

**WHO
WE
WERE**

B.M. CARROLL

VIPER

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The lock takes less than a minute, the fourth key a close enough fit, assisted with a few bumps from the handle of a screwdriver. The door pushes open into a hallway with off-white tiles laid on the diagonal. Next is an open-plan kitchen and living area, a study nook on the far side of the sofa: small desk, dated laptop, a printout of the invitation sitting atop a neat pile of paperwork.

You are invited to the twenty-year reunion of the Class of 2000

Deep breath. Don't get angry. Don't lose focus.

The laptop whirrs to life, its fan sounding inordinately loud in the silent apartment. No password required, stupidly trusting and naive. Insert the USB, click on install, twenty minutes to completion. Be calm. Be thorough. She won't be home for hours yet. Plenty of time to check her browsing history, her Facebook page and the rest of the paperwork on the desk. Glimpses into the construct of her life, the friends she holds close, her most secret desires.

Wander into the kitchen, opening and shutting cabinet doors, cataloguing the food she eats, the brand of coffee she prefers. The main bedroom is located down a short corridor. White cotton bedcovers, faux-fur cushions, the book she's reading – a bestselling thriller – open on the bedside table. Underneath it, another book, larger, sickeningly familiar.

Yearbook of Macquarie High, Class of 2000

Don't touch it, don't look at those hateful faces, don't fall for that fake innocence.

Back to the antiquated laptop. Glare at the screen as it reluctantly grinds through the final stages. Pocket the USB. Switch off the machine. Pause inside the front door, key poised, cap pushed low in case there's a security camera lurking somewhere. Listen. All clear. Bump, bump, bump goes the screwdriver.

It's happening. Their shallow lives will be blown apart.

And they'll be sorry. Finally.

Name: Annabel Moore (School captain)

What you will be remembered for: Not keeping a straight face when Miss Hicks fell up the stage steps on awards night.

Best memories of high school: Year 11 snow excursion.

Worst memories of high school: Double period maths on Fridays.
Torture.

What will you be doing ten years from now: Marine biologist.

1

ANNABEL

The phone rings on the way to school pick-up. Annabel takes the call, even though she's almost outside the school and the conversation will have to be a short one.

'What happened to marine biology?' Grace's voice fills the car.

'What?'

'Our school yearbook. Apparently, you were going to be a marine biologist!'

'I was?' Annabel is astounded. She has no recollection of this.

'It's here in black and white.'

'What else does it say?'

'That you'll be remembered for not keeping a straight face at awards night!'

This she does remember. Miss Hicks catching the toe of her shoe on the second step. Face-planting on the stage. Annabel trying, unsuccessfully, to quell the urge to laugh. Death stares from the principal, Mr Rowland.

She snorts. 'Well, they could hardly put in what I was *really* remembered for, could they?'

'No,' Grace agrees. 'That wouldn't have come across as well.'

Annabel Moore: the girl who was pregnant during the HSC. Her enlarged belly jutting against the exam desk. Her ankles swollen in her school shoes. No surprise that she and Jarrod got disappointing

results. How could they study, concentrate, pretend that the Higher School Certificate mattered while their lives were imploding?

She flicks on her indicator and pulls into a space that isn't quite big enough. The rear end of her Ford Territory juts into a residential driveway. *It's okay*, she tells herself. *It's only for a few minutes.*

'Why are you looking at that stupid old thing anyway? Aren't your kids keeping you busy enough?'

Grace, like Annabel, is a stay-at-home mum. She has four children, all quite close in age. The strange thing is, she was never the maternal type.

'Katy Buckley wants to do an updated yearbook,' Grace explains. 'For the reunion.'

Katy Buckley. Plain and studious. Perennially mocked for being such a try-hard. Annabel feels a rush of that old derision, its resurgence taking her by surprise.

'Oh, for God's sake. What's wrong with just rocking up on the night, getting drunk and making fools of ourselves on the dance floor? Who the fuck cares about yearbooks?'

'It's because Katy's a teacher. She's still caught up in that world. Where things like yearbooks actually matter ... Having said that, I think it's a rather good idea ...'

'And what did Katy Buckley want to be when she left school?'

Annabel can hear Grace turn the pages of the book.

'President of the Wilderness Society.'

Both women burst into laughter. Explosive, unstoppable laughter that reminds Annabel of when they were younger, and half the time didn't even know what they were laughing about. The school bell rings, the sound carrying through the open windows of Annabel's car, bringing a distinct feeling of nostalgia.

Some children, the quick ones, are already flying through the gates. The ones to whom being first means everything. First to get to school in the morning. First out the door to lunch. Their darting eyes able to establish where queues will be formed and their agile bodies manoeuvring so they're always at the front. Annabel used to be one of those kids.

'Gotta go,' she tells Grace. 'Mia will be out any second now.'

Mia is towards the back, a dreamy smile on her face. Dearest Mia. Such a gentle soul. Such a joy. If only her brother had a fraction of her affable nature.

'Hi, darling. Hop in quickly. We're going straight to the mall. We're going to buy the most perfect pair of communion shoes.'

Annabel sees him in the food court, pushing up against some other boy with his shoulder. Guffawing in that annoying horsey way that teenage boys laugh.

'What the fuck?' It's out of her mouth before she can stop herself.

Mia's eyes widen in shock. 'You swore, Mummy. You said the F word.'

'It was an accident,' she counters weakly. 'Wait here, Mia. Don't move till I get back.'

Mia stands uncertainly, clutching the bag that contains her communion shoes in one hand, and her milkshake – the reason they are in the food court – in the other. Annabel marches towards Daniel, who is so absorbed in his friends he hasn't noticed her approach. It's a mistake, she knows, to confront him like this, to publicly humiliate him, but he has obviously dodged school – again! – and if he's not going to keep to the rules, then neither is she.

'What the hell are you doing here?'

His head jerks up at the sound of her voice. Surprise registers before he holds up a McDonald's bag as though it's vital evidence. 'Just having a burger ... What's the problem?'

'You should be at school. *That's the problem.*'

'We had a free period for our last lesson.'

'Don't lie to me!'

'Ask anyone.' He looks carefully at his friends, as though she can't interpret what that silent look is really saying. 'Tell her, Jez. She'll believe you.'

Jez is the most sensible of a bad lot. His face reddens till it blends into his strawberry-blond hair.

'It's true ... We were meant to have ... maths ...'

'You're a terrible liar, Jeremy Hughes.'

Daniel quickly resorts to anger. 'Just go away, Mum. *Leave us alone.*'

'You're coming with me.' She grabs his arm.

He shrugs her off. 'Go away. You're embarrassing yourself.'

'Do you think I care? You're coming home with me and Mia. *Right now.*'

'You can't make me!' He's shouting at her. In the middle of the food court. For everyone to see and hear.

'I *can* make you. Have some respect, for God's sake!'

Now she's being no better, shouting back at him. But she's so angry, and he does this to her, turns her into this demented stranger who people are staring at and will talk about when they get home from the mall. *Remember that woman screaming at her son?* If he would only listen. If he would only do what he's told. When she thinks of all the things she has sacrificed for him, for all three of them. She might have laughed about it with Grace earlier, but she will never forget the humiliation of sitting in that exam hall, her ballooned belly the talk of the school, the grave disappointment of the teachers, the disgust of the other parents, the shocked fascination of the students who once looked up to her. She didn't go to university because of the baby, because of Jemma. She never had a proper career. She got married too young – eighteen, for God's sake! – and while her friends were partying and travelling, she was stuck at home, lost in a haze of nappies, feeding and constant crying. Jemma is at college now and doing all the things Annabel herself missed out on: getting a degree, going to wild parties and travelling during the holidays. But Annabel's work is far from done. She still has Daniel and Mia to see through, and Daniel is proving to be the toughest.

'You come with me right now or I'll drag you all the way to the car, and then we'll see what's embarrassing!'

The email arrives a couple of days later.

From: admin1@yearbook.com.au

Subject: Updated Yearbook

Annabel clicks on it without much thought. That is not strictly true. If she is honest, there is a brief, quite vicious desire to topple Katy Buckley from her self-appointed role as reunion organiser.

The first thing Annabel sees is a grainy, unflattering photo of herself. Directly below there's text typed in an old-fashioned font.

Name: Annabel Harris (Née Moore)

Highest achievement at school: School captain.

What you do now: Stay-at-home mother.

Highlights of last twenty years: Nothing remarkable. Peaked at school.

Lowlights: Finding out your son smokes dope. Initially not telling your husband.

Deepest fears: That weed is a gateway drug for Daniel.

Her first reaction is horror, to the point where she actually feels sick. Then she recovers herself. This is someone's idea of a joke. The cruellest, most despicable joke. The kind of thing they'd have done twenty years ago, back when they'd time to waste, unlimited imagination, and the lines between humour and outright nastiness were blurred.

So, who sent this? Someone who knows about their struggles with Daniel, even though Annabel and Jarrod resolved to keep it within the family. Someone who wants the upcoming reunion to have a hint of mystery, and perhaps shock factor?

The photo – one she's never seen before – is fairly recent. Her hair is in its usual style – layered, blonde, shoulder-length. There are tell-tale lines around her mouth and purple shadows under her eyes: was it taken the morning after a night when she'd lain awake, listening hard to see if Daniel was moving around, sneaking out of the house? There are so many Facebook photos she's

been 'tagged' in, so many casual shots in restaurants and other gatherings, who knows where this one came from.

Will everyone else get one of these 'updates' in their inbox? Yes, that must be the plan, otherwise there'd be no joke. Annabel can't fathom who would have the time or energy for something this elaborate. Hardly Katy Buckley. Not imaginative enough. Not cruel enough. Definitely not ballsy enough. Besides, Katy would be up to her eyes compiling the real updated yearbook.

Melissa Andrews? Co-editor of the original yearbook, so maybe possessing a vested interest in the revised one? Melissa and Annabel used to be friends, before everything turned toxic during those last few months of school. Now, as Annabel allows herself to think about Melissa, the jealousy returns. It was never an ordinary jealousy; it was obsessive, powerful, insanely out of proportion. But regardless of how Annabel might feel, then or now, she knows that Melissa wouldn't be so juvenile as to do something like this. Too busy with her high-flying career.

Zach Latham? Another co-editor. Zach would do anything for a laugh and did have the propensity for cruelty. Is he still the same today?

Luke Willis? God, she hasn't thought about *him* in years. Whatever became of Luke Willis?

Annabel is shutting the upstairs curtains when Jarrod's van pulls into the driveway. COASTAL CURRENTS is painted on the sides and rear of the van: they came up with the business name together. Annabel watches him sit there, probably listening to the end of something interesting on the radio. The fact that he clearly isn't in a rush to get inside to see his family bothers her.

A few minutes later, as Annabel is coming down the stairs, the front door swings open.

'Daddy, Daddy!'

Jarrold picks Mia up, hoisting her on to his hip like a much younger child. Mia loves it. This is the first time she has seen her father today; he was gone when she got up for school this morning.

Annabel notices two things in quick succession: at the end of Mia's dangling legs are her brand-new communion shoes; and one of them looks like it is already scuffed.

'Mia, why have you got those shoes on?'

'I'm getting used to them, Mummy.'

'You've already marked them! Take them off this instant.'

Jarrold gives Annabel a look that says he thinks she's being too harsh but he would never contradict her in front of the children. United front: that's been their parenting motto. It feels like a long time since they've put their heads together to come up with parenting mottos, business names or anything else. The last time she remembers genuine collaboration was when they built this house, four years ago, but even that was more Annabel's project than Jarrold's. Tweaking the architect's plans. Visiting the site to check progress. Making decisions about door handles, skirting boards, wall colours.

'Where's Daniel?' Jarrold asks, setting Mia down so she can follow her mother's instructions.

The need to check Daniel's whereabouts has become the underlying beat to their lives. It's always one of the first things Jarrold asks when he comes in.

'At Jeremy's house, working on a project for school. Some video they need to do for PE. I'm picking him up in half an hour.'

'I can get him if you like,' he offers, exhaustion etched in his face. He tends to go pale when he's overtired. Annabel knows that on an average day he deals with a series of irate inconvenienced homeowners, outdated and treacherous wiring, claustrophobic ceiling cavities, not to mention alarmingly regular electric shocks caused by ditzzy apprentices who keep forgetting to follow the correct protocols.

'No, it's fine. Have your dinner. Here, I'll warm it up for you.'

Much later, when Daniel has been picked up and it has been confirmed that the PE project was all that he was up to, when Mia's maths homework has been extensively corrected and she's tucked up in bed, when Annabel has done her level best to remove

the scuff from the communion shoe, she finally sits down next to her husband on the sofa. Jarrod is watching the cricket; Australia appear to be in trouble.

‘This popped up in my email today.’

Jarrod takes the sheet of paper from her outstretched hand and skims it. ‘What the fuck is this?’

She shrugs. ‘I don’t really know. Some kind of joke, I presume.’

He jabs it with his finger. ‘How do they know about Daniel?’

Good question. Jarrod was livid when he found out about the bong. She had to tell him in the end, because although she confiscated it, Daniel lost no time finding both a replacement and a better hiding spot. Jarrod was equally livid with Annabel (for not telling him about it upfront) and Daniel (who point-blank refused to stop). The irony is, once Jarrod calmed down, his instincts were exactly the same as hers: to cover it up.

‘I don’t want anyone to know. I don’t want people making judgements, writing Daniel off as a no-hoper,’ he said at the time. ‘Let’s try to sort this out ourselves the best we can.’

They haven’t been able to sort it out, though. They’ve tried the calm and forthright approach, reasoning with Daniel about house rules, his health and his future. When that didn’t work, they came down heavier: limiting access to his bank account, keeping tabs on who he is with, enforcing curfews and a few sessions with the school counsellor. Daniel has responded by lying about his whereabouts, escaping from his room at night, and becoming increasingly disconnected from his family. His desire to get high, practically on a daily basis, suggests an inability to self-regulate and the possibility of a lifetime struggle with illicit substances.

So how has the author of this email found this information? The school counsellor? Unlikely. Maybe Jarrod broke his own rules and confided in someone. Or maybe Annabel accidentally let something slip, even though she’s pretty sure she didn’t. For God’s sake, she hasn’t even mentioned it to Grace.

Now she sighs. ‘I have no idea. Did you tell someone?’

‘Jesus, Annie, why the hell would I do that?’ His voice is loud

enough to carry to the kids' bedrooms. 'Didn't we agree that we'd keep it in the family?'

'Well, I haven't told anyone either.' She shrugs wearily. 'Unless I'm losing my memory Maybe I *am* losing my mind.'

'I'm going to find out who sent this and smash their face in.'

Jarrold was known for his short temper at school, especially at sporting fixtures. On-field grievances spiralling into tussles and swinging fists. Other team members pulling him back, talking him down. Minutes later he would be laughing and joking around. These days his anger is more entrenched.

Annabel stands up, pats him on the arm. 'It's a joke, Jarrod. Just a joke.'

He roars back at her. 'Stop saying that! Do you see either of us fucking laughing?'

Name: Luke Willis

What you will be remembered for: Playing the role of Danny in *Grease*. ‘Summer loving had me a blast ...’

Best memories of high school: Mrs Romford’s face when I told her I didn’t want to kiss ‘Sandy’ because I was gay.

Worst memories of high school: The mud and leeches during cross country in Year 10.

What will you be doing ten years from now: Famous Broadway actor (with at least five sports cars).

2 LUKE

'Ladies and gentlemen, this is the cabin crew speaking. We have a medical emergency on board and our plane will be met on the ground by an ambulance. On landing, please stay in your seats while the paramedics attend to the patient. We apologise in advance for any inconvenience and will notify the transfers department of possible delays.'

Luke's announcement is met with mutterings of frustration and sighs of inconvenience. Selfish bastards. A woman – fifty-something, extremely overweight – uses her bejewelled hand to beckon him over.

'I must get off this plane. I have a flight to catch.' Her accent is Eastern European, her tone accusing. 'You were already late taking off. It's your fault I have so little time to connect.'

Luke masks his irritation behind a slight, ultra-polite smile. 'I'm afraid the announcement applies to everyone, ma'am. You all need to stay in your seats. The paramedics will stabilise the patient and we'll do our best to have you off the aircraft as soon as possible.'

'Where is this patient?' She swings around in her seat. 'Tell me, which row?'

Jesus Christ. What is she planning to do? March down there and berate the man – who appears to be in the throes of a serious allergic reaction – for causing such inconvenience? Or declare that she could merely slip past the seat in question, and be on her merry way?

'I need to get back to my duties, ma'am. Excuse me.'

A flash of colour from the rings before her fingers bite into his arm. 'Listen to me, you *faggot*. I have a *right* to get off this plane as *soon* as it lands. I have no travel insurance to cover missed flights. *Do you understand me?*'

It always takes him by surprise. Invariably, it's the respectable-looking passengers, rather than the rough ones; the middle-aged women and harmless old men, as opposed to the supposedly mannerless youth.

He looks down pointedly at the fingers pressed into the white cotton of his sleeve. 'What did you just call me?'

She is not going to fall into the trap of repeating herself, not when there are other passengers listening now. She removes her hand quickly. Pats her hair.

Let it go, he tells himself. Fatima is waving at him from the galley. They need to prepare for landing. He has bigger concerns, a procedure to go through to get this plane on the ground, a man whose life may be relying on their efficiency. She is a nothing. A bigoted, selfish, nasty nothing.

It's that word, though. *Faggot*. It reminds him of his father.

Luke forces himself to walk away. After a few moments he has even resumed the slight smile – it's almost part of his uniform, that smile – proof that he is above people like her.

'Rubbish, anyone? Just pop it in here. Thank you.'

Back to the intercom. 'Ladies and gentlemen, please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their full upright position ...' He sounds as competent and calm as ever. Not at all rattled. 'Cabin crew, please prepare for landing.'

Nerida, his most experienced crew member, is assisting the man with the allergic reaction. It's unfortunate, and quite unusual, not to have an off-duty doctor or nurse aboard the aircraft. Nerida has administered oxygen and adrenalin and is on the phone to paramedics. Soon she will have to leave the man and belt herself in, as per procedure. Hopefully his blood pressure won't drop too low during the final stages of descent. In his twenty years of flying,

Luke's had six passengers die on board, mostly from heart attacks. Life is short. He's always known this fact and it's why he's never been a time waster. He couldn't wait to leave school, to get out into the world, to be independent. He loves his work. He loves his life with Aaron. He loves calling London home. If he doesn't love something, or someone, he doesn't do it, or them. It's simple really.

The plane lurches downwards. A baby wails.

'Cabin crew, take your seats.'

Luke sits in his seat, flanked by Fatima and, at the very last minute, Nerida.

'His bloody EpiPen was past its expiry.' Her voice has a tell-tale wobble. 'When will people learn?'

Luke takes her hand and squeezes it. She is a good friend. Later on, when they've dealt with the ambulance and all the paperwork, they'll go for a drink and she'll have a cry, let it all out. As the plane descends through the rain clouds over Heathrow, he thinks about another friend, from another lifetime: Katy. He must respond to her email as soon as he gets home. It's been sitting there for over a week now.

From: admin@yearbook.com.au

Subject: RSVP

Still waiting on your RSVP for the reunion. I know you can get back to Sydney if you really wanted to, so no excuses. Also, thought it would be fun to compile a new yearbook, showing where everyone is at today. Questions are below. Can you send me replies as soon as possible?

Xxx Katy

Where is he at? One of his passengers could be about to die, and if he does, Luke will be filling in paperwork for the next few hours. He has just been called a faggot, and it's made him angrier than it should have. Nerida will undoubtedly want to get drunk as soon as they escape the airport, and Aaron will be annoyed if he doesn't come straight home. A day in the life of Luke Willis.

Luke catches up with Katy whenever he deigns to visit Sydney, and she has dropped in on him in London a handful of times over the years. In between visits, they text, FaceTime and share funny jokes and videos. Their friendship has lasted twenty-plus years; not bad, considering his intentions at the start were less than pure. Luke – trying to get through exams on a minimum-effort policy – sat next to her in class, hoping to short-cut a difficult chemistry unit. Not only was she helpful – summing up the unit much more concisely than the teacher – Katy Buckley was other things, too: foolishly big-hearted, always believing the best of people, including him; so eager and perennially positive that it was actually hard to be cynical (Luke’s speciality) in her presence. Something softens in him whenever he thinks about her. Their friendship was viewed suspiciously, incredulously, by his other more popular friends, but that didn’t bother Luke; he never gave a shit about what other people thought. Katy was too nerdy to become part of that group. Neither was she pretty enough, but she’s had the last laugh there. Years ago, she dyed her carrot-coloured hair a rich shade of brown and the effect was transformative. More recently she’s got into fitness and developed a unique sense of fashion. The last time Luke saw her, she was unrecognisable.

Luke hasn’t stayed in contact with any of the others. As soon as the HSC was done, that was it: he was out of their group, out of Sydney, out of Australia. He landed his first job with a budget airline, jetting around Europe and having the time of his life. He never looked back, never regretted not furthering his education. Who needed university when there was real life waiting to be lived? Who needed to be dependent on your parents and subject to their rules when you could call the shots yourself? Who needed school friends who – when it came down to it – you had absolutely nothing in common with, other than the shared experience – torture, more like – of class after boring class, exam after pointless exam, teacher after detested teacher?

Now, just thinking about that core gang – Annabel, Grace, Zach, Jarrod – makes Luke feel a surge of loathing. He can’t understand

why. He didn't hate them at school, far from it. It's not as if they victimised him for being gay. If anything, it was the opposite: his sexuality made him more popular, at least with the girls.

The plane breaks through the cloud cover and suddenly there is a close-range view of London. Grey on grey on grey: the sky, the buildings, the Thames. The greyness is the ultimate understatement, a clever disguise for the excitement, diversity and pulse of the city. History and modernity, classiness and grit, flourishing side by side. Luke has travelled the world. This is his favourite place.

He'll do an updated page for Katy's yearbook but there's no fucking way he's going to the reunion. Why waste time looking back? Look forward, people. Look *ahead*. Grab life by the balls and live it. Forget about the past. The man struggling for breath on row fifteen is not thinking about the past. He's thinking about the things he still wants to do.

The plane bumps against the runway and bumps again, then screams forward at a ferocious speed. Luke always holds his breath at this point, thinking: *Is this the one where we won't be able to stop?*

But they stop. They always do.

As soon as it's permitted, Nerida unclicks herself. Luke folds away both their seats. When he turns back to face the aisle, he sees two things: Nerida manoeuvring the man so he is lying flat on the floor, and the overweight woman hoisting herself up from her seat. She reaches for the overhead locker and has her bag out before Fatima gets there to berate her.

'Please sit down, ma'am. The plane is still moving and we must make way for the paramedics.'

The woman looks her up and down. 'I'm not having a *Muslim* tell me what to do!'

Luke picks up the phone to greet the ground staff. 'This is Luke Willis, cabin supervisor. Can I please request police as well as the ambulance? We have an abusive passenger who's refusing to follow directions.'

She'll be first off the plane all right, but not in the way she expected. The police will detain her and she'll be charged and fined. There goes her connecting flight and whatever money she was trying to save by not taking out travel insurance. Serve her right. Fuck her.

Luke's never been one to take shit, and he's not going to start now. When he cares enough to exact revenge, he does so in spectacular fashion.

Name: Grace McCrae

What you will be remembered for: Probably for being Annabel Moore's best friend!

Best memories of high school: The Year 10 formal.

Worst memories of high school: Food technology.

What will you be doing ten years from now: No friggin' idea.

3 GRACE

Grace can't stop looking at it: *Yearbook of Macquarie High, Class of 2000*. Ninety-odd pages that depict another lifetime, one that feels so very strange it could belong to someone else. All the girls wearing similar hairstyles – layered at the front, highlighted – and the frumpy uniforms that they'd hated, with good reason. The boys with hunched shoulders and sneakers instead of the proper school shoes. The self-conscious quotes speckled throughout, not remotely as meaningful or humorous as they'd believed at the time. God, they all looked so gauche. And so terribly, terribly young.

'We thought we were hot,' she comments to Tom as he emerges from the en suite, dressed for bed in a pair of old soccer shorts and singlet. 'But we were just babies, really.'

'Are you still looking at that old thing?' he asks, sliding into bed next to her.

'I can't seem to put it away,' she laughs. 'I've become fixated on it.'

He sidles over, rests his head hopefully against her chest. 'I could give you something else to be fixated on ... if you like.'

Grace is considering his proposition when, with impeccable timing, the bedroom door creaks open.

'Mummy, Daddy,' whispers a voice.

Tom sighs and smiles at the same time. 'Yes, Lauren?'

It's nearly always Lauren who pays the after-hours visits. Their

third child suffers anxiety about school, social occasions, nightfall, and a long list of other things.

‘I heard a noise in my room. I’m scared.’

‘Right.’ Tom dramatically throws back the covers. ‘Daddy’s coming and we’ll have a full-scale search. There’ll be no escaping the eagle eye of Tom Coleman.’

He bounds out of the room, giving a great impression that this – a hunt for would-be intruders – is exactly what he’d like to do at this precise moment.

Grace goes back to the yearbook, flicking once again to her own entry.

Why did she say that the Year 10 formal was her best memory? Why not the Year 12 one? Was it because it was all coming to an end, and she felt sad that they were about to go their separate ways? Or was it because Annabel, seven months’ pregnant, didn’t attend the Year 12 formal, and because her best friend hadn’t been there, it didn’t hold the same importance?

Probably, pathetically, the latter. For this reason, Grace is watchful of the friendships that her children form and, whenever she can, veers them away from relationships that compromise their own identity.

Don’t have one friend, she tells them regularly. Have lots and lots of them. Be your own person, not just a mimic of your friends.

Sometimes she is more forthright: *When I was in high school, I had only one friend. If she was in a good mood, I was in a good mood. If she was in a bad mood, I was in a bad mood. I think I missed out on a lot of fun because of her.*

Grace is brimming with things to tell her children, lessons she herself had to learn the hard way. She even has a notebook where she writes things down, practical advice and nuggets of wisdom to be imparted when the timing is right. Tom calls it the Mother Manual, although he’s been known to write a thing or two in there as well. They laugh about it – ‘That’s definitely one for the manual’ – but beneath it all they’re deadly serious. Tom was always one of those men who was going to make a great father. It’s Grace who’s

the surprise. Being a mother is her calling in life, even though she never knew it until she held Tahlia – her eldest – in her arms. Grace plans to be proud about it at the upcoming reunion. *No, I don't have a paid job at the moment, because I have four fabulous kids – the best in the world – and I put all my time, energy and imagination into them.*

Grace waitressed when she first left school. An overpriced understaffed beachfront café that was always frantically busy. After a year of being paid a pittance and having an aching back at the end of each day, she landed a job in a travel agency. It was there she met Tom. He came into the office early one morning, his blue eyes fixing on Grace first and then her client.

'Does anyone here own registration UPL55T?'

'I do,' the client, a glamorous woman in her forties, admitted.

'Can you please move your car? I don't want to have to give you a ticket.'

Grace was instantly attracted to him. Those glittering blue eyes. The rugged tan of his face. The way his mouth twitched with a smile. But more than anything, his decency. How many rangers sought out car owners so they could avoid giving them a ticket? How did he even manage to keep his job?

Her client, immensely grateful that she'd avoided a 200-dollar fine, found him just as attractive.

'What a gorgeous-looking man,' she exclaimed when she came back from moving her car, presumably to a legal spot. 'I hope you got his number.'

Grace had. And here they are, sixteen years and four children later. She is looking forward to showing him off at the reunion. It will be his first time meeting her extended cohort: nothing was organised for the five-year or ten-year anniversary, too many people were overseas or interstate or unable to commit for one reason or another. The dress code is formal: black tie for the men, gowns for the women. Tom has a tuxedo that gets dragged out for occasions like these; he always looks particularly handsome in black tie. It will be hard not to feel smug. *Take a look at him.* Not just

at how drop-dead gorgeous he is. This is a good man, inside and out. Grace Coleman is the luckiest woman in the world.

The question is what should Grace herself wear? Options from her existing wardrobe are limited – most things are a size or two too small – and there simply isn't the budget to buy something new. Plenty of time to work it out. As she tells her children, it's not about how you look, it's how you feel. And Grace feels great. She couldn't be happier with her life.

Tom is standing in the doorway.

'All good?' she asks.

He rolls his eyes, the ones she fell in love with, indicating that the only baddies in Lauren's room are those from her imagination.

'Okay to turn out the light?' he asks with a yawn.

'Yeah.' She closes the yearbook, pops it on the bedside table. No doubt she'll pick it up again tomorrow.

Twenty years. Grace's life is completely different and, presumably, so is everyone else's. She is genuinely excited about reconnecting with the guys from school. Seeing what they look like now, how their lives have turned out. For her own part, she's looking forward to proving to everyone that she has well and truly come out of Annabel Moore's shadow. Yes, they are still friends. The truth is, she likes Annabel more now than she did in school. Maybe because their friendship is on more of an equal footing. Or maybe because Grace is her own person, driven by her own moods and thoughts and not those of Annabel.

Tom clicks off the bedside lamp. Maybe they could book a hotel room for the night of the reunion? Maybe, with some creative budgeting, there would be enough money?

Grace cuddles up to him. 'What was that thing you wanted me to fixate on again?'

He takes her hand, slides it under the band of his soccer shorts. 'It's this.'

Then he rolls on top of her, his lips – warm with a faint taste of toothpaste – seeking hers.

*

The email comes the next morning.

From: admin1@yearbook.com.au

Subject: Updated Yearbook

Name: Grace Coleman (née McCrae)

Highest achievement at school: Being Annabel Moore's best friend.

What you do now: Mum to four children (three girls, one boy). Keen gardener.

Highlights of last twenty years: Getting married. Giving birth to your children.

Lowlights: The miscarriage between number 2 and 3.

Deepest fears: That something bad will happen to one of your children. Lauren in particular.

Grace recoils from her laptop. What is this? Something relating to the reunion? She reads it again, more slowly, and realises it's set out in a format similar to the original yearbook. There's even a photo that's recent and quite familiar: Grace's curly brown hair lifted by an invisible breeze, her eyes – the same colour as her hair – squinting at the camera. Did Katy send this? No, Katy wouldn't know about either the miscarriage or her worries about Lauren, and would hardly be so insensitive. The miscarriage happened at eleven weeks, before her baby bump became noticeable. Not a lot of people knew she was pregnant, which made the grieving process both easier and more difficult.

Even so, Katy seems to be the obvious person to contact. The call goes straight to voicemail. Of course, it's mid-morning and Katy would be in class. Katy's a science teacher at a high school in the inner west. Grace knows the school: it attracts 'creative' types and has an ethos of encouraging the students' individuality. Grace and Tom are seriously considering it for Tahlia.

Grace decides not to leave a voicemail and calls Annabel instead. Annabel picks up straight away. It's rare she doesn't; she's one of those women whose phone is like one of her limbs.

'Hey, Annabel. I got this weird email just now ... Like a fake yearbook entry.'

There's a noticeable pause at the end of the line. Then: 'Me too. A few days ago.'

Grace is perplexed. 'Why didn't you say something?'

Another pause. Then an embarrassed sigh. 'There was something in there that nobody knows. Some trouble we're having with Daniel.'

Grace wants to ask what the trouble is but senses that Annabel's failure to elaborate is deliberate. She has always been a selective confidante.

'Mine mentioned Lauren and my miscarriage. It was really quite upsetting.'

'Look, I think it's someone trying to be funny and missing the mark,' Annabel states with her signature curtness.

Missing the mark by a goddam mile, Grace thinks. Then a guilty nigger. 'Hey, you don't think it's Melissa, do you?'

Annabel snorts. 'She wouldn't lower herself. Luke Willis came into my head. I have no idea why.'

Luke Willis. The one who did his own thing, never cared what people thought and defied all the rules when it came to popularity.

Grace frowns. 'Didn't he and Katy used to be friends?'

'Yeah.' Annabel's laugh is unkind. 'I still don't understand what he saw in her!'

Grace casts her mind back. She sees Luke singing and dancing in the *Grease* musical, totally at home centre stage. She sees him standing near the locker room, smirking after delivering a retort that had everyone falling around with laughter. She remembers the excitement that built in him as Year 12 drew to a close, the blatant impatience to leave school behind and strike out in the real world.

She has a moment of clarity. 'Annabel, I'm pretty sure that Luke

Willis hasn't thought about you or me since the day he left high school.'

Grace keeps busy for the rest of the day. She vacuums the entire house, sews a button on to Tahlia's school shirt and scrubs some mould from the bathroom wall. The shower is leaking; the entire bathroom needs to be gutted and replaced. The roof also needs replacing, as does the kitchen, but there's no money, not even for minor renovations. Just another couple of years of scraping by. Just another couple of years of full-time parenting to ensure that all the children are on track, to ensure that they're independent, resilient and responsible for their own behaviour. Then Grace will get a paid job. Something with short hours. Something she can fit around school. Maybe something involving children.

After lunch Grace puts on a sunhat and goes outside to do some gardening. The weeds are thriving but, on the positive side, so is her vegetable patch. While she's down on her hands and knees, perspiration dripping into her eyes, she thinks again about Annabel and Daniel. She hopes that the trouble isn't something serious or irredeemable. Teenage boys are such a difficult species.

Just don't let it be drugs.

Grace hears horrific stories from Tom, shocking things seen while doing his rounds of the local parks and beaches. Kids as young as twelve drinking alcohol. Teenagers unconscious in pools of vomit. The unforgettable morning he found a drug addict's body hanging from the monkey bars at one of the playgrounds.

The heat of the sun eventually drives Grace back inside, where she turns her attention to dinner. She deftly chops vegetables – some of which are home-grown – that she'll stir-fry later on. According to the yearbook, food technology was her worst memory of high school. Really? She quite likes cooking now. Finds it therapeutic. At least on the days when there's enough time to relax while she's doing it.

What was so bad about food technology? Why did she hate it so much?

Suddenly, she's back there, in the food tech room, wearing the compulsory blue apron, Melissa's face flushed and scornful.

'What do you mean I can't be your partner? We're always partners.'

'Sorry.' Grace shrugged helplessly. 'Annabel—'

'*What?* Annabel isn't even in this class, for God's sake. Do you care who her partner is in chemistry?'

'She ... I ... Sorry.'

'You're pathetic, Grace. She says, "Jump," and you say, "How high?" Have some fucking backbone for a change.'

Melissa flounced off and found herself another partner. Grace got stuck with one of the boys, who was even more clueless than she was. She remembers glancing intermittently at Melissa, looking for signs of forgiveness, or even some level of understanding of the predicament she was in because of Annabel. Melissa's eyes were firmly trained on her chopping knife, which she was using in a furious manner much beyond her level of skill. Grace had turned her attention to her own dish when she heard Melissa's cry. She looked up to see blood dripping down her friend's hand, blooming on the sleeve of her white shirt. There was blood on the blade of the abandoned knife, the plastic chopping board and even the food itself, celery and onion splattered with red. Grace stepped forward to help, but the teacher was already there, pressing a clean cloth to the wound, muttering about hospital and stitches.

Now Grace cringes at the memory of that day. Her role in causing Melissa to be so uncharacteristically upset and therefore careless. How she was prepared to ostracise her purely on Annabel's say-so. Her lack of 'fucking backbone'.

Thankfully, she is not the same person as she was back then.

Is anyone?

As is always the case, Grace never quite achieves everything on her to-do list. Almost 2.30 p.m.: time to pick up Billy from preschool. She's on her way out the door when it comes to her. The photograph. She knows where it came from. In fact, she sees it a

dozen times a day. It's from a group shot of the family, but everyone else has been cropped out. The photo was taken in the back garden on a sunny day in the lead-up to last Christmas. Grace had multiple copies printed so it could be popped into Christmas cards.

Grace backtracks to the kitchen. There's a gap on the fridge door where the photo should be. Where on earth has it gone to? Then a paralysing thought.

Has someone been in the house and taken it?