

An inverted pentagram, which is facing the ground instead of the heavens, represents independence, personal power, sexuality, and accomplishment. It is a rejection of Christianity's dominance over society and a reminder that you are in control over your fate.

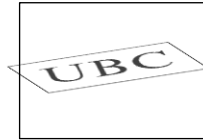
# **THE GAME**

BY

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### **Authors Note**

Each chapter of this book is written by a different author from all around the globe. The authors did not know each other and were only instructed to have continuity of the story and to use the main characters. They could take the story in any direction. I got the idea from camping when we used to sit around a campfire, and each tell part of a story with no preparation. A game that I thought was so brilliant, it should be taken it to the 'next level'. This book represents the creative work of a group of very talented people.

# *Chapter 1 — Rules of engagement*

**‘Mastering others is the strength, mastering yourself is the true power.’ — Lao Tzu.**

The bar Lucy enters is her favourite, casual yet elegant. Soft jazz music plays in the background. They have a fine selection of her favourite wines, one of her passions. She is surprised to find that there aren't any customers. As an FBI agent, Lucy has little time for socialising but tonight is a rare treat. She's meeting Xin, a friend who's a lawyer and makes a living out of representing organised crime bosses and their members. Lucy often jokes that she spends months catching bad guys and Xin spends just days letting them go. “Hi ya Xin”, Lucy says and goes to give her a peck on the cheek. Xin moves at the last minute and kisses Lucy fully on her mouth. Lucy doesn't flinch. “Xin!”, Lucy protests and laughs and pushes her back playfully. “What? I can't give the woman I love, a little love? That short gorgeous aqua blue dress perfectly matches your aqua blue eyes, I can see your alabaster athletic legs and can imagine the rest. I want to eat you alive”, Xin says with a mischievous smile, as she flicks her long black hair suggestively over her left ear. “I love you too, but not in that way. Which, by the way, I've been telling you for the last 10 years since we met at college”, Lucy says flashing a rueful smile with those perfect white teeth. “But don't think I haven't thought about it. And as I've said before, if I start batting for the other team, you'd be the first on my list!”. “Well, there's talking and doing, and I'm for the latter when it comes to you”, Xin says, and they both laugh. Xin, a Chinese American is so LA but has settled nicely into Seattle. Lucy often wonders if she only moved here just because Lucy did. Lucy is jealous of her long black hair and her slender, tanned athletic body. Xin is mad about Zuma and goes at every opportunity. She is flat-out sexy and is the kind of friend that you can tell anything to and she'll always have your back. Never judgmental

and loves you, warts, and all. There is sometimes a slight waft of incense from Xin. Lucy is never sure if it's her imagination or for real. The night progresses and they laugh and reminisce about cases they've both worked on (*albeit on opposing sides*). They are starting on their second bottle of a Napa Valley red when Lucy starts to feel weird, not drunk, but confused, and her vision becomes blurry. The room is spinning, and she feels like she's floating out of her body. It is a pleasant sensation, yet her body feels heavy. She tries to tell Xin that they have been drugged but can't form the words. It's like after a visit to the dentist but her whole face is numb. "Come on, home time for you. You're getting old, you never used to be such a lightweight.", Xin says as she hauls her friend out of her seat. She also is feeling weird and feels like she is walking through thick soup. They stumble out of the door onto the freezing, rainy street. They look like two drunk girls, making their way home. Outside the bar, a middle-aged man is watching the scene unfold from his black van, a huge wolfish grin on his face as if this is exactly as he had planned. He takes off his horn-rimmed glasses to polish them and looks at himself in the van's side mirror. His light brown hair is thinning. Just above the right-hand side of his top lip is a large mole, which he often touches. His brown eyes are resigned as if to tell the world, oh well, can't have it all. "Hey, ladies! Your chariot awaits", Mike grunts as he half guides them, and half carries them into the back of his van. He doesn't need to push them in. They both pass out. Dragging them to lie side by side, he handcuffs each of them and gags them as a precaution. They'll be out for hours after the amount of Rohypnol his cousin (the barman) had slipped into their drinks. Mike drives directly to the deserted dock that he scoped out days before. He pulls down his black baseball cap and being of medium height and build, he knows he would be unremarkable in a crowd. Not that there's anyone around. His plan was simply to dump Xin in the harbour and let her drown. One less lawyer in the world, who would care? But suddenly he thinks, that's too good for this bitch, and punches her in the face. She murmurs but hardly registers the pain. Closing the van doors, he sits on the dock and lights a cigarette. Thinking. The revenge of my

family, the ruination of his Practice that he spent his life building...*stop! There's no point going over this. It's time for action.* He throws his cigarette into the harbour. Fuck! He thinks and sees red. As he calms himself the thought of a long-suffering game that he has planned, is what these whores deserve. And they will play his game with no chance of survival unless they can outsmart him and this, he thinks will be the rules of engagement of 'The Game'. Xin and her crime buddies ruined his life. His family is dead. His bankruptcy. No, she'll pay and her suffering will be long and painful. Lucy, supposedly representing justice, failed him and his family with her botched investigation. She too deserves to suffer. Equally guilty. The best thing of all is the whole world can watch it for free. It'll be revenge for everyone who's lost it all. He searches both women finds their mobile phones and tosses them into the harbour. Setting off to the isolated barn where his brother-in-law lives, who's an ex-marine, his main occupation now is drinking beer and watching the sports channel. He was never the same after Afghanistan. Mike begins to laugh the maniacal laugh of one who has lost his mind and made a pact with the devil.

Xin wakes up in a barn with an ankle chain, the chain connected to a metal post at the centre of the barn. She is lying naked on a upside down Pentecost, dug into the barn floor which appears to be filled with a red sticky liquid. She dips her finger in it and realises it's blood. She screams and screams and can't stop screaming. At her feet is a bottle of water. A bucket. A packet of biscuits. Cameras everywhere. A giant TV showing her keeps changing camera angles. She realises it's a website but can't take in the details of her situation, she's in shock. This is too much for her mind to take it. She hears monks chanting but is unsure if it's real or imagined. Having studied Latin for fun she realises the chant is 'ardebit in ignem aeternum' (*burn in the eternal fire*). Suddenly, as if this nightmare couldn't get any worse, the candles of 12 hooded monks standing in the shadows around the barn magically light up but not enough to illuminate their faces. The monks don't move for minutes or perhaps it's an eternity. Their eyes set in their dark faces appear to be glowing red. Xin

smells wood smoke but sees no fire or smoke. One of the monks steps forward. He pulls out a golden blade from a sheath in his waist cord, she yanks fiercely at the chain in a vain effort to escape. He calmly kneels before her like a doctor and cuts a deep line across her lower thigh. The pain is excruciating, it feels like he's using a blow torch and she sees smoke rising from the wound. The blade has been heated and he inspects his work dispassionately and then draws a long line up her thigh. She realises it's an upside-down cross. She passes out.

The website switches to a blonde woman lying in a fetal position on a narrow dirt path. As if on cue, she wakes up in a misty forest at dawn. There is a narrow path leading in two directions and no sign of civilisation. She rubs her eyes, stretches, and tries to assemble her thoughts. Lucy doesn't recognise the forest but thinks it is beautiful, still but eerily quiet. For a moment she wonders if she lost her hearing and clicks her fingers. Now, that's stupid, she thinks and scolds herself. Obviously, she's not deaf. Her training kicks in and she's on her feet deciding to run downhill to find water. She still feels foggy and is incredibly thirsty. As she is about to set off, a few things suddenly dawn on her. One, she sees a camera on a tree pointing at her which tracks her as she moves. Two, she quickly concludes that she has been drugged and someone has changed her into an FBI tracksuit. But not just any tracksuit, it's hers. Three, there is a scroll on the path. She picks it up and quickly reads it. It says, *'A forest can be a dangerous place full of dangerous things. Things are not always what they seem. Some things look innocent enough but are deadly. Choose carefully which way you go on the path. One way leads to certain destruction. The other leads to possible salvation but most likely destruction. If you are thinking of leaving the path at any time, think again. There are mines and animal traps and all sorts of nasty surprises that await you.'* The odd thing about the scroll it appears to have been written on very old paper and in a very old style of writing in red ink or wait, is it blood? Ok, she thinks, 'game on'. Something catches her eye, it's a dark brown owl, watching as if wondering what she'll do. It is completely still like it's stuffed and put there as part of this sick set. "Hey! Which way should I go?"; she yells at the owl feeling stupid.



Nothing happens for a moment and then suddenly it takes flight, silently toward the dark forest.

‘Well, not my first choice but then again owls are supposed to be wise’, she thinks to herself and heads off at a slow jog. The black camera ominously swivels to follow her along the path.

As Mike watches both Xin and Lucy on his live streaming website simply titled, ‘The Game’ he thinks, ‘let the game begin’, and laughs like a hyena. The chat room is going crazy with people asking dumb questions like; ‘Is this for real?’. He looks at the number of site hits and can’t believe it’s gone over a million in less than a few minutes.

## *Chapter 2: Recollections*

The sunlight begins to dim behind the tall, shadowed trees. Pine trees, spruces, and birches seem to be stretching up like arrows into the sky. The now barely visible black trails are snaking through the underground. It's quiet. Suddenly, a chilly wind slips through leaves, cracking undergrowth with each of Lucy's steps. "Was that a wolf howling?" She stops for a moment.

The crepuscular animals of the forest begin to make their appearance. For them, it's time to hunt for some succulent prey. Surely, Lucy knew well the type of relationship a predator has with its prey. As an FBI agent, Lucy had played the part of a predator countless times. Right now, however, she felt more like a prey herself. "Rats! I wish I knew where I am, and where I am going," she thought, while rubbing her arms trying to warm herself up.

At night, the woods are an entirely different world. While during the day there is a breeze of magic and a fairytale feeling at times, the dark hours awaken mystery, and sometimes fear. Fear. This is something that Lucy has learned to fight; a battle she conquered a long time ago. Why was it then that she felt her old enemy was back? She felt as if fear was coming back to haunt her like a ghost that never quite leaves. Or, that was at least what the guide on the tour at that haunted castle Lucy visited once in Scotland said.

"I wish I had one of those emergency blankets dad forced me to pack once," Lucy thought, as the night was turning colder and colder. Her father, who had served in the military when he was young,

had given her a plethora of ‘essential items’ to add to her already heavy, overpacked backpack. Yet, that didn’t stop Lucy’s father from making sure his girl packed four jackets, including a thick, winter one. Just in case.

It was never clear to Lucy in case of what since she was not going to the North Pole or anything. Other bizarre items that Lucy recalled as ‘essential’ included a rather heavy and bulky metal camping cutlery kit in the style of a Swiss Army knife, a hand torch and a head torch, and two emergency blankets. Wouldn’t just one be enough? He was a military man. Preparedness was everything. As he said, “just in case.”

Lucy was eighteen at the time. It was late summer. She was embarking on her first-ever solo trip, far from home. She was going to taste freedom and independence for the first time. Despite her father’s apparent idea that Lucy’s trip was set to the high mountains away from any civilisation, she was going to Finland, to a guesthouse, where she wouldn’t need any torch or emergency blanket or camping cutlery kit. Much less a winter jacket in the land of the midnight sun!

Now, a few decades later, that first packing list came back to her mind. “What wouldn’t I give now for one of those emergency blankets?!” she cried while shivering. “Or that head torch to illuminate my way in this darkness, or the knife in that metal cutlery set Dad insisted me pack back then! I could defend myself if something or someone would attack me! Just in case, if here and now, I was the prey rather than the predator!” she lamented. “That camping lighter thing that Dad made me pack would be rather useful now to start a fire!” Lucy lamented as she tried to gather some tree leaves to improvise a softer surface on which to lie for a while.

She was utterly exhausted, thirsty, hungry, and cold. Lucy knew she needed to get some sleep, just a few hours to regain some of her strength. She needed a rested, focused mind to find a way out of the forest early in the morning. It was paramount to try to get some help to find Xin. At least, someone should know what happened in case they were killed. It was a dark thought, yet a possibility.

Her training in the FBI made this very clear, constantly. Lucy understood death was always a possibility. "I must stay focused," she thinks, knowing her very life depended on it. She lays on the bed of leaves she had gathered, curling herself into a fetal position and, unsuccessfully, tries to sleep.

Her thoughts are fixed on what she read on that scroll she found when first woke up in the forest. In particular, she was thinking about the mines and animal traps, and the drone CCTV cameras following her, watching her every move. That was one reason why Lucy decided to sort of camp for the night. To stay safe. As safe as she could be when playing someone else's game without knowing the rules.

Meanwhile, Mike keeps watching on his live streaming website. He is somehow puzzled about Lucy's actions. He was not expecting her to simply go to sleep as if she were in a girls' scouts' campsite. He was disappointed. "Are you trying to play mind games, Lucy?" he yells at the screen. The site hits over five million. The audience goes wild. "The Game is a success! " he screams. "And this is just the beginning."

In the morning, Lucy wakes up from what it felt like a few minutes of light sleep. “Oh, it was just a dream, rather, a nightmare!” she laughs. As she opens her blue eyes, she sees the black drone right in front of her face. She jumps up like a spring and starts to run as fast as she can. She turns her head and sees the drone following her. She falls into a bear trap. Lucy uses all her strength to free herself. She escapes but her left ankle is bleeding badly.

# *Chapter 3: ?*

**Coming soon...**