

The City Cats

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About the Author

Also by Colin Dann

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About the Book

The Strega-Borgia children are still reeling from the shock of their nanny's disappearance at the end of DEEP TROUBLE. Without Flora to tend to them the kids are growing up fast. Indeed, Titus is in the throes of a deeply embarrassing and magically accelerated puberty, while all around the usual chaos reigns. Baby Damp is learning to fly under the tutelage of a bat called Vesper, Ffup the dragon is struggling with the Atkins diet and Tarantella the tarantula is trying to teach her daughters the rudiments of mascara. So far, so StregaSchloss, but add in an arrest for murder, a demon intent on revenge and a suicidal deep-frozen ancestor and you have a recipe that could only be cooked up in a Gliori-cauldron.

The City Cats

Colin Dann

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For Anneka

1

Removed

SAMMY AND PINKIE were alone in Quartermile Field. After Sammy had established himself as King of the Vagabonds all the other cats had dispersed, one by one. They hadn't cared to remain in the neighbourhood under the supremacy of the young tabby. Once it was certain his days as leader were over, Sammy's father, Brute, had shown the way by leaving. Only the lame black cat, Scruff, stayed, hidden away in the rank undergrowth. He posed no threat and was in any case not fit enough to move far off.

Pinkie, the little white cat with the pink ears and nose that had given her her name, was Sammy's chosen mate. She rubbed herself against his coat, arching her back and nuzzling him in the darkness. She knew Sammy wouldn't desert her and had, at last, put his domestic upbringing behind him. 'We have the whole area to ourselves,' she purred. 'There's no competition, no rivalry remaining. We have the pick of everything.'

Sammy was aware he had won this position for them. His strength and endurance had been tried and tested and he had emerged victorious. He was lean and tough, a cunning and clever hunter. 'Yes, we shall do well here,' he answered Pinkie. 'It's a good place to make our own.'

Quartermile Field was indeed a good place for feral cats. Pinkie had grown up there, born into the way of life that Sammy had chosen to adopt. The place had plenty of

shelter. There was good hunting. Rabbits frequently strayed on to the site, as well as the mice and voles and birds that normally inhabited it. And it was sufficiently close to human dwellings that when times got hard, scraps and waste from their kitchens made a useful substitute for live prey. The pair of cats had everything they needed.

With no challengers to his role as the dominant cat of the area Sammy found his new way of life very satisfying. He went where he chose and everywhere he went Pinkie accompanied him. There was no scarcity of prey and the necessary wiles he had acquired for catching it made his task only as difficult as he permitted it to be. He and Pinkie shared all their catches and as the weeks wore on the two cats began to put on weight.

The only threat now to the cats' well-being was the weather. Sammy had never forgotten his father's description of the conditions in winter-time. As the days shortened and grew colder Sammy ranged farther afield, his wanderings bounded only by the impassable torrent of a vast river. He wanted to become familiar with a wider area than that of his immediate surroundings - to seek out any potential food resource that might prove of use in less easy circumstances. He went beyond Quartermile Field and the houses and gardens nearby, beyond the woods and meadows he had already explored. Roaming was in his blood - Brute, a great roamer, was responsible for that.

But when the weather grew cold, every creature's movements were curtailed, Sammy's along with them. Only the need to provide themselves with food made animals stir from their warm burrows or tunnels. And then Sammy was waiting for them, patiently and confidently.

But as the cold bit deeper, the rabbits stopped coming to the old allotment plots on the other side of the high wire fence which skirted Quartermile Field. Ice and snow kept them closer to their warren. Then the smaller prey - mice,

voles or shrews – diminished in number. More vulnerable to the harshness of the prevailing temperatures, many of them succumbed. Only the stoutest survived and these, by their very natures, were more successful at evading predators. So Sammy, Pinkie, and Scruff too, began to feel the prick of hunger. Brute's words seemed to ring in Sammy's ears each time he hunted and returned without a catch to his and Pinkie's shelter in the broken shed. Winter. Scarcity. Hunger. These were the three strands which held them fast and from which it seemed they couldn't break free.

As the winter made its relentless presence felt Sammy turned his attention, as he had once before, to human habitations. There was always food of a sort to be had around houses. Pinkie accompanied him on his forays into gardens. Sammy never ceased to marvel at the unerring way in which she rooted out every valuable titbit. He was a supreme hunter but Pinkie was his superior in providing food in their straitened circumstances.

'You're a wonder,' he said admiringly as they crouched one evening in the snow against the lee side of a garden shed. He had been convinced there had been no chance of their stomachs being filled. Two or three centimetres of snow had fallen, covering everything on the ground. Yet Pinkie had uncovered some nourishing strips of fat thrown out for birds before the snowfall.

'I could smell them,' she answered simply. 'I've been doing this sort of thing all my life.' But when they had devoured the cold hard scraps she began to purr, nestling against Sammy. She was pleased.

Sammy recalled another vagabond. 'I wonder how Scruff will manage?' he murmured. They had caught no glimpse of him for days.

'Nobody better than he at unearthing every last scrap,' said Pinkie. 'I once saw him eating worms. He's a survivor.' She wasn't greatly concerned with Scruff's problems. In the

world into which she had been born it was every cat for itself.

By morning the ground was frozen hard. Only the main road that ran past the wilderness that was Quartermile Field was comparatively clear, the motor traffic having prevented the snow from settling on it overmuch. In the early hours, however, the road was quiet. Sammy and Pinkie paced along it. Sammy wanted to know where it led. His curiosity drove him now to explore as far as he could in the direction away from the river. His tabby coat was duller than usual whilst Pinkie's stood out clearly, whiter than the trampled snow. Set well back from the road was the cottage of Mrs Lambert, Sammy's old mistress. He passed by without turning his head. His eyes were fixed on a distant point where men were moving around a large vehicle. It was barely light.

Sammy was interested in the human activity. Because he had been brought up in their care he was aware of the kindness of people. He was only half wild. But Pinkie had never known Sammy's early kind of existence. She didn't trust humans and had never formed an attachment to any. She had only accepted food from an old woman who had interested herself in the welfare of the vagabond cats. She had come no closer to human contact than that and she didn't wish to do so. As she and Sammy neared the parked vehicle she hung back. The men were unloading furniture from a removal van and the noise they were creating was almost enough to send her scurrying. She hesitated, flinching at each sound.

Sammy continued, unmindful of Pinkie's wariness. Presently he sat down in the gutter to watch more closely. A strong odour of cooked food emanated from the van. Over many months countless hamburgers and fish and chip suppers, consumed hastily in the cab during the men's snatched moments of rest, had pervaded the fabric of the

vehicle. Sammy licked his chops and waited. He thought an opportunity might arise for further investigation. The men paid him little heed. There was no time to waste on a stray cat when hefty furniture had to be shifted.

Sammy was patient. The smell from the lorry was so inviting it was impossible to ignore. The men carried on humping and heaving. The vehicle emptied. Sammy looked round, expecting to find Pinkie had returned home. He understood her suspicion of human contraptions, but she hadn't bolted. She squatted perhaps fifty metres away, still and silent, her eyes on her mate.

Finally the men had done. They left the ramp of the vehicle down and went into the house for well-earned mugs of tea. The van's interior loomed dark and empty save for a few boxes and chests. Sammy waited a few moments longer. The savoury smell stole through the crisp air and assailed his nostrils afresh. He ventured a step or two forwards, sniffing eagerly. He reached the ramp. He looked round. There was no sign of the men returning. In a trice he was up and into the van, searching systematically in every corner for the source of that delicious smell. Minutes later Pinkie edged forward too. She had caught an unmistakable whiff of fried fish. Some of the old wrappings of the men's takeaway meals still littered the floor of the cab. She miaowed to Sammy. 'Is it safe?'

Sammy paused from his search. 'Perfectly safe,' he assured her. 'There's something in here for us if we're quick.'

Pinkie followed him into the van. The quietness of its hollow interior encouraged her.

'It's just *finding* it that's difficult,' Sammy complained. 'You're more expert than I am, Pinkie. You'll probably go straight to it.'

They were far down the length of the lorry, hidden behind some boxes when the removal men came back. One of the men hurled a pair of tea-chests inside, then hitched the

ramp back into the interior. He shut the doors with a slam that echoed horribly inside the lorry, terrifying the trapped cats. Then the entire vehicle throbbed as the engine was started. The men, their work done, began to sing as the van pulled away from the kerb for the return journey. The two cats cowered in the back, all thought of food forgotten as they listened to the din of the men's voices. They had no idea what was happening to them – that with every jolt and rumble of the wheels beneath, they were being carried farther away from the place that they called their home.

2

Released

THE VAN HAD evidently come a long way to deliver its load, for the cats' misery seemed to have no end. Yet after hours of suffering the motion of the vehicle they gradually became used to it. The noise, though, was different. They couldn't get used to that. It was appalling; the engine, the roar of other traffic, the piercing shrillness of the cab radio and the men's booming voices. Their only consolation was that the heat from the lorry's engine kept them warm. At last they thought their ordeal had come to an end. The lorry stopped. The men left the cab, their voices receding as they walked away. Sammy and Pinkie, crouching amongst the debris on the metal floor, stayed motionless, thoroughly numbed by their horrible experience. Slowly, the welcome quietness restored their spirits.

'They've gone, I'm sure of it,' Sammy said in a low voice.

'Do you think so? Oh, if only you're right!' Pinkie wailed. She had never been so shaken up.

Still, they waited, hardly daring to stir in the darkness. Finally Sammy plucked up courage. He stretched and began to search in earnest for a way out. A chink of light here and there was his only guide. His enormously dilated pupils roved around the long container. Wherever he moved, his whiskers encountered obstacles, brushing boxes and chests and the imprisoning metal walls. He realized now that the absence of the men was of no advantage to them. He and

Pinkie couldn't escape from their prison without human help.

Pinkie had come to the same conclusion. 'Sammy, you're to blame for this,' she accused him. 'Why did you have to bother with humans and their things which we don't understand? I've never trusted them. Oh, why did we have to climb into here? Now we're trapped!'

Sammy was astonished at the new tone in Pinkie's voice, one he had never heard before. But she was simply very frightened. He tried to calm her down. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'We'll get out the same way we got in. We must be patient. The men will let us out.'

'The men have gone!' she hissed.

'Yes, I know. But this monster belongs to them, so they must come back.'

'When?'

'Well - some time.' Sammy's optimism was draining away.

Pinkie fell silent. Sammy lay down again. It was futile to continue searching. The cats listened to the drone and rush of passing traffic. Then their ears pricked up. Men's voices were again approaching the vehicle. The cab doors were opened, then slammed shut. The engine burst once more into life, the jangle of the radio began anew. Sammy and Pinkie's journey was not yet over. The men had only made a brief lunch stop. Now the cats' ordeal continued as the second leg of the journey back to base began.

There were no fresh alarms for the unwilling travellers; just the same jolting, buffeting racket as before. The two cats lay side by side, finding a sort of solace in their closeness. Pinkie said, 'I'm sorry I blamed you, Sammy. You weren't to know; the smell of food was very tempting. And yet, there is no food, is there?'

'No,' said Sammy glumly. 'Not until we are released from here.'

Eventually the removal van reached its destination. It was driven into the company yard and parked. The men's day