

## FOUR

“Drop your hands, Rook, you look ridiculous,” said Heat.  
“What the hell did you think you were doing?”  
“Racing to your loving arms. At least I thought I was.”  
“I could have shot you, do you know that?” she said as she holstered her Sig.

“It just occurred to me,” he said. “That would have put a damper on my homecoming. Not to mention meant a ton of paperwork for you. I think we’re both better off you didn’t.” He made a step from the kitchen to embrace her, but when she crossed her arms, he stopped. “You saw the paper.”

“Of course, I saw the damn paper. And if I hadn’t, half of New York City was very happy to keep shoving it under my nose. What the hell is going on with you?”

“See, this is why I came over. So I could explain this face-to-face.”

“This ought to be good.”

“OK,” he said. “My agent and I had a very important business dinner last night. A major studio has optioned my piece on Chechnya for a movie.” When Nikki didn’t seem so excited by that, he continued, “So . . . since I had *just* gotten back to town . . . we went to dinner so I could sign the contracts. I had no idea anybody was going to take a picture.”

“And when exactly did you ‘just’ get back?” she asked.

“Yesterday. Late. I trailed that money and the arms shipment all the way from Bosnia to Africa to Colombia to Mexico.”

“Good for you,” said Heat. “Now, that covers the last thirty days beautifully. “What about the last thirty hours?”

“My God, once an interrogator . . .” He chuckled and met an ice wall. “I can tell you about that.”

“I’m all ears, Rook.”

“Well, you know about the dinner.”

“At Le Cirque, yes, go on.”

“The rest is simple, really. Mostly I crashed. I think I slept thirteen, fifteen hours straight. First real bed in weeks.” He was talking faster then, eliminating pauses that made him vulnerable. “And after, I’ve been writing like crazy—phone off, TV off—writing. Then I came right here.”

“You couldn’t call?” Nikki hated the cliché even as it flew out of her mouth, but then decided if ever anyone had license to say it, she did right then.

“See, that’s what you don’t know about me. This is my process, you know, to sequester myself. Get it all down while it’s still fresh in my head and my notes still make sense to me. It’s how I work,” he said, equal parts explanation and justification. “But this evening when I finally saw the newspaper, I knew how you’d feel, so I dropped everything to rush to you in true ain’t-no-river-wide-enough fashion. All right, maybe instead of a handmade raft it was a taxi, but doesn’t that count for anything?”

“Not so sure it’s enough.” She picked up her coat and draped it on the back of the bar stool, buying time to sort her thoughts out. The fact was, for Nikki, it did not erase the month of isolation and the emotional burrs and raw abrasions that came with her journey. But the grounded side of her, the grown-up of the pair, was looking at the horizon to the days and weeks and whatever that came after this moment.

Rook cleared his throat. “There’s one more thing I need to say to you. And I know there’s no way we can move forward until I get this out.”

“OK . . .”

“I want to apologize to you, Nikki. Not just, ‘hey, sorry,’ but really. Apologize.” He paused, either to let her absorb it or to find his

way, then he went on, “This is all still new to both of us. You and I came to each other with full lives, past baggage, careers, the works. Both of us. And this trip of mine, this was the first time since we got together that you’re seeing what my real work is like. I have the advantage of having gone on ride-along, so you—I get your life, inside and out. Me, I’m an investigative journalist. If I’m doing it right, I’m spending big stretches of time in places nobody else has the balls to go and under conditions most reporters wouldn’t put up with. That explains why I fell off the radar on my story. I told you I might before I left. But it’s no excuse for not calling you when I got in the clear. The only explanation I can give may sound flimsy, but it’s the truth. When I come off assignment, I have a routine. I sleep like the dead and write like the devil, in seclusion. It’s the way I’ve always done it. For years. But now—I realize something’s different now. I’m not the only one involved.

“Now, if I could take back the past twenty-four hours, I would, but I can’t. What I can do, though, is say when I look at you now and see the hurt in you—the hurt I caused by being insensitive—I see pain I never want to bring to you again.” He let that sit there, then said, “Nikki, I apologize. I was wrong. And I am sorry.”

After he finished, they stood there like that, facing off in her front hall, silently looking each other over from barely a yard away—one hoping the rift was behind them, the other trying to decide—when the warmth that suddenly stirred inside Nikki swelled and made a decision of its own. It took control, radiating within her until the spreading heat rose and wouldn’t be stopped, making the “right here, right now” bigger—and more powerful—than anything else.

Rook sensed it in her, or maybe was feeling it in himself, too. It didn’t matter—any more than who flew to the other first, open mouth on open mouth, hungrily reaching, searching to get closer, closer. Without looking, she one-handed her holster onto the counter. Still kissing, pressing himself to her, his fingers undid her blouse.

When they finally gasped for air, every breath became a shared lust, giving as well as taking; a quest of passion, of sealed lips and

urgent tongues. He started to lead her to the bedroom by small steps backward. But Nikki had one more takedown in her that night. She rolled Rook over the back of the sofa and landed on top of him. He reached behind her, drawing her by the small of her back to him. She pressed forward, going with him. Then Nikki rose onto her knees and began to unbuckle his belt.

And then it was all about breathlessness again.

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**Nikki slept afterward, allowing herself a luxurious drift into the ozone,** sinking deeply into the couch cushions, her naked thigh draped over Jameson Rook's magnificent ass. She awoke slowly about an hour later and lazed a few moments watching him as he sat at the counter working on his laptop in only his untucked shirt and Calvins. "I didn't even feel you get up," she said. "Did you sleep?"

"Too wired to be tired. Don't even know what a time zone is anymore."

"Does sex help your writing?"

"Sure doesn't hurt." He stopped and rotated to face her with a grin, then went back to his computer. "But I'm not actually writing-writing. I'm just downloading and saving some attachments I e-mailed myself. Won't be a sex—I mean sec. . . . Or do I?"

"You e-mail yourself? Rook, if you're lonely, I could e-mail you."

He continued working keystrokes as he explained. "I always back up my iPad docs and smart phone notes by e-mailing them to myself. That way, if my iPad takes a dip in a swamp or my phone gets confiscated by some former Eastern Bloc gun runner . . . or I leave it on the R Train like an idiot . . . I don't lose all my work." With a flourish, he double-tapped the track pad. "Done."

After they made love again, of all places, in the bedroom, Heat and Rook held each other in the dark. A trickle of sweat ran across one of Nikki's breasts and she wondered—his or hers? She tracked the sensation of its slow, meandering course between them and

smiled. After a month apart, how wonderful to be close enough that she couldn't tell whose sweat was whose.

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When they both decided they were hungry, she wondered aloud who was still delivering after midnight, but Rook was already at his suitcase fishing out a pair of sweatpants. "You're not going out," she said. "10-10 WINS said it's in minus temps tonight." He said nothing, just handed Nikki her robe and led her to the kitchen. He opened the door to the refrigerator and came out with a half dozen takeout trays.

"Rook, what did you do?"

"Hit SushiSamba on the way over." He set a container of each on the counter. "Let's see, got your Samba Park roll, your BoBo Brazil, your Green Envy . . .," he paused to purr like a tiger, ". . . your tuna sashimi."

"Oh my God," said Nikki, "and you got yellowtail ceviche?"

"Do I know you? Margarita, señorita?"

"Sí." She laughed, remembering how long it had been since she'd done that.

Rook set the pitcher he had mixed on the tiles and, as he salted two glasses, said, "Consider the potential irony. Four weeks surviving nighttime jungle landings in the cargo bays of unmarked planes, multiple detentions by corrupt border guards, getting roughed up in the trunk of some paranoid Colombian drug lord's El Dorado by his crackhead flunkies, only to be gunned down in my girlfriend's apartment."

"No laugh, Rook, I was feeling jumpy. I think someone was following me tonight."

"Seriously? Did you see who?"

"No. And not a hundred percent sure about it."

"Yes, you are," he said. "Should you call Montrose?"

There was a time that's exactly what she would have done. Detective Heat would have let her captain know and then vehemently

declined his offer to park a cruiser out front (which he would have done anyway, ignoring her protests). It wasn't the uncertainty about the tail that stopped her, though. It was the uncertainty in the face of him questioning her judgment and leadership. Plus her own awkwardness dealing with the captain with so many suspicions swirling. "No," she said. "It's too weird with Montrose now. Kind of tense."

"With Montrose? And you? What's going on?"

The day had been such a grind, and this respite was such a welcome oasis, she said, "Way too much to get into now. I'm not shutting you out, but can we leave it until tomorrow?"

"Absolutely." He held up his glass. "To reunions."

They clinked *salut* and sipped. The taste of a margarita would always remind her of the first night they had sex in the summer heat wave. "Hope you learned your lesson about sneaking in here without a heads-up."

"You gave me a key. And what kind of surprise would that make, if I called?"

"The surprise would have been yours if I'd had company."

He served the food, placing the cut rolls of sushi on her plate and then his with chopsticks. "You're right. That would have surprised me."

"What?" she said, "You mean, surprised if I had been with someone?"

"You wouldn't be."

"I sure could."

"Could, yes. Would? No. That's not who you are, Nikki Heat."

"A little presumptuous." She ate some of the ceviche, and as she tasted the citrus and cilantro, relishing how it made the fish even fresher, Nikki reflected on how close she had come to bringing Don home with her that night. "And how do you know that's not who I am, Jameson Rook?"

"It's not about knowing. You can never really know someone. It's really about trust."

“Curious. We’ve never really defined our . . .”

“. . . Exclusivity?” he said, finishing for her.

She nodded, “Yeah, that. And yet you trust me?” He chewed a Green Envy and nodded back. “And what about you, Rook, am I supposed to trust you?”

“You already do.”

“I see. And how far does this trust extend?” she asked, chop-sticking a dab of wasabi for her next victim. “What about travel? What’s it called? The Hundred Mile Rule?”

“You mean the one that says you can do whatever—meaning whoever—you want if you’re more than a hundred miles away? The variation on the ‘What Happens in Vegas’ Rule?”

“That’s the one,” she said.

“Since you brought it up, the places I’ve been, situations do present themselves. Do they ever. And yes, I absolutely subscribe to the Hundred Mile Rule.” She set her chopsticks on the side of her plate, parallel to each other, and studied him. He continued, “But here’s the thing. According to Rook’s Rule, no matter where I am in the world, a hundred miles or a thousand, Mile Zero starts here.” He poked two fingers on his chest.

Nikki thought a moment, then picked up a piece of sushi with her fingers. “When I finish this Samba roll? I want you to pretend Mile Zero is a beach in Fiji. . . . And we’re on it alone.” She popped it in her mouth in one bite and flicked her eyebrows at him while she chewed.

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The next morning “brisk walk” took on a literal meaning as she and Rook picked their way over ice patches on the way to the subway in minus-two degrees Fahrenheit. At least the smack of cold in her face helped wake her up. Heat had to tear herself out of that toasty bed with him to make her breakfast meeting on time. He helped by getting up with her and brewing coffee while she showered. When she stepped out, he was packing up gear so he could get to his loft in

Tribeca and a day of writing. The deadline for his arms smuggling article loomed, and he told her that on its heels he owed the proof-read galleys for his ghostwritten romance novel, *Her Endless Knight*.

“I feel like I just had one of those,” she said as they kissed at the stairs leading down to the 6 train at 23rd.

“Any complaints?”

“Only one,” said Heat. “It is about to end.”

Nikki made one more survey of Park Avenue South and was satisfied she wasn't being followed. And as Rook stood holding the cab he had hailed, waiting in the street while he watched her, his pause confirmed Nikki's suspicion that his early rise to get to work was an excuse to escort her without saying so. The sidewalk rumbled like distant thunder below, and she could hear the screech of the subway braking as it slowed at the station. She gave him a head nod and hurried down to meet it.

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**The deli Zach Hamner had chosen couldn't have been more convenient.** The Corte Café storefronted her subway exit on Lafayette between Duane and Reade, right across the street from the Municipal Building and, just behind it, One Police Plaza. Heat pushed through the glass door behind a trio of construction workers who tossed their hardhats on a table and swarmed the counter, calling out orders for breakfast burritos and ham & eggs on a kaiser. She didn't know Hamner, but the skinny guy in a black suit and gold tie at a window table was a good candidate. He stood to wave at her with one hand; he held his BlackBerry to his ear with the other. As she stepped over, he said into his phone, “Listen, I gotta go, my breakfast meeting is here. OKlater-bye.” He set the phone on the table and extended a hand. “Detective Heat, Zach Hamner, sit, sit.”

Nikki took the chair across from him and noticed he had ordered for her. Coffee and a plain bagel with two plastic pots of cream cheese. “Coffee should still be hot,” he said. “It gets jammed in here, and I didn't want us to spend our whole morning in line behind the

construction goons.” At the table beside them, a hardhat with a brush mustache looked up from his Sudoku, buck-snorted, and then went back to his puzzle. If Zach Hamner noticed—or cared—he didn’t let on. “Anyway, glad you could make it. Hope it wasn’t too much of an inconvenience.”

She felt the side of her coffee cup. It was cool. She tried not to begrudge the extra hour she might have had with Rook, not to mention getting a jump on her case work. “I’m an early riser,” she said. “Plus you were pretty insistent.”

“Thank you,” he said, making Nikki wonder if there had been some unintended flattery in her tone. “I reached out to make sure we had the opportunity to connect early in your process. Not just to let you know we’re here—that Legal is here—if you need an assist along the way, but also because we think it’s important to have a relationship with the up-and-comers of the department.”

Heat was getting the picture fairly quickly. . . . How could she not? Zach, this—what did he say his title was?—Senior Administrative Aide to the Deputy Commissioner for Legal Matters, was a career networker. One of those functionaries who ate and slept the job, basked in the reflected glory of his boss, and drew power from the proximity he forged with the upper ranks. Hence the royal we. She decided he probably kept a picture of Rahm Emanuel taped to his bathroom mirror so he could see it when he shaved.

“You should know I have briefed the deputy commissioner on your stellar test score. I also slipped in a copy of that magazine piece on you. He’s quite impressed.”

“That’s nice to know.” She tore off a bite-sized piece of bagel and, as she smeared some cream cheese on it, continued, “Although, you know, if we do only get fifteen minutes, I hope those were mine.”

“Interesting. I assumed that you had maintained a close relationship with the press.” If he only knew, thought Nikki. She flashed on the wake-up surprise she had given Rook that very morning. Hamner continued, “From the article, I got the impression you knew just how to handle that reporter.”

“It’s a skill I’ve learned to develop,” said Heat, suppressing a smirk. “But I’m not one for the limelight.”

“Oh, please, we’re grown-ups here,” he said. “Ambition isn’t a dirty word. Not at this table, I assure you.” Clearly, she thought. “Your decision to take the lieutenant’s test, was that not ambition?”

“In a way.”

“Yes. And we are thankful you did. We need more Nikki Heats. And fewer bad apples.” He sat back in his chair and jammed his hands deep in his pockets, studying her reaction as he added, “Tell me what’s going on with Captain Montrose.”

Nikki felt her small bite of bagel pushing against the inside of her sternum. Whatever agenda Heat had perceived for this meeting, pure networking wasn’t it. She didn’t yet know how much weight Zach Hamner carried, but caution led her to choose her words carefully. She sipped some cold coffee and said, “I’ve been hearing that Captain Montrose has been going through a rough patch over there.” Nikki hitched a thumb behind her right shoulder in the direction of 1PP. “But I’m at a loss to understand it. Maybe after so many years working together, my experience with him has been different.” Heat thought about leaving it at that, but there was a distasteful undercurrent of something hungry and cunning coming off the young lawyer. In spite of Nikki’s unsettling feelings about whatever was going on with the Cap, her loyalty was strong and something about seeing all the dorsal fins break the surface lately made her add a little push-back. “With all due respect?”

“Please.”

“If you invited me to breakfast hoping I would give you some dirt or to go on record and disparage my commander, you’re going to be disappointed. I deal in facts, not innuendo.”

Hamner cracked a grin. “You’re good. No, I mean that. Well handled.”

“Because it’s the truth.”

He nodded and leaned forward, casually pressing his forefinger into a cluster of sesame seeds on his plate before he nibbled them off.

“But we all know, especially a veteran detective knows, there are many truths. It’s really just another value, isn’t it? Like discretion. Hard work. Loyalty.” His BlackBerry vibrated on the table. He looked at his screen, made a sour face, and pressed a button to silence it. “The thing about loyalty, Detective Heat, is that critical times come where a reasonable person has to be objective. Take a hard look at truths. To make sure old loyalties aren’t suddenly misplaced. Or blinding.” Then he smiled. “Or, who knows? To see if it may be time for some new ones.” He rose to go and gave her a business card. “The office number rings to my BlackBerry after hours. Let’s fly close.”

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**It was still early for her squad to be in for shift, so Detective Heat** speed-dialed their mobiles on her walk from the deli to HQ. The oyster clouds rolling in from New Jersey began to issue ice pellets that stung her face and bounced off the interlocking brickwork of the walkway between the Municipal Building and police headquarters. Halfway there Nikki stopped for shelter under the Tony Rosenthal sculpture and listened to the frozen rain tinkling like handfuls of rice off its red metal discs while she made her calls.

The male strip club didn’t open until eleven, so her plan was to split up Roach, assigning Ochoa to concentrate on getting Father Graf’s computer from Forensics to check his e-mails and Raley to run a check on the priest’s phone records. However, when she reached him, Ochoa reported that he and Raley had already hit the club the night before. “You were still behind closed doors with Montrose and we didn’t want to disturb you since it looked like you were having such a good time in there.” The detective paused to let his dry humor land then continued, “So we dropped by One Hot Mess at happy hour to see if we could get some momentum in the case.”

“That’s a load. You two just wanted an excuse to walk on the wild side.” She could have just said what she felt and expressed her genuine appreciation for their initiative, but that would have been a breach of UCRAP—the Unspoken Compliments and Relationship

Avoidance Protocols observed among cops. So Heat said the opposite. As if she meant it.

“I did it for Raley,” he said, responding in kind. “My partner, he’s a curious pony who will not be broken.” They’d had some success. After showing Father Graf’s photo around, one of the strippers recognized him. The Nekked Cowpoke (whose name and spelling, he pointed out, had for the price of a lap dance been legally parsed to avoid trademark infringement), said the priest in the photo had been in the club a week before and had gotten into a shouting match with one of the other dancers. It was so heated the bouncer kicked the padre out.”

“Did your cowpoke hear what they were arguing about?” asked Heat.

“No, that must have come before they threw down. But he did hear one thing before the bouncer intervened. The dancer grabbed the priest by the neck and said he’d kill him.”

“Bring him in for a chat. Now.”

“We have to find him first,” Ochoa replied. “He quit three days ago and cleared out of his apartment. Raley is doing a trace now.”

Her next call was to Sharon Hinesburg. She had been with Heat when Mrs. Borelli hesitated over one of the surveillance stills, so she got the call to work on finding an ID of the man. When Nikki reached Detective Rhymer, she told him to pass word to Gallagher that the two of them were back on the bondage beat. She wanted them to generate a list of freelance dominatrixes that they missed the day before. “I don’t want any to slip through the cracks just because they didn’t have relationships with the clubs in The Alley,” she explained.

“This is a surprise,” Rhymer said. “I thought we were going to work more lines than just the BDSM angle.”

“New orders for now” was all she said, but as she flipped up the back of her collar and stepped out into the cascade of ice pellets, she wondered what resources she was squandering by following Montrose’s edict. Her phone rang as she cleared the double-wide guard

shack outside the lobby. Raley had scored a recent gas-and-electric hookup for the male dancer. His new apartment was in Brooklyn Heights, just over the bridge from where she stood. Nikki told Rales she'd be done in fifteen minutes and to pick her up in the Roach Coach on their way over.

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**At Personnel, Heat signed her request for examination results, checking the boxes for both e-mail and hard copy.** Digital Age or not, there was something about having the document in hand that reassured her. Black-and-white still made it real. The clerk stepped away and returned a short time later to slide a sealed envelope across the counter to her. Nikki signed the receipt and stepped away with the aura of being too cool to rip into it right there in the office. That delay of gratification vaporized precisely two seconds after she got in the hall and tore it open.

“Excuse me, Detective Heat?” In the lobby Nikki turned to the woman she had passed who was getting on the elevator as she stepped off. She had never met Phyllis Yarborough, but Nikki certainly knew who she was. She had glimpsed the Deputy Commissioner of Technological Development at department ceremonies and, just over a year before, on *60 Minutes*. That was when Yarborough had celebrated the fifth anniversary of the Real Time Crime Center by giving a rare on-camera tour of the data nerve center she had helped as an outside contractor to design and now oversaw as a civilian appointee to the Police Commission.

The deputy commissioner was in her early fifties, a coin flip between handsome and attractive. To Nikki's view, attractive won the day. It was the smile. A real person smile—the kind you see more on entrepreneurial CEOs than government officials. Heat also noted that while many ranking women armored themselves in power suits or St. Johns upholstery, Phyllis Yarborough's business style was accessible and feminine. Even though she was wealthier than wealthy her suit only looked expensive. A tailored Jones New York cardigan

and pencil skirt Nikki could have afforded, and seeing it on her, thought seriously about getting.

“Your name’s come up a few times lately around here, Detective. Are your ears burning?” After she extended a hand to shake Nikki’s, Yarborough said, “Do you have some time to come up to my office for a cup?”

Nikki tried not to look at her watch. The other woman read her and said, “Of course, you’re probably on a tight schedule.”

“Actually, that’s quite true. You know how it is, I’m sure.”

“I do. But I hate to miss this chance. Do you have three minutes for a quick chat?” She side nodded, indicating the two chairs across the lobby.

Nikki considered, then said to the deputy commissioner, “Of course.”

When they sat, Phyllis Yarborough looked at her own watch. “Keeping myself honest,” she said. “So. Nikki Heat. Do you know the reason your name has been popping up? It’s in your hands, right there.” When Nikki looked down at the envelope resting on her lap, the administrator continued, “Let me put this in context for you. In this year’s Promotion Examination for Lieutenant over eleven hundred detectives took the test. You know how many passed? Fifteen percent. Eighty-five percent of the applicants flunked out. Of the fifteen percent that passed, you know what the highest score was? Eighty-eight.” She paused. “Except for you, Detective Heat.” Nikki had just seen her score and felt a small butterfly to hear it repeated. “You scored a ninety-eight. That is what I call flat-out exceptional.”

What else was there to say? “Thank you.”

“You’re going to find out it’s a mixed blessing, doing so well. It puts you on the radar as a rising star. Which you are. The downside is that everyone with an agenda is going to try to get their hooks in you.” Just as Nikki reflected on her breakfast, Yarborough spoke her thoughts. “Expect a call from Zachary Hamner. Oh, I see from your face he already has. The Hammer’s not a force for bad, but watch

your back. You will be quoted.” She laughed and added, “The damn thing is, he quotes accurately, so be double warned.”

Nikki nodded and thought, The Hammer, huh? Perfect.

“I have my agenda, too, I just don’t pretend otherwise. Know why transparency’s a beautiful thing? Transparency means no shame. So I’ll be shameless. There’s a future up the ranks for a smart detective who has her heart in the right place. Prepare yourself, I might even court you to work with me.”

This woman, as powerful and as busy as she was, had the quality of making Nikki feel like she was the only one on her mind that day. Heat wasn’t naïve; of course the deputy commissioner was pushing an agenda, same as The Hammer had, but rather than feeling wary, Nikki felt engaged, energized. These were the same qualities of leadership that had made her a dot-com fortune years before in private industry. Heat said, “I’m certainly open to seeing where this all goes. Meantime, I’m flattered.”

“This isn’t just because you scored a ninety-eight. I’ve had my eye on you since your magazine article. We are two women with a lot in common.” She read Nikki’s expression and said, “I know, I know, you’re a cop, and I’m a civilian—and an administrator, at that—but where I really connected with you in that article was when I read we are both victims of family murders.” Heat noticed she used the present tense, a sign of one who knows the pain that never heals.

Looking at Phyllis Yarborough, Nikki found herself peering into a mirror image that bore the imprint of a distant agony. The kindred spirits out there never fail to recognize the sear of fate in each other and in it an invisible brand marking the nexus of their upended lives. For Nikki, it had been her mother, stabbed to death a decade before. Yarborough’s loss was her only daughter back in 2002; roofied, raped, beaten, and dumped on a beach in Bermuda, where she had been on college Spring Break. Everyone knew the story. It was inescapable in the mainstream news and then milked beyond its shelf life by the tabloids long after the coed’s killer confessed and went to prison for life.

Nikki broke the brief silence with an affirming smile. “Yet we go on.”

The deputy commissioner’s face brightened. “Yes, we do.” And then she looked deeply into Nikki, as if taking her measure. “It drives you, doesn’t it? Thinking about the killer?”

Heat said, “I wonder about him, if that’s what you mean. Who? Why?”

“Do you want revenge?”

“I did.” Nikki had given it lots of thought over the years, and said, “Now it’s not so much revenge as justice. Or maybe closure. What about you?”

“Academic. My accounts are settled. But let me tell you what I’ve learned. Hopefully, it helps you.” She leaned closer to Nikki and said, “There is justice. But there is no such thing as closure.” Then she made an exaggerated show of looking at her watch. “Well now. I’m ten seconds away from not being a woman of my word.” She rose, and as Nikki stood, they shook hands again. “Kick some butt out there today, Nikki Heat.”

“I will. And a pleasure meeting you, Deputy Commissioner.”

“Phyllis. And let’s make sure this is just our first meeting.”

Heat left One Police Plaza with the second business card she had been given in a half hour. It felt like the one she would actually keep handy.

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**A firefighter came out of the Engine 205 station house on Middaugh Street in Brooklyn Heights and trotted, hunched against the frozen rain, to his pickup truck at the curb. Detective Raley said, “Whoa, whoa, hold up, here. Guy looks like he’s pulling out.”**

Detective Ochoa gave the Roach Coach some brakes and turned the rearview mirror so he could see Nikki in the backseat. “See what I put up with on a daily basis? ‘Turn here, stop there, look out for the homeless guy . . .’ It’s like I’ve got the Felix Unger dude from *Two and a Half Men* as my talking GPS.”

“Go before somebody takes it,” said Raley as the pickup left.

After Ochoa parked, the three detectives sat in the Crown Vic with the blades on intermittent so they could observe the apartment house where the male stripper had just moved. It was a 1920s eight-story brick building surrounded by scaffolding for its renovation. No workmen were in sight, which Raley said could have been due to the extreme wintry weather.

“Figures a male stripper would move in across from a firehouse,” said Ochoa. “In case he needs a pole to practice on.”

“What’s his name again?” asked Heat.

Raley consulted his sheet. “Horst Mueller. He’s from Hamburg, Germany. My witness at the strip club says when Mueller started, he danced in a World War I getup as The Red Barin’. Now he does a Eurotrash strip in silver lamé as Hans Alloffur.” He half-turned to Nikki. “All these guys have theme acts, you see.”

“Tell her the name of that one stripper last night.” Ochoa chuckled. “You’re gonna love this.”

“Marty Python,” said Raley.

Nikki shook her head. “I won’t even ask.”

The super let them in so they didn’t have to warn Mueller by buzzing his intercom. They took position outside his door and Ochoa knocked.

“Who is there?” came the accented voice from inside.

Raley held his shield to the spy hole. “NYPD to speak with Horst Mueller.”

“Of course. Just a moment, please.”

Nikki could smell the stall and was already down a half flight of stairs by the time she heard Mueller’s deadbolt snap into place on his door, followed by Roach-kicks to the wood. She sailed through the vestibule and out onto the sidewalk, looking for the fire escape. “That way!” called Ochoa out the open third-floor window.

Heat’s gaze followed Ochoa’s gesture to the far end of the building, where the male dancer was sliding down and around the corner pole of the scaffolding, toward the sidewalk. Heat called for him to

freeze, but he somersaulted off the last rung, landing on both feet. Mueller slipped and almost fell on the icy walkway but quickly got his balance and started to run, his long, blond Fabio hair fluttering behind him.

As Detective Heat took off after him, Raley blasted out the front door calling coordinates for backup on his walkie-talkie as he joined the foot chase.

Footing was treacherous with about an eighth-inch of ice granules down and more falling. When Mueller bolted across the intersection at Henry Street, an auto parts delivery truck slammed its brakes to avoid hitting him and skidded helplessly sideways, crashing into a parked car. Heat didn't cross Henry to pursue him. His side of the street was open sidewalk. Hers was largely restaurant and retail with numerous awnings overhanging the way, which meant she had a shot at running on concrete instead of ice.

By the next intersection, she was parallel with him. Heat made a fast street check over her left shoulder. The road was clear except for up the block, where she clocked the Roach Coach coming around the corner with its gumball lit. Slowing to keep from falling, she jogged across the intersection, calling, "NYPD, Mueller, stop!"

He turned, startled at the closeness of her voice, and when he did, his momentum pulled his center of gravity out from over his feet and he stumbled. Mueller would have fallen flat, but he grabbed the railing of some concrete steps leading up to the promenade to some high-rise apartments and only went down on one knee. He was just hoisting himself up when Heat leaped, grabbed the railing, and vaulted herself over, landing on top of him and taking him down.

The snap she heard as Mueller went down was followed by a "*Scheiss!*" and a moan. He writhed, groaning on the concrete stairs as Heat cuffed him. By then Raley had arrived and they brought him to his feet.

"Careful," said Nikki, "I think I heard something break."

"*Ja*, my collarbone, why did you do that to me?"

Ochoa had the Crown Victoria double-parked with the back door open, and they led their prisoner to it. “Why did you run?”

Horst Mueller never answered. The bullet ripped through the collar of his shirt, and Heat and Raley were sprayed with blood. He dropped again but didn’t moan. Or make any sound.

Heat called, “Down, down, everybody down!” and hit the deck, covering Mueller’s body as she brought up her Sig, scanning the apartment promenade, the high-rise, the roof across the street. On the other side of the fallen dancer, Raley had his weapon out and was doing the same; even as he called in the 10-13, shots fired.

On Henry Street, an engine thundered and tires spun, whining for purchase in the ice. Heat ran in a low crouch for cover beside Ochoa at the Roach Coach, but it was too late. The SUV spun its tires and sped off, driving over the curb as it turned onto Orange and out of view.

Heat recognized the SUV. She called it in as graphite gray with heavy-duty tires, but that was the best description she could give. This time, it had no license plates.