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The Battle for Big School

Sarah Tucker

About the Book

There are 50 places at The Oaks, the best grammar school in the area, and 1,000 children applying. Competition is fierce and parents are prepared to do everything and anything to get their child one of the coveted spaces. Absolutely anything ...

Close friends Lily, Julie, Karen and Paul aren't overly concerned. After all, aren't their children are bright and sociable enough? But they're quickly shaken out of their complacency when enrolment time approaches and turns out to be little more than a rigged lottery, where only the most ruthless hold the cards. Marriages and friendships crumble under the pressure, fake addresses abound and tutors rates soar. And, of course, money passes hands like water, between estate agents, local councillors and City fundraisers, all of whom hold the purse strings for school funding.

As measures get extreme (well, down-right ridiculous really), the four quickly rally their troops and throw themselves into the battle for big school. Initially wary to be in competition with each other, they realise that the only way of out-smarting the rest of the pack is by coming up with a plan. Because getting their kids into The Oaks will demand determination and strategy akin to Mission Impossible ...

The Battle for Big School

An award-winning broadcaster and journalist, Sarah Tucker was a presenter on the BBC1 *Holiday* programme and, more recently, anchored *I Want That House Revisited* on ITV1. She regularly contributes to women's magazines, *The Sunday Times* Travel Magazine and the *Guardian*. Sarah Tucker is the author of *The Playground Mafia* and three romantic comedies published by Harlequin.

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*The Battle for
Big School*

Sarah Tucker



arrow books

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For Tom.

And to William, his great-granddad.

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Chapter 1

Head Start

‘The head will see you now, Mr and Mrs Dearl.’

An elegant, somewhat vampiric-looking woman with blood-red lips, dressed top to toe in tweed, ushers us into the headmaster’s office, closing the door firmly behind us.

Mike and I are here to meet, or rather be interviewed by, a certain Dr Henderson Totham, venerable and esteemed headmaster of The Oaks. The Oaks is a grammar school – no, *the* grammar school – in the area, with an excellent overall reputation but particularly strong in sports and the arts. The Oaks has some of the best football and cricket coaches in the country, and it regularly turns out artists and graphic and interior designers who receive national acclaim. It’s no surprise, then, that it’s fiercely coveted in the area, the only public alternative being a smattering of church schools and the awful Readmere Comp, an absolute hellhole of a school if you ask me, that seems to gobble up hordes of unruly kids each morning and spews them back out at the end of the school day, leaving them free to roam the streets of Letchbury. A gross generalisation, I know, I know, but there’s more than a shred of truth in it and, regardless, it’s simply no match for The Oaks. Which means, sadly, that every year everyone flocks to The Oaks in droves. People say that competition is fierce and I’ve seen mums get quite anxious when enrolment time approaches, but I’ve tried to stay out of that and just hope that Tim won’t have too much of a problem getting in. I

don't know where he gets the brains from (not me, that's for certain), but he's been top in his class for the last three years, and the much-fêted captain of the rugby team as well. And I'm not just saying that in my role as doting mother of three - Ms Townsend, head teacher at Somerset School, only recently sent home a report card saying that 'Tim is a credit to himself and the school. Wherever he goes he will prove to be the cherry on the icing on the cake,' which I thought was quite charming and rather quirky, a bit like Ms Townsend and Somerset School itself really. Tim gets his patience and calm nature from his dad, and Mike says he gets his tenacity and good looks - almost five two at the age of ten, dark blond hair, striking green eyes - from me. Well, I don't know about that. He is far more considerate and thoughtful than I am even today and as I sit here waiting to be interviewed by one of the top state schools in the county, I think that The Oaks will be lucky to have him.

Now, Mike squeezes my hand and, looking back cautiously at the door and the vampire typing behind it, we tiptoe over to the big floor-to-ceiling picture window.

It's a bitterly cold wintry day outside, bursting with brittle blue winter sunshine that creates a rainbow on the walls, making the heavily panelled room less severe, magical almost.

I take this as a good omen, because we really, really want Tim to get into this school. It's crazy, and I'm sure I'm losing perspective, but I'm actually feeling quite nervous now. Tim might be a dead cert but why the hell are we here? I look at Mike to reassure myself and he gives me a slightly strained smile.

'I'm sure it'll be fine, sweetheart.' Well, we'll see.

Through the window we can see all over Letchbury and I point out the café where Jane Anderson, the highly competent PTA chair at Somerset, hurries every Monday at

nine fifteen prompt, just after drop-off, for her half-hour casual coffee mornings with the movers and shakers of the school and local community. And there's the slightly fancier coffee bar (further from the school, which is often a blessing) where I meet Julie and Karen, my two best friends, for the occasional afternoon treat before we each collect our respective broods, to discuss how we've shaken our butts at the local gym that week. Mike thinks our house is just behind those big trees, although I personally think he's pointing to Giorgiano's, our local bakers, which makes wonderful ciabatta and where Tim had a Saturday job until football training took over recently.

Letchbury is more urban than suburban thanks to the regular rail links in and out of London. The constituency is just outside London, and our local MP, Mr Wallace T. Heavie, is good at getting his own way, so whatever he wants Letchbury to have, Letchbury gets, regardless of whether Letchbury actually wants it or not. Consequently, our town has an ice rink instead of a multi-storey car park, a swimming pool instead of a block of flats, and rows of tree-lined avenues. Perhaps because of the heady combination of beauty and convenience, our town is also an expensive place to live and somewhere people visit rather than stay. They come here to work or to walk their dogs in the manicured parks and gardens at weekends. They pour in to have Sunday lunch by the river in one of the many over-priced gastro pubs, and wander down the narrow cobbled lanes, exploring the delightful little shops full of exquisite nonsense.

The view exhausted, we tiptoe back to our seats. How annoying to be kept waiting like this. Well, admittedly we *were* half an hour early.

I eye up the large lacquered-oak gilt-edged noticeboards, listing the names of past pupils and their achievements, and recognise some of the parents' names picked out in gold leaf. Some of the pupils have won so

many awards they've had to make the wording smaller and the leaf has smudged into one great golden blob of praise.

Interestingly, most of the pupils seem to come with quite a good pedigree. Fisher Bolden, the property tycoon; Tyler Villier, the mobile-phone maverick; and Lynda Dunworthy, the famous Royal Ballet ballerina. I think I met her once in Tatiana, the boutique owned by my exotic, beautiful and rather flighty neighbour.

Which reminds me, I wonder how Jenny is doing in her ballet exam? At six, my daughter is more tomboy than ballet dancer - a real tree climber - but I'm desperately trying to instil a modicum of femininity and grace into the girl. I'm sorry I can't be there with her today - one of the mums at school kindly volunteered to take her along - but we couldn't get another appointment. And I hope Henry hasn't terrorised the babysitter yet. At three he's already a bit of a vandal, although he hides it well by just being extremely curious about how things work, which, according to my mum, is a sign of brilliance. At the moment, Henry's latest peccadillo is to put things in the washing machine - light bulbs, breakfast cereals, Power Ranger toys, Jenny's schoolbooks, and once a tortoise which has never completely recovered from his 'great sea adventure', as Henry called it. Even on slow spin, poor Herman was seriously concussed, but managed to survive.

'Look, there are Dennis Resnaur and Francesca Frederic,' Mike interrupts my idle musings.

Dennis Resnaur is a marketing director of Delaylo Interiors, the designers favoured by footballers' wives (although I'm not sure that's much of a selling point). Then Francesca Frederic, who is the MD of NDW Bank or DNW Bank - can't be sure which, but I know she's been in the papers recently as she allegedly had an affair with celebrity chef Randy Hasbro.

We look at each other, slightly intimidated at the prospect of mixing with such illustrious company at parents' evenings. I will need to dust down some of my work clothes from my fashion-editor days at *De Rigueur* magazine. For a while I tried to keep my hand in doing some freelance stuff and the occasional feature but when Henry came I just had too much on. So there isn't much call for rows of funky suits and shoes these days. I think I'll do right by Tim today, though. I looked in the mirror so much before I left the house that Mike finally threatened to leave without me, but I wanted the right amount of style without going over the top. So I'm wearing a Paul Smith skirt and top and cardigan, which are sensible and stylish at the same time. Mike, bless him, would look good in a dustbin liner. As he is wearing a black Paul Smith suit, we look like a brand ad, but he carries it well. He has broad shoulders and has managed to keep his belly at bay by playing tennis, squash, cricket, football and every ball game known to man for the past six years, recently mostly with Tim, for the sake of keeping up not only his son's game, but his own. At forty-five he looks, well, he looks forty-five. But he's a sexy forty-five. Mike says I look ten years younger than I am which would make me thirty-two, hooray, and him the lucky one.

I'm just about to give up on Totham when the sinister-looking assistant finally emerges again and beckons us in with a long-taloned wave. Dr Totham's office is a large, square room, with the same floor-to-ceiling windows as outside, this time overlooking the playing field on one side and the playground on the other. More oak panelling, a large and striking mahogany desk, and a bookcase covering both walls to the right and left. A black phone - one of those modern ones that looks a little like a boomerang - sits on Totham's desk, as well as a file and a tall, silver spotlight. With the exception of these three items, his desk is clear. I edited *De Rigueur's* home-improvement pages

before moving on to fashion and since then I have found it difficult to walk into a room without taking in every detail. You learn more about people that way than from talking to them, I think. Mike thinks I'm paranoid that everyone has something to hide, but hey, they usually do. There's a sofa, a coffee table and two chairs adjacent to the desk, and it's here that the tight-lipped Ms Dailey asks us to be seated.

We obey and Ms Dailey turns and leaves as swiftly as she entered, without offer of tea or a biscuit. I'd have quite liked a little pick-me-up, or at least something to occupy my hands when talking to Totham, but perhaps that would be asking too much. Strangely, this is starting to feel like an inquisition, maybe because the waiting seems to foster all sorts of forebodings, and my earlier anxiety returns in full force. God, I hope he doesn't ask us to do long division or obscure stuff like the derivation of Mocha, or any of the things Tim brings home these days. Helping with homework has become a new challenge every day.

Mike leans over and takes my hand again, presumably to stop me from fidgeting. I smile back, suddenly leaning over and kissing him quickly on the lips.

'Ah, Mr and Mrs Dearl, good to meet you both,' comes a booming voice from behind. Dr Totham has timed his entrance perfectly.

We scramble to our feet, awkwardly offering our hands.

'So sorry to keep you waiting,' he says, shaking Mike's hand, then mine and smiling warmly which immediately puts me at ease. This is going to be absolutely fine. Tim belongs here. Just one look at the grounds crammed with rugby pitches, tennis courts and football fields, plus the two enormous libraries - it's almost as though the school was made for him.

Mid-fifties, dark haired and wearing thinly rimmed glasses, Totham has been headmaster of The Oaks for over ten years. I Googled him before we came over and found out he's an old Etonian and loves sports - everything from

rugby to golf. There was a profile on him in the *Education Gazette* several years ago, lauding him for keeping up The Oaks's standards by making excellent decisions about how the school is run and integrating it closely with the local community.

'Would you like to be seated again?' Totham has a round face and dark close-set eyes. I've always been suspicious of people with close-set eyes, not just because *De Rigueur's* women's pages always advised never to trust them - Gordon Brown, Tony Blair and President Bush being cases in point.

I quickly dismiss the eyes and focus on Totham's smile. He opens the red file on his desk and, while reading the first line, picks up a pen.

'So, Lily and Michael - may I call you Lily and Michael?' Totham asks, still smiling. Is this is a test question? To find out if we're a bit too touchy-feely, too liberal for The Oaks? But Mike speaks before I can pursue any of those theories.

'Yes, that's fine,' he replies calmly.

'Now, please tell me a bit about yourselves. What should I know about you both?' he says, pen poised over paper as if ready to note down our every word.

Wow, what a question. Talk about giving you enough rope to hang yourself. I take the safe option and answer a question with a question.

'I don't know if we've got that kind of time, Dr Totham,' I smile. God, stop the lame jokes, Lily. 'What are you interested in in particular?' This may not have come out quite right, but I'm honestly just trying to be helpful.

'Ah, yes, I can tell you're a journalist, or rather,' he looks down at the file, luckily unfazed by my response, 'you used to be a journalist. You are looking after three now, yes?'

'Yes, that's right. I was fashion editor of a women's consumer magazine, and I still do some freelance writing,' I reply, feeling as though I'm on trial in a courtroom. This meeting is much more interrogation than interview.

'Ah, very interesting. And Michael, you are an advertising director. Excellent. We have a lot of parents who work in media in our school PTA and amongst the parent governors. You'll feel quite at home here.'

I may have got a cross for my answer, but I think Mike just got a tick. So far so good.

Totham then proceeds to ask us how long we've been married, whether it's the first marriage for both of us (it is), how we met (at a cocktail work party neither of us wanted to attend but are pleased we did), where we live, what our house is like (large, sprawling, noisy). Totham runs through the questions one by one, apparently knowing the list by heart now, but I'm completely taken aback by the intimacy of the questions. I thought we were meant to talk about what we bring to the school and, of course, about Tim? No, Totham asks about our favourite country and why (Italy, because of the food, wine and irreverence of the Italians, although I nervously stumble and say 'irrelevance of the Italians' at first, which makes Mike smile but unfortunately not Totham). I feel I'm letting the side down here.

He even asks us our favourite colours (yellow and red) and smells (spring and autumn). I'm starting to think I've come straight into a psychometric test when the questioning suddenly stops. Perhaps we've given too many wrong answers? Perhaps we're the wrong types of parent for the school? Oh, fuck. What's the good of raising the game with our children if we can't keep up ourselves?

As if Totham has been reading my mind, he closes his file, smiles warmly and says, 'Right, well, thank you for answering my questions so thoroughly. I know they may seem irrelevant to you, but they give us a good first impression of the parents. And it's important that we know the children have the back-up they need at home. We are here to teach, nurture and nourish during the day, and parents can either enhance or undo the work we achieve at

The Oaks. But we have standards to maintain, and our parents play a crucial role in maintaining those standards.'

I relax, slump my shoulders and exhale. This sounds OK, doesn't it? I think we've done our best.

'One final question,' he says, looking pointedly at me. 'We are very keen on parents who are community-spirited. How are you contributing to the local community?'

Knew it. Just knew it. Every time I think we're home free something comes flying out of left field. Like some karmic force thinks I've become far too smug and need to be taught a lesson. Well, to be frank, we do nothing for the local community, really. I open my mouth and -

'Well, Dr Totham,' Mike cuts in smoothly, wanting to nip any emerging untruths quickly in the bud, 'the truth is that both of us lead very busy lives. I work full-time and Lily has three children to look after, plus a part-time career. Our focus is on our family, on helping our children grow and learn, and this leaves little time for anything else.'

Dr Totham looks disappointed. Shit, double shit. It's true: I'm not one for joining the PTA or working for some local charity. I just don't like the environment and even less do I like the petty power politics of the PTA. I could no more work with Jane Anderson than bake cakes. I'm the queen of the play-date and I always chat to the mums in the playground at pick-up time, but I'm not part of the group that gets involved with the fêtes, dances and lotteries. I've only ever attended one PTA meeting, six years ago when Tim first started school, and it scared me off for life. Jane Anderson wasn't chair at the time, Veronica Walsh was, Veronica who took no crap from anyone. But there was one mum at the meeting, Linda Black, who is still at the school (and only slightly taller than ten-year-old Tim, if you want to be mean). She had a habit of clicking her biro every time she spoke, and the more incensed she became about how much money we should spend on computers or books, the more vigorously she clicked her pen. She clicked it so hard

at one point that the ruddy thing flew across the assembly hall and hit the deputy chair in the eye. An ambulance and police were involved and now pens are no longer allowed in the meetings. Since then, I've kept myself out of the line of fire by keeping my head down. Jane Anderson seems to take everything in her stride now, treating with equal civility the 'corporate mums', who like to diarise everything months in advance, and the full-time mums, who tend to wing everything.

I half-listen to Totham drone on about the importance of 'giving back' as I desperately try to remember if I've given anything back recently. I wonder if there is some sort of points system, official or unofficial, that credits parents for their efforts. It's a bit ridiculous, really, as none of this has anything to do with me or Mike - nor should it. This is about Tim, who does a lot for the local community. He's completed his silver Duke of Edinburgh award, he's helped out in the local shops, and he represents Somerset against other schools from other regions and brings home the prizes. Surely Dr Totham can see this? Surely he knows Tim is more than the sum of his parents put together? But as I look at Totham's expectant face, I don't really see any of that there. His smile has become a touch bland, businesslike, and he starts shuffling together his papers, probably to indicate that the meeting is reaching its conclusion.

'And of course, as well as working, I'm always playing golf with my clients,' I suddenly hear Mike break the silence. That stops me short. To my knowledge, Mike Dearl has never so much as held a golf club in his life. I'm not sure he even likes the game. But his throwaway comment seems to do something to Totham's polite mask of civility because he immediately smiles broadly. 'Oh, I do enjoy the game myself. Are you a member of the local club, Michael?' he asks, lowering his chin slightly, as though encouraging Mike to nod in response.

'I have been intending to join for quite some time. It's a very sociable game and I like the people,' Mike replies. Liar liar, pants on fire, but you do have to admire his straight face. And then I spot something that Mike obviously has noticed before me. Perhaps I'm not as keen-eyed as I thought. In the corner behind Totham's desk is a set of golf clubs, silver, worn and shiny, each with a black woollen tea cosy on top, neatly tucked into a black-and-maroon leather golf bag propped up against the wall. I silently congratulate Mike for thinking on his feet. A white lie, well, a greyish lie, but if it gets Tim into The Oaks, it's worth it.

Dr Totham stands and offers his hand. Obviously the interview has at last come to an end.

'Well, I hope to see you at the Letchbury. Perhaps we could have a game one day,' says Totham, looking at Mike who, thankfully, realises that the Letchbury is the golf club he's just lied about wanting to join.

In the car on the way home, Mike and I hold a postmortem.

'Well, that was a bit of a disaster, wasn't it? I hadn't realised we would count so much. He didn't even say anything about Tim.' I'm still incensed at the interrogation and the implication that we weren't doing our bit.

'I don't think we did too badly, Lily,' says Mike, trying to sound encouraging.

'Well, good idea about the golf club, Mike. It seemed to distract him from our lacking community spirit, although I still don't see how that counts against us.'

'Everything seems to count these days,' says Mike, indicating out of The Oaks school gates. 'I know you and I think it's all based on merit, Tim's merit, but it does seem that grammar schools have become even more choosy than public schools. It wouldn't surprise me if they checked up on criminal records and credit scores, and interviewed the neighbours.' God, I hope he's joking. 'Sometimes I wonder if The Oaks is the right school for Tim, especially when

you've got someone like Totham at the head.' Mike pauses, then says emphatically, 'I really didn't warm to him.'

'No, he wasn't the nicest spirit I've ever met,' I agree, putting the car mirror down and checking to see if my lipstick's bled or my eyeliner's smudged. 'But perhaps that was part of the test as well. I don't think we've done too badly after all, and Tim would have wowed him during the interview, so hopefully he made up for any of his parents' shortfalls,' I add, squeezing Mike's knee.

'Don't be too smug, Lily,' Mike replies, rolling his eyes but smiling as he stops at the lights. 'Our interview went OK, but it looks like it's nowhere near guaranteed that he'll get a place, so we need to be realistic. Maybe think of a back-up plan. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt Tim's chances if I joined the Letchbury golf club, and you should probably think about all that giving-back stuff. It may be too late, but we can still try.'

I sigh. Mike's right. I'll mention it to Karen and see what her view is. Now that I really think about it, there has been more than the usual share of rumblings about all this school stuff. I'd always dismissed the rumours flying around - people moving house or shifting their front gate a foot to the side to fall within the good catchment areas; parents lying about postcodes, selling body parts to pay for private school, tutoring their children into nervous breakdowns - all that seemed so over the top, belonging to the realm of those over-perfect, over-zealous parents who have a ten-year plan for their five-year-olds. I always thought Mike and I were more hands on than that, wanting the best for our son, but just trying to play it straight. And we've been lucky with Tim - he's the perfect candidate, and once he's in, so will Jenny and Henry be. But apparently I need to be a bit more active, play the game a bit more the way everyone else does. I shudder at the thought, but then I suddenly remember Paul Wilton (my other man as Mike always calls him, only because he's the token house-

husband at the school gates and friends with Julie, Karen and me), saying that his wife Jessica has been on at him to double-check the Para Hills catchment area to see if they need to move. He really doesn't want to subject his daughters to the upheaval, even for the best girls' school in the area, but Jessica being the high-powered, strong-minded businesswoman that she is, won't take no for an answer.

'What are you doing this afternoon?' Mike asks as he turns in to the station and parks behind the taxi rank.

'Oh, a kick-box class with Karen. I definitely need to kick someone's ass after this morning,' I say, leaning over to kiss him goodbye as he climbs out of the car to catch his train to work.

'Well, we've certainly done enough *kissing* ass this morning,' he smiles. 'But don't worry too much, Lily. We'll think of something.'

Chapter 2

On Your Marks

'Upper cut, upper cut, jab, jab, punch. Right hook, left hook, shuffle, shuffle, hurrurr. Punch, punch, jab, skip, punch, hurrurr. Punch, punch, jab, skip, punch, hurrurr. Elbow, elbow, upper cut, jab. Elbow, elbow, upper cut, jab. Knee jerk, knee jerk, side kick, punch. Upper cut, upper cut, back kick, hook, hook, turn. Hurrurr! Yeah!'

Daisy Warte, body-combat instructor, twenty-something five-foot-nothing powerhouse, is built like a tank and booming instructions through a microphone as the mirrored studio steams up with the heat from over twenty bodies punching, kicking and grunting very loudly to Robbie Williams's 'Rock DJ'. It's one of the few things squeezed into my busy schedule during the week that's just for me and I love it. Daisy looks unassuming enough outside the studio, always in jeans, sweatshirt and cap, but inside when this little woman booms, eighteen women and two token males stand to attention, kicking the imaginary arses of bosses, lovers, wives, ex-wives, husbands, ex-husbands, bank managers, estate agents, politicians, mothers-in-law, parking attendants and anyone else they utterly detest.

I've been coming to her class at the Letchbury gym for two years now, in a desperate, last-ditch attempt to get my figure back after three kids. In my darker hours, I grumble to Mike that maybe I should just have had a tummy tuck, like the Chelsea mothers do, but I thought housework, gym,

three kids and walking everywhere would eventually do the trick. Obviously not. Daisy might be a bit of a cow, but being a bitch in the studio does work wonders for my thighs.

My gym is full of career women, with and without children. Men are only seen early in the morning and late in the evening. My personal trainer, Rasa - Polish, tall, blonde and beautiful - told me I should try to work out early in the morning as there is some 'real talent' as she puts it. Well, I'm not really a morning-gym person, plus Mike and I are happy. She laughed, saying I must be one of the few around here. When Rasa met and married one of the 'real talents', who happened to be unhappily married at the time, and moved in with him in his converted schoolhouse in Wiltshire, she recommended Daisy.

So here I am, punching, hurring, kicking, upper-cutting and hooking every imaginary horrible person I know, which at the moment is the parking attendants, but it could be Dr Totham if he doesn't let Tim into The Oaks.

I'm here with my best friend Karen Field. Forty-two, slim with green eyes and long brown hair, mother of Claire, ten, and Simon, seven. We struck up a friendship at NCT classes, since neither of us took them very seriously - yes, we will have every painkiller going; no, we won't use washable nappies; yes, we will give the water birth a miss; no, we aren't in denial just because we want to keep working as long as we possibly can during pregnancy because otherwise we will both go nuts - and have been close ever since. Karen has managed to keep working full-time as a columnist and reporter throughout, partly because as a journalist she can be quite flexible about her hours but mainly because she has a full-time nanny, Carlotta. Karen is more assertive than me, but perhaps that's because she's still working, while I've gone a bit soft having been out of the market for so long, and am now talking Teletubbie rather than local politics. I call her Ms