



Game

By Anders de la Motte

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“A taut thriller that will leave the reader excited for the next book in the series” (*Kirkus Reviews*)—the first novel in a groundbreaking international thriller trilogy about a deadly game that blurs the line between reality and fiction.

One Sunday morning after a long night of partying, Henrik “HP” Pettersson, a slacker with a lot of ego and very little impulse control, finds a cell phone of an unfamiliar make on a commuter train. Through insisting and slightly unnerving messages that refer to him by name, the phone invites him to play a game. HP accepts without hesitation.

The rules are that HP must complete tasks that range from childish pranks to criminal acts, as allocated by the mysterious Game Master. The Game starts out innocently enough and then becomes increasingly risky, threatening the safety of someone close to HP. He is determined to become a superstar, but when the dark and tragic secrets of his family’s past are at stake, HP must make a choice. Will he suffer the humiliation of defeat, or will the need to win push him to the limit—no matter the cost?

The first novel in a fast-paced and riveting trilogy, *Game* will leave you guessing. Follow the rules, and *everybody* gets hurt...

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Game By Anders de la Motte Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #2371081 in Books
- Published on: 2014-07-22
- Released on: 2014-07-22
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.75" h x 1.10" w x 4.13" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 400 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Anders de la Motte is the author of *Game*, *Buzz*, and *Bubble*. He has worked as a police officer and the director of security at one of the world's largest IT companies. He now works as an international security consultant in addition to being Sweden's most exciting and innovative new thriller writer.

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Game

1

WANNA PLAY A GAME?

THE TEXT FLASHED up on the screen for the umpteenth time, and for the umpteenth time HP clicked it away in irritation. No, he didn't want to play any bloody game; all he wanted to do was figure out how the cell phone in his hand worked, and whether it was possible to do anything as simple as make a phone call with it?

The commuter train from Märsta, early July, heading toward the city.

Almost thirty degrees, his top sticking to his back, his mouth already dry. Predictably, he was out of cigarettes, and the only consolation was the breeze generated by the speed of the train, forcing its way through the pathetic little ventilation window above his head.

He sniffed his T-shirt a couple of times, then checked his breath. The results were pretty much as expected. A road game, hangover, and the smell of something rotting in his mouth. Yeehaa! An almost perfect Sunday morning, if it weren't for the fact that it was actually Thursday morning and he should have been at work two hours ago. So much for that period of probation.

But so what?!

It was only a crap McJob anyway, a bunch of assholes with a fully paid-up jerk in charge.

It's important to be one of the team, Pettersson. Yeah, right! Like he was going to hum "Kumbayah" and play team-building games with a load of losers. The only reason he was there was so he could make a new claim for unemployment benefit afterward.

Suck my ass, mofos!

He had noticed it shortly after the train left Rosersberg. A small, silver-colored object on the seat on the other side of the aisle. Someone had been sitting there a minute ago but had got off and the train was already moving again. So there was no point waving and shouting about it now, if he was seriously considering Doing the Right Thing.

As if . . . !

Anyway, everyone had a responsibility to look after their own damn stuff, didn't they?

So he glanced quickly around instead, looking for security cameras with a practiced eye, and once he'd concluded that the carriage was too old to have any, he changed seats so he could examine his find at leisure.

A cell phone, just as he had thought, and his morning suddenly got a bit better.

One of those ones with a touch screen on the front instead of an old-fashioned keypad.

Sweet!

It was odd, but he couldn't find the manufacturer's name anywhere, but maybe the phone was so exclusive that there was no need for one? Unless the engraved lettering on the back was actually a brand name?

It said "128," in light-gray lettering slightly less than a centimeter high.

He couldn't remember ever hearing of a phone company with that name.

But what the hell . . .

It must be worth five hundred kronor or so from the Greek who dealt in stolen cells. The alternative was spending a couple of hundred disabling the IMEI code so the owner wouldn't be able to stop the thing working, then he could keep it for himself.

But that was hardly an option . . .

Last night had blown a definitive hole in his already overstretched finances. He'd had nothing in his account for ages, and he'd already used up all his other lifelines. But with a bit of hustling here and there he'd soon be back on his feet . . .

You could never keep someone like him down for long; the cell was living proof of that. He held the phone up to examine it more closely.

It was small and neat, hardly bigger than the palm of his hand, and the shell was made of brushed steel. A small hole in the back indicated that it was equipped with a camera, and at the top was a clumsy black clip, presumably so you could fasten it to your clothes. The clip was in marked contrast to the otherwise minimalist design, and he was about to see if he couldn't take it off when the screen suddenly came to life.

Wanna play a Game?

it asked, showing two icons for Yes and No.

HP started in surprise. In his comatose, hungover state he hadn't even checked if the phone was switched on.

Careless!

He touched his finger to the No icon, then tried to work out how to get the menu to appear. If he was lucky, he'd be able to use the phone for a few days until the owner managed to block it.

But instead of a normal Start menu, the phone just kept repeating the question, and now, as with growing irritation he clicked it away, goodness knew how many times later, he was on the verge of giving up.

Fucking shit phone!

He swallowed a couple of times in an attempt to stop himself throwing up. Fucking hangover; he ought to know better than to mix his drinks, and he was so desperate for a cigarette that he felt like he was going to explode. And as for that girl, Christ, she was a dog, but what could you expect if you went out on the pull in the burbs?

He'd made up some excuse about a hockey match he'd promised a friend he'd show up for and had made a quick exit when the morning sunlight mercilessly revealed the shortcomings of the previous evening's catch. To judge by the bitch's feeble protestations, the feeling had been pretty mutual. "Run, Forrest, run!"

But he wasn't really in any hurry to get back to Maria Trappgränd. A stop to see the Greek, some easy money that ought be enough for a hangover pizza and then a few beers at Kvarnen.

There was always space for that in the diary.

If he was lucky, there'd be enough left over for a bit of weed, because the cell was no standard design like the ones he sometimes happened to "chance" upon. Five hundred to a thousand kronor pure profit, all in all not a bad day, in spite of the hangover and the tropical heat.

The screen flashed again and his finger had almost gone automatically to the No icon before he noticed that this message was different.

Wanna play a Game, Henrik Pettersson?

Yes

No

HP stiffened in his seat.

What the fuck . . . ?

He glanced around quickly a few times. Was someone messing with him?

There were maybe ten, twelve other passengers spread out around the carriage, and apart from a mother with two hyperactive kids, almost all of them seemed to be in the same sluggish morning coma as him. Not one of them so much as glanced in his direction.

He checked the screen again. The same text. How the hell could the phone know his name?

He looked around but was left none the wiser. Then he clicked the button for No.

A new message flashed up immediately, this time in Swedish.

Are you really sure you don't want to play a Game, HP?

He almost flew out of his seat. What in the name of holy fuck was going on here?

He shut his eyes tight, took a couple of deep breaths, and regained control of his galloping hangover anxiety.

Just keep calm, he thought. You're a smart lad. And this isn't the fucking twilight zone.

Either this is Candid Camera or else one of your mates is mucking about with you. Probably the latter . . .

Mange was top of the list of suspects. An old friend from school, good with technical stuff, owned a computer shop, got furious about anyone disparaging his newfound Arab god, and he had a really sick sense of humor.

Yep, no doubt about it. This was one of Mange's sick jokes!

Relief spread through his body.

So, Mangelito.

It had been ages; HP had actually thought that getting married and his new religion had turned Mange soft, but the little bastard must have been biding his time for this masterstroke.

Now he just had to work out how it all fitted together, and then find a way to turn the joke back on Mange.

It was damn well thought out so far, he had to give the little floor kisser credit for that.

HP looked around once again.

Nine people in total in the carriage, twelve if he counted the young kids.

Three teenage girls, an alcoholic, two stereotypical Swedish men about the same age as him, somewhere around thirty. An old boy with a stick, a pretty decent girl of twenty-five or so with a ponytail and wearing running gear (it must have been the hangover that stopped him noticing her earlier), and finally the woman with the kids.

Whichever one of them Mange the Muslim had managed to recruit, they had to have some sort of electronic gizmo to be able to send the messages. Sadly, that didn't exactly make the list much shorter. Five of them were clicking on some sort of electronic gadget, and, if you counted the earplugs the alcoholic was wearing, at a push you could stretch the list of suspects to six.

His weary brain came to the conclusion that it was more the rule than the exception to mess about with a cell on the train, not just to send texts but to kill a few minutes with one of those stupid cell-phone games.

So, Einstein—not really much wiser!

His head was throbbing from the unexpected exertion, and his mouth was still bone-dry. Strangely enough, though, he did feel slightly more alert.

So what happened now?

How was he going to get his own back?

He decided to go along with the prank for a while, so first he pressed the No icon, then, when the question was repeated, the icon for Yes.

Oh yes, he'd play along with it for a while and pretend to be taken in, and the more he thought about it, the more he realized that this was actually pretty cool. A good way of passing time on a boring train journey.

“Fucking Mange.” He grinned, before a new message appeared on the screen.

Welcome to the Game, HP!

Thanks! he thought, leaning back.

This was actually going to be interesting.

◆ ◆ ◆

Even before the wheels of the heavy vehicle had stopped, Rebecca Normén was out on the pavement. The heat that hit her was so intense that she wanted to get back into the cool of the car at once.

Three weeks of high summer in Sweden had made the streets so hot that the tarmac had started to stick to your shoes, and the bulletproof vest she was wearing under her shirt and jacket was hardly making things any better.

After quickly surveying the scene and deciding there was no danger, she opened the door and let out her charge, who had been waiting obediently in the backseat.

The guard on the door of the main government offices at Rosenbad was for once awake enough to open the door immediately, and a few moments later Sweden's minister for integration was safely inside the thick walls of the government building.

Rebecca had time for a quick coffee in the canteen and then a trip to the toilet before returning to her driver to check they were ready for the next move.

She looked at the time. Fourteen more minutes to wait, then a short walk along the quayside to the foreign ministry for a meeting with the minister, who, unlike her own charge, had a full team of bodyguards. At least two, usually more. A whole team, the way it should be.

“Personal protection coordinator” was her job title, presumably because “one-man bodyguard unit” didn't sound particularly reassuring. The minister for integration was deemed a suitably demanding job for someone with less than a year's experience as a bodyguard, at least in the opinion of her boss. Medium-to-low threat level, according to the latest analysis. Besides—and this may have been more significant—none of her older colleagues wanted the job of personal protection coordinator . . .

As she emerged from the main entrance she caught her driver quickly tossing his cigarette in the gutter next to the car.

Unprofessional, she thought with irritation, but what else did she expect?

Unlike her, he wasn't a proper bodyguard but a less skilled version intended to save the state money. A

chauffeur with a bit of extra training and a badly fitting bulletproof vest, employed by the transport unit of the Cabinet Office rather than the Security Police. Twenty years older than her and with obvious problems taking orders from someone younger, let alone a woman.

“Ten minutes,” she said curtly. “Stay here with the car until we get there.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if I drove to the foreign ministry now? It’s usually a hell of job finding anywhere to park there.”

His objection was predictable. The driver, Bengt, his name was, had decided on principle to have some sort of opinion about everything she said. There was a hint of “Listen, young lady . . .” in every sentence he uttered.

As if age and gender automatically made him an expert at protecting people.

Clearly his one week of training hadn’t taught him that backward was safe, but that forward was unknown territory and therefore higher risk. Idiot!

“You’ll wait here until I tell you to drive over!” she snapped, without bothering to explain her decision. “Any questions?”

“No, boss,” he replied, without making much effort to hide his irritation.

Why on earth was it so hard to get certain types of men to accept a woman as their boss?

Either they tried to get the better of you and take control, like Bengt here, or worse, made insinuations and comments about your sex life, or lack of one.

Offering you their services, whether or not they happened to be married . . . And if you were stupid enough to complain to your own boss you were soon out in the cold. She’d seen plenty of examples of that.

She never dated colleagues out of principle. Mixing your work and private life soon got way too complicated. Put simply: don’t shit on your own doorstep.

The fact was that she never actually dated anyone. Maybe dating itself was too complicated?

She shrugged to shake off the unwelcome thought. Right now her job was her priority.

Everything else could wait.

◆ ◆ ◆

No sooner had they gone ’round the corner of the government offices than she realized something was wrong. A minute ago, when she had checked out their route in advance, there had been three people leaning over the railing by the waters of Norrström. Two of them holding fishing rods, and the third dressed in fishing gear too, even if she couldn’t see a fishing rod. None of them had seemed to pose any great threat.

But when Rebecca and her charge, along with the minister’s constantly chattering assistant, approached the place where the three men were standing, she noticed a change in their body language. She automatically slid

her right hand inside her jacket, putting her thumb on the barrel of her pistol, and her fingers on the telescopic baton and police radio attached to her belt. She just had time to put a warning hand on her charge's right shoulder when it happened.

Two of the men spun around and took a couple of quick steps toward them. One of them unfolded some sort of poster that he held in front of him, while the second raised his hand to throw something.

"Sweden protects killers! Sweden protects killers!" the men screamed as they rushed toward the minister.

Rebecca reacted instantly. She pressed the alarm button on her radio and in one sweeping gesture she pulled the baton out of her belt, extended it to its full length, and brought it down through the middle of the intrusive poster. She felt the baton hit something hard and saw the attackers take a step back, momentarily off balance.

"Back to the car," she shouted at the minister for integration, as she pulled the woman behind her back. With the baton raised over her shoulder she backed away quickly toward the car, her hand still gripping the minister's upper arm.

"Victor five, we're under attack, repeat, we're under attack, get the car ready!" she yelled into the little microphone in her collar: it had started transmitting automatically when she pressed the alarm.

It would be at least three minutes until reinforcements arrived, probably nearer to five, she calculated rapidly. She could only hope that Bengt hadn't dozed off behind the wheel so they could make a quick getaway.

Just as they got back to the corner of the building their attackers made a new attempt to reach Rebecca and her charge. Something came flying through the air and she hit out at it automatically with her baton.

Rock, bottle, hand grenade? she managed to think before tepid liquid rained down on her face and upper body. Dear God, please don't let it be gasoline!

Finally, they were around the corner again and she looked quickly behind her for Bengt, hoping that he remembered enough of his minimal training to have opened the car doors for them.

But the turning circle where the car had been parked was empty.

"Fuck!" she hissed but was drowned out by the assistant's screams.

"Blood!" he cried, almost in falsetto. "Christ, I'm bleeding!"

Rebecca twisted her head again and suddenly realized she was having trouble seeing. A red fog was descending over her eyes and she rubbed the hand holding the baton across her nose.

No car, no Bengt, and their attackers right behind them. What to do?

Make a decision, Normén, make a decision now! her brain shrieked at her.

Backward known and secure, forward unknown and dangerous. But what to do if your escape route had suddenly been cut off? They didn't teach you that on the bodyguard course. Improvisation had never exactly been her strong point. She was close to panic.

“Over here!” she heard a voice shout.

The guard had opened the door wide and had taken up a position halfway between it and her. He’d drawn his baton and was staring at the corner where their attackers ought to have appeared by now.

With a couple of quick strides Rebecca half-pulled and half-shoved the minister for integration through the door that they had left just a few minutes before. She could still hear the assistant’s hysterical sobbing behind her but paid him no attention, concentrating on getting her charge to safety.

It wasn’t until several minutes later, after reinforcements had arrived and the situation had calmed down, that she realized that the whole of her upper body was covered in blood.

Users Review

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