

The Character Strikes Back

by Tom Palmer

This story has been written in five parts to act as a classroom read that teachers can read to children for five minutes every day during a single week. It is a twist on Tom Palmer's Foul Play books, which are published by Puffin. www.tompalmer.co.uk

Day Five: The End

I stayed up all night, then walked the streets of Middleham once the sun started to come up. It was a clear morning.

If you've not been to Middleham, you should. There is a massive castle and, further back on the hill, a Mott and Bailey fortress too. It was one of those misty mornings. All quiet. All calm.

But not inside my head. In there, there was a thunder storm going on.

After I had had breakfast at the pub, a policewoman came to take details about my stolen car. Once that was done I decided to head home.

To be honest, I was sick of living my life dancing to the tune of some madman who may or may not have it in for me. I figured that if he wanted to kill me he would have done it by now. I'd go home. Make sure it was safe. Then get my wife and daughter back.

There is one bus a week for Middleham. I was lucky that it was today. It goes through Middleham, down to Harrogate, then onto Leeds, near where I live.

I climbed on and paid, sitting at the front.

The sun was up now and I enjoyed watching the fields go by. I started to relax – a bit. The bus didn't stop until the next big village. Masham.

Transforming Lives

I like Masham. My granddad used to live there. I was just thinking about him and how we used to watch the FA cup final together in his flat every year, when I saw the man again.

That man who was making my life a misery.

He was waiting at the bus stop.

I stood in panic, then sat down. I couldn't decide what to do. Try to escape? Try to sit it out?

Wait for him to do something?

He climbed on, paid, then sat at the other side of the aisle from me, putting a black leather bag on his knee.

At no time did he look at me.

I sat there, paralysed.

The bus went on. Passing through villages. Through a bigger town.

An hour later, after we had gone through Harrogate, I had still not acted. My heart had been hammering since he'd got on. My mouth was dry. And I felt sick. But I did nothing. I sat. That was it.

Because he had done nothing.

That was my plan. Do nothing until he does something.

Then, as if he could hear my thoughts, he did *something*. He put his hand in his bag – and pulled out a gun. He turned it over in his hands, away from anyone else's view, then put it back in the bag.

I knew what he was doing: threatening me.

Now I needed to change my plan.

I tried to think. But my mind was in a panic. It was hard to have clear thoughts when I was under so much pressure.

Transforming Lives

The bus was coming into Leeds now, the city where I was born and brought up. I knew what route the bus took. Into the city, over the ring road, then past Roundhay Park.

Roundhay Park is the biggest urban park in Europe. It has lakes and fields and huge woods. Even a small castle.

It's the park I use a lot in the *Foul Play* books. Danny lives near it: like I once did. He walks across it to get to school and goes there with Charlotte. He gets chased across it, follows criminals round it. I was quite surprised that I had used the park so much.

At some point I had to get off this bus. The man would probably follow me. So I had to get off somewhere I knew well and somewhere I could escape.

So, as the bus pulled in to stop by the park, three miles from Leeds city centre, I took my chance. I jumped up and ran for the door, hitting the pavement hard. Then I sprinted through the main gates, past the big house which I had used as a house for one of my characters, and down the hill into the arena where I used to sledge when I was a kid.

I practiced my usual plan. Don't look back.

By the time I reached the slopes heading down to the lake, by the old bandstand, I stopped. I couldn't go any further. I had run more than a mile at full speed.

This was the bandstand I had used at the end of the last *Foul Play* book, *Own Goal*. The last scene in the whole series.

Almost sick because I had run so hard, I turned round.

And there he was.

The man.

His gun pointing at me.

I didn't move. I couldn't do anything. He'd got me.

And it was weird.

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They say that, just before you die, your life flashes before your eyes. And mine did. Here in the park of my childhood.

I saw my mum and dad walking the dog.

I saw my wife and daughter on the playground further down the hill.

And I saw a boy and a girl walking towards me, holding something in their hands. And I thought: it's me when I was young.

And then the man with the gun was shouting, his eyes sparkling.

'You ruined me,' he shouted in a heavy Russian accent.

'What?' I asked.

'Your stupid story,' he went on. 'The police in Russia knew you were writing about me. They came after me. I had to leave my country. I lost everything.'

I said nothing. What *could* I say? He was holding the gun at his side now.

'Now you must die,' he shouted, raising the gun again.

I started to turn, so I could hide behind the bandstand.

And then it happened. The miracle.

There was no gunshot.

The boy and girl who had been walking up the hill had reached Borisoff. They had not been in my imagination.

I could see what they were holding now. A rope.

Quickly, before he could react, the two of them had grabbed him, wrapped the rope around him and pulled him to the ground. As they did he dropped the gun.

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I looked at them. If you could have made my characters, Danny and Charlotte, into real people, based on how I have described them, they would have looked just like them.

Borisoff lay glaring at me from the grass.

They'd disabled him completely.

Slowly I came to. I could feel my heart rate dropping. Calmer now.

I started at the young couple who were facing me. *Was it Danny and Charlotte? How was that possible?*

'Danny?' I said.

I couldn't believe I was asking it. Asking a real boy if he was my character.

The boy smiled. A brilliant smile.

Then, suddenly, a wind blew up from the lake. A cold wind coming across through the east of Leeds from the North Sea. The trees around the bandstand were going wild.

I turned to look.

Then turned back to Danny and Charlotte and the man.

And they were gone.

Had they run away?

Had they disappeared in the wind like ghosts?

Maybe they had all been in my mind.

Maybe they had been haunting me. Maybe I was going mad.

I didn't know.

What I *did* know was that it was over.

I walked over to the car park I'd seen Borisoff come from, calling my wife on the way.

My car was as I'd left it in Middleham, except for a newspaper on the passenger seat. There was a small article visible.

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RUSSIAN BILLIONNAIRE SHOT DEAD ON STREETS OF MOSCOW.

I didn't need to read the rest of the article.

I knew what it would say.

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