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BOOK ADDICT SHAUN



Corrie Jackson has been a journalist for fifteen years. During that time she has worked at *Harper's Bazaar*, the *Daily Mail*, *Grazia* and *Glamour*. Corrie now lives in Greenwich, Connecticut with her husband and two children. *Breaking Dead*, her debut novel, was the first in the journalist Sophie Kent series and was described by *Glamour* as 'Gripping . . . crime with a side order of chic' and by the *Sun* as 'Original, amazingly written and tense'.

THE PERFECT VICTIM

CORRIE
JACKSON

ZAFFRE



For my mum and dad

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2 April 1988

His mum is sleeping.

Her spidery limbs are tucked into the folds of the sofa. Her jeans button is undone, and the green shirt she's worn for three days straight is untucked, exposing a roll of white porridgy flesh. The yellow light from the lamp in the corner illuminates the sticky trail leaking out of her mouth. Her throat catches, and every breath sends a sour cloud towards him. The boy reaches forward to touch her chestnut hair, then pulls back, swallowing his tears.

He chews his fingernail down to where it hurts, stares at his trainers, scuffed, with a hole in the toe. He has small feet for his age. Small *everything* for his age. Puberty has fucked him over. There are hints, a deepening voice, baby-fluff on his chin, *urges*. But he's lagging behind. He pretends not to care, but the weight of it sits in his stomach like a stone.

The boy shivers and pulls his grey tracksuit top tightly around him. He glances at the candy-pink record player in the corner. His mum saved up for months to buy it. He can see her whirling round the sitting room in her grubby blue dressing gown, singing that pop song, '99 Red Balloons', at the top of her voice. She



didn't know he was watching as she reached for the bottle of Blue Nun and downed the last two inches of rancid wine. Nor when she sank to the floor and retched into her hand.

The boy glances at the clock: 11.48 p.m. He creeps to the fridge and snaps open a can of Coke. As the bubbles hit the back of his throat, he runs his eyes over the crayon picture taped to the fridge door. It's been there for so many years the edges are curled and yellow. A woman with jagged brown hair and loopy legs, one longer than the other where the green crayon slipped. A little boy, whose feet are larger than his head. He stares at the scribbled blue heart between them and his breathing quickens.

A shriek pierces the air outside and he looks nervously towards the window. A brick wall runs around the edge of a garden, and beyond it are fields. The washing line flaps in the breeze. The breeze, he thinks. *Perfect.*

He crunches the Coke can between his small hands and leaves it on the counter. Then he pads towards the cellar door and lifts it to stop it scraping against the stone floor. The smell hits him in the face – wet-rot mixed with something else. Salt. Their cottage is only three miles from the sea and the briny air permeates everything: your house, your clothes, your skin. The boy doesn't need to turn on the light. He feels his way down the wooden steps taking care to miss out the fourth step, which has broken away. As his feet hit concrete, something scuttles away. A mouse, probably. He sees them down here all the time.

His heart bumps against his ribs as he pulls a torch from his pocket and shines it into the space behind the washing machine. He pulls out a brick and his fingers close around something





feathery. The baby bird is as light as dry leaves. He's amazed it's still alive. It's been in there for days. There are others buried deeper in the wall that haven't been so lucky.

He folds one hand round the bird and, with the other, he opens the laundry basket and digs around. The Blue Nun bottle is at the bottom, where his mum hid it. He waits a beat, then springs up the steps to the kitchen.

As he tiptoes past his mum, a car shoots past, its headlights turning the sitting-room shadows cartoony. He freezes, not used to seeing cars in this remote place. His mum shifts, snorts, rubs her stomach with a stubby red fingernail. He counts to fifty. The bird quivers, soft and sick, in his hand. He places it on the carpet, beside his sleeping mum, where it twitches, then settles. It looks peaceful but its eyes are milky with death.

The boy unscrews the bottle lid. Then he pours the liquid on the carpet, trails it around the sofa, over the cigarette butts, the ashtray, the empty wine boxes, the remains of a congealing pizza. It splashes onto his shoes, drips down his wrists. He saves the final drops for the baby bird.

The boy takes one last look at his mum, then flicks the green lighter. The tiny flame shivers and he realises his hand is trembling. He cocks his head to one side, then snaps the lighter shut. His trainers squeak as he lurches – a childish zig-zag – across the kitchen and rips the crayon drawing from the fridge door. He rolls it into a cone then lights one end and tosses it onto the carpet. As the flames shoot forward in an angry orange stripe, words fill the boy's head: *He himself will be saved, but only through fire.*



The boy waits, his eyes watering, lungs filling with smoke as he watches the fire swallow up the bird. Then he drops to his knees and crawls into the hallway. He is about to open the front door when he hears coughing. It's coming from the sitting room. His mum is awake. His hand hovers over the door handle. Then he remembers the crayon drawing.

The woman. The boy. The heart.

He opens the door and darts out into the dirty moonlight.



1

Present Day

The dewy grass was wet against my ankles as I stood in the sunshine listening for signs of death. There, through the whine of a low-flying aircraft, I heard it: the staccato fizz of a police radio. I raced towards the river, kicking through drifts of pink blossoms. The Thames was mirror-flat and sparkled in the Monday-morning sunlight. I paused to glance at a trio of women with buggies. The one nearest me scratched her thick neck and squawked into a mobile phone. The other two balanced snotty toddlers on their hips. I could tell by their loose, easy gestures that they weren't part of the story. A good crime reporter knows that the difference between a page-one splash and a shitty page-five is timing. On a fresh crime scene, I'm dealing in moments. Flashes. I never know how long I've got before the scene shuts down. Before yes becomes no.

As I scanned the crowd, I stretched out the stiffness in my neck, trying to shrug off the weekend from hell. I'd crawled into bed on Friday evening and switched my phone off, and the world out. Three minutes in and my heart was galloping. Five minutes, my palms were on fire. Eight minutes, the negative thoughts



thrashed against my ears like bats in the attic. I counted my breaths, just like my therapist, Dr Spado, taught me. Dr Spado is a new addition to my life. It was the *London Herald's* policy that I check in with him, following a close shave with a serial killer, and a stint in Chelsea & Westminster hospital. I didn't argue. To be frank, I could do with the help. But during my weekly visits to a stucco-fronted house on Leamington Row, it hadn't taken long for Dr Spado to realise that my big black nightmares had very little to do with my run-in with death. You see, not long ago, my younger brother's scrawny, filthy body washed up under Albert Bridge. Tommy was my lifeblood, my reason to get up every day. He was also a homeless drug addict. His death cut me in half. Suicide was the official story, but I'd recently discovered the truth, well, part of it.

Tommy was murdered.

I hadn't got any further, and each day that Tommy's killers walked free was a day I was failing him. Guilt and grief are toxic companions. They fill my head, my heart, my lungs until I can't breathe. Nights are the worst. Without the thrum of day, there's nowhere to hide. So, Dr Spado recommended 'managed relaxation' as a way to ward off the panic attacks that hit when I turn out the lights. Mostly, I resort to next-level help, 'emergency measures', he called it. Sometimes I stagger the sleeping pills. Other times, I throw them down in one, welcoming the slide into oblivion. Last night was a three-pill night, and those always make me feel hollowed-out.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I sighed. I'd only turned it back on this morning and was paying for the forty-eight-hour

technology blackout. A flood of emails and voicemails that I hadn't even begun to sift through.

As I rubbed my gritty eyes, a woman in a red gilet, cradling a black terrier under her arm, shuffled towards me. The breeze whipped her chalky-grey curls around her face.

'Don't go closer, love. Trust me, you don't want to see it.'

'See what?'

'A body. In the river. They just pulled it out.' She pressed the dog into her ample chest, squashing a pair of thick librarian glasses.

'Did you get much of a look?' I pulled out my notebook, then caught her frown. 'I'm a reporter.'

The woman cocked her head to one side. 'Which paper?'

'The *London Herald*.'

She shifted onto the toes of her flip-flops and sniffed. 'I prefer the *Post*.'

I smiled politely, nodded towards the river. 'Can you describe what you saw?'

The woman clucked at the squirming dog and her neck skin wrinkled like baggy tights. 'This going in the paper?'

'If it's useful.' I realised how rude that sounded, and cracked a smile. 'Sorry, my boss just gave me an earful. If I don't phone in with details . . .' I mimed slitting my throat.

She gave me a sharp look. 'Perhaps you ought to find a different vocation.'

I laughed and risked a glance at my watch. I wasn't lying about my boss. Mack Winterson, the *Herald's* News Editor, had called ten minutes ago.

‘Drop what you’re doing and get to Bishop’s Park. There’s a body.’

I had just finished interviewing a member of Hammersmith ambulance crew who had collided with the number 14 bus on the corner of the Fulham Road. Mercifully no one was hurt but, even so, it looked bad ditching the guy mid-interview.

‘There’s something else.’ Mack sounded distracted. ‘We’ve got to fill a double-page spread.’

‘Why?’

‘Rowntree verdict is delayed. Jury member emergency.’

‘Fuck.’

The national media was on high alert waiting for the outcome of the Eric Rowntree court case. Rowntree was a fifty-four-year-old plumber charged with killing his wife and three young sons. With large black sideburns, an oily ponytail and a small pouting mouth, Rowntree looked as if he’d aced an audition for ‘deranged killer’ in the kind of trash-movie that has critics sniggering into their fists. Apparently fed up with being the proverbial punchbag, his wife, Linda, kicked him out just before Halloween. Rumour has it she’d been shagging a local cab driver, Allen Holmes. Rowntree allegedly repaid her by slaughtering them all in their Battersea maisonette. *Allegedly*. Who was I kidding? Rowntree was guilty. Everyone knew it. But the prosecution had had a hard time proving it. The CCTV camera in the petrol station opposite Linda’s house was on the blink that night. Had it been working, it would have shown Rowntree slipping into the house. Still, they were making progress. We were just waiting for the confirmation. But the verdict was due at 5 p.m. yesterday, then at 9 a.m. this morning and now . . .



I kicked the ground with the heel of my boot. 'What else is on the bubble?'

'As of this moment: sweet FA. No one's been paying attention to anything else. We're screwed.'

I rolled my eyes. Mack wasn't known for his grace under pressure. I could picture him pacing up and down by his desk, shiny black brogues scraping away what little of the blue *Herald* carpet was left by his desk, or 'Mack's Patch' as it was dubbed in the office. Mack was a hard taskmaster, but his drive came from a place of fear. Fear that he wasn't good enough, fear that he'd get found out. I pulled my jacket around me as the sun dipped behind a cloud. To say Mack and I had history was an understatement. Screwing my married boss was one of the more messed-up things I'd done lately. When your life blows up and you can't see a way out you tend to make stupid decisions. A smarter one was ending the affair. Mack disagreed, but eventually he saw sense. He was divorcing his wife and, since then, we'd reached a delicate truce; agreed to put the past behind us and act like grown-ups. But there was nothing grown-up about the casual way we picked fights with each other. To be honest, I think we both missed the stress release. Losing yourself in someone else can be addictive.

'Growler's calling an emergency conference this morning. Do not come back empty-handed.'

Growler was the *Herald's* Editor, Philip Rowley; so-called for his high-pitched nasally voice. But he was as formidable as he was short. I liked to think we shared that, at least.

A loud shout punctured the air. An officer leaned over the railings, one hand on his hat, the other pointing at something we couldn't see.



‘What do you think it is?’ The dog lady’s voice was breathless.

I strode towards the knot of people, notebook in hand, ready with my opening line but a female officer blocked my path. She was slim and neat with a chin that looked as if it had been chiselled in a pencil sharpener. She thrust it towards me, crossing her arms in front of her chest. ‘Can I help you, Miss Kent?’

I recognised PC Debbie Waters.

‘Nice morning for a walk.’ I grinned at her, but she didn’t smile back. Waters was too smart to get sucked in, and I respected that about her. I’d heard on the grapevine that she was struggling to make the policing job work around her little boy’s schedule after the recent split with her boyfriend. And by ‘grapevine,’ I mean me leaning on every source I had. I like to know as much as possible about every new recruit. In my job, information is currency. I knew PC Waters was fast becoming DCI Sam Durand’s righthand officer. And where DCI Durand is concerned, I make it my business to know. We’ve worked together for years. Durand is a first-class police officer with the right amount of dirt on his hands. We’d grown close in recent months. Close enough to make me wonder if there was something more between us. I shook the image of Durand’s rugged face and auburn hair out of my mind. It was easier to tell myself that our relationship was based on scratching each other’s backs. Nothing more. At least, not in this lifetime. I’ve learned the hard way that mixing work and pleasure was the fastest route to a P45. If there were rumours about anything more between Durand and PC Waters, I put it down to idle

gossip. The same noise that follows any vaguely successful woman in a male-dominated industry.

‘I’m not trespassing.’ I gestured towards the blue and white police tape.

Waters glanced towards the river. Her long brown plait swung over her shoulder. A crimson ribbon was tied to the end. I pictured her that morning; the extra few seconds she’d spent fastening it to her hair. Precious seconds she could have spent with her little boy.

‘How’s life on the Force?’

‘Glorious. How’s life at the *Herald*?’ Her eyes scanned my face, taking in the bloodshot eyes, dark circles and unwashed hair. I knew she wanted to ask more. Waters had seen me at my worst. The days I had lain in a hospital bed, unshowered and pale, my stale breath filling my nostrils, unable to look in the mirror at the purple bruises dotting my neck. When Waters took my statement in that stark white room, she pretended not to notice the tremor in my voice, or the way I gripped the bed. I found out later that Waters called the *Herald* a couple of times to check how I was doing. It was a kindness I wouldn’t forget.

‘I saw your piece on the Edgware Road riot,’ she said. ‘Nicely handled.’

I smiled, nodded towards the river. ‘So, what have we got?’

‘Sophie, listen, there’s something you need to kn—’ She spotted something over my shoulder, flicked her plait behind her and drew herself up. ‘I was just asking Press to stay behind the tape, Sir.’



A man appeared beside us with a ferocious look on his young face. Tufts of sandy-coloured hair sprouted out of his head like the top of a pineapple. A cheap charcoal suit hung off his thin frame.

‘Waters, go and check the logbook,’ he said in a curt voice.

I stepped forward, plastering a smile on my face. ‘I don’t think we’ve met. I’m—’

‘I know who you are.’

I frowned. ‘Are you in charge of this scene?’ When he didn’t respond, I pointed to the police tape. ‘I’m a crime reporter. This is a crime scene. I’m doing my job.’

‘And I’m doing mine.’ The man’s hand wandered to his earlobe and his aggression spilled out in a short, sharp pinch.

I studied him, trying to read the situation. Being disliked by police is not something I lose sleep over. There are a million reasons why coppers hate reporters. We don’t do as we’re told, for one. We hold police accountable, for another. But this man’s hostility was so potent, I could taste it in the air.

Suddenly, a tinny voice rattled out of the radio in his hand.

‘Sir, we’ve just found a handbag hooked on the railings. Must be hers.’

I raised my eyebrows. ‘It’s a woman, then.’

He scowled, then leaned towards me, belching coffee breath in my face. ‘No comment. Now, piss off.’

‘Lovely to meet you, too,’ I called out as he stomped away. But my bravado vanished along with him. A CID officer with a personal grudge was very bad for business.





I heard Rowley's voice in my head: *Find me ten ways around the word no, Kent.*

A police van crunched along the path and parked beside the railings. I pulled out my phone to snap pictures and a message blinked at me on the home screen: a voicemail from Charlie Swift, the *Herald's* Business Editor and one of my best friends. I shut it down and took more photos of the two figures emerging from the police van and pulling on white protective suits.

At that moment, a line of reporters began streaming towards the crime scene. I recognised Stuart Thorp from the *Post* grilling the trio of mums. I nibbled my fingernail. Had I missed something? My eyes slid right and I spotted a figure slumped on a bench by a large oak tree. He was wrapped in a foil blanket and might as well have had a target tacked to his back.

I glanced over my shoulder, then hurried towards him. He was in sportswear: a tight black tank-top and lime-green running shorts.

'Are you thirsty?' The man's head jerked up and I reached into my bag for the unopened bottle of water I hadn't had time to drink. 'Here.' I handed it to him, then sat down on the bench. He pulled his leg away from me for a second, then let it fall back where it was. The leg was smooth and hairless. As he gulped down the water, I stole a glance. Early twenties, blond stubble, white marks around his hairline where sweat had crusted onto his skin.

'I'm guessing you found her,' I said. The man nodded and dug his elbows into his muscly thighs. 'Can you tell me about it?'



He fingered his leather necklace. It was threaded with beaded letters that spelled out S-O-U-L-W-A-R-R-I-O-R, the kind they sell in cheap shops on the Southern Hemisphere gap-year-circuit. 'Are you the police?'

I hesitated then shook my head. 'Press. The *London Herald*.'

'Should I be talking to you?'

'Do you often run in Bishop's Park?'

'I'm training for the marathon. Twenty miles a week.' He coughed again – short, wheezy clicks – and the foil blanket rustled. 'Ran it last year but my hip was playing up. If I can do it sub-four hours I'll be happy.'

I nodded, chewing the inside of my cheek. I didn't want to rush him, but I didn't want to blow the opportunity either. I gazed towards the river. 'What's your name?'

'Adrian.' He cleared his throat. 'Adrian Bronson.' He slid off his glasses and wiped them on his top.

I pulled out my notebook and watched Adrian's eyes flick nervously towards it.

'I'm just after a few facts,' I said, as Adrian twisted the bottle cap in his hand. 'I don't want to do the victim a disservice by getting anything wrong. How did you spot her?'

Adrian thought for a moment. 'I only stopped to take a breather. By the railings there.' He pointed to the spot where the forensics team were setting up a white tent. 'I noticed something in the water. At first I thought it was a coat. Then I saw hair,' he pulled an inhaler out of his pocket, 'lots of it. Red. With things stuck in it. Leaves. And other stuff. I climbed over the railing to get a better look. And that's when I saw the rest of her.'



Adrian shoved the inhaler in his mouth and sucked hard. I didn't speak, wanting him to take his time, knowing how hard this was. In my experience, drowned corpses are among the worst.

The first post-mortem I witnessed was a thirty-eight-year-old homeless woman who'd been found in a canal behind Swiss Cottage Tube station. Police caught her killer; a spineless mouth-breathing drunk with an inferiority complex. When I wrote up the piece, we ran the last-known photograph of the woman. A delicate face with small, pointy teeth and a schoolteacher fringe. She was pretty. Not that it mattered, but I couldn't reconcile that photo with the bloated mess on the coroner's table. Water can do that to a face. So I knew exactly what Adrian was going through.

'What time did you find her?'

He glanced at his shiny watch. 'About an hour ago. I called the police the moment I realised what it was. Waited here. I didn't want her to be alone. Or float away or whatever.' He ground the heel of his trainer into the dirt, and coughed again.

'What was she wearing?'

Adrian licked his lips, trying to unstick his words. 'Black coat. Skirt. No shoes.' He swallowed. 'Her right hand, there was something wrong with it.'

'What do you mean?'

'Like it had been hacked at, or something.'

A wave of nausea burned my stomach, catching me off-guard. I wasn't squeamish. I took a long breath, not wanting to interrupt his flow. 'Did you see anything else?'





Adrian coughed into his hand and took another hit on the inhaler. 'Do you know how long I'll have to hang around?'

I closed my notebook, then handed him my business card. 'Has anyone taken a statement?' He shook his head. 'Speak to that female officer over there. The one with the plait.'

He stood up, but his legs failed and he slumped back down. He gave me a wry smile. 'Sorry, I'm not usually so . . .'

I smiled. 'Her name is PC Waters.'

As he stumbled away, my phone rang.

'Well?' Mack's bark wrong-footed me.

'It's a woman. Just interviewed the jogger who found her. And a bag has turned up; police think it's hers.'

'So who is she?'

'I haven't got that far.'

'Chop chop, Kent. You're almost out of time.' He hung up and I collapsed against the bench, closing my eyes as the adrenaline seeped out of me.

I sighed and scrolled down to Charlie's voicemail. When I needed cheering up, Charlie was the man to do it. Laid-back, popular, Charlie was known for his dry one-liners and infectious smile. Which is all the more impressive when you consider the double tragedy he had suffered. I never met his late wife, Lizzie, but I knew they hadn't been married long when she was diagnosed with leukaemia. In the end it wasn't the leukaemia that killed her. Lizzie went for a swim in the Serpentine Lido and never made it back. Charlie took a fortnight off and returned to the office, deflecting people's condolences with a tight smile. Gradually his smile became larger; the charisma returned. Most



people soon forgot. But I wasn't most people. The closer we got, the more I understood how deeply Charlie buried his pain. I knew the effort it took to plaster the smile in place because I was doing the same thing myself. Over the years we picked up each other's pieces – and many long nights in the newsroom led to a friendship I'd come to cherish. One evening, three years ago, Charlie told me he'd started seeing Emily, the young pretty wedding planner who'd organised his wedding to Lizzie. He raised his chin and waited for me to judge him, but I'm the last person to judge anyone.

I hit 'play' and Charlie's deep voice filled my ear. 'Hello? Is that the great Sophie Kent, reporter extraordinaire?' I rolled my eyes at his naff American accent. 'Call me when you get this. I need to talk to you about something . . . personal.'

I pressed 'call back' and put a hand over my ear as a plane whistled low overhead. Charlie's phone rang out to voicemail: '*You've reached Charlie Swift, leave some words.*'

I dug my nails into the wooden bench. 'Here are some words for you: Mondays suck. I'm on a crime scene and the officer in charge wants me dead. I swear, dude. The look in his eye. Also: he looks like a demented pineapple. That reminds me, can you pick me up one of those radioactive smoothies from the canteen? And, yes, I want whipped cream on top. Like I said: Mondays suck. Back in the office soon. Can't wait to hear the personal news. Are you finally coming out of the closet? Because, FYI, your sock choice has been betraying your secret for yea—'

The beep cut me off. I glanced towards the railings where PC Waters was resting a hand on Adrian's arm. She held my

gaze, gave a tiny nod. Then I clocked her boss, the man in the grey suit. As he jabbed a bony finger in a police officer's face, he caught me watching and scowled.

To my horror I felt tears prick the back of my eyes. I forced myself off the bench and scurried towards the Tube.