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Opening extract from

Nemesis: Sinister Intent

Written by

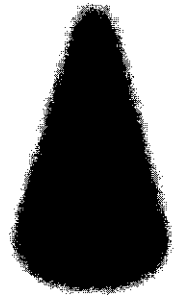
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TUESDAY 2 A.M.

It was the lights I saw first, lights that illuminated the dark of the night. They appeared suddenly, bright and fierce. One second the pitch-black of night, and then the sky was ablaze with a light that almost blinded me.

At first I thought there had been some kind of explosion, but there had been no sound. Still was no sound.

No sound at all. Except for the thunderous rush of a nearby torrent of water. No birds, no hooting owls, no crickets or frogs. I began to get an eerie feeling that something was wrong.

So, step back, Ram, a voice whispered. The sensible part of me. But I wondered if I had ever been sensible. Had the memory that was lost to me ever done the sensible thing?

The beams were shining like searchlights in the night sky, somewhere over this hill. From the top, I was sure I would be able to see where that light came from, watch in safety and never be seen. Probably teenagers having a party. Nothing sinister at all. It would only take a moment to check it out. I lay flat and pulled myself up

the steep slope, gripping at the grass and rocks, my feet scrabbling against earth and stone.

Still not a sound, just those bright lights.

I reached the top, dragging myself on my belly and cautiously peered over to see what was below in that valley.

Something was moving down there. Shapes that didn't look human. What had I stumbled on?

And then, in an instant, the light changed – from the bright white to a single green ray, shooting up out of the ground; a pencil of light beaming into the night sky. I leant closer, eager to see more – let loose some boulders at the top. The sound of the falling rocks roared into the silence as they rolled and crashed to the ground below.

The figures stood still. As one, they turned to where the sound was coming from, watching the rocks as they thundered to the ground. And that's when I saw the faces. I'd never seen anything like them. The faces weren't human, reflecting green from that strange light. Faces with no expressions, just blank stares.

I blinked. Now they were looking up. They were looking at me. Those inhuman faces were turned towards me. I felt the menace in those stares.

They began to move, as if some invisible force was sending them my way. They were coming closer, moving towards me. I wasn't going to wait for introductions. *Time to run, Ram.* I slithered on my belly down from the summit. Only got to my feet when I was sure I would be out of sight.

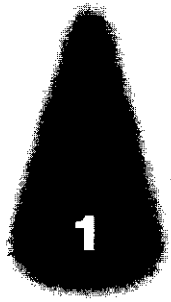
But I was only on my feet for a second. My foot caught on the roots of a tree and I pitched forward. I put

my hands out to stop myself from falling, grabbing nothing but air. My hand cracked against stone. Down I tumbled, over and over, rocks slamming against my back, my shins, my face. At last I crashed to a stop.

I lay there; my head ached; I thought my heart was about to burst. I looked up. Something was caught in the light at the top of the hill. Something was moving there, seemed to shimmer in a green haze. One of them had reached the top. They were still after me. But I was sure they couldn't see me hidden here by bushes and trees. If I moved off into the darkness I would be safe. Unseen.

I tried to stand up, and the ground swayed and pitched beneath me as if there was an earthquake, but the earthquake was inside me.

I had to get away. I knew I had to get away. I took one step forward. The world turned upside down and the lights went out.



'Wake up, boy! Wake up!'

I was being shaken roughly. I opened my eyes and saw a host of strange faces staring down at me. Wild red hair, scarlet lips, and I remembered in that instant the beings I had seen – a moment ago? An hour ago? Or longer? How long had I been unconscious?

I scrambled back, away from those faces. That was when I realised just how much pain I was in. My head felt as if there was a bell clanging inside it. Every bone in my body ached. I was sure I was going to be sick.

'Are you all right?' a voice seemed to echo down a tunnel. 'Are you all right? Are you all right?'

The faces were merging now, from a legion of them to a dozen, to just a few. I shook my head, and the bell inside my head pealed out. Then I really was sick. I bent forward and vomited up over a pair of green brogue shoes.

And the thought came to me . . . is that what strange beings were wearing this year?

I looked up again. There was only one face now, vague and undefined. A hand still gripped tight at my shoulder.

'Are you all right, boy?' The voice was clear now.

It was an old woman who was leaning over me. It looked as if she had tried to dye her untamed hair and failed miserably. Strands of red stood up, embedded in grey roots. She was wearing lipstick. Unfortunately, it wasn't on her lips. She'd missed her lips by a mile and drawn a scarlet streak across her chin.

Who on earth was this?

'Can you stand up?' She was hauling me to my feet anyway. 'What are you doing out here this time of night? A boy your age?'

Same questions I was always asked. Still didn't have an answer.

'Never mind, you can tell me later.'

I tried to stand straight, but my legs wobbled like they were made of rubber. I would have crumpled to the ground if she hadn't held me.

'Lucky for you I've got transport,' she said, and she cackled. That was the only way to describe the laugh she let out. A cackle.

Oh no, I've come across another weirdo, I thought. Why was it always the weirdos who seemed to seek me out?

She helped me to sit again. 'You wait here. I'll be back in a minute,' she said.

I didn't want her to go. Weird as she was, she was human. Well, almost. And I didn't want to be alone. I imagined those things with their blank green faces, still watching, still waiting for the moment to come down and get me. But the old woman was gone before I had a chance to ask her to take me with her.

It was a still black night, deep black, heavy clouds hiding moon and stars. I looked up at the brow of the hill. No lights there now. No strange figures. No feeling of menace. The only sound the thunderous torrent of that nearby waterfall. Had it all been my imagination? Here in the dark of night, alone, had my imagination turned the headlights of a car into something sinister? Turned a couple of teenagers having a laugh into something menacing? Maybe it had been the headlights of the old woman's car I had seen. Maybe that was why she was here. If this was a strange place for a boy my age, it was an equally strange place for a little old lady to be in the middle of the night.

I heard her behind me, heard something trundling closer, and turned to look. It wasn't a car she had . . . it was a bike.

'What? That's your transport?'

'Oh, he's got a voice, and the first thing he does is complain.' She moved closer. 'I don't expect you to ride on the handlebars, don't worry. Look.' She turned the bike round. It had a little tent-like trailer hooked on to the back, the kind you might put a toddler in.

She was smiling. 'I usually put my shopping in here . . . in fact there might be a couple of potatoes still in there, but you can pop in. Save you walking.'

I tried to get to my feet. 'I'm not going in there.'

'What are you complaining about? I'm the one that's got to drag you behind me.'

I was feeling woozy again. She hurried towards me, caught me just before I fell. 'Come on, get in there. You need one of Bella's nice cups of tea.'

She pushed me in headfirst. I felt too sick to argue. Didn't fit inside either. My legs dangled out of the back.

She folded them in behind me. 'You're well hidden in there.' And then she said something that made me feel even sicker. 'There's people going missing around here . . . you're lucky I came when I did. You might have been one of them, eh?'



The Reaper was watching it all. It had only been a boy, of course, but it would have been better if they had caught him. He might have been useful. The old woman had come along too soon. Always in the way. One day she would be dealt with. The Reaper moved behind the bushes, careful not to make a sound, watching as she helped the boy up and on to his feet. Then she pushed him roughly inside the cart at the back of her bike.

Who was this boy? And what was he doing out here?

And, most importantly, how much had he seen?



Her house was hidden somewhere inside an overgrown garden of weeds. I had expected some kind of ramshackle cottage, with smoke trailing from a chimney in the roof. But, actually, it was a modern house built on two storeys. She had just managed to make it look rundown. Had she said her name was Bella? I peered outside the cart as she bumped and grinded the bike over the broken slabs to her front door. I still felt woozy and sick, even sicker now. My head ached. I couldn't understand what was going on, but then, when did I ever understand anything?

It had only been days since I left the moors, and Faisal and Kirsten and Noel, sleeping rough in any place I could find. It amazed me the number of places a boy could find to sleep. A stone-built shed on the edge of a hill, a bothy, a hidden room, an abandoned house, a tunnel beside a long-forgotten station.

Now I was somewhere else, and I hadn't a clue where. All I could see from between the flaps in the cart was a modern estate laid out in a valley. The houses were in darkness. The streets were empty. Where was I?

One step ahead of the Dark Man – that was all that mattered.

The old woman, this Bella, hauled back the cover of the trailer. 'Right, let's get you inside.' She took my arm and almost lifted me out – strong, in spite of her age. She pushed open the back door of her house.

Why could I never meet normal people? A nice millionaire who was looking for a long-lost son? A beautiful rock star who wanted the publicity for adopting an orphan? What do I get? Some crazy old woman who talks in riddles and shoves me in the toddler cart at the back of her bike.

Inside her house was as untidy as her garden. She wiped a place clear on the settee for me to lie on, scattering papers and magazines on to the floor – along with a couple of long-haired cats, who didn't look too happy about being moved. 'That's Mata, and Hari, my lovely strays,' she said. 'Say hello to the nice boy.'

Mata and Hari only hissed at me. Mata was black and white. She looked as overgrown as Bella's garden, her coat standing out in tufts. Hari was a tortoiseshell with a half-shut eye. He looked as if he was winking at me.

'Now you lie there. I'll make you a cup of tea, and you can tell me all about yourself. I should introduce myself. My name's Bella Bartell.'

With that she disappeared into the kitchen. I could hear her clattering dishes about. *Maybe I should get out of here*, I thought. Now was my chance to escape. I tried to stand again, but it was no use. When I closed my eyes the room swirled. I had a pair of jelly legs. I sat back. Tell her about myself? What could I tell her? I had no

memory of who I was. Or where I came from. All I knew was that a Dark Man, Mr Death, was on my trail, and my greatest fear was of him catching me. Yet I didn't know why he wanted me. What was the secret locked in my head? At the moment there didn't seem to be any room for any kind of secret, room for anything but this giant clanging bell.

'I think I'm going to be sick again,' I looked around for something to be sick into . . . even considered Mata and Hari's basket. They stared at me with narrowed eyes, daring me to use it.

The old woman came running in with a bucket. 'Here . . . be sick all you want. Enjoy.' So I was. But I can't say I enjoyed it.

I lay back on the settee. Sweat was pouring from me. My head was bursting with pain. I still felt sick. She touched my brow. 'I think I'm going to get the doctor,' she said.

I was up in the instant she said it. 'No! I'm fine. Please don't.'

A doctor. Publicity. The Dark Man finding me again. Couldn't risk it.

She sat beside me, shook her head. 'Oh . . . a boy with a secret, eh? Don't want to be caught. Run away, have you? Wondered what you were doing up there. Strange place for a boy to be in the middle of the night . . . unless he's up to no good. *Have* you run away?'

I didn't know what to say to that. I didn't have to bother saying anything. She seemed happy supplying the answers for herself. 'Had a bad time at home, did you? So many young people run away because of that.

Don't want anybody to know you're here, is that it?'

I nodded weakly, and the bell rang loudly inside my head, swaying from side to side in slow motion. Beating against my temples.

'I quite understand,' she said. She stood up. 'And I promise I won't give you away. But I am going to send for the doctor. Don't worry. Dr Mulvey's a friend, and I won't tell him anything. I'll make up a story about you. About why you're here. Now what's your name?'

How could I tell her I didn't know that either. I had a made-up name that I had plucked from thin air . . . Or had I?

Ram. Did my name mean something?

She leant down to me. 'Not normally a hard question. Your name . . . What do you want me to call you, then?'

'Ram,' I said. 'Just call me Ram.'

She didn't make any comment on that. 'How would it be if I adopted you for a bit? I'll say you're my grandson come for a visit. He'll believe that. Nobody really knows me very well here. They all think I'm mad as a hatter. But then, everybody's as mad as a hatter in this town. This is the UFO capital of the UK. Did you know that?'

'UFO?' I mumbled, puzzled. What did that mean?

'Unidentified flying objects,' she explained. 'Spaceships. Little green men from Mars.'

I let out a gasp. She caught it, must have seen the expression on my face.

'Oh, don't say you've seen something as well? Is that what happened back there in the valley?' She tutted. 'It was your imagination. Listen, we've got enough trouble in this world without importing it from outer space.' She

leant down to me. 'There's certainly something going on here, but it's got nothing to do with spaceships.'

I was too weak to argue. All I wanted to do was sleep, but she wouldn't let me. 'Not till the doctor comes,' she said. 'You might have concussion.'

She poured me a mug of tea from a cat-shaped teapot, and handed it to me. 'Maybe you'll be able to keep that down.' I looked at the tea. There were a couple of grey hairs streaked with red floating in it. She didn't even blush. 'They're not mine, you know,' she insisted. 'Either Mata or Hari. Their hairs get everywhere. Just pick them out.'

I didn't manage to keep the tea down after all.



I lay on the sofa, shivering, while she busied herself in the kitchen. I heard her switch on the radio and night music from a local station filled the air. I wanted to get up and walk out, move back into the shadows where I was safe. But I was too weak. Once the headache left me, then I could go.

The music faded and the news came on. The cheery voice of the presenter seemed at odds with the dark news. The terrorist threat. The lone bomber. Hostages held by a foreign power. His voice almost became a giggle as he began talking about the next item.

'And now for one of our Mad March stories. In a small sleepy town not far from here a woman has been claiming her nephew isn't her nephew, but a ghost sent to haunt her. How does she know this? Because she claims she murdered her nephew.' I sat up. He was talking about Noel Christie. Had to be. The presenter was almost laughing. 'She even told the police where to find the nephew's body. Wasn't there, of course, and the nephew is undoubtedly who he says he is, as DNA tests have confirmed. But she still insists he's a ghost. This story, by the way, comes from the same area where there

have been sightings of some sort of wild beast roaming the countryside – probably reported by the same woman! Or maybe there's something in the water up there. Well, if you have any more Mad March stories out there, let us know. Though this one will take a lot to beat.'

The story was about Noel. The boy I had replaced, who now had taken his rightful place. Our plan had worked. Noel was safe.

I was feeling a mite cheerier by the time the doctor arrived. He looked as if he should have retired many moons ago. Grey hair, what he had of it and a face lined like old leather. He shuffled into the room, with Bella just behind him. I noticed she had put on more lipstick, still missing her lips. It made me think that maybe she fancied him. She was certainly fluttering her eyelashes at him.

'So is this another of your strays, Bella?' he asked. He smiled at me. 'Bella picks up strays all the time.'

'No, he's my grandson, Dr Mulvey. I told you on the phone.'

'Your grandson?' the doctor said, as if he didn't believe her. 'Didn't know you had any family. You never mentioned him before.'

'Oh, well, you know me – keep myself to myself. There's only the one grandson. He's arrived tonight. I just picked him up.'

Picked me up indeed. Now that wasn't any lie.

'But he fell down my stairs,' she went on. 'He's very clumsy on his feet, and he's not been feeling right since.'

Dr Mulvey placed his hand on my brow. 'Bit of a

temperature,' he said. He eased himself on to a chair beside me and took his stethoscope out of his case. 'Let's have a listen . . . Heart beating like a drum,' he said after a few moments. 'Healthy boy.'

'He's been sick,' Bella said.

'Headache?' the doctor asked. I almost told him just how bad the headache was but he turned to Bella just then. 'Maybe we should get him to the hospital and have him checked out.'

That was the last thing I wanted. I took a deep breath. 'No. No headache at all. Don't even feel sick now.'

I just hoped I didn't make myself out a liar by vomiting all over him.

He checked my eyes and my pulse, gripped my head in his hands and moved it up and down, from right to left. I felt myself going woozy again.

Finally, he was finished. He looked up at Bella. 'Get him into bed. Nothing broken, no lasting damage.' He laughed. 'Sure you didn't get me here for ulterior motives, Bella?'

Bella blushed the same colour as her lipstick. 'You're a devil, Dr Mulvey.'

Dr Mulvey smiled too. He stood up. 'Well, it's nice meeting you, young man. I'll pop in tomorrow, see how you are.'

Pop in all you want, I thought. *I have no intention of being here tomorrow.*

I could hear them whispering at the door. Whispering sweet nothings probably.

Bella came back a few minutes later. The doctor's car purred away from the house. 'Isn't he dishy?' she said.

I tried to sit up. 'Dishy? He's as old as the hills.'

'He's not that old. He's a lot younger than me. He's my toy boy.'

'Toy boy! He looks ancient.'

'He just hasn't worn well.' She nodded and laughed. 'It's a race against time who gets me first. Him or the Grim Reaper.' Then she cackled again.

Her voice went right through me. 'OK, that's our cover story. While you're here I'll say you're my grandson,' she went on. 'And I've told him your name is Ramon.'

'Ramon?' What was the idea of that? 'Where did you get that name?'

'It's close enough to your own name . . . and it reminds me of my mother's favourite movie star. Ramon Navarro.'

'I don't believe you. Nobody was ever called Ramon Navarro.'

She waved over to a computer that sat in the corner. I hadn't noticed it before, covered with coats and towels and with either Mata or Hari slumped on top of it. 'You look it up on my computer. You'll find out all about Ramon Navarro. So you're called after him.'

'Have you a grandson?'

'No. No family at all. Never had time to have one. I was a career woman.' She waited as if I was supposed to ask her what her career had been, but I said nothing. 'No grandson. No family. I'm all alone in the world.' If she said that to get my sympathy she was barking up the wrong grandson. I think she did the world a favour. This woman was nuts.

'Anyway, what you need now is bed. You'll feel better in the morning.'

She lifted me by the arm and helped me up the stairs to a small landing where there were two bedrooms. She flung open the door of one of them. It was jammed pack full of old furniture, black bin bags and boxes. 'Is this the junk room?' I asked.

'You cheeky monkey! It's my guest bedroom. It just needs a little feng shui.' She looked closer. 'There's a bed in here somewhere.'

And she wasn't lying. We finally found the bed under a pile of boxes and bags and second-hand clothes. Bella shook the dust from the duvet, pulled back the covers. 'There,' she said. 'You'll sleep great in there.'

A second later Mata and Hari bounded up the stairs and threw themselves on the bed before I had a chance to move. Bella grinned. 'There's plenty of room for the three of you.'

It was only as I lay on the edge of the bed – Mata and Hari took up most of the room – that I began thinking again about the place where I had seen the lights. I had forgotten to ask what exactly Bella Bartell had been doing there in the middle of the night. Had she seen them too? The lights, and those strange figures with their non-human faces?

The UFO capital of the UK, she had said. People going missing. What had I stumbled into now?



I awoke later to go to the toilet. As soon as I moved, Mata and Hari rolled into my place. I had a feeling I would have to fight to get it back. I opened the door, ready to creep down the stairs. Bella would surely be snoring noisily in her bed by now.

But she wasn't.

Halfway down the stairs I could see a green light in the living room. Otherwise the house was in darkness. I could hear the gentle touch of fingers flying over keys. The door was slightly ajar. I peered closer. Bella Bartell was on her computer. She didn't look dotty or forgetful at all now. She was sitting up straight and looked as sharp as a knife. She seemed intent on the screen in front of her. She had told me she had no family. She was all alone in the world, but she certainly had someone to send emails to. I stepped back. Something strange was going on here, I was sure of it. But what?

After I'd gone back upstairs, I stood at the window in the bedroom, wondering if I should go right now, get away from here. I had a gut instinct that would be the wise thing to do. I was safer keeping on the move. But my head still ached. My legs were shaking. The pull of

that warm bed, even sharing it with two scruffy cats, was too hard to resist. If I could get back some strength I would be fit to move on, I told myself. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe then I would go.

I pulled back the curtains and peered outside. Mist from the drizzly rain hung over the houses like smoke. From this window I could see the town laid out below. The houses were in darkness, only the street lights illuminated the night. People asleep. Then I turned my eyes to the hills. Total darkness there. No strange lights now. Nothing.

I would definitely leave tomorrow, I decided. Bella Bartell was an old woman. But there was something not quite right about her, and I wasn't hanging around to find out what it was.



The Reaper had been right. It *was* the boy he had seen at the site. He could see him at the window now, watching. His face thoughtful and troubled. What had he been doing there in the valley? Did he understand what he had been looking at? Who would believe him anyway? No point stirring up any suspicions. The boy might just move on. That would solve everything. But if he didn't . . . well, he knew exactly what he could do with a nosy young boy.



Someone else was at a window, watching everything through a pair of high-powered binoculars. Ryan Gallacher, boy detective. He had been investigating

Bella Bartell for a long time. There was something strange about her. She was always behaving suspiciously, riding about the town on that old bike of hers, her wild hair flying behind her.

It was the doctor's car driving past his house that had woken Ryan. Why was the doctor here in the middle of the night? (If Dr Mulvey really was a doctor! His dad had said he should have been struck off years ago. Though struck off what, Ryan hadn't understood.) Anyway, he had watched him going into Bella Bartell's house, and waited until he came back out, clutching his case. Then he watched him drive off.

Ryan wondered at first if Bella Bartell was ill. Or maybe dead. She was certainly old enough. But now he could see a boy standing at the upstairs window, holding back the net curtain, looking outside. A boy about his own age. A boy he had never seen before. Dark hair, long pale face. He looked ill, or maybe that was fear? Was Bella Bartell keeping him in there against his wishes? He drew out his notebook, made some entries quickly. Tomorrow he was going to investigate further.



I climbed back into bed with the two cats. They refused to budge. Eventually I managed to balance myself on the edge of the bed and hold on tight. It was like clinging to the side of a mountain. I was trying to force myself not to be sick. I would not be sick. I wanted so much to feel well again. But my head reeled. I was sweating buckets. Had she given me something to make me feel like this? I mean, what did I know about this old woman? I needed

to leave. If I could just stand up. If my legs would only support me.

I imagined myself standing erect, walking out of the room, down the stairs, striding out of the front door and off into the night. It all seemed so real I was sure I had done it, that I would open my eyes and find myself outside in the open air. But when I did open my eyes, Hari was staring at me with his one good eye. I was still in the bed in Bella's spare room. Eventually, I gave up even trying. I closed my eyes and, moments later, I was fast asleep.