

## CHAPTER ONE

*Dear Mr. Colt: You're dead...*

I broke the seal on a bottle of Old Fitzgerald, generously bathed some ice cubes, and took a sip. Satisfied the subject line couldn't possibly be true, I opened the email.

It was spam, an advertisement from a company called *Plots with a Twist*. They were trying to sell me a hole to be buried in and a high-tech grave marker—a solar-powered, weather-proofed video screen embedded in a slab of granite. When your loved ones walked up and pressed a button, they got to watch all the good times you had when you weren't a stiff yet.

I decided not to get one.

I finished my drink, closed the laptop, and headed down to the lounge. I had a one o'clock appointment with a guy named Nathan Broadway.

I'd driven to St. Augustine and checked into the hotel the night before, thinking a couple of days at the beach might be good for me. My adopted daughter Brittney was living in one of the dorms at the University of Florida in Gainesville, and my wife Juliet and I had been separated for some time. Juliet was living near Jacksonville, in the house we once shared, and I was back

in my 1964 Airstream Safari travel trailer on lot 27 at Joe's Fish Camp. It got lonely out there sometimes. I missed my daughter, and I missed my wife.

At 1:05, Nathan Broadway still hadn't shown up. I took a seat at the bar.

It was Sunday, and the Jacksonville Jaguars were playing on the big screen television. There was a free buffet table set up against the back wall. Pigs-in-blankets, fried cheese, potato chips, and a bunch of other greasy salty fare designed to make you hang around and buy more six-dollar beers. A dozen people stood in line, waiting to cram as much food as possible on paper plates slightly larger than drink coasters. Near the front of the queue a tall woman in a business suit kept rubbing her nose with a handkerchief. When she sneezed in the general direction of the hot wings, I decided I wasn't hungry.

"What can I get you to drink?" The bartender's nametag said Sheri. She had a long blond ponytail I guessed to be fake, and a gold stud in her tongue I guessed to be genuine. Nice smile.

"Old Fitz on the rocks," I said.

She made the drink and I started a tab. Jacksonville scored a touchdown on their opening drive. While they were getting set to kick the extra point, Nathan Broadway walked in and sat on the stool next to mine. He ordered an Amstel Light and said, "Mind if we move to a booth?"

I shrugged, got up and followed him to the table farthest from the television. A few people cheered when Jacksonville made the extra point. It was seven to nothing. Nathan Broadway and I sat facing each other. I guessed him to be in his early thirties. He wore a crewcut and jeans and an orange polo. Clean-shaven, looked like he went to the gym. He pulled an envelope out of his back pocket and handed it to me. There was a letter inside, typed on a single sheet of white paper, and a hand-drawn map.

*Dear Nathan Broadway: You are cordially invited to come and play a game called Snuff Tag 9. We have provided a map for your convenience. You will need a vehicle with four-wheel drive to get there. Come alone. Pack as you would if you were going to stay at a hotel overnight. We will be expecting you on October 11 at approximately 8:00 p.m. If you choose not to come, you will die. If you try to trace this letter, or try to get the authorities involved in any way, you will die. If you show this letter to anyone, you will die. This is not a joke. We will kill you. Thank you for your cooperation, and we look forward to seeing you on the 11<sup>th</sup>. Sincerely, The Sexy Bastards.*

I looked at the envelope. No return address, no postmark, no stamp.

I laughed. "Snuff Tag Nine. Sounds like some kind of second-rate action movie."

"You're kidding, right?" Broadway said. "It's one of the most popular videogames on the planet."

"I don't play any of that stuff," I said. "So I wouldn't know."

"It's really cool. You can play alone, or you can go online and play against other people. I've even played against people in foreign countries. I signed up for a tournament a while back, so maybe that's where these sexy bastard people got my address. I don't know."

"You found the letter in your mailbox?" I said.

"Yesterday. I opened it and, I don't know, it scared me. I thought about calling the police, but I was afraid whoever put the letter in my mailbox might find out and really kill me. I thought it would be safer to call a private eye. I appreciate you meeting me on a Sunday, Mr. Colt, on such short notice."

I took a sip of my drink. "How many other private investigators did you call?"

"Only two."

I tried my best to look crushed.

“So I wasn’t your first choice?” I said.

“You were third in the phone book.”

“Must have been an old phone book.”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I mean it must have been an old phone book. I’m not a private investigator anymore.”

He looked confused. “What are you then?”

“I’m nothing. I don’t have any sort of license anymore. Long story. If it makes you feel better to call me something, call me a security consultant.”

“I thought I was going to be dealing with a licensed professional. Now I’m not sure. I mean—”

“I was a licensed investigator for a long time,” I said. “I know what I’m doing. And apparently I’m the best you’re going to get on a Sunday on short notice.”

He nodded. Took a swallow of beer and wiped his mouth with the cocktail napkin he’d brought from the bar.

“Okay,” he said. “So what should I do? You think someone is really aiming to kill me? They said it’s not a joke.”

“They said that, but it probably is a joke. These kinds of letters make the rounds from time to time. If it was me, I would wad it up and throw it in the trash can.”

He fidgeted with the napkin, twisting it into a skinny rope. “I don’t know. I don’t want to take any chances. I don’t like threats, you know? I mean, I can take care of myself, but—”

“So what do you want me to do?” I said. “There’s no way to trace the letter. We could take it to a laboratory for fingerprints and DNA, try to find the sender that way, but it would be

expensive and I doubt anything would show up. I imagine whoever handled the letter and the envelope used gloves. The way I see it, you have three choices: you can ignore it, which is what I would recommend; or, you can rent a jeep and follow the directions on the map and find out for yourself that it's only a prank; or, you can hire me for a hundred dollars an hour, plus expenses, and I'll drive out there for you and report back that it's only a prank."

"A hundred an hour?"

"Yeah, and the clock started ticking at one."

"So I owe you fifty bucks just for sitting here and talking?"

I looked at my watch. "That's about right. So what's it going to be?"

He stared at his mutilated cocktail napkin for thirty seconds or so, and then said, "How about we ride out there together?"

"Nope. I don't take clients on jobs with me. If I go, I go alone. I'll need a thousand dollar retainer up front. If there's any left over, I'll refund the difference."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a checkbook.

"I'll need cash," I said.

"Where am I supposed to get a thousand dollars cash on a Sunday?"

"At the front desk. I already asked, and they said it shouldn't be a problem."

"How will I even know you went out there to check it out? You're so convinced it's a hoax, you could just—"

"I'll take pictures and email them to you from the site. That good enough?"

He studied the label on his beer bottle.

He was starting to annoy me. When you hire a private investigator, or a former private investigator who lost his license over a narcotics conviction and now calls himself a security

consultant, or any professional, there's a level of trust involved. If you don't trust them to do the job you want done, don't hire them. Simple. Broadway had gone down the alphabetical list in the phone book. That had been the extent of his research. Going down the alphabetical list in the phone book is a stupid way to hire a chimney sweep or a house painter or a guy to pump out your septic tank. Never mind someone you think might save your life. But Nathan Broadway's stupidity was his problem, not mine. I needed the work, and if he wanted to fork over a thousand bucks to send me on what I figured would almost certainly amount to a wild goose chase, then I wasn't above taking it.

“Can I at least see your driver's license?” he said.

I took it out of my wallet and handed it to him. He glanced at the surgical scars on my left hand but didn't say anything.

“Satisfied?” I said. “I have references too if you need them. All you have to do is ask.”

“That's okay. It's just a lot of money, that's all.”

He took a deep breath, looked over at the television for a second, and then wrote the check. We walked to the front desk together, and the cash went from his hand to mine.