

SANDIE JONES

# THE BLAME GAME

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## PROLOGUE

*She wants to be everything to everyone, but making yourself indispensable is dangerous.*

*It means you're party to secrets that others don't want you to know. It means you'll go to any length to keep your own close to your chest. It means that everyone around you becomes collateral damage.*

*But she'll not bring me down. I'll get to her, before she gets to me.*

*Her need to be essential is about to make her an accessory.*



# PART ONE





# 1

I'm sure, as soon as I see the door ajar, that something has happened. I never leave my garden office unlocked overnight, not because there's anything in there worth stealing, but there's been a spate of petty shed burglaries around here recently and I don't need my clients' files strewn across the manicured lawns of Tattenhall in the hapless pursuit of a mower or power tool.

Though you'd have to be pretty stupid if you honestly thought that the sprawling estate was tended to by a hand-held strimmer kept in my pimped-up shed. The fifty acres of rolling land that surround our cottage are maintained and nurtured by a team of three full-time greenkeepers, who you're more likely to see astride a sit-on John Deere than hovering a Flymo.

I remember Leon showing me the barn where all the machinery is kept, when we first moved here after he'd become the estate's manager. My eyes had stood out on stalks, as I'd always been a tomboy growing up and one of the best days I remember having as a child was being taken to Diggerland, where I was allowed to operate a JCB. I'd patiently waited in line for over an hour, just so I could pick up dirt from one pile with the giant

bucket and move it onto another. My dad was infuriated that a theme park would charge for such an inane activity, but I'd been delighted.

Pushing the memory to the back of my mind, before it turns sour, I tentatively pull the door open and peer inside the converted outbuilding I've grown to love. I expect to see my desk upturned and its drawers thrown across the room in frustration, as the low-life realized that there wasn't as much as a skateboard on which he could make his getaway. But my workstation is still upright; the framed certificates proving my right to practise as a psychologist still hang, dead straight, on the wall, and the vase of flowers that I'd been sent by a grateful client still blossom, their optimism jarring against the unnerving sensation that is coiling around my stomach.

My eyes travel to the salmon-coloured couch, where many a life story has been shared, but its cushions remain perfectly plumped and the magazines on the coffee table are fanned out just as I had left them after my last appointment on Friday.

Nothing looks to have been disturbed and I allow a little frisson of relief to ease its way across my shoulders, loosening the knot that has so quickly tightened there. Maybe I had carelessly left the door unlocked and the breeze had just taken it off the latch, leaving it swaying in the brisk morning air.

I admonish myself, promising that I will pay more

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attention in future. There might not be anything in here to entice an opportunist looking for an easy grab and sell, but there is still incredibly sensitive information held within the drawers of the cabinets that, in the wrong hands, could have far more damaging consequences.

I take a sip of my coffee and turn the electric heater on, just to take the edge off. It's forecast to be a warm day, but the overnight coolness has made its presence felt. *Not helped by leaving the door open*, I say scathingly to myself.

I shiver involuntarily as I open my diary, though I can't tell whether it's because of the very real chill in the air or seeing who my first appointment is.

*Jacob.*

My chest tightens and I ask myself for the hundredth time whether I've done the right thing by him. I know I certainly haven't done right by Leon, but then I wonder if that's not his own fault.

If he hadn't been so distracted lately, I would have found it easier to tell him. But the job that we thought would give us more time together has actually resulted in exactly the opposite. Because even when he's home, he's on constant call, and the summer concert that he's spent the last four months organizing is fast approaching, leaving him with even less time, and certainly less patience.

I've wanted to tell him about Jacob; tried to several times, but he's never listened long enough for me to get

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to the important part. But maybe that's just me choosing to see it that way, because I know how he's going to react when I do. He'll no doubt take me to task for caring too much and going beyond the call of duty. But there's a reason for that.

I knew as soon as Jacob started coming to see me three months ago that his story was different. Although he, like all of my clients, had reached the point where he felt able to put his pride aside and bravely ask for help, the irony of his situation was that he wasn't looking to save himself; he wanted to save the woman who had been abusing him for ten years.

'If I don't get out now, I'm terrified of what I might do,' he'd said when I asked why he'd come to see me, during our first session. 'For the first time ever, I was going to retaliate and it scared me because I didn't know what I might be capable of.'

I'd looked at him, curiously, unable to recall another client who thought they were the one who needed help, instead of the person who'd been making their life hell.

'Can you tell me what happened to make you feel this way?' I'd asked softly.

He'd looked down at his intertwined fingers in his lap. 'She stayed out last Saturday,' he started. 'All night.'

'OK,' I said. 'And do you know where she'd been?'

He'd laughed cynically. 'Oh, she made sure to tell me all the details.' He shifted on the sofa, pulling a

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scatter cushion onto his lap, as if it were a metaphorical barrier.

I'd sat back in my chair opposite him, giving him the time and space to decide whether he wanted to elaborate.

'She'd been with another man,' he'd said eventually. 'Having the best sex she's ever had.'

I'd recoiled inwardly, unable to imagine how it must feel to be told something like that by the person you thought you were going to spend the rest of your life with.

'She told you that?' I'd asked incredulously, seemingly still capable of being shocked by the sadistic behaviour of some people, despite being in the job for over ten years.

He'd nodded. 'Yes, just before she straddled me and attempted to force herself on me.'

'And what happened?'

'Absolutely nothing,' he said. 'I could still smell him on her, for God's sake. But regardless, I could no longer convince my body that making love to her was what I wanted to do. It had listened to the call to action for so long, ever ready to perform when she wanted it to, but eventually, my brain just said, "Enough, I can't do this any more."'

His lips had closed and he'd grimaced. 'She told me I was an embarrassment to mankind, unable to perform the most primitive of functions.'

'How did that make you feel?' I'd asked.

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‘Less of a man,’ he said. ‘Though I guess she’s ingrained it in me to such an extent that it’s impossible to feel any other way.’

‘So your relationship has affected your masculinity?’ I’d asked.

‘Of course,’ he’d said, sighing. ‘How can it not? The stereotype is that a real man should be in charge, be the breadwinner.’

I couldn’t help but cringe at his misguided definition. ‘Don’t you think that’s a rather outdated stereotype these days?’

‘Is it?’ he’d asked, seeming genuinely out of touch. ‘That gives me some hope then, as I’m not like that.’

‘I think masculinity’s more about how you feel.’

‘Well, that morning, I couldn’t have felt any less of a man if I’d tried. Maybe that’s why I almost did what I did.’

He’d wiped a tear away and I pushed the box of tissues on the table closer to him.

‘What did you *almost* do?’ I asked.

His jaw tensed, the bristles of his beard pulsing.

‘When she got off me and walked towards the bathroom, I reached for the baseball bat that we keep beside the bed. I’ve let her rain down blow after blow, insult after insult, without so much as a retort, but that morning, everything that I’ve held in over the years just rose to the surface.’

‘What were you thinking you would do?’ I’d asked.

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He took a deep breath. 'I wanted to kill her,' he said, before looking at me as if to gauge my reaction. When I didn't give him one, he'd forged on. 'It felt like the only way out and I remember thinking that all I had to do was swing it once and it would all be over. I was walking up behind her, having this internal dialogue with myself, wondering how bad it would be if I just did it.'

'So what stopped you?' I asked.

'As much as I so desperately wanted to do it, all the time I was rationalizing it in my head, it wasn't going to be an instinctive act, was it?'

'I'm going to ask the question that I'm sure you've asked yourself a thousand times,' I'd said.

'Why haven't I left her?' he sighed, beating me to it. I'd nodded.

'I will, but it's going to take some organization. I've been applying for new jobs in Canterbury as I can't risk her finding me once I've gone.'

'What is it you do?' I asked.

'I'm a school teacher,' he said. 'For my sins.'

I'd offered a small smile.

'And what about accommodation?' I'd asked.

'I haven't got anything lined up, but if I get offered any of the positions I've applied for, I'll have to get something sorted out pretty quickly, even if it's just something temporary, until I'm able to get myself properly settled.'

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I'd been tempted to offer him our flat, which was standing empty just a few miles down the coast, there and then. We were planning on decorating it, ready for the onslaught of tourists that descend on Whitstable for the holiday season, but somehow summer is already upon us and we haven't got around to it yet. It's in a great little spot, just two roads back from the beach, and has served us well these past six years whilst Leon and I have been commuting into nearby Canterbury: him to his job as events manager at the cathedral and me to my grey little windowless box in the council offices.

But when the opportunity to live in a grace and favour cottage at Tattenhall had presented itself, it had been a no-brainer. Not least because it gave me the chance to set up my own practice in the outbuilding, which, seeing as I was embroiled in a stand-off with my line manager, couldn't have come at a better time.

'You've crossed the line,' he'd said, when he discovered I'd helped a woman seek sanctuary from her violent husband in the middle of the night.

'She was in imminent danger,' I'd retorted. 'Are we really such slaves to bureaucracy that we're prepared to risk a woman being killed?'

'Red tape's there for a reason,' he'd barked as I walked away.

Well, if it was there, I chose not to see it when I slipped out of the house and drove the four miles to



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where Sarah lived. That's not to say fear wasn't coursing through my veins as I sat there with my lights and engine off, surrounded by what felt like an invisible trip wire that would set off a deafening alarm as soon as she crossed it. But my stomach was in knots for her, not myself.

I watched with my heart in my mouth as she came out and carefully closed the door behind her. Just one forced error, and her husband would be down those stairs and dragging her back up to give her the beating of her life.

'You can do this,' I'd said out loud, as she momentarily hesitated in the porch. 'Come on, Sarah, just a few more steps.'

She silently ran towards the car without looking back, but just as she reached the passenger door, an upstairs light went on.

'Get in, get in,' I whispered, my voice hoarse with terror.

I'd managed to get her to the safehouse, but two days later her husband had paid me a visit in the underground car park at work, demanding to know where she was.

I wasn't going to tell Leon, but I was still trembling when I got home, unable to shake the memory of a double-barrelled shotgun being pressed against my temple.

'Promise me you'll never do anything like that again,

Naomi,' he'd said, as he pulled me close and wrapped himself around me. Right there, nestled in my safe place, I never imagined I would.

Yet here I am, once again, with the weapon's indentation not yet forgotten, finding myself unable to deny someone in need.

'Are we still going to rent the flat out?' I'd mooted to Leon a few weeks ago, when Jacob told me he'd been offered a new job.

'Yeah, as soon as the concert's out of the way,' Leon had said. 'I'll look at getting it ready for the summer season. I think it will do well as a holiday rental.'

'Yes, but that could be unpredictable,' I'd said. 'Not to mention hard work for me and you. Wouldn't it make more sense to rent it out on a six-month contract, or even three? At least we'd know we had that guaranteed income.'

'I'm not sure there's anyone around here who would take it on that basis,' he said, his tone already distracted by something he was looking at on his laptop.

'Well, one of my clients might be interested,' I said, turning my back, conscious of what I was plotting being written all over my face.

'I don't think that's a good idea,' he'd said. 'Do you not think it would be better to keep your work and the flat separate?'

'Not when it's someone as desperate as he is.'

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‘*He?*’ Leon repeated, suddenly giving me his undivided attention. Was that what it took these days?

‘Yes,’ I said, wishing I’d kept Jacob gender neutral.

‘So what’s his story?’ he’d asked, his interest piqued.

‘He’s been abused by his wife for the past ten years and he’s finally had enough,’ I said. ‘Whenever he dares to fall asleep before her, she’ll pour freezing cold water over him or run razors across the soles of his feet. They leave just the tiniest of nicks that can barely be seen by the naked eye, but you try walking on a hundred paper cuts.’

Leon had looked at me with confusion etched across his brow. ‘And you want him to live in our flat?’

I’d nodded.

He’d shaken his head. ‘She sounds like a complete nutter.’

‘She is,’ I’d said, thinking he was finally beginning to understand the need to get Jacob somewhere safe.

‘I don’t think that’s something you should involve yourself in,’ he said. ‘God knows what she’s capable of.’

My heart had sunk. ‘But she won’t know where he is.’

‘Yeah, but still – it’s probably best we stay out of it.’

‘He doesn’t have anywhere else to go,’ I said.

‘Why is that suddenly your problem?’

‘I just want to be able to help, that’s all, and the flat’s sitting there empty . . .’

‘I think you do enough for your clients,’ he’d said. ‘You’re paid an hour for just that; an hour.’

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He'd made it sound so easy, but I defy anyone with half a heart to listen to what my clients say, and not think about it for long after they've left. It's a bit like reading a book. You know that feeling you get when you're so fully invested in the characters that you have to read one more page? And then another and another, until you find out what happens to them, even when you know you can't do anything to change their fate and what the author has already written on the pages.

But what if you *could* change the end of the story? What if you had the chance to change somebody's life, at no cost to your own? You would, wouldn't you?