

PROLOGUE

August 2, 1990 is burned in my memory. I had gone back to the office after a dinner meeting and had worked until well after midnight. It was late, so I decided to bunk on the sofa in my office. Shortly after two a.m., I heard what I thought at first were firecrackers. Groggy with sleep, I got up and looked out my office window.

Tanks! Iraqi tanks! Everywhere! They rolled down the street. It was a divided four lane road. There were dozens, on both sides of the road. My building started to shake. The next thing I knew the complex next door exploded while I watched. I froze. My brain wouldn't function. So I stood there, mesmerized by what I saw. The sky lit up. I could see for miles. At least it seemed like miles. A nightclub down the street was being ripped apart by huge fireballs. It was like looking through a kaleidoscope. Glass and bricks and... Oh, my GOD...people! There were people, flying in all directions.

I heard screams, and then another explosion shook the building like an earthquake. I lost my footing. I grabbed for something to break my fall. A chair was in the way; I stumbled, and my head struck the edge of the desk. It was enough to jolt me back to reality. I pulled myself into my chair and reached for the phone. Miracle of miracles, there was a dial tone. With shaking fingers, I called the police station.

"Get out of the business district, Hawk," the police chief told me. "The Iraqi Army crossed the Kuwaiti border at two a.m. They're comin' dead ahead toward the city with thousands of soldiers and well over 300 tanks."

"They're already here chief," I said.

"Damn Hussein! Damn, that dirty bastard!"

"What about the airport?"

"Sorry, Hawk, jets and helicopter gunships took it apart first thing; the runways are gone. I doubt you got a plane left. The focus of the attack seems to be the heart of the city as well as roads and airstrips. Right now, the safest place is your apartment, which is beyond the city limits. Go home. I'll try to keep in touch.

What choice did I have? I took his advice and headed toward home. It took awhile to get there because I drove without lights. The sky was lit up, so at first it was easy, but the farther away from the city, the darker it got; still, I didn't dare turn on my headlights. Finally, after what seemed like forever, I pulled into the garage.

Inside my flat, it seemed like any other night; quiet and dark. I leaned against the wall for a moment to let my eyes adjust to the blackness. I closed them, and what I saw outside my office window came rolling back to me in waves of horror. At that moment I knew what hell must look like. I could see the people, human beings, on fire, begging for mercy, the glass and mortar melting into a lava-like substance, sidewalks giving way, cars disappearing.

My eyes snapped open. I went to the refrigerator and got a bottle of water. My throat was dry, like cotton. Why hadn't I left last week as scheduled? The question whirled through my mind. It wouldn't stop. I drained the bottle and tossed it in the sink. I had to let my family know I was alive. I knew my parents always watched Ted Koppel's show, *Nightline*. From what the chief of police told me, the citizens of the United States first heard about the invasion as they watched Koppel.

I picked up the receiver and dialed the number in the United States. Nothing happened. It didn't ring. I tried again. Once more, I dialed; this time a local operator answered and told me that all international phone lines had been severed.

"Okay, Hawk Jameson, now what?" I asked myself. Razor sharp realization hit me. I was cut off from the outside world.

CHAPTER ONE

The phone rang. It rang again. After the third ring, Nicole Summers covered her head with her pillow all the while chastising herself. She should've unplugged the blasted thing the night before.

It had to be a wrong number. No one but her mother and her boss knew where she was. She had spoken to the former and she had an agreement with the latter. She would ignore it.

It rang again.

"I won't," she said, "I won't. I flat refuse."

She closed her eyes and commanded herself to go back to sleep. After all, she was not on a schedule. Beep, beep, beep; this time the obnoxious sound was softer, muted almost. It was coming from her handbag. Dang, Nicole thought as she reached from under the covers, felt around on the floor until she reached the black leather offender.

Her fingers were asleep and she couldn't get the darn thing unzipped. "Okay, okay, hold on. I'm coming." The covers, the pillows and any good thoughts she might have had fell to the floor in a heap. She barely had time to read the number on the pager when the phone rang again.

"Yes," she grumbled.

"Nic," came her boss, Bill Brownell's voice.

He had agreed before she left Dallas not to call, page, write, or send carrier pigeon while she was away. This was her first vacation in three years for cripes sakes!

She didn't care what he wanted. "No," she muttered sleepily.

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"I don't want to know. We had a bargain."

"I'm well aware of our agreement, but I need you."

Nicole glared at the phone. "But I'm on vacation, a well-deserved one, I might add."

He paid no attention to her. "Look, Nic, you're the best damn reporter I've got."

She brightened. "That's true."

Nicole sighed and he went on. "You can't say no. Besides, you're

already in South Carolina."

"Also true, but..."

"Hussein, Nic."

"Saddam Hussein is in South Carolina?"

"No. Damn it, Summers, the hostages."

"Hostages?"

"Stop repeating everything I say. For God's sake, Nic, wake up."

"Okay, okay. I'm awake." Nicole smelled a lovely smell. it was the aroma of a huge story. "That madman has actually let the people out of Iraq?"

"Not everyone."

"Who, then?"

"For now, all we know is there's a plane load of Americans, women and children only, and they'll be flying into Charleston."

"Why Charleston?"

"It's a clearing house of sorts. Some of the hostages will be debriefed at a military installation there, while others will catch flights to their homes and be questioned later."

"Interesting; very interesting."

"I knew you'd see it my way. I'll send Charlie."

"Without making me beg, you'll send Charlie?" Charlie Adams was *The Daily News's* ace photographer. He and Nicole worked well together, but he was highly in demand and she always had to fight to get him.

"Nic, this is big--front page stuff--the story of a lifetime."

Nicole's brain was on full alert now and she sat straight up in the bed. She had to admit Brownell was right. The concept was exciting. Nicole's curiosity spun off in high gear and her interest had just shifted into overdrive. "I'll do it," she said forgetting all about her vacation.

* * *

Nicole Summers entered the Charleston, South Carolina, airport not believing her eyes. The crowd was horrendous. There were yellow ribbons, huge placards, and welcome home banners everywhere.

Electricity was in the air, and its current ran rampant. Newspaper and TV reporters lined the hallways. Photographers from every medium had set up equipment in all available space; in each direction she looked, there were TV cameras, including NBC and CNN. Mr. Brownell had sent Nicole some taped info via carrier. She struggled with the earphones to her tape recorder as she fought her way through the corridor. She wanted to hear the taped information once more before the plane arrived.

The voice on the tape told her the release was unexpected, Hussein had kept everyone in Iraq hostage since his takeover of the oil-enriched country on August 2, 1990. Now, suddenly, he had decided to let all the women and children go, but the men hadn't fared so well. They continued to remain in his custody.

"Unbelievable," Nicole said aloud before turning off the tape recorder.

A wall of people had taken possession of the concourse surrounding the arrival gates. She stood on tiptoes looking for Charlie. "You're supposed to be here. Where are you?"

Just then, she noticed Ted Brown from *The Globe*. "Ted! Ted Brown," Nicole shouted, and waved.

She edged herself through the crowd to where he stood.

"Finally," she said.

"Good to see you, Nic."

"What have you got on the hostages, Ted?"

He raised his eyebrows. "No hello?"

"Hello, Ted. What have you got?"

He shook his head. "Not much. You?"

Nicole flipped open a small notebook. "Just that Hussein decided to let the American woman and children go, "Big of him, huh?"

"Yeah, a regular saint."

She closed the book. "How many are coming in?"

"You tell me."

"I'm asking you, Ted."

"You tryin' to bamboozle me, Nic?"

"Would I do that?"

"In a word, yes."

"Not this time, I swear. Be kind and tell me."

"I'm never kind, and you know it."

"Press conference. Give me that much."

"Are you for real?"

Nicole rolled her eyes.

"Where've you been, Nic, on another planet?" He looked at her and made a face.

"On vacation."

"Shit, you're serious, aren't you?"

"This is getting us nowhere," Nicole said. "Get out of my way."

He held up his hands. "Okay. Okay. The press conference is gonna be held in the airport's VIP lounge, on the other side of the concourse."

"What else?"

He winked at her. "What's it worth to you, Nic?"

She grimaced. "Not that much."

Ted shook his head. "Can't blame a guy for trying."

Nicole looked up and down the corridor. "All joking aside, you haven't by any chance seen my cameraman, have you? He was supposed to meet me at the ticket area."

"You talkin' about Charlie Adams?"

"Have you seen him?"

"Matter of fact, I did. He took out of here like a pack of wolves was after him - sick or something."

"Drat," Nicole muttered. "I've got to find him."

"Nic, you don't have time to chase after Charlie. The plane is due to arrive at the gate at any minute."

"Wonderful," Nicole said. "Are you certain Charlie's sick?"

"As a dog," Ted quipped, and she was positive he smiled. They had always been competitive, but surely he wouldn't have sabotaged her photographer?

She shook her head and said under her breath, "Nah."

Charlie's disappearance meant no cameraman, no camera, and no microphone. Which meant Nicole would have to think fast.

She began to dig through her tote bag. "Where is that camera? I know it's in here somewhere."

"You've got a camera in there?" Ted asked. "You're joking, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not joking - my 35 millimeter is buried in this mess."

Ted laughed, "Lots of luck. Gotta go, Nic. See you at the gate. Maybe you'll share your photos."

"Very funny."

Nicole dug deeper in her tote. She pulled out a tape recorder and connected the mic; next, came her trusty Minolta. "Yes," she said. Finally her press pass appeared from the depth of her purse. She secured it to her lapel and started toward the arrival gates.

All she had to do was get somewhere to see - something - or someone! At that moment, Nicole spied the Avis Rent-A-Car desk, and it didn't take long to decide what course of action to take.

She climbed up on the reservation counter from which she had a clear view. Just in time.

Women and children emerged through the jetway to a roaring, cheering crowd. As the hostages came into the gate area, Nicole's mighty Minolta clicked away, capturing many emotions. She saw elation mixed with relief radiate from family members who were there to greet the weary passengers. Nicole spoke into the microphone that she had clipped to her pocket. "There's relief on the faces of the hostages, but it's mixed with sadness at leaving their loved ones behind."

Just when she thought everyone had gotten off the plane, a force as strong as a magnet's pull drew her attention to the jetway and to a tall, bearded man who stood there, just for a moment, before walking toward the opened gate and into the flashing lights of the photographers. He was immediately surrounded by reporters with microphones, asking questions that Nicole couldn't hear.

Captivated, Nicole aimed her tiny camera at the stranger. For a brief moment, as she focused on his bearded face, Nicole felt he was looking directly into the lens of her camera. "Impossible," she muttered.

Still, the very idea caused her equilibrium to go awry, and she lost

her footing. Struggling to regain her balance and her dignity, the camera crashed to the floor and Nicole tumbled off the reservation desk--smack dab into the arms of the man who had captured her attention.

* * *

Hawk Jameson noticed the redhead the moment he walked into the gate area. She would have stood out from the crowd even if her feet had been firmly planted on the floor, but atop the counter, she made an unbelievable sight. Rent-a-car ads never looked so good.

The sight made him chuckle; something he hadn't done much of lately.

Hawk's laughter was cut short when she tumbled off the desk right in front of his eyes. He nearly broke his neck reaching her before she hit the floor.

"Lucky for you I'm quick on my feet," he said. Hawk continued to hold her in his arms, and made no move whatsoever to let her go. He started to ask why she was climbing around on the furniture when a flash bulb went off in his face and momentarily blinded him. He loosened his hold on her and she scrambled to her feet.

Before Nicole could regain her voice, he was whisked away by a man in a military uniform. "Wait - wait," she called after them, her words coming out in whispers.

For a moment, Nicole felt disoriented and dizzy. Must have been the fall from the desk, she justified. She shook her head and tried to clear her thoughts.

Just then, she heard another uniformed man mention the press conference - and something about holding a flight. Nicole fell in step behind them.

She was detained at the door when a guard checked for credentials. "Can I see your press pass, miss?" he asked. "Only, authorized members of the press are allowed in."

"Right here," Nicole pointed her finger to the lapel of her jacket where minutes ago she'd pinned her press pass. Her eyes grew wide as she smoothed her fingers over her bare collar.

The guard asked again, "Your credentials, please."

"It was here, journalist's honor," Nicole began. He looked skeptical. "Look, I have friends here who can vouch for me."

The brute wasn't buying it. "Sure ya' do. Show it or move it. I don't have all day."

She tried again. "I swear to you by all that's holy - my press pass was pinned to my jacket only moments ago. Wait, I have ID in my purse," she told the disbelieving guard.

He told her once more. This time, not so nicely, "Out, miss."

Well. She wouldn't give up that easily. No journalist worth her typed words could resist a challenge, especially one like the big gorilla dressed in military attire and blocking the entire door.

"Look, mister," she said with what she hoped was an authoritative tone.

He glared.

"Sir, you don't understand - it must have come unpinned, and I have to get in there. I'll lose my job if I don't." So what if she stretched the truth just a teeny bit?

"No pass - no get in. Understand?"

Before Nicole could argue the point, a military aide appeared out of nowhere. He took one look at her and hooked his thumb toward the door. Words were not needed.

This wasn't working.

Nicole could see through the open door, for all the good it did her. She looked quickly around for someone - anyone - who could attest to her authenticity. The guard took his eye from her for a moment, which was all she needed. Nicole bolted through the doorway.

The big ape's arm came from nowhere. "Not so fast," he growled.

"How can one person be everywhere at once?" she muttered. "Let go of me," she demanded as his big brawny hand bit into the flesh of her upper arm.

By this time, they began to attract attention.

Nicole cast her gaze around the room, and hoped to see a familiar face. The one she saw was that of the bearded stranger.

The stranger looked at Nicole a moment longer. He had looked into those green eyes when she tried to focus that silly little camera

at him, and was enchanted. Flaming red hair surrounded her delicate face like fire, and her eyes sparkled like finely cut emeralds.

He started toward them from the makeshift stage with a look at the ape that could have frozen an entire river.

At that exact moment, a well-dressed gentleman stepped to the microphone and spoke, "Ladies and gentlemen of the press, as mayor of Charleston, South Carolina, I would like to introduce you to a man who..."

With the stranger's attention diverted back toward the speaker, the big ape gave her an evil look and said, "Don't even think about it."

* * *

Nicole stalked down the corridor, which was now nearly empty. She kicked at a yellow ribbon and wished it had been Charlie Adams's butt.

"Ace cameraman, my butt" she snorted.

Nicole was depressed, tired, hungry, and had to go to the bathroom. "Where is the darn ladies room?" she grumbled. "And where the dickens is Charlie?"

Fortunately for her - or for him, according to how one looked at it, she found the restroom first.

Nic used the john, washed her hands, then she took a deep breath. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and tried to decide what to do next.

"What do I have so far?" She ticked off the pluses finger by finger. "One, I did get pictures. I hope," she added. "Two, I captured the emotions of friends and loved ones. Three, I got a word or two from them which will make super captions when the photos are published. Four... There is no number four, Nicole. Falling off a desk and into a handsome man's arms does not count."

Nicole emerged from the restroom, tote bag and purse thrown over one shoulder and still counting her options, when she spotted her cameraman coming from the men's room across the hallway.

"Charlie!" she bellowed. "If you'd been where you were supposed to be, we'd be in that room. I would be getting more than just a look,

I'd..." Nicole stopped, mid-sentence.

Charlie, leaning against a wall for support, looked like death should be descending on him at any given moment. If he were lucky, he would die before she got her hands on him.

"Darn you, Charlie Adams."

"Oh God, Nicole, not so loud, please."

"Where the heck have you been?" Nicole asked through gritted teeth.

"Hangin' over a toilet for the last hour."

"You do look a little green around the gills, but that's beside the point. I've been trying to get into the press conference, and..."

"You've lost me."

"You *and* my press pass."

"If I weren't so sick, I'd laugh. Mine's gone, too."

"Not funny, Charlie; not funny at all. Now hand it over."

Charlie swayed, and Nicole thought he was going to fall. "I'm not joking, Nic. I leaned over the john to hurl, and my lucky cap, badge, and everything else went down the drain, along with my breakfast."

"A conspiracy with my name on it flew in with the hostages, straight from Hussein himself. That's got to be it."

Charlie sat down on the edge of a trash can. "What do we do now, Nic?"

"I wish I knew, Charlie. I wish I knew." She may as well face the truth of the matter -- without her credentials, there was no way to get past the big brute who thought he was guarding Fort Knox.

Charlie swayed again and Nicole jumped to catch him before he collided with the concrete floor. "First things first," she said. "We're going to get you something to settle your stomach. Pepto-Bismol, and some hot tea and toast should do it."

"No, no," he argued, but let her lead him to the departure gate. She left him there and went to the closest snack bar. Moments later she returned, Pepto and food in hand.

"Come on, Charlie, swallow," she urged.

Charlie, too ill to argue, swallowed. He took a bite of dry toast and sipped as Nicole commanded, then lay down across two chairs at the gate.

While her cameraman groaned, Nicole made one last attempt at crashing the press conference. She didn't get in, but she did overhear two military men talking.

Nicole sprang into action. It took her about two minutes and a fifty-dollar bill to get the information she needed. There would be four released hostages, one man, a woman, and two children on their flight to Dallas. She returned to Charlie and said, "On your feet, Charlie, boy."

Still woozy, Charlie merely muttered, "What about - conference? Got to..."

"It's okay, we don't need it. We have something much better."

"We do?" Charlie rubbed his eyes.

"I upgraded to first class. We can board now." Nicole pulled the cameraman to his feet and said, "Lean on me."

"First class. Wow!"

"Yeah," Nicole smiled to herself, as she led Charlie toward the plane.