

KOMBI

by

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Sample chapters

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It was already dark when they pulled off the highway in Joey's gleaming new Audi TT. In the passenger seat, Alex was growing increasingly nervous. This was it, the final conclusion to a fortnight of restless anticipation.

He conjured up an image of his girlfriend. She was staring out at the view of the beach and the ocean, just as she'd been when he last saw her. He looked down at the bag between his feet - her bag - and groaned inwardly. A hell of a lot had changed since he'd first arrived in Sydney, the best part of a month ago. And, just when they'd finally got everything sorted out between them, everything else had gone horribly wrong.

She'd be fine, he assured himself. It would be against their interests to harm her: there was simply far too much at stake. Still, if there was one thing he'd learnt from the past few weeks, things seldom went according to plan. He focused on her, willing her to be unharmed, daring himself to imagine her staring out of the window of his flat back in England, watching the slow moving river below.

Joey guided the Audi away from the busy residential streets and into a quiet industrial area. Huge warehouses loomed above them, the deep shadows and empty pavements adding to the sense of haunting anticipation.

Joey stopped and killed the engine.

"That'll be it over there," he said, pointing at a warehouse office across the way.

Alex stared at the huge white building. There were lights on behind the two small windows on the near side. There was someone inside.

He lifted the bag from between his feet passed it to Joey. "I'll try and stay on the doorstep," he said, "But if anything happens and I'm not out in ten minutes, call in the cavalry. Actually, no, make that five minutes. And bring the Air Force as well."

He opened the door of the Audi and stepped into the cold night air.

"Alex," Joey called out as he went to shut the door. "Good luck, mate."

He walked across the empty stretch of bitumen, his palms beginning to sweat as a reel of nightmare scenarios played across his mind. What if Joey did a runner? Charging into the fray with fists flying was all well and good, but he was unlikely to feel so courageous if he was faced with a gun. Even a couple of crowbars would probably scare him off.

He glanced over his shoulder at the Audi, its bonnet protruding from the side of the warehouse. The headlights flashed once to let him know Joey was watching.

Christ, Alex thought. What an idiot he'd been. He could have done all of this by phone. They had no idea who he was, and he could so easily have kept it that way. There was still time. Joey was bound to have brought his mobile with him. Alex could run back to the car and do the whole thing from round the corner.

He turned on his heel to head back to the car, just a door opened ahead of him. Bright yellow light spilled out into the darkness. His shadow stretched out to the Audi.

"Alex Kirkham, I presume," a voice he recognised echoed from the walls of the warehouses.

Alex dragged in a breath and set his sights on the Audi.

6pm, the night before Alex hit Sydney. The babbling masses swarming through Bangkok's Hualumphong Station came to a sudden standstill. Those who were seated rose to their feet. Their faces were solemn, their mouths, for that brief moment, closed. Alex looked around him in utter confusion to see the few other white people joining in. He followed blindly, understanding nothing but conforming all the same.

The daily homage to the King lasted only a couple of minutes. The second it was over, the station returned to normal, hordes of people rushing to and fro with the needless urgency that characterised the country's capital.

Alex hoisted his rucksack onto one shoulder, lifting his day bag with the other hand. He was tired of their weight, tired of lugging what seemed like far too much stuff from one form of public transport to another, from island to island, beach hut to grotty hotel room. He found it hard to distinguish his boredom with these pursuits from his feelings for the country he would be leaving in only a matter of hours. Was it Thailand he'd had enough of, or the sense of being herded from one point to another? Which had come first, the realisation that he could quite happily never again see another temple or golden Buddha, or the realisation that, despite all of his aspirations to adventure when he left England, he had done little more over the past two months than retrace the steps of *The Great Unwashed*? He was the needle running through the groove of a well played record, a much loved but perhaps overrated LP that had been in wide circulation since the 70s, if not longer.

The train was waiting for him on the platform, one last non-adventure on a glamourless icon of public transport that was well past retirement age. It was packed, of course, but there was always room for one more. He shuffled along the narrow aisle, whacking several locals in the face with the straps and bulk of his oversized rucksack, scanning the overhead luggage racks for the necessary space. There, between a huge bag of dubious content and a plush leather briefcase that seemed desperately out of place, were the few inches of room he needed. He laid his day bag on the floor, sandwiching it between his feet for fear of having it stolen, and made awkward work of half-lifting, half-throwing his backpack into place.

A small Thai man with long wisps of wiry black hair sprouting from his chin made space for him to sit, smiling at him with a mouth half full of blackened stumps. Alex nodded courteously and mumbled a none-too-confident "Kop koon krap," his command of the Thai language restricted to greeting people, thanking them and ordering a rather meagre array of westernised local foods.

"Mai pen rai, kap," the old man responded, a phrase Alex recognised as meaning something along the lines of 'don't mention it'. "Pai don muang, mai?" the Thai continued.

Alex stared at him stupidly, wishing he'd stuck to a simple English 'Thank you' in response to the man's opening kindness, praying he wouldn't be forced to make tedious conversation for the entire duration of the journey.

"You go airport?" the old man tried in English.

"Yes," Alex nodded, a little too enthusiastically for sincerity. "Yes, I'm going to the airport. How about you? Where are you going?"

"Bang se," his new-found friend replied. Alex raised his eyebrows, feigning understanding.

"Where you fly to?"

"Sydney," Alex told him, "Sydney, Australia."

"Ah," the old man nodded slowly, his face adopting an expression of sudden unfathomable wisdom. "Olympic Games, Sydney 2000. You Australian."

"No, I'm English," Alex confessed.

"Ah, David Beckham," the man acknowledged, his eyes full of recognition as if the very name of the Spice Girl shagging footballer summed up the essence of a nation.

Bang se Station was a full thirty minutes from Hualumpong, most of which was dominated by exactly the sort of stilted conversation Alex had come to associate with public transport. For much of this time, Alex stared past the old man and out of the window. The sprawling suburbs of Bangkok lasted forever, the train winding its way through them with an interminable lack of speed. Alex was still amazed by the everyday activities of the Thai people, which seemed amplified here in the capital. He forgot for a moment the tedium of over-air-conditioned tourist buses, minibuses and dilapidated boats ferrying hordes of backpackers to and from their various pseudo Meccas. Instead, he paid close attention to this snapshot of the life of the average Thai, the workers and commuters who had little or nothing to do with the mass of foreigners that passed through their city each day. He loved the way well dressed men and women, obviously on their way to the office, stepped gingerly over the tracks and clambered onto the opposite platform, thinking nothing of a practice that was not only frowned upon but outlawed in his own distant metropolis. He had a keen fondness for the sight of dried squid being sold on the platform or by overzealous vendors shouting their way through each carriage. Even the fact that the rapid, special and express trains to the airport took no less time than the ordinary service, despite significant surcharges, caused him nothing but amusement. These were just some of the things he'd miss when he boarded that plane at 9 o'clock.

When the old man disembarked at Bang se, amid much hand shaking and wishing of good luck, Alex was left to himself. He shuffled closer to the window, hoping for just the touch of a breeze to ward off the stifling mugginess of Bangkok's early evening. Pointless. At the speed the train was travelling, the air was entirely still. The thick stench of a nearby canal filled the carriage, its pungency a sickening combination of unidentifiable odours. Alex looked at the fragile huts lining the narrow waterway, shook his head in silent disbelief that anyone could live with that constant aromatic assault. He cast a glance at the high-rise blocks only a few yards from the train tracks, at the dark brown stains on the once white paintwork, great rusty streaks like frozen muddy waterfalls edging downward from every tiny window. Across the cramped balconies hung line after line of laundered clothing that could never be truly clean, dried as it was in the ever-present smog that engulfed Bangkok.

He thought of his own clothes. It was more than thirty hours now since he'd had a shower. Thirty hours in the back of pickup trucks and three-wheeled *tuk tuks*, cramped into a poorly air-conditioned minibus, lying on the top bunk of an overnight train with only a slow moving fan for comfort. In those same clothes, in that same sweaty skin, he had spent the day wandering the traffic-clogged streets of a tropical, fume filled city, stopping occasionally for a slow, icy drink in some

roadside eatery just to kill time.

It seemed ironic to him that he should be travelling in such shoddy clothes while those around him were as well presented as they could manage. There he sat, with a money belt full of Traveller's Cheques and a rucksack worth more than most of his fellow passengers would earn in a month, perhaps even a year, with his university education and another six to nine months of backpacking ahead of him. Yet his trousers were threadbare and his T-shirt would be better suited as a dishrag. His normally close-cropped hair hadn't seen a barber in weeks or a drop of shampoo in several days. It was thick and salty from a mixture of sea water and sweat. By contrast, a Thai abroad would be travelling in his best, of that Alex was certain. He would be representing both himself and his country. His outward appearance would be a reflection of his worth, an extension of his self worth. Any Thai dressed like Alex wouldn't be going anywhere, wouldn't be much more than a vagrant. What did they think of all this, he wondered, of all these Westerners with their tattered neo-ethnic clothing, strange piercings, stock tattoos and manky dreadlocks, haggling over pennies when they could clearly afford to spend months on end lying on beaches, taking in the sights and getting blasted on Sang Som and Singha?

This vision of luxury from the Thai side reminded him of the overnight train from Surat Thani, in the south of Thailand. He'd boarded the train at 8.30 that evening, traipsing the length of the train in search of his own car, fourteen carriages away from the entrance to the station. Almost immediately, he had asked the steward to make up his berth and had climbed gratefully into it without exchanging a single word with those around him. True, he was exhausted, having managed precious little sleep the night before thanks to his first ever bout of food poisoning, but his main aim was to avoid conversation. It was this that had kept him in bed until moments before the train had pulled into Hualumpong a little after 9am. His Thai neighbours, with their impeccably quiet and well-behaved children had been up since six, showering, eating breakfast and generally getting organised for whatever awaited them in Bangkok. They must have been stunned at the sheer laziness of the Englishman who'd lain in his bunk for 12 hours, silent and still, and had done no more than brush his teeth in preparation for their arrival.

8.20pm. Don Muang Airport. Alex was through passport control and wandered aimlessly between the various shops and stalls, noting the presence of dried squid even in this relatively sterile environment. There was nothing here that interested him. Perfume and posh cosmetics were well beyond his budget and, besides, he already had all the presents he needed for Sydney. Not that he was heavily laden with gifts - there was only one person he knew in the whole of Australia - but, nevertheless, he had a few nice surprises, some of them luxuries from home, others more recently acquired. He was proud of the little package he'd managed to put together over the past few months. Not only would it show her just how much she'd been on his mind since she left England back in May, it was testament to how well he knew her and the things he hadn't forgotten despite their being separated for the past five months or so.

He pictured her waiting at the airport for him, nervously chewing her lip as she watched the steady trickle of people emerge from Australian Customs. As he looked her over, soaking up her anticipation, he imagined her wearing the dress he'd

bought her during those warm weeks of March not long before she'd left for Oz. He saw the big, childish grin on her face as she spotted him in the crowd, felt her delicate arms around his neck as he bent down and lifted her off her feet.

But she wouldn't be there. No one would be there. Alex was arriving unannounced, two weeks earlier than planned thanks to a stirring discussion with a sympathetic Israeli girl at Ko Pha Ngan's Full Moon Party a few days ago. By 11am the next morning, still peaking from his third E of the night, he'd brought forward his flight and was booked on a boat to Surat Thani. Not the sort of spontaneous act Alex was known for, it has to be said, but a noble act nonetheless.

11.30pm. Somewhere over Southeast Asia. Alex stared vacantly at the appalling Jackie Chan movie playing on the screen a few feet from the end of his nose. Once an avid fan of the master of pseudo-comic kung fu, Alex vowed never to suggest his movies to Sarah again, no matter how much of a cheeky grin accompanied the suggestion. This was shite, pure unadulterated shite. Up there with Will Smith's *Wild Wild West* outing, which was another splash of cinematic vomit to which Alex had been subjected by one of the world's most profitable airlines.

Similarly shite was the free brandy offered by the Thai stewardess, resplendent in her silk uniform and perfectly garnished with a smile far more genuine than could be found on any Caucasian airhostess. Excellent service, great food, passable wine, but the brandy was straight from the reserve fuel tank. Never again.

9.45am, Eastern Standard Time. Ten minutes west of Sydney. After enough circling to test Alex's aerial nerve, the plane was finally coming in to land. He'd read too many newspaper tales of Asian airliners carrying only enough fuel for two attempts at the runway and these past fifteen minutes had seen a lot of unnecessary swallowing and twisting in his seat. Alex wasn't too keen on flying at the best of times, despite all the positive press. This kind of hanging around was too much for him.

Now, though, as the plane followed the Parramatta River over the Western Suburbs, his unease was gradually replaced by wonder. This was the city in which he would live and work for the next six months or more. Sarah had everything sorted, an apartment overlooking the beach, a great bunch of friends, her own well paid job that would allow him the leeway to find work he really enjoyed and, of course, a whole load of Alex's cassettes. He thought through the half dozen tapes he had in his bag, tapes he'd heard over and over again since leaving England eight weeks ago. He couldn't wait to listen to some different music, the Stones, Blur, Oasis and the compilations he'd put together for her in the weeks leading up to her departure. The words to *Tender is the Night* drifted through his mind as the plane tipped dramatically to the right.

As it levelled out, Alex looked out of the window at the landscape below. Unmistakably Sydney, the Harbour Bridge panned out beneath him, and next to it the Opera House. Fucking hell, he thought to himself, the excitement welling inside him as he stared at the famous harbour spreading from there to the Pacific. I'm finally here. I'm in Australia. Fucking Australia. Vegemite, Kylie, Kangaroos, Barbies and Billabongs. Wicked!

Australian Customs was the most harrowing Customs Alex had ever experienced. Not only was there the usual guilt of not being a drug trafficker, the terror that some unsmoked spliff might lie at the bottom of his bag, and the fear that they'd spot his copied tapes and hang him for music piracy, there were sniffer dogs everywhere. Not after cannabis, coke or heroin, but far more innocuous vegetables, fruit and nuts. So thorough was the defence of this enormous island's wildlife that even his hiking boots were subjected to considerable scrutiny, just on the off-chance he'd actually used them and they'd snagged even traces of mud. Unsurprisingly, they were clean as a whistle. Alex had been determined to avoid physical exercise at all costs while seeing the sights of Thailand.

The rest of his trip through the airport was pretty swift and Alex chose to ignore the conspicuous signs to a public bus stop, favouring instead the tourist bus that would take him, for a price, to Bondi. He was tired, he'd not had much sleep - and, besides, he'd made his way to and from Bangkok airport purely by public transport. A little bit of luxury wouldn't go amiss.

Sure enough, within the hour, the bus dropped him across the road from Bondi Beach. Not quite what he'd expected from the country's most famous stretch of sand, especially with the Olympic ministadium bang in the middle, but not a bad stretch of sand at all. And it was heaving. Twenty degrees with clear skies and the masses had hit the beach. Ko Pha Ngan it was not.

The phone rang several times before she picked it up. He'd wanted to call her first, rather than just turn up at the door, wanted to get her going, to have her convinced he was still in Thailand before he delivered the surprise. He shivered with excitement at the sound of the receiver being lifted, grinned uncontrollably as he heard the familiar intake of breath.

"Hello?" Sarah's voice was unmistakable. Alex's heart missed a beat as Damon Albarn sang 'Tender is the night, lying by your side' in his head.

"Sarah, it's me," he said, desperate to tell her he was only minutes from her front door.

"Alex? My god, your voice sounds so clear..."

Alex stifled a laugh.

"How are you?" he asked her as he tried to pull himself together.

"Me? I'm fine. The usual. Got to be at work in half an hour..."

"Half an hour? But it's only half eleven," he insisted, checking his watch.

"Twelve," she corrected him. "The clocks went forward a few weeks ago. It's because of the Olympics. They brought summertime forward especially. Weird, eh?"

"Very," Alex agreed, more than a touch crestfallen. He'd known she'd be due at work today, but he had hoped for at least some time with her beforehand. Well, maybe there was still a chance she'd pull a last minute sickie.

"I can't believe you're here," she squealed, ushering him upstairs. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"I just thought I'd surprise you," he explained, already wishing he'd put the pack over both shoulders for the three-storey climb.

"Mission accomplished," she assured him. "So, what's it like being back in the Western world?"

"Dunno yet," he sighed. "I've been too knackered to take it all in."

"Well, let's get all this stuff up to the flat and I'll make you a cuppa. Still two sugars?"

"Just the one, now. Watching the waistline and all that."

She laughed at the cheap irony. Backpacker life had left Alex's waistline even slimmer than he'd been in England. "Still the comedian," she observed, slapping his backpack.

"Always," he chuckled.

They reached the door to the flat without too much hardship, but still Alex was out of breath. Those weeks of luxury had taken their toll; too many watermelon shakes, too many banana pancakes, and probably a couple too many beers to round it all off. Sarah squeezed past him and pushed open the door.

"Not much, but it's home," she warned, and led him inside.

The short hallway led past the poky kitchen and into a generous living room. The battered sofa faced an old TV propped up on dark blue milk crates. A ghetto blaster rested on a tired free-standing shelf unit, unmistakably Ikea. There was a pile of dog-eared magazines in one corner, a few of them straying across the dark, polished floorboards. Pretty dire, Alex thought to himself, and not very Sarah. Still, at least it was a flat, not a bamboo beach hut.

"Check out the view!" Sarah's voice burst with enthusiasm. Alex joined her at the window to see what all the fuss was about.

"That's why it costs \$230 a week," she explained, thrusting her head outside and taking a deep breath of sea air.

Alex was suitably impressed. The apartment boasted a fantastic view of Bondi Beach and its surroundings. Waves beat against the rocks at both ends of the beach. People surfed, swam and sunbathed in any available space. The street thronged with people, shopping, strutting and passing their time outside the numerous cafes and restaurants that lined Campbell Parade. And it was noon in the middle of the week. Did nobody work in this place?

"Help yourself to whatever's in the fridge," Sarah told him. "There's not much, but then I don't eat in all that much these days - it's far easier, and probably cheaper, to go out."

Alex lowered his rucksack to the floor, stunned and silent.

"I'll be back just after eight," she continued. "Make yourself at home. There's a video shop just down the road. The card's on top of the TV - oh, and here's a set of keys."

She tossed him some keys and was at the front door before he had a chance to react.

"See you later," she called, and closed the door behind her.

Something was definitely wrong. As enthusiastic as Sarah had sounded, there had been no great squeezing hug, no deep kisses or heartfelt sigh to welcome him to Australia. Not a single display of relief or excitement that almost six months of waiting was finally over.

Alex's mind was racing. Great, it told him. You've travelled halfway round the world just to get dumped. Fan-fucking-tastic. The fit Israeli from Ko Pha Ngan flashed in his mind. All that sympathy, all those hours spent E-ing together on the

beach. What a waste.

No, his conscience demanded. If he was due for the flick, he was going to receive it as self-righteously as possible. No thoughts of missed opportunities in Thailand, no rebound shagging under her nose just to get his own back. No. He would do this honourably. He would be perfect. Sarah and her friends would see nothing but Alex at his most desirable, his most understanding and resilient. She would regret her decision. Her heart would ache when she remembered how she'd left him in her flat on Campbell Parade, alone except for video club membership and a fridge full of nothing only moments after he'd arrived from Thailand to surprise her. Alone and helpless, without even a hint of the welcome he'd been expecting.

Yeah, the Guilt card, that was the one he would play. He would make a show of trying to be strong and failing, beg her to tell him what he'd done wrong, knowing all along that it was her fault not his. And finally, when she gave in and said she was sorry, that she'd just been confused and that nearly six months apart had led her to doubt that what they'd had at home was really that good... Then, he would turn on her, make a few snide comments and accuse her of stringing him along. He'd do it publicly, after a few drinks, so her friends could see just what a bitch she was. They'd side with him, talk behind her back about what a nice guy he was and how stupid she'd been to let him go. Yeah, the Guilt card.

Except it wouldn't happen like that. There was no way it could. Alex just wasn't that type of guy, wasn't that manipulative, that heartless, or that in charge of his feelings for her. Chances were he'd be doing all the begging, pleading with her to reconsider while clinging desperately to his dignity.

It was worse than he'd thought. Sarah may have become something of a slob since she'd left England. She may have exchanged what was once impeccable tidiness for a more relaxed attitude to being house-proud. Having copies of FHM lying around her flat was entirely different. Back in England she'd stopped just short of insisting that Alex have nothing to do with such 'laddish' magazines. Indeed Alex had been reduced to sneaking the occasional peek at his mates' houses or during trips to the doctor or dentist. She'd labelled them 'denigrating', 'puerile' and 'pathetic' at best. She would take his occasional glance at their front covers as a personal affront, a clear indication that her tall and classically curvaceous body wasn't good enough for him - ironic seeing as she was exactly the type of woman who insisted on being valued not for her looks but her personality, both of which were as close to perfect as Alex could imagine.

Hence the alarm bells at the presence of three issues of FHM on Sarah's living room floor, in amongst the usual drivel of celebrity gossip rags, Elle and Vogue that Alex had been sifting through in a bid to pass the time. FHM. 'For Him'. Not 'For Her', not 'For Anyone Who Fancies a Bit of Light Entertainment and Enlightenment in Matters of Men's Health'. 'For Him', a magazine that mixed the aforementioned light entertainment and enlightenment with a host of nubile young women barely dressed, with adverts for soft porn chat lines and books revealing how to attract these same nubile young women or someone almost as rewarding.

Alex stared at the covers of the three offending magazines, barely registering the implications. Three stirringly attractive semi-naked models merged into one and became a bizarre afterimage as he knelt on the polished floor and struggled for

alternative explanations. All were ridiculous. True, the brief suspicion that Sarah had recently discovered her own bisexuality offered some respite, but the probability of these magazines belonging to a bloke was infinitely higher.

Alex was seized by the need for irrefutable evidence. Leaving the magazines on the floor, he strode angrily into the bedroom, equally determined and terrified. The little bedside unit was the most obvious place to look, its small drawer a potential treasure chest of incriminating paraphernalia. He sat beside it on the bed, a double bed with a cream coloured duvet, the same as Sarah had had at home on the bed they'd shared for the year and a half before she'd left for Australia. The same bed they'd slept in the night before he'd driven her to Heathrow and waved her through Passport Control with tears in his eyes.

Only one of the pillows had a dent in it, small and head shaped. The other was fully puffed up, untouched, perfectly innocent. Alex looked at the bedside unit, at the drawer with its little wooden handle. He took a deep breath, and opened it.

8.45pm. Sarah was late.

Alex sat on the crappy leather sofa in Sarah's apartment overlooking Bondi Beach. It was dark outside and he hadn't bothered to turn on the lights, engrossed as he had become in his own dark thoughts and the movie that lit his face with a flickering blue and white light. *The Green Mile* was working its magic on him, its vicious injustice fuelling Alex's ever-swelling sense of self-righteousness.

There was a knock at the door. A friendly knock, the knock of someone who knows the occupant and is expecting them to be in. This'll be him, Alex thought. This will be the toned and bronzed surfer Sarah had chosen over him. Alex shook, pausing the video as Tom Hanks and co. walked their enormous black captive to the electric chair.

All feelings of self-righteousness drained from his body. He pictured himself swinging open the door with a 'Who the fuck are you?' on his lips, only to be met with the same question by the guy who'd replaced him in Sarah's heart, an enormous Aussie with shoulder length bleached blonde hair and muscles swollen by a mixture of beach life and hard labour, an enormous Aussie with more right to be there than him.

When the knock came again, harder and sharper, Alex began to prepare his excuses. First he was 'A friend of Sarah's'. Then, realising the implications, he was 'A cousin'. By the time he reached the door, he was on the verge of camping it up, greeting the guy with a squeeze of his bicep and introducing himself as Sarah's gay cousin from England.

"Christ, Alex! I thought you and my keys had gone and gotten yourselves lost in Bondi," Sarah despaired as she pushed past him into the hallway, leaving him with three plastic bags full of shopping to bring in. She dumped her own cargo on the rusted kitchen table and pulled out a six pack.

"Beer?" she offered.

Alex took the bottle from her hand and stood waiting for the bottle opener. Sarah twisted the top off her own by grinding it into the flesh of her forearm. Registering Alex's surprise, she handed him the bottle and took his, opening it in the same way.

"Twist tops," she explained. "Some of them are too tight for me to do without lacerating my fingers. The forearm seems to do the trick. Cheers."

She clinked her bottle against his and put it to her lips. Alex did the same. It was only when he did so that he realised he'd had nothing to drink since he'd arrived. The dry air of the plane had left him dehydrated and he hadn't had the thick heat of Thailand or the mass of beachside restaurants reminding him to make up the lost fluid.

He drank most of the beer in one long draught. After weeks of Singha and Chang, the standard Thai fare, what Sarah referred to as a 'Coldie' tasted fantastic.

"These ones are the cheap ones," she informed him. "I'll introduce you to the full delights of Australian beer later."

Sarah cooked them dinner, apparently something of a novelty for her. Never all that enthusiastic or accomplished in the kitchen, she opted for something quick and simple. After weeks of rice and noodles, Alex was glad of the change, even if it was a

little bland in comparison.

Conversation was short and shallow throughout the meal. Nevertheless, Alex's feelings of betrayal and the haunting sense of imminent excommunication gradually subsided. At last he was talking to someone he knew, someone with whom he'd spent some of the best moments of his life, someone with whom he was desperately, even pathetically, in love. FHM and the contents of Sarah's bedside drawer seemed insignificant in comparison. Whatever this hiccup was, it could be overcome. Sarah was alone in a foreign country, building a life for herself - for both of them - and it was inevitable that she would have felt isolated. Alex's occasional letters and phone calls, his sorry attempts to make e-mails suitably personal and romantic, none of these things could compete with on-the-spot attention, especially over almost six months. No amount of xxx's across the bottom of a page, no childish hearts or three page professions of love could offer the same comfort as one simple hug. Alex cursed himself for wasting so much time in Thailand. Why hadn't he come straight to Sydney? Why couldn't he have ignored the stopover in Bangkok, seen through the offer of a free flight to the Orient and followed his heart to Australia? There was no other explanation: he was a fucking idiot. But he would make up for that. Between them, they could sort it out.

This realisation, coupled with his swift consumption of Coldies, brought him a sense of calm. She'd been with someone else. He could accept that. He was, technically, an adult. All he had to do was avoid pandering to his hurt pride and they'd be able to salvage their relationship from all this. Yeah, they were in love; they'd work it out.

Dinner was done with and Sarah too seemed far more relaxed. She spoke more freely now, told him about her job in greater detail than she'd ever attempted when he was half a world away. He could feel the bond growing again, see the strength of her feelings for him in her eyes.

They polished off the Coldies and Sarah took him to one of her locals, a massive Aussie pub known to true devotees by its old name 'The Regis'. The ground floor boasted a sizeable bar with ATM, Internet access and a rowing boat, complete with oars, suspended from the ceiling. The crowd was a mixture of Brits, Mediterranean Europeans, Israelis and Australians, the latter in the minority. And everyone was getting slaughtered.

Sarah led him upstairs and challenged him to a game of pool, explaining that she and a few mates spent most Thursday and Friday nights here, talking crap and getting mashed. Her skill with the cue testified to this. Alex had always considered himself a dab hand at the game, but she beat him three games to two.

By midnight they were dancing to anything the DJ played. The afternoon's dramas forgotten, Alex was himself again, his drunken self, but himself all the same. Sarah was his girlfriend and Sydney was the greatest place on earth.

By 1am they were staggering home from the pub. Arm in arm and equally malcoordinated, they spoke in slurred voices of similar times back home. Alex filled Sarah in on the latest UK gossip and she briefed him on a few of her new-found friends.

By 1.30 they were drunkenly pawing at each other's clothing, giggling and panting as they fought to get naked.

By 2 they were blissfully asleep.

Alex awoke to find himself alone. His head was ringing and his throat was lined with bile. His naked chest was warmed by the late morning sunlight spilling in through the curtainless bedroom window. The flat was silent.

He sat upright and looked at the time. Reassured that she wouldn't yet have left for work, he slipped on the grey boxer shorts that lay in a pile of his and Sarah's clothing beside the bed. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he stood and left the room.

Sarah stood by the window in the living room. She was dressed in nothing but a large blue fluffy towel and sipped gingerly from a mug of black coffee as she stared vacantly at the horizon.

Alex cleared his throat and she turned toward him with a start, hot coffee lapping over the side of the mug and splashing down the front of her towel.

"Mornin'," Alex announced, the smile on his face only half genuine.

"Hi," she replied, her voice meek, her expression hunted.

There was a moment's silence, an agonising awkwardness that thickened the air between them. Then they both spoke at once, talking over each other, stopping, smiling, then doing it again. Sarah raised her hands, slopping more of the coffee onto the floor.

"Please," she said softly, too softly. "Let me go first."

Alex reluctantly conceded. He had no idea what he wanted to say, but he had hoped to get at least some words in first. Sarah, on the other hand, had clearly been rehearsing this for hours, maybe even longer.

"I'm sorry about last night," she told him, rubbing a lock of long brown hair between thumb and forefinger. "I had a great time, I think we both did, but that shouldn't have happened - not like that, anyway. We were drunk, shitfaced. I should have known something like that would happen, but I wasn't thinking straight. I was just so happy to see you, so happy to see a familiar face. We've talked about you coming here for so long and it seemed... natural... to celebrate..."

Alex heard little of what she said. All he could think of was the tenderness, the love he'd felt as they'd lain beside each other after sex.

"There's no easy way to say this Alex," she continued. "I've been seeing someone else. It's only been for a couple of weeks and so far it's nothing serious. I know it's wrong, and it's even worse that he doesn't know about you. I've lied to both of you. I guess I hoped it wouldn't seem so wrong if neither of you knew. I hadn't thought about what I'd do when you arrived... Oh God, Alex, I'm so confused. It's not that my feelings for you have gone, I just, well, I... Oh shit, I don't know. It's all just such a mess. I know it's clichéd but I need some time to get my head round it all. We've been apart for six months now and a lot's changed, for me at least. In some ways it feels like years since we were together. Last night, I just didn't know how to be with you. And then, after a few beers, it all seemed so natural, so right."

"Then go with it," Alex interrupted, only vaguely aware of what he was saying.

"But that's just it, Alex. I can't just go with it. We were hammered last night. Before that it all felt really awkward. Maybe that's just what happens when you've been apart as long as we have. Maybe it'll get back to normal over the next few days."

"So what are you saying? We see how it goes over the next few days?" Alex was getting angry. His pride had the upper hand. "And how's this bloke of yours going to feel about that?"

"Chris is away on business. He won't be back for a week and a half," she assured him.

"Meanwhile he thinks everything's fine?" Alex snapped.

"Chris isn't the issue here, Alex. This is about you and me. I'd like us to take the time to get to know each other again, as friends, to see if we're really compatible any more..."

"Compatible?" Alex scoffed. "Sarah, we've been together for two years. I think we know we're compatible."

"Those two years are why I don't want us to fall out over this. We have a lot of history, you and I, and I don't want to lose all that. All I'm asking is that you bear with me on this."

Alex stared past her out of the window. The ocean. And past that ocean was another ocean. And somewhere on the far side of that second ocean was home, a dreary little island off the coast of Europe.

Sarah had the upper hand. She may not have known it, but Alex would take any chance he could get. A few more days on top of the past six months wasn't too much to ask. It'd be harder with her only inches away, but he could handle it. The past two years were worth it. As long as he didn't have a face for Chris, didn't think of the two of them grinding away in that bed, as long as he could keep his imagination in check he'd be fine.

That afternoon, to keep himself from ransacking her flat in search of further evidence, he checked out the local area. Bondi Beach, only a small part of Bondi proper, was a magnet for English and Israeli backpackers. The Irish headed for Coogee, a few beaches south and a place Alex wasn't destined to visit. Campbell Parade, the main strip along Bondi Beach, was lined with cafés, restaurants and clothes shops aimed at the discerning traveller. The backstreets were filled with veggie eateries, overpriced minimarkets and Internet cafes. Typical backpacker facilities. But the difference here was that Bondi exuded money. It was a place that attracted celebrities and well groomed club types, as well as artists, street performers and importers of Asian jewellery. It had a certain coolness about it that most of the backpacker havens Alex had seen hadn't quite attained. Still, it would have been cooler without a McDonald's.

That night they ate out. Alex was keen for some Thai, and the area boasted a couple of great Thai restaurants. The larger of these embraced the pervasive Australian tradition of BYO booze, a budget-friendly phenomenon Alex had rarely seen at home. The atmosphere was like nothing he had felt in weeks. A young crowd, well dressed and brimming with enthusiasm, oozing the energy that summed up the Olympic city. Alex was quite the opposite. He'd invested in a trip to an eight dollar barber in a bid to improve his appearance, but he was still dressed in the same frayed clothing, freshly laundered but no more appropriate, and his mood was even more incongruous with his surroundings. The wine hadn't helped matters and he was growing increasingly sullen with each mouthful.

Sarah was determined to cheer him up. Alex was determined that she should fail.

A poor strategy given that he was supposed to be proving himself as the man of her dreams, but logic had less to do with it than sheer bloodymindedness.

"I've got an idea," she declared as they sat staring at their second empty bottle. "Some mates of mine have been to see a play at the Old Fitzroy. It'll be finished in half an hour or so and they're bound to stay on for a few drinks."

She paid the bill and dragged him to the nearest bus stop. Just over half an hour later they were in King's Cross, a horrendous part of town as filled with whores, beggars and drug addicts as it was with wide-eyed tourists. A five minute walk took them to Woolloomooloo, Alex's first encounter in what was to become a love affair with Australia's ludicrous place names. Here, on a secluded corner and jammed to the rafters with revellers, was the Old Fitzroy, a compact but many-roomed pub with a thoroughly British feel. Its basement held a well respected theatre and the backyard hosted patrons of its much praised restaurant. A gem of a drinking establishment that was the complete antithesis of The Regis back in Bondi.

All but one of Sarah's friends were English. The other was a broad, shaven headed Scotsman with a vast goatee beard who was busy charming a smiling Australian girl when Alex and Sarah arrived. The introductions were brief and quickly forgotten. Alex found himself scanning the faces of the four girls and two remaining guys, wondering which, if any of them, knew the true tragedy of his position. Did they know he'd been with Sarah for the past two years? Did they know Chris? Had any of these other blokes had their wicked way with Alex's girlfriend while he was thousands of miles away?

"You look a bit lost," one of the girls said to him as he stared into space, tuning out of conversation that was more or less meaningless given his recent arrival.

"Just a bit disoriented, that's all," he smiled weakly.

"Sarah said you only got here yesterday," the girl continued as Alex struggled to remember her name. "You flew in from Thailand."

"Yeah," he nodded. "Still a bit jetlagged, although the hangover from last night probably isn't helping."

"What did you think of it?"

"What? The Regis?"

"No, Thailand," she laughed. "Where did you go?"

"Oh, just round a few of the islands. Up to Chiang Mai and Sukhotai for a bit of culture. Nothing too adventurous."

"And how long were you there?" she asked, the conversation continuing in much the same vein, though with far more genuine interest than Alex had experienced in the backpacker cafes of Thailand. They talked their way through a couple of beers, wholly separated from the others, who were busy dissecting the play they'd just seen for the benefit of themselves more than Sarah. The girl, whose name Alex still didn't know, had been to all of the places he had seen and more. She'd travelled extensively through Southeast Asia back in '94 and '95 and had far more complimentary things to say about the more obscure places Alex hadn't known existed 'til he'd heard about them on the beaches of Ko Lanta and Ko Pha Ngan. Laos and Burma were her all-out favourites and Alex was stunned by her comparison of the effects of French colonisation and the British Raj on the architecture, politics and attitudes of two of the least touristed countries in the region.

She'd been in Sydney for just over four months, temping here and there, and was

keen to use the money she'd saved to see the rest of Australia. She'd answered an ad that day from a guy looking for someone to drive his VW Camper across to Perth. The lucky courier would pay only a few dollars a day, plus petrol, and any major repairs would be taken care of, the money reimbursed on arrival. Not a bad deal at all, Alex agreed, especially given the money and risks involved with buying your own van and hoping to sell it at the other end.

"I'm meeting him here tomorrow night," she told him. "Going to check the van over, give it a little test drive and see how it goes. With a bit of luck I'll be on the road in a couple of days. One minor hitch though..."

"What's that?" he asked on cue.

"My boyfriend's not going to be able to come with me. He was supposed to be flying to Sydney this week, but his gran's sick. She lives in San Diego and he was visiting her on the way over. They don't know if she'll do the distance, so he's staying there and will probably join me in Perth."

"Bummer," Alex tutted, glancing at Sarah to see her deeply engrossed in conversation.

"Too right," the girl agreed. "All that testosterone I'd have had to protect me and make sure the van doesn't pack up. Anyway, enough about me. What are your plans?"

"Well..." his mind racing, he looked at Sarah, who was laughing with one of the English guys, her hand on his arm as he leant against the bar. "I'm staying with Sarah at the moment. I reckon it'll take me a few days to decide exactly what I'm going to do."

"Don't get stuck in Sydney," she warned him. "So many backpackers come here with this idea that they'll work for a few months, save some money and then hit the road, see the rest of the country. Ninety nine times out of a hundred they don't. They all pile into cheap hostels or two bedroom flats, three or four to a room, thinking they're saving money when all they do is piss it away on beer. Wasted every night. The only way to do it is to keep the partying to a minimum and work your arse off. Forget you're on holiday for a few months and focus on making money. Chris is lucky. His job takes him all over the place, Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne, Perth. And he gets paid a shitload. The rest of us are stuck with the sort of job no one could ever take seriously. Chris has carved himself a nice little career out here, got sponsored and everything. I wouldn't be surprised if he stays. Not in Sydney, though. He's not as keen on the place as I am."

Alex's jaw hung slack. "You know Chris?" he asked at last.

"Yeah. Not all that well, but we've been known to share a few jars. Why?"

"Oh, it's just that Sarah was talking about him last night," Alex lied. "I didn't realise you knew him."

"Not as well as her, of course," the girl grinned, glancing at Sarah. "Although I might just have pipped her at the post if I wasn't already taken. Even now, I sometimes wonder why I ever introduced them. It's not like I knew Sarah that well anyway. But anyway, that's old news."

"No, please, I'd like to know a little bit more about him," Alex goaded her.

She looked at him tartly and prodded him in the ribs. "Bit of chemistry between you and Sarah, is there? Hoping to knock our Chris off his throne before he gets back from his latest business trip, are we? Tut tut."

"So they're a bit of an item, are they?" Alex swallowed, red-faced.

"Like Australia's a bit of a big country," she confirmed. "Trust me. It's a lost cause. I wouldn't be surprised if she jacked in the flat in Bondi and they got a place together."

"That serious?" He did his best to hide his discomfort behind a beer.

"Yep. If you're planning on staying in Sydney, if I were you I'd find myself somewhere else to kip or you won't be getting much sleep at all once he gets back. I've heard they're a bit of a dynamic duo in the sack"

Alex spent that night on the sofa, insisting that if he and Sarah were to try the 'friends' thing for a while, they'd have to start by sleeping in separate beds. Why he hadn't confronted her there and then about her dishonesty over the whole Chris affair, he had no idea. Maybe he'd been confident in his drunkenness that, even if the girl in the Fitzroy had thought Sarah and Chris were something major, two years of history and his own gut-wrenching love for her would win in the end. Or maybe he'd just been too drunk - too drunk but sensible enough to keep his mouth shut instead of letting it run free which would have only led to total humiliation, for him.

In the eye-stabbing light of day, as he eked out the last few minutes before Sarah gave up on her 'sleeping' guest and went to work, he was still undecided. He spent the remainder of the afternoon missing much of the Australian cinematic classic *The Castle* thanks to frequent interruptions by inquisitive cockroaches emerging from the sofa that had been his bed. His pristine hiking boots were treated to a thorough pounding, turning the bulbous bodies of the world's vilest insect into a noxious paste not too dissimilar to the discarded remains of a soft-centred chocolate. How absorbing it was, crushing the defenceless little fuckers with his heavy Goretex boots. How exhilarating, and how enlightening.

Enlightenment came as Alex scooped the 22nd twitching corpse from the nicely polished floor and tossed it through the window, a point of exit that was sure to cause a degree of consternation from the people on the street below. He thought of them and he thought of the cockroach, and then he thought of himself. He was that cockroach, powerless under the descending boot of Sarah's betrayal. Not only that, but he was the innocent passerby. His confident swagger into Sydney had been reduced to an embarrassed epileptic jitterbug by the falling cockroach of Sarah's request that they try and be friends while her new boyfriend spent a week or two away on 'business'.

He had to get out. He had to take control of his life and quit while he was only this far behind. Sod work, forget Sarah and take the only advice he'd been offered since he'd arrived. 'Don't get stuck in Sydney'. Over-consumption of the best beers the Fitzroy had to offer had done little to strike those words from his mind.

6pm. Back in Woolloomooloo. Alex's sense of direction was as unreliable as ever. He'd managed the bus to Bondi Junction and the train ride to Kings Cross, but within a few minutes he was in an eerie backstreet identical to all the others and equally devoid of a pub. Worse still, his only hope of directions was reclining against a wall on the other side of the street and wore the standard Kings Cross work clothes of a low cut top, miniskirt and cheap high heels.

He crossed the road and approached her, looking both ways to be sure no one would see him and get the wrong idea.

"Hi, honey," she purred, her voice considerably deeper than he'd expected. Alex's mind leapt to some of the less desirable but incredibly popular Thai nightspots he'd visited on his travels. Here though, unlike on a number of occasions in Pat Pong and Samui, he could tell at first glance - now that he was close enough to make out facial features - that this 'lady' had at some time been packing more than a packet of condoms in her underwear.

"Hi," Alex began, determined to get straight to the point. "I'm looking for the Old Fitzroy. Do you know where it is?"

"Don't know no 'Old Fitzroy'," she pouted, "But I got a young dick toy in here especially for you."

Alex squirmed as the twenty dollar cross dresser put a hand to its crotch and licked its lips. Meat and two veg was clearly still on the menu.

"You're sure you don't know where it is?" he tried again.

"Baby, it's all in here, but I can put it anywhere you want." More lip-licking, slow rubbing of the crotch, a flash of silicon breast.

"I'm sure you can," Alex sighed. "But I really need to find the Old Fitzroy."

"First right and it's at the end of the road on the right."

"Thanks."

He shifted the rucksack on his back and left her to tout her wares, far from confident that the directions were reliable but glad to be on his way. Sure enough, he could see the light of the pub as he rounded the first corner. It was only then that it crossed his mind that she might not be there. She hadn't said what time she was meeting the guy to look at the van. Chances were it wouldn't be much later than six, especially as it was getting dark already, but much earlier hardly qualified as 'tomorrow night'. Still, maybe he should have got there earlier, to be sure he hadn't missed her.

He wasn't sure bringing his rucksack with him had been the right thing to do, either. Hardly the subtlest lead up to asking if he could join her. Not that he'd thought all that hard about how he'd broach the subject. But maybe bringing all of his earthly belongings along was exactly the opener he needed. Besides, he'd needed to go the whole hog, to seize the moment while it was upon him. If he'd left his stuff at Sarah's there would have been the option of heading back to her place if his trip to the Fitzroy didn't work out. Posting the new set of keys she'd had made through the letterbox had been the clincher, the last snip at an umbilical cord based on nothing but history. He hadn't left a note. Taking a whole load of his tapes back would probably say it better than anything he might have come up with. It would piss her off, too, he thought, a childish smile creasing his face.

He was snatched from this daydream by a voice calling his name. A familiar voice, but not one to which he could attach a name. He looked about for its source. It was her, the girl he was there to meet, the girl whose name he still didn't know. She was waving at him from the passenger seat of a Volkswagen campervan parked only a few yards ahead of him. The headlights flashed, dazzling him in the twilight. Shielding his eyes, he walked towards her.

"How's it going?" she asked him.

"Oh, not too bad," he lied, smiling as sincerely as he was able.

"Where're you off to?"

He chewed his bottom lip, glancing at the driver, a guy in his thirties or early forties who seemed only vaguely interested. What was he going to say? Should he lie and tell her he was on his way to some backpackers, knowing full well that she was likely to know most, if not all, of the local hostels?

"I decided to take your advice," he told her.

She frowned, clearly confused.

"About getting out of Sarah's place," he explained.

"Oh, yeah," she nodded. "Got yourself somewhere else to stay, have you?"

Now. Do it now.

"Actually, I thought I'd come to the Fitzroy and see if you had any ideas," he blurted, not entirely sure what he was saying until it was over with.

"Sarah not too clued up on the old backpacker circuit, eh?"

"Not really, no."

"No surprises there," she snorted. "Well, you've got two choices. Either you head on up to the pub and I'll see you there or you can sling your pack in the back and join us for a quick spin. That's all right, isn't it Pete?"

"Sure," the driver nodded.

"Cool," she smiled at Alex. "So, what's it to be?"

Pete was the owner of the van, or at least he had been until a few weeks ago. On a recent trip to Perth he'd lost his beloved VW to a local in a no-holds-barred game of poker. Pete hadn't had the van with him at the time but had sworn to send it over as soon as he got back to Sydney. Unfortunately, he didn't have the spare cash to do so, things having gone rather badly for him in the past few months. Nor could he afford the time off work. Hence the search for someone to take it over for him. None of his mates were up for it, so he'd ended up placing the ad. Apparently, paying a few dollars a day for the privilege of driving someone else's car across Australia was something of a tradition in Perth, but virtually unheard of in the other direction. Pete had figured that, with vans of such calibre fetching anything up to \$6000 on the local market, the opportunity to pay a fraction of the price without the hassle of selling it at the other end was sure to attract plenty of interest. Apparently, he'd been right, claiming as he did that over a dozen people had rung his mobile on the first day alone.

The van itself seemed in pretty good nick. The interior was well kitted out, allegedly an original VW conversion, with a two ring gas hob and running water, as well as a three-way fridge that could run off the battery, gas or mains electricity. Plenty of cupboard space, Pete pointed out, and the bed filled the width of the van thanks to the lack of units running down one side, an inconvenience that was, he said, the norm. As for the innards, the engine was a 1.8, not a kick arse 2 litre job but recently reconditioned and far easier to find parts for. It was fully automatic, but readily converted back to a manual as all the original parts were still in place, and the engine was air-cooled, meaning no radiator to boil over in the heat of the Outback. Pete made it clear that this was not a new car. Born in 1971, the 'Kombi' as he called it belonged to the Australian Army - hence the dark green finish - and had in all likelihood seen more of the country than even the best travelled indigenous Australians. Which was why it was going in for a service as soon as he'd decided to whom he could entrust its safe arrival in Perth.

As Alex listened to all this, it was clear to him that the girl he was there to see had already landed the job. Exactly how she'd earned that trust was a mystery to him, unless of course it was simply down to good looks, of which she had ample. Rather than ruin her chances, and consequently his own, he sat in the back in silence while she took her new home for a test drive.

"If you throw in a bag of weed, I'll take it," she chuckled as she turned off the engine outside the Old Fitzroy.

"If you buy another bag, I'll let ya," he grinned, slapping the dashboard.

"All this upheaval just because I said you didn't have a hope in hell of getting into Sarah's pants," she laughed, spilling the beer he'd just bought her. "That's a bit drastic, isn't it?"

"It's not that," Alex insisted, determined to withhold the truth at least until he knew her better. "You were right about not staying in Sydney. And here I am, looking at what's probably my only chance to see Australia without suffering the indignity of public transport - assuming you'll take me with you, that is. I'd be an idiot to let this one pass."

"That's quite an assumption, though," she observed, raising her eyebrows. "You're not trying to get into *my* pants now, are you?"

Alex fought to swallow his beer. She was far more attractive than he'd remembered. A good five or six inches shorter than his own five foot ten, she was slighter than Sarah, less voluptuous. She had the lean body of a gymnast or a dancer, topped with a catlike face boasting bright, piercing green eyes and framed with a head of thick, dark brown hair in a jaw length bob. "No," he insisted at last, shaking his head as if the thought would never have crossed his mind.

"Good. As long as you remember I'm unavailable we'll be fine. Where are you staying tonight?"

"You mean I can come? With you? In the van?"

"As long as you quit the double entendres," she scowled. "It'll be a hell of a lot easier if I've got someone else to share the driving with, and splitting the bond and the price of petrol should make the trip easier with the limited cash I've managed to save."

"You never said anything about a bond," Alex objected.

"You don't think Pete's going to hand over the keys to his precious Kombi without some sort of security, do you?"

It was all Alex could do to keep from blushing.

"Pete's posting a cheque and my passport to Perth. I pick it up when I deliver the van," she explained. "We won't tell him you're coming too. That way you needn't worry about handing over your own passport. Fair?"

"And you trust him?" Alex was incredulous.

"He's trusting me with a van that's got to be worth five grand or so," she pointed out. "And besides, the guy works for the Passport Office. How dodgy can he be?"

Alex shrugged his shoulders and stared at his beer.

"It'll be fine. Anyway, if the worst came to worst, we just wouldn't hand the van over. This is such an opportunity, Alex. If we'd bought a van it would have cost us a packet and then we'd be stuck with trying to sell it at the end. Plus there'd be servicing and any repairs to pay for on the way."

"Yeah, you're right," Alex conceded.

"Oh, this is gonna be wicked," she grinned, rubbing her hands together excitedly. "And with you to share the driving with, we can even go the long way round."

"The long way?"

"Round the top instead of along the bottom. I couldn't have pulled all that off on my own but it's by far the most interesting way to do it."

"The van's due in Perth in three weeks."

"Give or take," she grinned. "Pete's not going to mind a few extra dollars in his pocket. If I wanted to get to Perth in a hurry and see bugger all on the way I'd have taken the bus. With you and me both driving we could go across the top and maybe even pop down to Uluru."

"Uluru?"

"Ayers Rock," she frowned. "Uluru's what the Aborigines call it, it's real name."

"What does it mean?" he asked, already feeling stupid for doing so.

"I dunno. 'Big Rock' or something, I suppose. Look it up in your Lonely Planet."

She lived in a first floor flat in Rose Bay, a rather plush Eastern Suburb neighbouring Double Bay, the even plusher suburb where Michael Hutchence met his maker. The flat was part of a converted house overlooking the bay itself, a beachless but beautiful cove in a south-east corner of Sydney Harbour.

"So, how did you score yourself a place like this?" he asked her as he stared out over the balcony at the view. "It must cost a packet."

"Not at all. I'm house-sitting for a woman I met in my first job - temping for one of the country's worst run insurance giants. I stayed in touch with her and her husband after I left and a few weeks later they asked me if I'd look after it while they went off to Europe for a couple of months. They'd been on the verge of paying an agency to find them a house-sitter when it dawned on them that I was sharing a room in Randwick with two other backpackers. They asked me if I fancied relocating to Rose Bay - which is about the same as asking someone if they'd like to move from the Costa del Sol to Cannes - and, naturally, I was more than happy to oblige. I've been paying them a nominal rent ever since, the only condition being that I stay until within a week or so of them coming back, which is in eight days time, hence the recent temporary acquisition of a 1971 VW Kombi."

"Not bad."

"Not bad at all," she agreed. "So, what do you want for dinner? I was thinking pasta or spaghetti."

"Sounds fine."

Fine was about all it was. The pasta was a little too *al dente* for Alex's tastes and the sauce was uninspiring slop scooped straight from a jar. But the accompanying salad was good, as was the wine, a South Australian chardonnay, and Alex ate and drank gratefully, keen to make a good impression on his host.

"So what kind of music do you like?" she asked as she cleared away the empty plates. "Just tell me it's not hip hop or heavy metal. I'm not too keen on spending the next few weeks cooped up with the love child of Puff Daddy and Axl Rose."

"Actually, Stab Master Arson and Guns *en* Roses are my favourite artists..."

"CB4, good film," she laughed, ferrying the plates to the kitchen.

"You know it? God, I didn't think anyone had ever heard of it." He stood up and helped her clear the table.

"Sure, Stab Master Arson, *Straight out of Lo Cash* and all that. I had a friend who was a real martyr to hip hop and one of our mutual friends bought him the video to see if he could see the funny side of it all."

"I can imagine that being a disaster," Alex said, shaking his head.

"Not at all. He loved it, as did I. Still, it didn't fill me with a desire to listen to hip

hop.”

“Me neither.”

“So, what *are* you into,” she asked again, kneeling down by the hi-fi and sifting through what Alex assumed to be her hosts’ CDs.

“Oh, pretty much everything.”

“That’s what everyone says when they don’t want to offend or seem blinkered.”

“No, really. There isn’t much I don’t like. Opera, gospel, country and western... Not too keen on Jean Michel Jarre or heavy metal. Bit iffy on hip hop, though some of it’s okay... What about you?”

“Oh, pretty much the same. Bit of Massive Attack, bit of Café del Mar and a dash of Radiohead and REM. I reckon we’ll be able to stop ourselves throttling each other on the way to Perth - at least as far as music goes. Listen, why don’t you have a look through these and see if you can find anything you want to put on,” she told him. “I’m in dire need of a shower and then I think I’ll be just about ready for bed. Sorry to be such a wet blanket on our first night and all. It’s been a long day with a vicious hangover, that’s all.”

“Don’t worry. I’m still a bit jetlagged myself. That wine’s just about tipped me over the edge. I reckon I’ll be joining you within a minute or two.”

There was an awkward silence as his Freudian slip hung between them. Alex cringed inwardly.

“There’s a spare bed in the second bedroom,” she said at last. “Feel free to have a shower yourself. There’s plenty of hot water, so you won’t have to jump in with me.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled sheepishly.

“Towels are in the airing cupboard next to the kitchen,” she called out as she disappeared into the bathroom. “Pick whichever one you want.”

He sat looking through the CDs for a few minutes, the sound of cascading water all he could hear in the silence. Eventually he fished out Radiohead’s *The Bends* and set it playing quietly before he wandered over to the window and stood staring out at the bay.

You can crush it but it’s always here.

You can crush it but it’s always near.

He raised his hands to his mouth as the words rang out from the hi-fi and played over and over in his mind. This was the city he’d been supposed to share with Sarah. The bay he was looking at was part of a harbour he’d long been expecting to look out on with her at his side. And here he was, in some complete stranger’s flat, ready to leave it all behind.

Everything is... broken.

Not everything. The boats in the harbour were fine. Sydney was fine. The girl he’d just met seemed perfectly intact, happy and eager to begin her next big journey. Even Sarah seemed pretty together. No, it was just Alex whose world had been snatched from under him.

Can’t you forget?

No. Not yet. Once he was out of Sydney, perhaps, but not while Sarah was no more than a couple of miles away, not while there was still a hope of them pulling things back together...

“Er, Alex. I’m off to bed. Sorry I’ve been such a lightweight.”

“No, not at all.” Alex smiled as he turned away from the window, swallowing back his sense of loss. “Thanks for dinner.”

She laughed. “It’s all right. I know it was crap.”

“Well...”

“Don’t even bother, Alex,” she grinned. “Honesty is the best policy if we’re to get on at all over the next few weeks.”

“Sure,” he agreed, embarrassed at her overuse of his name when he still couldn’t remember hers.

“And while we’re not quite on the subject. I was just thinking how weird it is that I hardly know you and yet I’m going to be sharing a bed with you every night between here and Perth.”

“Hadn’t thought of that bit.” Had he? He didn’t honestly know.

“I know it’s going to sound like a come on, and it isn’t, but I almost feel stupid having you sleep in the spare room.”

Radiohead wafted through the silence. *Where do we go from here? The words are coming out all weird; where are you now, when I need you?*

Where indeed? Alex shrugged. “You’ll know me better in a few days. Hopefully it won’t seem so weird then. If it doesn’t, you can always leave me behind. For now, I’m just grateful for my own bed in a nice apartment.”

She smiled and left him to it.

9am. Campsie, one of the least desirable of Sydney's Western Suburbs, themselves on the less desirable side of the city. Alex had made the most of the previous day touring the central parts of the city, taking in the town hall and Queen Victoria Building with its statues of the old maid herself and her less famous talking dog. He'd had his first taste of *sushi* and *inari* in one of the many underground shopping centres. Then he'd wandered through Hyde Park, laughing at the camp statue of a naked Theseus and submissive Minotaur, its toes curling over in anticipation of a damned good rodgering. It was no surprise that February's gay Mardi Gras procession would set off from Hyde Park.

He'd ended his day at the Opera House, a building far more impressive from the end of the Botanical Gardens than it was close up. Alex had always thought Australia's most famous landmark was white, as it appeared to be from the rocky outcrop at Lady Macquarie's Chair. How disappointed he'd been when he discovered that its exterior was covered with bad seventies tiling in a revolting nicotine stain yellow. In disgust, he'd headed off to a pub in The Rocks to drown his sorrows, far more enamoured by the timeless majesty of the Harbour Bridge.

Now, though, he was seeing an entirely different side of the city. They'd turned up early to pick up the van, only to find that Boris, one of Volkswagen's biggest fans and the owner of Sydney's best VW workshop, still had a few minor adjustments to make. Alex made a vain attempt to place Boris's oscillating Russian/Eastern European/South African accent as he gave them directions to Campsie's main shopping area where he'd suggested they pass the next hour or so until the van was ready.

They'd decided to go for breakfast, to find a nice quiet spot in the sun to while away the time. What they hadn't accounted for, as they walked toward the town centre, was that no such place would exist. The metal shutters gracing the windows of numerous squat houses on the way should have prepared them. No lightweight screen doors to keep out the flies and mozzies here, none of the traditional Aussie sofas-on-porches for Campsie. This was a place of mistrust and marginalisation, of industrious immigrants and out of work White Australians, a place of thievery and blinkered graffiti.

Their suspicions might also have been aroused by the 'UCANNV' number plate on the spoiled Ford Capri parked in front of a run down shack worth considerably less than the car. The 'BEEP ME' plates on another, far cheaper car were a humorous betrayal of the affordability of personalised number plates compared to the UK.

The main street was a thronging bazaar of second hand clothing stores, dollar shops and bargain basements, so devoid of decent fodder that, in the end, they'd settled for McDonald's, a choice akin to self immolation for both of them. Reluctantly, they squeezed through another queue of people waiting for the bank to open, took a deep breath and embraced America's ever-present offer of potato-free chips and milkless McMilksakes.

Campsie's version of McDonald's was a law unto itself. A red, white and yellow messiah for the disenfranchised, Ronald McDonald had welcomed the mad and the destitute with open arms, feeding their hungry souls a glorious communion of endless coffee and bacon McMuffin. And all the while, as Ronald's minions kept the

worst of eighties pop alive, his congregation sang.

On the right, a couple argued enthusiastically over the parentage of their children and the price of a new car as the council workers sharing their table fuelled the discussion in their own helpful way. To their left sat three extremely weathered old men, their caps hung on the backs of their chairs, their slippered feet crossed under them as they sipped their refills in silence. Closer to the pulpit, with its organ of deep fat fryers, grills and shake dispensers, sat a little old lady filling in the crossword in a copy of *The Telegraph* that had clearly done the rounds. From time to time, she would look up at the door with a hunted look in her eyes, her slippers twitching as she prepared to bolt to safety. Behind her, a couple who'd been viciously beaten with the ugly brush took it in turns to scuttle outside for a few desperate drags on a cheap cigarette.

And all of a sudden, an outburst. One of Ronald's keenest disciples delivered a rousing sermon on the difficulties of paying \$200 a week in rent, especially when you're unemployed. The crowd applauded, a heartfelt McDonald's 'Amen' that confirmed for Alex that everyone did, indeed, know each other.

It was a long hour, but it ended. They were back early to pick up the van, but were grateful for the relative safety of the workshop. Boris and his bearded henchmen seemed kindred spirits in a world of cruel abnormality.

Before long, Boris was reversing the van onto the road. They stood beside him as he sat in the driver's seat with the door open, patting the dashboard and delivering his seal of approval.

"You could take something like that van over there," he said in his strange hybrid voice, pointing at his own Kombi with its immaculate original paint job. "It's had everything done to it and still something might go wrong with it. Some people head off into the Outback in the cheapest thing they can find, that wouldn't even make it round the block. Eighty per cent of the Vee Dubs brought over here in the sixties and seventies are still on the road, you know. This is a good one. It should be fine. Go easy on it and it'll go easy on you. And remember, it's air-cooled so don't go too hard on the engine. It's got a temperature gauge, which should help. Don't let it go much over 110 and you'll be all right. Oh, and the fuel gauge is broken. Nearly always are in these things. Just take care to keep it topped up. You should get around 400km to a tank on the open road, maybe half that in the city."

He offered them a few more words of mechanical wisdom, much of which was lost on Alex, before wishing them luck and waving them on their way.

Alex sat in the front room, looking out over the bay. Supplies had been bought and he'd been given a quick tour of the city and Eastern Suburbs while they got to grips with the van. It was his first time in such a large vehicle, accustomed as he was to small cars and motor scooters, and it had been an effort to conceal his nervousness. Now, though, he had the hang of it. Reverse parking was a breeze and three point turns were a doddle. Still, he'd be happier once they were on the open road and there were a few less wing mirrors to look out for on the inside.

Natasha had gone out to say her goodbyes to various friends. Alex had finally relearnt her name, and committed it firmly to memory, by answering the phone for her almost an hour after she'd left the flat - a narrow escape as asking her outright had long since been impossible. He turned his attention to the harbour. There were

boats everywhere, some large and expensive, others small and affordable. Sydney was cool. In the brief time he'd spent in the city he'd come to appreciate the feeling of space it offered. So much water it seemed everyone could get a spot overlooking the ocean or the harbour. Back home none of this would be within his reach. But the cost of living here made it all so much more plausible. Seventy quid a week for a one bedroom apartment overlooking the ocean was just the tip of the iceberg. Restaurants were so cheap that with a decent job you could dispense with a kitchen altogether, and the choice was overwhelming.

And then there were the boats. From what Natasha had told him, everyone seemed either to have one or have access to one. The whole of Australia seemed to live for an outdoor lifestyle. No wonder they'd done so well in the Olympics compared to the pale and pasty athletes of the British Isles. Winter had, by all accounts, been a real hardship for Sydneysiders, a chilling few weeks for which the city was painfully unprepared. The populace seemed to assume, as do most foreigners who have never seen winter in southern Australia, that Sydney was hot all year round. Unlike the people of Melbourne and Canberra, who accept that their cities are prone to extremes and cater accordingly, Sydneysiders had never bothered with central heating.

Natasha had learnt this the hard way. Only weeks after she'd moved in, the winter had begun in earnest. She'd bought herself an electric heater from K-Mart but, as she'd only just discovered, the machine had had a far more drastic effect on her electricity bill than the temperature of the flat. At times, she had guiltily admitted, she'd even wished for a smaller, more cosy apartment.

Alex had agreed with her when she'd told him it was a shame to have lived through a winter in Sydney only to leave when the first signs of summer were upon them. As he looked around the apartment and out at the stunning view of the harbour, he imagined himself staying in Sydney and sticking with the original plan. But what was the point? He knew nobody else here but Sarah, and she was otherwise engaged. No, he'd said it himself, he'd be an idiot to let this one pass. A Vee Dub, a co-driver and the chance to see one of the world's least covered countries in pretty much optimal conditions, and all within moments of losing what he'd come here for in the first place. Nothing could have been more fortuitous, nothing could have made more sense. He was going, that much was certain, and Sydney could wait 'til he'd finished.

10.30am. They were finally on their way. Natasha had hired a carpet cleaner from Woolworth's the previous evening, running it through the apartment as a way of thanking her hosts. That much Alex had been able to stand, uninvolved as he was in anything but getting the machine to the first floor. But the following morning, when she'd insisted they use the machine in the van, he'd started to lose it. She was houseproud, that much was fine. What amazed him was the sheer pointlessness of going to such extremes on such dismal carpets and upholstery. The inside of the van clearly hadn't seen a Hoover in decades and would no doubt see far more mud, dirt, food and dust before they parted with it in Perth. Had the outside of the van been any more impressive, he might have felt more motivated as he ran the machine backwards and forwards over the seat cover that would double as the base of his bed for the next few weeks. As it was, the matt green of the paintwork was patchy at best and the once white kangaroo bars front and back were flaky and spattered with the blood and body parts of thousands of unfortunate insects.

In the unforgiving light of day, the 1971 VW Kombi looked every day of its 29 years old. Older than him, he reflected, and if he looked half as bad as that at its age, he'd ask to be put down. Not that it was doing badly for a vehicle of its age. Most cars would have been sold for scrap years ago, at least they would have in England. But Australians seemed to have a more sympathetic approach to old vehicles. Maybe it was something to do with the climate, or maybe it was because they didn't have much old stuff to be proud of, as short of history as they were.

As far as rust went, the van wasn't doing too badly. A patch on the driver's side wing, some spots on the roof, and a thick line below one of the rear side windows. Nothing a few licks of paint couldn't cover, Alex thought, and wondered what state its new owner was expecting it in, whether he'd seen it and why Pete hadn't made it look a bit more presentable before handing it over.

Alex's mental image of the front of the van dissolved in an instant when he realised they were on the approach to the Harbour Bridge.

"Well, this is it," Natasha announced. "It's bye-bye Sydney and hello the long hard road round Australia. Five and a half thousand miles of sitting in a van with a complete stranger to go."

The magnitude of what they were about to do finally dawned on him. Only a few days ago he'd been looking forward to setting up house with a girl he'd known for years, a girl he'd loved for ages. Someone with whom he'd shared some of his deepest, darkest secrets; someone who was bound to feature in every single anecdote he could think of. The girl he'd been expecting to marry.

And now, here he was, sat next to a girl he'd just met, setting out across a country he knew virtually nothing about. Five and a half *thousand* miles. It had sounded horrendous as 9,000km, but seemed all the more real now she'd said it in miles. Kilometres were small. You could run a tenth of one in sixteen seconds, they were the equivalent to 40 lengths in your average local pool. Miles were big, huge things. Marathons were 26 of them, and only 350 or so separated London from certain parts of Scotland. Five and a half thousand miles.

He looked at her, sitting there in the driver's seat, as calm and controlled as the

still blue water of the harbour, against which the Opera House was white once more. He wondered how he'd think of her in three weeks time, whether they'd be friends or just pissed off with each other. Would he see her again after they'd dropped the van in Perth or would they swap a few polite e-mails before drifting off into each other's distant memories? Would he look at photos of this trip and wish they'd kept in touch or thank God it was all over, that he no longer had to wrack his brains for conversation to fill the empty silence as they drove from one hick town to another?

"Any famous last words?" Natasha grinned, taking her eyes off the road for a moment.

"Do we have satellite TV on board?" he asked in his best dumb American accent.

"But of course," she replied, hamming up her own accent to even greater extremes. "And cable, too. I've been reeling out the cord since we left Rose Bay."

The harbour behind them, they joined the highway north, still in suburban Sydney. Natasha had wound down the window, resting her elbow on the frame as she guided the van with one hand. Alex looked at her hair, thrashing behind her in the wind. She was cool, undeniably cool. He wound down his own window, slipping on his sunglasses in the hope that he might be cool by association. The reflection in a series of large shop windows said it all. *They were cool.* They were on the road in a classic VW camper and Alex had never felt so cool in his life. And in another three weeks he'd be five and a half thousand miles cooler...