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Someone Like Me

Tom Holt

Chapter 1

THERE WAS ONE LYING in the road when I got there. She was dead, no need to look up close. You can tell from twenty yards away, when they're lying like that. It always makes me think of an old sack that's been blown away by the wind, or rubbish chucked out in the street. Strange, really. One minute someone's alive, with a mind full of thoughts and memories, and a moment or so later they're just a thing, a skin bag full of meat.

'They've been here, then,' I said.

There was a man who I guess had been waiting for us to arrive. He looked scared, so I knew he'd seen them. You can tell that at a glance, too.

I knelt down beside the dead woman. You know what to look for after a while. She'd been cut about with a blade, but the cuts were all on her wrists and forearms, where she'd been trying to shield her head. Messy wounds, like all cuts, but she'd have lived if that'd been all. What did for her was a long slit, starting just under the navel and going right up to where the collar-bones meet. Just like someone opening a letter. No weapon ever did that.

'How many?' I asked.

'Two,' the man replied.

'Did they get anybody else?'

He nodded. 'In the house,' he said.

That's bad. When they get inside a house full of people, it's like a fox breaking into a hen coop.

'Have you been inside?' I asked. He shook his head. He looked ashamed of himself, but that's stupid. Nobody should have to look at something like that, not unless they're in the trade, like me, and it's their job.

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So I went and looked; and I've seen worse. Downstairs there was a boy, about nine years old. Same sort of cuts as the woman had, but his head was missing. That gave me some idea of what I was looking for – a female, most likely, and either old or injured. When they're like that they go for kids because they're easy to pull down. A young, healthy male would go for an adult, so it would only have to kill once, and then it could lie up for a week, maybe even ten days, without having to hunt again.

But the man outside had said there were two of them, so I was probably looking for a nesting pair. My guess was that the female had killed the boy, and the male had gone for the woman out in the street, but since they hadn't dragged the bodies away they must've been startled by something before they had the chance. In that case, there'd probably be another body.

I found him upstairs. He was squatting down in the corner of the bedroom, arms by his side, head forward on his chest. Loss of blood, almost certainly. When I tried to move him, I saw a couple of stab wounds in the chest and gut, and the floor was wet with blood. It had soaked into the old, frayed carpet, which made it squelch underfoot.

The way I saw it, this man had come running in when he heard the kid yelling. Soon as he saw what was going on, he turned and ran up the stairs. He probably tried to barricade himself in, because there was a chair lying on the floor next to him. I suppose he'd been trying to jam the door shut with it. Wasting his time, of course. The door panels were splintered in three places where the female had kicked it or bashed it with her paws. Then she'd got scientific and hacked a big hole in the panel with an axe or one of those wide-bladed hooks they use. After that, all she needed to do was stick her hand through and push the chair away.

He'd had a go at her. I found a sword in the middle of the room, one of those cheap, thin things they sell for home defence. He must've landed at least one on her, because the blade was bent and there was a chunk taken out of the cutting edge. Nobody makes decent steel any more. He couldn't have done her much harm, because there wasn't any blood on the blade. Just enough of a contact to make her angry and scared and all the things you don't want them to be when you're trapped in a room with one of them.

After that, she'd killed him with whatever weapon she was using, but she hadn't stopped to snack. My guess is that she just wanted to get out of there as fast as she could.

I stood there, trying to figure out what to do. At times like that, you've got to keep a clear head. There was just the one of me, and it looked like they'd split up and gone their separate ways after the attack, so I couldn't go after them both. That meant choosing which one to follow.

My first thought was, go for the female. She's killed two people. But then I figured, The female's scared. If I'm right she's weak from old age or carrying some injury. She's not going to want to pick any more fights today. The male, on the other hand,

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he's killed, but he hasn't had a chance to eat, so he's still hungry. Also, he's probably young and fit, so it stands to reason, he's the one most likely to be a danger.

It wasn't an easy choice to make. None of the choices in this business are easy, I've found.

So I left the dead man and went back down¬stairs, past the boy, back out into the street. The man I'd talked to earlier was still there, and some other people, neighbours. They all had that blank, stunned look. Most likely it was the first time they'd come so close to an attack.

First thing you've got to do is get people off the street. You won't believe how often it happens that one of them gets chased off or spooked, and an hour or so later it comes straight back and has another go. I guess they realise people are off their guard. So what you have to do is round everybody up and find somewhere secure where they can stay put and wait till we give the all-clear. This time it wasn't a problem. Soon as I explained, they were only too pleased to have someone tell them what to do. There was an old church in the middle of the village, with a tower. I sent them up there, and told them to block the doors with every¬thing they could find.

Next I went back to the attack scene. Didn't take long to find tracks, but they were bloodstained, and I reckoned they must belong to the female, from where she'd been walking on the blood-soaked carpet. The pawmarks went off across the back yard of the house, headed straight for the woods behind the village. Well, I thought, if she's made it to cover, I'm not going in there after her, not without dogs and a lot of back-up.

So that was my choice made for me after all.

I nosed around for maybe a quarter of an hour before I picked up the other one's tracks. It took me a while, but I was able to make a pretty good guess at what it'd done after it killed the woman. Something must've spooked it after it killed her, and it ran off pretty fast up the street till it reached the corner of an old boarded-up shop. It must've stopped there while it caught its breath and calmed down, made sure it wasn't being followed. After that, it carried on down the street a bit until it came to an alley that wound back. There was a pile of old salvaged timber and scrap and stuff, and my guess is that it lay up there while I was in the house.

I was pretty certain it knew there was some¬one after it by that stage. They always seem to know. An old bloke who'd been in the trade told me they can smell something about the kit we use – saddle-soap or blacking, or the oil we put on our blades to stop them rusting. I don't know if that's true, but it's got to be something of the sort.

I stood by that scrap-pile, and that seemed to be the end of the trail. There weren't any more tracks, or else I couldn't see them, but the bastard thing had to have gone somewhere. Either that, or it was still there.

Another thing the old bloke told me: Never forget to look up.

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I saw him. He'd scrambled up to the top of the scrap-heap and flattened himself right down, the way they can when they don't want to be seen. Marvellous, the way they can break up their outline and almost melt away into whatever they're standing on. I'd been right about one thing. It was a young male, maybe four years old, no more than five.

I remember standing there looking at it, and it looking back at me. It was big for its age, a good five-footer. It had on a human coat-of-plates, probably stripped of one of my lot it had killed at some time. Under the coat it had pale brown fur, no markings. For some reason, the picture has stuck in my mind. It was like looking at a cat on a fence, with its back arched, like it's about to spit at you. Every bit of it was tense, which is a sure sign it's about to spring. It had a rusty flat-bladed hook in its right hand, and the claws were out on its left, but as we looked at each other I knew it wasn't going to make a move until I did.

I've heard people say that they're like dogs, they can't actually see you unless you move. I don't believe that. I think they're lazy, like all animals. They don't want to use up their energy unless there's a good reason. My guess is that this one didn't want a fight right then, so it was waiting to see if I'd just back off and go away.

Look, I've been in the trade fifteen years. In that time, you learn a bit about courage. First you learn that when you're close enough to one of them so that you can see the colour of its eyes, nobody's brave. Everybody's scared stiff. The next thing you learn is that nine times out of ten you can beat them if you keep your head – the tenth time is just bad luck, nothing you can do about it. Finding a way of calming yourself down is the only way you're going to make it out alive.

That knack of getting yourself under control is what I call courage, and either you can do it or you can't. It doesn't come with training or practice or experience. It's just there, or it isn't. I can do it, most times, but there's no way of knowing, when you're face to face with one of them, whether or not the knack's going to work today. It's really nothing to do with how dangerous this particular specimen is. I've had no trouble facing up to two-hundredweight seven-year-old males, and I've frozen when I've been facing sleepy old females. Every time, you're starting from scratch, like it's the first one you've ever seen.

This was a time when I froze. Can't begin to say why. Maybe it was because I could see it wasn't going to attack me if I didn't make the first move. Like I knew that this was one time I didn't have to do it just to save my own skin. Or maybe the sight of the dead bodies had got to me more than usual, I don't know. It always gets to you. That's the misery of it.

Anyway, I froze. I looked at it, and it looked at me. How long, I'm not sure. Probably no more than three seconds, but that's a hell of a long time when you're standing there, knowing that there's a good chance you won't be alive thirty seconds from now. I remember all sorts of stupid things about that one: the way the grain of the fur swept back sideways over the cheekbones, the angle the tusks jutted out from the corners of its mouth There are times when in one glance you can see every single

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hair, every flake of scurf in their coats, every bit of dust and dirt and caked blood matted in the fringe under their chins.

Crazy, the things you notice when you should be thinking about important stuff.

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