



THE FIRST

MISTAKE

New York Times Bestselling Author

SANDIE

JONES

AUTHOR OF
**THE OTHER
WOMAN**
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THE

FIRST

MISTAKE

ALSO BY SANDIE JONES

The Other Woman

THE
FIRST
MISTAKE

SANDIE JONES



MINOTAUR BOOKS
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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Rob

Who taught me to believe that anything is possible

THE

FIRST

MISTAKE

PROLOGUE

She looked at me with real warmth in her eyes, as if she trusted me with her life, and for a moment I thought I couldn't go through with it.

But then I remembered what she'd done and I suddenly felt calm again. What goes around comes around, and she deserves everything that's coming her way.

Trust is a funny thing; it takes such a long time to build, yet it's broken in a second.

She shouldn't trust me—it will be her undoing.

PART 1

PRESENT DAY

ALICE

ONE

“Sophia, let’s go,” I call out from the hall. “Livvy, where’s your homework?”

She huffs and rushes off to the kitchen. “I thought you’d put it in my bag.”

“I’m your mother, not your slave. And besides, you’re eight now, you should be taking more responsibility.” I’m exasperated, though in truth, I’d happily pack her school bag for another ten years if it meant I could hang on to my baby who, it seems, has disappeared within a blink of an eye. How had I lost that time?

“Here,” she exclaims. “Have you got my swimming cap?”

“Olivia! Oh, for God’s sake, is it swimming today?”

She sticks one hip out to the side and rests her hand on the other, with all the sassiness of her fifteen-year-old sister. “Er, yeah, it’s Wednesday.”

“Run upstairs quickly, look in your top drawer. I’ll count to five and you need to be back down here. Sophia, we’re going.” I’m shouting by the end of the sentence.

What my elder daughter does up there I don’t know. Every day it seems to take her five minutes longer to straighten her hair, scribe the black kohl under her eye, inflate her lips with self-plumping lip gloss or whatever else it is she uses. She looks undeniably gorgeous when she does eventually appear, but is it all really necessary, for school?

“I can’t find it,” Olivia calls out.

“We’re late,” I shout, before huffing up the stairs. I feel a heaviness in my chest, a spring tightly coiled, as I rifle desperately through her socks

and knickers. “If I find it in here . . .” I say, never finishing the sentence, because I’m not quite sure what I’m threatening. “Did you wear it last week?”

“Yes,” she says quietly, aware of my mood.

“Well, do you remember bringing it home?”

“Yes, definitely,” she says confidently, knowing that any other response will have me blowing a gasket.

The grip on my chest releases as I spot the matte rubber cap in the back corner of the drawer. “Great,” I say under my breath, before adding as I run down the stairs, “Livvy, you really do need to wake up. Sophia, we’re getting in the car.”

“I’m coming,” she shouts back indignantly, as if she’s said it three times already. With her music playing that loudly, how would anyone ever know?

She skulks into the passenger seat of the car and instantly pulls down the sun visor to inspect herself in the mirror as we drive.

“Haven’t you just spent the past hour doing that?” I ask.

She tuts and flicks it back up with as much attitude as it will allow.

“What time will you be home tonight?” I ask, ten minutes later, as I lean across and offer my cheek. She kisses it reluctantly, which she’s only just started doing again, since we struck a deal to park slightly farther away from school.

“There’s a maths revision class, so I’ll probably go to that,” she says. “What’s for tea?”

We’ve just had breakfast, are at least four hours away from lunch, and she wants to know what’s for tea? I do a mental scan of the fridge. It doesn’t look too healthy. I might be able to rustle up a pasta dish, at best.

“What would you like?” I smile.

She shrugs her shoulders. “Don’t mind. Something nice?”

I pull her toward me and kiss the top of her head. “Go on, go. I’ll pop into Marks and Spencer if I get time.”

She smiles and gets out of the car. “See you, divvy Livvy.”

“Bye poo face,” giggles her little sister from the back seat.

I put the window down as we drive past her and call out, but she’s already locked into her phone, unseeing and unhearing of everything else

around her. “Look up,” I say to her silently. “You’ll never know what you might miss.”

Olivia and I do a light jog into school, which isn’t easy in these heels. “I love you,” I say, as she rushes off to join a playground game of netball without looking back.

“Mrs. Davies, can I have a word?” calls out Miss Watts from across the playground. I purposely avoid eye contact. I don’t have time for this. I look at my watch to let her know I’m under pressure.

“Sorry, it won’t take a minute,” she says. “Would you like to come into the classroom?”

I look at my watch again. “I’m running late, can we do it here?”

“Of course. It’s just that . . .” She looks around surreptitiously, but it’s early enough not to have too many other parents within earshot. “It’s just that we had a little incident yesterday, in the playground.”

My heart lurches and I can feel my brow furrowing. “What kind of incident?” I ask, forcing myself to stay calm.

The teacher rests a reassuring hand on my arm, though it feels anything but. “Oh, it’s nothing serious,” she says. “Just a falling-out between a few of the girls.” She rolls her eyes. “You know how girls can be.”

“Was Olivia involved?” I ask.

“Apparently so. There were just a few nasty words bandied about, and Phoebe Kendall says that Olivia threatened not to play with her anymore. I’m sure it was nothing more than playground antics, but Phoebe was a little upset by it.”

I imagine she was. “Olivia didn’t mention anything last night. Did you speak to her?”

“I had a quiet word yesterday,” she says, looking around again before continuing in a hushed tone. “It’s just that it isn’t the first time that Olivia has been involved in an altercation of this type.”

I look at her, trying to read what’s going on behind her eyes. “Oh” is all I can manage.

Miss Watts leans in closer. “She’s normally such a bright and bubbly child, eager to be friends with everyone, but these past few weeks . . .”

I rack my brain, wondering what’s changed things. “I’ll talk to her—see what’s going on.”

“Perhaps it would be useful to come in for a chat,” she says, tilting her head to one side. Her condescending smile reminds me of a therapist I once had. The one who asked me to close my eyes and imagine I was lying on a deserted beach, with the sun warming my skin and the gentle waves lapping at my feet.

I hadn’t gone back. Treating me like a five-year-old didn’t work then, and it certainly isn’t going to work now.

“I’d be happy to see you and Mr. Davies after school today if you’re available?” Miss Watts goes on.

“I’m afraid Nathan . . . Mr. Davies is away on business. He’s flying back this afternoon.”

“Ah, okay then, perhaps another time,” she says. “I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about, just something we need to keep our eye on.”

“Of course,” I say before turning on my heels and instantly bumping into a group of girls playing hopscotch. “I’ll talk to her tonight.”

I make my apologies to the disgruntled children as I tiptoe over brightly painted numbers on the tarmac.

“Wow, you look a bit done-up for this time in the morning,” calls out Beth, as she streaks past me in trainers and go-faster Lycra with her daughter Millie trailing behind.

“Hey, gorgeous girl,” I say to the petulant-looking eight-year-old. “What’s up?”

“*She* got up late,” Millie replies, as she rolls her eyes theatrically toward her mother. “And now we’re *all* paying for it.”

Beth turns around and pokes her tongue out at the both of us. “Let me drop this little madam off and I’ll walk out with you.”

I tap my watch. “I’m running late,” I say after her. “I’ll catch you later.” But she’s already gone and is depositing Millie in the playground. I start walking out, knowing that within seconds she’ll be at my side.

“So where are you off to all dressed up?” she asks, half-accusingly, as she catches up with me. I look down at my black skirt; granted, it is a little tight. And my red top; perhaps a little low. But my jacket goes some way to covering me up. Suddenly conscious of what Miss Watts might have thought, I pull it closed.

“Do I have to be going somewhere to make an effort?” I laugh lightly, though Olivia is still nagging at my brain.

“Anything other than pajamas or gym gear is abnormal at this time of day,” Beth says. “So yes, you looking like that, when us mere mortals haven’t even had time to brush our teeth, is really not fair, and most definitely shouldn’t be allowed.”

“It’s just my normal work attire,” I say. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

My face flushes and she raises her eyebrows. Who am I trying to kid?

“I believe you, even if a thousand others wouldn’t,” she says, giving me a wink.

I smile, though I feel the heat rise in my cheeks. “Did you hear anything about the girls falling out yesterday?”

She looks at me nonplussed and shakes her head. “No, why, what happened?”

“Miss Watts just told me that a few of them had a bit of a ding-dong. It seems Phoebe and Livvy were involved. I just wondered if Millie had said anything to you about it.”

“No, but I can ask her if you like.”

“Probably best not to make a big thing of it for the moment,” I say. “I’ll wait and see if Livvy mentions it.”

“Okay. You still on for tomorrow night?”

“Definitely! Nathan’s back today and already knows he’s on babysitting duties.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” she says, laughing. “A man who knows his place.”

“Where do you fancy going?” I ask. “Uptown or do you want to stay local? There’s a new place that’s just opened in Soho. Nathan went there with a client and raved about it.”

“I don’t mind, could give it a try. Though saying that, I don’t get paid for another three days, so if it’s expensive, I might have to save it until after payday.”

“No worries, it’ll be my treat,” I say, and see her eyes momentarily narrow. I bite my tongue and immediately wish I could suck the words back in. I’d hate for her to think I’m being patronizing, but I’d genuinely like

to help. It takes a little longer for my brain to catch up with my mouth and realize that she might appreciate a handout for something more worthwhile than an over-priced meal in a fancy restaurant.

“Don’t be silly,” she says finally, and I let out a sigh of relief. “Why don’t we do a pizza night tomorrow and go uptown *next* week?”

“Sounds like a plan,” I say.

TWO

“So, are we going for the burgundy and gold for the drawing room at Belmont House?” I ask the team around me, as they contemplate the mood boards in front of them.

“I’ve tried working up a royal blue, with white accents,” says Lottie, our junior designer, as she absently chews on the end of a pencil. “But it doesn’t look nearly as decadent as the burgundy.”

“Great,” I say, gathering up the loose papers that I’d strewn over the table during the meeting. “So, let’s present them with that and see what they think. Is there anything else?”

“I’ve just got a few accounting queries,” pipes up Matt, “but they can wait until Nathan’s back from Japan.”

I look at my watch and my breath quickens. “He’s due to land in the next hour or so, all being well. If he makes good time, he might pop in. Are you sure it can wait until tomorrow if he doesn’t?”

“Yeah, course,” says Matt. “It’s nothing urgent.”

“Okay, so if that’s all?” I ask, looking around at the nodding heads.

“Can I have a quick word?” says Lottie, hanging back as the rest of the team file out.

“Sure.” I smile. “What’s up?”

“I just wondered if I’d be able to come to the meeting at Belmont House with you tomorrow?”

I consider it for a moment.

“It’s just that I’ve got loads of ideas, and I really feel I could bring

something to the table.” She looks at me, her mouth agape at the faux pas she thinks she’s made. “Not that there’s anything wrong with what’s already on the table,” she rushes on. “It’s *all* on there, *and then* some, and then you’ve wrapped it up in a big gold bow and put the Alice Davies signature on it . . .” She’s rambling, and I wait with raised eyebrows.

“I can’t see why not,” I say, when she stops to take a breath. “In fact, you can lead it, if you like.”

An involuntary squeal escapes from her mouth that I pretend not to hear, even though it makes me smile.

I can’t help but marvel at how far she’s come in the short time she’s worked here. She was as quiet as a mouse when she first joined AT Designs, barely able to look anyone in the eye. I remember asking at her interview where she saw herself in ten years’ time, and she’d meekly whispered, “Sitting in your chair.” The juxtaposition of her manner and her words had almost made me spit my coffee out. She had got the job on that alone.

She’d been almost mute for a week, just nodding and shaking her head at pertinent times, but I knew she was in there somewhere. I’d seen it, though Nathan refused to believe me.

“I’m telling you, you picked the wrong candidate,” he’d said over dinner after her second day. “We need someone with something about them—she’s not even going to be able to interact with clients.”

I’d smiled and shaken my head. “She’s young and shy, but she’s quietly ambitious and has a real flair for interior design. She reminds me of someone I used to know.”

He’d smiled ruefully. “I give her two weeks.”

Six months later and she’s truly come out of her shell. She’s not only able to interact with clients, but is working on one or two small projects by herself.

“I won’t say, ‘I told you so,’” I’d whispered to Nathan under my breath when she presented her ideas on a new restaurant concept we were pitching for last week.

“Smartarse.” He’d smiled, his blue eyes not leaving Lottie.

There was no denying that I felt a tiny sense of satisfaction at getting one over on Nathan. Our friendly competitiveness was part of who we were,

whether it be in work, a game of tennis, or playing charades with the girls. But the overriding emotion was one of relief; that in Lottie I might have found a protégé who could take the pressure off me. Nathan was, *is*, brilliant at keeping the business side of the company ticking over. It's in better shape now than it's ever been. But, until Lottie joined, I was the only creative, and to have someone to fall back on, to take the heat off, has meant that I've slept a little easier at night.

Although he's not one to admit defeat, Nathan obviously concedes that having Lottie around is making a difference, as just before he left for Japan he'd championed her for a pay rise.

"She's worth her weight in gold," he'd said, as he stood in the hall with his holdall in his hand. "You should have seen her in the meeting with Langley Kitchens. She had them eating out the palm of her hand."

"Er, you don't have to tell me," I had said, laughing. "I'm the one who told *you*, remember."

"If I'd thought of it sooner, I'd have asked her to accompany me to Japan."

"*Really?*" I was taken aback, even though I couldn't quite work out why. It had been my choice not to go.

"It's not too late if you want to come with me," he'd said gently, taking me in his arms.

"Don't be ridiculous." I had pulled away, my heart hammering through my chest. "Of course I can't, I've got the children to think about."

"Your mum would have them at a drop of a hat, you know she would."

My mind had frantically run through what I'd have to go through to get on that plane with him. My breath caught in my throat as panic crept through every nerve fiber, tingling the tips of my fingers.

"We've discussed this," I'd snapped.

"I'm just saying that there's still time," he'd said as he pulled away from me. "That's all."

"I'll see you on Wednesday," I replied. "Enjoy yourself."

"How can I if you're not with me?" he'd said forlornly.

"It's Japan, how can you not?"

“Be good,” he’d said with a wink as he walked toward his car on the drive.

“Call me as soon as you land, won’t you?”

When I didn’t hear from him, I frantically rang his mobile every few minutes as the horror stories played out in my mind. The plane had crashed, Japan had had an earthquake, there was a tsunami. By the time I’d eventually reached him, I’d convinced myself that there wasn’t even a remote possibility that he was still alive.

“Oh my God,” I’d cried, when he eventually picked up. “Are you okay?”

“I’m so sorry, darling,” he’d said in a gruff voice, as if I’d just woken him from a deep slumber. “I took a call as soon as I got off the plane and when I got to the hotel I crashed out for a few hours.”

“I thought something had happened to you,” I said, still with a slight hysterical lilt to my voice, though my chest had stopped hurting.

“I didn’t mean to worry you,” he said patiently. “I’m absolutely fine.”

I could hear ice cubes clinking in a glass.

“Are you all set for the big meeting tomorrow?” I’d asked. “Got everything you need?”

“Yep, Lottie’s sent it across and I’ve got all your mock-ups here. I’ll chat through the scheme with them and make sure we’re all singing from the same hymn sheet.”

“Even if we’re not, I’m prepared to compromise,” I said, laughing nervously. “I really want this, Nathan. This deal will put us up there with the big boys.”

“Where you deserve to be.”

“Where *we* deserve to be.”

“AT Designs is *your* baby,” he’d said. “It was your and Tom’s vision that started this whole thing.”

“That may be so, but having you beside me these past few years has made it the success it is today. I just know we can go even further.”

“It’s a massive ask, Alice. Are you absolutely sure you can take it on?”

I’d known what he was implying, and allowed the enormity of the task to wash over me. I sat with that feeling for a little while, like I had a hundred times before, waiting to see how it would present itself.

“It’s twenty-eight apartments,” he’d continued, as if reading my thoughts. “Our biggest job by a long way. Do you honestly think you can handle it?”

“Absolutely,” I’d said, my commanding voice belying the panic in the pit of my stomach. “I’ve never been more ready for anything in my life.”

And I’d meant it then, when I’d had a glass or two of wine inside me. But now, three days on, I don’t feel quite so confident in my abilities or my emotions. Nothing’s changed in that time, at least not in a tangible sense. But today it just feels different, as if the roller coaster I’m forever riding has shot straight past the station platform, where it’s calm and orderly, and stopped at the top of the loop-the-loop, with me, hanging there upside down, waiting to be rescued.

“Have you got everything you need for your meeting with Temple Homes?” asks Lottie now, interrupting my thoughts.

“I think so,” I say, walking across to my desk. “Is it definitely David Phillips that I’m seeing?”

“Yes, he specifically asked for you. He said he was a big fan of your work.”

My stomach turns over as I gather up a file and lined pad, avoiding Lottie’s gaze.

“In fact, he referred to you as Al,” she goes on, as I concentrate on not blushing. Though the harder I try, the redder I go. “I had to bring him down a peg or two and tell him that your name was Alice. I can’t stand it when people pretend to know you better than they do.”

I roll my eyes and smile tightly, while silently saying, *He knows me better than most.*

THREE

When my GPS tells me I'm under a mile away from Temple Homes's headquarters, I pull over and check my reflection in the rear-view mirror. I wonder if he's changed—I wonder if *I've* changed. I brush my hair through and feather my bangs with my fingers. I could do with a little more mascara, so deftly paint my eyelashes jet-black, taking extra care to lengthen them as much as possible with the wand. A brush of blusher, a dab of red lipstick and I'm as good as I can be without the benefit of plastic surgery or being able to turn the clock back some twenty years. It still doesn't stop me from trying though, as I pull my skin tight across my cheekbones, wondering where all that time's gone. I've never thought of it before, but I suddenly regret not having something done, so that I don't look too far off of when David last saw me. Ridiculous, I know, but doesn't every girl want to look their best when they meet their first love again? Not because you still want him, but there's a tiny part—okay, a big part—that wants *him* to still want *you*.

"Alice, wow, look at you," he says as he comes toward me in reception. He looks me up and down appreciatively and I'm pleased that I made a special effort. I kidded myself when I was getting dressed this morning that my "look" was just a subtle extension of what I normally wear, yet it had been the first thing Beth noticed when she saw me, and Lottie had also commented on how the red complimented my skin tone. Maybe it wasn't so subtle after all.

"David, goodness, you haven't changed a bit," I say, except he has, and

I struggle to hide my shock. I've spent all these years imagining him as he was, as if he'd been somehow frozen in time, while I grew older. But he's grown older with me. His dark wedge has been replaced by a bald head, so shiny that the glare of the spotlights above him are reflecting off it, and his perfect physique, the six-pack that all the girls swooned over, has been recast with what looks like an extra hundred pounds.

"So, how have you been?" he says as he kisses me on the cheek.

"Good, really good."

"I heard what happened to Tom." He leads me into the boardroom. "I'm so sorry."

People often say words to that effect when their back is turned. They're somehow under the misapprehension that it's easier that way. It might be, for them. But ask anyone who's been through it and they'll tell you that they'd rather people be up front than try to brush it under the carpet, or, even worse, avoid the awkward subject altogether.

"So, how are you doing?" he asks solemnly.

"I'm well, thanks. The business is going great, so it's all good."

"And you married again?" It's more of a statement than a question and I'm taken aback, like I always am when people I haven't seen for years seemingly know more about me than they should. I wonder what else he knows.

"Yes," I say. "In some respects, I've been very lucky."

"I'm pleased you were able to make a new life for yourself after what happened."

I offer a closed smile. "And you?" I ask. It seems rude not to at least pretend to be interested in what's been happening in his life since I last saw him. "You've obviously made a great success of Temple Homes."

He smiles, and his eyes disappear into the folds of skin around them. I can't even begin to compute that this is the same person, man or boy, who had taken my virginity one summer night, after the end-of-exams dance.

"The company's doing really well," he says. "But my marriage, unfortunately, was a casualty of its success."

I drop my eyes, uncomfortable with the personal slant the conversation has taken. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"It happens," he says. "Perhaps you can't have it all."

"But you must be very proud of what you've achieved here," I say, looking

around the boardroom and noting the various building certificates on the wall.

“Yes,” he says, puffing out his chest and sitting up straighter in his chair. “But I think we can go further, hence bringing you in. I hope you didn’t mind me contacting AT Designs, but I’ve seen your work around and I’m very impressed with what you do.”

“Not at all,” I say, smiling. “That’s good to hear.”

A phone trills around the room and for a moment I ignore it, as I’m sure I turned mine to silent. But when it continues, and I notice David’s sitting on the table between us, showing no sign of life, I rummage in my bag.

“Sorry, excuse me,” I say, before seeing that it’s Nathan and pressing decline.

“So, the Bradbury Avenue project is—” David begins, before the ringing of my phone interrupts us again.

“I’m so sorry, let me turn it off.” I hit decline again and turn the volume off, but panic is already beginning to set in and I can’t concentrate on anything David is saying to me. I note everything down as the silent calls continue to light up my mobile, my writing becoming more frantic.

“Okay, so leave this with me,” I say, standing up, in an attempt to wrap up the meeting prematurely. “And I’ll give you a call once I’ve got some ideas to present to you.”

“Why don’t we do that over dinner?” he says, holding on to the hand I’ve offered for a little longer than necessary.

“It’s probably best to keep this professional,” I say, half laughing.

Without warning, his hands are on my buttocks, pulling me into him.

“No one ever need know,” he breathes into my ear. The pungent smell of coffee permeates my nostrils and I turn my head. He makes a grab for one of my breasts, squeezing it hard. “We were good together, you and me. I bet we still are.”

“Don’t you *ever* do that again,” I hiss, pushing him away from me with two hands on his chest. He looks hurt, as if he can’t understand what he’s done wrong.

“But I thought—”

“You thought what? That just because we’ve been together before gives you the right to go for it again?”

“Well, y-yes,” he stutters, and it takes all my resolve not to slap his face.

I quickly gather up my things from the table and turn to walk out. “This has clearly been a waste of my time.”

“But the project . . .” he calls out after me. “What about the project?” I don’t answer, leaving him to fill in the blanks.

I’m shaking when I get to the car and fumble with the handle, slamming the door behind me in indignation. How dare he presume that this would be anything other than a business meeting?

I look down at my blouse, undone by one button too many, and I slam the steering wheel in frustration. “Shit!” I call out loud. What was I thinking? Aren’t I as guilty as he is? What message had I relayed in my pathetic attempt to recapture a time long since passed? But then I pull myself up. No. *However* I choose to dress does not give him the right to invade my personal space.

In my incandescent rage I’d forgotten that Nathan had been trying to call me and as I look at my phone, I notice I’ve missed twelve calls from him and one from the girls’ school.

“Shit! Shit!” I say as my mouth goes dry. My heart feels like it’s beating at double speed.

“Nathan, it’s me,” I blurt out when he picks up. “What’s happened?”

“Where are you?” he asks.

“I’m just out of a meeting,” I say, my voice frantic. “What is it? Are the girls okay?”

“It’s Livvy,” he says.

I feel like I can’t breathe.

“Wh-what is it?” I stutter, already working out the quickest way to get to her. I’m turning the key in the ignition but it’s not starting. Panic is building within me as I try it again and again. In a split second of clarity I remember that I need to put my foot on the brake first.

“What’s happened? Where is she? Is she okay?” The questions are all coming at once.

“She’s fine,” he says. “But she’s had a little accident at school.”

“What kind of accident?” I ask, leaving rubber on the road as I screech out of the Temple Homes car park and head in the direction of the school.

“It sounds like she’s hit her head.”

It physically hurts as I inhale. “Oh God.”

“Okay, now listen to me,” he says, his voice suddenly authoritative. “I want you to take some deep breaths and calm down.”

I try to do what he says, but my lungs don’t feel like they’re working. They’re not letting in the air that I need. My breaths are coming in short, sharp pants as I will the learner driver in front of me to put their foot down.

“Alice, listen to me,” says Nathan again. “I need you to slow everything down and just concentrate on inhaling and exhaling, long and slow.”

If I could close my eyes it would be easier, but cars seem to be coming at me from every angle. Cutting across my path, pulling out in front of me. Horns are blaring but I can’t tell where they’re coming from or who they’re directed at.

“You okay?” asks Nathan. I nod through pursed lips. “Alice?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Do you want me to stay on the line until you get there, or shall I let them know you’re on your way?”

“Can you call them?” I ask.

“Where are you? How long will it take?”

“I’ve . . . j-just left Temple Homes headquarters.”

I stutter because I genuinely can’t remember where I am, not because I’m trying to hide anything.

“Where are *you*?” I ask.

“I’ve just left the airport and I was going to go straight to the office if that’s all right with you.”

“Yes, I’ll see you at home then.”

“Call me once you’re with Livvy,” he says. “I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about.”

It only occurs to me then that he doesn’t know about the conversation I had with Miss Watts this morning. I wonder if the problem is bigger than either of us thought.

“They don’t sound that concerned,” he goes on. “They’re probably just worried about concussion and need to cover their backs.”

I end the call and turn up the radio in an attempt to drown out the noise in my brain.

When I reach the school, I park in the space reserved for the headmaster and half walk, half run into reception, trying hard not to look how I feel.

“Ah, hello, Mrs. Davies,” says Carole, the school secretary, careful to keep her tone upbeat. I’m quite sure they have a file on me with the words “Handle with care—unexpectedly widowed” written in big red marker pen. “Nothing to worry about, it’s just that Olivia had a little fall.”

“Is she okay?” I ask, following her through the double doors.

The unmistakable stench of boiled cabbage wafts under my nose as my heels click-clack on the polished wooden floor of the dining hall. It’s the same smell as my school dinner thirty years ago, even though we didn’t have boiled cabbage then, and Olivia doesn’t have it now. I know, because she memorizes the menu every week and tells me what she’s having day by day. I almost feel sorry for her that chocolate sponge and chocolate custard, the monthly treat that was part of the staple diet of inner London schools back in the day, is no longer offered. But even on those special days, the school still smelt like rancid vegetables, and I find myself wondering why that is. Anything to keep my mind off what I’m about to be faced with.

“Your mummy’s here,” says the school nurse, smiling at me. I half expect to peer around the curtain and be confronted by Olivia lying unconscious on the bed, with blood pouring from her head.

Relief floods through me as she looks up, a little forlornly. There’s no blood, no bandage, not even a bruise. “Hello, baby girl,” I say, my voice shaky, as I bend down to her level. “You okay?”

She nods, and I give her knee a squeeze, fighting the urge to wrap her in my arms and breathe her in, if only for the nurse and Carole, who, no doubt, will add “neurotic mother” to my file.

“It was only a little knock,” says the nurse. “But just keep an eye on it. If she complains of a headache or experiences any dizziness, you ought to get her checked out at hospital.”

I smile and nod.

“What happened?” I ask when we’re back in the car.

“Phoebe pushed me,” she says tearfully.

I picture Phoebe's normally angelic little face twisting into something ugly as she bullies my daughter. I can't bear the thought.

"She was being mean to me," whispers Olivia, as if someone might overhear. "So I did what you told me to do."

I wait with bated breath, unable to remember what I said. I'm hoping I told her to give as good as she gets.

"I ignored her and walked away," she says.

I can't help but be disappointed with my own advice.

"But she pushed me, and I fell onto the floor."

"Well, that's not very nice, is it?" I'm careful to keep my voice light, all the time wondering how quickly I can get an appointment to see the head. "I thought Phoebe was your friend. Is she always mean to you?"

She shakes her head, before immediately nodding. I'm not sure that she knows herself.

"Only sometimes," she admits. "She says bad stuff to try and make me cry."

I gently push her flyaway hair back from her elfin face. "What kind of stuff?" I ask.

She shrugs, as if trying to lift the weight of the world from her shoulders.

"Come on, you can tell me," I press.

"She says that my first dad is dead."

I'm momentarily speechless.

"But . . . but you know that Tom was Sophia's daddy," I say, as she nods. "He wasn't *your* daddy."

"I know, but Phoebe says that he was my first daddy."

I pull her to me, as much as is physically possible across the console of the car. "Listen—" I start.

"And . . . and . . . she says that my second daddy is going to die like my first daddy." Her eyes fill with tears and a big globule falls over her bottom lashes.

"Now, you listen to me," I say, assertively, keen not to pass on my own paranoid tendencies. "What happened to Sophia's daddy was a one-in-a-million. Nothing like that will happen to your daddy." I discreetly cross my fingers.

She looks at me, her big blue eyes glazed with tears. “I promise,” I say resolutely. “Now, how about an ice cream?”

“Yay,” she squeals, oblivious to her worries and sadness transposing from her to me.