

# HUMAN REMAINS

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## Annabel

When I got home I could smell the bins on the cold air, a faint bad smell that made me wrinkle my nose.

Inside, I opened the back door, rattling the box of cat biscuits in the hope that it would bring her scurrying. It was a clear night, so she would most likely not make an appearance at the back door until I was in the bath, when she would howl and scratch to be let in. Despite the cat flap and my efforts to get her to use it – propping it open, coaxing her and bribing her and even shoving her forcefully through it – she ignored it and came in and out only when I was home to open the door for her. I'd even tried getting rid of the litter tray, but she'd just piss on the lino in the kitchen and then pull it up at the corner with her claws to try and cover her excretions. After that I gave up.

I stood in the doorway for a few minutes. 'Lucy?' I called, experimentally. 'Lucy!'

Nothing. The bloody cat could stay out there all night, I thought, knowing for a fact that I would be down here in my bath towel in a couple of hours' time, dripping wet and freezing, rattling the cat biscuits while she sat on the lawn and stared at me, punishing me for having taken too long.

I made myself a cup of peppermint tea and some cheese on toast, and ate it sitting at the kitchen table with one eye on the open door in case the cat might walk in and I could shut it and trap her inside. When I'd finished I scraped the crusts of the toast into the kitchen bin, sniffing. Something definitely smelt bad. The last time I'd smelt something this rotten, the cat had brought in a frog and I hadn't realised until I found it, half-slimy, half-dried, under the dresser in the dining room,

right at the back. I'd had to get on my hands and knees with a wad of kitchen towel and rubber gloves on to get rid of it.

I stood in the doorway again, wondering if Lucy had killed a pigeon this time and left it by the bins, not trusting me to dispose of it appropriately. I put on my slippers, took my torch from the drawer and ventured down the steps into the darkness, listening to the sound of the traffic from the main road beyond the trees. In the alleyway between my house and next door I lifted the lid off each of the two bins: the black one, and the green one for compostable waste. Both smelt unpleasant, but that wasn't it. I shone the torch around the base of the bins. No pigeon, no rat – nothing dead.

The house next door was unoccupied, had been for some time, but as I stood there I realised I could see a light coming from inside. A dim golden light, as though a single bulb shone in a room somewhere inside, undisturbed.

I tried to remember when I'd last been out here. Sunday afternoon? But it had been broad daylight, sunny, and even if the light had been on next door then I wouldn't have noticed it. Maybe an estate agent had been in, or a property developer, and left it on?

When I'd first moved in, a couple had been living next door. I fought for the memory – what was she called? Shelley, that was it. She'd introduced herself to me once. It had been summer, a hot day. I was just getting home and she was working in the front garden. She stopped me for a chat even though it was the last thing I wanted. Tired, fed up as usual, all I longed for was to get inside and prise my shoes away from my hot, aching feet and have a cold drink. All I remembered from that conversation was her name, and that her 'partner' – which always sounds odd to me, not 'boyfriend' or 'husband' or 'fiancé' – was called Graham. I never met him. I think he moved out that autumn, and although I saw her coming and going a few times up until last winter I assumed she'd moved out some time after Easter because I hadn't seen her after that, and the garden she'd previously tended had grown wild and tangled.

At first it was just a feeling, a creeping sense of dread, and then I heard a noise from the direction of the empty house. Something was wrong. I peered across into the darkness as the cat pushed her way through the gate and trotted over to me, winding herself around my legs. She was covered in something, some mess, sticky and foul-smelling, wrapping herself round and round my skirt. My hand flew up to my nose and mouth to block out the smell.

At that point I thought about going back to my kitchen and phoning the police. Looking back, that was exactly what I should have done. But it was Friday night, and because I worked at the police station I knew that all the patrols would be busy, if not mopping the blood and puke off the streets of Briarstone town centre, then back at the station booking people into custody. I'd worked with the police for years and never once had to call them out myself. I didn't even know what to say. That there was a bad smell next door? They'd more than likely suggest phoning the council on Monday morning.

The low metal gate to the back garden hung off its hinges; beyond it the remains of what had once been a neat patch was now an untouched wilderness. The grass and weeds were waist-high in places, having outgrown their own strength and flopped over on themselves like an army midway through a battle. I stepped over the grass on to the brick path that led to the back door. The kitchen windowsill was covered in dead flies. I shone the torch into the empty room. A few flies were still crawling on the glass of the window and still fewer followed an angular flight path around the centre of the room. The door to the dining room was ajar and the light glowed through, a dim golden light from somewhere inside.

I looked down. The lower pane of the back door was missing. Dark smears marked the bottom of it, tufts of cat hair around the edge as though cats of various colours and breeds had all been in and out as many times as had taken their fancy. I tried the door. Too much to hope that it would be unlocked, of course. Then I knocked on it, the sound of my knuckles

rapping on the glass, which rattled in the frame. I pushed the pane gently, and then a little harder, and before I knew what had happened the glass had fallen in and smashed into pieces on the tiled floor of the kitchen inside.

‘Oh, shit!’ I said aloud. I was really in trouble now.

I should have turned away from the door. I should have gone back into my own house, and locked my door, and thought no more about it. It wasn’t my problem, was it? But, having practically broken into the house already, I thought I might as well finish what I’d started, and see if anyone was inside.

I put my hand through the empty frame and reached around to the inside. The key was in the lock. I struggled to turn it – it was stiff, hadn’t been opened in a long time – and at the back of my mind was the thought that there were probably bolts at the bottom and top of the door as well. But when I twisted the key in the lock it eventually turned, and the door opened easily enough. The smell from within was powerful, and sudden. And then it faded just as quickly, as if all the badness from inside had escaped and fled into the night.

‘Hello?’ I called, not expecting a reply and not knowing what the hell I would have done had one come. ‘Is anyone there?’

The house felt warmer than mine, or perhaps that was just because I was coming inside from the cold of the garden. My footsteps crunched on the broken glass, echoed in the empty kitchen and I put a hand over my mouth and nose to try to muffle the smell, which was stronger again in here. I shone the torch around the room, illuminating cupboards and shelves and a cooker, which were dirty, the surfaces dulled with a sticky film of dust.

Maybe it was just food that had gone bad, I thought. Maybe whoever had lived here had departed in a hurry and left the remains of their dinner behind. But the fridge door stood open and it was unlit, nothing but black mould inside. It was obviously unplugged.

I pushed the kitchen door open slightly and then there was enough light for me to turn off the torch. I was in a dining room, the table and chairs in place, a tablecloth covering the table and two placemats upon it. A table lamp sat on a sideboard, a modern design but, like everything else, with a thin film of dust blurring its surface. It was lit.

I could hear a sound. Low voices, but a bit tinny – it sounded like Radio 4. The radio was on? Surely, then, someone was in here? I felt as though I was being watched, as though someone just out of my line of sight was waiting.

I told myself not to be so paranoid, and went into the hallway. It looked lived-in, the house – carpet on the floor and pictures on the walls. The only light came from the table lamp in the dining room.

‘Hello?’ My voice was quieter in here, my footfalls on the carpet muffled. The smell wasn’t as bad, or was it just that I was getting used to it, growing accustomed to breathing through my mouth?

The radio was louder now, the sound of an interview between a male voice and a female, the woman arguing a point and the man placating her. Above that another noise, or was I imagining things now?

I felt something against my leg and jumped, a squeak of panic coming out of my mouth before I could stop it. But it was only the cat, winding herself around my ankles once before dashing off through the dining room door and into the next room. ‘Lucy!’ I said, urgently, not wanting to have to crawl behind someone’s sofa to try and coax her out again. I pushed open the door to the living room at the front of the house. It was dark in here, the light from the dining room not penetrating this far into the gloom. The curtains were closed, the gap between them letting in only the faintest glow from the street-lights outside. I turned on the torch again and as I did so I caught a movement, a flash of white. It was Lucy again, rolling on the carpet in the middle of the room. I could hear her purring above the thudding of my heart.

The room was furnished, but sparsely: a sofa, a low coffee table in front of it. On the table, a bunch of what must have once been carnations, stiff and brown in a waterless vase.

The beam of the torch passed over an armchair. And even having felt a presence, half-expecting to find somebody in here, in this room, I gasped at the shock of seeing a person there, one horrifically distorted out of shape: black instead of white, the skin of the face stretched and split in places, the eyelids drawn back into a wide, black, hollow stare and the belly blown up like a balloon, stretching the fabric of what it was wearing – what *she* was wearing, for it was a skirt, and the hair that still clung to the skull was long, fine, lank, and maybe still fair in places, although it was coated in something – grease, some substance. And what made it worse was that there was movement in the abdomen, as though she was breathing – although surely this wasn't possible? But when I looked closer I realised that her stomach was composed of a swarming, churning mass of maggots... And despite the horror, and my deep, heaving, choking breaths, I could not tear my eyes away. One hand was resting on the arm of the chair, and the other hand, the forearm from the elbow to the hand, was *on the floor* beside the chair, as though she'd dropped it, knocked it off the edge like a misplaced remote control.

And then the purring began again – the bloody cat – and I looked down to see her rolling on the carpet beside the dark mess, as if the smell was catnip to her, and not the stench of the putrefying bodily fluids of a decomposing corpse.