

## TWO

Nikki Heat marched toward the homicide bull pen of the Twentieth Precinct at a determined clip that left little doubt in the minds of the detectives trying to keep up with her that she had recovered from the shock of her discovery, and then some. “Briefing in ten,” she called out to her squad as she strode through the door. On her way to her desk, she said, “Detective Ochoa, fire off the Jane Doe head shot to Missing Persons. Include Westchester, Long Island, New Jersey, and Fairfield County cops while you’re at it. Detective Raley, erase that whiteboard and roll the second one over beside it so we can work both Murder Boards at once.” Heat broomed aside the morning’s pile of message slips and dusted away grains of acoustical ceiling tile that the 5.8 shaker had snowflaked onto her desktop. Then she hit her keyboard, e-mailing Lauren Parry at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner the same message she had given her verbally fifteen minutes before at the crime scene: to interrupt her the moment she had any information, no matter how minor.

She hit send and a cardboard coffee cup materialized on her blotter. Nikki swiveled in her chair to find Detective Feller lurking there. “In lieu of flowers, consider this the apology coffee for my big mouth this morning. Tall, three pump, hazelnut mocha, if I remember. Right?”

Actually, her drink of choice was a grande skim latte with two pumps of sugar-free vanilla, but “Close enough” was all she said. He was trying to make amends, but she was focused places other than coffee flavorings at the moment. “Thanks. And let’s put it behind us, OK?”

“Won’t happen again.”

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

As soon as Feller stepped away, she set the tepid cup at the back of the desk, beside her unread messages, and started a to-do list on a letter pad. One third down the page, she bulleted “additional manpower” and stopped. That would require clearance from the precinct commander, a hurdle the detective didn’t relish. Heat scanned across the pen into the PC’s glass office that looked out onto her squad. The glass also let the squad look in and had the effect of a creating a life-sized diorama out of that movie *Night at the Museum*. Captain Irons was inside the exhibit, hanging his jacket on a wooden hanger. Heat knew he was next going to go through his ritual of tugging the fabric of his white uniform shirt, and he did—all in his constant quest to eliminate button pucker on the gut that lipped over his low-slung belt.

“Excuse me, Captain,” said Heat at his door. “A word?” True to form, Wallace “Wally” Irons paused before he invited her in, as if he were searching for a reason not to but had come up empty. He didn’t ask her to sit, which was fine with Nikki. Every time she sat across the desk from him, all she could do was envision the wonderful man who had occupied that chair until he got killed and Irons, a career administrator, got tapped to replace him. Captain Irons was no Captain Montrose, and Heat bet both cops in that room knew it.

Adding further awkwardness to the dynamic, the top brass at One Police Plaza had offered her Wally Irons’s job after she passed her exams for lieutenant with record scores. But Heat got soured by the ugly departmental politics surrounding the whole process. It made her realize how much she would miss the street, so Nikki not only declined taking Irons’s command from him but passed on the gold bar, too. Yet the fact that she had come a hairsbreadth from being the one on the other side of that desk made the unspoken friction between the detective and her commander loud and clear. From her perspective, he was an organizational survivor concerned more with career than justice; someone she constantly had to out-think or out-manuever to get the job done right. For Irons, Nikki Heat was his Faustian bargain. She was a detective of incredible value whose case clearances made his CompStat numbers look hot ’n’

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

juicy downtown, but that same damned competency also diminished him. In short, Nikki Heat represented a daily reminder of everything he was not. Ochoa had told her he recently overheard Irons whisper to Detective Hinesburg in the kitchen, “Know what it’s like having Heat around? It’s like a football team with two head coaches.” Nikki shrugged it off and reminded Ochoa she wasn’t one for the gossip mill. Besides, she’d kind of known that without him telling her. To smell the paranoia you didn’t have to be much of a detective. Kind of like Irons.

“Word is you made quite a discovery this morning,” he said, not sounding so much interested in the actual discovery as praising his networking. Nikki kept her briefing to the broad strokes, building it as a multiple homicide worthy of high status and, most importantly, of added manpower from the beginning. The captain held out two palms to her. “Whoa, whoa, let’s not run away with the bit in our mouth here. Now, I understand your personal enthusiasm to hit code red with this, but, somehow, these resources have to be accounted for.”

“Captain, you see my numbers. You know I always exercise great restraint in overtime and—”

“Jeez, overtime?” He shook his head. “So it’s not just pulling uniforms and detectives from other squads, it’s OT for your crew, as well? Oh, man . . .”

“Money well spent.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t know what it’s like to have this job and . . .” He realized the road he’d put himself on and slapped it in reverse. “Easy for you to say, is all.”

“Captain, this is big. For the first time in ten years, I have a fresh lead to my mother’s murder.” She had learned never to take his obtuseness for granted, so she spelled it out for him. “The stolen luggage is a direct link between the two cases, and I am confident that if I can find the killer of this Jane Doe, I can find my mother’s killer, as well.”

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

He softened his face into a doughy grimace attempting compassion. “Look, I know this is charged by a highly personal element for you.”

“I can’t deny that, sir, but I assure you that I would pursue this just as vigorously regardless of my—”

“Knock, knock?” Detective Sharon Hinesburg leaned in the door. “Bad time?”

Captain Irons beamed at Hinesburg and then reeled his unmoored attention back to Nikki, offering her a sober look. “Detective Heat, let’s put a pin in this discussion until later.”

“But a simple yes would wrap it up.”

He chuckled. “A for effort, I’ve got to respect that. But I need more convincing, and right now, I’ve got Detective Hinesburg on my calendar.” He made a gesture to his desk agenda as if that settled that.

Apparently, thought Heat, Hinesburg was now booking formal appointments for her brownnosing. She slipped by her detective, the low performer in her unit, on her way out of the office. “Squad meeting in three minutes, Sharon.” The glass door closed softly behind her and she heard muffled laughter.

Detective Heat put her irritation in her back pocket. Nikki was too professional to get sucked into that quicksand and too driven by the gravity of the new lead to let petty office politics draw focus from her mission. Raley had finished positioning the two large blank whiteboards in an open V-angle against the painted brick wall of the bull pen, and she went right to work, prepping the Jane Doe Murder Board first. At the top corner of the left-hand board, Heat posted eight-by-ten color prints of the victim from various angles: a facial close-up; a side view of her head; an overhead shot of her body in the fetal position inside the suitcase; and a detail view of the stab wound. Beside these, she put up photos of the delivery truck from five angles: front, rear,

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

the two sides, and an overhead she had asked the photographer from the Evidence Collection Unit to grab from a fire escape. In New York City people did a whole lot of looking down at the street from their apartments and offices. The top view of the cargo box, including its telltale graffiti, might jar an eyewitness's memory and help that wit track the vehicle's journey. Any information like that, however small, could nail down how and when the suitcase got inside the truck. Or who put it there.

A burst of applause made her turn from the boards. Jameson Rook had entered the bullpen for the first time since he took the slug to save her life, and the full squad rose to its feet, cheering him. The intensity of the clapping grew as patrol uniforms, civilian aides, and detectives from other squads in the station gathered at the doorway behind Rook and joined in the standing ovation. He seemed taken aback and caught Heat's eye, clearly moved by the spontaneous group welcome. As if the morning hadn't been emotionally raw enough for her, Nikki found herself choking up at his reception and all that a gesture like that meant from the fraternity of cops, who weren't known for overt demonstrations of sentiment.

When it died down, he swiped at one of his eyes, swallowed hard, smiled at the gathering, and said, "Garsh, do you do this for everybody who delivers coffee?" During their laughter, he crossed to Nikki and handed her a paper cup. "Here ya go. Grande skim latte with two pumps of sugar-free vanilla."

"Perfect," she said, and as soon as she had, Randall Feller's face peered around from behind Detective Ochoa, wearing a slighted expression.

Rook noticed the group had remained in place, staring at him. "I guess I should say a few words."

"Do you have to?" said Detective Raley, eliciting more chuckles.

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

“Just for that, I will. But I’ll be quick.” He indicated the Murder Boards behind Heat. “I heard there’s some new casework to be done, and I don’t want to slow it down.”

“Too late,” said Nikki, but she was smiling and they both laughed.

“I guess ‘thank you’ is my beginning and end. Thanks for the support, the cards, the flowers . . . Although a naughty nurse would not have been unwelcome.”

“As long as he didn’t have too much back hair,” said Ochoa.

Rook continued, “And I’ll say it for the last time. Thanks to Detectives Raley and Ochoa. Roach, thank you for rolling up your sleeves for my transfusion that night. I guess that now makes us officially . . .”

“. . . Creepy,” called out Detective Rhymer, who had come down from Burglary.

“No, man, it’s all good,” said Ochoa. “Know what you have now, Rook? You have the power of Roach Blood.”

Raley added, “Use it wisely.”

Nikki cleared her throat. “About done?”

“Done,” answered Rook.

Heat went official. “My squad, pull up chairs for the briefing.”

As the visitors departed and her people began to form up around the Murder Boards, Rook got close and studied her, speaking in a gentle voice. “Hey. You doing any better since our call?”

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

She shrugged ambivalently. “I’ll be fine. Putting the shock behind me. I’m sort of in all-out task mode now. Except I got Iron-gated.” Rook followed her glance to Irons, who was still in his office with Hinesburg. “He’s balking at giving me OT and resources.”

“Drone.”

“I don’t know what I can do to convince him.” She shook it off. “Hey, thanks for the latte. Any chance you can swing by my apartment to see how it did in the quake?”

“Already did. Minimal breakage. I re-straightened the pictures, re-fruited the fruit bowl, re-tchotchked your tchotchkes, and sniffed the range for gas. All is well. Oh. Except your elevator is out. Three flights was no picnic, but I’m a trouper.”

Nikki thanked him, but instead of saying you’re welcome, he rolled up a chair. “What are you doing?”

“Getting ringside for my briefing.” He read her objection and said, “Come on, you really didn’t think I came all the way up here to bring you coffee, did you?”

Heat began with details. The major headline, she didn’t need to put into words. Not with this group. It rang loud and clear to everyone in that room who knew the lead detective and her history. If that didn’t say it, the parallel boards and her ultra-focused demeanor did. This was The Big Case. The case of Nikki Heat’s lifetime.

Attention was sharp. Nobody interrupted, nobody joked. Nobody wanted to blow this for her. They all shared one thought: Bring this one home for Detective Heat.

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

Quickly recapping the discovery of the suitcase by the bomb squad, she used the Jane Doe photos as reference for her grand tour of the victim, explaining her frozen state, lack of ID or personal effects, and apparent—but unconfirmed—death by single stab wound to the back, expertly delivered. Next she indicated the array of truck pictures. “The driver is cooperating fully, and, along with his employer, we are establishing the timeline of deliveries to see when the suitcase got put in there. We can assume the luggage was deposited along his delivery route, but I want no assumptions. None. That brings us to my first assignment. Detective Hinesburg.”

Nikki caught Hinesburg off guard as she joined the meeting late from the captain’s office. “What’s up?” she asked from a half-sit.

“I want you to run a check for priors on the truck driver and anyone at the loading dock who had access to that vehicle before it rolled out this morning. That means anyone who cleaned it, loaded it, inspected it, or who could have slipped the suitcase in there before it left the facility.” Hinesburg found a seat and nodded. “Sharon, do you want to write any of this down?”

“No, I got it.” And then, as she processed, Hinesburg added, “If the driver called in the 911, we probably don’t like him as the perp, do we? Isn’t this kind of busywork?”

If thought bubbles were visible in life, the one over Heat’s head would have said, You bet. Nikki had learned the hard way that the best way to contain the damage Sharon Hinesburg caused on a case was to give her assignments where her laziness and sloppy detail work would do the least harm. “Guess we’ll only know after you get busy, Detective.” She scanned the room. “Detective Feller.”

“Yo.” He had been leaning forward, intent, with his elbows on the thighs of his jeans. Hearing his name, he sat tall and poised his pen.

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

“You’ll work the delivery route. That means not only checking out the workers at the delis and bodegas he hit, but did he stop for gas? Did he leave the truck to use a restroom? Does he have an affair going on the side that made him park for a quickie? Is he skimming food off the books and dropping calamari at his uncle’s with the loading door unlocked? You get the idea.”

“On it.”

“Interface with Raley. As our King of All Surveillance Media he’s going to find all the security cams working the delivery route. And Rales?” The detective raised his chin to her, signaling complete attention. “Of course we’re hoping to score footage of the suitcase and the person or persons who put it on the truck, but also scrub the video for eyewitnesses. Pedestrians, news vendors—you know what I want.”

“Anybody who saw the truck and anything that was happening around it, everywhere it went,” answered Detective Raley, making it sound daunting and doable at the same time.

“Detective Ochoa, you run the fingerprints as soon as we get a set. Also, contact the Real Time Crime Center. See what their database spits out as far as disturbance calls, women screaming, even if they’re classed as domestic disputes.”

“Time frame?” asked Ochoa.

“We can’t fix our time of death until OCME can do some extra lab work after she thaws, so let’s tentatively set the kill zone in the past forty-eight and widen later, if we have to.”

As she noted that on the board, Feller asked, “You think this could be a serial killer? I wouldn’t mind running the MO through the database. Also see how the two kills match up with prison release times, stuff like that.”

“Good idea, Randy, do that.”

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

“What if it’s just a coincidence?” asked Sharon Hinesburg. The other detectives shifted in their chairs. Ochoa even dropped his face into both hands.

“I believe you know what I think about coincidences, Sharon,” Nikki said.

“But they do exist, right?”

“Come on,” said Feller, unable to contain his contempt. “You mean a different killer with the same MO just happens to defy all odds and put the body in the suitcase owned by the prior vic? If that’s so, I’m buying a lottery ticket.”

As the derisive laughter quieted, Heat said, “Tell you what. Just to cover the base, let’s check out eBay and area thrift shops to see if we get any tracking on the suitcase.” And then, to show how much faith Nikki put in that road, she said, “Sharon, why don’t you work that, too.”

Heat then lowered her gaze to a photo on the table, and when she saw it, the crackling energy she had been running on since her discovery on Columbus Avenue took a slight dip. Then she straightened up, willing herself back to full speed, and held the eight-by-ten for them to see. “This . . .” she said, then had to come to a full stop, fearing her voice would crack. Something moved in her periphery. It was Rook clasp his hands together and squeezing them before him in a gesture of strength. That small, secret move bolstered her, and Nikki felt a rush of gratitude that she hadn’t kicked his ass out of there, after all. Composed again, she resumed, “This is a detail shot of the bottom of the suitcase. She posted it on the upper right corner of the Jane Doe board. The silent room creaked with the sound of Sam Browne belts as they all leaned forward for a good look. The ECU camera flash had brightened the suitcase from blue-gray to a sky at high noon. In the center of the shot, two initials were crudely scratched into the case: N H.

While the squad silently absorbed the haunting significance—that the little girl whose hand had marked the suitcase now stood before them. The adult hand of the little girl slapped a

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

duplicate photo of the initials on Murder Board 2. “Here is our connection,” said Detective Heat, accessing a reserve of coolness and control in denial of her emotional turmoil. “Our hot lead runs to the unsolved ten-year-old homicide of Cynthia Trope Heat.” She traced an invisible arc back and forth in the air between the photos of her initials on both boards. “This case is going to help us solve the cold case.”

“And vice versa,” said Roach, in unison.

“Damn right,” said Nikki Heat.

As the group broke up to work its assignments, Detective Feller made his way to Heat through the dispersing crowd. “We’ll crack this one,” he said. “In my mind, this is my only case.”

“Thanks, Randy. Means a lot.” He waited, standing there looking like he wanted to say something else. Once more, Nikki read the unspoken crush on his face. She had seen it there from the first day they had crossed paths the autumn before, when his undercover taxi had been first to respond to her officer-in-distress call. Ever since, this rough-and-tumble street cop melted into the shy kid at the junior high sock hop whenever he was alone with her.

“Listen, I was wondering. If you hadn’t partnered up with anyone yet . . .” He had let it hang there, leaving her to figure out how to deal with it, when Rook swooped in.

“Actually, I was thinking Detective Heat and I would pair up on this case.”

Feller looked Rook up and down like he had just jumped out of a clown car. “Really.” And then he turned back to Nikki. “I was thinking a veteran detective might work out better than . . . a ride-along writer. Maybe that’s just me.”

“You mean, the ride-along writer who got shot saving her life?”

Nikki said, “Um, OK, listen.”

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

“I mean, the veteran detective who got shot saving her life,” said Feller, pulling back his big shoulders and taking a half step to Rook.

“I know how to settle this,” Rook said. “Rochambeau.”

“You’re on.”

Nikki said, “Seriously? No, you two are not doing rock, paper, scissors.”

Rook leaned close to her and whispered, “Don’t worry. I know the type. Macho guys like this always go for the rock.” And before she could protest again, he counted, “One, two, three, shoot.” And put out his flat hand for paper—to Feller’s scissors.

The detective cackled. “Hah-ha. Nice playing with you, Rook.”

“Sorry to throw cold water on this dance of the peacocks,” said Heat, “but Randy, I have plans for you that would put your talents to better use than duplicating effort with me. And Rook? Don’t take this personally, but this isn’t a case I want to be tripping over you every time I turn around.”

“Gee, how could I take that personally?”

Then Captain Irons stepped up from behind them. “Mr. Jameson Rook. Welcome back to the Two-oh.” A chamber-of-commerce grin pulled back the skipper’s fleshy face. He bumped aside Detective Feller reaching to grip Rook’s hand in a damp shake while he clapped his shoulder. “To what do we owe the honor? You writing a new story, perhaps?”

The precinct commander’s shameless attempts at self-promotion were always embarrassing, but clearly not to him. Wally Irons, who once accidentally knocked over a toddler after her AMBER Alert rescue while rushing to get his face in front of a TV camera, lacked the

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

mortification gene when it came to massaging the press. But Jameson Rook had spent a career dealing with his type and didn't miss a beat. In fact he grabbed the opportunity, for a cause.

“Hm,” he said. “Depends. Think there might be a story here, Captain?”

“Uh, Rook,” cautioned Heat.

“Ducks in a barrel,” Irons said, grinning. “To me, this new development cries out for a follow-up to your earlier article on my Detective Heat.” Nikki tried to get Rook's attention, drilling him with her eyes and shaking her head no. Rook knew how much she hated the attention his cover story in *First Press* had brought, but Rook pretended not to notice her.

“A follow-up?” he said, as if taken by the notion.

Irons said, “To me, it's a no-brainer.”

“Well, you'd be the expert there,” Rook said, and the captain's quick “thank you” certified that the insult had gone over his head. “Could have some merit. I'm not the editor, though, so don't hold me to this. But I like it.” Rook stroked his chin and said, “I suppose it would hinge on action, not just rehash, Captain.”

“I hear you.”

“For instance, I know Detective Heat's fully engaged and so is her squad. But the story really gets easier for me to sell to a publisher if it goes bigger. I assume, in your leadership role, you've already marshaled all the forces you can.” He resisted winking to Nikki as he continued, “For instance clearing overtime and . . . I dunno . . . tapping extra manpower from other squads and precincts?”

A cloud crossed over Irons's brow. “It has come up.”

## FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO

“See, that’s something new I could run with. A precinct captain fighting the bureaucracy to rally the resources for his detectives. A leader who can crack a cold case and a frozen one in the same stroke.” He chuckled. “What do you know: Headline!”

The captain nodded like a bobble head and turned to Nikki. “Heat, let’s move forward with the resources we talked about earlier.”

“Thank you, sir.” She half-smiled at Rook.

“And I was also thinking, Captain Irons.”

“Yes?”

“Now that I’m back to a hundred percent, it might not be a bad idea for me to go back to the arrangement I had with the first article and partner with Detective Heat. It’s a great way to follow up, plus it would help me document the fruits of your command from street level so—if there does turn out to be an article in this—I’d already be boots on the ground.”

“Done,” said Irons. Feller shook his head and walked away. “Heat, looks like the dynamic duo rides again,” said the captain on his way back to his office.

“Anything else I can help you with, Detective?” asked Rook.

“I just want to note for the record that, after that manipulative display of yours, I now know you are devious and can not be trusted. Ever.”

Rook just smiled at Heat and said, “You’re welcome.”

FROZEN HEAT – CHAPTER TWO