

## BECK

*Manhattan, New York*

She was never afraid of the dark. But the light? Now that terrified her. So when the perp ran down shadowed, dark Avenue D, she followed without hesitation.

“NYPD. Stop!”

A sergeant with the Ninth Precinct, Beck Holiday also never shied away from a fight. At least not on the streets of New York. Not in the name of justice.

Her partner’s footsteps resounded behind her, each heel crack vibrating against the cold New Year’s Eve night. But when the suspect jumped an iron gate bordering a small concrete courtyard between two buildings, Hogan slowed up.

“Beck, forget it.” He gasped between each word. “Happy New Year to him. We’ll get him next time.”

She reached for the bars and sailed over, the edge of her tac pants just clearing the five-foot wrought iron—despite the extra load she carried—with ease.

Adrenaline made her Wonder Woman.

“Stop. Police!”

The perp aimed for a side door of a run-down apartment building. His toe hit a crack in the concrete and he stumbled, dropping a package to the ground.

The item hit with a *thud*, and Beck glanced down as she leaped over, maintaining her pursuit.

“Hogan, get the package!”

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Just as the lanky, pasty, undernourished perp made the door, she grabbed the back of his jacket and tossed him to the ground face-first, driving her knee between his shoulder blades. “Hands behind your back.”

“I wasn’t doing nothing.” A boy. No more than eighteen. Lately the young ones were getting to her.

“Nothing? So why’d you run?” She slapped him in cuffs, then searched for a weapon, finding a knife, a crack pipe, and a plastic bag.

“I had to pee.”

Beck dangled the bag in front of his nose, almost gagging at its putrid smell. “And this?”

“Never seen it before in my life. You planted it on me.”

Hogan was hung up on the gate, his pant leg stuck on a spiked iron tip. Swearing, he yanked himself free with a ripping sound and fell to the ground with a grunt.

Beck dropped her head and sighed, then jerked the perp to his feet, shoving him toward Hogan.

“Get him to the car. I’ll investigate the package.”

Through the yellow glow of apartment lights, she caught a clearer view of her perp’s profile.

“Parker Boudreaux.”

Go figure. An Upper West Side kid with a serious addiction problem who had nothing better to do on this holiday than run drugs.

“Sergeant Holiday, so we meet again.” He stumbled toward Hogan. “I’ll be out before the clock chimes twelve.”

Beck had no doubt Boudreaux’s rich daddy would spring him in time to ring in the New Year with champagne and a blow of coke. But for now he was her collar.

She’d arrested him three times already for running drugs through Alphabet City, working for a sly dealer the Ninth had yet to collar.

“Do your parents know you’re down here? Working for your next high?” What a waste of potential, Boudreaux.

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Beck stood by the stash he left on the ground expecting to find a couple hundred milligrams of crack—just shy of felony possession.

“High? Why, you have me confused with someone else. I’m visiting a friend who’s throwing a New Year’s party.” Boudreaux leaned against the bars as Hogan tried to work the gate. “Uncuff me and I’ll open it for you.”

Hogan grunted as he tucked his light under his chin, giving the stuck latch a determined tug.

Beck watched, waiting. “Call the super, Hogan.”

“Don’t need you to tell me how to do my job, Holiday.”

She watched for another second, then bent down to Parker’s canvas tote bag. Seemed like a no-brainer to call for the superintendent.

But Hogan was Hogan. An old beat cop who knew more about crime and donuts than any cop she knew.

He’d trained her. Brought her up. Taught her how to do the job. He was the one who listened when her world didn’t make sense.

But a bad divorce and a battle with alcohol nearly ruined his career. He’d only recently returned to the Ninth and was eager to redeem himself. Seemed strange to be his boss now. She’d only been a sergeant for a little over a year. But if battling with a stupid gate made him feel like he was a member of the fraternity again—

“Pretty cop lady, hey, how about letting me go?” Boudreaux resorted to whining. “I can make it worth your while. Besides, when did it become a crime to visit a friend?”

Hogan battered the lever with his flashlight and a few choice words. “That kind of talk will get you nowhere. Especially with her.”

*Especially with her.* At one time that may have been true. But lately she’d started to change. Started to *feel*.

It wasn’t enough anymore to be a tough cop, to get the collar. Suddenly she teared up over the smallest detail—a kid with a cut or a single mom locked out of her apartment. Forget the hard stuff like a suicide or the death of a family member. A year ago, six months ago, she shook them off with a beer at Rosie’s.

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But lately she found it harder to look away. Harder to shake off the inhumanity, the ridiculous, the despair wandering her streets. This emerging compassion rattled her and, frankly, ticked her off.

“You need better friends, Boudreaux,” Beck said, peeling back the filthy cloth tote, getting a whiff of something . . . dying. She jerked back, covering her nose, then startled when the bag moved.

Snatching her hand away, she leaned right, aiming her light through the opening, finding the dirty, weary face of a small gray dog, his watery eyes pleading.

“Boudreaux!” Dropping to her knees, Beck gently slid the mutt from the worn canvas bag, compassion stinging her eyes.

The dog whimpered and moaned as she examined his protruding rib cage, his matted chest rising and falling, struggling for each shallow breath.

She’d kill him. *Kill him.* “Oh, sweet thing, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. What has he done to you?” But she knew. She knew.

Running her hand down the dog’s back, she felt every rib, every bone. Again he moaned when she touched his belly. The smell—vomit, feces—emanated from his fur and skin and clung to Beck’s nose.

“Hey, Five-O. That’s my friend’s dog, you hear me? Five-O, you listening?”

Beck raised up, adjusting the stiff waistband of her new cargo tac pants. She’d finally broken down and purchased a larger size to accommodate her expanding middle.

“Your friend’s dog?”

“You heard me. I don’t stutter.”

Beck shivered from the inside, numb to the exterior cold, and balled her hand into a fist. “Did you feed him this plastic bag?”

She held it up, pinched between her thumb and finger, the stench of the bag matching the dog.

“What bag? I haven’t seen a bag.” His prep-school accent only fueled her disdain.

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About then, the gate latch released and Hogan tumbled backward, a broken piece of metal clanging down on the concrete.

“Look here, the po-po damaged private property. I think that’s a felony, isn’t it?”

“Let’s go.” Hogan yanked Boudreaux toward the RMP, the boy’s protests bouncing between the brick buildings.

“Sergeant, careful with my friend’s dog.” Parker struggled against Hogan’s grip. “Help, police brutality!”

A few apartment windows lit up, and someone shouted an indistinguishable response.

“Easy now, little guy.” The dog moaned as Beck tried to pick him up. “What’d that mean ol’ Boudreaux do to you?”

Based on the dog’s bones-to-skin ratio, he was starving. A fresh wash of tears covered her eyes. This sort of emotion kicked at her steel doors, at her habit of ignoring tenderness, care, or concern. She had her MO when it came to her emotions or sorrowful memories—burying them. Even better, forget them.

From her side pocket, she retrieved a bottle of water, twisted off the cap, and touched the dog’s tongue with a few drops. He lapped it up, and she poured out a little more.

“Beck, let’s go.” Hogan peered between the bars. “Call animal control for the dog.”

Beck ignored him. How could she leave the pooch? He’d die. The dog’s sad condition reached deep and unwound her tight heart. Where she’d been hard and controlled, she was now soft and impulsive.

The night’s cold dipped between the buildings and the dog shivered. Beck shimmied from her coat to cover him up before scooping him, and the scent of death, into her arms.

He cried as she stood, making her way toward the gate. And darn if she didn’t feel the dog’s tears dripping against her hand.

“I’m sorry, so sorry, sweet boy. I’m going for help. Just stay with me. There’s a vet over on 15th—”

RACHEL HAUCK

From inside the patrol car, Boudreaux shouted against the glass. “That’s my dog. You hear me? Just because you’re the police doesn’t mean you can steal a man’s dog.”

“Is he alive?” Hogan peeked beneath Beck’s jacket.

“Barely.” Beck swore, kicking the car door with such force Parker jumped back. “Did you feed this dog drugs? That bag?”

Hogan took the moaning pooch in his arms and under Beck’s flashlight glow, examined him. She stroked the dog’s ears, telling him everything would be all right, fighting another grip of tears. Last thing Hogan, or Boudreaux, needed to see was feminine emotion.

“He’s in bad shape, but I’ve seen worse. He’s weak and hungry,” Hogan said. “Probably just gave back that bag. Wouldn’t surprise me if Boudreaux was about to feed him his next haul. Or worse, just stuff it up his—”

“That’s it!” Beck wrangled Boudreaux from the back seat by his hair and slammed him against the car, her knee boring into his thigh as she pressed his face against the trunk. “You think your daddy can get you out of this? Huh?” She slammed his face against the cold metal.

“You can’t treat me this way.” Boudreaux struggled against her hold, and it took every ounce of strength to maintain her grip.

“Yeah? Who says? I can treat you the way you treated that dog.” Every molecule in her body was on fire and racing through her. If she didn’t defend the weak and helpless, then who would?

“Sergeant.” Hogan yanked her back, sounding like his former-sergeant self. “Put him back in the car.”

But Beck shrugged him off. “You think you’re a big shot running drugs—for who, Vinny Campanile? He’s the devil himself. Feeding crack to sweet, innocent animals will not keep you alive. Or out of jail. People will cry for your head when they hear what you did.”

“He’s a mutt,” Boudreaux said, raising up enough to spit at her.

“That’s a step above the gutter you live in.”

“Okay, we’ve had our fun.” Hogan shoved her out of the way

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and turned the kid toward the open back seat door. “Get in the car, Boudreaux, and shut up.”

Parker cackled and snarled at Beck. “He’s a mutt. A *stinking*, nobody-wants-him mutt. I was planning on barbecuing him for dinner.”

Beck flew at Parker, swinging with the full force of her ire, driving a wild punch to his face. Boudreaux yowled as he toppled forward and cracked his head against the top of the door.

“Sergeant!” Hogan shoved her back, gripping her collar in his fist. But the dog in his left arm handicapped him. And Beck was too quick.

“This is for the dog,” Beck snarled over Parker before ramming her boot into his ribs. When he buckled she drove her knee against his nose. “That’s for squandering your life.” Beck extracted the pup from Hogan, whispering in the dog’s floppy ears. “I got you.”

“Sergeant—” Hogan lifted Boudreaux from the sidewalk and shoved him into the RMP. “I told you to shut up.” He slammed the door and chased Beck to the melody of Parker’s muted complaints. “Beck, talk to me. What’s going on?”

“I’m taking this poor animal to the clinic on 15th.” With each step, her stride lengthened. She never felt more right about anything in her life.

But Hogan’s firm grip pulled her back. “We’ve got Boudreaux. His fourth arrest. He’ll give us Vinny for sure this time. Happy New Year to us. We need this. I need this. Come back with me and I’ll help cover for you.”

“Cover what? That I gave him what he deserved?” But she knew. Hitting a man while he was cuffed was the *worst* offense. She could feel the steam rising from the hot water waiting for her. “Do what you have to do. I’m getting help for this dog.”

“Beck, wait.” Hogan sounded more like a father than a partner. “What’s gotten into you? This sort of stuff never put you over the edge before. You’ve always been so controlled.”

RACHEL HAUCK

A tear leaked from the corner of her eye. “I’m . . . I’m still controlled. Maybe my priorities are shifting.” She raised her chin in subtle defiance. “Can’t a girl change a little?”

“Sure, but not when it comes to procedure. You’ve been by the book since the day I met you.”

“Well, maybe the book needs some new pages.”

She’d been fine with life, ensconced in her routine and cop identity until this past summer, when a nine-month sting operation to take thugs like Boudreaux and Vinny Campanile off the street went bust.

The team met at Rosie’s to drown their sorrows, and she ran into—

“What?” she said, her gaze meeting Hogan’s through the ghostly drift of street lamps and the low yellow of apartment lights, the honks and motor sounds of the city boxing them in.

“Nothing.” Hogan squinted. “You just seemed different there for a second.”

“I’m the same old me, but I’m not abandoning this dog. Take Boudreaux in. Get the collar. My New Year’s gift to you. I’m going to the vet.” She whirled away as the dog emitted sounds of pain. A cold tear slipped down the side of her nose.

At first her steps were weak, undecided, as she marched down the avenue, her knuckles still stinging. But as Beck passed through swaths of dark and light, her confidence grew. The weak and weary pup nestled against her breast, and she felt as if she carried a piece of her own soul in her hands.