

Now, dead drops were all about peer-to-peer networks, thumb drives plastered into bricks, and wireless connections. And Nick Faulkner, who barely knew the difference between an escape key and an escape hatch, was suddenly right in the middle of a high-tech drive-by.

He looked up the street, then at his watch. It was 10:28 in the morning, two minutes before his contact—whose business card said Eldercare Specialist for a downtown law firm—was scheduled to cruise past Nick’s squat on New Hampshire Avenue Northwest, a tablet computer in his lap. At Corcoran Street, the guy would hit the Send button and electronically transmit evidence to the USB that someone high up in the Bureau was on the Kremlin’s payroll. The information would go through a router designed to conceal his location – first Singapore, no, Brooklyn, no, Prague, but never Washington. Then he’d continue to the Circle, follow it to the right, take the first turn onto Connecticut, valet park at the Washington Hilton, walk four blocks back to the Metro station, and head to a safe house in Maryland, where a team of agents would debrief him until Nick arrived with his classified gift.

Nick glanced again at his watch. Go time, 10:30. He rubbed his hands together, inhaled deeply and blew the air out, his breath a ghostly cloud. Instinctively, he reached into the coat pocket for a flask to beat the chill, but found nothing except lint, which was a good thing. One day at a time, he told himself. One damned day at a time.

Now it was 10:31, which was odd. His contact may have been a lot of things—a Kremlin insider and into-the-Russian-mob gambler with a weakness for teenaged Asian hookers and high-grade blow—but a lack of punctuality wasn’t one of them.

Just when Nick’s anxieties started to tick up from low to guarded, he saw the unassuming silver Toyota Corolla in the distance, just on the other side of R Street, heading his way. Sure, he was little bit late, but this was Washington traffic. A little bit late was like being two weeks early.

He felt his shoulders drop. After the last two debacles—neither of which was his fault but both of which still ended up on his balance sheet—he needed a win.

The Toyota slowed a bit when it approached Corcoran.

Out of nowhere, a land yacht of an SUV—huge and black, with tinted windows—blasted through the intersection like a guided missile.

It T-boned the Corolla, crushing the driver against the passenger side door.

A man in a long coat jumped from the SUV and raced to the Toyota, weaving his arms and screaming to anyone who would listen:

“Call 911, Call 911!”

He got to the car and reached in, not to help the driver, who had quickly departed this world, but to grab something.

It all took about six nanoseconds, not even time for Nick to draw his Glock 22.

Then another car, a dark blue sedan, screeched to a stop at 18th Street.

The screaming guy from the SUV—he wasn’t screaming anymore—jumped in, and the sedan shot left onto R Street.

Nick raced after it, but the sedan swerved onto Connecticut, disappearing into traffic.

Nick spun and headed back to the Corolla, which was crunched up like an accordion.

The driver looked like half of him had been put through a wood chipper, his face nothing but pulp, bones coming through his skin as if they’d been pushed out by some inner demon.

Blood everywhere.

Nick tore through the Corolla, jamming his hands under the front and back seats, throwing open the glove box, frantically trying to find the tablet computer.

Then came the sirens.

And the warnings, and a cold, gruff, no-nonsense voice:

“Sir, put your hands on your head.”

“Wait, wait, wait” Nick yelled. He reached into his pocket.

The no-nonsense voice sharpened, morphing into an unmistakable threat:

“Sir, keep your hands where I can see them!”

He threw his arms into the air. “It’s alright, it’s alright, I’m—”

The words rushed out of his mouth.

“I’m FBI agent Nicholas Faulkner.”

Chapter 2

“Three strikes, Nick. You know what that means.”

They were in a small, window-less conference room on the sixth floor of the J. Edgar Hoover Building. The space was so cramped it barely accommodated the government-issue desk that separated him and Solomon Gardner, the FBI’s deputy assistant director of intelligence.

Nick gave him a crooked smile. “I’m guessing it means you’re the principal and I’m here for a knuckle rapping.”

“Not exactly.”

“More like the guillotine and you’re the executioner.”

Sol shrugged slightly. He was 49 with a full head of gray hair, a slight scar on his chin, dark eyes that had seen a lot of things in a lot of places since 9/11. His no-political-bullshit reputation had served him well in the past three administrations. “What did you expect?”

“I expected to get evidence that the Russians had someone the inside the Bureau.”

From one corner of the room, Duane Easterby let out a chuckle, dripping with disdain. Easterby was Sol’s top aide, tall and thin and bald with a pock-marked face, a guy with dead gray eyes who looked like he’d walked out in the middle of a soul transplant. He was a straight arrow, but it was stuck firmly up his ass.

“Ah,” Sol said, nodding somewhat theatrically. He leaned back and planted his wingtips on the desk. “The old *Russian In The Woodpile Theory*, resurrected.”

Easterby snickered.

Nick said nothing.

“First,” Sol continued, “there was the Putin aide who was setting up network to push every kind of disinformation out into the world. He was about to give up the Kremlin jewels. Except, unfortunately, he was found dead from alcohol poisoning in his hotel room.”

Nick shrugged slightly. “He was a Russian. Vodka is a birthright.”

Sol ignored him. “Then there was the real estate mogul and arms broker, ready to tell all about Moscow’s adventures in Africa and the Middle East, shot dead while walking home from a party.” He paused, and put the next two words in air quotes. “*Unsolved murder.*”

“Take it up with the Metro cops.”

Sol smiled tightly. “And now this.” He took his feet off the desk and leaned forward.

“Are you back on the sauce.”

Nick shifted slightly in the chair, which was too small to handle his six-foot-four frame.

“No.”

“I ask because this is sloppy work. Somehow you telegraphed, to someone, that these people were targets, and whoever that someone was, they got there before you did.”

“Nobody knew.”

“Except the ones who did.”

Nick’s eyes narrowed. “What, exactly, are you saying? I’ve lost my edge?”

“You tell me.”

Nick looked around the room. “Funny, I don’t see a degree in psychiatry decorating the walls.”

“As I recall, you’ve already been down that path.”

“Your federal tax dollars at work.”

Sol sat back in the chair. His voice softened. “Listen, I understand how losing your son—”

“Stop.” Nick extended both hands, a fierce *don't go there* gesture. “Sol, one of the things I do, maybe better than most, is separate the personal from the professional. Yeah, Dennis dying took a toll. But it never—never!—got in the way of doing the job. What happens inside the four walls of my home is not, has not, ever compromised me.”

Sol stared at him. Hard. “So you’re saying this is a coincidence? That you, a guy on a rocket to the top, with a long string of bad-actor scalps on his belt, you’re saying that whatever it was that made you an elite agent all went to hell after you started going after Russians?”

Nick’s lips curled into a false smile. He crossed his legs, looking more casual than he felt or that fit the moment. “No, Sol. What I’m saying”—his smile got wider, and more false—“is that if you try to use my son as an excuse to fire me, I’ll come across this table and choke the life out of you.”

“Try it, pal,” Easterby said. “It won’t end well.”

Nick turned. “And when I’m finished with him, I’ll rip your arm off and beat you to death with it.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Sol jumped in. “Why don’t we take it down a notch or two.”

“Tell that to your attack chihuahua,” Nick said, spinning back to face Sol.

“All I’m saying, Nick, is that things have gone off the rail, and that’s not like you.” Sol held his hands up, as if in surrender. “I don’t know what. I don’t pretend to know why. I just know what is.”

Nick nodded his head slowly, lips pursed. “So you are firing me.”

“Do you think I should? Do you think I have legitimate grounds for dismissal?”

“No idea. I studied basketball in college, not law.”

“Let me give you an appropriate sports metaphor, then. You missed three easy shots. Layups.”

“Anybody who knows the game knows there are no easy shots. Shit happens. You don't see it coming until it does.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better? Knowing that you don’t see shit coming?” Sol suddenly slammed his hand on the desk. “That’s your job! To see it! That’s what we do!” He took a moment to dial it down. “And yes, I think you’ve lost your edge. Your instincts have been filed smooth. That’s not good for you, the Bureau, or the country.”

Nick flashed him a crooked smile, thin and laced with contempt. “It’s not good for you, either. God forbid my, uh, *failures*, should break a rung on your ladder to the top.”

“I’m perfectly happy where I am.”

“You're an ambitious bureaucrat, Sol. No ambitious bureaucrat is ever happy where they are.”

They stared at each other like a pair of duelists, unwilling to back down because only cowards walked away from a shootout.

Nick broke the silence. “So I’ll ask you again: Are you firing me?”

Sol rested his elbows on the desk, interlaced his fingers in a church-steeple configuration, and brought his index fingers to his lips. After a moment, he said, “No. Not unless you force me to.”

Nick took a second to process what he’d heard. “So, you’re telling me to resign.”

Sol nodded. “Full benefits. Nothing on your record. A strong letter of reference.”

“Just gone.”

Another nod.

“Great,” Nick said, matter-of-factly, his voice tinged with bitterness. “I can get a job as a rent-a-cop, maybe a night watchman at an auto junkyard.”

“As long as they don’t check your personal history,” Easterby chimed in.

Nick’s eyes flashed rage, but never left Sol. “Call your little puppet off, or I swear I’ll clip his strings.”

Sol shot Easterby a *back off* look.

“What you do is up to you,” Sol continued. “I’m giving you a respectable way out. No in-house investigation. No getting dragged before a congressional committee explaining what happened. No media crucifixion.”

“Heaven forbid the Bureau takes a hit.” He paused. “Another hit.”

Sol ignored the shot, and slid a business card across the desk. “This guy’s a former colleague who retired to Houston. Runs a background check consultancy for the government. Pay’s decent and it’ll do you good to get out of town for a little while.” He stood, a clear signal the meeting had ended. “Go home and talk to your wife. I’m sure she can be a much-needed voice of reason.”

“You don’t know my wife,” he fired back. “You’ve never spent more than five minutes talking to my wife. You don’t know a damned thing about her.”

Sol realized he’d pushed a sensitive button. “All I’m saying is that you should try to find a way to see through all of this clearly, and make the smart decision, one you and Lexi can both live with.”

Nick untangled himself from the chair. “Sometimes things aren’t so clear,” he said. “Even when you think they are.” He walked to the door and left, closing it softly behind him.

No truer words were ever spoken, Sol thought. He turned to Easterby. “Well?”

“That whole professional-personal thing was touching.”

Sol was barely listening. “He’s coming unraveled. And Nick being Nick, if those unclear things he was talking about ever come into focus, the damage could be massive.”