

NIKI UNLEASHED

A Niki Undercover Thriller

James M. Jackson



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DEDICATION

For Jan, alpha, omega, and all the letters in between.

HOLDING A CLANDESTINE MEETING AT a venue with 40,000 screaming fans was not the craziest thing Niki had done in her undercover work. It wasn't standard protocol, either. FBI Deputy Director Ambrose had insisted only three other people know of their ultra-secret relationship. Yet the ticket he'd sent her was for a suite that, according to the Washington Nationals website, held nineteen people.

If he planned on double-crossing her, this was the kind of venue the Bureau might choose. But if this was her first sub-rosa assignment under their agreement, she wanted to set him straight on a few rules. Either way, fun and games.

She showed her ticket to a gate agent.

"This is for a Jefferson Suite on the first-base side. We're Center Field. You can use the Media and Suites entrance."

"Oh gosh." Niki touched the older woman's arm and rolled her eyes. "Silly me. It's my first time in one of those Fancy Dan suites. I'm more a bleachers girl myself. Well, I'm already here." Which I did intentionally to make sure no one was following me.

The woman returned her ticket and motioned her toward the next person, who searched her cross-body bag, missing the thin ceramic knife hidden in its false bottom. A third person wanded her body for metal, not that she could hide anything in her little black cocktail dress that showed a glimpse of cleavage and a lot of leg. The guy didn't check her head, where she could have hidden contraband under the blond wig with the French braid she'd chosen for tonight, and he didn't bend down to check her black trainers.

Amateurs.

Waved through the gate, Niki took two steps and stopped. To the world, she might appear confused or disorganized. She memorized faces of the nearby crowd while she fumbled with the clasp on her bag before storing her ticket.

The air was festive with merry voices, upbeat organ music, and the smell of grilled food. She matched the pace of those around her, scanning for threats: familiar faces or anyone acting strangely. Once she reached the vicinity of the suites on level three, she kicked her threat detection into a higher gear. She stopped, reversed direction, apologized to the couple she

nearly bowled over, and memorized the nearby faces, then reversed direction again to join a long concession line. No one hung around during the ten minutes it took her to purchase a Nationals ball cap.

Snugging the cap on her head, she followed signs to her assigned suite, the next to the last on the first-base side. A placard outside the door welcomed her to the AHI Executive Committee. What, she wondered, is AHI? She engaged the recording app on her phone, slipped it into her bag, and pulled out her ticket.

Inside, the waiter, a six-footer fit enough to be on the playing field, rearranged the sparkling glasses next to the hot buffet. "I wondered if anyone was gonna show."

That struck her as a strange first comment. She acted the dumb blonde. "This is suite seventy-two, right?" She held up her ticket.

"It surely is. Can I get you a beer? Wine? Help yourself to the food. First come, first served. You want the TV on or are you a purist?"

She followed his pointing finger past a polished table for six to the TV fixed to one wall, screen on, volume barely audible. Tucked in the corner near the food and refrigerator were another table and chairs. Outside the suite were two empty rows of padded blue seats overlooking first base. Her gaze automatically drifted to the second baseman finishing his warmups.

"I'll wait for the others before I have anything." She wandered toward the outside seats and second-guessed her decision. The suites on either side were active, with more than half of their outside seats occupied. Sitting alone would draw attention. She shook off the shiver that ran up her spine. What the hell was going on here? Where was Ambrose? She retreated from the windows. "This a regular gig for you?" she asked.

His eyes flicked up, and he fiddled with the glasses again. Something was odd. She gave him a closer look. His haircut looked fresh. Solid face, clean-shaven, late-twenties or early thirties. Moving, his buffed body rippled beneath the Washington Nationals polo shirt. Pressed khakis led her eye down to polished oxfords.

"I work wherever I'm assigned. It's my first time in this suite."

"Oh yeah? What's your day job?"

He laughed. "Studying at Georgetown Law School. What about you?"

She amused herself speculating what his reaction would be if she said, Former FBI Special Agent—now nominally a U.S. Marshal being paid off the books to work undercover. "Restrooms?" She'd seen them but had no problem acting like a typical ditz to buy time.

He motioned in their general direction and appeared relieved that she'd broken off the conversation. She retreated to the sanctuary of the ladies'

room. Sure, she was on edge. It had been more than ten weeks since she and Ambrose had made their agreement. Thus far, they had paid her for sitting on her ass and doing nothing. She'd become more and more convinced her new "assignment" was only a bribe to shut her up. Now she'd find out. Maybe.

Like a lightning bolt, she realized the guy was FBI, working undercover for Ambrose. She checked her image in the mirror. She'd hidden her Midwest pallor under makeup to give the impression of an aging party-girl with a great tan. Contact lenses brightened her eyes from hazel to pale blue. Shadow and eyeliner made them look bigger. The sunbaked crinkles at the corners of her eyes combined with the anxiety shadows she had created under them added a decade to her thirty-six years.

Unless someone knew her well and saw her up close, they'd never recognize her. That was one of her superpowers, not the waiter's.

Through the walls came the sounds of a soprano belting out the National Anthem. Niki removed her cap and stood at attention until the singer finished to a roar from the crowd. Why had she ever thought this relationship would work? Because she wanted to—no, had a fierce drive to—bring bad guys down, and Ambrose had offered her a path after her former boss torpedoed her FBI career. That, she reminded herself, was the goal.

Get off your fucking high horse, Ashley, and play the hand they dealt you.

She straightened her shoulders and pushed through the door. "When did you attend Quantico?"

A deer in headlights couldn't have looked more startled than this guy. Not undercover material. Where had they found him? She followed his look and discovered Ambrose had arrived while she was in the head.

Two

AMBROSE'S CHUCKLE BROKE THE TENSION. "Busted, Steve. Thanks for holding down the fort until I could get here." He pulled a ticket from a shirt pocket. "Consolation prize. Box seat right behind the visitor's dugout. Enjoy the game."

Niki read confusion in Steve's eyes. Not what he was expecting, but he accepted the ticket with a cheerful, "Thank you, sir," and left without a look back.

Ambrose said, "I learned I would be late and asked Steve to make sure you didn't leave. He's safe. He went through Quantico a few years after you, and I checked that your paths had never crossed. Have you eaten? I'm starved."

His idea of safe and her idea of safe did not have a lot in common. "I'd rather you explained why I'm here."

He lifted the covers of the serving dishes, releasing scrumptious smells that triggered her mouth to fill with saliva. "Looks good. You were a four-year starter at UCLA. Second base. Three national championships. You look fit enough to still play. I thought you would enjoy a ballgame. I know it's not softball, but—"

He was clueless. "That's not what I meant. Has something happened at Patriots For Freedom? Did Colonel Pete reappear?"

Telling the truth wouldn't require him to stall, but he did. While he pulled a domestic beer from the refrigerator and filled a plate with a sampling of the items, she studied his appearance. He had swapped his nondescript suit for nondescript khakis—similar to Steve's—and a pressed oxford shirt open at the neck. He stood a few inches taller than her five-six. Wedding band on his left hand; the right devoid of ornaments.

The guy was not a gym rat and had gone a little fleshy around the neck. Sharp eyes hid under bushy eyebrows and missed little. In his mid-fifties, he was the kind of guy you'd walk by without a second glance. If you weren't careful, he could suck you in with his good-ol'-boy honey-sweet drawl.

She reminded herself to keep that in mind.

He stepped aside, inviting her to take some food. She shook her head and motioned him toward the tables. "Suit yourself," he said. "Patriots For Freedom shut down your old unit, and the other units have gone silent.

Your Colonel Pete is deep underground—one way or the other. No clues who burned down his country estate or trashed his in-town house.”

Meaning tonight didn’t relate to PFF. Alright, time to lay down the ground rules. “Have you ever run an undercover agent?”

“At least join me at the table. We can catch some of the game. I promise to answer every question you ask.”

Niki’s eyebrows rose in disbelief. With a moment’s reflection, she realized he had deftly deflected her question. The honey trap of “truth.”

He smiled at her expression. “I know. It’s D.C. Promises are cheap, but I keep mine.” His smile grew wider. “Promise.”

He sat at a table, his back to her, leaving her the seat across from him with a view of the entryway. She pulled the chair away from the table, sat on its edge, ready to spring at any trap, and waited for his next move.

Ambrose washed down a couple of bites and broke the silence. “I couldn’t have you come to my office. Since you no longer have an FBI badge, you’d have to sign in. And we don’t want your N. Iki Marshals Service badge recorded on the official register. By the way, your friend Rick never told me what you thought of the name he picked. He seemed immensely proud to figure out that play on words.”

Pain in her heart blossomed at being reminded of the day Ambrose had forced her to resign from the Bureau, swept her badge into a desk drawer, and offered her a secret deal to work directly for him and Assistant Director of National Security Park. A few days later, Special Agent Rick Kaska had shown up with a Marshal’s badge, which allowed her concealed carry and the ability to arrest people. She didn’t plan to tell Ambrose that Rick’s off-the-wall recommendation to use her favorite undercover name, Niki, and convert it from a first name into an initial and last name, had pleased her.

She walled off the pain to deal with later. “It’s a fine placeholder . . . until we have a specific assignment, at which time we’ll create a whole new identity. What is this about?”

“During the seventh-inning stretch, you’ll meet a friend of mine who’s in the next suite. I’ll brief you before he arrives. But first, the food’s good, we have the game to watch. I was sorry to hear about your father and brother. How are—”

He was changing the topic, but his first pitch was out of the strike zone. “The deaths of Robert and Bradlee Pendergast do not concern us. What should concern us is you breaching our security setup. We agreed to have Rick act as a cut-out between us. You contact him. He contacts me. If you can’t contact Rick, you go through his backup, my friend Seamus McCree. That protects my identity. I won’t be successful if everybody and his

brother knows I'm working for you. Having Agent Steve here introduces an exposure point. I almost didn't come. Damn good thing I wore a disguise."

"But you did come."

And that may have been a mistake. "Because you need to hear directly from me how important this is. And frankly, I'm bored out of my skull." She blew out a long breath of air. "Right now, you are treating me more like a source than an undercover asset. Maybe you don't know the difference. You can squeeze a source because you hold something over their head. You can tell sources when and where and what, and they have to comply because otherwise something bad happens to them. You can write things like 'dress appropriately' and a source has to swallow the insult. A UC operative is a member of a team dedicated to a common cause. You may not like all your team members, but you treat them with respect. I am *nobody's* source."

Well, crap, Ashley. Tell him how you *really* feel.

He set his knife and fork on the plate. "I'm sorry. I screwed up. Will you accept my apology?" He offered his hand across the table.

Regardless of the final outcome, she must appear to accept his apology. She grasped his hand and gave it a single firm pump. "Did your file," she gestured toward his attaché case, "mention that I tend to be direct?"

His smile crinkled his eyes. "I seem to recall something concerning an abrasive personality, lack of decorum, refusal to follow guidelines and procedures. Of course, that was just your fitness report for your first UC assignment. The one that got you transferred to the backwaters of Mississippi. Despite that, with your talents and hard work, you forced your return into good graces. Look, Ashley, if I wanted a smooth politician, I could find plenty to kiss my ass. Your history describes an agent dedicated to taking down bad guys, a woman with a terrific record of success who was being chewed up and spit out by a grinding bureaucracy. And, I might add, whose bosses tended to step on their dicks because you showed them up. I want us to succeed. As a team."

A roar from the crowd drew their attention to the field. The Nationals led 1-0.

His drawl thickened. "It was not my intention to treat you as a source. Tell me how I can change that."

Niki eased farther back in the chair, two feet still on the ground ready to move. "Where to begin?" she mumbled to herself. "First, you can't use my real name. If you do, you'll slip around other people. In any communications between you, ADNI Park, Rick, Seamus McCree, and

me, I should be referred to by my file codename, Beorn. Here's a secret about great UC operators. We don't role-play, we *become* the person from our deep background, the details of which have to be comprehensive and bulletproof. That takes time. If we have to meet, you *must* think of me by whatever undercover persona I have adopted. For today, we'll use Niki."

"All right, Niki. Points taken. But for what I am proposing, we don't have time to develop a deep background."

THREE

IT'S LIKE HE DIDN'T HEAR a thing I said. “If we don’t have time,” Niki enunciated each word to control her temper, “it’s a disaster waiting to happen. I’m not the Secret Service sworn to throw my body in front of a target and take a bullet, and this isn’t some novel where magic occurs off stage during a scene break and everything is designed for the hero to succeed—after overcoming a shit-ton of unforeseen obstacles.”

“Niki, we’re on the same side. You won’t do the country any good if you’re dead. May I tell you about the situation? It involves a radical group that splintered from Greenpeace. Call themselves Greenwar. They espouse violent means to achieve their objectives. Their Midwest group publishes the *Blame and Shame* blog.” Ambrose removed a yellow folder from his attaché and placed it and five red files before her. “Each of the five victims was featured twice in the blog, once before and once after their deaths.”

Following Ambrose’s presentation, Niki summarized the material spread on the table in front of her. “Someone is killing senior executives who retired from some of the biggest polluters in the United States. The President’s donors are running scared, and the President is pissing all over the FBI because you haven’t solved the crimes. These people have nothing in common with the militias I’ve infiltrated. There’s nothing I can leverage from any previous assignments. I can see no reason you even thought to come to me. What am I missing?”

“Terrorism is your thing and these people are domestic terrorists. The Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives Bureau has an undercover agent who can introduce you to them.”

“If ATF has a guy in place, why do you need me?”

“He’s there because of the explosives they’ve used for their ecoterrorism. He’s not trained in murder investigations. Secondly, women run Greenwar, and he’s a he and you’re a she.” He leaned back in his chair as though that sealed the deal.

“And what? You want me to join them in the restroom because they trade secrets in the stalls?” *Back off, Niki.* “This—”

“Look, it’s not just the president who’s interested in solving this. Greenwar’s blog called out my best friend from high school. He’s exactly the kind of target they’ve killed. This is personal for me. Jim and I have an idea about how you can gain entry. I’ll let him tell you when he gets here.

You're trained. You're experienced. You have the time. And you are creative and adaptive. For example, why did you choose that particular outfit?"

Another diversion. "Why did you write dress appropriately on the ticket?"

"Your training taught you that you learn more by asking subjects open-ended questions. Same thing." He cocked his head.

"You used it like an open-ended suggestion to let me fill in the blanks. What did you discover?" She shimmered her hands down her body.

"That you're not answering my question."

Talk about black pots and kettles. She could play this game. He who speaks first loses. To occupy her mouth, she nibbled on a gourmet brownie. Her knees went weak with the pleasure of its rich chocolate taste. She might take a doggie bag. On the second brownie, she won.

"Okay," he said. "Tell me if I get this right. You researched the Jefferson Suites and found pictures of business types and wore your little black dress to fit in with whatever gathering I had planned. You bought a new ball cap, which you could use to dress down or throw away if no one else was in fan wear. Sneakers are comfortable, and you're too smart to wear heels if you don't have to. Your wig and makeup disguise you, make you hard to recognize. How am I doing?"

"Close. Working undercover, you look for escape hatches in every situation. This dress has the added advantage that it won't slow me down if I have to run, and the trainers give me good stability."

His body language suggested this was not the answer he expected. "Why would you think you might need to escape?"

"If you were reneging on the deal we made and double-crossing me, this would be a perfect place to take me into custody. A place you thought I must be unarmed. Your agent Steve could have a few friends ready to appear at your call."

His face fell and he blinked several times. "That never crossed my mind. I understand why you might not trust the Bureau, but I see you don't trust me either. I asked and now I know." At a crack of the bat, he swiveled to catch the action on the field. "Let's watch a little baseball." He waved toward the field. "We're down a run with two men on and one out. Do you sacrifice? Bunt, I mean."

Sacrifice was an interesting choice of words. Despite his assurance that she wouldn't do him any good dead, she wondered if it was a Freudian slip.

FOUR

WITH THE SCORE TIED 3-3 going into the bottom of the seventh, Niki stretched, sucking in the energy from the packed stadium butchering A-ha's "Take On Me." A knock sounded at the door, and an older gentleman dressed in a cashmere sports jacket entered.

She recognized the face, the mane of gray hair, couldn't come up with the name. Chairman, CEO, something of one of the big international oil companies. He and Ambrose hugged. The guy indicated her with a tilt of his head. "This your agent?" Like she was a slab of corned beef or something.

With hand stretched out, she interrupted the bromance. "I'm Niki. Or if you don't like first names, you can call me ma'am."

"Jim Ford," he said. "Thank you for your work."

Whatever the hell that meant. She'd give him credit. He gave her a firm handshake, didn't hold on too long or do the power move of touching her arm with his other hand.

Ambrose ushered them to the table away from the windows. "We've talked, but you need to sell her on the cover we planned for her."

"Oh," he said. He fiddled with the American flag pin on his lapel, gears recalibrating behind his deep-set eyes.

"Let me be perfectly frank. Even though the blogger mentioned my name, I'm here because it's our civic duty to help in any way we can."

In other words, you're scared shitless that you're next. "My cover?"

"Right. I'm the chairman of American Hydrocarbons Institute. AHI is the world's largest—"

"Jim," Ambrose said, "you're not recruiting a new member."

The gears behind his eyes clicked again. "So, Niki, what we thought . . ." His arm sweep included Ambrose in the we, "was we make you my special assistant at AHI, give you access to files that Greenwar would find interesting. With that currency, we thought you—"

"Jim. I get it. You're worried you have a target on your back. AHI special assistant won't do. Too many loose ends. Can you hire me, or must it pass through HR? Whose noses will be out of joint when you show up with a special assistant? Desk or cubicle? My own extension? Are there employee lists I need to be on?"

Ambrose cleared his throat. "You know that if we follow regular FBI

procedures, we can't get any operation up and running for at least three months. The embedded ATF agent will be arrested later this month along with several of Greenwar's activists *before* they blow up a pipeline. AHI is a small organization. We can make it work."

"I'm not saying I'll do it, but the only way this *might* work is for Jim to personally hire me to become his assistant. You worked for a multinational. I'm fluent in Mandarin and Spanish. How can you use those skills and provide me with information I can take to Greenwar?"

Niki wondered if Jim's furrowed brow was because he was trying to figure out a workable cover or he was worried about the personal expense.

He said, "What does it matter if it gives you an excuse to possess the documents?"

She blew out a long breath. "So, Niki," she drawled to sound like Ambrose while mirroring Ford's language, "tell me how you spend your day working for Jim Ford. What do you do when he travels? How did you come across this document? Where does he keep files like this? Is there a way we can raid his office and get them all? So on and so forth."

Understanding sparked in Jim's eyes. "Personal assistant it is. I'll set you up in the AHI conference room next to my office. That allows you to match real names to real people and learn their real reactions to you. Half of them will be annoyed that I didn't ask them, and the other half will think I hired you to cover up an affair. How about researcher for an autobiography? I had projects in South America. The environmental reports and official government correspondence will be in Spanish."

Niki offered a smile. "Stick with translator." To Ambrose she asked, "What's the status of my current assignments with Benedict Arnold and Sonic Boom?" She hoped he remembered the code names she had insisted he use for her assignment infiltrating the Patriots for Freedom militia and her work with the Chinese arms dealer.

"They are both in limbo. We think this is a more urgent need."

Of course, "we" did. Oil and gas and coal bought elections. Militias mostly loved the current President, to the extent they loved any government. She ignored Jim and lasered her glare at Ambrose. "If this jeopardizes continuing my earlier work, I can't accept the assignment." She rose. "I'll show myself out."

Ambrose stayed seated and laid a hand on Jim's arm, preempting his rising. "I thought your life's purpose was broader than one militia. I didn't select you because we wanted a source. You have the skills for this opportunity and one thing no one else in the world has. Availability right now. Maybe we'll be lucky, and they won't kill anyone before we can install

another agent. Did you notice the murdered individuals have been past CEOs or board chairmen? Jim's both. And the interval between blog publication and the subject being murdered is getting shorter. Can you live with Jim's death if you do nothing?"

The bastard didn't get to be Deputy Director of the FBI without learning how to push people's buttons. It wasn't that she was limiting herself to one militia, but she was the only one who had an in with that particular militia and with their Chinese weapons supplier. It might take years for the Bureau to develop another UC with equivalent intel.

If she were still in the FBI, she wouldn't have a choice. Now she did and with choice came consequences. She was unwilling to give up her work with PFF, but she could only do that work if she stayed in Ambrose's good graces, and that meant making this abomination of an assignment work.

She let silence be her answer.

Ambrose said. "Greenwar has several cells spread across the U.S. We hope you can use material Jim provides to develop an in-person meeting. As Jim said, we can find reasons for his assistant," he finger-quoted assistant, "to be anywhere. If you need to be in St. Paul to take care of your fath—take care of that personal business, we can arrange that too."

The weight of that personal business pressed hard on her shoulders. *Focus on the issue at hand.* She returned to her seat. "Do I have your word that if Benedict Arnold revives, we will pursue that if at all possible?"

"Yes." Ambrose offered to shake her hand.

"And the same if Sonic Boom makes contact?"

"Even more so." Ambrose extended his hand a little farther.

"And I can pull out if I think this assignment's cover isn't adequate to protect me without it negatively affecting our other . . . um . . . agreements."

"I'm sure the cover will work," Ambrose said.

She had already conceded that her Patriots for Freedom infiltration was on hold, but on this point she wasn't yielding an inch. She gave him her best hairy eyeball.

"Yes."

She took his hand. "So we're clear. If you lied to me. I will destroy you regardless of what damage it causes me. You still want to shake?"

He pumped her hand. "Has anyone ever told you that you negotiate like a porcupine?"

Jim Ford pushed his chair away from the table. "I should get back to the gathering next door before the game ends. Here is my personal cell number." He placed a card on the table between them. "May I add your phone number to my contacts list? What name shall I use?"

With no time to create a detailed backstory, she had to choose one of her current undercover roles. The Niki persona used for the Patriots For Freedom involved someone who thought both political parties were out to line their pockets and those of their big business friends, like Jim, at the expense of regular folks. She could see that morphing into radical environmentalism after she “discovered” evidence of corporations hiding the truth about the harm they caused ordinary people.

She gave Jim Niki’s cellphone number. “Label it Niki Foster. N-I-K-I. Call me now and I can grab yours.” Seconds later, a technobeat sounded from her bag. She retrieved the phone, rejected the call, and entered his number under “Boss.”

“I’m in D.C. the rest of the week,” Jim said. “When can I expect to hear from you?”

“The deputy director and I have a few issues to work out,” she said. “I’ll call tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Niki,” Jim said. “I look forward to working with you.” With a last glance at his watch, he hurried from the room.

“What’s that ringtone?” Ambrose asked.

“It’s from the trailer for Wonder Woman 1984.”

“Naturally,” Ambrose drawled. His face brightened. “I have an operation code name picked out for this assignment: Svalinn. What do you think?”

“That you have the cart before the horse. But I’ll bite. Who or what is a Svalinn?”

“From Norse mythology, it’s a shield that protects the earth from the sun burning it up. You are all that stands in the way of people dying.”