

## ONE

Nikki Heat wondered if her mother hadn't been murdered what her life would have been. Would she be hoofing it like this from her police precinct to a crime scene, or would she instead be on Broadway rehearsing a Chekov revival or some cutting-edge relationship exploration with whispers of a Tony? At Columbus Avenue she paused for the walk signal. Life might have intervened in other ways, too. Fate could have just as easily made her that gourmet mom sitting in the Starbucks window to her right, helping her preschooler negotiate a hot chocolate. Or made her a panhandler, like that guy shaking his Dixie cup of coins outside the wine store across the street. She didn't see a Steely Dan backup singer anywhere around her, but she would enthusiastically be open to that possibility, also.

A swirl of urban wind lifted some gutter trash in a mini twister and Nikki watched a plastic grocery bag, candy wrappers, and a newspaper ad spin south from Eighty-second until the spectacle lost its center and came apart into something more mundane: random garbage. It was only half past 10 A.M. Why would somebody beg outside a wine shop that was closed?

She turned back to regard the panhandler, but he turned away from her and shuffled uptown. Heat got the light and crossed. One corner down, the traffic detail chopped the air with gloved hands to keep the gawkers moving past the street barricade. But they would let her through. The NYPD's top homicide detective had a corpse to meet.

The radio call from the first uniforms on-scene had carried a spoiler. "Don't eat or drink anything en route. Seriously." One part defiance, one part caffeine jones, Heat brought along the remnants of the vanilla latte cooling on her desk and polished it off before she reached the

cordon. She lobbed the cup into a city can and flashed tin at the patrolman guarding the caution tape.

Inside the barrier, Nikki paused. To anyone else, it looked as if she were stopping to adjust her holster, which she did. But that was cover. The interval was her own moment, a ritual of one deep breath to honor the loss of a life and to connect her own experience with tragedy. Even though Heat had closed her mother's case two years ago, she still meditated on her simple pledge every time she encountered a new body: victims deserved justice; loved ones deserved smart cops. Duly acknowledged, she exhaled and moved forward.

Scanning Eighty-first Street with beginner's eyes, she vacuumed details and opened herself to critical first impressions. Seasoned investigators were most vulnerable to missing clues because it all got workaday, if they let it. So Heat downshifted to rookie mode, playing her walk-up as if this were her first case ever.

Nikki's first ping registered a half block from the planetarium. The paramedics out front were busy. Usually medical first responders were idle by the time she arrived because the victim was dead at the scene. Occasionally, a shooting or a knife rampage left a collateral victim or two requiring treatment or transport. But this morning, the reflection of bright emergency lights bouncing off the wet pavement was broken by middle school field trippers huddled around three ambulances. Even from a distance Nikki noted the signs of emotional trauma—sobs, giddiness, faraway stares. A teenage boy sat on a gurney inside one ambulance, vomiting. Outside it, a pair of girls stood holding each, wiping tears.

She passed a coach bus with Edmonton plates idling at the curb. About two dozen Canadian seniors clustered near its door, muttering gravely in the drizzle and craning for a view of the action through the trees of Theodore Roosevelt Park. By instinct, Heat looked the opposite way, behind them. Her inspection tracked east from the Excelsior Hotel along the block of grand apartment buildings to The Beresford, whose rooftop towers blurred eerily into the low clouds and resembled a ghost castle lurking in the mist twenty-three floors overhead. Many of the street's windows were filled with rubberneckers, some of who held

up smartphones to live-Tweet the carnage from their three-million-dollar condos. She got out her own cell and snapped off some shots so, later, she could pinpoint where to send her squad to interview eyewitnesses.

High above the gray blanket, the lazy rumble of a jet on approach to one of the airports made her think of him. Six more days, he'd be back. God, these months felt like forever. Nikki shook off the distraction and once again told her longing to take a seat.

At the cobblestone driveway to the museum's main entrance she saw it for herself and stopped cold. Riveted, Nikki stood among the evacuees and stared like everyone else. Then muttered a curse.

The mammoth six-story glass box that encases the Hayden Planetarium looked as if a meteor had smashed through the roof. But what had punched a hole in the top of the massive cube had left an explosion of blood at the jagged circle in the ceiling. On the inside wall, tongues of red extended earthward, translucent paths streaking thirty feet or more down the glass curtain. Detective Heat didn't need to role-play beginner's eyes. This went down as a first.

**"Watch where you walk, Detective," said the medical examiner. But Heat** had already paused on the bottom step leading down to the lower level of the giant atrium. Dr. Lauren Parry knelt on the floor in her moon suit marking evidence under Alpha Centauri. "Got pieces of this body everywhere. Some still falling. Or dripping's more like it."

Nikki tilted her head back. A hundred feet above her, drizzle and unfiltered gray light seeped through the puncture a human cannonball had made. The hole created a ragged bull's-eye in the glazed strip that framed the outer edges of the roof. Beneath the impact splatter, more blood—mixed with chunks of tissue—had not only trickled down the window, but also on one half of the giant orb nested inside the Hall of the Universe. Jupiter took a hit, too. The nearest model planet of the array suspended by wires in the cube now wore vertical streaks of red crossing its latitudinal stripes.

Elsewhere, bits of shredded clothing hung from structural tension rods where they had snagged on descent. As she looked, a gob of viscera dripped off one of the tatters and plummeted three stories, meeting the

white marble floor with a splat as loud as a handclap. When it landed Detective Feller called out a long “Whooooaa!” which was followed by a chorus of rowdy guffaws from the three uniforms standing with him over near the gift shop. This time Heat wouldn’t reprimand him for his habitual lack of decorum. If ever a crime scene allowed for gallows humor to dissipate trauma, this was it. And with no family, media, or civilian bystanders around to offend, she let it slide.

Heat stepped carefully into the great hall, avoiding nuggets of glass and following the route suggested by the numbered yellow markers left behind by the ME on her way across the floor. When she reached her friend, Nikki asked. “Doesn’t figure as a jumper, does it?”

“First of all, you know better than to ask me that so soon. And second, thank you for not contaminating my crime scene.”

“I think I know where to walk, Lauren.”

“Then I have trained you well. Unlike your Detective Ochoa, who managed to slip on a piece of tendon his first minute on-scene and land on his ass. When you see Miguel, you can inform him that he is my soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend.”

Nikki scanned the neighboring buildings, all visible outside of the glass. “I don’t see anyplace close enough to make this drop.”

“You’re going to press this until I answer, aren’t you.” Dr. Parry stood and stretched her back. “Last week I worked a jumper up in the Bronx at the Castle Hill Houses. The rooftops of those projects are about the same height as these, OK? My victim had split open at the neck and abdomen and had gross organ protrusion, but she was, otherwise, an intact corpse.

“So there are not only no buildings close enough to reach this place, there’s no structure around here high enough for a fall to do this to a body. Injuries this massive are more consistent with falls from hundred-story-plus skyscrapers.”

“What about ID?”

“Our best bet will be DNA. If we get lucky, we may find extremities or teeth. Any more questions before I get back to work?”

“Just one. Are you going to chill out before tonight? Because I don’t want to sit through *Perks of Being a Wallflower* with you harrumphing all through it.”

“*Perks of Being a Wallflower?* I wanted to see Jeremy Renner as Bourne.”

“A: There is only one Jason Bourne, and, B: It’s my turn to pick, so deal, lady.” Nikki gave her the kind of serious look that neither could take seriously. During Rook’s two-month absence on assignment for his magazine, Nikki and Lauren had set a movie night once a week, a pleasant distraction for Heat but a weak substitute for having him near. Dr. Parry signaled her acceptance of *Perks* by telling Detective Heat to get out her notebook.

“Victim is, as yet, unidentifiable with no recovered parts sizable enough to distinguish. We have tagged one shoe, a New Balance men’s trainer that landed up on the First-Level elevator bridge, so we are open to the victim being male but cannot confirm without a DNA match.”

“But a safe guess.”

The medical examiner shrugged. “Otherwise, it’s the floor on hands and knees, or cherry pickers to search the rigging. That’s all I got.”

“Then you’ll be interested in this,” said Detective Ochoa, painstakingly tracing Heat’s path through the scattered remains and glass shards. Behind him, his partner Detective Raley followed, matching footfalls. “Found it over near Group Tickets.” The duo, affectionately known as Roach, a mash-up of their last names, both turned to indicate the counter across the hall. “It’s a piece of a finger.”

“Or maybe a toe,” added Raley.

The three detectives stood behind Parry while she crouched, examining the specimen with a magnifier. “Tip of a finger. Dark skinned.”

Heat knelt and put a cheek near the floor for a closer look. “Let’s assume black male, putting this with the men’s shoe. Any chance for a print?”

The medical examiner cautiously rolled the specimen a half-turn with the blunt end of her tweezers. It reminded Nikki of checking the edge of a pancake for doneness. “Promising. We’ll sure try.”

“Nice one, Roach,” said Heat as she stood.

Lauren tweaked her boyfriend. “Might even make up for your booty fall, Detective Clumsy.”

While Ochoa made a face at her, his partner said, “Amazing. I mean that we got a whole piece like that.”

“Not so unusual.” Dr. Parry placed an evidence cone then bagged the fingertip. “When the human body experiences catastrophic blunt force trauma like this it separates at the joints first as it explodes.”

“Giving the planetarium a brand-new exhibit for the Big Bang Theory,” said the familiar voice behind them. By reflex, Heat rolled her eyes and thought, Rook. Always clowning aro—?! Heat spun, and there he stood, ten feet away, grinning that Rook wiseass grin. Nikki tried to collect herself, but all she could do was manage a breathless, “Rook?”

“Listen, if this is a bad time. . . .” He gestured widely to the carnage. “Last thing you need is somebody else just dropping in on you.”

She rushed to him, wanting so much to forget who she was and where she was and just throw herself at him and kiss him. Instead, the homicide squad leader clung to her professionalism and said, “You weren’t supposed to be back until—”

“—Next week, I know. Surprise.”

“Uh, understatement.” She took both his hands in hers and squeezed, then, frustrated, snapped off her nitrile gloves and held him again, this time feeling the warmth of his flesh. Soon a familiar rush filled her; the same intense magnetism that drew Heat to Rook three years before when he first came into her life. Nikki often reflected on how their relationship almost didn’t happen. A damn journalist assigned to her for a research ride-along? No, thank you, she’d thought.

But soon enough Heat went from trying to get him reassigned because his pigtail-pulling wisecracks annoyed her, to yearning for his companionship so much she let him stay around. In time they not only became a couple, trading nights at each other’s apartments, but Jameson Rook evolved into a valued collaborator on her toughest cases, notably solving the homicide of a celebrity gossip columnist, exposing a killer at the highest levels of the NYPD, helping her nail her mother’s murderers, and even in saving the city from a bioterror plot. Oh, sure there had been some romantic ups and downs, including a few trial separations, but they didn’t last. The pull—the magnetism—the rightness of their togetherness always prevailed. And, of course, there was the sex. Yes, the sex.

Nikki studied him. In two months he had grown thinner, tanner, more fit. And something else was different. “So. A beard?”

“Like it?” He struck a pose.

She stepped back and smiled broadly. “No. Hell, no.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“No I won’t. You look like . . . you look like the Jameson Rook action figure.”

He withdrew one hand and felt his chin to assess.

“Who told you I was here?” she asked.

“Sorry, an undisclosed source protected by my rights under the First Amendment. OK, it was Raley.” The detective gave her a sheepish wave. When she turned back to Rook he leaned in close enough for her to inhale his scent and whispered, “I thought I’d kidnap you for an early lunch. Say, someplace with room service?”

What Heat wanted to do was exactly that. Only screw room service; just race across the street to the Excelsior and leave a trail of clothes from the Do Not Disturb sign to the bed. But she said, “A terrific idea. If I weren’t kinda busy investigating a suspicious death, and all.”

“If your job is your priority.”

“Says the man who left me eight weeks ago to write a magazine article.”

“Two magazine articles. Or, as my editor prefers to call them, in-depth investigations. And seven weeks. I came back early. See?” He spread his arms wide and turned a circle, which made her laugh. Damned Rook, he could always make her laugh. The other thing he always did was understand how dedication translated into deferred gratification. So without complaint, he hoisted his duffel onto the counter at Coat Check, which sat unattended but full of backpacks and raincoats left behind in the hasty evacuation.

**Since the morning rain had let up, Heat decided to convene her squad meeting outside and yield the interior to OCME and Forensics, who seemed less than thrilled by all those extra personnel contaminating their scene. She and Detectives Raley, Ochoa, Feller, and Rhymer formed a loose circle on the entrance plaza between the revolving doors**

and the circular driveway. Rook sat on a stone bench off to the side, making no attempt to stifle his jet-lag yawns. Up the grass slope, evacuated tourists milled on the sidewalk behind the wrought iron fence. Predictably the news vans had arrived. Their raised snorkels formed portable forests at both ends of Eighty-first.

“I don’t know why we got bounced out here,” said Feller. “Didn’t we find that finger for them?”

“We?” replied Roach, in near unison. And then Ochoa added, “Here, homes, I’ve got a finger for you, too.”

Feller came back with, “I’m touched, Miguel. You even took it out of your nose,” bringing a volley of chuckles that Heat clamped a lid on.

“Gentlemen, may I remind you we are in public at a death scene? Let’s not find ourselves laughing it up on the cover of this afternoon’s *Ledger*.” She surveyed the street, and, sure enough, her eye caught a man snapping shots of them with a long lens. But as Nikki turned back toward her group, it occurred to her that, even though the guy seemed familiar, she didn’t see a credential or recognize him as one of the usual press photogs. Where had she seen him before? Glancing again, she caught the back of his jacket getting swallowed by the crowd and shrugged it off. This was New York. The sidewalks were full of puzzler faces.

“Let’s all remember,” she began, “open minds. This could turn out to be an accidental, not a homicide. Either way, we are going to go about this case a little differently.”

“As in, we’re not looking for lurkers or suspicious persons fleeing the area,” said Detective Feller. Like his colleagues, he had jettisoned the grab ass and gone all business.

“Exactly. Let’s focus our efforts instead on establishing what happened. Starting with two priorities: victim ID and mode of death.”

Rook raised a hand. “I’m going with *kersplat*.” God, how Nikki hated and loved having him back. He read their reactions and, instead of backing off, joined the circle and doubled down. “Indelicate perhaps, but come on. The guy was basically a bug on a windshield. Except this bug actually went through the windshield, so he must have been going, what . . . five hundred miles an hour?”

“No way,” said Ochoa.

“For a lawman you seem quick to doubt the laws of gravity, Detective.” He appealed to Nikki, “What height did Dr. Parry say the injuries were consistent with?”

Heat felt wary of having her briefing hijacked but answered, “Over one hundred stories.”

“So we’re talking an altitude of at least one thousand feet. I’m surprised he didn’t achieve Mach-One.”

“Doubtful, Rook. An object falls at thirty-two feet per second per second until it reaches terminal velocity.” Ochoa turned a few heads with that one. “What? Back in the service, I was Airborne. Trust me, before you go jumping out a cargo door you buddy-up with ol’ Ike Newton.”

Rook couldn’t let it go. “I don’t doubt your courage, but aren’t we splitting hairs here?”

The detective smiled to himself, then recited, “Mach-One is the speed of sound, which is seven hundred sixteen miles per hour. Terminal velocity for the average human in free fall is one hundred twenty MPH and takes approximately twelve seconds to reach.”

After absorbing his calculus beatdown, Rook paused and said, “‘Approximately.’ I see.”

“The variable is the drag coefficient. Drag is created by things like clothing, body position . . .”

“. . . Facial hair, such as a G.I. Joe beard,” said Detective Rhymer.

Heat jumped in. “All right. I know how much you guys like to measure and what not, but can we just stipulate our victim fell from a height that suggests an aircraft and leave it there?” They all nodded. Then, when Rook opened his mouth, she said, “Moving on” and he closed it and gave her a smiling salute with his forefinger.

Nikki assigned Rhymer to scrub the Missing Persons database for an ID on the John Doe. “Obviously start with New York City and the tri-state,” she said, “but since this poor guy probably came from an aircraft, tap the FBI and Homeland, too. Also, do a run of prison escapees and active NYPD, county, state, and federal manhunts.”

She gave Randall Feller the neighborhood to canvass beginning

with the tourists being held between the sawhorses on Eighty-first. “What am I looking for, though?” he asked. “I mean, since we’re not seeking a lead on a perp.”

“This is one of those times that we won’t know until we find it,” she replied. “It’s the lottery. All it takes to learn something is one person who saw the fall.”

“Or heard something,” added Raley.

Heat nodded. “Sean’s right. Plane in distress, a scream, a gunshot, whatever. And take a platoon of uniforms to knock on doors in those apartments.” She gestured to the block of pale stone encasing the Upper West Side’s most fortunate and texted him her iPhone shots of the looky-loos in their windows. Next she turned to Detective Raley and said, “Make a guess.”

“Show me: video cams.”

“Ding-ding-ding.” Rales wore the crown as the squad’s King of All Surveillance Media. Over the years he had excelled at scrubbing hours of sleep-inducing closed circuit television footage of everything from neighborhood traffic cams to bank and jewelry store lipsticks, and scored major breaks in their cases. Today Nikki tasked him with finding CCTV mounts at the planetarium and the surrounding businesses and residences.

“There’s a plus side,” she said. “What you’re looking for happens within a very tight time window.”

“Detective Ochoa, I’m going to split you off from your partner to work the skies.” He flipped open his notebook and took notes as she directed him to contact the FAA and Air Traffic Control for any Maydays, distress calls, or unusual activity in the local air space. “Get a list of all aircraft—commercial and general aviation—that came anywhere near here around ten this morning; anything that might have veered off course or acted erratically or raised notice from other pilots.”

“Like did they see anything up there or hear something on the radio that was freaky, got it.”

“And don’t forget the helicopters. Not just NYPD but the TV, radio, tourist, and commuter choppers.” Heat looked up. The sky was brightening but still oystery. “Not sure how many of them got up in that, but if they did, somebody might have registered something.”

Rook raised a hand but didn't wait to be called on. "Stowaways. Every once in a while you hear about dudes hitching a ride in the wheel well of an airliner. The pilot opens the landing gear and . . . well, you get the idea."

"Won't hurt to check, Miguel."

"Oh, and skydivers. Write that down." Rook annoyed Ochoa by tapping his finger on his notepad.

"No helmet or parachute turned up," said Heat.

"Maybe the plane banked and he fell out. Or jumped." Feeling their stares, he added. "Did anyone here see *Point Break*? Keanu Reeves dives out of a plane to chase Patrick Swayze, who left with the last parachute? Anybody?"

Ochoa clicked his pen and winked at Raley. "Skydiver one word or two?"

**Heat knew it was time to send Rook home when she asked the group if they had any other theories about the victim and he didn't chime in. No speculation about an untoward application of the Monty Python cow catapult. No conjecture about a boozy wing walker stumbling off a biplane. No nothing. In fact, he had returned unnoticed to his spot on the stone bench and sat with a fixed vacant stare into the middle distance.**

"Maybe you should get a nap," she told him when the others had dispersed. Logging thirty-six hours from Central Africa to Paris to JFK to that bench had finally taken its toll. He nodded blankly and she watched him amble away with his duffel after giving her an unsteady hug and a vow to catch up with her after some shut-eye. That bastard knew she was looking, too, because, at the top of the driveway, he lifted the vent of his sport coat and shook his ass. "Welcome home," she said to herself.

Back inside, Dr. Parry looked up at Heat over a grim container of human morsels and declared she would be at this for hours and that movie night was definitely off. "Although I had already assumed so now that handsome's back. Go ahead, you fickle bee-otch. Have fun."

"I will. Think I'll take him to see the new Bourne movie." Nikki turned and walked off to hide her grin.

As the detectives began to filter into the bull pen to report at the

end of shift, Heat was surprised to see Rook arrive with them. “Not much of a nap,” she said when he took a seat on her desktop.

“A nap’ll kill ya. You want to know how an experienced traveler blows the gum out of the carburetor? Hit the treadmill, instead. Three miles and a hot shower, I’m good for, oh, another twenty minutes.” He scanned the squad room. “What’s with the empty desk?”

“We, um, lost one of our detectives this week.” Before he could follow up, she cut him off. “A little sensitive, a little public right now, all right?”

“We won’t discuss it here, then.” He nodded, but continued, “Let me guess. Do I smell the handiwork of one Captain Wally Irons?” She gave him a sharp look and he put up both palms. “I think we best not discuss this here, if it’s all right with you.”

Detective Ochoa came over, turning pages to the front of his notebook. “No hits at the FAA or ATC. No commercial air traffic over this part of Manhattan at that time. One outbound from LaGuardia over the Bronx ten minutes before and two JFK approaches: one, five minutes after—that was over the Hudson; the second traversed the West Side at about ten-thirty.” Nikki recalled the sound of that plane on her walk-up, then asked about general aviation. “Nada. Same for Maydays, distress calls. And yes, Rook, I did inquire about stowaways. None reported, plus they said it wouldn’t be procedure to drop landing gear this far out.”

According to Rhymer, Missing Persons didn’t kick out any matches. “And still waiting on callbacks from various law enforcement on fugitives and escapees.” Mindful of the polite Southern nature that had earned Rhymer the nickname of Opie, Heat directed him to be a pain in the ass with those agencies. She also suggested he widen the window on Missing Persons to include the past week; you never knew.

“Sure thing. And I’ll check MP reports throughout the evening, just in case somebody comes home tonight and finds it empty by surprise.” When he said it, it sounded buttery, like “bah supprahs.” Opie in the big city.

Rook stood. “Hang glider.”

Ochoa shook his head. “From where, the Empire State Building?”

“You’re right. He’d have to get it up there undetected.” But Rook kept going with it. “How about the big skyscraper they’re erecting on West Fifty-seventh.”

“And what happened to the actual hang glider?” asked Heat. “Rook, you should have taken a nap instead.”

Rhymer beamed. “A wing suit could do it.”

“*Madre de dios*, it’s contagious.” Ochoa stared at the ceiling tiles, shaking his head.

Rook clamped an arm around Opie’s shoulder. “You know something? The halls of this precinct are going to ring with sweet laughter when one of our brainstorms leads to a break in this case.”

Detectives Feller and Raley strode in together, urgency on their faces. “You’re going to want to see this,” said the King of All Surveillance Media.

**The six of them could barely fit into the storage closet Raley had converted into his digital domain, which basically consisted of two tables resting on filing cabinets, a scrounged assortment of yesteryear’s technology, and a cardboard Burger King crown, presented to him years before by a grateful homicide squad leader.** “While I was canvassing the crowd for eyewitnesses, some old dude from Canada is getting real freaked over near the tour bus, so I check him out,” said Detective Feller. “He and his wife—by the way, I’m betting she’s a recent trade-up, if you catch my meaning—Anyway, the two of them were posing for a video the bus driver was shooting of them in front of the planetarium.”

“Makes sense,” said Rook. “What’s a trip to New York without a picture of Uranus?”

Feller couldn’t resist joining in, adopting the voice of a tourist. “‘My God, Harry, I can’t believe the size of Uranus.’”

“Wanna talk massive?” said Rook. “Feast your eyes on this space junk.”

Heat turned to them. “Boys.” Then, admonishing Rook, “Definitely a nap next time.”

Raley resumed. “The tourist couple volunteered the video so I could make a digital copy. This part’s in slo-mo. Ready?” Rales didn’t

bother waiting for a reply. Everyone gathered a little closer to the monitor when he rolled the footage.

The screen displayed a barrel-chested senior citizen with silver hair sprayed into a meticulous pompadour embracing a buxom woman of about fifty who wore her jewels proudly and rested her head on the love of her life. Both smiles seemed frozen, but that was due to the video speed, apparent when their eyes blinked in slow motion. “Here comes,” said Raley. A few seconds later, a dark form shaped like a bullet descended from the sky at a steep angle and crashed into the roof of the cube. Nobody on the video noticed or reacted, but the video room sure did, resounding with moans, gasps, and a long “Fuuuuck” from Ochoa.

“Can you zoom in?” asked Heat.

“Already done. Now, the more you zoom, the more this stuff pixilates, so it’s not real sharp, but there’s something interesting. Ready?”

His zoomed version excluded the couple, except for the top of the silver pompadour. Raley had also slowed the video down a step further so, as the body appeared, its movement played somewhat jerkily. A second before impact, he froze the frame.

Rhymer said, “Oh, man, headfirst.”

“And check it out.” Raley used a pencil to indicate the victim’s hands. “Tucked behind his back.”

“Who doesn’t put his hands out?” asked Rook.

Detective Feller said, “Might be unconscious.”

Ochoa shook his head. “If you’re unconscious, your arms are all loose.” He posed to demonstrate.

They all studied the image. After a few moments, Raley played it out to impact. This time it was met with silence. Which was broken by Rook. “I guess that’s what the kids today mean by photobomb.”

**It turned out Nikki Heat’s fantasy about a trail of clothes from the door to the bed wasn’t so far off—the two main differences being it was Rook’s loft, not the Excelsior Hotel, and they never made it as far as the bed. At least not the first time.**

Separation had created a hunger and they eagerly flew at each other in a frenzy, the time apart making this reunion feel fresh. Even their familiar ways and places carried a sense of novelty and wild excitement.

And abandon. Definitely abandon. Afterward, with her head nestled into his shoulder, Nikki reflected how she had never been with a man who could make her forget everything so completely and lose herself in the instant they were creating. Of course, he could also break the spell.

“Reunion sex,” he said. “Nothing like it.”

“Hotel sex? Sex on the roof? And what about that time in the back of the squad car?”

“Oh, right. You know I’m very sorry to hear the NYPD is retiring the noble Crown Victoria from the its fleet. Fuel economy is one thing. A spacious and, might I say, firm, backseat is another.”

“On the topic of firm backseats, how much weight did you lose?”

“Jungle travel is very slimming.”

“And what is this here?” Nikki ran her fingertips down from the old indent made by the bullet he took to save her life and traced them over a jagged scar. She slid down his chest to examine it. Even in the dim light she could make out the bas-relief of crude stitchwork, recently healed.

“Later,” he said, drawing her face up to his. “Let’s enjoy this.”

“Oo, man-of-mystery man.”

“Yeah?”

Heat rolled on top of him. “Oh, yeah.”

They found each other’s mouths again. But this time, tenderly. The two held eye contact as she caressed him and took him inside, and then in wordless synchronicity, they spoke with only their most naked, unabashed gazes, each slowly moving, reaching for, and feeling, the depths of one another.

Rook called to order dinner in from Landmarc then stepped into the shower with her. As he soaped her back, he asked, “Now exactly which action figure do I remind you of? G.I. Joe?”

“It was just a wisecrack, let it go.”

“Then perhaps one of the others in the ensemble. Storm Shadow? Snake Eyes?”

“Rook, how do you know all these? You’re kinda scaring me.”

“I ghostwrote a piece on Hasbro for a trade publication once. We all have a past.” Then he resumed, “Shipwreck? Snow Job? I know. Firefly. I sort of feel a connection to him. Can’t explain it.”

Nikki turned and cupped his face in her hands. “This wasn’t my favorite sport, you know.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. I found you downright gymnastic.” But he read her, and grew serious. “I know the separation sucks.”

“And I don’t want to be a whiner, Rook, but two months. . . .” It had started as a mere six-day jaunt to Switzerland to file a quick and dirty glamour piece on the Locarno International Film Festival. But when his editor at *First Press* dangled an investigative cover story on diamond smugglers in Rwanda funding international terrorists, Rook smelled his third Pulitzer and hurried his rental Peugeot down the E35 to Milan, dashed through La Rinascente for tropical clothing, and hopped the next flight via Entebbe to Kigali.

“Which is why I said no when they asked me to go to Myanmar next week to cover the human rights situation.”

“I hope you didn’t do that because of me. Do what you have to do. I mean, you know I pride myself on my independence.”

“All too well.”

“That’s what makes us work. We both cherish our independence, right?” Then something odd registered on his face, enough for her to study him and ask, “. . . What?”

But Rook didn’t reply. He simply gave her a knowing smile and drew her close to him. After a moment, embracing skin-to-skin, under the steam, Nikki whispered, “Oh. I think a new action figure just joined us.”

“Please,” he said in mock indignation. “Must we cheapen this?”

**The next morning, Heat brewed herself a scoop of Rook’s stale coffee; and while the water sieved through the Melitta cone, she watched *Good Morning America* announce that a tropical depression off the coast of Nicaragua had now graduated to a tropical storm with a name: Sandy. Her cell phone rang and Nikki raced up the hall to the bedroom, hoping to hell it wouldn’t wake him. But Rook slumbered in deep oblivion as she grabbed it and finger swiped the screen. Heat spoke in a hushed voice as she closed the door behind her. “Hey, Doctor.”**

“You sound out of breath,” said Lauren Parry. “Please tell me I interrupted something wicked.”

“He bound me to the bedposts with old typewriter ribbons. I’m lucky I could reach the phone. You still at the planetarium?”

“Oh, hell, no. But I did pull an all-nighter here at OCME with my recovery.” It always fascinated Heat how professionals found a vocabulary to cope with the macabre. “I’ve sent good DNA samples off to Twenty-sixth Street, but that’s not why I’m calling. I also came across a significant piece of remains. I’m certain it’s a section of upper arm near the left shoulder. Nikki, it has a tattoo. Open your e-mail, I sent you a JPEG.”

Nikki thanked her and hung up. Wincing at the outdated French roast, she watched her laptop screen fill with the ME’s attachment. Lauren’s photo reflected her friend’s experience and attention to detail: sharply focused on the pores, lit for clarity, and no flash bounce. The dark brown skin, torn at the edges had been inked with a slogan in an ornate font: *“L’Union Fait La Force.”*

“Unity Makes Strength,” thought Heat. Then, always eager to use her French, said the words aloud. *“L’Union Fait La Force.”*

“That’s on the Haitian coat of arms.” Startled, she turned to find Rook standing behind her. “My French is nowhere as good as yours, but I spent some time there after the quake to cover Sean Penn’s mission.”

“It walks,” she said, and stood to kiss him good morning. In his jet lag haze the night before, he’d gamely attempted to unpack from his trip, but mainly just wandered stupidly, making a ludicrous job of it. “Do you even remember me catching you putting your dirty underwear in the bureau drawer instead of the hamper? You fought me all the way to bed.”

“Then I must have been out of it.”

Nikki offered him her coffee. Surprisingly, he drank it without reaction, while she explained the origin of the tattoo.

When she’d finished Rook said, “You know what this means, don’t you?”

“Of course. There’s a possibility I can ID him through the department’s tattoo database.”

“OK, that. And . . .” He set the mug down and became animated. “Come on, Nikki. This guy might be an alien. Do you know how easy

it will be for me to pitch this to the magazine? An alien falling from the sky and crashing into the planetarium? Best. Death. Ever.”

**The NYPD’s Real Time Crime Center maintained a computerized catalog of** tattoos that proved incredibly useful identifying both suspects and victims. Initially, gang and prison tatts got the focus but, as body art gained mainstream popularity, all sorts of ink from all sorts of people got photographed by detectives and logged into the hard drives on a high floor in police headquarters. If this John Doe from the sky had any recent arrest, however minor, the likelihood that his tattoo would spit out a name and last-known address was very high. So while Rook headed off to get dressed, Heat e-mailed copies of the image to RTCC as well as to Detective Rhymer so he could share it with FBI, Homeland, and Immigration and Customs.

When Nikki went to dump her soggy Melitta grounds, she got a laugh at more hamper confusion. Resting on top of the kitchen garbage was a pair of socks and Rook’s prized Comic-Con baseball cap, obvious casualties of his loopy foray into unpacking. As she rescued them, her eye caught something: a shopping bag lying underneath. It was small and of high-quality paper with braided cord handles from a jewelry store in Paris. Nikki hesitated, then, deciding it was none of her business, took her foot off the pedal. The lid dropped and she started for the bedroom with the cap and socks.

Seconds later, her toe hit the pedal again. She wondered—or maybe rationalized—what if something was in it and he had accidentally thrown away, say, cuff links? Or an expensive pen? She set the souvenir hat and socks on the counter and removed the bag, which had been folded flat. She ran her fingers on its glossy surface and felt nothing. After a hitch of minor hesitation, she opened it and peered inside, where she found a receipt for many thousands of euros.

“Nik, you haven’t seen my Comic-Con hat anywhere, have you?” he called on his way from the bedroom. She stuffed the receipt in the bag and dropped it back in the trash. But not before she saw what the purchase was.

*Bague de fiançailles.* She didn’t dare give voice to the words this

time. But feeling the sudden flush on her face, she listened to her private translation reverbering in her mind: “Engagement ring.”

**On the elevator ride down, Rook surveyed Nikki and asked if she felt all right.** She nodded, presenting the most unfazed smile she could muster, which seemed good enough for him. But, of course, she knew why he’d asked. The few minutes it took for them to get out of his loft had played out for her as a sluggish walk through a Coney Island hall of mirrors, only underwater. Her mind swirled with a cyclone of emotions. Guilt at having snooped. Exhilaration at the receipt’s meaning. Fear, too. Yes, fear. And more guilt about feeling that feeling. And—fueling the icy center of the vortex—a breath-robbing, knee-jellying numbness. Because she couldn’t figure out how to feel.

The sunlight cut sharp to her eyes when they stepped out of his building onto the sidewalk and he took a long inhale of Tribeca, declaring, “God, I’ve missed this city.”

“Subway, not taxi,” was all Nikki could think to say, choosing a crowded express train over the intimacy of a cab’s rear seat and the conversation opportunity a venue like that threatened to open up.

As they approached Reade Street, Heat lurched into another emotional mode when she made the guy. The long lens puzzle man from the Hayden stood outside the little park in Bogardus Plaza. Only this time he wasn’t holding a camera. He’d gone back to panhandling. “Keep walking,” she told Rook. And when he gave her a curious frown, she repeated it, evenly but firmly. He did as he was told for once, and when he reached the corner and looked back, Nikki had vanished.