

# 1

You were in your important BBC meeting this afternoon, so you won't have felt the strong warm breeze – 'A godsend for sports day,' parents were saying to each other. I thought that even if a God existed he'd be a little tied up with starving people in Africa or abandoned orphans in Eastern Europe to worry about providing free air-conditioning for Sidley House's sack race.

The sun shone on the white lines painted on the grass; the whistles hanging around the teachers' necks glinted; the children's hair was shiny-bright. Touchingly too-big feet on small legs bounced on the grass as they did the one-hundred-metre dash, the sack race, the obstacle course. You can't really see the school in summer time, those huge pollarded oaks hide it from view, but I knew a reception class was still in there and I thought it was a shame the youngest children couldn't be out enjoying the summer afternoon too.

Adam was wearing his 'I am 8!' badge from our card this morning – just this morning. He came dashing up to

me, that little face of his beaming, because he was off to get his cake from school *right now!* Rowena had to get the medals so was going with him; Rowena who was at Sidley House with Jenny all those moons ago.

As they left, I looked around to see if Jenny had arrived. I'd thought that after her A-level disaster she should immediately start revision for her retakes, but she still wanted to work at Sidley House to pay for her planned trip to Canada. Strange to think I minded so much.

I'd thought her being a temporary teaching assistant at seventeen was challenge enough – and now she was school nurse for the afternoon. We'd gently crossed swords at breakfast.

*'It's just a little young to have that much responsibility.'*

*'It's a primary school sports day, Mum, not a motorway crash.'*

But now her shift was almost over – with no accidents at all – and soon she'd be out to join us. I was sure she'd be itching to leave that small stuffy medical room stuck at the top of the school.

I'd noticed at breakfast that she was wearing that red frou-frou skirt with a skimpy top and I'd told her it didn't really look very professional but when did Jenny ever listen to my advice on clothes?

*'Just count your lucky stars I'm not in bumsters.'*

*'You mean the jeans that hang around boys' bottoms?'*

*'Yup.'*

*'I always want to go and give them a hitch up.'*

*She bursts out laughing.*

*And her long legs do look rather wonderful under the*

*too-short, gauzy skirt and despite myself I feel a little proud.  
Though she got her long legs from you.*

On the playing field, Maisie arrived, her blue eyes sparkling, her face one large smile. Some people dismiss her as a jolly-hockey-sticks Sloane in FUN shirts (long sleeves a different pattern to the rest) but most of us love her.

‘Gracie,’ she said, giving me a hug. ‘I’ve come to give Rowena a lift home. She texted me a little while ago, said the tubes were up the spout. So Chauffeur-Mum to the fore!’

‘She’s getting the medals,’ I told her. ‘Adam’s gone with her to get his cake. They should be back any minute.’

She smiled. ‘What kind of cake this year?’

‘An M&S chocolate tray-bake. Addie dug out a trench with a teaspoon and we took off all the Maltesers and replaced them with soldiers. It’s a World War One cake. Which is violent but fits with key stage two, so I don’t think anyone’ll mind.’

She laughed. ‘Fantastic.’

‘Not really, but he thinks so.’

*‘Is she your best friend, Mum?’ Adam asked me recently.*

*‘Probably, yes,’ I said.*

Maisie handed me a ‘little something’ for Adam, beautifully wrapped, which I knew would contain a spot-on present. She’s brilliant at presents. It’s one of the many things I love her for. Another is that she ran in the mothers’ race every single year that Rowena was at Sidley House, and always came last by a mile but didn’t give a hoot! She has never owned a piece of Lycra clothing and,

unlike virtually every other mum at Sidley House, has never been inside a gym.

I know. I'm dawdling on that sunny playing field with Maisie. I'm sorry. But it's hard. What I'm getting to is just so bloody hard.

Maisie left to find Rowena in the school.

I checked my watch; it was almost three.

Still no sign of either Jenny or Adam.

The PE teacher blew his whistle for the last race – the relay – bellowing through his loudspeaker for teams to get in position. I worried that Addie would get into trouble for not being in his designated place.

I looked back towards the school, thinking surely I'd see them coming towards me any moment.

Smoke was coming from the school building. Thick black smoke like a bonfire. I remember the calm most of all. The absence of panic. But knowing it was accelerating towards me, like a juggernaut.

I had to hide. Quickly. No. I am not in danger. This terror isn't for me. My children are in danger.

It hit me in the chest, full on.

There is a fire and they are in there.

*They are in there.*

And then I was running at the velocity of a scream. Running so hard that I didn't have time to breathe.

A running scream that can't stop until I hold them both.

Darting across the road, I heard sirens blaring on the bridge. But the fire engines weren't moving. There were abandoned cars by the traffic lights blocking their path, and

women were getting out of other cars just left in the middle of the road and were running across the bridge towards the school. But all the mothers were at the sports day. What were these women doing, kicking off their high-wedged shoes and tripping over flip-flops and screaming as they ran, like me? I recognised one, the mother of a reception child. They were the mothers of the four-year-olds coming to do their usual pick-up. One had left a toddler in her abandoned SUV and the toddler was hitting the window as he watched his mother in this ghastly mothers' race.

And then I was there first, before the other mothers because they still had to cross the road and run down the drive.

And the four-year-olds were lined up outside the school with their teacher, a neat little crocodile; and Maisie was with the teacher, with her arm around her, and I saw how shaken the teacher looked. Behind them black smoke poured out of the school like a factory chimneystack, staining the summer-blue sky.

And Adam was outside – *outside!* – by that bronze statue – and he was sobbing against Rowena and she was holding him tightly. And in that moment of relief, love flooded out from me not only onto my boy but onto the girl who was comforting him.

I allowed myself a second, maybe two, to feel gut-wrenching relief for Adam and then I was looking for Jenny. Bobbed blonde hair, slender. No one like Jenny outside. From the bridge the sirens wailed.

And the four-year-olds were starting to cry as they saw their mothers, running full tilt towards them down the

drive, tears streaming down their faces, arms outstretched, waiting for that moment to hold their child.

And I turned towards the burning building, black smoke billowing out of the classrooms on the second and third floors.

Jenny.