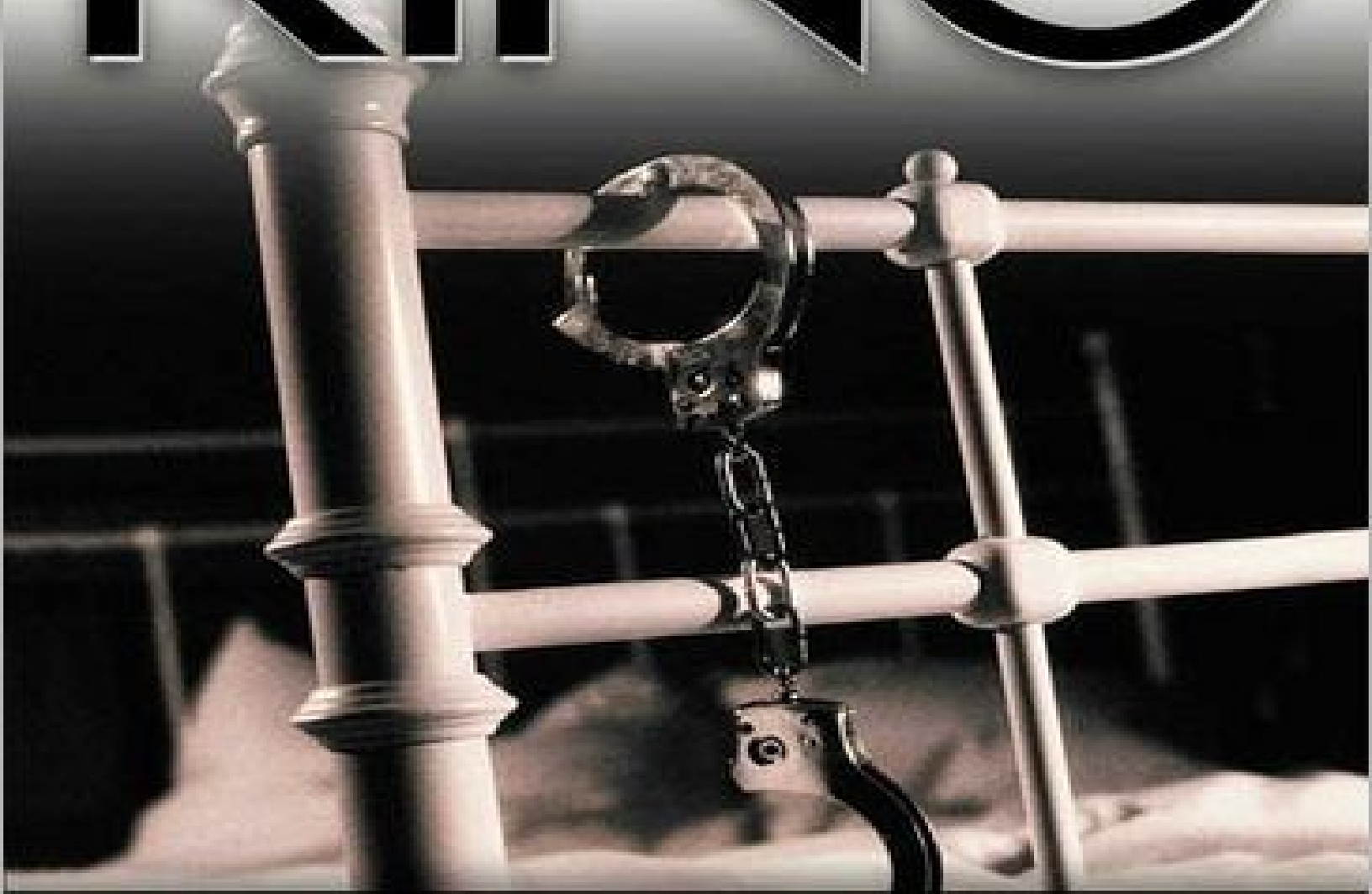




#1 BESTSELLER

STEPHEN KING



GERALD'S GAME

King, Stephen

Gerald's game.

1. Title

813.54 [F]

ISBN 0-340-57493-3

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First published in Great Britain 1992

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Published by Hodder and Stoughton,

a division of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd,

Mill Road, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 2YA.

Editorial Office: 47 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP.

Photoset by Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd,

Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

Mackays of Chatham PLC, Chatham, Kent

This book is dedicated, with love and admiration, to six good women:

Margaret Spruce Morehouse

Catherine Spruce Graves

Stephanie Spruce Leonard

Anne Spruce Labree

Tabitha Spruce King

Marcella Spruce

(Sadie) gathered herself together. No one could describe the scorn of her expression or the contemptuous hatred she put into her answer.

'You men! You filthy dirty pigs! You're all the same, all of you. Pigs! Pigs!'

—W. Somerset Maugham,

'Rain'

CHAPTER ONE

Jessie could hear the back door banging lightly, randomly, in the October breeze blowing around the house. The jamb always swelled in the fall and you really had to give the door a yank to shut it. This time they had forgotten. She thought of telling Gerald to go back and shut the door before they got too involved or that banging would drive her nuts. Then she thought how ridiculous that would be, given the current circumstances. It would ruin the whole mood.

What mood?

A good question, that. And as Gerald turned the hollow barrel of the key in the second lock, as she heard the minute click from above her left ear, she realized that, for her at least, the mood wasn't worth preserving. That was why she had noted the unlatched door in the first place, of course. For her, the sexual turn-on of the bondage games hadn't lasted long.

The same could not be said of Gerald, however. He was wearing only a pair of Jockey shorts now, and she didn't have to look as high as his face to see that his interest continued unabated.

This is stupid, she thought, but stupid wasn't the whole story, either. It was also a little scary. She didn't like to admit it, but there it was.

'Gerald, why don't we just forget this?'

He hesitated for a moment, frowning a little, then went on across the room to the dresser which stood to the left of the bathroom door. His face cleared as he went. She watched him from where she lay on the bed, her arms raised and splayed out, making her look a little like Fay Wray chained up and waiting for the great ape in *King Kong*. Her wrists had been secured

to the mahogany bed-posts with two sets of handcuffs. The chains gave each hand about six inches' worth of movement. Not much.

He put the keys on top of the bureau — two minute clicks, her ears seemed in exceptionally fine working order for a Wednesday afternoon — and then turned back to her. Over his head, sunripples from the lake danced and wavered on the bedroom's high white ceiling.

'What do you say? This has lost a lot of its charm for me.' *And it never had that much to begin with*, she did not add.

He grinned. He had a heavy, pink-skinned face below a narrow widow's peak of hair as black as a crow's wing, and that grin of his had always done something to her that she didn't much care for. She couldn't quite put her finger on what that something was, but —

Oh, sure you can. It makes him look stupid. You can practically see his IQ going down ten points for every inch that grin spreads. At its maximum width, your killer corporate lawyer of a husband looks like a janitor on work-release from the local mental institution.

That was cruel, but not entirely inaccurate. But how did you tell your husband of almost twenty years that every time he grinned he looked as if he were suffering from light mental retardation? The answer was simple, of course: you didn't. His smile was a different matter entirely. He had a lovely smile — she guessed it was that smile, so warm and good-humored, which had persuaded her to go out with him in the first place. It had reminded her of her father's smile when he told his family amusing things about his day as he sipped a before-dinner gin and tonic.

This wasn't the smile, though. This was the *grin* — a version of it he seemed to save just for these sessions. She had an idea that to Gerald, who was on the inside of it, the grin felt wolfish. Piratical, maybe. From her angle, however, lying here with her arms raised above her head and nothing on but a pair of bikini panties, it only looked stupid. No . . . *retarded*. He was, after all, no devil-may-care adventurer like the ones in the men's magazines over which he had spent the furious ejaculations of his lonely, overweight puberty; he was an attorney with a pink, too-large face

spreading below a widow's peak which was narrowing relentlessly toward total baldness. just an attorney with a hard-on poking the front of his undershorts out of shape. And only moderately out of shape, at that.

The size of his erection wasn't the important thing, though. The important thing was the grin. It hadn't changed a bit, and that meant Gerald hadn't taken her seriously. She was *supposed to* protest; after all, that was the game.

'Gerald? I mean it.'

The grin widened. A few more of his small, inoffensive attorney's teeth came into view; his IQ tumbled another twenty or thirty points. And he still wasn't hearing her.

Are you sure of that?

She was. She couldn't read him like a book — she supposed it took a lot more than seventeen years of marriage to get to that point — but she thought she usually had a pretty good idea of what was going through his head. She thought something would be seriously out of whack if she didn't.

If that's the truth, toots, how come he can't read you? How come he can't see this isn't just a new scene in the same old sex-farce?

Now it was her turn to frown slightly. She had always heard voices inside her head — she guessed everyone did, although people usually didn't talk about them, any more than they talked about their bowel functions — and most of them were old friends, as comfortable as bedroom slippers. This one, however, was new ... and there was nothing comfortable about it. It was a strong voice, one that sounded young and vigorous. It also sounded impatient. Now it spoke again, answering its own question.

It isn't that he can't read you; it's just that sometimes, toots, he doesn't want to.

'Gerald, really — I don't feel like it. Bring the keys back and unlock me. We'll do something else. I'll get on top, if you want. Or you can just lie

there with your hands behind your head and I'll do you, you know, the other way.'

Are you sure you want to do that? the new voice asked. *Are you really sure you want to have any sex with this man?*

Jessie closed her eyes, as if she could make the voice shut up by doing that. When she opened them again, Gerald was standing at the foot of the bed, the front of his shorts jutting like the prow of a ship. Well ... some kid's toy boat, maybe. His grin had widened further, exposing the last few teeth — the ones with the gold fillings — on both sides. She didn't just dislike that dumb grin, she realized; she despised it.

'I will let you up ... if you're very, very good. Can you be very, very good, Jessie?'

Corny, the new no-bullshit voice commented. *Très corny*.

He hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his underpants like some absurd gunslinger. The jockeys went down pretty fast once they got past his not-inconsiderable love handles. And there it was, exposed. Not the formidable engine of love she had first encountered as a teenager in the pages of *Fanny Hill* but something meek and pink and circumcised; five inches of completely unremarkable erection. Two or three years ago, on one of her infrequent trips to Boston, she had seen a movie called *The Belly of an Architect*. She thought, *Right. And now I'm looking at The Penis of an Attorney*. She had to bite the insides of her cheeks to keep from laughing. Laughing at this point would be impolitic.

An idea came to her then, and it killed any urge she'd had to laugh. It was this: he didn't know she was serious because for him, Jessie Mahout Burlingame, wife of Gerald, sister of Maddy and Will, daughter of Tom and Sally, mother of no one, was really not here at all. She had ceased to be here when the keys made their small, steely clicks in the locks of the handcuffs. The men's adventure magazines of Gerald's teenage years had been replaced by a pile of skin magazines in the bottom drawer of his desk, magazines in which women wearing pearls and nothing else knelt on bearskin rugs while men with sexual equipment that made Gerald's look

strictly HO-scale by comparison took them from behind. In the backs of these magazines, between the talk-dirty-to-me phone ads with their 900 numbers, were ads for inflatable women which were supposed to be anatomically correct — a bizarre concept if Jessie had ever encountered one. She thought of those air-filled dollies now, their pink skins, lineless cartoon bodies, and featureless faces, with a kind of revelatory amazement. It wasn't horror — not quite — but an intense light flashed on inside her, and the landscape it disclosed was certainly more frightening than this stupid game, or the fact that this time they were playing it in the summer house by the lake long after summer had run away for another year.

But none of it had affected her hearing in the slightest. Now it was a chainsaw she heard, snarling away in the woods at some considerable distance — as much as five miles, maybe. Closer by, out on the main body of Kashwakamak Lake, a loon tardy in starting its annual run south lifted its crazed cry into the blue October air. Closer still, somewhere here on the north shore, a dog barked. It was an ugly, ratcheting sound, but Jessie found it oddly comforting. It meant that someone else was up here, midweek in October or no. Otherwise there was just the sound of the door, loose as an old tooth in a rotted gum, slapping at the swollen jamb. She felt that if she had to listen to that for long, it would drive her crazy.

Gerald, now naked save for his spectacles, knelt on the bed and began crawling up toward her. His eyes were still gleaming.

She had an idea it was that gleam which had kept her playing the game long after her initial curiosity had been satisfied. It had been years since she'd seen that much heat in Gerald's gaze when he looked at her. She wasn't bad-looking — she'd managed to keep the weight off, and still had most of her figure — but Gerald's interest in her had waned just the same. She had an idea that the booze was partly to blame for that — he drank a hell of a lot more now than when they'd first been married — but she knew the booze wasn't all of it. What was the old saw about familiarity breeding contempt? That wasn't supposed to hold true for men and women in love, at least according to the Romantic poets she'd read in English Lit 101, but in the years since college she had discovered there were certain facts of life