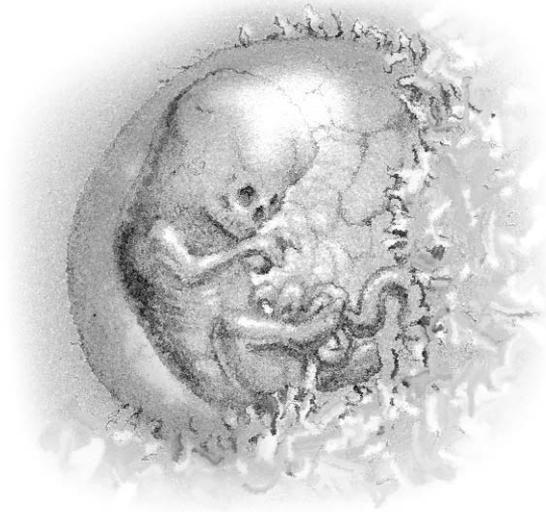


THE RISING

Brian Keene



DELIRIUM BOOKS

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CHAPTER ONE

The dead scabbled for an entrance to his grave. His wife was among them, as ravenous for Jim in death as she'd been in life. Their faint, soulless cries drifted down through ten feet of soil and rock.

The kerosene lamp cast flickering shadows on the cinder block walls, and the air in the shelter was stale and earthy. His grip on the Ruger tightened. Above him, Carrie shrieked and clawed at the earth.

She'd been dead for a week.

Jim sighed, breathing in the dank air. He lifted the metal coffeepot from where it sat on the heater and poured himself a cup. The warmth felt good, and he lingered there for a moment, before regretfully turning the heater off. To conserve fuel, he only ran it to heat up his meals. The brief comfort only made the damp chill stronger.

He sipped instant coffee and gagged. Like everything else, it was bitter.

He crossed back to the cot and collapsed upon it.

The noises continued from above.

Jim had built the shelter in the summer of 1999, when Y2K fever was at its highest. Carrie laughed at him, until he'd shown her some of the reports and articles. Even then, she'd been skeptical—until the nightly news' constant barrage had made her a believer. Two months and ten thousand dollars later, the shelter was

completed, using most of Carrie's savings and all of his construction knowledge.

It was small; a ten by fifteen-foot bunker that could hold four people comfortably. Despite the size, it was safe, and more important, secure. Jim equipped it with a generator and a vacuum powered toilet that drained into the septic tank behind the house. He'd stocked it with canned and dry foods, toilet paper, medical supplies, matches, guns, and lots of ammunition. Three pallets of bottled water and a fifty five-gallon drum of kerosene stood in the corner. There was a battery-operated boom box and a wide assortment of their eclectic musical tastes. Another shelf held their favorite books. He'd even brought down the old Magnavox 486SX. It wasn't fast, but it was easy on the generator and still gave them contact with the outside world.

They'd started out that New Year's Eve day by keeping a close eye on CNN. When the century passed in Australia and the world failed to end, he knew that all the preparation had been for nothing. Country after country greeted the millennium and the power stayed on.

That evening, they attended a party at Mike and Melissa's. When the ball dropped and the drunken revelers counted down, Carrie pulled him close.

"See, crazy-man? Nothing to worry about."

"I love you, crazy-woman," he had whispered.

"I love you, too."

They were lost in their kiss and barely noticed when Mike turned off the breakers and screamed "Y2K!" as a joke.

As the months went by, the shelter gathered dust. By the end of the next year it lay forgotten. After September 11th raised the fears of biological or nuclear attack, Jim re-stocked it. Even then, it was just an afterthought.

Until the change began. Until the rising started.

In the end, the ghosts of Y2K and September 11th had doomed the world. Tired of the unending stream of "end-time prophecy" and "destruction of Western Civilization as we know it" disasters of the week, the world had ignored the early media reports. It was a new century;

one that had no room for those medieval fears and extremist paranoid attitudes. It was time to embrace technology and science, time to further the brotherhood of man. Mankind had perfected cloning, mapped the human genome, and even traveled beyond the moon, when the joint Chinese/U.S. mission had finally set foot on Mars. The world's scientists proclaimed that the cure for cancer was just around the corner. Y2K didn't destroy civilization. Terrorism didn't defeat it. Society had faced both, and conquered them. Civilization was invincible!

Civilization was dead.

A muffled scrabbling came from overhead as something pulled on the periscope. The portcullis wiggled in its turret, swiveling back and forth. The scratching changed to a frustrated grunt, and the view-piece shuddered on its axis. It rose, slamming into the ceiling and dropping back down.

Jim closed his eyes.

“Carrie.”

* * *

He'd met her through Mike and Melissa. Like him, she was newly divorced.

“She doesn't want anything serious,” Mike had cautioned him. “She just needs to have a little fun again.”

Jim knew about that. He knew about happiness and contentment. He'd had a beautiful son, Danny, and a wife, Tammy. They'd been the core of his world.

Until Rick, a co-worker whom Tammy had never mentioned, stole both away.

After the divorce, Jim had his share of fun—drunken one-night stands that blurred together.

He had custody of Danny every other weekend and during those precious times, the beer and bimbos were forgotten. On those weekends, he was Daddy. Those were the only times he was truly happy.

Tammy and Rick married. Rick got a better job in Bloomington, New Jersey. “The chance of a lifetime,” Tammy said. That had been it. They left West Virginia,

taking the one good thing Jim had left.

The move destroyed him. In an instant, he went from seeing Danny every other weekend to ten weeks in the summer and one week at Christmas, along with the occasional weekend trip to New Jersey. If he'd had the money, if he'd been a little more together, he could have fought it in court. But by that point, Jim had racked up a driving while intoxicated offense. His credit was shot. He'd known that Tammy's lawyer, paid for with *his* money, would eat him alive. He was allowed to call once a week, but the distance along the phone lines only deepened his loss.

Finally, Danny started referring to Rick as his 'other dad' and that had devastated Jim.

There were more women and one night stands. He played at drinking himself to death, knowing he wouldn't because Danny still needed him. He lost his job, his apartment, his driver's license, and his self-respect. The only thing that kept him going were those once a week phone calls and the small voice on the other end that always said, "I miss you, Daddy."

Then he'd met Carrie.

Jim sobbed, bitter tears of rage and loss cutting through the stubble on his haggard face.

For five years they'd been happy and content. The only sadness Jim felt was not being a part of Danny's everyday life. Carrie had helped to dull even that pain.

She saved him.

Eight months ago, Carrie announced over dinner that she was pregnant. Ecstatic, Jim lifted her in his arms, kissing and loving her so much it hurt—an actual, physical hurt deep inside his chest.

Then the world died, taking his new wife and their unborn baby along with it. Now, joined by their dead neighbors, Carrie was back, digging with rotted fingers to be reunited with her husband.

Mike and Melissa were dead too; ripped apart by a dozen of the creatures. They were among the lucky ones.

Their bodies had been so badly damaged that there was no way for them to be reanimated. Shuddering, Jim recalled how the things had swarmed Mike's car, reaching through the shattered windshield and crawling inside. He and Carrie had watched in horror from the living room, ducking into the shelter when the screams stopped and the wet sounds began. The four of them had planned on escaping together. That had been their first attempt to get out of Lewisburg.

* * *

Despite the chill, Jim was sweating. He brushed tears from his eyes and went to the mini-fridge. Still holding the pistol in one hand, he opened the door and paused, letting the draft of cold air wash over him. He marveled again that he'd been down here for three months and had yet to start the generator. The power remained on, as did his cell phone. He thought about the deserted nuclear power stations, still automatically pumping out electricity for a deceased world.

How long until they shut down or blew up? How long would the cell phone and radio and television satellites float up there, waiting for communications from the dead?

* * *

In the first few days, they had talked to people online, learning that the situation was the same everywhere. The dead were coming back to life, not as mindless eating machines like in an old horror movie, but as malicious creatures bent solely on destruction. Various causes were speculated on and debated. Biological or chemical warfare, government testing, alien invasion, the Second Coming of Christ, a meteor from space; all were discussed with equal fervor.

The media soon grew silent, especially after a rogue

Army unit executed six reporters during a live broadcast. After that, as civilization collapsed, even the most dedicated journalists gave up, preferring to be with their families rather than bearing final witness to the chaos for an audience that could see what was happening just by looking out the window.

Several times, Jim had sent frantic emails to Tammy and Rick, trying to determine if Danny was safe.

He never received a reply.

Each time he called them, he received a message telling him that all circuits were busy. Eventually, even that message stopped.

He'd argued with Carrie, insisting that they make an escape attempt. He was determined to get to his son. Eventually, through gentle reasoning, she got him to see the reality of the situation. Danny was surely dead by now.

Deep inside, he'd wondered if she was right. The father in him refused to give up. He found himself clinging to the conviction that somewhere out there, Danny was still alive. He found himself envisioning different escape attempts, if only to break the monotony of living in the shelter.

Carrie's health began to crumble. Their medical supplies consisted of the bare minimum. She'd long since run out of pre-natal vitamins. Reluctantly, Jim realized it would be impossible to leave. Danny was dead, he knew. In the weeks that followed, as Carrie's condition worsened, there had been times that Jim blamed her.

He still hated himself for that.

One morning, he awoke next to her still form, just as the final, congested breath rattled in her chest. Then she was gone; the pneumonia had finally claimed her. He'd curled up against her cold, lifeless body and cried, bidding farewell to his second wife.

He'd known it was useless to bury her, grimly understanding what needed to be done. But when the madness of grief seized him, he couldn't believe that it

would happen to her. Not Carrie. Not the woman who had saved his life. The woman that had *become* his life in these last five years. It was inconceivably blasphemous to think that she would turn into one of *them*.

Alert for the undead, he'd quickly buried her under the pine tree that they had planted together earlier that summer. They'd held hands beneath that tree only months before, talking of how it would watch over the house when they were old.

Now, it stood watch over her.

That night, Carrie raged above him. By morning, she'd been joined by what was left of the Thompsons from next door. Soon, a small army had gathered in the yard. Jim had used the periscope only once since then, giving in to hopelessness when he saw more than thirty corpses milling around on his lawn.

It was then that he started to go mad.

Cut off from the outside world and besieged by the undead, Jim contemplated suicide as the only real escape. He had no way of knowing if there was anyone still alive in Lewisburg, or the country for that matter. For him, the world had become a tomb, outlined by four cinder-block walls.

As weeks went by, the internet went quiet, as did the phone. His cellular was a powerful unit, able to transmit and receive beyond the concrete bunker, but in the past month it had gone silent. In their rush to get to the safety of the shelter, Jim had forgotten the charger. Now he kept it on sleep mode, trying to save the battery and the spares for as long as he could. He was down to his last one.

The television displayed static, except for a channel out of Beckley, which was still showing the emergency broadcast screen. The AM station in Roanoke had stayed on the air until the previous week. Jack Wolf, the station's afternoon talk radio host, kept a lone vigil next to his microphone. Jim had listened in dreadful fascination as Wolf's sanity slowly crumbled from cabin

fever. The final broadcast ended with a gunshot. As far as Jim knew, he was the only listener to hear it.

* * *

Jim shivered in the air pouring from the open refrigerator. He pulled out his last can of beer and shut the door. The pop of the tab sounded like a gunshot in the silence. His ears rang, drowning out the cries from above. His pulse throbbed in his temples. He placed the cold can against his head, then brought it to his lips and drained it.

“One for the road.” He crunched the can in his fist, tossing it into the corner, where it rattled on the concrete floor.

He returned to the cot and pulled back the pistol slide. The first bullet of the clip slid into the chamber. The clip held thirteen more, but one was all he needed. The pounding in his ears was louder now, and above it, he could hear Carrie. He glanced down at the photos spread out before him on the dirty sheets.

A shot of them at Virginia Beach. That had been the weekend she got pregnant. She smiled at him from the photo and he smiled back. He burst into tears.

The beautiful woman in the photo, the woman who had been so vibrant and energetic and full of life, was now a shambling, rotting husk that ate human flesh.

He put the gun to his head, the barrel cool against his throbbing temple.

Danny stared up at him from the other photo. In it, they were in front of the house: Jim was crouched on one knee with Danny standing beside him. Danny held his soapbox derby trophy, the one that he had received in New Jersey and had brought along that summer to show his Daddy. Both of them were smiling, and yes, his son *did* look just like him.

Their final phone conversation came back to him now. His finger tightened on the trigger. He hadn't

known it would be their last, but each word was burned into his memory.

* * *

Every Saturday, Jim would call Danny and they watched cartoons over the phone together for half an hour. That last time had been one of those mornings. They had discussed the dire peril that the heroes of *Dragonball Z* had found themselves in. They had talked about school and the ‘A’ that Danny had received on his last test.

“What did you have for breakfast this morning?”

“Fruity Pebbles,” Danny had replied. “What did you have?”

“I’m eating Cheerio’s.”

“Yuck,” Danny made a disgusted noise. “That’s gross!”

“As gross as kissing a girl?” Jim teased. Like all boys of nine, Danny was repelled and yet strangely mystified by the opposite sex.

“Nothing’s that gross,” he answered and then grew quiet.

“What are you thinking about, Squirt?” Jim asked.

“Daddy, can I ask you something serious?”

“You can ask me anything you want to, buddy.”

“Is it ever okay to hit a girl?”

“No, Danny, that’s wrong. You should never, ever hit a girl. Remember what we talked about when you got in that fight with Peter Clifford?”

“But there’s this girl at school. Anne Marie Locasio. She won’t leave me alone.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s always picking on me and taking my book bag and chasing me around. The fifth graders laugh at me when she does it.”

Jim had smiled at this. The fifth graders, they who ruled the elementary school playground. He’d felt a

sudden pang of age when he realized that Danny himself would join those ranks the following year.

“Well, you just have to ignore those guys,” he answered. “And if Anne Marie won’t leave you alone, just ignore her too. You’re a pretty big guy. I’m sure you can get away from her if you want.”

“But she won’t leave me alone,” Danny insisted. “She pulls my hair and...”

“What?”

Danny’s voice was a whisper now. He obviously didn’t want his mother or stepfather to hear this.

“She tries to kiss me!”

Jim smiled, valiantly struggling to keep from laughing. He then explained to Danny how that meant that she liked him, and what steps Danny should take to protect himself from further torment without hurting Anne Marie or her feelings.

“Know what, Daddy?”

“What, Squirt?”

“I’m glad that I can ask you stuff like this. You’re my best friend.”

“You’re my best friend too,” Jim said around the lump in his throat.

In the background, Tammy had hollered something. Jim winced at the sound of her voice.

“Mommy needs to use the phone so I have to get going. Will you call me next week?”

“I promise, cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Love you more than Spider Man.”

“Love you more than Godzilla,” Jim replied, playing the familiar game.

“I love you more than ’finity,” Danny answered, winning for the thousandth time.

“I love you more than infinity too, buddy.”

Then there was an empty click and a dial tone, and that was the last time he had ever spoken with his son.

* * *

Through his tears, Jim glanced down at the smiling boy in the photograph. He hadn't been there. He hadn't been there when his son had gone to sleep every night, when he constructed epic Star Wars vs. X-Men battles with his action figures, when he played ball in the backyard, or when he learned to ride a bike.

He hadn't been there to save him.

Jim closed his eyes.

Carrie dug at the earth and called to him, hungry.

His finger tightened.

The cell phone rang shrilly.

Jim jumped, dropping the pistol onto the bed. The phone shrieked again. The green digital readout glowed eerily in the soft light of the lantern.

Jim didn't move. He couldn't swallow, couldn't breathe. It felt like someone had hit him in the chest, kicked him in the groin. Consumed with dread, he tried to move his arms and found them frozen.

A third ring, then a fourth. He was insane, of course. That could be the only explanation. The world was dead. Yes, the power was still on and the satellites still kept a silent and mournful watch over its remains, but the world was dead. There was no way someone could be calling him now, here underground, beneath the remains of Lewisburg.

The fifth ring brought a whimper from his throat. Fighting off the emotional malaise that held him, Jim sprang to his feet.

The phone buzzed again, insistent. He reached for it with a trembling hand.

Don't pick it up! It's Carrie or one of the others. Or maybe something worse. Pick up that phone and they'll pour themselves through it and...

It stopped. The silence was deafening.

The display blinked at him. Someone had left a message.

“Oh fuck.”

He grasped the phone as if he were holding a live rattlesnake. He brought it to his ear and dialed “o.”

“You have one new message,” said a mechanical female voice. The canned inflections were the sweetest sound he had ever heard. “To hear the message, press one. To erase your message, press the pound key. If you need assistance, dial zero and an operator will assist you.”

He jabbed the button and there was a distant, mechanical whir.

“Saturday, September first, nine p.m.,” the recording told him. Jim let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. Then he heard a new voice.

“Daddy...”

Jim gasped, his pulse jack-hammering. The room was spinning again.

“Daddy, I’m scared. I’m in the attic. I...”

A burst of static interrupted. Then Danny’s voice drifted back, sounding very small and afraid.

“I ’membered your phone number but I couldn’t make Rick’s cell phone work right. Mommy was asleep for a long time but then she woke up and made it work for me. Now she’s asleep again. She’s been sleeping since... since they got Rick.”

Jim closed his eyes, the strength vanishing from his legs. Knees buckling, he collapsed to the floor.

“I’m scared Daddy. I know we shouldn’t leave the attic, but Mommy’s sick and I don’t know how to make her better. I hear things outside the house. Sometimes they just go by and other times I think they’re trying to get in. I think Rick is with them.”

Danny was crying and Jim wailed along with him.

“Daddy, you promised to call me! I’m scared and I don’t know what to do....” More static, and Jim reached out to keep himself from sprawling facedown.

“...and I love you more than Spider Man and more than Pikachu and more than Michael Jordan and more than ’finity, Daddy. I love you more than infinity.”

The phone went dead in his hand, the battery using its last spark of life.

Above him, Carrie howled into the night.

* * *

He wasn't sure how long he'd stayed crouched there, with Danny's pleas echoing through his head. Finally, the strength came rushing into his numb limbs and he staggered to his feet.

"I love you, Danny," he said aloud. "I love you more than infinity."

The anguish vanished, replaced by resolve. He grasped the periscope and peered into the darkness. He saw nothing, only a jagged sliver of moonlight. Then a baleful, sunken eyeball glared back at him in hideous magnification. He jumped away from the portcullis, realizing that a zombie was looking back through it. He forced himself to peek again and slowly, the zombie moved away.

Carrie's corpse stood bathed in moonlight, radiant in her putrescence. Her bloated abdomen was horribly distended; the malignant pregnancy still lurking within her, hidden beneath the tatters of the silken robe he'd buried her in. Frayed ribbons fluttered against her gray skin.

He thought about the night that she'd told him she was pregnant. Carrie was lying next to him, the fine sheen of sweat from their lovemaking cooling on their bodies. His head against her stomach, his cheek pressed against her warm, soft curves; the luxuriant feel of skin on skin. Her scent, and the tiny, almost invisible hairs on her belly swaying gently as he breathed. Inside her, their baby grew.

Jim didn't want to think about what was squirming there now.

He rotated the periscope full circle. Life after death had been kind to old Mr. Thompson from next door. His

face held a pallor that, although the color of oatmeal, was still brighter than the one that adorned it when he'd been alive. The persistent stiffness of joints that had plagued the elderly neighbor was apparent as he gripped the shovel, except that now, rather than with the throes of arthritis, his fingers swelled with the slow rot of decay. Knuckles poked through leathery skin the texture of parchment, as Mr. Thompson raised the shovel and thrust it into the ground.

The fact that the zombies could use tools didn't surprise Jim. During the siege, he'd watched in horror, listening helplessly to the creature's efforts to dig into the stronghold. Clumsily, but with slow and steady success, the things had managed to remove the sod, revealing the concrete slab beneath the dirt. That slab had been the only thing that had saved him.

Could they get bored, he wondered. *Indeed, could they reason at all?* He didn't know. Obviously, the thing that had once been his wife was drawn to this place. But was it because she remembered it from before, or mere instinct? The fact that they clawed at the ground seemed to indicate that they knew. *That they remembered.* If that theory were true...

Jim shuddered at the implications.

He was nothing more than a sardine, waiting in the silence of a darkened can. Sooner or later, the things above would find the correct can opener and would consume him.

"...more than 'finity, Daddy," Danny's frantic cries echoed in his mind. *"I love you more than infinity."*

He swiveled back to Carrie and noticed that she was smiling, her blackened lips pulled back against stained teeth. The plump end of an earthworm disappeared between them. She raised her head and laughed.

Were there words buried within that ghoulish howl? He couldn't be sure. There had been times over the past few weeks when he could have sworn the things were talking to each other.

Another worm vanished down her decomposing gullet. Horrified, Jim thought of her eating spaghetti on their first date.

Sudden movement caught his eye. The zombies had noticed the periscope turning and now lurched toward it. He glimpsed more of them in the distance, attracted by the commotion. Soon they would be swarming the grounds, searching once again for an entrance into his stronghold. The chance of escaping without a fight had just vanished. They knew now that he was still alive. Although it was unclear what the zombie's reasoning capabilities were, it was obvious they sensed their prey below.

Fifty or more. Not good odds.

He lowered the view-piece.

With his son's pleas for help still haunting him, Jim began to prepare.

"Hang on squirt. Daddy's coming."