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# HEAT WAVE

RICHARD CASTLE

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HYPERION

NEW YORK

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# ONE

It was always the same for her when she arrived to meet the body. After she unbuckled her seat belt, after she pulled a stick pen from the rubber band on the sun visor, after her long fingers brushed her hip to feel the comfort of her service piece, what she always did was pause. Not long. Just the length of a slow deep breath. That's all it took for her to remember the one thing she will never forget. Another body waited. She drew the breath. And when she could feel the raw edges of the hole that had been blown in her life, Detective Nikki Heat was ready. She opened the car door and went to work.

The wallop of one hundred degrees almost shoved her back in the car. New York was a furnace, and the soft pavement on West 77th gave under her feet like she was walking on wet sand. Heat could have made it easier on herself by parking closer, but this was another of her rituals: the walk up. Every crime scene was a flavor of chaos, and these two hundred feet afforded the detective her only chance to fill the clean slate with her own impressions.

Thanks to the afternoon swelter, the sidewalk was nearly empty. The neighborhood lunch rush was over, and tourists were either across the street cooling in the American Museum of Natural History or seeking refuge in Starbucks over iced drinks ending in vowels. Her disdain for the coffee drinkers dissolved into a mental note to get one herself on the way back to the precinct. Ahead she clocked a doorman at the apartment building just her side of the barrier tape that encircled the sidewalk café. His hat was off and he was sitting on the worn marble steps with his head between his knees. She looked up at the hunter green canopy as she passed him and read the building name: The Guilford.

Did she know the uniform flashing her the smile? She rapid-fired a

slideshow of faces but stopped when she realized he was just checking her out. Detective Heat smiled back and parted her linen blazer to give him something else to fantasize about. His face rearranged itself when he saw the shield on her waistband. The young cop lifted the yellow tape for her to duck under, and when she came up she caught him giving her a sex-ray again, so she couldn't resist. "Make you a deal," she said. "I'll watch my ass, you watch the crowd."

Detective Nikki Heat entered her crime scene past the vacant hostess podium of the sidewalk café. All the tables at La Chaleur Belle were empty except one where Detective Raley of her squad sat with a distraught family with sunburned faces struggling to translate German into a statement. Their uneaten lunch swarmed with flies. Sparrows, avid outdoor diners themselves, perched on seat backs and made bold dives for *pommes frites*. At the service door Detective Ochoa looked up from his notebook and quick-nodded her while he questioned a busboy in a white apron flecked with blood. The rest of the serving staff was inside at the bar having a drink after what they had witnessed. Heat looked over to where the medical examiner knelt and couldn't blame them one bit.

"Male unknown, no wallet, no identification, preliminary age range sixty to sixty-five. Severe blunt force trauma to head, neck, and chest." Lauren Parry's gloved hand peeled back the sheet for her friend Nikki to have a look at the corpse on the sidewalk. The detective glanced and quickly looked away. "No face, so we'll comb the area for any dental; otherwise not much to ID from after that impact. Is this where he landed?"

"There." The M.E. indicated the café busing station a few feet away. It had caved in from the top so hard it was split in half. The violent splash of ice and blood had already baked into the sidewalk in the minutes since the fall. As Heat stepped over there, she noted that the café umbrellas and the stone walls of the building also wore dried blood, ice spatter, and bits of tissue. She got as close to the wreckage as she dared without contaminating the scene and looked straight up.

"It's raining men."

Nikki Heat didn't even turn. She just sighed his name. "Rook."

“Hallelujah.” He held onto his smile until she finally looked at him, shaking her head. “What? It’s OK, I don’t think he can hear me.”

She wondered what sort of karma payback it was for her to be saddled with this guy. It wasn’t the first time that month she had wondered it, either. The job was hard enough if you were doing it right. Add a reporter with a mouth playing make-believe cop and your day just got a little longer. She backed up to the long flower boxes that defined the perimeter of the outdoor café and looked up again. Rook moved with her. “I would have been here sooner except somebody didn’t call me. If I hadn’t phoned Ochoa, I would have missed this.”

“It’s just tragedy upon tragedy, isn’t it?”

“You wound me with your sarcasm. Look, I can’t research my article on New York’s finest without access, and my deal with the commissioner specifically states—”

“Trust me, I know your deal. I’ve been living day and night. You get to observe on all my homicides just like real-life detectives who work for a living.”

“So you forgot. I accept your apology.”

“I didn’t forget, and I didn’t hear any apology. At least not from me.”

“I kind of inferred it. You radiate subtext.”

“Someday you’re going to tell me what favor you did for the mayor to get this ride-along pushed through.”

“Sorry, Detective Heat, I’m a reporter and that’s strictly off the record.”

“Did you kill a story that made him look bad?”

“Yes. God, you make me feel cheap. But you’ll get nothing more.”

Detective Ochoa wrapped his busboy interview and Heat beckoned him over. “I passed a doorman for this building who looked like he was having a very bad day. Go check him out, see if he knows our Doe.”

When she turned back, Rook had curled his hands to form skin binoculars and was sighting up the building overlooking the café. “I call the balcony on six.”

“When you write your magazine article, you can make it any floor

you like, Mr. Rook. Isn't that what you reporters do, speculate?" Before he could reply, she held her forefinger to his lips. "But we're not celebrity journalists here. We're just the police, and darn it, we have these pesky things called facts to dig up and events to verify. And while I try to do my job, would it be too much to ask that you maintain a little decorum?"

"Sure. No problem."

"Thank you."

"Jameson? Jameson Rook?!" Rook and Heat turned to see a young woman behind the police line waving and jumping up and down for his attention. "Oh my God, it's him, it's Jameson Rook!" Rook gave her a smile and a wave, which only made his fan more excited. Then she ducked under the yellow tape.

"Hey, no, get back!" Detective Heat signaled to a pair of uniforms, but the woman in the halter and cutoffs was already inside the line and approaching Rook. "This is a crime scene, you have to go."

"Can I at least get an autograph?"

Heat weighed expediency. The last time she tried to chase off one of his fans, it had involved ten minutes of arguing and an hour writing up an answer to the woman's official complaint. Literate fans are the worst. She nodded to the uniforms and they waited.

"I saw you on *The View* yesterday morning. Oh my God, you're even cuter in person." She clawed through her straw bag but kept her eyes on him. "After the show I ran out and bought the magazine so I could read your story, see?" She pulled out the latest issue of *First Press*. The cover shot was Rook and Bono at a relief center in Africa. "Oh! I have a Sharpie."

"Perfect." He took the marker and reached for her magazine.

"No, sign this!" She took a step closer and tugged aside the cup of her halter.

Rook smiled. "I think I'm going to need more ink."

The woman exploded with laughter and clutched Nikki Heat's arm. "See? This is why he's my favorite writer."

But Heat was focused on the front steps of the Guilford, where Detective Ochoa clapped a sympathetic hand on the shoulder of the doorman. He left the shade of the canopy, did a limbo under the tape, and

crossed to her. “Doorman says our vic lived in this building. Sixth floor.”

Nikki heard Rook clear his throat behind her but didn’t turn. He was either gloating or signing a groupie’s breast. She wasn’t in the mood to see either one.

An hour later in the solemn hush of the victim’s apartment, Detective Heat, the embodiment of sympathetic patience, sat in an antique tapestry chair across from his wife and their seven-year-old son. A blue reporter’s-cut spiral notebook rested closed on her lap. Her naturally erect dancer’s posture and the drape of her hand on the carved wooden armrest gave her a look of regal ease. When she caught Rook staring at her from across the room, he turned away and studied the Jackson Pollock on the wall in front of him. She reflected on how much the paint splatters echoed the busboy’s apron downstairs, and though she tried to stop it, her cop’s brain began streaming its capture video of the mangled busing station, the slack faces of traumatized waitstaff, and the coroner’s van departing with the body of real estate mogul Matthew Starr.

Heat wondered if Starr was a jumper. The economy, or, more accurately, the lack of it, had triggered scores of collateral tragedies. On any given day, the country seemed one turn of a hotel maid’s key away from discovering the next suicide or murder-suicide of a CEO or tycoon. Was ego an antidote? As New York real estate developers went, Matthew Starr didn’t write the book on ego, but he sure did the term paper. A perennial also-ran in the race to slap his name on the outside of everything with a roof, you had to credit Starr with at least staying in the chase.

And by the looks of his digs, he had been weathering the storm lavishly on two luxury floors of a landmark building just off Central Park West. Every furnishing was either antique or designer; the living room was a grand salon two stories high, and its walls were covered up to the cathedral ceiling by collectible art. Safe bet nobody left take-out menus or locksmith brochures at this front door.

A trace of muffled laughter turned Nikki Heat’s attention to the balcony where Detectives Raley and Ochoa, a duo affectionately condensed to “Roach,” were working. Kimberly Starr rocked her son in a

long hug and didn't seem to hear it. Heat excused herself and crossed the room, gliding in and out of ponds of light beaming down from the upper windows, casting an aura on her. She sidestepped the forensics tech dusting the French doors and went out onto the balcony, flipping her notebook to a blank page.

"Pretend we're going over notes." Raley and Ochoa exchanged confused looks then drew closer to her. "I could hear you two laughing in there."

"Oh, jeez . . .," said Ochoa. He winced and the sweat bead clinging to the tip of his nose fell onto her page.

"Listen to me. I know to you this is just another crime scene, right? But for that family in there, it's the only one they've ever experienced. Are you hearing me? Good." She half turned to the door and turned back. "Oh. And when we get out of here? I want to hear that joke. I could use it."

When Heat came back in, the nanny was ushering Kimberly's son out of the room. "Take Matty outside for a while, Agda. But not out front. Do you hear me? Not out front." She pulled another tissue and dabbed her nose.

Agda stopped in the archway. "It is so hot in the park today for him." The Scandinavian nanny was a looker and could have been Kimberly's coed sister. A comparison that made Heat ponder the age disparity between Kimberly Starr, who she ballparked at twenty-eight, and her dead husband, a man in his mid-sixties. Can you say Trophy Wife, boys and girls?

Matty's solution was the movies. The new Pixar film was out, and even though he'd seen it on its first day, he wanted to go again. Nikki made a note to take her niece to it on the weekend. That little girl loved animated movies. Almost as much as Nikki. Nothing like a niece to provide the perfect excuse to spend two hours enjoying pure innocence. Matty Star left with an unsure wave, sensing something amiss but so far spared the news that would descend upon the little boy soon enough.

"Once again, Mrs. Starr, I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, Detective." Her voice came from a far place. She sat primly, smoothing the pleats of her sundress and then waited, immobile except for the tissue she absently twisted on her lap.

“I know this isn’t the best time, but there are some questions I’m going to need to ask.”

“I understand.” Again, the waif voice, measured, remote, and what else? Heat wondered. Yes, proper.

Heat uncapped her pen. “Were you or your son here when it happened?”

“No, thank God. We were out.” The detective made a short note and folded her hands. Kimberly waited, rolling a chunk of black onyx from her David Yurman necklace, then filled the silence. “We went to Dino-Bites over on Amsterdam. We had frozen tar pit soup. It’s just melted chocolate ice cream with Gummysaurs. Matty loves the tar pit soup.”

Rook sat down on the toile Chippendale wing chair opposite Heat. “Do you know if anyone else was home?”

“No, I don’t think so.” She seemed to see him for the first time. “Have we met? You look familiar.”

Heat jumped in to close that flank, and fast. “Mr. Rook is a journalist. A magazine writer working with us in an unofficial capacity. Very unofficial.”

“A reporter . . . You’re not going to do a story about my husband, are you?”

“No. Not specifically. I’m just doing background research on this squad.”

“Good. Because my husband wouldn’t like that. He thought all reporters were assholes.”

Nikki Heat said she understood completely, but she was looking at Rook when she said it. And then she continued, “Did you notice any changes in your husband’s mood or behavior recently?”

“Matt did not kill himself, don’t even go there.” Her demure, preppy composure vaporized in a flare of anger.

“Mrs. Starr, we just want to cover all—”

“Don’t! My husband loved me and our son. He loved life. He was building a mixed-use low-rise with green technology, for God’s sake.” Beads of perspiration sprouted under her side-swept bangs. “Why are you asking stupid questions when you could be looking for his killer?”

Detective Heat let her vent. She had been through enough of these

to know that the composed ones had the most rage to siphon off. Or was she just recalling herself back when she was the one in The Loss Chair, nineteen years old with her world suddenly imploding around her? Had she really siphoned off all her rage, or merely clamped a lid on it?

“It’s summer, damn it, we should be in the Hamptons. This wouldn’t have happened if we were at Stormfall.” Now, that’s money. You don’t just buy an estate in East Hampton, you name it. Stormfall was beach-front, secluded, and Seinfeld-adjacent with a partial Spielberg view. “I hate this city,” Kimberly shouted. “Hate it, hate it. What is this, like, murder number three hundred so far this year? As if they even matter to you people after a while.” She panted, apparently finished. Heat closed her notebook and circled around the coffee table to sit beside her on the sofa.

“Please hear me. I know how difficult this is.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I’m afraid I do.” She waited for the meaning of that to sink in on Kimberly, then continued. “Murders are not numbers to me. A person died. A loved one. Someone you thought you were eating dinner with tonight is gone. A little boy has lost his father. Someone is responsible. And you have my promise I will see your case through.”

Mollified or maybe just shock-worn, Kimberly nodded and asked if they could finish this later. “Right now I just want to go to my boy.”

She left them in the apartment to continue their investigation. After she left, Rook said, “I always wondered where all those Martha Stewarts came from. They must breed them on a secret farm in Connecticut.”

“Thank you for not interrupting while she was spewing.”

Rook shrugged. “I’d like to say that was sensitivity, but it was really because of the chair. It’s hard for a man to sound authoritative surrounded by toile. OK, now that she’s gone, can I tell you I get a vibe off her I don’t like?”

“Uh-huh, I’m not surprised. That was a hell of a shot she took at your ‘profession.’ Accurate though it was.” Heat turned, in case her inner smile leaked onto her face, and started back to the balcony.

He fell in with her. “Oh, please, I have two Pulitzers, I don’t need

her respect.” She gave him a side glance. “Although, I did kind of want to tell her that the series of articles I wrote about my month underground with the Chechen rebels are being optioned for a movie.”

“Why didn’t you? Your self-aggrandizement might have been a welcome distraction from the fact that her husband just died a violent death.”

They stepped out into the afternoon scorch, where Raley and Ochoa’s shirts had soaked clean through. “What have you got, Roach?”

“Definitely not liking suicide,” said Raley. “A, check out the fresh paint chips and stone dust. Somebody banged open those French doors pretty hard, like during a struggle.”

“And B,” Ochoa picked up, “you’ve got your trail of scuff marks leading from the doors across the . . . what is this?”

“Terra-cotta tile,” said Rook.

“Right. Shows the marks pretty good, huh? And they go all the way to here.” He stopped at the balustrade. “This is where our man went over.”

All four of them leaned to look below. “Wow,” said Rook. “Six floors down. It is six, isn’t it, fellas?”

“Let it go, Rook,” said Heat.

“But here’s our telltale.” Ochoa got on his knees to indicate something on the railing with his pen. “You’ll have to get close.” He backed up to make room for Heat, who knelt to see where he was pointing. “It’s torn fabric. Forensics geek says it’ll test out as blue denim after he runs it. Our vic wasn’t wearing jeans, so this came from someone else.”

Rook knelt down beside her to look. “As in someone who shoved him over.” Heat nodded, as did Rook. They turned to face each other, and she was a little startled by his proximity but didn’t pull back. Nose-to-nose with him in the heat, she held his gaze and watched the dance of reflected sunlight playing off his eyes. And then she blinked. Oh shit, she thought, what was that? I can’t be attracted to this guy. No way.

Detective Heat quickly rose to her feet, crisp and all business. “Roach? I want you to run a background on Kimberly Starr. And check out her alibi at that ice cream place on Amsterdam.”

“So,” said Rook, rising beside her, “you got a vibe off her, too, huh?”

“I don’t do vibes. I do police work.” Then she hurried away to the apartment.

Later, on the elevator ride down she asked her detectives, “OK, what was so funny that I could have killed you both with my bare hands? And so you know, I am trained to do that.”

“Aw, nothing, just letting the giddy out, you know how it gets,” said Ochoa.

“Yeah, nothing at all,” said Raley.

Two floors of silence passed and they both started a low hum of “It’s Raining Men” before they cracked up.

“That? That’s what you were laughing at?”

“This,” said Rook, “may be the proudest moment of my life.”

As they stepped back out into the blast furnace and gathered under the Guilford canopy, Rook said, “You’ll never guess who wrote that song.”

“I don’t know songwriters, man,” from Raley.

“You’d know this one.”

“Elton John?”

“Wrong.”

“Clue?”

A woman’s scream cut through the rush-hour noise of the city, and Nikki Heat bounded onto the sidewalk, her head swiveling to search up and down the block.

“Over there,” called the doorman, pointing toward Columbus. “Mrs. Starr!”

Heat followed his gaze to the corner, where a large man gripped Kimberly Starr by the shoulders and jammed her against a store window. It thundered on impact but did not break.

Nikki was off in a sprint, with the other three close behind. She waved her shield and hollered at pedestrians to move as she wove through the after-work crowd. Raley fisted his two-way and called for backup.

“Police, freeze,” called Heat.

In the assailant’s split second of alarm, Kimberly went for a groin kick that missed wildly. The man was already on the move and she torqued herself down to the pavement. “Ochoa,” said Heat, pointing

at Kimberly as she passed. Ochoa stopped to attend her while Raley and Rook followed Heat, dodging cars into the crosswalk on 77th. A tour bus making an illegal turn blocked their path. Heat ran around the bus's rear end, through a puff of hot diesel exhaust, emerging on the cobblestone sidewalk that surrounded the museum complex.

There was no sign of him. She slowed to a jog and then a race-walk across from the Evelyn at 78th. Raley was still on his walkie behind her, calling in their location and the man's description: ". . . male cauc, thirty-five, balding, six feet, white short-sleeve shirt, blue jeans . . ."

At 81st and Columbus Heat stopped and turned a circle. A sheen of perspiration glistened on her chest and fed a darkened V-pattern down the front of her top. The detective showed no sign of fatigue, only alertness, seeing near and far at the same time, knowing all she needed was a glimpse of any piece of him to put her back on the run.

"He wasn't in that good a shape." Rook sounded a little winded. "He couldn't have gotten far."

She turned to him, a little impressed he had kept up. And a little annoyed that he had. "What the hell are you doing here, Rook?"

"Extra set of eyes, Detective."

"Raley, I'll cover Central Park West and circle the museum. You take 81st to Amsterdam and loop back on 79th."

"Got it." He cut against the grain of the downtown flow on Columbus.

"What about me?"

"Have you noticed I might be too busy to babysit you right now? If you want to be helpful, take that extra set of eyes and see how Kimberly Starr is doing."

She left him there on the corner without looking back. Heat needed her concentration and didn't want her focus pulled, not by him. This ride-along was getting tired enough. And what was with that business back there on the balcony? Pulling up next to her face like some perfume ad in *Vanity Fair*, those ads that promise the kind of love that life just never seems to deliver. Lucky she shook herself out of that little tableau. Still, she wondered, maybe she had just bitch-slapped the guy a little too hard.

When she turned to check on Rook, she didn't see him at first.

Then she spotted him halfway down Columbus. What the hell was he doing crouching behind that planter? He looked like he was spying on something. She hopped the fence of the dog park and cut across the lawn toward him at a jog. That's when she saw White Shirt-Blue Jeans climb out of the Dumpster at the rear entrance to the museum complex. She kicked it up to a sprint. Ahead of her, Rook stood up behind his planter. The guy made him and took off down the driveway, disappearing into the service tunnel. Nikki Heat called out to him, but Rook was already running into the underground entrance after her perp.

She cursed and leaped over the fence at the other end of the dog park, chasing after them.