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Opening extract from

Zom-b Clans

Written by

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Published by

Simon & Schuster Children's Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

HB ISBN: 978-0-85707-780-6
TPB ISBN: 978-0-85707-781-3
EBOOK ISBN: 978-0-85707-783-7

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Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

THEN . . .

When Becky Smith's racist father told her to throw an innocent black boy to a pack of zombies, she did it because she had spent her whole life obeying his orders. Instantly horrified by what she had done, she told her father that he was a monster and cut herself off from him. She was killed soon after and turned into one of the living dead. Unlike most of her kind, she regained the use of her brain, the result of a vaccine which had been given to her as a child by Dr Oystein, the world's first sentient zombie.

Desperate to atone for her crime in whatever small way she could, B joined Dr Oystein's Angels, teenagers like her who had pledged to fight for the future of the world's living survivors. It was to be a tense, terrible war. They not only faced the flood of

brain-hungry zombies, there were other forces stacked against them, such as the sinister Mr Dowling and his mutants, the mysterious Owl Man, nightmarish babies and a powerful group of humans known as the Board, who tormented revitaliseds for fun.

After an uncertain start, and a period of captivity in which she was forced to fight for the amusement of the Board, B settled into life as an Angel, trained hard and developed swiftly. For her first proper mission, she and her room-mates were asked to escort a group of humans to New Kirkham, a town outside London. She hooked up with Vinyl along the way, an old friend of hers who had come through the attacks unscathed and was working with the Angels to try and restore order.

Having successfully delivered their group to New Kirkham, B and her team set off for their base in County Hall. But, as they were returning, B spotted Owl Man and a troop of humans dressed as members of the Ku Klux Klan. Though she had only her gut instinct to base it on, she was certain that they were

heading for the town, and that Owl Man's primary aim in going there was to get hold of Vinyl. She had started to believe that Owl Man had been following her around London, and that he wished to use her friend to somehow manipulate her.

The other Angels were unconvinced by B's arguments, but agreed to retrace their footsteps, to make sure everything was OK. To their dismay, they found the robed vigilantes rounding up anyone who wasn't white or British. They were assisted by some of the settlement's residents, who had welcomed the Klan with open arms — in fact, a number of them had been secretly working with the KKK in advance, and they were the ones who had let in the savage invaders.

Some of the townsfolk had fought back, but most stood by neutrally, letting events play out, abandoning people who had previously been their friends and allies. It seemed, in this horrific world of the living dead, that most of the survivors were more interested in saving themselves than in fighting for those who needed their help.

B and her fellow Angels didn't do neutral. Without a thought for their own safety, they scaled the wall, slipped into town unseen, moved in on the racist tormentors and attacked.

NOW . . .

ONE

The Klanners drove to New Kirkham in jeeps, vans and trucks, which they parked in the town's main square. While many of them rampage through the streets, on the hunt for anyone they don't approve of, the rest force their prisoners into cages and load them up. They cackle as they work, beating their captives, firing shots into the air, whooping wildly. They've already notched up plenty of murders, and corpses lie strewn across the ground.

Owl Man is grimly overseeing it all from the back of a jeep. He's a strange-looking figure. He has

enormous eyes, all white except for a dark dot at the centre of each, a thin frame and a pot belly, white hair and long, creepy fingers. He dresses in a striped suit with a pink shirt.

Owl Man is studying his pet dog as it roots among the guts of a guy it killed moments before. The dog looks like an ordinary sheepdog, but when it opens its mouth, it has fangs like a zombie's, and bones slide from its claws when it attacks. Owl Man called the dog Sakarias.

'Clever doggie,' Owl Man murmurs as Sakarias rips the dead man's heart from his chest, tosses it high into the air, catches it and wolfs it down. Then he hears my war cry as I charge into the square, the rest of my crew behind me. He looks up and smiles. 'Ah,' he says in his smooth voice, sounding pleased. 'The undead cavalry comes riding to the rescue. This should be interesting.'

Ignoring Owl Man, we tear into the startled members of the Ku Klux Klan and the men and women of New Kirkham who have been helping them.

Ashtat's hands and feet are a blur as she unleashes

one perfectly orchestrated karate chop after another. She was worried that she might not be able to bring herself to kill a living human, no matter how evil they might be. She needn't have been concerned. She's like a biblical warrior angel, raining down hell-fire on anyone who gets in her way.

Pearse and Conall flank her, picking off anyone she misses. The ginger-haired pair have more first-hand experience of battle than the rest of us, but I'm sure they've never had to deal with a situation like this before.

Carl leaps around like a crazy killer frog and strikes swiftly every time he lands. The speedy Jakob races after Carl, backing him up, targeting those who scatter ahead of the acrobatic teenager.

Shane and I wade into those standing close to the trucks, throwing one jab after another, ripping open throats, breaking bones, crushing skulls.

That last bit is crucial. All hell is breaking loose, but each one of us takes the time to crack open the skull of every person we kill, destroying the brain inside. Otherwise the corpses would revive and attack

the humans, causing even more problems than the Klanners.

The humans in hoods fly into a panic. They weren't expecting an attack of this nature. Most of them have guns. If they closed ranks and worked as a team, they could pick us off easily. But they're all over the place. They wheel away from one another, firing crazily, screaming, jumping at shadows. It's utter chaos, which suits us perfectly.

The dog became alert as soon as it heard my challenging roar. Looking up from its meal, it glanced around, took in everything that was happening, identified the various threats, then hurled itself at Carl, who was its nearest target.

Sakarias chases after the springing Carl. It snaps at his heels and just misses as he soars overhead. As it turns to follow him, Jakob grabs it by the scruff of its neck and tries to wrestle it to the ground. The dog shrugs him off – it must be a lot stronger than it looks – then locks its jaws round his left arm. Jakob screams as it chews through his flesh and bone, shaking its head, trying to rip the arm free of its socket.

'Sakarias!' Owl Man calls, then whistles sharply. The dog instantly releases Jakob and bounds back to its master, leaving a relieved Jakob to grit his teeth against the pain – we don't feel it as much as the living, but serious wounds definitely hurt – and rejoin the action.

I grab a Klanner – a short, thin, wiry woman – and smash her head open against the side of a truck. Turning from her corpse, I fix on Owl Man and start towards him. The dog spots me and draws to a halt ahead of the jeep where its master is standing. It squares up to me, snarling, blood dripping from its fangs, the fur around its face soaked with the red stuff and covered in scraps of gut, sharp bones jutting out of the tips of all its paws.

'Easy, Sakarias,' Owl Man purrs, studying me with an amused look.

I take the dog's measure and decide I don't fancy the fight. I spot a discarded gun and pick it up. Dr Oystein and Master Zhang abhor guns. They've trained us to fight without them, told us never to resort to using such foul weapons. But in my book

there's a time and a place for everything. Steadying my arm, I aim at the mutant dog's face.

'No,' Owl Man barks, his smile vanishing. 'Drop it.'

I sneer and start to hurl an insult at him. Then I stare with astonishment as my fingers open and the gun falls. Confused, I bend to retrieve it.

'Leave it alone, Becky,' Owl Man mutters, and for some sickening reason I stop short of picking it up. 'Kneel,' Owl Man whispers, and I find myself obeying his soft command.

As I stare at Owl Man with shock and terror, he climbs down from the jeep and strolls towards me, clicking his tongue for the dog to follow. The pair stop in front of me and Owl Man sears me with his unnatural gaze.

'Little girls should not play with guns,' he growls. 'You have betrayed the wishes of your superiors. You should be ashamed of yourself.'

'How . . . are you . . . doing this?' I snarl, willing myself to attack him, but unable to get my limbs to respond.

'Oh, I'm a man of many subtle talents,' Owl Man says with a wicked chuckle. He walks around me, then whistles again at the dog and makes a gesture with his left hand. Sakarias opens its mouth wide and fastens its fangs round my throat. I moan and stare at the sky, expecting it to be the last thing I see before the dog severs my head and digs into my brain.

'If you ever threaten Sakarias again, I will tell him to finish you off,' Owl Man says. 'He is a sweet animal who only kills when ordered or if we are threatened. Those of us with a choice must be kind to the dumb creatures of the world. Otherwise we are no better than the reviveds who tear their heads open for the sweet brains within.'

Owl Man clicks his fingers and Sakarias withdraws. The dog gives me an evil look, then follows its master back to the jeep, where the pair hop onboard.

'Your body is your own again,' Owl Man says with a mocking smile. To my relief, I find myself in control once more. Flexing my fingers, I get to my feet and shake my arms and legs. I feel like my heart is

beating fast, but that was ripped from my chest when I was turned into a zombie, so I know it's my imagination.

'What the hell happened?' Shane shouts, pulling up beside me.

'I don't know,' I croak, then cock my head at him. 'Where were you?'

'Back there,' he says.

'Why didn't you help me?'

He looks sheepish. 'I couldn't move.'

'Owl Man was controlling you too?' I ask sympathetically.

He grins shakily. 'Not exactly. I was just too stunned to do anything.'

I roll my eyes and curse him, then look around to see how the battle is going. It seems to be favouring us. About a hundred of the white citizens of New Kirkham took a stand against the Klan when they invaded. They were led by the mayor, Biddy Barry. The Klan had the rebels clustered against a wall when we attacked, but now they've overthrown their captors and massed behind us. With Biddy's roaring