

Legacy and Other Lies

Jennifer C Robson

Printed edition:
Also available in multiple e-book formats.

Published by:
The Endless Bookcase Ltd,
Suite 14 STANTA Business Centre, 3 Soothouse Spring,
St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL3 6PF, UK.

More information can be found at:
www.theendlessbookcase.com

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Print ISBN: 978-1-918379-11-2
eBook ISBN: 978-1-918379-10-5

About the Author

Jennifer Claire Robson is a busy working mum who understands firsthand the strength it takes to keep going when life doesn't go to plan. Over the past eight years, she has navigated the challenges of chronic pain and the long, uncertain road of medical investigations in search of answers. Along the way, she has leaned on the love of her family and the unwavering support of her friends – an experience that has deeply shaped both her life and her writing.

Her work is inspired by the bonds that hold people together in difficult times, the resilience found in community, and the power of friendship to carry us through uncertainty. *Legacy and Other Lies* is her first novel, written with gratitude for the people who stood by her, and with hope for those walking their own difficult paths.

Prologue



“Legacy and Other Lies”

*They told us legacy was marble,
names carved sharp enough to outlast rain,
a house of glass and steel,
a title passed like currency.*

*But legacy is not the stone.
It is the hand that steadies another
when the world tilts.
It is the laughter that returns
after the long silence,
the memory of tears shared without shame.*

*The lie was permanence.
The truth is presence.
What we leave is not monuments,
but moments—
the fragile, flickering kind
that live only in the bodies and hearts
of those who stood beside us.*

*And when we are gone,
no plaque will matter.
But a friend may pause mid-step,
hear our voice in her ear,
and walk a little steadier.*

*That is legacy.
All the rest—
the marble, the titles, the applause—
were other lies.*

The familiar clink of glasses and murmur of voices filled the warm, cosy living room of Olivia's house. A stack of untouched nibbles sat on the coffee table, dwarfed by a leaning tower of the book club's to-be-read (TBR) paperbacks. On top this week's book: *Legacy: What We Leave Behind*, its title emblazoned in a severe serif font that made it look more like a judgment than a reflection.

Olivia sat cross-legged on the oak floor, back against the armchair, a cushion wedged behind her. She'd offered the chair to Jess forty-five minutes ago, but Jess had chosen to sit on the wide windowsill instead. She looked like a cat ready to pounce, her sharp eyes daring anyone to say something foolish. Olivia didn't blame her, she had purposely selected cushions and blankets to make her windowsills into a sanctuary for curling up with a good book.

"This book," Jess declared now, waving the paperback like evidence in court, "is absolute tosh." Her voice had a relish to it, the thrill of demolition. Jess was always forthcoming with her opinions, whether or not they were sought.

"It's all nonsense about fate and finding your true calling," she continued, flipping a page as though it had personally offended her. "As if life just happens to you, and all you need is a few signs from the universe to sort yourself out. People make choices, and then they live with them – that's it. No magic. No grand design."

Her dismissal was as absolute as it was animated. For Jess, legacy wasn't luck or destiny; it was earned. It was

the sum of one's actions, the tangible proof left behind – work well done, people remembered, a mark made with intention. To her, meaning didn't fall from the sky; it was something you built, brick by brick, through will and effort.

Sarah sat poised on the sofa; she wore a crisp Max Mara silk blouse that probably cost more than Olivia's entire wardrobe. With authority and a diplomatic smile, Sarah said, "It's a bit idealistic, sure. But the question it poses, 'what will we be remembered for', isn't trivial. It's something we should all consider."

"Depends who's remembering you," Helen muttered from the adjacent kitchen, her voice echoing through to the others whilst she rinsed her mug and set it upside down on the draining board. The words came out half to herself in the quiet of the kitchen and half to the others. Helen often found herself on the periphery of the group, less academic than the others, she had learnt her life lessons through experience, and her perspectives were grounded in her observations.

She knew it to be true. Most people weren't remembered in any grand way after they died. Their names didn't end up in history books. Their faces didn't appear on plaques or in framed photographs in galleries. They were remembered for a while by the people who had loved them, then gradually, softly, their presence faded. Even family stories blurred with time, "*Your great-grandmother used to say...*", until the person behind the story was more suggestion than flesh. And eventually, unless someone happened to stumble across a birth certificate or a weathered gravestone, even those traces disappeared.

Helen thought of her own caseload. Dozens of women she had known, fought for, and then lost contact with.

Where were they now? Did they remember her? Did it matter if they didn't? She had poured hours, sometimes months, into their lives, but she doubted her name lingered in their minds for very long. She was a helper passing through, not someone etched into their family line.

Wasn't that the truth of it for nearly everyone? Legacies weren't marble statues. They weren't speeches carved into the public record. For most people, legacy was smaller, more fragile – woven into daily kindnesses, in the laughter their children carried forward, in the habits and hopes quietly passed down. That was enough. It had to be enough.

Helen dried her hands on a towel, feeling the weight of that thought settle. Being forgotten by the world didn't mean your life hadn't mattered. It meant your legacy lived differently – unwritten but not unfelt, carried invisibly in others like breath. As she rejoined the others in the living room, Priya chimed in, nudging her glasses up her nose.

Priya leaned forward, balancing her mug on her knee. "But that book makes a good point about systems legacy," she said, her voice quick with the kind of energy that came when she'd been thinking about something all day. "It's not just about whether someone remembers our name when we're gone. It's the systems we leave behind – the habits we instil, the culture we develop, the ripple effects of our choices. That's what carries on after us."

Jess rolled her eyes, though not unkindly. "You sound like a council manifesto."

Priya laughed, brushing a strand of hair back. "I know, I know. But think about it. Like – take recycling. One person rinsing out a yoghurt pot doesn't feel like much, but if that behaviour spreads, it becomes a norm. A system. My kids just assume you separate plastics and paper, they

don't question it. That's the culture they've inherited because we built that habit into daily life. That's legacy, too. It's bigger than memory."

Helen tilted her head, considering. "So you're saying it's not only personal. It's the structures we create – how they shape the future."

"Exactly," Priya said, warming to her point. "The impact of our choices right now – what we normalise, what we let slide – that's what future generations live inside of. Whether it's climate issues, or how communities support each other, or even the way we talk about fairness. Legacy isn't just the stories people tell about us, it's the invisible systems we leave them to live with."

Sarah, ever precise, nodded thoughtfully. "So legacy isn't only about the individual. It's about infrastructure – social, cultural, economic. The scaffolding we hand down."

"See?" Priya grinned. "Exactly that. Which means," she said as she lifted her mug as if to toast them, "we can choose to build systems that are kind, sustainable, and fair. Even if no one remembers our names, the way we lived can still shape the way they live."

Olivia, quiet until then, smiled faintly. "That actually makes me feel lighter. Like even the small things matter, because they can outlive us without needing monuments."

"Precisely!" Priya said, a spark in her eyes.

"Forget the statues. I'll take a world where kindness is just the default."

Olivia watched them, her friends all caught up in the tangle of ideas. She reminisced about her days at uni, where she often debated problems with her fellow engineers. She tried hard to stay present, but she felt oddly outside her own body for a moment, like a guest at her own gathering. There was something about the word lega-

cy that made her stomach twist. Maybe it was the grandeur of it. Or maybe it was the question that had been quietly tapping at the back of her mind for months now – what if she didn't leave anything behind at all? She hadn't mentioned it to anyone yet, but she had been battling with increasing pain. A pain that her doctors seemed unwilling to acknowledge or investigate. She winced as she reached for the wine bottle and topped up her friends' glasses.

Jess, with a dramatic sigh, said, "Alright then, what's your legacy? What do you think you're leaving behind?"

"Power," Sarah said without flinching. She saw the raised eyebrows and leaned forward, her tone sharpening with conviction. "Not in the greedy sense you're all thinking. For me, power is the ability to make decisions that matter. I work in finance – I sit at tables most women never get invited to. And when I'm there, I can make sure doors stay open behind me. That's part of my legacy."

"You see, without power, you're at the mercy of other people's choices. I learned that the hard way when Tom died. Everything I thought was stable just... collapsed. The only thing that held me together was the fact that I had authority, independence, the means to protect Lily and myself. Power meant survival then. And now it means something bigger – it means shaping a world where Lily won't have to fight so hard just to be taken seriously."

"So yes, legacy to me is power. Not the kind you hoard, but the kind you pass on. If I can leave behind proof that I didn't just survive but carved out space for other women, then I've left something worth remembering."

Helen set her bag down a little harder than necessary, the sound cutting through the room. "I want something quieter," she said, her voice steady but edged with frustration. "Less shiny. Not about the rooms with glass walls

and polished tables – rooms I'll never be in, and neither will most of the women I work with."

"For me, legacy is about systems that work. Safeguards. Things that protect the women who never even get invited into those rooms in the first place. The single mums filling out the same benefit forms year after year. The women who are told to wait their turn while their lives unravel. The ones no one notices until it's too late.

"I've seen too many fall through the cracks – smart, resilient women who just needed the system not to grind them down. That's why safeguards matter. They outlast us. They don't depend on someone remembering your name, or you being powerful enough to argue your way in. They just... work, quietly, in the background. They hold people up when the rest of the world looks away.

"So if I can leave behind anything, it's that. A safety net that doesn't unravel the moment you lean on it. That's my legacy."

"And I want a planet for my kids to live on," Priya said simply.

"Honestly, I'd settle for breathable air and bees still existing by the time they are adults."

They all turned to Olivia, who had been silent too long. She glanced at the copy of legacy beside her and thought of the engines she'd helped design, the flight safety systems now embedded in half the commercial aircraft now flying across Europe. I'd always thought that mine would be technology, she said, machines that outlive me. Systems that don't fail. But, she hesitated, I'm not so sure anymore.

Olivia's fingers tightened on the edge of the deep velvet cushion. She didn't know how to explain it yet – that sense of shifting ground, like something was eroding from

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the inside out. The pain, the exhaustion, the unanswered questions, appointments, and scans.

Chapter 1: She exhaled slowly

Olivia pressed her fingertips against her temples, trying to quell the dull, thudding ache. It wasn't just a headache – this was something deeper, something sharper; pressure was building up inside her skull, threatening to snap. Her whole body ached. A deep throbbing feeling that never subsides.

She exhaled slowly, her eyes flicking to the laptop screen in front of her. The CAD model of a new safety system for a commercial aircraft was still open, waiting for her to finish the final adjustment before she sent it off for approval. The simulation bar was creeping forward at an agonisingly slow pace. Her hands were shaking. She had lost her focus. She'd been working late, too late, all week, trying to perfect the design. It was hard to concentrate with the constant throb in her head and the ache in her bones, as if her body were quietly betraying her.

The shaking had become more frequent lately. At first, it was only when she was overtired – an occasional tremor she could laugh off. But now it came without warning: her pen skittering across the page, her mouse jerking so she clicked the wrong line, her coffee sloshing over the rim. She found herself gripping tools tighter, as if she could steady the tremor by sheer will. Except she couldn't.

Worse was the dizziness. It would hit in sudden waves, the floor tilting under her as though she were on an aircraft caught in turbulence. She would blink, press her fingers to her temples, and wait for the spinning to pass. But in those moments, her thoughts scattered, her concentration unravelled. She'd read the same figures three times

and still not trusted that she hadn't missed something. For someone who prided herself on precision, it was unbearable.

She told herself it was just stress, just fatigue. She was used to pushing through, used to long nights and impossible deadlines. But deep down, Olivia knew this was different. Her body was no longer obeying her. And for the first time in years, she felt a quiet flicker of fear.

~

Olivia's home office was the most ordered room in the house, and the most revealing of her character. Where the living room softened itself with cushions and blankets, this space stood clean, functional, stripped to its core purpose. The desk dominated the room – a striking, engineered piece of furniture that she had commissioned, all clean lines and polished steel supports, designed more like a bridge than a table. It was the kind of thing that made a statement without needing to speak, a piece that said: this is the desk of someone who builds things that last.

The walls carried the same sense of intent. On one side hung framed technical drawings, crisp blueprints of past projects – aircraft components sketched in precise ink lines, annotated with measurements and neat handwriting. To the casual visitor, they might have looked dry, but Olivia had chosen them carefully, almost reverently. They were reminders of her craft, her contribution, the hidden beauty in function.

Beside them were photographs, softer in tone. One showed Dan and Ella laughing on a windswept beach, hair flying wildly; another, Ella asleep in Olivia's lap, clutching a ragged toy rabbit. These images, tucked between the drawings, were her counterweight: proof of why the work mattered, why safety and precision weren't just abstract

ideals but promises to real lives.

Over the desk itself, a small print was pinned – a minimalist piece of art depicting the arc of a bird in flight, traced in a single sweeping line. It was both technical and poetic, like her: a reminder that engineering wasn't only about numbers, but about movement, freedom, the possibility of air.

The window overlooked the back garden, not the street, framed by voile curtains. Olivia had angled her desk so that when she looked up from the screen, she saw the apple tree Dan had planted the year Ella was born, its branches now spreading wide. In spring, blossom scattered like confetti; in autumn, fruit gathered heavy on the limbs. She loved that tree for its persistence, its rhythm. It grounded her in a way the sharp edges of her desk did not.

Her phone vibrated on the desk, cutting through the quiet of the room. She glanced at it. It was a message from Sarah.

Sarah: "PTA meeting at 8.30 am. Can you make it?"

Olivia winced. She could ignore it. She should ignore it, but she felt guilty for missing the last two.

Olivia messaged back: "I'll try."

She meant it. She always meant it.

At 8:15, the school car park was already a hive of activity. Cars edged in and out of tight spaces, brake lights flashing red in the grey morning. Parents leaned over steering wheels with the same taut concentration as commuters merging into city traffic. Children spilled from back seats with oversized rucksacks that seemed to drag them down, their voices carrying across the tarmac in sharp bursts of chatter and laughter. The air was full of the smell of exhaust fumes and damp earth from the grass verges where a few impatient parents had mounted the

curb to claim makeshift spaces. A crossing patrol officer, fluorescent jacket bright against the drizzle, waved impatiently at a distracted driver. Somewhere, a horn sounded, quick and irritable. Olivia eased her car into a gap at the far end, the thrum of the engine fading as she killed the ignition, and for a moment the chaos outside felt like a world she had to steel herself to step into.

She gripped tightly to the steering wheel as another wave of pain rolled through her chest and head. The doctors had yet to give her any answers. They had taken routine blood samples, but her results had come back clear. Maybe it was stress. Maybe it was something else.

Olivia had a constant feeling of being on the edge of something unbearable, something terrifying, a feeling that was becoming harder and harder to bury. Each day she woke with the same unease coiled inside her, a dread she couldn't name but couldn't shake either. What unsettled her most wasn't only the pain itself, which was relentless, but the way that the doctors seemed to glance past it, as though her symptoms were inconvenient details rather than urgent clues.

She could still remember her last appointment with a kind of bitter clarity. The young doctor had strolled in late, sleeves rolled up, stethoscope slung around his neck like an afterthought. He couldn't have been more than thirty. His trainers squeaked faintly on the linoleum floor as he gave her a brisk smile that didn't reach his eyes.

“So,” he'd said, scanning her notes with a sort of practiced detachment, “still having a bit of discomfort, are we?”

Discomfort. The word had landed like a slap. She wanted to tell him that it wasn't a bit of anything – that the pain gnawed at her bones, stole her breath, hollowed her out from the inside – but his tone made it clear he

wasn't inviting elaboration. When she tried to describe it anyway, he nodded absently, typing as she spoke, occasionally interrupting to clarify minor details but never once looking up at her, never giving her eye contact.

When he finally did look up, it was with a patronising tilt of the head. "You know," he'd said lightly, "sometimes our bodies amplify things when we're under stress. It might help to focus on rest, relaxation, maybe some light exercise. You'd be surprised how much that can improve things."

Olivia had smiled tightly, the kind of brittle smile you give when you know protest will only make things worse. But as she left the room, clutching her useless new prescription, she felt the dread coil tighter in her chest. She wasn't imagining this. Something inside her was breaking, and no one – least of all him – seemed to believe her.

She left every appointment with the same sense of being patted on the head and sent away, told to wait and see when all she wanted was answers. Dismissed as a busy mum working too hard and not able to prioritise. Their reluctance to refer her to a neurologist, a rheumatologist, or anyone who might actually look deeper gnawed at her. It made her feel invisible, disappointed, like a problem they didn't want to take ownership of. Beneath that dismissal, her fear grew. What if the thing causing her pain and fatigue was serious and being missed? What could she do to make them take her seriously?

But Olivia was not the sort of woman who gave in easily. Her work, her daughter Ella, her friendships, all of it required a face she had learned to wear no matter what her body was doing beneath it. She clung to routines like scaffolding, keeping her mind fixed on manageable tasks: packing Ella's lunch, replying to emails, taking measure-

ments for her designs at work. The logic of engineering steadied her; numbers and systems made sense when her body did not. But there were moments, more and more frequent now, when the focus slipped and her pain broke through the cracks. In those moments, she forced herself to breathe deeply, trying desperately to recall the different yoga breaths her teacher had taught. Relaxation techniques, anything to distract her from the pain. She tried to look outward rather than inward, to anchor herself in the lives of others. To be mindful.

“Mummy.”

She looked in the rear-view mirror. Ella was watching her, her dark brown eyes sharp with concern. Seven years old and already too wise for her age.

“Are you okay, Mummy?” Ella asked again.

Olivia forced a smile. “Of course, sweetie, let’s get you inside.”

Ella hesitated longer than usual, her little hands gripping tightly to Olivia’s trousers as she said goodbye.

The village primary school was small but exceptionally sought after, its reputation stretching far beyond the parish boundaries. With an Outstanding Ofsted rating and a record that rivalled the best local private schools, it had become something of a hidden gem. Parents spoke of its nurturing ethos and high academic standards in the same breath, and every year hopeful families queued for a place, their children sitting an entrance exam that felt more akin to grammar school selection than village routine.

It was for that very reason Olivia had uprooted her life to come here, trading her spacious, modern home closer to the city for a modest cottage at the edge of the village – a place with peeling paint, draughty windows, and a garden that had long since surrendered to weeds. The house

needed more work than she'd bargained for, but she told herself it was worth it. Ella would have the education Olivia had always dreamed of for her: a place where curiosity was cherished, where every child was known by name, and where potential was not only seen but nurtured.

~

The school cafeteria smelled of bleach and children's lunches, a sharp tang of disinfectant mixed with the lingering sweetness of fruit juice and the heavy starch of yesterday's chips. Light fell in flat strips through high windows, catching on the glossy tables that had been wiped to sterility but never truly felt clean. Against that backdrop of clatter and echo, the five women gathered, their voices knitting together into something softer, more intimate.

At first glance, they could not have been more different. Priya, still flushed from cycling through the drizzle, had propped her helmet beside her coffee. The faint smell of wet earth clung to her clothes, as if she carried the outside world in with her. She spoke quickly, passionately, her words tumbling over themselves when the subject turned to the planet's future – as though urgency were always on her heels.

Jess sat opposite, phone face-down but buzzing insistently, her posture taut, her expression quick to sharpen. There was a restless energy about her, the sort that could spark into argument in a heartbeat. She had the look of someone always half-engaged in another conversation, another battle waiting to be fought – eyes flicking, fingers twitching, mind never still. Yet when she laughed – loud, unselfconscious – it filled the air like a match struck in a dark room. The sound was disarming, reminding you that beneath the edge and impatience there was warmth, loyalty, and a hunger to be heard. Jess wasn't easy, but she was

far from dull. She carried opinions like weapons, but also affection, fierce and unflinching, for those she considered her own. She was bold and vivacious, intriguing.

Helen's presence was quieter. She held her mug with both hands, shoulders slightly hunched, as though bracing against the weight of invisible things. Weariness etched her face, yet there was a softness in the way she watched others speak – eyes that lingered a moment longer, as though she were gathering up what was left unsaid as much as the words themselves. She nodded often, not absent-mindedly, but with a kind of patient attention that made people feel steadier in her company, as if their tangled thoughts had been gently set in order.

Helen rarely spoke first, and never to fill a silence. But when she did lift her voice, it carried with it the slow strength of someone who had seen too much to waste time on pretence. Her words landed without flourish, plain and clear, like a truth that had been waiting beneath the surface. In those moments, even the louder women leaned in, sensing the weight behind her quietness.

There was something resilient about her – a backbone disguised in gentleness. The lines at the corners of her mouth weren't just from fatigue, but from years of choosing compassion even when it cost her. Helen gave the impression of someone who had stood in many storm doors, absorbing what others could not bear, and though the toll showed, so did a kind of unshakable steadiness.

Sarah had already smoothed the crease from her skirt before sitting down, her orderliness a contrast to the cafeteria's jumble. She spoke with precision, her sentences carefully measured, but now and then a quick smile betrayed the warmth she kept tucked beneath her composure. Among the others, she allowed herself a small un-

buttoning, though even then her gaze often drifted to her watch, the clock never far from her thoughts. Since Tom's death, she had used her schedule as her shield.

Olivia paused at the cafeteria door, steadying herself. For a moment, she let the noise of the room blur into a dull hum, pressing her palm discreetly against her ribs where the jagged ache flared like a warning light. It was a pain that seemed to catch her unprepared, as though her own body had turned unreliable, and the uncertainty unsettled her more than she cared to admit. She drew in a slow breath, pasted a smile over the grimace, and stepped forward.

She had always been methodical, precise – an engineer who trusted systems, who believed that every problem had a fix if only you worked through the logic. But pain was different. It didn't follow equations, didn't respond to neat solutions. It blurred the edges of her focus, made the world tilt just slightly off-centre. She found herself rehearsing expressions like calculations: shoulders back, stride steady, voice light. Each movement took an extra beat of concentration, a silent override of her body's urge to fold inward.

Her friends rarely noticed, and that was how she wanted it. She wore composure the way she wore her work clothes – functional, practical, convincing enough at a glance. Yet behind the smile, her jaw tightened, and her hands, usually so steady, betrayed the faintest tremor when she set the lunchbox down on the table. She carried herself as though nothing were wrong, but the effort of doing so left her thinner, stretched across the hours like a wire drawn too taut. She wondered how long she could maintain this level of effort just to keep up appearances.

She took a seat, noticing the way that the conversation

shifted when she entered. There was a subtle hush, just a flicker, as if the energy in the group recalibrated to include her.

Jess waved her over, her voice brisk, bright blue eyes glinting with mischief. “Liv! We were just talking about you.”

Olivia forced her smile to hold, “Should I be worried?” Her voice was lighter than she felt. Inside, she wondered if they’d been talking about her absence at the last few PTA meetings, or if someone had noticed the way she’d ducked out earlier at pickup yesterday, one hand pressed into her side. She’d never been a particularly self-conscious person, never really giving how she was perceived much thought, but recently that had changed. She was so aware of her attempts to conceal her pain that she didn’t trust herself to hold the poker face.

Priya grinned, her usual confident ease filling the room like sunlight. “Depends, how much do you love fundraising committees?”

Olivia let out a laugh – too quick, a little brittle. She was filled with a sense of dread and relief, pleased that the others hadn’t noticed her attempts to conceal her pain but also concerned. It was easier to laugh than to admit that right now the idea of giving her energy to anything outside her own survival felt overwhelming. How could she wriggle out of this one?

Sarah, who had been steering the conversation, leaned forward in her plastic chair. It creaked as she did so, the sound echoing Olivia’s mood: stretched, strained, close to breaking.

“It’s not just about fundraising,” Sarah said, ever the strategist.

“We’re talking about investment in the school’s future.

We need a clear investment goal and an action plan to get us there. An occasional bake sale is not cutting it.”

Helen, arms folded, gave a dry snort. “And when Sarah says investment, she means numbers, loans, capital, spreadsheets.”

“Of course I do,” said Sarah. “If we expect to be taken seriously, we need to approach this with the same rigour we would if it were our business.”

The women chuckled, and Olivia joined in, though her laughter was quieter than theirs. The ache in her chest made it hard to draw a full breath. She shifted in her seat, hiding it behind the motion of reaching for her water bottle. She was incredibly uncomfortable and could feel the pain surge through her body. She wondered how much longer she could sit here pretending to be okay.

Jess was watching her. Olivia felt it – the assessing glance that missed little. Jess thrived on knowing more than she was told, on spotting the weaknesses in people’s armour. “You’re looking pale, Liv,” Jess said bluntly. “Everything alright?”

Olivia’s heart sank. She met Jess’s gaze and summoned her most convincing tone. “I’m fine. Just tired. Work’s been full-on this week.”

It wasn’t a lie, just not the truth that mattered.

“I could probably do with another coffee,” she said, trying to divert attention from herself.

Helen tilted her head, her social worker’s instinct kicking in. She didn’t pry, not like Jess, but Olivia caught the soft furrow in her brow, the way she seemed to file away her unease for later.

Helen was used to spotting exhaustion in the women she worked with, the kind that came from being pushed past limits. She got up and went over to the coffee vend-

ing machine and made them all a coffee. Well, if you can call it that!

Sarah, ever running to schedule, pressed on with the discussion. “The point is we can’t just keep scrapping by with bake sales. We need to think bigger. Sponsorships, partnerships. Real money to secure proper resources for the kids.”

She paused for effect and then continued, “To attract that kind of funding, we need to professionalise our approach. It needs to be clear what we are working towards and we need to be able to communicate it so we can win support.”

Olivia tried to listen, to focus, but her body clamoured beneath the surface. Pain sharpened behind her eyes, a jagged pulse in her temples. She sipped water again, alternating between that and the “coffee” Helen had brought over to her. She was silently counting her breaths the way she sometimes did in meetings when pain threatened to undo her composure. One. Two. Three. Inhale. Exhale. She focused on the sound of Sarah’s voice and its steady rhythm. She focused on Priya’s animated gestures as she countered Sarah’s logic with her own environmental concerns.

“This isn’t just about money,” Priya argued, her voice rich with conviction. “It’s about values. We can’t be teaching the kids to take corporate sponsorships from the very industries we should be resisting. Legacy isn’t built with more laptops, it’s built with conscience.”

Olivia smiled. Priya never wavered, never softened her principles. It was something Olivia admired, even envied. Her own sense of legacy had always been measured in design blueprints and engineering solutions. But lately, even those things had begun to blur under the haze of pain.

The only thing standing up to her pain at the moment was her growing appreciation for the people she loved.

Jess rolled her eyes. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, Priya. Not every local business is an evil empire. Sometimes money is just money. And the school needs it.”

The conversation ricocheted, bouncing from principle to practicality. Olivia sat in the middle of it, nodding, occasionally offering a few words, but mostly conserving her energy. Inside, she was calculating: how long can I sit here before the pain forces me to leave? How many minutes before someone notices my hand pressed too tightly into my side?

Laughter rippled around the table again. Olivia forced herself to join in. Her smile stretched thin over her discomfort. Priya’s eyes flickered towards her, warm but searching, as if she sensed something beneath the surface.

Maybe they all did. Each of the women, in their own way, had noticed small things; Jess with her sharp observations, Helen with her quiet empathy, Priya with her attentiveness, and Sarah with her subtle all-knowing glance. None of them pressed too hard. Olivia was grateful for that, and terrified by it too. The longer she held her silence, the heavier it grew, she knew eventually one of them would break through the facade.

For now, she steadied herself, one breath at a time. She listened, clinging to the voices of her friends. Reminders of normal life and her community. The pain throbbed underneath, a shadow she could not escape. She did not want to let it claim her, not in front of them.

Still, as she glanced around the table, Olivia knew the truth: the cracks were showing, her pain was growing, and her friends had begun to notice.

The discussion wound down eventually, the way it al-

ways did. Jess threw a final jab, Sarah half-smiling as she tried to have the last word, Priya shaking her head but laughing anyway. Plastic chairs scraped on the lino floor, bags were gathered, and phones were checked.

Olivia rose carefully, as though her body was made of glass. The effort of sitting still for so long had left her hurting in ways she didn't want to admit. She adjusted her coat and tugged the strap of her bag onto her shoulder. She was so frustrated that the simple act of sitting on a hard chair for any length of time now gave her pain. Simple everyday actions now felt like major hurdles. Hurdles her doctors seemingly expected her to just adjust to, but how could she when the pain was taking over every aspect of her life?

"See you next week," Priya called as she headed towards the door. "Don't forget," Sarah added, "we'll need numbers from you, Olivia. You're the sensible one."

Olivia managed a smile. Sensible. Reliable. The woman who could make anything add up. If only they knew how precarious the sums of her own body had become.

Jess swept past with a quick wave, already talking into her phone. The room emptied until only Helen lingered, watching Olivia with her measured, patient gaze.

"Are you alright?" she asked once the others were gone. The simple question felt heavier than all the debates that had filled the last hour. Olivia opened her mouth, ready with the easy answer, "I'm fine, I'm just tired". But Helen's expression stopped her. There was no sharpness there, no agenda, just a steady, unblinking kindness that disarmed her.

Olivia's throat tightened. She looked down, fussing with the strap of her bag. "I'm fine," she said at last. "At least I have to be." Helen didn't push. She just nodded,

slow and deliberate, as if to say, ‘I hear you, even if you don’t want to say more’. That small act of restraint, of not demanding more than Olivia could give, nearly undid her.

Olivia felt the weight of everything pressing down: the pain she couldn’t escape, the doctors who dismissed her, the fear that grew louder each day. She wanted to tell Helen everything, to admit how afraid she was of what was happening to her body. But the words stuck. To say them would make them real. She didn’t know if she could cope with the reality yet.

So she forced a smile and said, “I’d better go, I’ve got lots of meetings at work today.”

Chapter 2: Don't mistake privilege for virtue

At parents' evening, the five women found themselves sitting in the same row of chairs, waiting for their turn to speak with the teacher. The corridor hummed with the muted shuffle of bodies and the occasional burst of laughter from a nearby classroom. Fluorescent strip lights buzzed faintly overhead, casting a hard white glow that made the display boards along the walls look garish. The children's artwork was pinned in proud, uneven rows, each one signed in a scrawl of coloured felt-tip.

The smell of floor polish lingered beneath a sharper note of dry marker pens. Coats dripped from hooks too small to hold them, and puddles formed beneath the damp wellies kicked off and left in a heap. A stack of forgotten jumpers slumped on a radiator, their name labels curling at the edges.

Other parents sat dotted along the corridor, knees brushing as they leaned on tiny plastic chairs that creaked under their weight. Some scrolled silently on their phones, the glow of screens bright in the sterile light; others bent close, speaking in hushed tones, the way people do when they're trying not to be overheard but want to be seen.

There was a certain performance to it all, an unspoken competition woven into every murmured conversation and polite smile. These were the parents who wanted to be noticed by the headteacher, to be recognised as the kind who volunteered for bake sales, chaired committees, and remembered every staff birthday. Being seen here wasn't vanity – it was strategy. In a school where places

were precious and reputations mattered, visibility was currency, and every exchange in that corridor was a quiet investment in belonging.

Helen didn't buy into any of it. The whispered competitiveness, the subtle displays of status – it all left her exasperated. She'd spent too many years as a social worker to mistake privilege for virtue or polish for substance. To her, children's worth wasn't measured by how early they learned to read or how many after-school clubs their parents could afford, but by their kindness, resilience, and curiosity. She'd seen what real struggle looked like – families doing their best with almost nothing – and it had given her a kind of quiet clarity. While the other parents angled for approval, Helen sat back, calm and self-contained, believing that what mattered most couldn't be performed in a corridor or captured in a smile.

Every so often, a teacher would appear at a classroom door and call a name, sending a ripple of movement down the line as parents gathered themselves, exchanged glances, and disappeared inside.

Helen shifted in her seat. She tugged her coat tighter around her, not for warmth but for comfort. Whoever designed these things had never sat in one for longer than five minutes, she thought.

She wasn't in the habit of speaking first in groups like this. Better to watch, to listen, to get the measure of people before joining in. Years in social work had trained her to read between the lines, to notice the silences more than the chatter. She quietly observed.

Olivia was easy enough to read – fast tapping, shoulders tense, eyes elsewhere. She gave off the restless energy of someone who wanted to be anywhere but here, her mind ticking through a thousand tasks she had left unfin-

ished. Helen had seen that kind of woman before: competent, capable, and carrying far too much. The type who never asked for help until she was already breaking, who wore efficiency like armour but carried cracks just beneath the surface. There was a brittleness in the way Olivia held herself, as if letting go for even a moment might bring the whole careful structure of herself tumbling down.

Next to her, Sarah looked as if she had stepped straight from a glass tower in the city centre. Perfectly pressed suit, hair sleek, phone in hand, scanning through emails even as she muttered about the inefficiency of the evening. She gave the impression of someone who thought in numbers, who viewed time like currency: to be invested wisely and never wasted. Helen felt a stab of admiration – how did she manage to hold herself together so tightly? Followed quickly by irritation. It was easy to talk about efficiency when your life ran on schedules and assistants, not on the unpredictable mess of other people's crises.

Jess was impossible to ignore. She stood out among the other mothers, larger in frame and presence, with porcelain skin that flushed easily and a scatter of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her hair was a riot of red curls – untameable, expressive, as if it had its own opinions. She dressed smartly, always with a touch of flair that set her apart: a patterned silk scarf knotted at her throat, a tweed jacket with unexpected lining, bold earrings that caught the light when she turned her head. There was nothing timid about her appearance; Jess carried herself with the confidence of someone who knew exactly who she was and saw no reason to soften the edges. Helen liked that about her.

Jess radiated a kind of noisy energy. Her voice was

pitched just a little louder than was really necessary. She had already turned Sarah's complaints into a rallying cry about the school's disorganisation, her words spilling out as though she'd been holding them in all week. Maybe she had? Helen half-smiled to herself; she knew this type too, the ones who needed to be heard in every room, who thrived on the friction of disagreement. Still, there was something likeable about Jess's fire, even if it could scorch.

Then Priya, calm and self-assured, cardigan flecked with the tell-tale traces of a busy household, spoke with a tone that was gentle but firm. Well dressed but informal. She believed in community, in things being done the right way. Perhaps things being done her way! Helen noted the way she listened before she spoke, steady and measured, her words carrying weight without her voice ever being raised. She seemed the sort of woman people trusted instinctively, the kind who didn't need to shout to be heard. She was confident and comfortable in her own skin. Naturally funny and able to put people at ease. Helen envied that.

Helen sat a little apart, content to let the conversation wash over her at first. She didn't belong to their world exactly – she wasn't polished like Sarah, or fiery like Jess, or effortlessly warm and funny like Priya. She'd been here, done this, got the T-shirt. Her first child, Tim, was now at university. Joe had come along rather unexpectedly just as Helen had returned to working full time. She hadn't expected a second round of nappies, late nights and school assemblies. She was older than the other mums around her, she knew the score at school, and she didn't feel the need to compete. She carried the fatigue of too many late nights with case files spread across her kitchen table, the weariness of a job that swallowed more of her than she

could spare.

“My Ella’s obsessed with planes,” Olivia said, eyes lighting up. “Sketches them on every scrap of paper she can find. The back of homework, envelopes, even the shopping list.”

Priya laughed. “At least it’s creative. My eldest has started composting all the leftover food from the lunch hall. He’s been entered for the school’s sustainability award, though honestly, I think he just enjoys bossing everyone about with banana peels.”

Jess leaned in, smirking. “Meanwhile, my Thomas has taken to loudly quoting me at dinner – mostly my political rants. Apparently, the entire Year Four now knows my stance on tax reform.”

That got a burst of laughter, quickly followed by Sarah shaking her head. “Lily’s not far behind. She’s set up her own surveillance system in the kitchen. Says she’s monitoring biscuit distribution for fairness.”

The laughter echoed down the corridor, genuine and bright. Helen felt her own lips twitch before she even realised it.

“Well,” she said, surprising herself as all eyes turned her way, “Joe refused to tidy his room last week. Declared himself ‘too oppressed’ for chores. Apparently, he overheard one of my work calls and decided to unionise.”

There was another ripple of laughter – louder this time, warm and real – and Helen felt something inside her ease. For the first time in months, the weight in her chest loosened. It wasn’t just amusement she felt – it was belonging.

She studied the faces around her as the conversation continued. As different as they were, there was something binding them. Circumstance perhaps? Motherhood? The daily balancing act of holding everything together in a

world that constantly demands more and more. Helen couldn't quite name it yet, but she recognised the feeling of connection and friendship, and she realised she needed it.

Chapter 3: A quiet guardian protecting everyone who flies

The hum of the school corridor was oddly familiar to Olivia – muffled conversations, the scuff of shoes against linoleum, the faint scent of whiteboard markers lingering in the air. It had been many years since she had been a pupil here, but very little had changed. She glanced at her watch. Seventeen minutes behind schedule. Typical.

She adjusted the strap of her bag, still weighted with the next project's blueprints that she hadn't had time to put back in the office. It wasn't every day an aircraft safety system you'd spent years designing got approved for production. Today was momentous; it should have been a celebration. Instead, she was sitting in a tiny plastic chair, waiting to hear whether Ella was meeting literary milestones. Dan was working away, so not around to attend parents' evening or celebrate with her. She was disappointed but also relieved, as the pain was too unbearable to stand in a bar drinking with colleagues or go out for a long dinner with Ella and Dan.

Her fingers tapped absentmindedly against the folder on her lap. She thought of the long nights in the lab, the endless revisions, the simulations that had pushed the limits of patience and stamina. All of it distilled into code and circuitry that now lived inside aircraft around the world. A quiet guardian, protecting everyone who flies. No one on board would ever know it was there, and that was the point. Families could board planes with less fear, parents could buckle their children in with more trust, business travellers could stare out at the clouds without that knot