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# HEAT WAVE

RICHARD CASTLE

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HYPERION

NEW YORK

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## FIVE

**T**here is very little chance of a high-speed pursuit on any street in Midtown Manhattan. Detective Heat accelerated, then braked, eased forward, jerked the wheel hard right, and accelerated again, until she was forced to brake again in a matter of yards. As she continued like that, working the avenue uptown, her face was set in concentration, eyes darting to all mirrors, then to the sidewalk, then to the crosswalk, then to the double-parked delivery guy who swung his van door open and almost became roadkill but for her experience and skill at the wheel. The siren and light meant nothing in this traffic. Maybe to the pedestrians, but the traffic lanes were so packed even the drivers who cared enough to pull aside and make a hole had scant room to maneuver.

“Jeez, c’mon, move it,” shouted Rook from the passenger seat, at another taxi trunk sitting there in front of their windshield. His voice was dry from adrenaline, his words punctuated by air squeezed out against his seat belt with each sudden braking, which broke his syllables in two.

Heat maintained her tense composure. This was the live-action video game cops played every day in this borough, a race against the clock through an obstacle course of construction, stalls, jams, daredevils, idiots, sons-of-bitches, and the unaware. She knew Eighth would be all-stop south of Columbus Circle. Then, for once, gridlock worked in her favor. A stretch Hummer, also heading uptown, was blocking the cross-flow at 55th. Nikki gunned it through the sliver of daylight it created and pulled a sharp left. Taking advantage of the lighter traffic the Hummer block created, she sped crosstown to Tenth with Rook’s expletives and Ochoa’s radio chatter filling her ears.

Things improved, as she had projected, when she squealed around

the corner at Tenth. After a game of dodge 'em through the two-way intersection at West 57th, Tenth became Amsterdam Avenue and grew wider shoulders and a nice emergency lane up the middle that some drivers even respected. She was ripping it north with a little more speed, past the back of Lincoln Center, when the call came from Raley. He had custody of Miric. Ochoa was in pursuit of suspect two, on the run west on 72nd. "That would be Iron Man," she said, her first words since her instructions to Rook back in Times Square, to buckle up and hang on.

Ochoa was gasping into his walkie when she shot through 70th where Amsterdam and Broadway crossed at an X. "Sus . . . spect . . . running . . . west . . . approa . . . Now at Broadway . . ."

"He's heading for the subway station," Heat said to Rook, but more talking out loud.

"Crossing . . ." A loud car horn, and then . . . "Suspect crossing Broadway . . . to subway . . . station."

She keyed her radio. "Suspect description."

"Copy . . . white, male, two-twenty-five . . . red shirt over cammy . . . , pants . . . black shoes . . ."

To complicate things there were two station houses at the 72nd and Broadway subway: the old stone historic building on the south side and the newer glass-and-metal atrium station house just across the street to the north. Nikki pulled up to the old stone building. She knew the OTB sat mid-block on the north side of 72nd, so a fleeing Iron Man would likely duck into the closest station—the newer one—and Ochoa would be following there. Her idea was to cut off him off from escaping up the tunnel of this one.

"Stay in the car, I mean it," she called over her shoulder to Rook as she bailed out of the driver's side, hanging her shield around her neck. The MTA tunnels ran ten degrees warmer than street temps, and the air that rose up the from underground to greet her as she sprinted past the MetroCard machines toward the turnstiles was a mix of garbage funk and oven blast. Heat vaulted a turnstile with a sweaty hand that slipped on the stainless steel. She recovered her balance but landed in a low crouch and found herself looking up at the hulk in the red tank top and cammies as he crested the stairs.

"Police, freeze," she said.

Ochoa was coming up the steps behind him. Cut off from retreat, the big man broke around Heat for the turnstiles. She blocked him and he clawed her shoulder. She brought one hand up to break his grip at the wrist and, with the other, grabbed his tricep and pulled his back across the front of her body, so he couldn't reach her to land a punch. Then she grabbed his belt, hooked his ankle with hers, and dropped him on his back. He hit hard. As Heat heard the air come out of him, she scissored a leg over his neck and yanked his wrist toward her in what a certain ex-Navy Seal called an arm bar. He struggled to rise up but found himself staring into her gun.

"Go ahead," she said.

Iron Man laid his head back on the grimy tiles, and that was that.

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**"Not very quotable," said Rook on the drive back to the precinct.**

"I told you to wait in the car. You never wait in the car."

"I thought you might need help."

"From you?" She scoffed. "Wouldn't do to reinjure those tender ribs."

"You do need help. Writer help. You take down a character like that, and the best you can do is 'Go ahead?'"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Sorry, Detective, but I'm left sort of hanging. Like 'shave and a haircut' minus the all-important 'two bits.'" He glanced over his shoulder into the backseat, at the manacled Iron Man staring out the side window at a Flash Dancers ad on a cab top. "Although, plus ten for not saying, 'Make my day.'"

"As long as you're happy, Rook, I've done my job."

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**A column of fluorescent light cut into the dimness of the precinct observation booth as Jameson Rook stepped in to join Heat and her two detectives. "Got one for who wrote 'It's Raining Men.' Ready?" said Ochoa. Spirits were palpably lighter after the afternoon's arrests. One part come-down from the adrenaline, one part feeling this case would clear if their two prisoners did Matthew Starr.**

Rook crossed his arms and smirked. "Let me hear it."

"Dolly Parton."

"Oh," moaned Rook, "I knew I should have put money on this."

"Hint," said Raley.

"Living."

"Bigger hint," from Ochoa.

Rook was loving this and announced like a game show host, "This famous cowriter is a he and is on network television every day."

"Al Roker," shouted Raley.

"Excellent guess. No."

"Paul Shaffer," said Heat.

Rook couldn't hide his astonishment. "That's right. Was that a lucky guess, or did you know?"

"Your turn to guess." She flashed a smile that dropped as fast as it appeared. "Oh, and my prize for winning? You wait here in the Ob Room while I do my work."

Detective Heat kept the two suspects separated for their interrogations as a matter of practice. The two had been apart since their arrests, to prevent them from co-formulating stories and alibis. Her first session was with Miric, the bookie, who indeed had ferretlike qualities. He was a small man, five-four, with thin pasty arms that could have gone missing from a Mr. Potato Head. She selected him because he was the known person and, if there were such a thing, the brains of the two.

"Miric," she said, "that's Polish, right?"

"Polish-American," he said with the lightest trace of accent. "I came to this country in 1980 after this thing we called the Gdansk Shipyard strike."

"We, as in you and Lech Walesa?"

"That is right. *Solidarnosc!*, yes?"

"Miric, you were nine."

"No matter, is in the blood, yes?"

Less than a minute and Nikki had this guy down. A time-filler. An amiable who talks and talks but says nothing. If she kept up the ballet, she'd be there hours and come out with a headache and no information. So corral him as best she could, she decided.

“Do you know why we picked you up?”

“Is this like speeding ticket and officer asks you to tell him how fast you are going? I don’t think so.”

“You’ve been arrested before.”

“Yes, number of times. I think you have a list in there, right?” He nodded his long nose to the file on the metal tabletop in front of her and then looked at her. His eyes were set deep and so close together they almost crossed. Calling him a ferret might be complimentary.

“Why did you go to the Guilford day before yesterday?”

“The Guilford, on West 77th? Very nice building, that. A palace, yes?”

“Why were you there?”

“Was I?”

She slapped the flat of her hand down on the table and he jumped. Good, she thought, let’s change the tempo. “Let’s cut the bull, Miric. I have eyewitnesses and photographs. You and your goon went to see Matthew Starr and now he’s dead.”

“And you think I had something to do with this tragedy?”

Miric was a slippery one, a true slimebag, and, from her experience, the ripest type for divide-and-conquer. “I think you can be helpful here, Miric. Maybe whatever happened to Mr. Starr wasn’t your doing. Maybe your pal . . . Pochenko . . . got a little more excited than he was supposed to when you went to collect your debt. It happens. Did he get too excited?”

“Whatever you are talking about, I don’t know. I had an appointment to see Mr. Matthew Starr, of course. Why else would they allow me in such a wonderful building? But I went to his door and he did not answer.”

“So your statement is that you did not see Matthew Starr that day.”

“I don’t feel I need to repeat when I say so clearly.”

This guy had been through the mill too often, she thought. He knew all the moves. And none of his priors, though numerous, involved violence. Scams, cons, and bookmaking only. She shifted back to Iron Man. “This other man, Pochenko, he came with you?”

“The day I did not see Matthew Starr? He did come. You know that already, I bet, so there you go. You have good answer from me.”

“Why did you bring Pochenko to meet with Matthew Starr? To show him the wonderful building?”

Miric laughed, showing a tiny row of other teeth. “That’s a good one, I’ll remember that.”

“Then why? Why take such a big guy like that?”

“Oh, you know in this economy many people want to rob you on the streets. I sometimes carry sums of money and one can’t be too safe, yes?”

“You aren’t convincing me. I think you’re lying.”

Miric shrugged. “Think what you like, is free country. But I say this. You wonder if I killed Matthew Starr and I say, Why would I? Bad for business. Want to know my pet name for Matthew Starr? The ATM. Why would I pull plug on ATM?”

He gave her something to think about. Nonetheless, when she rose, she said, “One more thing. Hold out your hands.” He did. They were clean and pale, as if he had spent his days peeling potatoes in a washtub.

Nikki Heat compared notes with her crew while they moved Pochenko from his holding cell to Interrogation. “That Miric’s a piece of work,” said Ochoa. “You see critters like that covered in sawdust in bitty cages when you raid meth dealers.”

“OK, we agree on the ferret profile,” said Heat. “What do we come away with that’s useful?”

“I think he did it.”

“Rook, you say that about everyone we meet on this case. May I remind you of Kimberly Starr?”

“But I hadn’t seen this guy before. Or maybe it’s his muscle. That is what you guys call them, muscle?”

“Sometimes,” said Raley. “There’s also goon.”

“Or thug,” said Ochoa.

“Thug’s good,” continued Raley, “So’s badass.”

“Meat,” from Ochoa, and the two detectives alternated euphemisms in rapid-fire succession.

“Gangsta.”

“G.”

“Punk.”

“Bitch.”

“Gristle.”

“Knucks.”

“Ballbuster.”

“Bang-ah”

“But muscle works,” said Ochoa.

“Gets it said,” agreed Raley.

Rook had out his Moleskine notebook and a pen. “I gotta get some of these down before I forget.”

“You do that,” said Heat. “I’ll be in with the . . . miscreant.”

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**“Vitya Pochenko, you’ve been a busy boy since you came to this country.”** Nikki turned pages in his file, silent-reading as if she didn’t already know what was on them, and then closed it. His jacket was full of arrests for threats and violent acts, but no convictions. People either shied away from testifying against Iron Man or they left town. “You’ve gotten away clean. A lot. People either really like you, or they’re really afraid of you.”

Pochenko sat looking straight ahead with his eyes fixed on the two-way mirror. Not nervously checking himself, not like Barry Gable. No, he was fixed and focused on a point of his choosing. Not looking at her, not like he was even there with her. He seemed deep in his own mind and nowhere else. Detective Heat would have to change that.

“Your pal Miric mustn’t be afraid of you.” The Russian didn’t blink. “Not from what he just told me.” Still nothing. “He had some interesting things to say about what you did to Matthew Starr at the Guilford day before yesterday.”

Slowly, he unhooked his eyes from the ozone and rotated his head to face her. As he did, his neck twisted, revealing veins and tendons strung deep into bulky shoulders. He stared at her from underneath a thick ginger brow. At this angle in the downcast lighting he had a prize-fighter’s face with a telltale nose that curved in an unnatural flatness where it had been broken. She decided he had been handsome once before the hardness. With the brush cut, she could picture the boy of him on a soccer field or lofting a stick in a hockey rink. But the hardness

was what Pochenko was all about now, and whether it came from doing time in Russia or learning how not to do time, the boy was gone and all she saw in that room was what happens when you get very, very good at surviving very, very bad things.

Something like a smile formed in the deep creases at the corners of his mouth, but it never came. Then he spoke at last. "In the subway station when you were on top of me, I could smell you. Do you know what I'm talking about? Smelling you?"

Nikki Heat had been in all sorts of interrogations and interviews with every stripe of lowlife in God's creation and those too damaged to make the list. The wise guys and the crazies thought because she was a woman they could rattle her with some leering porn-movie trash talk. A serial killer once asked her to ride in the van so he could pleasure himself on the way to the penitentiary. Her armor was strong. Nikki had the investigator's greatest gift, distance. Or maybe it was disconnection. But Pochenko's casually spoken words along with the entitled look he was giving her, the intrusion of his casualness and the threat carried in those amber resin eyes, made her shudder. She held his gaze and tried not to engage.

"I see you do know." And then, most chilling of all, he winked. "I'm going to have that." Then he made wet air kisses at her and laughed.

Then Nikki heard something she had never heard in the Interrogation Room before. Muffled shouting from the observation booth. It was Rook, his voice smothered by soundproofing and double-pane glass, hollering at Pochenko. It sounded like he was shouting through a pillow, but she heard "... animal ... scumbag ... filthy mouth ...," followed by pounding on the glass. She turned over her shoulder to look. Hard to be nonchalant when the mirror is flexing and rattling. Then came the dampened shouts of Roach and it stopped.

Pochenko glanced from the mirror to her with an unsettled look. Whatever had gotten into Rook's pea brain and made him slip his leash in there, he had succeeded in undercutting the Russian's moment of intimidation. Detective Heat latched onto the opportunity and flipped the subject without comment.

"Let me see your hands," she said.

"What? You want my hands, come closer."

She stood, trying to gain height and distance and, most of all, dominance. “Put your hands flat on the table, Pochenko. Now.”

He decided he would choose when it was time, but he didn’t wait long. The shackles on one wrist clacked against the table edge, and then the shackles on the other, as he spread his palms on the cold metal. His hands were scuffed and swollen. A few knuckles were plumping into bruises, others were missing skin and wept where they had not yet scabbed over. On the middle finger of his right hand, there was a thick stripe of blanched skin and a cut. The kind a ring would leave.

“What happened here?” she said, relieved to feel in charge again.

“What, this? Is nothing.”

“Looks like a cut.”

“Yeah, I forgot to take my ring off before.”

“Before what?”

“Before my workout.”

“What workout at what gym? Tell me.”

“Who said anything about a gym?” And then his upper lip curled, and she instinctively took a step back, until she realized he was smiling.

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**Captain Montrose’s office was empty, so Nikki Heat ushered Rook inside** and pulled the glass door shut. “Just what the hell was that all about?”

“I know, I know, I lost it.”

“In the middle of my interrogation, Rook.”

“Did you hear what he was saying to you?”

“No. I couldn’t hear him over the pounding on the observation mirror.”

He looked away. “Pretty lame, huh?”

“I’d call it a first. If this were Chechnya, right now you’d be riding down the mountain feet-first on a goat.”

“Will you knock it off about Chechnya? I get one movie option and you pick, pick, pick at it.”

“Tell me you don’t have it coming.”

“This time, maybe. Can I say something?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I don’t know how you can stand doing this.”

“You kidding? It’s my job.”

“But it’s so . . . ugly.”

“War zones aren’t so much fun, either. Or so I’ve read.”

“War, not so good. But that’s just one part. In my job I get to move from place to place. It may be a war zone one time or riding in a Jeep with a black hood over my head to visit a drug cartel, but then I get a month in Portofino and Nice with rock stars and their toys, or I shadow a celebrity chef for a week in Sedona or Palm Beach. But you. This is . . . this is a sewer.”

“Is this the equivalent of ‘what’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?’ Because if it is, I’ll kick you in the balls to show you how not nice I can be. I like my job. I do what I do, and deal with the people I deal with, and here’s a headline for your article, writer boy: Criminals are scum.”

“Especially that G.”

She laughed. “Excellent research notes, Rook. You sound so street.”

“Oh, and by the way? No goats. Popular misconception. Up in the Caucasus with General Yamadayev, it was all horses. That’s how we rolled.”

When she watched him leave the room, she was surprised not to feel pissed anymore. How angry could you be at somebody who acted like he cared a little?

A half hour later, she sat with Raley, screening the surveillance video from the Guilford. Detective Heat did not look pleased. “Run it again,” she said. “And let’s watch every corner of the screen. Maybe we missed a piece of them coming back later.”

“What’s wrong?” Rook arrived behind them, his breath smelling of contraband espresso.

“It’s the damn time code.” She tapped her pen on the pale gray digital clock embedded on the bottom of the surveillance video. “It shows Miric and Pochenko arriving at 10:31 A.M. They go up the elevator, right? And come back down to the lobby roughly twenty minutes later.”

“Sure puts a big hole in Miric’s statement that Starr never answered his door. Unless it was a twenty-minute knock.”

“Ask me, the only thing that got knocked was Matthew Starr,” said Raley. “This had to be when Pochenko gave him a boxing lesson.”

“That’s not our problem, guys,” said Heat. “According to this, our

two Elvises left the building at 10:53 A.M., about two and a half hours before our victim was thrown off his balcony.” She tossed her pen onto the desktop in frustration. “So our two primes get cleared by the tape.”

“And they’ve lawyered up,” added Ochoa, looking at his BlackBerry. “They’re getting sprung now.”

From outside the security door, Heat stood with Roach and looked across the processing area as Miric and Pochenko collected their property. Of course Miric was the one who had the attorney on call, and when the lawyer caught Detective Heat’s eye, he didn’t like what he saw, so he got extra busy with paperwork.

“Guess I should cancel that search warrant for torn blue jeans at their apartments,” said Raley.

“No, don’t,” said Nikki. “I know what the time code says, but what’s the harm in checking? Details, gents. You’ll never regret being thorough.” And as Pochenko spotted her, she added, “In fact, add another item to Iron Man’s search warrant. A large ring.”

When Ochoa left to get the warrant processed, she gave an assignment to Raley. “I know it’s drudgery, but I want you to screen that lobby video again from the moment those jokers left until a half hour after Starr’s time of death. And do it in real time so we’re sure we don’t skip past them at high speed.”

Raley left to do his screening. Nikki stayed to watch Miric, his lawyer, and Pochenko head for the exit. The Russian lagged and split off from the other two, crossing to Heat. A uniform shadowed him so he stopped in a safe zone, a good yard away from her. He took his time looking at her head to toe, then said in a low whisper, “Relax. You’re gonna like it.” Then, with a shrug, “Or not.”

And then he left without looking back. Nikki waited until the exit door shut with Pochenko on the other side before she went back to work.