
HEAT WAVE

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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.

Book design by Shubhani Sarkar

FIRST EDITION

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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T E N

Nikki led him wordlessly into her bedroom and set the candle on her dresser, in front of the trifold mirror, which multiplied its light. She turned to find Rook there, close to her, magnetic. She folded her arms around his neck and drew his mouth to hers; he wrapped his long arms around her waist and tugged her body to him. Their kisses were deep and urgent, familiar all at once, her tongue finding the depth and sweetness of his open mouth while he explored hers. One of his hands began to reach for her blouse but hesitated. She clutched it and placed it on her breast. The heat of the room was tropical, and as he touched her, Nikki felt his fingers ride the slick of perspiration above the dampness of her bra. She lowered her hand and found him and he moaned softly. Nikki began to sway, then he did, too, both doing a slow dance in some sort of delicious vertigo.

Rook walked her backward toward her bed. When her calves met the edge of it, she let herself do a slow fall back, pulling him with her. As they both floated down, Heat pulled him closer and twisted, surprising Rook by landing on top of him. He looked up at her from the mattress and said, “You’re good.”

“You have no idea,” she said. They dove into each other again, and her tongue picked up the faint acid tang of lime and then salt. Her mouth left his to kiss his face and then his ear. She felt the muscles of his abdomen flex hard against her as he curled his head upward, nibbling the soft flesh where her neck met her collarbone. Nikki stirred and began to unbutton his shirt. Rook was making a project out of her blouse button so she rose up, straddled him on both knees and ripped the blouse open, hearing one of her buttons skitter against the hardwood floor near the baseboard. With one hand, Rook unhooked the front clasp of her bra. Nikki shook her arms out of it and made a

frenzied dive onto him. Their wet skin made a slap as her chest landed on his. She reached down and unhooked his belt. Then undid his zipper. Nikki kissed him again and whispered, "I keep protection in the nightstand."

"You won't need a gun," he said. "I'll be a perfect gentleman."

"You'd better not." And she pounced on him, her heart pounding high in her chest with excitement and tension. A wave crashed over Nikki and washed away all the conflicted feelings and misgivings she had been wrestling with, and she was simply, mightily, powerfully swept up. In that instant, Nikki became free. Free of responsibility. Free of control. Free of herself. Swirling, she clung to Rook, needing to feel every part of him she could touch. They held on with a fury, his passion matching hers as they explored each other, moving, biting, hungry, reaching and reaching to satisfy what they ached for.

Nikki couldn't believe it was morning already. How could the sun be so bright when her watch alarm hadn't gone off yet? Or did she sleep through it? She squinted her eyes open enough to recognize she was seeing the Nightsun beam from a police helicopter against her window shears. She listened. No sirens, no bullhorns, no heavy Russian footsteps on her fire escape, and soon, the spotlight was extinguished and the drone of the chopper grew silent as it flew on. She smiled. Captain Montrose may have kept his word and pulled the patrol car, but he didn't say anything about air surveillance.

She rolled her head to her alarm clock, but it was flashing 1:03 and that couldn't be right. Her watch said 5:21, so Nikki calculated that the difference was how long the blackout had lasted.

Rook drew a long, slow breath, and Nikki felt his chest expand against her back, followed by the chill of his exhale against the dampness of her neck. Damn, she thought, he's actually spooning me. With the windows closed, the bedroom was stifling, and there was a film of sweat fusing their naked bodies. She considered moving to get some air between them. Instead, Nikki settled herself back against his chest and thighs and liked the fit.

Jameson Rook.

Now, how did this happen?

Since the day she got stuck with him for this research ride-along business, he'd been a daily annoyance to her. And now here she was in bed with him after a night of sex. And great sex at that.

If she had to interrogate herself, Detective Heat would end up signing a sworn statement that there was a spark of attraction from their first meeting. He, of course had no qualms about voicing that every chance he had, a trait that may have had something to do with his high annoyance factor. May have? But his certainty was no match for a greater force, her denial. Yeah, there was always something there, and now, in hindsight, she realized that the more she'd felt it, the more she'd denied it.

Nikki wondered what other denials she had been dealing with.

None. Absolutely none.

Bull.

Why else did Matthew Starr's mistress strike such an uncomfortable chord with her, talking about how staying in a going-nowhere relationship was just a way of avoiding relationships, and asking her—asking *her*—if she knew what she meant.

Nikki knew from her therapy after the murder that she wore a lot of armor. Like she needed the shrink to tell her that. Or to warn her about the emotional peril of constantly deferring her needs, and yes, her desires, by packing them too safely inside her no-go zone. Those shrink sessions were long past, but how often lately had Nikki wondered—scratch that—worried, when she threw up her barriers and put herself in full Task Orientation Mode, if there might be this tipping point at which you can lose something of yourself you have been sheltering and never get it back. For instance, what happens when that hard coating you've developed to protect the most vulnerable part of you becomes so impenetrable that that part can't even be reached by you?

The Sargent print Rook gave her came to mind. She thought about those carefree girls lighting paper lanterns and wondered what became of them. Did they keep their innocence even after they stopped wearing play dresses and lost their soft necks and unlined faces? Did they lose the joy of play, of knowing what it was like to romp barefoot on damp grass simply because it felt good? Did they hold onto their innocence

or had events invaded their lives to make them wary and vigilant? Did they, a hundred years before Sting wrote it, build a fortress around their hearts?

Did they have sport sex with ex-Navy Seals just to get their heart rates up?

Or with celebrity journalists who hung with Mick and Bono?

Not to compare—oh, why not?—the difference with Rook was that he got her heart rate up first and that's what made her want him. From that initial blood rush her pulse had only beat faster.

What was it that made sex with Jameson Rook so incredible?

Hm, she thought, he was passionate, for sure. Exciting and surprising, uh huh. And tender, too, at the right times, but not too soon—and not too much, thank God. But the big difference with Rook was that he was playful.

And he made her playful.

Rook gave her permission to laugh. Being with him was fun. Sleeping with him was anything but solemn and earnest. His playfulness brought joy into her bed. I still have my armor, she thought, but tonight, anyway, Rook got in. And brought me with him.

Nikki Heat had discovered she could be playful, too. In fact, she rolled toward him and slid down the bed to prove it.

Her cell phone startled them awake. She sat up, orienting herself in the blinding sunlight.

Rook lifted his head off the pillow. "What's that, a wake-up call?"

"You had your wake-up call, mister."

He dropped back on the pillow with his eyes closed, smiling at the memory. "And I answered."

She pressed the cell to her ear. "Heat."

"Hi, Nikki, did I wake you?" It was Lauren.

"No, I'm up." She fumbled for her watch on the nightstand. 7:03. Nikki worked to clear her head. When your friend from the medical examiner's office calls at that hour, it's generally not social.

"I waited until after seven."

“Lauren, really, it’s fine. I’m already dressed and I’ve had my exercise,” Nikki said, looking at her naked reflection in the mirror. Rook lifted himself up and his smiling face appeared in the mirror with her.

“Well, that’s half-true,” he said in a hushed voice.

“Oh . . . Sounds like you have company. Nikki Heat, do you have company?”

“No, that was the TV. Those ads come on so loud.” She turned to Rook and put a finger to her lips.

“You have man company.”

Nikki pressed for a change of subject. “What’s going on, Laur?”

“I’m working a crime scene. Let me give you the address.”

“Hang on, I need something to write with.” Nikki crossed to the dresser and grabbed a pen. She couldn’t find a pad or paper, so she flipped over her copy of *First Press* with Rook and Bono on the cover and wrote on the vodka ad on the back. “OK.”

“I’m at the impound lot near the Javits.”

“I know the impound. That’s West, what, 38th?”

“Yes, at 12th,” said Lauren. “A tow driver found a body in a car he was hauling. First Precinct’s got jurisdiction, but I thought I’d give you a call because you’re definitely going to want to come by for this. I found something that might relate to your Matthew Starr case.”

“What? Tell me.”

Nikki could hear voices in the background. The mouthpiece rustled as Lauren covered it and spoke to someone, then she came back on. “Detectives from the First just got here all hot to trot, so I’ve got to go. See you when you get here.”

Nikki hung up and turned to see Rook was sitting on the edge of the bed. “Are you ashamed of me, Detective Heat?” He said it with a theatrical air. Nikki could hear a bit of the Grand Damn in his posh accent. “You bed me, but you hide me from your high-class friends. I feel so . . . cheap.”

“Comes with the territory.”

Rook thought a moment and said, “You could have told her I was here for security.”

“You?”

“Well . . . I did cover you.” He took her hand and pulled her closer, so that she stood between his knees.

“I’ve got an appointment with a corpse.”

He looped his legs behind hers and rested his hands on her hips. “Last night was great, don’t you think?”

“It was. And you know what else last night was? Last night.” And she strode to her closet to get dressed for work.

Rook did the cab fishing on Park Avenue South and hooked a northbound whopper, a minivan-cab. He held the door for Nikki, who got in with one last glance over her shoulder, harboring the concern that Captain Montrose had left a blue-and-white on her and she’d be spotted on her morning after with Jameson Rook. “Looking for Pochenko?” asked Rook.

“Not really. Old habit.”

She gave the cabbie Rook’s address in Tribeca.

“What’s going on?” he said. “Aren’t we going to the impound lot?”

“One of us is going to the impound lot. The other is going to go home and change his clothes.”

“Thanks, but if you can stand me, I’ll wear this again today. I’d rather hang with you. Although, checking out a body isn’t exactly our best denouement. After a night like that, the New York thing would be take you to brunch. And pretend to write down your phone number.”

“No, you’re going to go change. I can’t think of a worse idea than for the two of us to show up in the same cab at my friend’s crime scene first thing in the morning with bed hair and one of us in yesterday’s clothes.”

“We could show up wearing each other’s clothes, that would be worse.” He laughed and took her hand. She withdrew hers.

“Have you noticed I don’t do a lot of hand holding on the job? Slows down my fast draw.”

They rode in silence for a while. As the cab cut across Houston Street, he said, “I’m trying to figure out . . . did I bite my own tongue when you kicked me in the face, or did you do it?” That earned a fast check from the driver in the rearview mirror.

Heat said, "I want to lean on Forensics to cough up that report on Pochenko's blue jeans."

"I can't recall getting bitten either time," said Rook.

"Blackout probably set the lab behind schedule, but it's been long enough."

"Things were happening fast and, dare I say, furious."

"I'm betting those fibers match," she said.

"But still, you'd think I'd remember a bite."

"Surveillance video be damned, somehow he got in there, I'd bet on it. I know he likes his fire escapes."

"Am I talking too much?" Rook asked.

"Yes."

Two blessedly chatter-free minutes later, Rook was out of the cab, standing in front of his building.

"When you're done, go to the precinct and wait for me. I'll meet you there after I finish at the impound." He sulked like a rejected puppy and started to close the door. She held it open and said, "By the way? Yes. I did bite your tongue." Then she slid the door closed. Nikki watched him grinning on the sidewalk through the back window as her cab drove on.

Detective Heat badged herself through the gate of the city impound, and after she signed in, the guard stepped out of his tiny office into the hot sun to point out the medical examiner van on the far end of the lot. Nikki turned to thank him but he was already inside filling his shirt-sleeves with air from the window AC.

The sun was still low in the sky, just clearing the top of the Javits Convention Center, and Heat could feel its bite on her back as she paused to take her long, deep breath, her ritual remembering breath. When she was ready to meet the victim, she walked the long row of dusty parked cars with grease-penciled windshields to the investigation scene. The M.E. van and another from Forensics were parked close to a tow truck still hooked up to a newish, green metallic Volvo wagon. Technicians in white coveralls were dusting the outside of the Volvo.

As Nikki got closer, she could see the body of a woman slumped in the driver's seat, the top of her head pointed out the open car door.

"Sorry to interrupt your morning workout, Detective." Lauren Parry stepped around the rear of the M.E. van.

"Not much gets by you, does it?"

"I told you Jameson Rook was doable." Nikki smiled and shook her head, she was so busted. "Well, was he doable?"

"And doable."

"Good. Glad to see you enjoying life. Detectives just told me you had a close call the other night."

"Yeah, after SoHo House it was all downhill."

Lauren stepped to her. "You all right?"

"Better than the bad guy."

"My girl." Then Lauren frowned and tugged aside the collar of her friend's blouse to look at the bruising she saw on her neck. "I'd say it was a very close call. Let's take it easy, all right? I have enough customers, I don't need you, too."

"I'll see what I can do," said Nikki. "Now, you dragged me out of bed for this, it better be worth it. What are you working here?"

"Jane Doe. Like I said, found in her car by the tow truck driver when he dropped it off here this morning. He thought it was heat asphyxiation."

"A Doe? In a car?"

"I hear you, but no driver's license. No purse. No plates. No registration."

"You said you found something connected to my Matthew Starr case."

"Give a girl a little sex and she gets very impatient."

Nikki cocked an eyebrow. "A little?"

"And boastful." The M.E. handed Nikki a pair of gloves. While she put them on, Lauren turned to the back of her van and came out with a clear plastic bag. She pinched it at the corner and held it up so that it dangled in front of Nikki's eyes.

Inside was a ring.

A ring shaped like a hexagon.

A ring that was a good match for those bruises on Matthew Starr's torso.

A ring that could have put that cut on Vitya Pochenko's finger.

"Worth the drive?" said Lauren.

"Where did you find this?"

"I'll show you." Lauren took the ring back to her evidence locker and led Heat to the open door of the Volvo. "It was there. On the floor under the front seat."

Nikki looked at the woman's body. "It is a man's ring, isn't it?"

The medical examiner gave her a long, sober look. "I want you to see something." The two leaned in through the open car door. Inside it was humming with blowflies. "OK, we have a female, aged fifty to fifty-five. Hard to get an accurate postmortem interval without labbing the rate test because she's been in that car so long in this heat. My guess—"

"Which is always damn close."

"Thank you—based on the state of putrefaction is four, four and a half days."

"And cause?"

"Even with the discoloration that's taken place over the last few days, it's pretty clear to see what happened here." The woman had a thick curtain of hair across her face. Lauren used her small metal ruler to pull the hair aside and reveal her neck.

When she saw the bruising, Nikki swallowed dryness and relived her own choking. "Strangulation" was all she said, though.

"Looks like from someone in the backseat. See where the fingers would have laced together?"

"Looks like she put up a hell of a fight," said the detective. One of the victim's shoes was off and her ankles and shins were mottled by scrapes and bruises where she had kicked the underside of the dash.

"And look," said Lauren, "heel marks on the inside of the windshield over there." The missing shoe rested broken on the dash above the glove compartment.

"I think that ring belongs to whoever strangled her. It probably came off in the struggle."

Nikki thought of the woman's desperate last moments and her brave fight. Whether she had been an innocent victim, a criminal getting a payback, or something in between, she was a person. And had she ever battled to live. Nikki made herself look at the woman's face, if for no other reason than to honor that struggle.

And when Nikki looked at her, she saw something. Something death plus time couldn't obscure. Images played hazily in the detective's mind. Grocery clerks, and bank loan officers, and photos of women from society pages, an old schoolteacher, a bartender in Boston. Nothing came to her. "Could you . . ." Nikki pointed at the woman's hair and waved her forefinger. Lauren used her ruler to gently draw all the hair off the face. "I think I've seen her before," said the detective.

Heat shifted her weight on her heels, leaned back from the woman about a foot, and tilted her own head to match the angle of hers. And pondered. And then she knew. The grainy photo, at a three-quarters angle with the expensive furniture in the background and the framed lithograph of a pineapple on the wall. She would have to look it up to be sure, but damn it, she knew. She looked at Lauren. "I think I've seen this woman on the surveillance tape from the Guilford. The morning Matthew Starr was killed."

Her cell phone rang and she jumped.

"Heat," she said.

"Guess where I'm standing."

"Rook, I'm not up for this right now."

"I'll give you a clue. Roach got a call about a burglary last night. Guess where."

A cloud of dread gathered around her. "Starr's apartment."

"I'm standing in the living room. Guess what else. Every single painting in the room is gone."