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Opening extract from

The Secret Gift

Written by

Ian Somers

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The Secret Gift by Ian Somers

Chapter 1+ 2

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CHAPTER ONE

The Attack

'Night was fast approaching and I was running out of time,' Inspector James Harper began. 'I felt we had to close in on Wilson before darkness fell; we simply couldn't risk losing him again. He was headed for the busiest part of town, I weighed up the situation with the aid of my colleague Detective Alan Dinsley, and felt that apprehending Wilson at that time was the wisest course of action to take.'

'Your wisdom led to a lot of police officers losing their lives,' Superintendent Wayne Beckett countered coldly.

'I couldn't have foreseen what happened next. I made the logical decision considering the information that I had at that time.'

'Did any of your officers object to this course of action?'

'Not that I am aware of,' Harper shrugged. 'We all understood that we'd be putting innocent lives at risk if we allowed Wilson to disappear into a crowd. Everyone knew that he had proven dangerous and elusive since his crimes were uncovered. We didn't want to lose him again. We all believed that it was the right time to apprehend him.'

'How did it all go so wrong?'

'That's a difficult question to answer.'

'How about this question instead: Do you think the terrorist attack in Liverpool that occurred last night – 1 December – was linked to Malcolm Wilson?'

'Impossible to say with any certainty.'

'Are you aware that we've already questioned a number of your officers?'

'Yes, I am aware of that.'

'Are you also aware that most of them claim this wasn't a normal terrorist attack?'

'I'm not aware of exactly what they told you. I am aware, however, that they are fine police officers and would never lie to, or withhold evidence from, a commanding officer.'

‘Stop trying to butter me up,’ Beckett snarled. ‘The stories your officers told me are complete fiction. No one in their right mind would believe them.’

‘I’m not aware of what they told you, so I can’t comment on that.’

‘Right, how about you tell me what happened in Liverpool last night. Give me your own version of the events. Begin with you making the decision to apprehend Malcolm Wilson. How many men did you have at your disposal and what were their positions?’

‘It was exactly 6.35pm when I gave the order to close the net on him. There were a total of twenty-one police officers at the scene, including myself. Wilson was not aware of us at that point – I’m sure of that. He was on foot and was headed deeper into the city centre. We had twelve armed officers in plain clothes on the ground, following him from various distances. The rest of us occupied three cars – all unmarked. We also had the services of a marksman who was positioned nearby. Wilson took to Ranelagh Street. That route was leading him to an area of the city which is always very hectic at that time on a Friday evening. Detective Dinsley believed there was a risk of losing him in such a built-up area, particularly as it was getting dark. I concurred. That’s when I told the officers on the ground to make the arrest. They encircled him moments later.’

‘Who was the first to use a weapon?’

‘I believe it was Officer James Burnett.’

‘What is your understanding of Burnett’s actions?’

‘I heard the shots and thought that perhaps Wilson had tried to run and my men had opened fire. It quickly became apparent that that was not the case. I saw Burnett discharging his sidearm with my own two eyes. He never once took a shot at Wilson, who was completely surrounded at the time.’

‘Explain in as much detail as possible what you witnessed next.’

‘Burnett fired eight rounds. All shots were directed at his colleagues. He killed five officers in total. Two more were seriously injured.’

‘He killed six officers; Officer Fiona Jennings succumbed to her injuries two hours ago.’

‘I hadn’t heard …’

‘Please continue, Inspector Harper.’

‘Burnett took us all by surprise. It was so unexpected. Most of us failed to react in the way we should have. I think it was Richardson who finally tackled him and dragged him to the ground. That was when the ninth shot went off – the one that killed Burnett.’

‘Do you know of any reason why Burnett, an officer with an exemplary record, would open fire on his colleagues?’

‘I know of no reason.’

‘No one ever suspected him of taking bribes, perhaps? Did he gamble or use drugs?’

‘No, nothing in his record would suggest he was anything other than a dedicated professional.’

‘Well, my opinion at the present is that he was working with Wilson in some capacity.’

‘If that was the case, why didn’t Burnett inform Wilson that we were watching him?’

‘I don’t know yet.’ Beckett raised his voice. ‘Now, what happened after Burnett was grounded?’

‘Wilson made a dash for Church Street. A number of us – I had left my vehicle at this point – gave chase. There were a lot of civilians in the area and we didn’t dare risk firing on Wilson.’

‘This was when the explosion occurred, yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘Describe that moment for me.’

‘It was powerful enough to destroy two of the buildings on the street. I was thrown to the ground by the force of it. There was a cloud of debris spewing out across the road. People were screaming. There were bodies all around me …’ Harper ran a trembling hand across his forehead and swallowed hard. ‘I got back to my feet and wandered into the dust cloud towards a number of stricken bystanders. I was trying to help them. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, and when they did, I saw three of my men had been killed by the blast. I don’t know how many civilians – maybe a dozen or more.’

‘Did you see Wilson after the explosion?’

‘No, he wasn’t seen again. Oh, one other thing: I don’t think it’s right to describe it as an explosion.’

‘Why not?’

‘The buildings simply erupted. There was no blast. No flames. No bright flash.’

‘That doesn’t sound plausible.’

‘I understand that it sounds insane, sir. But it’s what happened.’

‘Let’s not dwell on this right now,’ Beckett said impatiently. ‘Tell me how the fighting started.’

‘A man appeared from the rubble,’ Harper said ominously. ‘He walked straight towards us.’

‘Describe him in as much detail as you can.’

‘He stood approximately six feet nine inches tall. He had a very stocky build – exceptionally so. He wore a dark coloured jacket and beige combat trousers. Almost like tactical clothing that the special forces wear. He also wore a black hood pulled over his head that cast a shadow over his face. His eyes were … er …’

‘What about his eyes?’

‘His eyes were glowing,’ Harper admitted. ‘They were glowing bright green.’

‘Glowing eyes?’

‘I know how it sounds, but I’m telling you the truth. His eyes were glowing like neon. I’ve never seen anything quite like it before.’

‘So, did this giant with glowing green eyes attack your men on sight?’

‘Too right he did. Waded into us. I saw him kill two men with his bare hands.’

‘And what did you do?’

‘I unloaded what ammunition I had left.’

‘From what distance?’

‘No more than three metres.’

‘How many rounds?’

‘Seven shots.’

‘And you missed him seven times?’

‘I hit him seven times.’

‘Why wasn’t his body recovered?’

‘The bullets … they …’

‘They what?’

‘The bullets bounced right off him. I shot him five times in the chest. I thought he was wearing a ballistic vest or something so I adjusted my aim and capped off two more rounds – both bullets struck him in the head. He remained unharmed and kept stalking forward. He whacked an officer to my left, knocking him ten feet into the air. He was about to clobber me when our sniper, who had picked up a position nearby, shot him in the back. He took some notice of that. But he still wasn’t grounded by it.’

‘Do you expect me to believe that a round from a high powered sniper rifle struck this man in the back, yet it failed to inflict a significant injury?’

‘I don’t expect you to believe it,’ Harper snapped. ‘I am simply telling you what I witnessed. That monster took seven 9mm rounds from me, from a distance of less than three metres, and it didn’t even slow him down. I watched him toss a grown man into the air as if he was a scrap of paper. I saw the sniper’s bullet bouncing off his back like it was a ping pong ball. He stumbled forward, straightened himself, then took off into the cloud of debris.’

‘Impossible, I say.’

‘I don’t give a damn what you say!’ Harper shouted. ‘I trust my own eyes and I hope they never set upon that man again. The mere thought of him makes my blood run cold.’

‘Is that all you’ve got to say?’

‘It is.’

‘I’m ending the recording at this time.’ Beckett switched off a recorder that was placed between them on the desk top. He gazed at his colleague with a mixture of sympathy and puzzlement. ‘Bloody hell, Jim! Is this some sort of sick joke?’

‘I wish it was, Wayne. I really do.’

‘You’re telling me this giant is real?’

‘He is. You have to put out a search for him immediately. Get his description to the newspapers as soon as you can.’

‘Not a chance. This is being wiped off the record forever.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if it goes public, every man and woman involved in the operation will have to be discharged from the force on grounds of insanity.’

‘I’m not insane.’

‘I know you’re not. Listen, go home and get some sleep.’

‘Nothing will be done about this?’

‘Of course we’re doing something about it. Interpol are already searching for Wilson. I’ll have MI5 informed of this giant of yours. I just hope they find a way of stopping him if they do find him.’

CHAPTER TWO

Isolation

A single hour had passed since I said farewell to Cathy and I was already feeling intense loneliness. We’d spent over a year together in a small cottage on a remote strip of the west coast of Ireland. All we’d had during that time was each other and now she was gone. All I had now were my own thoughts. I had nothing really, as most of my thoughts were in fact memories. Painful ones. I was now the loneliest person in all the world.

I’d brought her across the country to Dublin airport where she was to catch a flight to France, where her mother was living. June Atkinson had been unwell recently and Cathy said that she wouldn’t be able to live with herself if she didn’t go to her. At least that was the excuse. The truth was that Cathy couldn’t live with me anymore. Our relationship had become stormy in recent months and all we seemed to do was argue with each other over meaningless little things.

I had to let Cathy go, no matter what her true motives were. I had to let her return to the world of the living. I, on the other hand, was to remain in the domain of the dead, for only the dead were company to me.

I brought her to the airport on the kinetibike, but couldn’t enter the complex because my face was still well known and I could have been spotted which would have landed both of us in a lot of trouble with the authorities – or worse. I pulled over to the side of the road and she climbed off and fixed the straps of her haversack, saying they were digging into her shoulders. I stayed on the bike, sulking. I forced a smile when she hugged me, telling me that she would return when we’d both had a little time to think things over. She said I’d be all right. She didn’t know how fragile my mind had become, though. I had hidden most of my weaknesses from her. That’s what men are supposed to do, right? Men are meant to be strong. Men aren’t supposed to depend on their girlfriends for strength, which is what I had been doing since we moved to Ireland.

‘Keep to a routine, Ross,’ she said, holding back tears. ‘Don’t alter your habits no matter what. Do your shopping down at the village. Don’t go near any big towns. And don’t do anything stupid! And don’t be drinking alcohol either – you know what happens when you –’

‘I’ll stay out of trouble.’

‘I’ll miss you,’ she said, stooping slightly to look into my eyes. She pecked me on the cheek and her hand massaged my shoulder. It felt like pity. ‘You know that, right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I’ll write to you soon enough. Watch the skies for –’

‘Don’t say that!’ I snapped. ‘Don’t ever say that to me!’

‘Jesus, Ross,’ she gasped, backing away from me. ‘What the hell is wrong with you?’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, disgusted with myself for losing my temper with her. ‘Those words reminds me of …’

‘Forget him, Ross. He’s long dead. He can never return to hurt you again. He can’t hurt anyone ever again.’

‘I know.’ I nodded nervously as I scanned the cars that droned past us. ‘I know.’

‘I’ll be in touch. Try to keep your temper in check. And try to keep your mind off that person and the things he did.’

‘Cathy,’ I said as she was about to turn away. ‘Is this the end of us?’

‘I just need some time, Ross.’

Her final words left me cold. She couldn’t say yes or no. If she didn’t know whether she wanted a future with me, then I felt that our relationship was over. Neither of us spoke again. She simply walked away towards the bright lights of the airport and soon disappeared.

I instantly regretted being so short tempered with her. But anything relating to Edward Zalech set me off. In truth, lots of things set me off. My moods had been unpredictable since we left the Guild of the True. A stubborn anxiety had been living in the pit of my stomach since we fled England, and it was growing more potent as time went on. I also suffered crippling headaches on an almost daily basis. I didn’t feel like myself anymore. I was becoming someone different to the person I once was.

Sadness stung my chest when I lost sight of Cathy. I really wasn’t sure if I’d ever see her again. My crutch had been swiped from under me. It was time to stand on my own two feet again. There would now be a time without distraction ahead of me, and I would be forced to deal with, or capitulate to, the many horrors that haunted me.

I steered the kinetibike onto the road and twisted the right grip and moved off at a modest speed. The bike could run on psychokinetic energy, but I chose to drive with petrol that evening, as I was training myself not to use any of my gifts. I was trying to erase the person I had been while I was part of the Guild of the True. It wasn’t easy. The temptation to use my powers was rarely absent. I felt feeble without them. I guess that’s always the way when you give up strength. You feel weak.

At first I headed for a motorway that would lead me to the west of the country, but after a few moments I turned the bike onto a slip road and headed for south county Dublin. I felt an overwhelming urge to visit the small town that I grew up in.

It took almost an hour to reach Maybrook. I slowly traversed the maze of narrow roads and thought that the estate hadn’t changed a bit as I surveyed it. I soon made my way onto the avenue and slowed to a stop outside the house that once had been my home. The windows were grimy and filled with shadows. The garden was overgrown. Litter and dead leaves were bunched up by the

front door. Some illegible graffiti on the front window. One piece of Maybrook had changed quite a lot in my absence.

'Bricks and mortar,' I whispered to the night. 'Bricks and mortar that now belong to no one.'

I wondered if anyone else really knew what had transpired in the sitting room of that house the previous year. Did anyone know that one of the most evil murderers ever to walk the earth had stalked the rooms of this abandoned house? I felt ill every time I thought about what happened on that terrible night. I often wondered what Zalech said to Dad before he killed him. Had my father been brave in those final moments? Had Zalech made him suffer? Was it swift or prolonged? Had Zalech watched the house as I now watched it? Did he stand at this very spot as he prepared to enter? What was going through his mind? There were so many questions that would never be answered. Zalech had taken all the answers to the grave with him. I was the only one who kept the questions alive. Zalech and Dad only lived on in my mind.

I took one last look at the house and doubted I would ever lay eyes on it again. There was nothing for me there anymore. I drove slowly along the avenue and out of the estate onto the narrow road to the south that led to a small cemetery. I parked the bike on the roadside, awkwardly scaled the tall iron gates without using my gifts, and wandered the gravelled pathways until I found Dad's grave. I sat for a while in silence with my head resting against the headstone. I remembered the happy days, back before my mother died. I'd been close to Dad at that time. We'd shared so much and laughed all the time.

Those comforting memories were quickly consumed by the images my mind had conjured up of Zalech killing him. My skull was aching as I tried to banish the false memories from my brain.

'I know you would have given him a good fight,' I said to the grave. 'I know you wouldn't cower at his feet. It must have really pissed him off that you weren't a quivering mess. He never got the better of us. No way. We Bentleys were too good and too strong for him in the end.'

I continued talking until my emotions finally boiled over and I wept so hard my throat and chest got sore. It was only an hour since I'd said farewell to Cathy and the loneliness was unbearable. I was breaking apart. The person known as Ross Bentley, who had fought Edward Zalech and Marianne Dolloway, was gradually morphing into a nervous wreck.

My mood grew dark and I wished that I too had taken a place in the family plot next to my mother and father. I often wished for a way out of life. Why remain alive when life is so empty? I had to keep reassuring myself that the future was worth living for. But now that Cathy was gone, I really didn't see much hope for me.

There was once a time when the mere sight or thought of her would snap me from the depths of the depression. She always found ways to cheer me up when I was down. Once she transported her mind into our cat, Nightshade, and made her dance like a drunken reveller. I couldn't help but laugh. On other occasions she would remind me of all that I had achieved since entering the Million Dollar Gift.

'You're not useless, Ross,' she would insist. 'Over the last few short years you discovered your gifts, won the toughest contest ever devised, joined the Guild, saved countless lives, confronted and defeated the greatest of foes, overcame tragedy and you fell in love with the best looking girl that has ever lived!'

Sometimes the speech worked, sometimes it didn't. Whenever it failed to lift me, Cathy would speak of Sarah Fisher, and how I had rescued her from the clutches of evil. That had been the most dangerous task I'd ever been involved in. We had saved the young prophet from Edward Zalech, who was planning to sell her to JNCOR, who in turn would use her to aid their nefarious activities. It actually did make me feel heroic that I'd delivered her to safety. Sarah was such an innocent and loveable young girl, and it would have been a great tragedy if we hadn't gotten to her in time.

Innocent and loveable, but also unwittingly powerful and dangerous. Her sinister premonitions often played on my mind. Sometimes I'd become overwhelmed with fear when I thought back to some of the predictions I'd found in her diary. Then it would be up to Cathy to cheer me up again. Sometimes with a hug or a kiss, other times she'd reminisce of the time we first met, in the English countryside on those long summer nights.

Those were nice memories, but now they were causing me even more anxiety. Now that she was away from me, I was struggling to think of reasons to continue on. Dealing with these ugly feelings alone was what I had been dreading for the two weeks since she announced her departure. I reached my lowest point as I sat there next to the graves of my parents. You couldn't get lower than this.

I was starting to feel the tearing chill of the December night and decided I had to get going. I zipped up my jacket to the point of my chin then pushed myself off the dirt and rested a hand on the frigid marble headstone. I bowed my head and said 'sorry' before 'goodbye'. Would he accept my apology if he could hear my words? I think he would have. Dad was a good soul. He was a wiser person than I could ever hope to be.

There was no true forgiveness, though. Dad was dead and I had taken his place in the world as the lonely man, as Sarah Fisher once described him. Yes, Dad was dead, like so many of those who I had been close to in my life. Being close to me was like a fatal disease.

I scaled the gates and mounted the bike once more. The road ahead was an empty one. A life of solitude lay beyond. To reach the motorway I had to cross through the western side of Maybrook, and as I did, a warm light caught my eye. I slowed the bike and stopped by the corner of Maybrook Road. The box room light was on in the Wrights' house. It was Gemma's room. My one real friend from childhood was only a few yards away. I had once endangered her life by calling her to let her know how I was, back when I was living at the Atkinsons' house. My stupidity had put her in great danger. The calls I made that night had almost gotten me killed, too. Marcus Romand hadn't been as lucky as I was.

I wished to go to her, to talk to her, to laugh with her. I couldn't be so reckless again. She might catch that awful Bentley disease if I re-established contact.

The window was cast into darkness as the light inside was extinguished. Best to leave Gemma to her own life, I thought. I started the bike, kicked off the stand, and was about to fire the engine when the front door to the house opened and Gemma came bustling down the driveway to the pavement. She took a glance in my direction, scowled at me, then continued in the opposite direction. I knew her eyesight was awful and felt no offence. She'd always needed glasses but refused to wear them. She could never recognise people in the dark. It seemed some things never change.

'Gemma!' I instinctively called after her.

She slowed her pace and looked over her shoulder. Then she scowled again and was shaking her head as she walked away even faster than before.

‘Gemma, it’s me.’

She spun around and squinted at me, then smiled hesitantly,‘Ross?’ She cautiously walked towards me as that lovely smile of hers widened. ‘Ross Bentley? Is that you?’

‘I wouldn’t say that name out loud if I were you,’ I replied with a snort. ‘It attracts all the wrong sorts of attention.’

She hurried towards me and the glare of a streetlight illuminated her face. She looked more mature and elegant than she did when we were friends. She’d grown into a beautiful young woman.

‘I don’t believe it.’ She rushed at me and flung her arms around my shoulders and kissed me on the cheek. ‘Ross, I can’t believe it’s you! I thought you were dead, you moron!’ I got a slap in the arm then for my troubles. ‘Why the hell didn’t you …’

Gemma took a stunned step backward. It was as if she suddenly went back to not recognising me. ‘My God,’ she whispered, ‘you look very different, Ross.’

‘I am … different.’

‘What happened to you?’ she asked as her gaze drifted across the face that was scarred by combat, hardened by conflict, and weathered by loss. ‘You look five years older than you should.’

‘I’ve lived a lot over the last couple of years,’ I told her. I’d died more than I’d lived in that time, but I didn’t want to sound morbid by admitting such a thing to her. ‘Enough about me, how are you?’

‘Don’t change the subject,’ she replied instantly. ‘How did you get those cuts on your face?’

I slapped the tank of the bike. ‘Went too fast on this hunk of junk a few months ago and fell off. I wasn’t wearing a helmet.’

‘Just like you fell off your skateboard and got covered in dust? Remember that?’

‘Yeah,’ I smiled. ‘It was something like that.’

‘Oh, Ross.’ Tears glistened in her eyes as she stepped forward and hugged me again. ‘I missed you a lot, you crazy bugger. I worried so much about you.’ She released me and looked me dead in the eye. ‘I thought something bad had happened to you. Then your dad died. I was so sure you’d show up for the funeral but when you didn’t, I thought that the only thing that would keep you away was death.’ A deep frown twisted up her pretty face. ‘Why didn’t you come back for the funeral, Ross? Who doesn’t attend their parent’s funeral?’

‘I couldn’t come back.’

‘You do know what happened to your dad, right? How he died?’

‘I know exactly what happened.’

‘They never caught the person responsible.’

‘Oh, he was caught,’ I said bitterly. A shimmer of the darkness inside was revealed for an instant. The memories of fighting Zalech on that lonely country road were as close as ever. ‘He paid dearly for what he did.’

‘The way you say that makes me think that it was you who caught him.’

I said nothing.

‘Did you?’

‘I don’t feel like talking about all that, Gemma. It’s not easy for me, you know.’

‘I can imagine.’

‘I’m over all that now.’ I forced a smile as the lie left my lips. ‘I’m fine now.’

My smile must have been an unpleasant one judging by the reaction it gained from Gemma. She stood away and looked a little wary of me. This was the last thing I wanted. I didn’t want to scare off the only friend I had left in the world. I couldn’t remain with her for much longer either. I was endangering her by being out in the open with her.

‘Are you well?’ I asked.

‘I am,’ she said with a weary grin. ‘College is fun and I’ve made lots of new friends. I don’t work at the supermarket anymore.’

‘Brilliant! I’m glad you escaped the tyranny of Mr Reynolds!’

‘So am I.’

‘How come you’re out at this hour?’ I wondered. ‘Not like you to be out so late on a school night.’

‘Ross, it’s Saturday night …’

‘Oh. I guess I’ve lost track of time this week.’ This was another lie. I no longer paid attention to dates or times or days or months. Every day was a carbon of the previous one for me. My life was alien to the one Gemma was leading. I was in hiding from the world of the gifted. Gemma was a carefree student. There could be no friendship between us. It was far too late for that.

I reached out to her and ran my hand along her cheek.

‘I’ve missed you, Gemma. I’ve really missed you.’

‘You’re going again, aren’t you?’

‘I have to.’

‘Will you ever come back? I mean, will you ever come back properly?’

‘I can’t. I made a mistake when I left this place for London and I will be paying for it for the rest of my life. The price of my error is exile.’

‘Why are you talking this way? What have you done that’s so bad?’

‘It’s impossible to explain.’

‘Can’t you just tell me what’s going on, Ross? I might be able to help.’

‘You can’t.’

‘Are you on drugs or something? Do you owe money to bad people?’

‘No,’ I laughed. ‘If only it was that simple.’

‘Come here if you’re ever in need of help. Even if you simply need a friend. I liked you being a part of my life, Ross. Promise me you’ll come back again.’

‘I will.’ Another lie. I could never return. ‘I promise.’

I turned the key on the dashboard of the bike. The roar of the engine gave Gemma a fright and she took a few sharp steps away from me. ‘Don’t ever tell anyone you know me, or even knew me, Gemma. Do me that favour. Do yourself that favour.’

She looked crestfallen as I drove away from her. I shouldn’t have talked to her in the first place. I’d now tainted her memory of me. At least she wouldn’t talk about me to strangers, although I doubted that my enemies would come looking for her. I was surely off the radar. I would be safe as long as I kept my head down and didn’t get involved in any mischief, as Cathy used to say.

I ran out of petrol before long and had no money to refill the tank. I was forced to use psychokinesis to power the bike for the rest of the journey across Ireland. I didn’t speed like it was possible to on a kinetibike. I didn’t even break the road limits – although I wanted to. I’d always liked being a daredevil but I was in no rush to get back to the empty cottage that night.

The ride took almost four hours and I reached my home in the dead of night. I rolled the bike up the driveway that arced around the cottage, and parked it in the garage out back. I found the cottage frigid when I stepped into the kitchen. The heating always took an age to fire up, so I didn’t bother trying to get it started. Instead I climbed into bed, fully clothed, and wrapped the duvet around my shoulders.

I liked the cottage for the most part, but the silence on calm nights was in some way disturbing. It was more noticeable than ever now that Cathy was gone. I felt terribly anxious. There, in the quiet darkness, I was overcome with the faces of those who were dead: Dad, Peter Williams, Marcus Romand, Marianne Dolloway, Linda Farrier, Edward Zalech, Shinji Sakamoto, and worst of all, Ania Zalech. I mourned for those close to me and was haunted by those who once opposed me. It was Ania Zalech’s face, though, that was the most troubling of all. I’d never truly gotten over what happened to her. She was too young to die and I was the one who was responsible for her death. It was an accident. There was no intention on my part. I wasn’t a murderer. That didn’t make it any easier to deal with. I was still responsible for ending her life.

On reflection I think something snapped inside me when I killed Ania and I never got a chance to recover properly from it. June Atkinson once told me that the human mind is like any other part of the body. It can be broken like a bone. It can become strained or torn like a muscle. It can get bruised and tender like skin. And like all injuries it takes time to heal, because, according to her, the mind can repair itself over time. If my mind had been injured by what happened to Ania, then it should have been given time to heal. That didn’t happen. I was immediately dragged into a lethal vendetta after her death, one that claimed the lives of my father, some close friends, and many innocents. The last blow was dealt when I seized control over Edward Zalech’s mind. I had in essence become him for a brief moment. I saw the look in Peter Williams’ eyes when Zalech strangled the life out of him. I saw it, but I also felt what Zalech had felt. A part of his insanity and immorality had been passed to me as I time-scanned him. It had remained in some capacity. A piece of Edward Zalech’s tormented mind lived on inside my own – I was sure of it. It had all been too much for one person to deal with and now I was paying the price. My sanity was balanced on a knife edge.

I cast off the duvet and climbed out of the bed. My mind was too busy for sleep, so I wandered the house aimlessly for a while, then tried to read one of Cathy’s books. I couldn’t concentrate on the words and soon placed the book back on the shelf and began roaming the rooms once more.

Eventually I found myself standing in the crisp night air. Sometimes when I couldn't sleep, I found that a stroll along the nearby beach had a calming effect on me. I was free of the deathly silence when I climbed over the dunes and onto the hard sand of the beach. A wind was rolling in from the great Atlantic and the sea was at war with itself. I stood watching it for a time. White explosions were erupting from the dark depths, creating shimmering shapes that caught the moonlight. But always the black water reached out and swallowed these livid white forms. It seemed the view was reflecting my own inner struggle. My true self was trying to break free. The blackness beneath kept dragging the real me back into the shadowy depths.

I stood there until the wind gusting in from the west became too icy to face. I turned my back on the raging waves and headed for home, following my own faint footprints in the frozen sand. In all the time I'd lived out there, mine were the only footprints I ever saw. That was how remote that place was. I doubted that anyone else had walked that stretch of coast for years.

I stalked up the dunes and took one last look over the vast, violent waters. As I turned away I saw a black spot on one of the distant cliffs. I watched it for a few moments, trying to ascertain if it was a person, or simply some rogue farm animal with a death wish. Eventually it faded from sight and I was left guessing whether my mind was playing tricks on me. After all, I was on the verge of a breakdown. I'd probably be babbling to myself and foaming at the mouth within days.

It was more morning than night when I returned to my bed. A sleep terrorised by evil dreams followed.