

## **Almost Paradise**

### **Laney Cairo**

“You’re booked for the Nimbin tour too?” the girl in the bunk above Lee’s asked, tossing her wet towel over the top of his.

He nudged his towel along the bunk rail, giving her more space. “Seemed like I had to,” he said. “Couldn’t come all the way to Byron Bay and not take the trip to see Nimbin after hearing so much about it all my life.”

The girl, wearing a ubiquitous shell necklace and the sunburn of someone who had grown up somewhere without sunshine, like London or Tasmania, nodded. “All those hippies taking over an abandoned town in the Seventies, and never leaving. And the Phantom Plantum, wandering the countryside, planting dope seeds everywhere, so everyone could get wasted for free. I’ve got to see this!”

Lee, who was from Melbourne and knew better than to get sunburned, even on beaches as gorgeous as Byron Bay’s, grinned back at her. “You gonna buy some?”

“Sure. They say the cops don’t care, or don’t go into the town. You?”

Lee shrugged. “Depends, I guess,” he said. “I’d told myself that I’d grown out of that, you know. Got a job, got a clue, that sort of thing.”

The girl giggled. “C’mon. It’s Nimbin.” Her smile dropped. “I heard, down the pub, that things happen to tourists who miss their buses, you know. Bad things.”

“Then you’d better not miss the bus,” Lee said.

The girl propped herself against his bunk. “Want grab a beer with me, then watch the sunset?”

Lee considered the girl, who was definitely hitting on him. “Let me change my T-shirt,” he said.

Somewhere in his backpack, he had a T-shirt with ‘Recruiter’ written in huge rainbow-colored letters. That should sort out that particular misunderstanding, and also save him from a night of fighting off the American and Canadian backpacking girls that Byron Bay was overrun with.

A couple of idyllic late-summer weeks, roughing it on the north coast of New South Wales, had been a damned good idea, but he wasn’t finding any cute male backpackers to match the girls that were everywhere.

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The tour bus rattled down the winding mountain road, the driver talking over the dreadful Seventies music playing over the stereo. “...after that first two years, a true community was established, with rules and a recognized leader. Nimbin now has a mayor and a town council, and is a thriving tourist town, hosting the Mardi Grass

concert every year, and providing a permanent base for the Marijuana legalization movement within Australia.”

“So, can we buy joints?” someone up the front of the bus asked. “Legally?”

“Not legally,” the driver said, over the top of Jimi Hendrix's ‘All Along the Watchtower.’ “Illegally, sure. The tour takes no responsibility for your safety if you break any laws. You get busted or into trouble, you’re on your own, kids.”

The girl from the hostel, who had thankfully transferred her attentions to a German tourist with a camera that had to compensating for something, leaned over the seat in front of Lee and said, “Told you so.”

“Nice bus driver is not so nice,” Lee said. “Everyone gets to walk home. Thanks for your money, and fuck you all.”

“On your left are the rock formations that give their name to the town,” the driver said.

The forested hillside beside the road was broken by three huge pale rock formations, towering over the valley, and Lee found he didn’t care about bastard bus drivers, because between the lush forest, the twisted rock crags and the sharp blue sky, the day was looking promising.

Minutes later, the bus rattled into a tiny town, parking beside a row of stores. The three huge rocks loomed up, looking close enough to climb.

“Meet back here at three,” the driver said. “Everyone repeat after me!”

“Meet back here at three,” the dozen people on the bus chanted, rumbled and whined, including Lee.

“Go have fun,” the driver said as he opened the bus door.

If Lee had ever bothered speculating as to what a town run by hippies for more than thirty years would look like, Nimbin was exactly what he would have imagined. Every available surface was painted in rainbow stripes, including entire buildings, and as a gay man, it felt disorienting, like the messages were all mixed. Store fronts were smothered in graffiti, and the street was packed with stalls selling tie-dye clothing, second-hand philosophy books, and organic vegetables.

The stores themselves were delightful: The Hard Wok Café, Happy High Herbal -- which promised entirely legal recreational substances and paraphernalia -- an apothecary, the offices of the Nimbin Hemp Embassy, and a pub which seemed to be genuinely a pub.

Lee turned down two offers of drugs from dealers on the street and wandered into the museum as a starting point, past the displays acknowledging the Indigenous landowners, then the white pioneers. The proof that Nimbin was not an ordinary place was on the ceiling of the room, which someone had hung with dozens of rusty and

cobwebbed egg-beaters, in a silent tribute to past meals. The altar to unemployment benefits in the museum café, festooned with monkeys, seemed all pretty fucking normal really, after that, and Lee bought himself a coffee and a piece of space cake and wandered out of the museum and into the sunshine again.

The space cake didn't count as lunch, so Lee strolled back past the book stall and the godawful tie-dyed T-shirts, to the Hard Wok Café, the first tingling of the space cake hash oil beginning to wash through his bloodstream.

The bloke behind the counter at the café was rocking out to the pop punk blaring over the stereo, jumping around as he tossed veggies into steaming woks, sweat staining his bandana and T-shirt. Lee leaned against the counter, watching the tattoos on the guy's arms slide around as his biceps contracted and shifted.

"Veggie, beef or chicken?" the guy asked Lee, and Lee blinked.

"Um."

"What kind of stir fry do you want? Do you know?"

"Veggie," Lee said, and the guy grinned.

Lee's brain was focused on where the sweat and tattoos trailed down, into the guy's T-shirt, rather than on the lunch options. The guy must be used to tourists who had been sampling the local pot and were out of it, because he just seemed amused by this.

"Now you pay me," the guy said. "Or I don't make your lunch. Though, you're cute, and I might cook lunch for you anyway."

Lee grinned back at the guy. "How about I pay you?"

When the guy put Lee's plate of stir fried veggies and tofu on the cracked and stained table, he slid into the seat opposite Lee. "I'm Charlie," he said. "Mind if join you?"

"Lee. And you're welcome to watch me eat, if that's your thing."

Charlie laughed, loud and deep, and Lee had to laugh too. "If it was, I'd be in the right job. Where are you from, Lee?"

"Melbourne. I got tired of a summer that had rain in it, and took a couple of weeks off work to head north. What about you?"

Charlie shrugged. "From Sydney originally, but I live outside of Nimbin now, on a property. I came looking for paradise, didn't quite find it, but I can't work out how to leave."

"Nimbin is beautiful," Lee said. "Living here would be easy."

"It is, but there are shadows," Charlie said. "Don't miss your bus out of here."

Lee looked up, his mouth full of bean sprouts and tofu, but Charlie was leaning back in his chair, looking out of the café window at the view of the three rocks overlooking the valley.

A couple of giggling girls Lee recognized from the tour bus walked into the café, tinkling the bell on the door, and Charlie stood up, his hand lingering on Lee's shoulder as he called out, "G'day," to the girls. "What can I get you ladies?"

The public toilets were down the hill, past the candy-striped Arts Center with the lizards painted on the eaves, and Lee stood blinking in the shade of the gum trees, not quite believing what he was seeing. The front wall of the toilet block had been completely removed, and chain link mesh stood in its place, with a gate instead of a door. The wash basin was visible from the footpath, the unoccupied cubicle doors ajar and toilets on display. Someone was in a cubicle, and Lee could see their jeans bunched around their ankles.

"Fucking hell," he said. "What does Nimbin have against privacy? At least there isn't a urinal."

Inside the cubicle, in the place where most Public Health Authorities felt the need to lecture the public on their safe sex practices or the state or their prostates, or whatever, Lee found what had to be the most depressing notice ever. *In case of overdose: Between the hours of 10am and 11pm, the nearest crash cart is at the pub. Between 11pm and 10am, call the District Hospital on the following number...*

He washed his hands, in full view of the bloke selling hits on the footpath, and walked back out into the sunshine.

The pub? He could do with a beer, after the discovering that the pub needed to keep a crash cart on hand.

Charlie was at the bar, and he smiled at Lee, waving Lee over. "Hey," Lee said, leaning over the bar to order a schooner of lager. "You finished work?"

"My boss has taken over, so it's time for a beer."

The barman pushed Lee's schooner across the bar, and Lee clinked his glass against Charlie's. The beer slid down Lee's throat smoothly, taking the edge off the thirst the hash had given him. Charlie was watching Lee drink, eyes on his mouth and throat, and it made Lee put his glass down too hard, his distance perception a little off.

"Thirsty?" Charlie asked.

Lee looked at his mostly empty glass and nodded. "That'll be tomorrow's hangover I'm working on."

"Can't have that," Charlie said. "Finish your beer, and come back to the café. I'll give you some water."

Charlie's hand was wrapped around Lee's wrist, his fingers cool and damp against

Lee's skin, and his eyes were calm ocean blue, like Byron Bay, holding Lee's gaze.

"Beer," Charlie prompted, and Lee picked up his glass with his free hand and drained it.

When they arrived at the café, the woman behind the counter waved at Charlie in between flipping veggies, and Charlie called out, "I'll be out the back for a bit, boss."

"No worries," the woman called back.

Charlie grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge at the back of the café and handed them to Lee, then held open a rickety door beside the fridge and grinned at him.

The door opened onto a storeroom, lined with open shelves stacked with crates of veggies and catering-sized tins of sauce, sacks of rice and noodles underneath. Charlie propped the back door of the café open and sat down on the top step, patting the weathered plank beside him.

Lee sat down and undid one of the bottles of water. "Wow, you've got a great view."

The steps looked out over the valley, the three huge rocks rising up out of the hillside, towering presences against the summer sky.

Charlie slid his arm around Lee's shoulder as Lee drank the water. "Yeah, I like what I see. Want a smoke?"

Lee nodded, and Charlie wriggled a tin out of his shorts with his free hand, then tightened his arm around Lee's shoulders so that he could use both hands to open the tin. He took out a rollie and put it in his mouth, then struck a match to light it.

The smell of the joint was fresh and green, reminding Lee of being a teenager and smoking up with his mates at the beach, then Charlie was pressing his mouth against Lee's, sealing their lips together, shotgunning the smoke for Lee to inhale.

Lee breathed it in, holding the smoke, and Charlie's tongue flickered against his lips for a brief second, before Charlie pulled back and Lee exhaled in a rush.

They both coughed, and Charlie said, "Sorry, home grown is always a bit rough."

On the next drag, Lee was ready for Charlie, mouth open. The smoke slid into his throat easily, and Lee shoved the water bottle between his knees and grabbed the back of Charlie's head, holding their mouths together, licking his tongue across Charlie's teeth.

Charlie dragged his mouth away, and they both breathed out, Lee panting for air.

"Let's stop multi-tasking," Charlie suggested. "Before we do ourselves an injury."

Lee drank water, while Charlie toked, then took his turn on the joint as Charlie

emptied the water bottle. Charlie tossed the water bottle over his shoulder, into the storeroom, and took the roach off Lee, stubbing it out on the step.

The pot slammed into Lee, at about the same time as Charlie's mouth connected with his, and they fell backward, onto the floor of the storeroom, mouths sliding together, Charlie's hands pushing under Lee's T-shirt.

Charlie's back was damp with sweat, and his neck tasted salty when Lee bit at the skin, making Charlie grunt.

"Why aren't all the tourists like you?" Charlie asked, pushing Lee's T-shirt up, forcing Lee to prop himself up on his elbows and pull his T-shirt over his head.

Lee didn't have an answer for that because Charlie was dragging his own shirt off, and Lee had far too much of a thing for lean, tanned men with Celtic knot tattoos to be doing anything except touching right then. And licking. And, fuck, biting at Charlie's nipple.

Charlie laughed, deep and rumbling, and ran his hands down Lee's back as far as he could reach. "Feels good," he said. "Really good, but I can't reach you."

When Lee lifted his mouth and looked up, Charlie had lost his bandana and his dark hair was hanging around his face. The storeroom floor was gritty under Lee's shoulders as he wriggled back up level with Charlie, and Charlie lowered himself over Lee.

Kissing was slow and wet, and the skin of their chests stuck and came unglued every time they moved. Charlie's cock rode against Lee's hip, hard and tempting, then Lee pushed his hands inside Charlie's shorts, pushing his palms against the bare skin of the cheeks of Charlie's arse.

Charlie nuzzled Lee's ear and whispered, "Mmm. Wanna do something?"

"Guess," Lee said, rocking his hips and rubbing his cock against Charlie, just to ease the ache.

Pushing Charlie's shorts down was easy, but Lee had to let go of Charlie's arse for Charlie to be able to get at Lee's clothes. Charlie knelt over Lee, and Lee had one of those moments of disconnection that had nothing to do with being smashed and everything to do with being so fucking lucky, because Charlie was gorgeous, like a wet dream come to life, and he was looking at Lee like he wanted to eat him.

Lee dragged fingernails up Charlie's thighs and cupped his balls, then wrapped his fingers around Charlie's cock. "C'mere," Lee said, tugging gently on Charlie's cock, and Charlie grinned at Lee and crawled up his chest.

Lee's mouth was dry, and he wondered where the second bottle of water had gone to, then Charlie pushed his cock past Lee's lips and across his tongue, and it was all going to be fine because there wasn't anything Lee wanted to do more than suck cock right at that moment.

The shelf Charlie was holding onto creaked alarmingly, and Lee had vague concerns about them being showered with boxes of spring onions and broccoli heads. The music from the café filtered through the door, and Lee could feel footsteps vibrating through the floorboards. Then Charlie groaned and pushed his cock farther into Lee's mouth, so the head nudged against the roof, and Lee closed his eyes and focused.

Fingers touched Lee's face, stroking his cheek, pushing hair off his forehead, and Lee curled his tongue around Charlie's cock, letting Charlie find the right angle, slide in, rock and groan.

Charlie's fingers gripped Lee's hair, and he said, "I'm gonna... Do you want me to...?"

Lee moaned around Charlie's cock and tightened his grip on Charlie's thighs. "Fuck, yeah," Charlie gasped, and then he was coming, pushing his cock hard into Lee's mouth.

It was about as uncoordinated as their attempt at shotgunning had been, and messier, and Lee went from choking to laughing as soon as Charlie had pulled out. Charlie handed him a T-shirt to wipe his face on when Lee sat up, and Lee was secretly pleased it was Charlie's shirt, not his own.

"You all right?" Charlie asked when Lee ditched the shirt.

Lee wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, just to make sure he'd cleaned up thoroughly. "Yeah, apart from this small problem I've got."

Charlie's gaze was speculative when he looked down to where Lee's shorts were pushed down around his knees. "If that's a small problem, I'd hate to see what you think a big one is."

"It's the sort of thing that gets worse before it gets better," Lee said, then he had to bite his lip to stay quiet as Charlie bent over and licked wetly down his cock.

Lee thudded back against the floor, sure that he could feel the earth turning underneath him, and Charlie sucked his cock slowly into wet heat.

"Oh, fuck," Lee whispered, running his hand up Charlie's back, over the ridge of prominent spine. "Yeah, like that. Feels good."

Lee's whole body was humming, synchronized with the fridge on the other side of the wall in the café, and Charlie's tongue was doing something pretty fucking amazing, right at the head of Lee's cock, pushing and twisting, then flickering away.

"Fucking tease," Lee said, and Charlie laughed, making Lee jerk his hips up, and the storeroom door opened beside Lee's head.

"Hey, Charlie?" Charlie's boss said, as the door opened, and Lee found himself looking up at the startled face of the woman who had been behind the counter of the

café.

Lee froze, and Charlie stopped sucking Lee's cock and looked up. "Um," Charlie said. "Oops?"

The silence didn't last long, not really, just for a couple of heart beats, then the door closed again, and Charlie stared at Lee, then burst out laughing, and Lee had to join him.

"Oh, shit," Charlie said, and Lee nudged Charlie with a knee, hand wrapped around his cock. "Go on, no one's going to open that door now."

Charlie grinned. "Sure."

The adrenaline surge from being walked in on added to what was already in Lee's bloodstream, and within seconds Lee was breathing hard, his hands scrabbling at the floor boards as Charlie took him right back down. Coming fucking crashed through Lee, leaving him wrecked and breathless.

The water bottle was welcome when Charlie handed it to him. "I like Nimbin," Lee said, when he passed the water bottle back to Charlie.

"Put your clothes back on and go catch your tourist bus," Charlie said. "Before Nimbin decides it likes you, too."

Charlie was smiling, and Lee smiled back at him. "Will you be in much trouble with your boss?" Lee asked, pulling his boxers and shorts back on.

Charlie retrieved his own shorts, from behind a sack of rice. "I'll find out in a moment, when I've shown you the back way out. Here's your shirt."

The back steps, where they'd smoked up, led down to a yard, and round past the rubbish bins, Charlie opened a gate onto a laneway. "Up there, to the main road."

Charlie waved from the gate, and Lee strolled up the laneway, where the side of the café had been painted in huge swirling rainbows, heading past the dealers and toward the main road and the stalls and the car park.

He was loose, drifting really, buzzing from coming and smoking, so when one of the dealers bumped against him, just Lee mumbled an apology and backed away. The dealer shoved Lee against the café wall and slammed a fist into his chest, driving air from his lungs and winding him, then pushed Lee to the ground.

The plants he landed in crunched under his face, and someone kicked him hard, then stomped on his back. Lee could hear himself whimpering, distantly knew he'd curled his arms around his head and face in some vague attempt at self-protection, but his mind had locked onto the sight of a line of ants moving grains of sand.

He laid there, waves of grayness rolling through him, after the kicking had stopped.



No one else came down the laneway. No one touched him or spoke to him.

Lee sat up carefully, touching his ribs, patting his back where he could reach it. He could move, and nothing seemed to be broken. "Well," he said out loud. "There's an argument against the marijuana lifestyle, children. It makes you stupid enough that you give some sucker a kicking while wearing thongs, instead of boots. Any smart thug would have put a pair of steel caps into me."

It took time before Lee felt he could stand up without chundering or passing out, and when he stumbled out onto the main street, the tie-dyed T-shirts and the organic veggies stalls were gone and the shadows were long across the street.

"Fuck, no," Lee said. He ran, holding onto the sorest of his ribs, to the car park. A couple of cars remained, but the rest of the car park was empty, the bus bays in deep shadow as the sun dipped down below the hills behind the town.

The Hard Wok Café was locked up, and no one answered when Lee banged on the door, and he sank down onto the doorstep. The only place still open was the pub, but the footpath outside was crowded with the people he'd seen hanging around the streets of Nimbin all day, at least a couple of whom had beaten him up.

His phone had been taken at the same time as his wallet, but there wasn't anyone he could call anyway, not closer than Melbourne. If he could find some police, he could report that he'd been assaulted, but that would involve getting out of Nimbin first.

Sitting there was stupid, that was obvious, so Lee rounded up the last of his courage and self-preservation and made himself go back down the same fucking laneway, to the gate that Charlie had let him out of.

The gate was locked, and it took three tries before Lee hauled himself over the top of it, to drop into the yard on the over side, among the rubbish bins and dope plants. The back door was locked, but Lee found a wind-cheater among the tea towels hanging on a washing line in the yard and pulled it on. The wind-cheater smelled of Charlie.

Lee crawled under the steps, out of sight of anyone that looked over the fence. He'd take his chances with any spiders that were under there, no matter how poisonous they were. Even a funnel-web spider had to be less dangerous than the average human in Nimbin after dark.

It all made sense, now the hash had been kicked out of Lee. If you took a town, and let the dealers run it for thirty years, no amount of bright paint could hide the fact that you had to take the fronts off the toilet blocks so that the overdosed bodies could be seen from the street.

The gate scraped open, sometime during the night, jerking Lee awake. He couldn't see who it was in the darkness, as someone creaked up the steps over his head and fiddled with the back door of the café before opening the door.

The person didn't turn on a light, leaving the storeroom, steps and yard in darkness, and Lee listened to them rummaging around the storeroom and muttering to

themselves.

“Damn,” the person said, finally, and Lee crawled out from under the steps, because that was Charlie’s voice.

“Charlie?” Lee said quietly. “Charlie, it’s Lee.”

Charlie squawked and dropped something, then appeared as a shape on the steps. “Get in here,” he hissed. “Quickly.”

Charlie pulled Lee into the storeroom and closed the backdoor, then switched on a torch, shining the beam on Lee’s face. “What the fuck happened to you? Why are you wearing my wind- cheater?”

Lee winced, where Charlie’s hand touched his face. “They took my wallet and phone, gave me a kicking. What are you doing, sneaking around here?”

“I got fired. I’ve come back to get my stash.”

The torch swung back, across the shelves, and Charlie reached up and pulled down an ice-cream container. “Got it. Now, let’s go get your wallet and phone back.”

“What?” Lee said. “You can’t!”

Charlie grinned, and it wasn’t a friendly smile. “I can.”

He opened the door to the café, and disappeared for a moment, then came back carrying a cricket bat.

“Crime in Australia has resisted Americanization,” Charlie said, hefting the bat. “And the cricket bat is still the preferred weapon for personal assault. The boss keeps one under the counter, just to keep things under control. Here, you carry my stash. Reckon you can ID the arseholes who attacked you?”

“No, sorry,” Lee said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Charlie said. “I’ll just hit a couple of dealers at random, and we’ll see what happens.”

“You’re fucking joking!” Lee said. “You can’t just go and hit people!”

Charlie pulled the backdoor closed and Lee heard it lock. “Of course I can. I’m a local. They attacked my friend, I’m sorting it out.”

Lee blinked, and followed Charlie over the road toward the pub and the crowd of dealers. “Hey, Charlie,” one of the dealers called out. “Wanna buy?”

“Two of you fuckers beat up my lover today,” Charlie snarled. “I want his wallet and phone back, now, with all the cards and money, and enough extra cash to cover anything that’s been taken off his cards and any calls that have been made on his

phone.”

“Fuck off,” a middle-aged man with a shriveled-up face said. “You fucking poof.”

Charlie swung the cricket bat, smacking the man solidly in the face, then ducked the fist of the young woman standing beside the man.

“Fucking homophobic wanker!” shouted a man with dreadlocks, who kicked the man who Charlie had whacked, and Lee watched in disbelief as a brawl erupted amongst the dealers.

Charlie landed a couple more hits with the bat, then extracted himself from the melee as the patrons and bouncers spilled out of the pub.

Charlie sidled over to Lee. “Let’s go,” he said. “I think I got your phone and wallet. Gazza had his back to me, and he’s the local pickpocket, so I just grabbed his bag while he was getting punched.”

The two of them ran down the road, and Charlie pointed at a rusted-out old Holden parked beside Arts Center.

Lee slid into the passenger seat and pulled his seatbelt on as Charlie coaxed the Holden into life. “We started a fucking riot!” Charlie said, sounding jubilant. “I’ve never started a riot before.”

Lee looked out of the back window of the station wagon, as the car roared away from the town, but no one seemed to be following them. “Fuck,” he said weakly. “What the fuck happens now?”

“Where are you staying?”

“Youth hostel in Byron Bay. Why?”

“Because I need to clear out of my place fast, before the brawl manages to pack itself into cars and come looking for me,” Charlie said. “Think there might be room for me at the hostel?”

Lee sank back into the car seat and closed his eyes.

Charlie’s place was down a gravel road, deep in the hills behind Nimbin, and was no more than a shack. Lee stayed in the car while Charlie grabbed clothes, picking through the wallets and phones that Charlie tossed into his lap by the pale interior light of the car.

His was there, stripped of cash but not cards. His phone was among the jumble, too, out of its carry case. Someone had made several calls on it, when Lee checked. Calls to somewhere expensive, no doubt.

Most of the other wallets were also stripped of cash, the IDs belonging to Japanese girls with bobbed hair or middle-aged Americans with too many teeth. One was

bulging with notes and contained no ID, and Lee put that one aside.

Twenty minutes later, Charlie slung two duffels and a pack into the back of the car and got behind the wheel.

“Found yours?” he asked, looking at the wallets lined up on the dashboard, then starting the car.

“It was there,” Lee said. “What do we do with the rest?”

“Wipe them off and drop them off at the police station in Byron Bay,” Charlie said. “The cops can have the rest of the cash from Gazza’s wallet, once you’ve been reimbursed. They’ll work it all out.”

Lee watched Charlie’s face, lit eerily by the dashboard lights. “Do you deal?” He wasn’t sure why it mattered, but it suddenly did.

Charlie shook his head. “Strictly personal use only, and strictly pot. Those dealers, they’re all supporting hard drug habits, and that’s not what Nimbin was originally supposed to be about. There’s antiestablishment, and there’s junkie.”

Lee was quiet, while Charlie negotiated the rattling old car around twisting roads, then Charlie said, “Besides, they hurt you, and I happen to think you’re possibly the hottest bloke I’ve met in the past few years, and I’m taking that personally.”

In the dashboard light, Charlie was grinning at Lee. “You’re pretty fucking hot, too,” Lee said. “For an antiestablishmentarian with a propensity for solving problems with cricket bats.”

“Hey, that was a first!” Charlie said. “Could you tell I was opening bat for the school cricket team?”

“I had my eyes closed,” Lee admitted. “And I hate organized team sports.”

They drove into Byron Bay as the pubs closed for the night, so Charlie had to drive at a crawling pace to the youth hostel, through the milling tourists.

The young girl at the front desk looked blankly at Charlie and shook her head. “We’re full. No beds.”

“Can he share mine?” Lee asked. “Can you book him in like that?”

The girl’s eyes drifted past Charlie’s tattoos, to where presumably bruises were spreading across Lee’s face. “No fucking in the dorms,” she said blandly. “That’ll be \$36.”

In the dorm, the girl in the bunk above Lee’s whistled at Lee’s bruises, then grinned at Charlie. “Hi there,” she said. “I know you, you were at the café in Nimbin.”

“You were the chicken with satay sauce, right?” Charlie said, and the girl nodded.

Charlie touched Lee's arm, pulling him closer. "Shower? I want to check your bruises properly, for a start."

In the bathroom, Lee pulled his T-shirt over his head carefully, wincing as his body complained.

"You've got bruises," Charlie said, from behind him. Charlie's hands were gentle, tracing over Lee's ribs, running down beside his spine, smoothing across his shoulders. Then Charlie moved closer, wrapping his arms around Lee from behind, so Lee could feel Charlie's chest pressing against the sore places on his back.

"I don't think you've taken any real damage," Charlie murmured against Lee's ear. "I've looked worse after playing chess against my sister."

Lee laughed, really laughed, and the person who walked into bathroom at that moment said, "Excuse me," with an Irish accent and backed out again.

"That's better," Charlie said, kissing Lee's neck. "You're safe, you can relax now. C'mon, let your shoulders go."

Lee took a breath in, and consciously let the tightness in his shoulders go as he breathed out. "Better?"

One of Charlie's hands pushed down, under the waist of Lee's shorts. "Gonna reward me for rescuing you?"

"Shower cubicle?" Lee asked. "Since I don't fancy waiting for everyone in our dorm to go to sleep."

"Or listening to every guy that walks in here apologizing?" Charlie suggested, as someone else opened the door behind them, stuttered out an "Oops," and closed the door again.

The cubicle was big enough, just, for both of them. Lee traced Charlie's tattoos, all dark blue and black, intricate knots and whorls that looped around his back and chest, while Charlie wrestled with the shower, trying to find a water temperature between 'icy' and 'satanic.'

Under water that was unpleasantly hot, rather than frigid, Lee poured shower gel into his hand and then smoothed the lather down Charlie's back, while Charlie kissed him. The tiled wall of the cubicle was cold against his back, but it was doing a good job of holding him up, and he needed something with Charlie's mouth stealing every breath, and their bodies sliding together.

Charlie dragged his mouth off Lee's, breathing hard. "Do you fuck?" Charlie asked, his mouth against Lee's ear, the water pouring over both of their faces. "Because I do."

The bottle of shower gel was within reach, and Lee managed to get some gel into his

hand. “Do you?” Lee asked, sliding a handful of lather down Charlie’s back, to the crack of his arse. Charlie humped against Lee’s body, his cock sliding wet and hard against Lee’s hip as Lee’s fingers dragged.

“We gonna do it that way?” Charlie asked, his voice catching as Lee eased a fingertip inside. “I’d like that.”

“Yeah. Turn around.”

Lee’s shower kit was hanging from a hook, under his towel, and he retrieved a condom and tube of lube, shivering a little in the cool air of the bathroom. It took a few seconds to dry himself off enough to get the condom open and rolled on, but one glance at Charlie braced against the tiles, the water streaming down tanned back and legs, was enough that Lee had to squeeze the base of his cock hard, just to steady himself.

With the water turned off, Lee could hear other people in the bathroom, brushing their teeth or washing their hands, and Charlie’s hiss at the touch of Lee’s lube-slick fingers on his arse was sudden and loud. Lee eased one finger in, slow as he could, then another, and watched the knots and braids on Charlie’s back shift as Charlie jerked at his cock.

“C’mon,” Charlie said. “Don’t keep me waiting, babe.”

Someone at the sinks laughed, sounding embarrassed, and Lee laughed too, because it really was fucking funny.

“Slow down,” Lee said, but he took the hint and reached for the lube.

The noise Charlie made when Lee began to push in was so fucking hot that Lee was glad that there were other people in the room, because, really, everyone should have a chance to hear that sound once in their lives, low and growling, running right through Charlie, so Lee felt every vibration.

They both held still, and Lee didn’t dare breathe, then Lee pushed in slowly, the feeling of sliding into Charlie almost enough to make him scream.

Charlie banged a clenched fist against the tiles, twisting against Lee, pushing himself back onto Lee’s cock hard, the muscles of his back flexing, his breath coming in short gasps.

Lee pulled back slowly, dragging his cock almost all the way out, then drove in hard, making Charlie yell.

Holding onto Charlie was hard work when they were both slippery with shower gel and sweat, but Lee dug his fingers into flesh and drove in, hoping that neither of them fell over on the stupid tiles, and that no one called the management to complain about the noise Charlie was making.

“Fuck, yeah,” Charlie shouted, and Lee pushed himself up on his toes, looking for

that extra bit of leverage, the right angle, the way to climb inside Charlie's skin, inside his tattoos and warmth and life.

Lee's knees weren't going to last, there was a burning in his belly and balls that was building, and Charlie was hunching down, buckling toward coming, arm working harder, dragging Lee right behind him, too.

Lee held out, his vision graying like it had in the laneway, ribs burning, his whole fucking body on fire, while Charlie yelled his way through coming. Then Lee grabbed Charlie's shoulders, pushing him back against the tiles again, and said, "Just fucking stay still, all right?"

Charlie laughed, short of breath, his voice raw and open. "Gotcha."

It took a handful of strokes, hard and deep, then Lee was coming his brains out, hanging onto Charlie, trying desperately not to bite too hard, wild and crazy, just like the whole day had been.

He stumbled back against the other wall of the cubicle, pulling the condom off, while Charlie fought the shower again, trying to adjust the temperature of the water to something bearable.

Charlie slung an arm around Lee's neck, pulling him under the water, and that time the kiss was gentle and kind.

While Lee brushed his teeth, Charlie leaned against a basin, hair still dripping water, toothbrush in his hand, ignoring the stares of the other people in the bathroom.

"So," Charlie said, squeezing toothpaste. "I realize that we've not hooked up in the conventional manner, but I was kind of hoping that you'd not want to be a wombat." Lee spat.

"Because a wombat eats, roots and leaves?"

Charlie grinned.

Lee wiped toothpaste off his chin. "I've got a week's holiday left. Want to hang out in Byron Bay with me for a week?"

"Let's do that."

\* \* \*

They shared the driving, taking the old Holden down to Melbourne at the end of the week.

The End