

Jessie Keane – DIRTY GAME (Harper Collins Paperback)

PROLOGUE

Annie Bailey knew she was dying. She was in an ambulance, she knew that too. It was very bright. She could hear the siren, feel the motion. She had drifted in and out of consciousness several times since they had bundled her in here. She knew that someone was leaning over her, saying her name, clamping a mask to her face, telling her it was going to be all right, Annie. While someone behind him shook his head.

Yeah, she was dying all right.

She could taste blood and her face was wet with it. Couldn't seem to get her breath. Which was what you'd expect, if you'd been shot in the chest.

'You're all right, Annie, you're going to be fine,' said the medic.

Bullshit, she thought.

But she was okay with that because at least now there was no pain. They'd given her a shot of something, a sharp sting in her arm and suddenly she was floaty and hazy, but still aware. Aware of too-bright lights and the man bending over her telling her lies, aware when that same man turned and looked at his companion and nodded, aware that the other one moved to the front and said: 'Every red light's a green one, Steve.'

She closed her eyes. Too bright in here. But this seemed to cause the man agitation.

'Come on, Annie, look at me. My name's Simon. Look at me, can you see me, I'm right here.'

It was too bright in here. She kept her eyes closed, despite what he said. Stubborn as a mule, as always. Going her own way. Going, for sure.

So this is what it's like to die, thought Annie. Actually it wasn't too bad. No pain, anyway, not now. She gulped down a breath. It was difficult, breathing. She tasted blood again. Unpleasant. But now she couldn't feel the movement of the ambulance as it roared, tyres shrieking, siren screaming, through the night streets of London. Couldn't feel anything much, really, and that was good.

She was sinking into a warm cocoon. The medic's voice was fading.

'Fuck, she's flatlining,' she heard him say.

She felt a little movement then, someone doing something at her chest where the bullet had ripped through, severing flesh, exploding bone, but there was no pain now, no pain at all, and that was good.

She thought of Max, Ruthie and her mother, but there were no regrets now, it was too late for regrets. It was too late for anything because she was too busy dying. Her mind felt detached, disengaged from what was happening here. She let it wander back, to find the place where it had all begun for her.

Annie Bailey lay naked in the arms of Max Carter. They were in his bed in the flat over his club, the Palermo Lounge, and she could hear the sound of the star turn coming through the ceiling. A new rising star called Billy Fury. A good singer, but such silly names they had. That Heinz for example. What a joke. Dyed blond hair and a name taken straight from a tin of baked beans.

Max had left the small bedside light on while they had sex. He said that she'd been driving him mad and he wasn't going to have her in the dark when he could see her and enjoy her all the more.

She lay there, ecstatic, feeling the heat of his big hard body and stroking her fingers over the crisp damp curls on his chest. His right hand was flung over his waist. He had strong hands, a fighter's hands. On his index finger he wore a gold ring, engraved with Egyptian *cartouches* on either side of a square slab of *lapis lazuli*.

Annie stared at his curving nose, at the smoothly tanned skin, the gleaming thickness of his black hair, the flat brows above the long dense black sweep of his lashes. His eyes were closed. She could hardly keep from laughing out loud with triumph and joy.

She'd been to bed with Max Carter!

Annie had wanted Max from the first moment she'd set eyes on him. She knew she was only twenty and he was thirty, but she'd been instantly struck by his elegance, his poise, his presence, and had quickly developed a massive crush on him. She was a girl who could smell power and wealth through a four-foot concrete wall, and Max had both.

Well, he owned the club.

Three clubs, actually.

This, the Palermo Lounge, was the one his father had started out with. It was his favourite, and the one he frequented the most. But there was also the Shalimar, and the Blue Parrot. Max exuded an aura of danger and riches, and she loved that. It turned her on. And she had seen a reciprocal flicker of interest in his eyes, much as he might have tried to conceal it.

That flicker was all she needed.

She had set out to get Max Carter.

She looked at him again and shivered with the excitement of it. Then there came a pang of guilt, but she quickly suppressed that. No, she was going to relish this moment. Nothing was going to stop that.

He must have felt her shiver. He opened his eyes. His head turned. God, he had such beautiful eyes! They were a bright clear blue, very deep-set and penetrating. Those eyes seemed to look straight into her soul.

'You didn't mind, did you - that I was a virgin?' asked Annie.

Max shook his head, but truthfully she had surprised him. He had thought she was a right little tart, the way she'd come on to him, a dolly bird flashing her arse in those tiny mini skirts, showing off her long slender legs in those trendy white boots. Hanging around the club on the nights she knew he'd be there and giving him the glad eye even when her sister was there taking the punters' coats and hats.

She had some front.

But fuck it, she was a little beauty.

Max liked her big bouffant of long dark hair and her bootblack eyes. He liked her low, husky voice. She followed the fashion of putting that horrible pan stick on her mouth, making it look white, but he'd kissed all that away and now her lips were pink and she looked even more beautiful, rumped and warm. No doubt about it, Annie was a handful.

Strictly mistress material, he thought. Unlike her older sister.

His old Dad had given him just one piece of advice about women. He said: 'Son, marry a plain woman. Keep her well fucked and poorly shod, and she'll never give you a moment's trouble.'

Max knew his dad was right.

Ruthie was the sort a man married.

Annie was the sort he took to bed.

Max cupped one of Annie's full breasts in his hand. Annie shivered again, and arched her back as his mouth got to work there.

God, if Ruthie could see her now! Again she felt that tickle of guilt. Annie knew she shouldn't be here like this with Max, but the temptation had been irresistible.

All her life Annie had grown up in Ruthie's shadow. Ruthie was a good girl, home-loving and quiet, or so Mum always said. Mum favoured Ruthie, and always had. Annie had got used to that over the years, and she'd had no father to take her part when her more unruly nature had landed her in trouble.

Dad had left when the two girls were little, and Mum had worked like a slave, holding down three cleaning jobs, God knew how many catalogues and a job folding greetings cards that paid a princely

four shillings and sixpence for every thousand folded. Connie never tired of ranting on about all the sacrifices she'd made to bring her two girls up decent and to keep the family home going.

There had been no money for luxuries. It was enough that they had food on the table and could just about pay the rent. Well, sometimes. There were times when Connie had to send Annie to the door when the rent man called, to say that Mum was out and would settle with him next week. No good sending good-as-gold Ruthie, who would have choked on the bare-faced lie.

As part of their frugal existence, Annie had long since got used to wearing Ruthie's cast-offs. She often went to Carnaby Street to window shop on her days off, to drool over Chelsea Girl and Biba and Quant, just to stare longingly in shop windows. But she only worked in a corner shop, she couldn't afford new stuff. It was all mend and make do.

And then their ship had come in! Ruthie got a job in the Blue Parrot and hit the jackpot. One night she caught Max's eye, with her unremarkable looks and her reserved manner. Max started escorting Ruthie about town, taking her up West and lavishing money upon her. He moved her from the Blue Parrot to the Palermo, so he could keep a closer eye on her.

One unforgettable day, Max Carter - *the* Max Carter - had bought Ruthie an engagement ring. Their mum Connie had been in heaven. She said that once Max married Ruthie all their money problems would be over, Ruthie would see them all right.

But all Annie could see was the prospect of more hand-me-downs of Ruthie's. Ruthie the rich married lady would dole out cash and goods to her mother and sister, the poor relations.

Resentment festered in Annie's heart. Trust Ruthie to be at the front of the queue, getting a man like Max to marry her and never having to worry again where the next meal was coming from.

Annie had always fancied Max like mad. But Ruthie had hardly even noticed him. How could it be fair that Ruthie got the wedding ring, when Annie was the one who really wanted Max?

So Annie had set about getting him for herself. Just for once in her life, she would have something first, before demure ladylike Ruthie got her claws into it.

He was *such* a man.

Not a bit like his brother Jonjo, who was always out on the town and fooling around with different women

Nothing like his other brother, too-pretty Eddie, who it was rumored went out on Clapham Common in the evenings touting for young men. But if that was Eddie's bag then it was fine with her. After all, he wasn't murdering nobody, now was he?

Max, she was pleased to find, was all man. And she'd had him first, on the night before her sister was to marry him.

When many another man would be out on the town with his mates getting blotto, Max was here bedding her. Not that Max ever seemed to drink much, and he didn't like drunks around him. Drink made people loose-mouthed, she'd heard him say, and he wouldn't have that.

'This is lovely,' Annie sighed happily.

'Yes it is.' Max raised his head and smiled down into her eyes.

'You really don't mind that I was a virgin, do you?' she asked again, nuzzling her nose playfully against his.

'No,' said Max, caressing her cheek. 'It doesn't matter a bit. Because this is a one-off.'

Annie felt the smile freeze on her face. 'What?'

'You heard me, Annie love. This shouldn't have happened, and we both know it. But now it's done, and finished.'

Annie felt panic growing inside her. She hadn't known what to expect from tonight. She didn't know whether she thought Max would carry on seeing her covertly, or call off the big wedding that Ruthie had planned for tomorrow and announce that he was going to marry her instead. She had just aimed for this one night and believed that things would sort themselves out.

Oh, she had imagined various outcomes, played with visions of her walking up the aisle in white and Max waiting for her at the altar, of falling into bed with him all laughing and happy on their honeymoon. But the last thing she'd expected was what he'd just said.

'But Max,' she started, trying to sit up, her eyes wide with shock.

Max's hand on her face was suddenly hard and hurtful. He grabbed her chin and stared into her eyes.

'No buts,' he said flatly. 'This is it. Finished and forgotten. No-one's ever going to know about it. Clear?'

Annie nodded as best she could and he let her go. He patted her cheek. 'Good girl,' he said, and reached for a cigarette.

Annie lay staring at the ceiling, her face throbbing and her mind seething with resentment. So Ruthie won again. As always.

The phone rang and Max snatched it up.

'Jimmy. What kept you?'

Someone spoke. Max put his hand over the mouthpiece and looked at Annie. 'Go and get cleaned up, eh love?'

So she was dismissed. Had and then forgotten. Rage started to eat at her. Bastard! She threw back the covers and stormed from the bed, aware that he was watching her. Not that she cared. She was proud of her body. It was good, better than Ruthie's. Better than a lot of girls could hope for.

Annie went into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her. She could hear Billy Fury still singing away downstairs as she ran water into the sink to clean the blood off her thighs. She snatched up the flannel and started to wash. She could hear Max on the phone talking about some club or other. She blinked back stupid weak tears. She never cried. *Never.*

She turned the tap on harder to drown out the sound of his voice.

Max's business was best not known about.

The killer drove through the night and parked the car a mile away from the Tudor Club in Stoke Newington. Then the shadowy figure walked to the club and waited, cloaked in darkness. The killer was patient and could wait for hours, but this time wouldn't have to. The information was sound, the soundest you could get.

The killer felt the cold hard weight of the .38 Smith & Wesson and was reassured. The gun was familiar, like family.

The punters were coming out now. And it was fortuitous that Tory Delaney was – as usual – toward the back of the crowds and without a minder. The killer sneered at the man's arrogance. He would pay for it.

The figure followed Tory at a discreet distance as he went to his car, a flashy-looking Rover. When Tory had the key in the lock and there was no-one about, the killer stepped out of the shadows.

'Hello, Tory.'

Tory was fast on his feet. Always had been. You didn't have to paint Tory no pictures, and that made him dangerous.

Tory turned and suddenly there was a knife in his hand. He came at the interloper with the blade slashing. The killer felt the knife swish past, missing by an inch as Tory lunged, teeth bared like a madman.

The gun lifted and shot Tory three times in the chest. Tory dropped the knife and fell back over the bonnet of his car. He slid down, his face draining of blood, and landed on the tarmac.

The killer kicked the knife away from Tory's groping hand, then looked around to be certain no one was around. They would come soon, staff and management pouring out of the club to see what was going on. The noise would have alerted them. But there was a moment.

Just a moment.

'You,' gasped Tory, and his killer smiled.

One more shot was fired between Tory's eyebrows. Pink jelly spattered, brain and bone. Then at last Tory was still, staring sightlessly at the balmy evening sky.

No time to gloat.

The killer was already walking away, slipping the gun back into its oiled bag and then into a larger polythene container – *don't want any cordite on our coat pockets, now do we?* - then moving into deeper shadows as people started to appear at the door of the club, looking around to see what the noise had been about.

The killer walked away in darkness and strode out the mile back to the car, then got in, pleased with a job well done, and placed the gun in a concealed compartment under the passenger seat, removed the thick leather gloves and drove home.

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Later that same night Max Carter sat in his Surrey kitchen and cleaned and oiled his gun. While he was doing it, his kid brother Eddie came in and sat down at the kitchen table.

'Busy night?' asked Eddie.

'Fair,' said Max, carrying on with his work.

Max looked at Eddie. Eddie was queer as a fish, but he was a good kid and trustworthy. He liked to wear all those floral shirts and cords, and his mid-brown hair was over his collar, like that new group the Beatles wore theirs. Mum would have thrown a fit to see it.

But she was gone.

The bleakness filled Max again at the thought of that.

Gone forever.

'Where's Jonjo?' he asked Eddie.

Eddie made a face. 'Out with a new blonde.'

That cheered Max up a bit. Jonjo was good entertainment value, that was a fact. Jonjo and his fucking blondes. When Marilyn Monroe offered herself last year, Max almost thought that Jonjo would off himself too. Marilyn, to Jonjo, had been the ultimate.

Max couldn't see it himself. He preferred dark eyed brunettes. And Eddie preferred pretty young blokes, but so long as he didn't frighten the horses, so what?

Eddie was looking at the gun in his brother's hand.

'You did it then,' he said flatly.

Max paused and looked at Eddie square in the eye. Max's eyes were suddenly a chilly blue, like arctic ice.

'I did nothing.'

Eddie swallowed nervously. His lips quivered. 'Holy Christ,' he muttered.

Max replaced the gun in its oiled cloth and held it out to Eddie.

'Take it out and bury it,' he told Eddie. 'I don't want to know where.'

Eddie did as he was told. Max went into the lounge and put Mozart on the radiogram. He sat down with a brandy, feeling like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

'And where the fuck have you been?' Connie Bailey demanded of her daughter as Annie let herself in the front door of her mother's little terraced council house.

It was nearly dawn and one of Max's boys had just dropped her off at the end of the road. Annie silently cursed her mother's erratic sleeping habits. Connie was always trotting about in the night, making cups of tea and smoking fags, and that was in the quiet times. Now it was the day of the wedding, and with all the excitement Annie doubted that her mother had slept a wink.

Connie was perched on the bottom stair with a mug of tea and a cigarette. Annie looked at her with stark dislike and hoped it wasn't true that daughters turned into their mothers.

Connie was dirt-poor skinny, with a smoker's lined and yellowish skin. Her dry dyed-blond hair was up in the sponge rollers she always wore at night, and her candlewick dressing gown, once peach-coloured, had faded to dirty beige.

Oh God, Annie thought, I could do without this. She was still smarting from the fact that Max had barely bothered to say goodbye to her. Annie wondered if he'd had Ruthie yet, but she doubted it. Ruthie was the Virgin Princess. Ruthie was the sort that men took home to meet their mums. Ruthie had been presented to Queenie Carter over tea at Christmas, and when she had met with Queenie's approval, the marriage had been given the go-ahead.

Annie had never even met Queenie, although she had seen her about now and again with Max and his brothers. She'd never meet the imperious old woman now. She'd croaked back in the spring, heart attack or something.

There had been a lavish funeral on a rainy April day, a huge black fleet of Daimlers gliding through the East End behind the hearse. The pink carnations on either side of Queenie's coffin had spelt out MUM. The streets had been lined with silent, respectful watchers.

All the men had removed their hats.

Some of the women had cried.

The Carter family were held in high regard around this manor, and that day was the proof.

'I stopped at Kath's,' said Annie, closing the door behind her.

'You're a bloody liar,' said Connie flatly, snorting smoke from her pinched little nose. 'I spoke to Maureen two hours ago and she said that Kath was home by eleven, and she didn't have you with her. You've been up to no good.'

Annie let out an angry breath. 'I'm twenty, Mum, not ten. What I do is my business.'

'Not while you live under my roof,' snapped Connie. 'You've been out mucking around with some bloke or other.'

Annie stared at her mother. She ached to wipe that smug look off Connie's face by telling her that the *bloke* was Max Carter, who was marrying good-as-gold Ruthie today.

It would be quite a laugh, standing behind them both at the altar in her role as bridesmaid, looking at Max's broad, expensively suited shoulders and knowing that her scratch marks were still on them.

'What's going on?'

They both looked up. Ruthie was standing at the top of the stairs, yawning as she shrugged into her red dressing gown. Her mousy hair was rumped around her plain, placid face.

Ruthie wasn't bad looking, really.

There was a serenity about her.

But she didn't have Annie's incendiary beauty, and she didn't have that flirtatious spark that made men lose their heads and sometimes their hearts. Connie always said that Ruthie was her good little girl. She also said that Annie was trouble just like her father, always had been, always would be.

Annie had been hurt by that when she was little. For a while she had tried to be good like Ruthie, to prove her mother wrong, but then Dad had left so it was clear that the good-behaviour policy had got her nowhere. Bad behaviour got her a lot more attention. All right, it was a clout around the ear or bed without supper, but it was attention nevertheless, and she had to claw a little back from perfect Ruthie now and again, or go mad.

'Nothing's going on, sweetheart,' said Connie, and Annie's lip curled because even Connie's voice was different when she spoke to Ruthie. It was soft and gentle and soothing. When Connie spoke to Annie, her voice was harsh with dislike. 'Just Annie out on the tiles, hooking her pearly about for any lad that wants it.'

Now that was unfair. Sure, she went down the pub with her mates and up West sometimes when she was flush, and she flirted and danced and teased, but she'd never come across for a man until last night, and she wanted to tell her mother that but she couldn't.

Pride wouldn't let her.

'Oh Annie,' said Ruthie. 'I don't want you looking all washed out for the big day.'

'I won't,' said Annie tightly, pushing past Connie and running up the stairs. She paused in front of Ruthie. 'What time did you say we had to be at the hairdresser's?'

Ruthie rolled her eyes. 'Nine o'clock. I told you.'

'I forgot. I'll get washed up,' said Annie, and hurried into the bathroom.

She leaned on the sink and looked at her reflection. Her face was flushed, her dark eyes flashing with suppressed anger. She heard Ruthie go downstairs, heard their murmuring voices and knew what they were saying.

Poor Annie, Ruthie would say, she seems so lost.

Little tart, Connie would retort, if she isn't knocked up before Christmas I'll eat my hat.

Annie touched her belly thoughtfully. No, Max had been careful. An unplanned pregnancy would really put the cat among the pigeons. She thought back to how tender he had been at first, how sweet ... and then how dismissive. Had and then forgotten, she thought. Her first time, a special time with a special man. That's what it had been to her. To him, it had been nothing.

Nothing at all.

She felt tears prick her eyes again and blinked them back, hating the momentary weakness. *Dig deep and stand alone*, she told herself. She never cried. Even when her dad had left, she hadn't cried, even though she had missed him like mad. She had idolised her dad and he had called her his little princess, but he had left her all the same, left them all, without so much as a kiss-your-ass.

Annie had withdrawn into herself with the shock of his leaving, but Ruthie had cried for days and got lots of cuddles off Connie as a consequence. Annie was made of tougher stuff, and she knew it. You could only ever rely on yourself in this world, she knew that too. Hard lessons, but she had learned them well.

So what if Connie had cuffed her more often than cuddled her? She had learned to cope with that.

She would cope with this.