

## THE GAME

I'm a realist. Life is a game and death its reward. Pain is the rail on which it runs.

When I caught Sebastian alone at the party last week, I told him the simple truth: I don't mind pain at all – it's real and it stops me drifting. Pain is immediate. Blood is tangible. I know you know these things, I said to him. Even the inner agonies can do the trick, so in a way I'm obliged to you all for all you've done to me. If you guys are still holding your games nights, I have a special one for you. It's one that we can all enjoy but it can only be played once.

I watched him reading me – more than slightly unhinged? Trying to impress? High? I saw his curiosity piqued and his savagery aroused. I saw him connect with what he thought I meant. A week later their invite arrived by SMS. At last. They must think I'm mad, coming to them like this, begging for more.

So here we all are, at table in Felicity's house. I am watching them finishing their meal, toying with the scraps, their conversation beginning to wind down as they allow their thoughts to scratch the itch of anticipation. I am theirs already. They know it and I can feel it. But they are also mine. My silence is acceptable – perhaps it even indicates a quiet resignation or anticipation on my part – and, indeed, it is as though they are speaking outside a soundproof glass. They have felt no need to acknowledge me during the meal beyond a little polite conversation, never alluding to the real pleasure of the evening. I am a nobody basking in the presence of their nobility. They think themselves the social elite, the epitome of style and fashion, the envy of all outside their little circle. So white and smooth, they glided through the unwashed masses on golden wheels, so they thought, but they never understood why the crowded hallways parted: we could not stomach the reek of blood and gore that never washes off and we feared that whatever had poisoned them was contagious. Disgust, not adulation. Their elegant disguises could not conceal their eyes when goaded – flat, cold, venomous. They were bimbos and thugs who defended the edifice of their status with fang and fear. Fascinating.

When I arrived this year looking for a fresh start, I was fresh blood to them. It has always been the same. Someone stamped me VICTIM at birth in ink that only predators can see, or smell. Like white vampires to the spill of blood they came to me, smug and sleek and beautiful, circling, assessing. Animals can smell fear and blood and mine was real but I refused to buckle again. Endurance, I had resolved, was to be my new strategy in fighting the demons. I knew these were the ones who were most likely to wreck my plan to start again. They were so tempting.

I endured. Their minor assaults and irregular humiliations initiated me into the circles of the ordinary people who recognised the significance of the blood – mine on me. Among them I found Celine, my first real girlfriend and my first real hope that maybe, this time, I could actually escape into the background. Their nickname for her was 'Celerylegs'. It must have been a quiet night in the town that night because suddenly the reptiles arrived uninvited. Dominic slid right up and hit on Celine. It was nothing in the common room to see him with one playing with his hair while another sat on his lap trying to have a conversation, but there was no way he was getting his slimy hands on Celine. I told him to go find someone else to prey on, that Celine was taken, as if he didn't know. He acted surprised then invited me out to the backyard to discuss the matter further. I should have known: take on one and you take them all on. Danyall was waiting. To others he may have seemed unhappy to be interrupted by our argument but I knew him better – I knew him from the inside out. To my eye, he gleamed like the rings on his fingers. I went down swinging because I believe in trying to give as good I get. He only got in two good shots at my head. Seven stitches. The ribs took longer than the skin to come back together but it was worth it at the time.

Of course they didn't leave it at that. The niggle got nasty. There was the rumour that I was bi, which Celine didn't quite entirely disbelieve, then that I was gay and just using Celine for camouflage while I studied the local form. Sure we hadn't done it yet, but not everyone jumps straight into bed, do they? I thought she respected me more for it. And I thought that standing up for her against Dominic, even if I did end up in emergency, would have shown her how much I cared. I thought maybe I would have a bit more support next time or at least some sympathy. How stupid was I? I was the total reject. Worse, I was now fair game for everyone.

Our break-up was catastrophic. One minute beautiful, the next there was shrapnel and bits of relationship and bits of me flying everywhere. I was a complete laughing stock. What happened? I still don't know. Celine didn't want anything to do with me. She was suddenly over me and moving on and there I was, dumped for no reason that I could see, a shattered human being with no explanations and no friends. This was supposed to be my new start – this was supposed to be where I got myself together again. And everything was a total disaster – again. What was I going to do? There was no longer any point in fighting.

In the end, I went up to Dad's shack and stayed pissed for three days. After that I understood things better. I worked out what they had done. Their reasoning was transparent – why did they do anything but for the sheer, sick pleasure of it? I did not bother trying to sort out who was responsible for what because they were all implicated so they were all going to suffer. There were only four weeks left until the exams so, once I made my decision, I headed back to study – *them* – and calculate my vengeance.

I played the spy who had survived being hauled off to the secret house of fear and had returned, aggrieved, with nothing to hide, acting like I was trying to act normal. I spied on them, prodding, pricking, slicing, licking and enjoying the reactions. I watched them working alone, in pairs and, only the once in public, as a pack. Then, even I was afraid beneath the thrill of seeing them at work, weapons drawn and fangs bared openly. It was exhilarating to see them disembowel with surgical precision a particularly dense or stubborn transgressor. I can still taste the fear that shivered through us looking on. They showed us all - *this is what happens if you dare ...* Then suddenly the fangs and blades were sheathed and their smooth selves slid serenely on.

The lone avenger's challenge would always fail and, besides, I liked my belly just the way it was. But an organised assault on their impregnable defenses was also unrealistic. It would result in so much sacrifice that any victory would be pyrrhic. I knew that if I approached anyone they would regard me pityingly, remembering what I had already suffered. No-one else was prepared to pay the price of so much blood. What I needed, then, was a way to bring them all down together; I needed an explosive trigger and a way in to plant it. My studies intensified.

How to endure without seeming to enjoy? How to invite while seeming to be repulsed?

The key was balance.

I feared I might have overplayed my part, because they bled me and bled me until the smell of me grew thin and stale and all common sense was screaming out to leave them be, but I did not.

Balance.

Balance between victim and avenger.

Balance between rage and ecstasy.

Did they ever wonder whether I was enjoying myself – whether they were playing into my hands?

I kept coming back until I had what I needed.

And I found it in the gaps between them.

Danyall's brutality is brainless. He revels in the excess of parties. A real party animal. He has begun to roam alone the more dangerous zones beyond the narrow security of the group. His growing contempt for their veneer of gentility is abrasive. Sebastian, on the other hand, is graced with infinite cunning, fruit of his wide experience and deep intelligence that made him a straight A student and supremely arrogant. Nasty things tend to happen around him. Dominic, the supposed alpha, has no idea he is a pawn. The bleach-blond clones, Angelina and Simm, are too dense to comprehend their real status: unwitting foot soldiers of the true aristocrats. They are both passionate about Sebastian and brightly coloured drinks, both of which they frequently indulge. Serena, brunette, bitchy and very clever, admires the civilised savagery in Sebastian and in her soul mate, Felicity. A less aptly named person I have not met: a real mean beauty queen. She and Dominic were a blazing couple sometime past until the boredom got to her. Felicity is merciless when threatened, an artist in humiliation. She, Serena and Sebastian are the perfect match. They are masters of the precise manipulation of the finest of edges on tools so slender they could be a trick of the light – sometimes so clean that only the beading blood and dawning pain reveal the attack. And the needle – deft, quickly in and out but leaving something poisoned to be dealt with. And the razor words slid gently into ears and left there. Those three are the core.

Solidarity, their greatest strength, has to be their most profound weakness also. Their unity is brittle. It is based on mutual dependence and unacknowledged manipulation. One small, precisely placed and perfectly timed trigger could exploit the fault lines and shatter them all, even the most clever.

Now we are here at the feasting table for their final supper.

Life is a game and death its reward.

I am ready.

Let the games begin.

This is a game we can all enjoy, I will say to them. I poisoned myself, just now when you thought I went to the toilet. Did none of you notice that I was gone a little while? I left traces of the poison in the kitchen and hid the bottle where you will not find it. With it is the antidote. Both are wiped clean. I have an hour to live unless I take the antidote. Once taken, it will clear my system of all trace of the poison in another hour.

Could I be bluffing? Maybe, but I have no more to tell you even if you beat me to pulp, which won't look very good on my corpse, will it?

If you refuse to play, I will not tell you where or what the antidote is. Then I will die. What do you think the police will suspect? We have a nasty little history between us, don't we? This might be another of your torturous, twisted intrigues but one that went too far. The antidote, when they discover it with the poison bottle, will suggest that. And it won't matter where you dump my body or what else you might do with it - you think no-one knows who invited me to dinner? Besides, your invite's on my phone, Angelina, which is not here, of course.

If you refuse to play and take me to the hospital, I'll become hysterical and accuse you all of poisoning me. I can be very believable. You should know that now. In their shoes, who would you believe? A search will reveal all anyway.

The stakes are high but you have few choices now.

If I win, I will leave quietly and I'll never bother you again.

If I lose, I promise you I'll slit my wrists in your bathtub while you watch. You can wait for me to bleed out before you pretend to suspect that something isn't right and you hammer down the door to save me. Call the ambulance, the police - as many witnesses to your innocence as you think you'll need.

Sound fair?

So, to the game.

The game is simple.

Do I win or do I lose?