

NIKI UNDERCOVER

James M. Jackson



Niki Undercover Copyright © 2025 by James M. Jackson. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, including internet usage, without permission from Wolf’s Echo Press, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Edition
Trade Paperback Edition: September 2025

Wolf’s Echo Press
PO Box 54
Amasa, MI 49903
www.WolfsEchoPress.com

This is a work of fiction. Any references to real places, real people, real organizations, or historical events are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, organizations, places, or events are the product of the author’s imagination.

ISBN-13 Trade Paperback:	978-1-943166-44-2
ISBN-13 e-book:	978-1-943166-45-9
ISBN Audiobook	978-1-943166-46-6
Library of Congress Control Number:	2025940476

Printed in the United States of America
10987654321

DEDICATION

For the women in my life.

ONE

Saturday, May 2, 0749 EDT

ASHLEY PRESCOTT BACKPEDALED FROM THE hallway to the emergency stairs she had just run up. She caught the fire door before it slammed shut and eased it closed to avoid announcing her presence to whoever the hell was standing at her door. Was it another tenant wanting her to sign a petition or to borrow sugar for their coffee? Or was this the end of her world?

She released her cellphone from its armband and pressed her right index finger to its sensor. Through the sweat stinging her eyes from her ten-mile run, she made out the display. In tiny letters under the time, she read *Fingerprint not recognized*. She heeled the sweat from her brow and searched for something dry on which to wipe her hand. Her sock sufficed, and this time, the home screen animated, and she opened the app that controlled three hi-res security cameras she had installed unbeknownst to the apartment manager—or the FBI.

The image from the pinhole camera above her apartment door showed a male Caucasian in a Nationals' ball cap, his head tipped to peer through the door's peephole into her apartment. He cupped ungloved hands with trimmed, flesh-colored fingernails to shield his eyes. No visible weapons. *Not a pro assassin . . . unless he has a partner.*

She switched views to the camera feed covering the hallway from the emergency stairs to the elevator and looked for any play of light to suggest someone hiding. All clear. *Confront or wait?* She glanced at her watch, cursed herself for cutting it so close. She could spare two, max three, minutes to allow the guy to leave on his own accord. Then she'd have to confront him because no way was she letting fear torpedo two years of hard work.

Who are you?

She switched to the third view, this from the camera positioned across from her door, hidden below a framed picture of cherry trees in bloom at D.C.'s Tidal Basin. Using two fingers to zoom in on the threat, she noted

his muscular neck poking from a zipped navy-blue jacket that emphasized the taper from his broad shoulders to narrow waist.

Come on, asshole. Turn around. She manipulated the lens to scan his lower half. Jeans. No external weapons. Cowboy boots.

Her racing heart froze before kicking into an even higher gear. She would not let Special Agent Rick-spelled-with-a-silent-P Kaska interfere with her morning assignment. Gex would not sideline her like that. No way. Wait! How had Rick gotten past the doorman? The heat from her exercise turned into a blast furnace. *If he'd badged his way through—Don't go there.* She'd deal with it when she had to. Right now, he could still walk away, she would reach her assignment on time, and she'd prove to Gex that everything was fine.

Rick stepped away from the door, allowing the camera to capture his expression: furrowed brow, eyes squinted like he was trying for X-ray vision, thin lips drawn into a tight line. He raised his fist and pounded on the metal door; the reverberations echoing in the hallway.

She pushed through the fire door, extracted the apartment keys from her running shorts, and sprinted toward him. He pounded on her door again. "Wake all the neighbors, why don't you?"

He spun around, eyes wide. "Ashley—"

"Shut up, Rick." She unlatched the three locks, flung the door open, and yanked him inside. She hipped the door closed and caught him giving her a full-body scan.

"Stop drooling. It's running gear, not your wet dream from Frederick's of Hollywood. Did Gex send you?"

His face crinkled into a smile. "I prefer the Agent Provocateur style myself."

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

He put on a wounded puppy look. "Double entendre? They're a British company. They—"

"Don't know. Don't care." She strode into the kitchen, grabbed the metal bottle waiting for her return, and shook it to make sure the carb-protein-electrolyte mix had fully dissolved.

He followed her in. "What are you going to do about those phone calls?"

Aha! If Gex *had* sent him, Rick would claim that authority. He was cowboying it. She downed the tangy orange mix in one long draw. Whumped the bottle onto the counter harder than she intended. "Ignore

them.” She made a production of checking her watch. “I have just enough time to shower before I catch the Metro to my meet.”

He blocked her from leaving the kitchen. “You can’t possibly think it’s okay to go through with it.”

Adrenaline urged her to kick his nuts so hard they’d explode from his nose. Instead, she channeled Ann Cuddy from her Ted Talk on projecting strength and assumed a Wonder Woman pose: back straight, hands on hips, eyes glaring—which worked well on Rick since his boots only made him a couple of inches taller than her five-six. “No, Rick. What I can’t possibly think is that it’s okay to miss today’s meeting and torpedo two years of work to embed Niki—meaning me—into Patriots for Freedom. Certainly not because some jerk wakes me up at oh-two-hundred hours and insists it’s *imperative* that I drop everything and hop on the private Pendergast jet and meet Robert Pendergast no later than Sunday morning. Bullshit to that. And you—” She shoved his chest with both hands. “—need to get out of my way.”

He recovered his balance and widened his stance. “I get it you’re not happy your father crooked his finger for his—what did the guy call you?—Little Spitfire. That’s not the issue. The problem—”

“Damn it, Rick. He may have given me half my DNA, but he’s never been my father, and he’s not sucking me into his drama.”

“You, Special Agent Ashley Pendergast Prescott, are missing the damn point. I don’t give a flying fig about the message from your fath—from Robert Pendergast. The problem is this Malachi Cluff guy didn’t call *your* phone. He called *Niki’s undercover* phone. No one is supposed to have that number besides your team and your Patriots For Freedom targets. You screwed up. You compromised your undercover work infiltrating PFF. If you la-di-da waltz into your meeting today pretending to be Corporal Niki, you’re likely to return in a body bag.”

Through clenched teeth she said, “The way I stay alive, Rick, is I don’t *pretend* to be Niki. I *become* Niki. Robert didn’t get a single damn piece of information from me. And regarding security breaches, you being here, calling me Ashley in the hallway, is a billion times worse.”

He blinked and shook his head, like she had slapped him. “Nah-uh. The FBI has rules to prevent you from walking into a trap. We are a team, remember? In case you’ve forgotten, my role is to monitor your undercover persona electronics. Especially before your meetups with PFF. If you had

answered my calls this morning, I wouldn't have had to show up at your door. No one knows I'm here. I grabbed keys from the safe house and used the apartment building's back door." He glanced at the keyring in his hand. "We don't seem to have keys for the extra locks you installed."

"No shit, Sherlock. No woman would let a set of keys lie around where any Tom, Dick, or Harry can make a copy." She adopted a smile, a soothing tone, and a lie. "Look, Rick, I agree we have a security breach. And I appreciate your work keeping me safe. I really do. But PFF is not behind it. If they discovered their Corporal Niki Foster was an undercover FBI agent, they wouldn't invoke Robert Pendergast's name to convince me to go to an airport. They'd wait until today's meet and flat out kill me."

"No, this is Robert Pendergast's doing. He's wanted to suck me into his world ever since the summer I stayed with him. Right before my mother picked me up, he presented me with a list of my strengths and weaknesses and a long reading list to help me improve. I was a kid in grammar school, for fuck's sake, and he was already grooming me for his business." Her churning guts and angry voice reminded her that despite her promise not to let Robert's singlemindedness get under her skin, he'd done it again. Forcing calm words, she said, "No, whatever this is, it's not PFF, and I am totally safe."

Seeing the objection forming on his face, she added. "Well, no more at risk than I ever am. Rick, listen. I am ninety-nine percent sure something huge is about to happen at PFF. That's why we've invested two years on this assignment. We can talk later, but right now, I gotta get ready. Let yourself out. We will discuss *everything* at this afternoon's debriefing because I want to rip the liver out of the asshole who gave Niki's phone number to Robert." *And since you're all-fired ready to intervene, you're number one on my suspect list.*

She feinted left and slid sideways, ducking under his outstretched arm. She grabbed Niki's clothes from the spare bedroom and found him again blocking her exit. "If you don't get out of my way, I will fucking break your arm."

He must have realized she was not exaggerating because he backed away.

She locked the bathroom door and cranked the shower to its maximum temperature, knowing she'd be lucky to get it even lukewarm by the time all the people doing laundry on the lower floors took their cut. At least she needn't waste time wiping steam off the mirrors.

She stripped and tested the water with a finger. Good way to get a heart

attack. She gritted her teeth and stepped under the shower head, letting the flow sluice her sweat down the drain.

Her burr haircut required no time to dry. She replaced her sports bra with an FBI special that incorporated a GPS tracker. Her weather app claimed the expected high in D.C. was seventy-two. Maryland, the location of the planned meet, was often cooler. She shimmied on a hi-tech base layer and donned camouflage fatigues, figuring the combination would keep her warm all morning but not overheat her come afternoon. She double-knotted the laces on her army-style boots, above which she strapped an ankle holster with a snub-nosed revolver. A patrol cap pulled low completed her visual transformation from Ashley to Niki.

She patted her pockets. Niki's Wallet. Check. Metro pass. Check. Niki's phone. Yep, and no messages. She dropped the phone into her camo knapsack, loosened the Velcro of its easy-to-access storage, and felt Niki's Beretta M9. Check.

She breezed from Niki's room to find the Prick rifling through the report on a Chinese assault rifle she had translated from Mandarin and left on the secretary. "I thought I told you to leave."

"And I thought you'd come to your senses. What's this?" He held up the sealed envelope marked **OPEN IN EMERGENCY**.

Enough of this bullshit. "Go ahead. Open it. I dare you."

He dropped it on the table as though it burned his fingers.

She pointed toward the door. "Your aftershave is polluting my apartment. Get your ass out before I kick it out. If I ever see you here again, I'll report you for freaking breaking my cover."

He held his hands up in surrender. "The Bureau has rules designed to keep you safe. Despite your preference to be independent, you *are* part of a team. I don't want you hurt, Ash. That's all."

It wasn't like she didn't know the rules; she just didn't always follow them when they didn't make sense. Like now, and she was out of time. She motioned at her outfit. "Do I look like Ash to you? I am Corporal Niki of Patriots For Freedom. Make sure no one sees you leave." She strode into the kitchen and pulled a die and a quarter from the junk drawer. She rolled the die. One pip faced up.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Randomizing my route. Six exits from this building don't trigger the fire alarm. A one on the die means I use the main entrance. Then I flip the

coin.” It spun in the air, dinged on the tile, and rolled toward the dishwasher. She stomped it. “Tails, Cleveland Park station. Heads and I walk to Woodland Park. Didn’t they teach you anything at Quantico?”

“You do all that random draw bullshit and ignore a genuine threat? Go through with this, and I’m telling you, Gex will make sure it’s the last time you get to play weekend warrior.”

Two

Saturday, May 2, 0800 EDT

MALACHI CLUFF GLARED AT THE pimply doorman for Ashley Prescott's apartment building. "You're sure she doesn't live here? It's an enormous place. You didn't even check."

"P-r-e-s-c-o-t-t, right?" The kid used a finger to mark his place in an organic chemistry textbook. "Sir, we go from Prescher to Presley. I got nothing to do here but schoolwork and memorize the tenants' names. And before you ask, never been any Prescotts while I've been working here. That's going on two years. Academic years."

Malachi laid the four-by-six photo of Ashley and her three half-brothers on top of the textbook. "Ever seen her?"

"Believe me, I'd remember someone who looks that good."

"She'd be a dozen years older."

"Ah, well . . ." The kid's dating fantasy seemed to evaporate.

"She might have shorter hair, gained some weight."

"Why would she cut off her ponytail?" The kid handed the photo back. "You can check with the day guy if you don't believe me. Be an hour though, he comes on at nine." He returned his attention to his book.

Malachi grabbed the photo and retreated to the sitting area between the entrance and the doorman's table. He tried Ashley's number. Voicemail kicked in and he endured her message again to hear her precise Midwestern diction. "Leave a message if you think I'll call back." Alto, for sure, could cover tenor parts in a pinch. Sexy. All assuming it was her, not some purchased recording.

"This is Malachi Cluff. I'm in your apartment lobby. Please buzz me up or call." Maybe that would get her to respond. He tested the couch cushions. Comfier than the pleather at the airport. He'd wait.

A steady trickle of residents passed by. The doorman greeted each one by their first name. Most ignored him or told "Danny" to have a good day or wished him luck with his finals. A deliveryman brought a box of long-stemmed roses. Danny signed for them and, without consulting the directory, placed a call to alert the recipient.

The longer Malachi sat, the larger the aching hole grew in his stomach. Danny wasn't lazy or lying. Ashley Pendergast Prescott didn't live here. He studied the photo taken at Ashley's mother's funeral. She'd been what, twenty-two? Not long graduated from college. Makeup had covered her grief, and the black pant suit hid her athletic build. Her brothers had aged. She might look nothing like this.

Everything he knew about her was from Robert. It was hard to judge how much was her father bragging and how much was truth. Robert had hoped she would join his business and admitted he'd made a mistake trying again to convince her at her mother's funeral. She'd joined the FBI, been one of the top graduates of her academy class, and had grown into an incredible undercover agent with a knack for ticking off the old-boy network. Robert's face glowed when he related that. According to him, she had more balls than his three sons put together.

Which made Malachi curious. Why did Robert want to see her in St. Paul no later than tomorrow morning? And what did Malachi plan if she didn't return his phone calls? Control what you can; let go of whatever you can't, and plan for everything in between. That's what his SEAL training had taught him.

He laughed at himself. Here he was drawing six figures to sit on a couch, a heck of a lot better deal than freezing his butt off collecting intel in the mountains of Afghanistan. Hearing the words, "Thanks, Danny. No taxi," rocketed him from his memories. The voice that had asked him to leave a message after the beep when Ashley didn't answer her phone. The woman double-timed it past Malachi toward the exit, her head turned away from him. "Metro today."

Dressed in full fatigues—no name, no insignia, she was the right height. But exercise and diet had chiseled away Ashley's curves, leaving a muscular woman, whippet thin.

He extricated himself from the couch and impatiently waited for a guy with two dachshunds tangled around his feet to clear the doorway. Once outside, he spotted her speed-walking down the block, already past shouting range. He hustled in her wake.

Halfway across the Connecticut Avenue bridge crossing the Klinge Valley Trail, she reversed course, walked several steps toward him, reversed again, and continued in her original direction. The SEALs had taught him similar techniques to spot surveillance. Instinctively, he had kept moving at the same

pace, closing their gap to shouting distance. He inhaled, preparing to project his voice above the passing traffic noise. A thought froze him. Robert Pendergast had told Malachi she was a highly effective FBI undercover agent. The woman he was following was wearing mossy oak camo fatigues and had performed a surveillance maneuver. Was Ashley on assignment?

How would she react to him yelling her real name? He'd follow and wait.

As Ashley reached the far side of the bridge, a man hopped the green metal fence separating the sidewalk from the park and raced toward her from her blind side. An older woman with a Shih Tzu on a short lead was approaching Ashley on the sidewalk. The dog tore its leash from the woman's grip and bolted toward busy Connecticut Avenue.

Ashley attempted to stomp on the leash, but the dog jerked away. Malachi's stomach knotted as the dog sprinted into the road with Ashley in pursuit. Brakes screeched. Horns blared. Like the all-American second baseman Ashley had been in college, she anticipated the Shih Tzu's path, scooped up the dog one-handed, and reached the relative safety of the double yellow line in the middle of the avenue. Once the traffic in her path stopped, she trotted back to the woman and handed her the dog and leash. After a brief conversation, she gave the woman and dog a quick hug and hustled forward. The guy who had caused the disturbance spoke briefly to the woman, gave the dog a pat, and ran after Ashley.

Malachi realized he was holding his breath and his feet had stopped moving. Unsure what was going on, he followed at double time. The guy got in front of Ashley, made a gesture Malachi interpreted as "just wait." Ashley bore down on the gesticulating man, her arms pistons, fists closed. At the last moment, her interloper stepped aside, and they strode away side-by-side.

The man was marginally taller, but his shorter legs forced him into a faster cadence. Getting slightly ahead, he turned his head sideways. Malachi was too far away to lip-read and, from his angle, couldn't determine whether Ashley responded. The tableau reminded him of a child trying to keep pace with an angry parent. The vibe wasn't something he alone felt; people coming the other way parted like the Red Sea before an approaching Moses.

The two of them reached the next intersection as the light changed to yellow. Ashley slowed, then at the last minute ran across. He, a little slow

on the pickup, raced after her, flipping off the driver waiting to make a right who laid on her horn. Ashley clearly didn't want the guy with her, but with a pit bull's determination, he caught up, and they disappeared down the Metro escalator.

Malachi reached the intersection and, using the forced down time, he extracted a credit card from his billfold. Once the signal said he could walk, Malachi sprinted to the station, feet slapping hard on the concrete, jarring his shinbones. He bought a day pass, tapped the turnstile reader. Fifty-fifty chance which direction they went. He followed the larger crowd onto the Glenmont platform. A train was arriving with a push of wind and a squeal of brakes. Following the example of two college-age women, he broke into a run, weaving through others content to take the next train.

At the platform, he spotted Ashley and the guy entering the far door of a car two down from where he was. With a burst of speed, he reached the nearer entrance of the same car and stepped through the closing doors. He brushed by a mountain of a black dude too rude to follow common-courtesy and move into the interior. Malachi grabbed the center pole and set his feet against the expected jerk of the starting train.

Once the ride steadied, he rose on tiptoes and spotted them standing close to the other door. Dropping back down, he checked the metro map posted on the wall. This route would bring her to Union Station, where she could catch Amtrak or MARC and take it to Baltimore/Washington International, the airport where the plane awaited her. Robert had warned him the girl was an independent thinker and did not like being given direction. Was using public transportation rather than accept Robert's offer of a town-car ride to the airport her rebellion against Robert's wishes? He could hope.

If she was traveling to BWI, Malachi didn't want to spook her or tick her off by having her discover he was following her. Yet, dressing like a soldier and stuffing everything she'd want for a trip to St. Paul in her knapsack made little sense. Okay, if she did anything other than get off at Union Station and take a train toward BWI, he'd approach her and make his pitch. Or discover he was a fool because he'd stressed out over the wrong person who *sounded* like Ashley.

The train's automated voice announced the coming stop. Widening his stance to stay balanced, he again rose to his toes to see if Ashley moved toward the door. He kept a vigilant watch, his calves burning from the

strain. Once the doors began closing, he relaxed until the next station, where he repeated the process.

Approaching Union Station, he felt the flush of adrenaline flooding his system, his unconscious mind anticipating rapid movement. This time, he narrowed his stance, preparing to follow those in front of him onto the platform. Still, she clung to the strap, and he released a frustrated breath. Which plan two: work his way through the train and approach her or wait until she got off and then connect?

A gaggle of teenagers entered the car at Ashley's door, blocking his view of her. He lasered onto her companion, who was gesticulating in her direction. The incoming crowd flowed around him, thinning to an older woman with an oversized purse who must have waited for the kids before getting on. The automatic voice informed everyone to step back, doors closing. He rolled his neck against the tension.

Over the din, Malachi heard a female voice yell, "Keep your hands to yourself, pervert." Up on tiptoes, looking back toward Ashley, he witnessed her companion knock into the older woman, then grab her. Beyond the kerfuffle, the camouflaged cap exited the door. He pushed off the pole, shouldered aside a kid wearing headphones and smelling strongly of weed, and went to smack the closing door with his hand to force it to re-open.

An iron shackle grabbed his wrist, preventing him from hitting the door. The big black dude jerked him back. "Next station, bro."

Through the door's window, he watched Ashley take a half-dozen steps, stop, and face the train. A crooked smile creased her face. And why not? She had played it perfectly. He should have known she would make that move: it mimicked the same approach she had used at the yellow traffic light to try to ditch the guy.

Malachi excused and pardoned his way down the railcar until he reached the man who had accosted Ashley. Up close, he realized that the man, below average height and all muscle, had narrowed eyes and was audibly grinding his teeth. Precisely groomed, he gave off an air of authority. Like a special forces guy. Or a cop—if cops wore cowboy boots and used too much aftershave.

The door lady's voice announced the next stop. Malachi followed the guy onto the platform and moved to his side. "Excuse me." Malachi used a soft, non-threatening voice. "I thought I recognized an old friend who got on with you. Maybe. Was that Ashley?"

The guy's eyes widened for a millisecond, giving away his lie. "Sorry, bud." He pursed his lips in shared disappointment. "Don't know who you're talking about."

"My bad." Malachi sidled toward the underground's exit, sending a prayer to God that nothing he had done would endanger Ashley. He should have put it together quicker. The doorman didn't know her as Ashley Prescott because she used her undercover name at that address.

In service, sailors died because of bad intel and Robert's had been inaccurate. Malachi's mission still gave him twenty-four hours to bring Ashley to meet his boss. He could hope she was waiting to finish whatever she was doing today before she contacted Malachi, and they'd jet to St. Paul.

If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. He needed new intel fast and knew just who to ask.

THREE

Saturday, May 2, 0810 EDT

ASHLEY MONITORED RICK'S DEPARTURE ON the camera feed and checked Niki's phone once again. Another call from Malachi. She didn't want him leaving more messages and deleted the voicemail and call logs. Given Rick's unexpected appearance, she wasn't keen on leaving by the main entrance. But breaking her security routine was a slippery slope she did not choose to risk. The moment you stopped being random, you started being predictable. Once the stairway door latched behind Rick, she closed her eyes, mentally adopted her Niki persona, said out loud, "I am Corporal Niki." She triple-locked the door behind her and caught an empty elevator to the lobby. Said hello to Danny, the geeky twenty-year-old doorman. A junior at Georgetown, he unabashedly ogled the T and A passing his desk but could barely make eye contact.

"Hi ya, Niki. Can I get you a cab?"

She smiled, recalling the time she'd embarrassed him with a ten-dollar tip and a kiss for hailing her a ride during a sleet storm. "Thanks, Danny. No taxi." She passed by, waved fingers behind her head at him. Seeing a six-foot-ish, early forties, fit, military cut, pasty-colored guy who resembled the pictures of Malachi Cluff she had found on the internet, she hid her face with her near hand and said over her far shoulder to Danny, "Metro today."

Once through the door, she sprinted through the courtyard to Connecticut Avenue, where she slowed her pace to a fast walk. Rick would go apeshit if he learned Cluff had Niki's address. She wanted to confront Cluff and learn how Robert had gotten Niki's phone number and apartment address. But this shit with Robert was personal, and she would let nothing personal knock her off her stride. Hell, she realized, it already had.

She was thinking as Ashley and supposed to be acting like Niki. "I am Corporal Niki," she muttered under her breath, and kicked her walking speed up another level. Halfway across the bridge, she reversed field, saw

Cluff following. *That's unfortunate.* Niki spun on her heel and continued her original route. If she lost Cluff before she hooked-up with Sergeant Oliver, there was no reason Rick had to know Cluff had spotted and followed her. Without moving her head, she scanned for bogies and caught a flash of movement in the woods beyond the bridge. The Prick, the son of a bitch. The bastard must have cut down the hill from her apartment building, crossed the Klinge Valley Trail, and climbed up to intercept her.

She quickened her pace, moved left to avoid an older woman walking a hairy toy dog. If Ashley was going to have a dog, it needed to be something you could pound on the back without—the dog shot a look at Rick running up behind her and leaped in the opposite direction, pulling the leash from the woman's hand. Niki took two steps and jumped, intending to trap the lead under her boots. The furball shied away from her move, pulling the leash an inch beyond her stomp.

Niki raced after the dog, glanced at the first lane of Connecticut Avenue—clear—and trusted cars in the other lanes would stop before they hit her. She snagged the dog in the third lane, pulling it and the leash tight to her chest. One more step brought her to the center yellow line. Assuring herself the traffic had stopped, she waved her thanks to the drivers and returned to the woman and laid the dog in her arms.

"Bless you, bless you," she said. "You saved Reginald from sure death. Can I give you something?"

"How about a hug?" Niki gathered the woman and dog into a quick embrace. "Make sure to hold on tight to that leash. You never know when jerks, like this guy Rick, will show up out of nowhere." She disengaged and told Rick, "I expect you to apologize to Reginald and his owner." Hopefully, that would slow him down. She took off in a fast walk and heard the woman say, "And thank you for your service."

She waved a hand behind her head to let the woman know she had heard the words. *It's not what you think, but you're welcome, anyway.* The rapid clomping of cowboy boots behind her warned her Rick had not given up. Soon after, he ran in front of her and told her to slow down, motioning with his hands like she was Reginald.

She clenched her hands, narrowed her eyes, felt her teeth grinding as she steamed at him, intending to run him down if he didn't get out of her way.

"Hey, Niki," he said, sweet as a cobra seducing a mouse. At the last

moment, he stepped out of her way. Hustling to catch up, he added, "Don't be like that. I thought of another reason you should call today off."

"Right. I'll be at the morgue identifying your body. Can it, Rick. Anything you say can and will be used against you."

"When PFF takes your phone, they'll find those missed calls and check your messages."

"Give me a fucking break. We have no evidence they've *ever* checked that stuff. Collecting my phone is their way to follow army procedure and not allow cell phones on maneuvers. Plus, they believe it provides an alibi for where their members have been while they're on missions. I deleted the messages. And the call log. And I killed voicemail. If Malachi Cluff calls again, he can't leave a message. If he rings while my phone-minder has it, she'll think it's a wrong number. It's not an issue."

"Well, I'll keep watch until the meet. Make sure you stay safe."

"Tiny has that assignment today." And I'd damn sure prefer a six-six, ex-pro linebacker watching my back than a five-six wannabe.

"Two are better than one."

Quit wasting your breath on him. On the bright side, Cluff wasn't coming closer. Maybe Rick was accidentally keeping Cluff at bay. Rick had planted the seed about her cover being blown. Cluff following her was fertilizer for her imagination, tendrils of concern growing. How compromised was she? Would Cluff show up at the gravel pit?

Do your thing and ditch him. Rick, too. But if anything at the meet smells wrong, she promised herself she'd skedaddle. No second thoughts.

Up ahead, the walking man symbol on the crosswalk sign flashed, numbers counting down the seconds. She eased her pace to reach the intersection at zero. "Crud. Won't make it," she said for Rick's benefit. The signal changed to a raised hand. She waited until the declining numbers reached one, then dashed across the street, knapsack thumping on her back. Rick's booted steps followed her. Someone laid on their car horn and Rick yelled, "Get a horse, lady."

She scampered down the concrete stairs to the Metro, staying left to pass, tapped her card, and proceeded to the platform. Following the game plan developed in yesterday's undercover planning meeting, she ambled to the approximate spot for the front entrance to the second car. She ignored Tiny, who wore a Nick Foles Philadelphia jersey. Niki smiled at the inside joke: Nick Foles had been the last quarterback Tiny had sacked before he

retired. Washington fans might have something to say about that shirt, except no one was dumb enough to take on a black dude whose arms were thicker than most people's legs.

No sign of either Rick or Cluff. Maybe Rick had given up, and maybe Cluff didn't know how to use the Metro. *Hope for the best; prepare for the worst.* She slipped both arms through her knapsack straps, snugged everything tight around her chest, and flexed her knees to judge the fit. Wearing the pack would annoy some passengers because it occupied extra space, but she wanted flexibility for action.

The first push of fetid air from the arriving train tickled her face. From the corner of her eye, she caught Rick sidling toward her. That sucked, although at least he was respecting her being undercover. No way she'd let him anywhere near her meeting with Sergeant Oliver. With time, she had lots of ways to ditch him. With no time, her only choice was to make sure he stayed on the train when she got off at Union Station.

The train's twin headlights grew brighter, air pressure increased, levitating a scrap of paper from the track. Lights at the edge of the platform blinked for the hearing impaired. She plugged her ears against the squeal, wanted to close her eyes against the sting of the dust, but that could be fatal.

She chose an angled path to the open door. Inside, she grabbed the closest pole, forcing Rick to move past her. Right where she wanted him. Stooping to look through the window, she caught Cluff's sprint, his arms pumping, dodging obstacles, and breathing through his nose. The dude was in shape. He followed Tiny through the car's other door as they were shutting.

Your move, asshole. The train accelerated with a whine. She got a whiff of Rick's sandalwood aftershave and changed her thinking to *assholes*. At least Rick was smart enough not to say anything to her, and when he had used her name, he'd remembered to call her Niki.

Cluff remained where he was. That gave Niki time to mentally rehearse moves to free herself. A buzz of anticipation rippled up her spine as the train approached her exit.

The automated voice announced Union Station, and Rick gave her a little after-you motion. She pretended not to see. He moved closer and said, "Excuse me, ma'am, are you getting off?"

"Nope. Feel free." She held his stare, dropped her hand from the pole, and leaned into it, offering to let him pass. She nudged her feet together,

preparing to launch her escape. He inched closer. *Go ahead. Touch me, Rick.* Closer. Waiting. Waiting.

At the Metro's automatic warning that the doors would soon close, she yelled, "Keep your hands to yourself, pervert," and gave Rick a two-handed shove, causing him to stumble into an older woman.

Niki raced through the opening, bouncing off a closing door like it was a pinball bumper. Hearing the hum of the train starting, she stopped and watched the train.

Behind one door, a red-faced Rick stared darts. Behind a second, she spotted Cluff standing next to Tiny.

Double play to end the inning. Now to discover what's up with Sergeant Oliver.