
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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FOUR

Nikki didn't go home following the movie after all. She stood on the sidewalk in the warm, spongy air of the summer night looking up at her apartment, the one where she had lived as a girl and that she had left to go to college in Boston, and then left again on an errand to buy cinnamon sticks because ground wouldn't do. The only thing up there in that two-bedroom was solitude without peace. She could be nineteen again walking into a kitchen where her mother's blood was pooling under the refrigerator, or, if she could bat the image balloons away, she could catch some news on the tube and hear about more crimes—heat-related, the Team Coverage would say. Heat-related crime. There was a time when that had made Nikki Heat smile.

She weighed texting Don, to see if her combat trainer was up for a beer and some close-quarter bedroom grapples, against the alternative of letting some late night comic in a suit help her escape without the crowded bathroom in the morning. There was another alternative.

Twenty minutes later, in her empty precinct squad room, the detective swiveled in her chair to contemplate the white board. She already had it burnished in her head, all the elements-to-date pasted and scrawled inside that frame which did not yet reveal a picture: the list of fingerprint matches; the green five-by-seven index card with its bullet points of Kimberly Starr's alibis and prior lives; photos of Matthew Starr's body where he hit the sidewalk; photos from the M.E. of the punch bruising on Starr's torso with the distinctive hexagonal mark left by a ring.

She rose and walked up to the ring mark photo. More than studying its size and shape, the detective listened to it, knowing that at any time any piece of evidence could gain a voice. This photo, above all

other puzzle pieces on the board, was whispering to her. It had been in her ear all day, and its whisper was the song that had drawn her to the squad room in the stillness of night so she could hear it clearly. What it whispered was a question: “Why would a killer, who tossed a man over a balcony also beat him with nonlethal blows?” These bruises weren’t random contusions from any scuffle. They were precise and patterned, some even overlapping. Don, her combat boxing instructor, called it “painting” your opponent.

One of the first things Nikki Heat had implemented when she took command of her homicide unit was a system to facilitate information sharing. She logged on the server and opened the read-only file OCHOA. Scrolling through pages, she came to his witness interview with the doorman at the Guilford. Love that Ochoa, she thought. His keyboard skills are crap, but he took great notes and asked the right questions.

Q: Had vic lef bdg anytm drng curse of mornng?

A: N.

Nikki closed Ochoa’s file and looked at the clock. She could text her boss, but he might not see it. Like if he was sleeping. Drumming her fingers on the phone was only making it later, so she punched his number. On the fourth ring Heat cleared her throat, preparing to leave a voice mail, but Montrose picked up. His hello was not sleepy and she could hear the TV blasting the weather forecast. “Hope it’s not too late to call, Captain.”

“If it is too late, it’s too late to hope. What’s up?”

“I came in to screen that surveillance cam video from the Guilford and it’s not here yet. Do you know where it is?”

Her boss covered the phone and said something muffled to his wife. When he came back to Nikki, the TV sound was off. He said, “I got a call tonight during dinner from the attorney representing their residents board. This is a building with wealthy tenants sensitive about privacy issues.”

“Do they have issues with their fellow tenants hurtling past their windows?”

“You trying to convince *me*? For them to give it up it will take a court order. I’m looking at the clock and thinking we’ll wait to find a judge to issue one in the morning.” He heard her sigh because she made sure he did. Heat couldn’t stand effectively losing another day waiting for a court order. “Nikki, get some sleep,” he said with his usual gentle touch. “We’ll get it for you sometime tomorrow.”

Of course the skipper was right. Waking a judge to cut a warrant was capital you spent on high-priority matters against a ticking clock. To most judges this was just another homicide, and she knew better than to push Captain Montrose to squander a chip like that. So she switched her desk lamp off.

Then she switched it back on. Rook was pals with a judge. Horace Simpson was a poker pal at the weekly game she always ducked when Rook invited her. Simpson was not as sexy a name drop as Jagger, but last she heard, none of the Stones was issuing warrants.

But hang on, she thought. Eager was one thing, owing a favor to Jameson Rook was another. And besides, she had overheard him boasting to Roach he had a dinner date with that groupie in the halter who crashed Nikki’s crime scene. At this hour, Heat might be interrupting the application of his autograph to a new and more exciting body part.

So she picked up the phone and dialed Rook’s cell.

“Heat,” he said with no surprise. It was more a shout-out, like on *Cheers* when they’d holler, “Norm!” She listened for background noise, but why? Did she expect Kenny G and a champagne cork?

“Is this a bad time?”

“The caller ID says you’re at the precinct.” Evasion. Writer Monkey wasn’t answering her question. Maybe if she threatened the Zoo Lockup.

“A cop’s work is never done, and all that. Are you writing?”

“I’m in a town car. Just had an awesome meal at Balthazar.” Then silence. She had called to screw with him, how did her head end up being the one messed with?

“You can give me your Zagat rating some other time, this is a business call,” she told him, even as she wondered if his halter groupie knew not to wear cutoff jeans to a bistro, SoHo hip or otherwise. “I called to tell you don’t come in for the morning meeting. It’s off.”

“Off? That’s a first.”

“The plan was for us to prep for a sit-down with Kimberly Starr tomorrow morning. That meeting’s in question now.”

Rook sounded beautifully alarmed. “How come? We need to get with her.” She loved the urgency in his voice more than she felt guilty for playing him.

“The whole reason to see her is to screen surveillance pictures from the Guilford yesterday, but I can’t get access to the surveillance tape without a warrant, and good luck reaching a judge tonight.” Heat envisioned underwater video of a big mouth bass opening wide for the miracle lure on one of those sport fishing in-fomercials she saw too many of on her sleepless nights.

“I know a judge.”

“Forget it.”

“Horace Simpson.”

Now Nikki was up, pacing the length of the bull pen, trying to keep the grin out of her voice as she said, “Listen to me, Rook. Stay out of this.”

“I’ll call you back.

“Rook, I am telling you no,” she said in her best command voice.

“I know he’s still up. Probably watching his soft-core porn channel.” And then Nikki heard the woman giggle in the background just as Rook hung up. Heat had gotten just what she wanted, but it somehow didn’t feel like the win-win she’d envisioned. And why did she care? she asked herself yet again.

At ten o’clock the next morning, in the stickiness of what the tabloids were calling “The Summer of Simmer,” Nikki Heat, Roach, and Rook met under the Guilford canopy holding two sets of twelve still frames from the lobby surveillance camera. Heat left Raley and Ochoa to show one array to the doorman while she and Rook entered the building for their appointment with Kimberly Starr.

As soon as the elevator doors closed, he started in. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“Why should I thank you? I specifically told you not to call that

judge. As usual, you do what you please, meaning the opposite of what I say.”

He paused to absorb the truth of that and said, “You’re welcome.” Then he broke out that shit-eater of his, “It’s the subtext thing. Oo, the air is thick with it this morning, Detective Heat.” And was he even looking at her? No, he was tilted back enjoying the up-count of LED numbers, yet she still felt all X-rayed and naked and at a loss for words. The soft bell chimed a rescue signal on six. Damn him.

When it was Noah Paxton who opened the front door of Kimberly Starr’s apartment, Nikki made a mental note to find out if the widow and the accountant were sleeping together. On an open murder case everything went on the table, and what belonged more on the “What If” list than a trophy wife with an appetite for cash and the man who handled the money hatching a pillow-talk conspiracy? But she let it go by saying, “This is a surprise.”

“Kimberly’s running late from her beauty appointment,” said Paxton. “I was dropping off some documents for her to sign and she called to see if I’d keep you entertained until she got here.”

“Nice to see she’s focused on finding her husband’s killer,” said Rook.

“Welcome to my world. Trust me, Kimberly doesn’t do focus.” Detective Heat tried to read his tone. Was it true exasperation or cover?

“While we’re waiting, I want you to look at some pictures.” Heat found the same tapestry chair as she had on her last visit and took out a manila envelope. Paxton sat opposite her on the sofa, and she dealt two rows of four-by-six prints on the red lacquer coffee table in front of him. “Look carefully at each of these people. Tell me if any of them looks familiar.”

Paxton studied each of the dozen photos. Nikki did what she always did during a photo array, studied the studier. He was methodical, moving right to left, top row, then bottom, no inordinate pauses, all very even. Without any sense of desire, she wondered if he was like that in bed and once again thought about her untaken road to the suburbs and more pleasant routines. When Paxton was done, he said, “I’m sorry, but I don’t recognize any of these people.” And then he said

what everybody said when they came up empty. “Is one of these the killer?” And he looked again, as they all did, wondering which one did it, as if they could tell by looking.

“Can I ask an obvious question?” said Rook as Heat slid her photos back in the envelope. As usual, he didn’t wait for permission to shoot his mouth off. “If Matthew Starr was so broke, why didn’t he just sell off some of his stuff? I’m looking around at all this antique furniture, the art collection . . . That chandelier alone could fund an emerging nation for about a year.” Heat looked at the Italian porcelain chandelier, the French sconces, the floor-to-cathedral ceiling display of framed paintings, the gilded Louis XV mirror, the ornate furniture, and thought, Then again, sometimes Writer Monkey came out with a gem.

“Look, I don’t feel comfortable talking about this.” Then he glanced over Nikki’s shoulder as if Kimberly Starr might come walking in.

“It’s a simple question,” said the detective. She knew she’d regret giving the props to Rook but added, “And a good one. And you’re the money man, right?”

“I wish it were that simple.”

“Try me. Because I hear you telling me how broke the man was, company imploding, personal money leaking like an Alaskan oil tanker, and then I look at all this. What’s this worth, anyway?”

“That I can answer,” he said. “I.T.E., forty-eight to sixty million.”

“I.T.E.?”

Rook answered that. “In today’s economy.”

“Even at a fire sale, forty-eight mill solves a lot of problems.”

“I’ve opened the books to you, I’ve explained the financial picture, I’ve looked at your pictures, isn’t that enough?”

“No, and you know why?” With her forearms on her knees, she leaned forward to him and bored in. “Because there is something you’re not wanting to say, and I will hear it here or at the precinct.”

She gave him space to have whatever his internal dialogue was, and after a few seconds he said, “It just feels wrong to dump on him in his own home after he just died.” She waited again and he let go. “Matthew had a monster ego. You have to have one to accomplish what he

did, but his was off the chart. His narcissism made this collection bulletproof.”

“But he was in financial quicksand,” she said.

“Which is exactly the reason he ignored my advice—advice hell, my hounding—to piece it off. I wanted him to sell before bankruptcy creditors went after it, but this room was his palace. Proof to him and the world he was still king.” Now that it was out, Paxton became more animated and paced along the walls. “You saw the offices yesterday. No way Matthew would meet a client there. So he brought them here so he could negotiate from his throne surrounded by his little Versailles. The Starr Collection. He loved big shots standing over one of these Queen Anne chairs and asking if it was OK to sit. Or looking at a painting and knowing what he paid for it. And if they didn’t ask, he made sure to tell them. Sometimes I hid my face, it was so embarrassing.”

“So, what happens to all this now?”

“Now, of course, I can start liquidation. There are debts to pay, not to mention Kimberly’s tastes to support. I think she’ll be more prone to lose a few knickknacks to maintain her lifestyle.”

“And after you pay the debts, will there be enough to make up for her husband not having life insurance?”

“Oh, I don’t think Kimberly will need to throw any telethons,” said Paxton.

Nikki processed that as she wandered the room. Last time she visited, it was a crime scene. Now she was simply taking in its opulence. The crystal, the tapestries, the Kentian bookcase with fruit and flower carvings . . . She saw a painting she liked, a Raoul Dufy yachting scene, and leaned in for a closer look. The Boston Museum of Fine Art was a ten-minute walk from her dorm when Nikki attended Northeastern. Although the hours she spent there as an art lover did not qualify her as an art expert, she recognized some of the works Matthew Starr had collected. They were expensive, but to her eye, the room was a two-story grab bag. Impressionists hung beside Old Masters; 1930s German poster art rubbed elbows with an Italian religious triptych from the 1400s. She lingered before a John Singer Sargent study for one of her favorite paintings, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*. Though it was a preliminary sketch in oil, one of the many Sargent made before each

finished painting, she found herself transfixed by the familiar little girls, so wonderfully innocent in their white play dresses, lighting Chinese lanterns in a garden in the delicate glow of twilight. And then she wondered what it was doing beside the brash Gino Severini, a pricey, no doubt, but gaudy canvas of oil and crushed sequins. “Every other collection I’ve seen has a . . . I don’t know, theme to it, or a common feel or, what am I trying to say . . . ?”

“Taste?” said Paxton. Now that he’d crossed his line, it was a free-fire zone. Even so, he lowered his voice to a hush and looked around as if he would be ducking lightning bolts for speaking ill of the dead. But speak ill he did. “If you’re looking to see rhyme or reason to this collection, you won’t, due to one unavoidable fact. Matthew was a vulgarian. He didn’t know art. He knew price.”

Rook came up beside Heat and said, “I think if we keep looking we’ll find a *Dogs Playing Poker*,” which made her laugh. Even Paxton indulged himself a chuckle. They all stopped when the front door opened and Kimberly Starr breezed in.

“Sorry I’m late.” Heat and Rook stared at her, barley masking disbelief and judgment. Her face was swollen from Botox or some other series of cosmetic injections. Redness and bruising highlighted the unnatural swelling of her lips and smile lines. Her brow and forehead was marked with deep pink speed bumps that filled wrinkle lines and seemed to be growing before their eyes. The woman looked as if she had fallen face-first into a hornet’s nest. “The traffic lights were out on Lexington. Damn heat wave.”

“I left the papers on the desk in the study,” said Noah Paxton. He already had his briefcase in one hand and the other on the doorknob. “I have a lot of loose ends to attend to at the office. Detective Heat, if you need me for anything, you know how to find me.”, The eye roll he gave Nikki behind Kimberly’s back threw water on Heat’s trophy wife/accountant sleeping together hypothetical, although she would still check it out.

Kimberly and the detective took their identical seats in the living room from the day of the murder. Rook avoided the toile wingchair and sat on the couch with Mrs. Starr. Probably so he wouldn’t have to look at her, thought Nikki.

The face work wasn't the only change. She was out of her Talbots and into Ed Hardy, a black tank dress with a large tattoo print of a red rose and the legend "Dedicated To The One I Love" in biker scroll. At least the widow was in black. Kimberly came at her brusquely, like this was some intrusion on the rest of her day. "Well? You said you have something for me to look at?"

Heat didn't personalize. Her style was to assess not judge. Her assessment was that, personal grief modality aside, Kimberly Starr was treating her like the hired help, and she needed to reverse that power dynamic and fast. "Why did you lie to me about your whereabouts at the time of your husband's murder, Mrs. Starr?"

The woman's swollen face was still capable of registering some emotions, and fear was one of them. Nikki Heat liked the look. "What do you mean? Lie? Why would I lie?"

"I'll get to that when I'm ready. First, I want to know where you were between one and two P.M. since you were not at Dino-Bites. You lied."

"I didn't lie. I was there."

"You dropped your son and nanny off and left. I already have witnesses. Should I ask the nanny, also?"

"No. That's true, I left."

"Where were you, Mrs. Starr? And this time I'd advise you to be truthful."

"All right. I was with a man. I was embarrassed to tell you."

"Tell me now. What do you mean with a man?"

"God, you're a bitch. I was sleeping with this guy, OK? Happy?"

"What's his name?"

"You can't be serious."

The face Nikki gave her could still show the full range of expression. It told her she was quite serious. "And don't say Barry Gable, he says you stood him up." Heat watched Kimberly's mouth go slack. "Barry Gable. You know, the man who assaulted you on the street? The one you told Detective Ochoa must have been a purse snatcher and that you didn't know him?"

"I was having an affair. My husband just died. I was embarrassed to say."

“So if you’re over your shyness, Kimberly, tell me about this other affair so I can verify your whereabouts. And, as I’m sure you just figured out, I will check.”

Kimberly gave her the name of a doctor, Cory Van Peldt. Yes, it was the truth, she said, and yes, it was the same doctor she had seen this morning. Heat had her spell his name and wrote it on her pad along with his number. Kimberly said she met him when she went in for a facial assessment two weeks ago, and they had this magic thing. Heat was betting the magic was in his pants and was his wallet, but she knew better than to say so. She prayed Rook had the same sense.

As long as things were in a hostile vein, Nikki decided to press on. In a few minutes she would need Kimberly’s cooperation with the photos and wanted her to think twice about lying, or be so rattled she’d do it poorly if she did. “A lot of things can’t be taken at face value with you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You tell me, Laldomina.”

“Excuse me?”

“And Samantha.”

“Hey, don’t you start with that, nuh-uh.”

“Wow, that’s cool. You sounded pure Long Island.” She turned to Rook. “See what stress does? All that preppy posing falls away.”

“First of all, my legal name is Kimberly Starr. There’s no crime in changing a name.”

“Help me out: Why Samantha? I’m picturing you with your natural color and see you more as a Tiffany or Crystal.”

“You cops, you always loved to give us girls a hard time for getting by any way we could. People do what they gotta do, ya know?”

“That’s why we’re having this conversation. To find out who did what.”

“If that means did I kill my husband . . . God, I can’t believe I just said that . . . The answer is no.” She waited for some response from Heat, and Nikki didn’t give it. Let her wonder, she thought.

“My husband changed his name, too, did you know that? In the eighties. He took a branding seminar and decided what was holding him back was his name. Bruce DeLay. He said the words construction and DeLay weren’t the best selling tool, so he researched names that

would be brand-positive. You know, upbeat and inspiring confidence. He made a list, names like Champion and Best. He picked Star and added the extra r so it wouldn't sound fake."

Much as she had the day before, when she'd crossed from his opulent lobby into his ghost-town offices, Heat watched another chunk of Matthew Starr's public image crack and drop off. "How did he end up with Matthew?"

"Research. He did focus groups to see what name people trusted that went with his looks. So what if I changed mine, too? BFD, ya know?"

Detective Heat decided she had gotten as much as she was going to get out of this line of questions and was happy at least to have a fresh alibi to check. She took out her photo array. As she began to lay down the pictures and tell her to take her time, Kimberly interrupted her on the third shot.

"This man here. I know him. That's Miric."

Nikki felt the tingle she got when a domino was tipping, ready to fall. "And how do you know him?"

"He was Matt's bookie."

"Is Miric a first or last name?"

"You're all about names today, aren't you?"

"Kimberly, he might have killed your husband."

"I don't know which name. He was just Miric. Polish dude, I think. Not sure."

Nikki had her examine the rest of the array, without any other hits. "And you're positive your husband placed bets with this man."

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be sure of that?"

"When Noah Paxton looked at these pictures, he didn't recognize him. If he's paying the bills, wouldn't he know him?"

"Noah? He refused deal with the bookmaking. He had to give Matthew the cash but looked the other way." Kimberly said she didn't know Miric's address or phone number. "No, I only saw him when he came to the door or showed up at a restaurant."

The detective would double-check Starr's desk and personal diary or his BlackBerry for some coded entry or recent call list. But a name and face and occupation was a good start.

As she squared her stack of photos to put away, she told Kimberly she had thought she didn't know about her husband's gambling.

"Come on, a wife knows. Just like I knew about his women. Do you want to know how much Flagyl I took in the last six years?"

No, Nikki did not care to know. But she did ask her for any names she recalled of her husband's past lovers. Kimberly said most of them seemed casual, a few one-nighters and weekends at casinos, and she didn't know their names. Only one got serious, and that was with a young marketing executive on his staff, an affair that lasted six months and ended about three years ago, after which the executive left the company. Kimberly gave Nikki the woman's name and got her address off a love letter she had intercepted. "You can keep that if you want. I only held onto it in case we got divorced and I needed to squeeze his balls." With that, Nikki left her to grieve.

They found Roach waiting for them in the lobby. Both had their coats off, and Raley's shirt was soaked through again. "You've got to start wearing undershirts, Raley," said Heat as she walked up.

"And how about switching to an Oxford?" added Ochoa. "Those polyester things you're wearing go see-through when you sweat."

"Turning you on, Ochoa?" asked Raley.

His partner jabbed back. "Much like your shirt, you see right through me."

Roach reported the same hit off the photo array when they showed it to the doorman. "We had to sort of pry it out of him," said Ochoa. "Doorman was a little embarrassed Miric slipped into the building. These guys always call up to the apartment before letting anybody in. He said he was taking a leak in the alley and must have missed him. But he did catch him coming out." Quoting from notes, the doorman described Miric as a "scrawny little ferret" who came by to see Mr. Starr from time to time but whose visits had become more frequent over the past two weeks.

"Plus we scored a bonus," said Raley. "This gentleman was coming out with ferret dude that day." He peeled off another shot from the array and held it up. "Looks like Miric brought some muscle."

Of course, Nikki's instincts had already been crackling about this other guy, the brooder, when she screened the lobby video that morning.

He was in a loose shirt, but she could tell he was a bodybuilder or at least spent a lot of his day at the weight rack. Under any other circumstances, she wouldn't have thought twice and would have assumed he was delivering air conditioners, probably one under each arm, from the looks of him. But the serene lobby of the Guilford wasn't the service entrance, and a grown man had been tossed off his balcony there that day. "Did the doorman give a name for this guy?"

Ochoa looked at notes again, "Only the nickname he gave him. Iron Man."

While the precinct ran Miric and Iron Man Doe through the computer, digitals of the pair were blast-sent to detectives and patrols. It was impossible for Heat's small unit to canvass every known bookie in Manhattan, even assuming Miric was a known, and wasn't from one of the other boroughs, or even Jersey. Plus a man like Matthew Starr might even use an exclusive betting service or the Internet—both of which he probably did—but if he was the volatile mix of desperation and invincibility Noah Paxton painted him to be, chances were he'd hit the street, as well.

So they spilt up to concentrate on known bookmakers in two zones. The Roach Coach got the tour of the Upper West Side in a radius around the Guilford, while Heat and Rook covered Midtown near the Starr Pointe headquarters, roughly Central Park South to Times Square.

"This is exasperating," said Rook after their fourth stop, a street vendor who suddenly decided he didn't speak English when Heat showed him her shield. He was one of several runners for the major bookies whose mobile food carts were a convenient one-stop for bets and kabobs. They were treated to eye-stinging smoke that swirled off his grill and found them wherever they moved, while the vendor furrowed his brow at the photos and ultimately shrugged.

"Welcome to police work, Rook. This is what I call the Street Google. We are the search engine; it's how it gets done."

As they drove to the next address, a discount electronics store on 51st, a front specializing more in bets than boom boxes, Rook said, "Have to tell you, a week ago, if you told me I'd be hitting the shawarma carts looking for Matthew Starr's bookie, I never would have believed it."

“You mean it doesn’t fit the image? This is where you and I come from different places. You write these magazine pieces, you’re all about selling the image. I’m all about looking behind it. I’m frequently disappointed but seldom wrong. Behind every picture hides the true story. You just have to be willing to look.”

“Yeah, but this guy was big. Maybe not elite-elite, but he was at least the bus and truck Donald Trump.”

“I always thought Donald Trump was the bus and truck Donald Trump,” she said.

“And who’s Kimberly Starr, the truckstop Tara Reid? If she’s the poor little rich girl, what’s she doing blowing ten grand on that face?”

“If I had to guess, she bought it with Barry Gable’s money.”

“Or she took it in trade with her new doctor boyfriend.”

“Trust me, I’ll find out. But a woman like Kimberly’s, not going to start clipping supermarket coupons and eating ramen one night a week. She’s all about prepping her face for her next season of *The Bachelor*.”

“If they’re holding it on *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.” She didn’t like herself for it but she laughed. It only encouraged him. “Or if she’s doing a remake of *Elephant Man*. Rook took guttural breaths and slurred, ‘I am not a suspect, I am a human being.’”

The radio call came when they were getting in the car after the discount electronics store dead end. Roach had spotted Miric in front of the Off Track Betting facility on West Seventy-second and was making a move, calling for back-up.

Heat slapped the gumball on the roof and told Rook to buckle up and hang on.

He beamed and actually said, “Can I work the siren?”