

**ALAN
CARTER
PRIZE
CATCH**



FREMANTLE PRESS

PRELUDE

There always seems to be more roadkill just after the weekend. Makes sense. People are out and about more on Saturday and Sunday nights. Pub. Dinner. Family and friends. Innocent pastimes and lethal consequences. A wallaby lies brained across the cycle path and she veers further out onto the road to avoid it. The traffic is building but it's still early enough for drivers not to get too impatient. A crisp, sharp autumn morning with a dusting of snow on kunanyi/Mt Wellington and the North West Bay jerry mist spilling over the Channel. She's glad she opted for the thicker riding gloves today; even with them her fingers feel frozen. Hardly a breeze but there's an iciness at her core, which she puts down to the approach of winter.

Left onto Sandfly Road for the climb past the white weatherboard church. This isn't the steepest or longest hill on the ride, but it's the first and always seems the toughest. The sun breaches the eastern cloudbank and her last view of kunanyi is of a pink glow cast across the Organ Pipes. On now past the alpacas in the paddock, her breath steadying, legs warming up. The sharp twisting incline to the Nandroya Vineyard ahead of the blessed flat stretch towards Allens Rivulet. A tradie in his black muscle ute decides the one-and-a-half metre safety margin is not for the giving and she feels his sidewind. She gives him the finger but doubts he ever checks his rear-view mirror. Every ride there's at least one fuckwit. The ute disappears into the distance: good riddance. The long climb now towards Allens Rivulet Two, as it is designated on her Strava app, the last nasty hill until beyond the Longley Hotel up to Riverbend Road. A twenty-two K round trip before getting on with her day.

At times like this she's glad they made the move to Tasmania. It hadn't been an easy decision; she was Fremantle born and bred – a beach

baby. The idea of moving somewhere not just cool but so fucking cold that swimming gave you a headache seemed mad. She didn't mind the Western Australian heat so much, but the evidence was before them – the summers were getting longer and hotter – and there's no point staying on if one of you is suffering. And Ros really was suffering: the relentless heat made her irritable, she slept badly, lost her energy, her joie de vivre. They'd moved to Tassie three years ago, contributed to the local housing affordability crisis by outbidding and outcashing the competition, and now here they were in semi-rural splendour. It was growing on her too. She'd given in, bought herself a swimming wetsuit and joined the local open-water nutters – at least during the warmer months anyway. Even Ros seemed to be almost back to her old self, the woman she'd fallen in love with. Yes, the move has been the right decision.

The Allens Rivulet sign has been partially blacked out by some graffiti, renaming it Aliens Rivulet. She smiles every time she sees it. A simple and effective commentary on the rural Tasmanian underbelly – or just a silly joke? The sun is well and truly up now, warming her back, and it's going to be another stunning day. She picks up pace for the downhill run to the Huon Highway. Head down for the sprint, click those gears into high.

It's already too late when she sees the vehicle that cleans her up and dumps her in the ditch like just another piece of roadkill.

‘Got your lunch? Thermos?’

‘Yes, Mum.’

‘Don’t you “Mum” me.’ Kaz slips her tongue between his lips, gives his crotch a stroke. ‘From here on, you’re on your own, buster.’

Sam pulls her closer. ‘Thank you.’

‘What for?’

‘For sticking by me, through all ... this.’

‘On your way. Don’t want to be late on your first day.’ Kaz scoops Ollie up from the rug and hands him over. ‘Kiss your son and hit the road. See you tonight.’

Out the door. Sam checks everything is secured in the ute tray, chucks his holdall in the back seat and hops in. Gives Kaz and the bub a last wave and reverses out onto the road. Sparrow fart and hardly anyone around. It’s a long haul from Claremont down the Brooker Highway through to the Channel, but leaving this early he hopes to beat the work traffic. Today and tomorrow are induction days – a straight nine-to-five before he’s allocated his shift pattern of ten on, four off.

A job. At last.

He just needs to hold on to this one. That’s all.

As he passes the Tasman Bridge to his left, the jerry mist is thinning out over the gunmetal Derwent. To his right, the city with the mountain rearing behind. The summit cocooned by cloud but some glimpses of early-season snow. A helicopter landing on the roof of Royal Hobart Hospital, somebody being medivaced. A road smash maybe. He feels the familiar tightening in his chest and throat, breathes slowly to calm it. Past the fishing boat dock and the old Hobart sandstones where the

money and power reside. On the Southern Outlet now, up over Tolmans Hill and the transition to rolling countryside hemmed by dolerite ridges. The farm paddocks outside Kingston churned over for new houses: Blue Wren Estate. Maybe, in time, they'd be able to save up and buy one of those fuckers. May as well have a mortgage with rents the way they are, through the damn roof. He realises his fingers are gripping the wheel over-tight. Loosens them off.

New job. In these Covidy times too. He'd known the old skills and networks would come in useful one day. Catches the 7 am news on the radio: Covid blah-blah, anti-lockdown, anti-vaxxer demos over the weekend, cops scanning CCTV and ready to come knocking. Senate estimates, pollies' snouts in the trough again. A bomb somewhere in the Middle East. Weather set to be nice for the rest of the day. Beautiful.

A whole succession of small Channel towns on the way through. He'll never be able to afford to live in any of them. Cashed-up boomers from the mainland are buying up big time. Tree-changers. Climate 'refugees'. First-world fucking worries. To his left, glimpses of the water. Be nice to have a place here, though, looking out on that. All peaceful like.

Through the gate past the picket line of scruffy hippie protesters.
Yeah, fuck 'em.

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She's going to be late but she keeps getting lost, every corner she turns is a dead end. She should know her way by now, for goodness' sake. She'll be late and he'll give her that look, break her down bone by bone, pore by pore. Fill her with shame and self-disgust. Looking down, she sees she's forgotten to dress appropriately again. Her mother's soiled slippers and dressing gown, that sour ashtray stench. Another corner and he's right there in front of her, blocking the path. Criticising everything about her. Nothing is, or ever will be, good enough.

Ros wakes with a start. Slides her hand across the bed, feels the residual warmth where Niamh has been. Opens an eye to survey the empty space. She supposes she should get up, have a pot of coffee waiting for when Niamh gets back from her ride. Sip and admire her while she does her stretches. Maybe make a list for the day to keep everything on track: coffee, breakfast, medication, piano practice, job application, anxiety attack, medication, nap and repeat ad nauseam.

Snap out of it, you're on your way back! Out of bed, trackies and t-shirt.

Uggs. Cardie. In the kitchen, Ros flicks the kettle on and opens a tin of cat food for Monica who's curling around her ankles and mewing.

'Okay, okay. Here.'

Cat sorted, she pours boiling water into the plunger. Seven-thirty. Niamh is usually back around now. Out the window to the north, the mountain is dappled by patches of light and shade from the scudding clouds. The wind seems to have bristled, even in the short time since she got out of bed. On the back lawn, the chooks have edged out of the hen house and peck the earth with a level of concentration she can only dream of. Medication. She knocks a couple back and feels the flattening out that makes life bearable these days.

Is this all there is?

It mustn't be. That's why they're here. To start again, to rebuild. To get better.

Yes. She can't and mustn't allow her life to be forever defined by that man and what he did to her. After all, she'd won, hadn't she? The compensation payout had helped them buy this house. And under the terms of the non-disclosure agreement there was a glowing job reference which they were obliged to honour. Water under the bridge.

Three years under the bridge and washed out to sea. Three years unable to land a new job. Glowing job reference dated and worthless. And him still on his upward trajectory after his campaign of bullying, belittling, isolating, gaslighting. Why? Because, like any predator, he'd spotted some weakness in her that triggered him. Nothing special about her except that she came into his line of sight and suited his purposes. Why did she let him get away with it? Was it disbelief and denial that this could happen to her? Some kind of shame she couldn't put a name to. That denial, in turn, translating into self-disgust. Feeding on itself. Unreal. Jeez, Niamh had been a saint putting up with this crippling, ugly, repulsive paralysis.

Come home, Niamh. Where are you?

Ros checks the time on the microwave. Nudging eight. Niamh is usually home by now, she has to be out by 8.30 am to get to her job. Shower, breakfast, everything before that. Where's Ros put her phone? She finds it on the couch in the lounge room, switched to silent. Swiping her screen back to life, she sees a number of missed calls and messages. None of them from Niamh.

Then she hears the knock at the front door.

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He's clipped on his name badge, filled out a whole bunch of forms, had his photo taken for ID, been given his uniform: a polo shirt, fleece, beanie, baseball cap – all with the D'Entrecasteaux Salmon company logo. A fish leaping in the rapids, going against the flow. Protective and wet weather gear. Then some babe from marketing had shown them a video about the product. Who knew that farming fish could be so fascinating? Another from HR laid down the law about zero tolerance for this and that: drugs, alcohol, unions. Then they all signed the non-disclosure agreement.

Morning-tea time.

'Sam Willard. That right?' The woman holds out a hand for shaking. He juggles his cuppa and carrot cake into one paw, and they do the business. 'Kristin Baker. Call me Kris. Sustainable Business Team.' It's the marketing babe who showed them the flash video. On closer inspection she's not as young as he thought she was. But wearing well, that's for sure.

'G'day.'

'I was told to look out for you. Introduce myself.'

'Yeah?' He can't help the unease spreading across his face.

She laughs. 'Don't look so worried. We're all family here.'

Some of the other new guys are looking this way. The odd wink or grin. Wondering why she's singled him out. He's wondering the same. 'Great to meet you ... Kris. Very happy to join the team.' He's stammering like he's sixteen and getting up the nerve to ask her out. He waves his carrot cake at the room. 'Great set-up. Impressive.'

Her eyes sparkle, she's enjoying his discomfort. 'You were in Afghanistan, I hear.'

Who from? He'd kept it off his CV. 'Yeah. While ago now.'

She nods. 'We look after our veterans.' Taps his name badge. 'Farm Attendant is just the start, Sam. I know you've got great potential.' She hands him her card. 'Welcome to the team.'

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Could that really be Niamh there on the hospital trolley?

Ros glances at the detective and he nods for her to move forward, get a closer look. Yes, it's Niamh. Her face looks so peaceful. It's been cleaned up but there are grazes down the left side from temple to jaw, all swollen. Ros fights the urge to kiss Niamh, shake her awake. No touching, she's been told.

‘Is that her?’ The detective looks like he too is trying to hold it together. She wonders if he has access to the same pills she’s on, the ones that make things dreamlike. He’s a handsome, sporty man. Ambitious too, she thinks. The kind of man her mother would have wanted her to marry. His name, what was his name? Ian Cavanagh. That’s it.

‘Ros,’ says Ian, apologetically. ‘Can you confirm ...?’

‘Yes, that’s Niamh.’

He nods and the attendant covers Niamh’s face as Ian guides Ros towards the door. Some paperwork changes hands, signatures required. Ros is passed over to a uniformed constable who will drive her home. Ian says he will be in touch soon. She slides into the back seat; the constable glances at her in the rear-view.

‘Let’s get you home, eh, Ros?’

‘Yeah, thanks.’ The pills are wearing off. The edges of her world dropping away like a landslip in torrential rain. How is she meant to go on without Niamh?

‘The detective said it was a hit-and-run?’

‘Did he?’ The constable indicates, bolts through a break in the traffic. ‘Got somebody to be with you at home, Ros?’

‘No.’

‘We can organise somebody.’

‘No. I’ll be fine.’ I won’t, she thinks. But a stranger would be worse, however sympathetic. Another tranche of her world slides down into the abyss. Soon it will just be her on a tiny tract of soil. Like a cow marooned in a monsoon flood. When can she next have some medication? Hours away yet. Hobart streets give way to bush as they climb over Tolmans Hill on the Southern Outlet. ‘How could somebody do that? Run someone over and leave them for dead?’

The driver shakes her head. ‘Probably horrified at what they’ve done. One minute you’re looking at your phone, distracted, and next, bang.’ Those big, young eyes in the rear-view. ‘Sorry.’ A shake of the head. ‘The techs are up there examining the scene. If there’s anything to find, they’ll find it.’

And that still won’t bring Niamh back.

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‘Hey Cav, take a look at this.’

Ian Cavanagh bins his coffee cup and heads for her desk. That look of

having other, better, things to do. A fixture on his baby-smooth chops since he got his promotion last year. ‘Jill?’

She points to one of the items on the morning traffic incident reports. ‘This guy was clocked on the Huon Highway up at Vinces Saddle doing one twenty-five. Just after seven this morning. And blew point six on the breathalyser.’

‘Early start or leftovers from last night?’

Why does Cav think that’s relevant? ‘Look at his address.’

‘Margate.’

‘He’s on Sandfly Road, travelling in the same direction around the same time as our lady on the bike.’ Jill does some clicks on the keyboard. ‘Look at his history. He’s a menace to other road users.’ Indeed, he is. In the past five years his licence has been suspended more than it was in action: dangerous driving, speeding, DUI. ‘There’s more. The preliminary report from Traffic branch has black paint traces on the deceased’s bike frame. Look what colour vehicle our speed demon drives.’

No prizes for guessing.

‘Good stuff, Jill. Where is he now?’

‘At his job in Huonville. The Traffic guys made him leave his car by the road and he caught an Uber. Here’s his mobile.’

‘Kieran McKay.’ Ian gives Jill a nod of encouragement. ‘A drive out to Bandit Country, Detective?’

‘Sure.’

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On the way out to Huonville, south-west of Hobart, Ian Cavanagh looks up their speed demon on social media. ‘Ooh, our boy Kieran’s warm for this. Listen to him on Facebook trolling cyclists. Quote: “Pay your road tax or keep out my way, fuckwit.” Or this, a photo of the Tour de France peloton next to one of an Orc saying “Fresh meat”. I think we’ve hit the jackpot, Jill.’

‘Team effort, Sarge. As always.’ Jill Wilkie can’t disguise the ring of insincerity; she can’t be arsed today. Another shit night’s sleep. Hot flushes, fretting about Dad and where she’s going to find the money to cover the hike in fees from his care-home provider. Fucking vultures. A sideways glance at Cavanagh. Just one rung above her in rank but completely at ease with his status, his destiny. Dresses like he means it. Sharp as. No kids yet, no aged and demented parents making demands of him, all the

time in the world to realise his ambitions. Unless he gets cancer.

Cav makes a call to get the abandoned ute collected by Traffic.

Kieran McKay is a mechanic at a vehicle service and repair joint on the outskirts of town. The bloke's boss gives them all a filthy look when they step outside for a chat. Kieran lights up a smoke. 'What's this about?' Late twenties going on fifty. He's got a beer gut on him and one of those rural Tasmanian goatees that needs a tidy up but never receives it.

'How was the drive to work this morning?' Cavanagh waves the rogue cigarette smoke away and positions himself upwind. Jill is happy to let him run this while she studies Kieran's body language for fibs.

'You lot already know. I've been booked and I'll take whatever's coming.'

'Notice any cyclists when you were coming along Sandfly Road?'

'A couple, probably. There's always some. Never pay them much attention.'

'Tell us about the ones you saw. Where were they? What do you remember of them?'

He makes a show of thinking. 'One towards the Margate end, another up nearer the highway at Sandfly.'

'Male, female? Racer, mountain bike?'

A shrug. 'Can't remember. One had fluoros, one didn't. Has there been a complaint or something?'

'Why would there be?' asks Cav.

'You tell me.'

'There was an accident on Sandfly Road this morning. Cyclist got killed in a hit-and-run. Wondering if you saw anything, knew anything about it.'

'Not me, mate. Got the wrong bloke.'

'Have we?'

Kieran turns to head back to his job. 'Not going to pin that one on me, buddy. I'm finished here, work to do.'

Cav writes something on a pad, tears off the top sheet and hands it to Kieran. 'You'll need this.'

'What is it?'

'A receipt. We've impounded your car. If the paint on the victim's bike matches your paintwork, we'll be having another chat.'

'Fucken pathetic.'

'We'll pass on your sympathies,' says Jill.

'What?'

‘To the family of the deceased cyclist.’

A snort. ‘Don’t fucken bother. One less on the road is fine by me. Best news I’ve had all day.’

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By the end of the afternoon Sam pretty much has the gist of the job in hand. Dogsboddy, at \$36.25 per hour. A bit above Maccas pay rates but with plenty of fresh air. Who’s he to complain, it’s a job. At last. He just needs to keep this one. Not let his smart mouth and attitude get him booted. His capacity for insubordination. His propensity to self-destruct. The things he’s seen and done which he can’t unsee and undo. No, he’s going to make this one work. Once the bub has gone down and they’ve had dinner, he excuses himself. Kaz was keen to hear about his day and he tried to make it sound fantastic.

‘You’ll be great,’ she says, eyes shining. ‘I just know you will.’

He’s told her he wants to do some homework on his employers, be ahead of the game. It’s partly true. He wants to look up Kris Baker. Only fair: if she’s been researching him then he can repay the compliment. ‘Won’t be long.’

Kaz kisses him. ‘Whatever you need, pumpkin.’

Type it in: Kristin Baker, D’Entrecasteaux Salmon. Lots of love on the first few pages of the search results: ‘Tassie Fish Farm Company Lands Whopper’, ‘Rising Corporate Star’, ‘CEO-in-Waiting’, ‘Baker’s Dozen – the Top 12 Aussie Companies Headhunting Ms Fix-it’. A puff profile piece in the weekend *Mercury*: ‘From Duntroon to D’Entrecasteaux, Kristin Hears the Call of Nature’. So, she’s ex-Army and a go-getter. Out of Duntroon and straight into Army Intelligence Corps, serving in Afghanistan a decade or so ahead of Sam.

‘It was my job to identify threats and opportunities and to come up with ways to deal with them,’ she is quoted, under a photo of her in fluoros staring into an aquatic Tassie distance. The camera loves her.

It no doubt serves her well in the corporate world. The profile raves about her creative, often risky, approach to corporate troubleshooting. Seeing off hostile takeover bids, outflanking rivals, clearing out deadwood, conquering new territories. But the inevitable question from the interviewer: what about the glass ceiling? A wicked smile in return, the journo notes.

‘Glass ceiling? No such thing. It’s just a thick layer of men.’

The article ends: Get ready to hear a whole lot more from the redoubtable Ms Baker.

Impressive, Sam thinks. But if she's so shit hot, with the multinational corporate world knocking at her door, what the fuck is she doing in this Tassie backwater?

And why has she chosen to home in on him?

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'There's been a mistake. Niamh's going to be okay. She just needs a few days in hospital then she'll be coming home.'

Ros allows a tear to slip down her face. Her chest is full to bursting. Thank God. Oh, thank you, God. The nurse shares her tears, her relief. Begins plucking at a loose thread on Ros's jumper. Pulling. Miaowing. Somebody knocking at the door. Miaowing.

Ros wakes up. Then lets out a low animal moan, her face crumpling, reality punching her in the gut. The knocking persists. Go away. Just go away. Monica the tortoiseshell terror circling on the doona, plucking at it and mewling. Answer the door, says Monica, and give me some food. The mobile pings. A message from the cop, Ian. He's outside, is everything okay? Can he come in for a moment?

Shit.

Ros clambers out of bed. Nearly trips over the cat now twirling around her ankles. More knocking. Insistent. 'Okay! Coming!' Opens the door to a concerned and wet detective. It's dark behind him, and raining.

'Sorry to bother you so late.'

'I was asleep. What time is it?'

'Sorry. After nine. Sorry.'

'Has something happened?'

'Just a welfare check.' Ian steps inside before she can ask herself whether she even wants him to come in.

He insists on making her a cuppa: tea, coffee, herbal, anything. She relents and allows him to potter about in her kitchen. She hears him humming, opening and shutting drawers and cupboards. He returns with a tray: cups, saucers, milk jug, pot and cosy. She didn't even realise she owned a cosy. Maybe it was Niamh's. He found some leftover slice in a cake tin; Niamh must have made it. Does she mind, he enquires, it's been a long day. Then he tells her about Kieran, the cyclist-hating bogan and his black ute.

‘Are you going to arrest him?’

‘Mustn’t get ahead of ourselves. We’ll see what comes back from the labs.’

‘It’s murder. He murdered Niamh.’

Ian shakes his head. ‘One step at a time, Ros. Whether it turns out to be Kieran or not, somebody has done the wrong thing. That could be anywhere on the spectrum from failing to report an accident, through reckless driving, to manslaughter or murder. We can’t jump the gun.’

‘Why did you need to tell me this now?’

‘I was on my way home and I thought ...’

‘Home?’

‘Kingston.’

‘This is an extra ten Ks out of your way. More.’

‘I needed to ask you some questions about Niamh.’

‘Questions?’

‘If this is foul play then we need to know if she had any enemies, anyone who might wish her harm.’ Ian wipes some cake crumbs from his chest, takes another sip of tea.

‘Okay.’

‘Tell me about Niamh.’

Where would she start? Niamh’s smile, maybe. Her smell. That glint in her eye when she’s teasing. That fire when someone crosses her line. Once again, Ros finds it difficult to breathe, panic consuming her.

Ian places his hand on hers. ‘We’ll do everything we can to find the person who did this. I promise.’

She feels herself going under.

‘Ros?’ he says. ‘You okay?’

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