

The Pickup

By Michael Zielinski

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Cast of Characters

BETH COLLINS:

NICK PAXTON:

ACT IScene 1

NICK PAXTON, in his 30's, sits at a small table nursing a drink in a hotel bar. BETH COLLINS, in her 30's, carrying a drink, walks up to his table and sits down.

BETH COLLINS

Can I have your baby?

NICK PAXTON

Excuse me?

BETH COLLINS

How's that for a pickup line?

NICK PAXTON

Your biological clock must be ticking louder than Big Ben in London.

BETH COLLINS

Or perhaps Ivan The Great Bell Tower in the Kremlin.

NICK PAXTON

Never heard of it.

BETH COLLINS

Have you ever been to Moscow?

NICK PAXTON

Never.

BETH COLLINS

So you say.

NICK PAXTON

What's your name?

BETH COLLINS

Beth Collins. I know yours. I think.

NICK PAXTON

What is it?

BETH COLLINS

It's Nick Paxton, the ESPN college football analyst.

NICK PAXTON

You must be a sports fan.

BETH COLLINS

I love college football. You were a good quarterback at Penn State. But you did throw six interceptions against Ohio State.

NICK PAXTON

A six-pack of disaster. The Venus de Milo has a better arm than I did that game.

BETH COLLINS

I know that you often still are armed and dangerous.

NICK PAXTON

What do you mean?

BETH COLLINS

I have good reason to believe that Nick Paxton is just an alias and that you lead a double life.

NICK PAXTON

Double life? My single life is so busy I don't have time for a double life.

BETH COLLINS

You and I know that's not so. Your real identity is Casimir Popov of the SVR RF.

NICK PAXTON

What the hell is the SVR RF?

BETH COLLINS

Russia's external intelligence agency.

NICK PAXTON

You think I'm a spy?

BETH COLLINS

Precisely. As well as an assassin.

NICK PAXTON

That's ridiculous. I was born in Pennsylvania. On the Fourth of July no less.

BETH COLLINS

Being a high-profile sportscaster who travels frequently is the perfect cover for your intelligence and assassination activities.

NICK PAXTON

Is this some sort of joke? Are you here to pick me up or not?

BETH COLLINS
I'm here to pick you up all right.

NICK PAXTON
My dream date, huh?

BETH COLLINS
Actually, I'm your worst nightmare. I'm an FBI agent here to arrest you on charges of espionage, Mr. Popov.

She shows him her FBI badge.

NICK PAXTON
If I had a lawyer, I'd call him right now.

BETH COLLINS
We'll provide you with a list of public defenders you can call. Or perhaps the Kremlin can provide you with legal representation.

NICK PAXTON
This is insane. I'm the last guy in the world who'd be a Russian spy. I don't even like Russian dressing.

BETH COLLINS
You look just like Casimir Popov. We have extensive footage of you doing security surveillance at Logan, JFK, LaGuardia and Newark airports as well as Boston and New York harbors.

NICK PAXTON
I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I fly out of those airports for work. And I hang out at Boston Harbor because I'm a history buff and that's the site of the Boston Tea Party.

BETH COLLINS
A half-dozen Russian expatriates highly critical of Vladimir Putin have been shot dead in the past five years -- all in cities with major college football stadiums on days you were covering games for ESPN.

NICK PAXTON
Pure coincidence. Do you think I caught a cab at halftime, assassinated a guy and was back in time for the second-half kickoff?

BETH COLLINS
We both know that college halftimes last forever, what with all the commercials and studio commentary.

NICK PAXTON

Talk to my play-by-play guy. He'll vouch for me that I never left the stadium during a game.

BETH COLLINS

I talked to him the other day. He said you have this exasperating habit of disappearing at halftime and scrambling back to the booth moments before the third quarter.

NICK PAXTON

I have irritable bowel syndrome and spend halftimes shitting my brains out.

BETH COLLINS

Or rather shooting other people's brains out. And one Russian expatriate drowned in New York Harbor on a day when you were spotted there.

NICK PAXTON

I frequent New York Harbor because I'm very patriotic and love to see the Statue of Liberty up close.

BETH COLLINS

You must think I'm dumber than a box of rusty nails.

NICK PAXTON

Why rusty nails?

BETH COLLINS

Because they were too dumb to get out of the rain.

NICK PAXTON

You've wasted enough of my time. I'm out of here.

He stands up and is about to walk away when she pulls out a gun.

BETH COLLINS

Sit down, Mr. Popov. You're not the only expert marksman at this table.

He sits down.

NICK PAXTON

Maybe I'm a dead ringer for this Popov guy. But I'm not him. Before you cuff me, can I buy you another drink? I sure as hell could use one.

BETH COLLINS

You drink Scotch. Single malt whiskey. Never on the
(MORE)

BETH COLLINS (CONT'D)
rocks.

NICK PAXTON
Damn, you do know a lot about me.

BETH COLLINS
I know more about you than you do. I've been obsessed
with you for years.

NICK PAXTON
Sexually?

BETH COLLINS
My fixation on you is ensuring that you get what you
deserve.

NICK PAXTON
I've had enough of this charade. Shoot me if you want
but I'm leaving.

BETH COLLINS
Indeed you are, Mr. Popov. We're leaving together.

NICK PAXTON
To FBI headquarters?

BETH COLLINS
First we have another destination.

NICK PAXTON
Where?

BETH COLLINS
My apartment. I'll be the best piece of tail you ever
had.

NICK PAXTON
You don't sound like an FBI agent.

BETH COLLINS
I'm sure J. Edgar Hoover used sexual slang when
talking to his boyfriend.

NICK PAXTON
So now I'm your boyfriend?

BETH COLLINS
Boy toy. I want to handcuff you to the bed and soak
you in Russian dressing even if it stains my sheets.
Then stuff you with hot dogs and apple pie until your
(MORE)

BETH COLLINS (CONT'D)
stomach explodes like an ammo dump.

NICK PAXTON
Why the hell would you want to do that?

BETH COLLINS
To gorge you on distinctively American staples to
punish you for violating my beloved country.

NICK PAXTON
You'd better stay out of the line of fire. Remember,
I have irritable bowel syndrome.

BETH COLLINS
I'll make a note of it.

NICK PAXTON
I take it you don't exactly follow FBI protocol to
the letter.

BETH COLLINS
I make my suspects confess by any means necessary. It
is my sworn duty.

NICK PAXTON
Your mother should have taught you not to swear.

BETH COLLINS
My mother swore like a sailor. The few times she
spoke to me.

NICK PAXTON
Just my luck.

BETH COLLINS
OK, we're leaving.

NICK PAXTON
How about I get you two Rose Bowl tickets at the 50-
yard line and we forget all about this little
misunderstanding?

BETH COLLINS
Are you offering a bribe to an FBI agent?

NICK PAXTON
I prefer to think of it as appealing to your inner
fan.

BETH COLLINS

I find your offer to be as appealing as those godawful Russian sardines.

NICK PAXTON

Which is why Russians wash them down with barrels of vodka.

BETH COLLINS

You definitely are Russian.

NICK PAXTON

You don't know everything about me.

BETH COLLINS

Like what?

NICK PAXTON

I have an uncanny ability to read people. I know you're a liar.

BETH COLLINS

Liar?

NICK PAXTON

You're no more an FBI agent than I am Casimir Popov. Your FBI badge is a forgery and your cheap handgun is not a FBI-issued Glock.

She suddenly looks distraught.

BETH COLLINS

Ridiculous.

NICK PAXTON

I've been indulging your fantasy by playing along with you. You've been stalking me for years.

She begins to sob.

BETH COLLINS

Stalking and surveillance are not the same thing.

NICK PAXTON

I hired a private eye to check you out. You build and service joy buzzers for a living. Who the hell buys joy buzzers these days?

She is crying hysterically.

BETH COLLINS

Not many. Thank God I have a small inheritance to live on. I admit I'm obsessed with you. So I came up with my absurd FBI fantasy. Being mentally ill is about as much fun as a circus without clowns.

She dabs her eyes with a tissue and stops crying.

NICK PAXTON

Did you have a traumatic childhood?

She pauses, takes a deep breathe and exhales slowly.

BETH COLLINS

I was the loneliest child imaginable. Only child. Workaholic parents. No cousins. No friends that weren't imaginary. My parents rarely spoke to me. Many days it was just good morning and good night.

NICK PAXTON

(Sighs)

Maybe you were lucky. My old man never shut up. He was always putting me down, insulting me. And I was a straight A student and a star athlete. But nothing I ever did pleased him.

BETH COLLINS

You had a totally different childhood hell. My parents' neglect stunted me emotionally. I'm socially awkward. I had no friends in school or now. I don't know what to say to people.

NICK PAXTON

You approached me tonight.

BETH COLLINS

Only because I was in my FBI persona. My whole life has been one of utter isolation, like living in an abandoned tenement building with dirty, rain-streaked windows.

She begins crying again.

NICK PAXTON

If I don't have another drink, I'm going to start crying.

BETH COLLINS

The only beacon of light in my life of darkness is
(MORE)

BETH COLLINS (CONT'D)

you. When I saw you on television the first time, you became my imaginary lover. Sick, huh?

NICK PAXTON

Why didn't you just approach me and ask me out years ago?

BETH COLLINS

Actually I did. Mustering up all the courage I had in me and with my knees quivering like pats of butter, I asked you for a date in the parking lot after Maryland beat Iowa 38-31 in 2014.

NICK PAXTON

I don't remember that.

BETH COLLINS

Of course not. You simply brushed past me like I was a nobody and you were freaking Nick Paxton.

He laughs sarcastically.

NICK PAXTON

The freaking Nick Paxton persona is a fucking sham. My swagger is just a cover. I have an inferiority complex that is big enough to be the eighth continent. Courtesy of my old man.

She stops crying and smiles.

BETH COLLINS

Really? Are you bullshitting me?

He angrily slams the table, spilling their drinks.

NICK PAXTON

I hate myself for constantly feeling inadequate. My abusive old man and his acidic tongue mutilated my self-esteem forever by the time I was a teenager. I rarely date because I'm afraid women will think I suck in bed.

She frowns.

BETH COLLINS

Do you?

NICK PAXTON

I honestly don't know. I've only had sex with
(MORE)

NICK PAXTON (CONT'D)
actresses. They all had the acting ability to fake convincing orgasms.

She beams.

BETH COLLINS
You're as fucked up as I am.

NICK PAXTON
I am. The only reason I became a successful network sportscaster was because I was fueled by anger to show my fucking old man that I wasn't the total loser he always said I was.

BETH COLLINS
What did he say about your professional success?

NICK PAXTON
He always said I sucked on air. Thank God the bastard is dead.

BETH COLLINS
How did he die?

He breaks out into a huge grin.

NICK PAXTON
The dumb shit got killed by lightning on the golf course. Mother Nature gave him what he deserved. He always made fun of people who were squeamish about bad weather. He ignored it. He would take me for joy rides in heavy snowstorms.

BETH COLLINS
Where was your mother through all of this?

NICK PAXTON
My mother died when I was five. She hit a tree while skiing because my old man thought it would be a hoot to ski during a blizzard.

BETH COLLINS
How godawful.

NICK PAXTON
And how godawful that you've wasted years obsessed with a guy who doesn't exist. Your imaginary lover is imaginary himself. Imagine that. How can I make it up to you?

BETH COLLINS

Come back to my apartment and impregnate me. We need each other to flesh out our lives. So why not start by committing a sin of the flesh?

NICK PAXTON

We both have been living a lie. You as a FBI agent and me as a cocksure announcer. How do I know you haven't lied about everything? How do you know I haven't lied about everything? Maybe your parents were Ward and June Cleaver and my old man was Mr. Rogers.

She grabs and holds both his hands and leans close to his face.

BETH COLLINS

I believe you. And believe this. This is my first date. Ever. How pathetic is that?

NICK PAXTON

Not so pathetic considering the context of your childhood. I'll go home with you.

BETH COLLINS

(Euphoric)

Great. Can I fantasize that you're Casimir Popov when we make love?

NICK PAXTON

Just as long as you don't name our kid Casimir.

BETH COLLINS

No worries. It's gonna be J. Edgar whether it's a boy or a girl. Spawned by two screwballs like us, the name will be the least of the poor kid's issues.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF PLAY)

