

FIVE

The two paramedics in the back of the ambulance were still working on keeping Horst Mueller from slipping away when the uniform buttoned up the rear doors and it rolled from the scene. Nikki Heat stood holding her breath against its issue of diesel exhaust and watched it lumber off in the sleet, following the same route the SUV had not a half hour before. A block down Orange Street, at the perimeter of the crime scene, the siren kicked on, a sign that, at least for the moment, there was still a life on that gurney.

Detective Feller handed Heat and Raley each a cup of coffee. “Can’t vouch for it, it’s from the Chinese place over there. But it’ll warm you up.”

Raley’s assist call had drawn a swarm. First on the scene had been the crew of New York’s Bravest from the 205 up the block. If the dancing German pulled through, he would owe it to his firefighter neighbors for slowing the bleeding within minutes. Cruisers from the Eighty-fourth Precinct and the neighboring Seventy-sixth were first cops on-scene, followed immediately by Feller and Van Meter in their undercover taxi. With their roving status, it was typical for Taxi Squad cops to be first responders to officer assist calls, and Ochoa threw a barb at the pair for letting the home blue-and-whites beat them.

Dutch Van Meter winked to his partner and lobbed one back. “Oh, by the way, Detective, how’d you do apprehending the vehicle after your pursuit?”

Ochoa had come up empty. The chase was perfunctory at best given the shooter’s head start, and they all knew it. But he had given

it his best effort, able at least to follow the wide tracks in the freshly fallen sleet until he lost them on Old Fulton Street, which was more heavily traveled. He drove the Roach Coach on a honeycomb of the neighboring streets on his way back just to make sure, but no SUV.

On the other side of the yellow tape, the first TV news minicams were setting up. Nikki saw a lens pointed at her from under a blue Gore-Tex storm cover and heard her name. She rotated to present her back to the press line and once again grumbled a mental curse about her magazine cover.

Feller took a sip of his own coffee and made a face. "So none of you saw the shooter?" Steam rose as he poured it out into the gutter. Heat, Raley, and Ochoa all looked at one another and shook their heads.

"It was one of those split-second things," said Raley. "We're all focused on our prisoner, you know, and out of nowhere, bang."

"More like boom," said Ochoa. All nodded in agreement. "I make it a rifle."

"Boom," said Van Meter. "Not much to go on."

Heat said, "I know the vehicle." They all turned to look at her. "I saw it yesterday. Twice. Once in the afternoon on Columbus on the way to Andy's and then last night in my neighborhood."

"What's this, Detective?" Heat turned. Captain Montrose had come up behind her. He must have read their surprise, and explained, "I was on my way to 1PP for a meeting and heard the tenthirteen. Now, am I to infer that you were being tailed but you didn't report it?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I could have called in protection."

"I wasn't sure. And I didn't want to draw resources without more certainty." Heat left out the part about how the strain between them made her hold back.

The old Montrose would have taken her aside for a chat. But New Montrose snapped at her right there in front of her colleagues. "That's not a call for you to make. I'm still your commander. My job isn't yours . . . yet." At that, the captain turned and crossed the

sidewalk to confer with the CSU team gathered around the bullet hole in the service door of the high-rise.

An ass-kicking in front of the family is an uncomfortable thing for everyone, and in the dead air that followed, the other detectives busied themselves trying not to make eye contact with Heat. She turned her face upward into the sleet and closed her eyes, feeling the hundred little stings of the sky falling.

When she got back uptown, Nikki made a quick stop to do an appearance check outside the door to the bull pen, where the fluorescent overheads created a poor man's mirror in the window of Montrose's dark office. It wasn't about vanity; it was about dried blood. At the shooting scene in Brooklyn Heights, EMTs had given her wipes to clean her face and neck, but her clothes were another story. The emergency shirt and slacks she usually kept folded in her desk file drawer were still at the cleaners following a latte mishap, so the rust-colored spray on the collar of her blouse and in the V pattern down the front where her coat had been open would have to do. While Nikki made her appraisal, she heard Detective Rhymer's soft drawl coming around the corner from the squad room.

Heat couldn't hear all he was saying, just snippets because he was speaking in hushed tones. She picked up phrases like "... wheel spinning and make-work ..." and "He said, 'Screw it, life's too short ...'" and then "... Heat's more worried about her freaking promotion ..."

Listening in was tantalizing but made Nikki feel skeezy, like she was in a soap. What had Phyllis Yarborough said a few hours before? Something like 'transparency means no shame'? So Heat turned the corner to face whatever she would face.

What she found was Detective Rhymer leaning in gossip mode with Sharon Hinesburg at her desk. Both sat upright in their rolling chairs when they saw her walk in. "Damn, look at you," said

Hinesburg, hopping to her feet. “Who took the bullet, you or the dancer?” She was extra loud, the way people get when they’re diverting attention. Or hoping to.

Nikki ignored her and gave a puzzled look to Rhymer. “Are you and Gallagher done working your list of dommes already?”

He rose, too, albeit more tentatively. “Not quite. We came back so I could drop Gallagher off.”

Nikki scanned the room and didn’t see his partner. “What, is he sick?”

“Gallagher, he, ah . . . He requested a reassign back to Burglary.” The detective turned to Hinesburg as if he’d find some help, but Sharon was letting him deal his own hand. The whispers Nikki had just overheard sufficed for her to do the math. Another day talking to dominatrixes felt like a waste to Gallagher and so he booked out. Apparently with some opinions expressed about Detective Heat on his exit. “You know,” continued Rhymer, “we had some cases hanging that needed some attention, and he must have just felt, you know, obliged to mind them.”

Heat knew it was bull but didn’t expect Opie to throw in his partner. This latest piece of unrest created by her coming promotion tasted bitter, but she set it aside. Her immediate concern was that she was suddenly down one investigator. “In that case, I’m glad you hung in, Ope.”

“I’m here, Detective.” But then he couched it. “Long as I can be, that is.”

At the Murder Board a few minutes later Heat selected a new marker color and printed the dancer’s name in the upper left corner where there was plenty of white space. “Probably doesn’t feel like it to him, but it’s Horst Meuller’s lucky day,” she told the squad. “The slug they pulled from that door was a .338 Magnum.”

Raley said, “Any brass?”

She shook no. “My guess is he either never threw the bolt since it was one shot, or if he did, the casing ejected into the vehicle and left with him.”

Ochoa let out a low whistle. “.338 Mag. Man . . . Hunters use those loads to drop grizzlies.”

“And, apparently, pole dancers,” said Heat. “I want to find out why. Detective Rhymer, dig deeper on Horst Mueller.”

“I thought you wanted me to check out the freelance dommes,” he said.

Nikki stopped herself and for the hundredth time thought about her contentious meeting with the captain and all the lines of this investigation he had closed down. She clenched her teeth and reversed herself, trying not to choke on her own words. “Stay on the BDSM canvass. When you finish, let me know. Then we’ll see where we are with Mueller.”

“Are you sure Mueller was the target?” asked Raley. “If that SUV was tailing you, seems like maybe you’re the one who got lucky this morning.”

“As a trained sleuth that possibility did not escape my notice,” said Nikki, tugging at her bloodstained collar and triggering a laugh from the squad. Heat turned to the board and sketched a looping arc from Mueller’s name to Father Graf’s. “What I really want to do is see what the connection is, if any, between these two victims. Hopefully, our dancer will survive and be able to shed some light. Meanwhile, let’s treat these two incidents as related.”

“By interviewing random dominatrixes?” said Detective Rhymer.

His instincts were right; it was her orders that were wrong, and she knew it. But she followed the edict. “Domes for now, Opie. Clear?”

“What about the money in the cookie tins?” asked Raley. “Want me to contact the archdiocese, see if they have any suspicions about the padre doing some skimming?”

Once again, Heat came nose first against one of the brick walls Montrose had put up. It was an obvious trail to follow; why had the captain obstructed it? “Leave that to me for now,” she said.

Hinesburg reported that she had no hits yet on the man in the surveillance photo Father Graf's housekeeper reacted to. "Which only means he may not have a criminal background."

Nikki said, "I'll call Mrs. Borelli and press her. But keep working it and all the other stills." Heat opened the folder of surveillance pictures and took one out. It was of a man and a young woman coming down the stairs into the lobby of *Pleasure Bound*. The woman was laughing with her face turned up at her companion, but his was obscured by a Jets cap. Nikki posted it on the board with a magnet. "Had a thought about this one. See on his arm there, the tattoo?" First Raley and then the others rose to gather closer. The tatt was of a snake coiled around his left upper arm. "Real Time Crime Center keeps a data bank of scars and tattoos. Why don't you have RTCC run it, Sharon. See if you get any matches."

"Detective?" said Ochoa. "I know that woman."

Raley said, "Something you want to tell us, pard? You in the life-style and holding back?"

"No, seriously. I talked to her yesterday. Know that *domme* who's over in Amsterdam? Whatsername . . . Boam? Andrea Boam?" He tapped the picture with his pen. "That's the roommate I talked to."

"Pay her another visit," Nikki said. "Let's see what this roommate knows about charming snakes."

Heat had to wade through a dozen messages on her voice mail from people who had seen her on the TV news at that morning's shooting scene and hoped she was OK. One was from Rook, who also insisted on treating her to a non-takeout dinner, "in a sit-down restaurant like a respectable woman." Zach Hamner left word, as did Phyllis Yarborough. Nikki appreciated the sentiments but could see how easy it would be to keep up with all the bonding outreach from 1PP and never get her work done. She saved the messages to answer later. Lauren Parry down at OCME, however, got an immediate callback.

Lauren began, "I just want you to know that I am going to be

seriously pissed if I come in here some morning and find you laid out on one of my tables.”

“I’d hate that, too,” said Nikki. “I’d want a week to diet first.”

“Yuh, right,” her friend laughed, “like you’d need to, woman of steel.” Nikki could hear keystrokes and pictured the ME in the cramped dictation office, at the desk that looked out onto the autopsy room. “OK, interesting discovery about that fingernail they vacuumed up in the torture room. It wasn’t a fingernail after all, but tested out as hardened polyester.”

“Plastic? That looked like a fingernail?”

“Exactly like a fingernail clipping. Even the same color. But know what it actually was?” Lauren, always happy to put on a show, said, “Wait for it . . . A piece of a button. Little crescent-shaped sliver broken off a button.”

“So no DNA help.”

“No, but if you find the button, we can always match it.”

The detective didn’t see a lot of hope there. “What else you got?”

“Something inconsistent came out of the ECU sweep at the rectory. I’m looking at the meds they collected from the victim’s bathroom chest. There is a vial of adefovir dipivoxil. That’s a reverse transcriptase inhibitor used to treat HIV, tumors, cancer, and hepatitis-B. The thing is, Nikki, the priest had none of those conditions. And none of it showed up in his tox screening.”

A true odd sock, Heat thought as she finished jotting down the list of diseases. “But it was his prescription?”

“Made out to Gerald Francis Graf, ten milligrams. The pill count says it was full.”

“Who’s the doctor?” Nikki wrote Raymond Colabro on her spiral Ampad.

“And a heads-up,” Lauren added. “The DNA test is still in process on that blood on Graf’s collar.”

“What about that little speck you showed me in that vial?”

“As I thought, a flake of leather from a laminate. But it’s not consistent with any equipment at Pleasure Bound, including the other

studios, or any of the devices in their storage locker. I've ordered more forensic testing to ID its source. When we get a hit, I'll call you." Before she hung up, she added, "And remember, Detective Heat, you show up on my autopsy table? I'll kill you."

The first thing the old lady said when she saw Heat was "Good Lord, is that blood?" Heat had managed to do a commendable wet paper towel job on her coat in the precinct restroom but skipped the blouse. Her neck was wrapped by a scarf, and she had her coat fastened all the way up, but some of her collar must have been visible. Mrs. Borelli seemed less put off by the idea of blood and more focused on the laundry mission. "Give me a half hour, I can get that out for you."

Career caregiver, thought Nikki, smiling at her. "Thank you, but I won't be that long." Heat adjusted the scarf to conceal the stain.

When they reached the kitchen, the housekeeper said, "You're going to roast in that coat. If you're leaving it on for me, don't." Nikki kept it on anyway and sat at the table where there was a cup of hot coffee waiting for her and homemade pizzelles resting on the saucer.

Ms. B. still seemed fragile, so the detective decided not to jam her right off about the picture. Instead she began by saying, "I dropped by to see if you can clear something up. Yesterday we collected prescriptions from Father Graf's medicine cabinet, and among them was something called adefovir. What's confusing is he had none in his system and had none of the diseases it would be prescribed for."

"I don't know what he had in that cabinet. I cleaned in there, but personal is personal, and it doesn't get any more so than a medicine chest."

Nikki nibbled a pizzelle. It was extraordinary. If heaven were made of vanilla, that is what it would taste like. For Nikki, this was lunch. She finished it off and said, "I wanted to ask if perhaps the adefovir was yours."

"No. And trust me, last thing I need is another pill to swallow."

“Fine then. As long as I’m here,” said Heat, suddenly feeling like her last name should be Columbo—why not? she was certainly wearing the coat—“I want to ask if you had any new thoughts about the pictures I showed you.” When the woman shook no, Nikki handed her the photos again and asked her to give them a second look. She cleaned her glasses on her sweater and surveyed them. This time she went through the stack with no reaction to the one she had hesitated over before.

“Sorry,” she said and handed the array back across the table. Nikki was trying to figure an approach that wouldn’t traumatize her even more, when Mrs. Borelli said, “Oh. I did have one other thing to mention to you. I thought of it this morning and was going to call you, but here you are.” She seemed overwhelmed by circumstances. “You asked if Father Gerry had any trouble with anyone.”

“Please, go ahead.” Nikki flipped to a clean page.

“We had a priest here a while back. There were accusations that he had been . . . improper with two of the altar boys on a weekend field trip. Now, I don’t know what happened, and neither did Father Graf, but as the pastor, soon as he heard about it, he did the right thing and reported it immediately to the archdiocese. They transferred Father Shea and started an investigation. But one of the boys’ parents, Mr. Hays, filed a lawsuit—which was fine, who wouldn’t? But he also harassed Father Graf.”

“Harassed how?”

“Phone calls at first, and then showing up here at the rectory, unannounced. He kept getting more and more irate.”

“Did he ever get violent or threaten Father Graf?”

Mrs. Borelli tilted her head side to side. “He got loud. Shouted a lot, blaming him for letting it go on, and then accused him of trying to whitewash it. But he never threatened, until about three months ago.”

“What did he say, Mrs. Borelli? Did you hear his exact words?”

“I did. It was the one time he didn’t shout. He was calm, you know? Scary calm. He said . . .” the old housekeeper tilted her head

back as if reading the words on the ceiling, “. . . I’m done talking. Your church may protect you but not from me.’ Oh, and he also said, ‘You don’t know who you’re dealing with.’” She watched Heat writing the quotes down then continued. “I apologize for not thinking of it yesterday. Part was because Mr. Hays hasn’t been around since then, so I let it go. And also yesterday I was a little, you know . . .” She said it with a shrug and played with the crucifix around her neck. The poor woman looked drained. Nikki decided to let her rest.

But first she got the name and address of the irate man from the parish registry, as well as the name of the accused priest. At the front door she reassured the housekeeper that she had done the right thing in sharing the information and added pointedly, “It’s always helpful to speak up no matter when your memory brings a detail to mind.” Then she handed the photo array back to Mrs. Borelli and left.

The blue-and-white that had followed her to the rectory was waiting with its engine idling when she came out. Heat walked over to the driver, a mean-looking career uniform whose nickname around the Two-oh was The Discourager because when they posted him at the entrance to crime scenes nobody dared cross the line. “Harvey, don’t you have something better to do?” she asked when he powered his window down.

“Captain’s orders,” he said with a voice accented by sandpaper and gravel.

“I’m heading to the precinct. I’ll be taking West End instead of Broadway.”

“Don’t you worry, Detective, you won’t lose me.” He said it casually, but the fact was The Discourager was exactly the pit bull you wanted to have your back. She handed him the small bag of pizzelles Mrs. Borelli had given her. When he looked inside it he damn near smiled.

Later that afternoon, back in the bull pen, Detective Heat wheeled her chair over from her desk and stared at the Murder Board hoping it would speak to her. It didn't happen in every investigation, but with uncanny frequency, if she was focused enough, quiet enough inside, and alert to the right questions to ask herself, all the disconnected facts—the squiggled notes, the timeline, the victim and suspect photos—they wove together in a harmonious voice that spoke to her of the solution. But they did it on their schedule, not hers.

They weren't ready yet.

“Detective Hinesburg,” she said, still facing the board. When she heard the footfalls draw up behind her, Heat stood and pointed to the blue printing that said, “Graf Phone Records.” There was no check mark beside the notation. “Wasn't that your assignment?”

“Yeah, well, in case you hadn't noticed, I've got a number of assignments to clear.”

“When?” was all Nikki said. It was all she had to. Hinesburg saluted in a way that irritated the piss out of Heat and returned to her desk. Heat turned back to the board, this time not seeing anything on it, just needing someplace to look while she let her temper subside.

Raley hung up his phone and crossed over with the cap of his pen in his teeth and a notepad in his hand. “Got some info on the Mad Dad,” he said, referring to the altar boy's irate parent. “Lawrence Joseph Hays. One aggravated assault in '07 against a neighbor with a barking dog, in his neighbor's apartment building. Charges suddenly dropped at the request of the complainant. Doesn't say why.”

“That's his only prior?”

“Affirm.”

Heat said, “We should pay him a visit this afternoon.”

“That'll be tough. I already called his office to set a meet—didn't say why, of course. He's in Ely, Nevada, on business.” Before Nikki could ask, he said, “I was wondering where it was, too. Ely's like this teensy dot on the map in the middle of the desert.”

“What kind of business is he in?” she asked.

“He’s the CEO of Lancer Standard.”

“The CIA contractors in Afghanistan?”

“The one and only,” said Raley. “Black helicopters, freelance commandos, and saboteurs for hire.”

Heat said, “Ely must be their training center.”

“I’d tell you you’re right, but then I’d have to kill you.”

“Hilarious, Rales. Find out when Hays gets back. I want to talk with him myself.”

Ochoa called in to report that his visit to the domme’s roommate was fruitless. “Got here, and she’d cleared out. Building super said she rolled out a couple of suitcases last night.”

“Did she leave a forwarding?” asked Heat.

“Not that lucky, I’m afraid. I did call the hotel in Amsterdam her roommate listed with Customs, just in case she knew where she was headed. Front desk says Andrea Boam is still checked in but hasn’t been around for two days. He thinks she and some guy hooked up.” He chuckled. “Interesting choice of words, considering she’s in bondage.”

“Nice to know if we don’t clear this case, Miguel, at least you’ve got some material for the Christmas talent show.” Heat saw the lights flicker on in Captain Montrose’s office and a small butterfly beat its wings in her chest. “Look, I have to go. But Forensics is done with Graf’s computer. When you get back, see what you can find on it.”

Detective Heat kept herself at a discreet distance but saw that Montrose was back but he wasn’t alone. He was behind closed doors with two serious suits she didn’t recognize. It did not look like a happy gathering.

Later, after they had spent some time going through Father Graf’s computer, Roach came over to Heat’s desk in tandem. “So what do you make of the suits?” said Ochoa. “Internal Affairs?”

Raley said, “My money’s on Men in Black. If there’s a big flash of light, put on your sunglasses.”

To Nikki, the look and the soberness screamed IA. But there was enough gossip floating around the Twentieth without adding to it, so she kept it on point and asked what they’d learned from the computer. Roach led her to the timeline on the Murder Board. “First thing we learned,” said Ochoa, “was that priest needed a new computer. That fossil took ten minutes just to boot. First we opened up his History and Bookmarks.”

“Always telling,” Raley added.

“Nothing shocking there. A few Catholic sites, Public Television, online booksellers—all mainstream, no erotica. According to his recommendations and recent purchases, he was nuts for mysteries . . .”

“. . . Cannell, Connelly, Lehane, Patterson . . .”

“There were other favorite sites,” Ochoa continued. “A number of charities and human rights organizations. One Chinese, most Latin American.”

Raley said, “That’s where we might have some traction. We opened up his Outlook to check his calendar.”

“He never used it,” Ochoa chimed in.

Raley picked it up with “So we checked out e-mails. He had a message about an urgent meeting from an activist group he was involved with, *Justicia a Guarda*.” Nikki’s gaze went to the picture at the top of the board, of Graf at the protest rally.

“Literally, ‘Justice to Guard,’” translated Ochoa. He pointed to the timeline. The meeting was ten-thirty the morning he disappeared.”

“Right,” said Nikki. “The housekeeper said the last time she saw him, Father Graf broke routine and left right after breakfast for somewhere unknown.”

“I think now we know,” said Raley.

“It took him two hours to get to a meeting? That’s another time gap,” she said. “Either way, the folks at *Justicia a Guarda* may have been the last to see Father Graf alive. Boys, take the Roach Coach and go see what they know.”

Just after 6 P.M., Rook breezed into the bull pen and turned in a circle. “My God, I have been away too long. It’s like coming back to visit my old grammar school. Everything looks smaller.”

Nikki rose from her desk and made a quick check of Montrose’s office, but he had shut the blinds for his IA meeting long before. “Rook, do you even own a phone?”

“You know, there’s a pattern here. Nikki Heat is a woman who doesn’t love surprises. Duly noted. Remember that on your thirtieth birthday, OK?”

He held out a garment bag to her. “What’s that?” she asked.

“At the risk of offense, another surprise. On the news it looked like you might need a change of clothes. Something a little less, shall we say, Type-A Positive?” He handed her the garment bag by the hanger loop. “There’s a Theory store down Columbus. This may be a little stylish for taking down cold-blooded killers, but they’ll just have to adjust.”

She wanted to hug him but let her grin say it. Then, what the hell, she kissed his cheek. “Thanks. I love surprises.”

“Woman, you have my head spinning.” He took a seat in his old chair from his ride-along days. “We don’t have to go now if you’re busy.”

“Busy hardly describes it.” She looked around to make sure she wasn’t broadcasting. “Things are even tougher between me and Montrose.” She drew closer and whispered, “He’s got Internal Affairs in there for some reason. Plus, I had one of my borrowed detectives from Burglary transfer out today. In a huff.”

“Let me guess. Rhymer. What a weasel. I never bought that whole Opie act.”

“No, Rhymer’s solid. His partner, Gallagher, quit.”

“In a snit?”

“Stop it.”

“Or I’ll get hit?”

“Count on it.”

“No . . . kidding?” While they chuckled, his cell phone rang. He made a puzzled look at his caller ID. “Don’t let me hold you up, I’ll take this.” As he left the room, she heard him exclaim, “Oh my God. Is this Tam Svejda, the Czech who loves to bounce?”

He took Nikki to Bouley in Tribeca, still one of the greatest meals in a city of great meals. Roach phoned just as they were entering, and Heat and Rook stopped while she took their call in the vestibule—not the worst place to wait, surrounded by walls that were decorated by shelves of aromatic fresh apples.

Between drink orders and bread selection she briefed Rook on the main points of the Graf investigation, including some of the problems she was having with Captain Montrose. She left out his link to the old Huddleston case, since even she didn’t quite know what to make of it. Plus she was in public. They had an alcove to themselves, but you never knew. He listened intently, and she enjoyed watching him suppress his urge to blurt premature theories based on his writer’s imagination instead of facts. He did interrupt when she told him Raley and Ochoa had just left the headquarters of *Justicia a Guarda*.

“Those are militant Marxists,” he said. “Not your warm and fuzzy Kumbaya demonstrators at all. A few of them are ex-Colombian FARC rebels who’d be happier with rifles instead of picket signs.”

“I’ll have to look into that part,” and Heat got out her notepad. “Roach says, according to the office staff there, Father Graf was a staunch supporter of their cause, and they’re mourning him. Even though one of the leaders threw him out of the meeting the other morning when he showed up drunk.” She pondered a Graf connection with armed rebels. “How violent are they, I mean here in New York?”

“Probably no more than, say, the IRA back in The Troubles.” He tore off a piece of raisin bread. “They’re fresh on my mind because

I witnessed some assault rifles and grenade launchers being delivered to them in Colombia.”

“Rook, you were in Colombia?”

“You’d know that if you ever asked me how my month was.” He dabbed a fake tear from his eye with his napkin. Then he grew pensive. “Do you know Faustino Velez Arango?”

“Sure, the dissident writer who disappeared.”

“*Justicia a Guarda* are the dudes whose small army broke him out of his political prison and snuck him underground last fall. If your priest was mixed up with those guys, I’d start taking a hard look at them.”

Nikki finished her cosmo. “You had me worried, Rook. I thought we were going to go the whole night without a wild, half-baked theory.”

On their walk back to his loft it had warmed just enough for rain to mix with the ice pellets. The cruiser that was following them pulled alongside, and The Discourager lowered the passenger window. “You two sure you won’t take a ride?” She thanked him and waved it off. Heat could accept protection, but not a chauffeur.

She opened a bottle of wine while he flipped on the eleven o’clock news. The reporter live on the scene of a manhole explosion in the East Village said, “When the rain came down, it washed road salt away and it corroded a junction box, causing the blowout.”

“And the itsy bitsy spider went up in about a gazillion pieces,” said Rook. Nikki handed him his glass, then killed the TV during the teaser for the shooting in Brooklyn Heights. “I can’t believe you don’t want to see it. Do you know what some people do just to get on the news?”

“I lived it all day,” she said, slipping off her shoes. “I don’t need to see it at night.” He opened his arms wide, and Nikki nestled herself into him on the sofa, burying her nose into the open throat of his shirt, breathing him in.

“How are you going to work things out with Montrose?”

“Hell if I know.” She sat up, cross-legged on the cushion beside him, taking a sip of her wine and resting her palm on his thigh. “I don’t even know what to make of him, he’s so not Montrose to me. The attitude, and the behavior—that’s the tough thing. Searching the rectory, roadblocking my case. I don’t get it.”

“Or is it that you do get it and you’re afraid of what it might mean?”

She nodded, more to herself than to him, and said, “I thought I knew him.”

“That’s not the issue. Do you trust him? That’s what’s important.” He took a sip, and when she didn’t answer, he said, “It’s like I said last night. You never really know someone. I mean really, do I know you? How well do you know me?”

Tam Svejda, the bouncing Czech, came to her mind. Again. “Right. I guess you can’t know everything about someone. How can you?”

“You’re a cop. You could interrogate me.”

She laughed. “Is that what you want, Rook? For me to grill you? Break out the rubber hose?”

He jumped to his feet. “Stay right there. You gave me an idea.” He went to his reading nook to the side of the living room. From behind the bookcases, she heard keystrokes and then a printer fire up. He returned with some pages. “Ever read *Vanity Fair*?”

“Yeah. Mostly for the ads.”

“On the back page each month they interview a celebrity using a standard questionnaire they call The Proust Interview. It comes from a parlor game that was all the rage back in Marcel Proust’s era as a way for party guests to get to know each other. I guess this was pre–Dance Dance Revolution. Proust didn’t invent it, he was just the most famous one to play it. This is a version floating on the Internet.” He held up his pages with a sly grin. “Wanna play?”

“I’m not so sure. What kind of questions are they?”

“Revealing, Nikki Heat. Revealing of who you truly are.” She reached for the pages but he pulled them back. “No previews.”

“What if I don’t want to answer some of them?” she asked.

“Hmm.” He tapped the rolled pages against his chin. “Tell you what. You can skip answering any question if . . . you take off an article of clothing.”

“You’re kidding. You mean like strip poker?”

“Even better. It’s strip Proust!”

She mulled it over and said, “Shoes off, Rook. If we’re going to do this, we’re going to start even.”

“All right, here we go.” He flattened the pages on his thigh and read, “‘Who is your favorite author or authors?’” Nikki blew an exhale and frowned, thinking. Rook said, “Playing for your blouse. No pressure.”

“I’ll go with two. Jane Austen and Harper Lee.” And then she said, “You have to answer, too.”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll say a certain Charles Dickens and toss in Dr. Hunter S. Thompson.” He went back to the pages. “‘Name your favorite hero in literature.’”

Heat reflected and shrugged. “Odysseus.”

“Mine, too,” said Rook. “Pinkie pull.” He held out his little finger and she hooked hers onto it and they tugged and laughed. “Nobody gettin’ nekkid yet. Try this. ‘Who is your favorite poet?’”

“Keats,” she answered. For ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn.’”

Rook replied, “Seuss. For ‘One Fish, Two Fish.’” He went back to the page for his next question. “‘How do you wish to die?’” They both looked at each other. Then Nikki took off her blouse. He had similar sentiments and took off his sweater.

“I told you I may not want to answer some of these.”

“And therein lies the game, Detective Heat. Moving on to “‘What musician has impacted your life the most?’”

“Most impactful musician . . .,” she said, pondering. “Chumbawamba.”

“You’re kidding. Not Bono? Or Sting, or Alanis Morissette, or—really? Chumbawamba? *Tubthumping* Chumbawamba?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. When my high school drama coach told me a freshman couldn’t play Christine in *Phantom*, a song about

getting knocked down and getting up again resonated very strongly with me.” Still does, she thought. “What about you?”

“Steely Dan for ‘Deacon Blues.’ And James Taylor for everything, especially ‘Secret O’ Life.’” Then Rook palmed his forehead, “Oh, oh, no, wait! I forgot AC/DC.”

Heat made a buzzer sound. “Ambivalent reply, Rook. Points off, pants off.” After he complied, he looked at the questionnaire, made a little head shake, and turned to the next page.

“Whoa, whoa, penalty flag,” Nikki said. “You can’t skip questions, let’s hear it.”

He shuffled back and read, “‘What qualities do you look for in a woman?’” Rook paused. “Minefield, I’m not answering that.” After she made him take off his shirt, he said, “This is not how I saw this game going,” and he turned to the top of the next page. “Payback time. ‘What qualities do you look for in a man?’”

“I can answer that. Honesty. And a sense of humor.”

“Uncanny how I have the quality of being both honest and funny. Like if you asked me about your clothes and said, ‘Hey. Does this blood make my ass look fat?’ I’d tell ya.”

“Are you stalling because you’re losing?”

“Fine.” Next he read, “‘Who would you have liked to be?’ All right, I’m going to answer this one first. A backup singer for Aretha Franklin. The sequined dress could be an issue, but that would be my other life. You? Who would you be?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Meryl Streep.” He gave her a sympathetic look because they both knew she gave up her theater major when her mother was killed.

“Moving on. ‘What is your present state of mind?’”

All Heat could do was think about the turmoil she was experiencing. She didn’t answer and took her slacks off.

“My state of mind . . . ?” said Rook. “The Strip Proust tide is turning. Yay! Next question: ‘What is your idea of misery?’”

“Pass. I don’t like how these questions are going.” As she un-

hooked her bra and set it on the coffee table, she said, “You have to answer, too, Chuck Woolery.”

“Simple. Misery for me is what I felt after I hurt you by not calling after my trip.”

“To coin a phrase, good answer,” said Nikki. “Next?”

“Let’s see . . . ‘What is your motto?’” He dropped his head. “I don’t have a motto. Who has a motto?”

“You’ve got a choice, underpants or socks.”

“There. *That’s* my new motto.”

“Nice try,” she said.

He slid out of his underwear, leaving his socks on. “Take that, Spitzer.”

“I actually do have a motto,” said Heat. “It’s ‘Never forget who you work for.’” And as she voiced the words, Nikki felt a creeping unease. It wasn’t exactly shame, but it was close. For the first time it sounded hollow. Fake. Why? She examined herself, trying to see what was different. The stress, that was new. And when she looked at that, she recognized that the hardest part of her day lately was working to avoid confrontation with Captain Montrose. That’s when it came to her. In that moment, sitting nearly naked in Rook’s living room, playing some silly nineteenth-century parlor game, she came to an unexpected insight. In that moment Nikki woke up and saw with great clarity who she had become—and who she had stopped being. Without noticing it, Heat had begun seeing herself as working for her captain and had lost sight of her guiding principle, that she worked for the victim.

Right then Nikki resolved to call her own meeting with Montrose first thing the next day. And let the damned chips fall.

“Hello?” said Rook, bringing her back. “Ready for the next one?” She looked on him with clear eyes and nodded. “Here we go then. ‘What is your ideal dream of earthly happiness?’”

Heat paused only a moment to think. Then she said nothing, but stood and slid out of her panties. Rook looked up to her from the

couch with a face that she couldn't resist, so she didn't. She bent down, taking his mouth in hers. He met her hungrily and pulled Nikki into his arms. Soon, the rhythm of their bodies answered that last question. She didn't think about it but found her lips to his ear, whispering, "This . . . This . . . This . . ."