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Opening extract from

Nemesis: Ride of Death

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SUNDAY 1.15 A.M.

Dead of night. Something woke me. It took me a moment to remember where I was – to shake the memories of the past few days back into my head. Was it only yesterday that I had escaped the Dark Man again, vowing that from then on *I* would follow *him*?

So, where are you now, Ram? I asked myself.

I remembered his car had come up behind the farm truck I had escaped in. I knew he would be after me, would be close behind me. And sure enough, I hadn't had to wait long. There he was. I saw his face behind the wheel of the car. He looked furious. Had I something to do with that anger? I hoped so. I had stayed out of his clutches yet again.

But he had surprised me. Instead of following the main road, he had turned on to a slip road. Not after me at all. Going somewhere else . . . but where? And why?

That was when I had jumped from the truck and rolled on to the grass verge. The wet road made it easy to follow the tyre tracks. Where could he be heading, I wondered, down that quiet side road?

I had walked, it seemed, for ages. Dark morning became even darker afternoon, and finally I could no longer make out his tracks. They were lost among those of tractors and lorries and other cars. Where had he gone from there? Was it a shortcut? But a shortcut to where?

I had kept walking, my eyes scanning the road for any sign of him. It was the icy rain and the darkness that had finally stopped me. I had found shelter in this old deserted church. Outlined against the fast-moving clouds, gargoyles of mythical creatures, their faces ugly and stark, seemed to leap from every turret. Not a comforting place to rest – and it had no roof. But at least there were lots of nooks and crannies and alcoves out of the rain and wind where I could hide myself away and figure out my next move.

I wasn't worried about losing the Dark Man. I knew the best way to find him was to let *him* find *me*.

My clothes had dried into my skin, cold and stiff. I curled myself into a ball, rubbed at my arms. I longed to be warm. I was so hungry that if I'd seen a bird scrabbling for a worm, it might have had to fight me for it.

I hadn't meant to sleep. But after what I had been through, who could blame me?

There was a sound. An owl hooting? And then a bird flapped across the night sky. I was convinced that one of those gargoyles' horned heads turned to watch it. The jitters were definitely getting to me. Perhaps, I thought, I could find somewhere not so isolated, closer to a town, to spend the rest of the night.

I sat up and looked round. It was dark, but winter

nights in those parts were dark for so long. There was hardly any daylight. It had stopped raining but the sky was still thick with clouds. If there was a moon, it was well hidden. I even thought of lying back down again, going back to sleep till morning.

But I had no time to waste.

'Time is running out.'

The words repeated themselves in my head. I didn't understand. I only knew it was a fact. That was about the only thing I did know. Even my name was a mystery. I called myself Ram and didn't know why, just knew it was important – no random choice.

I stood up and brushed myself down, wrapped my arms about me to try to keep warm. I stumbled out of the church, tripping over the flagstones on the ground – no, not flagstones. I stepped back quickly. These were gravestones. I was walking over the graves of people from an ancient past. Definitely time to move on.

I came out of the church, tried to remember how I'd got there. I had left the road and crossed a field, then climbed over a broken wall. Now all I wanted was to find my way to the road again. As I walked, my eyes peered through the dark, to the left and to the right, looking for a path, for a sign that would lead me out.

Too bad I wasn't looking down. One minute I was walking on solid ground and the next I was falling, my arms flailing in mid-air. I didn't make a sound – didn't have time. I crashed face down, landing hard.

I was on my feet in an instant. Where was I? I saw only darkness. My face ached with pain. I began to feel my way around. My hands touched earth. I spread out

my fingers, moving them along one wall till they could go no further, turning along a shorter wall, then turning again, and then again – back to where I had started.

Two long sides, with two shorter sides at each end. Man-made, that was for certain. Not a square . . . What did you call a shape like that? An oblong? The word came to me from somewhere. I had fallen into an oblong hole, almost like a box – long enough to lie down in.

My teeth began to chatter, and it was nothing to do with my frozen clothes. It was as if iced water was being poured down my back. My whole body started to shake.

Because in that second, I knew exactly where I was.

I had fallen into an open grave.



I leapt as high as I was able, desperately trying to grasp a hold in the hard earth. The clouds parted briefly, teasing me with enough light to see how deep I had fallen. Then it was all darkness again. There was the eerie sound of that distant owl – my only company. At least, I *hoped* it was my only company. I tried to dig my fingers into the earth, but they could get a grip of nothing.

I wanted to yell out. Yet I was afraid. Afraid of what might be lurking out there in the dark. Maybe not just an owl.

I made as much of a run as I could and jumped again . . . but I was in too deep.

How deep was I?

Six feet under.

Something in my hidden past told me that.

I wouldn't panic. I would not panic!

Think rationally, Ram. This was a freshly dug grave. Even if I had to stay there all night, someone would surely be around in the morning.

Spend a night in an open grave?

Not on your nelly! I would get out of there. I'd find a

way. But how? There was nothing to stand on, no room for me to make a leap and nothing to hold on to if I could. No handy foothold. Nothing.

I took a deep breath, tried to calm my rattling nerves. OK, if there was no foothold, I would make one. I frantically dug my fingers into the sides until I was sure they must be bleeding. It was March; the earth this deep was still concrete hard. But I was terrified of being down there and that terror turned my fingers into steel claws. The blood pumped through my head as if it would come bursting out of my ears at any second. I clawed at the side, kicked it. The slightest dent would give me hope.

Why were these things always happening to me? Wasn't I in enough trouble?

And only days left. Time running out. I had something to do, something to stop. I had to have stayed alive for a reason. It wasn't the first time I'd thought that.

I would get out of there.

I had to . . .

How long it took I don't know, but at last! I could bury my fingers into one tiny little hole in the earth. It was all I had made, but it gave me hope, and a start. I sunk my fingertips in as deep as I could and hauled myself higher. Centimetres higher. But when I dug my fingers in the earth above, some soil came loose. I made a desperate grab for the next hold, terrified I would lose my grip and fall again. I clung on, willing myself to move. I had to get out, one foothold at a time, one finger hold at a time.

It seemed to take for ever. I used the groove I had

made below for a foothold while I dug above me with my fingers. My arms cried with pain. My fingers were almost numb. Yet still I climbed.

When my hand touched the grass at the top I gripped it, held on fast. Wet with icy dew, it began to slip through my fingers. I had visions of myself tumbling into that black pit again. No way. I couldn't bear the thought of that. Above me, a hand's length away, there was a young tree. I lunged at it. The bark cut into my fingers, but I would not let go, and started to haul myself to the top.

I was almost out.

I clung there for a moment, half in, half out, gasping for breath. My legs still dangled inside the grave. Then my imagination brought skeletal hands up from below, rising out of the earth, reaching to drag me down again. With a split-second movement I pulled myself higher, swung my legs up and over on to the grass and rolled away from that open grave. As I did, my jacket caught on the sharp little branches of the tree. I almost let out a cry, because for a moment I was sure the tree had come alive, and was reaching for me with gnarled bony fingers, to throw me back down. My jacket ripped as I yanked it free, part of the sleeve fluttering on one of the branches. I scrabbled away from it, away from the grave; tried to get my breath back.

Only then did I sit up and look around me. My eyes were more accustomed to the dark now and I could see the outlines of gravestones in all directions, surrounding the church. I leant back to rest, whipped round when I realised what I was leaning against. One of those old

gravestones. The inscription was so worn I could hardly read it.

OWEN BALFOUR
1891–1923
DEATH MAY SOON CALL YOU



That really gave me the creeps. It was like some kind of warning.

Death may soon call you. Nice thought, Owen.

1923 – that was almost a century ago. This graveyard was as deserted as the church, overgrown, filled with broken gravestones, overflowing with the dead.

My eyes went back to the open grave yawning in front of me. Well, someone new was moving in. I got to my feet. That was the explanation, no mystery here. There must be a funeral tomorrow. A freshly dug grave waiting for a new tenant . . . and it had almost been me. I only wanted away from that place. I began to hurry, my eyes on the ground now, just in case. I had no intention of falling into another grave.

I was so intent on watching the ground, trying to find the path, that I might have walked into her . . . or through her.

But something made me look up. Some movement out of the corner of my eye.

She was heading towards me through the darkness, the figure of a girl – the cold breeze billowing her white dress around her.

I couldn't see her eyes.

Did she have eyes?

She was stumbling, her arms outstretched, her long black hair falling over her face, hiding her features.

She didn't look real.

I wanted to scream. I tried to scream, but it wouldn't come. The vision was terrifying, advancing through the dark trees and the gravestones. It was as if my throat was closing up so tight that no sound could pass through. Had I seen her before? I felt I had – somewhere in that nightmare past.

I took a step back. She still came, moving closer, not making a sound. Silent as death.

As death.

Was she the angel of death, coming for me? I'd been certain I'd been kept alive for a reason, but maybe it just hadn't been my time to die. Not then.

But maybe now, tonight, in this lonely graveyard. Now . . . it *was* my turn.

She was reaching out to me. I had a feeling that when she looked up and I saw those eyes, it would be the end for me. There would be no escape. I imagined her touching me, her fingers snatching at my clothes, clutching me to her, and then it would all be over.

NO!

That's when I moved. No. No end for me. No way. I was going to live.

I turned away from her and ran. I tried not to think of her behind me. In my imagination she began to fly, was suddenly above me. It was so clear in my mind I even looked up, took my eyes off the path for a second and

went tumbling to the ground. I was on my feet in the same instant, still running. Ahead of me I could make out the cemetery gates.

They only added to the nightmare. The gates were locked tight. Heavy iron chains with padlocks wound round the railings. Snakes and skulls intertwined with the iron like a vision from hell. I shook those gates, rattled them, dared a look back. She was still there. It seemed to me she floated closer. I put my foot into the mouth of a skeleton and began to climb. My fingers closed round a serpent's tail and I pulled myself higher. My foot slipped, but I clung on, trying not to think of what was behind me. I just kept climbing and, reaching the top at last, swung myself over and jumped – didn't even think of the height.

I hit the ground hard. And I ran. I ran till I could hardly breathe. I ran even when I had no more breath. Still I ran. I ran back on to the road. Only then did I turn to look, sure I would see her.

But she was gone.

And even then, I didn't stop running.



I was shaking with terror as I ran. What was it I had seen? A ghost? One of the undead? A *zombie*? The word came to me. A zombie – a creature who comes alive after death and eats human flesh. I almost fell, I stopped running so suddenly. There was a picture in my head . . . a movie in a dark theatre – no, not a theatre, a house, *my* house. A zombie movie . . . laughing, shrieking, throwing popcorn – trying to hide the terror I felt as the creatures lurched towards some hapless victim.

'*He's too young to watch that!*' a woman's voice called out. Not angry, laughing too. My *mother*? Was I remembering the voice of my mother?

The image was gone in an instant. Why couldn't I hold on to my memories? Yet the terrifying vision I had seen had brought something back to me. And it occurred to me that it was always fear that made me remember. If only I could piece these threads of memory together, hold them for longer than a few seconds.

I bent over, my hands on my knees, trying to get my breath back. I dared to turn and look again. There was only black road behind me. The figure was gone. Had I really seen something? I started to doubt it. It couldn't

have been real, had to have been my imagination. I had fallen into a grave. Of course my mind would be playing tricks on me.

I pictured again that piece of my jacket fluttering on the branch of the tree, and her dress, too, fluttering in the night breeze. It must have been my imagination, I thought, because I definitely didn't believe in ghosts. But I had had enough of the dark. I wasn't going to risk my imagination going into overdrive again. I ran on to find life, and lights, and people.

I was desperate to be out of the dark.



'Gallacher's dead, thanks to that boy!'

His associates were angry. He didn't tell them that it was, in fact, thanks to him that Gallacher was dead. He'd held out a hand to save his friend, his colleague for so many years, and at the last moment he had saved the boy instead. Not a wise thing to admit to his associates.

The boy would die – he wanted to assure them of that – but only when he, the Dark Man, was ready.

'He's not immortal,' he told them. *But he is special*, he wanted to add. He had always known the boy was special.

'We have no more time to waste on this,' was their answer. 'Find him, and kill him.'



It was a pile of newspapers smacking down on the pavement that woke me up. I had found the doorway of

a corner shop to sleep in. I lay still, hardly breathing, curled up in the corner, not wanting anyone to know I was there. I had discovered it was safer that way. The van hadn't even stopped, only slowed down to dump its load. It roared away, too loud in the early morning silence. It was still dark, but there was just a hint of light on the horizon. I shivered with cold, pulled my stiff jacket tighter around me. Soon this little corner shop would open. I would have to move on, find somewhere else. But for the moment the road was quiet and empty. I dragged the pile of newspapers towards me. I wanted to see what day it was, what date.

It was Sunday. These were the Sunday newspapers. They were tied up with string, but I could make out the headlines:

US PRESIDENT TO HEAD HOME TOMORROW

CONFERENCE ON TERRORISM DECLARED A SUCCESS

WORLD LEADERS UNITE TO FIGHT WORLD TERRORISM

And underneath, in smaller headlines:

POLITICIAN'S DAUGHTER STILL MISSING: TERRORISTS BLAMED

I slipped one of the papers out of the pile and curled back into the corner to read it.

But the story of this conference only held my interest for a second. It was the column on the side that really brought me awake:

Am I the only person left alive who believes the lone bomber wasn't alone?

Emir Khan on the conspiracy theory, page 3.



7 A.M.

Footsteps were coming along the lonely street. I cowered back and covered myself with the newspaper. I held my breath as they stopped right beside the doorway. Any second now I expected a long arm to reach out and grab me. A gruff policeman moving me on, or worse, asking questions I couldn't answer.

I needn't have worried. Whoever it was either didn't notice me or didn't care. A paper was tugged from the pile, and I heard some change being thrown on top for payment.

It made me smile. Even here, on a quiet street, when it would be so easy to steal, decent people never did.

I waited till the tattoo of footsteps had faded before I opened the paper at page three and began to read.

It was dark in the doorway and I had to peer at the words to see them:

Just a few weeks ago a bomb went off in London. We have been told the perpetrator, whom we have all come to call the 'Lone Bomber', was acting on his own. An ex-soldier, invalid-

ed out of the army and possibly suffering from Gulf War Syndrome, he became paranoid. He began to see conspiracies everywhere and was eventually forcibly retired from his civil service post. Even at the time, we have now been told, there were people who warned he might do something that would threaten the security of this country.

And it seemed their fears were justified. The bomb he planted could have killed hundreds, including the Prime Minister. But it went off early, and he was the only casualty.

At least, that's what we've been told.

But in the weeks since the bombing, many eye witnesses – people who were on the scene at the time – have died in what might be called 'mysterious circumstances'.

Brian Farrel, was the first: he suffered a heart attack while driving his taxi, killing him instantly. Farrel was only thirty-two years old and had no history of heart problems.

Joanna Impinenti, a fifty-year-old teacher, fell from the window of her fifth-floor flat. A tragic accident, was the official story.

Edward Moore, a traffic warden, was the victim of a hit and run. And only two days ago, Colin Drummond, a retired businessman, drowned in his own swimming pool.

No suspicious circumstances . . . except they were all eye witnesses to what happened that day.

I don't believe the Lone Bomber was working alone. I have never believed that. What if he were part of a bigger conspiracy?

Do you have any information that could help me? Or are you a witness, afraid to step forward?

Was that why the Dark Man was after me – I was an eye

witness, I had seen something that day? Did he plan to torture me or drug me till he found out what it was?

Well, I had plenty of information to give Emir Khan, didn't I? Information – and the photograph. The photograph of the Lone Bomber with Gallacher and the Dark Man. There was a number at the bottom of the article for people to call if they had information. I read the phone number again, memorised it.

I was disturbed by the sound of a car turning on to the dark road. It seemed to be slowing to a halt. The shopkeeper coming to open up maybe. There wasn't time to read any more. Could I call this Emir Khan, tell him what I knew? Phone calls cost money, I thought, and I had none. I clocked the coins lying on top of the pile of newspapers. It wouldn't really be stealing. I would make up for it . . . and it was for a worthy cause, wasn't it? I had no choice. I picked up a coin, enough for the call, and with a silent apology I slipped away from the doorway and hurried off down the street.

It was only when I rounded the corner, backed into an alleyway, that I realised how much I was shaking.

The Lone Bomber hadn't been working on his own. I knew that already. But now I knew I wasn't the only one who had discovered that. And one by one we were being killed off. Why?

Emir Khan suspected there was a conspiracy. He wanted to hear from anyone else. Here, at last, was someone I could surely trust, someone who would help me. I was going to call Emir Khan.



Emir Khan knew his story would rattle people. He already knew he was in danger because of what he believed. But it was a story that had to be told. He had to take the chance. Only yesterday, another witness had died. Colin Drummond had been a proficient swimmer who got into difficulties in his own pool. Cramp? Possibly. No suspicious circumstances, the police said.

No suspicious circumstances when the others had died either. All dead, all the witnesses he knew about. One by one they had been disposed of.

He, Emir Khan, had seen nothing, knew nothing. He had been nowhere near the scene at the time of the explosion – hadn't even been in London. He had no proof, just the gut instinct of a seasoned reporter that there was more to this story. The article was meant to bring another witness, silent till now, out of the woodwork. There had to be someone, somewhere, surely?

But he knew his article would be noticed by others too: the dangerous, shadowy men he believed were behind this conspiracy. And he was sure there was a conspiracy.



Jane Faulkner picked up the paper during her break at the hospital where she worked as a nurse. It had been a quiet night shift, and she was keen to read the latest in the story of the missing politician's daughter. A publicity stunt, the gossip columns had been saying. That's what many people thought. Angus Lennox was up for re-election and looking for the sympathy vote. His daughter, Sapphire, was a wild child, always being snapped by the paparazzi in one nightclub or another, always partying. She had a book coming out – ghost written no doubt. This would be her way of making sure it had the maximum publicity.

Yet, Jane wasn't so sure. A politician would surely never risk staging something like that. Lennox had looked genuinely distraught when she had seen him on television. He seemed to adore his daughter, in spite of her being a constant embarrassment to him. Didn't he have a pet name for her . . . What was it again? He had brought her up on his own after his wife's death. As to Sapphire, she was wild, yes – but she was young, she was pretty and she was spoiled. It had never seemed to Jane that she had any real badness in her. To let her father think his beloved daughter, his only child, had been kidnapped would be cruel in the extreme.

The Sunday paper put aside speculation about the publicity stunt though, and reported that some kind of terrorist organisation had claimed responsibility for the kidnapping. The paranoia about terrorism was intensifying. But it was a column at the side of the page that

caught Jane's eye. She opened the paper at page three and read the article.

Emir Khan . . . Phone me if you have a story. And then the number.

She was fed up trying to tell her story. She'd told the police on the day of the bombing – told them what she'd seen. She'd been assured it was of no importance; nothing to do with the bombing. It had been filed away.

And they were probably right.

What she had seen was such a little thing.

It had niggled at her though. She'd heard stories too, about witnesses dying mysteriously. And she had begun to feel afraid.

Best keep your mouth shut, she'd decided. But she wasn't the kind of woman who liked keeping her mouth shut.

And now this. *Discretion guaranteed*, the article assured her. *If you have anything to tell, get in touch with me.* And that phone number.

What harm would it do to call? Perhaps she would do it just before she finished her shift.



The Dark Man saw the article too. Khan was a nuisance. He had wanted him out of the way from the beginning. He had warned his associates about him.

But they hadn't been concerned about Khan. The man knew nothing. His speculation had been dismissed as a reporter going for a story, or making one up if one wasn't there. He wasn't considered a danger.

This was different though. Now he was asking for

witnesses to come forward. Even though after tomorrow it wouldn't matter what Emir Khan or anyone else said, the Dark Man was going to suggest he should be disposed of – for good.



Emir Khan put the phone down. He'd had several calls, all from cranks. Some had been convinced they'd seen little green men that day. One had said he'd seen Elvis with a bomb hidden in his guitar case. And another claimed that he knew the Lone Bomber wasn't alone, because he'd marched into that underground car park along with the seven dwarves. Emir had begun to think that perhaps his colleagues back at the London office had been right. Giving the phone number of the flat – even though it belonged to the newspaper and wasn't his – was asking for trouble.

But then this last call, this one was genuine. Jane Faulkner. Had he heard the name before? He'd learned the names of almost all the 'conspiracy witnesses', as he called them. But the woman had said she'd only given the police one statement. Her story had been brushed aside, or 'under the carpet', as she put it.

Was she in any danger? That was the first thing she wanted to know. He had reassured her that he wouldn't reveal her identity in his story. She'd be safe.

Was that true, though? He hoped so. Too many had died already. He had made an arrangement to meet her

at Waverley Station at ten o'clock, as soon as her shift finished. No time to waste. He'd been sent to Glasgow to cover the conference. He could drive to Edinburgh easily by ten.

He lifted the phone again, examined it. Was it tapped? Would he know if it was? Or was he becoming as paranoid as everyone said he was. He'd seen his colleagues raising their eyes at any mention he made of a conspiracy; he'd watched them avoiding him whenever he approached.

And then the phone rang again, its shrill tone cutting the air in his quiet flat.

He hoped it wasn't another crank call.



I had expected Emir Khan to sound Asian. He didn't. If anything, his accent was American. 'Emir Khan speaking. Do you have information for me?' That was the first thing he said. Straight to the point.

How could I begin? I didn't even know my name. So I jumped right into the part I did know. 'I have a photograph of the Lone Bomber.' I patted my pocket to reassure myself it was still there. 'He's with two men. They're both involved in the conspiracy.' I rattled on, eager to tell my story. 'And there *is* a conspiracy. They were both after me. One of them's dead now, but the other – he'll never give up till he gets me. I know something – something really important . . .' I hesitated, wishing I could tell him more. 'Trouble is, I don't know what it is. I've lost my memory.' I knew I was beginning to talk too fast. Excitement, fear, getting the better of

me. 'There's something big coming. The bombing was just the beginning of it. If I could just remember . . .'

'Calm down.' His voice was soft. 'I'll help you; I'll find somewhere safe for you. I'm meeting another witness later. I can meet you too. I'll help you remember.' And I believed him. He would find a way to bring my memory back. I felt as if a curtain was about to be lifted from my past.

'Where are you phoning from?'

It had never occurred to me to check where I was, but I did now. I looked at the number on the phone, at the advertisements for local taxis and restaurants on the walls of the phone box. 'I think I'm in a place called Haddington.'

'Haddington! That's Edinburgh. Do you know where Waverley Station is? It's the main railway station in Edinburgh.'

'I'll find it,' I told him.

'I'm meeting a woman there this morning, at ten. Can you make that?'

'I'll be there. How will I know you?'

He paused to think about it. 'Tell you what, I'll wear a red baseball cap. You'll see me coming for miles.'

'And you'll know me,' I told him. 'I'll be the boy who looks lost.'



Emir put down the phone carefully, but his hand was shaking. He had struck gold, he was sure of it. A boy, who knew so much, who had a photograph.

A boy. He had once interviewed the Impinenti

woman, and she had mentioned a boy. Then she had died. Had any of the others seen a boy? But it couldn't be that same boy . . . could it?

What if it was? He hadn't even asked his name. He picked up a pen and, on the pad beside the phone, under *Jane Faulkner*, added: *The boy with no name. 10 a.m.*

He looked at his watch. Still early morning. Time for him to get what he needed together before he drove to Edinburgh to meet Jane Faulkner and the boy. The boy, especially, would have to be kept safe. Emir wondered where he could take him, who he could trust.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. He was close to exposing the biggest story of his career. This boy could be the key. He wished now he had told him he would meet him right away, that he would drive to Haddington and pick him up. Never mind, not long to wait now. He walked to the door and opened it.