
HEAT WAVE

RICHARD CASTLE

HYPERION

NEW YORK

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NINE

Nikki Heat's apartment building was not the Guilford. It was not only a fraction of the size, there was no doorman. Rook looped his fingers in the brass handle and held open the front door as she entered the small vestibule. Her keys clacked against the glass of the inner door, and once Nikki unlocked it, she waved to the blue-and-white still double-parked out front. "We're in," she said. "Thank you."

The cops left on the spotlight for them, and thanks to its spill the lobby was dim but not totally dark. "Chair, see?" Nikki shined her light at it briefly. "Stay close." A row of shiny metal-plated mailboxes caught reflection beside them. She twisted the beam a little wider, and although it was not as intense, it gave them a better sense of the area, revealing the long, narrow lobby, which was a small-scale match for the footprint of the building. A single elevator sat ahead to the left, and on its right, separated by a table holding some UPS deliveries and unclaimed newspapers, was an open passageway to the staircase.

"Hang onto this." She gave him the box and crossed over to the elevator.

"Unless that thing's steam powered, I don't think it's going to be working," said Rook.

"Ya think?" She shined the light up at the deco brass dial indicating which of the five floors the car was on. The arrow pointed to the 1. Heat rapped the heel of her flashlight on the elevator door and a series of loud bongs resonated. She called out, "Anybody in there?" and put her ear to the metal. "Nothing," she said to Rook. Then she dragged the lobby chair to the elevator door and stood on it. "For this to work, you have to do this up top, at the header." Clenching the tiny flashlight in her teeth to free her hands, she used them to pry the doors open a few

inches at the center. Nikki angled her head forward and inserted the light into the partition. Satisfied, she released the doors and stepped down, reporting, "All clear."

"Always a cop," said Rook.

"Mm, not always."

She learned just how dark it could get when they started climbing the stairs, which were wall-bound and did not get any of the police spotlight bleeding into the lobby. Nikki led with her Maglite; Rook surprised her with a beam of light of his own. At the second floor landing she said, "What the hell is that?"

"iPhone ap. Cool, huh?" The screen of his cell phone radiated a bright flame from a virtual Bic lighter. "These are all the rage at concerts now."

"Did Mick tell you that?"

"No, Mick didn't tell me that." They resumed their climb and he added, "It was Bono."

It was an easy climb to her third-floor apartment, but the stifling air of the staircase had them both palming sweat off their faces. Inside her foyer she flicked the light switch out of habit and chided herself for being so on autopilot. "Do you have service on that thing?"

"Yep, showing all bars."

"Miracle of miracles," she said and flipped open her own phone to speed-dial Captain Montrose. She had to try twice to get a connection, and while it rang, she led Rook into the kitchen and lit up the freezer. "Ice down that jaw, while I—Hello, Captain, thought I'd check in."

Detective Heat knew the city would be on a tactical alert and wanted to see if she should come to the station or go to a staging area. Montrose confirmed that Emergency Management had called the T.A. and that leaves and days off were temporarily suspended. "I might need you to cover a shift, but so far anyway, the city is behaving. Guess we've got this down from the 2003," he said. "Considering the twenty-four hours you've just had, your best use for me would be to get some rest and be fresh tomorrow in case this drags on."

“Uh, Captain, I was surprised to see I’ve got a little company out front.”

“Oh, right. Put in a call to the Thirteenth Precinct. They’re treating you right, I hope.”

“Swell, very solid. But here’s the thing. With this T.A. on, is this the best use of resources?”

“If you mean covering my best investigator to make sure she doesn’t get her sleep disturbed, I can’t think of a better use. Raley and Ochoa insisted on doing it themselves, but I put a stop to that. Now, that would be a waste of resources.”

God, she thought. That would be just what she needed, having Roach show up and catch her out there brushing buttons in the dark with Rook. As it was, she wasn’t keen on the idea of those uniforms knowing what time Rook was leaving, even if it would be soon. “It’s sweet, Cap, but I’m a big girl, I’m home safe, the door’s locked, the windows are closed, I’m armed, and I think our city will be better off if you kick that car loose.”

“All right,” he said. “But you double-lock that door. No strange men in that apartment tonight, you hear?”

She watched Rook leaning against the butcher block holding a dish towel of ice cubes to his face and said, “No worries, Captain. And Cap? Thank you.” She pressed End and said, “They don’t need me tonight.”

“So your obvious attempt to cut my visit short didn’t pan out.”

“Shut up and let me look at that.” She stepped over to him and he lowered the towel so she could examine his sore jaw. “Not swelling, that’s good. An inch closer to my foot, you’d have been drinking soup through a straw for the next two months.”

“Hold on, that was your foot you hit me with?”

She shrugged and said, “Yeah?” then rested her fingertips on his jaw. “Work it again.” Rook moved in back and forth. “That hurt?”

“Only my pride.”

She smiled and held her fingers there on him, caressing his cheek. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly, and he looked at her in a way that made her heart flutter. Nikki stepped away before the magnet

pull gained real force, suddenly worried that deep down she might be some sort of freak who got turned on at crime scenes. First on Matthew Starr's balcony and now here in her own kitchen. Not the worst thing, to be a bit of a freak, she thought, but crime scenes? That was sure the common denominator. Well, that and, um, Rook.

He shook the ice out of the towel and into the sink, and while he was occupied, her mind raced to figure out just what the hell she was thinking, asking him up there. Maybe she was loading too much meaning into this visit, projecting. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, right? And sometimes coming up for ice was just coming up for ice. Her breath was still high in her chest, though, from being close to him. And that look. No, she said to herself, and made her decision. The best course was not to force this. He had his ice, she'd kept her promise, yes, the smart thing would be to stop this now and send him on his way. "Would you like to stay for a beer?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he said with a grave tone. "Is your iron unplugged? Oh wait, there's no electricity so I don't have to worry about my face getting pressed."

"Funny man. Guess what? I don't need no stinking iron. I've got a Bagel Biter over there and you don't want to know what I can do with that."

He took a moment and said, "I'm good with beer."

There was only one Sam Adams in the fridge so they split it. Rook said he was fine with sharing hits off the bottle, but Nikki got them glasses, and while she got them down, she wondered what had made her ask him to stay. She felt a naughty thrill and smiled about how black-outs and hot nights brought on a certain lawlessness. Maybe she did need guarding—from herself.

Rook and his virtual lighter disappeared into the living room with their beers while she scrounged a kitchen drawer for some candles. When she came into the living room, Rook was standing at the wall adjusting the John Singer Sargent print. "This look level to you?"

"Oh . . ."

"I know it's kind of forward. We know about my boundary issues, right? You can hang it somewhere else, or not, I just thought I'd swap it for your Wyeth poster so you could get the effect."

“No, no, it’s good. I like it there. Let me get some more light going for a better look. It might have found its home.” Nikki struck a wooden match and the flare-up anointed her face with gold. She reached down into the curved glass of the hurricane lamp on the bookcase and touched the flame to the wick.

“Which one are you?” said Rook. When she looked up, he gestured to the print. “The girls, lighting the lanterns. I’m watching you do the same thing and wondering if you see yourself as one of them.”

She moved to the coffee table and set out a pair of votives. As she lit them, she said, “Neither, I just like the way it feels. What it captures. The light, the festiveness, their innocence.” She sat on the sofa. “I still can’t believe you got it for me. It was very thoughtful.”

Rook came around the other end of the coffee table and joined her on the couch, but putting himself at the far end with his back against the armrest. Allowing some space between them. “Have you seen the original?”

“No, it’s in London.”

“Yes, at the Tate,” he said.

“Then you’ve actually seen it, show off.”

“Mick and Bono and I went. In Elton John’s Bentley.”

“You know, I almost believe you.”

“Tony Blair was so pissed we invited Prince Harry instead of him.”

“Almost,” she chuckled and glanced over at the print. “I used to love to see Sargent’s paintings at the Fine Arts in Boston when I was going to Northeastern. He did some murals there, too.”

“Were you an art student?” Before she could answer, he raised his glass. “Hey, look at us. Nikki and Jamie, doin’ the social.”

She clinked his glass and took a sip. The air was so warm, the beer was already hitting room temp. “I was an English major, but I really wanted to transfer to Theater.”

“You’re going to have to help me with this. How did you go from that to becoming a police detective?”

“Not such a huge leap,” said Nikki. “Tell me what I do isn’t part acting, part storytelling.”

“True. But that’s the what. I’m curious about the why.”

The murder.

The end of innocence.

The life changer.

She thought it over and said, "It's personal. Maybe when we know each other better."

"Personal. Is that code for 'because of a guy'?"

"Rook, we've been riding together for how many weeks? Knowing what you know about me, do you think I would make a choice like that for a guy?"

"The jury will disregard my question."

"No, this is good, I want to know," she said, and scooted closer to him. "Would you change what you do for a woman?"

"I can't answer that."

"You have to, I'm interrogating your ass. Would you change what you do for a woman?"

"In a vacuum . . . I can't see it."

"All right, then."

"But," he said and paused to form his thought, "for the right woman? . . . I'd like to think I'd do just about anything." He seemed satisfied with what he'd said, even affirmed it to her with a nod, and when he did, he raised his eyebrows, and at that moment, Jamie Rook didn't look like a globetrotter on the cover of a glossy magazine at all but like a kid in a Norman Rockwell, truthful and absent of guile.

"I think we need better alcohol," she said.

"There's a blackout, I could loot a liquor store. Do you have a stockings I can borrow to pull over my face?"

The exact contents of her liquor cupboard in the kitchen were a quarter bottle of cooking sherry, a bottle of peach Bellini wine cocktail that had no freshness date but years ago had separated and taken on the look and hue of nuclear fissionable material . . . Aha! And a half bottle of tequila.

Rook held the light and Nikki rose up from the crisper drawer of the refrigerator brandishing a sad little lime as if she'd snagged a Barry Bonds ball complete with hologram. "Too bad I don't have any triple sec or Cointreau, we could have margaritas."

"Please," he said. "You're in my area now." They returned to the couch and he set up shop on the coffee table with a paring knife, a salt

shaker, the lime, and the tequila. "Today, class, we're making what we call hand margaritas. Observe." He sliced a lime wedge, poured a shot of tequila, then licked the web of his hand at the thumb and forefinger and sprinkled salt on it. He licked the salt, tossed back the shot, then bit the lime. "Whoa-yeah. That's what I'm talkin' about," he said. "I learned how to do this from Desmond Tutu," he added and she laughed. "Now you."

In one fluid move Nikki picked up the knife, sliced a wedge, salted her hand, and brought it all home. She saw his expression and said, "Where the hell you think I've been all these years?"

Rook smiled at her and prepared another, and as she watched him, she felt herself relaxing her sore shoulders and, inch by inch, coming untethered from the state of alertness she had unwittingly adopted as a lifestyle. But when he was ready, Rook didn't down this shot. Instead, he held out his hand to her. She looked down at the salt on his skin and the lime between his thumb and finger. Nikki didn't look up at him because she was afraid if she did she would change her mind instead of taking the leap. She bent toward his hand and darted her tongue out, quickly at first, but then, choosing to slow the moment down, she lingered there licking the salt off his skin. He offered her the shot and she fired it back and then, cradling his wrist in her fingers, she guided the lime wedge he was holding to her lips. The burst of lime juice cleansed her palate, and as she swallowed, the warmth from the tequila spread from her stomach to her limbs, filling her with a luxurious buoyancy. She closed her eyes and ran her tongue on her lips again, tasting the citrus and salt. Nikki wasn't at all drunk, it was something else. She was letting go. The simple things people take for granted. For the first time she could remember in a long time, she was flat-out relaxed.

That's when she realized she was still holding Rook's wrist. He didn't seem to mind.

They didn't speak. Nikki licked her own hand and salted it. Held a wedge. Poured a shot. And then she offered her hand to him. Unlike her, he didn't avert his gaze. He brought her hand up to him and put his lips on it and tasted the salt and then the saltiness of her skin around it as they stared at each other. Then he drank the shot and bit the lime she gave to him. They held eye contact like that, neither one moving,

the extended-play version of their perfume ad moment on Matthew Starr's balcony. Only this time Nikki didn't break off.

Tentatively, slowly, each drew an inch closer, each still silent, each still holding the other's steady gaze. Whatever worry or uncertainty or conflict she'd felt before, she pushed it aside as too much thinking. At that moment, Nikki Heat didn't want to think. She wanted to be. She reached out and gently touched his jaw where she had struck him earlier. She rose up on one knee and leaned forward to him and, rising above him, lightly kissed his cheek. Nikki hovered there, studying the play of shadows and candlelight on his face. The soft ends of her hair dangled down and brushed him. He reached out, gently smoothing one side back, lightly stroking her temple as he did. Leaning there above him, Nikki could feel the warmth from his chest coming up to meet hers and she inhaled the mild scent of his cologne. The flickering of the candles gave the room a feeling of motion, the way it looked to Nikki when the plane she was in flew through a cloud. She pressed herself down to him and he came to meet her, the two of them not so much moving as drifting weightless toward each other, attracted by some irresistible force in nature that had no name, color, or taste, only heat.

And then what began so gently took on its own life. They flew to each other, locking open mouths together, crossing some line that dared them, and they took it. They tasted deeply and touched each other with a frenzy of eagerness fired by wonder and craving, the two of them released at last to test the edge of their passion.

A votive candle on the coffee table began to sputter and pop. Nikki pulled away from Rook, tearing herself away from him, and sat up. Chest heaving, soaked with perspiration, both his and her own, she watched the candle's glowing ember fade out, and when it had been consumed by the darkness, she stood. She held out her hand to Rook and he took it, rising up to stand with her.

One candle had sparked brightly and died but one was still burning. Nikki picked that one up and used it to light the way for them to her bedroom.