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# HEAT WAVE

RICHARD CASTLE

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HYPERION

NEW YORK

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## TWO

Nikki Heat's footsteps echoed back at her off the concrete tunnel as she ran. The passage was wide and high, big enough to truck in exhibits for both museums in the complex: the American Museum of Natural History and the Rose Center for Earth and Space, aka the planetarium. The orange cast of sodium-vapor lamps gave good visibility, but she couldn't see ahead around the curve of the wall. She also didn't pick up any other footfalls, and coming around the bend, she saw why not.

The tunnel came to a dead end at a loading dock and nobody was there. She bounded up the steps to the landing, from which a pair of doors fed off—one to the natural history museum on the right, the other to the planetarium on her left. She made a Zen choice and hit the push bar to the natural history door. It was locked. To hell with instinct; she went for the process of elimination. The door to the planetarium service bay popped open. She drew her gun and went in.

Heat entered in the Weaver stance, keeping her back to a line of crates. Her academy trainer had drilled her to use the more square and sturdy Isosceles, but in tight quarters with lots of pivoting, she made her own call and assumed the pose that let her flow and present less target area. She cleared the room quickly, startled only once by an Apollo space suit dangling from an old display. In the far corner she found an internal staircase. As she approached, somebody upstairs threw a door open against a wall. Before it slammed shut, Heat was climbing steps two at a time.

She emerged into a sea of visitors roaming the lower level of the planetarium. A camp counselor passed by leading a herd of kids in matching T-shirts. The detective holstered-up before young eyes could

freak out at her gun. Heat waded through them, squinting in the blinding whiteness of the Hall of the Universe, speed-scanning for Rook or Kimberly Starr's attacker. Over by a rhino-sized meteorite she spotted a security guard on his two-way, pointing at something: Rook, vaulting a banister and clambering up a ramp that curved around the hall and spiraled to the floor above. Halfway up the incline, her suspect's head popped over the railing to back-check on Rook. Then he raced on with the reporter in pursuit.

The sign said they were on the Cosmic Pathway, a 360-degree spiral walkway marking the timeline of the evolution of the universe in the length of a football field. Nikki Heat covered thirteen billion years at a personal best. At the top of the incline, quads protesting, she stopped to make another scan. No sign of either of them. Then she heard the screams of the crowd.

Heat rested a hand on her holster and orbited under the giant central sphere to see the guest lineup for the space show. The alarmed crowd was parting, backing away from Rook, who was on the ground taking a rib kick from her man.

The attacker drew back for another kick, and during the most vulnerable part of his balance shift, Heat came up behind him and used her leg to sweep his out from under him. All six feet of him dropped hard onto the marble. She cuffed him rodeo quick and the crowd broke into applause.

Rook sat himself up. "I'm fine, thanks for asking."

"Nice work slowing him down like that. Is that how you rolled in Chechnya?"

"The guy jumped me after I tripped." He pointed under his foot to a bag from the museum store. "On that." Rook opened it up and pulled out an art glass paperweight of a planet. "Check it out. I tripped on Uranus."

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**When Heat and Rook entered the Interrogation Room, the prisoner snapped upright at the table the way fourth-graders do when the principal walks in. Rook took the side chair. Nikki Heat tossed a file on the table but stayed on her feet. "Stand up," she said. And Barry Gable did. The de-**

tective walked a circle around him, enjoying his nervousness. She bent low to examine his blue jeans for any rips that could match the fabric shard the killer had left on the railing. “What did you do here?”

Gable arched himself to look at the scuff she was pointing to on the back of his leg. “I dunno. Maybe I scraped them on the Dumpster. These are brand-new,” he added, as if that might put him in a more favorable light.

“We’re going to want your pants.” The guy started to unhitch them right there, and she said, “Not now. After. Sit down.” He complied, and she eased into the seat opposite, all casual, all in charge. “You want to tell us why you attacked Kimberly Starr?”

“Ask her,” he said, trying to sound tough but shooting nervous looks at himself in the mirror, a giveaway to her he had never sat in Interrogation before.

“I’m asking you, Barry,” said Heat.

“It’s personal.”

“It is to me. Battery like that against a woman? I can get very personal about that. You want to see how personal?”

Rook chimed in, “Plus you assaulted me.”

“Hey, you were chasing me. How did I know what you were going to pull? I can tell a mile away you’re not a cop.”

Heat kind of liked that. She arched an eyebrow at Rook and he sat back to stew. She turned back to Gable. “Not your first assault, I see, is it, Barry?” She made a show of opening the file. There weren’t many pages in it, but her theater made him more uneasy, so she made the most of it. “Two thousand six scrape with a bouncer in SoHo; 2008, you pushed a guy who caught you keying the side of his Mercedes.”

“Those were all misdemeanors.”

“Those were all assaults.”

“I lose it sometimes.” He forced a John Candy chuckle. “Guess I should stay out of the bars.”

“And maybe spend more time at the gym,” said Rook.

Heat gave him a cool-it glance. Barry had turned to the mirror again and adjusted his shirt around his gut. Heat closed the file and said, “Can you tell us your whereabouts this afternoon, say around one to two P.M.?”

“I want my lawyer.”

“Sure. Would you like to wait for him here or down in the Zoo Lockup?” It was an empty threat that only worked on newbies, and Gable’s eyes widened. Underneath the hard-ass face she fixed on him, Heat was loving how easily he caved. Gotta love the Zoo Lockup. Works every time.

“I was at the Beacon, you know, the Beacon Hotel on Broadway?”

“You do know we will check your alibi. Is there anyone who saw you and can vouch for you?”

“I was alone in my room. Maybe somebody at the front desk in the morning.”

“That hedge fund you operate pays for a mighty nice address on East 52nd. Why book a hotel?”

“Come on, are you going to make me say this?” He stared at his own pleading eyes in the mirror then nodded to himself. “I go there a couple times a week. To meet somebody. You know.”

“For sex?” asked Rook.

“Jeez, yeah, sex is part of it. It goes deeper than that.”

“And what happened today?” asked Heat.

“She didn’t show.”

“Bad for you, Barry. She could be your alibi. Does she have a name?”

“Yeah. Kimberly Starr.”

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When Heat and Rook left Interrogation, Detective Ochoa was waiting in the observation booth, staring through the magic mirror at Gable. “Can’t believe you wrapped this interview and didn’t ask the most important question.” When he had their attention, he continued, “How did that swamp doofus get a babe like Kimberly Starr into the sack?”

“You are so superficial,” said Heat. “It’s not about looks. It’s about money.”

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“Weird Al,” said Raley when the three of them entered the squad room. “‘It’s Raining Men’? My guess is Al Yankovic.”

“Nope,” said Rook. “The song was written by . . . , Ah, I could tell you, but where’s the sport in that? Keep trying. But no fair Googling.”

Nikki Heat sat at her desk and swiveled to face the bullpen. “Can I break up tonight’s episode of *Jeopardy!* for a little police work? Ochoa, what do we know about Kimberly Starr’s alibi?”

“We know it doesn’t check out. Well, I know, and now you do, too. She was at Dino-Bites today but left shortly after she got there. Her kid ate his tar pit soup with the nanny, not his mom.”

“What time did she leave?” asked Heat.

Ochoa flipped through his notes. “Manager says around one, one-fifteen.”

Rook said, “I told you I got a vibe off Kimberly Starr, didn’t I?”

“You like Kimberly Starr as a suspect?” asked Raley.

“Here’s how it spins for me.” Rook sat on Heat’s desk. She noticed him wince from the rib kicks he’d taken and wished he would get himself checked out. “Our adoring trophy wife-and-mother has been getting sweet lovin’ on the side. Her punch pal Barry, no looker he, claims she dropped him like a sack of hammers when his hedge fund cratered and his money supply pinched off. Hence today’s assault. Who knows, maybe our dead gazillionaire kept the little missus on a short money leash. Or maybe Matthew Starr found out about her affair and she killed him.”

Raley nodded. “Does look bad that she was cheating on him.”

“I have a novel idea,” said Heat. “Why don’t we do this thing called an investigation? Gather evidence, assemble some facts. Somehow that might sound better in court than, ‘Here’s how it spins for me.’”

Rook took out his Moleskine notebook. “Excellent. This is all going to be swell in my article.” He clicked a pen theatrically to needle her. “So what do we investigate first?”

“Raley,” said Heat, “check out the Beacon, see if Gable’s been a regular there. Show them a picture of Mrs. Starr while you’re at it. Ochoa, how soon can you pull together a background check on our trophy widow?”

“How’s first thing tomorrow?”

“OK, but I was kind of hoping for first thing tomorrow.”

Rook raised his hand. “Question? Why not just pick her up? I

would love to see what happens when you set her down in your hall of mirrors.”

“Much as I live my day to provide you with top entertainment, I’m going to hold off until I learn a little more. Besides, she’s not going anywhere.”

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The next morning, amid flickering lights, City Hall put out the word for New Yorkers to curtail air-conditioning use and strenuous activity. For Nikki Heat that meant her close-quarter combat training with Don, the ex-SEAL, would be done with the gym windows open. His brand of training combined Brazilian jujitsu, boxing, and judo. Their sparring began at five-thirty with a round of grapples and rolls in eighty-two degrees and humidity to match. After the second water break Don asked her if she wanted to call it. Heat answered with a takedown and a textbook blood choke and release. She seemed to thrive on the adverse weather, fed on it, really. Rather than wearing her down, the gasping intensity of morning combat pushed out the noise of her life and left her in a quiet inner place. It was the same way when she and Don had sex from time to time. She decided if she had nothing going, maybe next week she’d suggest another after-hours session to her trainer, with benefits. Anything to get her heart rate up.

Lauren Parry led Nikki Heat and her reporter tag-along through the autopsy room to the body of Matthew Starr. “As always, Nik,” said the medical examiner, “we don’t have the tox work yet, but barring lab surprises, I’m writing up cause of death as blunt force trauma due to a fall from an unreasonable height.”

“And what box are you going to check, suicide or homicide?”

“That’s why I called you down. I found something that indicates homicide.” The M.E. circled to the other side of the corpse and lifted the sheet. “We’ve got a series of fist-sized contusions on the torso. These tell me he got worked over sometime day of. Look closely at this one here.”

Heat and Rook leaned in at the same time and she drew away to avoid a repeat of the balcony perfume ad. He stepped back and gestured a be-my-guest. “Very distinct bruising,” said the detective. “I can make out knuckles, and what’s this hexagonal shape from, a ring?” She

stepped out to let Rook in and said, “Lauren, I’d like to get a photo of that one.”

Her friend was already holding out a print to her. “I’ll put it up on the server so you can copy it, and what did you do, get in a bar fight?” She was looking at Rook.

“Me? Oh, just a little line-of-duty action yesterday. Cool, huh?”

“Way you’re standing, my guess is intercostal injury right here.” She touched his ribs without pressing. “Does it hurt when you laugh?”

Heat said, “Say ‘line-of-duty action’ again, that’s funny.”

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**Detective Heat taped autopsy blowups on the bull pen whiteboard to prep** for her unit case meeting. She drew a line with a dry-erase marker and wrote the names of the Forensics print matches off the balcony doors at the Guilford: Matthew Starr, Kimberly Starr, Matty Starr, and Agda the nanny. Raley arrived early with a bag of donut holes and confirmed Barry Gable’s regular hotel bookings at the Beacon. Reception and service staff had identified Kimberly Starr as his steady guest. “Oh, and the lab work came in on Barry the Beacon Beefcake’s blue jeans,” he added. “No match to those balcony fibers.”

“No surprise,” Heat said. “But it was fun to see how fast he was willing to drop his pants.”

“Fun for you,” said Rook.

She smiled. “Yeah, definitely one of the perks of the job watching sweaty clods shimmy out of their knockoff jeans.”

Ochoa rushed in, speaking as he crossed to them. “I’m late, it was worth it, shut up.” He pulled some printouts from his messenger bag. “I just finished the background check on Kimberly Starr. Or shall I say Laldomina Batastini of Queens, New Yawk?”

The unit drew close as he read bits from the file. “Our preppy Stepford Mom was born and raised in Astoria above a mani-pedi salon on Steinway. About as far from the Connecticut girls’ schools and riding academies as you can get. Let’s see, high school dropout . . . and she’s got a rap sheet.” He handed it to Heat.

“No felonies,” she said. “Juvie busts for shoplifting, and later for pot. One DUI . . . Oh, and, here we go, busted twice at nineteen for lewd

acts with customers. Young Laldomina was a lap dancer at numerous clubs near the airport, performing under the name Samantha.”

“I always said *Sex and the City* fostered poor role modeling,” said Rook.

Ochoa took the sheet back from Heat and said, “I talked to a pal in Vice. Kimberly, Samantha, whatever, hooked up with some guy, a regular at the club and she married him. She was twenty. He was sixty-eight and loaded. Her sugar daddy was from Greenwich old money and wanted to take her to the yacht club, so he—”

“Let me guess,” said Rook, “he got her a Henry Higgins,” drawing blank stares from Roach.

“I speak musical theater,” Heat said. Right up there with animated films, Broadway was Nikki’s great escape from her work on the other streets of New York—when she could swing a ticket. “He means her new husband got his exotic dancer a charm tutor for a presentability makeover. A class on class.”

Rook added, “And a Kimberly Starr is born.”

“The husband died when she was twenty-one. I know what you’re thinking, so I double-checked. Natural causes. Heart attack. The man left her one million dollars.”

“And a taste for more. Nice work, Detective.” Ochoa popped a victory donut hole, and Heat continued. “You and Raley keep a tail on her. Loose one. I’m not ready to show my hand until I see what else shakes free on other fronts.”

Heat had learned years ago that most detective work is grunt work done pounding the phones, combing files, and searching the department’s database. The calls she had made the afternoon before, to Starr’s attorney and detectives working complaints against persons, had paid off that morning with a file of people who’d made threats on the real estate developer’s life. She grabbed her shoulder bag and signed out, figuring it was about time to show her celeb magazine writer what field-work was all about, but she couldn’t find him.

She had almost left Rook behind when she came upon him standing in the precinct lobby, very occupied. A drop-dead-stunning woman was smoothing the collar of his shirt. The stunner barked out a laugh, shrieked, “Oh, Jamie!” then pulled her designer sunglasses off her head

to shake her raven shoulder-length hair. Heat watched her lean in close to whisper, pressing her D-cups right against him. He didn't step back, either. What was Rook doing, making a perfume ad with every damn woman in the city? Then she stopped herself. Why do I care? she thought. It bothered her that it even bothered her. So she blew it off and walked out, mad at herself for her one look back at them.

"So what's the point of this exercise?" Rook asked on the drive uptown.

"It's something we professionals in the world of detection call detecting." Heat picked the file out of her driver's door pocket and passed it to him. "Somebody wanted Matthew Starr dead. A few you'll see in there made actual threats. Others just found him inconvenient."

"So this is about eliminating them?"

"This is about asking questions and seeing where the answers lead. Sometimes you flush out a suspect, sometimes you're getting information you didn't have that takes you somewhere else. Was that another member of the Jameson Rook fan club back there?"

Rook chuckled. "Bree? Oh, hell, no."

They rode another block in silence. "Because she seemed like a big fan."

"Bree Flax is a big fan, all right. Of Bree Flax. She's a freelancer for the local glossy mags, always on the prowl for the true crime piece she can up-sell into an instant book. You know, ripped from the headlines. That operetta back there was all about getting me to cough up some inside stuff on Matthew Starr."

"She seemed . . . focused."

Rook smiled. "By the way, that's F-l-a-x, just in case you want to run a check."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Rook didn't answer. He just gave her a smile that made her blush. She turned away and pretended to watch cross traffic out her side window, worried about what he saw on her face.

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**Up on the top floor of the Marlowe Building there was no heat wave. In the enveloping coolness of his corner office, Omar Lamb listened to the**

recording of his threatening phone call to Matthew Starr. He was placid, his palms rested flat and relaxed on his leather blotter as the tiny speaker on the digital recorder vibrated with an enraged version of him spouting expletives and graphic descriptions of what he would do to Starr, including where on his body he would insert an assortment of weapons, tools, and firearms. When it was over, he turned it off and said nothing. Nikki Heat studied the real estate developer, his gym-rat body, sunken cheeks, and you're-dead-to-me eyes. A surplus of refrigerated air whispered from unseen vents to fill the silence. She was chilly for the first time in four days. It was a lot like the morgue.

"He actually recorded me saying that?"

"Mr. Starr's attorney provided it when he put the complaint on the record."

"Come on, Detective, people say they're going to kill people all the time."

"And sometimes they do it."

Rook observed from a perch on the windowsill, where he divided his attention between Omar Lamb and the lone blader braving the heat in the Trump Skating Rink in Central Park thirty-five stories below. So far, Heat thought, thank God he seemed content to follow her instructions not to butt in.

"Matthew Starr was a titan of this industry who will be missed. I respected him and deeply regret that phone call I made. His death was a loss to us all."

Heat had known on sight that this guy was going to take some work. He didn't even look at her shield when she walked in, didn't ask for his lawyer. Said he had nothing to hide, and if he did, she sensed he was too smart to say anything stupid. This was not a man to fall for the ol' Zoo Lockup routine. So she danced with him, looking for her opening. "Why all the bile?" she asked. "What got you so lathered up about a business rival?"

"My rival? Matthew Starr didn't have the skill set to qualify as my rival. Matthew Starr needed a stepladder just to kiss my ass."

There it was. She'd found an open sore on Omar Lamb's tough hide. His ego. Heat picked at it. She laughed at him. "Bull."

"Bull? Did you just say 'bull' to me?" Lamb jerked to his feet and

hero-strode from behind the fortress of his desk to face her. This was definitely not going to be a perfume ad.

She didn't flinch. "Starr had title to more property than anyone in the city. A lot more than you, right?"

"Garbage addresses, environmental restrictions, limited air rights . . . What does more mean when it's more crap?"

"Sounds like rival talk to me. Must have felt bad to unzip and flop 'em on the table and come up short."

"Hey, you want to measure something?" This was good. She loved it when she rattled the tough boys into talking. "Measure all the properties Matthew Starr stole from under my nose." With a manicured finger, he poked her shoulder to punctuate each item on his list: "He fudged permits, he bribed inspectors, he underbid, he oversold, he underdelivered."

"Gee," said Heat, "it's almost enough to make you want to kill him."

Now the developer laughed. "Nice try. Listen. Yeah, I made threats to the guy in the past. Operative word: past. Years ago. Look at his numbers now. Even without the recession Starr was a spent force. I didn't need to kill him. He was a dead man walking."

"So says his rival."

"Don't believe me? Go to any of his job sites."

"And see what?"

"Hey, you expect me to do all your work?"

At the door, as they were leaving, Lamb said, "One thing. I read in the *Post* he fell six stories."

"That's right, six," said Rook. The first thing he said and it was a shot at her.

"Did he suffer?"

"No," said Heat, "he died instantly."

Lamb grinned, showing a row of laminates. "Well, maybe in hell, then."

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**Their gold Crown Victoria rolled south on the Westside Highway, the AC blasting and humidity condensing into wisps of fog around the dashboard vents. "So what's your take?" asked Rook. "Think Omar offed him?"**

“Could have. I’ve got him on my list, but that’s not what that was about.”

“Glad to hear it, Detective. No rush, there’s only, what, three million more people to meet and greet in New York. Not that you aren’t a charming interviewer.”

“God, you’re impatient. Did you tell Bono you were tired of relief stations in Ethiopia? Did you push the Chechen warlords to pick up the pace? ‘Come on, Ivan, let’s see a little warlord action?’”

“I just like to cut through, is all.”

She was glad for this sea change. It got her off his personal radar, so she ran with it. “You want to actually learn something on this ride-along project of yours? Try listening. This is police work. Killers don’t walk around with bloody knives on them, and the home invasion crews don’t dress like the Hamburglar. You talk to people. You listen. You see if they’re hiding something. Or sometimes, if you pay attention, you get insight; information you didn’t have before.”

“Like what?”

“Like this.”

As they pulled up, the Starr construction site on Eleventh Avenue on the lower west side was dead. Almost noon, and no sign of work. No sign of workers. It was a ghost site. She parked off the street, on the dirt strip between the curb and the plywood construction fence. When they got out, Nikki said, “You hear what I hear?”

“Nothing.”

“Exactly.”

“Yo, miss, this is a closed site, you gotta go.” A guy in a hard hat and no shirt kicked up dust on his way to meet them as they squeezed in the chain-link gate. With that swagger and that gut, Heat could picture whooping New Jersey housewives sticking dollar bills in his Speedo. “You, too, buddy,” he said to Rook. “*Adios*.” Heat flashed tin and Shirtless mouthed the F-bomb.

“*Bueno*,” said Rook.

Nikki Heat squared herself to the guy. “I want to talk to your foreman.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

She cupped a hand to her ear. “Did you hear me ask? No, I definitely don’t think it was a question.”

“Oh, my God. Jamie?” The voice came from across the yard. A skinny man in sunglasses and blue satin warm-ups stood the open door of the site trailer.

“Heyyy,” called Rook. “Fat Tommy!”

The man waved them over. “Come on, hurry up, I’m not air-conditioning the Tri-State Area, you know.”

Inside the double-wide, Heat sat with Rook and his pal, but she didn’t take the chair she was offered. Although there were no current warrants on him, Tomaso “Fat Tommy” Nicolosi ran enforcement for one of the New York families, and caution dictated she not get wedged in between the table and the Masonite wall. She took the outside seat and angled it so her back wasn’t to the door. Through his smile, the look she got from Fat Tommy said he knew exactly what she was doing.

“What happened to you, Fat Tommy? You’re not fat.”

“The wife’s got me doing NutroMinder. God, has it been that long since I saw you?” He took off his tinted glasses and turned his pouchy eyes to Heat. “Jamie was doing this article a couple of years ago on ‘the life’ on Staten Island. We got to know each other, he seemed OK for a reporter, and what do you know, he ends up doing me a little favor.” Heat smiled thinly and he laughed. “Don’t worry, Detective, it was legal.”

“I just killed a couple guys is all.”

“Kidder. Have you noticed he’s a kidder?”

“Oh, Jamie? He has me going all the time,” she said.

“OK,” said Fat Tommy, “I can see this ain’t no social call, so go ahead. The two of us can catch up later.”

“This is Matthew Starr’s project, right?”

“It was until yesterday afternoon.” The wiseguy had one of those faces that was perennially balanced between menace and amusement. Heat could have read his answer as a joke or a fact.

“Mind if I ask what your role is here?”

He sat back, relaxed, a man in his element. “Labor consultation.”

“I notice there’s no labor taking place.”

“Damn straight. We shut it down a week ago. Starr stiffed us. You know, nonpayment on our, ah, agreement.”

“What sort of agreement was that, Mr. Nicolosi?” She knew full well what it was. They called it lots of things. Mostly the unofficial construction tax. The going rate was 2 percent. And it didn’t go to the government.

He turned to Rook. “I like your girlfriend.”

“Say that again and I’ll break your knees,” she said. He looked at her and decided she could, then smiled. “Not, huh?” Rook affirmed that with a mild shake of his head.

“Huh,” said Fat Tommy, “fooled me. Anyways, I owe Jamie a solid, so I’ll answer your question. What sort of agreement? Let’s call it the expediting fee. Yeah, that works.”

“Why did Starr stop paying, Tommy?” Rook was asking questions, but she found herself glad for his participation, tag-teaming from angles she couldn’t take. Call it good cop/no cop.

“Hey, man, the guy was strapped. He said he was and we checked. Underwater so deep he was sprouting gills.” Fat Tommy laughed at his joke and added, “We don’t care.”

“Do guys ever get killed for that?” asked Rook.

“For that? Come on. We just shut it down and let nature take its course.” He shrugged. “OK, sometimes guys get dead for that, but not this time. At least not at this early stage.” He crossed his arms and grinned. “For real. Not his girlfriend, huh?”

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**Over *carnitas burritos* at Chipotle, Heat asked Rook if he still felt like they were wheel-spinning. Before he answered, Rook slurped the ice cubes with his straw, vacuuming for more Diet Coke. “Well,” he said, finally, “I don’t think we’ve met Matthew Starr’s killer today, if that’s what you mean.” Fat Tommy drifted in and out of her mind as a possible, but she kept it to herself. He read her though, adding, “And if Fat Tommy tells me he didn’t do Matthew Starr, that’s all I need.”**

“You, sir, are an investigative force unto yourself.”

“I know the guy.”

“Remember what I said before? Ask questions and see where the answers lead? For me they’ve led to a picture of Matthew Starr that doesn’t fit the image. What did he put out there?” She drew a frame in the air with both hands. “Successful, respectable, and most of all, well funded. OK, now ask yourself this. All that money and he couldn’t pay his mob tax? The spiff that kept concrete pouring and iron rising?” She balled up her wrapper and stood. “Let’s go.”

“Where to?”

“To talk to Starr’s money guy. Look at it this way, it’s another chance for you to see me at my charming best.”

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Heat’s ears popped on the express elevator to the penthouse floor of Starr Pointe, Matthew Starr’s headquarters on West 57th near Carnegie Hall. When they stepped into the opulent lobby, she whispered to Rook, “Do you notice this office is one floor higher than Omar Lamb’s?”

“I think it’s safe to say that, even up to the end, Matthew Starr was acutely aware of heights.”

They announced themselves to the receptionist. As they waited, Nikki Heat perused a gallery of framed photos of Matthew Starr with presidents, royals, and celebrities. On the far wall, a flat screen soundlessly looped Starr Development’s corporate marketing video. In a glass trophy case, beneath heroic scale models of Starr office buildings and gleaming replicas of the corporate G-4 and Sikorsky-76, stretched a long row of Waterford crystal jars filled with dirt. Above each, a photograph of Matthew Starr breaking ground from the site that had filled the jar.

The carved mahogany door opened, and a man in shirtsleeves and a tie stepped out and extended his hand. “Detective Heat? Noah Paxton, I am . . . Rather, I was Matthew’s financial advisor.” As they shook hands, he gave her a sad smile. “We’re all still in shock.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss,” she said. “This is Jameson Rook.”

“The writer?”

“Yes,” he said.

“OK . . .,” said Paxton, accepting Rook’s presence as if recognizing there was a walrus on the front lawn but not understanding why. “Shall we go to my office?” He opened the mahogany door for them and they entered Matthew Starr’s world headquarters.

Heat and Rook both stopped. The entire floor was empty. Glass cubicles to the left and right were vacant of people and desks. Phone and Ethernet cables lay disconnected on floors. Plants sat dead and dying. The near wall showed the ghost of a bulletin board. The detective tried to reconcile the posh lobby she had just left with this vacant space on the other side of the threshold. “Excuse me,” she said to Paxton, “Matthew Starr just died yesterday. Have you already begun to close the business?”

“Oh this? No, not at all. We cleared this out a year ago.”

As the door closed behind them, the floor was so deserted the snap of the metal tongue latch actually echoed.