

**SEE  
YOU IN  
SEPTEMBER**

**CHARITY  
NORMAN**



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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 pasty 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 whirled 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.

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

Cameron Allsop

## **Step 2: Persuade the new recruit to walk into the web**

Call it something innocuous: an introductory weekend, a course, a party, a bed for the night, friendship, marriage guidance, a church meeting, even a business proposition. It doesn't matter what you call it, but get them to come along.

## *Three*

‘Shame your friend wouldn’t come,’ said Paris.

‘His loss.’ Cassy meant to sound breezy, but the shock of it took away her voice.

It was over. That was a fact. They’d still been together when they woke up that morning, and the day before, and the day before that. Two years’ worth of days before that. But now it was over. *There*. She’d finally admitted it to herself. She’d thrown up five mornings in a row, and she was on her own.

The van people rallied to cheer their hitchhiker. Somebody handed her an apple; the driver turned up the heating. Her hair was dripping down her back, so they gave her a towel. Paris poured black tea from the thermos.

‘It’s got honey in it,’ she said, watching as Cassy took her first sip.

‘Lovely,’ sighed Cassy. ‘I was so cold.’

Her rescuers introduced themselves. Crammed into the back two rows were a Swiss couple who looked about seventy—Otto and Monika—and their two teenaged grandsons. Otto had hedgehog brows and bulldog jowls, but he smiled often. Monika was pint-sized, with sparse grey hair. She was a doctor,

apparently, and still working. The grandsons' names seemed to be Washington and Riyadh, though it was difficult to hear over the rumble of the van. They spent most of the journey playing a peaceful game of I-Spy.

*Amazing kids*, Cassy thought. *Why aren't they squabbling? Tara and I couldn't manage a long car journey without World War III breaking out.*

Directly behind Cassy sat Bali's partner, Sydney: a quiet young man who blinked at Cassy from round-rimmed glasses. He was brought up in Cape Town, he said, but never saw a future for himself in South Africa. He travelled around New Zealand after finishing his degree.

'Then I met Bali . . . and this chap came along!' He stroked Monty's head. 'So I'm still here.'

Monty reclined in a car seat between his young parents, gazing open-mouthed at Cassy's hair. She leaned over the back of her seat, letting him play with the heavy strands.

'Don't pull,' warned Bali, but he didn't. He was a gentle child.

'What about you?' asked Cassy, turning to the boy who'd so willingly given her his seat and was now scrunched up on the floor beside a box of apples. He was in the lanky stage of adolescence, all legs and arms. He grinned, showing slightly crooked teeth. No phone, no tablet, no hoodie, no sullen silences.

'I'm Rome,' he said, holding out his hand to shake hers. 'Very pleased to meet you.'

Cassy was bemused. 'Sorry,' she said. 'This might sound rude, but . . . is it a coincidence that most of you are named after places? Sydney, Rome, Paris, Bali . . . and aren't you two Washington and Riyadh? Are they nicknames?'

There was laughter. 'Nope, real names—we're a whole planet in one van!' cried Rome.

A freckled child sat in the front passenger seat, peeking over her shoulder. Her hair was covered by a rather ugly knitted hat.

'Meet Suva,' said Bali. 'She turns eleven next week. And our chauffeur is her dad, Aden.'

Cassy was surprised. The driver didn't give off the vibes of a married man. When he met her eye in the driver's mirror, he seemed amused.

'Too many whacky names to remember?' he asked. 'We don't mind if you forget.'

The journey to Rotorua took a little under three hours, and Cassy felt more relaxed than she had in days. She counted herself lucky to have landed in the company of such thoroughly nice people. In the whole journey, she didn't hear a single word of bitchiness. There was no tension, no eye-rolling behind one another's backs. They seemed happy with life, happy with one another and genuinely interested in her. It was a new experience for Cassy: most of her friends pretended to listen for three seconds before jerking the subject smartly back to themselves. The van people asked questions and listened to her answers, laughed at her jokes, exclaimed when she mentioned that she was in the final year of a law degree.

'You must be clever,' said Suva, from the front seat.

'Nah. Law students are two-a-penny, nowadays. I kind of wish I'd done something else.'

'Such as?' That was Swiss Otto, who'd been leaning forwards to catch Cassy's every word.

'Um . . . if I had my time again I reckon I'd look at teaching. I like the way children think.'

'Well, why not?' He held out his hands. 'It's not too late! It's *never* too late.'

'True.'

'And what made you study law?'

She grimaced. 'Seemed like a good idea at the time. My dad was keen.'

'He's a lawyer?'

'No, no. He was in the army for twenty-something years. He retired as a major, and nowadays he works for a security firm. If you're doing some kind of business in—let's say—Venezuela, they'll assess the risks and provide some ex-army heavies if you

need bodyguards. If there's a meltdown, they'll help you get your business out fast.'

'Wow! That's a very cool line of work.'

'Not as cool as it sounds. Mostly dull stuff. Not sure it's even ethical, helping these big corporations exploit people. But that's more than enough about me! Who are you guys?'

'Okay,' said Paris. She clapped her hands and held them together for a moment. 'Okay. Now please, Cassy, don't think we're crazy, but we all live on a farm and market garden on Lake Tarawera.'

Cassy imagined greenhouses, perhaps a vegetable stall by a road. 'All of you? Must be a big house.'

'Not in the same house. In the same . . . village. It's a farming and gardening community.'

'Are you fruit pickers? Seasonal workers?'

'No, it's our home. We've got about five hundred hectares, not all cultivated. There's forestry and native bush. We're growing sustainably—completely sustainably—putting more back into the soil than we take out. We're off the grid for water, electricity, sewage . . . everything. But we live really well.'

Cassy sensed a change in mood. Her new friends seemed watchful, as though they were waiting for her to laugh at them.

'Yes, you have guessed it,' said Otto. His accent was strong, his delivery deadpan. 'We're just a bunch of bloody hippies.'

He winked, and Cassy smiled. They didn't strike her as being hippies. They looked neat and alert. They were glowing.

'But you use petrol,' she said. 'What about this van?'

'Runs on ethanol we've made ourselves. We had to fill up earlier because we couldn't carry enough to get us to Auckland and back.'

'So what were you doing in Auckland?'

'Just a few errands.'

'I always feel so happy to be going home,' sighed Bali. 'Gethsemane's the most beautiful place you can imagine. The lake, the hills, the bush—it's like nowhere else on earth.'

‘Sounds like heaven.’

‘It *is* heaven. I wish you could see it.’

When the van was forced to halt behind a school bus, Aden turned in his seat.

‘Hey, Cassy—why don’t you come along? Take a look at what we’re doing?’

‘I’d love to.’ Cassy thought about the logistics, but shook her head. ‘No, I’d better hop out in Rotorua. First thing tomorrow, I have to get down to Taupo. Find Hamish.’

‘The guy you were hitching with?’

‘Mm.’

‘Boyfriend?’

‘Not sure.’

Aden’s smile made creases on either side of his mouth.

‘We’ve not been getting on,’ said Cassy. ‘I think it might be over.’

They all looked sorry, and Cassy felt someone press her shoulder. Outside, the rain had intensified into a downpour. Drops bounced off the road; the van’s windscreen wipers were struggling. A sign was barely visible through the misted window: *Rotorua 5km*.

‘We’re almost there, aren’t we?’

‘Almost,’ replied Aden, and once again his smiling eyes met Cassy’s in the mirror.

Once again, she caught herself smiling back. *Stop it!* She slapped her own wrist. *Get a grip.*

‘If you’re wondering about the smell,’ said Bali, wrinkling her nose, ‘it’s coming from all the geothermal activity around here. Rotorua’s famous for that smell!’

Cassy sniffed. There *was* a sulphurous smell, a bit like the stink bomb someone once let off in her school hall.

‘People stop noticing it after a few hours,’ said Rome.

Soon they were passing shops and takeaway restaurants. Suva knelt up on her seat, murmuring earnestly into her father’s ear. The child was a waif, with darkness around her eyes.

‘Why don’t *you* ask her?’ replied Aden in a stage whisper.

‘Can’t you?’

He poked her gently in the ribs. ‘No, you.’

Suva turned right around to face Cassy.

‘Please, please, please will you stay with us?’ she asked. ‘Dad and me. We’ve got a spare bedroom. It’s lovely in our cabin. We’ll drive you back here in the morning.’

‘Aw! That’s so nice of you, but I’ve got to say no.’

‘Why?’

*Where’s the harm? These people obviously aren’t dangerous.*

‘Because I can’t make your dad do all that extra driving.’

‘Dad doesn’t mind! You don’t mind, do you, Dad?’

‘I certainly don’t,’ said Aden. ‘And we refuse to drop you in this filthy weather.’

Suva was clasping her hands, pleading. Cassy didn’t know many ten-year-old girls, but this one seemed unusual; nothing like Tara, for example, who’d been a bumptious pain in the back-side at that age. Suva had a stillness about her, a watchfulness, as though she were guarding her happiness.

‘The turnoff’s up ahead,’ said Aden. ‘Coming?’

‘There’s a venison casserole on my stove,’ added Bali.

The whole crew joined in. *Oh, go on, say yes . . . You’re such a breath of fresh air . . . Bali’s casserole is famous!*

In the years to come, Cassy would replay the next few seconds again and again. She’d wonder what it was that persuaded her to stay in that van and go to a place she’d never heard of, with people she knew nothing about.

The choice seemed easy at the time: she could get soaked to the skin, with all the hassle of finding a hostel in a strange town. She could force down her thousandth meal of packet noodles in a grubby communal kitchen. (There would be a smug Scandinavian couple wearing designer fleeces, cooking something healthy involving vegetables and a wok. There always was.) She could crawl into a creaking dormitory bunk and lie awake, waiting for the terrifying morning sickness to begin again. She could face it all on her own.



Or she could be an honoured guest in a warm house, chatting with these kind, good people over a homemade casserole. She could be cared for, pampered, wanted, liked. It was a blissful prospect.

‘If you’re sure,’ she said, and a rowdy cheer went up.

Aden indicated left and turned off the main road.

•

The landscape had changed. The hills were steeper, the vegetation wilder. Giant tree ferns brushed against the roof of the van while rain streamed down the windows. From time to time Aden swung around a dead creature in the road, which Rome said were possums. Cassy had begun the day in Auckland, with its Sky Tower, its cafés and traffic. This felt like another planet.

As they drove on, the afternoon lightened a little. Aden had to change down two gears as the van climbed up and up, before swinging around a long bend. Suddenly the outline of a mountain came into view—a fractured giant, rearing into a whitewashed sky.

‘Tarawera!’ cried Bali. ‘The volcano. We’re almost home.’

A lake stretched into the misty distance, but it didn’t look like water. It reminded Cassy of mercury: slow, gleaming, filling the scars in the earth.

‘I didn’t even know this lake was here,’ she said.

‘Imagine that,’ said Paris. ‘For me, it’s the other way around. I hardly believe the rest of the world exists.’

The road descended rapidly before turning along the shore. At first they drove past houses—mostly holiday homes, they told her—but these petered out. As the miles passed, the road became more primitive, narrower, less well maintained. Finally it ended altogether.

The child, Suva, got out to open and shut a gate, and her father navigated down a steep bank and onto a potholed track. Soon they were bumping through gloomy native bush with no sign of human habitation. Cassy was at the mercy of total strangers.

What if they were—as her mother would say—a bunch of mad axe murderers?

At last, Aden pulled into a clearing and turned off his engine.

‘End of the road,’ he said in the sudden silence.

*But there’s nothing here.*

One by one, they jumped down to the muddy forest floor and began to collect boxes from the back of the van. Mist seemed to cling to Cassy’s clothes, carrying scents of bracken and moss. She heard the trickling of water in the undergrowth.

‘Right,’ said Aden, who’d been locking up the van. ‘Gimme your pack, Cassy—we’ll get it stowed.’

‘Stowed where? In what?’

He nodded towards the lake. That was when she saw that everyone was making their way along a ramshackle jetty, lowering their cargo into the bow of a wooden boat.

‘You’re joking!’ Cassy was half nervous, half delighted. ‘You get to your place by *boat*?’

It looked like something out of a film: much bigger than an ordinary rowing boat, with boards for seats. Six oars. Rome, Paris, Sydney and the two Swiss grandsons hopped in and made ready to row. Bali was already sitting in the stern, Monty on her knee. He snuggled up to his mother, softly crooning a song of his own.

‘She’s an old whaleboat,’ said Aden. ‘Been used on this lake for well over a century.’

Cassy admired the curves of the hull; dark wood that had expanded and shrunk under thousands of suns. She imagined men balanced on the prow, wielding harpoons.

‘You and Suva could sit next to Bali,’ suggested Aden, who was untying a rope from the jetty. ‘I’ll be rowing. Let’s shove your pack in the middle. Okay . . . in you hop.’

The next moment, six people were pulling on their oars while coots skittered out of the way with offended shrieks. Cassy looked over the side, feeling the movement of water against the hull. The lake was clear and already deep—hard to judge just how deep, but a mass of weed seemed disturbingly far below. There was no

sign of a life jacket or rubber ring. Soon the weeds on the lake bed were swallowed into blackness.

‘How deep is this lake?’ she asked.

‘Very deep, in places,’ said Bali. ‘But it’s calm today. You’d think butter wouldn’t melt in its mouth.’

Across the water, Mount Tarawera reared up with barren shoulders. It wasn’t high so much as massive, broken by a series of craters. The scarred desolation reminded Cassy of the final episode of *Walking with Dinosaurs*—the late Cretaceous, when volcanic activity was suffocating the earth and a fatal meteor was about to wipe out almost all life.

‘Tarawera erupted in my great-great grandmother’s time,’ said Bali, pointing. ‘The force tore the bottom out of Lake Rotomahana, on the other side of that spur over there. This whole area was buried in millions of tonnes of ash. Lots of people died.’

It was cold on the lake; too cold to be sitting still for half an hour. Cassy was shivering by the time they rowed close to a small island. All heads turned towards it, as though it held some kind of magnetic power. A breath of smoke spiralled from the trees, and a blue rowing boat was drawn up on the beach.

‘Does someone live there?’ Cassy asked.

She heard murmurs from all around her; a sound even happier than laughter.

‘Someone amazing lives there!’ said Rome.

Cassy was intrigued by this hermitage, adrift under the shadow of a volcano. As she watched, a figure stepped out of the trees. It was a man—tall, quite rangy—strolling towards the shore. He was barefoot, wearing a pale shirt and trousers. A dog paced alongside him: a beautiful creature, like a wolf, with a heavy coat and pricked-up ears.

Rome had leaped to his feet, waving and shouting, *Justin, Justin!* All the other youngsters joined him, and the old boat rocked.

‘Come on, lads,’ warned Otto. ‘Focus on the job. You’ll have us in the water.’

They immediately sat down—though Rome couldn't resist a final wave—and picked up their oars.

The man had reached the water's edge. Cassy had an impression of spare features and fair hair lifting in the breeze. He was looking directly at her. Then he smiled and raised one hand.

Cassy couldn't look away; she kept staring back at the island, even as the boat slid into the shelter of an inlet, fringed by a grey beach.

'Who was that?' she asked Bali.

'Justin.'

'But who is Justin?'

'He's the most wonderful person you'll ever meet.'

The more she thought about it, the more Cassy was gripped by a very odd, very strong certainty. There were other people on the boat, and at least half of them had been hailing that man. Yet his greeting had been meant for her. She was sure of it.

*Why me?* she thought. *I'm only a hitchhiker. He didn't even know I was coming.*

And then she was struck by something else. He hadn't behaved as though she was a stranger. It was as if he already knew her.