
Flesh and Blood

John Harvey

Chapter 1

Soft and insinuating, the cat brushed against his face and Elder, still three-parts asleep, used his arm to push it away. Moments later, it was there again, nudging itself against him, its purr loud inside his head. Sharp, the cat's claws kneaded the soft flesh at the top of his shoulder, the back of his neck. Beneath him, the pillow was rank with sweat. With an effort he turned and lifted the animal clear, its thick coat matted and damp, skin flaccid and loose across its meagre ribs. The bright slits of its eyes yellow in the almost dark.

As Elder struggled himself upright, the cat twisted inside his grasp and bit deep into the base of his thumb. With a curse, he dropped it down on to the bed and it jumped, hissing, to the floor. When he brought his hand to his mouth, the taste of blood was sour and bright.

And now there were other cats, close in groups of two or three, emerging from the shadow round the edges of the room. Elder could hear the faint rasp of their feral breathing, ragged and low. Throwing back the sheet, he began to pull on his clothes, the cats close about him now, rubbing against his ankles, running over his bare feet.

When he held the door open and tried to urge them out, they 1 slithered back between his legs and moved in a softly undulating mass towards the stairs.

In the room above, eyes stared back at him, unblinking, and, as he stepped forward, something pliant and smooth gave beneath the bones of his foot. Hairless, a swathe of newborn kittens writhed, mewling and blind, along bare boards. Vomit caught in his throat. From somewhere close above his head, a full-grown cat launched itself towards him, claws unsheathed. A ribbon of blood fell from his upper arm, another laced across his cheek. The door he had come through stood closed.

Shaking, Elder crossed towards a further set of stairs. At the top, the tread gave way beneath his weight and he had to brace himself against the walls before jumping clear.

Through gaps in the roof, light spilled, weak, across the floor.

Nothing moved.

On the far side of the room was a narrow bed. Not empty. Quite. Beneath a blanket, grey and threadbare, something lay curled. The skin on Elder's legs and arms seized with cold. His body cramped. He knew, or felt he knew, what lay beyond his sight. The cats, almost silent now, had followed him into the room and massed about him, quiescent, waiting. The space between the bed and where he stood was vast, a pace or so away; the blanket rough and cold between finger and thumb. When he pulled it back, it shredded in his grasp.

The girl's legs were pulled up tight towards her chest, her breasts small and empty, bone of her buttocks breaking through blotched skin. The stench fouled his mouth and filled his nose. One side of her face, the face of a girl, a young woman of sixteen or maybe seventeen, had all but disappeared. There were bite marks, small and deep, around the socket of the eye.

As Elder bent forward, one of her arms reached suddenly towards him, hand outstretched and feeling for his own. Seized him and would not let him go.