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CHASE AUSTIN

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ABOUT WICKED BULLET

The two major crime lords of Mogadishu are going for an alliance to rule the city.

There is only one problem - Sam Wick.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Enter the universe of Sam Wick thrillers.

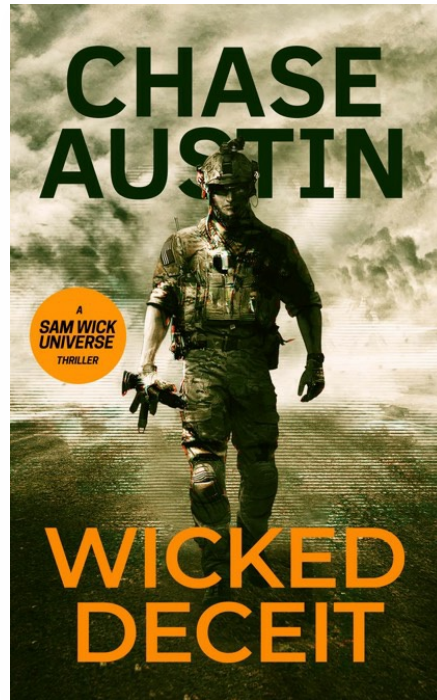
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Review

WICKED BULLET

MOGADISHU, **Somalia**

A dusty haze hung over the little cluster of mud and brick huts, and the smell of cooking fires filtered back to Sam Wick, lying prone beneath a mountain of mud and leaves.

He could hear the evening call to prayer sounding from a nearby mosque. A boy with a stick was herding his few goats across the stony ground to the east, trying to find something his animals could graze upon. The land was barren and bleak, like the lives of the few people who lived here. The temperature was approaching single digits at the end of a late December day. The stars had begun to pierce the darkness of the Indian Ocean sky with their twinkling brightness, though there was still light.

This was a region where the so-called development had not reached yet and probably never would. Wick couldn't care less about it. He was lying in that prone position for over four hours and perhaps would have to stay so for another four. His back had started to hurt, but he couldn't move. The mud and the leaves were now a solid mass that sheltered him. Any movement beyond what was permissible in that

position would have nulled everything. He had to persist.

* * *

Once labeled the 'Switzerland of Africa,' Somalia had enjoyed almost a decade of democracy. After gaining independence from Britain and Italy in 1960, it held free and fair elections and was ruled democratically from 1960 to 1969.

The first elected President of Somalia, uniting the former British and Italian territories, was Adam Abdullah Osman, who reigned for seven years. He was succeeded, freely and peacefully, by Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke.

Sharmarke, however, was assassinated by one of his bodyguards in 1969.

The Speaker of the Somali Parliament, Mukhtar Mohamed Hussein, took over. Still, his brief, six-day tenure was cut short by a military coup led by General Siad Barre, ending Somalia's period of democratic government.

Whatever its faults – and there were many – Barre's 22-year rule created modern Somalia, building one of Africa's strongest armies and massively improving the literacy of the population. Yet Barre, who gained the support of the US and the Soviet Union, also dissolved parliament, suspended the constitution, banned political parties, arrested politicians, and curbed press freedom. From then, there was a downward trend in everything. A disintegration.

And every time things were going down; the military regime was becoming more brutal and dictatorial.

Opposition to the Barre government gradually increased, and in May 1988, encouraged by Ethiopia, the same northern tribes rebelled against Barre's dictatorship. This provoked the full force of his military power and aggression, and thousands of northern Somalis were killed.

Three years later, in 1991, both the northern and southern tribes, again supported by Ethiopia, rose against Barre. His grip on power had weakened, his former allies had abandoned him, and he was finally brought down. One outcome was the northern region proclaiming its independence and declaring itself as Somaliland. It maintains its separatism today but has hardly any international recognition.

But the other long-lasting outcome was a civil war, with myriad competing factions and frequent intervention by foreign powers and neighboring countries.

The nation fell apart as rival tribes emerged to battle for control.

And then came a monster famine that wiped out more than three hundred thousand people and killed more than seventy percent of the livestock.

The only thing left was fear. Predator warlords and their men preyed on destitute refugees swarming into camps.

Mogadishu became a lawless city in a lawless land.

The rest of the world tried to help a dying country with food and aid. But the militias seized the distribution points and robbed relief planes as soon as they rolled to a halt. Nothing the United Nations did was enough to stop the starvation, disease, and raging civil war.

Eventually, the United Nations and the United States decided to launch a massive military intervention and commit thousands of troops. But the major warlords moved quickly to forge alliances among themselves to fight the Americans. They knew whoever was in control when the Americans arrived would most likely stay in power.

The situation stayed stable only for a year, till such time US troops remained stationed in Somalia. After the US forces were gone, warlords rose again after a lull in the action, and the most powerful took control of the meatiest of the regions.

After decades of civil war, the two of the biggest warlords decided to go for a truce, but it simply meant more bloodshed and oppression of the refugees and locals.

* * *

Wick watched as two Toyota SUVs sprinted from the north. They were followed by five more, packed with mercenaries. Each one of them had at least one innocent's blood on their hands. That was the critical criteria to be a part of any of those two clans. For Wick, every man in those SUVs was a prime candidate to be shot in the head.

Wick waited for the other warlord to arrive, and he didn't have to wait much longer. A haze of dust was coming from the south. Seven SUVs raced at the meeting point from the south.

Wick looked at the sky. The light was diminishing fast. With each passing minute, he was losing precious time.

The surveillance team at the TF-77 had explicitly said that this meeting was a rare opportunity to get all the major players of the two clans in one place. It meant that this was also Wick's only chance to do everything precisely.

As the final SUV came to a halt, a man appeared on the crosshair of Wick's rifle. A large man. With a height of more than six feet and a weight of over two hundred pounds. He walked like a rhino with an AK-47, a razor-sharp ax wrapped in a thick leather hatchet blade cover hanging on his back. His real name was Dahir Omar Elmi, but Wick knew what the local people called him— Butcher.

Behind Butcher, his men stood like an army who had come for war and not for a peace meeting.

From the other side, Wick saw Odowaa Yusuf Jimale getting out of the SUV. His form was in contrast to the Butcher. He looked like a minion amidst killers at only 5 feet in height with a lean built, but Wick knew better. Jimale had once killed seven people with just three bullets. That had earned him the name— 'Cobra.' The one who could kill with just a drop of poison. His men, all armed, stood behind him.

Wick watched the two groups weighing each other's strength. He waited for one of them to make a move. Then the Butcher moved warily but with unusual confidence. Five of his men followed him, but he gestured to them to stay.

Seeing this, the Cobra stepped ahead too, alone. Wick sensed a smile on their faces that seemed out of place in that setting. But for a handshake meeting, this was probably the fitting gesture. This was akin to a photo opportunity usually reserved for politicians announcing jointly contesting an election. Both factions vary in how much they would lose rather than how much they could win, like in a marriage of convenience.

Wick laid the crosshairs of his rifle on the Butcher first.

"Target in sight," he spoke on the microphone. Then he quickly glanced at the logbook and made a mental note of the distance and the wind. Seven hundred and two yards. The wind was four minutes, right. He then fine-tuned until Butcher filled the scope.

The people listening on the other side looked at each other. This was the critical stage that they had been waiting for forever.

"Fire when ready."

That was the go-ahead.

Wick exhaled and gently pulled straight back on the trigger. The 7.62mm slug tore through the massive body of the Butcher, ripping through his vital organs and arteries, taking out a chunk of his heart. He staggered back and collapsed as the blood poured out of him.

Wick didn't wait for him to fall. Instead, his barrel turned towards his second target—Cobra, who was staring down at the Butcher in surprise. Wick jacked in a new round and hammered Cobra with a headshot. His body crumpled and quivered like a piece of Jell-O onto the ground.

"Two hits," Wick confirmed. "Butcher and Cobra down."

The men on both sides watched their leaders going down in the dimming daylight, and someone yelled— "Traitors!"

This time someone other than Wick took the shot.

Wick remained at his place, watching the massacre. The bullets dismembered bodies and the SUVs equally. The shots echoed across the valley for the next fifteen minutes.

Wick watched it until only a single guy was left surviving. Wick tracked him limping away from the bloodbath, continually looking back to see if anyone was still gunning for his head. Wick watched the man labor through the treacherous terrain. An AK-47 hung around his neck, but Wick suspected it was of any use to him. His right hand was shot

multiple times and hung limply. His left one was also not in good shape. Wick could see blood coming out of his right thigh too. The man wasn't going to survive for long, but Wick didn't have that much time for the last stage of his plan, so he took his last shot of the day.

Once the man was motionless, Wick got up and ran down to his two targets. Nearing them, he opened a test tube kit, snipped a hair sample from both Butcher and Cobra, and shoved a long cotton swab to the back of their tongues for the saliva sample. Bottling them both, he locked them in the small box. It was the specific requirement of the mission— 'Get their DNAs for identification.'

When he was done, he started to sprint back to a flat area about a mile away, where a Black Hawk helicopter convoyed by a pair of Apache gunships would extract him. The jig was up, and the only thing Wick now had to do was get out of there.

The truce was over. The mission was over.

* * *

"This is for you." The operator handed Wick a Sat phone as soon as he boarded the Black Hawk.

"We have a new mission for you in Hong Kong. Over." It was Riley— Wick's handler.

"Copy. Over." Wick said and heard the line gets disconnected.

It was time to leave Somalia.

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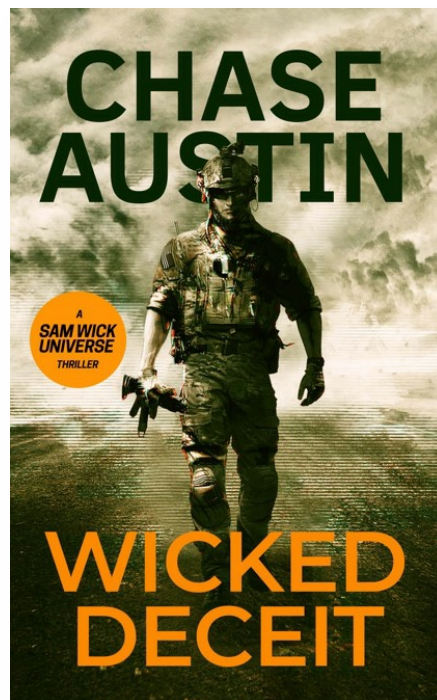
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To my parents who taught me to dream big.

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