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Opening extract from

Blade: Closing In

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Blood-sky. Streets dark, houses dark, night dripping down. But the city's awake. She never sleeps. She dozes but she never sleeps—and she sees too much.

Like you.

Don't think I don't know, Bigeyes. You're like some mad insomniac, too nosy for your own good. You pry into what I do, whether I like it or not. Well, I don't like it, not right now. It was different when I wanted company.

Now I got company—plenty—and I don't need

any more. But I guess I'm stuck with you gawping at me.

Who else is watching, though?

That's the question.

There's enough people looking for us. The police, the girl gang, all the others. I don't like to think about it. But the past has come back, hooked its claws into me. Life's dangerous again and I can't just think of myself like I used to.

Becky's walking funny, kind of a shuffle. Can't work out if she's tired or hurt. I know she's scared. She's been choked out since Trixi got killed and Tammy's lot came for us.

She's not a fighting troll like them. She thought she was but she's not. I can't make her out. It's not that I don't care about her. I do—a bit. But I can't crack her. We were getting on good back in the flat but hit the streets again and she chills up.

I don't need that right now. I need her to be strong. But she's turning into a millstone. Sixteen years old and it's like she's got no instinct for anything, not even looking after her kid.

But I guess that's the real reason why I haven't

blasted out of here. If it was just Becky, I'd tell her we got to split. But I can't walk out on Jaz too.

Look at her. Three years old, been living in a drug den and God knows where else, got a dronky troll like Becky for a mother, spends most of her time with dungpots and drifters and duffs off the street, or girls who'd stab you soon as blink, and here she is strolling through the night holding my hand like she's on her way to a party.

Like there's no danger. Like we got a place to go. Only we got no place to go.

Just the future. And what kind of a place is that?

No place for Jaz, I reckon. Not much of a place for me and Bex neither. Not for anyone with a past. And that's the thing, Bigeyes. To go to the future, you got to have a future.

I don't know if I got one. I got my past, same as Bex, whatever hers is, and then I got this—the effing present. Only it's no present you'd ever want. It's dark streets, dark houses, dark city, dark sky.

Becky's looking at me.

'Blade?'

I wish she wouldn't keep calling me that. But it's

too late now. She's worked me out on that one.

'Blade?'

'What?'

'How much further?'

'Not far.'

'What's that mean?'

'About five miles.'

'That ain't far?'

I don't answer. She's been glumming for the last half hour cos I won't tell her where we're going.

She's right and she's wrong. About it being far, I mean. It's not far for her and me. When you got porkers and other nebs tramping on your shadow, five miles is a jink. We got to stuff it out of here quick as fly.

But she's right about Jaz.

Five miles for that little kid's going to hurt. Trouble is, I don't know what else to do. When we left the flat we were snugging out in, I didn't have a clue where to take us. I just said we got to go.

Somewhere away.

That's all I knew. Somewhere out of the city where the porkers and the gang and all those other

nebs won't find us. Then I thought of something that might help us on our way—if we can just get there.

Not a great idea but it was the best one I could scrape. So right now that's all I'm thinking of. That and how to get Jaz there—and her dimpy mum.

'Keep going, Bex.'

She glares at me. I take no notice, look at the kid instead.

'Jaz?'

She turns her head, fixes those eyes on me.

'Jaz? Do you want to ride on my shoulders?'

I'm half-hoping she'll say no. She's light as breath but it won't take long for me to get tired if I go too far with her perched up there. She gives me this munchy smile.

I'm telling you, Bigeyes, she melts me, this kid. Doesn't say much, but there's something about her. She's like a pixie or an elf or something.

'Come on, then.'

I hoist her up and she hooks her legs round my neck. I grab hold of her feet.

'You're getting heavier.'

'No, I ain't.'

She's got her arms round the top of my head. She pats me a couple of times on the scalp, funny little pats, like a baby petting a dog.

'Stop that.'

I'm only joking but she stops. We walk on. I can feel Becky watching me. Hard to tell what she's thinking. Mixture of stuff probably. Glad to see me bonding with her kid, or maybe the opposite. But I can't be worrying about that now.

We got to walk. We got to get there. That's all that matters.

'Left here, Bex.'

It's a narrow lane, no lights, no houses. She stops. I can see she doesn't want to go. She's just staring down it.

'What we got to go down there for?'

'Cos it takes us where we're going.'

'And why won't you tell us where that is?'

'Cos it might not work out.'

'You mean it's dangerous?'

Dangerous.

What kind of a stupid question's that, Bigeyes? I want to throttle this troll sometimes. It's like she thinks

there's somewhere that's not dangerous for us. Like we can choose this road and not that one and everything'll be all right.

Only it won't. Cos every road, every path, every patch of ground's got danger for us now. We're wanted by too many people, and she knows that as well as I do. But I can't say all this with Jaz listening.

'Bex, I'm just saying it might not work out, OK?'

I lower my voice.

'Look, any way we go's risky right now. We're on the news. People'll know about us. Girl of sixteen, boy about fourteen, three-year-old kid. There'll be descriptions of us. So we got to keep away from people and from CCTVs. We got to keep to lonely places. And this lane's a lonely place.'

Some of the time. But I'm not telling her that.

'Where's it go?' she says.

'Through some playing fields. Then it splits up and one bit goes towards the city centre. We'll take the other bit.'

'Where's that go?'

'To the place I'm aiming for.'

'The place you won't tell me about. The mystery

destination.'

Sarky voice but I'm not jiffed about that. I'm more bothered about shifting this troll. She's still blobbed there staring, like she's nailed to the ground.

Then suddenly she looks round at me.

'OK,' she says.

And she sets off down the lane.

I follow, Jaz still perched on my shoulders. I know what you're thinking, Bigeyes. You're wondering why I won't tell Bex where we're going.

Well, you can go on wondering. I know what I'm doing. She's a loose bullet. I don't trust her to do things and I don't trust her to know things.

I don't trust you much either but that's another story.

Down the lane, on, on, darker down here than the streets we just left. This isn't a good place. Better than the streets, less exposed, but not a good place. I'll be happier when the playing fields open up. But that's not for a while yet.

High walls either side, see? There's a school

behind that one. Wouldn't know it, would you? Waste ground behind the other one. You'll see it in a moment. I keep clear of this place normally.

Waste ground's got some funny nebs hanging round it—scavengers and druggies mostly, maybe the odd duff looking for something warm to sleep under. Dronky place but what choice have we got? Better among people who want to keep clear of the porkers like we do. They're less likely to give us away.

But we still got to watch ourselves. These nebs might hate the porkers but that doesn't mean they'll like us any better. Becky speaks, low voice.

'There's some people.'

'I've seen 'em.'

'Just ahead.'

'I've seen 'em.'

'Shall we turn back?'

'Keep walking.'

Three figures, slumped against the wall. But they're muffins, no trouble at all. Don't ask me how I know.

'Blade?'

She's whispering now, and she's slowed down,

more shuffly than ever. I whisper back.

'Keep moving. It's OK.'

'But—'

'Keep moving. And shut up.'

She does both, somehow. I can see she doesn't want to. She wants to scream her fear into the night sky, and turn and run. She's feeling in her pocket. I can see her hand fumbling about. She's searching for Trixi's flick-knife.

'Bex.'

I'm speaking dead soft. She looks round at me.

'Don't,' I say.

She reads my face in spite of the darkness, pulls her hand out of her pocket.

No knife.

The figures are closer now—two men, dozy-looking gobbos, and a woman swigging from a bottle. They look up, take us in. I give Jaz's feet a little squeeze.

'Say hello to them, Jaz.'

'Hello!' she calls out.

'All right, poppet?' says the woman.

We walk on. I give Jaz's feet another squeeze.

'Good girl.'

She gives my head another one of those funny little pats. She's still light on my shoulders. I'm starting to think I could carry her for ever.

On down the lane, wall on the right falling away. Waste ground opens up. We got to get past this bit quick. I'm hoping there's no trouble but you only want one claphead to start something.

So far, so good. Lane looks clear and nothing in the shadows to the right, nothing dangerous anyway. Just the big heaps of rubbish people dump here in the middle of the night, or whenever the coast looks clear.

'Something's moving,' says Becky. 'By the old fridge.'

'It's a cat.'

'You seen it?'

'I just said. It's a cat. There's another one further off.'

'Where?'

'Behind the pram.'

I nod towards it. Becky looks.

'Can't see no cat.'

'It's just gone.'

She glances at me.

'You don't miss nothing, do you?'

I don't answer. I'm too busy missing nothing.

Another movement among the rubbish. Something low, a body under a blanket. A cough, twitch, wink of light as an eye opens. It fixes me for a moment, then closes again.

We walk on. Hum of the city over to the left. Night hum, like she's moaning, like she wants to rest but can't. I know this sound. I know all her sounds.

But this place is almost silent. Just a pattering among the rubbish, rats probably. Little squeal somewhere behind us, like the two cats just met. But it's soon quiet again. Then another sound.

Footsteps.

Stop, listen. Becky stops too, looks at me.

'What?' she says.

'Sssh!'

Look around. No sign of anyone following, no more steps. Walk on. Sound starts again. Stop.

It stops.

I'm looking all round now, watching cute. Nothing moving on the waste ground, nothing on the lane.

'I didn't hear nothing,' says Becky.

I feel Jaz playing with my hair like everything's OK. Walk on again, slow, steady. But I'm watching, listening, hard as I can. Can't see anybody, can't hear anybody. No more steps, just our own, and the hum of the city again further off.

'I didn't hear nothing,' says Becky again.

It's starting to rain, little feathery drops. Jaz gives a chuckle. I look up. Can't see her clear, just a bit of her face as she leans forward.

'Raining,' she says, and she tugs my hair.

It's like everything's play to her, and for a brief, dimpy moment, I almost feel it too. But it doesn't last.

The footsteps are back.

Stop again, listen, look round. I can feel Becky watching me. I want to throttle her again. She should be watching the lane, the waste ground, not me. She should be checking for trouble.

'What?' she says.

I've seen him now, good way back down the lane, over by the wall. Should have clapped him before. Either he's clever or I'm losing my touch.

He's stopped, keeping in the shadows. Can't make

out his face but it's a gobbo, thick build. Watching me, that's for sure, even if I can't see his eyes.

'What?' says Becky again.

All she's got to do is look. Follow my gaze and look. But she's still watching me. I can feel it. She's just staring at me like a dimp.

'Over there.' I nod down the lane. 'In the shadows by the wall. A guy.'

She says nothing but I feel her eyes lift off me.

'Can't see nobody,' she says.

Jaz tugs at my hair again. I tickle her ankle, glance at Becky.

'Move on, slow. But keep your wits about you.'

We move on down the lane. I don't look back. I'm not going to keep turning. I'll hear him now, even if he creeps after us. But he's not creeping. He's walking loud as you like. Knows we know and doesn't care.

I need to get some kind of a glimpse in case I know him. Not yet though. Got to act confident, like I don't care either.

Only I do. I don't like this stop-start stalking. Almost better if he just came on. But he's keeping his distance, watching but staying back.

Becky's all tensed up again. How she ever got in Trixi's gang's a blind-go for me. She must have done something, shown some bottle, or the trolls would never have let her in.

She's not showing much bottle now. She's choking out again. I can see it. She's gone right down inside herself and she's not coming out.

'Bex.'

I'm listening even as I speak, listening to the footsteps. They're still there, clear in the night in spite of the rain. And they're closer.

'Bex.'

No answer, not even a glance. Now I look back, just quick, enough to see what I need to see. He's closer but still keeping to the shadows. I hear Becky stop.

I do the same, look at her. She's staring back down the lane.

She's got to see him now. He's stopped too and he's still in the shadows but he's much closer than last time she looked.

'Got him?' I say.

She sniffs, turns, walks on.

'Can't see nobody,' she mutters.

She's lying, Bigeyes. I can always tell. And what's worse is she's zipping me over double-time. Cos you know what? There's something I feel as clear as the rain on my face.

She hasn't just seen that gobbo.

She knows who he is.

I'm saying nothing. I'm dead quiet. I'm watching round me, watching Becky. And I'm thinking: first question—if she knows him and doesn't want to tell me, what's she hiding?

Second question—how did he find us? Either it was luck or someone spotted us in the streets and told him. Doesn't matter who. Dregs know dregs. Word goes round, specially if there's money on the barrel.

Third question—if she knows him and doesn't want to go near him, does that mean he's dangerous? I can't make up my own mind about that. I usually know when I see people but I don't with this guy.

Fourth question—if he's dangerous, why's he hanging back?

Maybe he's just cautious, biding his time. Or maybe he's scared too. If he's heard about us on the news, there might be talk about how I'm useful with a knife, how I can throw 'em and stuff. Maybe they're saying this boy's lethal, keep away.

That could help us a bit. Or it could make things worse. Muffins keep their distance anyway. It's the nutters you got to watch, the hard nebs with something to prove.

Or the ones who don't care.

Becky's walking faster, not looking back, not looking at me. Hard to know if she's scared of the gobbo or not. This is stupid. I might just as well ask her.

'Bex?'

'Don't ask me any questions.'

Fair enough. Can't say I blame her. I've been telling her nothing. But Jaz speaks, in that little moony voice.

'Blade?'

First time she's used that name. Doesn't make me feel good to hear it. Not from her. Don't know why.

'What do you want, Jaz?'

'Want to get down.'

'OK.'

I put her down. Feels strange without her up there. She was starting to get a bit heavy but it was nice carrying her. She takes Becky's hand. Becky looks at her, frowns a bit, like she doesn't want to be slowed down. Jaz takes no notice, just smiles. After a bit Becky smiles back at her.

'All right, Fairybell?'

Jaz nods.

I'm looking round again. Gobbo's still there but he's fallen back a bit. He's harder to see than he was but I'm sure he's speaking into a mobile. We've slowed right down now, or Becky has cos of Jaz. Maybe just as well. There's other things to watch for round here apart from the gobbo.

Waste ground's slipping away. Lane's narrowed and the playing fields are opening up on either side. And I'm starting to wonder, Bigeyes. I was going to take us straight on down the lane, then cut off right where it forks.

Now I'm not so sure.

Something about that gobbo's worrying me. He could be all kinds of trouble, specially if he's phoning

people about us. He could be talking to the gang or the porkers. He might even be in touch with one of the ticks from my past. He could be one of their hired slugs.

I didn't think so at first but now I'm starting to wonder. God knows how many people they got working for them. There's the gobbo who killed Trixi, there's his mate, and there's that other guy, the big, hairy grunt. And now this new gobbo with his mobile.

He could be one of theirs too. Maybe I was wrong about Bex knowing him. Maybe she's got no idea who he is.

'He's called Riff,' she says suddenly.

I look round at her. She's plodding along, still holding Jaz's hand, but she's watching me.

'That guy.'

'I thought you said you couldn't see anybody.'

'Well, I was lying. I saw him. And I know him.'

I keep quiet. Best not to push her. She's dead tense. She'll tell me if I let her. Push her and she'll close up like a fist.

Rain's stopping but we're walking on through the night. Gobbo's a good way back now. Hasn't moved

any further. I can just make him out in the shadows. Think he's still talking on his mobile.

I look back at Becky. She's staring down at the ground, like she thinks she's said enough. I got to prompt her again. But Jaz speaks first.

'Riff,' she says.

Becky glances down at her, then up at me.

'He's a mate of Tammy's gran's,' she says. 'Well, not a mate. More of a sponger.'

I can guess. I remember Tammy's gran well enough. A right old dunny. Anyone could take her for a sky-dive.

A picture floats into my head of that other old lady—white-haired Mary with her scented candles and crazy dog. Nobody would ever call her a dunny. But I can't start drumming myself over that business again.

It hurts too much to think back. All I see is that bungalow. All I hear is the gunshots and the stabbing of my feet as I ran away and left her. There's no way she's still alive.

I got to break out of this, got to get back to what's cracking us now.

'Who's this Riff?' I say. 'Apart from being a sponger.'

'He's harmless. But he knows some scum.'

'I bet he does.'

But at least he won't know anyone from my past. Not if he's tied up with Tammy's gang. I suppose that's something.

'He hangs round with Trixi's brother,' says Bex.

Trixi's brother? I never knew she had one. That's all I need to hear.

'Who's this brother?'

'He's called Dig.'

'Older or younger?'

'Twenty.'

'Mean as Trixi was?'

'You don't want to cross 'im.'

'Turn left,' I say.

'What?'

'Left. Cross the lane.'

I feel her look at me, but I'm glancing back now. I need that Riff gobbo to see us. Trouble is, I can't see him. Don't tell me he's wigged it, Bigeyes. Hang on—I got him again. Still hanging back but he's there.

'Cross the lane, Bex. Move slow. We need that guy to see us.'

She doesn't argue, just starts across the lane.

'Stop,' I say.

She stops, Jaz still holding her hand. They're both looking at me. I bend down to Jaz, give her a smile.

'Riff,' she says.

I don't see her mouth move in the darkness. All I see is those glowy eyes. It's like they're talking instead.

'Do you like him, Jaz?'

She says nothing, just stands there. I'm starting to feel something other than fear. I'm getting flashbacks again as I look into those bright little pools.

'Did he hurt you, Jaz? Did he do something you didn't like?'

I feel myself look away, down the lane to those quiet shadows, then back. Jaz is still watching me, like she's been waiting to answer. She shakes her head.

'Riff's harmless,' says Becky. Her voice sounds harsh in the night. I'd almost forgotten she's there. I straighten up, glance back down the lane again.

'Let's hope he's seen us crossing the lane.'

'What for?' says Becky.

'Never mind. Come on.'

I lead them right across to the fence. It's an easy climb into the playing field beyond and Jaz is small enough to crawl through the little gap in the wire.

'Go through there, Jaz. It'll be fun.'

She doesn't hesitate, just crawls through. I'm over the top by the time she's in the field, Becky just behind.

'Now what?' she says.

'We want to make it look to that Riff guy like we're running across this field.'

'What for?'

'So he can tell that to his mates on his mobile. But we'll cut back further down to the lane, cross it where he can't see us, and lose 'em over the fields on the other side.'

But already I can see that's not going to work.

There's lights moving towards us from both ends of the lane.

Different kinds of lights. Car headlamps behind us,

some way back. But it's the lights coming from the other direction that bother me more.

They're torches, and there's lots of 'em.

They're also some way down but if we'd hung about another minute, one or other of these nebs would have seen us. Trouble is, we're going to have problems cutting over the lane further down with these torch-carriers trigging up.

'Come on,' I say. 'We got to move fast.'

I pick Jaz up and set off.

'Want to walk,' she says.

'Got to carry you, baby, OK? I'll put you down soon as I can. Promise.'

She doesn't argue. Thank God she's a sweet kid.

We're running now. Becky keeps up easy with me carrying Jaz. I'm trying to think as we run. There's still a chance we can double back further down but we got to make sure we're over this field and well out of sight of the lane before we cut right.

And we got to cut right. We can't go into the city again. To get to where I want to take us, we got to go in the same direction as the lane. If we give these nebs a wide enough berth, we could still manage it as

long as we keep 'em off our scent when they come looking this way.

Cos that's what they're going to do. I know it.

We're halfway over the playing field. Rugby posts, changing-rooms, pavilion. We run past, but I'm getting tired now. Look back.

Headlights by the fence along the lane, figures standing there. It's porkers—two cars, four nebs, no dogs.

But the torches have gone.

Switched off anyway. They don't want to see the porkers any more than we do. Question is, where are these other nebs? They haven't cut into this field. We're almost on the far side but I'd have seen 'em easy.

And now I'm getting a new pile of thoughts.

Risky thoughts, Bigeyes. Scary too. But they won't let me go. I'm thinking, I got to know more about those torches. They're after us, that's for sure, but who are they?

Not just the three gobbos who were hunting me before. I know that much. I saw at least five lights on the lane. I got to know who these people are. I

got to know what they look like, how dangerous they are.

Yeah, yeah, I know about Bex and Jaz. I know I got to get 'em away. But I got to know who's after us too. I got to know my enemies.

'What's up?' says Becky.

She's looking at me as we run.

'You got something on your mind,' she says. 'I can see it in your face.'

'Tell you in a minute. Let's get clear first.'

We run on. Still no sign of anyone in the field behind us. I got no idea where the torches are now but hopefully they haven't spotted us either. The porkers are where they were before. I can see the lights from their cars burning up the night.

Jaz is getting heavy but we've reached the far end of the playing field. Stop by the wall, breathing hard.

'Down,' says Jaz.

'I know, baby.' I put her down. 'There you go.'

'What now?' says Becky.

'You and Jaz are going to hide behind this wall. There's a way over further down where the brickwork's collapsed a bit.'

'How do you know?'

'I just do. Climb over—it's dead easy—and keep out of sight. There's some bushes on the other side and a little patch of scrubby ground.'

'And what are you going to do?'

'Go back.'

'What for?'

'To check those people out.'

'But we got to get away. You said we got five miles to go to this place of yours. What's it matter who's after us? We know it's people we don't want to see. That's enough for me. It's like one in the morning or whatever and I just want to get the hell out of here.'

I'm looking at her. She's right. We should wig it out of here, for Jaz's sake if nothing else. But it's no good, Bigeyes.

I got to get a closer look at these nebs. I might not recognize any of 'em. They might just be hired slugs. But I got to know what kind of shit's after us.

'Stay here,' I tell Becky. 'And stay quiet. I won't be long.'

She doesn't answer, just scowls. Jaz looks up, like

she's waiting for something.

'She wants a kiss,' says Becky.

I hear the threat in her voice.

I look down at Jaz. Long time since I kissed anyone. Last person was Becky—not this Becky, the other Becky. The ever-special Becky. The dead Becky. But I don't want to talk about that now.

I lean down, give Jaz a kiss on the cheek. Feels kind of weird.

'Bye,' she says, and she turns to Becky like I'm not there any more.

Like I've never been there.

'Jaz? You all right, kid?'

'She thinks you're never coming back,' says Becky.

'What?'

'She's used to people not coming back. That's why she wanted a kiss from you. She thinks you're leaving us for good.'

'Bex—'

'And maybe you are.' Becky looks at me hard. 'Maybe this is it. You don't want us round your neck. You can move better on your own. We're just a nuisance.'

I glance down at Jaz again. She's clutching Becky's leg, pushing her face into the thigh. She's not crying or anything. She's just … I don't know …

'She's trying to forget you,' says Becky.

I bend down, stroke Jaz's hair. She doesn't move, doesn't look round. Feels strange doing this. I don't like being close to people normally. But it's OK with her.

'Jaz,' I whisper. 'I'm only going away for a few minutes. I'll be back. I promise I'll be back.

She doesn't turn round, just goes on pressing her face into Becky's thigh.

'Jaz?'

She moves her head, just enough for me to see her right eye. It's got tears in it.

I'm losing it now, Bigeyes. I can't cope with this. I'm thinking, maybe I should just stick here, get us away, forget those nebs.

But it's no good. No matter how much this kid burns me up, I got to know what's out there.

I give her another kiss on the cheek. She doesn't move, doesn't speak.

'I'll be back, Jaz. Promise I will.'

She says nothing, just looks at me with that wet little eye. I feel something drop into my pocket. I know what it is without looking. I glance back at Becky.

'I don't want the knife.'

'Keep it,' she says. 'You're more likely to need it than me. And you know how to use it.'

I reach into my pocket, squeeze the knife, hold it tight.

'Keep it,' she says.

I let go, pull my hand out. The knife feels heavy in my pocket, heavier than it should. I don't know why.

'I'll see you,' I say.

And I'm gone.

Got to think. Got to get back to being me, being strong, being alone. Got to forget about Bex and Jaz for a few minutes. If I'm worrying about them, I'll get snagged.

Check over my shoulder. Becky's found the broken-down section of the wall and she's helping Jaz over it. Least she's doing what she's supposed to. I just hope she waits there till I get back.