

NIKI UNBOUND

James M. Jackson



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First Edition

Trade Paperback Edition: August 2026

Wolf's Echo Press

PO Box 54

Amasa, MI 49903

www.WolfsEchoPress.com

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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:	978-1-943166-53-4
ISBN-13 e-book:	978-1-943166-54-1
Library of Congress Control Number:	2026938227

Printed in the United States of America

10987654321

DEDICATION

For everyone who helped me on my journey.

ONE

ASHLEY PRESCOTT WOKE IN A coffin-dark room to a ringing tone. She groped the nightstand and found her cellphone. *No vibration.* Her eyes popped open. Fighting against her heart thumping in her ears, she focused on locating the sound.

Under her bed. Where she kept “Niki’s” knapsack.

She flicked on the light switch, flattened herself on the wood floor, and retrieved the phone from the knapsack. Blinking her eyes into focus, she read *Seamus McCree* on its display.

She swiped the answer icon and yelled at the phone, “What the hell happened now?”

Seamus laughed. “And hello to you, too.”

She sat against the bed, the frame pressing into her back. “The last time you called in the middle of the night was to tell me that Musk’s DOGE boys had decided Niki Foster was one of the gazillion dead people being paid by the government, and they had stopped my paycheck.”

“Hopefully this will be as easy to solve as that was. All I know is Park left a message. Said he needed to see you faster than ASAP, no one could know, and to meet him in his bedroom—whatever that means—no later than five this morning. It’s one here, making it two there. You have three hours. Now you know everything I do.”

And so much more. She had never told Seamus how she had sneaked past the Assistant Director of National Intelligence’s security detail and broken into his home, catching him asleep in bed.

“Actually,” Seamus said, “looking at my scribbles, he said to tell you he had removed the screen and unlocked the window for you. You want to tell *me* what’s going on?”

While dressing in ninja black, she pressed the phone to her ear with her shoulder and related how she had gained access to Park at his home. “What’s your best guess for his summons?”

Seamus asked when that escapade had happened and who else knew.

“Five years ago. I was working on the Svalinn undercover operation. Only Rick Kaska knew what I had planned. He dropped me at a nearby

hospital. From there, I went on foot. Aw, crap. How am I going to get there today? We don't have driverless taxis in DC, and—"

"You can't let anyone see you. Lisa Latoya is in town to testify to an intelligence committee about the President firing her over DEI stuff. She'll do it."

"I can't ask—"

"You won't. I will, and I am positive she will do it. No arguments. My guess is the short time frame means Park needs to talk to you before something major happens first thing this morning. He doesn't want anyone to know he's talking with you and doesn't think he can get past his security. I know you don't want Lisa to know where you live, so tell me where you want to meet her. I'll text you the time she'll pick you up. And make sure your tracking stuff is live so I know where you are."

"That's our agreement."

"No. That's your commitment to yourself."

True. She gave Seamus the name of an all-night diner where Lisa could meet her. "Undercover rules apply. I need at least forty-five minutes to allow me time to perform proper counter-surveillance. Make sure if she uses any name, she calls me Niki."

NIKI ARRIVED AT THE DINER and found Lisa Latoya in the rear of the parking lot standing next to a nondescript four-door something. The diminutive former general, dressed head to toe in Mossy Oak camo, looked more relaxed than Niki felt.

Once they were in the car, Niki directed Lisa to the hospital near Park's home. "You can drop me there and return to your hotel."

"Seamus said the same thing, but that's not happening. If one of us can get into Park's house, two of us can. We have each other if something goes wrong. If this is a trap, you have a witness. I'll live-stream to the cloud and Seamus can watch."

"But your son—"

"Is having a terrific time in Chicago with his godparents while I'm here being a political football. Now tell me how you did this the last time."

With less than ninety minutes before Park's deadline, Niki didn't have time for a protracted argument, so she relived the scene for Lisa: How she

had walked from the hospital parking lot through the woods, taken backyards to get in place. How deer were everywhere, and no one paid much attention to security lights going on. Two guys handled the security. One stayed with the car parked out front; the other performed periodic perimeter searches. The latest satellite photos she'd checked before leaving her apartment showed the tree she had climbed to drop onto the house roof was still there. She shivered describing how she had almost been caught.

"What was the weather?" Lisa asked.

"I don't remember. It was dark, not like tonight with a three-quarter moon. And I didn't have a time crunch. I could creep and stop, creep and stop. Don't think that's an option this time. You carrying any ID?"

Lisa's look said Niki was stupid for asking. "Sorry," Lisa said. "You're right. We don't want to screw up. It's important to ask questions and not make assumptions. Remember before the Army got me, I was a hacker extraordinaire, and before that—Not important. Let's just say this isn't my first rodeo. Tell me about the house."

This might not be Lisa's first rodeo, but Niki didn't figure she'd ever played in the big leagues. "If it comes down to one of us being caught and one of us escaping, you escape. I have identification with the false name I've been using these last three years. That background is rock solid, and my prints are not on file anywhere. If Park's done what he promised, my face won't appear in any of their facial-recognition databases. Eventually, they'll learn who I am, but a lot can happen before that. You have the kid, and not having an ID only slows them down an hour. They can get your fingerprints from the military. You have zero protection. Do I have your agreement?"

"And if Park's setting a trap for you?"

"Then he goes down with me. I need your agreement, or we're going nowhere."

"You have it. Now, tell me about the house."

Two

NIKI LED THE WAY FROM the hospital parking lot, through the woods, through backyards to the spot where they had a clear view of the front of Park's house. One garden-variety government-issue dark sedan with four whip antennas parked in front. Niki closed her eyes and brought up the picture from five years earlier. Same parking spot, but only two antennas. What were the extras for?

"The moon's too damn bright," Lisa said. "In the backyards, we're visible or our shadows will be obvious. We can run and pray or, better, take out the two security guards."

What the heck had the Army done to her? "No way. If I can't see Park, I can't see him. I'm not—"

Lisa laid a restraining hand on Niki's arm. "I meant secure and contain. No long-term harm. I brought two flashlight/stun guns. We just have to get close."

Niki's stomach knotted. "Too much can go wrong. If we separate, they're unlikely to spot and catch us both. We move fast, triggering lights like deer racing through the backyards. I'll take closer to the houses, you take the woods. Once we get to Park's yard, we'll stay separated until we know we're safe. Then you join me, and we go the rest of the way together. From here on, we glove up." Niki handed Lisa nitrile gloves pulled from her backpack.

They belly-crawled from the street, past a garden fence, to where backyards met woods. Niki waved Lisa into the woods. At a hand-signal countdown, three-two-one, they both ran toward Park's house. To Niki's ears, they sounded more like moose or bear than deer. Security lights flicked on, dogs barked from two houses, but no human voices joined the chorus. She reached the fence and the large tree, sucking in huge gulps of air, her heart pounding.

Around her, the world settled. The yippy dog shut up first, then the one with the deeper woof. House security lights winked off. Unlike the last time, no walkie-talkie chatter broke the silence. After several minutes, she

caught the sounds of something moving in the woods. She peered in that direction but could not yet see Lisa's approach.

A branch snapped behind her. She twisted toward the sound. A bright light blinded her. "Hands up where I can see them."

Keeping her eyes down, she slowly raised her hands. Boots walked into view six feet away. Not police-trained, or they'd have her on the ground before they approached.

"Turn around and place your hands on top of your head." In a normal speaking voice, he said, "Bringing in an intruder from the southeast quadrant."

She partially complied, keeping her arms raised. How to play it if he gets close? Leg whip? Arm grab?

"I said, hands on your head. Walk that way."

He intended for her to follow the fence toward the street. No response from his teammate. So earbuds. Just two of them, or he'd wait for reinforcements. She chose the path of maximum resistance and pretended to stumble on a root. Flinging her right arm dramatically in the air to distract him, she grabbed a sharp rock with her left. Righting herself, she returned her hands to her head—good little prisoner that she was.

A pair of trees growing close together provided the opportunity she was looking for. She could slip through, but her captor would need to move sideways. And if he wore a pack, he'd have to go around. She strode toward the opening.

"To the right of those trees. Stay closer to the fence."

Not totally stupid.

Time was running out for her move. She resumed at a steady pace, scanned ahead. Excellent—a gopher hole. She stepped into the hole and flung herself to the ground, rolled, and grabbed her foot with her right hand, leaving her left arm cocked to rifle the rock at her captor. "Crap," she yelled. "I twisted my ankle in that damned hole. You'll have to help me walk."

With the flashlight focused on her foot, she could see him in the moonlight. Three feet away. Uniform without insignia or name. Body armor, comms on the left with wire to his ear. Night-vision goggles perched on his head. Balaclava covering his mouth and nose. Five-tenish. Gun in right hand pointed to her left. She rifled the rock at his head and scrambled right.

The gun fired. She whip-kicked his legs, dropping him to the ground. The gun fired again; the light bounced away. *Get the gun.* She grabbed his wrist with both hands, ignored his blows to her back, and applied her weight to his extended elbow.

He screamed in pain. She secured the gun but lost her balance. He used her momentum to flip on top of her.

She head-butted backward. Connected. She hooked his elbow with hers and used the leverage to pull him over her, reversing positions and pinning him with her weight. “Stop fighting or I’ll shoot your balls off.” She whapped his ear with an open hand.

He howled again, covering his ear with one hand.

With the fight gone from him, she zip-tied his hands and feet. She flipped him. Blood flowed from a gash under his eye. Her stomach recoiled. She’d damn near blinded him. And probably busted an eardrum. Whatever Park wanted had damn well better be worth it.

She found a kerchief in her knapsack and gagged him. She ripped the comms from his chest and tucked the earbud into her ear. Nothing. Where was his partner? Her prisoner could inchworm his way wherever he wanted, but he wouldn’t get anywhere fast. She extinguished the flashlight and disarmed the gun, threw it and the clip in opposite directions. Drew her weapon, put it back. Park was not worth her getting into a gun battle.

Lights from Park’s house spilled into his yard, but not past the fence. The house nearest to her was still dark, but the next two showed lots of lights. Someone had surely called the cops for shots-fired. Once multiple cop cars arrived, she was toast. Had the other security guard entered the house to protect Park? That’s how she’d play it, but who knew? Lisa was MIA. Two shots should qualify as a sufficient problem for Lisa to have retreated to the hospital parking lot, their SNAFU meet-up spot.

Niki ran to the end of the fence, dropped to a knee, and peered around the corner. In the shadows thrown by the federal vehicle, one person lay on the ground, trussed like a Thanksgiving turkey. One giant—Park?—watched a much smaller person searching the human turkey’s clothes. The searcher extracted something from the turkey’s jacket and held it up to the taller man.

“Now what?” Park said.

“Now we hightail it and hope the person you want to talk to is waiting where we agreed.”

Lisa.

THREE

NIKI SPINTED TOWARD THEM.

Park and Lisa both turned toward her. Park said, “I didn’t want anyone to know I was meeting you.”

“That pooch is already screwed,” Niki said. “We can talk and drive, or you can go back inside and deal with this yourself.” She reached him and tugged his arm. “Neighbors either see you talking to two people who let you go or two people who kidnapped you. Which story do you want to sell?”

“Kidnapping it is.” Park strode to the passenger door. “Wait.” He extracted a gray box from his coat pocket and pressed a button. “Now we can talk.”

They scrambled into the car. Lisa’s U-turn tossed Niki across the back seat. She righted herself behind the driver and snapped on the seatbelt. “What’s the box?”

“Electronic jammer in case they have this car wired.”

Good thinking. “I left one of the guys zip-tied in the woods. What did I miss?”

Lisa said, “I had already secured two guys in the woods and was listening in using their comms. A third guy reported he was bringing in an intruder—you, I assumed. I arrived to find the fourth guy walking toward the front door. He never saw me and my little Taser coming. I secured him and rang the front doorbell. Mr. Park answered, and here we are.”

Short and sweet and leaving out a lot that Niki wanted to know.

Park said, “You got the drop on three of them?”

Lisa gave a thumbs-up. “Two in the woods and the guy coming for you. The facility I used to run was remote. If someone attacked us, help would arrive too late to save us. I had the troops do weekly training—half attempting to infiltrate, the other half trying to stop them. Everyone participated, including officers. We did it like flag football, so no one got hurt. We got very, very good.”

“That,” Park said, “might be something of an understatement. It’s a shame they removed you from your command, General. But I’m glad

you're with my favorite undercover agent. She might need your help. I, too, will soon be fired by the President—except I'm not supposed to know. And I'm facing criminal charges. The whole thing is supposed to be announced this morning after they perp-walk me from my home at dawn."

Niki's brain whirled like an uncovered blender, spitting bits and pieces of thoughts until she came up with something coherent. "Someone tipped you, but why did you want to see me?"

"Three reasons. First, you'll no longer have an official sponsor." He chuckled. "Second, the Justice Department is charging me with stealing from the government by setting up a bogus employee and paying myself those wages and expenses. The wages were yours. The expenses are those we incurred running your operations for five years. Your expense reports are small potatoes compared to other expenses, like purchasing all those weapons we took off the streets. The only way I don't go to jail is if you testify."

"Of course I will."

Park held up a hand. "I may have a different angle regarding your testimony that avoids open court. The third thing is the most important. An attack on our government is fast approaching. Not imminent, but soon. I want to give you the intel I've gathered to support my reasoning. For that to be legal, I must give it to you while we are both still federal employees. It also assumes you'll remain undercover to prevent their plans—whatever they are—from reaching fruition."

Lisa said, "We're almost to where we stowed our ride. What do you want me to do?"

Niki had a thousand questions, but Park was the one under the gun. She motioned to him to answer.

"I've been kidnapped," he said. "You're both out-of-the-box thinkers. What do my kidnappers suggest?"

Niki said, "Let's work from the end forward. Where do you need to be and when?"

"I'd like to be in my office at my normal time, looking to the world as though nothing unusual has happened."

Niki checked the car's clock. Not a lot of time, but enough. "Soon as they know you're missing, they'll use CCTV to trace this car. We can't swap this for Lisa's rental because they can trace it to her. The whole thing with circumventing CCTV is to defeat their ability to follow from one camera to the next."

Lisa cleared her throat. “If I can get to an anonymous computer connected to the internet, I can cause the entire Metro CCTV system to temporarily stop recording.”

Niki reminded herself that Lisa had commanded the Army’s unit tasked with proving how nation-state hackers and other bad actors could disrupt the US in a time of war. “Too big a hammer.” She snapped her fingers. “Zipcar. Here’s how we do it: we’ll dump this car near Benjamin Banneker Park. I know a place you can drop me that’s a CCTV blind spot. From there, you’ll enter the parking lot from Blair Alley.”

Lisa said, “I don’t—”

“I’ll get you there,” Park said. “Then what?”

“I can get through that park without being caught by any cameras. I’ll use one of my other aliases to rent a car and come find you in the garage. Just wait there, I’ll pick you up. I’ll use another entrance and exit, and that breaks their CCTV chain. We can drive and talk before dropping you near your office.”

Niki opened her knapsack and spread its contents on the seat next to her. “Park will give you directions while I create a disguise.”

NIKI FOUND THEM IN THE parking garage. She made Lisa take the back seat and cover her face, even though it was painted in camo. “We have to protect you from being tied to this escapade. They’ll use CCTV to trace the car back after we drop Park off. The alias I used to rent this car is toast, but no one can trace it to me.”

Park said, “Lisa thought I should have a plausible story for what happened to me. We didn’t come up with anything brilliant.”

Niki waited for Park to adjust the rental’s passenger seat and buckle in. “Spitballing. Someone who learned of the planned perp walk wanted you to know. They hired some . . . um . . . ex-SEALs to rescue you from being held captive. Once you convinced them you were fine and happy to confront your accusers, you had them drop you at your office because they couldn’t risk taking you home. Flimsy as all get-out. They wore masks and spoke with voice modifiers. All you know is they were efficient and polite.”

Lisa said, “Did the guard who captured you realize you’re a woman?”

“Right,” Niki said. “Sorry. I was channeling previous kidnapping

attempts involving ex-SEALs. No female SEALs. Leave it at ex-military. Other problems?”

“Why was I already dressed?” Park said.

“Insomnia?” Lisa offered. “Worried about national security?”

“That’s pretty close to the truth,” Park said. “What else?”

“Are the secure transmissions still secure?” Niki asked. “Is Seamus in jeopardy?”

“Seamus is fine,” Park said, “provided no one captures the secure transmissions in real time.”

Niki said, “How good a liar are you?”

“Professional. What clearance do you have, General? Assuming Niki agrees to do it, she could use your expertise.”

Niki’s breath caught in her chest.

“Top Secret with lots of Sensitive Compartmented Information access. Broadly speaking, if it relates to threats against US intelligence systems, governmental cyber-attacks, or similar, I have automatic SCI clearance. And unlike others, including ex-presidents, I have authorization to have material off-base, provided I maintain it on a secure device. No one has informed me that the President stripped me of my clearance, but . . .”

The hanging “but” said everything.

Niki said to Park, “Let me understand exactly what my position is once they terminate you. My job and clearance remain until stripped? What about my NSA special agent credentials and my US Marshals badge? Can I still make arrests? Legally carry concealed?”

Park pursed his lips. “Your credentials, including the ability to arrest people, are still on the books until someone realizes they exist and removes them. For past arrests, I assigned a case agent on record, meaning your undercover ID never appeared. Make your first arrest count for something because it *will* point a spotlight on you.”

“The shit hits the fan, and my protection is finished. Got it. Am I right that I’m protected until I’m outed? Lisa is on much shakier grounds?”

“Lisa doesn’t care how shaky the grounds are. Crack me open and inside you’ll see a hacker through and through. Park says this needs to be done. Assuming I review the intel and agree, I’m in. Period. Leave me out of your decision-making. You say no, I’m still saying yes. I thought Park’s office was closer to the White House.”

Park said over his shoulder, “She crossed into Virginia, returned to DC,

and that bridge takes us back to Virginia where my office is. I assume those maneuvers spread surveillance responsibility across more agencies. Slows them down. Some.” Park faced Niki. “I’ve heard the General’s answer. Yours?”

“Oh, sorry. I was always in. I just wanted to understand the ground rules.”

Park handed her a slender solid-state drive. “Overkill on memory. It’s password protected with your Beorn operation code. Third wrong attempt erases everything. The only thing on it is a link to a secure server that holds the material. To be on the safe side, access that site while I’m still the ADNI. Set a password only you and the General will know.”

FOUR

BEFORE LEAVING HER VIRGINIA APARTMENT that afternoon, Ashley changed her mindset to the one she thought of as Niki. She rolled dice to determine which of six alternate routes she would use to drive into DC. She'd instilled the randomization habit while infiltrating Patriots for Freedom, and all these years later, she kept it as a component of her general anti-surveillance craft. After parking in a garage, she spent half an hour performing an exhaustive on-foot counter-surveillance routine. She doubled back, looking for familiar faces or anyone acting like they *weren't* watching her. She slipped out the rear door of establishments, made several quick changes in her appearance. Her knapsack provided hat changes, a reversible jacket, a silk scarf, three different pairs of sunglasses, and one pair of regular glasses with clear lenses.

All good. *Unless they have an extensive team of talented people.*

At the Metro, she hid her face from the camera. On the train, she slipped a pebble into her left boot. She exited three stops later with a gait unique for the day. Again shielding her face from the camera, she reached street level and hobbled half a block to the tapas bar where she was to meet Lisa.

Once inside, she dawdled at the entrance, fiddling with her hat and scarf, allowing her eyes to adjust to the darker interior. She claimed a table in the rear corner, sat, and scanned the scattered patrons. No one she recognized. She told the twenty-something who came to take her order that she'd have water and wait for her friend to arrive before ordering. She took everything into the ladies' room and in a stall completed a transformation to professional-woman-stopping-for-after-work-drinks-and-dinner.

No one paid attention to her return. Two glasses of water with lemon slices sat on the table. She spent the time waiting for Lisa to arrive by prioritizing what she wanted to accomplish. The most important thing was to get Lisa's take on the material Park had provided. Second was to understand Lisa's motivation. Patrick and Seamus McCree both trusted Lisa, and Niki had no reason to doubt that trust until Trump had fired her. She had gobs of money, having invested the proceeds from the sale of the company she and Patrick had founded into early shares of what was now

the Magnificent Seven, excluding Tesla. So, it wasn't about losing a high-paying job, but how did being fired make her feel? Was she angry, looking for revenge—of the I'll-show-you-how-wrong-you-were variety? Was she relieved to exit the pressure cooker of finding holes in US cybersecurity before bad actors exploited them?

At Lisa's arrival, Niki rose and motioned her over. Unlike Niki, who had entered unnoticed, Lisa drew many eyes. That woman had looks and a presence people remembered. Not a good thing for undercover work, but it could be useful if Niki wanted a distraction. Either way, something to keep in mind. "I sit with my back to the wall. If you're the same, we can sit side-by-side."

"I'm glad you waved," Lisa said. "I wouldn't have recognized you, which I know is the point. In my business, we fight with ones and zeros, not bullets." She pulled out the chair opposite Niki and sat like a pianist, alert but relaxed. "If my phone explodes, it won't matter whether I'm facing the door."

"That's a pleasant thought." Niki squeezed the lemon into her water; the spray tickled her nose. "How'd the hearing go?"

"The Republicans were all focused on DEI being the only reason that someone like me had been in charge of such an important component of our national security. The Democrats tried to make me into a martyr, crucified because I'm a five-foot-two lesbian."

Lisa and Niki dealt with the server, who recited the daily specials and agreed to return with their drinks and to take their orders.

Lisa picked up the conversation. "I spoke the Army line: The President is the Commander-in-Chief. He can fire whomever he wants for whatever reason he wants."

Listening to Lisa reminded Niki a lot of how she had dealt with being forced from the FBI: When asked about it, she'd protected the institution, even when it didn't deserve protection. But privately, she'd been relentless in taking down the individual who had betrayed her. For Lisa, that person was President Trump. "Yeah, but how do you really feel? I'd be super pissed."

"Honestly? They told me, and my first thought was to hack into a bunch of Trump's buddies' investment accounts and dig up evidence of insider trading. But I'm a single mom now, not eighteen. Doors close. Other doors open. I never considered joining the Army until a prosecutor brought

charges shortly before the statute of limitations closed on some youthful hacking adventures. And the government offered me a deal—drop the charges if I become an officer for a six-year hitch. Being paid to work with a bunch of rad hackers was so much fun, I re-upped and ended up the youngest brevetted general in the Army since the Civil War. The bureaucracy was a bummer, but we were a skunk works and got to ignore most of it.”

She sipped her water. “Then one day, poof, gone. I could have reverted to major, and the Army would have found a place for me until my enlistment ended. The work’s too damn important to let politics stand in the way, so I resigned to allow whoever replaces me a clear field in which to operate. Today Park opened a door with his disturbing intel. Do you have any reason to think he’d make any of it up?”

Niki *had*, especially regarding the conspiracy elements. Plus, Park hadn’t trusted his own agency for at least three years. “That Russian proverb to trust but verify comes to mind.”

“I never liked that,” Lisa said. “It should be distrust until you can hack it.”

The server placed Niki’s red wine in front of her and poured an O’Doul’s for Lisa. They tapped glasses and traded “Cheers.”

Niki pointed to the nonalcoholic beer. “You pregnant again?” She grinned, thinking it was a joke.

“Well, I wasn’t planning on telling anyone yet, but given what we’re up to, you should know. I figured if Lucas was going to have a brother or sister, I’d best be getting at it. Back to our discussion. I have thoughts on how we can verify what Park gave us, but that’s not our biggest issue.”

Niki hoped her face didn’t show that she thought anyone bringing a kid into the bonkers world they were living in had to be crazy. Given Lisa’s work, she wasn’t naive. *She’s way more optimistic than me.* “What *is* our biggest issue?”

“Seamus and Patrick swear by you, but no matter how good you are at going undercover and infiltrating whatever this is, and no matter how wicked-good a hacker I am—and I am super prime—no way can the two of us take this down ourselves.”

Niki had spent much of the afternoon considering how she might continue her current undercover work without the ongoing support Park had provided and had decided she’d be fine until she had actionable

intelligence that required law enforcement intervention—or if she ended up in deep shit. But Park’s material involved a whole different level of complicated. “You have ideas?”

Lisa gave her an exaggerated wink. “I do, but our food’s arriving, and people are coming to eat at the next table. Illegal deeds require more privacy.”