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Opening extract from

The Savage Kingdom

Written by

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Published by

Simon & Schuster Children's Books

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Prologue

Drue Beltane sat alone in the dark, cocooned in a threadbare goose-down quilt. Her heart raced. She drew a gulp of musty air and held her breath for a silent count of five, before softly, silently, exhaling – a trick she'd been taught to calm her nerves when taking tests at school.

The trick failed. And, as thoughts even darker than the ancient priest-hole in which she was hiding began once again to take shape in her mind, the fearful twelve-year-old sought touchstones, familiar points of reference, to help suppress her welling sense of foreboding. She picked at the frayed hole in the left pocket of her flannel pyjamas; worked the hinged, clam-like case of her mobile phone; pressed her toes into the pitted contours of the smooth limestone floor beneath her bare feet.

Just like the walls that surrounded her, and the ceiling that she could reach if she were to stand and stretch, the floor was cold, vaguely damp – though not actually wet – to the touch, the moisture held inside the fabric of the stone, somewhere deep beneath the surface, like a memory.

A secret chamber little bigger than a double wardrobe, the priest-hole was concealed behind a false panel adjacent to the soot-blackened fireplace in the Beltanes' sixteenth-century flint-faced cottage.

Drue had lived in the cottage in Kingley Burh – a semi-rural scattering of farms and houses that lay between the industrial outskirts of Portsmouth and the cathedral city of Chichester – her entire life, and never before had the hide-away unsettled her. On the contrary, it had been the focus of many a dare and game throughout Drue's early childhood, a doorway to the world of unbridled imagination. But now, forced to confront its true purpose, she finally understood what it must have been like back in the days of old, when deadly feuds and religious persecution had swept through the country like a plague.

Drue's fingertips crept to the inscription that had long ago been gouged into the heavy ashlar block above the entrance hatch, like initials notched in a tree trunk, or a prison sentence scratched into mortar:

Ex umbra in solem

Drue had asked her history teacher to help with the translation of the text, and the result was just as cryptic in English as the original Latin:

From the shadows into the light.

Why she was hiding was also something of a mystery to Drue, but the gravity in her father's voice when he ordered

her to remain hidden, completely still and completely silent, until his return was something Drue had never heard before, and it frightened her to the core of her being.

There was only one way in or out of the priest-hole, and the panel that served as the door was secured from inside by a tapered wooden peg, slotted through the rusty eye of a wrought-iron latch. Drue had checked and double-checked that the peg was firmly in place a dozen times since climbing inside, but still she ran her fingers over it once more.

Don't open the hatch for anyone but me, her father had commanded. *Promise me that whatever happens, whatever you hear, you'll stay hidden until I return.*

Darkness. Silence. And then . . .

A crash!

Drue reacted with a start. She listened for her father's voice. The call of her name. Instead, she heard . . . grunts. Snuffling. Scratching.

The sound of breaking glass.

Something heavy – a chair perhaps – being knocked over and dragged across the quarry tiles of the kitchen floor.

The creak of the stairs.

Muffled footfalls on the floorboards above her.

The slam of a door (her bedroom door!) being thrown open and crashing into the desk where she sat most days to do homework.

Whoever, or whatever, it was, was now in her room.

Drue thought about springing out of the priest-hole and bolting for the front door. Then she remembered her promise to her father, and she forced herself to sit tight and listen.

The house was alive with movement now. Whatever was out there, it wasn't alone, and the disturbing, audible destruction of the property and the family's belongings was accompanied by a raucous cacophony of grunts, yaps, squeals and hissing. The invasion seemed to go on forever. And then, as abruptly as it had started, it stopped.

Drue could feel her heart pounding, was afraid it beat so fast and so hard it might be heard. The wood-ash dust of the adjacent chimney caught in her throat and she had to summon every ounce of willpower to stifle a cough.

She waited.

Listened.

Silence.

It didn't seem possible, but somehow the darkness grew darker. The cell began to feel more like a tomb than a sanctuary. Drue wanted to cry out. To throw open the door. To run! But she clung to her promise, to the hope and security bound up in it, her father's words a silent mantra echoing in her mind like a silent mantra: *Stay hidden until I return.*

Still, the claustrophobic gloom and uncertainty gnawed away at her resolve. Every second spent in that dank, dark chamber now seemed like an eternity. She placed a trembling hand on the iron latch, was almost ready to remove the wooden peg and abandon her hiding place when she heard . . . a log tumble from the basket beside the fire, no more than an arm's length from where she sat cowering in the shadows. But what had disturbed it?

A hiss. More snuffling. A guttural grunt. Scratching. Something was clawing at the hatch itself.

A fleeting ray of hope: perhaps her cat Will-C had come home to find her. But no. Drue knew his every touch, every gesture, every sound – his meowing, purring, even his funny, wheezy little snore. This was different. These were the sounds of a hunter. A predator tracking a scent. The stuff of nightmares and scary films.

Drue slowly moved her hand away from the latch and buried her face in the quilt. She prayed that whatever hellish creature lay on the other side of the false oak panel that separated them, it wouldn't find a way through.

Movement on the stairs again.

More scuttling on the quarry tiles in the kitchen.

Dogs barking somewhere outside.

Then . . . silence.

Drue bit on a corner of her quilt and prayed her father would call out her name. But the longer she waited without hearing his voice, the deeper the seeds of doubt took root: what if he never came back? What then? What if he'd returned already, only to come face to face with the intruders? What if he lay injured, in desperate need of her help?

Another breath. And then, with the lightest touch and the greatest care, Drue eased the peg from the locking plate, swung open the hatch and climbed out into the moonlit living room.

For a moment she kept quite still and listened to the distant clamour: cries, screams, hollered commands, the unmistakable unsettling *crack* of a twelve-bore shotgun. Had their neighbour, old Farmer Callow, seen off the danger? Whatever had happened, the house itself was quiet

now, and it seemed to Drue that whoever, whatever, had been there had gone. The coast, if messy, seemed clear.

Drue picked her way across the room. She wanted to switch on a light, but didn't dare. The tall barley-twist lamp by the window had been toppled and was speared through the shattered screen of the TV. The sofa and chairs had been slashed and spewed stuffing. Her dad's prized collection of *National Geographic* magazines was scattered across the floor.

Drue made her way to the kitchen. The door was ajar and she peeked round it.

Almost every pane of glass in both windows had been smashed. The curtains that Drue had helped her mother sew hung in shredded rags.

Compost spilled from toppled potted herbs, one of which, a variegated thyme, now appeared to be sprouting from the toaster. Cutlery and shattered crockery – including her maternal great-grandmother's fine bone china – littered the floor, along with the entire contents of the walk-in larder: brown rice, buckwheat flour, pasta, cereal, broken eggs, biscuits. Cranberry juice bled from a crushed, upturned carton in the open fridge; splintered jars of tahini, preserves and organic honey formed sticky islands in a lake of spilled rice milk.

Drue stared in amazement. It was so awful, so radical, it was almost funny.

Then a bag of blue tortilla chips beneath the kitchen table suddenly began to shuffle as if possessed.

It startled Drue. She took a step backwards and instantly felt the jagged edge of a shard of glass beneath her bare feet.

Though the cut wasn't deep, as the glass nicked the high arch of her instep, Drue gave a faint yelp.

This brought the tortilla bag to an abrupt halt.

Then, slowly, a slim, whiskered, twitching snout appeared over the edge of the crumpled foil. It belonged to the dormouse that had been concealed inside the bag, greedily munching on the looted contents.

Indignant, Drue clapped her hands to frighten it away.

But, instead of darting for cover, the dormouse stayed right where it was. It fixed Drue with a defiant, beady-eyed stare and, cheeks still bulging with corn chips, continued to nibble on its late-night snack.

Drue clapped her hands again and made a gesture to shoo the dormouse away. Still the tiny creature paid her no mind. Drue picked up a broom and wielded it as if she were about to strike (though she didn't actually want to hurt the dormouse; she just wanted to remind it who was in charge), but still it continued to chew its mouthful of food. And then, when it was finished, it squealed.

A single, shrill, plaintive *squeeeeeeeeal*, which stopped Drue in her tracks.

In an instant, there were ten . . . twenty . . . thirty mice spilling into the kitchen from all directions. Then came the rats, both black and brown, bristling with menace. Finally, a mink appeared, long and lean, cold eyes narrowed to slits.

Drue lowered the broom.

For a moment she thought that she must be dreaming. That the whole thing – the promise to her father, hiding in the priest-hole, the ransacked house, everything – must be a nightmare, a terrifying figment of her vivid imagination,

and she actually said out loud: 'OK, you can wake up now!'

But, as the rodents closed ranks and began to advance, and the mink rose up on its hind legs, hissed and bared its needle-sharp teeth, Drue realized, to her horror, that what was happening was all too real.

Part I
The Sixth Wave

Chapter One

The beginning of the end of the world as we knew it began with the disappearance of a three-legged, short-haired, house-trained cat named Will-C. At least, in retrospect, that's how it would seem to Drue Beltane.

In truth, the cataclysmic events that would change the course of life on Earth in the early part of the twenty-first century could be traced back to a much earlier time: the dawn of industrialization. An evolutionary leap that struck fear into the hearts of all the creatures who shared the planet with humans, the untamed birds, beasts, fish and reptiles of the wild: the *Animalians.*

Not that the Animalians themselves, at least not the vast majority, knew just what fate had in store for them. Their lives for many generations had revolved around their primal instincts, the survival of the fittest: food, water, shelter and procreation. These were their key considerations. Their only considerations.

Few had ever questioned the order of things, the nature of their individual journeys and how they might relate to the

whole. Such matters were far too abstract; as remote and inconsequential as raindrops falling on a distant sea. Until the day the winds gathered up those same raindrops to create a swell, which grew into a wave that would crash on to the shores of every country in the world; a devastating tidal wave of vengeance.

The first Will-C knew of the brewing conflict was a summons from the local Feline Proxy (each species in each shire had one such elected representative) to attend a midnight summit in the ancient yew forest of Kingley Burh, deep in the heart of the rolling chalklands of the South Downs.

The fact that the order had been issued by the District Proconsul of the West Sussex Chapter of the Council of Elders, and even Truckles like himself who lived with humans were to attend, only added to the intrigue, and Will-C wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

One thing was clear, however: it had to be a matter of grave importance, as gatherings on such a large scale, which brought together such a vast array of species – foxes, weasels, wild boar, badgers, ravens, deer, dogs, cats and so on, many of whom were avowed enemies – carried considerable risk.

Not that even the bravest of them would dare to breach the established code of conduct under which the Great Summit operated; breaking the temporary truce that applied on such occasions was an offence punishable by death. But if a human were to happen upon them, to witness the session in progress ... well, the consequences would be unthinkable, disastrous.

For as long as human beings had walked the Earth, they had sought to conquer or destroy what they didn't control or understand. Because of this – despite their origins, their evolution, their technological prowess – the fundamental laws and traditions of the animal kingdom had remained a closely guarded secret that had been kept from humans at all costs. As a result, the Summit meetings were always conducted in the strictest secrecy, and were also extremely rare.

In fact, Will-C had only attended one such assembly in his lifetime: crisis talks held in the wake of the Borneo slash and burn forest fires of 2006. This had devastated massive swathes of the natural habitat of South-East Asia, wiped out one-third of the orang-utan population of that area and, according to eyewitness accounts, caused a feathered blizzard to rain down from the smoke-filled heavens, as flocks of exotic birds were overcome by the intense heat and choking fumes rising from the raging inferno.

As Will-C had only been a kitten back then, he had lacked both the concentration and the vocabulary to fully understand the wider implications of the impassioned high-level debate at the Great Summit. But the memory of his late father (a barrel-chested granite-grey tomcat, considered by many to be one of the finest Feline Proxies ever to hold the post) gravely recounting the details of the man-made disaster, and placing it into context with some that had preceded it, had left a lasting, extremely vivid impression.

Despite his gene pool and signs of early promise, Will-C had never risen to high office, but his prodigious memory for detail – which had made him a natural Clerk of the Feline Council – enabled him to recall by rote the names,

dates and places that had peppered his father's address to the assembly that night.

The Bhopal disaster in India in 1984, for example, in which forty tonnes of deadly pesticide was accidentally released into the environment, causing widespread devastation.

The Sandoz factory chemical spill in Switzerland two years later, which had turned the River Rhine blood-red and slaughtered over half a million fish by the time it reached the North Sea.

And the deliberate, indiscriminate flooding of 600 square miles of pristine, densely populated tropical rainforest. This consigned entire generations of hundreds of thousands of different species to a grim and watery grave and some disappeared from the face of the Earth forever. All in the name of progress, and all to transform the once wild and noble Suriname River in northern South America into a vast stagnant lake of dead water the humans called a reservoir.

The thought still made Will-C shudder. He hated water at the best of times, but an unforeseen, inescapable flood was truly the stuff of nightmares.

And so it was that in the days leading up to the Great Summit Will-C had been filled with a growing sense of dread. What was it that Man had done this time to threaten the natural order of things? And what action would the Council of Elders deem necessary to right these wrongs?

Will-C knew better than to waste too much time on speculation. *Worry gives a small thing a big shadow*, his father used to say; but it hadn't made the wait any easier.

Will-C had lived with the Beltane family for more than

twenty-one feline years – over half his lifetime in fact – and the bond they had formed in that time, particularly the friendship that had developed between him and the human child Drue, had a special quality, a depth to it, that was unlike any inter-species relationship he'd ever heard of. And that was what really troubled him.

Deep down inside, Will-C sensed that whatever was to follow would be history in the making, and he only hoped that it wouldn't place his beloved adopted human family in mortal danger, or force him to make a choice between their kind and his own.