

Party Time

Kids squealing. Susie couldn't think of a more joyful sound. It was the sound of life bright and shining with infinite possibility, of life unencumbered with pain and regret, of life lived as if it were fun and nothing but.

Sunlight was everywhere. In the sky, spangling off the green tree leaves and the glossy party hats and the fizzy raspberry lemonade, and twinkling in the kids' eyes, eyes filled with wonder and excitement. The spring weather in Melbourne, notoriously fickle at this time of the year, was pouring on the meteorological charm. It was a perfect day. Made to order for her daughter Chloe's fifth birthday.

Her husband, Jordan, was overseeing a game of pin the tail on the donkey. He seemed to be having as much fun as the kids.

Susie chuckled. Chloe had just affixed the tail to the donkey's snout. Good thing she wanted to be a ballerina. A vet was out of the question.

Susie scanned the dining room table, checking that all the party treats were present and accounted for. Hold on a sec. Something was missing. What was it? Of course, the chocolate crackles! How could she have forgotten those? No kid's party was complete without chocolate crackles. She removed a trayful from the fridge, placed it on the table, next to the vacant spot reserved for the birthday cake. The cake would arrive fashionably late. It had to. It was an ice-cream cake. It would melt if she put it out now. Well, the ice-cream part of it

would.

Jordan was under strict instructions. Once pin the tail was done and dusted, he was to usher Chloe and friends inside so they could all sing her happy birthday, then have their brains carbonated by processed sugar and a cornucopia of chemical additives.

A blissful sigh blew softly between Susie's lips. She loved being a mum.

Hey. *Heyyyyyy*. That didn't sound like a playful squeal. That sounded like a full-on scream. There was another scream. And another scream. And another scream. Screams of pain. Screams of terror.

The kids were scurrying toward every point on the compass as if the gravest of danger were bellowing in their ears like a pissed-off drill sergeant. What the hell was going on? Where was her husband? Where was *Chloe*? "Chloe!"

Chloe's best friend, Julie Petersen, slammed into one of the living room's double-glazed windows. Blood sprayed from her button nose. She slid, unconscious, possibly dead, to the patio, leaving a claret smudge and a baby tooth on the glass.

Brooke Jones collapsed on the banana-yellow plastic slide that was part of Chloe's play gym. She was clutching the side of her neck. Red spurts discolored her hand.

Stumbling sideways, Molly Flanagan, a ragged hemorrhaging stump where her left arm had been, collided with Ginger Gosford. Ginger had been partially scalped. A bloody flap of skin hung off the side of her head. She and Molly reeled to the ground. They didn't

move after that.

Susie lurched toward the sliding-glass back door, which was already open. “CHLOE!” she screamed.

Jordan burst inside, clutching Chloe to his chest. She was sobbing. There was a single patch of blood on her white party dress. Jordan’s eyes were blank and staring, as though he were in a state of cataclysmic shock. “T-take,” he said, holding Chloe out. Susie grabbed Chloe just as he headed face-first for the kitchen tiles. His back was bleeding copiously. It had been ripped to pieces.

“Jordan!” Susie cried. She anxiously inspected Chloe for wounds. “Are you all right, darling? Are you hurt?”

“Mummy,” Chloe sobbed. “Are party balloons supposed to bite?”

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