

POCKET-47 Excerpt

Jude Hardin

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CHAPTER ONE

My stepfather taught me three important survival skills: how to use a baitcaster reel, how to filet a bass, and how to adjust for the kick of a .44 magnum. I had gotten up at six a.m. and exercised the first. By nine, I stood under the shade of a loblolly pine, busy with the second.

I never quite mastered the third. That's why I carry a .38.

I wore khaki shorts, no shirt, a pair of topsiders and a ball cap that said Guinness. Typical north Florida fishing attire.

I scraped the scales off my third and final fish, looked up and saw a little red car turning from Lake Barkley Road onto my gravel driveway. It was one of those cars I call a Bic. Like the lighters, they're cheap and disposable. You buy one fresh off the lot, and by the time it needs new tires it's ready for the junkyard. An internal timing device insures that all working parts take a dive at the precise moment the warranty expires.

It struggled up the hill and parked beside my GMC Jimmy. The driver's side door opened and a young woman got out, wearing what at first appeared to be a hearing aid. It was one of those cell phone gizmos you hang on your ear so everyone thinks you're loony tunes walking

around talking to yourself. In the future, they'll implant a computer chip directly into your brain and you'll be perpetually connected, via satellite, to people you don't want to talk to anyway.

I was hoping I'd die before anything like that ever happened when the woman said, "I'm looking for Nicholas Colt. The private eye. Is that you?"

She surveyed my home sweet home--a 1964 Airstream Safari travel trailer--my ten-year-old SUV, my bloodstained picnic table littered with catch-of-the-day carcasses. She had an expensive-looking hairstyle, clipped shoulder-length, dark brown with bourbon highlights, and a *what is that smell?* expression. She wore a navy blue skirt and jacket, silky white blouse, some sort of shoes that didn't tread well on my sandy yard. White leather purse. I doubted she was old enough to drink.

"If you're selling something, I'm broke, so don't bother. If you're from the loan company, I'm really broke, so really don't bother." I was six weeks behind on my car payment. I expected to wake up any day now and find my Jimmy not there. A tow truck hadn't followed her in, so I figured I was safe for the moment.

She stepped forward and extended her hand, briefly breaking eye contact to glance at the scar on my belly. Her perfume was light and spicy, very nice. I put the filet knife down and opened my palms to show the fish grime. She frowned and laced her fingers together against the front of her skirt, quickly giving up on the idea of a handshake. Tiny beads of sweat studded her forehead.

"My name is Leitha Ryan. I need help finding someone, Mr. Colt. Is that something you might be interested in?"

She raked her hair back with her fingers and chewed on her upper lip as if she were hoping I'd say no.

“My clients usually call first,” I said. “Kind of caught me at a bad time.”

“I apologize. I did try to call, but--”

The sandy-haired dog we call Bud crept up from behind and pushed his muzzle under her skirt. Bud has some Great Dane in him. He looks like a Labrador on steroids. Leitha screamed.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “He doesn’t bite.” Dylan Crawford, my friend Joe’s son, likes to think Bud is his dog, but Bud belongs to nobody. I like that about him. He showed up at the lake one day a couple of years ago, mangy and half-starved. Joe took him to the vet and got him straightened out, and he’s been with us ever since. Sometimes he sleeps at my place, sometimes on Joe’s porch.

Bud trotted toward the lake wagging his tail, apparently satisfied with the smell of Leitha’s crotch.

“Was my phone disconnected?” I said.

Leitha nodded.

“Sorry. Been a little slow lately. How did you find my place?” I don’t tell many people where I live, and I don’t advertise the address.

She hesitated, took a step back toward the Bic. There was a St. Christopher statue on the dashboard, similar to the one my mother had when her ’65 Fairlane met with a tree. The statue survived. Mom didn’t. Mom was a Baptist.

“Can I get you a cup of coffee or a glass of iced tea?” I said. “I’m having fish for breakfast. You like fish?”

She looked at the mess on the picnic table and her face went pale. “No thank you. I already had breakfast. Maybe I should come back some other time. Sorry I interrupted what you were doing there.”

She turned to leave.

“Wait,” I said. I needed the work. My bank account had bled to death waiting on a couple of previous clients to pay up, and I wasn’t in the mood to shoot the repo man when he came for my Jimmy. “If you can hang around for a few minutes while I get cleaned up, I’ll be happy to discuss your problem.”

She halfheartedly followed me inside, visibly relieved that my air conditioner was functioning. I washed my hands, put some ice cubes in a glass, filled the glass with sweet tea and handed it to her. I switched on the television so she’d have something to do while I took a shower. I put my bass filets in the refrigerator and closed the partition on my way to the bedroom and bath.

The shower in an Airstream is slightly larger than a coffin. I scrubbed my body and toweled off and gave my beard a quick trim. I pulled my hair back in a ponytail and returned to the living room wearing fresh khaki shorts and a Hawaiian shirt. They were talking about the local weather on television. No surprise there. High in the mid-nineties, hundred-percent humidity, chance of afternoon thundershowers.

Leitha had helped herself to one of my Marlboros from a pack on the coffee table. Beside the cigarettes were a box of toothpicks, a stack of nicotine patches, and a package of peppermint chewing gum. I’d been trying to quit. Rule #6 from Nicholas Colt’s *Philosophy of Life*: Shit happens, especially when you give up smoking. I was seventeen the first time. My stepfather blew his brains out that week, with the same .44 he’d used to teach me how to shoot. Years later, I had the gun melted down to a blob. It’s on my desk now, next to Mom’s St. Christopher.

At first I thought Leitha was talking to herself, but she was connected to someone on that goofy ear thing. She said goodbye when she saw me coming. I poured myself a glass of tea, sat on the sofa beside her and picked up the cigarette pack.

“Mind if I have one of these?” I said.

She smiled. “I should have asked.”

“No problem. *Mi casa es su casa.*” I lit my cigarette.

Leitha crossed her legs, which I noticed were first-rate. Rule #3 from Nicholas Colt’s *Philosophy of Life*: Love will break your heart, and lust will break your bank account. Rule #3 has been proven many times, and is universally accepted as being true.

She stood and examined the gold record hanging on my wall, the only one I hadn’t pawned for blow in the 80s. An awkward moment of silence inevitably follows when someone realizes I’m *that* Nicholas Colt, the one who crawled from the wreckage of a chartered jet seconds before a massive fireball consumed his wife and baby daughter and everyone in his band. I let it tick off and then said, “You’re trying to locate someone?”

“Is this your wife and little girl?” She pointed at the framed photograph hanging near the gold record.

“Yes,” I said.

“They’re beautiful.”

Twenty-some years had passed, but it was still difficult for me to talk about the tragedy. Especially with a stranger.

“You’re trying to locate someone?” I repeated.

Leitha blew smoke at the ceiling. “My sister. She ran away from home.”

“Sister. How old?”

“Fifteen.” Her voice broke slightly when she said it.

“I figured you to be about that age.”

“I’m twenty-three, Mr. Colt.” She sounded offended.

“Where’s home?” I asked.

She sat back down on the couch. “We live in Jacksonville, downtown in Springfield. I work at the hospital there. We’re orphans, Mr. Colt. Grew up in foster homes. When I graduated from nursing school, the state allowed me to take custody of Brittney. So, basically, I’m raising her.”

“My girlfriend’s a nurse,” I said. “I should have done something like that. Good money, never any shortage of work.”

Leitha laughed. “You should have been a surgeon. Seem to be pretty good with a knife.”

I cleared my throat. “How long your sister been gone?”

“Almost two weeks. She did it once before, ran away, but she came back after two days. I kept thinking she would come back again this time, you know?” Leitha stubbed out her cigarette. Her eyes were red now, on the verge of tears.

“You’ve contacted the police?”

“That’s the thing. I’m afraid to. I’m afraid they’ll take her away from me and put her back in foster care. Please don’t tell the police, Mr. Colt.”

“Call me Nicholas. You sure she ran away. Sure she wasn’t kidnapped or something?”

“We had a fight. It was a week ago Saturday, August fifth, right before she left for her tennis lesson. She’d started hanging out with a guy named Mark Toohey. He was way older than her, like nineteen I think. Seemed like an all right guy, just too old for Brittney. I told her Mark could come to the house when I was home, but that she wasn’t allowed to go off with him in his

car. She freaked. She called me a bitch and said I wasn't her mom and all that. You know, the usual bullshit. I told her that as soon as she got home from her lesson, she was grounded for a week. Next morning I found this note under my windshield wiper."

Leitha reached into her purse, pulled out a crumpled paper that had been torn from a spiral notebook. It seemed the note had gone to battle with a half-eaten red Twizzler stick. She peeled the sticky candy away, handed the note to me. I found my glasses and read it.

Leitha,

You are so fucking mean. I can't live with you anymore.

B

"Well," I said, "she certainly knows how to get to the point. Sounds like you got yourself a runaway all right. Can you afford to hire a private investigator?"

"You look different with the glasses on. More intelligent or something," Leitha said.

I took them off. "What do I look like now? A moron?"

"Come on, Mr. Colt. I mean Nicholas. You're good looking and you know it."

I kept chanting rule #3, the last part. "You trying to butter me up?" I said.

"Is it working?"

"Maybe. The thing is, I can't work for free. I wish I could, but I can't. You didn't answer my question. Can you afford a PI?"

"I talked to an agency in Jacksonville. They were going to charge me a hundred an hour. I can't afford that. Plus, they said they could try to locate her, but that the police would have to actually pick her up. As I told you before, I don't want that if there's any way to avoid it. They gave me your name, said you could probably do it for less. They said you specialize in runaways."

“What agency?”

“Brett Hershey and Associates.”

“Ah. Brett. All the beat cops call him ‘Candy Ass.’ Did you visit his fancy office downtown? That’s why Brett charges a hundred an hour. He’s right about the cops being the pickup guys, though. Most PIs won’t pick up a runaway.”

“Why not?”

“We really don’t have any authority to use force. Say I pick her up and she alleges abuse or something. Runaways don’t want to be caught. They’ll lie through their teeth to get revenge. You could sue me.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“If you want me to pick her up, I’ll need you to sign a contract giving me twenty-four hour custody rights.”

“Okay. How much are you going to charge?”

“So, Brett sent you down here to Hallows Cove, to me, the remainder bin, the clearance rack. You drove forty miles down here thinking you’d get a bargain, right? I like you, so I’m going to do something I never do. I’m going to give you a flat rate. Thousand bucks, win, lose, or draw. If it takes me two hours to find her and bring her home, I make five hundred an hour. If it takes me two weeks, I make twelve-fifty an hour. If I haven’t found her after two weeks, we’ll renegotiate. Can you live with that?”

“What’s your hourly rate?”

“Hundred dollars.”

“But you don’t have a fancy downtown office.”

“Yeah, but I’m good. I have the right connections when I need them. Plus, I dedicate myself to one case at a time. Like Brett told you, I specialize in runaways.”

“I’ll take the flat rate, I guess.”

“Fine. Do you know where Mark Toohey lives?”

“Yes. It’s only a few blocks from our house. I went over there and talked to him, but he says he hasn’t seen Brittney.”

“Does he have a job?”

“He delivers pizza for the Domino’s in Springfield.”

“I’ll talk to him. What about school?”

“She was supposed to start tenth grade last week. Didn’t show up for any of her classes.”

“Friends? Anybody she might have gone to stay with?”

“She spends a lot of time on the computer. MySpace and all that. I really don’t know of any friends.”

Leitha dug in her purse and produced a plastic ID card. I looked it over. Stanton College Preparatory School. Blue eyes, sandy blond hair, 5’3”, 105 lbs. I knew a little bit about Stanton. It’s a public school, but you have to apply to get in.

“She must be smart,” I said.

“She’s very bright. She struggled for years with dyslexia, but seems to have it under control now. We were so excited last year when she got accepted to Stanton. I can’t believe she’s throwing it all away like this.”

“She drink or do drugs?”

“I’d kill her.”

“Medical problems? Any psych history?”

“She’s healthy. We’ve both been to counseling but, you know, she’s not crazy if that’s what you mean.”

“What about hobbies?”

“She reads a lot, and plays on the internet. She swims. Oh, and there’s tennis. Her last foster parents were big into tennis. They gave Brittney lessons. She played on the JV team at Stanton last year.”

“How long did she live with the tennis people?”

“Almost two years.”

“Did she like them?”

“It’s a doctor and his wife. They were planning to adopt Brittney. They still pay for her tennis lessons. Every Saturday morning Doctor Spivey picks her up and takes her for her lesson. They usually have lunch, and then he brings her home.”

“But you said she didn’t come home after her lesson a week ago Saturday. I assume you’ve talked with the Spiveys.”

“Yes. Doctor Spivey said he dropped her at the house and waited to make sure she got inside. I was at work at the time. The Spiveys are very worried about Brittney. They wanted to call the police, but I talked them out of it.”

Ordinarily, that would have raised a red flag. But I understood why Leitha didn’t want the police involved. She didn’t want Brittney forced back into foster care.

“Can you give me the Spiveys’ address and phone number?”

Leitha wrote it on the back of the paper Brittney had used for her note. The address was in Ponte Vedre. Rich people.

“I’ll talk to the Spiveys,” I said. “Who was giving her lessons?”

“A pro in Ponte Vedre named Kent Clark.”

“Kent Clark?” I laughed. “Like Superman, only backwards. Any reason to believe she might have been involved with him? Other than the lessons, I mean.”

“I don’t think so. He’s old, like forty or something.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Does Brittney have any scars or tattoos? Piercings?”

“She wears earrings. That’s all.”

“She got a cell phone?”

“She’s on my plan. Here’s the bill from last month.”

I took the phone statement and put it with the note. “I want to get started right away,” I said. “I’ll need the money up front.”

Leitha wrote me a check. I wrote my cell phone number on the back of a business card and handed it to her. “As of today, my cell still works. I leave it turned off most of the time, so leave voice mail and I’ll get back to you. Call me right away if you hear from Brittney or if she comes home.”

Leitha nodded. She rose and offered her hand again, then moved toward the door.

“Will you be home later?” I said.

“I have to work tonight. Why?”

“I’d like to take a look at Brittney’s room.”

“I’ll be home from work around eight tomorrow morning, if you want to come then.”

“I’ll be there,” I said. “Any questions?”

“Just one. How--”

She hesitated, but her eyes and facial expression spoke volumes. I finished the thought for her. “How does a world-renowned blues guitarist with homes on both coasts end up as a PI working out of a camper? I ask myself the same question every day.”

She stepped out into the August heat, avoiding further eye contact. I stood in the doorway and watched her drive off in the Bic.

Bud barked and chased her a quarter mile down Lake Barkley Road. He finally stopped and sneezed a couple of times, from all the dust she had stirred.

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