

SIX

At eight the next morning Nikki sat at a window table at EJ's Luncheonette, blowing on her large coffee and waiting for Lauren Parry to pick up her phone. Instead of corporate jazz or Soft Hits of the Eighties and Nineties, the programming for anyone stuck on hold at OCME was a loop of short messages about New York City's municipal opportunities and services. Rather than Seal's "Kiss from a Rose" or Shania Twain's "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" the mayor invited you to call 3-1-1 for all your information needs and some monotone DOT administrator extolled the virtues of Alternate Day, Alternate Side Parking. Where were Annie Lennox's "Sweet Dreams" when you needed them?

"I have a question for you," said Heat when Lauren finally came on the line. In the background she could hear the snap of gloves and the lid of a metal pail clanging open against a wall. "It's about that bruise on Father Graf's lower back. You recall it?"

"Of course. What about it?"

It had come to her in bed with Rook—appropriately enough—at dawn. Heat had been sleepless, mulling the confrontation she planned to bring to her captain in the coming hours. Next to her, Rook turned onto his side and Nikki rolled to face his back, using her fingertips to comb down the sprung hairs on his cowlick. He looked thinner to her than when he had left. His shoulder muscles revealed more cording, and even in the waxy light his ribs were defined by deeper shadows between them. Her eyes traced his vertebrae to the small of his back, where she saw the fading bruise. While they were drying each other from their shower, she asked him where he got it.

Rook told her that two weeks before, he had ridden by cargo ship from Rijeka, on the Adriatic, to Monrovia on the West African coast, where he witnessed what he considered a brazen daylight offload of black market arms. The dealer, who was on the wharf to supervise the transfer of thirty tons of AK-47 rounds, plus crates of grenade launchers, onto waiting trucks, kept glancing up from his Range Rover to the ship's navigation tower, where Rook was lurking, trying to be inconspicuous. But after the convoy lumbered off the pier, Rook went below to his crew quarters, only to be grabbed by three of the dealer's goons. They put a hood over his head and drove him for over an hour, to a plantation in the hills. There, they removed the sack but handcuffed him while he waited, locked in an empty horse stall in the barn.

At nightfall, he was taken to the great lawn beside the yellow plantation house, where the arms dealer, a former MI6 operative named—or at least using the name—Gordon McKinnon, was at a picnic table tossing back Caipirinhas under strings of fiesta lights shaped like red chili peppers. Rook decided not to let on how much he knew about McKinnon from his research . . . that the former British SIS man had amassed a fortune brokering black market weapons to embargoed nations in Africa . . . that the blood flow from Angola, Rwanda, the Congo, and recently Sudan could be traced to the drunken, sunburned, ginger-haired man right before him.

“Have a seat, Jameson Rook,” he said, and gestured to a wooden stool across the table. “Oh, come on. I knew it was you when you boarded in Croatia.” Rook sat but didn't speak. “Call me Gordy.” Then he laughed, and added, “But I guess you damn well know that already, don't you? Huh, am I right?” He slid a tall glass across the rough timber to him. “Drink up, it's the best fucking Caipirinha on this whole fucking continent. Both my bartender and my cachaça are flown in from Brazil.” Maybe he was too drunk to remember his guest's hands were cuffed behind him and he couldn't reach his glass.

“I read all your stuff. Not bad. Bono and Mick. Bill Clinton. Well done. But come on, Tony fuckin' Blair? And Aslan Maskhadov?

I've damn sure got more going than that bollocks you wrote about the damn Chechen. Maskhadov, hah! Only regret is I didn't sell the grenade that killed him." He tilted his glass back and some of it sloshed down his face onto his Ed Hardy shirt. His barkeep replaced the glass with a fresh one, and he continued, "Hey now, bottoms up. This is your last drink."

And then he stood, pointing the biggest handgun Rook had ever seen, an Israeli Desert Eagle .50-caliber, right at him. But then he pivoted, sighting to the left, firing into the night. The thunderclap report of the Eagle was followed immediately by hissing and a white-hot glow that filled the grounds with the brightness of frozen lightning. Rook turned to look behind him. In the searing brilliance he could see magnesium flares lined up along the fence posts across the great lawn. McKinnon fired again. His bullet struck another flare, which sparked to life, huffing and fizzing as it spun off the fence into a pasture, illuminating fleeing horses and a pair of Gulfstream IVs parked in the distance.

The arms dealer raised both fists in the air and war whooped to the Liberian sky. He polished off his drink and said in a hoarse voice, "Know what I love? Rockin' my own life. Did you know I have enough bloody cash to buy my own country?" Then he laughed. "Oh, wait, I already did! Are you aware, Rook, I have been given—are you ready for this?—diplomatic immunity? They made me minister of some shite or other here. Truly. I do what I want and nobody can touch me."

He brought up the Desert Eagle and stepped closer, training it on Rook again. "This is what happens when you poke it where it doesn't belong."

Rook stared into the gaping muzzle and said, "What was it that I rode up here in, a Range Rover? Have your valet pull it back up. Think I'm ready to go." McKinnon jerked his hand to menace him with the gun. "Put that damn thing away, you're not going to shoot me."

"No? What makes you think so?"

"Because you would have done it back in port and left me floating

out to the Canary Islands. Because you put on this whole . . . show for me. Because if you kill me, who will write your story, Gordon? That's what you want, isn't it? Of course it is. And you gave me some great quotes. 'Rocking your life'? 'Minister of some shite'? Brilliant. It's tough to be a bad boy and have no fan club, isn't it? You didn't bring me here to kill me, you brought me here to make you a legend."

McKinnon rushed up to Rook, locking his elbow around his neck. "What's with you? Do you have some fascination with death that makes you think you can tease me? Huh? Huh?" He pressed the muzzle against his temple and stared at Rook with wild eyes dancing with the mad light of devil fire from the flares.

Rook sighed and said, "Still waiting for that Range Rover."

McKinnon set the gun on the table then pushed Rook backward off his stool onto the stone patio, where he landed hard on his handcuffs.

In the time it took Detective Heat to walk from EJ's on Amsterdam to the sidewalk in front of the precinct, Lauren Parry had called her back. "I just checked the photo of the bruise. It definitely could be from handcuffs. I'll do a test but hinged cuffs would definitely account for the ladder-shaped bruise at the small of his back." Then she asked, "What do you suppose it means?"

Heat said, "It means we hope it means something."

Captain Montrose told her he was busy when she knocked on the door frame and said she needed to talk with him. Heat came in anyway and pulled the knob behind her until it clicked. He looked up at her from some printouts. "I said I was busy."

"I said I needed to talk." Detective Heat, the immovable object.

Montrose stared at her from under a thick hedge of furrowed brow. "This is what my life's come to. Numbers. First they criticize my stats, telling me to step it up, pay my rent. Now they're sending me these." The captain lifted the thick spreadsheet off his blotter and let it drop with unmasked contempt. "Target numbers. Microman-

aging me. Telling me how many Class C violations to write up this week for blocking sidewalks and littering. Class B summonses, too. Let's see . . ." He ran his finger along a row. "They want eight seat belt violations and six cell phone tickets. Not five, not seven. Six.

"I don't make my numbers, they do a number on me. So what's my choice, fluff my books? Do I tell the uniforms not to take certain robbery or assault reports so the stats don't work against me? If it doesn't get written down, it never happened. What do you know, a crime drop in the Twentieth!" He capped his highlighter and tossed it on the desk. It rolled onto the floor, but he made no attempt to stop it. "If you're determined to interrupt me, sit down." She took one of the guest chairs and he said, "So how are you going to brighten my already perfect day?"

Nikki knew where to begin. With her goal, simply stated so it wouldn't get lost. She said, "I want to open the Graf case wider."

"Did you complete the BDSM checks like I told you?"

"Not yet, but—"

He cut her off. "Then this meeting is over."

"Captain, with due respect, we're chasing a foul ball. Promising leads are surfacing and I feel hamstrung not being able to follow them."

"Such as?"

"OK," she said, "the money stashed in those cookie tins. Why would you tell me not to reach out to the archdiocese right away?"

"Because it's not relevant."

Nikki was struck by his sense of certainty. "How can you know that?"

"Are you questioning the judgment of your commander?"

"It's a legitimate question, sir." She made the "sir" carry respect. Nikki wanted her case back, not for him to dig in his heels to prove his rank.

"Your vic was killed in a bondage dungeon—work it."

"This feels like a roadblock."

"I said work it."

She decided to move along, hoping to find an open flank. “I also have a shooting victim with a connection to the priest.”

“And to your negligence for not reporting the tail.”

To Nikki this began feeling like her jujitsu sparring matches with Don. She raised a fact, the captain threw a feint. Heat didn’t take his bait. “We can discuss that later, but let’s not get sidetracked. Father Graf had the phone number of that strip club hidden in his room. Eyewitnesses saw him fighting with the dancer. I want to work that angle, but you have my investigation corralled.”

“You’ll make a fine lieutenant in this department,” he said. “You’re already learning how to shift blame.”

“Excuse me, but I am doing exactly the opposite. I’m taking responsibility. I want you to let me run my case my way.” Since Nikki had made up her mind the night before to reclaim her sense of mission, she pressed onward, making her scariest leap. . . . She addressed the elephant. “What is going on with you, Captain?”

He poked his finger hard enough on the spreadsheet to dimple it. “You know damn well what’s going on with me.”

“I wish I did. I get the pressure,” she said, “I do. But there’s a lot of other stuff I don’t get. Things I’ve observed. Things I’ve learned. And, frankly, it worries me.”

There was a sea change in that room. Her skipper’s anger and irritation gave way to a steely wariness. He studied her with an intense concentration that made Nikki uncomfortable. His head was glistening, and behind him on the window that gave onto the street she noticed an aura of condensation forming on the glass, probably from his elevated body heat. It outlined Montrose like his own ghost. “Learned, like what?” he said.

Her tongue felt like it had a sock on it. “Your search of the rec-
tory the night of Graf’s killing, for instance.”

“Asked and answered already.” His voice was chillingly calm and his face had taken on a flat affect. “If you have more, let’s hear it. Is there more?”

“Captain, let’s not go down this road right now.”

“What road? The one that leads to you implying I had something to do with his death?” Under his measured tone Nikki could sense the next wave of anger building pressure. “Is that what you think?”

When she hesitated, the interrogator in him kicked in. Nikki had always been impressed by how intimidating her mentor could be working a suspect against the ropes. Except now it was all on her. “You’re already knee-deep, Detective, so you’d better bring it—unless you want to go on the record in a formal conduct review.”

Heat ran down the short list in her mind. She looked at the fresh Band-Aid on his finger and pictured the blood on the priest’s collar. Then she thought of the TENS scars on Graf and how similar electrical burns had also appeared in the 2004 case Montrose had investigated. And now the latest revelation, that the bruise on the small of the priest’s back came from handcuffs . . . Yes, these raised lots of questions, and Nikki didn’t like the way the scale was tipping as she weighed them. However, none of these proved anything. And she certainly couldn’t voice them. Not without mortally wounding an already frail relationship. So she said, “Nothing worth discussing.”

He slapped the palm of his hand on the desk and she jumped. “Liar!” In her periphery, Nikki saw heads in the bull pen turn their way. “It’s all over you. Come on, Detective, lay ’em on the table. Or are you saving it for your new friends at 1PP?”

“Captain . . . no, I . . .” She trailed off, on the defensive now.

“Oh, or maybe you’re holding it for the next article.” He read her reaction and said, “You haven’t seen it yet?” He reached to his briefcase and pulled out the morning edition of the *Ledger*. “Metro section, page three.” He tossed the newspaper on the desk right in front of her. It was folded open to the story, a short item headlined, UPHEAVAL AT UPPER WEST SIDE PRECINCT. Reported by Tam Svejda. “You still claim you didn’t talk to that reporter?”

“I didn’t.”

“Somebody did. And gave her details, including Gallagher bailing in frustration. I wonder who.”

Rook’s phone call from the bouncing Czech played itself back,

but Nikki dismissed it as a possibility. There was no way she could imagine him doing that. “I have no idea.”

“Bullshit.”

“Captain, whatever else is going on here, I hope you know . . .”

But he stopped her, holding out the palm of his hand in the gulf between them. “We’re done,” he said. There was a gravity, a global finality in the weight of his words. Montrose stood. She sat looking up at him. How had this meeting slipped out of her grasp? Nikki had only wanted one thing when she walked in there, and it had dissolved in the toxic haze. “And if you have anything to discuss about this case, you bring it to me, not reporters, and especially not the sharks downtown. Tempting as it is to go polishing that gold bar, remember, you work for me.”

“You don’t need to tell me who I work for.” Heat rose to face him, feeling herself reclaiming lost meaning from a mislaid motto. “There’s a killer out there, and for the sake of his victim, I want to catch him.”

“Damn it, Heat, not every victim is your mother.”

Her old friend might as well have slapped her face. He knew her vulnerability, and that stung her all the more. But she didn’t back off. Nikki absorbed it and spoke her guiding truth. “No, but every victim is somebody else’s mother. Or their father, or daughter. A son, or a wife.”

“I’m telling you. This time, let go of this.”

She said, “If you know anything about me, you know I am not going to lie down.”

“I could fire you.”

“You’ll have to.” And then, as turnabout, she dealt him his own vulnerability card. “How will you explain that downtown? Because you must know I’m not the only one asking these questions.”

His jaw muscles flexed. He tilted his head to her, leveling a challenge. “Are you saying I can’t stop you?”

“You can’t.” Heat returned his stare, unblinking. “Make your call, Captain.”

He pondered a moment. Then, unhappy but resigned, he said, “Go ahead then.” And as she turned to go, he said, “Detective Heat. Watch your back. You may be poking into something you wish you had never gotten into.”

On her walk across the bull pen, Hinesburg said, “Detective Heat, you got a sec?”

“Actually, Sharon, not the best time.”

“I think you should make time.” There was something in the way Hinesburg presented herself that felt different. The bluff of arrogance was muted. Replaced by an uncharacteristic urgency.

“All right. What is it?”

In answer Detective Hinesburg handed Nikki photocopies of Father Graf’s phone records. There weren’t many calls over the month, so Heat was able to scan the pages quickly. She stopped abruptly, however, when she hit the last page, covering the prior week . . . the one before Father Graf was killed. There were numerous calls to and from two phone numbers Heat recognized—because she had called them so often herself. They were the office and cell phone numbers of Captain Montrose.

Heat looked up from the page to his office. He was standing at the glass wall looking at her. Just as they made eye contact, Montrose snapped his blinds shut.

In fewer than five minutes Nikki had assembled her squad at the Murder Board. Detective Heat moved quickly before the captain had a change of heart about breaking the restraints he had placed on her investigation. She also wanted to energize her people by illustrating that this was a new day.

The revelation about Montrose showing up on the victim’s phone records was huge, but Heat decided not to bring up at an open meeting. She had collected the file from Hinesburg and told her that she would take it from there. It would mean another confrontation, but the captain had already turned off his lights and left, so it would

have to come upon his return. As painful as the meeting with her embattled commander had just been, her next session could make that one look like high tea.

They all took notes while she reported that the bruise on Father Graf's lower back had likely been caused by handcuffs. "Isn't that consistent with the whole bondage-torture deal?" asked Rhymer.

"Could be," said Heat. "It could also be the best evidence that he was brought there against his will." Ochoa raised a forefinger. "Question, Miguel?"

"He was a big drinker. Plastered the morning he disappeared, according to his activist group. Have we checked records to see if he got cuffed for a Drunk and Disorderly over the last few days?"

"Good thought," Nikki said. "Sharon, when you get with RTCC on that snake tattoo, ask them to run this week's ten-fifty complaints and see if Graf shows up."

She assigned Ochoa to look up Dr. Colabro about the mysterious prescription. "Then I want you and Rales to make another visit to *Justicia a Garda*. I hear they have paramilitary connections. Find out who their leaders are and invite them in for a chat. Use the waiting room instead of Interrogation. I don't want them treated like suspects, but I want them on our turf, in a formal setting."

She put Detective Hinesburg on the found money from the rectory attic. "Reach out to Forensics and hustle along a complete workup on that cash. Everything. And Sharon? Like yesterday." Hinesburg arched a brow, taking that like the shot it was. Nikki couldn't give a rat's ass. She continued, "I want to pay a visit to the archdiocese later today to ask them if they had any accounting concerns from Our Lady of the Innocents. So whatever you can get before I go—get."

"Rhymer. You're off dommes. Dig into Horst Mueller. He's able to speak this morning, so I'm going to make a hospital call. Meanwhile, you learn all you can. Obviously any more on his connection to Graf, but also work history, financial, any connection to *Pleasure Bound* . . . Also run him through Interpol and Hamburg police."

Rhymer dotted a sentence on his pad and said, “Nice to see we’re moving out of the horse latitudes.”

“You and me both,” she said. “Tell your pal Gallagher. If he wants to come back, I can let bygones be bygones.”

From where she stood looking out a tenth-floor window of New York Downtown Hospital, Nikki could pick out the spot across the East River where the shooting had taken place the day before. A low range of buildings south of the Brooklyn Bridge blocked her street-level view of the exact location on Henry, but on their far side she was able to pinpoint the high-rise where it all went down. Ragged, bruisey clouds streaming trails of snow and frozen rain gobbled the top of the apartment building as she watched, darkening the neighborhood until it disappeared in a curtain of foul weather.

“Excuse me?” Nikki turned. A male nurse with a youthful face and surfer dude curls was smiling at her. “Are you waiting for Dr. Armani?”

“Yes, I’m Detective Heat.”

He took a step closer and his smile widened. Nikki thought he had the most brilliant teeth she had seen since the Dawn of Bieber. “I’m Craig.” He gave her a quick head-to-toe that was approving yet somehow not creepy. She bet Nurse Craig got laid a lot. “Dr. Armani is stuck on rounds. We’re a teaching hospital, you know, and she is, well, she is definitely not one to be hurried.” Craig said it with the intimacy of a patient lover.

“How long will she be?”

“If I had a nickel . . . But good news, she told me to personally escort you to Mr. Mueller’s room.” He flashed his teeth again. “My lucky day.”

The uniform outside the door rose from his metal folding chair when Heat approached. She gestured for him to sit and he did. The detective turned to her guide and said, “I can take it from here.”

“Craig,” he answered.

Nikki said, “Yeah, I got that,” and that seemed to please him no end. He walked on but not without a turn back to wave before he rounded the corner.

The dancer had his eyes locked on her the moment she entered the room. Because of his wound he couldn’t turn his head, so Heat stopped at the foot of his bed to help him out. “How are you feeling?” He croaked out something she couldn’t make out. Either it was in German, or the thick bandages framing his jaw made it hard for him to talk. “You got lucky, Horst. An inch or two lower, you wouldn’t be here.”

Heat had been briefed on the phone by his surgeon. The bullet had completely blown out his trapezius muscle but missed the carotid artery. If the shot had come from above, say from a rooftop or balcony, instead of from a car window, the trajectory would have been downward with fatal consequences.

“Lucky?” he said. “You break my collarbone and now this.” Meuller paused and pushed the morphine button connected to his drip. “My dancing career is over. What do I do now?”

“You talk,” she said. “Why did you run from us?”

“Who says I was?”

“Horst, you rappelled three stories down a scaffolding to get away. Why?” He couldn’t turn away so he looked up at the ceiling. “Any idea who would want to shoot you?” He kept his gaze fixed above her. “Tell me about Father Graf.”

“Who?”

“This man.” She held the picture above him so he had to see it. “Father Gerald Graf.” He pursed his lips and did a mild head shake, which obviously pained him. “Eyewitnesses saw you fighting with the priest at One Hot Mess. The bouncer intervened when you tried to choke him. You also threatened to kill him.”

“I don’t recall.” With the accent, it came off sounding like Sergeant Schultz’s “I know nuh-think” from *Hogan’s Heroes*. And about as credible.

“I’m asking because he is dead now. Choked.” She omitted the

other details, holding them for corroboration, in case he decided to confess. “Is that why you ran, because you killed him?” He pressed his morphine button repeatedly and turned his eyes upward again. “Let’s walk it back. What was your relationship with Father Graf?”

This time he closed his eyes. And kept them closed, the corners of his lids twitching from the effort to shut her out. “You rest up, Mr. Meuller. You’ll need it. I’ll be back to talk later.”

Nurse Craig was fussing with meds on a cart outside the door, pretending he wasn’t waiting for Nikki. “I’ll be seeing you again, I hope,” he said.

“Never know, Craig, it’s a small hospital.”

He looked around, flunking the irony test. Then he gestured toward the elevators and walked with her. “Sometimes I think maybe I should do some professional dancing.” Nikki gave him a side glance and, even in the scrubs, figured he could.

“I hear there’s big money for male nurses at bachelorette parties,” she said and pushed the down button, hoping the car would arrive soon.

“Maybe. Wouldn’t want to do the clubs, though. After seeing that guy, the stripper pole is bad for you.”

“How?”

“I had to sponge bathe him this morning. You wouldn’t believe all the scars. Looks like rope burns all over his legs and chest.”

The elevator doors opened, but Heat didn’t get on. “Show me.”

Detective Heat didn’t wait to get back to the Two-oh to deal with the discovery of TENS burns on the dancer. She got off the FDR at the 61st Street exit and took First Avenue uptown. At the first stoplight, she speed-dialed Captain Montrose’s direct line. Four rings in, she could picture the lonely light blinking in the dark office, and sure enough, it dumped to voice mail. Nikki left her name and the time only, trying to keep the tightness out of her voice. She knew she would have to address his numbers on the priest’s phone records, but she

had planned that for the end of shift, when the office had cleared. But finding those marks from electrical burns on Mueller forced her hand. It was time to ask him about the Huddleston murder he had handled back in 2004. Heat didn't know its relevance, but experience had made her wary of coincidences.

Lost in thought, turning left onto 79th, she ran the tail end of the yellow and immediately saw police lights in her rearview mirror. For a split second her heart jumped—even cops get a *klong* if they think they're going to get ticketed—but it was The Discourager alerting traffic that he was shaving the light with her. He pulled his cruiser beside her at the next stop and she powered her window down. A mix of sleet and snow hit her sleeve. "Don't worry about me," he said, "I've got life insurance."

"Just keeping you on your toes, Harvey," she said with a laugh and pulled away. One more Montrose attempt. Nikki tried his cell. It didn't even ring, but went straight to voice mail. Heat left another brief message and tossed her phone on the passenger seat. She'd try again in five minutes, back at her desk.

She crossed Fifth Avenue for her cut across Central Park, taking the Transverse. As always, Nikki's gaze drifted to the right for an appreciative glimpse of one of her favorite buildings in the city, the Metropolitan. On that raw winter's day it looked to her like a brooding hulk, damp and icebound, hibernating among bare trees of a mean winter. The blare of car horns brought her to the rearview, where she saw a white step van, tagged with graffiti, lurch to a stop across the road behind her, blocking it. More horns. Then she could hear the double chirp of a siren and The Discourager's command voice on his PA. "Move the vehicle . . . now."

The 79th Street Transverse is a two-lane road cut like a narrow canyon ten feet below ground level across Central Park. An urban compromise, its submersion allows traffic to flow without spoiling the view. As the street lost elevation descending beneath the park's East Drive, Heat entered the shelter of the underpass and the Crown Victoria's wiper blades chattered across the dry windshield. As she

emerged, a loud pop echoed in the tunnel and her steering wheel lurched in her hands. Not a flat tire, she thought. But instantly came another series of pops, and the rear of the car fishtailed in the slush. She took her foot off the gas and corrected as best she could on the icy road, but without air in any of her tires, it was more like skating than driving. Her car slid sideways until the front end smacked hard into the wall of rocks lining the road. At impact, Nikki lurched against her seat belt, and papers, pens, her cell phone—everything loose in the car—flew. Shook up but unhurt, Heat couldn't figure how she got four flat tires. She craned to look behind her. Since her car was diagonally across the road, she had to look through the rear side passenger window. Just as she made out the traffic spike strip lying across the underpass, the back window exploded. A bullet struck the side of her headrest, ripping it off the seat and shattering the driver's window beside her.

Nikki dove, flattening herself as far down as she could, clawing the two-way out of its bracket. "One-Lincoln-Forty, ten-thirteen, officer needs help, Seventy-ninth Transverse at East Drive, shots fired." She unkeyed the mic and listened. Nothing. She tried again. "One-Lincoln-Forty, ten-thirteen, Seventy-ninth Transverse at East Drive, shots fired, do you copy?" Silence. She was groping on the floor trying to find her cell phone when another bullet tore through the seat back and into the dashboard just above her head. If the shooter was a professional, the next one would be lower. She had to get out of that car, fast.

The angle of the skid worked in her favor; the driver's side door was away from the direction of the shots. She threw herself out onto the icy, wet pavement and rolled under the car door to shelter herself behind the front tire and the engine block. That's when the third bullet fractured the steering wheel.

With four flats the Crown Vic sat low enough that she could lie prone and get a view without having to gopher up and make herself a target. Heat drew her Sig Sauer and pressed her cheek down against the slush. Behind her in the underpass an SUV idled. Not the graphite

gray, this one was navy blue. In the dimness of the tunnel, it was impossible to see how many there were. The driver's door stood open with the window down, so her guess was that the driver was also the shooter, using the window frame as a brace. She made a quick clock of the street behind her and got a bad feeling. There was no oncoming traffic. The Transverse cut across Central Park, connecting two busy avenues. The only way there could be no cars was if somehow both ends of the road had been blocked.

There was movement at the SUV when she looked back. A glint—probably reflection off a scope—shimmered briefly in the open window of the driver's door. Heat made an isosceles brace, pressed the butt of her gun on the ground, and squeezed. The sound was deafening as her shot reverberated under the chassis. Nikki didn't wait to see if she hit him. She was still smelling cordite as she duckwalked away, keeping the Crown Vic between herself and the SUV.

After twenty yards, the road curved and she was able to jog upright. The same high wall that trapped her down in canyon of the Transverse was serving as cover. Behind her she could hear the growl of the SUV engine and then a brief squeak of brakes. Her abandoned car was diagonally across the lane and would have to be moved unless the shooter wanted to chance coming on foot.

Nikki stepped up her pace, wishing to hell she had located her cell phone. She arrived at a point where the curve that had concealed her began to straighten out. She slowed to a walk and then stopped before rounding the bend and risking exposure. Lying down in the slush and pressing herself against the icy rocks of the wall, she crawled forward until she had a view of the straightaway.

What Heat saw chilled her more than the ice she was lying in. A hundred yards out, three men in ski masks and hooded rain gear were slowly walking a line across the road toward her. They all held rifles.