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# HEAT WAVE

RICHARD CASTLE

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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](mailto:psales@harpercollins.com).

*Book design by Shubhani Sarkar*

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## SIX

Nikki stepped into the rooftop bar of the Soho House and wondered what her friend had been thinking when she booked outdoor cocktails during a heat wave. Seven-thirty on a weeknight in summer was too light out to feel cool and too early for any action, especially on this stretch of Ninth Avenue. In the hipper-than-thou meatpacking district, seven-thirty was beyond *outré*. It was downright early bird.

Lauren Parry, who clearly wasn't bothered by any of that, flagged her from her street-view table where the canopy ended and the pool area began. "Is this too hot?" she said when Nikki arrived.

"No, this is fine." After they hugged, she added, "Who couldn't stand to sweat off a few pounds?"

"Well, sorr-ee. I spend my day in the morgue," said the medical examiner. "I grab all the warm I can get."

They ordered cocktails. Nikki went for a Campari and soda, craving something dry, sparkling, and, most of all, cold. Her friend stuck with her usual, a bloody Mary. When it came, Nikki observed that it was an ironic favorite for a coroner. "Why don't you break out, Lauren? This isn't Sunday brunch. Get one of those sake-tinis or a sex on the beach."

"Hey, you want to talk ironic drinks, that would be it. In my line of work, sex on the beach is usually what led to body under the pier."

"To life," said Nikki, and they both laughed.

Meeting her friend for a drink after work once a week was more than just cocktails and chill time. The two women had hit it off right away over Lauren's first autopsy, when she started at the M.E.'s office three years ago, but their weekly after-work ritual was really fueled by their professional bond. Despite cultural differences—Lauren came out of

the projects in St. Louis and Nikki grew up Manhattan middle-class—they connected on another level, as professional women navigating traditional male fields. Sure, Nikki enjoyed her occasional brew at the precinct-adjacent cop bar, but she was never about being one of the fellas, any more than she was about quilting bees or Goddess book clubs. She and Lauren clung to their camaraderie and the sense of safety they had crafted with each other, to have a time and place to share problems at work, largely political, and, yes, to decompress and let their hair down without having it be in a meat market or at a stitch and bitch.

Nikki asked, “Mind a little shop talk?”

“Hey, sister, on top of being cold all day, the people I hang out with don’t do much talking, so whatever the subject, bring it.”

Heat wanted to discuss Matthew Starr. She told Lauren she now understood how the victim got those torso bruises. She bullet-pointed her sessions with Miric and Pochenko, concluding by saying she had no doubt the bookie had his muscle man encourage the real estate developer to “prioritize” the repayment of his gambling debt. With experience talking, she added that, thanks to lawyers and stonewalling: Good luck making a case. What she wanted to know was if Lauren recalled any other marks that might be read as a separate event from the Russian’s work-over?

Lauren Parry was a marvel. She remembered every autopsy the way Tiger Woods could tell you every golf shot he made in every tournament—as well as his opponent’s. She said there were only two relevant indicators. First, a pair of uniquely shaped contusions on the deceased’s back, an exact match to the polished brass flip handles on the French doors leading to the balcony, probably where he was pushed outside with great force. Heat recalled Roach’s tour of the balcony crime scene and the powdered stone under the spot where the door handles had impacted the wall. And second, Starr had grip marks on both upper arms. The medical examiner air-demoed a thumb in each armpit, hands wrapped around the arms.

“My guess is it wasn’t much of a fight,” said Lauren. “Whoever did this picked up the victim, slammed him through those doors and then tossed him backwards to the street. I examined his legs and ankles

closely and I'm certain Mr. Starr never even touched the railing when he went over."

"No other chafing or cuts, no defensive wounds or marks?"

Lauren shook her head. "Although, there was one irregularity."

"Out with it, girl, next to inconsistency, irregularity is the detective's best friend."

"I was detailing those punch bruises, you know the ones with the probable ring mark? And there was one that was an exact match for the others but no ring mark."

"Maybe he took it off."

"In the middle of a beating?"

Nikki took a long pull on her drink, feeling the carbonation bite her tongue as she stared through the Plexi barrier beside her at the avenue seven floors below. She didn't know what Lauren's information meant, but she got out her notebook and made a note: "One punch, no ring."

They ordered some arancini and a plate of olives, and by the time their finger foods arrived they were on to other subjects: Lauren was teaching a seminar at Columbia in the fall; her dachshund, Lola, got picked for a dog food commercial when she took her to the dog run last weekend; Nikki had a week off at the end of August and was thinking of Iceland and did Lauren want to come. "Sounds cold," she said. But also she said she'd think about it.

Nikki's cell phone vibed and she looked at the caller ID.

"What's up, Detective," Laura asked, "are you going to have to deploy or something? Maybe rappel down the face of the building and spring into some two-fisted action?"

"Rook" was all she said and held up the phone.

"Take it. I don't mind."

"It's Rook," she reiterated, as if it required no further explanation. Nikki let his call drop to voice mail.

"Forward him to my phone," said Lauren, stirring her bloody Mary. "You could do worse than Jameson Rook. That man is doable."

"Oh, sure, that's just what I need. The ride-along isn't bad enough without putting that in the mix." When her phone pulsed to indicate voice mail, she pressed the button for a fetch and held the phone to her

ear. "Huh. He says he's come upon something big about the Matthew Starr case and needs me to see it . . ." She held up a staying palm to Lauren as she listened to the rest and then hung up.

"What's the development?"

"Didn't say. He said he couldn't talk now but to come to his place right away, and left his address."

"You should go," said Lauren.

"I'm almost afraid to. Knowing him, he's probably made citizen's arrests of anybody who knew Matthew Starr."

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**When the industrial strength elevator reached his loft, Rook was waiting for her on the other side of the accordion mesh doors. "Heat. You actually came."**

"Your message said you had something to show me."

"I do," he said and strode from the entry and disappeared around a corner. "This way."

She followed him into his designer kitchen. At the other end of it, in the great room, as the cable designer shows called those open spaces that merged living rooms and dining rooms off an overlooking kitchen, there was a poker table, a real poker table with a felt top. And it was surrounded by . . . poker players. She came to a halt. "Rook, there's nothing you need to show me here about the case at all, is there?"

"Say, you *are* a detective, aren't you?" He shrugged and gave a little impish grin. "Would you have come if I had just plain invited you to play poker?"

Nikki got hit with a major turn-around twinge, but then the poker crowd rose to greet her and there she was.

As Rook escorted her into the room, he said, "If you really, really need a work reason to be here, you can thank the man who got you your warrant for the Guilford. Judge, this is Detective Nikki Heat, NYPD."

Judge Simpson looked a bit different in a yellow polo shirt, hunkered behind tall stacks of poker chips instead of his bench. "I'm winning," he said as he shook her hand. A network news anchor she and the rest of America admired was also there, with her filmmaker husband.

The anchorwoman said she was glad a cop was there because she had been robbed. “And by a judge,” said her husband. Rook placed Nikki in the empty seat between him and the newswoman, and before Nikki knew it, the anchor’s Oscar-winning husband was dealing her a hand.

It was a low-stakes game, she was relieved to discover, and then that turned to worry they had lowered the ante in deference to her pay grade. But it was clear this was more about fun than money. Although winning still mattered, especially to the judge. Seeing him out of his robe for the first time, the overhead light shining on his bald head, the manic obsession he brought to his play, Nikki couldn’t shake the comparison to another Simpson. She would have given up a whole pot just to hear the judge say “D’oh!”

After the deal of the third hand, the lights dipped out and came back up. “Here we go,” said Nikki. “Mayor said we’d have rolling brown-outs.”

“How many days is it for this heat wave?” asked the filmmaker.

“This is day four,” said his wife. “I interviewed a meteorologist and he said it’s not a heat wave unless it’s three consecutive days above ninety degrees.”

A woman appeared in the kitchen and added, “And if the heat lasts more than four days, consult your doctor immediately.” The room burst into laughter, and the woman stepped from behind the counter, taking a deep, theatrical bow, complete with a graceful upward arm sweep. Rook had told her about his mother. Of course, she already knew who Margaret was. You don’t win Tony Awards and show up in the *Style* section and *Vanity Fair* party collages as often she did and go unnoticed. In her sixties now, Margaret had gone from the ingénue to the grand dame (although Rook once confided in Nikki that his spelling was grand d-a-m-n). The lady exuded every bit of the joyful diva, from her opening line to the way she entered the great room to take Nikki’s hand and fuss about how very much she had heard about her from Jamie.

“And I’ve heard a lot about you,” Nikki replied.

“Believe it, all, darling. And if it’s not true, when I get to hell, I’ll sort it out there.” Then she swept—no, there was no more accurate way to describe it—she swept back into the kitchen.

Rook smiled at Nikki. "As you can see, I believe in truth in advertising."

"So I'm learning." She heard ice plinking in a rocks glass and saw Margaret uncapping a bottle of Jameson. Yes, she thought, I'm learning a lot, Jameson Rook.

The news anchor appealed to Rook's sense of civic responsibility and he killed his air-conditioning. Nikki looked up from her cards, and her eyes followed his shorts and *U-2 3D* T-shirt as he moved barefoot across the oriental rug to the far wall. He bent to open the sash windows that gave onto his penthouse view of Tribeca, and when Nikki's eyes drifted off him, it was to the hulk of a distant building, RiverStarr on the Hudson, backlit by Jersey City. The structure was dark, except for the red aviation lamp atop an idle crane balanced above girders awaiting skin. They'd wait a long time.

Margaret took her son's chair beside Nikki and said, "It is a very good view." And as Rook bent to open the next window, the doyenne leaned in to whisper, "I'm his mother and even I think it's a great view. But that's just me taking credit." And then, just to be clear: "Jamie got my ass. It got a marvelous review in *Oh! Calcutta!*"

Two hours later, after Rook, then the news anchor, and then her husband folded, Nikki won yet another hand against the judge. Simpson said he didn't care, but from judging from his expression, she was glad she got the court order out of him before the poker game. "Guess the cards aren't falling my way tonight for some reason." She really wanted him to just say "D'oh!"

"It isn't the cards, Horace," said Rook. "For once, somebody at this table can read your tells." He got up and crossed to the counter to peel a tepid slice of Ray's out of the box and fish another Fat Tire from the ice in the sink. "Now, to me, tonight, anyway, you've got a great poker face. I can't see what's going on behind the taciturn judicial mask. It could be woo-hoo or yay-boo. But this one here, she's gotcha." Rook took his seat again, and Nikki wondered if the whole pizza-and-beer run had been a ruse to move his chair closer to hers.

"My face gives nothing away," said the judge.

"It's not about you giving it away, it's what she's taking," said Rook. He turned to her as he spoke to the judge. "I've been with her

weeks now, and I don't think I've ever known someone so adept at reading people." He held that look to her, and although they were nowhere close to breathing each other's exhalations like they had on Starr's balcony that day, she felt a flutter. So she turned away to rake in the pot, wondering what the hell she was playing with here, and she didn't mean the cards. "I think I should call it a night," she said.

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**Rook insisted on walking her down to the sidewalk, but Nikki stalled until** they were embedded in the group departure of the other guests, so she could get away clean. A group seemed the perfect place to fulfill that. Because the truth of it, she reflected on the ride down, was that she didn't want so much to be alone as not to be paired up.

Not tonight anyway, she thought.

The news anchor and her husband lived in walking distance and made their exit just as Simpson flagged a cab. The judge was heading uptown near the Guggenheim and asked if Nikki wanted to share the ride. She sorted her feelings about leaving Rook hangdogging on the sidewalk versus staying and having to deal with the awkwardness of the good-night moment, or worse, the come-back-up moment, and answered yes.

Rook said, "Hope you don't mind I sort of Punk'd you into coming over."

"Why would I mind? I'm leaving with money, jokey boy." Then she slid way across the taxi seat to make room for Simpson. Ten minutes later, she was unlocking her lobby door in Gramercy Park, thinking about a bath.

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**Nobody would accuse Nikki Heat of leading a life of indulgence.** "Delayed gratification" was a phrase that came to her mind often, usually invoked as a means to talk herself down off some rare flash of anger at what she was doing instead of what she would rather be doing. Or saw other people doing.

So as she ran the tap to revitalize the bubbles in her tub, allowing herself one of her few indulgences, a bubble bath, her mind ran back to

thoughts of the road not taken. To Connecticut and a yard and the PTA and a husband who took the train to Manhattan, and having the time and resources to get a massage once in a while or maybe take a yoga class.

Yoga class instead of close-quarter combat training.

Nikki tried to imagine herself in bed with a ropy tofu advocate with a Johnny Depp beard and a “Random Acts of Kindness” bumper sticker on a rusted-out Saab, instead of sheet grappling with the ex-Seal. She could do worse than Johnny Depp. And had.

A couple of times that evening she had thought about calling Don but didn’t. Why not? She wanted to boast about her perfect arm-bar takedown of Pochenko at the subway station. Quick and easy, take a seat, sir. But that wasn’t why she wanted to call him, and she knew it.

So why didn’t she?

It was an easy arrangement with Don. Her trainer with benefits never asked her where she was or when she’d be back or why she didn’t call. His place or hers didn’t matter; it was logistical, whichever was closer. He was looking neither to nest nor to get away from anything.

And the sex was good. Once in a while he would get a bit too aggressive, or a bit too into task completion, but she knew how to work with that and get what she needed. And how much different was that from the commuter guys, the Noah Paxtons of the world? The Don thing wasn’t the be-all, but it worked fine.

So why didn’t she call?

She shut off the tap when the bubbles tickled her chin, and inhaled the scent of her childhood. Nikki thought about the delays, tried to imagine fulfilling purpose instead of needs, and wondered if this was what it would be like in, say, eleven years, when she hit forty. That used to seem like such a long way off, and yet the last ten years, a full decade of rearranging her life around the end of her mother’s, had blipped along like a TiVo on forward. Or was that for the lack of savoring?

She went from convincing her mother she should be a Theater Arts major to transferring to the College of Criminal Justice. She wondered

if without realizing it she was getting too tough to be happy. She knew she did less laughing and more judging.

What had Rook said at the poker game? He called her adept at reading people. Not what she wanted on her tombstone.

Rook.

OK, so I was checking out his ass, she thought. Then the flutter came over her, probably embarrassment at being transparent enough to be caught in the act by The Grand Damn. Nikki submerged under the bubbles and held her breath until the pounding of her flutter got lost in the pounding of oxygen debt.

She broke the surface and palmed the suds off her face and hair, and floated, weightless in the cooling water, and let herself wonder what it would be like with Jameson Rook. What would he be like? How would he feel and taste and move?

And then the flutter hit her again. What would she be like with him? It made her nervous. She didn't know.

It was a mystery.

She unstopped the drain and got out.

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**Nikki had her air-conditioning off and walked her apartment naked and wet, not bothering to towel off in the humidity. The die-hard soap bubbles felt good on her skin, and besides, once she dried off, she'd be damp in no time in the soggy air, so why not be damp and smell like lavender?**

Only two of her windows gave views to facing neighbors, and since there was no breeze to obstruct anyway, she drew the shades down on them and went to the utility closet off the kitchen. Detective Nikki Heat's miracle time- and money-saver was to press her own clothes the night before. Nothing stopped the crooks in their tracks more than defined pleats and sharp creases. She drew the board down on its hinge and plugged in the iron.

She hadn't overdone the alcohol that night, but what she had drunk had made her thirsty. In the fridge she found her last can of lemon-lime seltzer. It was quite ungreen of her, but she held open the refrigerator

door and moved herself close to it, feeling the cool air cascade out against her naked body, chilling her skin into gooseflesh.

A small click turned her away from the open door. The red light had popped on, indicating the iron was ready. She set the can of seltzer on the counter and hurried to her closet to find something relatively clean and, above all, breathable.

Her navy linen blazer only needed a touch-up. Walking up the hall with it, though, she noticed that a button on the right sleeve was cracked and she paused to look at it, to remember if she had a match.

And then, from the kitchen, Nikki heard the seltzer can open.