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Opening Extract from...

Fire Damage

Written by Kate Medina

Published by HarperCollins

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FIRE DAMAGE

TO FIND A KILLER, SHE MUST UNLOCK A CHILD'S TERROR

'A huge new talent'
MO HAYDER



KATE MEDINA

A JESSIE FLYNN CRIME NOVEL

KATE MEDINA

Fire Damage



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2016

1

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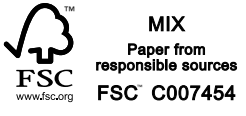
A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 0 00 813228 6

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Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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2

Jessie stood in the women's toilets and stared at herself in the mirror. She was shaking, her stomach churning. The cut on her forehead was a deep scarlet slash against the milky white of her skin, still bleeding. Her temple was throbbing, an egg-shaped bruise already forming under the skin. Tugging some paper from the hand dryer, she soaked it under the hot tap, wiped it up her cheek and pressed it to the cut, wincing with the pain. She couldn't stop trembling. What the *hell* had just happened? She cast her mind back over the referral notes she had been given.

Sami Scott. Four-year-old boy.

Four years and four months old – a July birthday – young for his year. But although he had been due to start school in September, he hadn't, couldn't.

Father: Major Nicholas Scott, Intelligence Corps, badly burnt in Afghanistan three months previously.

Mother: Nooria Scott, Persian-English, born and raised in England.

Preliminary diagnosis: post-traumatic stress disorder.

But was it?

What was with the torch?

'The girl knows.'

Who was the girl? Was it Jessie? She was pretty sure it wasn't her. She was twenty-nine, and to a four-year-old she would seem ancient, a woman, not a girl. Semantics perhaps, but she thought not. She'd had the sense that he was referring to himself, but that couldn't be right. Despite the shoulder-length, curly dark hair, huge chocolate eyes, that chubby, cherubic appearance that could be either girl or boy, he was definitely a boy. The notes had clearly specified gender.

Referred to the Defence Psychology Service by his father who had been evacuated from Camp Bastion and repatriated to England in August, after suffering horrific burns in a petrol-bomb attack.

The face looking back at her in the mirror was ghostly, sallower even than usual, her eyes a blue so pale they were almost translucent. She looked wraithlike. Felt as though once she released her grip of the basin, there would be nothing to tether her to this earth; that she would float up into the chilly winter sky.

Looking at herself now, she was transported straight back fifteen years – a hospital mirror, the same ethereal being – just a traumatized girl then. So viscerally could she remember her helplessness, that she could taste it in her mouth. Acid vomit.

And now, another little boy who desperately needed her help. The last half an hour had stripped her raw. She felt completely out of her depth.

3

Jessie waited, engine idling, while the guards swung open the heavy metal gates. She gave them a brief, distracted wave as she drove out of Bradley Court Army Rehabilitation Centre, and joined the public road. The tension in her was so acute she could feel it physically: a skintight electric suit coating her body, clenched around her throat, the bare wires hissing and crackling against her skin.

There was no traffic on the narrow country road and her headlights cut twin beams through the gathering dusk, tracking the hedgerows, knotted with Elder and Dogwood, on one side, the dotted white line demarcating the oncoming lane on the other.

Winding down her window, she let the chill evening air funnel over her face and neck, cooling the heat from the electric suit, the rush of cold bringing tears to her eyes. She had felt like crying ever since the end of her session with Sami. She let them flow, needing the release.

Her mobile phone rang and she glanced at it. Gideon Duursema. She ignored it, couldn't face the 'how did it

go?' conversation. Reaching across to the CD player, she cranked up the sound, let James Blunt, full volume, assault her eardrums. *Back to Bedlam*. Appropriate. It was the only CD she had in the car, a Secret Santa departmental gift last Christmas. Everyone had laughed when she unwrapped it, uniform groans of *Jesus, not him*. But there was something about his voice that took her somewhere better, whatever she had been doing. She had played it on a constant cycle for a year, knew all the songs by heart, felt opera-singer talented when she sang along, but knew that the reality was closer to a stray cat's chorus.

Slowing to twenty, she pulled into the single-track country lane that led to her cottage. It was windy, hemmed by high hedges, only a brief flash of open fields through the odd metal five-bar farm gate during the day. She'd had a close shave a few months before with the farmer and his herd of prize Friesians, and he'd promised to grind his tractor down the side of her beloved Mini if she ever drove that fast down *his* country lane again.

Rounding the final bend, her headlights picked out an unfamiliar car parked outside her cottage, a red Golf GTI, complete with spoiler and sports profiling. It looked like a pimp's ride. A man she didn't recognize was standing on her minute patch of lawn, arms folded across his chest, studying the leafless wisteria clogging the front wall. Behind him, her retired next-door-neighbour, Ahmose Rahotep, was standing on Jessie's doorstep, leaning on his stick, mouth pressed into a thin, tight line.

At the sound of her engine, the man turned. He was about thirty, broad shouldered and long limbed, dressed in grey jogging bottoms, and a navy-blue hooded sweatshirt.

She realized, suddenly, that there was something familiar about him. Something she couldn't quite place.

Pulling up behind the Golf, Jessie cut her engine. Her head was still throbbing, Sami's look of utter terror fixed in her mind. She had wanted to come home to a silent house and a glass of wine, space to think, to get a head start before she saw Sami again tomorrow and met his father, Major Nicholas Scott, for the first time.

No such luck.

With a sigh, she opened the car door. The man walked down the path as she climbed out and met her on the lane. Recognition dawned. Virtually all resemblance to his former self, the man she had last seen, a skeletal shadow, a hermit in his mother's house, confined to those unusual amber eyes. Her gaze found the scar from the bullet wound on his temple, damaged, stitched skin like the brown petals of a dead rose.

Captain Ben Callan, Military Police Special Investigation Branch. The only patient she had treated since she joined the Defence Psychology Service, two years previously, who she felt she'd completely and utterly failed.

'Ben . . . Captain Callan.' Her gaze dipped to the red-and-gold Royal Military Police insignia on his blue hoodie. 'You're—' She broke off.

'Yes,' he said quietly. 'I'm back.'

Pushing her hair from her face, wincing as her fingertips dragged against the cut Sami had inflicted with his torch, Jessie looked up at him. He was clean-shaven, his sandy-blond hair cut short. He looked as if he'd had a few proper meals since she'd last seen him in July, had added muscle at the gym. But vestiges of his Afghan experience, the last few months of the fight to reclaim his sanity, clung to him.

He was still ten kilos lighter than the photographs she had seen on his mother's mantelpiece. Black shadowed the skin beneath his eyes, which contained a watchfulness, a twitchy awareness of everything that was happening around him. She had seen that same look in many of the other veterans she had counselled, men and women who had survived long tours in a war zone – Afghanistan, Iraq – and frequent contact with a ubiquitous enemy. He clearly wasn't sleeping properly, was most likely having ongoing nightmares.

'How are you, Dr Flynn?' He grimaced at the cut on her head. 'Not good.'

She shrugged. 'I had a run-in with a small boy. As you can see, I lost.'

'Small boys can be dangerous.' He met her gaze, the ghost of a smile crossing his face. 'Big boys even more so.'

She cocked an eyebrow. 'So I've been told.'

'I'm glad to see your patients aren't letting you get the better of them, at least.'

'Round two tomorrow, so we'll see.'

She moved past him and he turned to follow her.

'What do you want?' she cast over her shoulder.

'I need your help.'

'My help? I thought you'd had enough of my help to last you a lifetime.'

'With a case.'

She pushed open her garden gate. 'As you can see from my war wound, I already have a case. In fact I have a five-centimetre-high stack of them sitting on my desk, begging for attention.'

'Gideon told me that you'd argue.'

'He was right.' She swung around to face him on the garden path. 'Look, it's good to see you back on your feet

and I don't mean to be rude, but I've had a long and relatively shitty day. Couldn't we have had this conversation over the phone?'

His expression remained impassive. 'I would have been happy to. If you'd picked up.'

Sliding her mobile from her pocket, she checked the display. Five missed calls from an unknown number and three from her boss, Dr Gideon Duursema.

She pulled a face. 'Must have switched itself to silent.'

'Must have done. Though you'd have struggled to hear a grenade going off over the sound of that singer-soldier crap you were listening to.'

'How dare you. James Blunt is a god.'

He rolled his eyes. 'Let's not go there. I don't have a spare couple of hours to tell you how pitifully misguided you are.' Holding out a file, he glanced across at Ahmose who was in place on her doorstep, leaning heavily on his stick, a tired, bent St Peter valiantly guarding the gates to heaven. 'Look, I have a meeting tomorrow afternoon and I need a psychologist there. Gideon said to get you to call him if you want an argument.' He paused. 'Can we go inside to talk? It's confidential.'

Jessie sighed. 'Do I have a choice?'

His reply was curt. 'No.'

Turning, she laid a hand on Ahmose's arm. 'Thanks for looking out for me, Ahmose, but it's fine. Unfortunately it's work. Cup of tea tomorrow evening? I should be back by six.'

Ahmose nodded. 'I'll put the kettle on soon as I hear your car. My sister sent me some ghorayebah biscuits direct from Cairo.' Raising his hand to his mouth, he kissed the tips of his fingers. 'We can share those too.' He tilted towards

her, lowering his voice. 'He wasn't polite. I didn't want to leave him alone outside your place, just in case. You never know these days. He really wasn't polite.' Hooking his walking stick over his forearm, he reached for Jessie's hand, gave it a reassuring squeeze. 'I'll be able to hear if you shout.'

She gave Ahmose a quick peck on the cheek. 'I'll be fine. He's police. If you're not safe with the police then who are you safe with?'

'Police.' He almost spat out the word. 'Now don't you get me started.'

Jessie had chosen to buy her own house, rather than living in Army accommodation. As a single woman, even an officer, she would have got little more than one room and no privacy. And it made sense, given that her work took her to different parts of the UK and abroad, wherever a psychologist was required.

Her tiny farmworker's cottage was the middle in a row of three, down a single-track country lane in the Surrey Hills, an area of outstanding natural beauty, fifty square miles of rolling hills that cut east to west from the sprawling satellite villages bordering southwest London, to meet with the Sussex Downs in the south. It was picture-postcard England: narrow, winding lanes, thatched cottages, flint stone churches, cricket greens, village pubs garlanded with hanging baskets of busy Lizzies and lobelia, fields of hot yellow rape seed in summer, cabbages and sprouts in winter.

Her cottage put her five miles from the Army rehabilitation centre, a converted former manor house near Dorking and a short drive from the town of Aldershot, 'Home of

the British Army', where many regiments had their base, and where much of her work took her.

Ahmose lived alone on one side. Over one of their many shared teas, he had told her that he'd bought the cottage to retire to with his wife, Alice. She had died of a stroke within four months of their moving in, and he had continued to live there alone, his sitting room a photographic shrine to the woman who had shared the English portion of his life for almost thirty years. The cottage on the other side was owned by a childless, professional London couple who came down once a month at the most and kept themselves to themselves when they did, which suited both her and Ahmose perfectly.

Callan had to duck to get through her front door, which opened directly into the living room. She hadn't noticed how tall he was, given that he had rarely been standing when she'd seen him at his mother's house, or if he was, he'd been hunched and folded in on himself, both physically and mentally. He was well over six foot, and in the cottage built to house farmworkers from the eighteenth century, average height five foot four, he looked huge, a vision of Gulliver. Slipping off her ballet pumps, Jessie lined them up side by side at the edge of the mat, shrugged off her jacket and hung it on the hook behind the door, straightening the sleeves until they hung parallel, creaseless, aware all the time that Callan was watching, the creaking of the floorboards as he shifted his weight from foot to foot telegraphing his impatience. When she had finished, he bent to untie his shoelaces, kick his trainers off carelessly.

He straightened and she watched him surveying her sitting room, the pristine cream carpet, minimal furnishings – two cream sofas and a reclaimed oak coffee table, free of clutter

– the fitted shelves empty of books and ornaments. Show-home spotless.

'What did you say to Ahmose?' she asked, when he joined her in the kitchen.

'We were having a conversation about gardening. I told him that your wisteria needed cutting right back. It will flower much better in spring with a decent prune.'

'Ah. That'll be why he was looking at you as if you were the devil. He does my garden. Takes a huge amount of pride in it. You've just driven an articulated lorry through his ego.'

Callan smiled and shrugged. 'I wasn't entirely idle for the past six months. At least my mother now has a flourishing garden, even if her nerves are shot to shit.'

For an unexpected moment, Jessie's mind flashed to Wimbledon, to the small sixties house she had grown up in. She had only seen her mother once since last Christmas, she realized, in March, when she had popped in with a present and cake to celebrate her mother's birthday, taken her for lunch at a local pub. Her own birthday this year spent at home with Ahmose, pleading pressure of work to duck a visit. Guilt at that decision still hanging over her like a shroud, adding to the other accumulated layers of guilt and self-recrimination. Even more reason not to get in touch.

'Coffee? Tea?' Tugging open the fridge, she pulled out a bottle of Sauvignon. 'Wine? I'm having wine – lots of it – if that helps your decision.'

He shook his head. 'I'm on duty.'

The words 'on duty' surprised her, though she realized that they shouldn't. He had, after all, come to ask for her help on a case. So he was back at work in the Military Police Special Investigation Branch then. Properly back. She

was pleased for him. She glanced around, caught his eye and smiled.

'Dressed like that?'

He smiled, an easy smile that lit his amber eyes the colour of warm honey. Despite the watchfulness, he seemed relatively comfortable in his own skin, a state that three months ago she would have happily bet a sizeable sum he was too far gone ever to reach.

'I've been in the gym. I'm on call. I can work out and I can turn up to a crime scene looking like shit, but I can't drink. I'd love a coffee.'

While she put the kettle on, he wandered into the sitting room. Jessie poured herself a large glass of wine, returned the bottle to the fridge with the label facing outward, replaced the kettle on its stand, angling the handle so that it was parallel with the wall, wiped down the work surface, picked up his coffee and her glass and followed him.

He was standing by the fireplace, studying the pictures on her mantelpiece. Just two. The only personal things on display in her sitting room, the only clutter. One of her brother, the other of Jessie, Jamie and their mother at London Zoo, all three of them happy and healthy looking, an image of her family that seemed so unlikely given what followed, that sometimes she felt as if the photographs had been mocked up on Photoshop.

'Who's this?' He picked up the photograph of Jamie.

'My brother,' she said curtly. She willed him to put it back, leave it.

'Younger or older?'

'Younger by seven years.'

'A lot.'

She shrugged. 'He was a late addition.' *A Band-Aid baby.* She didn't say it.

'So he's . . . how old now?'

'Nothing.' She fought to keep her voice even, feeling the tension rise, the electric suit tingle against her skin. 'He's nothing. No age.'

Taking the picture from Callan, she put it back on the mantelpiece. It was her favourite picture of Jamie, taken when he was four, his mouth, ringed by a telltale brown smear of chocolate ice cream, wide open in a beautiful, innocent grin, his eyes clamped shut in the way that small children have of smiling with the whole of their faces. All teeth and gums. She remembered the occasion well. She had taken him down to watch the tourists queuing for entrance to Wimbledon tennis championships, the queue five thick and a kilometre long. Day 1. Back when Andre Agassi was limping out the last of his career. It had been punishingly hot and the atmosphere had felt like a street party, people handing around bottles of wine and juice, sharing golf umbrellas for shade.

She steadied herself against the mantelpiece, unprepared for the emotional vertigo of Jamie being so close, but not being there, feeling exposed in front of this virtual stranger.

The picture wasn't straight. The electric suit was hissing and snapping against her skin. Realigning the picture, she checked the distance between the two photographs. She could sense Callan watching her, knew she should move away and straighten things once he had gone, but couldn't. Just *couldn't.*

She spun around to face him.

'The case.' It came out more roughly than she had meant.

'Did you come to interfere with my things or did you come about a case?'

He held up his hands in a mock defensive gesture, but the expression on his face held no apology. Only query.

'Can I sit?'

'Sure.'

She indicated the sofa, curled herself into the chair opposite, folding her legs underneath her, wrapping her arms around her torso. Defensive body language, she knew, but too stressed now to unwrap herself. In the confined space of her living room his presence, those bright amber eyes fixed on her face, his easy confidence, so unexpected, made her feel gauche and claustrophobic in equal measures. The shift in the balance of confidence palpable, to her at least.

'Last week, one of our Intelligence Corps non-commissioned officers, a Sergeant Andy Jackson, died in Afghanistan.'

'He's not the first and I'm sure he won't be the last,' she replied.

'This was different. He was . . .' he paused, as if trying to find the right words. 'Being beasted, I suppose you'd call it, by one of the other Intelligence Corps sergeants, Colin Starkey. They were based at TAAC-South, headquartered in Kandahar Airfield, doing whatever secret squirrel stuff Intelligence Corps soldiers do. They went for a run in the desert around the airfield.' He paused. 'You've been to Afghanistan, haven't you?'

'Twice. The first time January to April 2014, to Camp Bastion, before our combat mission in Afghanistan ended and most of our troops were pulled out. The second time was for four weeks in February of this year. I was working with TAAC-Capital at Camp KAIA – Kabul International Airport.'

'So as you know, we still have a few troops out there training, advising and assisting the Afghan Army and Security Forces.'

Jessie nodded.

'What Starkey and Jackson did was insane given the security situation out there, more so given that it was the hottest time of the day, and even though it's autumn the temperature would have been hitting the mid-thirties, with fifty per cent humidity. They were both dressed in combat kit and had no water with them.' He sighed. 'Jackson ended up dead.'

'Dehydration?'

He shook his head. 'A bullet wound to the stomach.'

'From whose gun?'

'Starkey's.'

Jessie's eyes widened. 'And it isn't cut and dried? Murder or manslaughter?'

'The only viable print that was lifted from Starkey's gun was a partial of Jackson's on the trigger.'

'And Starkey's? There weren't any of his?'

'No. The gun was well oiled. It's almost impossible to lift prints from a well-oiled gun. Forensics said that they were lucky to get the sliver of Jackson's on the trigger.'

'What about Jackson's sidearm?'

'It was holstered when he was found. It had recently been cleaned and oiled. No prints.'

Jessie took a sip of wine, rolled the stem of the glass between her fingers, thinking. 'Who said that Jackson was being beasted? He could have gone voluntarily. There's not much else to do out there during downtime and many of the lads are obsessed with fitness.'

Callan nodded. 'So that's where the picture gets muddy.

A corporal who shared their quarters said that he walked in on them having an argument.'

'What about?'

'He didn't catch the subject, just the raised voices. They stopped when he came in and left straight after, to go for the run. But he said that Jackson looked . . .' He fell silent, searching for the right words. '. . . *off*. But not enough so as to make him step in.'

Jessie frowned. 'And he was a corporal, so he would have had to feel on very solid ground to question two sergeants.' Her legs were deadening, pins and needles. She shuffled them from under her, stretched out and put her feet on the coffee table. She saw Callan cast a quick look at her legs. Smoothing her skirt down below her knees, she continued: 'Starkey and Jackson were the same rank.'

He looked up and met her gaze, unembarrassed. 'Yes.'

'So . . . what's the psychology behind that?'

He shrugged. 'You're the shrink.'

Silence, which, after a moment, Callan broke. 'Starkey had a black eye forming when he was found and bruising to his torso when he was stripped and searched back at camp.'

'And Jackson?'

'His autopsy is booked for the day after tomorrow.'

'How did Starkey explain the black eye and bruising?'

'He didn't.'

'But he radioed the medics after Jackson was shot?'

Callan nodded. 'The shot was heard by the camp guards. Starkey radioed for help straight after.'

'Is Starkey under arrest?'

'He's back in the UK, relieved of duties and confined to barracks for the moment, but he hasn't been charged with

anything. We don't have enough evidence either way. I need to work out whether it's murder, manslaughter, suicide or an accident borne of plain fucking stupidity. As well as collecting physical evidence, I need to understand what Colin Starkey was thinking – what they were *both* thinking.'

'Motive,' Jessie murmured. She took another sip of wine and looked past him, to the window. It was dark now, the night so dense that it could have been made from liquid; the table lamp she had switched on a hot yellow sun reflected in the glass.

'Have you talked to Starkey yet?'

'Once today.'

'With a Ministry of Defence lawyer?'

'He didn't want one.'

'And . . .?' She looked back to him.

His amber eyes were fixed on her face, head on one side, as if he was studying her, sizing her up. Though his bald scrutiny put her on edge, she wasn't about to let him realize it. She met his gaze directly.

'Did you get anything from him?'

'Not much.'

'Name, rank and number?' Soldiers were notoriously tight-lipped; gave nothing away unless it was absolutely unavoidable.

He rolled his eyes. 'That's the polite way of saying it. Fuck-all is the less polite way.'

He'd finished his coffee, was looking around for somewhere to put the empty cup. Jessie jumped off the chair, took it from him and deposited it carefully in the kitchen sink, resisting the intense urge to wash it, dry it, stow it in the cupboard then and there.

'This has the potential to get properly out of hand,' he

said, when she returned to the living room. 'Jackson leaves a wife and two small children, under fives. His father is a troublemaker. He works as a shop steward at a factory in South London. Knows his rights – that kind of guy. He's already spoken to the *Daily Mail*. The newspapers are all over the cutbacks in defence spending, how it's putting lives at risk. They're gagging for anything that makes the Army look bad. I need to get to the bottom of this quickly, keep a lid on the negative publicity.'

'His son is dead. His grandchildren are fatherless. You can't blame him.'

Callan didn't hesitate. 'His son joined the Army. It goes with the territory.'

'But not to die like that, potentially at the hands of your own side.'

A grim smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. 'We don't get to choose how we die. Many people don't even get to choose how they live.' Tossing the file on to the coffee table, he pushed himself to his feet. 'I'll leave the file with you – not that there's much of use in it. I'm interviewing Colin Starkey tomorrow at Provost Barracks.' His will stretched out to her. 'I'll see you there at ten to four. Ask for me at the gate, they'll let you through. I'll meet you downstairs, main entrance.'

'Fine,' Jessie said simply. 'One interview and then we'll see.'