

SIDNEY
SHELDON



MASTER OF
THE GAME

A NEW NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF
RAGE OF ANGELS

SIDNEY SHELDON
MASTER OF THE GAME
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PROLOGUE

Kate 1982

The large ballroom was crowded with familiar ghosts come to help celebrate her birthday. Kate Blackwell watched them mingle with the flesh-and-blood people, and in her mind, the scene was a dreamlike fantasy as the visitors from another time and place glided around the dance floor with the unsuspecting guests in black tie and long, shimmering evening gowns. There were one hundred people at the party at Cedar Hill House, in Dark Harbor, Maine. Not counting the ghosts, Kate Blackwell thought wryly.

She was a slim, petite woman, with a regal bearing that made her appear taller than she was. She had a face that one remembered. A proud bone structure, dawn-gray eyes and a stubborn chin, a blending of her Scottish and Dutch ancestors. She had fine, white hair that once had been a luxuriant black cascade, and against the graceful folds of her ivory velvet dress, her skin had the soft translucence old age sometimes brings.

I don't feel ninety, Kate Blackwell thought. Where have all the years gone? She watched the dancing ghosts. They know. They were there. They were a part of those years, a part of my life. She saw Banda, his proud black face beaming. And there was her David, dear David, looking tall and young and handsome, the way he looked when she first fell in love with him, and he was smiling at her, and she thought, Soon, my darling, soon. And she wished David could have lived to know his great-grandson.

Kate's eyes searched the large room until she saw him. He was standing near the orchestra, watching the musicians. He was a strikingly handsome boy, almost eight years old, fair-haired, dressed in a black velvet jacket and tartan trousers. Robert was a replica of his great-great-grandfather, Jamie McGregor, the man in the painting above the marble fireplace. As though sensing her eyes on him, Robert turned, and Kate beckoned him to her with a wave of her fingers, the perfect twenty-carat diamond her father had scooped up on a sandy beach almost a hundred years ago scintillating in the radiance of the crystal chandelier. Kate watched with pleasure as Robert threaded his way through the dancers.

I am the past, Kate thought. He is the future. My great-grandson will take

over Kruger-Brent Limited one day. He reached her side, and she made room for him on the seat beside her.

"Are you having a nice birthday, Gran?"

"Yes. Thank you, Robert."

"That's a super orchestra. The conductor's really bad"

Kate looked at him in momentary confusion, then her brow cleared. "Ah. I presume that means he's good."

Robert grinned at her. "Right. You sure don't seem ninety."

Kate Blackwell laughed. "Just between the two of us, I don't feel it."

He slipped his hand in hers, and they sat there in a contented silence, the eighty-two-year difference between them giving them a comfortable affinity. Kate turned to watch her granddaughter dancing. She and her husband were without doubt the handsomest couple on the floor.

Robert's mother saw her son and grandmother seated together and she thought, What an incredible woman. She's ageless. No one would ever guess all she has lived through.

The music stopped, and the conductor said, "Ladies and gentlemen, it's my pleasure to present young Master Robert."

Robert squeezed his great-grandmother's hand, stood up and walked over to the piano. He sat down, his face serious and intent, and then his fingers began to race across the keyboard. He

played Scriabin, and it was like the rippling of moonlight on water.

His mother listened and thought, He's a genius. He'll grow up to be a great musician. He was no longer her baby. He was going to belong to the world. When Robert finished, the applause was enthusiastic and genuine.

Earlier, dinner had been served outdoors. The large and formal garden had been festively decorated with lanterns and ribbons and balloons. Musicians played from the terrace while butlers and maids hovered over tables, silent and efficient, making sure the Baccarat glasses and Limoges dishes were kept filled. A telegram was read from the President of the United States. A Supreme Court justice toasted Kate.

The governor eulogized her. "... One of the most remarkable women in the history of this nation. Kate Blackwell's endowments to hundreds of charitable causes around the world are legendary. The Blackwell Foundation has contributed to the health and well-being of people in more than fifty countries. To paraphrase the late Sir Winston Churchill, 'Never have so many owed so much to one person.' I have had the privilege of knowing Kate

Blackwell..."

Bloody hell! Kate thought. No one knows me. He sounds like he's talking about some saint. What would all these people say if they knew the real Kate Blackwell? Sired by a thief and kidnapped before I was a year old. What would they think if I showed them the bullet scars on my body?

She turned her head and looked at the man who had once tried to kill her. Kate's eyes moved past him to linger on a figure in the shadows, wearing a veil to conceal her face. Over a distant clap of thunder, Kate heard the governor finish his speech and introduce her. She rose to her feet and looked out at the assembled guests. When she spoke, her voice was firm and strong. 'I've lived longer than any of you. As youngsters today would say, 'That's no big deal.' But I'm glad I made it to this age, because otherwise I wouldn't be here with all you dear friends. I know some of you have traveled from distant countries to be with me tonight, and you must be tired from your journey. It wouldn't be fair for me to expect everyone to have my energy.'

There was a roar of laughter, and they applauded her.

'Thank you for making this such a memorable evening. I shall never forget it. For those of you who wish to retire, your rooms are ready. For the others, there will be dancing in the ballroom.' There was another clap of thunder. "I suggest we all move indoors before we get caught in one of our famous Maine storms."

Now the dinner and dancing were over, the guests had retired and Kate was alone with her ghosts. She sat in the library, drifting back into the past, and she suddenly felt depressed. There's no one left to call me Kate, she thought. They've all gone. Her world had shrunk. Wasn't it Longfellow who said, "The leaves of memory make a mournful rustle in the dark"? She would be entering the dark soon, but not yet. I still have to do the most important thing of my life, Kate thought. Be patient, David. I'll be with you soon.

"Gran..."

Kate opened her eyes. The family had come into the room. She looked at them, one by one, her eyes a pitiless camera, missing nothing. My family, Kate thought. My immortality. A murderer, a grotesque and a psychotic. The Blackwell skeletons. Was this what all the years of hope and pain and suffering had finally come to?

Her granddaughter stood beside her. "Are you all right, Gran?"

'I'm a little tired, children. I think I'll go to bed.' She rose to her feet and started toward the stairs, and at that moment there was a violent roar of

thunder and the storm broke, the rain rattling against the windows like machine-gun fire. Her family watched as the old woman reached the top of the stairway, a proud, erect figure. There was a blaze of lightning and seconds later a loud clap of thunder. Kate Blackwell turned to look down at them, and when she spoke, it was with the accent of her ancestors. "In South Africa, we used to call this a donderstorm."

The past and present began to merge once again, and she walked down the hallway to her bedroom, surrounded by the familiar, comfortable ghosts.

BOOK ONE

Jamie 1883-1906

"By God, this is a real donderstorm!" Jamie McGregor said. He had grown up amid the wild storms of the Scottish High-lands, but he had never witnessed anything as violent as this. The afternoon sky had been suddenly obliterated by enormous clouds of sand, instantly turning day into night. The dusty sky was lit by flashes of lightning—weerlig, the Afrikaners called it—that scorched the air, followed by donderslag—thunder. Then the deluge. Sheets of rain that smashed against the army of tents and tin huts and turned the dirt streets of Klipdrift into frenzied streams of mud. The sky was a roar with rolling peals of thunder, one following the other like artillery in some celestial war.

Jamie McGregor quickly stepped aside as a house built of raw brick dissolved into mud, and he wondered whether the town of Klipdrift was going to survive.

Klipdrift was not really a town. It was a sprawling canvas village, a seething mass of tents and huts and wagons crowding the banks of the Vaal River, populated by wild-eyed dreamers drawn to South Africa from all parts of the world by the same obsession: diamonds.

Jamie McGregor was one of the dreamers. He was barely eighteen, a handsome lad, tall and fair-haired, with startlingly light gray eyes. There was an attractive ingenuousness about him, an eagerness to please that was endearing. He had a light-hearted disposition and a soul filled with optimism.

He had traveled almost eight thousand miles from his father's farm in the Highlands of Scotland to Edinburgh, London, Cape Town and now Klipdrift. He had given up his rights to the share of the farm that he and his brothers tilled with their father, but Jamie McGregor had no regrets. He knew he was going to be rewarded ten thousand times over. He had left the security of the only life he had ever known and had come to this distant, desolate place

because he dreamed of being rich. Jamie was not afraid of hard work, but the rewards of tilling the rocky little farm north of Aberdeen were meager. He worked from sunup to sundown, along with his brothers, his sister, Mary, and his mother and his father, and they had little to show for it. He had once attended a fair in Edinburgh and had seen the wondrous things of beauty that money could buy. Money was to make your life easy when you were well, and to take care of your needs when you were ailing. Jamie had seen too many friends and neighbors live and die in poverty.

He remembered his excitement when he first heard about the latest diamond strike in South Africa. The biggest diamond in the world had been found there, lying loose in the sand, and the whole area was rumored to be a great treasure chest waiting to be opened.

He had broken the news to his family after dinner on a Saturday night. They were seated around an uncleared table in the rude, timbered kitchen when Jamie spoke, his voice shy and at the same time proud. "I'm going to South Africa to find diamonds. I'll be on my way next week."

Five pairs of eyes stared at him as though he were crazy.

"You're goin' chasing after diamonds?" his father asked. "You must be daft, lad. That's all a fairy tale—a temptation of the devil to keep men from doin' an honest day's work."

"Why do you nae tell us where you're gettin' the money to go?" his brother Ian asked. "It's halfway 'round the world. You hae no money."

"If I had money," Jamie retorted, "I wouldn't have to go looking for diamonds, would I? Nobody there has money. I'll be an equal with all of them. I've got brains and a strong back. I'll not fail."

His sister, Mary, said, "Annie Cord will be disappointed. She expects to be your bride one day, Jamie."

Jamie adored his sister. She was older than he. Twenty-four, and she looked forty. She had never owned a beautiful thing in her life. I'll change that, Jamie promised himself.

His mother silently picked up the platter that held the remains of the steaming haggis and walked over to the iron sink.

Late that night she came to Jamie's bedside. She gently placed one hand on Jamie's shoulder, and her strength flooded into him. "You do what you must, Son. I dinna ken if there be diamonds there, but if there be, you'll find them." She brought out from behind her a worn leather pouch. "I've put by a few pounds. You needn't say nothin' to the others. God bless you, Jamie."

When he left for Edinburgh, he had fifty pounds in the pouch.

It was an arduous journey to South Africa, and it took Jamie McGregor almost a year to make it. He got a job as a waiter in a workingman's restaurant in Edinburgh until he added another fifty pounds to the pouch. Then it was on to London. Jamie was awed by the size of the city, the huge crowds, the noise and the large horse-drawn omnibuses that raced along at five miles an hour. There were hansom cabs everywhere, carrying beautiful women in large hats and swirling skirts and dainty little high-button shoes. He watched in wonder as the ladies alighted from the cabs and carriages to shop at Burlington Arcade, a dazzling cornucopia of silver and dishes and dresses and furs and pottery and apothecary shops crammed with mysterious bottles and jars.

Jamie found lodging at a house at 32 Fitzroy Street. It cost ten shillings a week, but it was the cheapest he could find. He spent his days at the docks, seeking a ship that would take him to South Africa, and his evenings seeing the wondrous sights of London town. One evening he caught a glimpse of Edward, the Prince of Wales, entering a restaurant near Covent Garden by the side door, a beautiful young lady on his arm. She wore a large flowered hat, and Jamie thought how nice it would look on his sister.

Jamie attended a concert at the Crystal Palace, built for The Great Exposition in 1851. He visited Drury Lane and at intermission sneaked into the Savoy Theatre, where they had installed the first electric lighting in a British public building. Some streets were lighted by electricity, and Jamie heard that it was possible to talk to someone on the other side of town by means of a wonderful new machine, the telephone. Jamie felt that he was looking at the future.

In spite of all the innovations and activity, England was in the midst of a growing economic crisis that winter. The streets were filled with the unemployed and the hungry, and there were mass demonstrations and street fighting. I've got to get away from here, Jamie thought. / came to escape poverty. The following day, Jamie signed on as a steward on the Walmer Castle, bound for Cape Town, South Africa.

The sea journey lasted three weeks, with stops at Madeira and St. Helena to take on more coal for fuel. It was a rough, turbulent voyage in the dead of winter, and Jamie was seasick from the moment the ship sailed. But he never lost his cheerfulness, for every day brought him nearer to his treasure chest. As the ship moved toward the equator, the climate changed. Miraculously,

winter began to thaw into summer, and as they approached the African coast, the days and nights became hot and steamy.

The Walmer Castle arrived in Cape Town at early dawn, moving carefully through the narrow channel that divided the great leper settlement of Robben Island from the mainland, and dropped anchor in Table Bay.

Jamie was on deck before sunrise. He watched, mesmerized, as the early-morning fog lifted and revealed the grand spectacle of Table Mountain looming high over the city. He had arrived.

The moment the ship made fast to the wharf, the decks were overrun by a horde of the strangest-looking people Jamie had ever seen. There were touts for all the different hotels—black men, yellow men, brown men and red men frantically offering to bear away luggage—and small boys running back and forth with newspapers and sweets and fruits for sale. Hansom drivers who were half-castes, Parsis or blacks were yelling their eagerness to be hired. Vendors and men pushing drinking carts called attention to their wares. The air was thick with huge black flies. Sailors and porters hustled and halloed their way through the crowd while passengers vainly tried to keep their luggage together and in sight. It was a babel of voices and noise. People spoke to one another in a language Jamie had never heard.

"Yulle kom van de Kaap, neh?"

"Het julle mine papa zyn wagen gezien?"

"Wat bedui'di?"

"Huistoe!"

He did not understand a word.

Cape Town was utterly unlike anything Jamie had ever seen. No two houses were alike. Next to a large warehouse two or three stories high, built of bricks or stone, was a small canteen of galvanized iron, then a jeweler's shop with hand-blown plate-glass windows and abutting it a small greengrocer's and next to that a tumble-down tobacconist's.

Jamie was mesmerized by the men, women and children who thronged the streets. He saw a kaffir clad in an old pair of 78th Highland trews and wearing as a coat a sack with slits cut for the arms and head. The kaffir walked behind two Chinese men, hand in hand, who were wearing blue smock frocks, their pigtails carefully coiled up under their conical straw hats. There were stout, red-faced Boer farmers with sun-bleached hair, then wagons loaded with potatoes, corn and leafy vegetables. Men dressed in brown velveteen trousers and coats, with broad-

brimmed, soft-felt hats on their heads and long clay pipes in their mouths, strode ahead of their vrows, attired in black, with thick black veils and large black-silk poke bonnets. Parsi washerwomen with large bundles of soiled clothes on their heads pushed past soldiers in red coats and helmets. It was a fascinating spectacle.

The first thing Jamie did was to seek out an inexpensive boardinghouse recommended to him by a sailor aboard ship. The landlady was a dumpy, ample-bosomed, middle-aged widow.

She looked Jamie over and smiled. "Zoek yulle goud?"

He blushed. "I'm sorry—I don't understand."

"English, yes? You are here to hunt gold? Diamonds?"

"Diamonds. Yes, ma'am."

She pulled him inside. "You will like it here. I have all the convenience for young men like you."

Jamie wondered whether she was one of them. He hoped not.

"I'm Mrs. Venster," she said coyly, "but my friends call me 'Dee-Dee.'" She smiled, revealing a gold tooth in front. "I have a feeling we are going to be very good friends. Ask of me anything."

"That's very kind of you," Jamie said. "Can you tell me where I can get a map of the city?"

With map in hand, Jamie went exploring. On one side of the city were the landward suburbs of Rondebosch, Claremont and Wynberg, stretching along nine miles of thinning plantations and vineyards. On the other side were the marine suburbs of Sea Point and Green Point. Jamie walked through the rich residential area, down Strand Street and Bree Street, admiring the large, two-story buildings with their flat roofs and peaked stuccoed fronts—steep terraces rising from the street. He walked until he was finally driven indoors by the flies that seemed to have a personal vendetta against him. They were large and black and attacked in swarms. When Jamie returned to his boardinghouse, he found his room filled with them. They covered the walls and table and bed.

He went to see the landlady. "Mrs. Venster, isn't there anything you can do about the flies in my room? They're—"

She gave a fat, giggling laugh and pinched Jamie's cheek. "Myn magtig. You'll get used to them. You'll see."

The sanitary arrangements in Cape Town were both primitive and inadequate, and when the sun set, an odoriferous vapor covered the city like a

noxious blanket. It was unbearable. But Jamie knew that he would bear it. He needed more money before he could leave. "You can't survive in the diamond fields without money," he had been warned. "They'll charge you just for breathin'."

On his second day in Cape Town, Jamie found a job driving a team of horses for a delivery firm. On the third day he started working in a restaurant after dinner, washing dishes. He lived on the leftover food that he squirreled away and took back to the boardinghouse, but it tasted strange to him and he longed for his mother's cock-a-leekie and oatcakes and hot, fresh-made baps. He did not complain, even to himself, as he sacrificed both food and comfort to increase his grubstake. He had made his choice and nothing was going to stop him, not the exhausting labor, or the foul air he breathed or the flies that kept him awake most of the night. He felt desperately lonely. He knew no one in this strange place, and he missed his friends and family. Jamie enjoyed solitude, but loneliness was a constant ache.

At last, the magic day arrived. His pouch held the magnificent sum of two hundred pounds. He was ready. He would leave Cape Town the following morning for the diamond fields.

Reservations for passenger wagons to the diamond fields at Klipdrift were booked by the Inland Transport Company at a small wooden depot near the docks. When Jamie arrived at 7:00 am., the depot was already so crowded that he could not get near it. There were hundreds of fortune seekers fighting for seats on the wagons. They had come from as far away as Russia and America, Australia, Germany and England. They shouted in a dozen different tongues, pleading with the besieged ticket sellers

to find spaces for them. Jamie watched as a burly Irishman angrily pushed his way out of the office onto the sidewalk, fighting to get through the mob.

"Excuse me," Jamie said. "What's going on in there?"

"Nothin'," the Irishman grunted in disgust. "The bloody wagons are all booked up for the next six weeks." He saw the look of dismay on Jamie's face. "That's not the worst of it, lad. The heathen bastards are chargin' fifty pounds a head."

It was incredible! "There must be another way to get to the diamond fields."

"Two ways. You can go Dutch Express, or you can go by foot."

"What's Dutch Express?"

"Bullock wagon. They travel two miles an hour. By the time you get