

‘The master of razor-sharp one liners, David Jackson’s *The Rule* is an absolute belter’

MANDASUE HELLER

‘Brilliant. Spiralling tension, wit and heart, this is British crime writing at its best’

MARK EDWARDS

‘I really enjoyed [it]. Jackson doesn’t do cosy thrillers. There is dark, ultra dark, and then there is *The Rule*. You’ve been warned’

PAUL FINCH

‘An intense and compelling read that will evoke complicated emotions in every reader. Highly recommended’

LISA HALL

‘Excellent as always. Grimy and heartbreaking in equal measure, peppered with Jackson’s trademark wit and humour.

May be his best yet’

WILL CARVER

‘Jackson is one of the finest British thriller writers. A thrilling, propulsive and ultimately heartbreaking tale of the lengths a father will go to in order to protect his family’

MARTYN WAITES

‘A pacy, smart and darkly funny heartbreaker of a crime novel’

SUSI HOLLIDAY

‘David Jackson has done it again. *The Rule* is incredible. Creepy, emotive, dark, tense and disturbing’

NOELLE HOLTEN

‘A stupendous piece of literary engineering. When high-rise tenants meet the local vicious lowlife, who knows what the outcome will be’

JENNY O'BRIEN

‘A stomach-lurching descent into parental desperation, full of surprises from start to finish. A gasp-out-loud read after which I dare you to break The Rule’

JANICE HALLETT

‘A dark, poignant and perfectly observed page-turner that asks: How far would you go to protect the people you love? A triumph’

VICTORIA SELMAN

‘Another fantastic book by David Jackson. A real balls-to-the-wall thriller, with a surprisingly emotional end. Should be a big hit’

DAN MALAKIN

‘Cleverly crafted and darkly disturbing, with some deftly written emotional moments that show just how far some will go to protect those they love’

ROBERT SCRAGG

‘A real rollercoaster. It's a brilliantly worked series of moral dilemmas that sucks in the protagonists, with twists and turns that will keep you reading till late at night. I loved it’

GUY MORPUSS

THE RULE

DAVID JACKSON



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PROLOGUE

‘Bloody hell. Not you lot again.’

The furious manner in which Suzy Carling was drying her hands on a faded tea towel threatened to peel off her skin. She turned away from her front door and marched back into the gloomy interior of her terraced house.

Detective Inspector Hannah Washington looked at her colleague standing next to her.

‘I think that’s her way of inviting us in.’

Detective Constable Marcel Lang nodded. ‘She’s obviously in a rush to get the kettle on. I do like a friendly welcome.’

They entered the hallway. Marcel closed the front door and said, ‘I hope she’s got some Hobnobs in. Or KitKats. I’m not fussy.’

‘Didn’t I just see you wolfing down a pasty and chips in the canteen?’

Marcel rubbed his belly, which belied what he shovelled into it on a regular basis. He was one of those people who was always charged to capacity with nervous energy. He could cram in a four-course meal, then burn it off within the hour. He was neither tall nor stocky, but in a fight he was tenacious and ferocious. A darting, snapping terrier rather than a lumbering Rottweiler.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I’m sure Vera was a bit stingy with the chips today.’

The hall was papered in busy patterns that made Hannah’s eyes wobble. It was like one of those optical illusions where you had

to look at it a certain way to make it pop out in 3D. She was glad to get past it and into the living room, where Suzy had plonked herself down on an armchair and was lighting up a cigarette. The room already reeked of stale smoke.

‘Mind if we sit?’ Hannah asked.

‘I don’t care if you do handstands if it helps get this over with. Ask your questions and get out.’

Hannah lowered herself onto the sofa. It was upholstered in a floral fabric that didn’t match the chairs. A stack of interior design magazines was balanced on one of its arms, although it was clear that the advice within their pages had not been taken on board. To Hannah’s right, a gas fire was fixed to the wall on an obvious slant, as though it might fall off at any second. Behind Suzy, a large window with failed double-glazed units offered a fogged view of a garden crowded with weeds and junk.

Marcel didn’t sit down. He hardly ever relaxed in other people’s houses. Hannah didn’t mind on this occasion. His steady pacing, coupled with the occasional surprise launch of a question, would unsettle Suzy.

Hannah studied the woman for a few seconds. She was thirty-nine. Coffee-coloured hair that she’d endeavoured to make more interesting with some blonde streaks. Trim figure and a push-up bra straining against a vest top. Cartoonish doodles of eyebrows. Inflated lips that made it look as though she’d stick fast if she walked into a plate-glass window.

‘This doesn’t have to be difficult,’ Hannah said.

Suzy snorted out two streams of smoke, like an angry bull.

‘Try saying that when a gang of hairy-arsed coppers breaks down your front door at four o’clock in the morning and then rips your house apart.’

Hannah sighed. She could do without the attitude. It was wearying, draining. She didn’t have the patience for this shit anymore.

‘We didn’t rip it apart. We searched it. And we were acting on information received that Tommy was here.’

‘Well, he wasn’t, was he? Which just goes to show how crap your information is. He wasn’t here then and he isn’t here now, so why don’t you just sling your hook?’

‘Have you seen him recently?’ Marcel asked.

‘Not since the last time you asked me, no.’

‘Has he phoned you?’

‘Nope.’

‘What, not a single call? I thought you two were inseparable. Suzy and Tommy sitting in a tree.’

She showed him her middle finger. ‘Don’t take the piss, all right? You’re the ones who are keeping him away. Don’t know if I’ll ever see him again now.’

Hannah shook her head. ‘My heart bleeds for you. Not as much as his fiancée’s, mind.’

Suzy stabbed her cigarette into the overflowing ashtray on the table next to her and jumped to her feet.

‘That’s it!’ she yelled. ‘Get out of my house.’

Hannah stayed put. ‘You need to talk to us, Suzy. You’re not helping him or yourself.’

‘I said get out!’

The command was followed by a thunder of footsteps rolling down the staircase. Hannah saw Marcel’s eyes widen. He dived for the doorway to intercept whatever was heading their way. Hannah had faith in him. He would handle it. And if he didn’t . . .

Well, did it matter? Did anything really matter? Sometimes she thought someone beating the crap out of her might do her some good.

She remained on the sofa, staring philosophically at Suzy, wondering if she had a similar attitude to life. Despite the heavy foundation, the bruise on her cheek still shone through. Why would

she put herself through that? Why would any sane woman stay loyal to a violent nutcase like Tommy Glover?

‘What are you doing to my mother?’

Shane Carling. Eighteen years old and straining to fill the shoes of the man of the house. Still baby-faced but attempting to counter the apparent innocence with a scalp of stubble and a tattoo of three swords on his neck. Now getting gobby like he always did. He stood in the doorway, jabbing his finger at the detectives while the unintimidated Marcel blocked his path and itched for an excuse to get him in an armlock and call for a van.

‘We’re having a quiet chat,’ Hannah told him. ‘Nothing to get your knickers in a twist about.’

‘Quiet chat, my arse,’ Suzy said. ‘They’re accusing me again. I want them out!’

‘You heard her,’ Shane said. He tried to take a step forward, but Marcel didn’t budge. Shane’s glower became increasingly aggressive, but it was no match for Marcel’s unwavering stare.

Hannah kept her voice flat, calm. ‘We’re not accusing you of anything. Can we have a proper adult conversation now, please?’

Suzy mulled it over. Gradually, the tension drained from her and she lowered herself onto her chair. Shane and Marcel continued their staring match, like championship boxers at a weigh-in.

Realising she had just stubbed out her cigarette, Suzy picked up a carton from the table, but discovered it was empty.

‘For fuck’s sake.’ She looked across at her son. ‘Fetch me some cigarettes, lad.’

Shane seemed relieved at the excuse to break eye contact. ‘Ma . . .’

She waved him away. ‘It’s all right. Let them say their piece and go. I’ve got nothing to hide.’

‘Where are your cigs?’

She snapped again. ‘I don’t bloody know. Try my bedroom. One of my bags. Use your head.’

Shane took one last glance at Marcel before disappearing upstairs. Hannah gained the impression he was more scared of his own mother than he was of the police officer.

She turned back to Suzy. 'We're not trying to make life difficult for you, but you don't seem to appreciate how dangerous Tommy is.'

'He's not dangerous. Not to me. He loves me.'

Ah, Hannah thought. So there it is. Love. Everything can look brighter through the prism of love.

'You've heard what he did to Marie, haven't you? That was his *fiancée*. The woman he once *loved*. We don't know if she's ever going to come out of hospital. And even if she does, she'll never be the same.'

Suzy turned away as if she didn't want to hear any more, but Hannah pressed on.

'Did you know he insisted on getting the engagement ring back? And when she refused, he attacked her. And when she still refused, he cut off her finger to get it. That's the kind of man your Tommy is. That's what he does to the women he claims to love.'

Suzy's head was still turned to the side, but there was a discernible tremble in her lower lip.

'Where the hell is he with those ciggies?' she said. 'I'm gasping here.'

Hannah watched her for a few seconds, allowing her words to percolate further into Suzy's brain. If the woman could see sense, if she could just allow herself to step back and see the danger she was in . . .

And then there was a movement in the corner of Hannah's eye. At another doorway, leading to the kitchen.

She was standing there, as pretty as a field of flowers. Only eight years old. A sunshine smile that seemed to fill the room with bird-song. She was wearing her school uniform: bottle-green sweater,

black skirt, shiny black shoes, and white socks pulled up tight and precisely aligned below her kneecaps. As always, a lock of her hair had escaped to coil between her eyes.

And then she was gone, retreating into the depths of the kitchen.

Hannah stood, moved towards the kitchen. She couldn't help herself.

'Hey!' Suzy said. 'Where do you think you're going?'

Hannah heard the voice but couldn't stop. From behind her came further protestations from Suzy, then words from Marcel as he tried to hold the woman back. It was all just background noise to Hannah now.

The kitchen was empty. The back door was open, admitting a broad wedge of warm September sunshine, but there was no sign of anyone in the garden.

Hannah surveyed the room. Finger-stained cupboards, one absent its door. The washing machine thrumming its motor and sloshing its contents. A basin full of soapy water. A precarious mountain of dishes on the draining board . . .

The voices grew louder. Shane pounded downstairs again and joined the commotion. Marcel had his hands full back there.

She took a step closer to the sink . . .

Something winked at her. A brief glint of brilliance. Like a light-bulb moment. Hannah could almost hear the *ding* in her head.

Yes. There. Evidently, Suzy had been washing the dishes when they'd arrived. Hannah remembered her drying her hands on that grubby towel. And in preparation for the task, she had removed her ring.

It rested on a window ledge above the sink. Rose gold, with a bulbous central blue stone surrounded by smaller white gems. Exactly as she had seen it in the crime reports.

This ring had belonged to Tommy Glover's fiancée, before he hacked it from her hand.

Tommy had been here.

A rush of movement behind her.

She whirled to see Suzy racing out of the back door and across the garden. Hannah threw the ring down and took up the chase.

‘Marcel!’ she yelled.

She dashed outside but could see that Suzy had already reached the fence and was pulling a couple of the panels aside to duck through. Hannah sprinted through the tall weeds, hurdled over a broken lawnmower. When she reached the dilapidated fence, she looked back to see that Marcel had been tackled to the ground by Shane, and was now wrestling with him. She debated whether to go back and help, decided against it. She had confidence that Marcel could handle himself.

She pushed through the hole in the fence, then barged through dense shrubbery that seemed intent on clawing her back. She was unprepared for the steep slope that met her on the other side. She lost her footing, rolled down the bank, slammed hard onto a pathway and felt sharp-edged stones cutting into her knees and shins.

‘Shit!’

She clambered to her feet. Saw the blood oozing from the puncture wounds on her legs. She fought through the pain and started running again. Ahead, Suzy was widening the gap, but there didn’t seem to be anywhere she could go. To her left were the steep, slippery, grassy banks bordering the rear of a long row of houses, and to her right was a tall wire fence closing off access to a railway line. Another section of fencing ran perpendicular to it in the distance, terminating the path.

Jesus, Hannah thought. For a chain-smoker in her late thirties, that woman can move!

As she picked up the pace, her mind began to make sense of the situation. She realised that Tommy had been visiting Suzy via this route to her rear fence, and that was why he had never been

picked up by surveillance officers stationed on the road at the front. Perhaps Suzy was heading towards him now, to warn him off. Or perhaps she knew that she was in deep shit herself. Was it Tommy's idea to bring his fiancée's ring to Suzy, or had she insisted that he do it to prove his devotion?

And then Hannah realised something else. A short distance in front of Suzy was an opening in the fence – a pedestrian level crossing to the other side of the tracks. Hannah could see the bright warning lights flashing.

And she could hear the train.

It was coming up behind her. She glanced over her shoulder. Still at some distance, but it was probably going at a hell of a speed. She looked again at Suzy and the crossing, performed some crude mental calculations. Decided that it wasn't worth the risk.

Don't do it, Suzy. You won't make it.

She found some acceleration. Her heart was pounding, her lungs were ready to burst, her legs were burning, but still she ran.

Suzy looked back. Saw Hannah and the train. Carried out her own instant risk assessment.

No, Suzy. Please. It's too dangerous.

Hannah heard the train roaring up behind her, the sudden ear-splitting two-tone blare of its horn, and she kept her eyes focused on Suzy, kept willing her not to attempt it because *No Suzy, you won't make in time, you're too late*, and then there was a rush of wind and thunderous noise and the sight of Suzy jinking to her right, onto the level crossing, and all that Hannah could do was collapse against the fence, her fingers clutching the wire as she stared at the blur of darkness rocketing past her, praying with all her might that Suzy had made it across that track, that she would soon be seen running in the distance and flipping two fingers up to her pursuer, because that would be so much better than the alternative.

But then the train was gone.

And so was Suzy. What remained of her was now scattered far and wide.

Hannah slid down the fence. She threw her head back and let out a howl of anguish. When she dropped her chin again and blinked away the mist of tears, she yearned to be proved wrong, to be shown that Suzy had evaded both capture and death.

Suzy wasn't there.

Somebody else was, though.

Standing to attention atop a small hillock, stiff and proud in her new school uniform.

1

The hiss of the bus doors made Daniel Timpson look up from his comic. He peered through the grimy window to check where he was. The journey home took in a total of ten bus stops. This was number eight. He had to be careful about his count, because sometimes drivers skipped a stop if nobody wanted to get on or off.

‘I thought you’d gone to sleep.’

Daniel turned to the woman sitting next to him. He thought she looked very old. Maybe more than a hundred. She’d probably die soon. He hoped she didn’t die on the bus.

‘I don’t sleep on the bus,’ he told her. ‘I might miss my stop if I do that.’

She smiled. She had a nice smile, but it made him wonder if her teeth were real.

‘Very wise,’ she said. ‘I only mention it because you haven’t moved an inch for the past few minutes. You seem very engrossed in your comic.’

This puzzled Daniel. He didn’t know what *engrossed* meant, but he knew that a thing was horrible if it was gross, so why would he be reading something horrible?

‘It’s about Adam-9,’ he told her.

‘Adam-9? Is he a superhero?’

‘Not really. He’s a secret agent. That’s him.’ He pointed to a figure in his comic.

‘What’s so secret about him?’

‘Well, nobody knows what he looks like.’

‘Oh. Now I’m confused.’ She touched a withered finger to his comic, and he hoped that she didn’t put old-person germs on it. ‘Doesn’t he look like that?’

Daniel wasn’t surprised she was confused. Old people could get very muddled.

‘No. He puts on rubber masks that make him look like other people. He can look like anyone. Maybe even you if he had a really wrinkly mask.’

She laughed, and he didn’t know why.

He continued: ‘So nobody knows what he really looks like, and Adam-9 is just his call sign, so nobody knows his real name either.’

‘Gosh, he *is* secretive, isn’t he? But he doesn’t have any special powers?’

‘No. But he does have a special briefcase with lots of special gadgets in it.’

The woman moved her skeletal digit to Daniel’s own briefcase on his lap. ‘A bit like this one, I imagine.’

He stared at her. How did she know? Was she an enemy spy?

No, he decided. She was just old, and old people are very wise. Like owls.

‘A bit,’ he said. He went on to explain that Adam-9 carried his briefcase everywhere, and that it was the most amazing briefcase that had ever been made. He told her that it didn’t just hold his disguises and other useful stuff, but that it could also do really clever things, because the top of the handle could flip up and show buttons and dials, and one of the buttons made it fire knockout darts, while another made panels slide out from the briefcase to turn it into a bulletproof shield. And in last week’s story on TV (because Adam-9 isn’t only in comics), Adam-9 was thrown out of a plane, and it looked like he was going to die, but he didn’t die

because by pressing the right button on his briefcase he made it release a parachute.

What Daniel didn't admit to the old lady was that his own briefcase didn't do any of that stuff. It didn't even have buttons on the handle. But he could pretend it did. His mum had wanted him to have a backpack or a sports bag like everyone else, but he'd insisted. It was the briefcase or nothing. So they had gone shopping and looked at every single case in town before deciding on the one that most looked like Adam-9's. This was it, and that was why it was special.

The bus doors hissed again.

'Oh,' Daniel said. 'I have to get up now and wait for the next stop.'

'Well,' said the woman, 'it's been a pleasure talking to you, young man, but I wouldn't want you to miss your stop.'

'Thank you. Don't miss your stop either. Old people can forget things. My nan used to forget everything. She used to fart a lot, too.'

The woman laughed again, but Daniel didn't know why.

When it came time for him to alight, he made sure to thank the bus driver. He always made a point of doing so. 'Politeness costs nothing,' his mother always told him. That, and 'Manners maketh the man.' He never understood why she said *maketh* instead of *make*, but he knew she was right. More often than not, his courteous behaviour provoked a smile, and that made him happy.

At the bus stop he looked around to make sure his mother wasn't there. He had informed her many, many times that he was perfectly capable of getting home by himself now, but she often turned up nonetheless. Sometimes she would lurk in the shadows of a shop doorway and then follow him at a discreet distance, like a spy. Like Adam-9.

He turned off the busy main street and onto Marlborough

Road. Home was only a short walk from here. A few minutes, although he didn't know exactly how many. He wasn't very good at telling the time. He was good at drawing pictures, though. Today he had drawn a picture of Adam-9 destroying a missile, and Mrs Collins had said it was AMAZING and put a gold star on it, *that's* how good he was at drawing. And when she did that, he felt he should say something nice back to her, so he told her that the spot on her nose looked a lot better and that she was wearing a pretty bra today, and Mrs Collins smiled and went red, probably because they were such nice compliments, and she hurried away with one hand on her nose and the other pulling together the top of her shirt.

He was looking forward to getting home and telling his mother all about his wonderful day, and what Mrs Collins had said. He was also looking forward to his tea, which tonight would be chicken nuggets and chips and two slices of bread and butter, and he'd have a diet cola with it because *diet* meant it didn't make you fat. Then he'd have ice cream with strawberries, and he'd have five strawberries because he was supposed to have Five A Day. That was his Friday night meal. Not the Friday after next, though, because that Friday would be his birthday, and on that day his diet would go out of the window and he'd have his favourite chippy meal of all time, which was steak pie with chips and gravy, and then his mum would bring out a Colin the Caterpillar cake, because that was his favourite cake of all time.

Halfway down Marlborough Road he crossed over. That was because he could see the Dirty Man sitting on his front step. Daniel called him that because he didn't know his real name and because his hands and clothes were always dirty, like he'd been working in a coal mine or down a sewer. It wasn't the dirt that made Daniel cross the road, but the fact that the Dirty Man owned a dog that ran out at anyone who got too near the house, and it would yap

and try to bite their ankles. Daniel didn't like angry dogs like that, so he crossed the road and then crossed back again a few yards farther along.

At the end of Marlborough Road, he turned right onto Pickford Avenue. Mrs Romford was in front of her house, polishing the letter box on her front door. Usually when she was out like this, it was to wash her car, but today it was to polish the letter box.

'Hello, Mrs Romford,' he said, being polite.

She looked up and smiled and said, 'Oh, hello, Daniel. How are you today?'

'Fine, thank you. I'm having chicken nuggets and chips tonight. Not chippy chips. Frozen chips. I'll have chippy chips when it's my birthday, which is very soon.'

'That's nice. How's your father?'

Mrs Romford was always asking about his dad. He didn't know why, because she saw him often enough. She was always taking her car into his dad's garage. The last time it was because one of the seats was making a funny squeak, and the time before that it was because one of the wipers wasn't cleaning the windscreen properly. When his dad said Mrs Romford was his best customer, Daniel's mum said it wasn't only her car she was looking to get serviced. Daniel didn't know what that meant.

'My dad's fine, thank you. He said to tell you something.'

Mrs Romford suddenly perked up. She got to her feet, still clutching her cloth and can of Brasso.

'Oh,' she said. 'What's that?'

Daniel put a finger to his chin as he tried to recall the exact words. 'He said, "Tell Mrs Romford that if she ever needs anything lubricating or pumping up, I'm her man."'

Mrs Romford suddenly emitted a deep-throated chuckle, which startled Daniel. The remark had seemed so ordinary at the

time, although he had wondered why his mum had jabbed her elbow into his dad's ribcage.

When she had finished laughing, Mrs Romford pointed with her oily rag and said, 'You look very smart with that briefcase.'

Daniel raised the briefcase in the air, offering her a better view. 'I use it every day. It's special.'

'It certainly is,' she replied, clearly spellbound.

He hoped she wouldn't ask him why it was so special, because then he would have to answer, and he had already gone through all that with the old lady on the bus.

'I'm going home now,' he told her. 'My mum will be waiting. She gets worried if I'm late.'

'You do that, Daniel. Tell your dad I'll see him soon.'

Daniel nodded. Then, feeling the need to pass a compliment, he said, 'I'll bet the postman will enjoy putting his package into your lovely letter box.'

Mrs Romford exploded into laughter again. Through her tears she barely managed to get out the words, 'Like father, like son.'

Daniel didn't know why she was saying that, or what she found so hilarious, so he waved goodbye and moved on.

The flats loomed into view. Twelve storeys high. Daniel lived on the top floor. There was a lift, but unless he was with someone else he always took the stairs because it was healthier. And because the lift usually stank of wee. He didn't understand why anyone would want to wee in a lift unless they were trapped in there for a long, long time.

A gang of boys came around a corner, heading towards Daniel. They were on the opposite side of the road at first, but then they saw him and crossed over. He told himself not to worry.

The boys were dressed in school uniform. They carried backpacks and sports bags rather than briefcases. One of them was bouncing a football on the pavement. The steady banging

echoed off the buildings and made Daniel feel a little uneasy. He felt even more unsettled when the boys spread out to block his route.

‘Where you going?’ said the lad with the ball.

Daniel pointed. ‘Home. I live there. 1204 Erskine Court.’

The boy grinned, and his mates sniggered.

‘Why’ve you got a briefcase? Are you a bank manager or something?’

The laughter grew more intense. Another boy said, ‘Maybe he’s the prime minister.’

‘Is that right?’ said the first. ‘Are you our leader? Are you going to save the country?’

‘No. I—’

‘What’s your name?’

‘D-D-Daniel.’

‘Duh-Duh Daniel? That’s a funny name. Well, Duh-Duh, what’s in the briefcase?’

‘Yeah, Dodo,’ said a voice behind him. ‘What’s in the case?’

Daniel turned to face the new interrogator, and the ball hit him on the back of the head. He whirled back to face the group’s leader.

‘Sorry about that, Doo-Doo. My hands slipped. Anyway, you were about to tell us what’s in the briefcase.’

‘My lunchbox,’ Daniel said. ‘It’s empty now. I ate all my sandwiches and my fruit and my biscuits at lunchtime. Oh, and my picture is in there too. I drew a picture, and Mrs Collins gave me a gold star. I’m going to show it to my mum.’

There was another splutter from behind, and again when Daniel turned, the ball was bounced off his head.

‘You shouldn’t do that,’ Daniel said. ‘It’s not nice.’

‘It was an accident,’ said the lad. ‘Come on, then, Dumbo. Show us your picture.’

Daniel contemplated the request. He wasn’t very good at