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Opening extract from

Killer Game

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CHAPTER 1

It is about 4 a.m. when they come for me. I am already awake, strung out on the fear that they will come, and the fear that they won't. When I finally hear the click of the latch on the dormitory door, I have only a second to brace myself before they're on me.

'Do as we say!'

A rasping voice, sudden and violent, in my ear.

I swallow my scream as a hood – a pillowcase? – is shoved over my head. A large hand clamps across my mouth and nose, mashing my lip against my upper teeth, and I taste blood. Weight presses down on my pyjama-ed chest, and panic rises as I wriggle a little to clear my nostrils to breathe. Silently, I'm lifted from my bed. *Efficiently*. They've done this before.

They bundle me to the floor and flip me on my

stomach, yanking my hands behind my back. My gut lurches with panic. A pinch of plastic, and my hands are trussed so tight that I can feel the blood thudding out a frantic heartbeat back and forth from wrist to wrist.

'One noise from you, Cate, and this is over.'

I want to puke. I try to nod, but my neck is twisted at an awkward angle, and that hand is still clamped over my hooded face. But they must understand my compliance, as the hand is removed; I'm forced to my feet and pushed forward, one bare foot stumbling after the other. The urge to pee is extreme, but I have to fight it with everything because, hey, if I wet myself, I'm dead for sure.

We walk; there's the shove of shoulders to either side of me, and the hands are there again, on my arms this time, pulling me to one side then another. Light seeps into the pillowcase from somewhere, but I still can't see anything other than shadows. My feet tell me we have exited the dormitory as the carpet briefly gives way to a strip of bare boards before they find the hall runner, and turn left, left towards the short staircase down to the ground floor. The staircase! Will they push me? Will I fall? My fears are unfounded as suddenly my legs are swept up from under me and, with a grunt, someone carries me downstairs.

I know that grunt. He remembered to disguise his voice when he spoke, but not the grunt. Does the fact that it is *him* carrying me make me feel better, or worse?

Dark again. The cool September night air hits me; we must have left the building by the side door. And then I'm lowered, surprisingly gently, and I feel cold, damp metal beneath my PJs. A hard rim under my shoulders and knees.

A box? Some kind of coffin? Would they go that far? The panic comes back. I'm tilted, and I draw my feet inside to brace myself against the rim. There's a wobble, a crunch of stone and then, a squeak.

OK, a *wheelbarrow*. The squeak gave it away. I breathe again. I'm being pushed in a wheelbarrow, my bum rubbing in earthworms and soil. This is their idea of funny.

Slowly we travel over the gravel, almost silently, except for that tiny little squeak every rotation. I'm sure someone was tasked to oil it, but not well enough. They'll get into trouble for that.

There's a slight bump as the terrain gets softer, I sink and wobble again, and then we take off, much faster than before, a wild ride. The squeak becomes a constant whine. I wish I could hold on to the sides but all I can do is push down on my feet to wedge myself in there as we bump along, my abs burning in a half-crunch. I hope the ride will be short. Which way are we heading? North to the woods, or east to the causeway? Please, please, not south to the cliff path; surely they wouldn't risk that? I don't have much idea, no sense of direction, but as we jog on I hear a few muted giggles and pants, even a whisper that is quickly shushed. Three of them with me? Four? One pushing, the others running alongside.

We stop. I strain to hear the sea, but all I can hear is the blood in my ears. And then:

'Woo-woo!' goes the world's least convincing owl.

'Twit-twoo!' No, strike that. The second one is worse.

'Coooo-oo!' The third sounds like a drunken dove, and suddenly the first two seem very realistic.

Muted giggles. We're off again, faster this time, and I hear a rumble to my left, a rumble to my right. More wheelbarrows? Yes, without doubt, and we're racing. I'm not the only one who has been taken, and that's reassuring. The race is almost fun at first – apart from the sheer terror, of course – but it's exhilarating at least. Just when I'm thinking I can no longer hold on, my knees are burning and my feet are turning to ice, I sense my kidnappers are tiring as well, and we slow. There's more panting, unabashed and unconcealed this time. Someone mutters, but I can't hear what's said. Almost there. The fear comes back.

We stop again, this time for good. I'm lowered with a thud, pulled out of the wheelbarrow and on to my cold, bare feet. Blood wells up into my face, and I sway a little. I squeeze my toes, trying to find my balance.

I'm standing on sand. Cool, but not damp. And yet, no sound of the waves hitting the rocks . . . where are we? There's a smell, too, but it's not of salty air – at least, no more than this whole island smells of the sea. It's an acrid, oily smell. Something is burning.

I dare to open my eyes, and through the pillowcase there's light out there. Orange, glowing balls of light, suspended off the ground. *Of course*. Suddenly, I know exactly where we are.

My hood is whipped off. Shadows slink away into shadow, I squint and try to stop the ground from spinning.

An amphitheatre, carved into the side of a hill, and I am onstage. Oil lanterns hang from stands, lighting the scene. There's also the full blood moon – but it only winks at us

as blue-grey clouds blow across it, obscuring its light. My kidnappers gone, I turn round to see my fellow captives, blinking and swivelling their heads, all of us nodding dogs, taking it in.

Martin Parish is next to me, bent over, panting and grinning his goofy gap-toothed grin. He's just stoked to be selected, he doesn't care what they might do to us. Tesha Quinn stands to his right, eyes wide and also swaying on her bare feet, her dark blonde corkscrew curls standing out in shock from her head. She doesn't look at me – trying to hold the panic down – because if she does, she might break. Both kids have tied hands, both in night attire. I thank luck and good judgement that I'm wearing modest pyjamas; Martin is shivering in boxers and Tesha's not much better off in knickers and a cami. They're cold and vulnerable. At least I have flannel to hide behind.

Only three of us harvested tonight? The final selection for this year. The Game can begin.

I rub my chin on my shoulder and try to see the shadows moving on the tiered seats, but I can't focus that far yet. Two kids had been harvested on Monday, or so it was rumoured. Two kids were taken on Tuesday, and then none on Wednesday and Thursday, so we thought that tonight would be big. But only us three?

A figure moves into view above us on the steps of the auditorium. He's wearing a long cloak, which ripples in the night breeze. The hood is pulled low over his face, revealing only a square jaw, and a hint of thin lips with a Cupid's bow.

'Fresh meat!'

He raises his face, and he is wearing a black half mask. There was never any doubt it was him. The grunt, the voice in my ear. Alexander Morgan, alpha male of sixth form, and the one who is running this show.

'Welcome to the Game, apprentices.' Alex walks down the steps and on to the sand, smiling at us. 'Be happy. You are the chosen few.'

I allow myself to relax, slightly. We have this weird dynamic, Alex and I. He's nice enough to me when he remembers to be – basically because of my family owning this island – but I'm not inner-circle cool, so most of the time he ignores me. Well, apart from that one time we snogged, but few people know about that. It certainly wouldn't improve my popularity here; most of the girls and a handful of the boys go gooey for Alex. He's blond and tall and good-looking in a screwed-up Hitler Youth kind of way, and that's obviously not my type on a typical day. It just wouldn't fit in with my admittedly half-baked idea of who I am. But . . . for all the smooth breeding and athlete OCD-neatness about Alex, there's something feral there too. He's like a wolf: he likes to run, and he likes the smell of fear.

'Tesha!' Alex kisses his fingertips and touches them gently to her lips. 'Welcome!'

She jerks her head back and scowls at him, her curls bouncing, Medusa-like. He moves down the line. 'Martin, my friend!' He scruffs Martin's spiky brown hair, and Martin grins up at him like the little boy he is.

And then he walks to me. 'Cate.' I wait for the touch, but there is none. 'Fully dressed, unlike the rest.' He makes

it sound rude, his eyes burning through the mask. I hate it that he can switch on that power, like he won something from me just because we kissed that one time. And now it's some horrible in-joke between the two of us. He laughs, walking backwards, away from us. I'm glad it's too dark for anyone to see my red face. 'All kneel before your Grand Master!'

I glance at Martin, who is already down on the sand. He's so pathetically grateful to be here, he'd kneel before Alex under any circumstances. Tesha is slower, but at least the command annoys her even more, and that seems to give her courage. She catches my eye this time, and we both reluctantly sink to our knees.

'Cower before the Assassins' Guild!' Alex cries. Somewhere, someone hits a button on an MP3 player and music plays, not quite loud enough to let anyone know we're here. It's The Doors, 'Riders on the Storm'. I suppose this was an edgy choice back in the days of yesteryear when the Game began, but it's simultaneously unnerving and slightly silly, and it makes me feel like I'm in someone's dodgy straight-to-video.

The Assassins' Guild walks out in front of us, all wearing masks. Four are in cloaks like Alex's; they are the Elders, the veterans, the movers and shakers of the Game. Then come the two Journeymen: two boys who have played the Game once before. Finally, the four apprentices who were harvested earlier in the week.

Faced with them all, like this, I realize that I'm terrified. I have friends behind those masks – well, two of them – but even so, the weight of What Comes Next is

frightening. Marcia, my best friend and an Elder, stands next to Alex, wisps of long, languid hair escaping her hood and blowing across her face in the breeze. A couple of days ago I was moaning to her that I wasn't going to get harvested, and she must have known all along. And then there's Daniel, a skinny Journeyman standing at the back, and my only other real friend at this school. I wish I could read his expression.

I take a breath. This part will be over soon. And after all, isn't this what I've been looking forward to? The Game?

We call it 'Killer'.

Every autumn term it begins, for a few short, crazy, wonderful weeks. The Assassins' Guild harvests new members to play, and the rest of the school holds on tight and watches the fallout. We call it Killer, but you might know it by another name – Gotcha, Assassin, Battle Royal. And if you don't? Well, it's the twisted love child of Secret Santa and Wink Murder, but even then you're only halfway there to understanding it all. The Assassins' Guild makes the rules, and they are this:

One Killer is chosen, and he or she has to Kill. Not actually, you understand; this school is tough, but the jeux is definitely not sans frontières. No, the Killer has to think of wacky-but-child-friendly ways to off their victims. Death by rubber snake in the desk during double Geography. Death by gassing with a stink bomb in the common room. Death by 'suffocation' with a duct-taped duvet in the dorm room. It's funny, it's thrilling, and silly-scary. One by one, the Guild are picked off, and every week the remaining players can take a guess at who the murderer is.

If you guess right, you're the glorious victor. If you guess wrong, you're dead.

And nobody wants to be dead, because then it's back to life, back to reality – the reality of school days at Umfraville Hall, Skola Island, Arse-End-Of-Nowhere, Wales.

'Tie them!' Alex shouts, and I'm jolted back into the present. Tie us *more*? How? I'm about to find out. Masked bods run forward. We're pushed from our knees to our stomachs, and more plastic ties are tightened around our ankles. I brace my feet so I'll have some slack when I relax my muscles, but my assailants know what I'm doing and pull the ties tighter. They hurt like hell.

A long rope is clipped around the plastic tie; I feel a pull. I twist to look behind me. Two masked Guild members are pulling on the rope and it is stretching. It's a bungee cord. The Masks clip the other end into some kind of stake that is protruding from the ground a metre away, and I'm tethered, like an animal.

Alex claps his hands, and a Mask brings something forward on a velvet cushion. Alex picks the thing up and waggles it at us, and a glint of blade flashes in the light. Two blades? Secateurs. Bitterness rises in my throat.

'Freedom through the blade,' Alex says, walking a few paces away from us and drawing an X in the sand with his foot. He drops the secateurs on the ground.

Before I have time to consider the implications of this, I feel the hit of freezing water on my back from above. I gasp in shock; someone has tipped a bucket of sea over me. Martin and Tesha yell beside me, as they get their own showers.