

1. Smoke & Mirrors

Moonlight pierced the drifting mist. It illuminated the remote church ruin and the drystone-walls of the surrounding landscape. In the darkness, Nick wondered if he could kill somebody close to him. Emma had asked him only days before, and now the thought returned to prey on his mind.

He pressed his back to the granite wall and drew his Walther automatic. He eased the heavy oak door inwards, and it creaked as he closed it from inside. Once again, as he stood in the darkness, he considered Emma's strange question.

There was a strong, musty smell of old wood and damp, but Nick caught a hint of something else. It might not be perfume, but it was fresher. It was a recent scent. A scent he thought he recognised. He crept towards the rear right corner, concentrating with all his senses. Nick used peripheral and not direct vision to see possible movement. He kept his mouth open slightly, which he knew would improve his hearing.

The young agent stepped further to his right. He felt comfortable with a solid wall against his back. He decided to wait in the corner for two minutes, to become accustomed to his new environment. His thoughts returned to earlier in the day; back to the small office the covert unit shared.

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It had been at 3:15pm. Nick had just written a note for Emma, who at thirty, was the only other member of the team of Nick's age. Emma had breezed into the room, glanced at him and then the envelope on her desk, before speaking.

"Something on your mind Nick—you look worried?"

"Hello Em'," he'd replied. "I thought you'd gone to lunch."

"Not today. I've got too much to ponder, so I'm making do with coffee." She picked up the buff coloured envelope, recognising the handwriting. "So, what's this all about?"

"I've got a hunch I want to follow up. If I don't turn up in the morning—open the envelope."

"What have you found out?" She stared into his eyes.

"Just promise me, you won't open it until tomorrow."

"Okay, okay." She glanced at the envelope. "Be careful mister."

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Nick's attention was brought back to the present when a rat scurried silently along the aisle close to him. It now struck him Emma had put the envelope in her handbag, not her desk drawer. He

tried to focus on the job in hand and set off again, now confident he would notice any movement. His eyes were scanning left to right, and his lips remained parted.

A blue-grey light filtered through the four large windows on the right, allowing him to see his surroundings. There were five small pews, either side of the central aisle, and to the front a large altar. The dull shine on the altar's surface suggested it could be marble or polished wood. Close to the rear, on the opposite side to him, was a small double cubicle—perhaps a confessional. Two doors leaned open at a precarious angle on their remaining hinges, and the remnants of a dark-coloured curtain hung from one side.

Nick maintained the classic two-handed grip on his weapon, held upright and close to, but below his constantly moving eyes. He continued to creep forward, staying to the right of the pews. As he neared the front, he noticed open doorways to either side of the altar. He continued, placing his feet gently down on the heel and easing off on the toe. A glance at every pace confirmed the floor was clear to advance.

As he moved forward, stopping every few paces, his father's words came back to him.

'I'd prefer to look strange, creeping about with my mouth open; rather than be dead because I didn't hear the assassin.'

Nick's father Ken had been in the covert operations business a long time and had a reputation as a survivor. He did have, until he disappeared two weeks earlier.

Since Ken's disappearance, three more agents had also vanished, or at least one had. Two had been found; dead.

The message Nick found inside his car had been unequivocal.

'Come to the old church on the moor alone—if you want to catch the traitor.'

When he'd parked his car a mile from the ruin, he wondered if the dead agents had received similar messages. It was his aim to find out, but survive. At the back of his mind, it worried him his father was involved and had disappeared first.

He came back from his reverie when he noticed the moonlight shining on the wooden face of Christ, high above the altar, creating small shadows under the gaunt eyes.

There was a creak from somewhere up ahead. It sounded as if it was from the left-hand room, but Nick knew better than to assume he was correct. There would be no knee-jerk reaction. He continued along to the front right corner to check the dark recess there. The hinges had long ago given way, and a large door lay on the dusty floor within.

He stepped close to the entrance and paused. Before stepping into the cold and damp of the room, Nick looked across the front of the altar to the other room. He thought he saw movement, but decided his nerves were playing tricks on him. He had to concentrate.

With his back close to the cold wall, he continued moving slowly to his right. He entered the room, and the shafts of moonlight were bright enough to show that the area was clear. Nick glanced across the front of the altar again at the other room. There was a movement.

An eerie figure appeared within the semi-darkness at the opposite side of the altar. Nick froze for a moment as he focused, but recovered and aimed his weapon. There was something ethereal about the man before him, but there was no mistaking who it was; and he was armed.

“Dad?” Nick said.

“What are you doing here?” Ken Turner said.

“I got a note—”

“Hold it,” Ken interrupted. “It was asking if you wanted to catch the traitor?”

“Yes. Why am I getting the impression—”

“If I’m *right*, we haven’t got much time,” Ken said. “I need you to trust me son.”

“Go on.” Nick kept his weapon in the aim as he watched, and listened. He looked at the strange figure, and saw a rat wander up to his dad’s feet where it came face to face with another rat. Both rodents appeared to climb onto the bottom of Ken’s trouser leg simultaneously, but he never flinched. Nick’s mind was racing. Respect and love for his father battled against common sense and all his training. Something wasn’t right.

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While Ken was trying to win his son’s confidence, Emma was parking about half a mile from the church. She left her car, looked around as best she could in the drifting bank of grey, then jogged toward the old building. She was thankful the moonlight occasionally cut through the mist. On arrival at the ruin, she heard two shots from inside, and drew her automatic.

She pushed the large door, entered and stopped for a moment. Her eyes flitted from side to side of the dark interior as she walked up the centre aisle. A shaft of moonlight played on the front of the altar, which in turn silhouetted a prostrate figure on the floor.

Emma continued to glance from side to side as she advanced, and squatted beside the body. Even in the semi-darkness she realised it was Nick; his weapon still gripped in his hand. She kept her pistol at the ready in her right hand, and reached for his carotid artery with her left.

“Nick, are you okay?” Her fingertips caressed his neck under the jaw.

“Of course he’s not okay,” Ken said from the side room. “I had to kill my own son.”

Emma leapt to her feet and glared at the man in the shadows.

“Ken, I thought—”

“You thought I was *dead*.”

“Yes,” she said, and noticed he had a pistol in his right hand, but his left hand was pressed to his right shoulder. “Are you hit?”

“Yes, but I should pull through,” he whispered. “At least I found the traitor eh?”

“Yes, I suppose you did.” She raised her gun. “But too late.” She fired twice.

The fragments of mirror scattered over the floor, and Emma stared in disbelief. It was several seconds before she spun around, but it was she, who was too late.

The barrel of Nick’s gun was aiming directly at her face, held in a steady hand.

“Drop the weapon Emma,” Nick said. “None of the other rats in here have guns.”

“But I’m your wife—” she started.

“You’re also a traitor, and a murderer, so it would be easy for me to kill you.”

From the darkened room, Ken walked out, his left arm swinging down by his side, revealing his lack of injury. Ken shook his head as he spoke.

“Smoke and mirrors, my dear ... smoke and mirrors.”
