
HEAT WAVE

RICHARD CASTLE

HYPERION

NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data TK

ISBN: 978-1-4013-2382-0

Hyperion books are available for special promotions and premiums. For details contact the HarperCollins Special Markets Department in the New York office at 212-207-7528, fax 212-207-7222, or email psales@harpercollins.com.

Book design by Shubhani Sarkar

FIRST EDITION

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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THREE

Heat and Rook trailed two steps behind Noah Paxton as he led them through the vacant offices and cubicles of Starr Real Estate Development's headquarters. In stark contrast to the go-go opulence of its lobby, the penthouse floor of the thirty-six-story Starr Pointe tower had the hollow sound and feel of a foreclosed grand hotel after the creditors had swarmed it for everything that wasn't nailed down. The space had an eerie, post-biodisaster feel. Not merely empty, abandoned.

Paxton gestured to an open door and they entered his office, the only functioning one Heat had seen. He was listed as the corporation's financial officer, but his furniture was a combo plate of Staples, Office Depot, and hand-me-down Levenger. Neat and functional but not the trappings of a Manhattan corporate head, even for a midsize firm. And certainly not befitting the Starr brand of swank and swagger.

Nikki Heat heard a small chuckle from Rook and followed the reporter's line of sight to the poster of the kitty dangling from the branch. Under its rear paws was the caption "Hang in there, baby." Paxton didn't offer coffee from his four-hour-old pot; they just took seats in mismatched guest chairs. He established himself in the inner curve of his horseshoe workstation.

"We came to ask for your help understanding the financial state of Matthew Starr's business," said the detective, making it sound light and neutral. Noah Paxton was edgy. She was used to that; people got spooked by the badge same as they were by doctors' white coats. But this guy couldn't hold eye contact, a basic red flag. He looked distracted, like he was worried he'd left his iron plugged in at home and wanted to get there, and right now. Play it out mellow, she decided. See what tumbles when he lets himself relax.

He looked again at her business card and said, “Of course, Detective Heat,” once more trying to hold her look but only half making it. He made a deal of studying the card again. “There’s one thing, though,” he added.

“Go ahead,” she said, alert for the dodge or the call to the bullpen for a shyster.

“No offense, Mr. Rook.”

“Jamie, please.”

“If I have to answer police questions, that’s one thing. But if you’re going to quote me for some expose in *Vanity Fair* or *First Press*—”

“Not to worry,” said Rook.

“—I owe it to Matthew’s memory and to his family not to air his business in the pages of some magazine.”

“I am only here on background for an article I’m doing on Detective Heat and her squad. Whatever you say about Matthew Starr’s business will be off the record. I did it for Mick Jagger, I can do it for you.”

Heat could not believe what she’d just heard. The bald ego of a celebrity journalist at work. Not only name-dropping but favor-dropping. And it sure didn’t help get Paxton in the mood.

“This is a horrible time to do this,” he said, trying her now that Rook had met his terms. He turned away to study whatever was on his flat-screen and then brought it back to her. “He hasn’t even been dead twenty-four hours. I’m in the middle of . . . Well, you can imagine. How about tomorrow?”

“I only have a few questions.”

“Yes, but the files are, well, I’m saying I don’t keep everything,” he snapped his fingers, “right at hand. Tell you what. Why don’t you tell me what you need, and I can have it ready when you come back?”

All right. She had tried smooth ’n’ soothe. He was still dodgy, and now he had it in his head that he could stiff-arm her out of there in lieu of an appointment at his convenience. Time, she decided, to switch tactics.

“Noah. May I call you Noah? Because I want to keep this friendly while I tell you how this is going to go. OK? This is a homicide investigation. I am not only going to ask you some questions right here and right now, I expect you to answer them. And I’m not worried about

whether you have your figures,” she snapped her fingers, “right at hand. Know why? I’m going to have our forensic accountants go through your books. So you can decide right now how friendly this can be. Do we understand each other, Noah?”

After the smallest pause, the man put it right out there for her in a headline. “Matthew Starr was broke.” A calm, measured statement of fact. What else was it Nikki Heat heard behind it? Candor, for sure. He was looking her directly in the eye when he said it; there was no aversion now, only clarity. But there was something else, like he was reaching out to her, showing some other feeling, and when she struggled to grasp the word for it, Noah Paxton said it as if he were in her mind with her. “I feel so relieved.” There it was, relief. “Finally, I can talk about this.”

For the next hour Noah did more than just talk. He unfolded the story of how a personality-branded wealth machine had been flown to great heights piloted by the flamboyant Matthew Starr, amassing capital, acquiring key properties, and building iconic towers that indelibly shaped the world’s view of the New York skyline, and then had rapidly been imploded by Starr’s own hand. It was the tale of a boom-to-bust crash in a sharp down spiral.

Paxton, who corporate records said was thirty-five, had joined the firm with his newly minted MBA near the peak of the company’s upswing. His sure handling of creative financing to green-light construction of the avant-garde StarrScraper in Times Square had cemented him as Matthew Starr’s most trusted employee. Perhaps because he was forthcoming now, Nikki looked at Noah Paxton and saw a trustworthiness about him. He was solid, capable, a man who would get you through the battle.

She didn’t have much experience with men like him. She had seen them, of course, on the Metro-North train to Darien at the end of the day, with ties loosened, sipping a can of beer from the bar car with a colleague or neighbor. Or with wives in Anne Klein at *prix fixe* dinners before curtain on Broadway. That might have been Nikki in the candlelight with the Absolut cosmo, filling him in on the teacher conference and planning the week at the Vineyard, if things had gone differently for her. She wondered what it must be like to have that lawn and the reliable life with a Noah.

“That trust Matthew had in me,” he continued, “was a two-edger. I got to know all the secrets. But I also got to know all the secrets.”

The ugliest secret, according to Noah Paxton, was that his Midas-touch boss was driving his company into the ground and couldn't be stopped.

“Show me,” said the detective.

“You mean, like, now?”

“Now or in a more . . .,” she knew this dance and let her pause do its work, “formal setting. You choose.”

He opened a series of spreadsheets on his Mac and invited them inside the U of his workstation to view them on the big flat-screen. The figures were startling. Then came a progression of graphs chronicling the journey of a vital real estate developer who was practically laser-printing money until he plummeted off a red-ink cliff, well ahead of the mortgage meltdown and ensuing foreclosure debacle.

“So this isn't about hard times in a bad economy?” asked Heat, pointing over his shoulder at what looked to her like an escalator to the basement painted red.

“No. And thank you for not touching my monitor. I never understood why people have to touch computer screens when they point.”

“I know. The same people who need to mime telephones with their fingers when they say call me.” When they laughed, she got a whiff of something citrus-y and clean off him. L'Occitane, she guessed.

“How did he manage to stay in business?” asked Rook when they retook their seats.

“That was my job and it wasn't easy.” And then, with a disclosure look to Nikki, “And I promise you it was all legal.”

All she said was “Just tell me how.”

“Simple. I started liquidating and divesting. But when the real estate bust came along, it ate our lunch. That's when we ran into the buzz saw with financing. And then we hit a snag maintaining our labor relations. You may not know it, but our sites are not working these days.” Nikki nodded and swept her glance to Fat Tommy's champion. “We couldn't service our debt, we couldn't keep construction going. Here's a simple rule: no building, no rent.”

Heat said, “It sounds like a nightmare.”

“To have a nightmare, you have to be able to sleep.” On the office couch she noted the folded blanket with the pillow resting on it. “Let’s call it a living hell. And that’s just the business finances. I haven’t even told you about his personal money problems.”

“Don’t most CEOs build a firewall between their corporate and personal finances?” asked Rook.

Damn good question. He’s finally acting like a reporter, thought Nikki, so she jumped aboard. “I always thought the idea was to structure things so a failure in business doesn’t wipe out the personal and vice versa.”

“And that’s how I built it when I took over his family finances, too. But, you see, both sides of the firewall were blazing cash. You see . . .” A sober look came over him and his young face gained twenty years. “Now, I truly need assurance this is off the record. And won’t leave this room.”

“I can promise that,” said Rook.

“I can’t,” said Detective Heat. “I told you. This is a homicide investigation.”

“I see,” he said. And then he took the plunge. “Matthew Starr indulged some personal habits that compromised his personal fortune. He did damage.” Noah paused then took the plunge. “First, he was a compulsive gambler. And by that, I mean losing gambler. He not only hemorrhaged cash to casinos from Atlantic City to Mohegan Sun, he bet the horses and on football with local bookies. He was in debt to some of these characters for serious money.”

Heat wrote a single word on her spiral pad: “Bookies.”

“And then, there were the prostitutes. Matthew had certain, um, tastes we don’t need to get into—unless you say so, I mean—and he satisfied them with very expensive, high-end call girls.”

Rook couldn’t help himself. “Now, that’s a marriage of terms that always tickles me, ‘high-end’ and ‘call girl.’ Like, is that your job status or a sexual position?” He earned their silent stares and muttered, “Sorry. Go on.”

“I can detail the burn rate of the money for you, but suffice it to say these and a few other habits ate away at him financially. Last spring we had to sell the family estate in the Hamptons.”

“Stormfall.” Nikki reflected on Kimberly Starr’s upset that the murder never would have happened if they had been away in the Hamptons. Now she understood its depth and irony.

“Yes, Stormfall. I don’t need to tell you about the bath we took on that property in this market. Sold it to some reality show celebrity and lost millions. The cash from the sale barely made a dent in Matthew’s debt. Things got so bad he ordered me to stop payments on his life insurance, which he let lapse against my advice.”

Heat jotted two new words. “No insurance.” “Did Mrs. Starr know about that?” In the periphery of her vision, she saw Rook lean forward in his chair.

“Yes, she did. I did my best to shelter Kimberly from the seedier details of Matthew’s spending, but she knew about the life insurance. I was there when Matthew told her.”

“And what was her reaction?”

“She said . . .” He paused. “You have to understand, she was upset.”

“What did she say, Noah? Her exact words, if you remember.”

“She said, ‘I hate you. You’re not even any good to me dead.’”

In the car on the ride back to the precinct, Rook went right to the grieving widow. “Come on, Detective Heat, ‘No good to me dead’? You talk about gathering information that paints a picture. What about this portrait we’re seeing of Samantha the Lap Dancer?”

“But she knew there was no life insurance. Where’s the motive?”

He grinned and needled her again. “Gee, I don’t know, but my advice is to keep asking questions and see where they lead.”

“Bite me.”

“Oh, are you talking tough with me now that you have other irons in the fire?”

“I’m talking tough because you are an ass. And I don’t get what you mean by other irons.”

“I mean Noah Paxton. I didn’t know whether to throw a bucket of water on you or fake a cell phone call to leave you two alone.”

“This is why you’re a magazine writer who only *plays* cop. Your imagination is greater than your grasp of facts.”

He shrugged. “Guess I was wrong.” Then he smiled that smile, the one that made her face flush. And there she was again, feeling this torment over Rook for something she should have laughed off. Instead, she popped in her earbud and speed-dialed Raley.

“Rales, it’s me.” She angled her head toward Rook and sounded brisk and formal, so he wouldn’t miss her meaning, even though she did radiate subtext. “I want you to run a background on Matthew Starr’s financial guy. Name’s Noah Paxton. Just see what kicks out, priors wants, the usual.”

After she hung up, Rook looked amused. This was going nowhere she liked, but she had to say it. “What.” And when he didn’t answer, “What?”

“You forgot to have him run a check on Paxton’s cologne.” And then he opened a magazine and read.

Detective Raley looked up from his computer when Heat and Rook came into the bullpen. “That guy you wanted me to run, Noah Paxton?”

“Yeah? You got something?”

“Not so far. But he called for you just now.”

Nikki avoided the playground look she was getting from Rook and surveyed the stack of messages on her desk. Noah Paxton’s was on top. She didn’t pick it up. Instead, she asked Raley if Ochoa had checked in. He was on Kimberly Starr surveillance. The widow was spending the afternoon at Bergdorf Goodman.

“I hear shopping is a balm for the bereaved,” said Rook. “Or maybe the merry widow is returning a few designer rags for ready cash.”

When Rook disappeared into the men’s room, Heat dialed Noah Paxton. She had nothing to hide from Rook; she just didn’t want to deal with his preadolescent taunts. Or see that smile that chapped her ass. She cursed the mayor for whatever payback made her have to deal with him.

When Paxton got on the line, he said, “I located those life insurance documents you said you wanted to see.”

“Good, I’ll send someone over.”

“I also got a visit from those forensic accountants you were talking about. They copied all my data and left. You weren’t kidding.”

“Your tax dollars at work.” She couldn’t resist adding, “You do pay your taxes?”

“Yes, but you don’t have to take my word for it. Your CPAs with badges and guns look like they’ll be able to tell you.”

“Count on it.”

“Listen, I know I wasn’t the most cooperative.”

“You did all right. After I threatened you.”

“I want to apologize for that. I’m finding I don’t do well with grief.”

“You wouldn’t be the first, Noah,” said Nikki. “Trust me.”

She sat alone that night at the center row of the movie theater laughing and munching popcorn. Nikki Heat was transfixed, swept up in an innocent story and spellbound by the eye candy of digital animation. Like a house tied to a thousand balloons, she was transported. Just over ninety minutes later she carried the weight again on her walk home in the mugginess of the heat wave, which brought fusty odors up out of subway grates and, even in the dark, radiated the day’s swelter off buildings as she passed them.

At times like these, without the work to hide in, without the martial arts to quiet it, the replay always came. It had been ten years, and yet it was also last week and last night and all of them thatched together. Time didn’t matter. It never did when she replayed *The Night*.

It was her first Thanksgiving break from college since her parents divorced. Nikki had spent the day shopping with her mother, a Thanksgiving Eve tradition transformed into a holy mission by her mom’s new singleness. This was a daughter determined to make this not so much the best Thanksgiving ever, but as close to normal as could be achieved given the empty chair at the head of the table and the ghosts of happier years.

The two squeezed around each other as they always had in the New York apartment-sized kitchen that night, making pies for the next day. Over tandem rolling pins and chilled dough, Nikki defended her desire to change majors from English to Theater. Where were the cinnamon sticks? How could they have forgotten the cinnamon sticks? Ground cinnamon never flew in her mother’s holiday pies. She grated

her own from a stick, and how could they have overlooked that on their list?

Nikki felt like a lotto winner when she found a jar of them on the spice aisle at the Morton Williams on Park Avenue South. For insurance, she took out her cell phone and called the apartment. It rang and rang. When the message machine kicked on, she wondered if her mom couldn't hear the phone over her mixer. But then she picked up. Over the squeal of recorder feedback she apologized but she had been wiping butter off her hands. Nikki hated the sharp reverb of the answering machine, but her mother never knew how to turn that damn thing off without disconnecting. Last call before closing, did she need anything else from the market? She waited while her mom carried the portable to check on evaporated milk.

And then Nikki heard glass crash. And her mother's scream. Her limbs went weak and she called for her mom. Heads turned from the check stands. Another scream. As she heard the phone on the other end drop, Nikki dropped the jar of cinnamon sticks and ran to the door. Damn, the in door. She brute-forced it open and ran out in the street, nearly getting clipped by a delivery guy on a bicycle. Two blocks away. She held the cell phone to her ear as she ran, pleading for her mom to say something, pick up the phone, what's wrong? She heard a man's voice, sounds of a scuffle. Her mother's whimper and her body dropping next to the phone. A *tab-tang* of metal bouncing on the kitchen floor. One block to go. A clink of bottles in the fridge door. The snap-hiss of a pop top. Footsteps. Silence. And then, her mother's weak and failing moan. And then just a whisper. "Nikki . . ."