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Opening extract from  
**Hidden Gift**

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Smoke & Mirrors

**N**ight was fast approaching and I was running out of time. I'd spent over ten hours wandering through the forest, unable to find a way out and it would be an impossible task once the sun set. I wasn't afraid of the dark, but at the same time I didn't want to spend an autumn night out in the Scottish wilderness, and certainly not in that particular wooded area; someone had been following me all day and despite my numerous attempts at an ambush they had evaded me time and time again.

I was beginning to think my pursuer was a figment of my imagination until I heard the footsteps once more. I dashed down a slope then sprinted for the cover of a fallen tree. I crouched low to the ground and watched from behind the twisted branches for any sign of life. The forest had fallen silent again and after ten minutes I rose despondently from my hiding place and continued my search for an escape route from the dreadful woodland. The footsteps were not the only things that had me on edge. The forest itself was unsettling. At times that day the trees on the periphery of my vision seemed to move. Something very unusual, and sinister, was going on around me and I was convinced I had been led into a trap that morning. One that I would not easily break free of.

The sun was low to my right and I figured I was heading south. That was the direction I needed to be going if I was to make it back to the road that I'd foolishly left that morning. I set a strong pace and kept to that direction for more than twenty minutes. I stopped when I came to a felled tree – the very same one I'd hidden behind twenty minutes earlier. I kicked up some loose dirt and roared in frustration.

How was this possible? I'd kept the sun to my right the whole time yet I'd walked in a circle. It went against all logic and I'd wasted too much time. The sun was slipping behind the labyrinth of pines and the sky was dimming rapidly. I'd never make it out in darkness and I accepted I was sleeping rough for the night.

I sat down on the trunk of the withered tree and rubbed my face. It was getting cold now the sun was fading and I could see faint trails of mist every time I exhaled. This was not going to be a pleasant experience. It was made ten times worse when I heard the sporadic tapping sounds from the branches above me – the first and unmistakable signs of rain. Within minutes it was a good old-fashioned Scottish downpour. I pulled up my hood and pushed my hands into my pockets and cursed under my breath. I should have been searching out shelter but I was too irritated to concentrate on anything apart from my aching legs; I'd been marching through woodland all day and my thighs and calves were throbbing.

The scar on the back of my leg was acting up too. It had been seven weeks to the day since Marianne Dolloway fired a white-hot arrowhead into my leg and it still dogged me when I over-exercised. Seven weeks since that awful evening when my mentor and friend, Marcus Romand, was killed. I'd escaped the attack with my life,

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but the scars from the fighting would be with me for the rest of my days. I'd suffered injuries to my legs, ribs and face, however the emotional scars were the hardest to overcome. I hadn't managed one good night's sleep in those seven weeks.

I hung my head and rubbed my hands together vigorously as the rain got heavier. I should have moved to a more sheltered spot but I remained in the open as the rain lashed my shoulders. I didn't move because out of the corner of my eye I could see the trees were shifting around again. I *had* to get to the bottom of this little mystery before I settled down for the night.

Everything was static for a few moments and I remained seated, with my head bowed. I was ready to make my move and once I noticed the trees far off to my right moving again I sprang off the fallen tree and forced psychokinetic energy out of my arm. I whipped the energy through my hand and sent the wave shooting across the forest at the trees that seconds earlier had been floating from side to side.

The energy sliced through the woodland, downing branches and there was a loud blast as one tree took the brunt of the wave and was shredded into a million splinters. As the tree fell I glimpsed a figure moving away into the shadows. I summoned my power once more and fired a spike of energy out of my index finger. More branches crashed to the forest floor, but the figure was gone. Or was it?

Suddenly the trees to my left were shaken by a mysterious force and I threw myself to the ground to avoid it. The pine just next to me bent violently as a psychokinetic wave swept over me. I *had* been followed, and it seemed I'd ruffled my pursuer's feathers!

I scrambled along the damp woodland floor on all fours and

crept into some bushes. The rain was coming down heavier now and it was impossible to listen out for footsteps. I'd have to wait until my attacker revealed himself. I had gathered a lot of energy and was ready to strike at the first sign of movement.

A shadow moved across the pines and I looked left to see a man moving to a thick tree trunk and using it as cover. I sprang from my hiding place and released the energy from within me. The trees swayed before me and the man was knocked off his feet. I moved forward, with the intention of hitting him even harder as soon as he got back to his feet, then I was sent reeling backwards by another wave of energy.

I crashed into the undergrowth and my head bounced off the ground. My blood was boiling as I clambered to my feet and fired an immense wave of power across the forest. The mysterious attacker should have been broken in half by my attack, but he appeared again, as a shadow deep in the forest.

I felt a sudden surge of anxiety creeping into my chest and knew my precognitive gift was warning me of an imminent attack. I moved to the side and an invisible bolt that made a sharp buzzing sound whizzed past my ear. Something struck the tree right behind me and it was instantly set alight. The flames spread across the branches and a bright yellow light shone across my face. I was a sitting duck.

Yet another shot was fired at me and I only managed to avoid it thanks to my precog gift. It had been a close call – the loud buzzing had come so close that it left my right ear ringing. I tried my best to counter the attack by forcing out a broad wave of energy to hold off my foe.

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I then saw many shadows moving through the trees. There wasn't just one person following me, it seemed there were scores of them hunting me down! I knew I was outmatched and decided on making a hasty retreat. I fired out a wild blast of energy then turned and ran. To my surprise I saw a gap in the trees ahead of me leading to an open space. I had found the way out and just in time. I ignored my aching legs and sprinted for the opening. I ran as fast as I possibly could, hoping I could reach the open field that would surely deliver me to safety, or at least to a place where I could *see* my enemies.

Something hit my face with an almighty crack. I was knocked off my feet and came down on my back. I rubbed my face to find a trickle of blood from my nostrils, but thankfully my nose wasn't broken. My eyes had filled with water and it took a moment to clear them enough to see what had hit me.

This wasn't making any sense at all. I thought at first that something had hit me; as I gazed upward I saw that it was the other way around. There was no gap now, just another wall of pines and I had run straight into one at full tilt. I recognised the deep rolling laughter that was coming from behind. I didn't need to turn around to know it was Mike 'Hunter' Huntington. I pushed myself off the sodden ground and leaned against the tree, still rubbing my nose. Hunter was sitting on a tree stump nearby.

'You're a horrible person,' I shouted at him. 'What on earth did I do to deserve being sent out here to live with you? This is like a prison sentence! Actually, it's not – it's like being trapped in a lunatic asylum.'

'You're the only crazy one here, Bentley,' he chuckled. 'Look at you, running face-first into a tree. That looked mighty painful by

the way.’

‘Funny,’ I sneered. ‘Did you have this whole thing planned?’

‘It’s part of your new training regime.’

‘Training regime, my eye!’

I snapped my hand forward and fired a shot of energy at him. The blast shook some long grass at the foot of a tree. Hunter was not there. The tree stump was not there either. Had it been a figment of my imagination? Was I going nuts? I had been through hell and back in recent months and perhaps it was finally taking its toll on me psychologically.

No! This was another illusion. This was Hunter’s latest effort at unnerving me. To run away. To have me wandering aimlessly through that damned forest.

I wasn’t playing his game any longer. I sat down on the grass and folded my arms. No matter what he tried I was not going to be drawn into this ridiculous game again.

I’d spent seven weeks living in the isolated cottage with Hunter – I called him that because it seemed to irritate him – and he was supposed to be teaching me how to improve my gifts. But in all that time he hadn’t taught me a single thing, except how to lose my temper. The man had barely talked to me the first four weeks and he still hadn’t even told me what gifts he possessed. When he did start talking to me all he did was order me about and give me *exercises* to do each day. Within a week it became clear that the exercises were only chores and had nothing to do with my gifts. My time in Scotland was becoming a nightmare and all I wanted was to either get back to London to see my girlfriend, Cathy Atkinson, or to kick Hunter’s ass!



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Chores were difficult enough to deal with but now it seemed my tutor was moving to another level of antagonism by playing mind games. He'd told me that morning that I was about to get a chance to prove my power. We got in his 4x4 and he drove along the border of the forest for an hour before telling me to get out and find my way back to the cottage. And with that he drove off and left me standing in mud up to my ankles by the edge of the darkest forest I'd ever seen.

I shouldn't have been surprised at all; I'd already discovered that the gifted, mostly the older ones, were an eccentric lot. They never did what you expected them to. This also made them very dangerous when they weren't on your side, which I'd found out in such tragic circumstances at the Atkinson house seven weeks earlier.

'Do you always give up so quickly?' Hunter asked in his deep Scottish accent. He was standing only a few yards away and was leaning against a wide tree with his muscular arms folded across his chest.

'Do you always sneak up on people like this?'

'Never answer a question with a question,' he said as he left the tree and strolled towards me. He sat close by and grinned at me, almost as if he were gloating. 'I'm quite skilled at sneaking, aren't I?'

'You are,' I replied as I watched him carefully.

He looked older in the dim light than he had earlier that day. The lines on his face were deep and rigid as if he'd endured a hard life. My Dad would have described it as a face that was well lived in. I guessed he was about forty years old but he was quite athletic and could probably outrun me. He had a fast temper and knew little of fear. Hunter wasn't the type of man you'd want to get

into a fight with.

‘How did you do it?’ I asked.

‘You mean follow you without you seeing me?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought you might have guessed that by now.’

‘I’m too tired to guess.’

‘One of my gifts is light-tuning. It’s the pure form of the gift and I’ve mastered most of the techniques developed over the centuries – and I also have a few tricks of my own design.’

‘I saw Romand use that gift a few times. He was very skilled.’

‘He was. Alas, Romand did not have a pure gift.’

‘Someone with a pure gift can draw in energy from their surroundings, right?’

‘Exactly. It makes them extremely powerful compared to those with gifts that can only use the residual energy in their own bodies, which is limited. Unfortunately, Romand’s gifts were not pure ...’ A sudden sadness fell over Hunter’s expression and he became distant. It was hardly surprising, as Romand had been his friend for many years.

‘It’s a shame Romand wasn’t more powerful,’ I said.

‘Indeed,’ Hunter nodded. He looked at me and smiled. ‘Despite his shortcomings, Romand made the most of his abilities and was a fine warrior. But he could not do some of the things that *I* can do. Romand could only cloak himself using body refraction for a couple of minutes. I have remained cloaked for the entire eight hours that we’ve been in these woods.’

‘You’ve been on my heels that long?’

‘Yes, ever since I left you by the side of the road. I drove on for a

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couple of hundred yards then pulled over and followed you. I can remain cloaked for days on end, but that isn't the only way I tune light. This woodland for instance, it stretches for only a mile and a half between the road and my cottage, yet you have wandered around for eight hours without finding your way out.'

'That's impossible. If this forest was that small I would have definitely found the road or the fields leading to the cottage by now.'

'I'm not lying. I have shielded the way out from you with my gift.'

'I don't understand.'

'I have been bending light rays around you all day, which has prevented you from seeing the way out. This is one of my own techniques. I came up with the idea when I was a boy. My aunt brought me to a carnival – ever been to a carnival?'

'Yes.'

'Then you must have been in a house of mirrors?'

'Yeah, hate those bloody things. I banged my face off a mirror one time.'

'It seems nothing has changed since then,' he chuckled. 'This technique is very similar to the house of mirrors, which is a series of mirrors strategically placed at conflicting angles so that you can't clearly see the way out. This is the same. You were standing at the border of the forest many times today – you were looking into a mirror which was reflecting trees before your eyes. This has basically trapped you in this woodland for an entire day.'

'How the hell do you make these mirrors? It's like you create them out of thin air. That doesn't make any sense to me.'

'It doesn't make any sense to you because you don't think of light

in the way that I, and other light-tuners, do. I think of light as if it's a tangible substance. One that can be captured, gathered, and moulded in whatever manner I choose. Light is everywhere. It is constantly surrounding us. I have the ability to trap it then transform it into any shape. One way of doing this is the creation of a mirror – just a simple shape that reflects the light that hits it. Another way I use light-tuning is to shape light into an orb that sucks in light that surrounds it – it gets brighter and brighter until it's blinding to look at.'

'I saw Romand creating light orbs before.'

'Yes, he was cunning in his use of light. Psychokinetics, like you, must deal with kinetic energy in the same way that light-tuners deal with light rays.'

'I don't understand.'

'You must think of kinetic energy as a substance. One that is invisible yet surrounds us at all times. When you've trained your mind to think of it in that way you will become exceptionally powerful.'

'That's all very interesting but this morning you said we were going to be training. I fail to see how trapping me in a forest is improving my gifts.'

'I said *training*; I didn't say we'd be improving your gifts. I don't think I could teach you how to be a better psychokinetic or time scanner or precog. Perhaps you don't need to improve those skills. After all, you fought Marianne Dolloway and managed to survive.'

'She was about to kill me when she was shot by a police officer.'

'Nevertheless, you're here. By all accounts you held her at bay for quite some time.'

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‘That still doesn’t explain how this is training.’

‘Your gifts are strong and you use them well, but you must learn to sharpen your mind and not depend solely on your gifts to survive. If you’re to take Romand’s place you will need to act fast and decisively. You were able to contend with Marianne because she fought in a way that your mind could easily understand; she used psychokinesis against you. It’s a gift you are very familiar with. If you are to be a member of the Guild, though, you will certainly come up against people who have different gifts. Obscure gifts that are more subtle, harder to comprehend and in their own way more dangerous than psychokinesis. You will need to understand these gifts if you are to defend yourself against them. We will start with light-tuning. I will train you by helping you to understand a gift you know little of and how to counter it or, if possible, avoid it.’

‘How about we come back to this tomorrow?’ I asked. ‘I’ve had enough for one day and I’m wrecked.’

‘No. Will you say that to an assassin when he is trying to kill you? “Oh, sorry, Mr Assassin, I’m in need of my beauty sleep. Can you come by tomorrow and try to kill me in the morning?”’

Hunter laughed wildly at me.

‘I don’t find you in the slightest bit funny.’ I said

‘So what? I’m not here to entertain you. Besides, I like my own jokes.’

‘Nightmare,’ I sighed. ‘This is an absolute nightmare!’

‘It’s only a game, Bentley, so stop your whining.’

‘It’s a very annoying game, *Hunter*.’

‘Don’t call me that.’

‘Why? Does it bother you, *Hunter*?’

‘You’re only making things harder on yourself.’

‘It doesn’t get any worse than this!’

I couldn’t help thinking of my dad in that moment. I remembered how, only months before, I was so desperate to leave him and the gloomy housing estate we lived in. How foolish I had been. I’d have given anything in that moment to be able to return to Ireland, and to my family home. I would have loved to be sitting watching a football match on the TV with him, and not trapped in a freezing forest.

‘Of course it can get worse,’ Hunter said, snatching me from my thoughts. ‘Imagine I disappeared and left you out here to find your own way home ...’

‘Don’t you dare! Listen, I’ve failed this test. I admit it. You’ve won this round. Just don’t leave me here. It’s impossible to find a way out in the dark.’

‘Darkness doesn’t make this test any harder.’

‘Oh, really?’

‘Remember to use your mind. This is a simple puzzle and like all puzzles there is always a solution.’ He swiped his hand in front of his chest and he became cloaked once more. ‘I’ll see you when you get back to the cottage.’

‘Hey, you’re not gonna leave me out here, are you? Hunter ...?’

The forest had fallen silent. I couldn’t tell if he was still standing in the same spot or if he really had gone off back to the cottage. It didn’t matter, he wasn’t going to show me the way home either way. This was a problem I would have to solve for myself.

I clambered off the damp ground and looked at the surrounding trees. The forest was filled with darkness, and I had no idea of

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what direction to take, but I paced forward just to get myself motivated. Two hours later I was sitting on the ground again. I remained trapped.

Hunter had said it was a simple puzzle and all puzzles have a solution. But how could I find my way out? I realised that I could not trust my eyes and that what I was seeing was what was tricking me over and over again. I considered closing my eyes to remove the chance of being fooled by trickery, but the woodland floor was far too unpredictable for that; I'd end up falling down a ravine and breaking my legs or something equally as painful. There *had* to be a way!

'I am being fooled by what I see ...' I said to myself. 'The trees are not real, but I cannot distinguish which are the real trees from the reflections that he is creating ... I need find and follow something that he cannot distort.'

There was no moon in the black sky above the forest and the mountains nearby were out of sight. There was no landmark to follow, and it probably wouldn't work anyway. After all, Hunter had reflected the sun when I tried using that as a guide hours earlier. It was only now, after his explanation, that I realised he'd used his weird gift to prevent me from seeing the real sun, and to trick me into using a reflection of it as a guide.

I was growing extremely frustrated by the whole situation and the rain was coming down even heavier than before. I bowed my head to hide my face from the torrent and stared at the ground, hoping that a solution would present itself.

'Damn it!' I shouted out. 'How did I not think of this earlier?'

I'd been pacing that opening for quite a while and my footprints

were clearly visible on the damp earth. All I had to do was find Hunter's foot prints and follow them home.

I went to the place where I'd ran into the tree and just a few yards away were a number of larger and deeper prints, obviously made by Hunter's heavy boots. The tracks went in circles at first, but soon they led me out of the trees to the grassland that stretched out to the foothills of the mountains, where the cottage was. I trudged through the waterlogged fields and I finally made it to the cottage around midnight.

I had to concentrate hard to stop my body shivering when I got inside. I caught my reflection in the mirror in the hallway and I looked like a half-drowned rat. I didn't want to give Hunter the pleasure of seeing me shaking from the cold so I straightened up and put a brave face on.

I kicked off my runners in the hall then paced through the sitting room to see him sitting, in the only chair there was, by the fire with a cigar in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other. The cloud of smoke that slowly swirling around him didn't hide his grin. I felt my temper boiling over and I wasn't going to let him get away with leaving me out in the rain for the night.

'What's your problem with me?' I snapped. 'You've treated me like a leper since the day we came here.'

'I don't know what you're talking about, Bentley.'

'I hope you choke on that whiskey!'

'You're making a mess,' he said, pointing his cigar at the expanding pool of water at my feet. 'And I'm sure you don't want to be mopping the floors at this late hour.'

'Mop them yourself. I'm outta here first thing in the morning.'



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‘Grow up, Bentley.’

‘Grow up? You’re the one who’s acting like a child with all these games and stupid remarks. I’m telling you now, I’ve had enough of this and I’m leaving tomorrow. You can stick your Guild and your smart remarks where the sun don’t shine.’

‘Do you always run away when times get tough?’

‘I certainly do not but I won’t remain here unless I’m shown some respect!’

‘Respect is earned not demanded.’

‘Respect is a courtesy that should always be given.’

‘I think you should take your own advice and lower your voice while you’re in my home.’

‘I’d show you some respect if you stuck to your word.’

‘I have broken my word?’

‘Yeah, you have. You told me I was here to learn and all I get is abuse and stupid chores to annoy me. When does the *real* training start?’

‘All in good time, Bentley.’

‘Stop saying that. You always bloody say that.’

He turned his chair to the fire and took a sip from his glass. There were no more words between us that night.