The Daughter Game

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Published by Picador

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Chapter One

Jackson was melting. Anna played the flame-thrower up and down his body and watched him shrink like a wax model, his head disappearing into his neck and his outline sweating away in fat tears. Next she applied the flame, now a Bunsen burner, to his middle and grew a hole in his stomach. His top half fell off.

And she was home.

Putting down her bags of folders and the roll of sugar paper she'd carried up the drive, she opened the front door, then scooped everything up again to dump in the hall. Come back to it after dinner.

'Hello?'

No reply, but the answerphone was showing two messages. She pressed play and listened as she pulled her cardigan off. The house was stifling. Had the heating been on all day?

The moment when you left, said Jamie's voice, *was the second between two heartbeats. Beeeeep.*

I am the rose beneath the hammer – I am a rose, the rose, I am a rose beneath your hammer—

She left it playing and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on, sloshing water about needlessly, trying not to think about the day.

Jackson had flicked the *No Admittance* light on and come out from behind the desk – she'd known she was in trouble then. She closed the door herself and he'd leaned against the desk as though overwhelmed by the mighty burden of headship.

'Anna,' he said. 'I know you must be very busy today, setting the rooms up, and unpacking your books—'

She allowed herself a very slight nod.

'Yes. Well, I won't keep you long. So. Year Ten. A difficult year, tricky age, I mean. And one or two colourful characters this time round.'

She waited.

'And you do a marvellous job with them.'

He let his eyes flick to the window, to the horizon, so as to demonstrate sage consideration.

Prick, Anna was thinking. Sad fat prick.

'Because I wouldn't want you to think we didn't appreciate you. I know you're one of the most dedicated members of my staff. But I'm sure you can understand, after last term, why I'd want to have a little chat with you. Before we get too busy.'

Still she'd said nothing. Why should she give him any help?

'After last term . . .' Jackson said again, as if the phrase encompassed everything he needed to express.

'I thought that had been dealt with.'

'And it has, it has.' A sort of smile. 'Absolutely. But you and I know that pastoral tutors – all teachers, really – tread a fine line. I do myself. There's a lot goes on in the privacy of a Head's office. Sometimes I have very delicate situations to deal with, very delicate. And it's hard not to become overinvolved, the very process of learning can create a certain intimacy—'

'I never made him come to my house.'

Jackson held up his hand. 'This isn't about Adam Gardiner. As you said, that's over and done with. It is, isn't it?'

It bloody well is, Anna thought. She managed another nod. If she opened her mouth now, God knows what might come out.

'This is more a general chat, just to remind you of what we might call the professional parameters. Because it's easy to get drawn in, especially if you have a caring nature. Some of these children can be, what, manipulative. Teenagers are much more sophisticated these days than we were at that age.'

Anna fixed deliberately on the wall clock next to his head. He turned to see what she was looking at.

'Sorry,' she said, not sorry at allm, 'I have a departmental meeting at twelve.'

Jackson detached himself from the desk and came forward. For one awful moment she'd thought he was going to touch her.

'We've decided to give you a break from being a form tutor this year,' he said. 'Less work for you. Three nice easy terms, no pastoral reports or meetings to attend. You can concentrate entirely on your lessons. There.'

He walked past her and opened the door wide.

I did nothing wrong, she'd wanted to say. But Les was outside, holding a sheaf of papers and looking harassed. So she'd just walked out. That was – she checked her watch, 4.30 now – nearly five hours ago. Did other people get this memory loop thing? She opened the freezer, saw the damn pork steaks she'd intended for tea still in there. Jackson's face smiled on.

She brewed two coffees and climbed the stairs, stopping at the airing cupboard to switch the heating off. Even from the first landing she could hear Jamie's Bix Beiderbecke. That meant he'd finished working for the day, if he had ever started.

He was at the desk, anyway.

'Hello,' he said, as if it was a huge surprise to see her.

'Coffee.' Anna held the cup out to him and he rose to take it.

'Top girl.'

There were three empty mugs on the windowsill.

'Good day? Get much done?' She leaned in the doorway and scanned the room for evidence of industry. On the computer side, two noticeboards, a hand-drawn chart, two calendars, her NUT wall planner; also shelves of box files and two tables covered with wire trays. On the wall opposite the window a set of plastic drawers for stationery, and a floor-to-ceiling bookcase. Next to the door, a bed-settee covered in loose books; more than her life was worth to shift any of them. His systems. She'd read in one of the Sunday supplements about a Paperless Office: imagine.

'Bits and pieces. Research.' Jamie lifted one corner of a computer printout.

She'd tried to work in here herself when they first moved in but he said her presence interfered with his creativity. Anna's office area should have been the spare bedroom, but there wasn't much space and the table was taken up with the dolls' house. She did her marking in the lounge.

'I don't know how you can work in this temperature. It's boiling up here.'

'Is it?'

'Top floor's always the warmest room in the house. Heat rises.'

'You should've been a physics teacher.' He turned to the keyboard and typed something in. 'Sorry. While I remember. Oh, you haven't wiped the answerphone tape, have you?'

'As if.'

'I had this fantastic idea while I was out—'

She waited while he typed some more. Bent over the desk he looked such an academic, with his longish grey-blond hair and his open-necked shirt. Still attractive at fifty. He clicked on save and closed the screen down.

'That's nailed him. So, sorry, good day at school? Get everything done you wanted?'

Anna sighed. 'Jackson was a git. As usual.'

'Uneasy lies the head that wears a throne. Specifically gittish, or just generally?'

'I've been sacked from being a form tutor. He tried to sell it as a sabbatical, but basically I've been demoted.'

'Bad luck.' Jamie arched his eyebrows in sympathy. 'Less hassle, though.'

'That was his line. But I like having a form, it's nice. Oh, and I've got to take Nathan sodding Woods into my GCSE set.'

Nathan Woods: Your Nemesis, Mel used to say. Anna hadn't taught the boy for a year, but even so, on nights she couldn't sleep her mind sometimes played a Nathan slideshow: the wide-legged stance; the folded arms; the way he leant against the display boards, crushing paper; his grin. Once Anna had come across Nathan and Les in a corridor when the rest of the school was in assembly. Les, normally so cool, had been twitching with fury but Nathan had just looked bored. He was taller than Les; a lot taller than Anna. Jackson avoided him.

'Nathan the Bastard? I thought you'd shifted him onto someone else.'

'That's what Mel promised last term. She said Andrew could have him, it was his turn. But Mel's not there any more, and this new head of department, Chrissy—'

'The one with the rigid hair?'

'Yeah: she's decided to give Andrew all the A level Language, so his timetable's full.' Nathan taking someone's shoe and throwing it over the wall into the road; that had been in his very first week. Just a joke, Miss. 'It's not spectacular disobedience, he never does anything we can chuck him out for. It's low-level disruption, arrogance, continual abrasiveness. And I suspect he's much worse out of lessons. God only knows what it's like to be a pupil in his year.'

'Poor Anna,' said Jamie.

'I can handle him, I'm not *worried*. But he will be a damn nuisance.'

'You'll show him.'

'I wish Mel was still around.'

Mel. Gone all the way to Liverpool.

'Give her a ring tonight. She's probably had just as tough a day. Tougher. It's all new for her, remember, not just a couple of fresh faces in the department and a bunch of Year Sevens who'll wet themselves if you go boo. Anyway, you like it, really, all the argy-bargy, the pressure. You were like a lost soul over the holidays. Be honest, you couldn't wait to get back to school, could you?'

'You forgot to take the chops out again,' said Anna.

I am a bad wife, she wrote. *A good teacher but a bad wife. That is why, despite the brain-numbing meetings, the recycled assemblies, and Jackson, I would rather be here in school and not at home with Jamie.*

She paused to enjoy the quiet of the classroom for a few seconds. A few feet away, Nathan had his hand up. Already his shirt collar was pulled apart, his bead choker on show. Which was against the rules but not worth the confrontation; not now, with the others so immersed in writing. Anna shook her head at him and put her finger to her lips. To her relief, he only dropped his arm with a sigh.

Jamie thinks I am jealous of him, which is ironic. I am bloody angry with him, but not jealous.

Nathan was tapping his teeth with his biro, click-click,

click-click. She opened her mouth to say something, but at the same moment he took the pen away from his face and began scribbling earnestly. Through the wall she could hear a jolly French song, children's voices dragging behind it.

'I want you to write a letter,' she'd told them. 'To yourselves. As you'll be in ten months' time, at the end of the year. Its contents will be completely private, only you will ever read them. You'll need to move your desks apart, like an exam – no, when I've finished speaking – because I don't want you looking at anyone else's work but your own. And at the end of the twenty minutes you're going to put what you've written into an envelope and seal it up. I'll then take your letters away and lock them in a cupboard till next July.'

'You're not going to mark them?' Lin from the front row.

'I'm not going to see them at all. What you write will be entirely up to you. Entirely private.'

Glances round the room, smirks.

'Entirely honest.'

'She's going to take them in the staffroom and read them out.' That was Nathan.

'No one will see what you write, you have my promise. And I shall do one too, one of my own. I always do.'

Hands had gone up.

'How many words do you want? – Mrs Lloyd, can I say about my athletics training. – Is it OK if I use—'

She waved them quiet. 'I'll put some questions on the board to start you off. Which you choose to answer is up to you.' She wrote quickly across the whiteboard:

Who are the most important people in your life right now? Which material possessions do you most care about? What are your goals for the months ahead? What is your biggest secret? If you could change one aspect of your life, what would it be? What scares you? Are you looking forward to this year?

'Why are we doing it, Mrs Lloyd?' This was from Lin so she knew it was a genuine question and not cheek. 'What's the point in writing to yourself?'

'Because you can sometimes learn a lot from looking back, see how much progress you've made. A lot can happen in a year, you know.'

Lin nodded thoughtfully.

The class settled.

Anna wrote: *I want not to be having an affair any more. I want to be a different person. In ten months' time I want to have turned my life right round.* Then she took the Tippex and blotted it out, just in case. She felt a bit sick.

Across the room, Nathan smiled to himself. She could see even from here he was drawing a huge cannabis leaf.

At the end of the day, with the corridors quiet again, she sat in the staffroom going through the envelopes. You could tell a lot just from the outsides. Lin Keane had formally addressed hers, c/o the school, postcode and all. Sally Marsden had drawn a heart-shaped seal with *4 U* in the middle. Anna shuffled through to find Nathan's. *This envelope is BOOBY-TRAPPED if you try to open it you will get your fingers BLOWN OFF!!!*, he'd scrawled across the flap. She could make a good guess at the kind of things he'd written about.

She put the sheaf of envelopes into a cardboard wallet, labelled it, and slid it to the back of her locker. Somewhere under the folders of work was her own letter from last year, which she had not opened because she knew the kind of wishes and promises she'd made, and what had happened to them.

Outside the work annexe in the coffee area she could hear snippets of conversation: *Did you get down to St Remo in the end? – Yes, Cathy did very well in her exams – I can't believe Frankies' started nursery already!*

It was like a club, a society that she'd never learned to infiltrate. It wasn't that she disliked her colleagues, just that a lot of the time she couldn't think of what to say back to all the mumsy twitter. She knew some of the women thought she was cold.

Yes, a little girl, eight pounds four. She's sending a photo in for the board.

Anna went out of the staffroom when people brought babies in.

Chrissy poked her head round the door. 'Everything Ok?'

I should be the one asking that, thought Anna. 'Fine. And you?'

'Getting there!' Chrissy smiled and rolled her eyes. How did she make her hair go like that? Anna wondered what it would feel like to touch that crispy fringe, feel its mesh give under her fingers.

'And Nathan? Did he give you any trouble?'

'Not a peep.'

Chrissy gave a pleased tut that meant, There, I told you so.

But it's only lesson one, Anna wanted to say. They're all subdued at the start.

'So, first day over with. I hope you're not going to sit and mark all evening, Anna. Not on the first day back.'

No indeed, thought Anna. I'm off to meet my lover shortly.

'Jamie's busy this evening at his writing group. He has to be out early so it doesn't matter if I get back late.'

'Well, don't overdo it,' said Chrissy. 'I won't be staying tonight.' She gave a twisted wink, and disappeared.

'Has he sold any scripts yet?' asked Les, coming through the door with a box of files. 'When's he going to be on TV, that's what I want to know. ITV Drama Premiere, written by Jamie Lloyd. Then we can all boast that we know him.'

'He's trying something experimental,' said Anna, decorating the pages of *Walkabout* with mini-Post-its. 'He says television needs more than cops 'n' docs.'

'Get him to write a good comedy. There's nothing decent on, even after the watershed.'

'No.' She did a quick calculation on the bottom of an Oxford pad. Three weeks, plus homeworks, would get this book read and discussed. She paused and looked up. Les was staring at her.

'You all right, Anna?'

He seemed to have gone greyer over the summer, and more lined. She'd found out last term that he was only a year older than she was.

'Fine. Why?'

'You look really pale.'

'Do I? I'm fine.' She shrugged. 'Tired. You know.'

'God, if you feel like that now, at this stage, you'll be on your knees by Christmas.' He shook his head, mock-stern, and pushed the files onto a shelf above her head. 'Take it easy, girl.'

'I will.'

She'd told Jamie that she'd be staying late to get all the boards backed and rejig the stock cupboard. Sugar paper lay in inviting sheets across the far tables; in her pigeonhole were envelopes full of Scholastic invoices that had to be gone through, and ticked, and filed. Anna pushed her cuff aside to check her watch. Given the choice between meeting Russ and stamping new books, *Get Set for English* would have won hands down.

When Anna had decided to have an affair with Russ seven months back, she'd first arranged the rental of a caravan on a park outside Chester, then set up a direct debit to pay for it from an account Jamie didn't even know she had. If any communication ever came from the Halifax, Anna would drop it casually in the bin and call it junk mail, fishing it out later and clipping it into the back of a ring binder where she kept her Key Stage 3 worksheets. She'd had an extra copy of the key cut, bought new bedding, and spent some time cleaning the interior of the caravan and going round the windows with sealant. Only when she'd finished did she approach Russ.

One of the worst things about the place was the awful decor. She longed to smarten it up, but you don't personalize a place like that because you don't want to leave clues about. When Anna lay pinned to the bed by

Russ, she'd turn her head and let her eyes rest on a bobbly copper ashtray and a crappy shell owl. She always meant to move them, always forgot afterwards. 'Someone must have left these,' Russ had observed brightly when he first saw them, as though there were any other kind of explanation. She'd put her own curtains up, though; thick brown velvet ones from a second-hand shop. Impossible to see through. She'd have liked to hang a good watercolour above the bed.

It was ten minutes' drive from school, twenty from Russ's timber yard. Tonight Anna was first there, which gave her time to put the kettle on and go round quickly with a duster. Then she sat with the curtains drawn and ate a biscuit, and tried to read *The Times* that she'd filched from the staffroom.

At last she heard the car engine, silence, door slam, footsteps on gravel. An impatient scrabble at the door. Russ thought she was going to have sex with him tonight.

She called, 'Hi!' and he turned the handle like a thief, peering in. Oh, for God's sake, she wanted to say.

A smile of relief spread across his wide face. 'Oh, 'sgood to see you again. Jesus. We've got this new bloody undermanager, wanting to go through some orders for tomorrow, as if he's not paid to sort it out on his own.'

She let him embrace her but he must have sensed her stiffness because he faltered and took his arms away.

'All right? Hey?'

'Not really.'

'Oh, God.' His alarm was instant and electric.

'What's happened? Has someone said something? Does Jamie – Ruth—?'

'No. Calm down.'

He stepped back and she moved across to sit on the sofa.

'What, then? What?'

She'd decided before he came to make it quick. Straight to the point. What else was there to do?

'I think we should finish it.'

'Finish?'

'We need to end our affair.' Russ always needed things spelt out.

'Oh. God. No. No, Anna, no.'

She swivelled away from him and studied the interlocking squares pattern of the cushions. Russ was never a handsome man, but at his best he'd had a boyish charm which had been quite attractive. He'd inherited his mother's flushed and cherubic features while Jamie looked like his father, manly, classical. Russ suffered in hot weather, Jamie stayed cool.

'Don't make it difficult, Russ.'

To her dismay he lunged and dropped to his knees before her, grabbing her hands. From this position she could see how thin the hairs on his crown were. He'd be bald in five years.

'Anna, love, you can't just decide to stop like that. This is about both of us. Let's at least talk it through. What's the matter, what's changed? Is it something I've done? Is it Jamie?' His eyes bulged. He had not been expecting this.

'Nothing's the matter. It's time for – we need to wind

things up, we're not going anywhere and I'm not happy.' She nearly added 'with the deceit', but that would have been too provoking. She'd been all right with half a year's worth of deception, he'd say, justifiably. God, what a mess.

'*I* was happy. I don't get what's going on. You never said anything. What can I do?'

Get up, she wanted to say. 'Nothing.'

'You've decided?'

'Yes.'

He knelt back, sulking. After a moment he said, 'Don't you love me?'

She didn't answer.

'I know you never said, but I thought . . . I love *you*.'

'Sorry.'

'Shit.'

Russ shifted awkwardly then got to his feet, looked down at her. 'I still don't understand. Jamie's said something, hasn't he?'

'No. It's me. I'm not comfortable doing this any more.'

'But—' He waved his arm around the caravan. 'All this—?'

Stick a bomb under it as far as I'm concerned, thought Anna. 'The lease ends on March 1st. I'll hand back the keys then.'

'We could have another six months. Please. I know I can talk you round. You need these meetings. You said Jamie's so cold. What about that first time, and after you'd come back from Wales? You *cried*.'

She shook her head.

'What about me, Anna? What am I going to do?'

'Go home. Love Ruth.'

'I can't. Not that way, you know what she's like.'

Then go home to your kids and be damn grateful, she thought.

Suddenly he sank down next to her, embracing her hard, kissing her and pushing her back against the cushions. '*Please.*'

For a split second she wondered whether to go with it, just to shut him up. Then she felt nauseous and turned her head away from his wet mouth. His erection jutted into the top of her leg.

'It won't do. No. Stop, Russ. There's no point any more.'

At last he was angry, which was easier. 'No point? No fucking *point?*' He jerked his body upright, glared at her, and swept her newspaper off the table onto the floor. Nice one, Russ. That was about as violent as he could manage. And yet, when he stood up and grabbed his coat, she flinched, wondering whether he was going to take two strides across the room and hit her. Instead he wrenched the door open, slammed it behind him.

That was that over with, then.