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Opening extract from

Blade Playing Dead

Written by

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'The BLADE series has grown out of my terror of knives. Not fear—terror. I cannot think of a more frightening weapon for a young person to possess. Guns are terrible too, of course, but knives chill me. A knife is an instrument of pain, mutilation and death.

The boy at the heart of the story has lived by the knife and paid the price. His future now hangs in the balance.'

Tim Bowler

So he's looking at me with his puggy face, this big jerk of a policeman, and I'm thinking, take him out or let him live?

Big question.

I don't like questions. Questions are about choices and choices are a pain. I like certainties. Got to do this, got to do that, no debate. Take him out, let him live. Know what you got to do. Certainty.

Only I'm not certain here. I'm pretty sure I want to take him out. I hate the sight of him and I hate being back at the police station.

The knife feels good hidden inside my sock. Pugface didn't even feel it when he frisked me. But he'll feel it pretty quick if he doesn't treat me right. It's only a small blade but I know how to use it.

He's still watching me with those pig-eyes.

'Right, young man,' he says.

'I'm not your young man.'

He takes no notice. He's too busy smirking.

'In your own words,' he goes on.

'In your own words what?'

'In your own words—what happened?'

'What happened where?'

He gives this heavy, exaggerated sigh. I hate that. Move my fingers slowly down my thigh.

He can't see with the desk in the way. That bosomy policewoman over by the door's watching but she can't see anything either. I can tell from her face.

Anyway, she's too far away. I can have my knife out and into Pugface before she's covered

half the ground between us. Probably time to stick her too.

He goes on in that patronizing voice.

'What happened at the pedestrian crossing?'

My fingers are close to the knife now. I stop my hand. No need to move it any further. I'm safe enough. All that's needed is a lunge and a thrust. Maybe a bit more if Bosoms gets involved.

'What happened at the crossing?' says Pugface.

'Nothing.'

'You stood in the road after the lights had turned to green and refused to move and let the traffic pass.'

'Did I?'

'You shouted abuse at the drivers waiting to move on.'

'Can't remember.'

'Especially the man in the nearest car.'

'Can't remember.'

'The man in the green estate. He asked you to move aside so that he and everybody else could drive on. You swore back at him and made obscene gestures.'

'He was rude to me.'

'You don't think maybe you were the one being rude?'

I shrug. I'm starting to enjoy this now.

'Eh?' says Pugface.

'Don't know.'

'It was dangerous.'

'No, it wasn't. He was never going to run me over.'

'Because unlike you, he had some sense of responsibility. Though it would have shaken you up quite a bit if he had put his foot down and driven at you. I don't doubt you'd have moved aside pretty quickly if he'd done that.'

'He wouldn't have had the guts.'

'Is that what you think stopped him? Lack of guts?'

'Yeah.'

'That's what you'd have done, is it? If you'd been the driver and you'd seen some rude little kid standing on the crossing and refusing to move? Jeering and swearing at you, and daring

you to drive on? You'd have put your foot down and run him over, would you?'

'Too right.'

He leans back in the chair, glances at Bosoms. I'm really having fun now. They're both out of their depth. They don't know what to do with me. They know they can't prosecute or anything. It's just not that big a deal. I'll get a warning, nothing more.

Then Pugface stands up.

'Seems like we've got a problem, then.'

He moves round the desk towards me. I don't like the look of him suddenly. Don't know why. He sits on the edge of the desk.

Too close. Don't like people that close. Makes me remember things. I think of the knife, squeeze my hands into a ball. He glances at Bosoms again, then back at me.

'The driver's told us he doesn't wish to take things further. He just wanted to report the incident.'

Say nothing.

'He was a bit worried we might not be able to trace the boy who held up the traffic for five

minutes, swore at all the drivers, then ran off.' Pugface sniffs. 'He clearly wasn't aware just how well we know you round here.'

He leans closer. I'm hating this now. It's not the police station. It's this face leering down at me. He's got to pull back. He's got to do it now, right now.

But he doesn't. He just smirks again—then leans even closer.

'Do you really think,' he whispers, 'that we haven't noticed you've got something hidden inside your sock?'

I lunge for the knife—in vain. The man's hands are tight round my arms. I don't even see the woman move. One minute she's over by the door, the next she's behind me, pulling me back against the chair. I spit at 'em, snarl at 'em, try to break free. Doesn't do any good.

'Bastards!' I'm rocking about, screaming my head off. 'Bloody bastards!'

'Yeah, yeah,' says Pugface. 'Bloody bastards.'

'Got a nice tongue on him,' says the woman.

'Bastards!' I scream.

'Look inside his sock,' mutters the policeman.

The woman pulls out the knife, fumbles with the other sock.

'There's nothing in there,' I yell.

She checks anyway, then straightens up, holding the knife. The man lets go of me and takes it from her. I duck under their arms and make a dash for the door.

I'm not fast—no point pretending—but being small sometimes helps, and somehow I've taken 'em by surprise. I'm at the door before 'em. I can see Pugface's hands clutching at me, and the woman's, but they're kind of falling over each other.

Then I'm out in the corridor.

Shouts from inside the room. Some constable running towards me from the desk. That's when fire extinguishers come in handy. A squirt over the guy and he slips. Jump over him and out the door.

Nothing to it.

And that was when I was seven.

Now that I've turned fourteen, I look back and you know what's weird? It's like nothing's

changed. I still don't like the police and I still don't like people getting close.

And that includes you, Bigeyes.

Not quite sure why I'm talking to you at all. I don't even know you. Maybe it's something Becky said to me. You got to make sense of your life. You got to think about what you're doing. You got to think before you act. And if you ever want to talk, I'm here for you.

Except Becky's dead.

So maybe that's why I'm dumping on you.

Not that I feel obliged to tell you the truth, mind. Don't get any ideas. I mean, I might tell you the truth but I might not. Just so you know.

I call the shots here. I choose what I say and what I don't. You can choose whether to stay or wig it somewhere else. And if you choose to wig it, that's fine with me. I don't need you. Remember that.

I don't need anyone.

Thing about lying—we're all told it's wrong. Tell the truth, tell the truth, tell the truth. But where's that ever got anyone? I've been lying

since as long as I can remember. Why? Cos everyone I've ever known has lied to me.

So what am I going to tell you? Not much, so don't get excited. You probably want to know my name. Well, that's a bit of a problem. I got loads.

There's the name I was given as a baby but that's a dronky name so I never use it. Then there's the names I make up. I got binbags of those. Different names for different people. Depends on where I am and who I'm with.

But there is one name I like.

It's the name Becky gave me. A name from the past. Everybody called me it in the old days. No one does now cos no one in this city knows it. And that's fine. I don't like to remember. But I do like the name. You can use it if you want.

BLADE.

That's what they used to call me. And I liked it. Bit of style, bit of clash. But remember—it's a secret. Don't be a claphead and spew it. If I find out you've blotched on me, then you'll find out why Becky called me Blade.

As for the rest of the world, I don't give two bells what people call me. Why fuss about a name when you can make 'em up so easy? And you know what? Life's a bit like that too.

Easy, simple, no sweat.

What you shaking your head for? Don't believe me? Well, I don't care. Believe what you like. It's true anyway. Life's a whack. It's no big deal coping with stuff. Other people—they make a horse trough out of it, get stressed out. Me, I'm different.

It's like I'm on top of this mountain, this great big mountain, higher than all the others, higher than—what's it called?—Everest. Miles higher. I'm all on my own with my head way up above everybody else, and I'm fine about it. There's no one'll ever conquer me, cos no one'll ever get near me.

You listening to this, Bigeyes?

That's what it's about. It's about seeing things from a higher place than everybody else. Seeing things no one else can.

Like that guy in Café Blue Sox. I can see things about him no one else can. I can see things about

him even he can't see. Got him? Table by the window. Not the guy with the vomity hair. He'll be leaving in a minute. Don't ask me how I know.

The other guy, the one with the mobile phone. Brown hair, about twenty, bit smooth. Got him?

There's loads like him round here. Big head, small brain. This city breeds 'em. Very easy meat. He'll finish his phone call in a minute, drape his coat over the back of that empty chair next to him, and forget about it.

Why? Cos all his attention'll be taken up with that blonde girl behind the bar.

There you go. What did I tell you? Vomity's leaving. Now—watch Dogbrain. There he goes, see? Mobile down, sip of coffee, coat over the chair.

Walk over, stand outside, wander in. Busy place, lots of yak. Even better.

No one notices me. I'm good at that. No one notices me when I don't want 'em to. I might be invisible. Only the red-lipped girl behind the bar sees me, and that's just cos I want a coffee.

Blondie's already over by the window talking to Dogbrain.

'Can I help you?' says Redlips.

'Latte, please. Medium.'

She fixes me the latte. Take it over to the window. Blondie's still there, leaning over the guy's chair. They're talking about nothing. Murmurs, giggles.

Sit down at the next table. They don't notice. Move the chair closer to his. More murmurs, giggles. They're talking about a guy he knows, some dungpot called Kenny.

Check round me, check the guy, check the girl.

Nobody even knows I'm here. I might be a dream, a spirit. I love doing this. I know where the wallet is. I can see the shape of it from here. Inside pocket of the jacket, closed with a zip.

Another check round—stop. Blondie's straightened up. She's looking me over. But she's not noticing me. She's thinking of Dogbrain even as she looks at me.

The guy hasn't even turned. He's drinking her up with his eyes like she's some kind of cocktail.

She looks back at him, leans down again, puts a hand on his shoulder.

Two minutes later I've drunk my latte and gone. And I've got a nice fat wallet.

I've also got a problem.

I'm being followed.

Can't see anyone but someone's after me. Don't ask me how I know.

Keep a lookout, Bigeyes.

It's not Dogbrain. I know that much. It's no one from Café Blue Sox. It's someone else. More than one person too. I can feel eyes on me from several places. Don't distract me. I need to work out how many people there are.

Four at least. Maybe more. Hard to tell.

Look behind. Check the High Street.

Nobody. Nobody dangerous anyway. Lots of people but they're all muffins.

Walk on.

Two men, big hairy gobbos like they're off a building site. It's not them. Another gobbo

coming the other way. But he's running for a bus.

Danger's still there. I can feel it. Which way? Left or right? Never mind, I'll decide. Left, down to the end of Crowstone Road, right at the bottom, down the pedestrian precinct.

Walk, walk, walk.

Still don't feel right. There's definitely more than four people. I can feel at least five, maybe more.

Glance round.

Nobody.

Walk on. End of the precinct, down the alleyway, hurry through it to Meadway Drive, on towards the canal. Don't run. They'll think I'm scared. Just keep walking, fast. Still a few people around but they're thinning out.

The canal looks quiet and the towpath's deserted. Not a good place to go but I can maybe cut across one of the bridges further down and shake 'em off round the industrial estate.

It's a mistake. I know it the moment I set off down the towpath. Three figures in front of me.

Trixi and two mates. If they've been following, they must have raced ahead and climbed over the fence. So where are the rest?

Look behind.

Three more covering my escape.

Shit, this is bad. Don't let anyone tell you girl gangs are a softer touch than boy gangs. They're worse. They fight dirty. And here's me with no weapon.

Trixi gives me a mocking little call.

'Hey, Slicky!'

They move in. I look about me. Canal on the left, fence on the right. Nothing for it. I make a dash for the fence.

But they catch me easy.

You can't fight six of 'em. I wouldn't want to take on one of 'em. Not these trolls. Boy gangs are another thing. There's always one or two muffins in there you can have a go at. Not this lot. You don't even get in the gang unless you've proved yourself and done some serious damage.

'Pull him back!' says Trixi.

They pull me back, throw me down on the towpath.

'Silly boy,' she says, looking down.

'Trix. Lay off me.'

'What you got?'

'Nothing.'

I look up at the faces. Flint-eyes, flint-hearts. I don't even want to know what they're carrying.

'I got nothing, Trix.'

'Stupid kid.'

Say nothing. Let her call me a kid. She's older anyway. They're all about sixteen. She can call me a kid.

'Stupid kid,' she says again.

'I got nothing, Trix.'

'No wallet?'

'No.'

She kicks me hard in the ribs.

'Ow!'

'No wallet?' she says.

It's stupid holding out. They're going to take everything anyway.

'Listen, Trix, I—'

'Check his pockets,' she says.

They poke about, pull everything out.

'What a surprise,' says Trixi. She holds up Dogbrain's wallet. 'What else has he got?'

'Another wallet,' says Sash.

'And another,' says Tammy.

'Busy boy, aren't we?' says Trixi.

'Trix, listen—'

'Sort him,' she says flatly.

They sort me, five of 'em. Trix doesn't get involved. I'm glad of that. She's the worst. But it's still bad. They beat the shit out of me, then stand back, breathing hard. I lie there on the towpath, aching for 'em to go. I can feel the scratches on my face, the blood in my mouth, the bruises all over my body.

Trixi steps forward and looks down.

'Just one last thing,' she says.

I brace myself. She's going to kick me in the head. I know it. But I'm wrong.

'Finish it,' she says to the girls.

And they crowd round again. I close into a ball. I've got no idea what 'finish it' means but it's

going to be bad. They yank my arms back. I wrestle free and close up again. Trixi kicks me in the back.

'Ah!'

'You'll make it worse,' she says and then, 'Finish it,' to the girls.

They force my arms back again, and now I know what they're doing.

'Don't!' I shout. 'Please!'

But I can't stop 'em. My clothes are coming off. The jacket first, then the jumper and shirt, then the shoes, socks, trousers. Only the pants left.

'No.' I'm looking up at them. 'Please.'

They don't even hear me. Off come the pants, and I'm lying there naked. They stand back and I close up into a ball again. I want to cry. Christ, I want to cry so much.

Don't bloody cry.

They're still standing round me, still looking down.

'Trix, listen—'

'Shut up.'

'Trix!'

'I said shut up.' She looks down at me with contempt. Enjoyment too. There's no missing that. I'm hugging my knees to my chest, shivering, shaking, fighting tears.

Don't cry. Don't bloody cry.

'Can't see you very well,' she says in a low voice.

I say nothing. I don't dare to speak. Trixi glances at her mates, then simply nods. They lean down again.

'No!' I shout.

They force my arms back again, stretch me out, spine against the ground.

Don't cry. Don't bloody cry.

Trixi's looking me over down below.

'Oh, dear,' she says. 'How disappointing.'

Don't cry. Please.

I'm begging myself now. Begging myself not to cry.

She pulls out a knife, flicks it open.

'Don't!' I'm screaming at her. 'Don't!'

She laughs. The girls start laughing too. She leans down, plays with the knife.

'Don't what?' she says quietly.

Now the tears come. They flood my eyes so deeply Trixi's face becomes a blur. All I see is the glint of the blade. I feel the scratches on my face sting as the tears run over them.

'Don't,' I murmur. 'Please don't.'

I'm weeping now, weeping like a kid who wants his mummy. Somehow my eyes clear. I see Trixi lean closer. I see the blade approach my face, then move slowly down my body, an inch from the skin.

More tears flood my eyes. I lose sight of her again, then feel my arms and legs released, hear the sound of laughter, and the ripping of fabric. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand and stare.

The knife's at work but not on me. She's cutting up my clothes. I don't speak, don't move. There's no point. The girls'll do what they want. They've all got knives out now and they're slashing the trousers, shirt, jacket, everything, even the pants.

They throw the shoes into the canal and chuck the shredded remains of my clothes in after them. Trixi looks down at me and smiles.