

## CHAPTER ONE

Anyone who says they're not afraid of death has probably never stared it straight in the eye. They've probably never had a knife held to their throat, or the barrel of a revolver pressed against their forehead. They've probably never been pinned against the bulkhead of a plummeting airplane.

Those were my thoughts as I headed south on Florida State Road 21, toward a nice little seafood restaurant in a nice little town between Jacksonville and Gainesville.

On the radio, some author I'd never heard of promoted some book she wrote about coping with mortality. She claimed to be completely unafraid of death herself. When the time came, she said, she would embrace it with passion.

I wondered how passionate she would be if a hungry tiger entered the studio and started gnawing on her face.

I switched off the radio. Embrace it with passion my ass, I thought.

It was Fat Tuesday, *Mardi Gras*, and I was meeting an old friend named Donna Wahl—*Prescott* now, I reminded myself—for cocktails and dinner. Donna had something important she wanted to talk to me about.

I still had several miles to go when my cell phone trilled.

I picked up. “This is Nicholas Colt.”

“Hey, Daddy.”

It was Brittney, my adopted daughter. She had been with my wife Juliet and me for nearly three years, and my heart still melted every time she called me Daddy.

“Hi sweetheart,” I said. “How was school?”

“School sucks. I can’t wait to be done with it and start college in the fall.”

You can never convince a seventeen-year-old how great it is to be seventeen. I skipped the lecture and said, “You’re almost done. Hey, I thought you had that thing at the skating rink tonight.”

“That’s why I called. I have a flat tire.”

“Where are you?”

“On Paradise. A guy helped me push the car into Wal-Mart’s parking lot.”

“I’m about thirty miles the other direction. Did you call the auto club?”

“No.”

“They’ll change the tire for you. But listen, I don’t want you driving around on that little emergency spare. Once they change it, go straight home. We’ll get your tire fixed tomorrow.”

Silence.

“Brit?”

“Okay,” she said, noticeably irritated at the thought of being without transportation for an entire evening.

“I’ll be home around nine or nine-thirty,” I said. “See you then.”

“Bye.”

We disconnected. I made a mental note to call her in an hour to make sure she arrived home safely.

I steered into the parking lot of the restaurant. I parked and walked inside, my hands fisted in the pockets of my leather jacket. Donna was waiting at the bar. She stood and greeted me with a hug.

“Cold out there,” I said.

“Well, let’s see what we can do about getting you warmed up.”

I sat beside her and ordered an Old Fitz on the rocks. I took a sip, felt a trail of fire from the tip of my tongue to the deepest part of my stomach.

“Better?” she asked.

“Yeah. Can I get you another one of those?” I gestured toward her martini glass.

“Actually, I’m ready for dinner if you are.”

“Okay.”

We settled up at the bar and walked to the dining room entrance where a hostess led us to our table. Donna was three years younger than me, but at forty-five she still looked great in tight black pants and a cranberry sweater. Her hair was shoulder length and expensively dyed, and she might have gotten a nose job at some point. We sat and opened our menus.

“I heard you got married,” Donna said.

“I did. After I lost Susan, I said never again. But I guess the old saying is true.”

“Who is she?”

“Her name’s Juliet. She’s from the Philippines. She’s a nurse.”

I pulled my wallet out and showed Donna my family portrait. She asked about Brittney and I told her the story.

“How’s the writing going?” I said. Donna wrote true crime books and magazine stories.

“Tough to sell anything right now. I’m thinking about getting a new agent.”

A muscular waiter with a military buzz cut and fake diamond earrings introduced himself as Brian and asked us if he could get us anything to drink. We ordered another round and some crab nachos. I remembered they were Donna’s favorite.

She closed her menu and took a sip from her water glass. “I know you’re probably wondering why I wanted you to meet me here. It’s about my brother, Derek. He’s been missing for over fourteen months.”

“Missing from where?”

“He’s a police officer in a little town in Tennessee called Black Creek. He went on a call a year ago Thanksgiving, a domestic disturbance, and then just disappeared. They found his car parked at the curb outside the address he was called to, but no Derek. He just vanished. Without a trace, as they say.”

“Any signs of foul play?”

“Plenty. There were two bodies in the dining room, the elderly woman who lived in the house and her widowed daughter-in-law. The elderly woman’s husband and their twenty-seven-year-old grandson are also missing. They were all recently declared legally dead, but I can’t accept that. I know in my heart Derek is still alive.”

“Any suspects in the murder case?”

“Not really, although the police did find some DNA at the scene that didn’t belong to Derek or any of the family there. The couple didn’t have any money to speak of, no big insurance policies. I was just wondering—”

“If I would go up there and take a look around?”

“Yes. It would mean a lot to me. Derek is my only living relative, and I—”

She broke then. She pulled a miniature package of tissues from her purse, pinched a few from the slit in the plastic wrapper and used them to dab the tears from her eyes.

Brian arrived with our drinks and appetizer and took our dinner order. By the time he walked away Donna seemed to have regained her composure.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“No need to be. Listen, Donna, I would love to help you out, but I’m not doing the private eye thing anymore. I don’t even have a license. I let it go inactive.”

“So what are you doing now?”

“I put a little band together. We have a house gig at a club in Jacksonville.”

She was still clutching her tissue, which was now twisted and resembled a short and skinny length of rope. She pulled the speared olives from her drink and downed the remaining vodka in a single gulp.

“Good for you,” she said.

Brian delivered our food. Donna and I relaxed and ate and drank and talked about some of the good times we’d had together a long time ago. The blackened fish was as delicious as any I’d ever eaten. I was about to take my last bite when the phone in my pocket vibrated.

The caller I.D. said Juliet. She was calling from her cell phone, but I knew she was still at work. I asked Donna to please excuse me.

“Hey, babe,” I said.

“Nicholas, have you heard from Brittney?”

“I talked to her a while ago. She had a flat tire on Paradise, and I told her to call the auto club. She should be home by now. I was fixing to call and check up on her.”

“A flat? Oh, great. I’ve left voice mail, and I’ve texted, but she’s not getting back to me. I know she was supposed to go skating tonight, but I’m starting to get worried. It’s not like her to not answer her phone.”

“I told her to go straight home after they changed the tire. That car has one of those skinny tires for a spare, and I didn’t want her out driving around on it. I’m sure she’s all right. Maybe she fell asleep. I’ll be leaving here in a few minutes and heading home. I’ll give you a call when I get there.”

“Please do. How’s your date going?”

“I’ll tell you later. Love you.”

“Love you, too. Bye.”

I tried Brittney’s number, got voice mail. I put the phone back in my pocket.

Brian asked if we wanted desert, but neither of us did. He brought the check, and Donna insisted on paying. I left some cash on the table for a tip.

I walked Donna to her car. My hair was long enough to cover my ears and I had a full beard, but the February wind still chilled me to the marrow. It wasn’t supposed to be this cold in Florida.

“I know a guy in Nashville who might be able to help you,” I said. “Pete Strong. I met him at a convention a few years ago. Strong Investigations. Google it. You’ll find contact info on his website. Just tell him Nicholas Colt sent you.”

“I’ll do that. Thank you. It’s just so horrible not knowing. I guess I’m expecting the worst, but I need some sort of closure. And those people who were murdered, just ghastly. Whoever did it mutilated them, you know. Carved crosses on them. I can’t imagine—”

“Wait,” I said. “What was that about crosses?”

“One of Derek’s fellow officers emailed me some pictures of the women who were murdered. From the autopsy. Oh, Nicholas, it was horrible. Both of them had what looked like slanted crucifixes carved into their foreheads...”

Donna kept talking, but my mind had drifted elsewhere.

Slanted crucifixes.

That changed everything.