
HEAT WAVE

RICHARD CASTLE

HYPERION

NEW YORK

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SEVEN

Even as she stood frozen in her hallway, Nikki's first thought was that she hadn't really heard it. Too many replays of her mother's murder had embedded that pop-top sound in her head. How many times had that snap-hiss jolted her out of nightmares or made her flinch in the break room? No, she could not have heard it.

That is what she told herself in the eternal seconds she stood there, cotton-mouthed and naked, straining to hear over the damned night noise of New York City, and her own pulse.

Her fingers hurt from digging the broken sleeve button into herself. She relaxed her grip but did not drop the blazer for fear of making noise that would give her away.

To whom?

Give it one minute, she told herself. Stay still, be a statue for a count of sixty and be done with this.

She cursed herself for her nakedness and how vulnerable it made her feel. Indulged in the bubble bath and now look. Stop that and focus, she thought. Just focus and listen to every square inch of the night.

Maybe it was a neighbor. How many times had she heard love-making, and coughing, and dishes stacking, come across the air space into her open windows?

The windows. They were all open.

A mere fraction through her minute, she lifted one bare foot off the runner and set it down one step closer to the kitchen. She listened.

Nothing.

Nikki chanced another slo-mo step. In the middle of it, her heart skipped when a shadow moved across the slice of floor she could see in the kitchen. She didn't hesitate or stop to listen again. She bolted.

Racing past the kitchen door to the living room, Nikki hit the light switch, killing the one lamp that was on, and lunged for her desk. Her hand landed inside the large Tuscan bowl that lived there on the back corner. It was empty.

“Looking for this?” Pochenko filled the archway, and he was holding up her off-duty piece. The bright kitchen light behind him cast him in silhouette, but she could see that the Sig Sauer was still in its holster, as if the arrogant bastard wouldn’t be needing it, at least not yet.

Confronted by facts, the detective did what she always did, pushed fear aside and got practical. Nikki ran a checklist of options. One: She could scream. The windows were open, but he might start shooting, which, for the moment, he didn’t seem inclined to do. Two: Get a weapon. Her backup gun was in her handbag in the kitchen or the bedroom, she wasn’t sure which. Either way she would have to get past him. Three: Buy time. She needed it to improvise a weapon, to escape, or to take him out. If she had been confronting a hostage situation, she would have used conversation. Engage, humanize, slow the clock.

“How did you find me?” Good, she thought, to her ear she didn’t sound afraid.

“What, you think you’re the only ones who know how to tail somebody?”

Nikki took a small step backward to draw him into the room and away from the hall. She retraced the places she had been since she had left the precinct—Soho House, Rook’s poker game—and got a chill realizing this man had been watching her each stop.

“It’s not hard to follow someone who doesn’t know they have a tail. You should know that.”

“And how do *you* know that?” She took another step backward. This time he moved with her a step. “Were you a cop in Russia?”

Pochenko laughed. “Sort of. But not for police. Hey, stay there.” He took the Sig out and tossed the holster aside like litter. “I don’t want to have to shoot you.” And then he added, “Not till I’m through.”

Game changer, she said to herself, and prepared for the worst option. Nikki had drilled the handgun disarm only a million times. But always on a mat with an instructor or cop partner. Still Heat thought of herself as an athlete, in constant training, and had run it only two

weeks ago. As she choreographed the moves in her head, she kept talking. “You’ve got balls coming here without your own gun.”

“I won’t need it. Today, you tricked me. Not so tonight, you’ll see.”

He reached for the light switch when he turned, and this time she took a step toward him. When the lamp came on he looked at her and said, “Daddy like.” He made a show of looking her body up and down. Ironically, Nikki had felt more violated by him that afternoon in Interrogation when she had her clothes on. Still she folded her arms over herself.

“Cover all you want. I told you I’d have it, and I will.”

Heat took stock. Pochenko was one-handing her gun, a plus since he had strength on her. He also had size, but she knew from his subway takedown that he was big but not quick. But then, he had the gun.

“Come here,” he said and took a step to her. The conversation phase was over. She hesitated and took a step toward him. Her heart thudded and she could hear her own pulse. This would all be a blink if it came off. She felt like she was on a high dive about to initiate a plunge, and the thought made her heart race more. She remembered the uniform in the Bronx who’d botched this last year and lost half his face. Nikki decided that wasn’t helping and focused herself again, visualizing her moves.

“Bitch, when I say come here, come here.” He brought the gun up level with her chest.

She moved the step closer that he wanted and that she needed, and as she did, she raised her hands in submission, quaking them slightly so their small movements would not telegraph the big one when it came. And when it came, it had to be lightning. “Just don’t shoot me, OK? Please, don’t shoo—” In one motion, she brought her left hand up and clamped it on top of the gun, wedging her thumb on the hammer while she pushed it away and slipped in and to his right. She hooked her foot between his and threw her shoulder against his arm while she wrenched the gun up and around toward him. As she yanked it to point at him she heard his finger break as it twisted in the trigger guard and he cried out.

Then it got messy. She tried to pull the gun away, but his broken finger was hung up in the guard, and when it finally jerked free the gun had such momentum it slipped out of her hand and across the rug.

Pochenko grabbed her by the hair and threw her toward the foyer. Nikki tried to gain her feet and get to the front door, but he lunged for her. He grabbed one of her forearms but it didn't hold. His hands were sweaty and she was slick from the bubble bath. Nikki slid out of his grip and twirled, shooting the heel of her other hand up into his nose. She heard a crack and he swore in Russian. Torquing herself, she raised her foot to chest-kick him back into the living room, but he had his hands up to the twin trails of blood coming from his broken nose, and her kick glanced off his forearm. When he reached for her, she fired two rapid lefts to his nose, and while he dealt with that, she turned to flip the deadbolts on her front door and screamed, "Help, fire! Fire!"—saddy the surest way to motivate citizens to make a 911 call.

The boxer in Pochenko came alive. He landed a hard left to her back that smacked her flat against the door. Her advantage was speed and movement, and Nikki used it, dropping so that his next shot, a left to her head, missed and he smashed his fist into the wood. While she was down, she rolled right through his ankles, sweeping his legs from under him and sending him face-first into the door.

While he was down, she broke for the living room, looking for the fallen gun. It had taken a bounce under the desk, and the time it took her to find it was too much time. Just as Nikki bent for it Pochenko bear hugged her from behind and picked her up off the floor, kicking and punching air. He put his mouth to her ear and said, "You're mine now, bitch."

Pochenko carried her to the hallway leading to the bedroom, but Nikki wasn't done. At the passage to the kitchen, she splayed out her arms and legs and hooked them on the corner. It was like hitting the brakes, and as his head whiplashed forward, she shot hers back and felt a sharp pain when his front teeth broke against the back of her skull.

He cursed again and flung her onto the kitchen floor, where he pounced on top of her, pinning her with his body. This was the nightmare outcome, letting him get his full weight on her. Nikki jerked and twisted, but he had gravity working for him now. He let go her left wrist, but it was only to free the hand without the broken finger to clamp around her throat. With one hand free, she pushed at his chin, but he didn't budge. And his grip tightened on her neck. Blood dripped

off his nose and chin onto her face, waterboarding her. She flailed her head side to side and took swipes at him with her right hand, but his choke was sapping her strength.

Fog crept into the edges of her vision. Above her, Pochenko's determined face became dappled by a shower of tiny shooting stars. He was taking his time, watching her lungs slowly lose oxygen, feeling her weaken, seeing her head flails become less rapid.

Nikki rolled her face to the side so she wouldn't have to look at him. She thought of her mother, murdered three feet away on this very floor, calling her name. And as blackness drew over her, Nikki thought how sad that she had no name to call for.

And that is when she saw the cord.

Lungs searing, strength draining, Nikki fumbled for the dangling wire. After two failed swipes, she snagged it and the iron crashed down off the board. If Pochenko cared, he didn't show it, and probably took it as the last thrashing of the bitch.

But then he felt the hot sear of the iron on the side of his face.

His scream was like no animal Nikki had heard. As his hand came off her neck, the air she gulped tasted of his burning flesh. She brought the iron up again, this time in a hard swing. The hot edge of it hit his left eye. He screamed again, and his scream mixed with the sirens pulling up to her building.

Pochenko struggled to his feet and stumbled toward the kitchen door, holding his face, bouncing off the corner of the entryway. He recovered and lumbered out. By the time she pulled herself up and made it to the living room, Nikki could hear his heavy footsteps clanging up the fire escape toward the roof.

Heat grabbed her Sig and climbed the metal steps to the roof, but he was long gone. Emergency lights strobed off the brick fronts on her street, and another approaching siren triple-burped through the intersection at Third Avenue. She remembered she had no clothes on and decided she had better go back down and put something on.

When Nikki came into her bull pen the next morning, after her meeting with the captain, Rook and Roach were waiting there for her. Ochoa

was leaning back in his chair with his ankles crossed on his desk and said, "So. Last night I watched the Yankees win and had sex with the wife. Can anybody top that?"

"Beats my night," said Raley. "What about you, Detective Heat?"

She shrugged, playing along. "Just some poker and a little workout at home. Not as exciting as you, Ochoa. Your wife actually had sex with you?" Cop humor, dark and laced with sideways affection only.

"Oh, I see," said Rook. "This is how you people deal. 'Attempt on my life? No biggie, too cool for school.'"

"No, we pretty much don't give a shit. She's a big girl," Ochoa said. And the cops laughed. "Put that in your research, writer boy."

Rook approached Heat. "I'm surprised you came in this morning."

"Why? This is where I work. Not going to catch any bad guys at home."

"Clearly," said Ochoa.

"Nailed it," Raley said to his partner.

"Thank you for not high-fiving," she said. Even though the precinct, and by now most of the cop shops in five boroughs, knew about her home invasion, Nikki recapped her firsthand highlights for them and they listened intently, with sober expressions.

"Bold," said Rook, "going after a cop. And in her own home. Guy must be psycho. I thought so yesterday."

"Or . . .," said Heat, deciding to share the feeling she'd been harboring since she saw Pochenko in her living room holding her gun. "Or maybe somebody sent him to get me out of the way. Who knows?"

"We'll bag this bastard," said Raley. "Spoil his day."

"Damn straight," from Ochoa. "On top of the all-points, we've notified hospitals to be on alert for anybody whose face is only half-pressed."

"Cap said you guys already gave Miric an early wake-up call."

Ochoa nodded. "At oh-dark-thirty. Dude sleeps in a nightshirt." He shook his head at the vision, and continued. "Anyway, Miric claims no contact with Pochenko since they got sprung yesterday. We've got surveillance on him and a warrant for his phone records."

"And a tap on his incomings," added Raley. "Plus we have some blue jeans from both Miric's and Pochenko's apartments in the lab now. Your

Russian pal had a couple of promising rips on the knees, but it's hard to know what's fashion and what's wear and tear. Forensics will know."

Nikki smiled. "And on the upside, I may have a match for those grip marks on Starr's upper arms." She opened her collar and showed the red marks on her neck.

"I knew it. I knew it was Pochenko who threw him off that balcony."

"For once, Rook, I'd take that guess, but let's not jump there yet. The minute you start closing doors this early in an investigation is the minute you start missing something," said the detective. "Roach, go run a check on overnight retail robberies. If Pochenko's on the run and can't go to his apartment, he'll be improvising. Pay special attention to pharmacies and medical supply stores. He didn't go to an ER, so he might be doing some self-care."

After Roach left for their assignment and as Nikki was downloading a report from the forensic accountants, the desk sergeant brought in a package that had been delivered to her, a flat box the size and weight of a hallway mirror.

"I'm not expecting anything," said Nikki.

"Maybe it's from an admirer," said the sergeant. "Maybe it's Russian caviar," he added with a deadpan look and then left.

"Not the most sentimental crowd," said Rook.

"Thank God." She looked at the shipping label. "It's from the Met Museum Store." She got scissors from her desk, opened the box, and peeked inside. "It's a framed something."

Nikki drew the framed something out of the box and discovered what it was, and when she did, whatever darkness she had carried into that morning-after gave way to soft, golden sunlight, breaking across her face in the reflected glow of two girls in white play dresses lighting Chinese lanterns in the gloaming of *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*.

She stared at the print and then turned herself to Rook, who stood frowning beside her. "There should be a card somewhere. It says, 'Guess who?' By the way, you'd better guess me, or I'll be massively pissed I sprung for next-day delivery."

She looked back at the print. "It's . . . just so . . ."

"I know, I saw it on your face yesterday in Starr's living room. Little did I know when I called in my order it would be a get well gift. . . . Well, actually more like a glad-you-didn't-get-killed-last-night gift."

She laughed so he wouldn't notice the small quiver that had come to her lower lip. Then Nikki turned away from him. "I'm getting a little glare right under this light," she said, and all he saw was her back.

At noon she shouldered her bag, and when Rook stood to go with her she told him to get himself some lunch, she needed to go on this one by herself. He told her she should have some protection.

"I'm a cop, I am the protection."

He read her determination to go solo and for once didn't argue. On her drive to Midtown Nikki felt guilty for ditching him. Hadn't he welcomed her to his poker table and given her that gift? Sure he bugged her sometimes on the ride-alongs, but this was different. It could have been the ordeal of her night and the aching fatigue she was carrying, but it wasn't. Whatever the hell Nikki Heat was feeling, what the feeling needed was space.

"Sorry about the mess," said Noah Paxton. He threw the remains of his deli tossed salad into the trash can and wiped off his blotter with a napkin. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I was in the neighborhood," said Detective Heat. She didn't care if he knew she was lying. In her experience, dropping in on witnesses unexpectedly brought unexpected results. People with their guard down were less careful and she learned more. That afternoon she wanted a couple of things out of Noah, the first being his unguarded reaction to seeing the photo array from the Guilford again.

"Are there new pictures in here?"

"No," she said as she dealt the last one in front of him. "You're sure you don't recognize any of them?" Nikki made it sound casual, but asking if he was sure put pressure on. This was about cross-checking Kimberly's reason he hadn't identified Miric. As he had the day before,

Paxton gave a slow and methodical pass over each shot and said he still didn't recognize any of them.

She took away all the photos but two: Miric and Pochenko. "What about these. Anything?"

He shrugged and shook no. "Sorry. Who are they?"

"These two are interesting, that's all." Detective Heat was in the business of getting answers, not giving them, unless there was an advantage. "I also wanted to ask you about Matthew's gambling. How did he pay for that?"

"With cash."

"Money you gave him?"

"His money, yes."

"And when he went in the hole to bookmakers, how did that get repaid?"

"Same way, with cash."

"Would they come to you for it, the bookies, I mean?"

"Oh, hell no. I told Matthew, if he chose to deal with that level of person, that's his business. I didn't want them coming here." He shivered for emphasis. "No thanks." She'd back-doored him but had her answer. Kimberly's reason the money man didn't know the bookie checked.

Heat then asked him about Morgan Donnelly, the woman whose name Kimberly had given her. She of the intercepted love letter. Paxton verified Donnelly had worked there and was their top marketing executive. He also verified that the two had a hidden office affair that was hidden to no one and described at great length how the staff would refer to Matthew and Morgan as "Mm . . ." Morgan earned a few nicknames of her own, he said. "The two that won the office pool were Top Performer and Chief Asset."

"One more piece of business and I'll get out of your hair. I got the report this morning from the forensic accountants." She took the file out of her bag and watched his brow fall. "They told me you were no Bernie Madoff, which is, I guess, what we needed to make sure of."

"Makes sense." Quite nonchalant, but the detective knew guilt when she saw it, and it was clinging to his face.

“There was one irregularity in your accounting.” She handed him the page with the spreadsheet and summary and watched him tense. “Well?”

He put the page down. “My attorney would advise me not to answer.”

“Do you feel you need an attorney to answer my question, Mr. Paxton?”

She could see her squeeze work on him. “It was my only ethical breach,” he said. “All these years, the only one.” Nikki just looked and waited. Nothing screamed louder than silence. “I hid money. I created a series of transactions to funnel a large sum to a private account. I was hiding a portion of Matthew Starr’s private funds for his son’s college education. I saw how fast it was going—to gambling and hookers—I’m just a functionary, but I was heartsick about what was happening to that family. For their own good, I hid money so Matty Junior could go to college. Matthew discovered it, same way drunks can find bottles, and raided it. Kimberly is almost as bad as he was. I think you have a good idea how she likes to spend.”

“I got that impression.”

“The wardrobe, the jewelry, the vacations, the cars, the surgeries. Plus she was hiding money. Of course, I spotted it. Much like your forensics guys—the numbers talk if you know what you’re looking for. Among other things, she had a love nest, a two-bedroom spot on Columbus. I told her to get rid of it, and when she asked why, I told her because they were broke.”

“How did she react?”

“Devastated doesn’t begin to cover it. I guess you could say she freaked.”

“And when did you tell her all this?”

He looked at the calendar under the glass on his desktop. “Ten days ago.”

Detective Heat nodded, reflecting. Ten days. A week before her husband was murdered.