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opening extract from

The Return of Johnny Kemp

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The Return of Johnny Kemp

by

Keith Gray

Teen fiction

Chapter 1

It was five to eight on Monday morning. They were already waiting for me.

My mobile rang. It had a heavy metal ring tone. I was packing my school bag. My room was a mess. It was always a mess. My PE kit was stuffed under my bed. My maths book was at the bottom of a pile of magazines. I didn't have a clue where I'd left my RE homework. I panicked for a second when I couldn't find my keys. But then found them in my school bag. My phone rang again. It was in my coat pocket – and my coat was on the floor.

I looked at the phone. I saw that my friend Gary was ringing. I pushed the button to answer his call. “Yeah. What’s up?” I said.

Gary came round to my house every day on the way to school. Maybe he was running late today? His voice sounded weird. “Dan? Dan? Is that you?” he asked me.

“Who else would it be?” I asked.

Gary sounded like he’d been running, like he was panting. “Dan, have you looked outside?”

I hadn’t bothered to open my bedroom curtains yet. “Why?” I asked. “What’s happening? Has it snowed again?” It had been a brilliant weekend of snowball fights.

“Go and look!” Gary said. His breath was loud and heavy over the phone.

I kept my mobile by my ear with one hand and pulled open my curtains with the other. My bedroom window looked out over the back garden and into the alley at the back of our house. It was a bright February morning. There hadn’t been any fresh snow overnight. It was just two-day-old grey slush everywhere.

“And?” I asked. “What am I supposed to be looking at?”

“Can’t you see them?”

I pulled my curtains as far back as they would go. I looked up and down the row of back gardens and along the alley-way in both directions. “See who?” I asked.

“The Baxter brothers,” Gary said. He wasn’t out of breath. He was scared. “They’re right outside your house.”

I felt my stomach go as cold as the dirty snow.

I ran to my mum’s bedroom at the front of the house. She was having breakfast downstairs. She hadn’t opened her curtains yet either. Her bed wasn’t made and her alarm clock was on the floor on the far side of the room. She must have thrown it there, angry at it for waking her up.

I didn’t yank her curtains open like I’d done mine. Instead I peered around the edge of them just enough to see down onto the street outside. And stood up against our garden wall were Neil and Matty Baxter. Neil had a hoodie on, Matty’s cap was pulled low over his eyes.

I swore loudly.

“That’s what I thought,” Gary said. “And you know why they’re there, don’t you? You know why they’re waiting for you.”

I was gripping the phone hard. “Johnny Kemp. He’s coming back to school today,” I said.

“Yeah, and that means you’re dead,” Gary said. “You know that, don’t you? He said he was going to kill you. He told everyone.”

“I know,” I said.

“He reckoned the first day he came back he was going to stomp you into the ground,” Gary said.

“Yeah, Gary. I know.”

“He said he was going to smash your head in two, Dan,” Gary went on. “I mean, he’s really, really, *really* going to kill you.”

“Yeah, OK, Gary. OK. I *know*.” I was scared too now.

Just over two weeks ago Johnny Kemp had been excluded from our school. He was a bully and a thug. He was mean like barbed wire, dangerous like broken glass. Everyone was scared of him. I think the teachers had been looking for just one more bad thing, one more reason, before they could exclude him. I was the person who’d given them that reason. I was the one who’d got Johnny Kemp kicked out of school. That’s why he wanted to get me back.

I looked down at the Baxter brothers waiting on the street outside. They were Johnny Kemp's best friends. I went as close to the window as I dared and peered both ways along our street. There was an old man walking his dog. There was a woman starting to scrape the ice off her car's windscreen. I couldn't see Kemp anywhere. Was he hidden behind one of the parked cars? Or was he waiting out of sight around the corner?

I reckoned Neil and Matty Baxter were here to grab me and drag me to where Kemp was waiting. He was somewhere he could kick me in without anyone seeing. Somewhere he could take all the time he needed.

"Where are you?" I asked Gary over the phone.

“At the bus stop on the corner,” he said. “I saw the Baxter brothers, but no way did I want *them* to see *me*.”

“Is Kemp there too?” I wanted to know.

“I can’t see him,” Gary said. “But I bet he’s nearby somewhere.”

I gripped the phone. I gritted my teeth. I walked up and down my mum’s room.

“Dan?” Gary asked. “Dan? You still there? What’re you going to do?”

“I don’t know what I *can* do,” I said.

“If I was you,” Gary told me, “I’d start saying I was ill. I’d tell my mum I had small pox or scarlet fever or something. Anything. Just so I didn’t have to go to school today. If I was you, Dan, I’d make

sure I stayed ill for a really, really long time. Being ill at home has got to be better than being dead at school.”