

## CHAPTER ONE

When I was twelve, a movie called *Time Traveling Zombie Bikers from Darkest Hell* came to the drive-in theater in Hallows Cove, Florida, where I lived with my stepfather. Supposedly it was the first in a series of low budget horror films featuring the zombie bikers, and rumor had it *Time Traveling Zombie Bikers from Darkest Hell Visit Nazi Germany* would be coming out later in the summer.

My best friend Joe Crawford and I begged his parents to take us, and one Saturday night they finally caved. They loaded some lawn chairs and a cooler full of soft drinks and an industrial-sized bag of cheese puffs into the back of their station wagon, and off we went. The film was rated R, so it was kind of a big deal. Joe and I hoped to hear a lot of cussing and see a lot of gore, and maybe even get a glimpse of a naked breast or two.

Thirty-some years later, the news of another murder down in Key West triggered the memory of that movie.

The reporter on the car radio said it was the eleventh case in a bizarre series of homicides where the killer surgically removed the victims' brains and then reattached the tops of their

heads with a fast-drying adhesive. In every case, asphyxiation was the official cause of death, but there were conflicting opinions about whether the victims were smothered before or after the initial cuts with the bone saw. My money was on after. Anyone sick enough to steal your brain is probably going to make you suffer for a while beforehand.

For obvious reasons, the mainstream media had dubbed the perpetrator of these heinous crimes *The Zombie*. One popular anchorperson even speculated that the killer might actually be eating the missing organs, although there was no real evidence to that effect.

Not all of the slayings had occurred in Key West, but the most recent three had, and some people had started calling the southernmost tip of our country *Key Death*. Tourism was down, as was the price of real estate.

“Aren’t you glad we don’t live in Key West?” Juliet said.

Juliet was my date for the evening, and she also happened to be my wife. We were on our way to see John Coppington in concert at the St. Augustine amphitheater.

“Some of the murders occurred up in Georgia,” I said. “And some of them in other states along the coast. You never know. He might even show up in a nice little subdivision thirty miles southwest of Jacksonville. Nobody is safe from *The Zombie*.”

I said it melodramatically, mimicking a measure of ominous music at the end. Joking around was my way of coping with something that scared the living crap out of me.

Not serial killers.

Zombies.

*Time Traveling Zombie Bikers from Darkest Hell* did a number on me when I was twelve. There weren’t any naked women, but the graphic violence was over the top.

Zombies have seriously freaked me out ever since.

“It’s not funny,” Juliet said. “I feel sorry for the families of those people. The latest victim was only twenty-eight.”

“I wonder if young brains taste better than old brains. I’ll have to Google that when we get home.”

She slapped me on the arm. “How would you like it if you found me or Brittney with an empty skull?”

I decided not to go for the obvious joke on that one. Anyway, it would have been grossly inaccurate. Both my girls were extremely intelligent. Juliet was a registered nurse, working on her master’s degree, and Brittney, our adopted daughter, was a sophomore at the University of Florida, majoring in English with the intent to apply to law school. If anyone was missing a brain, it was me, Nicholas Colt. World class guitar player with a crippled hand, ace detective with a revoked license. I like to blame my brainlessness on too many bottles of bourbon over the years, but the truth is I was never that smart to begin with.

I turned left into the amphitheater parking area.

“Maybe The Zombie won’t make it to the show tonight,” I said.

“Just shut up,” Juliet said, pretending to be annoyed with me.

I’d never met John Coppington, not even back in the 80s when I played some of the world’s biggest stages with my band. He wasn’t touring much back then, and our paths just never seemed to cross.

But tonight that was going to change.

A friend of mine named Lonnie Williams played bass for the warm-up band, and he had sent me a couple of VIP passes for after the show. I was finally going to meet one of my all-time rock heroes, a man who had penned more classics than I had fingers to count them on.

I parked the car and we walked to the gate and gave the man our tickets. On the way to our seats we passed the concession stand, and I asked Juliet if she wanted anything.

“A beer, I guess. And some nachos.”

I paid for the beer and the nachos, and a double bourbon on the rocks for myself.

It was going to be a great night. I could just feel it.

I had no idea it was going to set the wheels in motion for the most horrendous seven days of my life.