

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Playground Mafia

Sarah Tucker

## About the Book

Meet Caroline Gray: divorcee and newly-single mother. Firmly closing the door on her acrimonious divorce, Caroline and son Ben have moved to the trendy town of Frencham where they join Caroline's long-time best friends, Heather and Eva. Settling into their new life is easy, but nothing has prepared Caroline for the demands of motherhood at The Sycamore, the school the trio's beloved offspring attend. Forget classroom bullies, forget trips to the head's office, this is full-scale adult playground politics. This is battle with the mothers who won't take no for an answer - the Playground Mafia.

Amidst the four-wheel drives, Ben's complicated after-school play-date schedule and her friends' perilous extra-marital affairs, Caroline tries to keep a low and very single profile. But it's not long before she too finds herself under the mafia's scandal-radar, and her life takes an unexpected turn ...

# The Playground Mafia

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 and is the author of *Have Toddler, Will Travel* and *Have Baby, Will Travel* as well as three romantic comedies published by Harlequin. Sarah is a single mum and lives in Richmond.

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The  
Playground  
Mafia

Sarah Tucker



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To my darling Tom ...  
And to my mum and dad. I hope you approve.

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## Chapter 1

# First Day

‘Don’t be nervous, Mummy.’

My four-year-old is telling me not to worry. It’s Ben’s first day at school, in a new town, and he’s brimming with excitement. I’m so nervous I want to throw up.

I lie.

‘I’m not worried, just excited about your first day at school, making new friends and all that.’

I’m not sure he’s really buying it, but he just says encouragingly, ‘Yes, and you’ll make lots of new friends as well, right? And Harry’s mummy and Jennifer’s mummy will be there too.’

I look at Ben and laugh, because that’s the kind of thing I’m supposed to say to *him*. He grins back at me, giving me a little wink, or his lopsided attempt at one.

It’s seven o’clock on a bright September morning. We’re still in our pyjamas, slouching over cereal and orange juice (Ben) and toast and double espresso (me) and Ben is about to start his first day at The Sycamore. Leafy, sprawling and highly sought after, The Sycamore is one of the best state schools in the country. It also happens to be a mere four hundred yards from my front door, which, thankfully, is situated within the school’s ridiculously small and highly controversial five-hundred-yard catchment area.

Ruthless strategic thinking has led Caroline Gray & Son to the riverside town of Frencham. After an acrimonious

divorce (in truth, are they ever anything else?) from City trader John, I decided to leave behind the past and my oversized matrimonial home in Chetley. A house which said nothing about me, my character or taste, other than the obvious fact that I had married a control freak who didn't have much of either.

I spent almost an entire year looking for the right property in the right location. My initial plan after the divorce was to bury myself in some sleepy village in the middle of nowhere and dissolve into obscurity, avoiding all outside contact, especially with the opposite sex. But I quickly and regretfully had to abandon that plan. I'm a townie and like being with people and I wanted Ben to have a stimulating, lively environment to grow up in. Not the total inner-city experience, which would inevitably prove *too* stimulating for both of us, but a happy and healthy medium. Frencham seemed to have everything we needed. A glorious park up the hill, a river inviting long and leisurely walks, two cinemas (the mainstream one showing American crap and a smaller one for obscure European arty stuff), two theatres and a shopping centre with a balance of chain stores and independent shops. And the high street had a Waitrose, which, according to my mum, is a must-have. But what finally did it for me was the fact that my two best friends, Eva and Heather, live here. And their children go to The Sycamore.

So after leaving Chetley and my now ex-husband, I rented a two-bedroom flat in Frencham for a little while to find Ben and myself a home, somewhere that would be perfect for us but still doable on my income. Graphology and freelance writing - Editorial Services on my homemade but very classy business card - make me comfortably off, but obviously don't come with a huge salary. While everyone else was enjoying their summer holidays - Eva in Morocco and Heather in the Seychelles - I must have gone through more than a hundred high-maintenance cottages

with too much garden, low-maintenance characterless apartments with none, four-bedroom houses with potential, and two-bedroom houses with planning permission. Eventually, after much deliberation and discussion with the bloody-minded estate agents (and a feng-shui expert who told me only a south-west facing house would mean true 'happiness'), I bought a two-bedroom mid-terrace south-west facing Victorian house in a little cul-de-sac, in walking distance of local amenities and the school.

Other than Ben, who is all testosterone, a noisy and messy and aggressive four-year-old, there isn't a man in my life right now. A lot of my romantic belief in humanity was used up when I discovered John in our bed with his secretary. The devastatingly vulgar cliché of it all, the sense of utter betrayal by a man I thought I loved, the destruction of a relationship that I thought had been working just fine and the helpless grief at having to take Ben away from his father, all of those have sapped my energy for looking at men and engaging with them in an emotional way for the time being, not to mention for entering into something approximating a relationship with them.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't keeping my eyes open for someone who doesn't show asshole tendencies in his handwriting or erratic abnormalities in his behaviour, but I've not really felt up to being out and about on the dating scene a whole lot since my divorce. It's just too much work right now, with all that's been going on, and I've only started to discover the challenges of being a newly single mother. Just getting us organised on a day-to-day basis, coordinating my job with Ben's schedule, and now school, is a task in and of itself that requires the same kind of organisational skills, time management and delegating needed to run a full-scale company. A precarious balance at the best of times and getting involved with another person, bringing that person into our lives, would tip that balance and potentially invite so much trouble that it almost doesn't

really justify the effort. Plus, whoever manages to weasel his way into my life would have to get past Ben first. (His latest trick is to start a play sword fight and then go straight for the balls.)

I catch Ben peacefully playing shoot-the-cornflakes with his spoon, hitting table and floor more often than his bowl, but today's not the day to argue. I down my espresso and get up to make another one. Or would a cup of herbal tea be wiser? I hold out my hands and scrutinise them for any telltale jitters. I sigh and put the kettle on, reaching for the jar of tea bags. We've been gearing up for this day for so long, I'd better keep my wits about me. I can't arrive at the school gates shaking with caffeine and nerves. Especially when I think of the terrifying Mrs Kathleen Ellison, headmistress extraordinaire. I blush, thinking back to the school's Open Day.

I was still in the rented flat, sifting through the memories of a marriage gone wrong, throwing away anything and everything that reminded me of unhappier times. I threw away a lot. The day at The Sycamore was a welcome change from plastic bin bags and trips to the communal dump. Although I almost backed out again when I entered the classroom building behind a gaggle of other mums, all of whom were clearly as nervous and twitchy as me, and caught sight of a formidable figure. Tall, lean and attractive, in her early fifties and in top-to-toe brown and navy Jaeger, Mrs Ellison didn't look as though she suffered fools lightly. Not a person to cross. I'd already drawn attention to myself by knocking over a chair and half tumbling to the floor. And then I mistakenly entered through the wrong door of the music room, not noticing the 'In' and 'Out' stickers which were stuck, rather unhelpfully I thought, at crutch level - probably by someone no taller than Ben.

'Come through the wrong door?' she admonished me, brows almost disappearing into her hairline. 'We've got to



go through there and out here. Now off we go.’ She wagged a long finger.

I had felt four again and strangely disobedient. Another mum shot me a sympathetic look, trying to remain inconspicuous at the same time. I didn’t blame her. But despite Mrs Ellison, I noticed the coloured artwork taped neatly on the walls, the short handwritten stories and accompanying crayon drawings, and had a good feeling about The Sycamore.

And I’m sure he will be absolutely fine there, but all of a sudden I’m second-guessing everything. Is this really the right set-up for us? Will it be too posh, too competitive, too hard-core? Have I missed something? Forgotten to tick a box somewhere? Dinner money, PE kit, book bag, the correct uniform?

Ben is happily munching his way through the remnants of his breakfast, now engaged in a war between a mini Obi-wan and Darth Vader, and completely oblivious to his mum’s mild panic attack. Extraordinary to think how far we’ve come. In a year, as well as selling a house and buying another, I’ve researched more than twenty schools around Frencham and put Ben’s name down on ten waiting lists, spending £400 before he’s even been accepted by any of them. I’ve been interviewed by several headmasters and one headmistress, all of whom wanted to know much more about me than they did about Ben, and one who didn’t ask anything about me or Ben, just talked about himself all the time. When he found out I was a graphologist, he asked me to look at a sample of his handwriting. Ready to do anything that would help get Ben into the school – the same desperation that drives any mum of under-fives – I analysed him as self-absorbed and a tad dishonest, with the potential to be cruel with intent. This obviously wasn’t the time for honesty, so I told him he was single-minded, determined, creative and could be ruthless. Ben was offered a place.

After the endless hassle with the waiting lists - the energy spent on belatedly entering the rat race to get in and compete with mums who had had their children on those damn lists for the better part of the last five years, enduring the fake smiles during interviews and nervously waiting for the unassuming white envelope to plop through my front door - I declined all of them the moment Ben got a place at The Sycamore. I called John to tell him the news but he paid scant attention, although, admittedly, he seemed delighted not to have to pay the twelve-grand-plus annual fees of some of the alternatives I had recommended.

Still, he had always been hoping we'd stay in Chetley, especially since I had already researched all the schools there when I was pregnant. The girls at the local gym had warned me to put the baby's name down early as competition was fierce. For one school, I signed Ben up when he was no more than a two-month-old foetus. I didn't even know if he was a Ben then (I put his name down as *M Brio Gray*), but the school was one of the best in the county.

He got a place, but when John and I divorced I wanted to leave Chetley as soon as possible. I just didn't have a support network around me. His parents were round the corner but largely ignored me, thanks to John making me out as the scarlet woman. They're not hugely into children, so have never shown an avid interest in Ben, which suits me just fine. And my mum was still in a state of purdah about the divorce and unable to speak to me without screaming or, alternatively, sobbing. Eva suggested it was more to do with the fact she now couldn't face her coterie of tennis-club friends. Her only daughter a divorcee and, worse still, a single mum. Lowest of the low.

My reverie is interrupted by a loud slurping noise from my son. 'I'm done, Mummy,' he says, plonking his spoon down decisively on the table.

Ben is cornflaked out. He hops off the chair and carries his bowl and cup to the sink and drops them in with a loud

clatter. He turns to smile at me apologetically, a wide-eyed, innocent grin that Eva tells me will quickly disappear the more time he spends at school. His blond hair, freshly washed and carefully combed, is already sticking up at the back.

As we go to dress, I wish I had a uniform today as well. Ben's in grey trousers, white shirt and navy jumper with everything named. I always dress more hippy-chic than conservative and I love bold colours, but perhaps I should take the lead from Mrs Ellison and go more Jaeger today? I wouldn't normally be seen dead in that stuff, so as a compromise I wear a flowery dress from Red Dawn, my favourite shop in Chetley and the only worthwhile thing I left behind.

Right, eight fifteen and I said I would meet Heather and Eva at the gates at eight thirty. A ten-minute walk or a five-minute drive? A walk will do us good.

'Have you been to the toilet?' I ask for Ben the nth time, bending down to straighten his tie and tuck his shirt in more securely, handing him his jacket. Other kids at his age are still just a touch soft and rounded from their toddler years, but Ben's all bones, sticky-out elbows and knobbly knees. He seems to repel clothes, too, shirts mysteriously untucking themselves, new trousers immediately getting scuff marks and any buttons popping off upon contact with his body.

'Yes, Mummy,' he answers me for the nth time, sounding bored. In my head, I ask myself the same question. I've been five times in the last forty-five minutes.

Time for a final check in the mirror. Ben is gorgeous, as always. I look ill. I start fiddling with my hair. It's long and hideously straight and needs more than its fair share of attention before looking anything like presentable. Now. Book bag - check. Cap - check. Letters saying what Ben's allergic to (nuts and bullies) - check. Letters saying what clubs he's taking part in - check. Forms for the PTA -

check. Gym kit - check. Jumper round the right way - check. All labels in all clothes including coat labelled BENJAMIN GRAY - check.

'OK, let's go.' I breathe out slowly.

## Chapter 2

# Meeting the Mafia

I spy Heather and Eva, elegant in pink and purple amidst a scrum of mums in front of The Sycamore's black iron gates. God, there are a lot of people here this morning. Women in all shades from cappuccino to coffee, Mrs Ellison lookalikes with freshly scrubbed faces and brown highlighted hair neatly brushed into tight bobs. Women in designer tracksuits with immaculate make-up; expensively suited women on the way to work; and tired-looking mums dragging toddlers, some carrying a baby as well. Most of them look as if they've walked this path many times before and could do it with their eyes shut. As I come closer I notice some *do* still seem to have their eyes closed, with children running in front and behind them not looking where they're going either.

Dotted among the sea of mothers buttoning jackets, brushing hair and pulling apart little knots of rowdy boys, I also see quite a few nervy, black- and blue-suited men furtively fumbling with camcorders, looking awkward and threatened by the noise of female shouting and chattering. Those must be the fathers who've taken the morning off to be with their children for the first day of school and want to record the moment for posterity. Which reminds me - John said he would meet me at the school gates, too. I can't see him yet, but I know he wouldn't let Ben down. Not today.

Eva spots me and grins encouragingly. She waits for me to pick my way through the throng and then says ceremoniously, 'First day at school, Caroline Gray. You nervous?'

'It's perfectly natural,' says Heather, clipping her son, Philip, round the ear for tripping his younger sister, Jennifer, and giving her a bloody nose on the first day back.

Both hug me for support, while the children - Eva's twins Harry and Maddy and Heather's two - all scrubbed clean in grey and blue, ask each other what they've got for lunch, what they did over the school holidays and which teachers they've got this year. As I try to help stem the flow of blood from Jennifer's nose, I can hear Philip tell Ben that his teacher, Ms Silver, is a cannibal and eats fingers if she doesn't like the look of you. Since Ben doesn't know what a cannibal is, he thinks Philip means chocolate fingers so he is more concerned that she'll eat something from his packed lunch than bite his hands off.

Children taken care of and now running wild around us, we smile at each other and I finally have a chance to take in the scene in front of the school gates properly. More people have arrived while I was greeting the girls and I hardly recognise the school now, besieged by an onslaught of parents, and kids chasing each other. Over by the trees next to the gates, I notice a few women who look as though they belong on a Page Three spread rather than outside a suburban school. Cleavages heavy and high, cheekbones taut, hair peroxidized, expressions startled, skirts short, and vowels, when they speak, decidedly flat.

'God, they look like they've been bussed in here straight from Chetley.' I nudge Heather delightedly.

She follows my gaze. 'No, no, we get them here too,' she says casually, wadding up bloody tissues and stuffing them in her bag. The children have scampered further and further away and I look wistfully after Ben, running off

from his mother so happily, but I'm distracted now by the social strata at the gates.

Eva points over to another group, standing alone, whether through choice or circumstance, I can't work out. Averaging about five foot nothing, painted, manicured and highly polished, they are doll-like creatures who look strangely out of place in this Land of Suburban Giants. 'Those are second wives,' Eva whispers to me, more quietly than Heather. 'Second-time rounders and clearly seen as predators by some of the other mums.' Hence the distance. 'They wear conspicuous designer labels, usually arrive in the obligatory four-wheel drives and look only marginally taller than their offspring.'

Then, there's a group of women who look a few inches taller and leaner than the second wives and a lot more chilled and fresh-faced than everyone else. Dressed in sweatpants and shirts, iPods sticking out their pockets, as though they've just come or are just about to run round the park once their parental duties are done, they're smiling and chatting and gesturing to each other with big, bold arm movements. From Australia or New Zealand, Eva explains to me.

And in the corner by the side gate, three graceful Japanese women stand with their children, silent and still, although it's hard to tell whether they're dignified or terrified, whether they're gazing at everyone in amazement or amusement. Clearly startled by the noise and size of the crowd, they vice-grip their children, who stand equally immaculate and inscrutable, stunned into silence.

Heather tugs my sleeve impatiently, having asked me the same questions twice now.

'Did you drive or walk?'

'We walked, it's so close and I didn't want to have to drive around endlessly to park and get a ticket and stuff,' I say. 'But it seems I needn't have bothered.' I point to the

large number of cars parked illegally and in some cases downright dangerously around the school entrance.

Loads of second-hand Golf GTIs and new Minis, but mostly variations on four-wheel drives bursting with at least three children per car. I'm glad I didn't drive - we've got a ratty old Golf in dire need of servicing, which would be fairly out of place here. Despite the school-run mums' utter disregard for single- and double-yellow lines, parking-permit limitations and the ruthless way with which parking tickets are usually slammed on anything that so much as approaches a yellow line in the greater Frencham area, there are no parking attendants in sight.

'I should come here more often,' I say appreciatively. 'I get ticketed outside my own house if I'm not parked within my designated square.'

Heather smiles. 'I know, I have a whole wad of tickets I still need to pay off. I seem to collect them these days and Harvey gets so irritated.' She flicks her long hair out of her eyes and draws herself up to her whole impressive six feet. I'm fairly tall myself, but she's the only one I know who can pull off six feet and heels and still look stunning.

'It's different in the mornings, though. The parking attendants wouldn't dare incur the wrath of the school mums. There is one group in particular which practically owns this school. I think one young guy tried to curb the wild parking several years back. He must have been new on the job and gave out over sixty tickets in half an hour. Poor bugger thought he'd hit the jackpot and made his quota for the year. Unfortunately, he didn't reckon on one of the mums knowing his boss's boss, and he got the sack that same day for being dressed incorrectly. Or something innocuous like that. Anyway, the tickets were forgotten and put down as an administrative error.'

I'm intrigued. 'Really? Those would be handy to have as friends around here.' I'm thinking guiltily of my own collection of parking fines. 'Which ones are they?' I look



around, expecting to see a group wearing storm-trooper type outfits, dark glasses and pointy shoes. Heather snorts and points across the playground to a small group next to the entrance. 'I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you. There're a couple of them now, a woman called Sarah Flint, and a few others. We call them the playground mafia.'

I can't make out many details from here, but they seem harmless enough. Heather sees my shrug and shakes her head. 'They have power in Frencham.' She's always been a bit of a drama queen, I guess.

Just as Heather's about to speak again the bell rings and the scrum pours through the gates into a large concrete playground. We follow.

The Sycamore has the feeling of a rural school despite being in the centre of town. Perched at the top of Frencham Hill, the school grounds cover more than four acres of land, three of which are grass playing fields, bordered by huge hundred-year-old oaks. The drive up to the school is tree-lined and the main buildings are surrounded by a mass of green, giving the whole area a very lush, wholesome and spacious feel, like a vast meadow. Eva tells me the local council has been offered millions for the land, but has consistently refused - mostly because the land backs onto the gardens of some of the wealthiest people in the country paying millions in local taxes as well as backhanders each year to the local councillors. I'm glad. The school is like an oasis, right in the middle of town.

The school is split into two main buildings. The smaller, single-storey building to the left is for the infants - the four-to seven-year-olds. This has a little play area with slides and swings and climbing frames, towered over by a large plaque marked *With thanks to Sarah Flint and the PTA*. There is also a sandpit, and the play area is fenced round with a large gate on which sits another large notice: *For Reception Only*. For the other children there is a large

concrete playground, about the size of half a football pitch with markings for hopscotch and other games I'm sure I played but am now too old to remember. The mob slowly propels us forward and I can see the two doors into the school. I'm tugging Ben in their general direction when Heather says we have to walk round the corner to another one.

'If you don't arrive before nine, Ms Lockier, Mrs Ellison's deputy, locks the door and you have to go in the main entrance. The walk of shame. I had to do it so many times with this one,' she points to Philip, 'I used to give up on walking round to the infant side altogether. If you're late you have to put your name as well as your child's in the Late Book. It's ridiculous, but apparently "disruptions from latecomers pose a serious threat to the children's concentration".' She stabs the air, putting irritated quote marks around the last bit.

'Right.' I pull Ben alongside Jennifer, glad the two are going to be classmates. I don't think I could negotiate the plethora of rules, dos and don'ts, on my own. Eva's twins are a year above Ben, so close enough as well. 'And juniors, do they have the same rules?' I ask, slightly bewildered but determined to avoid the walk of shame at all costs.

'No, those parents aren't allowed to say goodbye to their children at the door any more, they have to stay back. Mind you, by that age the kids think it's uncool to be seen kissing and hugging Mummy, but I must admit I'll miss it when Jennifer goes up.' She looks over at her daughter who has torn herself away and is playing what looks like kiss chase with a boy who seems utterly terrified of being caught.

'Me too,' says Eva, lovingly surveying Harry and Maddy, who are bashing each other quite viciously on the heads with their book bags.

'They caught a bit of *Kill Bill* last night before bedtime.'

I look shocked.

'I know, I know.' Eva grins ashamedly. 'I was horrified too, but at least it was *Part I*. *Part II* is even worse, apparently. And it wasn't the bit where she had her head cut off,' she adds reassuringly.

Ben and I stand back a bit as we wait for the infants door to open. He's still clutching my hand and seems both bemused and amused by the throng of children milling around him, as though mentally totting up the number of playmates he will have and the fact that he may have to share his precious toys. He'll be in the 'system' now for at least twelve years, much longer if he wants to become an academic, although I haven't detected any nerdy or anorak qualities in him yet. But a lot could happen. This is only the first day.

'Is Daddy going to come, too?' Ben says, looking up at me expectantly. 'I can't see him anywhere.'

'Yes, he is. He's probably got caught up in traffic, but he will definitely be here,' I say, trying to convince myself as much as reassure him. I crane my neck, hoping to see a flash of John's carefully greying hair, but all I can see is women talking to each other, embracing small children, helping to carry book bags and straightening collars.

It's time to go already and, still looking around anxiously, I line up with the other mums for Ben's class. The Kangaroo Class. I like the idea of my boy as a mini marsupial, and bend down to hug him, bringing his little face close to mine. His blue eyes look back at me solemnly.

'OK?' I finally manage to say.

Ben smiles back. 'Philip says my teacher is Ms Silver,' he points over to the woman herding children together at the door. 'We saw her in the playground. I'm sure she's very nice and won't eat my lunch.' He nods vigorously.

I let go of him and ruffle his hair, then surreptitiously try to smooth down that tuft at the back. When I stand up I find Ms Silver in front of us, looking nothing like a cannibal, not that I would recognise one if I met one, but a

tall, slim woman, with brown hair and smiling eyes. She beams at me, asking if I'm Ben's mum.

I beam back. 'Yes,' pushing him forward a bit.

'Hi, Ben,' she says. 'Pleased to meet you.' And to me: 'Would you like to help him find his peg for his PE kit and put his lunch on the shelf? We don't allow this after the first few weeks but at the beginning we find it's quite good. And then you can look through the window and wave at them. They like that. The mums and dads as much as the children. Is your husband here?' She looks behind me.

'No, but we're expecting him,' I say, trying to sound confident again. Scanning the crowd. John's last chance. *Where the fuck are you?*

Ms Silver bends down to Ben's level. 'Ready for your first day?'

Ben nods enthusiastically, swinging his bag. 'I think so, Ms Silver, are you?'

She smiles. 'Yes, I hope so, but let me know how I'm doing, OK?'

Ben frowns, clearly liking the responsibility.

Heather and Jennifer are already in the classroom and we're one of the last to go in. We follow Ms Silver's lead and when I see Ben's peg clearly marked BENJAMIN with a little picture of a blue kangaroo underneath, I suddenly want to cry. I felt so emotional when he started nursery that I thought I'd got all that out of the way then, but here I am, furtively wiping at my eyes. I help him with the packed lunch (grilled chicken sandwich, strawberry yoghurt with no bits, apple and banana) and bend down for a final hug.

'I'll wave at you through the window, OK? And I'll pick you up at twenty-past three,' I say reassuringly.

'That's big hand on the three and little hand on the four?'

'No, other way round. Big hand on the four and little on the three, but almost right.'

And there he goes, he walks away and all I can think about is the first time I held him in my arms, so light and delicate. How I got up every two hours to feed him in the quiet of the night, rocking in my chair. I remember him sucking his thumb for the first time (and he still does sometimes when he's tired), taking his first steps and his first word. All those benchmark moments. I start blotting my eyes again, cursing my expensive but clearly not waterproof mascara. If I am to have any chance of surviving this, I need some support. As if I'd spoken aloud, I feel a tap on my shoulder and turn to see John staring at me, red-faced and out of breath.

'Sorry I'm late. Fucking trains. Ben in there already?' I shove him forward into the corridor, no time for anything.

'Go quickly and give him a hug. He so wants you to be there on his first day.'

It's probably fairly obvious by now that I don't really like John. If it weren't for Ben, who made everything worthwhile, I would rather not ever have met him in the first place, but today I'm happy to see him because it's important for Ben that both of us are here, I think. So with an unusual amount of benevolence, I watch my little boy's face light up when he sees John standing uncertainly in the door. Ben runs to him and wraps his arms around his neck. And I'm pleased to see that John fares no better than I have, looking quite choked up as he squeezes his son and picks him up. In that split second, that squeeze, I think John knows just what he had and what he's lost. And, despite everything, in my heart of hearts I feel for him.

John gets shooed out with the last stragglers and joins me at the window. I ignore him, my momentary sympathy already largely forgotten, and continue to peer through, pressing my nose hard against the glass like some schoolgirl coveting a doll in a toyshop window. I watch as the class quickly settles down and Ms Silver starts playing

the guitar. I can hear clapping, singing, excited chattering. Suddenly I feel very old.

After a few minutes I break the silence, grudgingly thanking John for being there. He looks contrite. 'Sorry I'm late. I have to run, though, get to the office.'

'I'll call and get Ben to tell you how his first day went, OK?' I offer generously.

'Yes, thank you.' He already starts down the drive. Eva and Heather join me as I watch him take his mobile from his pocket and start dialling, running his hand through his closely cropped hair, straightening his thinly rimmed spectacles which, he believes, hide his rather narrowly set eyes. He always looks so hunched these days, I notice. I'm able to look at him quite dispassionately now. Not too long ago I would have either ground my teeth trying not to bash in his head or dissolved into helpless weeping. He's pretty much a stranger to me at this point, though, belonging to another world, and although I still loathe him (no point beating around the bush here) we have reached a point of cool civility.

Noticing my smudgy mascara, Eva hugs me. 'I always get weepy on the first day too,' she says kindly.

'Makes you feel too damn old, doesn't it?' Heather agrees, trying to find her mobile in a bag which seems crammed with everything from lipsticks to soft toys.

I nod mutely.

'Fancy a coffee?' suggests Eva.

Heather looks up from her rummaging. 'God, not in the Sycamore Café, Eva, you know the mafia have their coffee mornings there. You don't want to expose Caroline to them this early on, do you?'

'I'm suggesting coffee, not initiation,' Eva retorts dryly, nodding to me. 'Let's go.' She buttons her jacket around her small frame and pushes back her short brown hair. If Heather's the beautiful, tall one, then Eva's enviably petite,