



TABLE  
*five*  
PREQUEL

THE  
*List*

Anna Cackler

# The List

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*~ A Table Five Prequel ~*

ANNA CACKLER



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Cover art by Anna Cackler

# The List

*A Table Five Prequel*

The man sat reading at the back of the bookstore, and Mae had long-since given up the pretense that she *wasn't* staring at him.

She leaned across the front counter, grateful for the bulky cash register that blocked most of her body from view. With a shake of her unruly, brown hair, she laid her head on her arm while she peered at him.

What difference did it make? It wasn't like he would notice. He hadn't looked up from his book in more than an hour.

He hadn't even bought that book. He'd brought it from home. What kind of a man brought his own books to a bookstore?

Ugh, the sexy kind.

The man was average height with a slim build, and he wore a well-fitting gray sweater that emphasized his figure. His angular face, often shadowed with five-o'clock stubble, was handsome enough, but his startling blue eyes caught Mae's attention like nothing else.

Those blue eyes focused exclusively on the crime drama in his hands, and no matter how much Mae willed it, he never looked up.

But that was probably for the best. Mae had no idea what she would do if he caught her staring. God, what if he got up and talked to her?

"What in the hell are you doing?"

Mae jumped and vaulted her body upright.

Her father, Jerry, had come to the front counter with an open cardboard box full of books to be inventoried. He was a bear of a man, tall and broad with hands the size of pot lids.

Mae had gotten her looks from her mother: short and curvy with too much brown hair and pale skin that turned pink in the chilly November wind.

“Did you melt?” he asked.

“No, Dad. I didn’t melt,” Mae said with feigned brightness. “I was staring at a guy, if you must know.”

“Thank god,” he said, stepping behind the counter with his box. “It’s about damn time.”

Mae scowled at her father. “It’s only been three months since I left Sam. And it’s not like I saw it coming.”

“I know, I know,” Jerry said. He disappeared into the back office.

“I’m grieving!”

“Well, stop it!” Jerry yelled back, causing Mae to glance across the bookshop to make sure the sexy man sitting at table five hadn’t heard.

“Dad, god. Lower your voice!”

“I’m serious!” he said in a less audible tone as he reappeared in the doorway without his box of books. “I know you were in love and everything. But that fucker cheated on you every which way from Sunday. You’re twenty-seven years old, and you’re living in your childhood bedroom. You need to get a life, sweetheart.”

Mae rolled her eyes in a spot-on emulation of the teenage-Mae that had lived in that bedroom a decade earlier. “I’m working on it!”

“No you’re not!” Jerry said with a knowing frown. “Have you started applying for jobs?”

Her father had started asking this question nearly two weeks ago, and every time she squirmed.

“I can’t yet. I have to take care of the store while you and Mom are on vacation, remember?”

“We’re going to be gone for less than two weeks, Mae,” Jerry said encouragingly.

“Haven’t you ever heard the phrase ‘Please specify a start date’?”

“I’m going to start applying as soon as you get back. That was always the plan.”

And that was the truth, though if Mae was being entirely honest with herself, this was little more than a tactic for procrastination. The thought of getting back out there, of putting herself up for rejection again, it made her sick.

Jerry grimaced at her. Despite the gruff words, he had always been a softy deep down. He was quickly losing steam, and Mae’s anxious expression wasn’t helping.

“Come here, you little whiner.” He wrapped her up in a smothering hug and squeezed the air out of Mae’s lungs.

“I’m not a whiner,” she said into his shoulder, indignant.

“There, there,” he said over her in an exaggerated, soothing tone. He patted her head as if she were a child. “No more whining. That’s it.”

“God! Get off!” Mae said with a laugh and hauled herself away from the sarcastic hug. She swiped her hands through her ruffled hair in an halfhearted attempt to tame it. “You’re the worst.”

Jerry pointed in triumph at the upward tilt at the corners of her mouth. “There’s that smile. I knew it was in there somewhere.”

“No, it’s not!” Mae insisted. “I’m sad! Go away.”

Jerry laughed at her and disappeared into the back office.

Mae turned involuntarily toward the main part of the store and her eyes fell on table five right at the back. The sexy man still sat there, reading his book without a care in the world, only just visible past the book displays and shelving.

There were six tables in the bookstore, which Mae had numbered as a child during a brief but intense phase during which she wanted to live above a restaurant instead of a

bookstore. She had just learned how to paper quill and had done a huge, elaborate numeral for each one, which her parents had proudly framed and hung.

Table one was large and well lit, supplied with practical chairs. That was where crafting groups and chess teams usually met. Table two was in the children's section. It sat low to the ground and had adorably tiny chairs to match.

The sexy man's table, the one at the very back of the store where it was much quieter, was table five. Its paper quilled numeral was a lurid purple with bright leaves as a background. She had been particularly proud of that one.

The man sat under the framed number, seemingly oblivious to her attention.

"Look up," she muttered to herself, willing him to comply. "Look up, come over here, and hit on me."

Then, as if by magic, the man's head started to rise.

"Shit!" Mae dropped to the floor behind the counter. "Shit, shit, shit."

She rose up just high enough to peek over the front counter between the pamphlet display and the bookmark rack. The man had settled even deeper into his chair, one leg crossed over the other. His full attention was back on his book.

Mae dropped back to the floor and settled against the boxes of bookmarks, pens, and receipt tape stored under the front counter.

"Jesus Christ, I'm pathetic," she said to herself.

Mae had only ever had one boyfriend: Sam. They'd gone to school together in Medford, Arkansas, where Mae's parents still owned and operated Norris Books and lived in the cozy apartment upstairs.

She and Sam had been together since they were sixteen. They'd gone to college together in Little Rock. They moved in together, bought cars together. Mae had honestly believed that she had found her soulmate as a teen. Hole-in-one. First try.

It was only a matter of time before he proposed. They'd get married, have babies, and grow old together. He was her best friend and always would be.

Except it had all been a lie. Mae had never been enough for Sam, so he'd spread his wild oats anywhere he could, basically from the beginning.

It had all fallen apart about three months previously, when Mae came home sick from work. She'd found Sam in the shower with a blonde from his office named Carol.

The worst part? Carol wasn't even very attractive. She was nearly ten years older than Sam, had badly bleached hair with dark roots, and a smoker's cough. And she was a homewrecker to boot.

It would have been mollifying if Sam wanted someone traditionally sexy, someone better looking or younger than Mae herself. At least then Mae could blame his infidelity on the male ego or something.

But no, he simply didn't care about Mae. He probably didn't care about Carol, either.

And where did that leave Mae? Suddenly alone, living in her parents' apartment, and completely unprepared to venture into the world alone.

For the first month, she barely left her parents' apartment. She couldn't bear to come down to the bookstore for any real amount of time. She had kissed Sam for the first time on the sidewalk outside, and the sight of it broke her.

Then, after a month of wallowing, her mother, Helen, had tolerated enough. And what started out as a stern talking-to turned into sobbing, screaming, and confessions on both sides. That night, laying next to her exhausted mother in her childhood bedroom, that was when Mae first saw the light at the end of the tunnel.

She had allowed this to happen by letting herself become complacent. Looking back, there had been countless signs that Sam wasn't to be trusted, but she had followed him blindly anyway.

That was when Mae made a vow to herself: Sam would not be the reason her life was over.

But that was easier said than done. Life had been too easy for her, and now that she had nothing, she didn't know how to start over.

"Just get up! That's step one!" she said in a stern voice and hauled herself to her feet.

"What?"

Mae startled, then panicked. The sexy man from the back of the bookstore stood at the front counter, his coat over one arm.

"What?" Mae echoed stupidly.

His mouth looked so inviting, full and expressive. Mae wanted to rub her cheek along his stubbly jaw and feel his hot breath on her neck. It would be so easy to just go for it, just ask him out right now. He wasn't wearing a ring.

It had been more than three months since Mae had been intimate with anyone, and she was starting to feel the loss of it. And for the first time in her life, she was allowed to act on the passing attraction she felt for someone else.

She had been faithful to Sam, but that was over, now.

"I thought you said something." The man's shockingly blue eyes bored into her face.

Mae shook her head once, still a little starstruck. "Nope."

He half smiled, in doubt. He had obviously overheard her, but accepted her denial anyway. Holding up the crime drama, he asked, "Do you have the sequel to this book?"

"Let me check."

Mae reached for the laptop on the counter. But it was at least three paces away, and she was forced to amend the reach with an awkward, sliding step.

Mae straightened and glanced at the man. He still wore a neutral expression, so either he was tremendously polite, or the move hadn't been as awkward as it felt.

*Pull yourself together!*



She typed the book's title into the search field. "Yup. Two copies. I'll just-" she trailed off as she darted out from behind the counter and into the shelves across the way.

She found the book quickly. "Do you want the third in the series as well?"

"No, just the second."

Mae brought the book back to the front counter and scanned it into the point of sale system. "Anything else?"

The man shook his head with a satisfied smile. "No, that's it."

He paid, and Mae slipped a Norris Books bookmark, along with the receipt, under the front cover. She slid it slowly across the counter, racking her brain for any way to drag out this interaction.

Just ask him out, you coward!

"Have a nice night," Mae said with her customer service smile.

"Thanks. You, too." The man took his purchase and slipped out of the store with a jangle of the little bell over the door.

Mae lowered her head to the counter with a thud. "Fuck."

"That's the spirit, sweetheart," Jerry called from the back office.

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The next afternoon, Mae fled the bookshop and her mother's incessant instructions.

"We're expecting the delivery on Friday. Hopefully it will come before we leave, but if not, you will have to inventory it."

"I know, Mom," Mae said in a patient tone.

Helen's graying hair was tied back into a messy bun. She had been running herself ragged over the past week as she prepared to hand the store over to her daughter during their upcoming vacation.

“It’s a new system, but it’s so easy. You just have to open the program, click ‘new stock,’ and start scanning.”

“I’ve been home three months, Mom. I know how it works. Don’t worry so much!”

But of course it was impossible for Helen to stop worrying. Norris Books was her whole life, and she hadn’t been away for more than a weekend in years.

Mae wasn’t concerned. She’d grown up in the bookstore, and she’d been back long enough to be comfortable with the updates and small changes Helen had made while Mae was away building a life with Sam in Little Rock.

So the first moment she could slip away without agitating her mother further, Mae snagged her coat off the rack by the door and disappeared into the chilly November wind.

It was a brisk, ten minute walk to the local high school, where Mae’s friend Margie taught math. Mae navigated the familiar halls as the last of the students exited the building to go home for the day and slipped into Margie’s empty classroom with a knock on the open door.

“Mae!” Margie cried in greeting. She tossed her long, wavy, blonde hair over her shoulder as she turned in her desk chair. “I’m glad you came by. You can help me take down the Halloween board and put up Thanksgiving things instead.”

“Okay. I can do that.”

Margie passed her the box of paper turkeys and crepe paper rolls in shades of orange, red, and yellow, and they began by carefully removing the skeletons and jack-o-lanterns from the cork board, placing them in a tidy stack on the nearest student desk.

“So how’s it going at home? Has your mom gone bonkers yet?”

“She’s off the rails, of course,” Mae said. “But I can’t blame her. The bookstore is her baby.”

“I’m glad your folks are going on a vacation. They haven’t had a real one in years, and your mom has been talking about Hawaii for as long as I can remember.”

“Yup.” Margie poked around in the little container of push pins, lost in thought.

“And how are you doing?”

“Great,” Mae said.

“Uh huh.” Margie eyed her sideways.

Mae shifted her weight, determined not to let her shit life dominate the conversation for once. She was tired of being angry and sad, and surely Margie was bored of hearing about it by now.

“I almost asked a guy out last night, but completely chickened out.”

Margie threw her hands wide and gaped at her. “Mae! That’s wonderful!”

Mae grinned despite herself. “I mean, it would have been better if I’d actually managed to do it.”

“But you wanted to,” Margie said, matter-of-fact. “It’s the first step to getting back on the horse. You’re thinking about moving on, at least.”

“I know! I just -” Mae let out a heavy sigh and dropped her pile of paper pumpkins into their box. “I don’t know how! I never did. Me and Sam just kind of happened, and that was it.”

“You just do it,” Margie said with a shrug. “You just ask him out. The worst that can happen is he turns you down.”

“That sounds awful.”

“It isn’t, though. Guys like to be asked out, same as we do. It’s flattering when someone likes you enough to ask. Just be cool and don’t be a creep.”

Mae remembered staring at the man, who she now thought of as Table Five, while he quietly read at the back of the store. “The ship may have sailed on that point.”

“What did you do?”

“Oh nothing. Just stare at him like a creep for several minutes.”

“Did he see you staring?”

Mae considered this. He had started to look up, but she hadn’t seen his brilliant eyes. “I don’t think so.”

“You’re hopeless,” Margie said with a laugh. “You just need a little confidence, that’s all. A little experience. Maybe you could sign up for a dating app.”

Mae frowned at the thought. “Hook ups? One night stands?”

“Sure. But they don’t have to be one night stands if you don’t want them to be.”

“Have you ever used one of those apps?”

Margie shrugged. “Yeah a bit. Before I met Gordon. Sometimes it was a crap shoot, sometimes it wasn’t. But either way, it would be good for you. Guaranteed. It would help you be more assertive.” She kicked the box of Halloween decorations so that it slid across the stained linoleum floor and came to rest next to her desk. “I’m so glad you’re here to help me with this. It goes so much faster.”

Mae opened her mouth to object to the idea of hooking up with a stranger, but hesitated. She had never thought about such a thing before. It could be exciting. Naughty.

It could be fun.

But she didn’t want to sleep with a stranger. She wanted to sleep with Table Five.

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The man came back to the bookstore the next night. Table Five brought the sequel he’d purchased during his last visit, settled in at the back table like before, and began to read.

Why did he keep coming in just to read all the time? Didn’t he have a house?

Most people either shopped and then left, or stayed for a group meeting. That evening, a youth book club occupied table one, discussing the latest book in a popular series of fairy tales retold in a modern setting.

The girls giggled over the handsome, fictional love interest, while Mae stared at a flesh and blood man across the room.

Would it really be so hard to ask him out? Mae wasn't unattractive. In fact, she would go so far as to say she was perfectly good looking. She was a bit too curvy to be a model, but she had always felt sexy in a bikini.

And she was nice, damn it! She was a fun person. Any guy would be lucky to have her! And so far, the only guy to have her was Sam, who didn't deserve her.

Mae began bouncing on her toes, working herself up to walk over and talk to Table Five.

It would be so easy. "Hey, I was wondering if you'd be interested in getting dinner with me sometime." Simple, classy. Just go do it!

But Margie's suggestion from the day before had worked itself into Mae's brain, and she was having a difficult time getting away from the idea of sleeping with a stranger. She had thought about it half the night.

Because if Mae was being honest, she liked the idea of anonymous sex. It would be thrilling and dirty, something she had never thought possible for her and had therefore discounted as fantasy.

And if anonymous sex was suddenly possible, what else was there to try? What else had she missed out on by settling early with Sam? She already had several things in mind. And what better time to do a little exploring than now, when she had a clean slate, a new life, and just a hint of reckless anger?

Mae retrieved her purse from the back office and pulled out her little black journal. She opened it to the next blank page and wrote on the first line:

1. Have sex with a stranger.

She glanced up at Table Five in the back corner. He was talking on his phone, his voice audible but unintelligible at that distance. He laughed at something the other person said, and his smile brought a light to his face that she hadn't noticed before.

God, he was sexy.

If men liked being asked out for dates, then would they also like being propositioned for sex? It made a sort of sense. And as Margie had said, the worst he could do would be to say “No.”

Table Five got up and tucked his book under his arm as he continued his phone conversation. He slipped on his coat, then began walking in Mae’s direction.

As he got closer, his words became clear. “That’s what I keep telling him,” he said to the unknown person. “Yes, I’m coming home now. I’ll be there in a few. Okay, bye.” He disconnected the call and slipped his phone into his back pocket.

*Now’s your chance, Mae!*

Mae bounced on her toes again and clenched her fingers together. Table Five strode steadily in her direction.

This was it. Just ask him. No big deal.

He cast his blue eyes on her and gave a friendly smile in passing.

Mae smiled back, her head turning as he walked past.

Then he pulled open the door, the little bell jingling, and disappeared into the early dark of Arkansas autumn.

“Jesus, fuck!” Mae hissed to herself, then glanced worriedly at the teens at table one. They didn’t look up in shock, so her voice must not have carried that far.

Well, this was not going well. How could she possibly ask a man for anonymous sex if she couldn’t even ask him to dinner?

This was not the sort of person she wanted to be. Her father was right. Margie was right. It was time to get herself together. For the first time in her life, Mae had the opportunity to take control, and that was exactly what she was going to do.

Mae opened her journal once more, and began adding to her list.

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The delivery Helen had been expecting did not come before it was time to leave for the airport on Friday.

Mae's mother fretted over it for the entire drive. "They're going to leave the boxes out by the back door in the alley, I just know they are. This is a major new release. There are strict guidelines. Do you think Margie can go bring them inside?"

"Margie can't just leave school, Mom," Mae said. "And I'll be home by four. If it comes before I get there, at least it won't be sitting there long."

"I know, you're right," Helen said. "I just need to relax."

"Mae has everything under control," Jerry said from the back. He stretched his wide frame across the entire back seat and closed his eyes. "Our vacation started an hour ago. Let me know when we get there."

"Everything will be fine, I promise," Mae said to her mother. "Just try and enjoy yourself. Starting now. It's out of your hands anyway."

"Alright, fine. If our vacation has already started, then pull off at the next rest stop so I can get some chocolate."

"Deal."

After dropping her parents off at the airport, Mae made the drive home in record time. And as she entered the alley behind the bookstore, a delivery truck pulled out of it.

As Helen had predicted, the delivery of the new releases had been left by the back door, but only a few minutes before Mae had arrived home. She texted her parents to let them know of her good timing and hauled the boxes inside.

After opening the store for the last few hours of the day, as she had faithfully promised to do, Mae settled in to wait.

Table Five did not come in.

Mae occupied herself at first by inventorying the new shipment. But the program was very efficient, and it only took twenty minutes to input the new stock and store it neatly on the wire shelving in the back office. She would put them out on display on release day, but that wasn't until Wednesday. Until then, they'd stay safely hidden away.

The rest of the time she spent painting fake frost on the plate glass windows with chalk paint and people watching. Every time someone walked by on the sidewalk outside, Mae's heart flipped.

But it was never Table Five, and after a while, Mae gave up hoping. If she was truly going to try dating again, this sort of anxiety was going to be common. She'd do better to master it now.

The next night, however, he did appear.

If Mae had been anxious when he didn't show, she nearly panicked when he did. He came in around five-thirty, went straight back to his usual table, and sat down with a laptop.

Mae sat in the red, wingback chair behind the front counter, knees drawn up under her body, and peered at him surreptitiously.

He wasn't even reading a book this time. He'd brought in a computer.

*Ugh, get a hold of yourself, Mae!*

She stood up and forced herself to look away. The store was busy at the moment, especially noisy because of the crafting group that occupied table one, and she refused to spend the entire evening staring at a man like a lovesick teenager.

With deliberation, she went around the counter and sat down at table one with the crafters. They accepted her with cheerful greetings and passed her the glitter and a canvas.

The evening went quickly, and Mae only glanced up at Table Five a few times to be sure he hadn't left. By the time the crafting group said goodbye and packed up their things, it was fully dark outside. Table Five still sat with his laptop at the back table, and Mae could only return to her wingback chair.



But she refused to stare at him.

She stared instead at the little journal in her hands, open to the list. She had written six items there, each more daring than the last. Her parents would be gone for ten more days, and she intended to use that time to her advantage. She would tic off as many of these items as she could while she had the apartment to herself, starting with sex with a stranger.

And if Table Five wasn't into it, then fine. He was sexy as hell, but he wasn't the only attractive man in town. Now that she was free, now that she had a plan in hand, nothing would stop her from crossing off every single item on her list, with or without him.

But preferably with.

The store was completely empty once the crafters packed up and left. Only Table Five and Mae remained. So when the time came, the telltale sounds of packing up were clearly audible. He zipped up his hoodie, threw his laptop bag over his shoulder, and began walking toward her, the wood floor creaking with every step he took.

Mae stood up, determined not to chicken out again.

He caught her eye and said, "Have a good night."

"You, too," Mae responded automatically as he passed her and reached for the door.

*Fucking hell, Mae. What are you waiting for?*

"Wait!"

Table Five paused, his hand on the door handle. "Yeah?" He glanced around on the floor. "Did I drop something?"

"Yup. Sure did." Mae looked around in a panic, and her eyes fell on the disposable pens in an old coffee mug that read "World's Greatest Dad!" She snatched a pen with a rattle of plastic on ceramic and held it out. "You dropped your pen."

"Oh, thanks." He strode back to the counter and took the pen from her, then hesitated. He studied the little white pen, which said "Norris Books" in bold blue letters along the side. Then his eyes went to the mug full of identical pens next to the register.

“No, you didn’t. I don’t know why I said that.” She snatched the pen back from him and dropped it back in the mug.

“I am so confused,” he said.

Shit, shit, shit.

“Uh,” she fidgeted, her hands clasped tight on her journal.

“Are you okay?” he asked, with a half grin. At least he found her nerves humorous. That was a good sign, right?

But for god’s sake, it was now or never.

“Do you want to go have sex with me in the back office?”

He shook his head slightly, entirely taken aback. “What?”

Oh hell, this was bad. This was so bad. What had she been thinking, lying about the pen? And now this?

She should have just asked him to dinner! That was what normal people did. You used hookup apps to get anonymous sex. You don’t proposition customers in your parents’ bookstore!

All her logic disappeared in the wake of her panic, and suddenly she thought, fuck it! She’d dug herself this deep, why not go all in?

And she did the only thing she could think of to explain her ridiculous request. She held out her open journal so that he could see her entire list.

*See? It’s just a bucket list. I’m not a crazy person.*

Yup, this was the right move. Solid decision making.

Table Five hesitated for a second, then took the journal from her hands before she could think to snatch it away again.

But as the seconds ticked by, as his eyes scanned over the short list and his face grew redder and redder, one very important realization hit Mae:

He still hadn’t left.

*Sweet Jesus, you've done it now, Mae.*

## There's More!

The List is only a prequel to my latest erotic rom-com, Table Five. You can order your copy now on [Amazon](#), or add it to your to-read list on [Goodreads](#) or [BookBub](#).

## I'd love to hear from you!

For bonus material and sneak peaks for all my books, visit my website: [annacackler.com](#). Sign up for my monthly newsletter to receive all of my short stories (like The List) as they are completed, along with updates and book recommendations from my blog.

I am also on [Facebook](#), [Goodreads](#), and [Instagram](#), so like and follow to stay in touch!  
I'd love to hear from you. :)

# About the Author

I love to read and write romance, humor, and fantasy -- in that order! My favorite books are those that feature a satisfying and healthy romance between realistic characters.

I have a degree in writing from the University of Central Arkansas. At the time, a Creative Writing degree was not available, but I consider that to be a blessing in disguise. Not only did I study storytelling, but I also dove deep into the worlds of audience, technical writing, non-fiction, and academic writing. And though my writing education has continued over the years in the school of life, I will be forever grateful for that solid foundation I received in the writing community at UCA.

Though I grew up in Arkansas and Oklahoma, I currently live in Puerto Rico, where it never gets cold! My family and I love going to the beach year-round, where I soak up the sun and inspiration.

But as little as I like winter, I admit I miss the crisp air from time to time. That's why I chose to set Table Five in a chilly Arkansas November.

I have a wide range of hobbies, including crochet, spinning thread, cross stitch, painting, home improvement, cake decorating, and piano. I like to incorporate these passions into my writing to add depth and detail.