

# CHILD'S PLAY

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# CHILD'S PLAY

AN ELLE HARRISON NOVEL

MERRY JONES

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*To Robin, Baille, and Neely*



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## CHAPTER ONE

I was the first one there.

The parking lot was empty, except for Stan's pickup truck. Stan was the custodian, tall, hair thinning, face pockmarked from long-ago acne. He moved silently, popped out of closets and appeared in corners, prowled the halls armed with a mop or a broom. In fourteen years, I couldn't remember a single time when he'd looked me in the eye.

Wait—fourteen years? I'd been there that long? Faces of kids I'd taught swirled through my head. The oldest of them would now be, what? Twenty-one? Oh man. Soon I'd be one of those old schoolmarms teaching the kids of my former students, a permanent fixture of the school like the faded picture of George Washington mounted outside the principal's office. Hell, in a few months, I'd be forty. A middle-aged childless widow who taught second grade over and over again, year after year, repeating the cycle like a hamster on its wheel.

Which reminded me: I had to pick up new hamsters. Tragically, last year's hadn't made it through the summer.

I told myself to stop dawdling. I had a classroom to organize, cubbies to decorate. On Monday, just three days from now, twenty-three glowing faces would show up for the first day of school, and I had to be ready. I climbed out of the car, pulled a box of supplies from the trunk, started for the building. And stopped.

My heart did triple time, as if responding to danger. But there was no danger. What alarmed me, what sent my heart racing was the school itself. But why? Did it look different? Had the windows been replaced, or the doors? Nothing looked new, but something seemed altered. Off balance. The place didn't look like an elementary school. It looked like a giant factory. A prison.

God, no. It didn't look like any of those things. The school was the same as it had always been, just a big brick building. It seemed cold and stark simply because it was unadorned by throngs of children. Except for Wi-Fi, Logan Elementary hadn't changed in fifty years, unless you counted several new layers of soot on the bricks.

I stood in the parking lot, observing the school, seeing it fresh. I'd never paid much attention to it before. When it was filled with students, the building itself became all but invisible, just a structure, a backdrop. But now, empty, it was unable to hide behind the children, the smells of sunshine and peanut butter sandwiches, the sounds of chatter and small shoes pounding Stanley's waxed tiles. The building stood exposed. I watched it, felt it watching me back.

Threatening.

Seriously, what was wrong with me? The school was neither watching nor threatening me. It was a benign pile of bricks and steel. I was wasting time, needed to go in and get to work.

But I didn't take a single step.

*Go on*, I told myself. What was I afraid of? Empty halls, vacant rooms? Blank walls?

For a long moment, I stood motionless, eyes fixed on the façade. The carved letters: Logan School. The heavy double doors. The dark windows. Maybe I'd wait a while before going inside. Becky would arrive soon, after she picked up her classroom aquarium.

Other teachers would show up, too. I could go in with them, blend safely into their commotion. I hefted the box, turned back to the car.

But no, what was I doing? I didn't want to wait. I'd come early so I could get work done without interruption or distraction before the others arrived. The school wasn't daring me, nor was I sensing some impending tragedy. I was just jittery about starting a new year.

I turned around again, faced its faded brown bricks. I steeled my shoulders, took a breath, and started across the parking lot. With a reverberating metallic clank, the main doors flew open. Reflexively, I stepped back, half expecting a burst of flames or gunfire. Instead, Stan emerged. For the first time in fourteen years, I was glad to see him. Stan surveyed the parking lot, hitched up his pants. Looked in my direction. He didn't wave or nod a greeting, didn't follow social conventions. Even so, his presence grounded me, felt familiar. I took a breath, reminded myself that the school was just a school. That I was prone to mental wandering and embellishing. And that children would stream into my classroom in just three days, whether I was ready or not.

\* \* \*

The hallways were still unlit. I hurried along the long, dark corridor, hearing only my breath and my own rapid steps until at last I came to room 2B. My room. Inside, I turned on the lights, closed the door, and worked nonstop all day, not joining colleagues for lunch, not taking breaks to chat. When Becky came by with Joyce, it was already after three.

Becky, one of my best friends, was Logan School's kindergarten teacher. Short, warm, honey-voiced, and bosomy, she was a

walking, talking hug. Children and puppies were helplessly drawn to her. So were men.

Joyce Huff, on the other hand, was my nemesis. She taught the other second-grade class. Except for one year when she'd filled in for a fifth-grade teacher on maternity leave, she'd been teaching second grade since the *Mayflower* landed, and she thoroughly disapproved of my teaching style. Her pale-tan hair was fastened in its customary old-fashioned beehive. Her smile, like her skin and posture, was tight. She stepped into my classroom, lost her smile, and raised a hand to her mouth, actually swooning.

I followed her gaze to my "Wonder Work" bulletin board, twenty-three sections in varied neon colors, one for each student's best assignments.

"My God," Joyce finally spoke. "Was there a Crayola explosion in here?"

I smiled. If Joyce didn't like it, it must be good.

"It's very colorful." Becky gawked.

The room was vibrant, yes. Each zone—Art and Writing, Reading, Tech, and Science—was identified by a large bright overhead mobile. Each bulletin board display radiated a medley of tones. Shelves contained glowing colored baskets. And each desk was labeled with a student's name in a rainbow of vinyl letters.

Becky didn't say anything, just looked around.

Bright colors were stimulating. What was the problem?

"Sweetie." Joyce called other people "sweetie" and "darling," as if she were a wise adult and we were all children. "I know you're a free thinker and you intend well, but you've . . ." She paused to purse her lips. "Sometimes you've got to follow the rules."

Rules? "Sorry?"

"We're dealing with second graders, Elle, darling. At their age, children are sensitive, struggling to make sense of the larger world.

They need their classroom to be an organized haven, a safe, soothing, structured place in which they can relax and learn.”

I looked at Becky, but she backed off, sank into the chair at my desk. Not getting involved.

No problem. I could deal with Joyce on my own. “My classroom is very well organized, thank you, Joyce. It’s also energetic and stimulating.” Joyce fancied herself the Martha Stewart of second-grade teachers. A self-proclaimed expert, the maven of oilcloth and doilies, her classroom featured monochrome pastel bulletin boards with matching fabric borders. Everything was consistent in size, color, and texture. Repetitive. Predictable. Mind numbingly boring.

“I’m only thinking of your sweet little seven-year-olds,” she went on. “They need order and calm. The security of regular patterns. Look around. It’s helter-skelter in here.”

I bit my lip so I wouldn’t lose my temper. “You and I have different styles, Joyce. So far, my students have done fine.”

“But you have every color in creation, clashing and battling for attention. You have moving pieces. Incongruent shapes. There’s no thematic thread in your design, no comfort in your color scheme. In fact, dear, you have no color scheme. The room has no focal point—”

“Elle?” Becky interrupted, lifted a printout off my desk. “You didn’t tell me Seth Evans is in your class.”

Joyce and I turned to her.

“Yeah,” I said. “He completes the set.”

“Who’s Seth Evans?” Joyce asked.

“Ty Evans? Seth’s his baby brother,” Becky told her.

Joyce’s eyes widened. “Oh my.”

Like Becky, I’d taught Ty Evans and his younger sister, Katie. Now, I’d teach their little brother, too. I’d treat Seth the same as

the other students. I picked up a marker, began tracing letters for a poster board. Eventually, it would be titled, “Mrs. Harrison’s Superstars,” decorated with the children’s glowing names glued onto colored stars.

“He’s out,” Becky said.

“What?” I asked.

“Ty,” she answered.

“Out?” Joyce grabbed the chain holding her reading glasses. “He is? So soon?”

I kept tracing.

“I saw it in the paper the other day. He turned twenty-one, so they sprung him.”

They sprung him? I looked up and smiled at Becky, her attempt at talking gangsta.

“So what did he serve, five or six years?” Joyce frowned. “They call that justice?”

I pictured Ty, a skinny, scrappy second-grader, knees scuffed, hair unkempt. Acting tough, picking fights, taunting other kids, making them cry. How many times had I tried to meet with his parents? His father never showed. His mother, Rose, came reeking of eau de booze. I could still see her, a small, bone-thin woman with leathery skin and inch-long dark roots, crimson glue-on nails, a broken front tooth. She’d insisted that her son was a good boy, that the other kids must be singling him out, lying about him.

I’d wondered about her tooth, how she’d broken it. And the thick makeup under her eye looked kind of green. Was it masking a bruise? I’d asked her if Ty had ever been exposed to violence, and she’d denied it so vehemently that I suspected his bullying behavior mimicked what went on at home. I’d recommended that Ty get counseling, brought Rose to talk to Mrs. Marshall, the principal. But without clear evidence that he was being abused,

there wasn't much we could do. Ty kept on bullying and getting suspended. Years later, when I heard he'd been arrested, I was sorry but not surprised.

Truth was, I'd let him down. So had his mother, his other teachers, Mrs. Marshall—every adult in his life. We'd let him slide, passing him and his troubles along year after year, until finally, at the age of fourteen, Ty had grabbed a knife.

I pictured his father's blood pooling on a linoleum floor. Ty, standing beside him, watching it spread. Had he been relieved? Shocked? Sorry? Scared?

"Elle?" Becky nudged my arm.

Oh dear. I'd lost track of the conversation.

"You just pulled an Elle," she whispered.

Damn. "Pulling an Elle" was the cutesy term my friends had for my mental wanderings. Actually, those wanderings were anything but cute. They were a symptom of what a shrink diagnosed as a dissociative disorder usually brought on by stress or intense emotion. In other words, when there was trouble, I escaped by slipping off into the safety of my mind. But until that day, I'd never "pulled an Elle" at school. So I was worried. Was my condition getting worse? Would I drift during class, abandoning the children? Would I have to quit teaching?

Joyce was still talking. "—but I had his sister, Katie, in class—that year I filled in for Jill Kaminsky and taught fifth. And that girl was an angel. Prettiest little thing."

"Elle and I taught her, too."

"So you know what I mean. She's a darling, yet her brother's a cold-blooded killer. Same family, opposite natures. Shows you that some children are just bad seed. Something rotten in their genes. Remember that boy in Myra Ellis' class? The one with the gerbils?"

“That was before our time,” Becky breathed.

“But you heard how he was burning them with matches and cutting their bellies open. Imagine. In fourth grade. His parents—well. On the surface, they were lovely people. They sent him to a psychiatrist, but you can bet that, wherever he is today, he’s still just as bad inside. You can’t change a person’s nature. I bet this Ty’s just the same as that boy.”

I blinked at her. To my knowledge, Ty had never tortured gerbils.

“I don’t know,” Becky said. “People can change.”

Joyce tsked. “You can’t change heredity, and mark my words, there’s a hereditary factor involved. I bet it’s sex-linked—you know, affecting only the Y chromosome. That would explain why Katie’s sweet as pie, not a bit like Ty. Either way, Elle, you better watch out for their brother. What’s his name again? Gabriel?”

Gabriel? Where had she gotten that?

“Seth,” Becky answered.

“I’m serious, sweetie. You have hamsters in here, don’t you? Keep an eye on that boy.”

“I’m not going to hold Seth responsible for someone else’s actions. Even his brother’s.”

“I agree,” Becky said. “I don’t think Elle should have preconceived notions about Seth.”

I resumed tracing an “S.”

“I didn’t say she should,” Joyce bristled. “But she’d be crazy not to watch him. After all, where’s his big brother, Ty, now? Living at home with the family? So the younger boy has a killer in his house? As his male role model? How is that even allowed?” Joyce shook her head, wrung her freckled hands. Held onto her reading glasses as she looked around the room. “And seriously, Elle, given



that boy's likely predispositions, you really should tone this room down. You don't want to overstimulate him—"

"Joyce, stop. Elle will handle it." Becky's hands were on her hips. "You don't even know Seth or Ty."

"No, but after teaching for almost thirty years, I know their like. Once in a while, maybe every six or seven years, you run into a child who's different."

"Every child is different," Becky countered.

"Not just different. Plain down-to-the-core bad. Soulless. Devoid of conscience. Capable of who knows what. And genetics has got to be part of it."

I shook my head. Refused to engage. Started a "U."

Becky rolled her eyes.

Joyce crossed her arms, raised her voice. "I'm right and you both know it. Take your boy Ty. The court said he was too young to be tried as an adult. But he wasn't too young to eviscerate his father. Where does that kind of brutality come from in someone so young? It's got to be inbred. In his genes."

Becky met my eyes, shook her head. "So, Elle. What about them Phillies?"

"You're changing the subject because you know I'm right."

Becky smiled at her. "I'd say it's time to call it a day. You heading out, Elle?"

She was giving me a chance to escape. But before I could respond, Joyce gave a harrumph and waved her pointer finger at us. "Okay, as usual, you two are trying to ignore me. But if you're smart, you'll think about what I've said. Trust me. Some people are bad from birth. Pretend otherwise at your own peril." With that, she stormed out of the room.

Becky stared after her. "You've been warned, Elle. You might have a second-grade psychopath."

“And you might have a kindergarten killer.”

I expected her to continue, come back with something like seven-year-old strangler, so I was trying to think of a retort, something better than kindergarten criminal. But Becky didn't continue. She frowned.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You're frowning about nothing?”

“No.”

I waited for her to continue, finished tracing an “R.”

“Just . . . What if Joyce's right? What if bad behavior is genetic?”

Was she serious? “Then there's nothing a teacher can do about it. We tell kids what the rules are and hope they'll follow them.” I put down the stencil. Reached for scissors.

“Why should they follow the rules when their teacher doesn't? ‘It's helter-skelter in here.’” Becky mimicked Joyce. Looked around the room, frowning. “Everything's clashing and competing for attention. You don't even have a focal point.”

I grinned. “Focal point? What the hell does that even mean?”

“No idea.”

We laughed. Becky looked around. “It really is bright in here, Elle.”

I tried to be objective. “Too much?”

“No,” she managed. “It's perfect.” Still laughing, she hugged me good-bye, reminded me of our weekend plans, and left me contemplating colored markers, letters, and star-shaped cutouts.

I worked another hour, finishing the Superstars sign, fending off images of Ty and his dead father. It was around four thirty when I closed my classroom door. On the way out, I noticed the lights on in the principal's office and stopped in to say hello, somehow not noticing the dark red smudges on the floor.

\* \* \*

Mrs. Marshall sat at her desk, arms at her side. Head tilted. Blouse drenched with blood.

I stopped breathing. The walls swayed and, for the briefest moment, Mrs. Marshall became Charlie, my late husband. Her office became our study. Just as he had two years before, Charlie sat on the sofa, a knife in his back. Dead. I grabbed the doorframe, bit my lip, and the flashback faded. Charlie vanished, but Mrs. Marshall remained, her head slumped to the side, exposing a deep gash in her neck. Her empty eyes gazed at blankness, and her cheeks oozed crimson clots. Wait—had her face been cut?

I didn't move closer to find out. Didn't move at all. My heart pummeled my ribs, adrenaline flooded my veins. I stood stunned, frozen, absorbing the sight. *Move*, I told myself. *Do something*. Finally, I did. I spun in a circle, looking for a killer, finding no one, just a dead elementary school principal with a mop of dyed dark curls and blood, lots of blood.

Okay. I knew what to do: call the police. Right. My phone was somewhere in my bag. I opened it, started digging. Remembered that there were landlines in the office. Phones on the desk. I dropped my bag, took two steps forward, reached for Mrs. Marshall's phone. Pushed a button for a dial tone, then 9-1-1.

When someone picked up, I told him who and where I was, what had happened. My voice sounded disconnected, far away. The operator said that police were on the way. That I should stay on the line with him until they arrived. But no. I hung up, wasn't comfortable staying there with Mrs. Marshall. Sarah Lorraine. Those were her names, not that I'd ever used either one. No one had, as far as I knew. No, staying there with her was way too intimate. Mrs. Marshall wouldn't want a staff member with her at

such a private moment. She didn't mix with staff, didn't warm up and chat or even celebrate birthdays. She kept everything coldly professional, rarely even smiled.

Oh God. Was that what was cut onto her face? A smile? I looked at her again, saw slits extending from her mouth to her ears. A wide grin carved onto her face?

I backed up, bumped into the door jamb, knelt to get my bag. Spun around and dashed out of the office into the lobby. Scanned the vacant seats, the "Welcome to Logan School" banner. Where was the killer? Was he still around, watching me? My skin itched. I had to get away, somewhere safe. The lobby was too open, exposed. The double doors—I could run outside. Leave. But the 911 operator had told me to stay. Did that mean stay inside? It made no sense. Why should I stay inside with a murderer? Why couldn't I think straight? Thinking was oddly difficult, taking too long. But I couldn't stay in the open lobby, vulnerable. I hurried up an empty hallway, along polished linoleum floors, under long fluorescent lights. I passed stairways and classroom doors, away from what I'd seen. Getting nowhere. Surrounded by silence.

Lots of silence.

What was I doing? The police would arrive and go to the lobby. I should stay where they could find me. I looked over my shoulder, saw no one. Started back.

I moved slowly, making no sound, and stood against the wall outside the lobby, watching, listening. Clutching my bag. Wait—what was that metallic clank? An old water pipe? What about that faint clicking, crackling? Shoes slapping the floor? I pressed against cinder blocks, teeth clenched, stomach knotted. The school was quiet, hollow, and the hollowness grew, echoed, roared so loudly that it drowned out the clamor of my breathing, my

heart pounding, my blood rushing. Was that a shadow or a flicker of the fluorescents? Was someone across the room? Watching me? Yes, I could feel it, the heat of his eyes.

Forget the 911 operator. I needed to get out of the building. I moved unsteadily toward the doors, certain that someone was behind me, sensing his body heat. Oh God. I should take off and full out run. Yes. On three. I took a breath. One. I readied myself, bent my knees slightly. Two. I recalled the morning, the school's odd sinister aura. Three. I started to run, and a hand clamped onto my shoulder. I smacked it and whirled around, yelling and swinging my bag, expecting to confront the killer.

And faced Stan Olsen.

\* \* \*

Stan didn't flinch when my bag struck his head. He eyed the floor as if it hadn't happened, mumbled. Something about not meaning to frighten me, about locking up. About security.

I backed away, readying my bag for another swing. Maybe he had a knife. Maybe he'd killed Mrs. Marshall. After all, he had motive. She'd berated him a thousand times in front of faculty, even more in front of students. Maybe she'd criticized him once too often.

Except that his hands weren't bloody. And his clothes had no red splatter.

Maybe while he'd stabbed her, he'd covered his shirt with a trash bag. Maybe worn work gloves.

"You're the last one." He ran a gnarled hand through his sparse hair and stepped toward me, eyes aimed at the floor to my left. "The rest are gone."

I kept stepping backwards, inching toward the doors. Where were the police? I was chilly, shivering. Alone with a possible killer.

“No.” My jaw was clenching. “Someone else is here.”

He frowned. “Who?”

“Mrs. Marshall.” Why had I said that?

“So late? It’s almost five.” He peered into the office. Saw her light. Stomped toward it, muttering. “She knows it’s still summer hours. Why’s she still here? How am I supposed to lock up?”

Did he really not know that she was dead?

“Stan, wait. Don’t go in there.”

He kept going. Maybe he was playing dumb to cover his crime.

“Mrs. Marshall is dead.”

He stopped, rotated slowly until he faced me. Didn’t say a word.

“Someone killed her.”

For a full second, his gaze actually flickered directly onto me. His eyebrows raised. Not surprised enough. Not upset or curious or scared. “For real?”

I shivered, nodded. “Yes.”

His eyes moved away. “Is there a mess?”

Did he think he’d have to clean it up? To Stan, was a murder the same as a kid throwing up or spilling milk?

There was a mess, but I didn’t say so. Instead, I told him we shouldn’t touch anything. “The police are on the way.”

“They’re coming now? So I guess I can’t lock up even though it’s already past time.” He headed out of the lobby, down the hall to his custodian’s closet.

As soon as he did, I ran out the front door to my car. Except for the principal’s car and Stan’s truck, it was alone in the lot. I turned on the engine, put on the heat, and sat there trying to get warm, not looking at the school. Afraid that it would grin.