

ONE

“Oh, yeah, that’s it, Rook,” said Nikki Heat. “That’s what I want. Just like that.” A trickle of sweat rolled down his neck to his heaving chest. He groaned and bit down on his tongue. “Don’t stop yet. Keep it going. Yes.” She hovered over him, lowering her face just inches from his so she could whisper. “Yes. Work it just like that. Nice, easy rhythm. That’s it. How does it feel?” Jameson Rook stared into her eyes intently just before he pinched his into a squint and moaned. Then his muscles went slack and he dropped his head backward. Nikki frowned and brought herself upright. “You can’t do that to me. I cannot believe you’re stopping.”

He let the dumbbells hit the black rubber floor beside the exercise bench and said, “Not stopping.” He pulled in a chestful of air and coughed. “Just done.”

“You’re not done.”

“Ten reps, I did ten reps.”

“Not by my count.”

“That’s because your mind wanders. Besides, this rehab is for my own good.

Why would I skip reps?”

“Because I turned away once and you thought I wasn’t looking.”

He scoffed, then asked, “Were you?”

“Yes, and you only did eight. Do you want me to help you do your physical therapy, or be your enabler?”

“I swear I did at least nine.”

A member of Rook's exclusive gym slid in behind her for some free weights, and Nikki turned to gauge how much of Rook's childish exchange he'd picked up. Judging by the tinny music spilling from his earbuds, the only thing the other man had heard was the Black Eyed Peas telling him it was gonna be a good night while he stared in the mirror. Heat couldn't tell what the guy admired more, the row of plugs from his new hair transplants, or the snap of his pecs under his designer wife-beater.

Rook stood up beside her. "Nice chesticles, huh?"

"Shh, he'll hear you."

"Doubt that. Besides, who do you think taught me the word?"

Chesticle man caught her eye in the mirror and favored her with a wink.

Apparently surprised that her knees didn't turn to jelly, he racked his weights and moved on to the tanning beds. Moments like that were precisely why Heat preferred her own gym, a throwback joint downtown with cinderblock walls, clanging steam pipes, and a clientele there to work instead of preen. When Rook's visiting physical therapist—whom he dubbed Gitmo Joe—had called in sick for his morning session and Nikki volunteered to spot him in his rehab routine, she had considered using her club instead. But there were negatives there, too. Well, one. Namely Don, her ex-Navy SEAL combat training partner with whom she had a history of grappling in bed, not just on the wrestling mat. Don's trainer-with-benefits days had come and gone, but Rook didn't know about him and she couldn't see the point in forcing an awkward encounter.

“Whew. I don’t know about you,” said Rook, toweling his face, “but I’m ready for a shower and some breakfast.”

“Sounds great.” She held out the dumbbells to him. “Right after your next set.”

“I have another set?” He maintained the innocent pose as long as he could pull it off and then snatched the weights from her. “You know, Gitmo Joe may be the spawn of an unholy union between the Marquis de Sade and Darth Vader, but at least he cuts me some slack. And I didn’t even take a bullet to save his life.”

“One,” was all she said.

He paused and then did his first rep, grunting, “One.”

They kidded about it, but that night two months before at the Sanitation Department pier on the Hudson, she’d thought she had lost him. The ER doc assured her afterward that indeed Nikki almost had. In the blink of an instant after she beat down and disarmed one bad cop in the garbage transfer warehouse, his crooked partner had fired an ambush shot at her. Heat never saw it coming, but Rook—damn Rook—who wasn’t supposed to be there, leaped out and tackled her, taking the slug himself. Throughout her NYPD career as a uniform and a homicide detective, Nikki Heat had seen many bodies and watched many men die before her, and as the color left him that winter night and she felt his warm blood flow out of his chest across her arms, the vision resonated with all the fragile breaks and hopeless endings she had witnessed. Jameson Rook had saved her life, and now his own survival was nothing less than a miracle.

“Two,” she said. “Rook, you’re pathetic.”

Out on the sidewalk, he took in a long, exaggerated breath. “I love the smell of Tribeca in the morning,” he said. “It smells like . . . diesel.”

The sun had risen just enough for Nikki to peel off her sweatshirt and enjoy the April air on her bare arms. She caught him looking and said, “Careful, you’re one hair plug from becoming chesticle man.”

She walked on and he fell in stride with her. “I can’t help it. You know, any moment can become romantic. I saw that on a TV commercial.”

“Let me know if you need me to slow down.”

“No, I’m good.”

Heat gave him a side glance. Sure enough, he was keeping up.

“Remember my first shuffles around that hospital corridor? Felt like Tim Conway on the old *Carol Burnett Show*. Now look at me. I’m back to my superhero stride.” He demonstrated and powered ahead to the corner.

“Nice. If I ever need help, and Batman or Lone Vengeance are booked, I know who I’ll call.” As she drew up to him, she asked, “Seriously, you doing OK? I didn’t tax you too much with that workout?”

“Naw, I’m fine.” He placed the tip of her forefinger on his ribs. “I just feel a little tugging sometimes when I stretch.” They waited for the light to change and he added, “Speaking of tugging.”

Nikki gave him her best blank expression. “Tugging? I’m sorry, I don’t follow.” They held each other’s gaze until he arched one brow and cracked her up.

Rook laced his arm through hers as they crossed the street. “Detective, I do believe if we skipped breakfast, you could still get to work on time.”

“Are you sure you’re ready for this? Seriously, I can wait. I’m the queen of delayed gratification.”

“Trust me, we’ve waited long enough.”

“Maybe you should double check with your doctor to see if you’re healthy enough for sexual activity.”

“Oh,” said Rook. “So you’ve seen the commercials, too.”

Instead of stopping for a bite at Kitchenette, they made a sharp turn at the corner and headed toward his loft, arm in arm, picking up the pace as they went.

They kissed deeply in his elevator on the way up, pressing against each other, his back to the wall, and then, suddenly, hers. Then they broke away, resisting or maybe teasing, or maybe a bit of both. Their eyes locked in on each other’s, only flicking away to monitor the floor count.

Inside his front door, he reached to kiss her again, but she ducked him and raced through the kitchen, bolted up the hall at a sprint, and leaped at the bed, flying airborne like a club wrestler and landing with a bounce, laughing out a “hurry up” while she kicked off her cross-trainers.

He appeared in the doorway, completely naked. At the foot of the bed, he struck a regal pose. “If I am to die, let it be this way.”

And then she grabbed him and pulled him on top of her.

The heat took them beyond caution, even beyond play. Lost time, raw emotions, and aching need all cycloned into a swirl of passion with no mind of its own, only frenzy. In minutes the room itself was in motion, not just the bed.

Lampshades swayed, books toppled on shelves, even the pencil cup on Rook's nightstand tipped, and a dozen Blackwing 602s rolled onto the floor.

Then it was over and they flopped back, panting and smiling. "Oh you're definitely healthy enough for sex," said Nikki.

All Rook could manage was a dry-throated, "That was . . . Whoa." And then he added, "The earth moved."

Nikki laughed. "Feel good about you."

"No, I think it literally moved." He got up on one elbow to look at the room. "I think we just had an earthquake."

By the time she came out from drying her hair, Rook had tidied up the fallen items in his loft and planted himself in front of the TV. "Channel Seven says it was a five-point-eight on something called the Ramapo Fault Line, epicenter in Sloatsburg, New York. Figures. The fault gets named for a town in New Jersey, and once again, New York gets the credit."

Nikki put her empty mug on the counter and checked her cell phone. "I've got service back. No messages or TAC alerts, at least not for me. What the impact?"

"They're still assessing. No fatalities, some injuries from fallen bricks and whatnot, nothing major so far. Airports and some subway lines closed as a precaution. Oh, and I won't have to shake the orange juice. Want some?"

She said no and put on her gun. "Who'd have thought? An earthquake in New York City?"

He put his arms around her. "Can't complain about the timing."

"Hard to top."

“Guess we’ll just have to try,” he said, and they kissed. Her phone rang and Heat pulled away to answer it. Without being asked, he handed her a pen and notepad and she jotted down an address. “On my way.”

“You know what I think we should do today?”

Nikki slipped her phone into her blazer pocket. “Yes, I do. And as much as I’d love to—believe me, I’d love to—I’ve got to get to work.”

“Go to Hawaii.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m not joking. Let’s just go. Maui. Mmm, Maui.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Give me one reason.”

“I’ve got a murder to handle.”

“Nikki. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in our time together, it’s never let a murder get in the way of a good time.”

“So I’ve noticed. And what about your work? Don’t you have some magazine article you should be writing? Some exposé of corruption in the dark corridors of the World Bank? A chronicle of your ride along with a bin Laden hunter? Your weekend in the Seychelles with Johnny Depp or Mick?”

Rook pondered that and said, “If we left this afternoon, we could be in Lahaina for breakfast. And if you feel guilty, don’t. You deserve it after taking care of me for two months.” She ignored him and clipped her detective shield onto her waistband. “Come on, Nikki, how many homicides are there in this city in a year, five hundred?”

“More like five-thirty.”

“All right, that’s fewer than two a day. Look, we peace-out to Maui today and come back in a week, you’d miss, maybe, ten murders. And not all of them would be in your precinct anyway.”

“You’re making a very clear point here, Rook.”

He looked at her, mildly taken aback. “I am?”

“Yes. And the point is, I don’t care how many Pulitzer Prizes you’ve won. You still have the brain of a sixteen-year-old.”

“So, is that a yes?”

“Make that a fifteen-year-old.” Nikki kissed him again and cupped him between the legs. “By the way? So worth the wait.” And then she went to work.

The crime scene was on her way to the precinct, so instead of going up to the Twentieth first to sign out a car and then double back, Heat got off the B train a stop early at 72nd Street to hoof it. The bomb squad had ordered a precautionary traffic shutdown at Columbus Avenue, and Nikki came up the subway steps near the Dakota to witness nightmare gridlock backed up all the way to Central Park. The sooner she finished her investigation, the sooner relief would come to the stuck drivers, so she quickened her stride. But she didn’t shorten her contemplation.

As always, Detective Heat steeped herself in thoughts of the victim on approach to a body. She didn’t need Rook to remind her how many homicides there were in the city every year. But her vow was never to let volume dehumanize a single lost life. Or inure her to the impact on friends and loved ones. For her, this

wasn't lip service or some PR tagline. Nikki had come by it honestly years ago when her mother was murdered. Heat's loss not only spurred her to switch her college major to criminal justice, it forged the mold for the kind of cop she vowed to be. Ten years later, her mother's case remained unsolved, but the detective remained unbending in her advocacy for each victim, one at a time.

At 72nd and Columbus she picked her way through the knot of spectators who had gathered there, many with their cell phones aloft, documenting their proximity to danger for whatever street cred that gave them on their Facebook pages. She reached down to draw back her blazer to flash her shield to the uniform at the barrier, but he knew the move and gave her the fraternal nod before she even showed it. Emergency lights strobed two blocks ahead of her as she proceeded south. Nikki could have taken the empty street but kept to the sidewalk; even as a veteran cop, it unsettled her to see a major downtown avenue completely shut in morning rush hour. The sidewalks were vacant, too, except for uni patrols keeping them clear. Saw horses blocked 71st also, and a few doors west of them an ambulance idled in front of a townhouse that had shed its brick façade in the earthquake. She passed one of the green ash trees growing from the sidewalk planters and looked up through its budding limbs at dozens of rubberneckers leaning out of windows and over fire escapes. Same on the other side of Columbus. As she drew closer to the scene, dispatch calls from the roundup of emergency vehicles echoed off the stone apartment buildings in enveloping unison.

The bomb squad had turned out, with its armored Mobile Containment Unit parked in the center lane of the avenue, just in case anything needed detonating. But

from twenty yards off, Heat could tell from body language that Emergency Services had pretty much stood down. Elevated above the roofs of vans and blue-and-whites, she caught a glimpse of her friend Lauren Parry walking around inside the open rear cargo hold of a delivery truck in her Medical Examiner coveralls. Then she ducked down, and Nikki lost sight of her.

Raley and Ochoa from her squad were interviewing a middle-aged black man in a watch cap and green parka beside the Engine 40 fire truck. They stepped away from him and met up with her as she arrived. “Detective Heat.”

“Detective Roach,” she said, using the partners’ house nickname that amicably squashed Raley and Ochoa into one handy syllable.

“No trouble getting here,” said Raley, not asking, not expecting that she, of all people, would have any.

“No, my line’s running. I hear the N and the R are down for inspection where they go under the river.”

“Same with the Q train coming out of Brooklyn,” added Ochoa. “I made it across before it hit. But I’ll tell you, Times Square station was unreal. Like a Godzilla movie down there, the way people were screaming and running.”

“Did you feel it?” asked Raley.

She replayed the circumstances and said, “Oh, yeah,” trying to sound offhanded.

“Where were you when it hit?”

“Exercising.” Not a total lie. Heat side-nodded to the armored blast container.

“What are we working here that warrants the parade of heavy metal?”

“Suspicious package lit things up.” Ochoa flipped to the first page of his notepad. “Frozen food delivery driver—that’s him over there—”

“—In the green jacket,” chimed in his partner in their usual duet.

“—Opens the back of his truck to unload some chicken tenders and burger patties at the deli here.” He paused to allow Nikki a beat to eyeball the “All In Bun” storefront where a trio of cooks in checked pants and aprons slouched at the window counter waiting out the closure. “He slides a carton aside and finds a suitcase sitting there between the boxes.”

“I guess ‘See Something, Say Something’ is working,” picked up Raley. “He books it out of there and calls 9-1-1.”

“Emergency Services Unit deploys and sends Robocop in to check it out.” Detective Ochoa beckoned her to walk with him while he led her past the bomb squad’s remote control robot. The ’bot does a sniff and an X-ray. Negative on explosive elements. Their bomb tech was suited up, anyway, so—abundance of caution—he pops the lock and finds the body inside the suitcase.”

A few feet behind her, she heard Detective Feller. “That’s why I go strictly carry-on. Those checked bags’ll kill ya.” She snapped her head around and saw the surprise on his face while his audience of two uniforms laughed. He’d been speaking in a low voice, but not low enough. Feller’s cheeks reddened as she left Raley and Ochoa to cross to him. The unis melted away, leaving him alone with her. “Hey, sorry.” Then he tried to charm it away with a preemptive grin and the self-effacing cackle that always reminded her of John Candy. “Don’t think you were supposed to hear that.”

“Nobody was.” She spoke so quietly, so evenly, and with so little expression that the casual observer would think they were simply two detectives comparing notes. “Look around, Randy. This is serious as it gets. A murder scene. My murder scene. Not open mic night at Dangerfield’s.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I know I stepped in it.”

“Once again,” she noted. Randall Feller, perennial class clown, had a nasty habit of cutting up at crime scenes. It was one bad habit of one great street detective. The same detective who, along with Rook, had gotten shot saving her life on that sanitation pier. Feller’s gallows humor may have fit right in during the years he’d spent in the Special Operations Division, riding around all night in undercover yellow cabs in the macho, kick-ass, Dodge City world of the NYPD Taxi Unit, but not in her squad. At least not inside the yellow tape. This wasn’t their first conversation about it since he’d transferred to her homicide unit after his medical leave.

“I know, I know, it just sort of comes out.” She could tell he meant it and there was no reason to grind him down. “Inside voice next time, I promise.” Heat gave him a short nod and moved off to the delivery truck.

From street level at the rear hatch, Nikki had to tilt her head back to look up at Lauren Parry, who squatted on the floor inside the cargo hold. The stacks of cardboard cartons deeper inside wept with condensation; some even glistened from ice crystals encrusting their sides. Even with the freezer motor off, refrigerated air rolled out cool across Heat’s face. At Lauren’s knee, a blue-gray hardside suitcase rested open and flat with the lid clamshelled up, blocking Nikki’s view of its contents. She said, “Morning, Dr. Parry.”

Her friend pivoted to her and smiled. When she said, “Hey, Detective Heat,” Nikki could see puffs of Lauren’s breath. “Got a complicated one here.”

“When isn’t it?”

The ME rocked her head side to side, weighing that and agreeing. “Want the basics?”

“Good a place as any to start.” Nikki took out her own notebook, a slender, reporter’s cut spiral that fit perfectly inside her blazer pocket.

“Female Jane Doe. No ID, no purse, no wallet, no jewelry. Estimating age as early sixties.”

“Cause of death?” asked Heat.

Lauren Parry’s eyes left her clipboard and settled on her friend’s. “Now, how did I guess that would be your question?” She glanced inside the suitcase and continued, “I can’t say, except preliminarily.”

Nikki echoed back, “Now, how did I guess that would be your answer?”

The ME smiled again and small trails of vapor floated from her nostrils. “Why don’t you come on up here and I can show you what I’m dealing with?”

Detective Heat gloved up as she ascended the corrugated metal ramp sloping from the pavement to the back ledge of the truck. As she stepped aboard, her gaze momentarily stuck on the suitcase, and when it did, her teeth clacked with an icy shiver. Attributing it to crossing climates . . . leaving behind the mild April morning for a January chill inside the cargo hold . . . she shook it off.

Lauren stood so Nikki could squeeze by to get a view of the corpse. “I see what you mean,” Heat said.

The woman's body was frozen. Ice crystals like the ones shimmering on nearby boxes of ground beef, chicken, and fish sticks glistened on her face. Clothed in a pale gray suit, she had been folded into the fetal position and fit into the suitcase, where she now lay on her side. Lauren gestured with the cap of her pen to the frosty bloodstain covering the back of the suit. "Obviously, this here is our best guess for cause of death. It's a significant puncture delivered laterally to the posterior of the rib cage. Judging from the amount of blood, the knife entered sideways between the ribs and found the heart." Heat experienced that uneasy déjà vu she felt every time she saw one of these wounds. She made no comment, though, just nodded and folded her arms to warm the gooseflesh the refrigeration had no doubt raised on them, even through the blazer. "With her frozen like this, I can't do my usual field prelim for you. I can't even unfold her limbs to check for other wounds, trauma, defense marks, lividity, and so forth. I can do all that, of course, just not yet."

Nikki kept her gaze fixed on the stab wound and said, "Even time of death is going to be a challenge, I suppose."

"Oh, for sure, but not to worry. We can still come close when I get a chance to work on her down at 30th Street," said the medical examiner. And then she added, "Assuming I don't get back there to a major situation following the quake."

"From what I hear, it's mostly a small number of treat-and-release injuries."

"That's good." Lauren studied her. "You all right?"

"Fine. Just didn't know I'd need a sweater today."

“Guess I’m more used to the cold, right?” She uncapped her pen. “Why don’t I stand aside and make some notes while you do your begin-y thing?” Parry and Heat had worked enough cases together that they knew each other’s moves and needs. For instance, Lauren knew that Nikki had an initial task she performed at each crime scene, which was to survey everything from every possible angle with what Heat called beginner’s eyes. The problem with veteran detectives, Heat believed, was that after years and years of cases, even the best investigators became numbed by habit; counterintuitively, experience worked against them by blunting observation skills. Ask a refinery worker how he deals with the stink, and he’ll say, “What stink?” But Detective Heat remembered how it had felt on her first homicides. How she’d seen everything and then looked for more. Every bit of input held potential significance. Nothing could be overlooked. Just as the experience of her mother’s killing ritualized her empathic approach to the crime scene, her belief in keeping it fresh prevented her survey of it from lapsing into ritual. As she often reminded her squad, it was all about being present in the moment and noticing what you notice.

Detective Heat’s eyes told her that this truck was not likely the murder scene. Walking the tight area of the cargo section, flashing the beam of her Stinger on the floor between boxes and on the walls, there were no signs of any blood spatter. Later, after the body removal, the Evidence Collection Unit would offload all the cartons for a thorough inspection, but Nikki was satisfied in her mind that the suitcase had been brought aboard with the victim in it and, possibly, dead already. Time of death and a time line of the truck’s loading and unloading would help button that down. She turned her attention to the victim.

ME Parry's pick of early sixties seemed right. Her hair was flatteringly cut to a shorter business length correct for a woman of that age and, from the roots that were starting to show some gray and dark brown in the part, her honey blonde do, subtly streaked with caramel, indicated two things. First, she was a woman with some money who cared enough about her hair to have an expensive cut and a skilled colorist. Second, in spite of that, she was long overdue for a visit. "What kept her away?" wrote Nikki in her notebook. The clothes were similarly tasteful. Petite size. Off the rack, but clearly the rack lived on one of the upscale floors of the department store. The blouse was from the current season and the gray suit was a lightweight wool with some function to it. The feeling Heat got wasn't so much expensive as good quality. Not the uniform of the lady who lunches, but the woman who power lunches. Nikki crouched to look at the one hand that was visible. It was partially closed and tucked up under her chin so she couldn't see all of it, but what she could see told a story. These were busy hands, toned without being muscular or abused by hard labor. The slender fingers had the kind of strength you see on tennis players and fitness enthusiasts. She noted a small scar on the side of the wrist, which looked years, maybe decades, old. Nikki stood again and looked straight down at her. The body fit the profile of a runner or cyclist. She made another note to have her picture shown at fitness clubs, the New York Road Runners, and cycle shops. Heat squatted again to examine a grimy, dark brown dirt scuff on the knee of the woman's pants, which could say something about her last moments. She made a note of it and scooted around to look more closely at the knife wound. Furthering Heat's notion that she had been killed before being put in the truck, the frozen

bloodstain formed a wide pond, as if she had bled out face down. The width of the stain indicated great volume, yet there was not much blood on the satin of the suitcase's interior, other than from abrasion smears on the upper lid. Nikki shined her flashlight where the victim's back met the inside hinge of the suitcase and saw only similar bloodstain rub-off, with no evidence of pooling. Again, when they removed her later, better measurements could be taken, but Heat was getting a picture of a murder not only outside the truck, but outside the luggage.

One more indicator would be to look at the exterior of the suitcase for any major blood collection along the hinges or seams. Taking care not to disturb it, she knelt on both knees, palmed one hand on the cargo deck for balance, and dropped her head, leaning over far enough for her eyebrow to nearly touch the floor. Slowly, methodically, she ran the beam of her flashlight from right to left along the bottom edge of the case.

When her light reached the left corner of the suitcase, Nikki gasped. Her vision fluttered and a vertigo sensation swept over her. The light slipped from her hand and she toppled over on her side.

Lauren said, "Nikki, you all right?"

She couldn't really see anything in that moment. Hands came on her. Lauren Parry cradled her head off the floor. A pair of EMTs started for the ramp, but by then Nikki had recovered enough to sit herself up and wave the paramedics off. "No, no, I'm fine. It's OK." Lauren crouched beside her at eye level to check her out. "Really, I'm OK," said Nikki.

But her friend's face said anything but. "You scared me there, Nik. I thought you went down in an aftershock or something."

Heat swung her legs over the back of the truck and let them dangle. Raley and Ochoa approached, followed by Feller. Ochoa said, "What's up, Detective? You look like you saw a ghost."

Nikki shivered. This time, not from the refrigeration. She twisted to look behind her at the suitcase and then slowly turned back to the others.

"Nikki," said Lauren, "what is it?"

"The suitcase." She swallowed hard. "My initials are on it."

The detectives and the ME all looked at each other, puzzled. Finally, Raley said, "I don't get it. Why would your initials be on that suitcase?"

"Because I carved them there when I was a kid." She could see them processing but it was taking them too long, so she said, "That suitcase belonged to my mother." And then she added, "Her killer stole it the night she was murdered."