

## PROLOGUE

### LITTLE BLACK TRAIN

Blake snuck a glance over his right shoulder, trying to see into the darkness. There were three of them—no, now there were four. He vaulted over a streambed and raced up the hillside. That didn't deter them. Their pounding footsteps marked their close pursuit. So far, he hadn't been able to shake them, nor had they shown any sign of giving up their chase.

His shoes dug into the dirt path, pushing hard with each step. The way was slippery, and for a moment Blake lost traction. He fought for balance, and with a sharp intake of breath, steadied himself. He didn't dare slip. They'd be on him if he did.

Blake reached the top of the rise and began sprinting. There was no way his pursuers should be able to keep up with him. Blake was fast. Few individuals could stay with him in a footrace. So how was it that he couldn't shake them?

He shifted his head and dared another quick look behind. The pack seemed to be gaining on him. Blake yelled, "What do you want?" Their silence was more frightening than an answer. He knew then that he was running for his life.

"Help!" Blake screamed. "Help!"

No one responded to his screams. Maybe they'd heard too many screams just like his. They were afraid to try and help, and for good reason. Oakley was looking more and more like a ghost town, especially at night. The citizens hunkered down when it got dark. Except for the ghosts and ghoulies. They came out at night.

The streetlights were few and far between. Most were in disrepair. Blake ran through the darkness, trying to find the light. Even though he'd grown up in Oakley, it was hard to figure out exactly where he was. The darkness muted the colors, offering up a stark black-and-white landscape. The shadows had to be playing tricks with his eyes. The once-familiar roads and woods and hollows seemed to have changed. Skeletal branches from trees reached for him, snagging his clothing.

The whistle of a train made him start. The sound was alien and out of place. You didn't hear trains in Oakley. The nearest train tracks were ten miles to the west. That didn't explain the whistle he was hearing, or the music. A man with a deep bass voice was singing. Blake could hear the words through the pounding footfalls of his pursuers.

"There's a little black train a-coming, better set your business right . . ."

Blake realized the singer must have a toy whistle that sounded like a train. The whistle sounded again.

"Help!" he screamed, but the man just kept on with his song.

Blake thought the lyrics sounded familiar, but he couldn't place them. The whistle screeched again. Now it sounded as if it were directly behind him, almost like it had joined the pack trying to run him down.

Run, run, run. He couldn't slow down. They'd catch him if he did. But the race was taking its toll on him. His breath was getting ragged. He dared not stop. Death was right on his tail, and death didn't even seem to be winded. The train whistle sounded once more, and it was accompanied by the singer's words:

"God sent to Hezekiah, a message from on high, you better set your house in order, for you must surely die."

*"Little Black Train,"* thought Blake. He'd grown up hearing that tune. But why was someone singing that song so late at night? And where was the singer?

The shadows finally opened up enough for Blake to see that just ahead was the turnoff to downtown Oakley, marked by a familiar sign that read WELCOME TO OAKLEY. The sign had been around for all of Blake's twenty-five years, but someone had defaced it the year before. The word *Oakley* had been X'd out with spray paint and replaced with *Zombieland*.

Blake was in the race of his life, yet he felt disembodied, no longer in control of his person. He needed to run, but he could never outrun what was chasing him.

Flight hadn't saved him. Maybe he'd do better to fight.

Blake slowly turned to face his pursuers. There was a part of him that was afraid to see exactly what was there. It was as if he knew it would be worse than he could even imagine. The pack was on all sides of him now. They were getting closer. He gasped at what he saw, at what was reaching for him. There was no wind in his lungs for him to scream.

Zombies.

Their faces were white, with huge dark circles, and their heads hung to the sides, jerking straight and then going slack, as if they were in between waking and nodding off. Eyes without pupils, and with no souls behind them, stared at him. Fingers with blue nails were aimed his way. The zombies reeked, and itched obsessively.

Blake knew there was something off in all of this. How had these lumbering zombies been able to run him down?

The train whistle called, and the singer called to him: "Death's dark train is coming, prepare to take a ride."

Blake knew he should grab a weapon or pick up a rock or branch, but he couldn't move. He swayed back and forth; it was all he could do to not fall. As he steadied himself, he had a moment of clarity. The zombies didn't exactly disappear, but they morphed—into the bodies of the four people sprawled around his own living room.

Everyone was wasted, including Blake.

He saw their pinpoint pupils and pale skin, watched them scratch at imaginary itches with blue-tinged nails, and forced himself to take a deep, shuddering breath. *What a nightmare*, he thought. He raised an unsteady hand up to his face. His nose and mouth were wet with a frothy fluid that had the consistency of snot.

*Shit*, thought Blake. He'd taken what he thought was oxy, but it must have been fenny. Maybe that explained him imagining the zombies. Or maybe the reality of his life was even worse than his hallucination. He'd heard from others who had experienced the willies that you could have an opioid-induced hallucination.

The train was whistling again.

Blake sank a little lower into his chair. He needed to get off this shit. It was time to clean up his act. In just a few days he'd be going to Jake's graduation. Luckily for him, Jake had visited only once in the last year. Blake had done his best to hide his addiction; he didn't want to worry his brother or take Jake's eyes from the prize. Good old Jake had done it. He was going to be a lawyer.

In his stupor, Blake smiled. He was so damn proud of his twin brother.

The thought of Jake's success eased Blake's mind. His panic subsided, as did his pain. He no longer heard the train whistle, no longer felt compelled to try and outrun the zombies, no longer strained to catch his breath.

Blake's lungs slowed to a stop, but his mind didn't know it.

"Jake," he tried to whisper, but didn't even have breath enough for a last word.

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