9 Beretta squelched his plea in mid sentence.

Warmed from the adrenaline rush following his recent activities, Nicky ignored the cold and stepped from behind his human duck blind and walked over to confirm the kill on each man. He took advantage of the light from the open cabin door to assist him.

Nicky started with the Driver, whose real name was Daniel Burke. “Danny Boy,” as he was known to his friends and associates, had run a stop sign in Nicky’s neighborhood and killed the eight year old daughter of one of Nicky’s closest high school friends in an unsolved “Hit and Run.”

Convinced that no one would ever catch him and confident that no one would ever know who did it, Burke, after some heavy drinking, admitted to it in a Philly taproom within earshot of one of Nicky’s sources. Apparently, he was on a job when he hit a little blonde haired girl on a bike and chose not to stop and save her. It was the reason Nicky had requested Burke for the P&D assignment. Walking over to him, Nicky retrieved his Santa’s hat and aimed his Beretta at the face of the still breathing Driver. “Revenge served cold,” he thought, before expressing his true feelings out loud, “Danny Boy, the O’Rourke’s send their regards,” Pfft---a score settled

Next stop, Brooklyn, Joey “Pinhead” DeLuca, a mob soldier. He didn’t seem like a bad guy, he just bet on the wrong *Capo*. His description was accurate based on what Nicky had been sent. “Ordinary” is how most people would describe him; for sure, he wouldn’t stand out in a crowd---the perfect tail. Nicky was right, he had no personal escape plan, but unbeknownst to his wife and kids, he had placed a substantial amount of his earnings in the master bedroom wall of their summer home in Sea Gate, Brooklyn, at the far western end of Coney Island. On the day that Joey headed to Philly, in a letter mailed to his wife, he gave his family the exact location of his stash; an escape plan actualized even if it didn’t include him.

Brooklyn and Nicky were opposites. Where Brooklyn’s unremarkable appearance couldn't be remembered, Nicky’s features defined him. Alive light brown eyes, high cheekbones, a flat nose, and full lips housed a deceptive smile; all anchored by a chiseled chin, populating an equally proportioned head. Of Latin American and Italian origin, he had slightly olive colored skin that blended in with the dirty blond hair that roamed aimlessly over his head. The individual lineaments converged in such a way as to create the appearance of ruggedness, appealing to both men and women alike. Without a second thought about Brooklyn, a thud and hiss completed Nicky’s ritual.

His reflection on the second of the three assailants was suddenly interrupted by a blindside tackle out of nowhere. The force of the collision caused Nicky to fumble his Beretta into the air, landing somewhere in the snow. Queens was alive, reborn from the two shots to his chest, as he yelled at Nicky through clenched teeth, "Mother fucker." Then, without hesitating, Queens struck Nicky again with his shoulder, before applying a bear hug and throwing him to the turf.

"Son of a Bitch," blew out of Nicky's mouth as he tried to regain his senses from under the weight of Queens's body, pile driving him downward.

Next, the two frantically grappled with each other on the snow-covered ground as they rolled around and around, each trying to gain an advantage over the other by being the one on top. Queens finally prevailed, but before he could hold his position, he jumped off Nicky and ran to the spot where Nicky had dropped his gun. Queens turned his back on Nicky for an instant as he retrieved the M9. Then in one fluid motion, he picked the weapon up from the snow, fingered it, and aimed to fire at the spot he had just vacated. The split second it took him to search out Nicky's new position, with the Beretta outstretched in his hand, was unfortunately too long; the non-spinning Blackhawk Tactical knife, hidden inside one of Nicky's boots, hit him flush below his Adam's apple. He staggered backward at first, then collapsed face forward in the snow.

Catching his breath, the crescent moonlight glimmered on the surface as Nicky remained in a throwing position with his strong-side left leg out at about 90 degrees and his right knee on the ground. Slowly, his breathing returned to normal as he remained motionless with his left arm casually draped over the top of his left thigh while his right arm and hand remained extended in the same follow through position Nicky used to propel his knife into the target.

Unhurriedly, Nicky pushed off his left knee, got up, and walked over to where Queens lay motionless at his feet. Slowly, he rolled him over with the tip of his boot. Reaching down, he pried the M9 out of his hand and pulled the Blackhawk out of his neck. Then he paused and looked at him. The bullets he fired from behind the SUV struck Queens chest, hitting him dead center, exactly where he aimed. Leaning over, he unzipped Queen's ski jacket and tapped his chest; he was wearing light body armor, which could have cost Nicky his life.

Slowly, Nicky straightened up and gave Queens a quizzical look. He shook his head and smiled. "Jimmy, 'The Cat,' Cavezza, you're out of lives."

Like so many other Wiseguys, greed, jail time, flashy clothes, and an unmarked grave would define Queens' chosen career. Whatever remorse Nicky might have felt for Queens ended with the final thud and hiss.

The contract had come down at the last minute with more risks than Nicky would have normally taken. The Five Families of New York decided that Queens and Brooklyn had

skimmed enough of their money. They knew that others were involved, but they didn't know who, so they put a contract out on the two of them and asked their Philly brethren to pull it off. Retained by Angelo through an intermediary, Nicky was chosen to execute the hit.

Nicky felt the best way to lure Queens and Brooklyn out of New York (who were on high alert ever since Queens' met with representatives of the Five Families) was to pretend he was the prey---a Trojan horse. It was a rush job with an increased margin for error, but the comp was worth the risk.

Nicky reached down, took the cell phone out of Queens' pocket and walking back towards the cabin, hit redial. He let it ring three times then hung up. Hitting redial again, he let it ring two more times then hung up. On the third redial, a voice on the other end answered.

“Hello?”

“*Finito*,” He said simply.

“All three?”

“Ho! Ho! Ho!”