

CHAPTER ONE

The blast came from behind, violently jarring me out of my trance. My breath caught and my heart pounded, but I didn't realize the full gravity of the situation until a split second later when I saw the blood splatters on the wall. I looked down at the wound, and for some reason all I could think about was that first phone call two weeks ago...

Two weeks ago everything was improving.

Or so I thought.

I was chopping an onion while Juliet stood by the stove watching a chunk of butter melt in a skillet.

“What else should we put in our omelet?” she said.

Her voice was pleasant, maybe even a little playful. We were getting along better than we had in a while.

“Cheese and onions are enough,” I said.

“How about some mushrooms?”

“Okay.”

“How about some spinach?”

“Now you’re going to ruin it.”

She laughed. She knew how much I hated spinach. She lifted the skillet and tilted it side-to-side.

I’d married a beautiful woman. Juliet had turned forty-two on her last birthday, but she looked at least ten years younger than that. She was half American and half Filipino, and every time she smiled at me with those big brown eyes my heart melted like the butter in the pan.

“Next you’ll be wanting to fry the eggs in *olive oil* or something,” I said.

“Just chop your onion,” she said. “You know, it wouldn’t hurt you to try to eat a little healthier. And what’s taking you so long over there, anyway?”

I glanced up at her. “You know I’m all thumbs with this kind of thing.”

“You better watch what you’re doing, or you’re going to be *no* thumbs with that kind of thing.”

“Sorry, but you’re a lot prettier than this onion,” I said. “And you smell better.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Nicholas Colt: world class guitarist with a crippled hand, ace detective with a revoked license, husband and father with a bad habit of opening his mouth. Juliet grew up in a different culture, speaking a different language, and she didn’t always get my humor. She didn’t seem at all impressed that I considered her better looking than a root vegetable.

I tried to focus on the task at hand. When I turned the knife a certain way, I could see Juliet’s distorted reflection in the shiny steel blade. She looked terrific, even with the funhouse dimensions.

I was still chopping the onion when I felt my cell phone vibrate in my pocket. I pulled the phone out and flipped it open, didn't recognize the incoming number. I was about to let it go to voice mail when Juliet said, "Give me the knife. Go ahead and take your call. You're just making a mess there anyway."

I smiled and set the knife on the cutting board. "Be my guest," I said.

I walked through the dining area and out to the back patio. It was only April, and it was only nine o'clock in the morning, but I guessed it must have been at least eighty-five degrees out there already. You could usually count on a decent breeze in north Florida this time of year, even thirty miles inland where we live, but today the air was like some sort of southern springtime syrup: thick and sticky and sweet, saturated with the steamy redolence of honeysuckle and juniper and freshly-mown grass.

And maybe just a hint of dog shit from the neighbor's Rottweiler.

I answered the phone.

"This is Colt," I said.

"Yes," a female voice said. "I saw your advertisement for guitar lessons, and I would like to sign up."

After a particularly harrowing time down in Key West last November, I'd decided to hang up my private investigator's hat and try teaching for a while. I'd tacked flyers on bulletin boards at several local music stores, and had gotten quite a few calls. So far I had twenty-nine students. They were keeping me busy, but I figured I could take on one more.

And thirty seemed like a nice round number.

"It's fifty dollars for one half-hour lesson a week," I said.

"That seems high."

“Do you know who I am?”

“No. Should I?”

“Ever hear of Colt Forty-Five? That was my band. I played lead guitar. We had quite a few hits back in the eighties.”

Quite a few hits until our chartered jet went down in flames one day, killing my wife and our baby daughter and all the members of my band. I was the sole survivor, and twenty years later I discovered the crash wasn't an accident. Nicholas Colt wasn't exactly a household name anymore, and nobody recognized me these days, but most people in this part of the country had at least heard of me.

“Guess it was before my time,” she said.

I sighed. “All right. You still interested in lessons?”

“Yes.”

“I have openings on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“I need to start today,” she said. “I could meet you in thirty minutes.”

“I don't work on Sundays. I usually don't even answer the—”

“I'll give you two hundred dollars for an hour of your time this morning, Mr. Colt. Otherwise, I'll have to find someone else.”

“Why the big rush?” I said.

“I'll explain when I see you.”

I didn't know how a guitar lesson could possibly be so urgent, but if she wanted to throw some money around I wasn't above taking it.

“What's your name?” I said.

“Kaliopé Pendergrass. Kaliopé with a K.”

“Nice. I don’t think I’ve ever known a Kaliopo, with a C or a K or any other letter of the alphabet.”

“My friends call me Kally. Kally with a Y.”

Kally with a *why*, I thought.

“I’m assuming you have an instrument,” I said.

“Of course.”

“Do you know where my studio is?”

“I do.”

“I’ll see you there in half an hour,” I said. “The clock starts ticking at ten.”

“See you there,” Kally said.

She hung up.

I walked inside. The house smelled like buttery eggs and onions. And coffee. I was starving.

“Breakfast is ready,” Juliet shouted.

I grabbed my keys from the dining room table and stepped into the kitchen. Juliet was sliding the omelet halves from the skillet onto plates. There was coffee and orange juice and buttered toast.

“You want the good news first or the bad news first?” I said.

“Where do you think you’re going with those keys?”

I told her.

“You sit down and eat with me,” she said. “Your new student can wait.”

“It’s two hundred dollars. For one hour’s work.”

“It’s Sunday, and you promised—”

“I know,” I said. “I’ll be back in a little while, and then we’ll have the rest of the day together.”

I heard something crash against the front door immediately after I walked out. My half of the omelet, I guessed.

Juliet had been on edge lately, for some reason. Maybe it was hormones. Or too much quality time together. Something. Anyway, along with everything else, she’d been nagging me constantly about my drinking habits.

You sure have been drinking a lot lately.

Don’t you think you’ve had enough?

Nicholas, you drink too much!

And it wasn’t even true. I never drank too much. I drank just enough. Every day.

My studio was in a strip mall with a supermarket and a Chinese takeout joint and a lawnmower repair shop. There was a thrift store and a hardware store and a vitamin shop, along with several places that had gone out of business. I pulled into the lot at 9:54.

The sign above my place said Nicholas Colt’s Conservatory of Music. It was a nice sign. I’d paid a lot of money for it. I backed my 1996 GMC Jimmy into the parking place next to the community mailbox. I knew there wouldn’t be any mail today, but I always grabbed that closest spot when I could.

I climbed out and stuck a key in the swinging glass door and walked inside. I punched a code into the keypad to shut off the alarm system.

The long and narrow space had once been an accountant’s office. The tax people had cleared everything out when they left, which gave me a nice blank canvas to work with. There was a reception area in front with a computerized cash register on top of a glass display case.

The case was filled with music books and other items a guitar player might need from time to time. Straps, cables, picks, strings, tuners, effects pedals. I was selling those things to the students at cost. Sort of like my version of a loss leader. I figured the deep discounts on accessories might keep them coming back for lessons. So far I was doing okay.

I'd positioned some steel and vinyl chairs beyond the reception area, where parents or other people waiting for students could sit and look at magazines. The chairs went mostly unused. People either headed to the supermarket next door or milled around in the other nearby shops while they waited. Or they walked around outside thumbing messages into their smart phones.

Beyond the waiting area there was a solid wall and a thick steel door that led to the studio proper. It was a ten-by-ten space, tightly soundproofed with fiberglass insulation and acoustic tiles. Quiet as a bank vault. Sometimes I went in there just to get away from the world for a while. There were two stools, two amplifiers, and a music stand. Everything I needed to guide my students toward improvement.

Kaliope Pendergrass walked in at exactly ten o'clock. I was standing behind the display case sorting flat picks.

"I'm Kally," she said.

"Nicholas Colt."

We shook hands. She was dressed in black pants and a sleeveless black top and black leather sneakers. I guessed her to be around five-six. Early thirties, slim and trim, dark brown hair. Leather shoulder bag, no jewelry. She had a pretty face and clear blue eyes.

She leaned over the counter and whispered: "I'm afraid I wasn't quite honest with you on the phone earlier."

“Where’s your guitar?” I said.

She gestured toward the studio door. “Can we talk in there?”

“Look, I was about to have breakfast with my wife when—”

She slapped a pair of hundred dollar bills on the counter.

“Can we talk in there?” she said again.

I picked the money up and shoved it into my pocket. She followed me into the studio room, and I shut the door behind us.

Two seconds later, I realized that I’d made a big mistake.

CHAPTER TWO

She grabbed my left hand and dug her thumb deeply into a pressure point. The hand had been crushed a couple of years ago on a job up in Tennessee. Six surgeries later, it still ached like crazy 24/7. It was the reason I couldn't play guitar nearly as well as I used to. It was the reason I didn't play in a band anymore, and it was one of the reasons I had decided to start teaching.

Kally with a Y had clamped the tip of her thumb directly over one of the surgical screws. My entire arm, up to the shoulder joint, felt as though someone had parked a tank on it.

I leaned forward and groaned in agony, and before I could do anything to defend myself she kned me in the face and slammed me to the floor and cuffed my wrists with a nylon cable tie.

"What do you want?" I said.

"Be quiet."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a little black box. It was about the size of a deck of cards, and there was a collapsible antenna on one end. It looked like a miniature walkie-talkie.

I knew what it was. It was an audio bug detector. I'd owned something similar back when my PI business was in full swing.

She swept all four corners of the studio with the device. Satisfied that nobody would be listening in on our conversation, she sat on one of the stools and crossed her legs.

"I'm sorry I had to put you down like that," she said. "But I have to be one hundred percent certain that nobody is watching us or listening to us."

"You could have just asked," I said.

"I could have, but you might have lied. Then I would have had to kill you."

She was speaking as though she'd pulled some dialogue from a really bad 1970s television script.

"What are you?" I said. "Some kind of ninja or something?"

"Or something," she said.

"Can you let me up now? Because, you know, this is just a wee bit uncomfortable."

"In a minute. After we chat."

I was baffled. She had given me two hundred dollars, and then she had assaulted me and tied me up. It didn't make sense.

"Who are you?" I said.

"Right now, I'm an inspector for the Department of Defense. I visit a variety of government contractors and make sure that their classified documents are secure."

"Like computer files and stuff?" I said.

"No, there are other agents who specialize in that side of it. I deal strictly with hard copies. I have to verify the content of the documents, and I have to verify that only a limited number of people have access to them."

“I thought that was what security clearance was all about.”

“Clearance is only part of it,” she said. “You can have top security clearance, but that doesn’t mean you’re allowed access to all top security files. Access is granted on a need-to-know basis.”

“You said you’re an inspector for the Department of Defense *right now*,” I said. “What does that mean?”

“It means my profession changes on a regular basis, and only a handful of people know what I do the rest of the time.”

“And what is it that you do the rest of the time?” I said. “You know, besides beat up innocent guitar instructors.”

“I hunt vampires,” she said.

I kept waiting for the punch line, but it never came.

Vampires. That explained everything. Kaliope Pendergrass had obviously escaped from a psychiatric ward.

“You mean those deathly pale creatures that only come out at night?” I said. “Those bloodsucking fiends that shy away from garlic and mirrors and objects made from silver?”

She maintained her serious tone. “Of course not. In my organization, *vampire* is the code word for any person or group that intends to do harm to our country. Especially, but not strictly limited to, a man or a woman or a terrorist organization that intends to assassinate the president.”

“*The* president?” I said.

“Yes.”

The tortured delusions of a paranoid schizophrenic, I thought. I decided to play along. Maybe I could convince her to cut me loose. Then I could call for the guys in the white coats.

“So you work for the Secret Service?” I said.

“No. My organization is completely cloaked from the public eye, Mr. Colt. Imagine the CIA as the basement of a skyscraper. We’re the sealed chamber a hundred stories below that. Like I said, only a few people on the planet know what I do. Have you ever wondered why there aren’t more terrorist attacks and assassination attempts? We’re the reason why.”

“Isn’t that what Homeland Security and the Secret Service are for?”

“They put on a good show for the media. Most of the real work is done behind the scenes. By us.”

“What’s the name of your organization?” I said. I couldn’t wait to hear what she came up with.

“You know the old cliché? I could tell you, but then I would have to kill you? Normally, that adage would apply. But you’re a very special case, Mr. Colt, and that’s why I feel comfortable passing this information on to you. But you can never, ever, tell anyone what I’m about to tell you now. You don’t even want to know what will happen to you and your family if you breach this confidence. Understand?”

“Yes. I understand.”

I was fascinated by the level of detail in her fantasy. She leaned over and whispered the fabricated name of the bogus organization into my ear.

“The Circle,” she said.

The name itself confirmed my suspicions: Kaliope Pendergrass was a level one nutjob.

“Okay,” I said. “So what do you want? I’m starting to get the impression you didn’t come in here for a guitar lesson.”

“I need your help,” she said. “I don’t know where else to turn.”

“What kind of help?”

“I inspected a government contractor the other day, and I came across a document outlining the exact time, date, and place that the president will be killed. *The* president, Mr. Colt. The document also named the individual responsible for the assassination. The vampire, if you will.”

“Yeah? Anybody I know?”

She took a deep breath. “It’s me, Mr. Colt. The assassin is me.”