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Zom-B

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ZOM-B

Darren Shan

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PROLOGUE

It was the darkest, most wretched hour of the night when the dead came back to life and spread like a plague of monstrous locusts through the village of Pallaskenry. The luckier victims were slaughtered in their sleep, their skulls ripped open, their brains devoured. The others suffered a far more terrible fate.

The living and the undead shared the village for a short, frantic time, but it was a balance made in hell and it could not last. One side would surely wipe out the other. As the demented, demonic beasts tore into their unsuspecting prey, killing or infecting, it soon became apparent that this was a war the living had never been destined to win.

*

Brian Barry watched sickly as his mother dug through the shredded remains of her husband's face to scoop out his brains. Mum had often joked about killing Brian's dad, on nights when he had stumbled home from the local pub, or when he wouldn't shut up about football. Brian and his dad had always laughed when she made her outlandish threats. But neither was laughing now.

Brian couldn't understand how the world had changed so abruptly. It had been an ordinary Sunday night. He'd watched some TV, finished his homework just before going to bed, and settled down for a night of sweet dreams before another school week kicked off.

Screams had disturbed his slumber. Brian wasn't a light sleeper, but even the dead were unable to sleep through the uproar in Pallaskenry that night.

Brian had thought at first that somebody was throwing a party. But he lived on a quiet stretch of road. His neighbours weren't party animals. Had teenagers driven out from Limerick city to bring noise and chaos to the countryside?

As his head cleared and he turned on the light in his bedroom, he quickly realised that this was no party. The screams were genuine roars of terror. Looking out of his window, he spotted some of his neighbours running,

shrieking, fighting. He watched, awestruck, as Mrs Shanahan stabbed one of her sons in the chest with a long, sharp knife, then staggered away, keening sharply.

The stabbed son should have died instantly, as the knife had pierced his heart. But to Brian's astonishment he yanked out the knife, tossed it aside, then fell upon his mother with a bloodthirsty howl. Mrs Shanahan had time to scream once more. Then her son somehow cracked her head open with his fingers and began pulling out lumps of her brain.

Brian turned away and vomited as Mrs Shanahan's son stuffed bits of his dead mother's brain into his mouth and swallowed gleefully. Then Brian rushed to his mum and dad's room to seek protection.

They weren't there.

As if in a nightmare, Brian shuffled towards the kitchen, where he could see a light. Pushing open the door, he spotted his parents, but he didn't call out to them. There was no point, he saw that immediately. His father would never hear anything again. His face had been ripped apart and his body was deathly still.

As for Brian's mother, she was too busy eating her dead husband's brain to care about anything her son might have to say. There was a nasty cut on her left arm and a green fungus was creeping across the wound.

There was something strange about her teeth and fingers too, but Brian didn't focus on those details. He could stomach no more. Weeping softly, he backed away from the kitchen of death and fled into the night of blood and screams.

Brian headed for the main street of Pallaskenry, crying, moaning, shivering. He could see atrocities unravelling wherever he looked, corpses littering the road, people – neighbours, family members, friends – feasting on the dead, tucking into their brains.

Fighting was rife, brother struggling with sister, wife with husband, child with parent. It made no sense. It was as if a great madness had swept through the village and struck at random. Anyone who tried to reason with the cannibalistic crazies was knocked down and ripped apart. The only ones who stood any chance of survival were those who didn't stop to ask questions, who didn't try to help, who simply turned tail and ran.

But Brian was a child and he believed that adults had all the answers, that you should always seek assistance if you found yourself in trouble. So he pushed on, searching for a police officer, a teacher, a priest … *anyone*.

All he found was more horror, blood everywhere, corpses everywhere, undead monsters everywhere.

Nobody could help Brian Barry. It was every man, woman and child for themself.

Brian somehow made it to the top of the main street, ducking challenges, skipping past the lunges of blood-thirsty abominations. In the middle of the killing frenzy there was no shortage of targets, so the undead creatures didn't take much notice of an eleven-year-old boy.

At the top of the street, where the road branched, a man was standing, feet spread wide apart, hands on hips, studying the violence. Lots of undead creatures were gathered at this point, scrapping with the living or feeding on the brains of the freshly killed. None attacked the man in the middle of the road. Some growled suspiciously at him, but all of the monsters let him be.

Brian was young, but he was no fool. He saw his best chance of survival and launched himself at it, desperation lending him one last blast of speed when he'd been sure that his lungs were about to burst.

Slipping past the frenzied, shark-like killers, Brian threw himself at the feet of the man who was immune to the attacks. He looked up and got ready to beg for his life. But when he saw the man's face, he paused. The tall man was very thin, with a large potbelly and extraordinarily unsettling eyes. They were double the size of

Brian's, the largest eyes the boy had ever seen, unnaturally white, with a tiny dark pupil set in the centre of each. Brian was immediately put in mind of an owl.

'Yes, little boy?' the man murmured. He had a soft, pleasant voice, like one of the announcers on the TV shows which Brian had been watching earlier that night. It didn't really suit those eerie eyes.

'Please,' Brian gasped, grabbing hold of the man's legs. 'Help me. Please. My dad's dead. My mum …'

'She killed him?' the man asked, then tutted when Brian nodded. 'How sad that you had to bear witness to such a shocking scene. No child should ever be put in so unfortunate a situation. You have my condolences.'

One of the undead creatures darted at them, reaching for Brian, drooling as it moved in for the kill.

'Back!' the man with the large eyes barked. The monster snarled at him, but retreated as ordered.

'You … you can … help me?' Brian wheezed.

The man frowned. 'I could, but with so many in your perilous position, it hardly seems fair that I should single you out for special treatment.'

'Please!' Brian wailed, clutching the tall man's legs even tighter. 'I didn't do anything wrong. I don't want to die. *Please!*'

The man sighed and looked around at the dead, the

dying and the undead. He hesitated, then decided to be merciful. 'Very well,' he muttered. 'But I'll only do it for you. The others will have to fend for themselves. What is your name?'

'Brian Barry.'

'You need to let go of my legs, Brian, move back and kneel in front of me.'

'Kneel?' Brian echoed uncertainly.

'Yes,' the man said. 'Then close your eyes and say a silent prayer, any prayer will do, or none at all if you're not religious, although I find that even the most agnostic individual gains a measure of comfort from prayer at a time like this.'

'You'll help me if I kneel and pray?' Brian asked.

'Yes,' the man smiled, and although it was a cold smile, it filled the boy with hope.

'OK,' Brian said, releasing the man's legs. The undead noticed this and started to move in for the kill. Brian gulped, then closed his eyes and prayed manically. He couldn't remember the words very well, but he did the best he could, trying not to think about his mum and dad and how he used to complain when they took him to church.

The tall man looked down tenderly on the boy. Then he spotted the monsters closing in and wiped the smile

away. He would have to act swiftly if he was to honour his promise and spare the boy the agony of death at the hands of these foul beasts.

'You have been a brave boy, Brian,' the man whispered. 'I am sure you will be reunited with your parents in the next world.'

Then his hands snaked out. Brian didn't see the long, bony fingers, and only barely felt them as they gripped his head and twisted sharply, left then right. He heard a sharp cracking noise, but felt no pain and was dead before he knew it.

The man let the corpse drop and bade Brian a silent farewell as the living dead moved in and tore into the boy's skull. He watched for a while, then checked his watch and grunted. There was still a long way to go until morning.

With a small cough, he adjusted the ends of his sleeves, then started down the road into the village, leaving the undead leeches to carve up Brian Barry's skull and feast upon the hot, sweet brain within.