

Night of the Living Dead: The Novelization

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Sardoodledom Storyhouse LLC

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Chapter One

They're Coming to Get You, Barbara

The black road curled and unspooled through the Pennsylvanian hills like a ball of black yarn dropped by a drunken kitten. Gravel split and crunched beneath the car tires as Johnny maneuvered his old Pontiac along the winding asphalt. The windshield wipers squeaked weakly before sputtering to a stop. Johnny cursed and smacked the steering wheel,

mad at the car for his own lack of preventative maintenance. The sky overhead deepened from a light grey to a dark one, pregnant with the type of fat clouds that were threatening to burst at any moment.

"It's getting dark," said a faint voice from the passenger seat. Barbara leaned her head weakly against the window; her hands clinging to a large wreath like it was alive and trying to escape. Her fingers fidgeted and picked at the plastic pedals of the artificial lilies lining the wreath. "And it's going to rain as soon as we get there. Six hours...six hours of driving just to put a wreath on a grave." On the last word, there was a catch in her voice as a lump formed in her throat. She sighed and closed her eyes against the onslaught of emotions coming her way. She had promised herself that she was done crying, and she didn't want to break that promise already.

Johnny shrugged, the slight motion of it causing the car to swerve into the other empty lane of traffic. "We could have just had it delivered."

Barbara turned her sad eyes on Johnny, which caused him to blush a little at how insensitive he had sounded. It had been six hours of driving, however. And his sister wasn't exactly the best of company at the moment.

"Mother wanted us to come. You know that."

That shut him up. For a moment, anyway.

The brakes squealed as the car pulled to a stop. Johnny hopped out and opened the ancient fence, which also squealed with age. He jumped back behind the wheel and navigated their car further into the gated cemetery. "No one else is here. It's kinda creepy," he said as he slowly rounded a turn in the gravel pathway. The cemetery was more than empty,

it seemed deserted and rundown. There were scant groupings of broken tombstones that leaned at severe angles, much like the teeth of a young Steve Buscemi. Scraggly trees scratched at the grey sky, wobbling with a dry rattle in the growing winds. "I don't even remember what the guy looked like," Johnny said in his usual offhanded way. "I mean it was what...ten years ago? Nine?" He put the car in park and they both got out.

"Eight," Barbara corrected him. "It was just over eight years ago." Barbara's walk was as imbalanced as her feelings, her wedge heels struggling to find footing in the loose gravel. Beside her, Johnny stumbled and cursed, apparently struggling as much as she was with the uneven pathway.

"They need to fire the groundskeeper," Johnny said, annoyed. "Look at this place; what a mess! The grass is overgrown, the headstones

are crumbling. And this gravel looks like it was put down by Ray Charles." They struggled forward together in silence until Johnny grabbed her arm and pointed off to their right. "Well, there he is. Quiet and flat as ever."

As they closed the distance to the gravesite, Johnny's feet slowed. He walked with the speed of a man who would rather be anywhere else at the moment. He was slouched, stalling as much as he could without physically stopping in his tracks. Finally, they reached the grave.

It was nothing special, just a simple rectangular stone that was flat and grey. It blended so well into the overgrown landscaping that it was almost as if it were trying to hide, embarrassed to be seen in such a messy cemetery. When they were right in front of it, Barbara knelt down and laid the wreath carefully upon the six foot patch of recently disturbed dirt. When it was

done she sighed, as if a heavy weight had been lifted from her arms rather than a light wreath made of wire and plastic. Leaves rustled and rose around them as the wind started to pick up. The clouds overhead began to open and slowly release their payload. Somewhere off in the distance, a crow cawed ominously.

Barbara broke her promise and allowed a couple of tears to fall to the earth with the rain. Johnny, feeling no such emotion, made the sign of the cross lazily, his hand moving like it was swatting a fly on a hot summer day rather than appealing to a heavenly father for mercy. With his other hand, he checked his watch.

"Okay, we laid the wreath and said a prayer. Our part is done, let's get out of here." Barbara continued to linger, her lips moving silently in a prolonged prayer of supplication. Johnny sighed and checked his watch again. "Come on sis, it's getting wet out here. We don't

need to catch a cold and join the guy in the ground, you know." When Barbara still didn't stir, Johnny walked a few paces away. He theatrically lifted his arms to the sky and yelled out, "I want to GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Barbara finished her prayer and sighed again, this time from annoyance, and shot her brother a tired look. "You're acting childish," she chided, "We've only been here for a minute." When Johnny gave her his signature smirk, she knew that she had used the wrong tactic with him.

"Yeah, you're right, sis," he said slyly. "We should stay here as long as you want, right here in this spooky dark *haunted* cemetery." He grinned when he saw her blanch.

"That's not funny," she said, which was all the fuel that Johnny needed.

"It's crazy, isn't it? How we can be out here all alone, in the middle of nowhere, but we

can still feel like somebody's watching us?" His smile spread as her spine stiffened. "Here we are, surrounded by only rocks and trees, yet you can *feel* it, can't you? Those eyes on your back? Those dark forces stirring out there in the shadows?" Barbara brushed herself off and tried to act annoyed but Johnny saw in her eyes that he was getting to her. The fear was there, and it was growing. His eyes twinkled as he thought up the perfect next line.

"They're coming to get you, Barbara."

She shuddered but made a show of rolling her eyes. "Stop it," she said in a half-whisper, as if afraid she'd be overheard by some eavesdropping ghoul.

"No, no I mean it," he said, his voice rising with mock panic. "Look! Barbara, look over there! Here comes one of them now!" He pointed over her shoulder, implying that something was creeping up behind her, prob-

ably with an outstretched claw. Barbara had no intention of looking...until she saw something flash across Johnny's face. It was a brief moment of confusion, maybe even a little bit of unease. She turned around to see that now, indeed, there *was* something shuffling toward them. It looked to be an old man, shrouded in shadows. He wasn't walking quickly but he was walking with purpose. He was on a steady, direct path right to them.

As the man got closer, Barbara noticed that he looked like someone that had attended his own funeral. He wore a faded and crusty suit, one that had been in fashion back when Taft was still in office. His face was pale, *too* pale, almost like bone. She had never seen a face so hauntingly white before. Barbara turned to her brother with a frown. "He's probably just old and lost, we should call somebody."

Johnny put a finger to his lips and his Cheshire cat grin returned. "Shhh! Not too loud, sis. He'll hear you!" His smile spread like butter. "They're coming for you Barbara, they're coming to get you."

Barbara had enough. She spun on her heels and headed back for the car. "You're acting like a child," she chastised again, throwing the words over her shoulder like a woolen scarf. Johnny continued to taunt her but she refused to turn around. As far as Barbara was concerned, Johnny could meet her at the car when he was ready to grow up. She would call someone about the old man as soon as they got out of there, she was sure a gas station would let them use the phone for that. However, despite committing herself to this plan, she found herself stopping and turning around when Johnny began to scream.

The old man had reached Johnny. The way he had been walking up until now was slow and deliberate, the type of slow shuffle that astronauts used for fake moon landings. But now, the old man moved with malice, he was fueled by hungry intent. The old man lunged violently for Johnny, catching him off-guard. As Johnny screamed, the old man sank his fingers and teeth into the exposed skin of Johnny's forearm. Barbara watched, terrified, as Johnny stumbled backwards, swinging his arm wildly in an attempt to wrench it free from the dirty old man's mouth. The old man didn't relent. Even as the screaming and begging started, even as the blood began to flow freely from Johnny's arm, the old man only bit down harder, invigorated. Their four legs tangled together and they fell together, landing on the ground in a writhing heap.

Barbara was frozen with fear. She felt unable to help, unable to move at all. With a deep sense of hopelessness, she found she could only watch as the old man lifted Johnny's screaming head and rammed it into the small rectangle of stone they had come to see. He slammed Johnny's head again and again until Johnny's screaming stopped, replaced by the sound of a chef cracking a dozen eggs.

Now, it was Barbara that screamed.

Life returned to her legs. She ran.

Barbara bolted down the uneven gravel. She didn't even notice when one of her shoes came loose and flew off into the darkness. Arms pumping, her legs burned from exertion. Halfway to the car she was huffing and puffing like a wolf trying to unhouse a pig. She risked a look over her shoulder and she saw the old man following. Not quickly, but not slowly either. The old man was coming for her, just

like Johnny had said. The old man shuffled forward, straight at her. He was a wind-up toy with a taste for blood and a dirty old suit.

Her hands hit the car. Clumsily she pawed at the handle, cursed, and then fumbled with the keys. She finally got the door open and quickly jumped in behind the wheel. With a shaking hand, she turned the key. The ignition coughed, sputtered and died. A shadow fell across the hood of the car.

The old man was at the window.

He slammed a dirty fist against the glass. Barbara shrieked. The glass shuddered but held fast. She turned the key again as the old man's fist fell for a second time. This time, the glass splintered. Cracks formed a spiderweb in the glass, sending shards tinkling into her car like ice cubes in a glass. The car engine roared to life. Barbara shifted gears and stomped the pedal to the floor. The car jerked forward and

stalled, the brakes screaming along with her as she tried unsuccessfully to accelerate in neutral. She blindly shifted again, praying that she put it into the correct gear this time.

She didn't.

The old man sneered with a mouth full of bloody teeth. He pulled at the door handle, grunting and snarling like an animal. Up close, Barbara saw that the face wasn't just dirty and old; it was rotten. His eyes were shriveled and sunken in. His skin was loose, white, and billowing off his skull like a plus-sized wedding dress on a skeleton.

Barbara finally managed to throw the gear into drive and she stepped on the gas with everything she had. The car lurched violently, veering off of the paved path. The wheels kicked up dirt and stone as the vehicle careened downhill, bouncing over roots and headstones like the old Pontiac had installed Lowrider hy-

draulics. The man stumbled after her for a few steps but then he stopped, head tilted like a dog with a thought.

Barbara didn't slow down. She didn't care where she was going, as long as it was away from there. Away from Johnny's crumpled body. Away from the hungry old man. Just away, as far away as she could get.

Behind her, the old man returned to where Johnny lay dead and leaking. Chewing sounds soon permeated the air of the abandoned cemetery.

All around them, the dead were beginning to stir.

Chapter Two

The Farmhouse

Barbara only got a little bit down the road before the car started to shake and smoke. She pushed it as far as it would go. When it sputtered and died out for the last time, she opened the door and ran.

She didn't know how long she ran, only that she ran hard. She ditched the other shoe and ran barefoot, scraping and cutting her feet against gnarled roots, pointed rocks and sharp twigs. She pushed her body until she collapsed, falling to the ground and gasping like a fish out of water.

As she paused and tried to catch her breath, Barbara noticed how quiet it was around her. There was no longer any rush of wind. There were no singing birds or rustling leaves. The night had stilled. All about her, it seemed as if the very trees were holding their breath and waiting to see what came next.

All was quiet. Not in a peaceful way, but in an expectant way. And in that quiet stillness, Barbara's brother's screams played on repeat in her head.

When her burning muscles and her falling tears allowed, Barbara struggled back to her feet. She began to move again, slower this time, but no less afraid, only more tired. After what felt like an eternity, she spotted something off in the distance. It looked to be a house.

When she got close, she saw that it was a weatherworn farmhouse, aged but sturdy and whole. It looked like the type of place that used

to be part of something bigger, like a ranch or a homestead. It was built with purpose but had fallen at some point into disuse. It was two stories tall, with the windows on the upper floor shuttered and boarded up. The white paint was peeling from the exterior like dead skin after a sunburn. She closed the rest of the distance and stepped onto a sagging front porch. It creaked and sighed beneath her feet. Despite the rundown appearance of the farmhouse, it seemed to Barbara to lack any immediate signs of danger. There was nothing on fire, there seemed to be no demonic old people. She didn't bother knocking, she just walked up to the door and turned the knob. It was open.

She stepped into the darkness within, eyes darting, alert and watching for danger. "Hello? Is anyone here?" Her voice sounded so meek and small that she had hardly recognized it as her own. She cleared her throat and tried again,

a little louder this time. "Hello? Does anyone live here? I need some help."

Silence was her only reply.

The house smelled of dust, decaying wood, and something faintly metallic. Not blood, not quite, but more like rust. It was the cold iron smell of things that were discarded and forgotten, things that were slowly returning themselves to the earth. Dispersed throughout the large front room she saw furniture beneath dusty old blankets. Somewhere off in the recesses of the house, she heard a clock ticking. To Barbara, the ticking sound seemed out of place in the house that time forgot.

Barbara gingerly crept through the front room, stepping lightly the way you tread on thin ice. She called out again, worried she might startle any residents still on the property, although she saw no sign of life. Again, there was no answer.

Her eyes darted, trying to take in the full layout of the two story home. There was a large staircase in the corner leading up to the dark second floor. She shuddered, not daring to go up there, at least not unless she had to. Instead, she spotted an entrance to a kitchen and decided to start there.

As soon as she crossed the threshold into the kitchen, her stomach began to growl. She hadn't realized how hungry her long run. and her unrelenting fear, had made her.

The kitchen seemed normal enough. There were even small signs of life, like the low hum of a deep freezer and a stack of dirty dishes in the sink. However, none of the signs of life were recent. The dishes were caked over and rusted through. There was a fine layer of dust covering the cabinet doors and the countertops. The deep freeze was rusted. Even the mouse crap scattered about looked old, as if the

mice too had packed everything up and left for greener pastures.

She crossed the kitchen with her ears perked, attempting to track down a low static sound she heard crackling beneath the hum of the deep freeze. She found a solar-powered radio and played with the dial. It was mostly static coming through the speakers, although here and there she was able to make out a word or two.

'Repeat, stay at home——unconfirmed reports——when the Satellite returned——mission to Venus, experts are still——in your homes.'

Her fingers froze on the dial. Between the static bursts and the incoherent mix of words from the radio, she heard something else. She lowered the volume and strained her ears. She heard the noise again. It was coming from outside. She ran to the window and looked through it with harried nerves.

It took only a moment for her eyes to adjust to the deepening darkness outside but, when they did, she wished that they hadn't. At the edge of the property, shuffling his way across the expansive yard, she spotted the old man. It was the same man from before, the one from back in the cemetery. His suit was still dirty and crumpled, the outfit of a recently evicted corpse. The front of it was now also stained with the dark syrupy blood of her brother. Her hand flew to her mouth in an attempt to stifle a scream. When she noticed that the old man was no longer alone, she found that she had to suppress another scream. And another. Then another.

A second lumbering figure appeared behind the old man, dark, stumbling and dirty. Then Barbara saw a third, and then a fourth, then a fifth. All of them were moving in that same mechanical fashion. Their steps were crooked,

cumbersome, but always advancing, like a drunk who knew where they were going. Barbara quickly backed away from the window, nauseated by the growing number of strangers gathering outside. The room spun. Barbara leaned against the kitchen counter, rapidly fanning herself and feeling like she could faint or vomit at any moment. At that inopportune time, there came a muffled cry and a heavy thud from the room she had just left.

Barbara held her breath. She waited. She listened. She was frozen in place. Not just from fear, but from indecision as well. Her thoughts raced. *Should I run upstairs? Do I try and outrun the horde outside? What if I hide and they all pass by? Can I hide? Or would they sniff me out?* Feeling lousy about her options, Barbara willed her feet into action and took a tentative step toward the stairs. Before she got any fur-

ther, the front door burst inward like it was kicked open by a mule on steroids.

He came in fast, a dark flash of movement like Bullet Bill from Mario Kart. The man flew into the living room and, spotting Barbara, did a double take. He shook his head clear and shouted to her, "They're coming!"

He was tall and muscular, his shirt clinging tightly to his torso from copious amounts of sweat. He looked like he had just run a marathon only to find out that they moved the finish line three more miles away. He was black skinned, in his early thirties, and he was wearing a jacket that appeared to be stained with something dark and slick like oil. His eyes were sharp and intelligent, as well as full to the brim with fear. He made a quick cursory scan of the room and began to move quickly with the type of adrenaline you only got from being chased. He slammed the door shut and

began to drag over one of the covered couches to block it. "Help me," he shouted, "They're almost here!"

Barbara blinked dumbly, her mouth opening and closing without making a sound. The constant whirl of events since arriving to this horrible town had started her head spinning like a top.

"Hey! Didn't you hear me? They're coming!" The man struggled alone with it but he finally managed to wrestle the heavy couch in front of the closed door. He turned his attention back to Barbara, giving her a harsh glare and snapping, "What's the matter with you? We need to move fast if we want to stay alive. You do want to stay alive, don't you?" Without waiting for an answer, he said, "We need to barricade the rest of the doors. How many entrances do you have in this house?"

She was able to shake away some of the mental fog and replied, "I...I don't live here. I was just visiting with my brother and —" The man shot past her, quickly scanning the other areas off of the front room. He ran into the kitchen and pulled out a couple of drawers. He was moving in a blind panic. The man found a large kitchen knife in one of the drawers, which he clutched tightly in a shaking fist.

"We need to block the doors. All of them. *NOW!*" He grabbed a rickety wooden chair and wedged it beneath the knob of the kitchen entrance. He dragged the dining room table over next and shoved it flush against the wedged chair. "My name's Ben," he said in a quick, clipped sort of way. "We can talk later. Right now, you need to either help me or you can sit and cry. Up to you."

Although she didn't think it was the option she would have picked, Barbara sat. Ben

didn't comment on her choice, he only moved. He flew through the house like a man possessed, dragging furniture and barricading the home like he had done this before. For all that Barbara knew, maybe he had. Ben ripped some planks from a nearby shelf and shoved them tightly against window latches and door knobs. He slid heavy furniture and threw lighter furniture atop it like he was playing a game of Jenga with household goods. He had just gotten an overstuffed easy-chair against the last window when the first of the walking dead reached the farmhouse.

The window next to Barbara shattered. She screamed, only this time she had no gas pedal to press. She ducked her head as glass shards flew and sprinkled the farmhouse floor like sparkling snow. A rotten hand reached through the broken window, its fingers splayed and sallow, skin the color of freez-

er-burned meat. The nails were long and sharp and there was dirt caked beneath each nail, evidence that the man had clawed his way through six feet of packed dirt.

Barbara screamed again as a flash of movement knocked her to the side. It was Ben, kitchen knife extended, face pulled back in a look of grim determination. With a big arcing swing, Ben buried the knife into the fiend's hand, the blade crunching through small bones and dead flesh. The ghoulish man didn't react, he only reached his other hand through the window and began to grope around wildly for them.

"Jesus Christ!" Ben spat, bracing a booted foot against the wall. He yanked back with all of his might and the knife ripped free, splitting the man's hand down the middle like the lines on a highway. The dead man's hand flapped wildly in two loose strips, looking more like an

origami bat than a human hand. Blood slowly trickled from the wound, but it was no ordinary blood. It was thick and dark and it moved like molasses, running from the man's wrist in sticky rivulets.

Ben took two steps back and changed tactics. He kicked over a wooden chair and stomped down hard on the back leg, wrenching it free with a splintering sound. Ben turned his attention back to the breathing corpse in the window. He reared back and brought the wooden leg around his body like he was swinging a baseball bat. The chair leg thunked into the side of the dead man's head, snapping it violently to the side. The skull cracked with a sound like a celery stalk snapping. Still, even as the man's head hung sickeningly diagonal to his body, his rotten hands kept on grabbing and dripping.

Ben swung the leg again. This time, the head caved in completely, collapsing in on itself like a dying star. Bits of bone, black blood, and brain matter splattered across the faded farmhouse wallpaper. With a scream, Barbara watched as one of the man's eyeballs came loose from its socket and fell to the floor, misshapen and withered like a grape that had been left to rot in the sun. The reaching arms went limp as the man's body collapsed and impaled itself on the remaining glass of the broken window. The man's head hit the sill, breaking his front teeth and sending them falling to the floor with a delicate plink. Ben turned his attention back to Barbara.

"They're not people. At least, not anymore," he told her solemnly. "Whatever the hell they are, you just hit 'em in the head. That's how you stop them."

Barbara nodded numbly. Something inside of her was trying to curl into a ball like a scared isopod, never wanting to unfurl or interact again. Ben tore a painting from the wall and tried to use it to secure the broken window. It didn't fit, so he settled on grabbing anything that wasn't nailed down and simply stacking it in a crude barrier in front of the window. As he finished building the primitive pile, the moans outside grew louder and louder. The sound of a reanimated fist hitting the wood siding of the farmhouse rattled both Ben and Barbara. The sound was soon accompanied by more banging sounds, some moans, and angry wailing. The walls of the house vibrated and shook beneath the weight of dozens of hungry fists. Behind them, another shattering sound filled the air, followed by a heavy thump.

A small woman emerged from the kitchen, covered in tons of tiny cuts that all slowly

dripped blood that was black as ink. Her matted hair was a mess of leaves, clumps of dirt and bloody chunks of meat. She staggered forward, her dry tongue flicking to and fro over a pair of cracked lips. Her jaw unhinged and she let loose a prolonged gurgling that sounded like a record player slowing down.

Without hesitation, Ben lunged for the woman. He again knocked Barbara out of the way, clearing the path to charge the undead woman with a full head of steam. With one swift motion, he buried the knife into her chin all the way to the hilt. Her lifeless eyes rolled back in her skull and she pitched forward, hitting the floor hard and driving the knife the remainder of the way through her chin until the blade popped out of her left nostril. The woman jerked and spasmed on the ground, giving her the appearance of a marionette being controlled by a puppeteer having a seizure.

Black sludge poured from the gaping wound in her face like struck oil.

Barbara whimpered, watching with horror as the woman's fingers continued to twitch and wriggle with her death throes. Ben stood over the seizing woman, panting and sweating from exertion. His face was flecked with droplets of deep black, like a man baptized in ink by a religious octopus.

More moans drifted in from the outside. Through a broken window, Barbara saw dozens of shuffling bodies, walking crookedly and clad in the tattered remains of whatever outfit they had been buried in. Dead faces pressed up against the rest of the windows, salivating like cartoon orphans outside a bakery. They all looked hungry. No, not just hungry. *Starved.*

Ben toppled a curio cabinet in front of the latest opening in their farmhouse defenses.

With a serious stare, he looked to Barbara and said, "We need to make this place a fortress." His breathing was slowing but still ragged. He needed help. He was tiring. Barbara didn't reply. Her eyes were still glued to the corpse on the floor. One of her fingers still twitched like it had been stuck in an electric socket.

Outside, the rising moon brightened the sky as the rainclouds began to dissipate. It would have been a beautiful night, if it weren't for all of the dead bodies.

Chapter Three

Barricades & Broadcasts

Ben tore through the farmhouse like a man possessed, searching for anything and everything that could be repurposed for security. As Ben began to reinforce the windows and doors, Barbara only sat and trembled. She was lost in a mental fog, the twitches of the dead woman and Johnny's screams both played on repeat in her head.

“Find tables, chairs, doors, anything heavy that can be moved!” Ben shouted as he came back into the room. He was carrying a claw hammer in one hand and a half-broken shutter in the other. “We’ve gotta nail these suckers over the windows before anymore of those things get in!”

Barbara blinked at him slowly, still distant in her private daze. “The radio,” she whispered. “I heard it playing earlier.”

“Later,” Ben said in a clipped tone. “We need to stay alive now and we can listen to the radio later.”

He paused only long enough to pry the double doors from the kitchen pantry. He dragged them over to the doorway and began hammering them in place. With each bang of the hammer, more dust and death seemed to fill the air. Barbara felt suffocated. The groaning of the

undead outside was growing both in volume and number.

Using all the resolve she had, Barbara was able to shake free of the fog and get back to her feet. Her steps felt sluggish and heavy, like she were walking underwater. She started to search the kitchen drawers half-heartedly, not finding anything of use. From the other room, Ben's hammering persisted, as did the hungry snarls of the people outside.

"Those things out there," Ben muttered, talking from the side of his mouth as he gripped a few nails between his lips. "They don't move all that fast, but they don't seem to stop either. It's like they're..they're.."

"Machines," Barbara finished for him in a distant voice. "Murder machines."

Ben glanced her way and gave a small nod. "Yeah," he admitted, "that sounds about right." Their conversation was cut short by the un-

mistakable sound of a door creaking. It came from beneath them; it echoed its way up through the wooden floor boards.

"The basement," Ben hissed. "There must be a cellar door. Someone's in the house."

Instinctively, Barbara placed herself behind Ben and put a hand on his arm. "Do you think it's one of those things?" Ben didn't answer her. Instead, he walked over to a dirty fireplace and picked up a tarnished brass poker. He crept his way to the basement door, heel-to-toe, careful not to make a sound. Ben cracked the door open and peered into the darkness below, searching for a sign of life. Or, as it were, *death*.

A husky voice drifted up from the darkness. "Don't shoot! Please! We're not dead!" Ben held his breath and took half a step back, watching two shadowy figures emerge from the basement below. Although they appeared to be human, Ben didn't lower the brass poker.

The figure in front was a squat bald man, covered in sweat that smelled like fear and hot-dog water. He wore a rumpled maroon dress shirt that was untucked and dirty, a loose charcoal tie hung from his neck like a noose. The second person emerged right on his heels. It was a short woman, pale and mousy. She had wide eyes that held the kind of fear that only those who were truly privileged and protected for most of their lives could feel. She was someone who looked like she had lost everything in a single, horrific night. She clutched a ratty blanket around her shoulders as she shivered.

"We heard the windows break," the man said. "We thought it was probably more of those damned biters. So we hid down in the cellar."

Ben's face was a mask of fury. "They were trying to kill us!" Ben shouted. "And you were just going to hide out as we were eaten, huh?"

"My wife and kid are with me," the man spat back. "We didn't know anyone else was up here! Besides, we don't even know you. We don't owe you a god damned thing."

Ben tightened his grip on the poker. He looked like he wanted to bash the man's skull in with it. The man noticed this and glowered. The frightened pale woman broke in, attempting to ease the escalating tension in the room.

"We thought it would be safer down there," she said quietly. "You two should come join us."

The look on Ben's face was so full of righteous indignation that it seemed as if the woman had suggested he put on a dress and dance the cha-cha for the demons outside rather than just retire to the basement. "It's *not* safe down there," he said through a clenched jaw. "There's no way out down there. If those

things break in, you're boxed in like a TV dinner Salisbury steak."

The man with the husky voice scoffed at Ben's remark. "Well, it's certainly better than staying up here and waiting for them all to come in through the windows," he said sarcastically. Ben lowered the fireplace poker, but not by much. "If you two want to go back down there and die like prepackaged morons, you go right ahead. But if you stay up here, you're going to need to help us. We need to board this place up tight, I'm not sure how much longer it's all going to hold."

The bald man gave Ben a look of disdain but, thankfully, he didn't argue. The woman gave both of them a small, apologetic smile and said that her name was Helen. She stepped forward and joined Ben at the other end of a long couch, helping him slide it toward the barricaded door. The bald man went back to

the basement, returning a short time later with two others that had been hiding out in the basement. Helen introduced them as Tom and Judy, and noted that Judy was their daughter. Then she revealed that the argumentative bald man's name was, ironically, Harry.

Tom was a strong young man with an amiable attitude. As soon as he was upstairs, he got right to work on barricading the house. Judy, however, did not. She was the youngest of the group, probably no more than eleven years old. Her eyes were as big as saucers and her skin was white and thin like a hospital sheet. She shuffled slowly and nervously, fidgeting at every sound and helping very little. Once everything was sealed up as well as could be expected, Ben turned his attention back to Barbara. "Why don't you go fetch that radio you were talking about earlier."

A minute or two later, their small group was congregated around the radio, which sat on the floor in the barricaded living room. After a few minor adjustments to the dials and antenna, it crackled to life. A radio announcer came in loud and clear, with a deep voice that was full of barely suppressed, unbridled fear.

“—reports are continuing to pour in. Authorities are still unsure about what has caused this epidemic of mass murder and mayhem. They are currently reporting that there may upwards of a few hundred victims already. These victims appear to have been partially consumed. Police urge citizens to stay in their homes and remain calm. Repeat: remain calm.”

Judy began to weep softly as the radio droned on. Harry looked down at his lap, feeling ashamed that he couldn't shield his daughter from these horrific events.

"In an extraordinary development," the radio announcer continued, "coroners and hospital staff are now reporting that the recently dead are returning to life."

The silence in the room felt heavy. It was as if all the air had been pulled from their lungs simultaneously.

"I repeat: the recently dead, even the partially devoured, are seemingly rising from the dead and attacking the living. This is not a joke. Repeat: this is not a joke."

Tom swallowed audibly and shook his head. He shook it hard and fast, like he was clearing an Etch A Sketch. He shook it as if doing so hard enough could clear away the truth from the words he'd just heard spoken. "That..that can't be real, right?" Tom asked. Judy cried harder as Ben only stared numbly at the radio. "It's real," he said in a faraway voice. The radio went on:

“Anyone who dies, regardless of their cause of death, may reanimate within just a few minutes. Those that are bitten seem to turn almost immediately following death. Authorities recommend destroying the brain to neutralize the threat. When questioned as to whether these events were related to the disastrous return of the Venus voyager satellite, authorities said they could offer no comment at the current time. In other news, reports of shoppers stranded at the Monroeville Mall have begun to—”

Harry, having heard enough of both the radio and his daughter's crying, shot to his feet and announced to the room, “That's it. I'm taking my family back downstairs. We were safer down in the cellar.”

Ben stood as well, ready to go toe-to-toe once more with the moron in the maroon shirt. “You do that and you're all on your own. Whoever stays up here needs to stick together.”

Harry harrumphed. "We'd rather be alone than taking orders from you, *boy*."

"Better to be alive and taking orders than dead and the boss, you stupid jackass!" Ben spat back.

Harry stepped so close to Ben that their noses touched. They looked to be about two seconds away from swinging at each other. Tom, trying to play peacemaker, wedged himself between the two men to create some distance. "Guys, we're *all* scared, okay? Let's not tear each other apart. If we do, we're no better than those things outside."

Ben turned and stared out the window. A look of grim determination crossed his dark features. Those things outside were coming, seemingly more of them by the minute. There were close to forty of them gathered outside already, and that number was continuing to grow. They stumbled and stalked and crawled

across the lawn. Some wore burials suits, some wore pajamas and regular street clothes. Some were covered with blood as black as pitch, missing limbs but not their appetites nor teeth. Harry's attention turned to the outside as well, when a heavy thump reverberated from the side of the farmhouse.

Everyone froze, listening. There was another thump, a third, and then a fourth. The splintering of glass filtered in from the kitchen.

"THE WINDOWS!" Ben yelled. "GET TO THE WINDOWS! HOLD THEM BACK!"

Then, there was chaos.

A wriggling mass of hands fought each other for access through the broken window. Tom and Ben ran over to the breached area and tipped a rickety bookcase over in front of it. As it fell, it severed a couple of the grasping hands, which hit the floor with a wet sound, flopping around for another few seconds like desperate

fish out of water. Behind them, Harry cursed and grabbed his wife and kid, ushering them towards the basement once more, even as Barbara shouted to them for help.

From the other side of the room, a small hopper window opened on rusty hinges and swung outward. A recently deceased woman began squeezing her way through it, grunting and screaming with the effort like she was being birthed into the room. As she forced her way through the small opening, her skin caught on the hinges and peeled away from her face as she climbed up and over the pane. Her tan skin hung in loose wet ribbons from her face and they flapped wildly when she screamed. In an absurd moment of fear-fueled observation, Barbara had the clear thought that the woman's face looked like a mitter curtain at the end of a car wash.

Ben ran over to the skinned woman as she twisted and ripped herself halfway into the room. He swung the fireplace poker, catching her right in the tattered flaps of her ferocious face. Her jaw shattered like it were made of porcelain, spilling her teeth to the floor like a decaying slot machine. Still, the woman clawed her way forward. Even without a mouth, she wanted so badly to eat each and every one of them.

Behind them, Judy screamed as the basement door slammed shut.

The annihilated face of the dead woman continued to advance on Ben, biting at him with gums that were dripping something viscous and black. Tom ran over, vaulted a makeshift pile of furniture, and landed hard atop the woman's head like he was stomping a Goomba. Her skull was crushed to a pulp. Black blood and brain matter splattered across

the floor like a Jackson Pollock painting made of shit. The woman stopped moving...at least on her own. With a sickening squelch, her body began to be dragged backwards, back out the window. The other ghouls seemed to want their turn inside. As she was dragged away, her skin ripped over the hinges again, exposing her deflated lungs, which jiggled like two sheets of cafeteria Jello.

When the woman's body disappeared, two more of the undead tried desperately to squirm their way through the opening. They struggled and clawed until they were tangled up and stuck, much like the Three Stooges walking through a doorway at the same time. The first one glared at Ben and snarled. In return, it received a fire poker to the eye, which Ben twisted until it popped and leaked a thick white sludge that reminded him of mayonnaise. Tom disposed of the second one, bring-

ing his boot down over and over again on the dead man's neck, mashing it until it was as flat as Graphene.

More thumps shook the walls. More hands grabbed at windows and jiggled hastily nailed down boards. There was more groaning on the other side of the wall than you hear at an orgy at Burning Man.

The dead were everywhere now.

They had the house surrounded; scratching, banging, and trying to chew their way in with greedy mouths and an endless hunger.

Barbara shrieked as a stinking arm burst through another boarded up window, its foul fingers grabbing a hunk of her hair and pulling like there was no tomorrow. Ben rushed toward the screaming, picked up the discarded kitchen knife and hacked away at the hand holding her, sending a geyser of black fluid to the ceiling like popped champagne.

With a quickness and intensity that only a situation like this could conjure up, Ben, Barbara and Tom reinforced the windows and used the last of the nails they were able to scrounge up to put up a few more boards. They held...for now. Ben turned toward the group, all of whom were panting and wide-eyed and flecked with black fluids. "We make it through tonight," he said, "or we don't make it at all. No more arguing. No more splitting up. We work together. We watch each other's back."

At their backs, the basement door creaked open, a pair of guilty eyes peering out at them from the darkness.

The walls shuddered under the mounting pressures of the dead. And the night had only just begun.

Chapter Four

The Basement People

With rage seething through him, Ben turned to accost the leering eyes floating in the basement doorway. "You miserable coward," Ben snapped, his voice closer to a dog's growl than a human voice. "You miserable, stinking coward! We could have been killed. *AGAIN!* And you just hid away. *AGAIN!*"

The doorway finished creaking open and the guilt left Harry's eyes, replaced by smug satis-

faction. "I told you we were safer downstairs," he said matter-of-factly.

"That's only because *we* fought them off again," Ben said. "If we were all in the basement, there would have been no way out. Trapped like a TV dinner, remember? Although I was wrong about that. You're not Salisbury steak; you're obviously *chicken*." Harry took a couple angry steps forward.

"Who are you calling a chi—"

"I'd call you much worse if your kid wasn't with you," Ben said with barely contained rage. "You want to hide in your little chicken coop down there? That's fine. But the next time that door closes, don't expect it to open up again." The threat was evident in Ben's voice and it wasn't lost on Harry, who flushed a deep crimson color.

Tom stepped in once more, trying to stand between two men who, in a short time,

had grown a deep and lasting hatred for one another. "Come on guys, we'll do better if we stick together. *All* of us this time. Maybe...well, maybe there's a compromise somewhere." Tom ran a hand through his hair as he thought. "Like how about we bring a couple of boards downstairs? We can keep them there as a backup; keep the door open as a last resort just in case things get bad."

"Things are already bad," Harry muttered with contempt.

"And they would be a lot worse if it weren't for Ben!" Tom shouted, his explosive anger hinting at a frustration with Harry that must have started in the basement before Ben and Barbara even showed up. Tom blew out a long breath in an attempt to calm his frazzled nerves, making him sound like a deflating balloon.

As the men argued, Barbara sat heavily upon the floor, nursing her head and feeling around for missing clumps in her hair. Her eyes were becoming distant and glassy, her lips were chapped and bitten raw by nervous teeth. Helen noticed and walked over, sitting beside her and laying a hand gently atop one of Barbara's. "A stupid question I know," Helen said, "but are you okay?"

Barbara sniffled and suppressed a shudder. When she answered, her voice was just one notch above a whisper. "I was just thinking. About my brother...Johnny." Helen nodded her somber understanding. "I'm sorry," she said sympathetically. "Do you want to talk about what happened?" Barbara sniffed back some tears and tried to open up.

"We had just gotten here. It..it was a long drive. Johnny knew I was upset about..," she trailed off, shook her head, and continued. "I

was just upset, and he knew it. So he did what he always did. He started to mess with me to try to get me to laugh." As Barbara spoke, her face grew pale, her eyes flashed back and forth. To Helen, it was obvious that Barbara was still living this moment, even now. "We saw an old man walking in the cemetery and Johnny started to act scared..it was all just pretend at first. He told me over and over, 'They're coming to get you Barbara. They're coming to get you.' It was just the way he was." Despite everything, the faintest smile touched her lips for a moment as she remembered her brother. Then, like steam on a bathroom mirror, it vanished in a breath. "But then the old man..he..they got him instead. They got Johnny." Barbara turned grey and looked like she was going to be sick from the memory. Helen stood up and interrupted the men, who were still arguing in heated tones.

"Hey! Cut that out. Barbara isn't looking so good. She needs some rest. Maybe we should check out the upstairs and see if they have a bed or something." The men stopped arguing, but it wasn't for the reason she thought. She followed Ben's hard stare and realized with horror what he saw.

It was Judy. She looked as grey as a London fog; and there was blood seeping through the arm of her dress. She was standing stone still in front of the very stairway that Helen was referring to. Her breathing was shallow and there was a dry rattle in her lungs that sounded like a garbage disposal full of gravel. She didn't speak, only stood in the shadows and stared blankly ahead, slightly swaying on her feet.

"What happened to her arm?" Ben asked coldly. A frosty demeanor was taking over his whole body. It was as if he were steeling himself for a horrific task ahead.

"She was bitten," Helen said, rapidly rising to her feet and placing herself between her daughter and Ben's stare. "One of those things got her on the arm before we made it to the basement," she said as she tucked an errant strand of hair back behind Judy's ear. Judy didn't react. "We just need a doctor, that's all," Helen said, her voice rising just the slightest. "We just need some help. When all of this blows over—"

"The man on the radio," Tom said, his face draining of color. His eyes were fixated on the blood on Judy's sleeve, which seemed to have soaked through a dish towel tucked beneath her dress. "He said that anyone who was bitten—"

"Don't you *DARE*," Helen snapped. If looks could kill, Tom would be dead on his feet. "Don't you even *think* about finishing that sentence, Tom." Tom closed his mouth, but

everyone's brain finished his thought for him. Judy was bitten. She was going to turn. It wasn't a matter of if, it was a matter of when.

Outside, the dead continued to moan. They continued to pound on the walls and the windows like an unrelenting rain.

Ben walked over to the radio. He never took his eyes off of Judy. He didn't even blink. Silently, he clicked the radio back on. When the announcer's voice crackled out over the speakers again, it was tired, raw. It was the raspy voice of a man who was exhausted and scared. The type of man who probably sat slumped over in the dark, suit rumpled, eyes sunken in from too many broadcasts without any food or rest between. It was the voice of a man who was constantly reporting the news and consistently wondering if any of the victims he was reporting on were someone that he loved more than anything in the world.

“—defense authorities have informed us that the hordes of reanimated dead have spread across the entire southern third of the country. The president has declared a national state of emergency.”

Ben turned up the volume. His stare didn't soften.

“FEMA is reporting that emergency rescue stations are being established in every state that still had radio contact. Citizens are urged to make their way to these locations during daylight hours only. I repeat: during daylight hours only.” The man on the radio began to read off a long list of locations. Ben continued to stare at Judy. The first time he took his eyes off of her was when the man on the radio mentioned a next town near the farmhouse.

“If you are able to do so safely, make your way to one of these locations during daylight hours only. Repeat: daylight hours only. Meanwhile,

National Guard units are being mobilized. Local militia groups are forming to assist. The most effective method for stopping the dead are as follows: Aim for the head, destroy the brain. If you cannot do this, burn the body. Fire seems to be almost as effective. These are the only means of destruction. Repeat: destroy the brain. Burn the body."

Ben clicked the radio back off. "We can make a run for that emergency shelter at dawn. It's our best chance." Harry snorted and replied in an angry huff, "Run for it? Yeah, sure. Maybe we could just politely ask those monsters to step aside so that we can run *six* miles down the road to that location."

"I spotted a truck when I first ran in here. It's only about sixty yards away. We can take the truck, there's enough room for all of us." Harry folded his arms and tapped an irritated foot. "We'll never make it. We'll—"

"Shut *UP* Harry! Just shut up!" The expression on Helen's face as she screamed left her husband no room for dissent. "We need to try! Judy needs a doctor and they will have one there. So unless you have a suggestion on how to get to the truck, just keep your god damned mouth shut." Helen stared her husband down, daring him to disagree. He did not. Judy showed no emotion. The tension in the room heightened, drawing everyone into one shared noose. The only sound in the farmhouse was the constant drumming of rotting hands on weakening wood.

Barbara was the one who broke the silence first. She was still grey, her eyes were vacant and sad. She got to her feet slowly, like she was moving in a dream. "I'm going to go see Johnny," she announced in a whisper. "He's probably waiting for me back at the car." She

took a few light steps, wobbling slightly. Ben stepped forward to intercept her.

"He's gone, Barbara. They got him. You told us so yourself."

Barbara continued forward, replying without breaking her lazy stride. "No, he'll be waiting for me. He always does the driving, so he'll be waiting back at the car. He would never leave me behind." Ben reached out and physically stopped her with a firm hand on her shoulder.

"He's dead, Barbara. He's not out there."

Barbara looked up at Ben with tear-streaked cheeks. "If he's dead, then he *is* out there. It's okay. I just want to be where he is." At that moment, the shaking boards covering the rear window gave out. The dead began to spill in again like a dam of the damned had burst. Three of the dead immediately dropped in through the space between the broken boards.

One of them was missing a jaw, it's tongue flapping wildly in the air like a red party streamer caught on a breeze. It licked at the air like it could already taste the impending blood that would be spilled, and then the hanging tongue salivated. Ben acted quickly, charging into the lead monster before it could get its bearings. Ben had picked up the claw hammer they used to nail up those boards and this time he swung it at flesh and bone instead of recommissioned wood. He knocked the monster back into the wall, its tongue hit the wallpaper with a wet lapping sound. A shattered plank from the window impaled the creature through the shoulder like a barbecue kabob.

Tom was assisting in a flash, smashing a lamp over the head of the second beast in the room, one that was already missing half of its skull, the grey matter in its head was on full display. Glass, wire and fleshy bits of gunk burst forth

from the opening like a watermelon at a Gallagher show. Harry joined in the fray, using one of the wooden planks to beat back hordes of greedy hands reaching through the window. Ben and Tom were soon next to him and together they dispatched one undead after the other, the walls and floor and faces of the men getting covered in more gore and black spatter.

As the men continued to fight off the hungry maws breaching their barricade, Barbara moved in a daze. Her eyes fixated on the front window, focusing on a familiar face peeking at her from in-between the boards. The dead man reached a hand through the gap, slowly, deliberately, like a hypnotist beckoning the dazed. Barbara's eyes filled with love and tears.

"Johnny?" she asked quietly.

The dead man groaned, but to Barbara it looked almost like a smile. She walked toward the window. As she got closer, the reanimated

corpse opened its mouth. Its breath smelled like spoiled meat. Ben, deep in the fervor of self-defense, noticed her when it was too late. She was already inches away from the barricaded boards, her hand outstretched and reaching out for the familiar corpse in the window. The dead man reached back, his black stained teeth shining while he smiled over a hungry growl. She closed her eyes and interlocked her fingers with the squirming ones Johnny extended. Then, a rush of air as something whizzed past Barbara's ear. It was a heavy stone that had been dislodged from the fireplace.

The stone hit its mark, bashing Johnny in the forehead at the very moment he squeezed his face through the open gap. His bared teeth were expelled from black gums as the stone turned his face into a cloud of red mist. Barbara screamed and collapsed, sobbing on the floor

in great heaving gasps. All around her, Johnny's teeth fell like autumn leaves.

Harry, chest heaving, silently set down a second stone, one that he had freed just in case he missed with the first. The room fell silent as the final intruders were beaten back into the night. The only sound in the room was the hysterical crying of a woman who had lost her brother for the second time. "We need to finish boarding everything back up," Harry said hoarsely. "And then we need to make a plan. I was wrong. We need to run at dawn."

Outside, the dead were still rising.

Inside, the living were desperately trying to stay that way.

Chapter Five

Frankenpines

The group worked in silence. Not just from an abundance of caution, but because they no longer had any words to speak. They were all quietly contemplating their own individual fates, trying to see a way that they could possibly survive a trip outside. One thing that was obvious to all of them, however, was that the farmhouse wouldn't keep the dead out for very much longer.

They had thought before that they had moved and stacked everything they possibly could. Now, they really did. Paintings from

the wall, pieces of old electronics, every bit of wood and metal and plastic that wasn't bolted down was now uprooted and repurposed. The house became a Frankenstein creation of broken furniture, duct tape, nails and desperate stubbornness. Every window was blocked, every door was barricaded with piles of second-hand crap. Even the bathroom door had now been ripped from its hinges and repurposed as a blockade for the backdoor of the farmhouse. Privacy didn't matter to anyone in that house, not anymore. Only survival mattered now.

The moaning and pounding from the outside was constant, a droning cacophony of doom that was so unrelenting that it had practically faded into mere background noise to them now. They had to redouble their efforts to stay vigilant, stay awake, as every sound and bang and thump could be interpreted as either

background white-noise or the beginning of the end of their lives.

Harry paced the room so repetitively that he could have worn a rut into the wood of the floor. "We should leave *now*," he snapped. "More of them keep on coming. The longer we wait, the worse it'll be when we finally go." It was unclear to the group whether he was really unsatisfied with their plan, or if Harry just hated not being in charge of it.

Ben sat cross-legged on the floor, his improvised weapon of a broken chair leg was draped across his lap like a sleeping dog. "I already told you, we wait until morning. If you want to run out there in the darkness like a moron, you go on ahead, but you'll be doing so all alone."

"Oh, *I'm* the moron here, am I?" Harry barked. "This place is falling apart. They're probably going to break in again before morning. It's suicide to just stay here and wait!"

Ben fixed Harry with a cold hard look before he replied. "Suicide? And what do you call it when you sit around in a boarded up house with a little kid afflicted with their sickness?" The statement made Harry flinch like he'd been stuck in the face. From across the room, Helen whispered a single word:

"Don't."

Ben stared at Helen. When he did, his scowl slightly softened at the edges with pity. "You know that I'm right," Ben told her softly. "We all heard the man on the radio. We've all seen what happens. When she dies, she turns. Then we're all in trouble."

Silence hung in the air. It was thick; thicker than blood, both shared and black. Tom, feeling uncomfortable with the ensuing silence, cleared his throat and suggested that they turn on the radio again to check for updates. Ben nodded and clicked the radio back on. The

speaker on the radio sounded even raspier and more harried than before. He sounded like a man who had lost all hope.

"—may in fact be related after all. The satellite, which served as a space probe on an unmanned mission to Venus, returned to Earth under mysterious circumstances. Shortly after it returned, top NASA brass reported an unusual amount of a foreign radiation pumping from the satellite's engines even after they were shut off."

Everyone around the room sat up a little straighter. All of them were equally eager and afraid for every update that the radio could offer.

"Although the source and type of radiation has yet to be identified, NASA scientists have conjectured that it may be able to affect the human brain by disrupting the human body's electrical pathways. This can lead to an uptick in aggres-

sion, a decrease in impulse control and, possibly, even the reanimation of dead tissue. More on this as it develops."

Harry stomped over to the radio and clicked it off with a huff. "Space radiation? That's what they're blaming for all this now?" He angrily kicked at the wall, which replied to him with a cacophony of hungry wailing from the other side. "Space radiation indeed. I've heard less ridiculous theories from Joe Rogan's fat mouth."

Tom shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "Makes as much sense as anything else about this situation." Harry whirled on Tom, his long shadow towering over him. In a condescending tone he asked, "Oh, really Tom? You think that space radiation from Venus is the reason we have zombies coming out of the trees? Tell me, just where exactly have you been hiding your marijuana this whole time?"

Ben got to his feet, his grip on the chair leg tightening. "Who the hell cares?" he asked. "It can be space germs, witchcraft or another radiation experiment from MIT and Quaker oats for all we know. The facts are still the facts; those things are out there, pissed off and hungry, and we're in here paying for it."

Helen, who had been eerily quiet and vacantly stroking her sick little girl's hair in the corner, lifted her head and asked quietly, "What if it's in the towers?" The entire room turned to look at her. Judy showed no reaction. "What if it's in the 5G towers?" Helen asked again. "The phone towers, they've been putting them up everywhere, haven't you noticed?"

"Phone towers?" Ben asked, unable to hide the edge of incredulity in his voice.

Blinking slowly, Helen started connecting the dots for them. "The 5G towers have been

going up for a while now. There were reports of dying birds, decaying plants surrounding the towers. People complained, so they changed tactics. They denied the negative effects, saying that the towers were all there just for better cell reception, for faster internet speeds. They kept on putting the towers up, only now they were doing it stealthily. The towers were disguised as crosses, or dressed up to look like cacti in the desert. There was one in Colorado that was camouflaged to look like a Bison. All over the place, they quietly put up 5g towers that looked like pine trees. Don't you remember all those news stories?"

Slowly, Ben nodded. "Frankenpines," he said. "The newspapers called them 'Frankenpines'." Helen nodded rapidly, happy that someone understood what she was talking about. She continued to stroke Judy's hair as she spoke. She didn't seem to notice that the

hair she was touching was starting to come out in chunks. "All of those 5G poles started going up in this area just last week," she said. "And even back then, Judy started acting a little..differently. Slower. Less emotional, maybe. Maybe the signal, the 5G or whatever, maybe it triggers something in us."

Harry rolled his eyes in a big exaggerated fashion. "Wonderful," he said sarcastically. "I had no idea that I had married one of those conspiracy theory nutcases. This explains a few things though." Before anyone else could defend her, Helen fixed her husband with a hard stare and did it herself.

"You act very arrogant for someone with no college education," she said, watching his bravado wilt beneath her words with a tight pained smile. "It's okay that you don't understand everything, nobody expects you to, believe me. This isn't just a conspiracy theory,

Harry, it is a scientific *fact* that those frequencies, those electrical waves, they can affect your moods, your sleep, your appetite. In extreme cases, those frequencies have been proven to alter your very thoughts. Our brains are electric and the air is chocked full of signals everyday from all of our growing technologies."

Harry tried to keep up his false front of confidence, but the entire room could see that he was standing on sinking ground. "Fine honey, we're all very proud of you for going to a junior college, I suppose that makes you the expert of everything. But seriously now, you think that this, *all* of this," he said, gesturing widely toward the wailing masses outside, "can be caused by cell phone towers?"

She shrugged. "Or satellites," she said, referencing the radio's report. "They're talking about how the satellite came back with this unknown radiation, but what if that's not what

this is? What if, instead of radiation, it's a signal that is being sent out?"

Tom fidgeted and chuckled nervously, trying to break the tension in the room. "So, what? Are you saying that we all needed those tin foil hats after all?" he joked. Helen turned to Tom and smiled without mirth. "Maybe," she said. Ben let out a sharp whistle, ending the conversation and taking back control of the room.

"That's enough," he told everyone. "No more guessing. No more theories. In the end, it doesn't matter. Even if we had all of the answers, our situation is still unchanged. We're in here. They're out there. We need to focus up and stick to the plan."

"Pfffft! The plan? What plan? Run and pray? That's not much of a plan," Harry said with rising anger. "Waiting until morning is going to be the end of us. We should leave, right now, while we still have the chance. Before all these

walls come tumbling down and we never even get the chance to try."

"We wait until sunrise," Ben said through gritted teeth. If looks could kill, Harry would have been a pile on the floor.

"You're not in charge," Harry retorted, his tone cold as ice. "You only *think* that you are, boy."

Ben took a measured step towards Harry, slow and deliberate. His grip on his weapon tightened. "If you want to go now, you go right on ahead. I'd love to hear your screams as you beg to come back inside. If you leave, you leave alone. If you try to put any of the rest of us in harms way...", Ben paused before finishing with a menacing smile; "then I'd kill you myself." The two men stood, locked in a silent battle, each searching the other for weak points. The tension in the air was palpable. Trying to

play peacemaker once more, Tom got to his feet to stand between them.

"I can go too," he said, trying to placate Ben's righteous anger with a weak smile. "At *dawn*," he added pointedly, giving Harry a look that offered no chance for retort. "We make a break for it. Together we get to the truck. I can drive it back here, right up to the door. We load everyone in quickly and then we get the hell out of here. There's no need to debate it any further, dawn is nearly here anyway," he said. The group all glanced through the gaps in the wooden planks on the windows. The moon was beginning to dip. The morning sun would replace it within the hour.

Ben nodded. "Pack only what you can carry. We go at first light."

As if they had overheard the plan, the dead outside began to moan louder and they pounded on the walls in a redoubled effort.

The farmhouse shook, as did its inhabitants.
Everything trembled, with fear and with inevitability.

Chapter Six

First Light

Outside, the moon fell the rest of the way to the earth. It was pale and bloated, like a corpse in a river. It illuminated with a sickly light the rotten remains of the world beneath it. The sky began to brighten, although no light source was yet visible beyond the dying moon. It was as if the very air itself were being lit from within like a Jack-O-Lantern in October. The air was thick and humid. If the beings moving around outside needed to breathe, each inhale would have felt like they were sucking molasses through a paper straw.

Still, they shuffled and groaned and banged on the outer walls, craving the tasty treasures within. The house was filled with what they craved: delicious living meat, as if the entire farmhouse were a twisted empanada.

Inside, the living stirred.

Harry continued to stalk his mad pace across the farmhouse floor. Each heavy footfall made the ancient floorboards creak underfoot, becoming a sort of soundtrack to his inner turmoil. He couldn't stand it any longer; the waiting, the dreading. Waiting for first light made Harry feel like he was already dying, only in slow motion. On the other side of the room, Ben and Tom sat on the floor, hunkered down and pouring over a crude map of the outside that they had scratched into the floor with the kitchen knife.

"The truck is about twenty five feet from that corner of the garage. We can run behind there

first, use it as a cover. Then we light the Molotovs, throw a couple of them to get the crowd scattered and confused, and then we make a run for it." As Ben ran over the plan, Tom nodded along nervously. Sweat was dripping down his nose in big salty drops. He sweat not only from fear, but also from the oppressive heat and the sickening anticipation of the horrors that awaited them outside of those doors. By the time Ben was nearly through his review of the plan, Tom's face was totally covered in a wet sheen like a freshly washed car. "I'll drive, you hop in the back. Then we drive up to the front door, load everyone in and grab all of the supplies that we can manage. If they swarm us again, we drive a long loop along the outskirts of the property to lead them away and then we haul ass back here to grab the rest."

When he had finished going over the plan, Ben locked eyes with Helen, who had been

quietly listening nearby. In Helen's gaze, Ben registered fear. She was not afraid for herself, however, but for her daughter, who continued to fester silently beside her. Helen didn't break eye contact with Ben. Instead, she leaned forward, setting her jaw in a look of iron determination. "I'm coming with you," she said in a flat, matter-of-fact tone. It was a tone that was reinforced by steel, the type of resolve that you only got when people knew that they were probably going to die.

"No you're not," Ben said calmly. "You need to stay and keep the door secured until we come back for you." Ben looked pointedly past her, to her daughter who was already mostly dead, and Barbara who was all but mentally the same. "Please," Ben said softly. "We need you here." Blinking back tears, Helen nodded her acquiescence.

Ben and Tom got to their feet. Harry halted his mad pacing and joined the pair over at the far wall. There they gathered glass bottles of liquor, each of which was fitted with a long ragged piece of cloth torn from the faded front room curtains. Then, one by one, Ben locked eyes with all of them, watching resolve and understanding sink in before he spoke the words he'd been inwardly dreading:

"It's time to go," he said, steadfastly refusing to let his voice betray any hint of his true feelings of fear.

The first ray of light broke through the darkness outside. It was as sure a sign as any; it was time to go, it was time to try. Ben kicked the front door open with a scream of rage, surprising the dead who were gathered on the front porch. As the dead turned their full attention to Ben, he launched the first Molotov cocktail out into the fading darkness.

The bottle smashed onto the lawn, erupting in a bright ball of orange light. With a satisfying *whoomph* sound, fire blossomed and grew like spring flowers, the flames licking at lawn and dead flesh alike. The first wave of the undead surged forward. Some of them screamed as they stumbled through the roaring flames, some did not seem to notice at all, only shuffling forward as their skin curled and crisped and fell away in stinking strips. More Molotovs flew through the air as Tom and Harry burst from the doorway next, drawing a line in the sand with fire and liquor.

Ben and Tom ran for the truck, boots crunching over the burnt corpses before them like a carpet made of dried leaves. As they ran, Harry provided cover, launching another round of Molotov cocktails at a horde approaching them from the side. Bodies burned and black liquid spilled, yet hunger still ruled

the early morning. Even as the undead burned and howled and died again, many more of them continued to spill forth in a frantic attempt to eat anything that moved.

Tom jumped into the bed of the pickup truck as Ben rounded the driver side and opened the door. With a mighty swing of his heavy chair leg, Ben decorated the interior of the truck with the brains of a reanimated asshole that tried to cut him off. He swung at another one, popping a woman's soft skull like it was a spoiled pumpkin dropped from a fourth floor walkup. With the closest corpses now dispatched, Ben slipped through the door and sat behind the steering wheel.

The key was already in the ignition. Ben turned it. The engine sputtered and coughed, resisting the spark of life as all around them, the recently reanimated crept ever closer. After a few more attempts, the engine roared to

life. Tires crunched gravel as Ben steered the truck into a wide loop. In the rearview, he watched as Harry got surrounded by a small mob of what appeared to be undead school children. Ben cranked the wheel and sped toward the group. He barreled into the first two children and watched with detached horror as they bounced up and over the hood of the truck like snarling traffic cones. Ben turned the wheel the other way, running down another hungry kid as Harry scrambled away. As the truck tires crunched over another tiny zombie that was still wearing a backpack, the truck jolted violently and stalled. In the back, Tom toppled over and hit the floor of the truck bed with a harsh metallic clang.

The truck died. Ben turned the key. The engine sputtered weakly and then fell silent. Ben tried again and again with the same result. Looking through the foggy windshield,

Ben cursed when he saw that the undead were closing in again. Ben shoved his shoulder into the driver side door and swung it open hard, knocking one of the ghouls off-balance and sending them tumbling to the ground. Ben stepped out of the truck, stomping hard on the corpses' head as he exited.

"Tom! Get up Tom!" Ben shouted as he saw the dead advance. The first one to step too close to him received a nasty blow from the table leg. The leg caught the ghoul across its biting jaw. The face exploded, sending teeth and bone to fall across the hood of the truck like putrid rain. From beneath the truck, a tiny grey hand reached out with its remaining fingers. Ben saw a child's face, covered in fresh tire tracks, growling at him from beneath the stalled vehicle. Ben stomped down with his muddy boot, adding a footprint to the tire tracks already on the undead child's face. He

stomped down a few more times, only ceasing when the child stopped moving.

Now with a brief moment of reprieve, Ben ran back to the truck bed to check on Tom, who was just beginning to struggle to his feet. His hand was sliced open and bleeding, the sharp remains of a broken liquor bottle still stuck into his flesh like porcupine quills. His entire lower body was wet, doused by the spilled contents of the shattered Molotov.

"You okay?" Ben asked as he swung his weapon and clubbed another growling monster over the head like it was a baby seal. It squealed, squished and fell silent at Ben's feet. Over his shoulder, he heard the war cries of a new wave of shuffling stiff's heading their way. Tom, acting more on instinct now than anything else, retrieved his final bottle and prepared to throw it. By the time Ben cried out for him to stop, it was already too late.

Tom flicked open his lighter. An errant spark fell to his feet, landing in the cool pond of liquor that had pooled in the bed of the useless pickup truck. The instantaneous blaze from the truck illuminated the breaking dawn. Tom screamed as the flames overtook his legs. Tom screamed again as his skin blistered and bubbled before it began to peel off of him in sticky crisp strips like scorched wallpaper. Only a moment or two later, and Tom had stopped screaming forever.

The undead flocked to the smell of barbecued flesh like cartoon hobos drawn to a pie cooling in a windowsill. Ben cried out in agony and ran full tilt back towards the farmhouse. His heart hammered in his chest as all about him, the dead reached out with hungry hands. An explosion came a moment later, thundering across the lawn and knocking Ben from his feet with the impact. Behind him, a boom-

ing mushroom cloud marked the decimated spot where there had once been a truck, a man named Tom, and hope. Ben fought his way back to his feet, losing track of his weapon and almost losing his sense of direction as well. In a traumatized haze, he regained his bearings and ran back for the farmhouse as his ears rang and his eyes burned. As he ran, all around him charred limbs, black gunk and expelled teeth scattered and fell to the earth like a piñata filled with rotten corpses had burst.

Bleeding, pained and covered in the type of filth that would make a butcher blush, Ben half-ran, half-limped his way to the front porch. When he was just a few steps from the door, it began to close. With rage, Ben saw that it was Harry's ugly face behind it.

Letting loose an animalistic cry of fury, Ben heaved his weight into the door, shouldering his way in and knocking Harry back violent-

ly. Harry stumbled a few steps, tripped over his own feet and then went flying into a wall with a hollow thud. Despite his injuries, Ben was on him in an instant. "You *bastard!* You son of a bitch!" Ben yelled, blood and spittle flying from his lips. "You were going to lock me out! Trap me out there with those things!" Ben grabbed Harry by his dirty shirt collar and pulled him close.

Harry regained his footing as Ben lifted him by his collar and he tried to stutter his way through an explanation. "I..we..I th-thought that y-you were dead and—"

Ben punched him hard across his lying jaw. Once, twice, a third time. If he hadn't lost the chair leg in the melee outside, Ben would have gladly spilled Harry's pea-sized brain all over the floor with it. Harry fell back into the wall and slumped to the floor, his face already a bat-

tered mess. As his nose leaked profusely upon the farmhouse floor, Helen screamed.

"What happened?" Helen shouted, her eyes darting rapidly back and forth between a bloody Ben and a bludgeoned Harry.

"Tom's dead," Ben said in a seething voice. His eyes never left Harry. "Tom's dead. And I would be too if it were up to your chickenshit husband."

Barbara screamed as the undead threw themselves against the door with a newfound fervor, the smell of blood and charred flesh drove the hungry masses forward with an unrelenting hunger. The door shuddered and bulged against the hastily replaced barricade. Boards cracked, nails snapped. Glass trembled and burst. Through every new hole, groans and groping fingers filled the open spaces.

"Go to the basement!" Ben yelled to Helen as he ran for the door. He leaned against it

with all of his weight as Barbara tried to hastily slide some more heavy objects in front of it. More noises came. Scratching. Wrenching. Thudding. Cracking. Ben glanced all about the room, sizing up their handiwork. It was clear to him that it would not last much longer.

A soft thump drew Ben's attention to his right. There he saw Judy sprawled out on the floor, unmoving. Helen suppressed a sob as she frantically shook her dead daughter, beckoning her, *begging* her to wake up.

"She's dead!" Ben shouted. Behind him, Barbara had sunk onto the floor herself, covering her ears against the onslaught of noise from the undead assault on their failing stronghold. Her lips moved in a silent prayer, beseeching god, buddha, even the 5G overlords to spare her for just one more day.

"No! No...she couldn't be. She's sleeping. She's just sleeping," Helen said in a rising voice.

Harry rose to his feet, clutching his broken nose with one hand and trying to shepherd his wife away from Judy with the other.

"She's not your daughter anymore!" Ben shouted as the wailing from outside increased in volume. More wood splintered and fell. The walls shook. Helen shook her head rapidly like a robot that was malfunctioning. "Sleeping," she repeated in a crazed, desperate voice. "Sleeping. She's only sleeping."

But Ben knew better. They all knew better.

Judy was dead. And soon, she would wake up. And when she did, she would be hungry.

Chapter Seven

Tumbling Down

The farmhouse held; until it didn't.

The beginning of the end started in the kitchen. The dead weight of far too many bodies throwing themselves against the outside had finally become too much. The decrepit farmhouse walls bulged inwardly, cracking and splitting like cheap roofing tiles. Punctuated by a loud crash that was loud enough to

wake the dead, the entire northern wall in the kitchen buckled and collapsed.

When the dust settled, all of those inside that were still living felt their hearts drop into their stomachs. The wall was eviscerated. No longer acting as a barrier to the outside world, the kitchen now sported an opening that was large enough to allow the dead to march through in a single file march. The first pair of uncoordinated dead legs walked through the opening, the black toenails of their rotten feet clicking along the floor like the legs of a centipede. Once the first corpse was through the wall, it was followed by another and another. Ben snatched up the brass fire poker and pointed it toward the advancing cadaver parade.

"Help me!" Ben shouted, calling out for backup as he drove the weapon hard through the open mouth of the first bloated face in line. The poker stabbed into the man's flesh

and squelched through the other side as easily as a hot knife through butter. Ben kicked the dead man hard in the chest, sending his body back in a crumpled heap as the fireplace poker wrenched free with a spray of black mist, coating the next face in line with a thin black mask. As Ben fought off more of the intruders, Harry screamed. The sound of it came out pinched and nasal through his broken nose. He grabbed for the basement door with shaking hands, calling out for his wife to run to the basement. All around them, the barricades were bowing and breaking and falling. The groaning of the dead grew louder, filling the space of the farmhouse with the sounds of hunger, anger and lust.

"You coward!" Ben shouted at Harry while he dispatched the next zombie in line. Harry fumbled with the basement latch but he finally got the door open. Helen scooped up her dead

daughter in her arms and rushed down the steps, disappearing into the darkness below. "Harry!" Ben continued to shout. "You stupid bastard! Help me fight these things!"

Harry glanced to Ben with panicked eyes. "I have a kid," he said unconvincingly. "I need to keep her safe." His guilt apparently appeased by the lame excuse, Harry disappeared into the basement as well, shutting the door behind him with a soft click. Had Ben not been so preoccupied fighting off a third biting mouth, he would have gladly broken Harry's sniveling jaw next.

Ben got a bit of a reprieve when the next corpse waltzing through the open kitchen wall got stuck. The deceased woman had a large piece of a white picket fence sticking out from her chest, which wedged itself against the sides of the hole and halted her progress. Seeing his chance, Ben turned and ran. He got to the

basement door and tried to turn the knob. It didn't budge. He pounded his fists against the door, yelling and cursing. Behind him, Barbara began to scream.

The rest of the walls and windows gave way within seconds of each other, releasing the dead into the farmhouse like a flood. Some of them were filled with holes and oozing black puss like Swiss cheese filled with tar. Others crawled and stumbled, dragging their deadened legs behind them like deflated balloons. The first one to reach Barbara had its head already halfway caved in, giving it the look of a loaf of bread that lost the will to rise all the way. The ghoul grabbed a handful of Barbara's hair and used it to pull her closer to its stinking mouth. A long wet tongue unspooled and wagged at her like the tail of a drowning black cat. Barbara screeched, terrified.

Glass and blood permeated the air as Ben smashed a lamp into the side of its head, collapsing the mushy skull the rest of the way. "Run!" Ben shouted to Barbara, pointing her towards the stairway leading up to the second floor. Ben took off in that direction, not waiting around to see if she would follow him. Ben took the steps three at a time, stumbling up the last couple and almost losing his balance entirely. After regaining his footing, he rounded the first corner of the upstairs hallway and came upon the master bedroom. His eyes darted around for something, *anything* to use as a weapon. He peeked beneath the bed, quickly ransacked the nightstand drawers. When he threw open the closet door, however, he couldn't help himself. Ben laughed.

On the main level, at the foot of the stairs, Barbara was surrounded. She made a break for the stairs but fear had slowed her steps and

soon, the group of snarling mouths had her encircled once more. She rotated in a tight circle, lashing out at every rotten hand that reached for her. With her kitchen knife she frantically sliced away at anything that so much as flinched. Slash after slash she held the biting dead at bay, dropping fingers and filleted skin to the floor like a butcher in a haunted deli. Just when it seemed that the surge of the dead would be too much for Barbara to hold back any longer, a long dark shadow fell over the fiends. Ben was back, standing at the top of the steps. A bright hallway lamp bathed him in light. To Barbara, he looked like an angel. Then she noticed the manic smile on his face. And then she noticed the reason why. In his hands, Ben held a gleaming twelve gauge shotgun. She had been right. Ben *was* an angel. He was the angel of death.

"Breakfast is canceled!" Ben shouted, bracing the shotgun against his shoulder and firing into the hungry mass. One of the undead heads exploded like an overinflated tire. The remaining monsters snarled and turned up their nasty faces to growl at Ben. It was the last thing they did before they died for a second time.

Three more blasts came booming from the shotgun. Three more heads popped like microwaved marshmallows. Ben charged down the steps, shooting and swinging the butt of the gun at everything that moved. With a small patch of the dead cleared away, Barbara made a break for it.

Ben fought his way across the first floor until he reached the basement door, which had been barricaded from the inside by something propped beneath the knob.

"Knock knock, asshole!" Ben shouted, aiming his gun at the door. With a deafening boom, the wood around the doorknob disintegrated. Ben kicked the remains of the door open, sending a ruined chair tumbling down the steps into the darkness below. Ben smiled with satisfaction as it splintered and fell away. From somewhere below, he heard Helen's voice screech out a single terrified word. *"Judy!"* Then, the screaming began.

Helen screamed. Harry joined her, screaming and crying out in agony from somewhere in the basement. Over his shoulder, Ben heard Barbara begin to scream too. She was hollering loud enough to wake the dead. Err, well, you know what I mean.

Ben paused at the top of the stairs, unsure which direction to go, unsure which screams to follow. He only had to think for a moment, however, before he turned back to help Bar-

bara. Whatever was happening in that basement, Harry had gotten his own dumb ass into it. And Helen did as well; she got herself into it on the day that she married a moron. Ben pumped the next round into the shotgun and followed the sounds of Barbara screaming.

When Ben found her, she was moving like a woman possessed. She was surrounded by a group of four or five of the undead. All of them were groping for her and staggering around with rotten breath, like a group of drunks at a carnival. Barbara fought them with ferocious speed, the kind only unlocked by sheer, unimaginable terror. A howl was accompanied by a small cracking sound as Barbara stabbed a small pencil into the dripping eye of the closest corpse, twisted it and broke it off. The dead man dripped white and black as he stumbled back, giving Barbara the small opening she needed. She dashed through the opening and

grabbed a couple of liquor bottles that had not been used in the failed mission to escape in the pickup truck.

The first bottle was smashed over the skull of a formerly beautiful dead woman, one who had made a biting motion at Barbara's arm. The woman was well-dressed, her clothing was professional and looked expensive. She looked as if she had once been a news anchor. Her face was once perfect and made for TV. Now, it wasn't even fit for radio, as the glass shattered and imbedded itself into the crevices and cracks of her hungry face. Syrupy black blood bubbled and dripped as the dead woman shrieked, collapsing into a shuddering mess on the floor, drenched in blood, glass and cheap liquor. The second and third zombies were on top of Barbara in a flash. Without taking the time to think, Ben turned on them and aimed the shotgun.

"Don't worry Barbara!" Ben shouted. "I'm coming for you!"

He aimed and fired. The shotgun bit into his shoulder as the buckshot expelled, accompanied by a sharp crack and the sound of tearing paper. All at once, yet still far too late, Ben realized his mistake.

The liquor-drenched dead took another stumbling step towards Barbara before the pellets impacted a dead man's chest. The buckshot collided with the T304 stainless steel of a pair of dog tags hanging from the man's neck and a small series of sparks flickered and fell to the puddle on the floor.

With a hauntingly familiar sound, the puddle *WHOOMPHED*, transforming from a horizontal spill into a vertical column of flames. Multiple zombies went up in a shrieking blaze of fire. The heat rose with a roar, evaporating eyes and peeling charred flesh

from walking bones. One of burning dead turned to face to Ben, reaching out for him and gnashing its teeth even as its skin bubbled and fell away from outstretched arms. It stumbled forward a few steps, thrown off balance by its flaming feet melting and following behind it like a slug's slime trail.

Barbara burst into flames next. She cried and screamed while she burned, calling out Johnny's name with her final breath as she vanished beneath a sea of fire and rotting limbs.

Chapter Eight

Throw in the Trowel

With Barbara burned, Ben saw only one option left to him: the basement. He was breathing hard, hands shaking. Ben was covered in blood, some was his own, some was not. Still, he was on his feet. As long as he was upright, he would never stop fighting.

The farmhouse was a cacophonous wreck; overturned furniture, broken glass, and the bodies of the undead and the unlucky lay in broken pieces along the floor like a twisted

jigsaw puzzle. Ben checked for shells. He had only two rounds left.

The burning dead people eventually stopped, dropped and ceased moving. From outside, dozens of angry, hungry eyes watched him. Then, all at once, the world was once again thrown into chaos. From every opening in every wall, every busted window and every broken doorway, the dead piled in.

Ben raised his shotgun. "You want me? You want a taste of the dark meat, you ugly rotten bastards?!" He pumped the penultimate round into the chamber. Ben grinned, wild and defiant. It was the smile of a man with nothing left to lose. "Come and get you some!"

As one, the undead swarmed. When the first one came within grabbing distance, Ben fired. It's skull disintegrated and sprayed the room like a burst balloon full of beef stew. More undead trampled over the body of the first even

as it was falling in a heap to the farmhouse floor. The air was filled with grasping fingers, bared teeth and breath that smelled of decay. Ben retreated back a step and fired again. The buckshot spread and shredded fingers like lettuce before impacting another pair of skulls that were soft as clay. As Ben turned to run, he rammed the butt of his gun into the nearest biting mouth. The biting woman's teeth shattered like cheap china and fell down her growling throat. When she hit the floor, the teeth tumbled from a ragged hole in her stomach and rolled across the room like they were expelled from a Yahtzee cup.

As the dead regrouped to surround Ben, he pulled out the wooden chair leg he had tucked into his belt. This was it. It was time for his last stand.

Ben swung for the fences, whirling and thrashing and impacting flesh and blood and

bone in all directions. He screamed as he swung the leg, feeling the impacts shudder up his arm and into his injured shoulder. Blood splashed into his mouth as he cried out and cursed and cajoled the dead pricks to try harder. Any dead person who reached for Ben would die twice, that was his solemn vow to them. Ben defended and lashed and ducked. He cleared a pathway back through the kitchen and to the basement door which, at that particular moment, he truly regretted shooting to pieces. Ben dispatched the nearest hungry corpse and then he ducked quickly through the gaping doorway. He propped up the broken door as best he could and jammed the chair leg between it and the wall. He used his belt to secure the door to the railing and prayed that it would hold.

Cold dead hands pounded on the broken door but it held fast. Ben couldn't believe it.

He would have thanked God at that moment if he had believed in him. Yet after a night like this one, how could anyone ever believe in a just and loving god again? He leaned against a concrete wall, suddenly swept up in a swell of nausea as the adrenaline coursing through his veins overwhelmed him in the first relatively quiet moment he'd had in what felt like forever. His chest heaved, his clothing was drenched with sweat. Dirt and blood streaked his face like native war paint. He tried to slow his breathing, he tried to still the absolute pounding in his chest. His heartbeat was a jackhammer sounding in his ears.

Despite the pounding on the door, none of the dead got through. Despite being out of ammo and out of places to run, Ben felt that at least his luck hadn't run dry yet. He was still alive. He was still breathing. When Ben was confident that the door would hold with-

out his watching it, he began to retreat down the steps into the cool air of the basement. Upstairs, the floorboards groaned under the weight of the undead. Upstairs, hands pounded on doors and walls as if the night itself had grown hands and wanted to use them to strangle Ben. Yet down in the basement, it was still. It was quiet. Once Ben's pulse left his ears, however, he heard a small noise that he hadn't noticed before.

Ben froze in place; body rigid, ears pricked. In the spaces between the pandemonium upstairs, he listened, trying to hone in on the sound. Then, he heard it. It was a dripping sound.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Ben tilted his head, trying to place where the sound was coming from.

Drip.

Drip.

Ben turned to his right. In the darkness, his eyes began to adjust and he saw the silhouette of a light chain hanging just above his head. He reached up and pulled it. The basement was suddenly awash in the pale yellow light of a single crackling lightbulb. Now that the darkness had been illuminated, Ben saw the basement for what it really was. It wasn't a stronghold, an underground fortress that Ben could use to shield himself from the undead. It was a concrete box. It was a tomb.

Blood painted the walls and the ceiling. It pooled heavily in the far corner, forming a congealed pond of deep black that looked more like molasses than blood. Something lay in the middle of that rancid pond. No, not *something*; but *someone*. It was Helen. Or, rather, it was *part* of Helen.

Helen's head was cracked in half like a walnut, split along a horizontal line where her top and bottom lips used to meet. The top half of her head was dropped into the black puddle, giving it the eerie appearance of floating, a macabre island atop a sea of gore. The rest of Helen was lying nearby, crumpled and discarded like dirty laundry. Her chest was sliced to ribbons, her cracked ribs were opened like she was a box of Chinese takeout. Next to her, Harry sat still and cold in a puddle of his own. His pale hands were still as stone, feebly clutching a mess of innards that had been slurped out of his abdomen like a Capri-Sun with pulp.

Sitting quietly beside the bodies of her parents, Ben saw Judy. She was chewing. And she was smiling.

In her small fist she clutched a garden trowel, which she repeatedly sunk into the slop spilling from her dead dad's guts. She used it to

dig for the juiciest parts, lifting them up to her red-stained lips. When she lowered the trowel for another scoop, it dripped.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

"Judy," Ben whispered in a horrified hush. She looked him directly in the eye as she shoveled in another mouthful of mom and dad. Red dripped down her chin. Her trowel rose and fell, each time with more force, each time scooping up a bigger bite.

Shlick. Munch. Drip.

Shluck. Crunch. Drip.

Shlick.

Drip.

Shlick.

Drip.

Ben's eyes widened with the frightening realization that he could be staring at his own

future. He was watching how someone could disappear forever on a night like tonight. Disappear, one wet bite at a time. Ben retreated until he felt the cold stone wall at his back. Judy rose to her feet gracefully, like a marionette manipulated by a practiced hand. She took a few short strides toward him. She didn't have the clumsy walk of the long dead, she seemed almost to float. Her movements were fluid, silent; she moved like death, like a duck through black water. Ben tried to retreat another step but he was out of room.

Judy took another aqueous step. Her eyes glowed ghastly white in the dim light of the hanging bulb. They were the white of spoiled milk. They were the white of city slush after a storm. They were the white of a pair of headlights shining on a long abandoned tombstone. She took another liquid step. Then, she paused. Judy smiled and cocked her head. Her

hair hung in matted clumps, wet with something thicker than water. Her lips spread and her tongue poked out, testing the air. She let out a low guttural growl.

Before Ben could formulate a plan, Judy pounced.

She was on Ben in a flash, a blur of pale skin and shining teeth. Judy collided with Ben, mustering all the speed and weight that her tiny frame could conjure up. Together they hit the concrete wall with a hard thud. Dust flew and bones rattled from the impact. The lightbulb swung wildly overhead, casting elongated shadows that grabbed at Ben from all directions. When his eyes refocused from the impact, Ben saw that Judy was hovering only an inch from his neck. Her lips were parted and covered with spit; her tongue thrashed frantically as if it were trying to flee her hungry mouth. Ben got his forearm up in time, brac-

ing it against Judy's tiny throat and holding her gnashing teeth at bay. He tried to push her off of him. She bucked and resisted, digging her nails into the soft flesh of his abdomen. When Ben let out a small cry of pain, Judy grinned predatorily. She roared with hunger. Her lips dripped droplets of red onto Ben's mouthwatering face.

Ben redoubled his efforts, using all the strength he had left to keep the feral child at bay; and keep her teeth from his throat. She screamed, enraged at being close enough to smell him but not able to taste him yet. Her primal scream from just an inch away, combined with the feel of her hot rotten breath on his face, filled Ben with a desperate type of strength. With a cry of fury, he shifted his weight and hurled the rabid child off of him. Judy hit the ground hard, her face colliding

with the concrete with an audible snap. It was the sound of a heavy footfall on a dry twig.

When she struggled back to her feet a moment later, her jaw was visibly broken, hanging loosely below her pallid lower lip. More thick black dribble made its way down her chin. She roared, a noise that sounded as if it were underwater, as if her throat were filled with syrup. The look in her eyes told Ben that a broken jaw wouldn't stop her. No, it only made it easier for her to swallow him up, like a snake unhinging its jaw to devour a helpless rabbit whole.

Ben went on the offensive, crossing the distance between them with two quick steps. He cocked back a fist and clocked her clean across her loose jaw. The snapping sound came again, louder this time. Her bottom row of bloodstained teeth hung limply from a severed mandible, which flapped lazily in the cool basement air like a wind sock. Judy shrieked

again. Not in pain, nor even hunger, but in rage. The sound was garbled as her jaw flapped like a limp pancake.

Judy extended her bloody fingers and lunged for Ben again. As she collided with him a second time, he was better prepared this time around. He wrapped his strong arms around her as her body impacted his. He turned, using her momentum to send them both tumbling to the floor, with Ben on top. Once he had her pinned down, Ben wanted to cry as he looked into the rabid, ravaged face of a child who was once pretty. "I'm so sorry, Judy," Ben said as he made a fist. With a sickening thud, he cracked her in the temple. He felt something cave. He lifted his meaty fist for a second blow. When it landed, Judy's tiny nose flattened, releasing spurts of black spray to coat the room all about them. Even as he landed blow after blow, she continued to shriek and twitch and bite at Ben

with her dismantled jaw. Then, as the overhead lightbulb continued its slowing arc, the light bounced off of something nearby. The glint caught Ben's eye.

It was the trowel.

Ben landed two more heavy blows, stunning Judy and momentarily stopping her struggle. Seeing his opening, Ben jumped off of her and grabbed for the garden tool. It wasn't until it was firmly in his hand that he realized how slick and covered with gore it was. He adjusted his grip, wiping the handle onto his already ruined shirt. Judy was beginning to struggle to her feet but Ben met the side of her head with a heavy boot. She collapsed back into the dust and blood pooling on the basement floor. "I'm sorry, Judy. I really am." Ben loomed over the child, trowel raised in a shaking but determined hand.

Judy looked up at him and growled. With all of his remaining strength, Ben brought the trowel down.

Once.

Twice.

Judy spasmed and jerked. Her little body went into seizures.

Thunk.

Shlick.

Thunk.

The last blow pierced Judy's eye socket. Black ichor rose from the wound. It bubbled and foamed, spilling forth and covering her dead face like porridge that had been left in an unattended cauldron. Judy convulsed for a final time. Her thin fingers scratched at the unforgiving floor until they too lay still. Ben collapsed beside her, a broken and bloody mess himself. He was soaked through with sweat; coated with dirt and a black, gnarly fluid. He

had a hard time catching his breath. He felt as if he had just outrun death itself, but on a treadmill cranked up to eleven.

Minutes passed. Ben's breathing eventually slowed. Above him, the house continued to creak. The dead were still moving about, but slower now. Maybe they were finally satiated. Maybe they were confused. Maybe it was both. A soft crackling sound brought Ben's attention to the single bare lightbulb swinging overhead. As he laid his eyes on it, it sputtered and flickered out, marking it as the most recent thing to die in this basement. Another bright light snuffed out before its probable time. As darkness spread and reclaimed the basement like a curtain falling on a final act, Ben allowed himself to cry.

He felt his way over to the wall, careful to not crawl through the sticky remains of a family he had once known. Once Ben found the wall,

he ran his hands along it until he found an old storage shelf. With a grunt of effort from the depleted man, Ben toppled it over. He lay on the floor, covering himself with boxes, bins and the like. He leaned the shelf at an angle above him, forming one final barricade, the only one he could manage down here. His barricade was about the size of a coffin, which he found fitting. He curled up in the grime of the floor, clutching a small wrench from a toolkit that had been on the shelf. Then, he waited.

Ben stared ahead blankly, seeing and feeling only darkness. He stopped crying. He didn't pray. He didn't hope. He only waited. Waited, for whatever came next.

Outside, the sun began to rise in earnest. However, for Ben? In the basement of that farmhouse, it was still the night of the living dead.

Chapter Nine

Survivor

When Ben opened his eyes again, the world was silent.

He must have dozed off at some point, although he couldn't remember doing so. The nearly constant adrenaline, paired with the nonstop horrors of the last twenty four hours, seemed to have taken their toll. Even when dead people are actively trying to eat you, the human body still has its limits. Ben, apparently, had reached his. He was alive, however. So whether or not dozing off was stupid, he was

glad to find himself unconsumed upon waking up.

He pricked up his ears, straining to listen for any movement in the farmhouse above. All was silent.

It wasn't a peaceful silence. It wasn't like the comfortable silence between two lifelong friends or the silence of gleeful anticipation that falls on a Christmas morning. No, this silence was thick; it was heavy. It was the kind of silence that you find at bombing sites, the type of quiet that fills empty cribs. It was the silence of a final breath.

Ben tried to sit up but he felt his entire body protest. Every muscle ached, every joint felt stiff. It felt like he had spent the night sleeping on a bed made of tortoise shells and crowbars. His head swum and his right eye was so swollen that it was practically sealed shut. Still, he was

alive. He was alive after a night that been filled with the living dead.

Eventually, Ben removed himself from his makeshift shelter and he struggled to get back on his feet. As he rose, his legs trembled like the earth itself were shaking. His whole body wobbled with each step. Ben felt like Bambi learning to walk at the beginning of the movie; although Ben felt quite a bit more like Bambi's mother at the moment. Once his feet steadied beneath him, Ben took a moment to lean against the cool concrete of the wall. He had to regain his bearings.

While Ben's eyes readjusted to his dim surroundings, his nose filled with a pungent odor. It was the smell of rotten meat, the smell of roadkill boiling on hot asphalt. His eyes focused and the contents of the basement became visible to him once more. Helen, or what was left of her, was still in a pile by the wall, her

chest opened like a Christmas present. Chicken shit Harry lay dead beside her, just as useful dead as he was when he was alive. There was another body in the basement too, but Ben was careful not to look at it.

At the foot of the stairs, he paused again to listen for any noise above. There was only silence. Ben held a hand over his mouth, doing his best not to gag on the tainted air of the basement which, in the growing daylight heat, was becoming more unbearable by the minute. Ben looked up the stairs and steeled his nerves. Whatever was waiting for him on the other side of that door, he was ready to take that chance. He wasn't going to die down here. With that stink, with those stains that used to be Harry, Helen and Judy. Ben sucked in a deep sour breath and released it slowly. Then, he ascended.

Ben dismantled the barricade at the door. Slowly, he opened the basement door, which screamed on broken hinges. Only silence stood on the other side. Ben set the broken door aside and stepped into the abandoned farmhouse. It was quiet. Deathly quiet.

Sunlight filtered through broken windows and battered walls. A bright beam of light was focused through a hole in the front room, illuminating the hideous evidence left behind by a night chocked full of nightmares. The wallpaper was bespeckled with brain matter and blood. Scorch marks marred the smoldering area where Barbara had made her last stand. Covering the floor were bits of glass, chunks of gore, broken teeth and the mangled remains of the eviscerated and masticated dead. The whole farmhouse looked as if it had been decorated by the love child of Jackson Pollock and Charles Manson. Still, silence hung above it all.

Room by room, Ben crept. His eyes were ever-searching, constantly on the lookout for the next bit of lingering danger. Room by room, he crunched over broken glass and stepped over upturned furniture. Every room, he confirmed that the dead were dead, and that the undead were dead once more. There was a small pillar of smoke still coming from the charred remains of a coffee table. There was a man's shoe, filled with something wet. A severed hand lay beneath a broken window sill, still faintly twitching, still weakly reaching for one last snack. Yet all inside the farmhouse was silent, the lack of noise serving as a stark juxtaposition to the chaos portrayed in it. The scenes of unimaginable suffering were now frozen in time, a snapshot of a terrible moment in the past, as unmoving as an oil painting.

Once Ben was sure that the house was clear of immediate danger, he allowed himself to look to the outside world. It was silent out there as well. No more shuffling dead, no ghouls moaning near and far. There was no longer a parade of hungry death, only the mist of a morning fog rolling over the wet grass. The breeze carried on it the scent of recently displaced dirt, cleansing rain, and something burning. Despite the events of last night, Ben thought that the world looked beautiful. He even dared to allow himself to hope.

At the edge of the tree line, Ben saw something move. His heart dropped into his stomach. *No, no it can't be. It can't be starting again. It has to stop. This needs to end.* Still, even as he thought these words, Ben watched as a figure emerged from the nearby woods. The man was dirty and slow. His right arm was missing below the elbow, the ragged sleeve of his

soiled dress shirt was flapping emptily with the morning breeze. The man's teeth were bared and in the hand that he still had, he was carrying something; something that looked like a pound of flesh. Ben felt his hope evaporate as the man shuffled closer, stumbling his way to the edge of the farmhouse property line. Then, the crack of a rifle sounded.

The deadman dropped mid-step, his seizing hand squishing his snack into a pulp. As the deadman's twitches lessened and then stopped, people began to appear at the tree line. Not dead people, living ones. Men and a few scant women began to emerge from the woods, all of them wearing some type of camouflaged clothing. The two men leading the pack wore trucker hats and had masks on, obscuring the lower half of their faces. They moved with a combination of military swagger and alcoholic sloppiness. As they marched

from the woods in a loose formation, the cracks and thwumps of their gunfire echoed back from all directions. From the sound of it, they seemed to be taking a shot at anything that moved, like a desperate incel on Valentine's Day.

"Clear!" A lumbering man shouted as he broke free from the cover of the trees. "Another three down. One of the damned things was still wearing a 'I got vaccinated' sticker. Can you believe that?" The man laughed as he joined the others. The man in front pulled his mask down, revealing a pudgy pale face with ruddy cheeks and few teeth. They were what Ben's father used to call 'March madness teeth,' because they were down to the final four. The man with the missing teeth turned and spat. "Don't surprise me none," the man said. "There was a whole batch of these reanimated libturds down by the highway. Mus-

ta been a protest, or an unemployment office near here." The men all shared a laugh, only pausing to fire at anything that moved in the trees around them.

Any other day of his life, Ben would have viewed these men as something to avoid. However, after surviving a night full of frights and bites, now they appeared to him like saviors. The makeshift army kept on coming, slowly advancing across the field towards the farmhouse. Ben watched from the shadows as they marched past the spot where the truck, and Tom along with it, had burnt to a crisp.

"Oy vey, do you fellers *smell* that? Think that somebody had a barbecue over here. And they didn't even invite us!"

A woman next to him sniffed the air and pulled a disgusted face. She wore a tight fitting vest that said ICE and wore a bitchy smirk beneath a baseball cap. "I wouldn't have come

anyway," she said in a flat tone. "I don't like my meat blackened." The man who spoke first shrugged and smiled conspiratorially.

"Well, what do you want? We're in that part of the county now. It's all well-done steaks and stolen shoes around here. It didn't look much better than this, even before last night." As the group snickered and fanned out, Ben stepped out from the shadows of the farmhouse.

"Hey! Hey, over here!" Ben stepped out onto the porch, waving his arms over his head like he was signaling a rescue plane. In unison, dozens of guns turned and pointed at him, like children snitching on the playground bully. One of the group dropped to a knee, taking up a firing position.

"Don't shoot!" Ben shouted. "I'm alive!"

The man with the missing teeth squinted. Seeing Ben, he cocked his head to the side like a confused dog. The sunlight bounced off of

a pair of aviator sunglasses hanging from his collar. "You sure?"

Arms still in the air, Ben dropped his head with relief. "YES!"

There was a pause. A few of the group looked to each other, hesitation playing out on their faces. Then, one of them shrugged. "Can't be too careful. Especially around these parts." The man lifted his rifle. Ben heard a sound like tearing loose leaf paper. Then:

BLAM!

Ben's head jerked back. The sun filled his eyes one final time before he pitched forward, tumbling to the porch. Dust kicked up a cloud around him as all of the fight left his body for the last time. The armed group approached, guns still hot and at the ready. The woman in the vest nudged Ben with a foot.

"Do you really think he was one of them?" The woman asked the question, but her tone

conveyed that she didn't care what the answer was. The shooter shrugged. The man to his left spit, snorted, and then spit again.

"Dunno," the shooter admitted. "But anyhow, can't trust any of 'em. Especially not now. Not after all that stuff the deep state has been doin' with the satellites. All that 5G, turning brains into pea soup. We tried to tell them but.." The man trailed off, waving his arm, indicating the massacre around them to make his point. "This is the progress the left wanted. Electric cars, Wi-Fi in everything. What'd they expect would happen?"

The woman nudged Ben with her boot again, this time harder. She seemed satisfied that he was dead. Nodding in satisfaction, she waved two men forward, signaling for them to go ahead of her into the farmhouse. "Couldn't agree more," the woman said. "This one doesn't look like he had much of a brain

in his head anyhow." For a very brief moment, the woman almost looked sheepish. She quickly added, "But you can't risk it, I've got kids waiting at home you know."

The man with the missing teeth nodded and winked at her. He waved the rest of their ragtag group forward. "Let's wrap this up. We'll meet up with the National Guard at the border. The Pride Gents are flanking the south, we'll meet up with them and then head to the border together for the next big push. Understood?"

The group all affirmed his orders as a big burly man reemerged from the farmhouse. "No survivors," he reported. His face was ghostly white. "And I wouldn't go in the basement," he added softly.

Gap teeth nodded and placed a hand on the man's shoulder. "It's a rough scene for all of us." Then, looking down at Ben's body, he added, "Bet this thug is the one who killed

everyone inside. Bunch of god damned opportunists in these parts."

"What should we do with him?"

Gap teeth waved a hand dismissively. "Toss him on the pile."

The bulky man groaned as he knelt to grab Ben around his ankle. Knees cracking, the man straightened up and began to drag Ben's body away from the porch, his head thunking hollowly onto each step until he hit the ground. From there, he was dragged through the dirt, hauled like a sack of potatoes towards a large fire that was beginning to burn brightly in the distance.

Chapter Ten

SardyHouse Presents: Night of the Living Dead

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