

Teeming hordes of morning commuters stream through Union Station in every direction. Metro and regional rail and bus lines service more than 90,000 passengers daily, and additional pedestrian traffic through the station's 135 retail shops and restaurants bring the total number of visitors each day to nearly 100,000. To my eye the swirl of motion resembles nothing so much as an anthill on steroids. The flow of people heading one way stops when it encounters a stationary cluster or torrent flowing the other way until those in the lead find their way through or around the impediment, and those behind sweep into the hole, a river jumping its banks and undulating through the landscape.

The sheer scale of the station, the kaleidoscopic swirl of color and motion, and the constant din strike first-time visitors dumb in their tracks, gawking at the spectacle. Besides the worker bees, intent and focused on getting from point A to B in as short a time as possible, and the open-mouthed tourists, at least two other generic "types" move through the wide corridors and cavernous halls. One prowls, stalking prey, eyes constantly shifting to find a victim to cull from the herd. The other includes Amtrak officers and local D.C. cops patrolling the space to discourage most pickpockets, perverts and panhandlers, but a few occasionally get through their defenses.

If I allow myself, I can be as awestruck and mesmerized by the spectacle as any greenhorn. But I'm here to catch a train, and my training automatically kicks in. I mentally remove myself from the sensory dump and take in the whole scene, looking, smelling, sensing the things that are out of place, that don't fit the milieu. I stop and lean against a balustrade to make a phone call I should have made days, maybe years ago. That's how I spot the team of pickpockets working the crowd in the main hall.

From an upper level of the main concourse, under the barrel-vaulted, coffered ceiling, I watch a couple, a boy and girl barely in their teens, separate, hurriedly walk in opposite directions, then turn

and approach each other. They pass each other without acknowledgement. When they're thirty yards apart, they both turn and advance toward each other again.

This time, however, the boy raises his hand as if to wave to someone far down the concourse and bumps into a businessman in a suit. The boy half-turns and says something, maybe a mumbled apology, and keeps going. Twenty feet behind the commuter, the girl draws closer carrying a large shopping bag. The teens pass each other again without acknowledgement, so close they nearly brush. I almost miss the handoff except for the ripple in the shopping bag, as what I assume is the businessman's wallet falls inside.

Nettled by their audacity, I check my watch. I don't have much time, but I pocket my phone and head for the stairs, keeping the girl in sight. I stay well back, but she's not hard to keep in sight despite being nondescript enough to blend in. The bag is the giveaway. It's from a high end department store, which doesn't fit with the girl's ratty jeans, baggy T-shirt and dirty brown hair hanging in rasta ropes down her back.

When I see her heading for a bank of lockers, I close the gap. I'm hoping the boy is scouting potential victims. Then maybe I can circle back and reel him in later. Right now, my focus is on the girl as she heads straight to a specific spot and digs a key out of her pocket. As soon as she has the locker open, before she stuffs the bag or its contents inside I swoop in, grab her wrist and twist her arm up behind her back. She yelps.

"What'cha got there, princess?" I say. "A little contraband?"

She struggles against my grip. I push her up against the lockers and pin her with my weight, and now I get a whiff of her that confirms my suspicions. She hasn't showered in a while.

"What are you doing?" she squeals. "Let go of me!"

Leaning over, I rustle through the bag with my free hand, pull out the wallet and hold it up next to her face. "I don't think this is yours, is it, sweetheart?"

"Hey!" a voice yells. "Leave her alone!"

My head swivels to see her partner running a zig-zag pattern through the crowd toward us.

"Stop her," the kid shouts. "She's trying to rip off my girlfriend!"

The girl struggles harder, and I drop the wallet to control her with both hands. Heads turn, and some people stop to look.

"Keep still," I tell the girl. "Don't make me hurt you."

She tenses, her head craning to see past me. I twist to follow her gaze and see not only the kid still barreling straight at us, but a uniformed Amtrak officer hot on his heels.

"Here comes a cop," I say. "It's all over."

*MISTAKEN IDENTITY*

"I don't think so," she says through gritted teeth.

She raises her free hand, slams the locker shut and twists the key out of the lock just as the kid slams into me, knocking me away from her. I lose my grip and go down hard onto the marble floor, arms twisted up in my backpack straps. The kid scrambles to his feet and takes off after the girl just as the Amtrak cop runs up.

"Don't move!" he says.

"I'm a cop!" I say.

Still on my side on the floor, I stretch my arms over my head, twist up to a sitting position, and slowly reach for my ID.

But the shield I always wear on my belt isn't there.