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Opening extract from

Blade: Risking All

Written by

Tim Bowler

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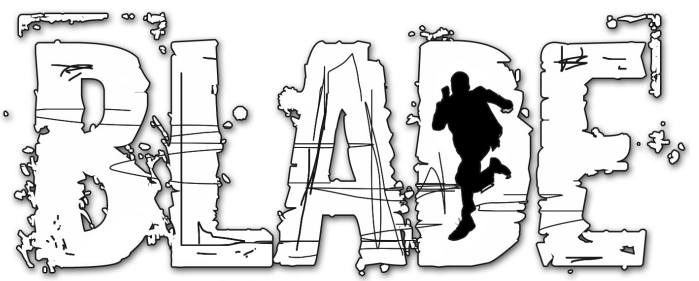
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Blade is ready. He knows where his enemy is and he's set on revenge. But it's going to be tough. Hawk has retreated to his hideout and surrounded himself with protection. How is Blade going to get past the guards and confront the man who has destroyed his life?

Because nothing else will do now. The days of running are over. It's got to be face to face, just the two of them, and losing is not an option. The question is—does Blade have the will and the strength to defeat the man who has always won?

The eighth and final title in this ground-breaking series from Tim Bowler, the Carnegie Medal-winning author of *River Boy*, *Starseeker*, *Frozen Fire* and *Bloodchild*. Blade can feel victory within his grasp, but is he risking all for nothing?

tim bowler



RISKING ALL

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winner of the carnegie medal

BLADE

RISKING ALL

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For Rachel
with my love

Dawn sky, dead sky. Deep, dronky grey. Clouds, no sun. Just the dream of it, somewhere far away. But you know what, Bigeyes? I never seen a dawn so beautiful.

Take my eyes off it, stick 'em on the house.

Cos that's what matters. That's where he is. My enemy. In his castle, his nest. Hawk's nest. He's got loads of 'em, Bigeyes. You bet. All over the country, all over the world. But this one? Out here in this remote spot?

He only ever uses it for one reason. And you can probably guess what that is. If you've been paying attention. You know enough about the bastard to work out his obsession.

Yeah, OK, he's got more than one. Power, that's a big 'un. He loves that, needs it. Money, that's another. Possession, number three. You name it, he wants to own it. Antiques, paintings, boats, cars, planes, whatever. He wants the whole stack.

And people.

Oh, yeah. He's into owning people big time. And he doesn't just want part of you. He wants all of you, good and total. When he's got you like that, he's one happy boy. And one dangerous gobbo. Cos you're drummed. You don't even breathe unless he says so.

And then there's the Game.

Hawk's big obsession.

To smash up this world and build it again, in his own stinking image. Him and his fellow slime. Playing for the highest stakes of all. Yeah, he wants all that. And more. Cos you know what? There's something he aches for, Bigeyes.

And it's constant. And when things are bad, that's

when he craves it most. When he's choking with anger, like he is now, that's when he's got to have it. So he comes here. To make sure he can have what he wants.

In secret.

Once upon a time, I was that secret. The reason why he came here. Not any more, thank Christ. It's some other victim now. But I can't be thinking about that. I got to stay focused.

Right, Bigeyes. Check out the house.

Go on, check it good.

All quiet. Just a few lights on. There'll be more soon. Give 'em time. They just got here, remember. Hawk's copter sitting on the gravel. No cars yet. But they'll be on their way. Hawk comes here for solitude, but it's not proper solitude.

It's solitude as he sees it.

Solitude with bodyguards.

Cop a glint over the house. Bigger than you thought, right? Looked small from a distance, I know. And it's not huge, not by Hawk's standards. Even so, it's got plenty of rooms. And there's two you got to know about.

Can't see either from here.

But you can picture 'em.

First up, look over to the right. Bottom of the house. Check out the porch. Now let your eyes flick over the gravel towards where Hawk's parked his copter. Stop just before that and let your mind dig down. Cos your eyes can't go there.

Under that very spot.

There's a bunker. Hawk had it built special. Told me himself, back in the days when I was in favour. You're thinking it's for protection. Well, maybe it was in the beginning.

But he doesn't need it for that. Not really. Got too much shit looking after him already. So he uses the bunker for something else. Yeah, Bigeyes, same again. Use your imagination.

You'll have to anyway. Cos we're not hitting the bunker. We're hitting the other room you can't see. It's hidden from here by the wing of the house. But we can't go for it now. Too dangerous. The grinks just got here so we can't snap straight in. They got their rituals. And the first ritual's to make sure the boss is safe.

So we got to pull back for a bit and . . .

Shit, sooner than I thought. Two grinks standing in the porch. I thought we'd get a few minutes to wig it but they're out here already. They'll be sniffing round the building, sheds, outhouses. And this fence I'm hiding behind.

Come on. We got to rip.

Check the bag, make sure everything's cute inside. Close it up, slip into the trees, find the darkest spot, bung a glance back. No sign of the grinks. Just glimpses of the house in the gaps between branches. But they'll grub out this little wood, no question.

I can't stay here.

On through the trees, stop at the edge, think. Got to watch my step here, Bigeyes. It's kind of thrown me, Hawk turning up same time I did. I never expected him to do that. Wasn't even sure he'd come at all.

I had two plans. If there was nobody here, I was going to break in and wait. Day, two days, whatever. Case the bastard showed. And if he was already here—like I hoped he would be—then I'd watch for a chance and snick in when I could.

Probably at night.

But now it's different, with him turning up right

this second and his grinks out bumming the turf already. I got to blast out for a bit, let 'em scout round, find nothing, then pick my time and creep back.

Skirt round the trees, keep 'em between me and the house. Stone wall just ahead, snaking up the side of the valley. I had this in my head, Bigeyes, when I was trigging here. I remember it from the past.

And there's a spot up there where I think I can hide. Just hope I've remembered it good. Or guessed it good. Cos I've never hidden there before. Just seen it from the house. Anyway, let's give it a fizz.

Over to the wall, crouch close, check over. House looks older from this angle. Don't ask me why. Maybe it's the dronky grey dawn. Seems to be getting darker rather than brighter.

That might help me a bit. Got to hope so. More lights click on. Most of the downstairs rooms lit up now, couple upstairs. Here goes another. Curtains whipping back, windows opening.

And more grinks cutting into the grounds.

I don't like this, Bigeyes. The two I saw in the porch have come round and now there's two more joining 'em. Big gobbos, hard slugs. Another light goes on

upstairs. Nothing on the top floor yet. All dark, curtains still drawn.

Check out the gobbos.

Talking in a group, like they're planning who checks where. I can't wait for this. Some are going to be heading this way and there's no point hanging round. But now we got more trouble.

Motors turning up, three of 'em, flash-looking slammers. Fourth motor further off, purring up the lane. They pull in, nose round Hawk's copter, stop. Clunk of doors and more beef gets out.

I'm counting fifteen.

Jesus, Bigeyes, what's happening? He never used to bring this many. Not out here. That was the whole point. He wasn't supposed to need to. Cos this was his retreat, his little secret den. His nest, like I told you. That was what he liked best. He could get away here, keep things simple, cos only a few of his most trusted grinks knew about this place.

Only now I'm starting to get it.

And it chills my heart.

Cos it's going to make everything that much harder. Might even make it impossible. And I'm angry

with myself, Bigeyes, cos I should have seen this coming. It's so bloody obvious now. Why didn't I crack it before?

Hawk's expecting grime. Course he is. I mean, face it, Bigeyes—doesn't take a buzzbrain to work it out. He's got shit flying all around him, right? The gangster bojos are blowing blood, the porkers are making arrests.

The honest porkers anyway, not the bent bastards like Jakes.

But the point is—there's enough grime out there now to make Hawk nervous. He knows they all got stuff on him. And what's worse is he knows the kid they got it from. So, yeah, even out here he's expecting trouble.

He might even be expecting me.

The grinks are still standing there, naffing. Some of the beef joins 'em from the cars. Check the numbers again. Ten standing there now. Rest of the gobbos are piling into the house.

But ten's enough.

They're splitting. Two cutting off left to the sheds and outhouses, two to the barn, three round the front of the house, three off to the fence where I was hiding. And they won't stop there. They'll climb over and work through the trees.

Then check this way.

I got to shift.

And I got to keep low. Not just from the grinks outside but from the house. If I could spot the hiding place from the window, someone else can too. And cop a glint of me clambering up the valley.

Up, up, fast as I can, low as I can.

Check over my shoulder.

House is still hidden by the wall, so I reckon I'm cute from that angle, for the moment anyway. What's really bombing my head is the grinks crabbing over the fence. I can't straighten up and look for 'em. Too risky. But they'll be into the trees by now.

If I don't make it over the rise quick, they'll be out in the field and they'll have a bung-clear view up the slope. With me on it.

Christ.

Scramble on, breathing hard. Getting tired now,

really tired, and the pain from where those other grinks hurt me yesterday's cranking up. Aching all over and head's thumping like it wants to break open. I grip the bag, push myself on.

Check behind again.

I can see the trees clear, and the field to the right, even the little track I cut across when I trigged here during the night. Still no figures breaking out. Jesus, Bigeyes. I just need 'em to stay in the trees a bit longer.

Few seconds, that's all.

Stay in the bloody trees.

I stumble on, up, up. Here's the top of the rise. Stumpy ground, rocky outcrops, grassy hillocks. Stone wall twists up and over the hill. Second wall branches off it to the right.

Check back.

And now there's figures below. All three gobbos. Light's picked up and I can see better. Trouble is, so can they. I drop to the ground, take a moment, lift my head, just enough to fix 'em with my eyes.

Mean-looking dregs. They'll all have guns. Not showing 'em, not here, case some farmer or local

dronk comes blundering by. But they'll be armed. Trust me. Don't think any of 'em's clapped me.

Shit, they're coming up the hill.

Crawl over the edge of the rise, bundle the bag into my chest, roll down the other slope. Boulder just below to break my fall. I brace myself for the thump. Mustn't make a sound. But I can't help it. Thing slaps me so hard I give a yelp.

I lean back against the rock, catch a breath, listen. They won't have heard. It wasn't that big a yelp. Take another breath, scramble down the hill. Yeah, Bigeyes, I know what you're thinking. I'm thinking it too.

So much for the hiding place.

Well, it looked like one from the house. That's all I can say. Yeah, I know. It was a long time ago. But I remember what I saw. And it looked like there was a little gully thing just below the stone wall. Kind of a nook where I thought I could keep out of sight. Wasn't expecting this other slope to be so flat and wide open.

So there's only one thing left.

Never mind what it is. No time to explain. Down the slope, fast, fast. Got to push hard now, really hard.

Moment they hit the top of the rise, they'll clap me. Unless I can get to what I've just seen.

The only place left to hide.

Trouble is, ground's rocky. One slip and I'll snag an ankle, and that's game over. Push on anyway, hard as I can. Got to risk it. No point hanging back. Turn an ankle and I get caught. Move slow and I get caught.

So what's the point hanging back?

Got to blast down this slope.

Halfway to the bottom. Check back to the rise. No figures yet. Maybe they won't come this far. Maybe they'll just climb up part of the other side, enough to get a view round the house. Maybe that's all Hawk wants.

Yeah, right.

I'm zipping myself over with that one.

They'll hit the rise. No question. They'll do this proper. And I got to be out of sight. But here's the broken bit of the wall I spotted from the top. Scramble over it, panting hard. And here's the other thing I saw.

Gorse.

Big spiky patch. Wish it was thicker but I'll have to

chance it and crawl in. It might just block the sight of me. Trouble is—I don't know. I might be easy to see. And even if I'm not, there's no other place to hide on this slope, so if the grinks are grubbing out thorough, this is the first place they'll slam.

But there's nothing I can do now. Nowhere else to go.

Onto my knees, hugging the bag with one arm, prodding a way through the spines with the other. Jesus, Bigeyes. I hate this stuff. Damp and prickly. Smells too, yuk. Check over my shoulder, peer through the spines.

Glimpses of sky, hill, the broken wall.

Too many glimpses.

This won't work, Bigeyes. If I can see out, the grinks can see in. Got to go deeper, find a place where there's no glimpses out. Trouble is, I don't know if you get that with gorse. Specially this time of year. It looked thick from up top but down here, in the middle of it, I'm crawling about and crawling about and I still feel like any neb with half an eye can see me.

Here's a better clump.

Thicker, darker. More prickly, more smelly, but who

cares? It's all that's left. And now I got no choice. Got to stay right where I am and not move. Cos there's voices coming close.

Gobbos.

Got to be those three grinks. Can't see 'em. I'm curled up, tight as I can, bag locked against my chest, back to the wall. And the voices are coming from there. Don't ask me if they can see me through the gorse, cos I don't know. And I don't dare move my head to look. Got to just trust now.

And hope.

Voices getting louder, footsteps tramping nearer. Then everything stops. And suddenly there's nothing. Just me curled up, in the gorse, in the silence.

Waiting.

Like them.

Just a few feet away.

I can feel 'em. They haven't climbed over the wall, but they're close. Don't ask me how I know. Leaning on the rubbly brick, I'm guessing, looking over, checking the gorse. Checking me, maybe. Grinning to each other at the sight of the kid curled up in the gorse, thinking no one can see him.

Sound of a chuckle, another. Burst of sniggering, then a scramble of feet, grunts. They're making their way over the broken wall. No mistaking that. Tramping again, swish of gorse, somewhere behind me.

Then a voice.

'Top field. Just down from the wall. The gorse.'

I'm shivering now. Can't stop it. I stay curled up, tight as I can. Nothing else to do. No point moving. But I want to look round. I want to fix 'em, if only to glare back. Voice comes again.

'Yeah, OK.'

He's talking on a phone.

I take a breath, force myself to stay still. More tramping, circling the gorse now. Flick my eyes about, peer into the spines. Nothing clear to see, just shadowy forms edging round. The voices have stopped. Then I catch a new sound. And I recognize it straight up.

The copter. It's taking off. I curl up tighter, listen. Sound's getting louder, closer. I look up and catch a new shadowy form, hovering over me like a great bird. Laughter again, hooting even.

I clench my fists. Yeah, you bastards. You're loving

this, aren't you? The easiest job you ever had. Stroll up the hill, down the other side, and there's the kid, shivering in the gorse.

Waiting for you.

Hawk's going to love you boys so much.

The bird-shadow looms closer. Hasn't landed yet. Still hovering, but it's getting lower all the time. I stare up. Still hard to make the thing out with all these spiny little branches in the way. But I don't need to.

I can picture everything.

And right now I'm picturing a face. Hawk's face. He'll be at the controls. Oh yeah, you bet. The grinks probably spotted me here from the top of the rise, rang the house, sauntered down.

And the big man's come in person. Like he would.

He's in that copter right now. I know it.

And I'm dead.

Copter moves closer. It's not just the engine getting louder, the shadow getting bigger. It's the spines of the gorse. They're dancing in the rushing draught. More laughter from the gobbos, more hooting.

I curl up tighter. Don't know why I'm bothering. Might as well lie on my back, wait for 'em to pluck me out. Cos they can't miss me, not now. The gorse is swaying, bouncing, over me, round me, gaps opening on all sides. I'm like water pouring out of a sieve.

I think of the bag, what's in it. If I'd been quicker, got myself ready, I could have used that. Now it's a wasted gig. The gobbos down here'll see what I'm doing and stiff me before I can prime up. Before the copter gets down, before Hawk even gets out.

But nobody grabs me.

Nobody even touches me.

And there's a change in the sound above me.

The copter's not coming down. I can tell from the buzz of the engine. It's climbing again. I whip a glance up. It's turned back into a shadow, cos the gorse has closed round me again. The other shadows are moving too, some disappearing, some cutting round after the others.

And suddenly there's no shadows at all.

No voices, no laughter. Just the drone of the copter, fading.

And the gorse lying still.

I'm trembling bad, squeezing the bag tight like before. I don't get it, Bigeyes. They must have seen me. They can't be blind. I take a breath. Too scared to move. I don't feel safe here but it's all I got. I want to just stay curled up, in this spiny darkness. But I can't.

I got to know what's happened.

Push back the branches, peer through.

I counted wrong. There's twelve of 'em. But maybe some came up from the house separate, climbed over that other wall. Yeah, there's a stile. They probably trigged over that way.

Whatever.

Twelve of the bastards.

And they're heading off right, backs to me.

Copter's wigged it over the house, hovering over the fields on the other side. Check back to the gobbos. Still walking on, but spreading out now, covering the ground all the way up to the top wall and down to the base of the valley.

I can only guess what happened.

They missed me, Bigeyes. They just bloody missed me. Came this way to grub out the place. Normal

routine. Hawk always makes his dronks do that. Gathered round the gorse, had a few laughs. Copter comes over, checking too.

Grinks in the copter fly down, hover over the gorse. Bit of larking with the dronks on the ground. Nobody's checking the gorse. Cos they're all looking at each other. Copter flies off. Gobbos on the ground trig on.

Just guessing.

Whatever happened, I was lucky. And I got another slam at this thing. Problem is, I can't stay here. Got away with it once but it's too risky. They should have smacked the gorse. They will next time. Probably poke it about.

I got to pull back, find another place to hide, wait there till dark. Yeah, Bigeyes. We got to be patient. There's that many grinks swilling round, I'll never get past 'em in daylight.

Hawk's nervous. That's clear. Never seen so many minders round this place. And he won't have been in the copter. I was wrong about that. He'll be holed up in the house, making sure he's safe. Then waiting for his treat to be brought to the bunker.

I got to play this cute.

Check out through the spines. Copter's way off to the right, grinks still ploughing on, backs to me. Clutch the bag, crawl back through the gorse, check out the broken wall. Nobody standing there, nobody near. Nobody I can see anyway.

I got to go for it, Bigeyes.

Out of the gorse, keeping low, scramble over the break in the wall, crouch against the other side, check round. Nobody up on the rise, nobody in this part of the valley. Bung a glance up the far hill. Looks like a fence running along the top.

Don't ask me what's behind it.

Just got to hope there's somewhere I can go to ground, stay out of sight, crack out the hours till dark. Down the hill, low, close to the wall. Ground's rocky like before but it's getting mushier with every step.

Bottom of the valley. Little stream trickling along it. Never saw that from the top. Kick through it, up the other side towards the fence. Check behind. Still nobody watching from the opposite hill.

But I'm choking about that copter. Can't see it but it sounds closer than it was. Think it's heading back

towards those other grinks. Jesus, Bigeyes. I got no chance if it rips over here.

Engine's getting louder. I push against the wall, twist my head. Still no sign of it. Creep on, up the hill towards the top. Copter's hovering, somewhere over the field beyond the wall. I keep moving, up, up, up.

Top of the hill's getting closer. Fence is clear to see now and it's a whack to climb, thank Christ. Just hope I can get to it without being clapped. On, on, tight to the wall.

Sound of the engine changes again. Now's the moment. Copter's spinning back towards the house. Push on up the slope, stop at the fence. This is where it gets scary, Bigeyes. Cos they can see me best up here.

Ease my head up, check over the wall.

The grinks I saw earlier are trigging back towards the gorse. Watch close, Bigeyes. See? I was right. They smack the gorse, poke through it. Move on towards the break in the wall.

This is it. Got to move now. Before they hit this part of the valley. Slime up the fence, low as I can, ease

over the top, down the other side, duck below the level of the rise.

Check what's in front of me.

And oh, you beauty. Another valley—and trees. Nice big patch too. Come on, Bigeyes. Down the slope, steady, steady. Got to watch my footing. Still rocky ground. But it's flattening out quicker than the other slope, and here's the first of the trees already. Dive into the dark, pick a path through the gloom.

Yeah, just what I want. Trees tight together. We'll find a spot on the far side. Stuff as much turf as we can between us and the grinks. Don't suppose they'll come grubbing out here. They'll check for grime close to the house, make sure everything's cute for Lord H, then pull back.

And watch.

All the time.

Yeah, Bigeyes. It's going to be a bum gripe getting into Hawk's nest. But I'm going for it. I'm telling you. I haven't come all this way just to blast off again cos it's a spitty gig. I got one reason for being here. And no reason for being anywhere else.

Here's a good spot.

Big, tall trees, close-packed, high canopies. Not much in the way of leaves, but I can't help that. Wrong bloody season to be doing this. Check round. Got to choose the best one.

This'll do. Bastard to climb cos there's no low branch and the trunk's got nothing to snag onto. Yeah, Bigeyes, you got it.

I want a bastard to climb. So no one'll expect to see me up there.

And this one's a proper dingo.

Come on.

Open the bag, check through. Still can't believe it, Bigeyes—Ezi giving me everything I asked for. Didn't think I'd get the plum shit, never mind the other stuff. But it's all in the bag. Bless his wicked heart.

Pull out the rope, check it over. Light, strong, just like I wanted. Tie a few stop-knots at one end, give it some weight. Peer up, fix the bottom branch, aim, chuck. Rope curls over first go, loops down the other side. Flick the rope a few times, ease the weighted end further down, reach up, grab it.