

BAD BLOOD

Sarah Hornsley

Chapter One

I was seven when I learned aloe vera plants are the best remedy for burns. I'd been watching my mother from the kitchen doorway as she sliced the plant in half with a knife before scooping out its wet flesh and applying it to the top of her arm. Her burn had taken almost three weeks to heal, first turning a sappy yellow in the middle before leaving a perfect circular scar I noticed every summer after. I never mentioned it; had jumped out of sight when she turned from the kitchen counter. This is how I know the defendant is lying about the burn. I scribble it down on a piece of paper and pass it to where Charles Cole is stood mid-way through his cross-examination. He glances at it and then to me. I can see he's confused but he trusts me. I am his rising star and so, after only a moment's deliberation, he indicates for me to stand and makes his way back to the prosecution desk. He is handing the court – our stage – over to me.

'Mr Jackson.' I smile at the defendant, though it isn't a friendly one. I am a wolf in a barrister's robe. 'I want to take a minute to go over the information you just gave to the court.' I gesture towards the jury, making sure they understand I am about to reveal how he has lied to them. I want it to feel personal. 'On 22nd November last year, did you expect Peter Taylor to be in his home when you entered it?'

'I did not.' He shakes his head, and I can tell he has no idea where I'm going with this. He thinks I'm lost and playing for time.

'When Peter did indeed turn out to be home, and he confronted you in his kitchen, can you tell the court again what transpired?'

'Sure,' he shrugs. 'He attacked me.'

'Can you describe the attack for the court?'

'He rugby tackled me to the floor and we fought a while, he kept trying to grab me round the neck but I managed to get away. I was trying to leave, had my back to him, when he must have grabbed the iron from its board where it stood at the side. The next thing I knew, I felt a searing hot pain on my left shoulder.'

'He burnt you with the iron?'

'Yes.'

'But he didn't hit you with it? It's a heavy object.' I watch his eyes flit to his defence barrister, Rose Ballard, before answering me. She hadn't prepared him for this line of questioning.

'Well, he was quite far away from me at this point. I was trying to leave. I guess he lunged and it caught me.'

'And what happened next?'

'I spun around and he was much closer to me by then. He had the iron swung back as if he was about to whack me with it again.'

'Can you tell me what was going through your mind when you realised he'd burnt you and was still holding the iron?'

'I thought he was going to kill me.' He looks over to the jury as he says it, all sad and forlorn looking. What he doesn't realise is he's just delivered me the perfect answer.

'And how exactly did you react to this?'

'I stabbed him.'

'How many times?'

'Five. In self-defence.'

I pause, letting it sink in. Not just once, but five times. 'Okay. Can you confirm for me that the reason you stabbed Mr Taylor in self-defence was because he burnt you with the iron?'

'That's right. I had my back turned and was leaving. I'm telling you, he came for me.' I try not to smile, keeping my cards close to my chest for just a little while longer.

'Did you have any injuries as a result of Mr Taylor's assault?'

'We've been over this already,' he sighs, clearly tiring of my questioning. Good. The more frustrated they are, the more likely they are to make mistakes. We wear them down.

'Humour me,' I say, gesturing theatrically and making some of the jurors snigger.

'I have a scar on the back of my shoulder.'

'And this scar was there when the police arrested you one week after Peter Taylor was killed in his kitchen. Correct?'

'That's right. They have photos and everything. I ain't lying.'

I raise my eyebrows. He is starting to sweat.

‘So, you were caught by the iron badly enough for it to scar. And that same burn had healed one week after the injury was first sustained, allowing the police to take photos of the area as shown during the trial when you were arrested one week after the attack?’

‘Erm.’

‘Just answer the question please. It’s a simple yes or no.’

‘Yes.’

‘During the period of time between the burning and your arrest – just one week – did you receive any medical advice or treatment? Did you google how to treat a burn? Was there anything you did to help it heal?’

‘Not that I can remember.’

‘The thing is, Mr Jackson, a second-degree burn, which is what you would need to have sustained for it to scar as shown in the photos, takes at least two to three weeks to heal, and that’s even using the best treatments around.’

‘Well not for me,’ he says forcefully, the puppy dog eyes from earlier turning into something a little more threatening. *That’s right, I’m on to you.* The adrenaline is pumping faster through my veins now. This feeling, it is addictive.

‘I put it to you that it did in fact take precisely the normal two to three weeks for the burn on the back of your shoulder to scar. It could not have been sustained during the alleged assault you were subjected to by Mr Taylor but must have happened before you even entered his home, otherwise it would still have been an open wound at the time of your arrest. To be clear, whatever caused you to get that scar must have been inflicted at least – and I repeat, at least – one week prior to the incident you’re currently on trial for. In fact, I think given this scar is the only injury you can point to having sustained from Mr Taylor, that there was no attack at all from the victim and you killed him in his home without being provoked. Importantly, you killed him not as an act of self-defence but simply because you could.’

He doesn’t say anything, just gawps, looking like a rabbit caught in headlights. ‘Mr Jackson,’ I raise my voice, ‘am I correct? Did you sustain your burn before the night in question?’ I watch as he rubs his hands over his face, leaving red finger marks trailing down his cheeks. He is cracking.

We are going to win.

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The robing room sounds a lot more majestic than it is, but the romance of it is not to be underestimated. I always find that I need this time and the camaraderie found here, even between opposing sides, to make the transition from hard-nosed barrister back to functioning human. Without it, I wonder if my marriage would have survived this long. If I'm honest, I highly doubt it. The two sides of me, constantly pulled in opposite directions. One part, doggedly determined to win no matter the cost; the other, desperate to find stability. I can't seem to make my mind up on what exactly I define as 'success'. That's why, as Rose asks if I'm joining them in The Ship for Lara's birthday drinks later, I can feel the familiar tug of regret as I decline. Everyone knows that important work still gets done during the hours spent at the pub. As old school as it sounds, it is still our reality. The problem is that you never know quite when those important conversations will take place, so it's not like you can strategically show up then make a speedy exit. They could happen at 10pm. Maybe 1am. Frequently, at 3am. Never before nine. You're in it for the long haul or you might as well not go at all.

And so I make my excuses, offering my biggest smile to the woman I just spent the past six hours up against in court, as I remove my wig that is the same off-white colour as the worn walls, and gather my things before heading home. I tell her it's mine and Noah's fourth wedding anniversary but decide to leave out the fact he isn't even home for it because he is away on business in Paris. That my evening will be spent sharing a dinner hundreds of miles apart, relying on dodgy Wi-Fi connection to summon some kind of romantic atmosphere.

'Well done today, Justine,' Rose calls after me, 'formidable as always, but next time I'll win.' I can hear the smile in her voice. Any trace of bitterness is gone. You can't hold a grudge in this business. Not if you want to survive.

'We'll see about that,' I call over my shoulder and smile to myself as I push open the door, though I make sure it doesn't linger too long. I have always made a point not to celebrate my court successes. There's something a little distasteful about being responsible for locking someone up. That's not to say they don't deserve it or that it isn't the right thing to do, but over the duration of a case you get to know the defendant. Not personally of course, but it feels like I become them. I like to think of it as a character study, doing what I

do. You simply can't ignore the nuances of it all, how each event in someone's life has shaped them. What if you could unshackle them from all of it? Start again, reborn. Do people deserve a second chance?

In my line of work the answer is no, but I spend one hour a week with my therapist, Aya, convincing myself that I am deserving of exactly that.

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The thing about red wine is that no matter how earthy or smoked it supposedly is, all I can smell as it swirls around my glass is the distinct iron zing of blood.

'Cheers,' we say in unison, all smiles as we pretend to clink our glasses together.

I look at the image of Noah over the rim of my glass; his suit is still on from a long day at the office, but his shirt is now open at the collar, his tie discarded, and I think about how different he is to the husband I'd always imagined myself to have. I push it away. Allow myself to be happy. He is handsome, very handsome, and he is kind. *The two don't normally go hand in hand, count yourself lucky*, my mother's voice echoes. And, whilst my skin crawls at the double standard of it – that a woman should, without exception, be always both beautiful and likeable – she is right. I am lucky. From the moment I opened the front door this evening, Noah has clearly been on a mission to make tonight feel special. A bottle of champagne – Bollinger, no less – delivered to the house along with a bunch of white roses (my favourite), and instructions to turn on a new Spotify playlist he has made with songs from our wedding.

I'm allowed to be happy.

I hear a knock on his hotel room door and a small voice announcing room service.

'Ah ha! The pièce de resistance,' he exclaims before dashing off-screen to open the door and retrieve his apple crumble. Noah is not normally the type of man to exclaim, nor dash, and guiltily I wonder if this display is an attempt to make up for my more lacklustre energy this evening. It's not Noah's fault, but it seems like the closer I get back to happy, the guiltier I feel for it.

While he is away, I take the opportunity to sneak a look at my phone. I'd promised him a phone-free (meaning work-free) evening and true to my word had put my work phone in the office drawer, but I'd kept my personal one tucked under the screen, just out of sight. The itch creeps along my fingers and quickly I log on to Instagram to see how my colleagues are getting on at Lara's birthday drinks. There's nothing on my newsfeed. In fact, there's nothing new at all since the last time I looked, and I find myself absent-mindedly typing into the search bar at the top of the app.

Jake Reynolds.

It's a habit I haven't been able to shift. Twelve years ago, it was only Facebook I would find myself searching through but now there's Instagram and Twitter too. Each time, I'm presented with a long list of Jake Reynolds but none of them are him.

I don't know why I still do it. It's not like I expect him to suddenly show up at the top of my screen after all these years. But just like unlocking your phone or checking your emails become habits, typing his name into search bars has become ingrained in my muscle memory. I don't consciously do it, but I can't stop either. I feel the guilt worm its way in, that on my anniversary it is Jake who I am searching for. I love my husband, I really do, but your first love never leaves you. And Jake was no normal first love. He saved me. And then he left me.

I suppose that's one of the reasons the next guy I fell in love with was Noah. In some ways the two of them are similar; they both made me feel safe, but the ways in which they achieved that were entirely different. Jake made me feel safe enough to be myself, to let loose, to free myself from any shackles of expectation. I was allowed to feel big. Being with Jake was like putting loud music on and finding yourself dancing to it without a care in the world. With Noah it is different. He is steady. Secure. I feel safe in the knowledge that he will not abandon me. Safe that I am loved. The emotions are there, I do not doubt he loves me, but somehow the world they inhabit feels smaller. We are more contained. At least this way, I don't need to be afraid it will spill over into something I can no longer control. I know who he is, and who I am supposed to be. This life with him – it gives me a framework. I can shape myself. I can be Noah's wife, and he will continue to love me for it.

He returns to his laptop full of gusto as he shows me his plate of food from across the ether, and I push my phone further out of sight. Take a large gulp of my red wine and tell him it looks delicious. That I wish I were there sharing it with him.

