



'Unputdownable . .  
spookily familiar, funny  
and darkly captivating'

SALLY HEPWORTH

FOUR COUPLES.

THE

ONE RECKLESS PACT.

TRIVIA

UNTHINKABLE CONSEQUENCES.

NIGHT

ALI LOWE

Ali Lowe

# The Trivia Night



HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

## Prologue

My dear husband,

I am at the place we used to come to, when we loved one another. Pen and paper on my knees, writing to you like I used to do, back in the day. Out front, waves thump the shore, turfing out early-morning surfers in their deadly roll, like debris being shaken from a rug. Heads bob up, followed by black rubber-clad bodies, invigorated by the cold and the ferocity of the swell. The dawn glitters off the ocean; how quintessentially Australian!

Behind me, the residents of Darley sleep as though drugged. Soon enough, the people we used to mingle with over cocktails and finger food, the creme of Sydney's beach-lined peninsula, will stir in their linen-covered king beds, inside Balinese-styled homes, hands feeling out for switches to flood the world with artificial light until the sun makes its show. But here on the beach the light is real. A deep, rusty glow that blurs to peach slower than the eye can see (but blink and you'll miss it), bringing with it a hug of warm air, a taste of the heat we've been promised. Summer is here again! The earth has done another circuit around the sun. It's hard to believe it's been a year since it happened, isn't it, my dear?

I can't help but think back on it all as I sit watching the waves. Isn't the feeling of cold sand sliding through your toes positively delicious? Each grain the perfect weight and consistency to make it flow like silk – until it is ruined by

the weight of water. But everything beautiful is ultimately sullied, isn't it? Like love. Like marriage. Oh, I can still picture it now. Eight adults – eight responsible parents – drunk on vanity and booze, eyes greedy, limbs poised, mouths frothing with innuendo. Eight lives merging for better or worse, like globules of hot wax fusing, irresistibly, inside a lava lamp.

There was something so utterly delicious about the predicament they were all in and I honestly believe it would have been remiss of me not to act, especially given what I'd been through. After all, I didn't make them do what they did. I didn't force them into anything. They did all of that themselves – I just helped a little afterwards. I just made the situation work for me. And didn't it work, my darling? It worked a dream!

But I do sometimes wonder how things would have gone if Amanda Blackland had never joined Darley Heights Public School. If the trivia night had been cancelled for some unforeseen reason. If they hadn't all been so selfish. Perhaps there would have been no funeral. No children standing at the foot of a polished mahogany coffin, tears spilling from woeful eyes and collecting sorrowfully at their tiny feet.

I guess we will never know, will we, my dear?

Yours fondly,  
Me xoxo

**Part One: Trivia Night  
One Year Earlier**



## Chapter One

### Amanda

Ted stood on the pavement and loosened the collar of his white work shirt. It was the hottest January for something like twenty years, and I was still in the passenger seat of the car applying mascara. He had turned off the engine, and the air-con along with it, presumably in a bid to force me out through heat exhaustion. Outside, swarms of dishevelled primary-age children trudged up to the school gates, devoid of energy, like last-place marathon runners.

My husband knocked on the window and tapped his watch with an indulgent smile. I held my index finger up, the universal ‘one more minute’ sign, and turned back to the overhead mirror. Not striking, but passable. I flipped up the mirror, and stepped out of the car.

‘Beautiful, my darling!’ Ted smiled. Beads of sweat had collected in rows on his forehead – not in a gross way, but in a sort of orderly, masculine fashion. He held out his hand. ‘Ready?’

I nodded and clipped shut my tan clutch. Perhaps it was a little too much preening for the year 1 assembly, but I could hardly go make-up free for my first Darley Heights Public School event. All the other mums had known each other for the entirety of kindergarten year already, enjoying playdates and school socials and whatnot, while I’d wasted four terms greasing up to the humourless flock at St Cecilia’s, the private primary school down the road (and

paying top dollar to do it). There was something so terrifying not only about stepping from a small private school community into a larger state one, but also in joining a flock that was already well formed. It felt like arriving late to a party where you don't know anyone except the host – although in this instance, without the benefit of a sneaky glass of Prosecco beforehand. But if I was a fifteen out of ten for nerves, my daughter was only a one. Evie may only be seven, but she wasn't remotely fazed about starting at a brand new school. She had already taken herself off on an exploratory mission. *Be more like Evie*, I told myself.

Although she had disappeared entirely.

'Where's she gone?' I shrugged.

Ted nodded to the other side of the car park, where the small body of our second-born hung by her hands from the branches of a tree like a monkey, in a green-and-white tartan summer dress.

Evie's long brown hair swung about her shoulders wildly, despite me having detangled it ten minutes previously with a brush and brute force, and her brand new, seaweed-green school hat lay in the arid dirt below. She was such an active child and so unlike the rest of the family. Sam wouldn't be caught dead up a tree – mind you, he was at high school now, so that wasn't exactly a surprise. For him it was all about hoodies, YouTube gaming channels, and skateboarding to KFC with his mates. This morning he had sloped out of the house en route to the school bus with his rucksack hanging so low off his shoulder that his lunchbox had fallen out.

A young female teacher with sweat patches under the arms of her silk blouse, and legs that were losing the battle

to walk quickly within the confines of a too-tight navy pencil skirt, passed the tree and smiled up at Evie.

‘Sorry.’ I shrugged. *Sorry my daughter is swinging from a tree.* The woman smiled and shook her head. *No worries. I’ve seen worse.*

How different Darley was to St Cecilia’s! At Saint Cee’s, Evie would have been lynched by the school principal for scarpering up a tree trunk like that, in regulation uniform no less. But then, Margot Walsh had been notoriously strict. It hadn’t been hard to affront her overzealous sense of propriety. It seemed like Darley Heights Public School wasn’t too hot on formality.

‘Careful you don’t rip your new school dress, Evie,’ I called as I watched the cotton of the green tartan scratch roughly against a branch. She ignored me and clambered higher.

‘Evie! Be careful!’ shouted Ted, letting go of my hand and moving underneath the branch that held our daughter, to act as a human crash-mat.

‘Honey, she’s fine,’ I told him. I prided myself on being relaxed about these things – too relaxed, my husband said.

Behind Evie, at the base of the hill, the town of Darley stretched out like a grid, one side lined entirely with blue ocean. Houses, mostly with white or dove-grey facades, sat in neat rows in the middle of the bustle, flanked by the green of the golf course and the tree-lined cricket oval on one side, and the tidy, manicured lawns of St Cecilia’s on the other. Half a kilometre away to the left was the sprawling compound of Darley Mall – its red illuminated sign likely visible from space – where teenage girls hung in packs in sweet-smelling, over-lit make-up stores;

high-school kids held hands and probably more in the back row of the cinema during the day; and young mothers with small babies and dark circles loaded up on coffee.

From up here, it all looked like perfect coastal bliss. Lush green grass, azure blue water, white picket houses – the kind a child might draw, with triangular roofs, trees in the front garden and pristine, landscaped paths leading up to symmetrical fences. Curtains neatly bunched like the letter ‘R’ in each of the four front windows. I could pick our house out from its position on Mentira Drive, along the edge of the golf course, its aluminium roof sloping down towards the garden, and the oblong, turquoise pool littered with gaudy inflatables. I’d always thought our home, with its slightly darker coat of paint, more charcoal than pigeon-grey, stood out a little more than the others on the street, but from this vantage point, it looked just the same as the others. Nothing notable, nothing special.

Evie’s dress caught the branch again and the hem strained against her knees.

‘Your *dress*, Evie!’ I called again, feeling a familiar flare of anxiety. I didn’t want anyone to be looking at us here, to be singled out again for any reason.

‘Kay!’ she yelled back.

‘C’mon kiddo, down please.’ Ted held out his arms. Evie let her body drop, landing with a puff in the dirt beside him, transforming her socks from pristine white to mud grey. Her smart new shoes looked like they’d already done a couple of terms of hard graft in the playground.

‘Fabulous,’ I said. ‘There go the Mary Janes.’

‘Mary Jane who?’ Ted said, confused.

‘They’re a type of shoe, darling.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t worry too much. Look at them all.’ He nodded at the large group of kids ahead who were pushing through the school gates ahead like parents at the Aldi ski sale. ‘Not exactly military about the uniform upkeep here, are they?’

He was right. The students at Darley Heights really were a motley crew – shirts in varying shades of white emblazoned with ink stains in red, white and blue; hats faded from dark green to an insipid olive colour thanks to the sun or the washing machine, or perhaps a combination of both; and trainers in rainbow hues that loudly flouted the ‘black shoes only’ memo we’d received in Evie’s new starter pack a month before.

Ted put his hand on my lower back, as if to guide me up the pathway towards the school. In the old days this smooth manoeuvre was an indicator of chivalry to lead me through doors and the like, but over the years it has developed into a ploy to get me to hurry along. I could tell by the fact the gentle nature of the push had just about doubled in pressure since 2010.

‘True,’ I said. ‘The cars, though . . . look at them, they’re pristine!’ I flicked an eyebrow to the kiss-and-drop zone on our right, where a row of shiny black SUVs with tinted windows and personalised number plates spat children out on to the pavement. The car game was strong – definitely more so than at St Cecilia’s – and that was a private school. Evidently, the thousands of dollars all of these parents were saving on school fees were being heavily invested

at Bruce Barclay Motors in the next-door suburb of Coral Plateau.

The school itself was small and neat, if not a little dated. The main building was clad with canary yellow weather-board, and was surrounded by the lower-school classrooms – portable buildings called demountables, that were raised up from the ground on stilts like large granny flats. Inside the circle was the concrete quad, where we'd been told students lined up in rows after the nine o'clock bell before class, and beyond that, across from the netball courts, canteen and uniform shop, were the upper-school rooms for years 3 to 6, which ran in a spacious semicircle around the sporting oval.

Ted and I had looked around the school eighteen months previously, prior to choosing St Cecilia's, and on that wet, winter day, with the children in their classes and the quad quiet and neglected, it had seemed so out-dated, so dull. But today it was different. The grass was green, flowers bloomed along the pathway that led from the gate to the main buildings, and laughter bounced off the walls as freely as the numerous handballs that were being lobbed across the quad. Kids raced across the oval, teasing one another with boisterous pushes towards the large sprinkler that rained down on the grass, relieving it from the ravages of the summer sun. The entire school hummed with something that was so much more vital than the stiff aura of St Cecilia's, with its circular water fountain, clipped hedges and eerie, silent halls. The children here seemed so much more content, *happier*, so much more like kids – even if they were scruffy as all hell.

I scanned the number plates as we walked along. AMY 06Y was nudged in ahead of MOM 079 and MICH 4EL.

‘HAM-5ON,’ I said, reading aloud the number plate of the car we were about to pass.

‘Maybe they’re butchers,’ Ted quipped.

As we levelled with the car, a blonde head shot out of the passenger seat window like a sideways jack-in-the-box, scaring the absolute bejesus out of me. The hair was caramel in colour and messy. It smelled of coconut.

‘Sienna, put your hat on *now*,’ the woman yelled up the hill towards the school gates. She was blonde and tanned, with tiny features. Unquestionably stunning, even with her face contorted in a shout. When she didn’t get a response, she cupped her hand around her mouth, creating a sort of fleshy megaphone, and as she did so, the giant solitaire on her wedding finger sparkled in the morning sun.

‘Sienna! Hat! Now!’ she called, shriller this time. The piercing screech was all wrong coming from such a tiny head, and I must have jumped back a little, because she began to laugh and reached her hand out of her window in an attempt to touch me. Which was a little odd because I was about a metre away.

‘Oh my *gosh*,’ she cooed, tugging on the little discs of her gold necklace. A henna tattoo snaked up the inside of her wrist. ‘I’m *so* sorry! I’m such a terrible nag. “Put your hat on!”’ She put hands around her mouth again and mimicked her own screeching. ‘I didn’t mean to startle you. It’s just I can never get Sienna to wear her hat and it’s ridiculously hot today – or at least it’s going to be. The forecast says thirty-four degrees, can you believe it? Not a day to go hatless, is it? Mind

you, I don't blame her. It's not the most fashionable head-wear.' She grimaced. A few metres ahead, a pale child who looked about the same age as Evie, with white blonde hair falling down her back, reached in her rucksack and pulled out a faded bucket hat, which she plonked moodily on her head before turning to the car and glaring as if to say, 'Happy now?'

The woman seemed totally unfazed by her daughter's rudeness. If it had been me, I might have stuck my hand on my hip and done the old what-did-you-just-say-to-me? routine, but HAM-50N just sat there, her turquoise eyes sparkling with pride and freckles dancing all over her annoyingly pretty face as she smiled. Not a jot of make-up to be seen, which, I'm not going to lie, was a little irksome since I'd just spent the last half an hour preening.

'Oh, please don't worry.' I smiled and took a step forward, giving Evie's hand a gentle tug.

But she hadn't finished with us yet. 'Are you 1S parents too?' she asked, sticking her head further out of the window. 'Miss Sawyer's class?' Her feet were still in the driver's seat footwell, but her body stretched across the passenger seat. It didn't look comfortable in the slightest. The car behind, obviously keen to pull in and drop off its own unkempt offspring, let out an aggressive beep. I looked back at the driver and winced apologetically.

'We are. I'm Amanda and this is Ted,' I said, gesturing towards Ted, 'Amanda and Ted Blackland, that is. And this is Evie.'

'It's so lovely to meet you.' She smiled and turned her head towards Evie, dropping her voice into child speak. 'Hi Evie. I'm Lara, Sienna's mum. How are you?'

‘Good thanks,’ Evie mumbled, and kicked the pavement, adding a scuff to her already filthy shoes. I made a mental note to buy them from Kmart next time instead of the extortionate kids’ shoe shop at Darley Mall.

Lara gripped the window frame enthusiastically. Her hair was loose around her shoulders, all salty and sun-kissed, exactly like her daughter’s. She looked like she belonged in an orange combi van in a hippy commune in Byron Bay, not in well-to-do Darley, driving a bullet-proof 4×4 with personalised plates. It was a weird juxtaposition, like turning up to work at a soup kitchen wearing diamonds. I wondered if she was one of those insufferable trustafarians – the trust-fund recipients that dress like grungy hippies but rely on Daddy’s dollar to pay their way. She was way too unhassled to work for a living and certainly didn’t seem in a rush to get anywhere.

I realised I was smiling excessively as I silently analysed her, because my cheeks started to hurt. ‘Well, it’s lovely to meet you,’ I said, scolding myself for being so judgemental.

Lara smiled and nodded.

‘Okay, well good to meet you, Lana,’ Ted said. He cast a not-so-subtle look at his watch and placed his hand on my lower back again. ‘Right darling, shall we?’

‘Luke’s meeting me in the hall,’ Lara garbled. ‘My husband. He’s following on in his car because he’s been at work since a sparrow’s fart. I’m sure you’ll meet him in the hall. Anyway, I’ll see you up there. Bye!’ Then she smiled, flicked on her right indicator and pulled out aggressively, narrowly missing a black people carrier passing on her right.

‘I just love small talk.’ Ted grimaced, dodging to avoid two gangly boys barging past him, their schoolbags flapping about haphazardly on their shoulders. ‘Bloody hell, it’s like the charging of the fucking bulls.’

‘Yay!’ Evie punched the air. ‘That’s two dollars for the swear jar, Dad. If you keep on using bad words, I’ll be able to buy another Beanie Boo this weekend!’

I’d just opened my mouth to admonish Ted for swearing (it really was something that irked me to high heaven), when a woman with flaming red hair and carrying a Louis Vuitton shoulder bag barged into my left hip.

‘Fuck,’ I said.

‘Ugh! Sorry,’ she sighed in a manner that suggested she wasn’t sorry in the slightest. ‘Otto! Charlie! Come here *now!*’ she called behind her.

‘Wow,’ I said, rubbing my hip.

And that’s when the smell hit me. Dior Poison. Sweet and plummy, but also kind of deadly and calculating with all those musky, sandalwood base notes. I stopped dead on the pavement and took in a sharp breath because I was suddenly back there at St Cecilia’s. Back in the playground where glances crossed like swords and tuts clicked like thunder; back in that pristine colonial-style house with the stark white deck and the colourful, single-knotted Moroccan rug, where everything had gone, quite alarmingly, pear-shaped. Where the thing had been done that could never be undone, which had changed the very course of my life, *all* of our lives, and led us here to Darley Heights Public School for a fresh start. My head swung around instinctively – left to right, behind, in front – but

the only familiar face was Alice's, up ahead. The coast was clear, and I allowed my lungs a relieved exhale.

'Darling?' Ted turned back and reached out his hand. 'All okay?'

I nodded and took his hand, allowing him to gently guide my momentarily paralysed body up the hill.

Inside the hall, the giant ceiling fans only seemed to recirculate the sticky late-January air. The main wall to the left of me, painted eggshell blue, was like a giant pin board. One side was decorated with forty or so paintings of native animals – kangaroos nestled side by side with koalas, echidnas and possums. One picture was of a father clutching a beer in one hand and a TV remote in the other, with the words, 'The Native Dad' at the top (give that child an A+ for thinking outside the box). Some of the paintings were jaw-droppingly artistic, others not remotely so, but what these ones lacked in precision, they made up for in charm. Opposite the large patchwork of art, on the right-hand side of the wall, the blue, red and white Australian national flag, dotted with stars, was pinned up on equal footing beside the red, yellow and black Aboriginal ensign, its three vibrant colours representing the people, the sun and the red ochre colour of the native earth. Both flags looked a little like they could do with a wash and an iron, which was sort of symptomatic of the entire place and its students – charming, but a little unkempt.

We made our way towards the rows of faded orange chairs.

‘So, let me get this straight,’ Ted whispered. ‘Not only are we here this morning, but we’re also back on Saturday for some fundraising event?’

‘Trivia night, you mean.’

‘That’s the one. And what does trivia night entail, exactly?’

‘Fancy dress and quizzes. They do it in most schools, darling. It’s the main annual fundraiser for the school year, but it’s basically a giant piss-up.’

Ted nodded. ‘I don’t remember St Cecilia’s doing it.’

‘No. St Cee’s doesn’t, none of the private schools do. They get enough cash from fees, I suppose.’

‘Bit full-on at the start of the year, isn’t it?’

‘Well I guess most people are ready to let loose at the end of Dry January and that means they’re happy to dress up and get drunk, which ultimately means they donate more in the raffle and auction. Well, that’s what Alice told me, anyway.’

Alice knew everything about everything as the parent-teacher committee’s events chair, including how to wangle a last-minute spot for the daughter of her oldest friend. She’d certainly pulled some strings for us – it wasn’t an exaggeration to say we wouldn’t have been in this hall without her.

‘What do we have to dress up as? Presumably it’s acceptable to go as yourself?’

Ted didn’t do fancy dress.

‘As a handsome school dad? Unfortunately not. This year’s theme is “back to school”. It’s a big deal, honey. Everyone puts loads of thought into their outfits and there are prizes for best-dressed. Didn’t you see the posters up outside?’

‘No, I didn’t,’ he sighed. ‘I’d do anything for you, my darling, but this sounds truly awful.’

‘Oh come on, Scrooge.’ I squeezed his knee. ‘You’re doing it for Evie, really. Besides, we can’t miss the first event of the school year, can we? It’ll be the perfect opportunity for us to get to know people, to make friends. It’ll be fine. You’ll just have to get into the spirit of it. Pop on a white shirt and grey pants like a schoolboy and it’ll hardly be a costume at all. I’m sure it’ll be hilarious.’

But even as I said it, I knew I wasn’t convinced. I mean, it sounded fun for sure, but for some reason it felt a little like a debutante ball, with me as the new girl. My stomach danced – and not in a good way – at the idea of hundreds of cliquy mums huddled in groups, scrutinising the rookie year 1 mum like lions appraising a defenceless gazelle. The dress-up element just made it worse. It’s one thing trying to impress your peers in your own clothes, but quite another in costume. It would, quite literally, be like going back to school – and I wasn’t under any illusion that the first time hadn’t been hellish enough. The only saving grace was the fact that, this time, everyone would have alcohol to numb the awkwardness.

‘I’ll take your word for it,’ said Ted.

We made our way to the nearest available seats, in the middle of the audience, about eight rows back. Just as I was about to sit down, Evie yanked my hand and pulled me upright again. ‘Mum,’ she said. ‘You have to walk me to the front to my class. Look, they’re all sitting in a line up there. I don’t want to go by myself.’

I looked to the front and saw a row of nervous looking children – Sienna, with her hat sitting haphazardly on her head, a nose full of freckles and delicate, pretty features, like her mother; along with Lottie and Freya, Alice’s twins, who were non-identical but disarmingly similar, more so as they got older. Their dresses were pristine, wrinkle free and a good deal brighter than most in the line-up, and they both had their hair pulled back tightly into French plaits. I hoped to God Evie wouldn’t sit down next to them in her dusty tunic and muddy socks.

‘Okay, okay,’ I told Evie, reversing myself back past six pairs of slender legs, and apologising profusely, like you do in the cinema when you need to get out to go to the loo in the middle of the movie. She pulled me along the aisle and I suddenly felt alarmingly self-conscious, as if I were the one on show, being judged as I walked along and not her. Something about it smacked of the new girl doing a weird lap of honour while the regular spectators awarded silent marks out of ten. And even though I *should* have felt confident as a perfectly presentable 42-year-old woman dropping her child off at school, and even though I knew deep down I had as much right to be there as any one of these mothers, I did feel different. After all, I hadn’t originally chosen to send my child to Darley Heights, I had ended up here because of the awful thing that had happened. I wondered if some of them knew about it, if they had heard the gossip being bandied around town. Darley was a small place and people did socialise outside of their own school communities, namely on the sidelines at Saturday sport. And even if they didn’t know, maybe they’d assume I was a snob for

opting to go private for a year when Darley Heights Public was perfectly good, thank you very much – or that I'd only picked their quaint little school because I'd seen the latest round of national primary school ratings.

These niggling considerations aside, there was also the fact that all of the mothers at Darley were so collectively gorgeous. They were all symmetrical, with smooth skin and blow-dried hair pulled up into silky, high ponies. All of them – and not just the few I'd seen in the kiss-and-drop area hanging out of their SUVs – but *every single one*, was wearing activewear, tight-fitting pants in bright colours and floral patterns, flattering their gym-honed physiques. It was like I'd rocked up to a yoga retreat. I almost expected some half-dressed, bangle-wearing guru to pop up on the stage and ask me to get into a downward dog. They all looked so healthy. And that's when I thought, as I looked down at myself and cursed my choice of Zara sundress and Saltwater sandals, *I do hope these people like a drink, otherwise I'm in for an incredibly dull five years.*

What was also strange was the overall appearance of the dads. There were only about a dozen or so in a hall full of women, but the ones that had made the effort to show up were all besuited, smart and well-groomed. *Businessmen and their stay-at-home wives.* I blinked my preconceptions away. *Perhaps they've taken the day off for the assembly, Amanda,* I told myself. *Perhaps all the women are off on a sponsored walkathon afterwards.* After all, community spirit was thriving at Darley Heights Public, according to Alice.

I bent down to kiss Evie, depositing her at the front of the hall, and began the somewhat intimidating walk back

to my seat. The women were huddled in impenetrable groups, chatting quickly, conspiratorially, as if they needed to cram a week's worth of gossip into an hour. Pony-tails swished back and forth dramatically as they swapped chatter like soccer trading cards.

'Did you hear about Patrick and Jodie Knight?' a peroxide blonde with a shiny, taut forehead said to her immediate neighbour as I approached. I turned my ear in to listen. 'Poor woman! All the while he was screwing that girl behind the coffee machine at Della's Cafe. She had no idea!' She shook her head slowly, her lips pursed white.

'Bet he's got plenty of points on his loyalty card, dirty pig,' her friend replied.

It was juicy stuff and, as drawn in as I was by the subject matter, I also felt a creeping sense of foreboding that I had inadvertently moved from one gossip-sodden school to another. I recalled Alice's reassuring voice when she had told me it was all sorted, when Evie's spot was confirmed. 'Darley Heights really isn't like your last school,' she'd said. 'Everyone is *so* genuine.'

She was proved immediately wrong about the last bit.

'I just love your pants, Tansie,' said a statuesque brunette, completely disingenuously, to the redhead who'd bulldozed me out of the way. I knew it was false praise because the pants were literally plain black. 'They're so slimming, are you off to the gym?'

'Nah, not today, I'm off for a mani-pedi,' Tansie replied. *Her* forehead didn't move either, although her nose wrinkled up like a pig's snout when she spoke. She looked

oddly familiar, and I wondered if I'd photographed her house before she'd sold it. I often saw clients of Fair & Brewer – the real estate agency I worked for as a snapper – when I was out and about. They never recognised me, but I knew who they were because I'd often spent ages moving their family snaps out of the way for their sale photos.

I must have been looking at Tansie with a gormless expression on my face, because her eyes flickered up at me abruptly with a glare that said, 'what are you staring at?' I shot my gaze down to the floor and scuttled back to my chair, performing an awkward sort of upright limbo past several yoga-wear-clad knees and neoprene holdalls in the same shade of grey to get back to Ted.

'Clones,' I whispered into Ted's ear, pleased to be in the safe haven of my husband's gentle, albeit sarcastic, aura. He looked up from the paper programme that had been left on alternate seats, emblazoned with the school logo and the words, 'Year 1 Welcome Assembly. Monday 25 January.'

'Drones?' he asked loudly.

'Shhhhhhh!'

'Drones in a school?'

'Ted, shhhh!' I sank into my seat.

Fortunately at that moment Alice bounded up the aisle, smiling and waving at the mums. She'd pulled her brown hair on to the top of her head in a high ponytail, and was wearing tight, three-quarter-length leopard print leggings and a matching crop top. She looked like she was fresh from the Lorna Jane summer sale. Credit to her, her stomach looked amazing. Probably because she only drank

the occasional gin and slinline, and did about 20,000 ab crunches a day. She got up at five thirty every single morning for a routine of weights and press-ups on her deck, rain or shine. Rather her than me.

‘My favourite couple!’ she sang, bending down for an awkward, three-person hug before pulling away. Ted looked her up and down with a smile. ‘Hey Alice,’ he said. ‘Taronga Zoo called. They want their big cat back!’

‘Very funny.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘How are you guys? I still can’t quite get over how amazing it is that you’re here, at Darley Heights. Honestly, it’s just *the best*.’

‘Well, it’s all thanks to you.’ I smiled, gazing up adoringly at Alice. And I did adore her; she’d been my bestie since I was the same age as Evie. She grinned back at me and shrugged to illustrate it was nothing, although that wasn’t remotely true because she had gone out of her way for us. I knew it and she knew it, and even Evie knew it.

When things had gone loco at St Cecilia’s back in November, I’d called Alice immediately and told her the whole story: what had happened and why we’d had to leave the school right then and there. And Alice had gone straight into the principal’s office up at Darley Heights Public and begged Brigitte Denner to find an extra spot for Evie for the new year. Thankfully, Alice had sway thanks to the parent-teacher committee, and even though it was very late in the term to be accepting new students for the year ahead, and even though all the class lists for term 1 had already been printed, Mrs Denner had picked up her big rubber headmistress stamp (or probably just a biro) and

marked our transfer approved. She did it, she said, because Alice had made such a tireless contribution to the school, and so any friend of Alice's was a friend of the school. Our luck was in.

And so here we were, in a school hall that was a fraction of the size of St Cecilia's, all squashed together on rows of plastic orange chairs. The centrepiece was the elevated stage, which was fronted with a large, maroon velvet curtain, like an old theatre curtain, weighty and ancient, and presumably cranked open at rare intervals with a large lever. Two sides of the school emblem, depicting two hands clasped together, met in the middle like a broken necklace.

A man in tracksuit pants and a T-shirt, with a whistle round his neck, climbed up the seven or so steps to the stage carrying a lectern, which he positioned in front of the school emblem, bypassing the glass trophy cabinet, crammed with little golden statuettes and photos, celebrating the winners of various sporting and public speaking contests.

The morning sun streamed in through the gaps of the aluminium blinds, and the heat inside the hall was stifling. 'At least after trivia night there'll be some air conditioning in here,' said Alice, reading my thoughts. 'I'll bet it is way more dated than the school hall at St Cecilia's, isn't it? In fact, that whole school is probably a lot swankier than this one.'

'On the contrary,' I said. 'It's so cosy and inviting here. Not to mention titillating! I mean, in the space of fifty yards I heard *all* about Patrick and Jodie Knight . . .'

Alice laughed, and then stopped herself and looked around, presumably to make sure she hadn't been seen

making a light-hearted response to the poor woman's misfortune. 'It's a terrible business,' she said loudly. 'Everyone's so sad for her.'

'They don't look particularly sad,' I said.

'Says the woman who never cries.'

It was a fair point. I wasn't a crier. In fact, I hadn't cried for years – not when Ted proposed, not when my babies were born, not when my mother died. Not a single drop. It was like I didn't have tear ducts or something. I mean I felt the emotion, but it was like I couldn't flush it out, couldn't finish the cycle. Sam thought it was fascinating. 'You're evolutionarily advanced, Mum,' he said. 'Like people who don't have wisdom teeth.'

Alice caught my pensive look. 'Honestly, Mand. They're a great bunch.'

'I'm not worried,' I lied. 'But one thing I am surprised about is the uniform. Clearly, I didn't get the memo . . .'

Alice looked concerned. 'Oh no. What's Evie missing? I can run to the uniform shop for you if you like?'

'No, not Evie, *me*, you dimwit! I didn't get the active-wear memo.'

'Oh, you're too funny, Mand.'

'There is literally no one here who isn't in yoga pants. Do they sell a range at the uniform shop, too? All in extra petite?'

Ted grinned and put his arm round Alice's shoulders, pulling her in affectionately. I loved how he did that, treated her like a sister. Although it was to be expected really, since she'd been part of his life for the last fifteen years.

Ted loosened his tie. ‘Wow, Al. There must be some sweaty crotches in here.’

‘Don’t be so crude Teddy.’ Alice was the only other human being in the universe allowed to call him Teddy. That’s the kind of privilege you get when you’re forty and have known your best friend for most of your life. ‘That’s so inappropriate in the school hall!’

I couldn’t tell if she was joking, or if she’d suddenly had her body infiltrated by the PC police. Either way, I was starting to get the distinct impression Alice *really* cared what people thought of her at Darley Heights.

Ted grinned and stood up. ‘Have I got time to go to the bathroom?’

‘Didn’t you hear me tell the kids to go before we left the house?’

‘I’ve drunk a venti latte since then,’ he said, and strolled off towards the toilet block at the back of the hall.

Alice slipped into Ted’s seat and tightened her ponytail, business-like. ‘Right,’ she said. ‘Trivia night is on Saturday, as you know, and I’m sorting tables. Late, I know, but it’s all part of Mrs Denner’s whole blend-the-tables thing.’

‘Her what?’

‘She wants to mix it up so that people who don’t know each other sit together.’

‘Well, that’ll be easy for me.’

‘Yeah for you it’s fine, but a lot of the other parents are a bit annoyed because they want to hang out with their usual cliques.’ She caught herself. ‘I don’t mean *clique* cliques. They just want to be with their mates. I don’t really care to be honest, as long as we sell all the tickets.’

She got out her iPad and scrolled to the notes section. ‘Okay, so you’re on my table, which sort of flouts the rules, but I’m exempt because I’m organising it. Anyway, so there’s you guys, myself and Pete, and Zoe and Miles Makin. Zoe is a mum from Miss Sawyer’s class too. She’s the *curvy* one . . .’ She whispered the word as if she were swearing. ‘Her husband is the tall bloke who looks like Stephen Merchant, works at Pasadena, as in the restaurant. Their kid is Freddie. He wasn’t in the twins’ class last year, so I barely know Zoe, but she looks like she’s good fun.’

She nodded vaguely at the other side of the room, towards the front. ‘They’re over there – see? The tall ginger guy and the brunette?’

I turned to see the back of an auburn head, next to a tumbling glossy brown ponytail. I couldn’t see the couple’s faces, but I imagined they both looked like thunder, since they were sitting about as far apart on their seats as they could.

‘Anyone else?’ I asked.

‘Yes, the Hampsons: Lara and Luke. They’re new, like you. They moved from the city last year because Luke set up his practice here, and they don’t know anyone. Lara specifically asked that they join my table . . .’

‘I just met her outside,’ I said, happy to be making connections, however diluted. ‘The hippy, right?’

‘Yep, that’s her. I don’t know her too well either, but she seems nice enough. She’s a radiologist up at Darley Imaging, you know, where they do the baby scans.’

I suddenly felt bad for assuming Lara was a ‘kept’ woman.

‘Right. She’s very pretty, isn’t she?’

Alice looked like she hadn’t considered it. ‘Yeah, I suppose,’ she said. Then she leaned in. ‘Okay, you’ll love this. I’m not gossiping, but . . . I’ve heard from a *really good* source that Lara and Luke are . . .’ She looked from left to right and then straight at me. ‘*Swingers*.’

‘No way!’ I leaned in. I should have known better than to lap up Alice’s amuse-bouche of gossip, especially since I’d been the focus of the rumours at St Cecilia’s, but really, this was tantalising stuff. ‘You’re kidding, right?’

‘Dead serious. Well, you never know, I suppose it could be bullshit. But Tori, who’s new on the committee and who is really very credible when it comes to *information*, knows someone who used to have a kid in kindergarten last year with their daughter, Sienna . . .’

‘Wow . . .’

‘Speak of the devil.’ Alice nodded to the front of the room as Lara floated past the stage.

‘She doesn’t exactly look like a swinger.’

‘Who does?’

‘She looks like she’d rather meditate in bed than do anything else.’

‘It’s always the ones you least expect.’

Lara offered us a shy wave as she slid into the row in front of us and towards two empty chairs with the words ‘saved’ on them in a child’s writing. As she inched forward, her floaty green floral kimono, bright and beautiful and fluid amid a sea of black, tight-fitting Lycra, caught on the static from one of the ugly orange chairs and she turned, her overrun hair covering her face, and

muttered, ‘Sorry, so sorry’ as she yanked the fabric towards her. For someone so incredibly beautiful, so *ethereal*, she was a tad on the jittery side, as if she wasn’t quite comfortable in her own skin. She made an ‘eek’ face at Alice and I, and took her seat, clearly relieved to have earthed herself.

‘It’s okay, you’re not late,’ Alice whispered, but Lara had already fixed her eyes on the front entrance, looking at the man who had emerged through the doors like a Ralph Lauren model stepping onto the catwalk at New York Fashion Week. A man who was clearly in no rush.

And that was the first time I saw Luke Hampson. He was tall, broad and very tanned, in the manner of a gap year student who’d just got back from six months dossing around in Bali. He had an air of arrogance about him, and evidently the rock-star effect, too, since row upon row of ponytails whipped round to check him out as he strode across the room.

‘That’s Luke,’ Alice whispered in my ear. She threw her head dramatically towards the door. ‘*Doctor* Luke Hampson. Totally up himself, but very popular with the mums. He’s been married before, you know, and has two older kids who live with his ex. I heard he couldn’t keep it in his pants, so she left him. Doesn’t surprise me. Not that I’m *gossiping* or anything . . .’

‘Wow,’ I said. For someone who didn’t gossip, Alice was incredibly informative. ‘What kind of a doctor is he?’

‘Botox, fillers and minor surgical stuff. He’s already got a very loyal following among the school mums, and he’s only been open for business a few weeks. Must have a very good bedside manner . . .’

I was about to tell her I could sort of see why, when Ted appeared again. He nodded towards Luke. ‘So, just a little prick then?’ he grinned.

‘Teddy!’ Alice wagged her finger at Ted with a smirk. ‘Anyway, I’d better go and sit down. I’ll catch you both after the assembly, okay?’

She ran off down the aisle. Ahead of us, the wrinkle doctor was doing his own version of the sideways limbo.

‘My apologies,’ he said as he stepped over Tansie’s feet.

‘No worries, Dr Hampson,’ Tansie said breathlessly.

‘Call me Luke,’ he replied.

I watched the redness creep up Tansie’s neck and spread across her ears, and I heard myself emit a sort of contemptuous, Peppa Pig-style snort. Thankfully, Tansie was too busy staring ahead (presumably repeating the mantra, ‘Don’t go red. Don’t go red. Don’t go red’ to herself) so she didn’t notice. But he did. He turned all the way around, a proper 180-degree owl head, to look at me, the source of the derisive sound. His dark eyes shone like a wet stone. The look was so intense it was almost invasive, and I felt the beginnings of the same flush on the skin of my own neck. Thankfully I was able to stop it and regain myself before I had a full-on scratching fit, and that was when he looked away from me and very pointedly up at the clock above my head (even though he was wearing a watch, and a very expensive one at that). Then he returned his gaze to the front of the hall.

Well, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t irritated by his dismissal. Not because I found him *attractive* – no, he was far too arrogant for my taste – but because, without wanting

to sound up myself, I'm usually the one to look away. I am not at all bad looking for my age, slim with shoulder-length caramel hair and great skin thanks to my own little anti-wrinkle injection every now and then (I get cash out with the shopping, so Ted doesn't know it comes from the joint account). In fact, I know I look okay, because Fair & Brewer chose me to model for our recent 'You're At Home with Fair & Brewer' campaign, and everyone knows a real estate agents would want someone fairly attractive on the side of a bus to tout for business. So, yes, I was used to getting a second glance and I didn't like the fact this man hadn't offered credit where it was due. What can I say? I'm only human. I was also annoyed because he was so tall and had completely blocked mine and Ted's view of Evie, which was the whole reason, aside from the checking-out-other-parents circus, we were there.

'Just great,' Ted muttered, interrupting my thought process. He gestured to Luke's back. 'Now I can't see a bloody thing.'

I nodded in support and offered a conciliatory pat on the knee, adjusting my body so I could actually see my child, who was seated beyond Luke's right earlobe. This meant I was forced to assess my fellow newcomer by default. His skin was tanned, and his hair clipped with the same precision as a hedge in the Botanical Gardens. It was neat and expertly set, not free-range like Ted's unruly mop, and was golden, the colour of a perfectly fried potato chip. He was clean shaven, a five o'clock shadow creeping across his jaw, and on his cheek was a deep-set dimple that seemed to wink when he smiled. He was perfect. If you

like that kind of thing. Personally, I'm not a fan of men who reek of too much time in front of the mirror.

As a couple, the Hampsons seemed to be the most horrendous mismatch. Luke was sterile and perfect, and looked as though he might have a touch of OCD – you know, aftershave bottles lined up perfectly on the dresser – while Lara was verging on unkempt, with her henna tattoos and her bangles and her wacky sartorial palette. She looked like the kind of woman who used deodorant made from coconut oil on her hairy underarms and had a downstairs like the Belanglo State Forest. Her hair, with its cascading golden waves, was too haphazard. It needed a good brush. Or did it? It somehow worked for her. Under the vibrant kimono, which broke up the muted tones of the dull school hall, she was wearing a designer dress from an outlandishly expensive Bohemian store in Byron Bay that I'd seen advertised online. Yes, she was unkempt, but expensively so. And the interesting thing was, she was nothing like the other women in the hall. Nothing at all. I watched her as she gazed adoringly at her husband, and I actually felt very sorry for her. As gorgeous as she was, it couldn't be easy to hold on to a man like that – a man who caused ponytail whiplash whenever he entered a room, and who, if Alice's assessment alone were to be believed, had every single mother at Darley wishing he'd flip them over his surgical bed and give them a jab to remember.

Mrs Denner climbed the steps to the stage, her heels thumping dramatically on the hollow wood, and tapped the microphone on the lectern, which was now dressed

with a frilly sort of tablecloth with tassels on the end. The microphone let out a high-pitched squeak, causing a room full of swallowed giggles.

‘I do apologise,’ she said, her voice weary. ‘Good morning parents. Thank you so much for joining us for this important assembly, the first one of term one.’ Her public speaking voice was lovely and poetic, unlike the shrill bark I had heard her use at one of the older kids who’d pushed his mate under the sprinkler on the oval just before the bell went.

‘I’m very grateful for such a good turnout today,’ she continued. ‘Especially given most of you will be back in this very hall on Saturday evening for trivia night. We truly appreciate your commitment to our little school. On that note, I’d like to remind you that we still have a couple of tables to fill ahead of Saturday. As I stressed at the end of last term, we are all in new year-groups now, and I’d like to encourage you all to sit with parents from your year that you may not have socialised with before. All of our new families will have received an email over the Christmas break with details about how to buy trivia night tickets, but if you are new to Darley Heights, and have yet to purchase your tickets, or if you have any questions about how to do so, please do not hesitate to reach out to Alice Daniels, who is running the event.’ She scanned the room.

‘Stand up, Alice,’ she said.

Alice jumped up and pointed at the top of her own head with her index finger.

‘Lastly,’ Principal Denner continued, ‘I would like to encourage you to give generously on the night. We will have a

raffle with prizes including wine and spirits, a luxury food hamper and theatre tickets; and a silent auction with a mountain bike and a girls' spa weekend in Melbourne up for grabs – thanks to the generosity of some of our parents. So it really is worth bringing along as much cash as you can afford . . .' She stopped and cocked an ear to the left. 'What's that Mr Mattock?'

The sporty man with the whistle, who I had now realised was the Phys-Ed teacher, shouted something up to her from the front row.

'Ahh yes, thank you Mr Mattock. Nigel Mattock has just confirmed we will have an EFTPOS machine on the night, so if you are not able to bring cash, you will still be able to bid on auction items and buy a strip, or strips *plural*, of raffle tickets. We encourage you to spend big! However, we will not allow IOUs on the night.' Principal Denner paused. 'I repeat, NO IOUs.'

'I think we got that,' Ted whispered. 'No IOUs.'

'Shhhh!' I said, holding back a giggle.

'As most of you know, all monies raised on the night will go towards air conditioning for this very hall, which, you will all agree, is well overdue,' Mrs Denner continued. 'We have already had a very generous cash donation from Dr Luke Hampson . . . .' Did she just *swoon*? 'So, um, thank you Dr Hampson!' The room erupted like the pit at a Justin Bieber concert. Luke nodded and waved his hand up and down in a manner that said, 'Thank you, ladies, you may cease clapping (but please do not, because I am basking in it).'

I was so close to him I could smell the arrogance wafting from his pores.

‘And there is one thing I feel I should mention.’ Mrs Denner’s expression was grave. ‘I do not like having to discuss this, but last year, it was brought to my attention that a group of parents brought along a type of hand-rolled cigarette that was not made from tobacco . . .’

There were some sniggers from the middle row.

‘I should not have to remind you that smoking marijuana on school property is illegal, and will not be tolerated. And while I am convinced none of you here would engage in such . . . *unsavoury* behaviour, I feel it is my duty to remind you that drugs are strictly prohibited on school grounds. Anyway, enough from me—’ Mrs Denner gestured towards her feet, where a hundred kids were seated cross-legged, facing their parents and carers. ‘Let’s hear from some of our wonderful students, who, after the Acknowledgement of Country, would like to begin this special assembly by reading a poem based on our own school motto – “Sharing is Caring” – written by our very own English teacher Mrs Seabold. It is entitled, “I’d Like to Get to Know You Better”.’

And as she said those words, Luke turned his head around and looked me straight in the eyes again, for a second longer than the last time, with the faintest trace of amusement on his face. *I’d like to get to know you better*. I can’t deny there wasn’t the smallest thrill that he had finally noticed there was a bona fide Fair & Brewer model sitting behind him, and this time I was the one who looked away first.

An hour later, we were out of the stifling heat and into the morning sun, which threatened to be just as unbearable. Ted’s shirt was wet with sweat patches and Evie looked

like she was about to pass out from heat exhaustion, so I made her have a few power gulps from my water bottle on her way to her classroom. She guzzled the lot and ran off before Ted called her back and rubbed sun cream into her face.

‘She can do that herself,’ I said.

‘Yes, but she won’t bother. She’s seven.’

I shrugged. Sometimes he was just a little too uptight about the kids. I was all for instilling a bit of independence in our offspring.

He took my hand and held it as we walked to the car park, in what I suspected was another ‘hurry the wife along’ ploy. Chatter rang in my ears as we followed the crowd.

‘. . . soooo cute, wasn’t it?’

‘And when Otto fluffed his lines . . .’

‘Oh, *bless* him . . .’

‘. . . did you *see* Luke Hampson?’

‘Shhhh, Tansie, you’re *terrible!*’

‘. . . have you got your trivia costume?’

‘It’s *definitely* school uniform.’

‘Ask Alice Daniels on the committee.’

‘Yep, BYO.’

‘. . . Prosecco, probably.’

‘*Another* new girl?’

‘Swingers? Says who?’

‘She’s got a girl in 1S. That’s Emma Sawyer’s class.’

‘. . . moved from Saint Cecilia’s.’

Saint Cecilia’s. The sound of the words seemed to conjure up that smell again, the smell of Poison, of foreboding.

But no sooner than it had arrived, the sickly aroma was gone again, carried away on the hot summer breeze. Stolen away to tease someone else, to pop the membranes of *their* memory like a balloon.

A few steps ahead, Lara kept pace with Luke's wide stride. She looked like a miniature Schnauzer trotting alongside a Great Dane.

'That bloke,' Ted whispered, nodding at Luke's back, which was broad at the shoulders and then sloped in, like an inverted triangle, 'walks like he's got a hot potato up his arse.'

'Arrogant,' I found myself saying. 'They're such a mismatch.'

'He was checking you out in the hall.'

'No he wasn't!' I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. 'Really?'

Ted tightened his grip on my hand. 'He was,' he said, bending down to kiss my temple. 'And who can blame him? You were the hottest woman in there.'

I did an over-exaggerated bat of my eyelids and squeezed his hand back.

In the car park, Lara chatted to Alice, who was twisting her wedding ring nervously on her finger. She did a double-take when she saw us.

'Amanda! Ted!' Alice called, beckoning us over.

Lara looked at me. 'Hi again,' she said. 'I was just asking about the trivia night, seeing as how we're all virtual strangers sort of thrown together. But then Alice told me you guys go *way* back.'

‘We do,’ I said, keen to let Lara know how far. I guess it made me feel a little more secure, showing another parent that I had connections with somebody who was *somebody* at Darley Heights. ‘Yes, we go back a very long way. We’re cheaters!’

‘I’m sorry?’ Lara smiled.

Oh God, did she think I was making some swinging joke? Or worse still, suggesting we were up for that kind of caper?

‘Um, I don’t mean *cheating* cheating,’ I heard myself emit a high-pitched laugh. ‘Not, I mean, in the *marriage* sense. I mean we’re openly flouting Mrs Denner’s rule at trivia night about making new friends.’

‘Oh, I *see*,’ Lara said. ‘Well, I’m all for a bit of cheating! I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.’

Alice threw me the side-eye. Lara seemed to have warmed up a touch from her previous awkwardness. She looked over her shoulder. ‘You must meet my husband, Luke!’ She stood up on her tippy toes and cupped her hand around her mouth, like she’d done with her daughter an hour and a half before. ‘Luke, honey?’

Luke was on the other side of the car park, unlocking his black BMW with a beep-beep. He turned around when he heard his name and pressed the fob again, dramatically.

‘Locking it? Is there a crime problem at Darley Heights Public I should be aware of?’ Ted muttered.

Luke strode over nonchalantly, in no hurry. I flicked my hair off my neck, where the heat had made it stick.

‘Luke, this is Amanda,’ Lara said, gesturing towards me.

The wet stone eyes met mine and he stepped forward with a waft of eau de toilette and grabbed my wrist. I barely had time to look down, let alone protest, before he yanked me in for a peck on the cheek. He smelled of expensive soap.

‘Hello Amanda,’ he said.

‘Hi . . . hi,’ I stuttered, stunned by the intimacy of his gesture. Then, quick as a tack, he let go of my wrist and turned to Ted.

‘Nice to meet you, mate,’ he said, holding out his hand.

Ted held out his own hand in response and the two men shook. I noticed Ted had pulled his body upright so that he had a height advantage on Luke, which was really unlike him. I mean, I knew he already thought Luke was a bit of a dickhead, but the uninvited kiss thing must have really peeved him. He was all straight, his chin unnaturally high like a bloke in an old sepia photograph, and, as he held up his head, I noticed Luke was doing the same, so the two of them looked like they were about to square off.

Ted stepped back after a moment or two. ‘You too, *mate*,’ he said in a manner that suggested Luke was very definitely not his mate.

‘Well,’ said Lara in a chirpy voice, oblivious to the tension. ‘We’d better be off. Luke’s got a busy line-up this morning. Nose job today, isn’t it honey?’

‘That’s correct!’ Luke said. He looked pleased with himself.

‘Really, mate?’ said Ted. ‘Are you sure you need one? Your nose isn’t *that* bad.’

Luke nodded and smiled. ‘Good one, *mate*.’

Lara let out a burst of laughter. ‘No, no . . . Luke’s *doing* the surgery, Ted,’ she said, with a flap of her hand. ‘He’s a plastic surgeon! That’s too funny!’

Alice bit her lip to stop herself from laughing.

‘Anyway,’ Lara said. ‘I just wanted to introduce you all to Luke since Alice has very kindly invited us onto your trivia table.’

‘It will be such fun,’ said Alice. She smiled warmly at Lara.

‘Can’t wait,’ muttered Ted.

‘So, see you on Saturday, guys!’ Lara sang.

Luke gave a nod and turned away. ‘Ciao.’ He waved over his shoulder as he sauntered off. I watched his buttocks rise and fall as he walked. Even his arse was arrogant.

‘*Ciao?*’ Ted scoffed, as he climbed into the driver’s seat, brushing off crumbs left by Sam’s chocolate croissant en route to the bus stop. ‘Ciao? Who’s said “ciao” since 1985? Handshake like a wet fish.’

‘I know,’ I agreed as I watched Luke climb into his car. ‘What an idiot.’

Just as Ted clicked into reverse, Alice banged on the window.

‘Christ, what does she want now?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, and let the window down.

‘I can lip read,’ Alice laughed. ‘Just checking you’re okay with the trivia table. It just dawned on me you might not want to be with the Makins or the Hampsons. Is there anyone else you wanted to sit with? Not that you actually know anyone else to pick from.’

‘No!’ I said, rather too hastily, as I watched Luke’s car pull away. I didn’t want to upset Alice’s meticulous

planning by demanding she swap someone out. And also, it wouldn't exactly be the best way to win friends and influence people, to reject a couple from the table because the bloke fancied himself, or because they might end up trying to shag us.

'Definitely not,' I reiterated. 'Thanks for sorting it all for us. We're happy, aren't we, Ted?'

'Yeah, sure,' he said, taking his foot off the brake and reversing ever so slowly in a bid to get Alice's hands off the window frame.

'Great! Okay then, just wait while I . . .' She pulled out her iPad from where it was tucked under her armpit and began tapping on the screen with her forefinger while walking backwards along the trajectory of the moving car. 'I just want to sort the table while . . . I . . . have . . . you . . . here . . .'

Ted let out a sigh, put his foot on the brake and ran his hand through his hair.

'Okay, we're all done,' she said, with a winning smile. 'I've confirmed everything online. We are officially table six! Remember the theme is "Back to School", so you'll need to think outside the box because there will be a heap of people just in regular school uniform which is completely dull. Try and make it as exciting as you can. Honestly, guys, trivia night is quite literally the best night of the school year. I promise you: it's going to be a night to remember!'