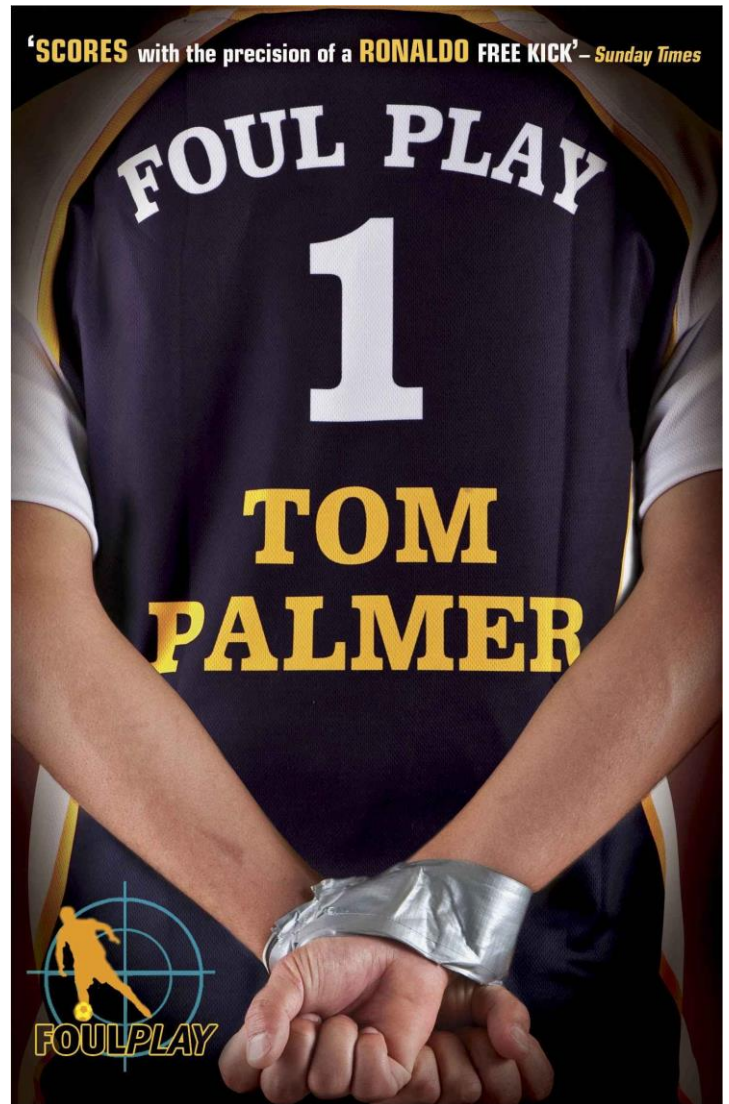


TOM PALMER FOUL PLAY

Danny Harte is obsessed with two things – watching football and tackling crime.



FRIDAY : Night Vision

Danny crouched when he heard the footsteps.

Then, after counting to ten, he looked carefully over the top of the wall, fragments of broken glass set into a line of concrete. There were two men. Both dressed head to foot in black. Both wearing ski hats low over their hair, their ears, their eyebrows.

This was it.

What Danny had been waiting for, sitting out in the cold every night for the past week. He felt excited. Or afraid. He wasn't sure which.

Danny watched the men, the tip of his nose touching the cold brick of the wall to make sure his head stayed still.

Neither man spoke. They communicated with nods and quick hand gestures.

At first, Danny couldn't be absolutely sure the two men were not just drinkers returning late from a night out, nipping round the back of the shops to relieve themselves. But it would have been a coincidence that it was the back of an electrical store at three in the morning, in the same month that a dozen other similar shops had been burgled.

Anyway, whatever they were doing, they wouldn't take kindly to being watched by a fourteen-year-old boy.

Danny held his breath as the two men studied the door and windows, shining a torch through one. The beam of the torch highlighted the red brick of the buildings, a shining black drainpipe, paint-peeling window frames. It was a typical rundown back alley. Boarded up windows on the building next door. Roof slates caught in the guttering above. Broken glass under foot, that Danny could hear crunching as the men trod on it, probably from discarded bottles that were strewn about the back of the terrace of shops.

Behind Danny there were a hundred yards of open ground: dog walking grass and makeshift playing fields. And, beyond that, a road with a vehicle coming every thirty seconds or so.

Suddenly one of the men looked straight at Danny.

Danny didn't move. Not at first. He kept his head absolutely still. He didn't dare breathe. Carefully, he shifted his feet into a position he could launch himself from.

The man looking towards him was short. Quite thin. Small features on his face. A moustache. Eventually the man's eyes turned from Danny

towards the bag at his side. He'd not seen Danny. Maybe he'd just sensed him.

Danny watched him pull a long piece of metal out of his bag. A crowbar. Then begin to touch the window frame, pressing it with his gloved hands, presumably looking for a weakness. The other man – tall, powerfully built, younger-looking – was standing next to a black wheelie bin, his back to a door, scanning the passageway he'd just come down. The smaller man began to jemmy the window, hacking at the frame, forcing the crowbar blade deep into the wood, then levering it away.

This was *definitely* it.

Danny took out his video camera. His fingers fumbled as he took the lens cap off and pulled the mini-screen out to face him. He pushed the camera up his jumper to switch it on. He had practiced this manoeuvre a dozen times in his room at home. To muffle the *ping* it made.

Had they heard?

Danny looked over the wall again.

The two men were still busy. So Danny checked the camera was on night sight and put it on top of the wall, the mini-screen angled down so he could see it. He felt as if he was in a submarine, peering through a periscope. It was so dark and cold it wasn't difficult to imagine himself underwater.

On the screen, he watched the smaller man levering hard at the window, working at the wood, then stopping, sometimes for up to a minute. But every time a car or truck came by on the busy road that ran on the other side of the row of terraces, the man would start again. Hacking at the wood.

Danny realised that he was waiting until a vehicle came past to lever the crowbar, shattering the window frame when no one would hear it above the rumble of an engine or tyres rattling over potholes.

Danny filmed the men, now focusing on their faces. First the one in the doorway. Then the one with the crow bar. He was getting good detail. This would be useful. Very useful.

His heart stopped when he saw the battery sign come up on the mini screen. He knew he had a second to switch the camera off before it made the sound to register a loss of power. But his hands weren't quick enough.

PING. PING. PING.

Danny felt like his heart had stopped. He raised his head very slightly above the top of the wall.

The two men looked in his direction and froze for a second. Then, frowning, the larger man began to move slowly towards Danny.

Danny shoved his camera into his jacket pocket.

Then he was running.

Read on ...

Danny is obsessed with two things: football – especially City Football Club – and investigating crimes. But is Danny getting into something he can't handle?

Foul Play by Tom Palmer is available in your local library, bookshop or on Amazon

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