

## SEVEN

**F**or Nikki Heat everything became about calculations. Panic had no place except to get her killed. As odds go, they sucked, but keeping her head would make the most of them. The TOs at every combat survival course she had ever taken had all drilled the same message. Put fear in your back pocket and train yourself to rely on your training. Assess, calculate, seek opportunity, act.

Her rapid assessment was simple: She was in the worst possible tactical position, trapped on a walled subterranean road midpoint between one shooter in a vehicle coming up behind her and three riflemen advancing on foot ahead of her. Heat's next appraisal was bleaker. There was an experienced air about the three men she was watching come toward her. They walked at an unhurried pace, with a military demeanor, weapons at the ready—alert but not tense. These were professionals who would not be fooled or spooked.

As they advanced three abreast, spanning the width of the road, she calculated her chances of putting a shot in each, left to right, from a distance of a hundred yards. *Pop, pop, and pop.* But while Heat weighed the riskiness of pulling off three successive kill shots with a handgun, they adjusted, as if reading her mind, to form a single file close to the wall and that opportunity evaporated. Nikki crawled backward before they could see her.

Around the curve behind her, she heard a revving engine and metal on metal as the SUV pushed her abandoned car out of the way. The sound was terrorizing in its implications. So she fought her fear and assessed. It meant that shooter would come in the SUV, not on

foot. What else? That he was probably alone. If he wasn't, his partner would have just driven her car out of the way for him.

Calculations: At pace, the three on foot would be there in twenty seconds. Sooner for the SUV.

Nikki looked upward, her eyes stinging from the sleet fall. The wall was about ten feet high, about the same as an average home ceiling. Leafless branches from park shrubs drooped down about two feet. She holstered her Sig, pulled her gloves out of her coat pockets, and started to climb.

The spaces between the rocks were barely wide enough for her to get a toehold, but she managed to find enough bite to boost herself up on her right foot and finger claw the rock above her head with her left hand. She reached up with her right for a jutting edge above, and in the transfer of weight, her shoe lost its grip on the icy rock and she landed on all fours on the frozen, soupy roadway.

Ten seconds lost.

Ten seconds until the three shooters rounded the bend and saw her.

The engine of the SUV stopped revving and purred. It was coming her way. Nikki was caught in a classic pincer movement.

Even if she were able to climb the ice-glazed rocks, there was no way to do it in ten seconds. With no opportunity to act upon, she made her own. In a split second of computing odds and physics, Detective Heat created what her training officers called a SWAG plan—acronym for Scientific Wild Ass Guess. She drew her weapon and started running toward the SUV.

The driver would be looking for her, so she had to come at him unexpectedly enough to startle and quick enough not to be a target. The midday overcast was so gloomy that she could see his headlight beams stabbing through the falling sleet and snow. Charging fast around the bend, Nikki dropped and rolled out right into the SUV's path, putting two rounds into the windshield and then stretching lengthwise between the front wheels, letting it drive right over her. By the time he braked, her head was under its rear bumper. She

scrambled out from underneath and started running back toward Fifth Avenue.

Heat knew there was no room for the SUV to turn around, which was the core of her SWAG plan, to charge past instead of run from it. What she hadn't expected was for the driver to jam it in reverse and floor it to pursue her. The engine banshee whined and wheels threw slush as the rear end closed in on her. Losing a step of critical speed, Nikki turned and fired on the run at a rear tire. The shot missed and punctured the fender. She got off one more and the tire burst. The vehicle swayed wildly. The driver overcorrected, sending himself into a skid. His tires whirled uselessly in the slush and he smacked the rear end into the wall. Nikki kept moving, but when she heard the door unlatch, she turned, braced, and pumped four bullets into the driver's side window, shattering it. A head in a ski mask slumped against the windowsill, motionless.

Around the bend came the sound of feet slapping the wet road on the double. Heat would be a sitting duck if she made a run toward the entrance on Fifth. Once again she reversed field, moving toward her attackers, but stopped at the SUV. Nikki holstered, grabbed the roof rack, and climbed up on top of it. From that height, she was able to take hold of the bare branch of a shrub sagging down from the park. She pulled herself up the wall, hoisting the upper half of her body over it, the rocky ledge digging into her waist as her legs dangled.

A bullet hit the rock beside her left foot and sent out a spray of jagged chips. Nikki almost lost her grip on the shrub but held on, hooking her knee on the ledge. When she hauled herself up and over, she heard something hard strike the roof of the SUV with a resonant *bong*. She reached for her holster. It was empty.

Below, a protest of air wheezed from a shock absorber, and Nikki heard the thump of multiple boot soles on sheet metal. They were climbing up after her.

She got up and ran full speed. Her legs fought through waist-high shrubbery turned leafless and sharp by winter. The branches

stung her thighs and whipped behind her as she plowed east paralleling the Transverse. A panic swell rose when she reflected on the sound back there. Boots on metal. They hadn't even paused to talk or check the driver, they just came. Fifth Avenue, if she could just get to Fifth Avenue.

At a break in the trees just before she reached the park's East Drive, Heat paused. This was an organized hunting party, and if she were organizing one, she would cover the target's escape route in case something went awry. Much as Nikki hated to give back her narrow head start, she crouched, panting in the thicket, to survey the tree line on the far side of the clearing. When she determined the best vantage point, she saw him. Through the visual clutter of sleet and snowflakes, a dark form huddled against a rock on high ground. She didn't need to see the rifle to know it was there.

Time to rethink. Blocked to the east, the other three would be closing in soon from the west. The Transverse cut her off to the south. But seven blocks north, near the reservoir, sat the NYPD Central Park Precinct house. It might as well be seven miles. What else was there? Heat envisioned a map of the park, and one word popped into her mind:

Castle.

There was a police call box near Belvedere Castle.

Detective Heat, wet, cold, and unarmed, reversed direction, bending her route slightly north as she moved parallel to the course of her three oncoming pursuers who, hopefully, would not expect her to backtrack their way.

She broke out of the woods on the footpath leading to the castle. Taking that trail presented a risk she accepted, trading exposure for the speed it would give her. There were no other footprints than hers as she sprinted in the new snowfall. Unfortunately, the weather had limited the population of runners and walkers that day—and darkened her hopes of getting help or access to a random cell phone.

The flakes had picked up intensity but not enough to cover her footprints. It wouldn't matter. These men would be able to hunt her

anyway. The thought made her increase speed and cast a look over her shoulder. As she did, Nikki slid on a patch of ice. The hard landing knocked the breath out of her. Her kneecap radiated pain like it had been smacked with a hammer. While she collected herself, a frozen twig snapped deep in the woods she had just left. They were coming. She hauled herself up. Lungs searing, Heat raced onward.

Belvedere Castle was built in the 1860s as an observation tower overlooking Central Park's old reservoir. Its ornate turrets, arches, and main tower, masoned of granite and native schist, replicated the feel of Sleeping Beauty Castle right in Manhattan. Heat barely looked at it. Her focus was on a lamppost holding the police box on the far side. Nikki slowed to a jog, taking care not to fall on the ice that had formed on the brickwork of the courtyard. That's when the .50-caliber slug blew the police box clean off the post.

The crack of the rifle echoed off the face of the castle, sending waves rippling through the woods. Heat didn't wait for the follow-up shot. She hurled herself over the low stone wall rimming the courtyard. The next bullet ricocheted off the granite trim above her head as she crouched pressing her back against the stones. Nikki had to dig in her heels in the ice to avoid sliding four stories down the sheer rock cliff she was perched on. One slip would guarantee her a broken skull on the tumble down.

They would divide up to get her. She knew her hunters were disciplined and tactical, so two would fan out to flank her. The third would wait for them to reach their positions then come over the top for her. That bought Nikki time but little else. Even if she could survive a descent down Vista Rock, running across the white ground below in her dark clothes would be suicidal. The only difference between her and a target silhouette would be that she was flesh and not paper. No, she had to play the odds again; she had to take the fight to them.

But not all of them. That was her slim chance. If they had split up as she anticipated, one of them would be alone, nearby and waiting. Nikki inched on her butt laterally along the wall, careful to keep her

footing. A fall would be the end of it. She reached a cluster of Chinese wintersweet and used the bare shrubs as cover when she periscoped up for a careful peek over the wall.

He stood alone presenting his side to her ten yards away, cradling his rifle, eyes fixed through his ski mask on the point where she had bailed over the wall. Heart pounding, she lowered herself and closed her eyes, summoning details of the image she had just seen. His position was in an open expanse of courtyard, no cover for her. To her left—and most appealing, behind him—was the pavilion . . . a roofed open-air patio bordered by low walls on three sides, with the fourth side open to the courtyard. Mindful that his partners could have her in their sights any second, she pulled herself farther along the rock ledge toward the back side of the pavilion. Along the way, she selected the largest loose rock she could find. It was about the size and heft of a shot put. Heat slid it in her side coat pocket.

Getting up and over the wall into the pavilion would be tricky. Huge icicles rimmed the entire roof, and their drips had frozen on the wall beneath them. She looked down. A slip now would be fatal. So would waiting.

Nikki stretched into a yoga pose, unfolding herself lengthwise along the top of the wall. Then, trying to avoid excess movement or noise, she slowly poured herself over the top and down to a rest in the patio area. Heat drew one long breath to quiet her pulse rate, then took off her coat.

She crawled to the wall closest to the courtyard and peered over. Her hunter was still there, but at this angle his back was to her. With the rock weighing heavily in the pocket, she tossed her coat over the cliff and screamed while she ducked.

Footsteps. Running her way.

But they stopped short of the pavilion. When they did, Nikki vaulted over the patio wall and caught him looking down the cliff at her falling coat. He heard her coming, spun, and tried to level the rifle at her. But she was already inside the muzzle with her left hand

grasping the forestock, using it to pull him toward her as she brought her right fist up to his Adam's apple. He was trained in close combat, though, and he dropped his chin to shield his windpipe. Her fist struck his ski mask instead. He countered instantly, twisting his body in a hard pivot, using his hip and her grip on the rifle to twirl her off him.

Heat landed on the icy bricks, but still clutched the forestock. She yanked backward. His forefinger was stuck in the trigger guard, and she heard bone snapping as she pulled. A round fired as he fell backward beside her. The bullet struck the pavilion roof, knocking a sheet of ice and a row of icicles onto the courtyard around them. She got up, trying to take the weapon from him, but he scissored her legs at the knees, knocking her back down.

He got up on one knee, moaning as he shook his broken finger clear of the guard. Heat lunged for the rifle. She should have gone for him instead; he simply raised the weapon and, as her momentum carried her by, slammed her with his forearm, sending her skidding in the ice debris. With his right forefinger dangling loose inside his glove, he transferred the rifle to his left side and went for the trigger with his good hand. But just as he pivoted to aim at Nikki, she came at him, thrusting the sharp end of an umbrella-sized icicle deep into his gut. The weapon dropped from his hand and he clutched his wound, eyes flashing disbelief through the holes of his mask. Heat took the rifle in both hands and hammered the butt hard into his windpipe. He fell backward, fumbling at his neck, gurgling and bleeding out of his stomach on the snow.

Across the courtyard, one of the other hunters double-timed into view and hunkered down behind a rock. Nikki took the rifle and scrambled back inside the pavilion. She was still outnumbered, but at least she had a weapon.

Sirens approached. They weren't close yet, but they were coming.

Just as she positioned herself, resting the rifle on the top of the wall, almost braced for her holding action, a blur of two figures moved into the woods, fleeing.

Nikki's body began to tremble but she kept close watch. Only when the sirens grew loud and she could see flashing lights did she let down. Still clutching her weapon, Heat leaned back against the wall, looking upward at the castle that had been her salvation.

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**Time had first slowed down and then stood still for Nikki. The ensuing minutes had no definition. And strangely, no sequence. A psychologist might say she didn't shut down, she surrendered. After the tense ordeal of being hunted, shot at, evading, and then doing some hunting and killing of her own, Heat released control. For her it was the greatest luxury of survival.**

Events lost their connective tissue and for Nikki Heat they kaleidoscoped. One moment, a face swam into view, reassuring her. Next, latex-gloved hands pried the rifle from her grip and slid it into plastic. Her own leather gloves came off, revealing palms wet with ice melt and blood. She found herself sitting in the back of an ambulance without recalling the journey. Did she walk there? Bushes parted in slow motion as her two assailants fled. Wait, that was before . . . She hallucinated Elmer Fudd standing there. Elmer Fudd with earflaps and jumbo binoculars hanging from his neck and snowflakes collecting on his eyebrows. Coffee in a cup rippled from her quaking hands. An EMT shined her penlight across her eyes and nodded, pleased. She pulled the blanket snug around her shoulders. Where did the blanket come from?

When the two shooting investigators from downtown joined her in the rear of the ambulance, Heat tossed back the rest of her coffee to spike her sharpness. She willed herself into the moment and walked them through the whole damn deal. They took notes and asked questions. Questions for clarification at first, and then the same questions asked a different way to see if her answers matched. She had been through this waltz before and so had they. Her answers were clear; they danced politely. But their goal was different than hers. They wanted to determine if she had killed according to policy. She wanted

to capture the bastards, and this interview was something to get through so she could get back to work and do just that.

Elmer Fudd wasn't a hallucination, after all—although he had a different name. The old man wearing the binoculars and the L.L.Bean hunter's cap was actually Theodore Hobart. A birder who had spent the morning in the castle tower waiting for an eastern screech owl to return to its cavity in a tree near the Turtle Pond, Hobart witnessed the siege below and called 911 on his cell phone. Heat thanked him for saving her. He blushed and plucked the feather of a red-tailed hawk from the breast pocket of his Barbour coat and gave it to her. To Nikki it felt like a rose.

Zach Hamner pulled up in a black Crown Vic and strode to the suits from downtown. Heat watched them confer briefly, one of the detectives gesturing toward the pavilion and the other to the woods where a K-9 dog was leading his partner into the brush. On The Hammer's walk to the rear of the ambulance he stared over at the body under the tarp. "Nice to see you made it, Detective," he said, standing on the bricks and looking up to her.

"Feeling good about it myself." Nikki folded her arms tightly inside the blanket, not much up for a handshake with the lawyer.

"The boys say it's going to go down as a righteous kill. Your story checks out with the bird-watcher, too."

Heat tried to like him but wasn't having much success. She said, "So you can relax. No liability for the department?"

"None so far," he replied, not reading any of her subtext. Nikki wondered where all the men with a sense of irony had gone in this city. "Sounds like you were quite the hero. That's not going to hurt things for your promotion."

"Given the choice, I'd rather do it the old-fashioned way," said Heat.

He said, "I hear ya," but he was looking away as he did, more interested in the form under the tarp.

"Who was he?"

"Male Hispanic, twenty-eight to thirty. No ID. We'll run prints."

“You see any of them?” Nikki shook her head. “Any idea who they were?”

“Not yet.”

He studied Nikki and could not miss seeing her resolve. “They say the SUV down in the Transverse is gone. No sign of the other guy, the driver you say you shot.” Then he said, “These guys were pros.”

It always annoyed her to have office functionaries roll up after the action and play cop. All she said was “Tell me.”

He looked at his watch and then around the crime scene. “By the way. Where the hell’s your boss? Where the fuck is Montrose?”

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**The Hammer irritated her, but he wasn’t wrong. Precinct commanders** always showed at every major incident involving their people. Captain Montrose didn’t make Belvedere Castle. He wasn’t in his office when she got back to the Two-oh, either.

Everyone knew of her ordeal, and all eyes fell on her as she entered the bull pen. In any other profession Nikki would have been forced to spend the rest of the day being pestered by sympathetic coworkers milking every detail of her story out of her and pushing her to share her feelings. Not in Copland. Ochoa set the tone when she reached her desk and he sidled over, checking the wall clock. “About time you rolled in,” he said. “Some of us have been working this case.”

Raley pivoted on his office chair to face them. “I hope you have a good reason for keeping us waiting.”

Heat thought a moment and said, “I made the mistake of taking the park. The Transverse was a killer.”

Detective Ochoa had a ball of kite string in his hand. He set it on her blotter. “What’s this?” she asked.

“Old trick. Tie one end of it to your gun.” He winked and clucked his tongue.

Then the three paused five seconds, letting the silence express the friendship. Marking the end of the interval, Raley stood. "Ready to hear what we've got?"

"Am I ever," said Heat. She wasn't just seeking solace in work, Nikki now had highly personal stakes in jamming this case even harder.

Lancer Standard, the CIA contractor, had finally called Raley back to set an appointment with Lawrence Hays, who was due back tomorrow from his desert training facility in Nevada. "Weird," he said. "His secretary said that he would only meet with you. By name, he specifically mentioned Detective Heat. I never brought you up."

"Pushy, but it just means he's done his homework," said Nikki. "He's a military type and probably wants to deal with the leader of the squad."

Ochoa said to his partner, "Man's busy. Can't waste time on a loser like you."

"Loser?" said Raley. "Partner, you are talking about the King of All Surveillance Media, now including hard drives."

"Whatcha got, sire?" asked Nikki.

"I took another look through Father Graf's computer and found a link to a second e-mail account that didn't forward to his Outlook. I accessed it and found only one folder. It's labeled 'EMMA.' There were no saved e-mails in it, nothing in the inbox. Either it was inactive," Raley speculated, "or it's been purged."

"Call Mrs. Borelli at the rectory," said Heat. "See if that name means anything to her." She cast another glance at the dark office across the pen. "Any Montrose sightings?"

"*Nada*," said Hinesburg, joining in as she crossed over. "And his cell is dumping to voice mail. What do you think it means?"

"Cap's been off the charts lately, but I have to say this has me shaking my head." Nikki recalled his warning an hour before her ambush to watch her back, and wondered if it was more than sage advice. The salacious hunger in Hinesburg's eyes alerted Nikki that

this was not the forum for thinking out loud about her boss, and she moved on. “Anything on the money in the cookie tins yet?”

“Oh, yes, and get this,” she said. “The serial numbers trace to cash used in a DEA sting years ago.”

Ochoa asked, “How does a stash from a fed drug deal end up in a priest’s attic?”

“Do we know who the DEA deal was with?” said Heat.

“Yeah, an Alejandro Martinez.” Hinesburg consulted her notes. “He cut a plea bargain for a deuce in Ossining and he’s out. Clean jacket since his release in ’07.”

Nikki crossed over to the board and started to write his name next to the notation for the found money. “Let’s see how clean this Alejandro Martinez is. Bring him in for a chat.”

They had just scattered to work their assignments when a familiar voice called from the door to the bull pen. “Delivery for Nikki Heat?”

Jameson Rook stepped in toting dry cleaning on hangers looped over his hand. “You know, I can’t just drop everything and keep coming here every time you get all bloody.”

Heat looked at the clothes from her closet, then at Rook, and then to Roach, arching a brow at them. Ochoa said, “We figured, you know, that he’d want to know how your day was going.”

Rook asked, “Did you really stab him with an icicle?” When she nodded, he said, “Please, tell me you said ‘Freeze,’ because that would be only perfect.” Rook was grinning, but there was worry behind it. He put his free arm around her waist. “Detective, you doing OK?”

“Fine, I’m just fine. I can’t believe you did this.” She took the clothes from him.

“Think they match. . . . You seem to have this sort of practical monochromatic thing going in your closet, not that I judge. All right, I judge. We need to take you shopping.”

She laughed and pulled a couple of items from the selection he’d brought. “These will do just fine.” She kissed his cheek, forgetting herself in a rare office display. “Thanks.”

“I thought you had protection. What happened to your Discourager?”

“Poor Harvey, you should have seen him. Mortified. In all his years he never got blocked like that.”

“How . . . discouraging. Whatever’s going on, you need better. When I went by your apartment, there was a car sitting up the block watching, I know the look.”

Nikki got a fresh chill and draped the clothes across the back of her chair. “How do you know it was watching?”

“Because when I walked up to it, he sped off. I yelled stop, but he kept going.”

“The yelling stop, that never works,” said Raley.

“Did you see him, get a description?” Ochoa had his pad open. Then he said, “You didn’t get a description, did you?”

“No,” said Rook. And then he took out his Moleskine notebook. “But would a license plate help?”

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“Got it,” said Raley, hanging up the phone. “Vehicle you saw was registered to Firewall Security, Inc., a domestic protection division of . . . are you ready? . . . Lancer Standard.”

“We should get on them. Get over there right now,” said Rook. “These have got to be the guys who ambushed you. It adds up, the surveillance, the military tactics, let’s go.”

Nikki finished putting on her clean blazer and said, “First of all, there is no ‘we’ or ‘let’s,’ Rook. Your ride-along days are through. And second, there’s nothing to go on. Third, if they are up to something, I don’t want to let on that I know. . . .”

Rook sat down. “When you get to the fifteenth reason, let me know. I believe this is like Little League; isn’t there a mercy rule?”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re not totally wrong. Of course this guy Hays and Lancer Standard have my attention, but let’s go about this the right way.”

“Did you say ‘let’s’? Because I heard ‘let’s.’”

She laughed, shoving him so he spun a rotation in the chair. Then Nikki felt Ochoa's presence, standing in the middle of the bull pen, ashen. The smile left her face. "Miguel?"

The detective spoke in a voice so low it would not have been audible if the room hadn't gone completely silent. "Captain Montrose. . . . He's dead."