
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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EIGHT

When Detective Heat nosed the Crown Vic out of underground parking at the Starr Pointe tower, she heard the low, steady thrum that could only mean helicopters, and rolled her window down. Three of them hovered to her left about a quarter mile west, on the far side on the Time-Warner Building. The lower one, she knew, would be the police chopper, the two deferential ones at higher altitude would belong to TV stations. “Breaking nyoooz!” she said to her empty car.

She dialed in the tactical band on her radio and before long put together that a steam pipe had blown and geysered, further evidence that the ancient Gotham infrastructure was no match for nature’s oven. Almost a week of the big heat, and Manhattan was starting to bubble and blister like a cheese pizza.

Columbus Circle would be impossible, so she took the longer but faster route back to the precinct, entering Central Park across from the Plaza and taking its East Drive north. The city kept the park closed to motor vehicles until three, so without traffic, her ride had a Sunday-in-the-country feel, lovely as long as she blasted the air conditioner. Sawhorses blocked the drive at 71st, but the auxiliary cop recognized her car as an unmarked and slid the barrier with a wave. Nikki pulled to a stop beside her. “Who’d you piss off to get this duty?”

“Must be karma from a past life,” said the uniform with a laugh.

Nikki looked at the unopened bottle of cold water sweating in her cup holder and passed it to the woman. “Stay cool, Officer,” she said and drove on.

The heat tamped everything down. Aside from a handful of certifiable runners and insane cyclists, the park had been left to the birds and squirrels. Nikki slowed as she passed the back of the Metropolitan

Museum, and looking at the sloped glass wall of the mezzanine, she smiled, as she always did, at her classic movie memory of Harry in there with Sally, teaching her how to tell a waiter there was too much pepper on the paprikash. A young couple ambled across the lawn hand in hand, and without deciding to, Nikki stopped the car and watched the two of them, simply together, with all the time in the world. When a ripple of melancholy stirred in her, she pushed it down with a slow press of the gas pedal. Time to get back to work.

Rook sprang up from her desk chair when Nikki came into the bull pen. It was clear he was waiting for her to get back and wanted to know where she'd gone, meaning, without saying it, Why didn't you bring me? When she told him it was to follow up with Noah Paxton, Rook didn't get any more relaxed or much less obvious.

"You know, I get it that you aren't the biggest fan of my ride-along thing, but I'd like to think I'm a pretty useful set of eyes and ears for you on these interviews."

"Can I mention that I am in the middle of an active murder investigation? I needed to see a witness alone because I wanted him to be open to me without any extra eyes and ears, useful though they may be."

"So you're saying they are useful?"

"I'm saying this isn't a time for you to personalize or be needy." She looked at him, just wanting to be with her and, she had to admit, being more cute than needy. Nikki found herself smiling. "And yes—sometimes—they are useful."

"All right."

"Just not every time, OK?"

"We're in a good place, let's not overexamine," he said.

"Got some news about Pochenko," said Ochoa as he and Raley came through the door.

"Tell me he's on Rikers Island and can't get a lawyer, that would be good news," she said. "What have you got?"

"Well, you called it," said Ochoa. "A guy fitting his description shoplifted half the first aid aisle at a Duane Reade in the East Village today."

“Got surveillance vid, too.” Raley popped a DVD in his computer. “Positive ID on Pochenko?” she asked.

“You tell me.”

The drugstore video was ghostly and jerky, but there he was, the big Russian, filling a plastic bag with ointments and aloe, then ducking through the first aid section to help himself to wrapping tape and finger splints.

“Dude’s in bad shape. Remind me never to get in a fight with you,” said Raley.

“Or to have you press my shirts,” added Ochoa.

They went back and forth like that. Until somebody came up with a magic pill, gallows humor was still the best coping mechanism for a cop. Otherwise the job ate you alive. Normally, Nikki would have been right there taking shots with them, but she was too raw to laugh it off just yet. Maybe if she could see Pochenko shackled in the back of a van on his way to Ossining for the rest of his life, then she wouldn’t be still smelling him or feeling his skillet hands on her throat in her own home. Maybe then she could laugh.

“Whoa, check out the finger, I think I’m gonna yack,” said Ochoa. Raley added, “He can kiss off that piano scholarship to Juilliard.”

Rook’s smart mouth was uncharacteristically silent. Nikki checked him out and caught him watching her with something like what she’d seen in his eyes at the poker table the night before, but magnified. She broke off, feeling the need to get clear of whatever this was, just like she had after he gave her the framed print. “All right, so that’s definitely our man,” she said and moved away to contemplate the white board.

“And do I need to point out he’s still in the city?” said Rook.

She chose to ignore him. The fact was obvious and the worry useless. Instead she turned to Raley. “Nothing at all on your Guilford tape?”

“I went over that puppy until I was cross-eyed. No way they came back through that lobby after they left. I also screened video of the service entrance. Nothing.”

“All right, we gave it a shot.”

“Screening that lobby video was totally the worst,” said Raley. “Like watching C-SPAN only not as exciting.”

“Tell you what, then, I’ll get you out in the world. Why don’t you

and Ochoa drop in on Dr. Van Peldt's office and see if Kimberly Starr's alibi clears? And since it's a safe bet she's tipped off her one true love that we'll be checking—"

"I know," said Ochoa, "verify with his receptionist, nurses, and/or hotel staff, etcet-yadda, etcet-yadda."

"Gosh, Detective," said Heat, "it's almost like you know what you're doing."

Detective Heat stood at the white board and under the heading "Guilford Surveillance Video" wrote two red letters: N.G. It must have been the angle she was writing at that brought on the pinching stiffness from the previous night's brawl. She let her shoulders drop and rolled her head in a slow circle, feeling the delicious edge of discomfort that told her she was still alive. When she was done, she circled "Matthew's Mistress" on the board, capped her marker, and yanked the magazine out of Rook's hands. "Want to take a ride?" she asked.

They took the Westside Highway downtown, and even the river showed symptoms of heat strain. To their right, the Hudson looked as if it was too hot to move and its surface lay there in surrender, all flat and dozy. The zone west of Columbus Circle was still a mess and would surely lead the five o'clock news. The erupting steam jet had been shut off, but there was a lunar-sized crater that would close West 59th for days. On the scanner, they listened to one of the NYPD quality of life squads report they had busted a man for public urination who admitted he tried to get arrested so he could spend the night in air-conditioning. "So the weather caused two eruptions that required police action," said Rook, which made Heat laugh and feel almost glad he was along.

When she'd set up the meeting with Matthew Starr's former mistress, Morgan Donnelly asked if they could meet her at work, since that's where she spent most of her time. That fit the profile Noah Paxton had sketched of her when Nikki asked him about her in their conversation earlier that day. As was his way, once he opened up, Nikki's pen could hardly keep pace. In addition to revealing choice office

nicknames, he'd called their romance the inter-office elephant in the conference room summed Starr's not-so-secret mistress up by saying, "Morgan was all brains, tits, and drive. She was the Matthew Starr ideal: work like crazy, screw like mad. Sometimes I'd picture them in bed with their BlackBerries, texting oh-yeah-like-that's to each other between deals."

So, with that in her head, when Nikki Heat parked the car at the business address off Prince Street in SoHo Donnelly had given her, she had to double-check her notes to make sure she had the right place. It was a cupcake bakery. Her sore neck protested when she twisted to read the sign above the door. "Fire and Icing?" she said.

Rook quoted a poem, "Some say the world will end in fire,/Some say in ice." He opened his car door and the heat rolled in. "Today, I'm going with fire."

"I still can't believe it," said Morgan Donnelly as she sat down with them at a round café table in the corner. She unsnapped the collar flap of her crisp white chef's tunic and offered the stainless sugar caddy to Heat and Rook for their iced Americanos. Nikki tried to reconcile the Morgan the baker before her with the Morgan the marketing powerhouse Noah Paxton drew. There was a story there and she would get it. The corners of Donnelly's mouth turned down, and she said, "You hear about things like this in the news, but it's never anybody you know."

The girl came from behind the counter and set a sample plate of mini-cupcakes in the center of the table. When she stepped away, Morgan continued, "I know getting involved with a married man doesn't make me look like the best person. Maybe I wasn't. But when it was happening, it seemed so right. Like in the middle of all the pressure of the job there was this passion, this amazing thing that was just ours." Her eyes filled a little and she swiped her cheek once.

Heat studied her for tells. Too much remorse or not enough were red flags. There were others, of course, but those indicators formed the baseline for her. Nikki hated the term, but so far Morgan's reaction was appropriate. But the detective needed to do more than take her temp. As the ex of a murder victim, she had to be checked out, and that meant getting answers to two simple questions: Did she have a strong revenge

motive, and did she stand to gain from the man's death? Life would be so much simpler if Heat could just have her check off boxes on a questionnaire and mail it in, but it didn't work that way and now Nikki's job was to make this woman a little uncomfortable. "Where you were when Matthew Starr was killed? Say, between twelve-thirty and two-thirty P.M.?" She started throwing the high heat to catch Morgan off guard.

Morgan took a moment and answered without any defensiveness. "I know exactly where I was. I was with the Tribeca Film people for a tasting. I won a catering contract for one of their after-parties this spring, and I remember because the tasting went well and I was driving back here to celebrate that afternoon when I heard about Matthew."

Nikki made a note and continued. "Did you and Mr. Starr have any contact after the affair ended?"

"Contact. You mean, did we still see each other?"

"That. Or any contact at all."

"No, although I did see him once a few months ago. But he didn't see me and we didn't talk."

"Where was this?"

"Bloomingdales. At the lunch counter downstairs. I was going to get a tea and he was there."

"Why didn't you speak to him?"

"He was with someone."

Nikki made a note. "Did you know her?"

Morgan smiled at Nikki's perception. "No. I might have said hello to Matthew, but she had her hand on his thigh. They seemed preoccupied."

"Can you describe her?"

"Blond, young, pretty. Young." She thought a moment and added, "Oh, and she had an accent. Scandinavian. Denmark or Sweden, maybe, I don't know."

Nikki and Rook traded glances, and she could sense him looking over her shoulder as she wrote "Nanny?" in her notes. "So otherwise no contact at all then?"

"No. When it was over, it was over. But it was very cordial." She looked down at her espresso and then up at Nikki and said, "Bullshit,

it was painful as hell. But we were both grown-ups. We both went our ways. Life goes . . . well . . .” She left that unfinished.

“Let’s go back to the end of your relationship. It must have been difficult in the office. Did he fire you when it was over?”

“It was my decision to leave. Working together would be awkward for us, and I sure as hell didn’t want to deal with the gossip residue.”

“But still, you had a big career there.”

“I had a big love there. At least I told myself it was. When that ended, I wasn’t focused on my career so much.”

“I’d be angry as hell,” said the detective. Sometimes the best way to ask a question was not to ask it.

“Hurt and fragile, yes. Angry?” Morgan smiled. “It ended up for the better. A relationship like that, you know, the fun-and-convenient, going-nowhere kind? I realized I was using that relationship to stay out of relationships, just as I was with my work. Do you know what I mean?”

Nikki shifted uncomfortably in her chair and managed a neutral “Uh-huh.”

“At best it was a place holder. And I wasn’t getting any younger.” Nikki shifted again, wondering how she had ended up as the one feeling uncomfortable. “Matthew was good to me, though. He offered me a huge chunk of money.”

Nikki snapped out of herself and back to the interview and made a note to check that out with Paxton. “How much did he give you?”

“Nothing. I wouldn’t accept it.”

“It’s not like he would have missed it,” said Rook.

“But don’t you see?” she said to him, as if he never would. “If I took his money, then that would be what it was all about. It wasn’t like people said. It wasn’t about rising to the top on my back with my legs in the air.”

Rook persisted. “Still, nobody would have to know you took his money.”

“I would,” she said.

And with those two words, Detective Heat closed her notebook. A carrot cupcake was screaming at her from that plate and it had to be silenced. As Nikki peeled at the ruffles of the bottom wrapper,

she nodded her head to the trendy bake shop and asked, “What about all this? Not where I expected to find the infamous M.B.A. on Red Bull.”

Morgan laughed. “Oh, that Morgan Donnelly. She’s around somewhere. Makes an appearance once in a while and turns my life nuts.” She leaned forward over the table, toward Nikki. “The end of that affair three years ago turned out to be an epiphany. Before it came, I was getting hints, but I ignored them. For instance, some nights I’d stand there in my big old corner office up on the penthouse floor of the Starr Pointe, one phone going, two lines on hold, and a dozen e-mails to answer. And I’d look below on the street and say to myself, ‘Look at all those people down there. Going home to somebody.’”

Nikki was licking some buttercream frosting from her fingertip and stopped. “But come on, a career woman at the top of your game, that must have been very satisfying, right?”

“After Matthew, all I could think of was, What was I left with? And all the stuff that had passed me by while I was putting on the power suits and doing the career. You know, life? Well, here was the epiphany. One day I’m watching *Good Morning America*, and Emeril’s on, and he was making pies, and it got me remembering when I was a kid, how much I loved to bake. So there I was, in my pajamas and Uggs, creeping up on thirty, no job, no relationship, and let’s face it, not getting much out of either one when I had them anyway, thinking, ‘Time to reboot.’”

Nikki found her heart racing. She took a sip of her Americano and asked, “So you just took the jump? No net, no regrets, no looking back?”

“At what? I decided to follow my bliss. Of course, the price of bliss is a loan to the eyeballs, but it’s working out. I started small . . . hell, look around, I still am small . . . but I’m loving it. I’m even engaged.” She held out her hand, which had no ring on it.

“It’s lovely,” said Rook.

Morgan made a whoops face and blushed a little. “I never wear it when I’m baking, but the guy who does my Web site? He and I are tying the knot this fall. I guess you never know where life’s taking you, huh?”

Nikki reflected and unfortunately had to agree.

As they headed uptown, Rook balanced a huge box of two dozen cupcakes on his lap. Heat brought the car to a gentle stop at a red light so his gift to the precinct break room wouldn't turn into a box of crumbs. "So, Officer Rook," she asked, "I haven't heard you tell me to slap Morgan Donnelly in jail. What gives?"

"Oh, she's got to be off the list."

"Because?"

"Too happy."

Heat nodded. "Agreed."

"But," said Rook, "you'll still check her alibi and whether Paxton cut her a fat good-bye check."

"That's right."

"And we have a surprise mystery guest to check out, the Nordic Nanny."

"You're learning."

"Oh, yeah, learning a lot. Those were very revealing questions." She watched him, knowing something was coming. "Especially when you finished asking about the case and started getting personal."

". . . Yeah? She had an interesting story and I wanted to hear it."

"Huh. You sure didn't look like it." Rook waited until he saw the color come to her cheeks, and then he just stared straight ahead out the windshield with that stupid grin again. All he said was, "Green."

"Hey, man, it's the thought that counts," said Raley. Rook, Roach, and a number of detectives and uniforms were crowded in the precinct break room, around the open Fire and Icing box Rook had lovingly cradled on the drive. The assortment of buttercream icings, whipped creams, and ganache had melted and run together into what would charitably be described as cupcake roadkill.

"No, it's not," from Ochoa. "Man promised cupcakes, I don't want thought, I want a cupcake."

"I tell you these were perfect when they left the bakery," said Rook, but the room was emptying around his good deed. "It's the heat, it's melting everything."

“Leave ’em outside a little longer. I’ll come back with a straw,” said Ochoa. He and Raley moved on to the bull pen. When they arrived, Detective Heat was updating the white board.

“Filling up,” said Raley. It was always a mixed feeling at this point on an open homicide, when the satisfaction of seeing the board becoming populated with data was offset by the most salient fact: Nothing up there had brought a solve. But they all knew it was a process, and every bit they posted was a step closer to clearing the case.

“So,” Nikki said to her squad, “Morgan Donnelly’s alibi checks with the Tribeca Film commish.” As Rook entered the room eating a cupcake out of a paper cup with a spoon, she added, “For the sake of her cupcakes, I hope the heat wave breaks by April. Roach, you saw Kimberly Starr’s cosmetic surgeon?”

“Yeah, and I’m thinking of getting something ugly removed that’s been bothering me for the past two years.” Raley paused and added, “Ochoa.”

“See, Detective Heat?” said his partner. “I give and I give, and this is what I put up with all day.” Then Ochoa went to his notes. “The widow’s alibi checks. She had a last-minute booking for a ‘consultation,’ and showed up at one-fifteen. That squares with her departure from the ice cream parlor on Amsterdam at one.”

Heat said, “Over to the East Side in fifteen minutes? She got there in a hurry.”

“Ain’t no mountain high enough,” said Rook.

“All right,” continued Nikki, “Mrs. Starr managed to tell us the truth about cheating on both her husband and Barry Gable with Dr. Boy-tox. But that’s just her whereabouts. Check phone records from her or the doc for any calls to Miric or Pochenko just to button it all down.”

“Right,” said Roach in unison and they laughed.

“See? I can’t stay mad at you,” said Ochoa.

That evening, darkness was trying to push through the soggy air outside the precinct on West 82nd when Nikki Heat stepped out carrying the Met Store box containing her John Singer Sargent print. Rook was

standing at the curb. “I’ve got a car service coming. Why don’t you let me give you a lift?”

“That’s all right, I’m fine. And thanks again for this, you shouldn’t have.” She started off toward Columbus, on her way to the subway near the planetarium. “But you’ll notice I’m keeping it. Night.”

She got to the corner and Rook was beside her. “If you insist on proving how macho you are by walking, at least let me carry that.”

“Good night, Mr. Rook.”

“Wait.” She stopped but didn’t mask her impatience. “Come on, Pochenko’s still at large. You should have an escort.”

“You? Who’ll protect you? Not I.”

“Jeez, a cop who uses proper grammar as a weapon. I’m rendered helpless.”

“Look, if you have any doubt I can take care of myself, I’ll be more than happy to give you a demonstration. Is your health insurance current?”

“All right, what if this is just my flimsy excuse to see your apartment? What would you say to that?”

Nikki looked across the street and back at him. She smiled and said, “I’ll bring in some pictures tomorrow,” and crossed with the light, leaving him there on the corner.

A half hour later, Nikki came up the steps from the R train onto the sidewalk at East 23rd and saw the neighborhood plunge into darkness as Manhattan finally threw in the towel and collapsed into a citywide blackout. At first a strange silence fell as hundreds of window air conditioners up and down the street ground to a stop. It was as if the city were holding its breath. There was some ambient light from headlights on Park Avenue South. But the streetlights were out, and soon came the angry horns as New York drivers competed for asphalt and right of way.

Her arms and shoulders were aching when she turned onto her block. She set the Sargent print down on the sidewalk and leaned it carefully against a neighbor’s wrought iron gate while she opened her shoulder bag. The farther she got from the avenue, the darker it had become. Heat fished for her mini-Maglite and adjusted the tiny beam so she wouldn’t take a header on uneven pavement or some dog crap.

The eerie silence began to give way to voices. They floated in the darkness from above as apartment windows were thrust open and she could hear over and over again the same words from different buildings: “blackout,” and “flashlight,” and “batteries.” She startled at a nearby cough and shined her light on an old man walking his pug.

“You’re blinding me with that damn thing,” he said as he passed, and she pointed the beam down at the ground.

“Be safe,” she said but got no response. Nikki picked up her box in both hands and moved on toward her building with the mini-Mag wedged between her palm and the carton, shining light a few feet ahead of each step. She was two doors from her building when a foot scraped on a pebble behind her and she stopped. Listened. Listened hard. But heard no footsteps.

Some idiot hollered, “Awooooo!” from the rooftop across the street and dropped some flaming paper that spun a bright orange swirl until it burned itself out halfway down to the sidewalk. These were healthy reminders that this would be a good time to get off the street.

At her front steps, Nikki set down the box again and bent to get her keys. Behind her came quickening footsteps and then a hand touched her back. She whirled and threw a high, backward circle kick that grazed Rook, and by the time she heard his “Hey!” it was too late to do anything but gain her balance and hope he didn’t hit his head on the way down.

“Rook?” she said.

“Down here.” Nikki shined her light in the direction of his voice and spotlighted him sitting up in the sidewalk planter with his back against a tree trunk, holding his jaw.

She bent down to him. “Are you all right? What the hell were you doing?”

“I couldn’t see you, I bumped into you.”

“But why are you here?”

“I just wanted to make sure—”

“—that you ignored what I said and followed me.”

“Always the savvy detective.” He put one of his hands against the tree and the other on the sidewalk. “You might want to turn away. I

am about to struggle. Pay no attention to the groaning” She didn’t turn away but put a hand under his arm to help him up.

“Did I break anything?” she asked and shined the flashlight on his face. His jaw was red and chafed from her foot. “Do this,” she said and shined the light on herself as she worked her jaw open and closed. She put the light on him and he followed her instructions. “How’s that?”

“The humane thing may be just to put me down. You got a bullet on you?”

“You’re fine. You’re lucky I only grazed you.”

“You’re lucky I signed that waiver against lawsuits when I started my ride-along.”

She smiled in the dark. “I guess we’re both lucky.” Nikki figured he must have heard the smile in her voice because he drew closer to her, until there was only the slightest gap separating them. They stood there like that, not quite touching but sensing each other’s closeness in the dark of the hot summer night. Nikki started to sway, and then leaned ever so slightly toward him. She felt her breast brush softly against his upper arm.

Then the bright light hit them.

“Detective Heat?” said the voice from the patrol car.

She took one step back from Rook and shielded her eyes against the spotlight. “I am.”

“Everything all right?”

“Fine. He’s . . .,” she looked at Rook, who wasn’t appreciating her pause while she struggled to define him, “with me.”

Nikki knew the score. As they lowered the beam out of her eyes, she pictured the meeting in Captain Montrose’s office after she’d left and the call that went out. It was one thing to rib each other and play their game of Too Cool to Care, but the precinct was family, and if you were one of their own and you were threatened, you could bet your badge they’d have your back. The gesture would have been so much more welcome if she hadn’t had Jameson Rook on her hip. “Thank you, but you know, this isn’t necessary. Really.”

“No sweat, we’ll be here all night. You want us to show you upstairs?”

“No,” Nikki said a little more urgently than she’d intended. She continued more softly, “Thank you. I’ve got a,” she looked at Rook, who smiled until she said, “flashlight.”

Rook lowered his voice. “Nice. Think I’ll tell James Taylor I have his new song. ‘You’ve Got a Flashlight.’”

“Oh, don’t be so— You know James Taylor?”

“Heat?”

“Yeah?”

“Got any ice up there in that apartment?”

Nikki gave it a moment while he rubbed his sore jaw. “Let’s go up and find out.”