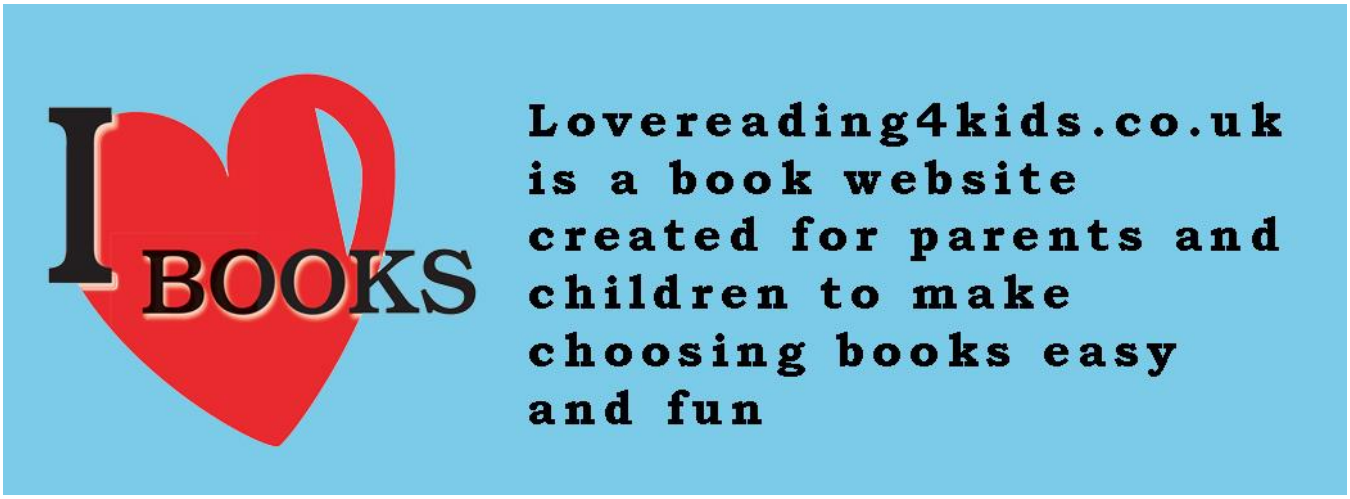


Opening extract from

Flesh and Blood

Written & Illustrated by

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For Torrin

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Chapter 1

The Dead House

Bill had made it plain he didn't want to talk to his sister, but Jane followed him out into the back yard and carried on anyway.

"It's all right for you," she said. "They weren't mean to you!"

Bill found it hard to look at her. "They weren't mean to you either, you little liar," he said.

"Don't call me a liar!" she yelled, and her face was fierce with rage.

"Don't lie then," Bill replied with a snarl.

"I'm not lying," Jane said. "They weren't mean when you were around. They were mean in secret."

"Ha!" Bill said, and he turned to face her. "You were homesick, that's all. Silly baby. Now look. We could be in the country right now. Playing in the woods, in the fields, down by the river. But oh no, because of you we've had to come back to London and now we'll get blown to pieces."

"Stop saying that!" Jane said, and her eyes were wet with tears. "No we won't. Mummy says we'll be safe as long as we do everything we're supposed to do and –"

"People get blown to pieces every night, Jane," Bill said. He poked the drain in the yard

with a stick. "Every night. We're no different. It could happen tonight."

"I hate you!" Jane said.

"I hate you too!" Bill said with a shrug.

Jane kicked the air between them and stomped back into the house. Bill could hear her telling their mother her side of the argument.

Bill's mother stormed out into the yard. "You apologise this instant, Bill Marshall," she said.

"Why should I?" Bill said. "Why is it always –"

"I'm not going to argue with you, Bill," his mother said. "You say sorry or you go to bed with no supper."

Bill glared at his sister.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

His mother knew that this was the most she could expect. "That's better," she said. "What would your father say? He could walk in the front door any day and he won't want to hear all this nonsense now, will he? After all he's suffered?"

Bill shrugged. He hadn't seen his father for the best part of a year. He wasn't sure he even remembered what he looked like – not really. When he thought of his father it was the dog-eared photograph by his bed that he saw in his mind, not the real-life man. Bill wondered what he looked like now.

Bill's father had been captured by the Germans and he was in a prisoner-of-war camp. He'd been the gunner in a bomber that had been shot down over Belgium in September – six months before. He had been in the P.O.W. camp ever since.

A lot of kids in the streets where Bill lived had been evacuated to the country in September 1939, right at the start of the war. Everyone was so sure that bombs were going to rain down as soon as war was declared. But it never happened. By Christmas a third of the kids had come back.

Bill and Jane hadn't been sent away in that first wave. Their mother couldn't bear the family to be apart. But after the fall of Dunkirk in May 1940, she packed Bill and Jane off to their aunts in Suffolk.

A lot of children went on their own, sobbing, with their names on tags, loaded onto railway carriages like parcels. The billeting officers farmed them out to anyone who would have them. At least Bill and Jane were staying with family. Their mother had taken them there.

Bill had never left London in his life and it felt like he was running away. He didn't care

about bombs – or he told himself he didn't. He felt like his place was in London – at home in the big, bustling city he knew so well. He might as well have been going to the moon.

Bill would never have admitted it, but he wasn't as brave as he pretended. He'd been more scared of the countryside than he was of the German planes.

He knew every drain cover and kerbstone of the streets at home and the thought of fields and dark woods made him feel dizzy. It wasn't natural to have that much green. It wasn't right. All that open space. London was filthy and black with soot, but Bill didn't care. He knew it. It was his. He felt safe there.

Jane had sobbed and sobbed on their first night and he'd been happy to comfort her – it helped to stop him from crying, like he'd wanted to.

At first, Bill's fears about the countryside seemed to have been proved right. The local children spoke in a strange, slow accent and then they had the cheek to make fun of the way Bill and Jane spoke. Bill had two fights with local boys in as many days. He and Jane kept to themselves after that.

But then something clicked. Bill woke up one day and looked out at the sun rising between the trees. He heard the birds singing and it was like a huge weight had been lifted from his back. All the effort he had put into refusing to take any pleasure in this new place fell away. Instead of fighting with the local boys, he worked at getting to know them. At last he started to enjoy it.

And he never stopped enjoying it. Right up until their aunts told them that they were to go back to London. The aunts didn't say, but Bill knew that Jane's endless letters of complaint had got their result. The bombs had never

come, so their mother thought that London was safe again. Bill knew he should have been glad, but he wasn't.

But no sooner had they come home than their father was shot down and all hell broke loose over London. The bombs that hadn't fallen the year before, now came down in their hundreds. There was death and destruction everywhere. But there was no more talk of sending Bill and Jane away. And now here they were, fighting in the back yard.

Bill and Jane had always fought, as brothers and sisters will, but the feeling between them was different now. Jane knew how much Bill had loved it in the country and how happy he was there. Bill wondered if that was why she'd complained. He would never forgive her. Never.

He felt ashamed and angry at himself and at Jane, and at the whole world for making him

feel that way. He kicked out at the wall, harder than he'd intended and he howled as his toe struck the brick.

Bill limped out of the back yard and down the alley to the street. Some boys he knew were playing at the far end, but he wasn't in the mood. They'd been happy enough to have him back, but he felt changed and they all seemed different – because they were the same as when he'd left them.

Bill found himself standing outside the Dead House at the end of his street. It was bigger than the rest, with a brick gable end with a billboard space on it. The poster there at the moment was a Dig For Victory one. Its bright reds and yellows were the only flash of colour in the street and they seemed all the more odd stuck on the side of this creepy house with its blank, boarded-up windows and door.

The house had been empty for as long as Bill could remember and even his mother couldn't remember the last time anyone lived there. It had been deserted since well before the war even started.

The local children had put the glass out of the windows years ago and they looked as dull and lifeless as the eye-sockets in a skull. Children whispered stories in playgrounds and on street corners of the many ghosts who haunted it and of the murders committed there. Bill never believed a word of them, but he still couldn't linger there alone. He turned his back on the house, and had to stop himself from running away.