



# ***PLAYS A DANGEROUS GAME***

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## *For Hope and Eve*

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*'A tame racing driver? Be not fooled.  
He is no more tame than the weather.'*

Excerpt taken from Top-Secret MI5 Report to the PM





It was late. The air was so still that anyone out walking would be able to hear the faint buzz from the telephone wires. But no one was.

Shattering the silence, the American boy crashed out of the forest on a mountain bike and on to the deserted road. Beside him, a panting dog kept pace.

On his left he saw the speed camera that had once flashed his dad doing thirty-three. Watch out, son, he'd said. It'll be flashing bikes next.

The lights changed. He set off down the hill and passed the camera doing twenty-five, tops. It flashed, twice. That settles it, he thought. It's busted.

He didn't see the camera silently extend and swivel to follow him, like an insect eye on a stalk. Nor did he catch its laser gaze tracking him all the way to the last lights before Bunsfold.

A black van drew up opposite. Dark windows, throbbing exhaust and a ridiculous number plate: '8AD'.

The dog – a scruffy brown mutt, with a jagged white flash on its forehead – took three steps towards the vehicle and growled.



The boy had suspected that the mansion on the hill needed a closer look, and he'd been right. The deadly tech released from the place had somehow turned his parents into zombie screen-heads in twenty-four hours. He had to raise the alarm.

He listened to the van's throbbing exhaust. Wait – that was a V8. Who'd put an engine like that in a *van*?

Them.

The van door opened and a dark silhouette stepped out. Vaguely human, but jeez . . . had to be over seven feet tall. The boy glimpsed two red pinpricks of light where the eyes should have been.

Time to split.

Boy and dog shot across the lights and charged towards town. The black van roared into a perfect 180-degree handbrake turn and thundered after them.

We're in trouble, he thought. This thing can really drive.

He needed cover fast, and the moonless woods were the only option. He made out the dirt path to Bunsfold Park on his left.

Maximum attack now . . . sixth . . . seventh . . . eighth . . .

Top gear.

The boy heard a sinister robotic hum getting closer. The black van couldn't follow but the shadowy figure, it seemed, could.

He turned to see the dark silhouette now running noiselessly behind him at the speed of a family hatchback.

The mongrel skidded to a halt and turned, teeth bared, to protect the boy's escape.

'NO! Here, pal!' screamed the boy, still racing. He couldn't



stop now. Whatever was chasing him was evil. He could sense it.

Then . . . the sound he'd most dreaded. An explosion of barking followed by a single, piercing yelp.

No!

Now he was alone. He *had* to get to the river.

The hum was closing in again. He skidded to a halt. *Think!*

The thing emerged from the trees and walked menacingly towards him.

The boy tensed.

WUMPH.

Suddenly a wounded, scruffy mongrel flew out of the undergrowth and knocked the dark figure to the ground.

As the murky shape lay prone, dog and boy took off towards the bridge.

The river was in sight. The exhausted mutt stopped at the water's edge.

'That's it, pal,' gasped the boy. 'You swim it – I'll jump it.'

But the dog wasn't going anywhere. Still determined to protect the boy's escape it turned, limping, to face whatever was in the trees.

The boy sped up and took off like a stuntman, jumping the stream and landing perfectly on his back wheel. Made it!

The dog barked a warning. Too late.

Two metallic tentacles whipped out from nowhere and grabbed on to each handlebar. The hum again, stronger and deeper than before. The dark figure was back.

It towered over the boy. Human? Spectre? Orc? Hard to tell



under that mask. The boy didn't scare easily, but this thing . . .

A stream of data flashed across the black visor. Whatever it was, it knew *everything* about him.

**NAME . . . VIRGIL BUSTER MUSTANG . . . BORN  
. . . SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA . . . ARRIVED UK . . .  
MARCH 7 . . . SCHOOL . . . BUNSFOLD HIGH . . . BLOOD  
GROUP . . . O RHESUS NEGATIVE . . .**

'Listen, T3,' said the boy defiantly, 'people know I'm here. In fact my dad's on his way right now.'

The stream of LEDs replied.

**INCORRECT. HE'S . . . BUSY . . . PLAYING . . . A . . .  
COMPUTER . . . GAME.**

The figure reached out a metallic finger, shot something into the boy's neck and continued its investigation.

**DISLIKES: HIS SMELLY MATHS TEACHER . . . BITS IN  
YOGHURT . . . BRITISH PORTIONS. LIKES *FAMILY GUY*  
DOUBLE BILLS . . . SURFING . . . DOWNHILL RACING**

The world was slipping away, but still the data streamed on.

**SECRETLY FANCIES . . . PRINCESS LEIA**

Wait a minute . . . how could it possibly know about *that*?

'Well, I certainly wouldn't have said "fancies",' said the boy, rather defensively. 'Respects, certainly. Admires, definitely. But . . . look. Cut me some slack. I'm only thirteen . . .'

**TWELVE YEARS TEN MONTHS EIGHTEEN DAYS  
ACTUALLY**

'Whatever. Listen, I haven't seen anything. I'll keep my mouth shut. Pinkie promise. Whaddya say? Let me go. I'll

disappear quicker than a fart in a fan factory.'

Another beep. It seemed the evil robot had finally found what it was looking for.

**DEEPEST FEAR . . . VAMPIRE.**

Oh no. Not that.

It had unearthed the one thing that really spooked him.  
*But how?*

A night fly buzzed around the visor. The dark shape plucked it from the air then held it, wriggling, right in front of the boy. Slowly the screen/visor transformed into a death-white face with hollow eye sockets, purple veins and fangs. It dropped the insect into its mouth and began to chew. The vampire-face leered.

**TASTES LIKE CHICKEN.**

Another message flashed across the visor. A confusing one.

**SO. WHERE . . . IS . . . THE STIG?**

'No idea,' said the boy. 'Never heard of it. But here's the thing . . .' he stared up at the creature defiantly. 'I wouldn't tell you if I knew.'

**THEN BUSTER LA VISTA, BABY.**

A flash of light, illuminating the scene for an instant, then blackness. The last thing Buster saw before he passed out was swings and a roundabout.

He'd made it as far as the playground. So close.

Back across the river, the wounded dog looked down on the scene and whimpered softly.

The shadow turned and walked slowly back to finish its night's work.