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Wicked Game

Written by Matt Johnson

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Wicked Game

Matt Johnson



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Dedicated to the memory of Police Inspector Stephen Dodd,
Sergeant Noel Lane, PC Jane Arbuthnot and Police Dog
Queenie, and to my friend PC Yvonne Fletcher.

Colleagues never to be forgotten.

‘To keep your secret is wisdom;
but to expect others to keep it is folly.’
Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)

Prologue

August 2001. Kalikata, India

Jed Garrett and Mac Blackwood stepped out of the artificially cool aircraft cabin into a wall of heat.

There was no shelter from the Indian sun and no breeze to provide even the smallest relief. Their faces flushed and moist, both men realised that their decision to wear jackets and ties had been a mistake. The monsoon season was nearing an end but Garrett knew they would have to endure this discomfort for another month at least.

‘Fucking hell, Jed, what is that smell?’ asked Blackwood, as they joined the other passengers on the short, stifling walk across the tarmac to the waiting airport bus.

Garrett had smelled Kalikata before. Sweat, exhaust fumes and local spices combined to produce a pungent, musty aroma that some loved but many found hard to bear.

‘That’s the smell of India, Mac. Get used to it, we’re gonna be here a while.’

As they boarded the bus, Garrett could see his friend becoming impatient. He was anxious to get to their hotel and get their business underway. Garrett smiled. Mac was going to have to adjust to the slower pace of life here. The perpetual heat and humidity would soon put paid to any ideas of doing things quickly. Mac Blackwood was used to the chilly, windswept streets of Glasgow, whereas Garrett was from Florida and had been to India many times before.

In the welcome air-conditioned atmosphere of the arrivals hall, Mac relaxed again.

‘No wonder they call this the black hole of Calcutta,’ he said pointing through the window to the crowds who stood outside waiting to beg from, or sell to, the arriving travellers. There were hundreds of them. Men, women and children of all ages. Kids with filthy hands, blackened nails and puppy-dog eyes chased around, pleading for small change from the tourists.

‘I fuckin’ hate this place already.’ Blackwood turned away from the window. ‘Ach, for Christ sake. Look at the state of that kit.’ He pointed to the uniforms of the soldiers who milled around the airport concourse, trying to look efficient.

Garrett was starting to get tired of his companion’s constant moaning. He stayed silent until their bags appeared on the carousel.

Outside, he hailed a taxi. But as the driver took their bags, children surrounded them, their tiny hands open and extended. ‘Gimme dollar, gimme dollar.’

One youngster held up a soiled copy of *Penthouse*. ‘You buy, you buy,’ he called.

As Mac Blackwood reached for his pocket, Garrett grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the car. He knew giving just one child some cash would mean another fifty blocking their way.

‘Oberoi Hotel,’ he told the driver.

Blackwood had to prise tiny fingers from the door handle before he could join Garrett in the back. They accelerated slowly away, stained and grimy hands smacking incessantly on the windows as the taxi driver sought out a route through the throng.

With the noise and bustle of the airport fading away behind them, Garrett sighed and shook his head at Blackwood. ‘Over three million kids die ever year in this country from diseases caused by poverty,’ he said. ‘They’ll do whatever they can to survive. Help one, and they’ll all want a piece of you.’

Blackwood simply nodded. Not helping a needy kid didn’t sit comfortably with him.

They had been travelling for only a minute or two when the taxi started to slow.

‘What now?’ Blackwood leaned forward. The taxi driver was stopping to let a cow cross the road.

‘Cows are sacred here, Mac,’ said Garrett, putting a hand on his friend’s shoulder. ‘Just be patient.’

At that moment, the front passenger door swung open and a filthy teenager in a simple shirt and trousers jumped in. The first thing Blackwood noticed was the smell. Garrett saw the holdall the kid carried.

‘American?’ The boy smiled as he turned to ask them the question.

‘Canadian,’ Garrett lied. Canadians were popular everywhere.

‘Have a nice day.’

The last thing Jed Garrett saw were the two wires that stuck out from the side of the bag the boy was carrying and the swift movement as he reached down to press them together.

The explosion tore the car apart.

Debris rained down, clattering over the road and sending onlookers scurrying for shelter.

Even before the smoke had cleared, barefooted men had begun to claw over the Westerners’ luggage. Some gawped at the scorched and mutilated figures that hung from the wrecked car.

Nobody tried to help them.

Chapter 1

As Costello watched the scene, he smiled. It was a twisted, sadistic expression. The smile of a killer experiencing a cruel sense of satisfaction at a job well done.

The window of the factory office allowed him a clear view of the local police as they started to close the road and move the looters away from the smoking wreck of the taxi. Nobody made any effort to give first aid to the occupants. There was no point: the explosive had done its job.

The door on the far side of the office opened. It was Malik, the local contact.

‘The airport will be closed for a short while, Declan. Do you want me to arrange some lunch for you?’

As Costello turned away from the window, his smile became a scowl. ‘How old was the boy you used?’

Malik shrugged. ‘He was nothing, do not trouble yourself. Just faqir, a street beggar. We gave his family many rupees. They will not miss having his troublesome mouth to feed.’

‘Really? I don’t get it.’

‘Our lives are not ours to decide, Declan. That is for God. We are but pawns.’

‘You speak for yourself, Malik. Where I come from we value our lives.’

‘And where is that, Declan? You have a very strange accent if you don’t mind me saying. Are you from Manchester?’

Costello smiled. He sounded nothing like a Mancunian. ‘Yes,’ he lied. ‘Manchester.’

‘Here, we are loving your football. Manchester United is very strong in India.’

‘I bet they are. Now, about that food. My flight takes off in three hours. That should give me plenty of time to check-in and then get a bite afterwards. Do you know a way around that mess outside?’

‘Not to worry, Declan. I will get you a tuk-tuk. He will take you back road to departure lounge so you have time to eat before flight.’

Costello turned back to the window. The first ambulance had arrived. Everywhere he looked scooters and small motorbikes darted and weaved through the congested traffic. It was a warm day, sticky and humid. The thought of a trip in one of the three-wheeler motorised rickshaws didn’t fill him with enthusiasm.

‘Can you get me a taxi?’ he asked. ‘And one with air-con that actually works.’

‘Mr Yildirim said I should give you whatever you need, Declan. I will make the arrangement.’ Malik pressed his hands flat together in a prayer position and raising them in front of his face, bowed gently, then turned back through the door.

Costello smiled. Yildirim would be pleased. His new employer was a fixer, an arranger. He had organised the job and identified the target. Costello did the work on the ground. Their clients were the kind of people who wanted things done quickly and effectively and paid well for the service. Very well, Costello reflected. But then the skills and expertise they were buying weren’t the kind to be found just anywhere. They were paying to have people killed, and that kind of service came at a high price.

His first meeting with Yildirim had been set up just a few weeks ago by an IRA intermediary. It had started badly. Costello had made the mistake of saying he thought he recognised the Arab. That had made Yildirim uncomfortable and for a minute or two it looked like the job was lost. Fortunately, when Costello speculated that they might have met at a training camp in Pakistan, the Arab had relaxed. He had indeed been there, to instruct young volunteers on techniques for making road-side bombs. They agreed it was quite possible that he had been Costello’s instructor.

Costello wasn't sure, though. He certainly didn't remember the name 'Yildrim'. In the end, he had deemed it wise not to press the point. People like Yildrim used many false names. The less Costello knew about his new contact, the safer he would be.

The rest of their conversation ran like a job interview. The work that Yildrim was offering was lucrative and had to be completed soon. He gave no explanation for the urgency but asked Costello a lot of technical questions. For his part, Costello explained his experience, his methods and provided the name of a mutual acquaintance who could vouch for his competence. Their shared experience at the Pakistan training camp seemed to swing it. He was offered the job.

Blackwood was the first target. Garrett had simply made a bad choice of travelling companion. The two men were ex-military instructors. A local militia group had hired them to teach volunteers how to plant mines, lay booby traps and use plastic explosive. Malik had discovered the pair's travel arrangements and had been instrumental in arranging the interception.

So now, phase one was complete. Yildrim had made it easy – Malik had done all the work, and would probably have been capable of dealing with Blackwood himself, but the Arab had insisted Costello travel to India to supervise the attack.

Yildrim had warned him that the remaining targets would be a lot harder.

As he continued to watch through the factory window, Costello could see that the airport approach road was now grid-locked. The air was filled with the constant sounding of car and motorcycle horns. Street vendors and beggars were taking advantage of the opportunity, moving from car to car, banging on windows to try and persuade frustrated motorists to part with a few rupees. Any car with a rear-seat passenger was singled out for particular attention.

Costello turned to his bag, which sat on a nearby chair. He unzipped it. The flight back to the UK would be a long one. A change and stop-over in Dubai meant the best part of fourteen hours in the air. He was travelling light, just a change of clothing and some cash.

He reached inside and checked for his passport and plane ticket. They were there.

If everything in the UK had gone to plan, all the necessary weapons and explosive should now be stored and ready for use.

Inside a week, he and his friends would be on their way home with the job complete.

Chapter 2

August 2001.

Police firing range, Old Street Police Station, London.

I rolled heavily over on my left side and then onto my stomach. The wooden floor rubbed my elbows. As I heard the noise from the motorised turning target, I raised the Beretta.

The smoke in the 'ambush simulation' range obscured my vision and choked my lungs. Pre-recorded gun-fire and screams conspired to confuse my senses, but I'd done this too many times before. The target was a 'friendly' – a woman holding a kid. Catching my breath for a moment, I held fire. A split second later there was a noise to my left. I rolled again.

Christ, I was getting too old for this. As I got back on to my knees, I caught a glimpse of an AK47-toting terrorist about twenty feet away, half obscured by a wall. I aimed quickly, fired three rounds and rolled again to take cover behind a mock wall.

The background noise stopped and extractor fans started up. As I stood, the lights came on and the smoke began to clear. My knees and shoulders ached. I arched my back to ease the discomfort.

Two policemen, wearing blue working uniform and berets, joined me as I unclipped the magazine from the Beretta and cleared the chamber. I squeezed the unused round into the magazine. With the pistol held safely in my shoulder holster I started to brush the dust from my clothes.

'Very good, Finlay.' Chief Inspector Gooding, immaculate in pressed blue shirt and trousers, shiny brogues and departmental tie, approached me. He made a note on a clipboard before folding it under his arm.

‘Thanks, I do my best.’ I smiled to avoid showing the pain my shoulders were causing me.

‘You scored ninety per cent, as usual. I will never understand why you insist on losing marks by firing three rounds at each target rather than two.’

‘Old habit, I guess.’ I was still breathing heavily, the smoke taking a while to clear from my lungs.

‘Well, you’ve passed your re-test, although I’m told that it’s academic: you’re leaving Royalty Protection and going back to division soon, aren’t you?’

The Chief Inspector escorted me to the armourer where I was required to store my pistol while I took a shower. He shook my hand firmly and wished me luck for the future. I wasn’t surprised to find out that he knew about my application. Rumours spread quickly in our job. I’d been a policeman for more than sixteen years, the last three in Royalty Protection. If there was one thing I had learned in that time, it was that it was impossible to keep anything secret for long.

I headed for the changing rooms. After a quick shower, I recovered my beloved Beretta, holstered it and buttoned my blazer.

I had good cause to be fond of that pistol. A standard military M9, it used 9mm ammunition, had a fifteen-round magazine and was fitted with military dot-and-post sights. The magazine capacity was the reason I preferred triple taps, three rounds at each target. Three into fifteen went easily. All I had to do was count five and I knew it was time to re-load. Plus the M9 had a smooth recoil and was easy to take apart, be it in the dark or in the field.

As I headed out into the street, the weather was glorious, warm with a slight breeze. I paused for a moment, enjoying the feel of the sun on my face. It reminded me a lot of the day when a similar Beretta had been the friend that had saved my hide.

Chapter 3

5th January 1980. Northern Ireland.

Armoury of a combined RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) and Army base.

‘Travelling alone boss?’ The Quartermaster Sergeant seemed concerned that I had no escort.

‘Yeah, a meeting with the RUC. They want to chat about a new cell operating in the area and about the contact outside Castlederg last week. I should be back before eleven hundred hours.’

I understood his concern, it was standard procedure to travel in pairs. I also knew that two fit-looking men in a car would be far more likely to be identified as soldiers than a scruffy-looking individual on his own.

That day, as I booked out my personal weapon, I had no idea how attached to it I was going to become. Even in those days, I preferred the Beretta over the standard issue Browning and, luckily for me, I was allowed the choice. At the time though, it was just a tool of the job. Nothing to be fond of.

In January 1980, I was twenty-seven years old. I’d been in the army for eight years, having signed on for a three-year, short-service commission after flunking my ‘A’ levels. My grammar school headmaster had been so surprised when he’d heard the news that he had actually rung my parents to see if it were true. ‘Robert Finlay an army officer? Never!’ I could just imagine his words. But he had only known me as a kid who seemed to have more time for girls than his studies. I could remember his words clearly from when he lectured me the second time I was given the cane. ‘Study now, fornicate later, Finlay,’ he said. I should have listened but, hell, I was sixteen, no-one could teach me anything.

I enjoyed the army so much that instead of leaving after three years, I signed on for a regular commission. The last three of my eight years' service had been spent as a troop commander in various parts of the world with the 22nd SAS Regiment.

I hadn't always wanted to try SAS selection. It was only when I met some of their lads on a training exercise in Germany that the idea entered my head. Generally speaking, artillery officers don't apply for Special Forces. My application surprised even my closest friends in the mess at Woolwich.

Although I made it through the selection process at the first attempt, I was a long way from being the best applicant the SAS ever had. And this was amply demonstrated by the hill-phase endurance test. It's ironically called the Fan Dance. Forty-five miles on foot in twenty hours, carrying so much kit that most men needed help simply to stand up.

After crossing the finish line with just a few minutes to spare, I developed both a deep respect and hatred of the Brecon Beacons, the range of mountains where the test took place. It's a beautiful place, incredible scenery and wonderful landscape, but I always seemed to see it through a fog of pain.

To this day, I don't really remember the last five miles. I just kept moving forward, my brain in a form of numbed haze. I passed four casualties in the final stages, including another of the three officer candidates, a Captain from the Royal Irish Rangers.

Perhaps I was stupid, but I lost time as I stopped to speak to all of them to see if they needed help. One of the lads from the Engineers had collapsed face-down near a stream. Poor bastard was being weighed down by his bergen and would probably have drowned if I hadn't come around the corner. I wasted several minutes dragging him into the shelter of a rocky outcrop before trudging on.

A few yards after crossing the line, my legs gave up the fight and I ended up on my back, bergen beneath me, flailing about like a stranded beetle. Strong hands helped me to my feet and a mug of tea was shoved into my hand. The corporal who handed it to me laughed at my reaction to the super-sweet liquid.

'Get it down you, butt,' he barked.

'You're Welsh?' I said as I took a second gulp.

'From the valleys.'

'My mother's from Swansea.'

'Like I give a shit. Now get moving, on the lorry and double quick,'
came the reply.

I'd been put in my place. Officer or not.

Over the coming year I spent all my time on the shooting range, in the jungle, on escape and evasion exercises or acquiring the skills needed on the counter-terrorist team.

I made the cut, and in late 1978 was assigned to B squadron.

Chapter 4

5th January 1980. Northern Ireland

It was just before seven a.m. when I stopped at the perimeter checkpoint before pulling out into the main street. The police guard looked closely at my pass and then at me. I guessed he was comparing the pristine facial features on the photograph to the curly hair and suntan I was then sporting. Like I always did at the gate, I winked.

With only the vaguest hint of a smile, the guard nodded me through. I hid the pass behind the dash of the Rover. The meeting with the RUC bosses was at nine. I'd figured the drive should take me about an hour. That would leave me plenty of time to sample the police canteen's excellent breakfast.

That day I was in plain clothes; it helped to avoid being noticed. The terrorists had spotters everywhere. Dickers, we called them. Often they were impossible to recognise. One might look like a schoolgirl, another like a postman.

The previous day, an Air Corps Sergeant had offered me an early ride to the meeting in a helicopter, but hell, I enjoyed driving and it had promised to be a beautiful day. With hindsight, I should have taken that heli.

As I neared the edge of the town I was waved straight through the vehicle checkpoint at the entrance to the main 'A' road. I eased down the accelerator, the smooth, powerful V8 engine bringing the Rover effortlessly up to seventy. The Rover was bog standard, apart from the Kevlar fitted to the rear of the seats and inside the doors. Kevlar was light, bullet-proof and didn't affect the car's performance. It wouldn't stop armour-piercing rounds but it certainly gave me some reassurance.

As a member of mobility troop, I'd had some advanced driver training. I'd never been that good a driver, though, I didn't have the concentration. I could do some of the tricks, handbrake turns, that sort of stuff, but wasn't an expert like some of the guys. Given the choice, in a scrape I'd leave the driving to someone else. I was better at talking.

We changed the external appearance of the Rover as often as possible. Number plates and tax disc came first, vinyl roof at other times. Paint was more difficult, but at least once a month someone found himself looking for the wrong-coloured car when he needed it in a hurry.

I slowed down to sixty as the road narrowed to a single lane.

The weather forecast was right. It looked like being a nice day in the province, blue skies, a gentle breeze and with the odd cloud. Like I said, my favourite kind of day.

Approaching Drumquin, I spotted a blue Mk2 Cortina waiting at a side junction. To this day, I don't know if it was curiosity or a sense of self-preservation that made me take a second look at the occupants. There were three. All men, all late teens or early twenties, all in casual clothes. They didn't look directly at me, but the one in the back caught my eye. He looked hard at the Rover and then started writing something down.

I eased off the gas and watched them carefully in the rear-view mirror. The Cortina pulled out and drove off in the opposite direction.

I had just started to relax when I saw the rear-seat passenger turn his head around. He was watching me. A dicker.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.



It was just before eight when I arrived at Castlederg. For the whole journey I'd checked my mirrors for any sign that I was being followed. There was none.

Castlederg Police Station was protected by a checkpoint and mechanical gates. Spiked metal ramps prevented car bombers getting

too close, high walls, barbed wire and weld mesh prevented any direct assault and reduced the risk of mortar attacks.

The constable on guard duty was polite but firm and took the precaution of telephoning to confirm my appointment and identity before allowing me entry. I always wore a hat when leaving and entering police and army premises, you never knew who was watching.

Identification formalities over, I eased the Rover through the gates and parked outside the canteen. Painted in large white letters on the wall behind the only available bay were the words 'Chief Supt'. I pulled into it and turned off the engine. As I tucked the Beretta beneath the driver's seat, I reached into my jacket pocket, paused for a moment and then cursed. I'd forgotten to bring a spare magazine. It was a careless mistake and, no doubt, one that the quartermaster would rib me about on my return.

Eight o'clock is always a good time to get breakfast in a police canteen. The frying pans are hot and un-christened as the early shift doesn't start arriving until nine. You always get a full selection from the menu and a friendly reception from the canteen cooks, who have time to rustle up 'something special'. I ordered my usual – poached eggs, fried bread, bacon, mushrooms and tomatoes. Amongst my many weaknesses, a cooked breakfast is a big one. I washed it down with a good strong brew, took a trip to the lav, had a browse through the *Belfast Telegraph*, and then had a quick read through my report on the previous week's contact.

It was exactly nine o'clock when I walked into the assistant chief constable's reception office.

'Prompt, as usual, Captain.' The secretary smiled warmly from behind her typewriter. 'Go straight in, they're just having coffee.'