

THE MORTAL MAZE

A novel by Ian D. Richardson

"In journalism, there has always been a tension between getting it first and getting it right" -- Pulitzer Prize winning American columnist, Ellen Goodman

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Although much of this story has the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as its setting, it is entirely a work of fiction. The events and the characters portrayed are the creation of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

CHAPTER 1 Jackson Dunbar – Jacko to his colleagues and friends – surveys the scene before him with some disappointment. He has been in Armibar, capital of Central Arabia, for a month now and he still hasn't been able to get a report on the BBC's Ten O'Clock News. It is a frustrating time for an ambitious TV correspondent.

Twice he has been to demonstrations in this shabby street, pock-marked by bullets from a long-past battle, and in a part of the city well away from the eyes of most citizens. On both occasions, a promised dramatic event failed to make the grade, except for a few short clips on the World News channel.

Jackson's young Australian cameraman, Pete Fox, is busy filming about 100 Arab men chanting and waving placards calling for the destruction of Britain, America and Israel.

Jackson stands to one side making a few pencilled notes. Jackson is 35, of medium height and weight. His face is smooth, having avoided the youthful perils of acne and chicken pox. His hair is dark but showing signs of thinning. His preferred work wear is casual shoes, neat jeans and plain open-necked shirts. In summary, his appearance is very ordinary. He is a person who would rarely attract attention in the street, but he is gifted with an intuitive talent to project an image of knowledge and authority when in front of a TV camera.

The demonstrators are mostly in grubby traditional outfits, the ankle-length thawb or dishdash, and headwear, the keffiyeh. Women wearing black hijabs stand in the doorways ululating and clapping. It is very routine stuff, unlikely to have any impact, and Jackson wonders why the demonstration is being held in such an out-of-the-way run-down street with its dusty pot-holed roads, broken pavements and heaps of stinking uncollected rubbish.

Police and soldiers in their cheap crumpled uniforms are there in substantial numbers as they always are for demonstrations, but even they are looking upon the protest in a manner that suggests they wish they were back in their barracks playing cards or football.

Pete, in his late twenties and with an accent and choice of clothes that make clear his Down Under origins, comes over to Jackson: "Do you want to do a piece-to-camera, mate?" Jackson takes another look around him and shakes his head. "It's another no-no. Let's pack it in and get back to the bureau."

Pete is unsure. "I think I'll stick around a bit while they're still here," nodding towards the CNN and Al Jazeera crews and newsagency reporters. "Please yourself, but my expenses need urgent attention," Jackson says with a grin.

He goes to the BBC's silver Range Rover 4x4 parked nearby and gets in beside the staff driver, Yassin Azizi, an easy-going young Arab with a bushy dark moustache, wearing smart western clothes and smoking a cigarette.

Five minutes later the car is moving down an avenue alongside the Armibar Central Plaza, a busy and prosperous air conditioned shopping mall with life going on as though the city is at total peace with itself. It is a world and a culture away from where they have just been.

Many of the women are confidently wearing fashionable Western clothes and proudly flaunting expensive designer handbags. Were it not for the many men bustling about in their neat white thawbs and patterned keffiyehs, it could be any flourishing business centre in the developed world.

Jackson spots a modern glass-fronted bank and tells Yassin to pull over at the ATM. He inserts his card and taps in the PIN. The card is rejected. Jackson angrily bangs the machine with his fist and walks back to the car, watched with resignation by Yassin. "Bloody banks!" mutters Jackson.

Yassin anticipates what will happen next and already has his wallet out by the time Jackson gets back into the passenger seat. He hands over a \$50 note. "Thanks," says Jackson, embarrassed that this is not the first time. "I'll give it back when I get my exes." Yassin sighs but says nothing.

The car resumes the journey back to the bureau. Jackson's mobile phone rings. He sees on the screen that Pete is calling. "Hi Pete!" There is no answer and the line goes dead. "Bloody phones," declares Jackson.

The car continues on its way, both men remaining silent. Then, as they turn into the street lined with modern brick office blocks where the bureau is situated, they spot the thirties-something Anglo-Arab office manager, Samira Lang, at the front door. She simultaneously sees the car and runs out onto the roadway, waving her hands furiously. Jackson winds down his window. "Go back, go back," Samira shouts.

Jackson's mobile rings. It is Pete again. "What's the problem, Pete?" Jackson listens briefly, then, "Okay. We're on our way back now." There is a Hollywood-style squealing of tyres as Yassin does a fierce U-turn and speeds back down the road.

Ten minutes later, Jackson is back at the scene of the demonstration. It could not be more shockingly different than when they left it such a short time ago. It is a blood bath. Wounded and dead Arabs, both military and civilian, both male and female, are lying in pools of blood on the road and in doorways.

Soldiers are tensely lined up, rifles raised and firing shots into the air, to keep back a gathering crowd. There are sirens as police and military cars and ambulances arrive. Some of the injured demonstrators are already in the back of private utility trucks that charge away with headlights and horns blazing.

Jackson sees Pete filming from a doorway and runs to him. Pete has blood running down his face. "What the fuck happened?" Pete replies while continuing filming. "The demo was infiltrated by militants just before you left." "Did you see them?" Jackson demands. "I guess I did." "Well, why the fuck didn't you tell me?" "How the hell was I to know they were carrying hidden guns and grenades?! They just looked like regular demonstrators who'd turned up late. Anyway, mate, don't

blame me for your own failings. You shouldn't have pissed off before you knew the story was really over. You should know how sensitive everything is in this city."

Jackson accepts that Pete is right and that is how the acerbic bureau chief, Mack Galbraith, will also see it. He knows he has to do something fast and drastic to salvage the situation. "C'mon. Let's not get into an argument, Pete, I need to know what you filmed?" "Most of it, mate." "Thank Christ!" Jackson mutters.

Pete pauses to wipe the blood from his face before adding caustically: "And thanks for asking how I am!" "Sorry, Pete. What happened?" "A ricochet off the wall just above me when the troops opened fire on a guy who had appeared at a window with his gun. It's only a graze. I'll be okay. But the guy at the window copped it." "Glad you weren't badly hurt."

Having expressed his concern, even belatedly, Jackson is anxious to get back to the story. He nods towards the CNN and Al Jazeera crews as they speed away. "How much did they get?" "All of it, mate, and both Jane and Omar were in the middle of doing their pieces-to-camera when it all blew up." "Oh shit, shit, shit! Mack is going to tear my balls off over this."

Desperation is taking hold of Jackson. "Look mate, I've really got to do a piece-to-camera." "That's going to look a bit lame at this stage, Jacko." "No it won't. Run into that derelict building over there, filming as you go, then turn the camera on me as I run in after you."

Pete hesitates. Jackson panics as he sees his promising career coming apart before his eyes. "Do it, will you! Just do as I say!"

The row begins to attract bystanders, now that most of the wounded and bodies have been taken away. Pete is embarrassed and runs without enthusiasm into the derelict building as instructed. Jackson pauses then races after Pete as though competing in a 100-metre sprint.

Once inside, he crouches down, catches his breath and begins pouring out words to the camera: "What started out today as a peaceful protest has turned violent. It..." Jackson suddenly flinches and anxiously looks around before resuming his report. "Er. It isn't quite clear why the protest turned into such a savage confrontation, but there are many dead and wounded. This bloody event is sure to place additional pressure on the Central Arabian Government, which has been facing serious allegations of corruption and a weakness towards what is seen as the imperial ambitions of Israel and Western governments."

Jackson flinches again, looks around anxiously, pauses a few seconds, then casually stands up and dusts himself down. "That should do the trick, Pete. Let's get this back to the office."

As they return to the 4x4, Jackson fails to notice a small heap of human excrement just inside the entrance to the building. He steps right into it. He screws up his face and wipes his shoe clean on a tuft of grass. "You could be in the shit in more than one way," laughs Pete.

At the BBC bureau, MacDonald "Mack" Galbraith angrily paces about his untidy office. He is 50 and a caricature of an old-fashioned world-weary Glaswegian hack. He puffs furiously on a cigarette and his clothes need the attention of an iron. As he mostly confines himself to doing reports for radio and online, his appearance doesn't really matter. The ash tray on Mack's untidy desk is overflowing, his book shelves lack any apparent order and the large wall map of the Middle East is faded and torn with Post-it stickers and scribbles all over it.

Mack goes to the door to the main work area and shouts at Samira: "Where the fuck is that numptie?" Samira attempts to calm him: "He'll be here in a few minutes. He says he's got a great piece-to-camera." "He'd better or I'll have him cut off at the knees,"

Mack shouts as he returns to his desk, lights another cigarette from a smoking butt and glares at three TV monitors fixed to the wall. They are permanently tuned to BBC World News, CNN and Al Jazeera.

Meanwhile, Yassin is swerving through the traffic, horn tooting and headlights flashing. Jackson is in the front seat and turns to Pete who is in the back studying the piece-to-camera on the camera monitor. "It'll work fine if you add some shooting and bullet pings to the sound track," he declares.

Pete frowns. "I'm not going to fake it, Jacko." "Jeez! We're not really faking it. It's what would have happened if I'd been there. Anyway, you must've done it all the time in Australia." "There are witnesses to what you – we – did, Jacko. And besides, we're working for the British Broadcasting Corporation, not some two-bit commercial outfit in Australia!" "Don't get pompous with me, Pete!"

Pete fiddles with the camera, then turns back to Jackson. "I've deleted your piece. Debate over!" Jackson sinks back into his seat, crushed. "Shit!" Back at the bureau, Mack's fury knows no bounds as he watches the TV monitors and sees that CNN and Al Jazeera are already on air with their version of the story. He lights another cigarette even though his previous one is only half smoked. He pours himself a large whisky from a bottle in a drawer in his desk.

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