

THE
EIGHT



OF
SPADES

A Law Unto Themselves

Benjamin J. West

The Eight of Spades: A Law unto Themselves

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 **Strategic Book Publishing**
New York, New York

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Strategic Book Publishing
An imprint of Writers Literary & Publishing Services, Inc.
845 Third Avenue, 6th Floor – 6016
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.strategicbookpublishing.com>

ISBN: 978-1-60976-914-7

Printed in the United States of America

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*This book is dedicated to Marmaduke James
and Marjorie Joan Howarth*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

John Nicholson

The main character in the story, he goes from works manager at an Engineering Company through to leader of a gang of predetermined rebels forced against their wills to do the outrageous deeds of an indolent government.

Sandra Nicholson

John's wife, who is grossly unaware of his wrongdoings whilst he is working away from home.

Sarah Nicholson

John and Sandra's six-year-old daughter.

Paul Nicholson

John's brother.

The Deacon

The top Government man who engineered the whole idea and transformed it into reality, leaving John to complete his dream whilst he disappeared into the woodwork.

Howson

The kind gentleman who looks after John whilst he is a guest of the Deacon.

Holly

Number two to John, a management consultant in the City, hailing from North London.

Stephen

Number three, an expert in the field of electronics from Northampton.

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David

From Catford in London, a locksmith and part-time safe cracker.

Brian

A Lancashire lad and a marine engineer to boot.

Ken

A big fisherman from Grimsby.

Caroline

Studying European Geography at Manchester University.

Gary

A College Lecturer in radio and telecommunications from Lincoln.

Terry

A motor engineer from Cambridge.

Dennis

A highly motivated controller of the base, pretending to know very little but probably knowing everything there is to know and more.

Mr. & Mrs. Fellows

Owners of the bungalow above where the base is in Scotland.

The Chief Constable

The bearer of bad news for Sandra.

Detective Inspector Pinner

The man sent to bring Sandra to the police station.

Detective Sergeant Davis

The man sent to assist Sandra to the police station.

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PROLOGUE

JOHN WAS YOUNG-LOOKING AND STILL extremely fit for his ripe old age of forty-nine. Ever since he was twenty-seven years old he'd lived ten years of his life in secrecy. The last twelve years were almost common knowledge to his family, but the previous ten years were as deep, dark, mystical and mysterious as they could possibly be.

Nothing was known to anyone, the subject being outlawed and strictly taboo in the Nicholson household.

He'd been plagued by his closest relatives for as long as he could remember to be forthcoming with his story, but he had bravely resisted all attempts to pressure him. It wasn't that he didn't want to tell his story, he just he felt that he couldn't. After all, he had never been formally released from the Official Secrets Act, even that in itself was a secret.

Now retired, he lived in a large detached cottage near Burn-sall in the beautiful Yorkshire Dales with his wife Sandra and son Philip, who was now twenty years old. His daughter Sarah, now twenty-eight, was married to James, and they were very proud of their four-year-old-daughter Sally.

It was a hot, humid summer afternoon. John sat alone in his superbly landscaped garden, relaxing with a cold can of beer, thinking to himself that perhaps life wasn't all that bad. He was pondering, as he so often did, the exploits that had consumed the very best years of his life, that had almost taken his life on more than one occasion.

His devoted wife Sandra had stuck by him through thick and thin. In actual fact, she'd had a million-and-one reasons to leave him because she hadn't spent all that much time with him during the first ten-year period.

His biggest regret of all was that he had never really seen his children grow up, and he carried this guilt with him wherever he went, even to this day.

John's can of lager wasn't his first. Far from it, in fact—he'd polished off far more than he'd originally intended. His thoughts were running wild, as they so often had done in the past.

Why shouldn't they know the truth? he thought. *I'm not ashamed of what I've done in the past; in fact I'm rather proud of everything I have done. Surely they have a right to know the truth.*

He was well aware, as he had been for some time now, that the day was fast approaching when the complete truth would have to be told. He had withheld it all far too long.

As his thoughts continued to spin, the sun was setting over the hillside far to the west. With the help of several more cans of lager, he finally made his decision. He made his mind up to call his immediate family together and tell them what they had patiently waited to hear for so long.

That evening he boldly asked his wife if she would organise a small family get-together for the following Saturday, and to arrange for them all to stay overnight. She in turn was curious, to say the least, about John's sudden request, and asked the inevitable question. But John wanted to keep the reason to himself—for the time being anyway.

This was not new to Sandra. She was used to him doing things out of the blue, with no apparent reason attached, so she did not pursue the matter—just as she hadn't done a thousand times before.

The one thing that she was not aware of was that this was all about to end.

Slowly but surely Saturday arrived, and by then John was far more excited than he could ever remember being—excited and extremely nervous at the very thought of what was about to unfold. He had managed to keep it to himself. No one knew the reason for the gathering—he had decided to keep it as a surprise.

The first people to arrive were John's parents—his mum Marjory, now seventy-one, whom he thought the world of, and his dad Jim, seventy-four. They were happy-go-lucky people who enjoyed life to the fullest whenever they could.

John's elder brother Paul and his wife Penny were the next to arrive. They had no children, and no one asked why. Next to arrive was Sarah, his daughter, closely followed by her husband James and the apple of John's eye, his granddaughter Sally. Sandra's father Stanley completed the guest list several minutes later. He was alone, his wife, sadly, having died five years earlier.

They all had a marvellous meal, even if it had been somewhat hurried. Now, John eagerly waited for them all to settle down before he told them of his long-awaited intention. In response, everyone was very excited at his seemingly sudden change of heart, as they had all pushed for this for so long. A log fire had been lit as the evenings did tend to turn quite chilly, even after a hot day.

John was feeling tense, to say the least. He paced up and down, much to everyone's annoyance, until Sally was finally put to bed. Then he started to relax, and he sat down with a much-needed drink, a bottle of whisky by his side as Sandra dimmed the lights. Only the glowing, crackling and flickering flames from the fire burning in the grate disturbed the peace and tranquillity.

The silence seemed to last forever, no one daring to say a word until John eventually spoke.

"Before I start," he announced, his voice croaking somewhat before clearing it with a couple of hearty coughs, "there is something that I must insist upon. Everything that is divulged in this room tonight must never ever be repeated outside of these four walls.

"The reason that I say this is because I am still sworn under The Official Secrets Act. If anything was to be leaked to a newspaper or anything of the like, whether accidental or not doesn't matter, then I could end up in serious trouble—even possibly in prison. So you can see the importance of my insistence."

Benjamin J. West

Except for one or two minor things, which he would omit for Sandra's sake, John was going to tell the complete truth.

The faces of all those listening were so intense as he nervously sat back in his favourite armchair and finally, after all these years, began the story that they had so long awaited.

CHAPTER 1

“SHUT UP OR I’LL BLOW your fucking head off,” demanded the scruffy giant in a terrifyingly deep, broad Geordie accent of northeast England; even John struggled to understand his dialect.

That was what greeted John out of nowhere when he arrived at work, and it sent ice-cold shivers down his spine.

It was the morning of Feb. 4, 1975, and his day had begun at 5:50 a.m. A cheerful but still half-asleep John Nicholson was leaving for work as usual, with a busy schedule ahead of him. But his car knew the way to work. It was gradually becoming light on a very cold, damp, miserable morning. The rain had stopped, leaving small pools of water scattered everywhere. At least the weather forecast promised a warm, sunny day ahead.

John drove off in his Cortina with a cigarette in one hand, the leather steering wheel in the other, and the radio blaring out loud. He was whistling along with the tune that was playing. Normally, the roads were deserted at this time in the morning, apart from the occasional police car neatly tucked away somewhere, the cop probably fast asleep.

The Engineering Company that John worked for was on an industrial estate some four miles from his home, the journey taking approximately six minutes at this time of the morning.

He was the works manager in charge of thirty-two people—a born leader according to his Managing Director. He was renowned for his trustworthiness and his adeptness at finalising everything he started. Failure was unknown to him. He was liked by few and hated by many, mainly because of his strict attitude to everything from timekeeping and record keeping to disciplining people for any kind of misdemeanour. But he was sympa-

thetic when he needed to be. At the same time he was highly respected because he did know what he was talking about, he always kept a close eye on everything, and knew exactly how to get the best out of everyone—even under extreme and extenuating circumstances.

Approximately six minutes later, John was just approaching his place of work. The keys to unlock the wooden gate to the side drive were on the seat beside him at the ready. Turning off the road to pull up in front of the huge ten-foot-wide gate, he found a red Mercedes parked directly in front of it, preventing any kind of entry. Still not fully awake, he nearly ran into the back of it.

“Shit, who the hell’s parked here, the stupid sod. How am I going to get in?” he said out loud, thumping the steering wheel in frustration.

John got out of his car, leaving the door wide open, engine running, and radio still blasting. A quick look around the Mercedes revealed that the doors were locked. It must have been here all night, he decided.

John wasn’t very happy, to say the least. He had more than a full day ahead of him, and already things weren’t going his way—and he hadn’t even got into the building yet. He didn’t know what to do. He wanted to get on with his work. Even scratching his head didn’t help, but that was all he could think of doing at the moment

He was on the verge of searching for a telephone box when a dark blue Volvo came to a screeching halt just behind his car. For a few seconds the two men sitting in the car looked at him, watching, before finally opening the doors at the same time.

Two giants got out of the car simultaneously, both around six-foot-six, he guessed. One was impeccably dressed in a suit, clean shaven, with short, neatly cut blonde hair. He looked rather like a business man. The other, weighing about 240 pounds, was shabby, with dark, greasy hair and a three-day growth of beard. He was dirty and scruffy looking, as if he’d slept in his clothes for a week. His tattooed hands, the size of melons, would put the fear of God in anyone.

They slowly approached John, cautiously looking from left to right, John not at all understanding the situation he was in.

John gulped, his throat dry from his lack of the early-morning coffee that he should have had by now. The men were now almost up to him.

“Excuse me, gentlemen. Does this car belong to you two?” said John, unable to hide the sarcastic tone in his voice.

“Yes, it does as it happens,” replied the smartly dressed one.

“Well, do you mind moving it? You’re blocking the entrance. It’s private property, you know!”

They were now only a matter of feet away from John, and he was feeling just a little bit uncomfortable. The scruffy man reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a revolver, pointed it directly at John’s head, and threatened him.

And that was where it all started.

John was riveted to the spot, speechless. He felt icy cold as if his temperature had dropped rapidly. *This is the sort of thing you only see in films*, he thought. He couldn’t believe that it was happening to him, just because he’d asked them to move their car. His mind was drowning in a very bad dream.

“Just do as he says,” advised the smartly dressed man politely, “and you will come to no harm.”

“Oh, I can see that,” mumbled John, his bottom lip quivering

“I said shut up,” the scruffy man reiterated.

John did as he was told, his mind struggling to cope with what was happening to him.

“Walk over to the Volvo slowly and don’t try anything,” said the scruffy one.

John did as he was told and slowly walked over to the Volvo. The big man pushed him up to the side of the car, forcing his arms up his back and tying his wrists together. He thought his lot was up.

“Steady on,” John pleaded. “There’s no need to be so rough. I’m hardly struggling, am I now?” he managed to say.

“Shut it,” the big man grunted, still holding on to his collar.

The man in the suit opened the car door, and John was thrown into the back seat, closely followed by the 240-pound gorilla. The well-dressed man got into the driver's seat and they drove away. They didn't even bother to close the door or switch off the engine of John's car.

"I don't believe this," John mumbled, shaking his head in disbelief. "Where are you taking me? What's this all about?" he dared to ask.

"I won't tell you again! Shut it!" John flinched as the big man shouted. He was in no position to argue.

Tucked around the corner, where John couldn't see as he was being driven away, were two police tow trucks. They moved into position, reversing up to remove John's car and the Mercedes that had blocked the entrance.

It was about thirty minutes after he was bundled into the back seat that the Volvo came to a standstill in an unobtrusive rest area out in the country, miles from anywhere. Although John did have a rough idea where he was, he didn't think it was really going to be of any advantage to him.

An old, rusty, dark blue unmarked van was waiting for them, and as the car pulled up alongside, he couldn't help wondering what his final fate would be. The smartly dressed man got out of the car and spent several minutes chatting to the driver of the van. Then he looked back at the gorilla and nodded his head.

"Get out," the ape demanded, pointing the gun at John's head again. *This is going too far*, John thought to himself, turning around to see if he'd left anything steaming on the seat. He was led to the rear of the van.

"Get in the back, and keep your mouth shut or else," the ape said, gesturing with the gun. "I'm not afraid to use this." The gun was now almost stuck up John's nose.

"No, I don't suppose you are," John found himself replying bravely.

A push from the ape sent John sprawling to the floor of the van, and he heard the door slam shut, darkness now surrounding him. A padlock rattling against the door assured that it was not

going to be opened by anyone without the key. The cargo area was completely enclosed. He felt so lonely

The van's engine started, and John rolled to one side as it set off, hurting his arm in the process and leaving him on his side in the dark, with only his imagination to keep him company—and that was working overtime by now. The wonder of what was going on had totally surpassed him. His main concern now was how he was going to get out of whatever situation he was in. So much seemed to have happened in such a short space of time.

It didn't take long for John's eyes to become accustomed to the dim light that seeped in around the poorly fitted doors and various other cracks you would expect in a van in poor condition. With that in mind, he thought *there must surely be some corrosion somewhere*, something he could rub his bindings on. He feebly groped around in the dim light, struggling with his hands behind him but fighting on, straining his eyes, searching. His search soon paid dividends. There was corroded metal on the wheel arch, a little awkward but his only chance to free himself of the bindings. The ape hadn't tied them all that tight, he realised. A couple of minutes of hard work should soon have them free. He was starting to panic now—fear was setting in. *What the fuck is going on?* he wondered. *They must have got the wrong person.*

“Come on,” he yelled, “come on for Christ's sake.”

His thoughts turned to further panic. “What if they're going to kill me? Shit—I must get out of here now,” he cried out loud.

At last he was free of the bindings, rubbing his wrists to get the blood flow to return, kicking the side of the van in frustration. *What am I going to do?* He wasn't thinking straight now.

The van seemed to have been on the move for hours, but straining his eyes John could now see from his watch that it had in fact only been thirty-five minutes. He didn't know what direction they were travelling in because the van had no windows and he had no idea of their speed.

His mind was drifting again. His whole life slowly started passing before him. He was sweating, yet cold at the same time.

He was confused, and all his thoughts were mingling into one, a very bad one.

Had anyone missed him at work? He had arranged for someone to come in early to see him before the telephone started going crazy.

John was starting to talk to himself: “Surely someone must have found my car and thought it a bit strange that the door was left wide open. I don’t even remember switching the engine off. Huh, with my sort of luck somebody’s probably found it and nicked it. I wouldn’t mind a cup of coffee and a bacon and egg sandwich. That would be nice. Huh, fancy thinking about food at a time like this. Christ, now I’m talking to myself. What the hell’s going on? What have I done to deserve this? Where are they taking me? What are they going to do to me? Stop this,” he bellowed.

John, now feeling very distraught, was very close to tears—tears of anger, fear, and frustration at not being able to do anything about the situation he was in. All he could do was sit there and wait—but wait for what?

“8:10 a.m. Tut—I could be anywhere by now,” he said out loud. “We must be on the main road as the van’s driving relatively straight, and I’m not being tossed all over the place now. I think we’re going faster as well.”

John found it helped to talk out loud. “Nobody’s going to hear me,” he shouted, “so it doesn’t matter. I’ll go mad if I don’t.”

Then he thought, *What about Sandra? Will I ever see her again? And Sarah, my little angel, what’s going to happen to them? I must be able to do something.* “I can’t let this happen to me,” he all but sobbed. “I’ve got to get out of here,” he screamed, thumping the sides of the van, kicking the wheel arches. His irritation continued. He was exhausted, but his life was at risk, his head was on the chopping block, he was going to be executed for something he knew nothing about. “God help me,” he croaked, his throat sore from shouting. “I must be dreaming, this isn’t real—it’s just a nightmare,” he tried to con-

vince himself, but after pinching his arm he realised it *was* for real. Tears smeared his cheeks.

He felt like screaming even louder and ripping the side out of the van. He tried kicking at the doors but they were solid, and they didn't move at all. *If only I knew what this was all about*, he thought. His mind was now working by itself. He could think of a dozen ways it could end, but none of them were very nice. He did his best to take his mind off the situation he was in, but everything he thought of took him back to this living nightmare. "For fuck's sake—what can I do?"

At one stage, he'd almost convinced himself that it was all just a dream, but the occasional bouncing around of the van made him realise that he was just fooling himself even more.

"They could have given me something to sit on instead of the metal floor, the miserable bastards," John said out loud, hoping that someone might hear him.

An idea came to him. He wondered if there were any tools in the back of the van. He imagined there must be. If there were, they wouldn't be in the front. For a moment, his hopes were raised.

His desperate search revealed absolutely nothing. "Shit," he muttered, "now what am I going to do? I can't even have a cigarette. I left them on the dashboard of the Cortina. God, I wish I knew what was going on."

The van was beginning to slow down. A cold shiver ran all the way down his back and all the way back up again.

"The van's definitely slowing down. Must be traffic lights or something," he surmised.

Slowly but surely, the van came to a complete standstill. Another shiver ran down his spine as he wondered if this was the moment of truth. Were they going to kill him and dump his body somewhere, or what?

He thought seriously about whether he had upset anyone recently and could only remember having had a few words with the newsagent over his last paper bill. No, surely not, not over the price of two weeks' newspapers. Not because they didn't

deliver an *Evening Mail* one night. It can't be. His mind was off again, almost out of control this time.

The front doors of the van were opened and then slammed shut. He could hear footsteps on the gravel surface just outside the back doors. "Fucking hell, this is my lot," croaked John.

He was now feeling very nervous. In fact, he was positively shaking. The padlock on the rear door rattled with the insertion of a key. It was being unlocked by one of the thugs. John's mind was racing again. He thought about hiding behind the other door, and when it was opened, he could smack him in the mouth as hard as he could and then jump out and run like the clappers.

But where to? he thought. *I don't even know where I am, and what if he still has that gun in his hand? Damn, I'll have to play it along and just see what happens.*

After what seemed an eternity, the door slowly creaked open, letting in a slice of brilliant sunlight that danced across the floor of the van. The bright light forced John to close his eyes—he had been in the dark for too long. He only just remembered to put his hands behind him as if they were still tied. The ape stood before him, no gun in his hand, but he did have an enormous thermos flask and a paper bag that rather looked like sandwiches. He threw them on the floor of the van.

"Where are we going? Why am I here? What do you want me for? What's all this about?" John demanded to know.

"Shut up for fuck's sake; just do as you are told. Turn around very slowly and I'll untie you, but don't try anything," he commanded.

"Look, no need—I've already undone them," said John, as clever as you like.

The ape quickly pulled the gun from his inside pocket. "Don't get clever with me, or you'll be sorry. Now sit down, and think yourself lucky that I'm not going to tie you up again."

Before John could utter another word the door was slammed shut, the padlock refastened, and he was back in the darkness once again.

John felt around for the flask and sandwiches, his eyes not yet accustomed after the brilliant sunshine. He found them not too far away.

“Thank God it’s not broken,” his relieved voice stuttered. He hoped the thermos contained coffee—he’d been desperate for some for so long. He couldn’t pour himself a cup quick enough. It tasted like nectar. “Oh, this is the best cup of coffee that I’ve ever had, even without sugar,” he almost cried. He nearly burned himself trying to drink it quickly as the van lurched when it began to move off.

The sandwiches were drab, as if they had been made days ago—corned beef, dry bread beginning to curl up at the edges, typical British Rail sandwiches. But John was hungry, and when you are, you don’t really care what you eat.

The van continued on its relentless journey. Hours passed, but to John it felt like weeks, months even, that he lay in the back of the van. His torture continued.

Eventually, the van came to a grinding halt, and for some unknown reason, John knew it was the end of his ordeal as far as travelling was involved. The front doors of the van opened and closed again. Straining his ears, he could hear voices just outside, but he couldn’t make out what they were saying.

Footsteps on gravel moved around the van. Then the rear doors were unlocked and opened. John stood up, pressing himself as far away from the doors as possible, his legs turning to jelly in the process. The two men that he had previously seen stood facing him. “Turn around and face the front of the van,” he was ordered.

“What are you going to do?” John dared ask.

“Be quiet, and put your hands behind your back.”

John, in his wisdom, decided it was best to say no more. It was evident they wouldn’t tell him anything. His hands were tied again. Only this time he was blindfolded, too.

God, it’s the firing squad, he thought, but surely they’ll tell me the reason first.

John was led out of the van and made to walk some distance, his ears straining for any evidence of where he might be. There

was only silence—no sound of animals, birds, humans, or traffic—just a deadly silence.

Before too long they were in some sort of building. John had the sensation of walking down a corridor of some description—that kind of echo—but still no voices to be heard anywhere. They finally halted, and a door gradually creaked open.

“Walk forward three paces and stop,” ordered one of the captors.

John did as he was told. He knew by now that any chance of escape was gone—for the time being anyway. He was untied. Leaving John to remove his own blindfold, the two men left immediately, slamming the heavy metal door behind them with a terrifying, thunderous crash.

“Thanks, bastards.” John replied to their hurried disappearing act. He stood there for a moment gathering his thoughts together.

The room was of a reasonable size, with a bed, wash basin, a small table, and a toilet. It quite reminded him of a chalet that you would find at a holiday camp, except the window was small and very high up, almost touching the ceiling and clad with heavy metal bars.

The décor left something to be desired, but in its own way was quite nice and cosy—as long as you didn’t suffer from claustrophobia. Maybe he saw it in this light because he had an inkling that he might be here for some time. He didn’t know why he thought this, but everything was pointing in that direction.

The door was solid. “It’ll take a tank to penetrate this bloody door. Look’s as if I’m stuck here for as long as they want,” sighed John, sitting on the bed wondering what on earth, if anything, he could do next. “I should be waking up by now,” John pondered, “I don’t like this dream any more.”

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