

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Second Wives Club

Jane Moore

About the Book

It's Alison's wedding day, her gorgeous husband Luca is by her side, and everything is just perfect. Perfect that is, until Luca's first wife gatecrashes the reception and makes it clear that she's going to remain very much part of his life ...

A stunned Alison soon finds an ally in Fiona, a founding member of The Second Wives Club and similarly plagued by her husband's ex. There she's introduced to Julia, whose husband has stayed best friends with his first wife - to Julia's intense irritation - and to long suffering Susan whose entire life is surrounded by reminders of her partner's saintly former wife.

For the women, The Second Wives Club is a refuge and a lifesaver: somewhere to bitch and to gossip and to share horror stories about the exes' latest excesses. But maybe if they all have the same problem they can work together on a solution? For enough is enough: it's way past time for the Second Wives to stop settling for second best ...

Jane Moore

the second
wives club



arrow books

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

About the Author

Also by Jane Moore

Acknowledgements

A first wife is for life, not just for Christmas

The trouble with children is they are not returnable

Fools rush in where angels have trodden

A friend in need is a friend to be avoided

Men and women. Women and men. It'll never work

Take a divorce letter, Miss Jones

Distant relatives are the best kind

Take my husband's ex-wife ... please

Teenagers are God's punishment for having sex

Love your enemy ... it'll drive them nuts

Sofia so bad

A steak through the heart

Teflon and velcro

Best of enemies

Testing times

Unravelling alone

Happy Birthday to me
The ecstasy and the agony
Sperm warfare
Strangers in the night
Some people don't hear you until you scream
Wake-up call
Don't put all your eggs in one bastard
Ooh la l-aaaarrrrgh
A conscious effort
One bump or two?
The ice man waiteth
I'm Alison, fly me
Out with the old in with the new
Here we babygro again
Honey, I'm home
Daddy fool
End of an earache

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For Marion

the second wives club

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Also by Jane Moore

Fourplay
The Ex-Files
Dot.Homme
Perfect Match
Love is on the Air

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You know who you are!

A first wife is for life, not just for Christmas

Letting out an ever-so-pretty little sigh that didn't cause her bosom to erupt from her corseted dress, Alison cast her eyes up and down the top table, letting her gaze linger on the eye-catching arrangement of lilies from one of London's top florists.

The fact that hundreds, if not thousands, of identical lilies were available from far cheaper outlets was neither here nor there. As she had told Luca on the numerous occasions he had questioned the validity, not to mention expense, of it all, she wanted *the best*.

If she'd had her way, they'd have been married in St Paul's Cathedral with a hundred-strong choir and Dame Kiri Te Kanawa warbling the bridal march. But the small matter of Luca's previous marriage had limited them to Windsor Register Office, and his refusal to shell out for any more 'London prices' meant the reception was being held at a nearby conference hotel of the kind usually associated with a Corby trouser press and complimentary bourbon biscuit in every room.

But looking at it now, she thought, you could never tell that the day before it had been a drab old room frequented by the sales team of a double-glazing company. The maroon Draylon-upholstered chairs were disguised with white cotton covers, gathered in by a red velvet bow tied round the back, and the four seventies-style pillars propping the ceiling up were now unrecognisable, peppered with red rosebuds and fronds of trailing ivy.

Alison had employed the services of an event organiser, but being the offspring of a mother who was such a fanatical perfectionist that she put newspaper under the cuckoo clock, she was also a control freak. So she'd overseen every last detail herself, adamant that her wedding was going to be the fairytale perfect day she'd always imagined as a little girl. So far, she hadn't been disappointed.

Turning to her left, the subtle smirk of satisfaction skewed slightly into one of dismay as she clocked Luca's six-year-old son Paolo smearing his foie gras terrine from one side of his plate to the other. Resisting the temptation to inform him it cost £10 per serving, she extended a gloved hand and patted him on the head, hoping to distract him from his messy task.

'All right, soldier?' she said gently, feeling him recoil slightly under her touch. He made an angelic pageboy, a vision in midnight blue velvet pantaloons with matching soft cap. At least he'd kept his on, she noted.

His four-year-old brother Giorgio, sitting to his left, had dispensed with his in a muddy puddle hours ago.

'When are we going to the park?' he whined.

'The park?' Alison looked puzzled.

'Yes, Daddy said he'd take us. Today.' Paolo's big brown eyes looked at her imploringly.

'Not now, darling,' murmured Alison. 'Another time, eh?' The bloody park indeed. What on *earth* was Luca thinking of, promising them that?

The sound of a finger being rapped against the side of a microphone broke into her thoughts. It was David Bartholomew, getting ready to speak. He'd been Luca's best man at his first wedding to Sofia, but despite Alison's keenest efforts to get him jettisoned from this in favour of someone new, Luca had flatly refused.

'I can't just change my best friend to suit you,' he'd growled, so she'd finally let the matter drop.

Luca and David knew each other through their love of football. They had met through a friend of a friend several years earlier, discovered a mutual passion for Chelsea, and – bingo! A firm friendship was formed on the terraces of Stamford Bridge. It was very much a season-ticket relationship, restricted to match days only.

Alison had only met David a handful of times, when he'd popped in for a quick coffee while dropping Luca home. She knew he was married to someone called Fiona, but other than that the details were patchy. Like most men, Luca was very unforthcoming on the minutiae of other people's lives. Not because he was being discreet, simply because he wasn't interested enough to ask.

'Well, here we are again.' David's voice boomed out of the speakers at the back of the room to a polite ripple of laughter.

Knowing all eyes were on her, Alison clamped on a beatific smile, but inside she was seething. She wanted this to be *her* day with Luca, their own special bubble where they could pretend his life began the day he met her. And David had already ruined it all with an opening gambit that reminded everyone present that Luca had been married before. It got worse.

'We're here to celebrate the union of a man who signs his wedding certificates in pencil,' he boomed, grinning at Luca who grimaced back.

Everyone in the room was tittering and Alison had to resist the urge to lunge for the six-inch knife lying idle by the side of the cake.

'He's the only guy I know who hires his wedding rings!' David ploughed on, waiting for the laughter to end before delivering his next hugely unoriginal joke that made Luca out to be a serial Lothario with a 'Next' label in his underpants.

Suddenly a door slammed at the back of the room, somewhere near the dreaded table nine. 'Dreaded' because

it was where Alison had seated the ghastliest of Luca's seemingly limitless relatives, supposedly out of harm's way. There was his Uncle Mauro who still pointed at planes and his second cousin Maria who, to put it kindly, was only knitting with one needle.

Alison scowled in the direction of the table, aware that a commotion had started there and was gradually rippling across the room in a Mexican wave of sharply indrawn breaths. She craned her neck to see what it was, but a hideously large hat on table eleven obscured her view.

David, seemingly oblivious to anything other than the small podium in front of him, was halfway through some lame old anecdote about when he and Luca had both fallen asleep on a train and accidentally ended up in Cornwall, but no one appeared to be listening.

By now Alison could see that a brown-haired woman was advancing unchallenged across the room, her face twisted in fury. As she moved closer and her features came into focus, Alison felt a slight chill start to prick at her forearms.

She couldn't be sure as she'd only ever seen one grainy photograph, but ...

'Luca?' she began tentatively. 'Is that ...'

'Mama!' Giorgio shot up from his chair and started to scramble under the table, brushing past Alison's ankles as he did so. Emerging the other side, he clamped himself to Sofia's left leg as if she was rescuing him from some horrific ordeal. Paolo had the foresight to take a couple of chocolates with him before swiftly following suit.

By now, David had stopped speaking, his face frozen with apprehension. There were over three hundred people in the room, but Alison had never heard a silence like it.

Sofia was now standing within two feet of her and Luca, her dark, Italian eyes burning with a look that could curdle milk.

'So thees is what you call going to ze park, huh?' She ignored Alison and looked defiantly at Luca who just

shrugged nonchalantly.

'You lied to me!' she shouted, pushing her face forward so it was just inches from his.

Luca recoiled slightly but his own face remained impassive. 'Let's get real, Sofia ...' He spoke so softly that a woman on table three had to crane her neck to hear. 'I had to lie or the children wouldn't have been able to come today, would they? Even though I'm their *father*, you would have forbidden it.'

For a few seconds they glowered at each other across the table before Sofia made a sucking noise with her teeth to illustrate dismissal of what he'd said. Drawing herself up to her full height of 5'6", her ample bosom heaving with a palpable sense of injustice, she stuck her chin in the air in defiance. 'What mother *would* want her children dressed like performing monkeys while their father marries some dirty *whore*?' For the first time, she actually brought herself to look straight at Alison as she emphasised the last word.

A chorus of gasps and 'Ooh, I says' swept through the guests who rapidly returned to silence in case they missed the next bit.

'Excuse *me*!' Alison stood up, her hands placed indignantly on her hips. 'How dare you call me that in front of my family and friends? You don't even know me.'

Sofia's lip curled into a sneer and she waved one slim, tanned arm dismissively. '*Your* family and friends? I see very few people here that I didn't see at my own wedding. You think you're the cat with ze cream, but you have a second-hand day.'

She paused a moment and pointed one finger towards David, whose terrified expression suggested he thought it might be loaded. 'A second-hand best man ...' the finger moved to Luca '... a second-hand husband ...' then finally Alison '... and what looks like a second-hand dress. You've even had to borrow my children.'

‘Well, not anymore.’ Sofia clamped an arm round each boy’s shoulders. ‘They’re coming with me.’

Her insides churning with humiliation and indignation, Alison looked to Luca to do something. But he stayed silent and motionless apart from yet another Latin shrug. It was a habit she’d found incredibly sexy when they first met; now it was overwhelmingly irritating.

‘See what you’ve married?’ scoffed Sofia, jerking her head towards her ex-husband. ‘Luca has never stood up to anyone, he always takes the easy option.’ A child clamped to each leg, she resembled someone in dire need of a double hip replacement as she jerked her way across to David’s podium. Grabbing his microphone and turning it towards her, she tapped the end of it like a true professional, checking that what she was about to say would be reaching the entire room.

‘My ex-husband is a coward and she’s welcome to him.’ Her voice seemed to hit the back wall and bounce back again, filling every corner. ‘But she’s not having my children.’

With that, she began to guide Giorgio and Paolo back towards the door she had burst through just minutes earlier, close to Uncle Mauro who was now grinning broadly and pointing at her.

About halfway across the room, Sofia walked past a table of the shellshocked bride’s friends and family. Alison’s sister Louise rose tentatively to her feet.

‘Excuse me,’ she said, with the unerring British politeness that suggested she was about to ask where the lavatories were, ‘but you can’t speak to my sister like that.’

Sofia stopped in her tracks and fixed her with a death stare. ‘Oh, yes, I can. And I have. And I will again if it suits me to do so. Got that?’

Louise sank back into her seat and shrugged at the others around the table. Emboldened by the sight of her sister’s embarrassment and her enemy’s retreating back,

Alison bristled into action, swivelling to face her new husband. 'Luca, they're *your* children too. Go after her and bring them back.'

But Luca stayed where he was and just sighed. 'It doesn't work like that. The mother has all the power.' He watched Sofia as she snaked her way to the back of the room, the guests parting before her like the Red Sea. 'Let them go. At least they were there for the ceremony,' he added as an afterthought.

'Well, hoo-bloody-rah, put out the frigging bunting!' Alison's face now matched the roses decorating the pillars in front of her. 'Is this how it's always going to be?'

'You should have asked that question *before* you married him, love.'

Alison's head swivelled to where she thought the woman's voice had come from, but everyone on table two was looking like butter wouldn't melt. If idiots could fly, she thought mutinously, this place would be an airport.

Sitting back down in her chair with a heavy thump, it suddenly dawned on her that she had spent so much time planning her fairytale wedding that she'd never actually stopped to think about the reality of what she was taking on. A man with a determined and ferociously bitter ex-wife and two children already poisoned against her.

She loved Luca dearly, was probably even a little obsessed by him if the truth be known. But now the subterfuge of their initially illicit relationship had been stripped away, would her passion for him endure throughout all the mini-dramas resulting from his past? She'd just have to wait and see, hoping that it would.

Sofia had finally disappeared from view and the room started to fill with noise again, the guests obviously discussing the theatrics they'd just witnessed. Alison knew that in most people's eyes, probably everyone's, in fact – including her own friends' – she had wilfully stolen Luca from Sofia and therefore deserved everything she got.

Speeches over, the band Zorba, or 'Ex-zorba-tant' as Alison referred to them after writing a £2,000 cheque for their services, struck up the first few notes of Elvis Costello's sleepy ballad 'Alison'.

With all eyes on them, Alison smiled and extended her hand to Luca who led her to the dancefloor.

"Aaaaaa Alison, I know this world is killing you ..."

Not to mention my husband's ex-wife, she thought mutinously. As they swayed slowly to the music, she tried to forget about Sofia, instead burying her head in Luca's neck and inhaling his Fahrenheit aftershave, the musky smell that had first attracted her to him. As she closed her eyes to block out everyone's gaze and let her mind wander, she could convince herself that everything was going to be all right. And it probably would if it was just the two of them.

Trouble was, there were three gigantic complications in the shape of his two young children and their ferocious mother, all of whom were here to stay.

"Oh, Aaaaaa Alison, my aim is true ..."

As the music trailed away, Luca took a step back from her to acknowledge the applause of the onlookers and Alison's bubble was broken. Leaving him to take the floor with a favoured aunt, she refused all offers of other dances, pretending she needed to visit the loo.

Heading in that direction for authenticity, she reached the door and bumped chests with a smiling woman whose brown curly hair was falling into her eyes. She looked dishevelled, but in a sexy rather than a slovenly kind of way.

'Hi, Alison.' She grinned.

Alison smiled back though she had absolutely no idea who this was.

'I'm Fiona.'

She extended her hand and Alison took it, still looking blank.

'David's wife. The best man?'

Alison theatrically slapped her palm against her forehead. 'Oh, God, sorry. I guess I'm still a little shellshocked from ... well, you know what.' She shrugged apologetically.

'Yes, I certainly do.' Fiona pulled a face. 'I wanted to talk to you about that, actually.'

'Oh?' Intrigued, she jerked her head towards an empty sofa positioned to one side of the foyer. 'Shall we?'

They wandered over and sat down, Alison smoothing her dress under her and scooping her train to one side. Fiona took a quick glance around then fixed her grey eyes on the bride's face.

'That was pretty ugly back there.' She tilted her head towards the reception room in a reference to Sofia's outburst.

Unsure where this woman's loyalties lay, Alison simply shrugged. '*C'est la vie*. I understand why she did it.'

'Really?' Fiona looked unconvinced.

'Why, don't you think it was justified?' Alison threw the ball into her court, testing the water.

Wrinkling her nose, Fiona sighed. 'Tricky one. Upset about the breakdown of her marriage? Yes, I sympathise.' She checked over her shoulder again. 'Causing an embarrassing scene at her husband's wedding in front of their two children? Nope, sorry. That's *so* wrong.'

'Do you think so?' Alison studied her face for signs of potential betrayal but saw none. She knew any of her own friends present would wax lyrical about how disgraceful Sofia's behaviour had been – in fact, many had done so already. But she desperately wanted allies in Luca's camp too. Or at least someone with an objective view, and Fiona might be that person.

'I must say, it has made me slightly apprehensive about the future ... if that's the way it's going to be,' Alison said tentatively.

Fiona sighed. 'Tell me about it.'

‘You sound like you’ve been there?’

‘Sort of. David ...’ She broke off as someone advanced towards them. It was Alison’s mother, Audrey.

‘Darling, I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Are you all right?’

‘Mother!’ Alison raised her eyes heavenward. ‘That’s the tenth time you’ve asked me that. I’m fine, really.’

Audrey looked unconvinced. ‘That dreadful Sofia needs to move on with her life, don’t you think?’ She glanced at Fiona but didn’t wait for an answer, turning back to Alison again. ‘Anyway, your father wants another word. Stay here, I’ll get him.’ She drifted off on a cloud of White Linen.

Fiona raised her eyebrows. ‘She’s formidable.’

Alison smiled. ‘She’s also on another planet. The other day, a homeless man came up to her in the street and said he hadn’t eaten for three days, and she said: “Dear chap, you must force yourself!”’

Fiona burst out laughing. In the distance, they could see Audrey bustling back into view with her husband Alasdair in tow.

‘Look, I won’t keep you on your big day,’ said Fiona hastily. ‘I just wanted to give you my number.’ It was already scribbled on the piece of paper she handed over.

‘Thanks.’ Alison wasn’t quite sure what this meant, but she was grateful for the gesture.

‘It’s just that a couple of friends and I have this little club, and I thought you might like to join. It’s a kind of self-help group, I suppose.’ Fiona smiled reassuringly.

Alison looked baffled. ‘What, like a weight loss thing?’ She looked down at her own enviably slim hips.

Grimacing at her own wide girth, Fiona laughed. ‘No, although I could probably do with joining something like that ... no, this is a sort of secret group founded by me. We’ve only got three members so far, four if you join us. We get together once a week for moral support.’

Intrigued, Alison's mind was racing over all the possibilities.

'What are the criteria for joining?'

'You just need a small scar running from here to here.' Fiona used her forefinger to trace a line from the corner of her mouth down her chin. 'It comes from years of biting your lip.'

Alison was starting to feel like someone whose pilot light had gone out. 'Sorry? I still don't get it.'

Fiona smiled benevolently. 'Welcome to the Second Wives Club.'

The trouble with children is they are not returnable

Jake tentatively dipped his elbow into the soapy water, just like he'd seen them do on the sex-education video shown at school a couple of years ago. It had been designed to show him and his classmates the enormity of the task of looking after a newborn baby, but instead he and his friends had simply tittered their way through it after catching a fleeting glimpse of the woman's nipple as she breastfed.

Jessica was sitting on the floor surrounded by her brightly coloured, plastic bath toys. Just one year old, she had recently started to crawl everywhere at high speed, so Jake's other free hand was extended to hold the back of her vest, making sure she didn't escape. 'C'mon, pumpkin,' he said, scooping her up and unbuttoning her Winnie-the-Pooh vest. 'Time for some splishy-splashing.'

He affectionately rubbed his hand across the smooth, downy fluff that covered the top of her head. She'd been overwhelmed with gifts from Father Christmas, but hair hadn't been one of them.

Lowering her gently into her swivel bath seat, he leaned down and picked up a selection of toys from the floor, plopping them into the water like tiny bombs as she shrieked with delight.

Immediately, she started doing what she always did in the bath - placing her little plastic Teletubbies in a boat then quickly tiring of such an idyllic scene and tipping it upside down.

Jake smiled benevolently. While his half-sister's arrival had meant he was no longer the centre of his father's attention, at sixteen he was old enough to handle it. In fact, as he saw it, her presence gave him a much-needed, occasional hiatus in the seemingly endless parental nagging about schoolwork, career options and the tidiness – or untidiness to be more precise – of his bedroom.

He looked down at his watch, an all-singing, all-dancing diver's timepiece even though the closest he'd ever come to being submerged was when he jumped off the highboard at the local baths. He'd only done it because that awesome babe Emma Davies had been watching him and he'd wanted to impress. Trouble was, he'd swallowed half the pool and emerged spluttering so badly that the lifeguard had felt compelled to ask him if he needed assistance. Emma had ignored him ever since, apart from remarking to her friends, 'Oh, look, it's marine boy,' every time they passed in the school corridors.

Jake wrinkled his nose at the memory. It was now 6 p.m. and, noting that Jessica was absorbed in her game, he slowly backed out of the bathroom door and into the hallway. By his reckoning, there was just enough time to listen to the first track of Rim of Scum's new album before she'd even notice he'd gone.

Jake's bedroom was right next door, identifiable by the 'Danger: Toxic Teenager' sign nailed on it. He let out a deep sigh as he surveyed his room. The posters of Cameron Diaz in a variety of microscopic bikinis were starting to look a bit naff and desperate, and he made a mental note to change them for some Goth images and memorabilia. Likewise, his old train set was stuffed on top of the wardrobe along with the evidence of his Pokemon obsession which had lasted all of five minutes several years ago.

This room undoubtedly suffered from the fact that Jake only frequented it every other weekend. On the few

occasions he was there, he couldn't be bothered to spend time having a clear out, preferring to while away hours and hours on his PlayStation 2 or watch the latest ubiquitous teen flick on DVD in which some young girl is scared witless in the dead of night and feels the urge to go and investigate the pool house while dressed in a baby-doll nightie.

Tracing a black-varnished forefinger along the neat row of CDs on his bookshelf, he quickly found the one he wanted thanks to his alphabetical storage system. It was the one thing in Jake's life that was ordered. He had bought the album earlier that day, and already it was in its place with a handwritten 'R' sticker, ready for its first airing. Music was Jake's greatest love. Well, *his* kind of music, not the old fuddy-duddy stuff his dad played like Dire Straits, Van Morrison and that Country and Western bollocks about wives leaving and dogs dying. Jake liked nothing better than to hike the volume up full blast and let the sound wash over him, transporting him to somewhere exciting and empowering, away from – as he saw it – his dull, suburban life.

Trouble was, his dad's neighbours had complained about the din, so his last birthday present had been a set of state-of-the-art headphones that he'd promised to use every time he listened to music.

After sneaking a quick peek at Jessica one more time, he darted back into his room, clamped the headphones in place, and lay back in his giant beanbag for the latest Rim of Scum experience.

Fiona felt her neck crick as she strained to see over her left shoulder. She was trying to reverse her little Ford Fiesta on to the shared driveway, but as ever it was like trying to thread a fine needle with a piece of string.

For some reason, despite living in a semi-detached house in the urban sprawl of Croydon, her neighbours felt

the need to have a monstrously large 4x4 jeep with go-faster stripes and vast bullbars more commonly used in the wilds of Northern Australia to fend off marauding kangaroos. It ate up every inch of the neighbour's half of the drive and jutted out into Fiona and David's space to such an extent that they were never able to open both their car doors once parked.

'Bollocks!' Fiona cursed as her wing mirror tapped the side of the jeep and she had to pull out again to reposition herself.

She rather hoped it was loud enough to wake David, snoring loudly in the passenger seat after consuming his own weight in lager at Luca's and Alison's wedding. 'I thought alcoholics were supposed to be anonymous,' Fiona said aloud, but he didn't even flicker.

Cranking the handbrake into position, she opened the driver's door and decided to leave him there to sleep it off. Besides, if she woke him now, he'd be disorientated and grumpy and it would be just one more child to deal with while she was putting Jessica to bed. Let snoring hogs lie, she thought, closing the car door gently.

As she fumbled to find her key, she could hear the faint sound of Jessica crying inside and smiled to herself. Even at the tender age of one she was already an arch-manipulator and probably had Jake wrapped round her little finger with the slightest wail. But as she opened the front door, Fiona's heart skipped a beat. That wasn't an attention-seeking whinge, it was a full-blown, hysterical scream. And it sounded like it was coming from the bathroom.

Jumping the stairs three at a time, Fiona reached Jessica in just a few seconds. The child was only partially in her bath seat, having wriggled one leg out and twisted her torso to the side. There was a deep red welt at the top of one of her thighs, where she'd clearly been struggling to escape, and her face was puce with what Fiona recognised as fury and fright.

As soon as she saw her mother, Jessica's high-pitched screaming became more intense and she extended her podgy little arms in the air. 'Mumma!'

'Jesus Christ!' She lifted her little girl out of the freezing water and wrapped her in a towel before fumbling her into the nappy and pyjamas that had been laid to one side. The child was shivering uncontrollably, presumably from a mixture of fear and cold, so Fiona just sat on the loo seat and cuddled her for a few seconds, trying to calm her down.

Her mind was racing. Where on *earth* was Jake? Something terrible must have happened to him.

Still holding Jessica close, Fiona stood up and left the bathroom in search of her stepson. She felt sick with apprehension at the thought of what she might find. Pushing open his bedroom door, she felt the cold, telltale prickle of nervousness when she saw him lying motionless on his beanbag in the middle of the room. His eyes were closed, his arms sprawled by his side. He was wearing his headphones and she could hear a faint, tinny noise that suggested something was still playing full blast.

'Jake?' she said tentatively and somewhat fruitlessly, given the headphones. But she was afraid to touch him, afraid he might slump lifelessly on to the floor.

'Jake?' This time, she placed her hand on his shoulder and shook him gently, fully expecting zero response.

But his arm twitched a little at first, then came up to rub eyes that were now open and blinking blearily at her, full of confusion.

'Oh, hi, you're back,' he said matter-of-factly.

Now Fiona wasn't fearful any more. Jake was alive and well and she was gut-wrenchingly angry.

'What the *fuck* do you think you're playing at?' she spat, grabbing his forearm and trying to haul him to his feet. It proved difficult as she still had Jessica clutched to her.

Jake stood up, his hands lifted in a gesture of surrender. 'Whoah! OK, OK, take a chill pill, will you?' At first, he looked puzzled by her outburst, then he focused on Jessica and realisation dawned. 'Shit!'

Fiona's jaw fell open. 'Shit? *Shit?* Is that all you have to say considering you just practically killed your sister?'

'Oh, come *on*,' he beseeched. 'I know I shouldn't have left her in there alone, but she looks well fine to me.'

The urge to slap his stupid, irresponsible face practically overwhelmed Fiona, but she knew that would instantly give him the moral high ground in the eyes of his mother and father. So she controlled herself.

'When I came in through the front door, Jessica was screaming the place down.' By contrast, Fiona's own voice was dangerously low, a sign that her control could snap at any time. 'She had tried to climb out of her seat and it's a miracle she didn't fall into the water and drown. And if she had, it would have been one hundred per cent *your fault*.'

Jake shrugged. 'Yeah, well, she didn't, did she? So let's all get real and move on with our lives.'

If he'd been in the slightest bit remorseful and apologised for being so irresponsible, then Fiona might have started to calm down. But his obvious determination to place the matter at the same level of importance as a spilt drink angered her enormously. Usually, she bit her tongue when Jake behaved disrespectfully – which he did often – but this time he wasn't going to get away with it.

'She didn't drown because I came home and saved her.' Fiona could hear a high-pitched, angry voice and realised it was hers. 'God only knows what would have happened if your father and I had decided to stay at the wedding any longer ...' She paused to catch her breath at the mere thought of it.

'Jake, you were out for the count, sleeping for Britain, while your little sister – who was relying on *you* to look after her – was terrified at being left alone.'

‘Half-sister.’

‘Sorry?’ Fiona stopped in her tracks, momentarily puzzled by his interruption.

‘She’s my half-sister, not my sister.’

Fiona’s hand had moved before she was even aware of it herself. The thwack as her palm struck the side of his face hung in the air between them, her glaring, him clutching his cheek with defiance in his eyes.

‘You immature little prat!’ she yelled. ‘Can’t you, just for *once*, take on board the enormity of what’s just happened, rather than make some facile, irrelevant remark? Surely even you can take *some* responsibility for your actions?’

Jake said nothing for a few seconds, merely rubbing his cheek and staring at the floor. When he finally looked up, he avoided her stare and glanced over towards his bedroom door.

‘Look, I’m a teenage boy not Jessica’s mother. She’s *your* responsibility not mine, and if you’re so worried about her then you shouldn’t have left her with someone untrained in baby care while you went off having a great time.’

His words cut deep, straight into the Achilles heel of every new mother who feels guilt-ridden every time she indulges in an activity that doesn’t involve her baby. But Fiona rallied herself, refusing to fall victim to such amateur, end-of-the-pier psychology.

‘Jake, you don’t have to be trained in baby care to know that you don’t leave a toddler unattended in water. Even a complete *moron* would know that, so cut the crap. You agreed to look after her – for money, of course – and therefore you were in charge. End of story.’

He stood motionless for a couple of seconds after she’d finished speaking, then stooped down to pick up the overnight bag at his feet and started to stuff clothes into it.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’

‘Home,’ he replied sullenly.

‘This is your home.’