

## ONE

**T**he thing about New York City is you never know what's behind a door. Homicide Detective Nikki Heat pondered that like she had so many times as she parked her Crown Victoria and watched police cruiser and ambulance lights lick the storefronts on Seventy-fourth off Amsterdam. She knew, for instance, the plain door to the wine shop opened into a faux cave done in soft beige and terra cotta tones with stacked bottles nested in wall grottos fashioned of riverstones imported from France. Across the street, the door of what had once been an FDR-era bank gave onto a staircase that spiraled downward to a huge array of indoor batting cages that filled with tween MLB hopefuls and kid birthday parties on weekend afternoons. But on that morning, just after four a.m., the most nondescript door of all, the frosted one without a sign, only a street number above it in gold and black foil stick-ons from a hardware store, would lead to one of the more unexpected interiors of the quiet block.

A uniform posted in front of the door shuffled to keep warm. Silhouetted by the industrial grade Crime Scene Unit work light from inside that transformed the milky glass into the blinding Close Encounters portico, Nikki could see his breath from forty yards away.

She got out and even though the air bit her

nostrils and made her eyes teary, Nikki didn't button her coat against it. Instead she fanned it open with the back of her hand by rote, making sure that she had clean access to the Sig Sauer holstered underneath. And then, cold as she was, the homicide cop stopped and stood there to perform her next ritual: A pause to honor the dead she was about to meet. That small, quiet, private moment lived as a ceremonial interval Nikki Heat claimed when she arrived at every crime scene. Its purpose was simple. To reaffirm that, victim or villain, the waiting corpse was human and deserved to be respected and treated individually, not as the next stat. Nikki drew in a slow breath and the air felt to her the same as that night a decade ago, a Thanksgiving eve, when she was home on college break and her mother was brutally stabbed to death and left on the kitchen floor. She closed her eyes for her Moment.

"Something wrong, detective?" Moment gone. Heat turned. A taxi rolled to a stop and its passenger was addressing her from his backseat window. She recognized him and the driver and smiled.

"No, Randy, I'm good." Heat stepped over to the cab and shook hands with Detective Randall Feller. "You keeping out of trouble?"

"Hope not," he said with the laugh that always reminded her of John Candy. "You remember Dutch," he said making a head nod to Detective Van Meter up front in the driver's seat. Feller and Van Meter worked undercover in the NYPD Taxi Squad, a special anti-crime task force run out of the Special Operations Division that roved New York's streets in customized yellow cabs. The plain-

clothes cops of the Taxi Squad had a foot in the old school. They were generally tough asses who took no crap and did what they wanted and went where they wanted. Taxi Dicks roamed freely to sniff out crimes in progress, although with more scientific policing, were lately assigned to target their patrols in areas where robberies, burglaries, and street crimes spike.

The cop at the wheel rolled his window down and nodded a wordless hi, making her wonder why Van Meter had bothered to open it. "Careful, Dutch, you'll talk her ear off," said Detective Feller with the Candy chuckle again. "Lucky you, Nikki Heat, getting the middle of the night call."

Dutch said, "Some folks have no manners getting killed at this hour." Heat didn't imagine Detective Van Meter paused a lot for reflection before meeting a corpse.

"Listen," she said. "Not that I don't like standing in twenty-five degrees, but I've got a vic waiting."

"Where's your ride-along?" said Feller with more than a little interest. "The writer, what's his face?"

Feller, fishing again. Just like he did every time they crossed paths, testing to see if Rook was still in the picture. Nikki had been on Feller's radar since the night months before when she escaped from a hired killer in Rook's loft. After Heat's battle with the Texan, he and Dutch were in the first wave of cops who raced to her aid. Ever since, Feller never missed a chance to pretend he didn't know Rook's name and take a sounding on her. Heat rolled with it, she was no stranger to interest from men, even liked it if they didn't cross a line,

but Feller . . . In the Rom-Com he'd be more Com than Rom; the joshing brother rather than the love interest. Detective Feller was funny and good company but more for beers in the cop bar than Sancerre by candlelight. Two weeks ago she saw him come out of the men's room at Plug Uglies wearing a sanitary tissue ring around his neck, asking everyone if they'd also like a lobster bib.

"What's his face?" repeated Nikki. "He's off on assignment." And then to send the message, she added, "He's back at the end of this week, though." But the detective read something else in her voice.

"That a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Good thing," Heat said a little too abruptly. So she flashed a grin trying to reset her tone. "Real good." And then, to convince herself, added, "Really good."

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What Nikki found on the other side of the door was not an urban shrine to oenology with artfully stacked green bottles, nor did she hear the ping of an aluminum bat followed by the thud of a ball into padded netting. Instead, a throat-catching mixture of incense mixed with vapors from a harsh cleaning solvent rose up to greet her as she descended a flight of stairs to the basement. Behind her, Detective Van Meter moaned a low, "Whoa," and as Heat rounded the landing to make her turn down the last flight, she heard Dutch and Feller snapping on gloves. Van Meter muttered to his partner, "I catch an STD down here, I'll sue till I own the damn city."

At basement level they arrived at something that

only charitably could be referred to as a reception area. The crimson painted brick walls behind the Formica counter and the Internet catalogue chairs reminded her of a small, private gym lobby, and not a very high-end one. Four doors were spaced along the far wall. They were all open. Three led into dim rooms, lit only by the spill of harsh radiance from the CSU light stands set up to illuminate the lobby during the investigation. More light, punctuated by strobe flashes came from the far doorway, where Detective Raley stood watching the activity, latexed hands by his side. He saw Nikki out of the corner of his eye and stepped out to her.

“Welcome to Pleasure Bound, Detective Heat,” he said.

Copsense made Nikki scope out the other three rooms before entering the crime scene itself. She knew they'd have been cleared by Raley and the uniforms who responded first, but she poked her head in each doorway for a quick glance. All she could make out in the murkiness were the shapes of equipment and furniture of the bondage trade and that each chamber was themed. In order: a Victorian boudoir; an animal role-play parlor; and a sensory deprivation room. In the coming hours these would be swept by CSU and forensic evidence gathered, but for now she was satisfied with her survey. Heat took out her gloves and walked to the far doorway where Feller and Van Meter waited deferentially behind Raley. This was her case on her turf and unspoken etiquette dictated she go in ahead of them.

The corpse was naked and bound at the wrists

and ankles to an X-shaped vertical wooden frame known as the St. Andrew's Cross. The structure was bolted to the floor and the ceiling in the center of the room and the dead man's body sagged downward, bent at the knees, his buttocks hovering above the linoleum. The bulk of his weight, which Heat put at almost two hundred-fifty pounds now unsupported by muscle, strained the wrist straps high over his head and pulled his arms into a taut Y.

Detective Feller whisper-sang the chorus of YMCA until Nikki scalded him with a glance. Chastened, he folded his arms and looked away at his partner, who shrugged.

"What have we got, Rales?" said Heat to her detective.

Raley consulted a single page of notes. "Not much, as of yet. Check it out." He swept the room with his arm. "No clothes anywhere, no ID, no nothing. After-hours cleaning crew made the discovery. They're not English speakers so Ochoa's doing the honors in the office getting their statement. Prelim, though, is they say the place closes about one, sometimes two, that's when they come in. They were doing their usual janitor stuff, figuring they were all alone, and came in here, to the, ah . . ."

"Torture chamber," said Nikki. "The rooms are themed. This one's for torture and humiliation." She read his look and said, "I worked vice once."

"So did I," said Raley.

"I worked it harder." Heat arched a brow and watched him blush. "So nobody else was here at the discovery. Did they see anyone leaving?"

“Negative.”

“There’s a bubble for a surveillance cam in the lobby,” said Van Meter.

Raley nodded. “On it.” And then he turned to Nikki. “There’s a locked closet in the manager’s office where the cleaners say she keeps the recorder.”

“Wake up the manger,” said Heat. “Tell her to bring in the key but don’t tell her about the body. Just say there was an attempted break-in. I don’t want her making calls on the way here and I want to see her reaction when she finds out.”

When Raley stepped out to make the call, Heat asked the CSU technician and the police photographer if they had looked for any clothing or a wallet or ID anywhere else on the premises. She knew what the answer would be—these were professionals—but the base had to be covered. The obvious, if thought to be too obvious, is what got overlooked and left holes in an investigation if you start assuming and stop checking. They confirmed no clothing, ID, or other personal effects on their initial sweep.

Detective Feller said, “How about Dutch and I cruise the neighboring blocks, see if anyone who’s up saw anything?”

Van Meter nodded. “At this hour not many people around but we can hit the diners, garbage collectors, delivery trucks, whatever.”

“Sure,” said Detective Heat. “Appreciate the assist.”

Feller gave her the puppy eyes again. “For you, Nikki? C’mon.” He took out his cellphone and knelt to get an angle of the dead man’s face with its

camera. "Won't hurt to show this around to see if anyone knows him."

"Good thinking," she said.

On his way out Detective Feller paused. "Listen, sorry if I was out of line with the Village People thing. Just breaking the tension, you know?"

As much as she couldn't abide disrespecting a victim, she looked at him and read his embarrassment. As a veteran NYPD detective, she knew it was just misplaced cop humor and not meant to be callous. "I don't even remember it," said Heat. He smiled, gave her a head nod, and left.

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**Lauren Parry knelt on the floor beside the victim and, as she filled in each box in her report, the medical examiner recited to Nikki, "OK, so we have a John Doe, late-forties, approximately two-fifty to two-fifty-five." The ME pointed to her nostrils. "Obvious smoker, definite drinker."**

It was always tough with the Does, thought Nikki. Without a name to go on you were hobbled at the starting gate. Precious time in the investigation would be spent just figuring out who he was.

"Preliminary T.O.D. . . ." Lauren Parry read the thermometer and continued, ". . . Eight to ten p.m."

"That long ago? You sure?" Heat's friend looked up from the clipboard at her and stared. The detective said, "OK, so you're sure."

"Preliminarily, Nik. I'll run the usual tests when we get him down to Thirtieth Street, but for now that's a good window for you."

"Cause of death?"

“Well, you just want every little thing, don’t you?” said the ME with a twinkle behind her deadpan. Then she grew pensive and turned to consider the corpse. “C.O.D. could be asphyxiation.”

“The collar?”

“That’s my best first guess.” Lauren stood and indicated the posture collar biting into the man’s neck, drawn so tight by the strapping at the back it caused his flesh to roll over its edges. “Certainly enough to restrict the windpipe. Plus the broken blood vessels in the eyeballs are consistent with choking.”

“Let’s rewind. ‘Best first guess?’” asked Heat.

“Come on, Nikki, you know I always tell you first shot is preliminary.” Then Lauren Parry looked back at the body, pondering again.

“What?”

“Let’s just mark it ‘choking’ as a prelim until I do my autopsy.”

Nikki knew better than to press Lauren for conjecture, just as her friend knew not to push her for speculation. “That’s fine,” she said, all the while knowing that her pal from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner was mulling something.

Lauren opened a plastic drawer in her kit for some swabs and resumed her testing while Nikki did what she always did at a death scene. She clasped her hands behind her and slowly walked the room, occasionally squatting or bending, eyeing the corpse from all angles. This wasn’t just a ritual, it was a fundamental procedure to clear her head of all conclusions and projections. The idea was to open her mind to impressions, to just let in whatever came in

and, most of all, simply to notice what she was noticing.

Her sense of the victim was that he wasn't a physically active person. The sizable roll of soft fat around his midsection suggested a lot of sitting, or at least an occupation that didn't involve movement or strength like sports, construction, or other manual labor. Like most people, the skin on his upper arms was pale compared to his forearms but the contrast wasn't great; no farmer's tan. That told her he not only was indoors a lot but that he either wore long sleeves most of the time or didn't likely tend a garden or play golf at a club. Even this long after summer there would be more residual tanning. She stepped close to examine his hands, being careful not to breathe on them. They were clean and soft, underscoring her feeling about his indoor life. The nails were neat but not manicured; she usually saw that among middle-aged men who were wealthy or young urban groomers who were more fit. The hair was sparse up top, befitting the age Lauren had fixed, as were the strands of white mixed in with its dull, iron filings color. The brows were wildly bushy, sometimes an indicator of a bachelor or widower, and his salt and pepper goatee gave him an air of academia or arts and letters. Nikki looked again at his fingertips and made note of a bluish tinge that looked to be within the skin itself and not topical, like from oil paint or ink stains.

Bruises, welts, and abrasions were everywhere, front, back, and sides. Torso, legs, and arms. In keeping with her open mind approach, the detective

tried not to ascribe the marks to a night of sado-masochism. Possible, even likely, given the setting but not a for certain. There were no obvious cuts, punctures, bullet holes, or bleeding she could see.

The rest of the room was immaculate, at least for a torture dungeon. The CSU vacuuming and print dusting might yield some forensic evidence but there was no visible trash, cigarette butts, or any clues such as a conveniently dropped hotel matchbook with a killer's room number on it like you saw in old movies on TCM.

Again, keeping an open mind, Nikki refused to conclude there even was a killer in the classic sense. A homicide? Possibly. Murder? Still just possibly. The door had to be left open for an accidental death from a consensual torture session gone too far resulting in a panic flight from the Dom in the relationship.

Heat was sketching her own diagram of the room layout, something she always did as a personal companion to the one filed by the Crime Scene Unit, when Detective Ochoa came in after his interview of the cleaning crew. He had a sober tone as he quickly greeted Nikki but softened when his gaze fell on the ME.

"Detective," said Lauren with a little too much formality.

"Doctor," he replied, matching her reserve. Then Nikki caught Lauren taking something out of the side pocket of her suit and slipping it into his hand. Detective Ochoa didn't look at it, just said, "Right, thanks," and stepped across the room, where he

turned his back and fastened his watch to his wrist. Nikki could do the math on where The Oach was when he was awakened by the dead body call.

Seeing these two go through this charade of non-intimacy gave her a twinge. She lifted her pen above her diagram and paused, reminded of how not long ago she and Rook had similarly conspired to low key their affair—also fooling no one. That was back in the summer heat wave when he was a ride along journalist researching Nikki's homicide squad, and ultimately Nikki, for the feature story he was writing for *First Press*. Having her picture on the cover of a respected national magazine was a mixed blessing for the publicity shy Heat. Bundled with the annoyance and unhappy complications of her fifteen minutes came some unexpectedly hot times with Jameson Rook. And now, some form of a relationship. Well, she thought—something she had been doing a lot of lately—not so much a relationship but a . . . what?

After the heat of their romance ratcheted up and rose to even greater intensity, something else happened over time and togetherness. It deepened into what began to feel to Nikki like a Real Deal that was headed somewhere. But where it ended up heading was off a cliff into an abyss where it suspended midair.

He had been gone four weeks now. A month of Rook disappearing on his investigation of international arms smuggling for a *First Press* exposé. A month off the grid while he bounced around mountain villages of Eastern Europe, African seaports, airstrips in Mexico, and God knows where else. A

month to let Nikki wonder where the hell they were with each other.

Rook's communications sucked and that didn't help. He told her he would be going deep undercover and to expect some radio silence, but come on. Going all this time in isolation without so much as a phone call was chewing at her, wondering if he was alive, rotting in some war lord's jail, or what? Could he really be out of communication this long, or had he simply not made a good enough attempt? Nikki denied it at first but after days and nights of trying not to think the thought, she now struggled with the notion that perhaps the charm of Jameson Rook, the rogue globetrotter, was wearing thin. Sure, she respected his career as a two-time Pulitzer-winning investigative journalist, and knew intellectually what came along with all that, but the way he blew out of Dodge, the way he blew out of her life so easily, had her questioning not just where they stood as a couple but where he stood with her anymore.

Nikki looked at her own watch and wondered what time it was where Jameson Rook was. Then she looked at its calendar. Rook had said he would be back in five days. The question for Nikki was, by then where would they be?

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Heat mulled resources and decided it would be more productive for her to wait for the manager of the underground sex club to arrive and unlock the video closet. That way she could free up her own pair of detectives to snag some uniformed officers

and canvass the neighborhood on foot. Since the taxi team had volunteered to hit the diners, all-night workers, and delivery guys, she charged Raley and Ochoa (collectively and always affectionately known as “Roach”) to concentrate on finding an ID or a wallet. “You should do the usual checks. Trash cans, dumpsters, subway grates, under apartment stoops, or anyplace else that’s a handy place for a dump and run. Not a lot of doorman buildings in this neighborhood but if you see one, ask. Oh, and check out the Phoenix House up the block. Maybe some of our friends in recovery were up and heard or saw something.”

Roach’s cell phones chimed about two seconds apart. Heat held up her own mobile and said, “That’s a head shot I just emailed you of our vic. If you get a chance, flash it, you never know.”

“Right,” said Ochoa. “Who doesn’t love to have a picture of a choking victim shoved in their face before breakfast?”

As they started up the stairs to street level, she called after, “And make note of any surveillance cams you see with a street view. Banks, jewelry stores, you know the drill. We can drop in and have them do a check when they open for business later this morning.”

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Detective Heat had to shake off a foul mood after dealing with the manager of *Pleasure Bound*. Nikki doubted the woman had been awakened by Raley. On the contrary, Roxanne Paltz vibed having been up all night, heavily and severely made up and arriving

in a tight vinyl outfit that creaked whenever she moved on the chair in her office. Her granny glasses had blue lenses matching the tips of her spiky, bleach damaged hair, which gave off the unmistakable scent of cannabis. When Nikki told her the real reason they were there, the dead man in her torture chamber, she lost color and reeled. Heat showed her the picture on her cell phone, and the woman nearly got sick. She sat down unsteadily and drank a sip of the water Nikki gave her from the cooler, but after she recovered, said she'd never seen the guy.

When Nikki asked if she could have a look at the surveillance video, it got contentious and Roxanne Paltz was suddenly all about Constitutional rights. Speaking with the authority of someone who has been hassled for running a sex trade business, she cited just cause, unlawful search, client confidentiality, and freedom of expression. Her lawyer was on speed dial, and even though it wasn't even six in the morning, she called and woke him up, Nikki having to deal with her raccoon mascara glare while she parroted back his certainty that no cabinets could be unlocked or video screened without a judge's warrant.

"I'm just asking for a little cooperation," said Nikki.

Roxanne sat there listening to the attorney on her phone, nodding and nodding, vinyl creaking with each head bob. And then she hung up. "He says to go fuck yourself."

Nikki Heat paused and gave a slight smile. "Judging from some of the equipment you've got here,

this would probably be the one place I could actually do that.”

The detective knew she would get the search warrant and had just ended her call downtown to get the wheels turning on one when her phone vibrated in her hand. It was Raley. “Come topside, I think we got something.”

She arrived back up on the sidewalk expecting sun but it was still dark. Nikki had lost a sense of time and place down there and reflected that was probably the whole idea.

Detectives Raley, Ochoa, Van Meter, and Feller stood in a semicircle across the street under the green canvas canopy of the corner grocery. Crossing Seventy-fourth to meet them Nikki had to pause so she didn't get run over by a delivery guy on a fat-tired bike. She watched his trailing breath as he passed with somebody's order-in breakfast bouncing in the wire basket and figured maybe she didn't have the hardest job in the city. “What-cha got?” she said as she stepped over to the crew.

“Found some clothes and a shoe wedged in the space between the two buildings here,” said Ochoa, training the beam of his Streamlight Stinger in the wall gap separating the grocery and the nail spa next door. Raley held up a pair of dark trousers and a black tasseled loafer for Heat and then slipped them into a brown paper evidence bag. “Spaces like this? Classic place to stash,” said Ochoa. “Learned that in Narco.”

“Give me the light, Crime Dog, think there's more here.” Raley took the mini from his partner and squatted in front of the gap. A few seconds

later he pulled out the mate to the other loafer then said, “Well, what do you know?”

“What?” Ochoa asked. “Don’t be a dick, what is it?”

“Hang on a sec. If you weren’t packing on the weight, you could have done this instead of me.” Raley twisted his shoulder to get a better angle for his reach into the narrow opening. “Here we go. Another collar.”

Nikki expected to see something in a leather gimp rig with sharp studs and stainless steel D-rings but when Raley finally stood and held it up in his gloved hand, it wasn’t that kind of collar at all. It was a priest’s collar.

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In 2005 New York City funded eleven million dollars to modernize the NYPD’s high tech capability by building the Real Time Crime Center, a computer operations hub that, among numerous capabilities, provides crime reports and police data to officers in the field with startling immediacy. That is why in a city of eight and a half million people it only took Detective Heat less than three minutes to get a likely ID on the victim in the torture dungeon. The RTCC accessed records and spit out a Missing Persons Report filed the night before by a parish rectory housekeeper for a Father Gerald Graf.

Nikki assigned Roach to stay and continue their canvass while she made the drive uptown to interview the woman who filed the MPR. Detectives Feller and Van Meter were off their shift, but Dutch offered to help Roach continue knocking on doors.

Feller appeared at her car window and said if Heat didn't mind the company, he'd be happy to ride shotgun with her. She hesitated, figuring this was about Feller engineering his opportunity to ask her to catch a drink or dinner later. But a veteran detective was reaching out to help with a case on his own time and she couldn't say no to that. If he tried to bend it into a date offer, she'd simply deal with it.

Our Lady of the Innocents was on the northern border of the precinct, mid-block on Eighty-fifth between West End Avenue and Riverside. At this early end of the morning rush hour, a five minute drive, if that. But as soon as she pulled onto Broadway, they caught a red in front of the Beacon Theater.

"Glad to finally have some time alone with you," said Feller while they waited.

"For sure," said Nikki, who then, hurried to steer the topic away. "Appreciate the assist, Randy. Can always use another pair of eyes and ears."

"Gives me a chance to ask you something without the whole world around."

She looked up at the light and considered breaking out the gumball. "... Yeah?"

"Any idea how you did on your exam for lieutenant?" he asked. Not the question she expected. Nikki turned to look at him. "Green," he said and she drove on.

"I don't know, seemed like I did all right. Hard to know for sure," she said. "Still waiting for the results to be posted." When the department's civil service test was offered recently, Heat had taken it

not so much out of a burning desire for the promotion, but because she wasn't sure when it would be given again. Budget cuts from the economic crisis had hit New York as much as any other municipality and one response the year before had been to cut back on raises by postponing the scheduled rank advancement tests.

Detective Feller cleared his throat. "What if I told you I hear you aced it?" She gave him a side-glance and then concentrated on the driver of the bread delivery truck who had stopped to double park in her lane without flashers. While she hit her blinker and waited for the passing lane to clear, he went on. "I know this to be a fact."

"How?"

"From some inside sources. Downtown." He reached for the dashboard. "Mind if I back off the temp? Starting to bake in here."

"Help yourself."

"I try to keep myself connected." He turned down the knob one click then decided on one more before he settled back in his seat again. "Not planning on riding in back of that cab forever, ya hear what I'm saying?"

"Sure, sure." Nikki made her swing around the bread truck. "I, um, appreciate the info."

"So when you get by your orals and all the other hoops they make you jump through—like teach you the secret handshake, or whatever—do me a fave? Don't forget your friends on your way up."

Whoomph there it is, thought Nikki. She felt a little embarrassed. All this time thinking Feller wanted to date her when maybe what he really

wanted was to network her. She replayed her mental picture of him at the cop bar clowning in his ass gasket lobster bib and wondered if the jester in him was all in fun, or if he was really just a skilled glad-hander. The more he talked, the more that picture emerged.

“When you get your gold bar it’s going to be a piece of good news in your precinct for a change. And you know what I mean.”

“I’m not sure I do,” she said. They hit another red at Seventy-ninth, and unfortunately this was a long one.

“Not sure, that’s a laugh,” he said. “I mean Captain Montrose.”

Nikki knew full well what he meant. Her skipper, her mentor, Captain Montrose was under increasing pressure from One Police Plaza over his performance as commander of the Twentieth Precinct. Whether it was the bad economy, increased unemployment, or a reset to the dark days of the pre-Giuliani disorder, crime statistics were edging up throughout all five boroughs. And worse, they were spiking in election season. Gravity rules, so in response, the shit roll was all downhill to the precinct commanders. But Heat could see her captain was taking an extra pounding. Montrose had been singled out, called down separately for extra meetings and ass chewings, spending as much time at HQ as he did in his office. His personality darkened under the pressure and he had grown atypically remote—no, more than remote, secretive. It made Nikki wonder whether something else was going on with him beyond precinct perf stats. Now

what bothered Heat was that her boss's private humiliation was Out There as department gossip. If Feller knew about it, others did, too. Loyalty made her deflect it, back up her boss.

"Listen, Randy, who isn't getting squeezed these days? I hear those weekly CompStat meetings at 1PP are brutal for all the skips, not just mine."

"Seriously," he said with a nod. "They should put a drain in the floor to let the blood run out. Green."

"Jeez, it just turned." Nikki pressed the accelerator.

"Sorry. Drives Dutch crazy, too. I tellya, I've got to get my ass out of that cab." He powered down his window and spat. When he closed it again, he said, "This isn't just about the performance figs. I have a bud in Internal Affairs. Your man is on their radar."

"Bull."

"No bull."

"For what?"

He made an exaggerated shrug. "It's IA, what do you think?"

"No. I don't buy it," she said.

"Then don't. Maybe he is clean but I'm telling you he's got his neck on the stump and they're sharpening the ax."

"Not maybe. Montrose is clean." She made a left onto Eighty-fifth. A block and a half ahead, she could see a cross on the church roof. In the distance, across the Hudson, the apartments and cliffs were pinking from the rising sun. Nikki switched off her headlights as she crossed West End Avenue.

"Who knows," said Feller, "you get rank, maybe

you'll be in position to take over the precinct if he goes down."

"He is not going down. Montrose is under pressure but he's straight as they come."

"If you say."

"I say. He's unassailable."

As Nikki got out in front of the rectory, she wished she had made the drive alone. No, what she wished was that Feller had just asked her for drinks, or bowling, or for sex. Any one of those, she would rather have dealt with.

She reached for the bell but before she could press it, she saw a small head through the stained glass window in the door and it opened revealing a minute woman in her late sixties.

Nikki referred to her notes from the RTCC message. "Good morning, are you Lydia Borelli?"

"Yes, and you're with the police, I can tell."

After they showed ID and introduced themselves, Nikki said, "And it was you who called about Father Graf?"

"Oh, I've been worried sick. Come in, please." The housekeeper's lips were quaking and her hands fluttered nervously. She missed the doorknob on her first attempt to pull it closed. "Did you find him? Is he all right?"

"Ms. Borelli, do you have a recent photo I could look at?"

"Of Father? Well, I'm sure somewhere... I know."

She led them over thick rugs that muted their footfalls through the living room and into the pas-

tor's adjoining study. On the shelves of the built-in above the desk several photos in glass frames were perched between books and knickknacks. The housekeeper took one down, swiping her finger along the top of the frame to dust it before she handed it over. "This is from last summer."

Heat and Detective Feller stood beside each other to examine it. The shot was taken at some sort of protest rally and showed a priest and three Hispanic protesters, with arms linked, leading a march behind a banner. Father Graf's face, frozen in mid-recitation of a chant, was definitely the same as the one on the corpse at *Pleasure Bound*.

The housekeeper took the news stoically, blessing herself with the Sign of the Cross and then lowering her head in silent prayer. When she was done blood vessels showed through her temples and tears streamed down her cheeks. There were tissues on the end table near the couch. Nikki offered her the box and she took some.

"How did it happen?" she asked, staring down at the tissue in her hands.

Fragile as the woman appeared Heat thought better of giving her the details at that moment about the priest's death in a BDSM torture and humiliation dungeon. "We're still investigating that."

Then she looked up. "Did he suffer?"

Detective Feller squinted at Nikki and turned away to hide his face, suddenly making himself busy replacing the photo on the shelf.

"We'll have more details after the coroner's report," answered Nikki, hoping her dodge was

artful enough to be bought. “We know this is a loss for you, but in a while, not just now, we’re going to need to ask you a few questions to help us.”

“Certainly, anything you need.”

“What would be helpful now, Ms. Borelli, is if we could look through the rectory. You know, search through his papers, his bedroom.”

“His closet,” said Feller.

Nikki moved forward. “We want to look for anything that would help us find out who did this.”

The housekeeper gave her a puzzled look. “Again?”

“I said, we’d like to search the—”

“I heard what you said. I mean, you need to search again?”

Heat leaned closer on the couch to face the woman. “Are you saying someone searched here already?”

“Yes. Last night, another policeman. He said he was following up on my missing person report.”

“Oh, of course, sometimes we cross signals,” said Nikki. That could well be the case but her uneasiness was growing. She caught a look from Feller that said his antenna was up, too. “May I ask who this policeman was?”

“I forgot his name. He said it but I was so upset. Senior moment.” She chuckled and then stifled a sob. “He did show me a badge like yours, so I let him roam free. I watched television while he looked around.”

“Well, I’m sure he filed a report.” Nikki flipped open her spiral reporter’s notebook. “Maybe I could cut through some red tape if you described him.”

“Sure. Tall. Black, or do I say Afro American these days? Very pleasant, had a kind face. Bald. Oh, and a little birthmark or mole or something right here.” She tapped her cheek.

Heat stopped writing and capped her stick pen. She had all she needed. The housekeeper had just described Captain Montrose.