

Two

With a terse flutter of wings the peregrine dropped onto the window ledge. The light outside, mid-morning, was brilliant and the air looked fiercely hot.

"There you are," the man whispered. Then cocked his head at the sound of the buzzer of the door downstairs.

"Is that him?" he shouted toward the stairs. "Is it?"

Lincoln Rhyme heard nothing in response and turned back to the window. The bird's head swiveled, a fast, jerky movement that the falcon nevertheless made elegant. Rhyme observed that its talons were bloody. A piece of yellow flesh dangled from the black nutshell beak. It extended a short neck and eased to the nest in movements reminiscent not of a bird's but a snake's. The falcon dropped the meat into the upturned mouth of the fuzzy blue hatchling. I'm looking, Rhyme thought, at the only living creature in New York City with no predator. Except maybe God Himself.

He heard the footsteps come up the stairs slowly.

"Was that him?" he asked Thom.

The young man answered, "No."

"Who was it? The doorbell rang, didn't it?"

Thom's eyes went to the window. "The bird's back.

Look, bloodstains on your windowsill. Can you see them?"

The female falcon inched into view. Blue-gray like a fish, iridescent. Her head scanned the sky.

"They're always together. Do they mate for life?" Thom wondered aloud. "Like geese?"

Rhyme's eyes returned to Thom, who was bent forward at his trim, youthful waist, gazing at the nest through the spattered window.

"Who was it?" Rhyme repeated. The young man was stalling now and it irritated Rhyme.

"A visitor."

"A visitor? Ha." Rhyme snorted. He tried to recall when his last *visitor* had been here. It must have been three months ago. Who'd it been? That reporter maybe or some distant cousin. Well, Peter Taylor, one of Rhyme's spinal cord specialists. And Blaine had been here several times. But she of course was not a *vis-i-tor*.

"It's freezing," Thom complained. His reaction was to open the window. Immediate gratification. Youth.

"Don't open the window," Rhyme ordered. "And tell me who the hell's here."

"It's freezing."

"You'll disturb the bird. You can turn the air conditioner down. I'll turn it down."

"We were here first," Thom said, further lifting the huge pane of window. "The birds moved in with full knowledge of you." The falcons glanced toward the noise, glaring. But then they always glared. They remained on the ledge, lording over their domain of anemic ginkgo trees and alternate-side-of-the-street parkers.

Rhyme repeated. "Who *is* it?"