

Not a word from Lord H at the other end of the phone. And I know why. The bastard's waiting for me to speak. He knows I will. He knows I've got to. Cos he knows he's stronger than me.

I might have kidnapped his son, might have little Damien trembling next to me on the front seat of the car, freaking his head at the sight of my knives. But it makes no difference.

The silence goes on. Like a scream.

Cos Lord H is stronger than me.

BLADE

Lord H.

Yeah, yeah.

I picture his face. He won't have changed at all. He'll be fifty-two now but he'll still look like he's forty. Younger even. An aristo god, master of all he surveys. Blue eyes, sculptured cheeks, hair the colour of a kiss.

If it wasn't for the mouth, you'd say it was a kind face. And he can make it look kind when he wants to, even with the mouth. He can make it look anything. Only I know better. Cos I know the face too well.

Haven't seen it for three years, but I remember it good enough. The picture I usually get is me sprawled on my front and him peering down at me from on top. He's got a hand under my chin and my head yanked up so he can mock me in the eyes while he has his fun with me.

He liked that. Mocking, humiliating. There was nothing I could do to stop him. Cos the truth is, Bigeyes, he was just too strong. All I could do was keep telling myself no one could hurt me if I belonged to him.

But that was before Becky died.

And the whole world went quiet.

Like this phone in my hand. A small, quiet thing, its silence seeping into me. I can feel that power again, and it's not coming from me. It's coming from Lord H, like it's always done.

I got to fight it.

Somehow.

Glance at Damien. Kid's curled up on the passenger seat, eyes flicking over the knives on my lap. I speak into the phone.

'You know what I want.'

Still silence.

'And you know who I got here.'

I take a long, slow breath.

'You took Jaz. Or your goofs did. And I want her back. So give her up and you get Damien. Simple as that. But listen.'

I take another breath. Got to keep my voice calm. Got to sound like I'm in control. Even if I'm not.

'You get what you give, OK? If Jaz is dead, then Damien's dead too.' I stare down at the knives. 'And so are the rest of your kids.'

Damien starts sobbing again.

BLADE

Yeah, I know. I hate doing this, Bigeyes, but I got no choice. There's too much at stake now. So I got to play it rough.

I can't mess with this slime. He wants his boy back but he's cold as steel and twice as hard. And that's not the worst. The worst is he's clever. Cleverer than anyone you'll ever meet. And more ruthless.

Don't be deceived like everybody else.

'Here's how it's going to work,' I say.

Still the silence. It's deeper than ever now. I can feel his hatred churning inside it, cold and dark. I force myself to go on.

'You get your goofs to drive Jaz to the police station. The one in New Cross Road. They stop outside, leave her by the main entrance, drive off. Someone'll be waiting for her.'

I pick up one of the knives.

'When I hear she's safe, I'll ring you again. And tell you where you can find Damien.'

Wait, listen.

He's never going to buy this. He's going to want a straight swap, both kids together. That way he's got a chance of slamming me too. He'll never hand over Jaz

and take my word I'll ring him about Damien afterwards.

'You got an hour,' I mutter. 'An hour from now.' I check the car clock. 'If she's not at the station by ten, I'll take it she's dead. And you know what that means for Damien.'

I squeeze the knife tight.

'And in case you're wondering, cos some of your slugs might just have told you I've lost my bottle, there's something you got to know. I'm not going to kill Damien myself. I'm going to hand him over to less pleasant people.'

I pause.

'Like Nelson or Fitz or Jimmy-Joe Spice. Or one of the others. There's plenty of bojoes who'd like a piece of your kid. If you think I'm bluffing, try me.'

Damien starts wailing nearby.

Still silence down the phone. Freaking me bad now, Bigeyes. Cos I can't work out what he's thinking. I could once. Or I thought I could. But not any more. Then it happens.

The click at the other end of the line.

And he's gone.

BLADE

Lean back in the driver's seat. I'm shivering. Trying not to but I can't stop. Got to do something, get a grip. Can't let Damien see me scared. Check him out. He hasn't noticed what I'm like. He's still wailing and he's turned away again, his face pressed against the side window of the car.

I stare past him at the garage wall beyond.

This isn't going to work, Bigeyes.

Lord Slime's never going to do what I want. And maybe he can't anyway. If Jaz is already dead, what can he do? On the other hand, what if Jaz is alive? There's still just a chance. And I got to act like there is.

Cos there's not much else I can do.

'Damien,' I say.

He doesn't answer, doesn't turn. Just keeps on crying, face against the window. I don't blame him. Jaz must have been the same. Blasted out of her head. But I don't want to think about that.

'Damien, I'm not going to kill you.'

Or hand him over, Bigeyes. Before you ask. I never intended to give him up to Nelson or the other gangsters. But I can't tell him that now. I just want him to

stop crying. First cos I got to make another call and I don't want the sound spilling down the phone. And second . . .

Cos I just want him to.

He curls up tight, hands clasped over the back of his head. But the crying eases off, turns into a snuffle. I can handle that. Look down at the mobile, punch in the number. Funny how it comes back. Like all the other numbers. Don't ask me how I do it, cos I don't know. I just remember stuff.

Press Dial.

Ring, ring.

He better bloody answer. It's not a whack like it was with Lord H. Slimeface was always going to pick up the phone. But this one's different. Still, I got a couple of backup numbers if the call doesn't work.

Ring, ring.

Come on.

Ring ring. Answerphone kicks in. Grumpy voice. Hasn't changed.

'Inspector Bannerman—'

'Yeah, yeah.'

'I'm not at my desk right now—'

BLADE

'Lazy bastard.'

'But if you leave your name and contact details after the beep—'

I hang up, key in another number.

Ring, ring. This one's his mobile. Let's hope he's—
Shit. Voicemail.

'Bannerman speaking. Can't take your call right now but if you—'

Hang up, glance at Damien, back at the phone.
Last number I got. Key it in.

Ring, ring.

'Hello?'

Woman's voice. Wasn't expecting that. Maybe he's moved. Cos I mean, there was no way he was ever going to get a wife. Not with a face like that. But maybe he's got a sister.

'Who is this?' she says.

I know that voice, Bigeyes. I've heard it before.

'Haven't got all day,' she says.

I make myself speak.

'Is Inspector Bannerman there?'

'Inspector Bannerman?' she says.

'Yeah.'

'Is this a police matter?'

'Might be.'

'Because if it is,' she goes on, 'you should be ringing the police station, not here. This is a private number.'

And suddenly I get it, Bigeyes. The voice. And I can't believe it. I can picture her face, clear as his, clear as my own in the car mirror. But it's not her face I remember most about her. It's something else. Something big.

Bosoms.

That's what I remember.

And that's what I called her. When I was seven. What the hell's she doing answering his private phone? It can't be what I'm thinking. No way. Not with him.

'Ring the station,' she snaps.

'It's Jonny Bell,' I say.

Intake of breath at the other end. I can feel her thinking. She was about to hang up. She still is. Don't ask me how I know. Sound of a door somewhere near her, footsteps coming close. Someone muttering, Bosoms whispering back, then a new voice in my ear. A new, old voice.

BLADE

'Jonny Bell,' it says.

'Inspector Bannerman.'

He gives a sneery chuckle.

'Or are we Billy Nail today? Or Richie Finch? Or Jimmy Stoko? Or Frankie Reeve or Stevie Black or—'

'Going through the whole list, are you?'

'Don't suppose I know the whole list,' says Bannerman. 'And even if I did, there's not much point reading it off. Life's too short for your fantasies. So let's keep it simple. Why don't I just call you Blade?'

'Yeah, why don't you?'

I give a sneery chuckle of my own.

'Pugface.'

Bannerman snorts.

'Pugface? That your name for me? I think you can do better than that.'

'I got others.'

'I bet you have.' He sniffs. 'So how did you get my home number?'

'I've always had it.'

'You never used it before.'

'Don't tell me you're disappointed.'

Bannerman grunts.

'So what's this about? Giving yourself up?'

'No.'

'You should. It's pointless running.'

'You got to help someone.'

'Who?'

'A three-year-old girl. She's called Jaz. She's—'

'I know who she is,' says Bannerman. 'And I know about Rebecca Jakes. And Trixi Kenton. And her brother Dig. And all the others. Including the elderly Irish woman.'

I feel myself stiffen.

'Mary,' I murmur.

'Yes.'

I swallow hard.

'Is she . . . I mean . . . is she still alive?'

'I don't have any information about her.'

'Cos last time I saw her, she was really ill. She was—'

'I don't have any information about her.'

Silence. I don't know what I feel. Just know it hurts. Like thinking about Becky hurts. Bannerman goes on.

BLADE

'How can I help the little girl?'

His voice sounds sharp, like he wants me to hurry on. And I'm glad. Cos I want to hurry on too. Can't be thinking about Mary. Not right now. There's no time to waste.

'You got to move quick,' I tell him. 'You and what's her name?'

'Who?'

I can't say Bosoms, Bigeyes. Even to Bannerman.

'Who?' he says.

'The woman who answered the phone.'

'DI Fern?'

'Yeah. You got to ring the station. Right now. Tell 'em Jaz is going to be dropped outside the main entrance some time before ten.'

'How do you know?'

'Never mind. I don't know what state she'll be in but it's going to be bad. They're not to mess with the people leaving her there. Probably won't get a chance. They'll drive off quick. But someone's got to be there to look after Jaz.'

Bannerman doesn't answer but I hear him muttering to Fern. Can't catch the words but I hear her

say, 'OK.' Nothing for a bit, then I catch Fern's voice talking on another phone. And here's Bannerman back.

'Now then,' he begins.

But I cut him short.

'You got to get there too, Bannerman. You and Fern.'

'There'll be people waiting at the station.'

'I want you there. And Fern.'

'We can't get there right away.'

'You got to be there. Both of you. For when Jaz turns up.'

'What for?'

Because she's got to meet the right nebs, Bigeyes. It can't just be anyone waiting for her. I'm not mad on porkers at the best of times, but I got time for Bannerman. And if Fern's his squeeze or his mate or whatever, that's even better. Cos she's decent too.

They'll help Jaz.

And that's all I care about.

'Never mind why,' I mutter. 'Get to the station and I'll ring you later.'

'Why don't you just come in?'

BLADE

'Why don't you just shut your mouth?'

I hang up, lean back again. Shivering like before. Not so bad as with Lord H, but I'm choked, Bigeyes. Head's full of stuff I can't handle. And now they're back again. Bloody tears. They're swilling round my eyes and I can't stop 'em.

And worse.

I'm moaning, shaking, slamming my head with my fists. Damien's peering round, his own eyes drenched up, his mouth gaping as he stares at me. I stare back, try to get a grip.

But I can't. The tears keep flooding, then something bursts out of me, a kind of bellow. Can't hold it back. I feel my hands clutch the knives, squeeze. I close my eyes and howl into the dark.

Feels like ages before I stop. When I do, I realize I've curled into a ball just like Damien did before. I can feel it, even with my eyes still closed. I've got my knees pulled into my chest, my hands clasped round the ankles. Must have let go the knives cos they're tucked into my lap, and the top of my head's pressed against the steering wheel. I can feel it chafing against the wound in my brow.

I keep my eyes closed a bit longer. Don't want to open 'em. Not yet. I take a long breath. Feels juddery, like my lungs don't want to work. Take another breath. Just as hard. Open my eyes, look round.

Damien's not there.

I stiffen. Passenger door's open, no sign of the kid. I feel a flutter of panic, grab the knives, scramble out of the car—and there's the boy. Far corner of the garage, slumped against the wall.

Never heard him get out. I must have been in a bad state to miss that. He could have got away maybe, if he'd had the spit. But he's still too scared. He looks up, watches me standing by the car, shrinks closer to the wall.

I call over.

'I'm not angry with you.'

He doesn't answer. Just goes on watching, his face dark.

And I'm wondering, Bigeyes. Does he see my darkness too? He must. He's seen me break down, heard me moan and howl and sob. He can't be scared of me still, can he?

But he is. Look at him.

BLADE

Choked out of his wits.

Maybe he thinks I'm even more dangerous now I've cracked in front of him. And maybe he's right. Maybe I am more dangerous. Truth is, Bigeyes, I don't know what I am any more. Or what I can do.

I used to know. Used to be bung-clear about all that.

And it gave me confidence.

Now I got none.

'I'm not angry with you,' I say again.

Don't know why I'm repeating myself. He just looks more scared every time I open my mouth. I look down. Still holding the knives, see? Same old problem. Like my hands are magnets. I grabbed the bastards without thinking.

Look back at Damien. Still watching me.

With those dark little eyes.

I drop the knives on the seat, close the door, edge round the front of the car towards the boy. He starts to whimper, press himself back against the wall. I stop moving, call out.

'Easy, kid.'

He goes on whimpering.

‘Easy, kid.’ I sit down on the bonnet, look down at him. ‘I’m not going to hurt you.’

He keeps his eyes on my face.

I stare at him. Hard to think this boy’s got such a father. If only he knew what his dad’s really like. But he won’t have a sniff of that. How could he? How could anyone? Cos you know what?

Only a handful of nebs know what Lord H really is. His wife and children certainly won’t. Nor will his relatives, or his friends. Or the nebs who run his charities. They only see the caring family man, the great public benefactor.

And one of the richest guys on the planet. He was already that when he was born. Only it wasn’t enough, Bigeyes. He’s a business supergun too and he must have earned his inheritance twenty times over.

But let’s give the bastard his name. And Nanny keyed it pretty good in her mobile—Lord H. Which kind of hits the spot. Only there’s something about the H Nanny won’t realize.

It hits the spot twice.

First there’s the name she knows. The official name.

BLADE

Lord Haffler-Devereaux.

Yeah, I agree. Fancy prick of a name. But don't worry. We don't need to use that. Not you and me, Bigeyes. Cos he's got another name. Another H name. And Nanny won't know that one. Practically nobody will, not even his wife, or his kids, or the thousands who work for him, or the government nebs who listen to his advice.

It's a name only the other slimeheads know. The ones at the top of his organization. The handful, the chosen few. The puppet-masters who are slowly cutting the cords that hold this world together. The ones behind the charade.

I told you about it before.

The Game.

They all got names, these players. Secret names for their secret lives. Want to hear 'em? Then listen. And remember.

Raven, Swan, Swift, Owl, Condor.

And then our man—Lord H. Worked out the H? Course you have.

Hawk.

That's what the other slimeheads call him.

And it fits pretty good. Cos you know what? For all his looks, charm, and manners, that's what he is. He roams like a hawk, sees like a hawk, kills like a hawk. And you never know he's there till it's too late.

I feel Damien's eyes on me. Stare back at 'em. Is that Hawk looking out at me? A future Hawk? Who's to know? Can't see one now. All I can see is a scared kid. He wipes his eyes and drops his head.

I reach into my pocket, feel for one of the mobiles, pull it out. It's the one I creamed off that ancient gobbo in the car park. Dimpy old phone. But who cares? Long as it works.

Too early to ring the police station. Jaz can't possibly be there yet. If she's going to turn up at all. But I can't help it, Bigeyes. I got to try Bannerman again. It's just possible.

Punch in the number. I'm trying his mobile first. He won't have hit the station yet but someone might have rung him already with some news.

Ring, ring.

This is stupid. It's much too early to phone. I got to be patient.

Click.

BLADE

'Bannerman speaking.'

'It's Blade.'

'What do you want?'

'Any news of Jaz?'

'Give us a chance. We've only just left the house.'

I can hear the sound of the car. And Fern talking in the background. Jesus, Bigeyes. What's she saying? Who's she talking to? Can't catch the words. It better be someone from the station. It better be good news.

'Ring me later,' says Bannerman. 'I'm driving. Or better still, come in to the station.'

'Piss off.'

'Suit yourself.'

Sound of a car horn, a growl from Bannerman. Fern still mumbling in the background.

'I'm hanging up,' says Bannerman. 'Ring me later.'

'Wait!' Fern's voice nearby. 'Hold on!'

More muttering, one to the other, then Fern's voice in the earpiece.

'Are you there?' she says.

'Yeah.'

I stare back at Damien. He's watching me close

again. And suddenly I see it, just for a moment, in those small, six-year-old eyes. The hawk, peering back.

Marking prey.

Though he doesn't know it yet.

Fern speaks again. And there's a shiver in her voice.

'They've got Jaz.'

I feel the words rush out of me.

'Is she alive? Is she alive?'

'She's . . . alive,' says Fern.

She hesitated, Bigeyes. Did you hear that? She definitely hesitated. And she spoke quiet. Something's wrong. I slam in quick.

'What's happened?'

'I just told you,' says Fern. 'She's alive.'

'You hesitated!'

'Don't shout down the phone.'

'I'm not shouting!'

But I am, Bigeyes. I can't help it. I got to know what Fern's holding back.