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The Killing Game

Written by J. A. Kerley

Published by Harper

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J.A. Kerley

THE KILLING GAME

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Harper
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A paperback original

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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 00 732823 9

Set in Sabon LT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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To Alexa and John,
Have a spectacular voyage

I thank all the great folks at the Aaron M. Priest Literary Agency, as well as a fine team at HarperCollins, UK: Sarah Hodgson, Anne O'Brien, and the marketing staff behind the scenes. I also wish to acknowledge Dr Martha Stout and Ms Barbara Bentley, whose respective books *The Sociopath Next Door* and *A Dance with the Devil: A True Story of Marriage to a Psychopath* started a line of thought that became this book.

1

"*It sounds like a helluva movie,*" David Letterman was saying to the popular movie actor. "*Great cast. . .*"

Gregory leaned toward the foot-square mirror propped against the DVD player beside the television. The actor was performing the most complex series of faces Gregory had ever attempted. He reset the DVD to seconds before the faces began, when David Letterman asked his guest – who had a wife and three small children – about a rumored affair with his latest co-star.

"*I guess I'd be remiss in my hostly duties if I didn't ask about your relationship with your lovely co-star, Maria Glassier. You guys shared, uh, a love scene or two, right?*"

The audience gasped, tittered, awaited the reply. Gregory pressed Play on the machine. The actor's faces began. . .

Face one: the actor's eyes popped wide. Gregory replicated the face in the mirror set atop the player. But this was a simple face he called *Sudden Surprise #3* and employed dozens of times a week.

Face number two started, eyes moving side to side, rising at the corners as if swinging on pendulums, the mouth dropping open. Gregory tapped Pause. It was a difficult move, the eyes wanting to stutter instead of glide. And moving eyes couldn't be followed in the mirror. But he'd practiced into a video camera until satisfied, so he trusted the face.

The last face was the toughest: four separate actions, but Gregory had deconstructed the components and mastered each. Today was about flow. Gregory felt his intestines squirming and reached to the floor for the bottle of Pepto-Bismol. He drank and restarted the player. The actor's lips tightened, eyes rolling heavenward, eyebrows flicking, the head cocking to a thirty-degree angle.

Gregory's first attempts felt ragged; the head-cock started before the lip-tightening, or he forgot the eyebrow lift after the eye-roll. Gregory's jaw tightened in exasperation. The food in his guts turned into cramps and sour, flatulent gas. He smelled the ugly vapor from his bowels and began to shake in his chair, angered by failure. . .

Do Relaxed Face #1, he told himself. *Then do Quiet Face.*

Gregory took a deep breath and performed faces that

relaxed him. His guts settled down. After a minute of visualizing, Gregory re-performed face three, nailing it five times in a row. Satisfied, he pressed Play.

The difficult faces were over. The actor's smile widened until it eclipsed every other feature on his face.

"*I'm afraid we're just good friends, Dave,*" the actor said.

The audience laughed and applauded. Gregory put his hand over the actor's lower face. Without the distraction of the tooth-bright smile and uplifted cheeks, the actor's eyes were points of angry fire. Gregory knew the actor wanted to grab Letterman's throat and rip it from his body, holding the wet and dangling esophagus aloft like a prize. The actor had ached to do this since Letterman asked the moronic question, but instead projected a meticulous series of facial expressions ending in a glittering smile.

He fooled everyone.

And one day, Gregory thought, if the actor is a careful planner, he can track down and kill Letterman, and no one will ever know.

He turned off the DVD player. Gregory's cell phone rang in his pocket and he pulled it out with irritation, saw the name EMA on the screen, her third call today. He stuck the phone back in his pocket and practiced facial moves as he left the room, its walls plastered with faces from magazine ads. Beneath each was a descriptor: *Happy #4, Not Pleased With Someone's Answer, New Car, Hurray!, I Love You #3* and over two hundred others.

He rested his finger on the light switch and turned his eyes to his faces.

He showed them *I'm Glad You're Here* and flicked out the light.

2

The coins in the cash-register drawer jingled as I slammed it shut. The bleached-blond iron-pumper on the customer side of the counter started to turn away, but spun back to the lottery tickets beside the register, his guayabera shirt open to display a stunning collection of gold chains around a ham-thick neck. I'd just rung up his purchase of a pack of Marlboros, a half-case of Miller Lite and a three-pack of Trojan condoms. The beer was selling briskly tonight, thanks to a display of discounted twelve-packs fronting the nearest aisle. Condoms weren't doing too bad either, but then it was Saturday night.

Ham Neck tapped the ticket dispenser. "Gimme four Hot Odds scratch-offs and a dozen Super Lottos."

"You couldn't think of that before I rang you up?"

His lamp-tanned face twisted into a snarl. "Here's how

it works, moron: I'm the customer, you're the clerk. I want something, you shut up and get it for me."

"*Stay calm, Carson*," said a voice in my head as I bit my tongue and peeled tickets from the dispenser. I glanced up and barely registered a skinny guy in a grubby denim jacket turning down the first aisle. Outside, a teen kid who'd just bought condoms and two Dr Peppers climbed into what had to be Daddy's white Yukon. The kid was grinning ear to ear, the girl looked uncertain.

Though it was forty minutes past midnight, outside the store it was as bright as high noon in the Sahara, a zillion watts lighting a dozen gasoline pumps on a half-acre of concrete. It was even brighter inside and on my first day I'd wondered if I needed sunscreen. There was an experienced manager on the shift – the three-hundred-sixty-pound Melvin Dobbs – but it was Mel's break and he'd booked to a nearby Waffle House to give his diabetes something to think about.

"C'mon, hurry up with those tickets," Ham Neck said. "I ain't got all night."

A shag-haired, net-hosed hooker by the coolers held up two forties of malt liquor.

"This all you got left of the Colt 45?"

"If that's what you see," I said, "that's what we got."

She shook her head. "How 'bout y'all stock this joint once inna while?"

I took Ham Neck's money for the lottery tickets. He expressed appreciation by telling me the floors were filthy and did I know how a mop worked?

"*Easy, Carson*," the voice said in my head.

Monitors from the security cameras sat to the right of the clerk station, two cameras inside, two outside. One was panning past the coolers and I saw the hooker opening her outsized purse, ready to drop a forty into it.

"Don't even think about it, lady," I yelled. She scowled and set the bottle back in the cooler. A seventyish black man in a blue porkpie hat was at the grill station, nodding at wrinkled brown hot dogs spinning on heated rollers.

"How long these weenies been cookin'?" he said.

I feigned uncertainty. "What year was the Crimean War?"

"The hell's that mean?"

"*Carson*," said the voice in my head. "*Be nice.*"

"About four hours," I said.

"Can I get a discount cuz they're so old?"

It was my second Saturday as a clerk working the midnight-to-morning shift. In the past six weeks there had been three Saturday-night convenience-store robberies, two ending in deaths. The third clerk was comatose, likely to remain that way. The C-stores had been just off I-10 on Mobile's southwest side. This was the only one in the quadrant that hadn't been robbed. My partner, Harry Nautilus, and I had judged it ripe for a hit.

"What about these weenies?" the porkpie-hat guy bayed. "They too old to be full price."

I checked the outside monitors, seeing a gray van slide into the rear of the lot and disappear until it was picked

up on the second outside camera. It rolled into the shadows beside the dumpster.

"*Gray van*," said the voice in my head. "*Get cautious*." A gray van had been spotted near two of the three hold-ups. Whenever one pulled in, the voice in my head alerted me to be careful.

"You got ten seconds to get out the door," I told the old man. "But all the hot dogs you can grab in that time are free."

The guy gave me two beats of *are-you-for-real?* then started jamming hot dogs in his pockets.

"Hey," the hooker whined. "How 'bout me?"

"We're having a special on malt liquor, ma'am. Two for the price of none." I nodded toward the old guy. "But you gotta beat him out the door or the deal's off."

She grabbed the forties and booked, the old guy in her wake, two hot dogs in his mouth like pink cigars, four in each hand, a box of buns beneath his arm. Before the door closed it was caught in the hand of a petite brunette in her thirties: brown cargo pants, pink blouse, white running shoes. She saw me watching, waved and smiled and headed toward the snack aisle. She'd exited the gray van but my glance hadn't picked up any threat. There were a lot of gray vans on the road.

"*Check the customers*," the voice whispered. I did a head count. Exactly two people inside, me and the woman. The lot was empty. The woman came to the register with a bag of chips in one hand, flipping open a cheap cell with the other.

"Be a buck-eighty-seven," I said.

She pressed a button on her phone and opened a brown leather purse. Though the woman had looked fine from afar, up close I saw hair days from a washing. Half-moons of grit under chewed fingernails. Pupils so dilated I couldn't discern an eye color. I was moving my hand toward the weapon in the small of my back, beneath my uniform jacket, when I heard a shotgun rack behind me.

"Move and you're dead," a male voice said.

I froze as the woman across the counter pulled a black automatic from her purse. I knew the model: cheap Eastern-European manufacture with a trigger-pull so congenitally light it might fire if a mouse sneezed in the parking lot.

"Open the register," she said, pointing the weapon at my throat. "Now."

I nodded acquiescence and started tapping keys on the machine.

"Hold on," the voice behind me whispered. "Some asshole comin' in the door."

I looked up and saw Ham Neck returning, straight-arming the door open. "You gave me the wrong goddamn cigarettes," he snarled, waving the pack. "I told you menthol."

The woman slid her purse up to cover the pistol and stepped to the side. The guy at my back whispered, "Get the fucker gone or you're dead." The gunman slipped to the end of the counter and I grimaced. It was the guy

in the dirty denim jacket I'd noticed not five minutes ago. He must have waited in the restroom until the woman's cell-phone signal told him the store was empty of customers.

My first job was getting the big buffoon out the door. I grabbed as many packs of smokes as I could hold, threw them Ham Neck's way, one bouncing off his chin.

"They're free," I said. "Compensation for my mistake. Sorry. Goodbye."

"You trying to be a wise-ass?"

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "My mistake. Please, take your smokes and go."

But Ham Neck was one of those guys who look for slights. He strode toward me, one hand in a fist, the other thrust out and showing me the finger.

"Throw stuff at me? I oughta kick your goddamn—"

The man at the end of the counter whipped up a sawed-off twelve-gauge and fired. It sounded like a cannon. Ham Neck's finger and hand disappeared in a red mist. He fell to the floor screaming, arterial blood spurting from his stump. The woman pulled the Czech weapon for the kill-shot. I stepped between them.

"I can open the safe," I said, hands in the air. "There's maybe three hundred bucks in the register. There's at least six grand in the safe."

She looked to Shotgun Man and he must have assented. Her eyes were unhinged, one fixed on me, the other on some hellish inner vision.

"Do it," she said.

I nodded down at the moaning Ham Neck. "I gotta fix his arm."

"I'll kill you."

"It'll cost you over six thousand dollars."

Her knuckles whitened on the gun, the chemicals in her head about to reach full boil.

"I can cut the lights and close down," I reasoned. "We'll be alone."

Her eyes flicked to Shotgun Man. He thought about how many drugs six grand would buy and followed me to a panel behind the counter. I turned off every light outside and inside, leaving the glow from the coolers. Ham Neck was rolled in a ball and grunting as his stump painted the floor red. I could feel my gun against my back, but had two weapons trained on my head. No way to pull my piece.

I yanked a bungee cord from a display and snapped a tourniquet around Ham Neck's forearm. He was slipping into shock. *Move them to the front*, the voice in my head said. I spun and walked to the front door.

"Stop right there." The woman pointed the pistol at my forehead. It was shaking in her hand like a trapped bird.

"I have to lock the door," I said, pulling my car keys. "The safe won't open unless the front door is locked. You ever hear of an entry-securified safe before?"

The invention worked and she gestured me forward with the twitching muzzle of the nine.

"Wait," Shotgun Man said. "Someone's outside."

A big square black guy in a Hawaiian shirt had parked beside the air pump and was kneeling by the front tire of a dark sedan. He looked unsteady and kept dropping the air hose.

"Just some drunk putting air in his tires," I said, slipping my truck key into the lock and jiggling. I moved my hand back like I'd locked the door. Then pulled it open. "It's bent," I said, making a big deal of wiggling the door. "Some old lady banged her car into the door last week." I did the key-jiggle again. Opened the door.

"GET IT DONE!" the woman screamed.

I turned to Shotgun Man. "If we both pull from the inside I can slide the bolt."

He set the sawn-off on the counter and came to stand beside me. He smelled like an outhouse.

Shotgun Man looked to the woman. "He makes one wrong move, blow out his brains."

"On the count of three," I said. "Pull hard and I'll set the lock."

Shotgun Man gripped the door handle. I slid my key into the lock and shot a glance at the drunk at the pump. He was leaning against his vehicle and scratching his belly, apparently exhausted by his labors.

"One!" I said, loudly, taking a deep breath.

"Two!"

On three, I dove to the floor as glass exploded everywhere. Shotgun Man seemed to pirouette in slow motion, then hit the ground beside me. A half-beat later the woman's body slammed the floor as well, half her skull

gone. There was nothing to be done for either of them, but if there had been, I probably wouldn't have done it.

Two cop cruisers skidded into the lot. The black guy was standing beside the car with a gun in his hand, smoke drifting from the muzzle. He spoke into a small transceiver in his palm. "*Looks like your clerking career is over, Carson*," the voice in my head said. "*You OK?*"

I waved, pulled the tiny WiFi speaker from my ear, and ran to check on Ham Neck.