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Opening extract from

The Deadly Game
The Malichea Quest

Written by

Jim Eldridge

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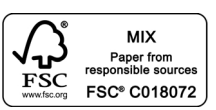
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The screams came from the man tied to the chair in the middle of the room. He'd been screaming for hours, in between sobbing and pleading for the torture to stop. There were two other men in the room. One was tall and muscular, with the broken nose of a boxer. The other, small and wiry, was holding something metal in his hand that glistened with blood. Both men looked on impassively, although the shorter man's face seemed to show a hint of a smile. The man in the chair suddenly slumped forward, his blood-soaked body straining against the ropes that held him. Boxer frowned and ran his fingers down the side of the tortured man's neck, feeling for a pulse. Then he switched to the wrist, the tips of his fingers searching for a sign of life beneath the flayed skin of the man's arm.

He looked up and shook his head. 'He's dead,' he said.

The short man scowled. Just then his mobile phone rang. He pressed the phone to his ear, and then said abruptly: ‘No, he ain’t talked.’ He cast a look of annoyance at the body strapped in the chair and added: ‘And he ain’t likely to any more.’

He listened some more, then hung up. He turned to Boxer. ‘He says forget about him. He’s got another job for us.’

Boxer gestured towards the lifeless body. ‘What about him?’ he asked.

The short man gave an evil grin.

‘One for the pigs,’ he said.

Chapter 1

Jake Wells sat in front of his computer and smiled into his webcam, beaming at the face looking back at him from his screen. Lauren Graham. Fugitive, exile, killer; his girlfriend.

He looked at the clock. 11 p.m. here in the UK. 11 a.m. in Wellington, New Zealand. In the old days people had to content themselves with intercontinental phone calls and echoing time delays. But now, with Skype, they could see one another, even though they were on opposite sides of the globe.

It was three months ago that Lauren had boarded a plane for New Zealand to start a new life with a new identity. Samantha Adams. That was what it said on her passport, her birth certificate and all the other documents MI5 had provided for her. But to Jake, she would always be Lauren.

'I went on a trip to South Island the other week,' she said. 'We went to the Franz Josef Glacier. It's amazing.

It runs down to rainforest — two totally contrasting climates right next to each other . . .'

'We?' Jake said, his heart sinking. Had she met someone else?

Lauren laughed.

'Me and a girl from work,' she reassured him, sensing his discomfort. 'She's really nice. Her name's Anna. She works with me at the research centre.'

The Antarctic Survey Research Centre, where Lauren — or rather, Sam Adams — had found a job studying environmental information from the base stations all over Antarctica.

Jake smiled.

'I've been doing some exploring, too,' he told her. 'Last week I went for a stroll at a place called Firle Beacon . . .'

There was a pinging sound from the screen, and suddenly the image of Lauren vanished. In its place a message appeared: *An error has occurred. This programme will close*. And then, as Jake watched, one by one the logos on the screen disappeared and finally the screen went blank. His computer had shut down.

He pressed the keys to reboot it. While it was starting up, he picked up his landline phone and dialled Lauren's mobile number. He got an automated message telling him: 'The mobile you are trying to call is unavailable. Please try later.'

He cursed. Lauren's mobile wasn't switched off. They'd been cut off deliberately. It had happened a lot when she had first been in New Zealand, but they'd learned that it was always when they started talking about Malichea and the hidden books. So they'd been more careful, and for quite a while they'd only discussed day-to-day things, where they'd been, what movies they'd seen.

Sometimes he'd be silly and romantic, holding up a single red rose towards the camera and then feeling happiness pour through him as she blew him a kiss and told him how much she wished they could be together again.

'We will be,' he promised her.

He didn't know how, there were so many obstacles to overcome, but he knew they were destined to be together. He needed her properly in his life — not just a moving image of her on a computer screen.

He tried phoning her again, but the connection was still broken.

He sighed and sent her an email, and hoped they'd at least allow this through to her . . .

Chapter 2

Next morning, Jake arrived at the Department of Science building in London's Whitehall district; the heart of government. As a working-class young man of nineteen, Jake was an anomaly in this place. Everyone else here, especially in the Press Office where he worked, seemed to have come through the same route: public school, then university, mostly Oxford or Cambridge. Jake was different. Eighteen months before a national newspaper had pointed out how elitist this was, and the department had acted to prove them wrong: a competition had been launched to offer an opportunity for a trainee press officer from what was termed 'the disadvantaged'. Jake had entered. He fitted the bill perfectly: abandoned at birth, brought up in a children's home and then a string of foster homes, and left school at sixteen because he couldn't afford to go on to

further education. After he left school he worked in a series of dead-end jobs. But he always had one burning ambition: to be a journalist. He wanted to write witty and biting articles about the issues of the day, expose corrupt politicians. But getting into journalism wasn't that easy; he discovered that he needed a degree.

It was while he had been wondering how to get over this problem that he'd read about the Department of Science competition, entered it, and won his place. That had been a year ago. At that time everything had seemed exciting, a life and a career full of possibilities.

And then the hidden books of Malichea had come into his life, and everything had been turned upside down.

He knew what lay ahead for him this morning: there'd be a message for him to go and see the head of the department, Gareth Findlay-Weston, and then a dressing down from Gareth for breaking the rules. But he *hadn't* broken any rules. All he'd done was talked to his girlfriend and told her what he'd been doing. All right, privately he admitted to himself, there had been more to it than that. Each time he and Lauren talked, they tried to find a coded way of talking about the Order of Malichea and the hidden books, without the people who were listening in and

watching them, picking up on it. So far they hadn't succeeded. But Jake had thought this time he'd found a way: an uncontroversial chat about a walk he'd been on in the Sussex countryside. He'd hoped that Lauren might read between the lines; that he'd been through her list of possible hiding places for the hidden library, and was checking one of them out: a long ancient barrow at West Firle. This first visit he'd made had been to recce the site for a possible dig later, perhaps under cover of darkness, but the size of the site had given him doubts. He needed to narrow down his area of search in some way. Right now, he wasn't sure how, but the place was a definite possible.

Jake walked into the large open-plan office where the department press office was based. It was just after nine o'clock, and already everyone seemed to be at their phones or their computer terminals, chasing down stories or responding to press requests. As Jake got to his desk, his fellow press officer, Paul Evans, hung up from a phone call and greeted Jake with a cheery grin.

'What time do you call this?' he demanded.

Jake looked at his watch.

'I call it five past nine,' he said. 'Why?'

'You should have been here at nine,' said Paul.

'My bus got stuck in traffic,' said Jake.

‘You should use a bike, like I do,’ said Paul. ‘It’s better for the environment, and gets through traffic quicker than anything else.’

‘Yeah, and you get lungfuls of diesel fumes and you’re liable to get knocked off it by some crazy driver,’ pointed out Jake.

Paul shook his head.

‘Not if you’re careful,’ he said. ‘Also, I wear a filter mask to protect against fumes. Trust me, Jake, you’d be a lot healthier if you biked it to work.’

Jake looked at him suspiciously.

‘Are you involved in some sort of government press initiative to get everyone in London cycling?’ he asked.

Paul looked slightly uncomfortable.

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘Although it’s just in the planning stage at the moment. Anyway, Gareth was looking for you.’

Jake’s heart sank. As he’d feared.

‘When?’ he asked.

‘He was waiting by your desk when I came in dead at nine,’ said Paul. ‘That’s why I said you should have been here on time. It doesn’t do to upset the big boss.’

‘What did he want?’ asked Jake.

‘He wanted to know if you were in. I covered for you, told him you were most likely in the toilet, but I’m not sure if he believed me.’

Unlikely, thought Jake. Gareth never believed anyone about anything. That was why he was so good

at the job he did. Officially, Gareth was head of the press office at the Department of Science. Behind the scenes, he was a very senior MI5 spook, with the power of life and death over people. People like Lauren and Jake. But, as far as Jake was aware, he was the only one in his department who knew about Gareth's real role. And he knew his life, and Lauren's, were at stake if he breathed a word to anyone about it.

'I'd better pop up and see him,' said Jake.

Just then, Paul's phone rang, and he was soon engaged in a conversation that appeared to be about how exercising the legs increased the supply of oxygen to the lungs and brain. Yes, Paul was definitely on a 'cycling is good for you' story.

With a sense of foreboding, Jake left the large office and began to mount the wide staircase to the third floor, and Gareth's sanctuary. As always, he noticed the change to the decor as he went higher. From the ground floor to the second, everything was hi-tech, thrusting modern. Then, as you left what could loosely be called the 'public' areas and entered the upper echelons, where the real power lay, the world changed, slipping back in time a hundred years or more. The banisters changed from ordinary metal to brass. The light fittings, which were plain white plastic up to the second floor, became shining gun-metal.

As Jake walked along the narrow corridor, panelled with dark oak, the wood adorned with old paintings showing an England long past, hunting scenes, countryside celebrations, his sense of dread was replaced with one of anger. Yes, he knew that Gareth was going to look at him and sigh with that tone of unhappy resignation Gareth did so well, and then proceed to tear him to shreds with his caustic, sarcastic language, which was not a happy experience. But what right did Gareth have? thought Jake indignantly. Jake hadn't been doing anything wrong. Well, not on the face of it. Even if Gareth suspected that Jake was trying to pass on some information to Lauren about the books, there was no proof. Not this time, anyway. And Gareth had had a nerve to shut down the Skype connection between him and Lauren. Well, Jake would have something to say about that!

Jake arrived at the door to Gareth's office, knocked, and went in to be met by Gareth's assistant, Janet.

'He's ready for you,' said Janet, and she ushered Jake smartly over to an inner office. Gareth was sitting behind his huge desk, empty except for a few papers, on which he was scribbling some annotations. He looked up as Jake arrived, and the inner door closed behind Janet.

Gareth gave an unhappy sigh.

‘What are we going to do with you, Jake?’ he asked in a tone that showed his deep disappointment.

Jake said nothing, just waited for the dressing-down he knew was coming, and got ready to bark back.

‘I thought we had an agreement,’ continued Gareth. ‘That you and Ms Graham would forget about the secret library of Malichea.’

‘No,’ Jake corrected him. ‘Our agreement was that we wouldn’t *search* for any more of the books.’

Gareth regarded Jake with his standard bland expression, but Jake could see the steel in his eyes, and now that same icy hardness entered Gareth’s voice as he said flatly: ‘Don’t mess with me, Jake. We could have put your girlfriend on trial for murder, but we didn’t, because we wanted to give both of you a chance at a fresh start.’

‘Her in New Zealand and me over here, and not allowed to meet, is hardly how I would describe a fresh start.’

‘Separately, Jake. It has to be separately,’ said Gareth. ‘We both know why.’

‘Yes, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me, anyway.’

‘To remind you.’ Now it was Gareth’s turn to do the correcting. ‘Apart, on opposite sides of the planet, you’re not a danger. When you get together, insane ideas seem to take on some kind of reality for you both.’

‘All we wanted to do was put the library into the public domain. Let the people know about the texts. What they contain. How they can help people.’

Gareth shook his head, wearing his more-in-sadness-than-in-anger expression again.

‘They won’t help people, Jake. Not the kind of people you’re talking about. The only people who will benefit are gangsters, warmongers, terrorists, patents lawyers.’ He shook his head sorrowfully again. ‘I thought you’d accepted that. But obviously, you haven’t.’

‘You shut down our Skype call yesterday,’ said Jake, doing his best to control his anger.

Gareth shook his head.

‘An automatic safeguard in the system shut it down,’ he said. ‘Obviously, we then got an alert to tell us what had happened, and a playback of your conversation.’

‘We didn’t mention the word Malichea,’ said Jake. ‘Or anything about the books.’

Gareth looked down at a print-out on his desk. Looking at it upside down, Jake saw that it appeared to be a script. He assumed it was the transcript of his and Lauren’s Skype call.

‘You said: “I went for a stroll at a place called Firle Beacon”,’ read Gareth.

‘Well, I did,’ said Jake, annoyed. ‘So what? That’s what you do when you talk to friends, you tell them what you’ve been up to. Things you’ve done. Interesting

places you've been. I thought it might cheer Lauren up, remind her of England.'

Gareth didn't bother to look up. He took a sheet of paper from a small pile at one side of his desk, and read aloud: 'Firle Beacon, West Firle, East Sussex. Said to be the burial place of a giant.' He looked up at Jake. 'In other words, one of the list of places that is said to be sacred, cursed or haunted. According to your very own Ms Graham, the very place that one of the Malichea texts might have been hidden.'

'I wasn't looking for any of the books,' defended Jake. He was lying, of course. And he could tell that Gareth knew it.

'Jake, I would have thought you would have been aware of it by now, the number of times you have been cut off when talking to Ms Graham; but in case you haven't yet worked it out: in addition to the security system being programmed with the name Malichea, and every other possible permutation that may be used to describe either the Order of Malichea, or the library, or the abbots or monks of the Order, it also contains every place in the British Isles that fits with the definition of sacred, cursed or haunted. It is also programmed with the list of the author and name of every suspected title believed to have been hidden by the Order. Any of those words can trigger the cut-off of any Skype conversation, email, or phone call, and a

report will then be automatically generated and delivered to me.' He looked Jake directly in the eyes. 'Do you understand what I'm saying, Jake?'

Yes, thought Jake. If you even think we might be talking about the secret library, we'll get cut off. And as he and Lauren had discovered that their letters were also being opened and read, and censored, the powers-that-be were making absolutely sure that Jake and Lauren would never again be able to even hint at mentioning the forbidden books.

'Pierce Randall are still looking for the books,' blurted out Jake.

Pierce Randall, the powerful international legal firm, with a client list that included dictators, organised crime around the globe, as well as governments and multinational companies.

Gareth hesitated, then he nodded slightly. 'We are dealing with Pierce Randall,' he said. 'They know the rules of the game. At this moment, you are the wild card, the unstable element. I hope I don't need to remind you that unstable elements cannot be tolerated in an orderly world.'

In other words, stop or we'll kill you. You and Lauren, thought Jake in horror as he decoded Gareth's outwardly bland words. It would be done in an untraceable manner. An unfortunate and tragic accident.

'Do I make myself clear?' asked Gareth.

Jake hesitated, then he nodded.
‘Yes,’ he said.
Gareth’s happy smile returned to his face.
‘Good,’ he purred. ‘Then we have an understanding?’
‘Yes.’ Jake nodded again.