

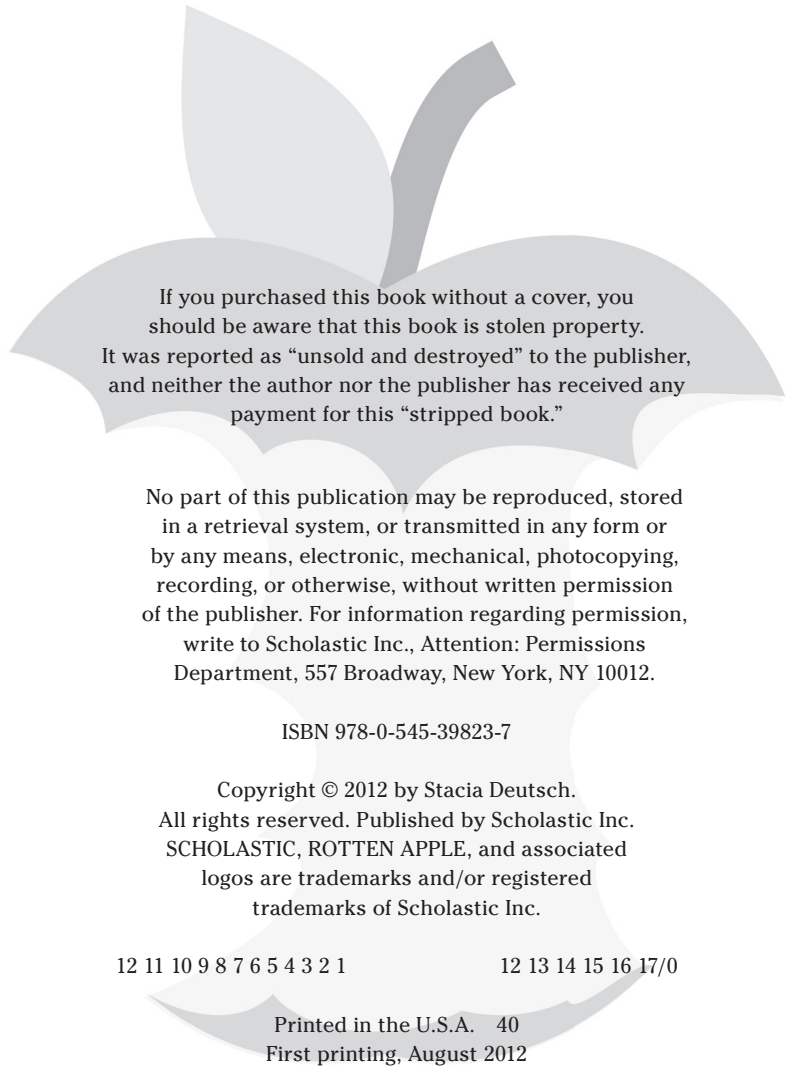
MEAN GHOULS

by Stacia Deutsch



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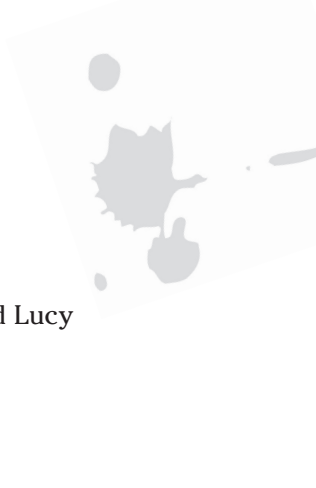
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To my Good Ghouls: Abby, Izzy, and Lucy



CHAPTER ONE

“I’ve got zombitus,” Megan Murry said. Her new cell phone felt warm and heavy in her hand. She’d hoped to get a phone for her thirteenth birthday, but that wasn’t until next year. Getting the gift early was great, except that it was a pity present. Her parents felt sorry for her and wanted to do something “nice.”

Sighing, Megan leaned back into the pillows on her bed and told Rachel, “It’s a virus.”

“Impossible,” her best friend replied. “I’ve never heard of zombie-i-tus? I thought you had the flu.”

“So did I!” Megan exclaimed. “Turns out that when your knees lock straight and you start to moan uncontrollably, it’s not the flu at all. Mom and Dad took me to see a special doctor. Dr. Shelley did a bunch of tests and the results were all positive.”

“No way!” Rachel was shocked. “Hang on, I’m Googling it.” Megan could hear the clicking of Rachel’s keyboard. “Ha! I knew it. No such thing as zombie-i-tus.”

“Try again.” Megan said. “It’s not called zom-beeee-i-tus. Plain zombitus. As in ‘Bite us.’”

“Oh,” Rachel said as Google reloaded. “I see it now.” There was a long pause as Rachel read about the disease. Megan had already scanned through everything she could find online.

“Bummer,” Rachel said at last. “Especially that part about how if you get a head wound it’ll never heal. And that other part about how your skin might decay and fall off, that’s bad, too.”

“No kidding,” Megan agreed. “It’s totally gross. Dr. Shelley said that zombitus is going around, and it’s super-contagious,” Megan told Rachel. “All kids with the virus have to be quarantined in boarding schools. Apparently, there are Zombie Academy schools popping up all over the world. The doctor said I’m lucky there’s one within a few hours of here. I can stay in Southern California and don’t have to go to Australia. . . .” Her voice trailed off as she added, “Real lucky, I guess.”

“I guess,” Rachel echoed.



“Zach says that doctors at the Zombie Academies are looking for the cure.”

Megan’s eight-year-old brother was completely monster obsessed. When the pediatrician said she needed to see a specialist, Zach was the one who suggested that Megan see Dr. Rosemary Shelley because she was both a doctor and the author of his favorite book: *The A-Z Monster Encyclopedia*.

“Zach would know,” Rachel agreed. “I bet he’s seen every scary movie ever made.”

“And now, he’s making his own movie about —” Megan began, but Rachel interrupted.

“Hang on a sec, Meg. Doorbell.”

With everything that had happened over the weekend, Megan had forgotten that the sixth grade theater club was meeting at the Hoffmans’ house before school today. The cast was going to school early to hang posters for the show. Megan didn’t do theater with Rachel. She played soccer instead.

Megan could hear Rachel chatting as she welcomed kids into her house. Megan’s new phone was a basic model, but she didn’t need video chat to imagine Rachel dressed for school in jeans and a T-shirt, her long bright red hair hanging straight down her back.

Megan's hair was as long as Rachel's, but where Rachel's hair was always neat, Megan's auburn mess was crazy curly and uncontrollable. Megan pulled it back in a ponytail, but it never stayed put. She'd always wanted hair like Rachel's —

“Zombitus?!” a boy exclaimed. “What's that?!”

“Shhhh,” Rachel told him. “She's on the phone. She can *hear* you.”

“Give me that,” the boy said.

“No. It's mine.” Megan listened to Rachel's laughter as she wrestled to keep her cell.

After a long minute, the boy announced with a snicker, “You lose!” Then, cheerfully, he said, “Hiya, Megan,” into the receiver.

Megan immediately recognized Brett Hansen's voice because she was a Brett Hansen expert. It was embarrassing, really. She'd read Brett's online profile so many times she had it memorized. School pictures usually stunk, but Brett's photo was amazing. His crew-cut hair was so dark it glowed against the beige background. And his new wire-framed glasses were awesome; they made his head look round like a pumpkin. A supercute pumpkin.

Megan didn't have any classes with Brett, but she had math with his twin sister, Hailey. Hailey was

popular and fashionable . . . and mean to anyone who wasn't popular and fashionable. Once, when Megan wore a shirt that Hailey called "ugly," one of Hailey's friends spilled Kool-Aid on her at lunch. Megan couldn't prove it wasn't an accident, but right after that, Hailey winked and waved.

Since then, Megan avoided Hailey and her friends as much as she could.

Brett wasn't like Hailey at all. It was hard to believe they were related.

"Hi," Megan said in a very small voice.

"Hey," Brett said. "Just wanted to say thanks."

"For what?" Megan managed to ask. She didn't know what he was talking about.

"I didn't have cash on Friday and I was starved. Since you weren't at school, Rachel said I could *borrow* the leftover half of the brownie in your locker." He smacked his lips. "I left an IOU. When you get back to school, I'll buy you something at the snack bar. Anything you want."

"Um. Okay." Megan imagined them standing in line together. Brett made her nervous so she usually avoided talking to him. She didn't want to say something wrong. Hopefully, the snack-bar line would be extra-short that day.

“So what’s this bizarr-o virus you have?” Brett asked.

“Um . . .” Megan didn’t know how to explain in just a few short words, so she didn’t reply at all.

In the background, Megan could hear Rachel’s mother offering the kids bagels with cream cheese and orange juice.

“Megan?” Brett’s mouth was obviously full of bagel. He swallowed hard, then shouted into the phone. “You there? Megan!?” Then, “Did I drop the call?”

“Give back my phone!” Rachel grabbed her cell back from Brett.

“Megan?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

Rachel whispered into the phone, “Don’t be so self-conscious. Brett’s easy to talk to.” Then she laughed. “It cracks me up that your crush is playing my crush in the school play.”

Megan joined in Rachel’s laughter at her awkwardness. “I hope I’m back in time to see it. . . .” Her voice trailed off. Then Megan said softly, “Someone from the zombie school is coming to get me soon. I better go finish packing.”

Rachel's voice softened as she began to realize that Megan was really leaving Dana Point. "Can I call you there?"

"Call. E-mail. Write letters." Megan hoped she'd get news from Rachel every day. "You have to keep me informed about the play!"

"You mean about Brett," Rachel said with a little giggle.

"Maybe," Megan admitted. "Just tell me everything that happens at school, okay? Even if you think it's boring, I want to know."

"I promise." There was a long pause of heavy silence before Rachel said, "Well, bye, then."

"Yeah," Megan said with a deep, sad sigh. "See ya."
Rachel hung up.

Megan crashed back into the pillows on her bed. She hated zombitus and hated leaving Dana Point Middle School. She covered her head with a pillow and moaned, "Uhhhh-uhhhh." She also hated that she couldn't stop making that sound.

"The call of the undead," Zach whispered in a ghostly voice. "Music to my ears."

Megan popped up. "Where'd you come from?" she asked.

“The hall,” Zach replied, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. “Duh.”

Megan slapped Zach with a pillow. “You know what I mean, dork.”

Zach laughed. “Don’t tackle the guy who’s risking his life to bring you breakfast.” He pointed at a loaded tray on her desk, then brushed his hair off his forehead. Everyone said that Zach’s straight brown hair and football-player build came from Mrs. Murry’s side of the family, while Megan’s insane curls and string-bean legs came from her dad’s.

Megan walked over to the tray, even though she wasn’t hungry at all. Suddenly, she turned to face her brother. “Hey!” she exclaimed. “You’re not wearing your sanitary gear!”

“Mom and Dad are terrible hall guards. Besides, I’m not scared of catching the disease,” Zach said. “Honestly, I’m kinda jealous. I mean, I’m the one who loves monsters and yet, you get to be one.”

Megan reached back, swooped the pillow off the floor, and smacked him with it again. “I’ll trade. You can be the zombie,” she said.

“I have a better idea.” Zach puckered and made smacking sounds. “Since the disease is contagious, if you kiss me, I can come with you.”

“You really are a dork,” Megan said, shaking her head. “Mom and Dad need you here. I’ll get better and come back soon.” Crossing her fingers as she glanced at her breakfast, Megan hoped it was true.

The tray was covered with a paper towel. Megan lifted it and gasped. The stuff on the plate looked disgusting. Pink and lumpy. “What is this?” She turned to her brother.

Zach raised his eyebrows. “Brains, of course.”

“No . . .” Megan was horrified.

“I just wanted to help you adapt,” Zach told her. Laughing, he admitted, “It’s spaghetti. With blush sauce and sausage links.”

That didn’t sound so bad, but Megan turned it down.

“There’s more.” Zach told her to look under the upside-down drinking cup. Beneath it were some moldy blueberries. They’d grown white fuzzy fur and were stuck together like a big lump.

“I knew you’d like the dessert.” He winked. “Spoiled fruit is a zombie favorite.”

She still wasn’t hungry, but weirdly the rotten berries really did look yummy. Zombitus had some very strange symptoms! Megan grabbed a spoon

and ate all the blueberries in one big gulp. They were delicious. “Thanks,” she told Zach.

“Megan!” Mrs. Murry called from downstairs. “Your ride’s here.”

Megan looked out her bedroom window. A long black limousine was parked in the driveway. A painted banner on the side said ZA TRANSPORT.

“Zombie Academy.” Megan rolled the name of her new school around on her tongue. “Dana Point Middle School” sounded better.

“Tell Zach to get out of your room!” Mr. Murry shouted up the stairwell. “We know he’s in there.”

“He needs to put on his protective mask and gloves,” her mom added.

“They might not be good hall guards,” Megan said, “but they are good parents.” She grinned.

“Eyes in the back of their heads,” Zach agreed. “There isn’t even a monster name for that kind of vision.” He grabbed a bag that he’d set down by the door when he came in. “I have presents for your trip.”

“More presents?” The pity phone from their parents would be hard to beat.

Megan took Zach’s sack and opened it. Inside were some balloons he’d made from Dr. Shelley’s

protective gloves. He'd decorated a few germ-preventing face masks, each with a different monster sneer or grin. And there was a strangely shaped key on a chain.

"A skeleton key," Zach said with a laugh. "A necessity for every monster!"

"Skeleton?" Megan put the key around her neck as Zach explained how it could open any lock.

Megan had no clue how the key could be useful, but the name *was* funny. "Thanks," she said as she reached in to take the last thing out of the bag.

Stuffed in the bottom, Megan found a T-shirt that said EVIL GENIUS across the front.

"This is your favorite shirt," Megan said. She tried to give it back to him.

"I know it won't fit you, but maybe you could pin it to the wall or something," Zach said, leaping forward and hugging his sister tight. He buried his head in her shoulder. "I'll miss you."

"I'm gonna miss you, too, dork," Megan said and held her brother until the limo driver honked.

It was time to go.