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See You in September

Written by Charity Norman

Published by Allen & Unwin

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**SEE
YOU IN
SEPTEMBER**

**CHARITY
NORMAN**


ALLEN & UNWIN

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For George, Sam and Cora Meredith, with all my love

*And those who were seen dancing were thought to be
insane by those who could not hear the music.*

Attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche

Prologue

Diana

2016

It doesn't look like a scene of death. It looks like paradise. Wooden cabins dream in autumn sunshine, goats graze by the lapping waters of a lake. Even the hills seem placid, luxuriating in their pelt of native bush. She can't hear a man-made sound: only the distant chuckle of a stream, the fluting and whistling of birds. The valley is submerged in a blue haze of peace.

Paradise.

Or not. Gaudy plastic stirs among the flax bushes. Police tape: a jaunty, jarring souvenir of tragedy. There are other signs too, if you look for them. Empty buildings, marker pegs on the beach. The authorities set up camp here, she knows, and stayed for weeks. Squads of divers plunged into the lake; dog handlers combed the shadowy folds of bush. They even used a drone to take aerial footage. She imagines them tramping around in heavy-booted incongruity, coaxing and bullying statements from people who desperately want to forget.

Until a few years ago, Diana had never heard of Justin Calvin. She'd never dreamed that events in a valley on the other side of the world could decimate her family. She and Mike were pretty bog-standard people in those days. They'd been married longer than

the national average, got through his army years and come out the other side. Not rolling in money, not struggling. A redbrick-and-stucco semi in South London. Most of their worry, their focus and hope were centred on their two daughters. Nobody had gone off the rails. Not unless you counted Tara's suspension for smoking behind the gym.

No sign; no sign at all of what was to come.

There's a new sound among the cabins. It's strong and clear and utterly unexpected. Someone is playing a piano: rippling, complex triplets with a haunting melody woven through them. A pair of fantails swoop and dive around Diana's head as though riding on the currents of the song. In this strange and beautiful place, after so much loss, the music seems to speak of appalling sadness. It makes her want to cry.

She has a photo of Cassy, taken as they waved her off from Heathrow. One final picture. One final smile. A butterfly in a glass case. *Have fun*, they were yelling, in the moment it was taken. *Watch out for man-eating kiwis!* Diana has used it as her desktop background ever since. She greets her elder daughter in the morning, and last thing at night, and a hundred times a day.

The girl smiling out of the screen is dear and familiar and . . . well, she's just Cassy. Voluptuous, long-legged, quick to blush. A thick plait hangs over one shoulder, an in-flight bag over the other. Her nose isn't quite straight, never has been since it was broken by a rogue hockey ball, but there's something arresting about the dark blue eyes and flicked-up lashes. She's always had that wistful expression: a downturn at the corners of her eyes, as though she knows something that others don't.

My God. Did we really make jokes about killer kiwis? If I'd seen what was around the corner, I'd have begged her not to get on that plane.

Across the lake, the volcano is a sleeping giant. The peace has a hypnotic quality. It stills your soul. It slows your breath. No wonder the media has become obsessed with this glorious wilderness. No wonder the police struggled to understand what

happened here. No wonder the nation is still searching its soul, wondering who to blame.

She's often wondered the same thing herself. There have been moments over the years when she's found she has stopped. Just stopped dead. She was meant to be walking to work or feeding the cat. Instead she is far away, arms limp by her sides, gazing at the past.

It's like watching a milk bottle falling off a table. It rolls and falls in nightmarish slow motion and yet it seems unstoppable. There was a time when the family was whole, and a time when it hit the ground, milk and shattered glass spraying across the tiles. In between is the moment when she should have caught it.

One

Diana

July 2010

Such a precious memory, those last minutes in Cassy's bedroom. They were driving her to the airport soon, but there were no long faces. After all, this was just a glorified holiday. She'd be back before they knew it.

Diana heard laughter and put her head around the door. There they were, her daughters: twenty-one and fifteen, both taller than their mother. Cassy had dumped everything she was taking into piles on the floor and was trying to cram it all into her backpack. Tara sprawled across the bed, hair a dark fan on the pillow, music pouring from her phone. It sounded tinny and pointless to Diana, but perhaps beauty was in the ear of the beholder.

'Mum!' cried Tara. 'For God's sake, tell Cassy she's taking *way* too many socks.'

Diana sat down at the end of the bed, glimpsing her ruddy complexion and silvery roots in the mirror. *Dowdy*, she thought, though without regret. *No other word for it*. Never mind. She could still scrub up when she had to.

Tara stirred an imaginary cauldron.

'When shall we three meet again?' she demanded in a witch's croak. 'In thunder, lightning—'

‘Third of September,’ said Cassy, stooping to retrieve three pairs of socks from her pack. ‘We’re due to touch down twenty-four hours before Imogen walks up the aisle.’

‘I wish you weren’t cutting it so fine,’ said Diana.

‘So does Imogen. She’s obsessed with this wedding. Never mentions poor Jack at all. I think he’s just a by-product.’

‘I’m sure that’s not true.’

Cassy pouted. ‘She says I’m not allowed to get a tan.’

‘You’re *kidding* me,’ gasped Tara. ‘Bridezilla!’

‘Yep. Apparently it’ll make her look nasty if her bridesmaid is a bronzed goddess.’

‘Tell her to fake it. She’ll be faking it for the rest of her married life.’

Diana tried to be shocked, but her daughters mocked her. *This is 2010, Mum, not 1810!* They were a formidable team when they banded together.

‘D’you want to see the bridesmaids’ dresses?’ asked Cassy. ‘Monstrous! Hang on a sec.’ She picked up her phone and flicked through the photos until she found one: a puff-sleeved nightmare in bright purple.

‘Not good,’ groaned Tara, shielding her eyes from the glare. ‘Oh, lordy, lordy. Not good at all.’

Cassy stared at the photo in dismay. ‘Becca can pull off that colour, being a skinny chick. I’ll look like Barney the Dinosaur.’

‘You could get your own back,’ suggested Diana. ‘Marry Hamish and make Imogen wear an orange jumpsuit?’

‘Brilliant idea! But I wouldn’t go shopping for wedding hats just yet, Mum. We’re far too young.’

‘True,’ said Tara. ‘Then again, a bird in the hand. Hamish isn’t bad-looking, he’s rich as Croesus and—*big plus*—Dad likes him.’

Diana listened with flapping ears. She rarely dared to pry into Cassy’s private life, but Tara seemed to get away with it.

Cassy crouched by her pack, shoving in a sponge bag with both hands.

‘I think I annoy him sometimes,’ she said. ‘We don’t care about the same things.’

‘You mean he isn’t a raving tree-hugger like you and Granny Joyce,’ scoffed Tara. ‘I mean—Lord save us—he’ll drink coffee that wasn’t grown by a one-legged women’s cooperative in Colombia. What a total bastard!’ She was yawning as she spoke, stretching angular arms. ‘We can’t all be bleeding hearts, Cass. Oh my God, that’s spooky. Your door’s opening all by itself.’

The three of them looked towards the bedroom door, which creaked as it inched just wide enough to admit the family’s cat.

‘Pesky!’ cried Cassy, picking him up and kissing him. ‘Don’t creep about like that.’

‘He’s getting tubby,’ said Diana.

Cassy pretended to block her pet’s ears. ‘Enough with the body shaming! You want him to develop an eating disorder?’

She’d found Pesky on her way back from a party one stormy night: a mewling scrap of black-and-white, dumped in a charity bin. She got her friend Becca to lower her into the bin by her legs, bundled the half-starved kitten under her jumper and brought him home. Three years on, you’d never know the sleek king of the household had once been so close to death.

‘Dad doesn’t approve of this trip,’ she said, once Pesky had wriggled out of her grasp. ‘He was on about it again this morning. Thinks I should be doing an internship instead of gallivanting around the world.’

Tara snorted. ‘What a stuffed shirt.’

Diana was inclined to agree with Tara, though she’d never say so. Mike’s father had died the previous year, leaving cash to all his grandchildren. Cassy was saving most of hers but had splashed out on this adventure—her last, she said sadly, before the dreaded treadmill of work. She and Hamish planned a fortnight’s volunteering at a wildlife sanctuary in Thailand, followed by a few days on a beach, before exploring New Zealand.

‘I’m ready to roll.’ Cassy got to her feet, bouncing up and down to test the weight of her pack.

‘Passport?’ asked Diana.

‘Check.’ Cassy nudged an inflight bag with her toe.

‘Credit card? Mosquito repellent? Phone?’

‘Check, check and check.’

‘Condoms?’ asked Tara.

Diana smothered a smile. Cassy flushed pillar-box red and said her sister was a total embarrassment.

It was around then that Diana felt a flutter of unease—shapeless, nameless and immediately suppressed. There was nothing to worry about. Nothing. Thousands of students did this kind of thing every year, with their Lonely Planet guides stuffed into their backpacks.

‘Right then,’ she said, standing up. ‘Quick cup of tea before we go?’



The whole family made the trip to Heathrow, including Diana’s mother Joyce, who lived in a care home nearby and liked a day out. They reached the motorway in good spirits. Mike was driving, the girls were singing along to Magic FM. Joyce had fallen asleep.

Cassy tried to plait her hair in the back of the car, but twists and twines of chestnut-brown escaped. She was wearing jeans and a grey t-shirt, a jersey tied around her waist.

It was Tara who started the trouble. She didn’t mean to. She was never vindictive, just careless.

‘Hey, Cass,’ she said, as she sat between her sister and her napping grandmother. ‘What’s this about you dumping your law degree?’

‘I’m not.’ Cassy’s denial was fast and sharp, but Tara didn’t take the hint.

‘Well, that’s funny, because Tilly’s brother reckons you are. Said you’ve been to see the tutors and everything.’

Mike turned off the radio. No more music. No more singing along. Diana braced herself.

‘What’s this about?’ he asked.

‘Nothing,’ said Cassy. ‘Honestly. Forget it. Tilly’s brother is an idiot.’

‘Doesn’t sound like nothing.’

‘Shh,’ murmured Diana, squeezing his upper arm. ‘C’mon, Mike. Not now. Not today.’

‘Cassy?’ insisted Mike. His voice was too loud.

Diana glanced around at the back seat. Cassy was biting her thumbnail, looking about six years old. Tara was pulling an agonised face and mouthing *sorry*.

‘I was just wondering about my options,’ said Cassy.

‘Why the hell would you do that?’ Mike raised both hands to head height and brought them down—*slap!*—onto the steering wheel. ‘*Christ* almighty! You’ve only got a year to go. Don’t tell me you’re going to throw it all away.’

‘I might have made a mistake, choosing law. That’s all. I maybe should have looked at something else. I’m not sure I want to be a lawyer.’

‘I can’t believe I’m hearing this. You’re doing so well!’

‘Drop it,’ warned Diana. She squeezed his arm again, harder this time, but he wasn’t going to be deflected.

‘What modules did you say you’d chosen for September?’ he asked. ‘Company, intellectual property . . .’

Cassy sighed. ‘Employment. Competition law.’

‘Right.’ Mike was eyeing his daughter in the rear-view mirror. ‘By this time next year you could have a training contract in a city firm. You could be set up for life.’

‘That’s what worries me,’ said Cassy. ‘A lifetime of that.’

‘What does Hamish think?’

‘He thinks I’m mad.’

‘He’s got more sense than you. We’re not millionaires, Mum and I.’

‘I know.’

‘We can’t support you forever. We’d love to, but we can’t.’

‘I don’t expect you to support me.’

Mike carried on ranting all the way to Heathrow, despite

Diana's attempts to shut him up. *The world's more and more unstable . . . can't live on air . . . I joined the army for a secure career with a decent pension, it wasn't for love.*

'D'you want to end up serving Big Macs and fries?' he demanded.

'No.'

'Well then! It's dog-eat-dog out there. Millions of graduates end up unemployed.'

'Leave her alone, for God's sake.' This was Tara. 'It's her life. Who cares whether she ends up working in McDonald's?'

'Stay out of this please, Tara.'

'I only asked about course changes,' said Cassy, sounding tearful. 'I only asked. But I can't do it. They said no way. I'd have to drop out and apply all over again, student loan, everything. And I'm not going to do that, so you don't need to worry.'

The exit for their terminal was coming up. Mike swung off the motorway, running his hand through his hair.

'So the upshot is you're sticking with law?'

Cassy said yes, that was the upshot, and Mike said good, because he never had her down as a quitter. Tara said some people get their knickers in a twist over nothing, and Diana—who felt it her duty—told Tara not to be rude to her father. Mercifully, Joyce chose that moment to wake up.

'Did I miss something?' she asked.

'No, Mum.'

'Hmm. Could cut the atmosphere with a butter knife.'

It was true. The cheerful day had been ruined, and Diana could have throttled Mike. Desperate to salvage things, she tried to make conversation: empty twaddle about the weather—the flight—the traffic. Nobody helped her. Mike was parking the car when a text arrived on Cassy's phone.

'Hamish,' she said. 'He's running late. Broken-down train.'

'Is it going to be a problem?' asked Diana.

'No. They're moving again already. He's checked in online. Says he'll meet us at security.'

The next half-hour or so was taken up with the maelstrom of the check-in queue, so there wasn't time for family rows. Once Cassy had dropped off her bag, Mike offered to stay back to look out for Hamish while the others headed for security. This involved steering Joyce and her walking frame through the crowds and up in a lift.

'Don't worry about Dad,' whispered Diana, once they were safely out of earshot. 'He overthinks things sometimes.'

Cassy shrugged.

'It's because he loves you,' Diana assured her. 'He wants to know you'll have a secure future.'

'I just wish he . . .' Another shrug. 'Never mind.'

They'd reached the screening point when a girl skidded to a halt beside them. She was wearing ripped jeans and a panama hat, and she grabbed Cassy around the waist.

'Becca!' cried Cassy. 'You never said you were coming.'

'Got out of work early. Bloody nearly missed you! It was hell on the Piccadilly Line.' The girl's face lit up when she spotted Diana's mother perched on the seat of her walking frame. 'Hi, Joyce! Great to see you.'

'You too, dear,' said Joyce, disappearing into her embrace.

Becca was a heartening sight after the tension in the car, and Diana was grateful to her. She was the other bridesmaid—the skinny chick who looked good in everything. Her life and Cassy's were running on more-or-less parallel tracks, except that Becca was studying psychology.

'You'd better be home in time for the Wedding of the Century,' she warned, stretching out her arm to take a selfie of herself, Cassy and Tara. 'I'm not going to be the only mug prancing about in a purple meringue.'

'I'll be there. Trust me.'

'What's Imogen even *thinking*? Imagine signing up to a life sentence at twenty-one.'

Joyce chuckled. 'I did! Fifty-one when I made my escape. You wouldn't serve thirty years for murdering somebody.'

The three girls seemed to find this hilarious. Diana didn't.

It wasn't long before Mike appeared with Hamish: a tidy young man, looking purposeful in a cycling fleece and designer stubble. Cassy scolded him for being late and pretended to cuff him around the ear. He was anxious to go airside straight away; he'd heard that security checks were taking twice as long as usual.

'Terrorist alert,' said Mike, tutting. 'Again.'

Becca appointed herself team photographer.

'Team mug shot before you go,' she ordered, holding her phone in one hand, conducting the group with the other. 'C'mon, c'mon! Huddle up. Yes, you too, Mike.'

'This photo had better not end up on social media,' said Hamish.

Becca ignored him. 'Let's see some smiles on your dials—yes, you too, Mike!'

The six of them huddled, grinned—yes, even Mike—and were immortalised.

Hamish was desperate to go through. He shook Mike's hand and muttered distracted goodbyes before hurrying behind the screen. But Cassy lingered. She'd already kissed everyone. She'd given her grandmother a gentle bear hug and a less gentle one to Mike—*Sorry, Dad*—who'd ruffled her hair and said, *Stay safe*. She had a plane to catch. And yet she turned back to her family.

At that moment Becca took one more picture. *Have fun!* the well-wishers yelled. *Watch out for man-eating kiwis!*

Cassy smiled, blew them a kiss.

'See you in September,' she said.

It was a throwaway line. Just words uttered casually by a young woman in a hurry.

And then she'd gone.

The Cult Leader's Manual: Eight Steps to Mind Control

Cameron Allsop

Step 1: Identify your potential recruit

He or she does not have to be especially young, vulnerable or gullible. On the contrary, you may want to recruit mature people with useful skills. However, their recruitment stands a better chance of success if you find them at a time of difficulty. For example: bereavement, relationship crisis, addiction, loneliness, depression and redundancy can all induce temporary vulnerability.

Look for someone who is out of their comfort zone and offer them comfort.

Two

Cassy

August 2010

Another car. Another car. Another bloody car. She turned her smile on—off—on. And all the time her life was spinning around, upside down, out of control.

They'd barely spoken in the past hour. They were hitching from outside a petrol station on the outskirts of Auckland, and it was her turn to do the work. She brandished a piece of cardboard with the word *TAUPO* scrawled across it, doing her Cheshire cat impersonation at every vehicle that passed. She'd dressed for the job in denim shorts and a clinging t-shirt—growing worryingly tighter by the day—but her legs weren't getting them any lifts.

It didn't matter whether they got to Taupo. It didn't matter how far she ran. She couldn't escape. The trouble had begun as a vague suspicion while they were still in Thailand, grew into gnawing anxiety, and now—today—had exploded into full-blown panic. She'd thrown up again this morning: jerked out of her dreams in a cold sweat, she tore out of the hostel bunk and down to the communal bathrooms. When she finally emerged from the cubicle, an Australian girl from her dormitory (Kylie? Keren?) was cleaning her teeth at the basins.

'Stomach bug,' muttered Cassy.

‘Seems to get you every morning,’ said Kylie or Keren, her words distorted by her toothbrush.

‘Just came from Thailand. Must have been the water.’

Kylie or Keren spat into the basin.

‘Yeah . . . I had one of those bugs once. Don’t worry, you can have it fixed. Better get on with it though.’

Cassy felt her knees shaking and leaned against the tiled wall. She desperately needed a friend. ‘Did you have yours fixed?’

‘Yep.’

‘Is it terrible?’

‘Not too bad. A whole lot better than the alternative.’

Cassy didn’t like to imagine the alternative. ‘I never thought this would happen to me.’

‘We never do.’

‘I wasn’t careless. I’m on the pill.’

The other girl zipped up her sponge bag. ‘Have you told him?’

‘I’m still hoping it’s not . . . I mean, it still might be a bug. He won’t want to know.’ Cassy shut her eyes. ‘Oh God, this can’t be happening.’

‘I think you’d better tell him,’ said Kylie or Keren, as she left the bathroom. ‘He’s got a right to know.’

Hamish hadn’t noticed anything amiss, but perhaps he had other things on his mind. He’d hated the wildlife sanctuary in Thailand so much that, in the end, Cassy had agreed to leave early and head for a beach. Now he was sitting on the grass verge, leaning against his pack, nursing a hangover. He’d spent half the night playing pool with a couple of English Gap Yah girls, swapping hyperbole about London house prices and how he was going to make his first million by the time he was thirty.

‘I thought they were meant to have decent weather in this country,’ he moaned, cupping his hands to light a cigarette.

‘It’s winter.’

The smoke made her nauseated again. Hamish unfolded the newspaper he’d picked up in a café that morning, flattening it against his knees to keep it from blowing away. The front page

featured a hero with a square jaw and All Blacks jersey—as though the world was fine and dandy; as though all the human race had to worry about was a rugby player’s hamstring.

Cassy knew otherwise. She was twelve when the Twin Towers came down. School classes were cancelled while everyone crowded around the nearest telly, shrieking when that second plane appeared out of nowhere. She never forgot the sight of skyscrapers collapsing like piles of Jenga. She never forgot seeing people—real people—jumping to their deaths.

‘The world will never be the same again,’ her housemistress had murmured, pressing her hand to her mouth. None of the girls understood what she meant at the time, but Cassy did now. From that day on, the bad news never seemed to stop. Afghanistan. Iraq. Genocide in the Sudan. A murderous Boxing Day tsunami, hurricanes, terror attacks. No sooner had 2010 begun than the earth contorted under Haiti, killing a quarter of a million people. *A quarter of a million*. The sheer scale of it was beyond comprehension. And right now, at this very moment, floods in Pakistan were drowning whole families.

‘I could murder another coffee,’ Hamish said, yawning. He flicked through the paper until he found the latest from the FIFA World Cup. Football was a nice, safe subject. *Life’s for living* was his new motto. *Lighten up, Cass*.

A car. One male occupant. She waved her sign, trying to look happy and apple-cheeked—the sort of girl any sane man would want in his passenger seat. He shot past.

Bugger. Her hands were turning mauve from the cold.

‘We must look like serial killers,’ she said. ‘Or maybe they think we’ll be really boring and they’ll be stuck with us for hours.’

‘Happens,’ grunted Hamish, turning a page.

‘What, people being boring?’

‘Hitchhikers killing drivers. Saw it on Facebook. Bloke who cooked and ate people who gave him lifts.’

‘That’s an urban myth. Been going around for donkey’s years.’ The rain began all at once, as though someone was

emptying a celestial bucket of water. Hamish used his newspaper as an umbrella.

‘I vote we give up,’ suggested Cassy. ‘Get a bus tomorrow.’

‘Can’t. We need to get to Taupo today.’

‘It doesn’t matter, does it?’

‘Bloody well does. I’ve got my skydive in the morning.’

Pulling her rain jacket from her pack, she dragged it over her head. She didn’t care about his skydive—and neither would he, once she’d told him the awful news.

She took a breath, holding it in for one last moment. *He’s got a right to know.*

‘Look,’ she said. ‘I’m really worried.’

He glanced up at her, perfectly calm. He didn’t see it coming.

‘Remember I got food poisoning, couldn’t keep anything down for the best part of a week? It was after the exams, so . . . end of May, early June.’

‘I *told* you that kebab was dodgy.’

‘Okay, okay. So you do remember.’ She rubbed her hands together. ‘Um . . . like I say, I couldn’t keep *anything* down. And now I think we might be in serious trouble.’

It took about five seconds. Then she saw it hit him—*bam!*—right between the eyes.

‘Have you done a test?’ he asked.

‘Not yet. I’ve been putting it off.’

‘Do a test, for God’s sake! Ten to one it’s a false alarm.’

‘I’ve thrown up every morning for days. I’m so tired I can hardly stand up—all I want to do is sleep. And . . . other stuff.’

‘Do a test, all right? It’ll be negative, I bet you anything.’ He chewed his upper lip. ‘If not, you’ll have to act fast. I’ll help.’

‘By “help”, d’you mean you’ll be a hands-on father?’

His reaction might have been comical if the situation hadn’t been so terrifying. He looked as though she’d dropped a scorpion down his boxer shorts.

‘C’mon, Cass! We’re both just starting out. We’ve got our futures ahead of us. There’s only one logical solution and you

know it.' He pulled out his Blackberry. 'Let's see if I can get online . . . Fuck it, I can't. But I'm sure you can get it done here. We'll look it up when we get to an internet café.'

She knew exactly where his research would lead. She'd already done her own, on the computer at the hostel in Auckland. *Good old Google*, she thought bitterly. *Book your skydive, your pepperoni pizza and the murder of your Little Problem, all from the comfort of your armchair.*

'It'd be easy enough to fix,' said Hamish.

'It wouldn't feel easy.'

'Even if this isn't a false alarm—and I bet it is—this is still just a bundle of cells. You can probably just take a pill. It's basically contraception.'

She rubbed her face with both hands. 'I don't know what to do.'

'You don't have a choice.' He looked away from her, down the road. 'Bloody hell. Doesn't bear thinking about. Imagine Mike's reaction!'

True. Imagine Mike's reaction. There was no way—absolutely *no way*—her father could ever hear about this. He'd go right off the deep end. He'd be intensely disappointed in her. He'd think her incompetent and careless and stupid, and she couldn't bear that. She'd made the age-old mistake: she'd cocked up and now she might be banged up.

Hamish seemed to have taken her silence for consent.

'So we're agreed? Neither of us can afford to be playing happy families. I certainly don't want to play—in fact, cards on the table: *I won't play.*'

The day darkened. Headlights were on, though it was still early afternoon. A horse box. A lorry. More heartless cars, their wheels spurting drips onto her bare legs. She was shivering now, but she kept switching on the smile. Nobody was going to pick up a red-nosed, blubbing hitchhiker.

'Anyway, you seemed perky enough last night,' said Hamish. 'When you were flirting.'

'Sorry?'

‘With that Swede.’

Swede? She thought back. ‘You mean the Finn? The guy who made me tea while you were holding forth to Charlotte and Topsy?’

‘Finn. Swede. Same difference.’

‘Actually, there’s quite a lot of difference. Finland is—’

‘Whatever.’

‘Nobody was flirting except you,’ she said. ‘I caught you and posh Charlotte swapping phone numbers.’

‘Charlotte’s father happens to be an equity partner at Bannermans.’ Hamish had an air of injured dignity. ‘She might be able to swing me an internship. I’d do anything to get a foot in that door. And I do mean *anything*.’

This remark took Cassy’s breath away. Even by Hamish’s standards—and his standards seemed to have dropped, lately—it was staggeringly shallow.

‘You really are a moron, aren’t you?’ she said.

If he heard, he pretended not to. A pack of cyclists whirred by: giant, lycra-clad insects with sinewy thighs and goggle eyes. Cassy thought of her dad. He was always out cycling, and he looked just like one of them. *Swish, swish*. The day was taking on a nightmare quality. Perhaps they’d never get to Taupo. Perhaps they were doomed to sit on this verge for all eternity, hating each other more with every passing hour.

‘Shall we go our separate ways?’ she asked.

‘Go our . . . ?’ Hamish’s mouth dropped open. ‘Where’s *this* come from?’

She held out her arms. ‘*Look* at us, Hamish. This isn’t making us happy! I hate the death throes of a relationship. Might be kinder to knock it on the head.’

She hoped there was still some love. She hoped he’d put up a fight—jump to his feet crying, *no, no*, and throw his arms around her. After all, they’d been together almost two years, and they used to be head-over-heels.

But he didn’t move. He didn’t argue. He even looked relieved. He was trying to hide it, but she knew him too well and saw the

signs: a slump of the shoulders, a poker-faced tilt of the head.

‘Your call,’ he said.

She muttered something about getting coffee from the petrol station, handed him *TAUPO* and walked away before he could see her cry. It was all too much. She was cold and tired and frightened. In her whole life, she’d never felt so lonely.

She was trudging across the verge—wiping away tears with the palms of her hands—when a white van pulled up at the fuel pumps. It was rusted, rattling, full of people singing at the tops of their voices. The driver’s door opened and someone swung to the ground. He might have been thirty or so. Broad shoulders. Lots of fair hair, short back and sides. Pretty hot, if you were into the rugged look—which she found she was. He grinned at her.

‘You okay?’ He sounded as though he cared.

‘Fine. *Brr*. Cold.’

He was unscrewing the petrol cap. ‘Headed south?’

‘Taupo.’

‘We turn off at Rotorua. Puts you a lot closer.’

The van’s passenger door slid open. Faces were looking out.

‘These guys wanna get to Taupo,’ the driver called over his shoulder. ‘Have we got room for two more back there?’

There were cries of *Always!* and *Bags of room!* before a couple of girls hopped out, one carrying a small boy on her hip. Both wore navy blue dresses with blue jerseys and lace-up boots, and both had short haircuts. They were smiling at Cassy. *Schoolgirls?*, she wondered. No, a bit too old. Perhaps a choir, on their way back from some event.

‘You must be freezing,’ said the one with the toddler. She and the child were obviously related, with matching olive complexions and almost-black hair. ‘We can’t leave you out here in the rain.’

The other girl—a willowy redhead—waved a thermos. ‘We’ve got tea!’

Cassy felt pathetically grateful. ‘You have no idea how welcome that sounds,’ she said. ‘Hang on, I’ll go and tell my wingman.’

She bounded back to Hamish, who hadn’t moved.

‘Good news—a lift!’ she announced, grabbing her pack. ‘They’ll take us as far as Rotorua.’

‘No way. That jalopy they’re driving is bursting at the seams. Can’t be legal.’

‘Beggars can’t be choosers.’

‘I don’t want to get stuck in Rotorua.’

Cassy looked back at the van. The easy-on-the-eye driver had finished refuelling; he gave her a cheerful thumbs-up as he strode away to pay. The two girls were walking towards the hitchhikers.

‘Hi!’ cried the one who’d offered tea. She had a Scottish accent. ‘I’m Paris. This is Bali, and—’ she tapped the toddler’s head ‘—Monty. Shall we help carry your stuff?’

She was one of those dramatic redheads who suit a pixie cut, and she was blasting Hamish with both barrels of her smile. He seemed unmoved.

‘Thanks, but no thanks,’ he said.

‘You’re being a wanker,’ hissed Cassy. ‘We have to take any lift that’s going in the right direction.’

‘Not if the vehicle’s a heap of junk.’

That was the moment. The pivotal moment. That was when she made the decision that would change her life forever.

‘Fine,’ she snapped. ‘Bye then. Might see you in Taupo.’

Her arrival at the van was greeted with cheers. It sounded as though there was a party going on inside—whooping and shouts of *Hi!* and *Welcome aboard!* They treated her like a celebrity. A boy reached out to take her pack; another gave her his seat. The door slid shut with a grating thud.

‘Ooh,’ sighed Cassy, massaging her bare legs to get the circulation going. ‘It’s lovely and warm in here.’

‘We’ll turn the heating up to dry you out,’ said Bali, who was strapping little Monty into his car seat.

The driver climbed back in and slammed his door. The engine rumbled into life.

In those final seconds, Hamish had scrambled to his feet. She saw him take a step towards the van but it was a half-hearted

gesture. He could have sprinted across and dragged the door open, if he'd really wanted to.

They were pulling away from the pumps. As they passed him, Cassy met his eye. He was holding out his hands, mouthing, *What the fuck?*

Then the van was accelerating away. Twenty seconds later, Hamish and the petrol station had disappeared behind a bend.