

CINCO
DÍAS DE
ZOMBI

THE SILVERCREST EXPERIMENT: BOOK ONE

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LOVE & WANDER BOOKS

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THE QUESTION

“And what about Sigmund Ratseneager?”

“Who?”

“Ziggy.”

“Ziggy is the last best hope for humanity.”

Silence.

“And he owes me ten bucks.”

ZIGGY, the one-eyed Austrian mischief maker. The person to blame for all my troubles. Asshole of inordinate magnitude. Proudly guilty of ruining my life. Ziggy, my one true friend.

And Ziggy the zombie. As zombie as any zombie is a zombie. Grunting and ripping the liver out of a screaming overweight cook.

Before he went down swinging his meat cleaver at the ravenous party of zombies demanding fresh flesh service in his place of employment, the cook had been the sort of fishing enthusiast who liked Buffet, Chesney, and Shakira on the weekends, and Sheryl Crow and the Eagles during the week.

Under his enchilada explosion-stained apron, he wore baggy cargo shorts (counter to the local health ordinance), kitchen clogs (evidence that he wanted his footwear, if nothing else, to have some association with some fine cuisine credibility), and a shirt that said, "If it ain't bass, it better be ass."

Over that fine slogan, I made out the remains of a faded cartoon drawing of an impossibly busty blond woman hooking a boat containing a fat fisherman. The fisherman, in turn, had hooked the back of the blond's daisy duke shorts. They reeled each other into some strange fisherman's wet dream.

Ziggy and a zombified off-duty cop who had dropped by to shoot pool and drink beer had taken the chef de cuisine of the El Coyote Gordo down and made a meal of his once sizable belly.

I will give that fisherman cook this, he had nerve. It takes more than a little to run at a flesh-eating ghoul instead of turning tail, no matter how well armed you think you are. He charged out of the kitchen with his cleaver in one hand and his cell phone in the other after seeing his bartender go down in a fountain of blood. Expecting to take the cop zombie out mano-a-zombie, he ran into both the cop and Ziggy. I wanted to help but ended up knocked out of commission in a tangle under a table with the zombie who had once been El Coyote Gordo's only waitress.

All of this adds up to your usual zombie outbreak chaos, but with my pal Ziggy at its center.

By the time I came to and finished dealing with the waitress, the cook had stopped screaming. With Ziggy chomping down hard into the cook's internal organs, and the off-duty cop lost in the burbling bloody spring of the cook's throat, I saw my chance. I lifted my aluminum bat, yelled, and took a running swing at the ex-cop zombie's head as he sat up blinking in search of the sound.

One swing. Up and under the head and...off it flew. Tee ball home run.

OK. Not quite off. Not really off at all, but not functional either. Hitting where the spine connects to the skull was a trick I picked up a while back on an incident in Helsinki. A strong upward blow rarely disconnects the head from the body (unless you are lucky enough to be wielding a sword—which I wasn't this time), but it usually disables the zombie. The jaw can bite and limbs move, but they lose all coordination and balance. It

neutralizes the threat, reducing it to a snapping jaw head hanging from an incapacitated body.

When I looked back, I saw the head flopped to one side like a melon in a hairy sack. The whole torso teetered there a moment before falling forward on to Zombie Ziggy. I came closer and waited for Ziggy to pop up so I could get a clear swing at him.

Funny thing about zombies, they react poorly (read: lurch, bite, and scratch) at any interference while eating. I mean, he could have kept eating, but the torso on his back constricted him, limiting his ability to bite, tear, and feed. So, I knew he would pop up to push it off.

Sure enough. Like some sick dance, down fell the cop's torso and up popped Zombie Ziggy, hard and fast enough to send the cop's torso back the other way, where it bounced but remained arched awkwardly backwards. And then I saw the cook's first twitch, enough of him connected and pumping fluids to become infected. In another minute, Ziggy Zombie would lose interest in the tainted flesh.

I looked at the back of Ziggy's gore-covered head. Aluminum baseball bat up and ready. He would go down with one clean hit. I hesitated.

Ziggy turned toward me the way they do, no longer flexible enough to twist the upper spine like a non-infected person. It was enough, though. His one good eye kept moving my way, all the way to the corner of the eye socket. Searching for me. It was not the empty starving thing, blind to all but heartbeats and bloody flesh, that typically looks out of a zombie head.

There was something alive in there. Something Ziggy.

His mischief. The way he joked about the darkest most awful thing you could mention. Not because it was funny, but because it was the opposite of funny and the only way to keep from falling into despair was to turn that day's bleakness into a

laugh. Hospital bombings? How many children lost? Crack a joke about it.

The worst was over and you lived to see it. Laugh so you can save all those people not already lost. I saw it there in that crazy eye of his. That awful horrible joke whose punch line is, "Surprise, asshole, you are alive."

The cook's body shifted gears into a spastic high-frequency twitch. I quietly stepped aside as Ziggy Zombie continued turning. Searching for me with that one good eye. Sniffing the air, unsure of the smell since the fighting had drenched me with a bloody spray of Eau de Zombie. I had him. I took a breath and tightened my grip.

My arms did not move. Could not move.

I knew he would continue turning, the disease in total control of how and why he moved. Despite the joker spirit still looking out from inside him, Zombie Ziggy would smell, see, and attack my living flesh.

All zombies must die, but how could I kill my last friend on earth?

WHY DID I have two sandbags pulling down on each side of my lower back? What was this noisy machine void around me? Why did I feel my kidneys?

As a rule, I take any awareness of my internal organs as a bad sign.

Slumped and twisted over myself, I had a hard time taking the breath I needed in order to come to and understand the situation. That, and those dragging anchors on my lower back. Pulling, pushing, and uncrumpling myself, I found an upholstered seat under me. Noise and vibration. A moving car. Classical music screeched from the stereo. I inhaled, and with the air came the smells of dust, oil, and old wool. Ziggy's car. And tobacco. Ziggy.

"Am I awake?"

"Yes, Mr. Singleton. Yes, I believe zat you are awake now."

"What the hell is going on?"

"We are on ze road to ze ah-pocalypse."

"Am I blindfolded?" I reached up and pulled off an airline issue eye mask, then blinked, squinting at the daylight flooding the car. Ah.

"To help you rest."

My body shivered at the rush of sun on my skin. “Which road?”

“Don’t you mean which ah-pocalypse?”

“No. Which road?”

“Away from Silvercrest, I will tell you zat.”

“Come on, Ziggy.” Rasping and coughing, I discovered out loud, “I’m so thirsty.”

“In ze ice chest in ze backseat.”

“How long have I been out?” Twisting back around, I opened and checked inside the blue plastic ice chest that covered half the back seat of Ziggy’s 1999 Toyota Corolla wagon.

“Out of what?”

“This looks like it’s just water back here. And cold gummy worms.”

“I zought you liked zose.”

“As an available alternative to Silvercrest cafeteria food? Sure. Also, I need to pee like crazy. What did you give me?”

“What you asked for.”

At that moment, I could not remember requesting anything of Ziggy. Ever. “More specific, please?”

“Ambien. Or somezing an awful lot like it, anyway. I was eem-proh-ving.”

“You’re lying.”

“How can you say zat?”

“As usual.”

“You slepted zrough ze whole zing. As requested.”

I guzzled down one of the small water bottles I had found in the ice chest, threw the empty in the back, and opened another. “I need to pee. And I need caffeine.”

“Ah. Right. Under your feet somewhere zere’s a whaddyacallit full of hot coffee. A zermost.”