Secret Confessions of a Backpacker:

My Adventure Down Under

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L.K. Watts

Published by L.K.Watts at iWriteReadRate.com

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All personal details have been changed to protect identities

For my dear friend Julian.

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Chapter1 - *Foreword*

I don't know exactly what it was that made me so determined to travel; maybe it was the fact I hated everything about the town I had grown up in.

Living in the south-east of England drove me insane, as I had nothing in common with the people who surrounded me. They seemed quite happy, living ordinary lives, doing nothing that would qualify as unusual. It was almost as if they were completely oblivious to the world around them, unaware of opportunities to broaden their minds. Either that or they didn't want to partake in anything which required effort and a trip out of their comfort zone.

Another thing that bugged me was their attitude to folk who did want to do something different with their lives. If you didn't conform to mainstream society, you were considered weird, odd; someone who perhaps should be locked away in an asylum somewhere.

So it was no wonder I couldn't wait to escape the place; a town where no positive opportunities existed.

My misguided sense of direction could have been partly to blame as well. After wanting to become a counsellor for many years, I objected when career advisors pushed me into mental-health nursing instead, insisting that was the better option. Counselling required 'life experience' and as I was still in my teenage years, they obviously thought that I was limited in this area. Unfortunately for me, I went along with their advice, despite disagreeing with everything said.

When I started my nursing degree, there wasn't the opportunity to live away from home; something I really wanted to do. The university itself was only a short distance away so it was close enough for me to commute … but that wasn't the point. Going to university was supposed to be the first time where you could be fully independent, and independence was what I craved. But it wasn't meant to be. All the student accommodation was full and there was no private property left to rent.

The big question now was: could I get through the next three years' with my own mental health still intact?

With each day that passed, I felt more unsettled and more convinced I was completely on the wrong track. I gave it my best shot, don't get me wrong. I listened fully in every lecture, dedicated entire weekends to study, and

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handed in every assignment on time. It seemed my only flaw was I tried too hard, thus burning myself out, and by Christmas I was starting to feel like I'd had enough.

Maybe if my first work placement hadn't been so great, then I would have given up. I spent two weeks working in a mental health day-care centre, with never a dull moment. Working in this environment is something only a few people can do without losing the plot themselves, and I could clearly see why.

Working there gave me the chance to see another side of people. And as I was only a student, the nurses really looked after me, making sure I wasn't left alone with the patients. Not that I ever thought my safety was at risk; it was only a day-care centre after all. My main duties included talking with the clients, actively seeking out their strong points, and encouraging their independence. Most of the clients used the centre as part of their rehabilitation after spending time in a psychiatric unit, so the staff arranged social and leisure activities for the clients to take part in. Some clients were even encouraged to go to college to gain further qualifications, and help was always at hand if they had to enquire about their welfare benefits.

By the time I returned to university however, I was extremely fed up. I had handed in three assignments before Christmas and we were just getting the results back, and it was then I discovered I had only passed one.

Soon after this, an idea started to develop at the back of my mind that I couldn't get rid of. What if I approached my head of year to ask if he would grant me a year out? After a year away, I would return with a fresh approach and a whole new perspective.

I wasn't nervous when I went to see him the following week. After all, what could he do? I would explain why I needed to take time out to travel, and if he refused permission I would quit the course anyway. I felt that if I didn't move my life in a different direction, I would simply crack up. I had to get away and do something out of the ordinary, and that's when I thought about travelling. It would certainly offer the independence I had been craving, and maybe it was the solution to my problems. My parents wouldn't be very happy but it was my life, not theirs. My dad had always said I could travel after my degree but I wanted to travel now; who knew what would happen in the future? Too many people put their lives on hold and I was not going to be one of them. If my nursing degree was meant to be, then I would come back to it.

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People went back to education in middle age all the time but not many middle-aged people could travel. They had other things to think about, such as mortgages and dependent children. Plenty of countries offered year-long working holiday visas to eighteen to thirty year olds, but once you were over that age, you weren't eligible.

At nineteen, I wanted to make the most of such opportunities.

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MAY

A few weeks after leaving university for a year, I decided to give up my degree for good. That had been in March and now it was May. I couldn't believe how quickly the time had passed.

As soon as I left university, I began to look round for ideas of where to go. I was constantly in the library, browsing books on backpacking, volunteering in third-world countries and just cruising around the world in general. Then I found a paragraph in a book about conservation volunteering. I noted down the contact information of the organisation and phoned them the following day to enquire about the job, which led to spending ten weeks in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

The whole experience was perfect. Belfast wasn't that far away from England and if I hated the experience, it would be easy enough to return home.

The company I volunteered for provided me with a flat to live in, free of charge, in exchange for five days' work in various locations of Northern Ireland. I lived with the people I worked with, had a great social network because of this, and even had financial help with food. I only really needed money to go on nights out and take day trips to places like the Giants Causeway.

I had a fantastic time over there and I couldn't have asked for a better first-time experience.

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AUGUST

I had only just returned home from Northern Ireland when I decided to apply for my working holiday visa to travel Australia.

I had spent many nights carefully considering this. Australia would be so different from Belfast. For a start, it was in a whole other hemisphere. I hadn't been that far away from home before: I hadn't even been close. I would also be alone out there. I had no family or friends' in that part of the world, so there would be no one to look after me should anything happen. I would also have to cope with the cultural differences too, not that I thought there would be that many. Australia was a westernised country after all and that factor would make things a little easier.

The money conversion rate was pretty simple as well. $10 was around £4.50 so the money I had saved would go far. The more I thought about it, the less daunting it became. Belfast had only made me want to travel further and this is my story of the events that unfolded in the following year. This is my story: completely uncut.

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Chapter 2 - *January*

Sunday 6th January

I suppose some people might say January is the best time of year to go on holiday; you can escape returning to work after the Christmas festivities, and escape the gloomy mid-winter weather too. But I was about to embark on far more than just a holiday: I was about to go on the adventure of a lifetime. And better still, I was going to be accompanied my dearest friend, Julian.

Julian and I had been firm friends for many years'. We had met in high school, in second year to be exact, as the result of a carefully thought out seating plan. Only our French teacher didn't realise this plan would backfire on her, as we spent most lessons just talking. I think the logic behind such an arrangement was that if the teacher sat all the girls next to the boys, then conversation wouldn't exist. After all, at that age the girls didn't dare look at the boys, never mind talk to them. But this wasn't the case for us; Julian loved speaking to anyone, especially the girls as he was one himself. However, he didn't admit to being gay until he was seventeen, and I wasted three years' being hopelessly in love with him.

I fell in love with Julian for his cheeky chappy nature. He could do practically anything and get away with it. You couldn't stay mad with him for long, and he was always there for me too. In the summer, we would spend our evenings hanging out in the field near his house, and in the winter we cuddled up together watching films.

So here we were now, in the airport, waiting to see what adventures would come our way on the other side of the world.

'Do you think they'll have the weather reports right?' he asked me.

'I don't know,' I replied, 'but seeing as it's mid summer over there, the weather can't be that bad.'

Julian laughed, showing a set of fading white teeth, discoloured by endless years of smoking.

'I tell you one thing, Laura. I'm not looking forward to this flight at all. It will be hell going without a fag for fourteen hours.'

I smiled at him affectionately. 'Yeah well, just let me know when you want your nicotine patches changing.'

On this Sunday evening, I watched the watery sunset disappear and darkness gently envelope the sky. The airport was busy with travellers

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returning from luxury weekend breaks, dashing here and there, anxious to return home for an early night before heading to the office next morning.

Julian and I sat in a bar, away from the endless flow of people. Julian's second favourite thing to do, next to smoking, was drinking. And when I was with him, I was in a constant haze of boozy smelling smoke. Through this mist, I could just make out a clock on the opposite wall. It said 7.50 p.m., and seeing as our flight was at 8 p.m., I thought we had better head down to the departure gate. Julian, however, was in less of a hurry to move. He assured me we still had time for one more drink. I sighed as he walked over to the bar to get his last refill.

Although he had been my best friend since high school, I wasn't sure whether he'd also be my best travelling partner. After all, while it was true we got on well, it was also true we had little in common. Julian liked to booze and smoke, and play poker, and I was virtually T-total in comparison and liked to stay healthy.

As we boarded our plane, a real sense of excitement grew inside my stomach.

'Hey,' I said, suddenly. 'Aren't you really excited? I can't believe this is happening!'

'I know,' Julian replied, his bright eyes sparkling. 'Do you want the window seat?'

'No thanks,' I screwed up my face in disgust. 'You know how much I hate flying.'

Tuesday 8th January

The scorching heat hit us as we stepped off the plane. The pilot had said that it was 31 degrees outside … at 9 o'clock in the morning! After two and a half minutes in this enervating heat, my make-up was starting to slide.

'Ugh, it's going to be a long summer if it carries on like this,' I remarked to Julian. 'I'm not going to be able to go out if I look like a clown. Look at the state of my face!'

We made our way to the immigration queue. I was beginning to feel uneasy as I thought of all the stories I'd heard about people being turned away. I knew this was unlikely to happen to us, as we both had the official visas but I still felt on edge. The security staff took our passports and eyed us up and down before letting us go through.

We hailed a cab after spending what felt like an eternity at the carousel,

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waiting impatiently for our luggage. The taxi driver gave us some rather helpful advice on our way down into Sydney's city centre. He told us what the best attractions were and which areas to avoid at night. And that was when it hit me. We were going to be here for the next twelve months: we had to make it work.

As we pulled up outside our hotel in Kings Cross, Julian pulled $50 from his wallet and handed it to the driver. I stepped out of the car and heaved my bag up the never-ending block of steps to the reception's main entrance.

The hotel was capacious with an excellent air-conditioning system but all I wanted to do was find my room, unpack and have a much needed shower.

An hour later we were standing at the bus stop waiting for the city sightseeing tour. We were looking forward to seeing Sydney's main points of interest and we figured this would be the best way to do it. As we waited for the bus, I could feel the sweat seeping out from the pores around my neck, sticking my hair to my skin.

'I don't think you should have had your shower,' Julian smirked, as he spotted the droplets of sweat on my nose. 'I think it was a complete waste of time.'

'Tell me about it,' I growled, stepping onto the bus and climbing upstairs. 'Let's hope the breeze on the top deck will help dry me off.'

As we sailed down the main street of Sydney, we were keen not to miss a thing. I pointed my camera at everything, carelessly clicking away. We went past the harbour bridge, the opera house, and the Botanic gardens.

After spending our day sightseeing, we decided it would be a good idea to pick up some groceries for the next couple of days. Although we intended to treat the first couple of weeks as a holiday, we couldn't afford to eat out all the time. Restaurants and cafés were so expensive, and already I had spent $50 on food in just one day.

'So, where do you fancy shopping then?' Julian asked, looking at his travel guide for inspiration.

'I don't mind. Anywhere that's cheap. Otherwise if we continue to spend a fortune, I'll have to start taking my clothes off for money.'

Julian let out a guffaw of laughter at this statement, but little did I realise then how true it would become over the year ahead.

Thursday 10th January

'Here's an interesting fact for you, Jules.' I looked over the magazine I

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was reading.
'What?' he asked, mildly distracted as he applied suntan lotion to his already burnt skin.
'Energy is measured in kilojoules over here, not calories.'
Talking of calories, I had a feeling I was consuming far too many. The tops of my thighs were beginning to rub together, as a result of excessive walking. I hadn't realised I would be on my feet so much, but I guessed that came with the territory of being somewhere new; you wanted to explore the place as much as possible.
Julian smiled at me, flicking down the cap of the sun cream. 'Are you ready to go to the opera house now?'
It was mid-morning before we reached the eminent building. We wandered around it, watching the boats on the river. Then a sudden thought struck me. After we had done all the sightseeing, then how were we going to spend our time? We couldn't afford to stay in Sydney if we weren't working, as everywhere was so expensive. I suppose it didn't help that I felt so unmotivated. If there was anything we needed to find out I left it for Julian to do, as I couldn't be bothered.
Don't get me wrong, I didn't wish to be back home or anywhere else for that matter, but I think what overwhelmed me the most was the fact that everything in the city was so spread out. Back in Belfast, life had been so easy because the city was so small, getting around places was simple, but here you only had to walk to the next street and you were exhausted: it took half the day!
Travelling can be hard; it's not as romantic as some people may think. The reality of it is you're in a strange place, a long way from home. Everything is new to you and you know absolutely no one. Travelling is all about making the most of opportunities, and to do this you have to socialise as much as you can. Being vivacious is not what defines me: I have always been a bit on the misanthropic side and I am aware this is my major downfall. I can be quick to judge and rather opinionated, sometimes projecting these feelings onto other people and, therefore, concluding that we are all the same. And I know I'm hypocritical, as I don't like being judged myself, especially by those who know nothing about me, so that's why I prefer to keep myself to myself.
Another thing that works to my disadvantage is that I look young for my age. People think just because I look innocent and vulnerable, they can play

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me for a fool. Trust me, folk don't mess with you half as much if you look tough and have a teardrop tattooed underneath your eye.

Friday 11th January

We'd been in this country a grand total of three days now and I had already visited a cash machine to check my account balance. I couldn't say exactly what it was that made me feel so perturbed, but I felt like I was going to run out of money in no time.

'Will you stop stressing,' Julian said to me later. 'We'll be fine.'

'We might be if we head out into the bush, skin rabbits and make fires,' I retorted defiantly. Julian's amused expression was irritating me.

He choked back on a giggle. 'I can't believe you're so worried. You've brought twice as much money as I have and look at me … I'm not worried at all.'

It was true: I couldn't deny that. I was cautious about spending money anyway. But now I was travelling and money was flying out of my account in all directions. There wasn't anything I could do about it either, not unless I wanted to return home; I would have to keep on spending. Julian, on the other hand, was spending like there was no tomorrow. He was still in holiday mode; it hadn't dawned on him yet that we would be here for a longer than two weeks. Anyway, I thought, as I tried to comfort myself, it's better to be frugal about things than to blow your whole bank balance within one month.

We spent the afternoon hunting for alternative accommodation. The hotel we were currently staying in was nice for a couple of nights, but it was way above even Julian's budget to stay there long-term.

'Okay, so here's what I've found so far,' he beckoned me over as he scrolled down the page. We were in Sydney's main library as I'd suggested the Internet access would be free.

'So there's a couple of decent looking hostels' around here then?' I looked at what had appeared on the screen in front of me.

'Yeah, there seem to be. Look at this one. It's right in the city centre with a roof-top swimming pool and it's only $35 a night.'

My eyes nearly popped when I heard this information. All things considered, it sounded fantastic.

'So do you want me to book a few nights there then?' Julian asked.

'Yeah. I'll have to dig out my bikini,' I smiled.

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Saturday 12th January

Today's first challenge was going to be tough and character-building, I thought to myself as I surveyed the endless blue skies and the sunburned skin of the people around me.

We had to leave King's Cross and head for central Sydney to check into our new hostel. It was a long trek there I had to admit, but I refused point-blank to call a taxi: I thought it would simply cost too much. After ninety minutes of walking we arrived at the hotspot hostel. It was more like a five star hotel than anything else, with everything a traveller could possibly need. The Internet café was on the first floor along with the restaurant. The spacious kitchen and the television area were on the second floor. The swimming pool was on the roof, as previously mentioned, complete with a sauna and a BBQ area. The hostel was great but I wished our room could have been bigger. I squeezed in through the tiny dormitory door and looked round for a place to put my bag. Six enormous bunk beds took up the entire room. The ceiling was so low, anyone sleeping in a top bunk had to watch they didn't bang their head getting up. A horrible sinking feeling descended over me; were these the conditions I would have to get used to over the coming year? I quickly realised this was the norm in the backpacker circuit. Most travellers were only looking for a cheap place to stay and this is what you paid for.

We spent most of the day just settling into our new digs. The hostel seemed to be full, the building overflowed with people milling about here and there, but no one seemed very friendly. Everyone was either alone or in pairs.

I flopped down in a chair and waited for Julian to return after having his fag outside. There was a surfer dude sat in the chair opposite me, but at first I didn't really notice him, as he was engrossed in his Lonely Planet travel guide. I watched him intently for five minutes before he looked up and smiled at me. I smiled back, wondering whether he would initiate conversation.

'You have a very nice smile,' he eventually said, putting down his book. He shook my hand, introducing himself almost in a formal manner. He too was from the south-east of England, and he spoke endlessly of wanting to join the police force when he returned home. He was a nice enough guy, but there was something about him that I didn't quite like. He ended up telling

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me he had a high success rate when it came to pulling women. I don't know whether that line was supposed to make me want to fall into bed with him, but it failed miserably. I tried so hard not to laugh at his pathetic chat-up lines, but I couldn't stifle my giggles so I made my excuses and left.

Sunday 13th January

I spent the morning alone to reflect upon the night before.

My life seemed to revolve around meeting two types of men: those who would try almost anything to get me into bed; and those who I found irresistibly attractive in every possible sense.

The Boy from Belfast opened up every emotion, every sense in my entire being, and in my eyes, he was absolutely flawless. I met him on a night out in a bar in Ireland, listening to a live jazz band. He had struck up a friendly conversation and I became instantly hooked, fixated on his divine Northern Irish accent. He was warm and gentle, kind and considerate: I was in awe of him.

So you can imagine how heartbroken I was when he told me, a couple of weeks later, he'd rather just be friends. We had shared some pretty intense conversations before then and opened up to each other almost instantly. He told me he didn't want to get close to someone in case he got irreversibly hurt, and that explanation was something I admired most about him. It took strength of character and a whole lot of courage to tell someone the truth, especially when it might not make you look or feel good. The vulnerability on his face as he told me this, just made me want him all the more.

A loud knock on my dormitory door disturbed my thoughts. I took a quick look in the eye hole to see Julian standing there.

'Hi, Laura,' he said with a lovesick expression on his face. 'Are you coming out with me and Steve this afternoon?'

Steve was another traveller Julian had met the previous night while I was being chatted up by the surfer dude. Despite knowing him for less than twenty-four hours, Julian seemed keen to spend as much time with him as possible.

'Yeah sure,' I replied, 'I'll just get my bag.'

I locked my dormitory door before we headed down the hostel's corridor. 'So how's it going with Steve then?'

'Pretty well thanks,' Julian replied, 'Although I'm still not sure whether he is gay or not.'

I laughed. 'Well, if he is, you'll be in there like a shot.'

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We knocked on Steve's door, waited a while for him to find his wallet and then headed off towards the harbour bridge. Standing by the water's edge, I felt at ease with our surroundings.

'We'll have to climb that one day,' Julian remarked. For a split second, I thought I'd misheard him.

'You what?' I spluttered, feeling a rising panic. 'You're joking aren't you? People don't climb that, surely?' I stared at the bridge; it suddenly appeared a lot bigger now. Julian looked at me, his face full of eagerness. I still thought he was having me on, that this was just another one of his impetuous ideas. 'You really want to do this?'

He nodded. 'Why not, Laura? It's entirely safe. You're attached to the bridge by a safety rope at all times.'

I sighed, looking straight up at Steve. He was grinning from ear to ear, no doubt highly amused by my facial expression.
'Don't look at me,' he said, 'I can't do it, I'm off up the east coast in a few days' time.'

I sighed again, this time turning to face Julian. 'Looks like I have no choice then, does it?' I fished out a wad of notes from my bag. 'Go and book it before I change my mind.' With that, I sealed my fate: the climb was booked for Tuesday.

Monday 14th January

As the first week drew to an end, I'd become very comfortable in Sydney. I'd had Jules with me for almost the entire time and I was beginning to get used to the constant company.

As an only child, I always had my own thoughts and ideas, so I never needed anyone else to get through life. Most of the time I couldn't rely on people to be there anyway, so when I had gone to Belfast alone, it didn't bother me. In fact, I relished it and had an amazing time over there. There are pros and cons to every situation and being on your own means you can be entirely selfish: no one else's needs come into consideration.

However, it can be lonely at times and company is nice when you can find it. So, just when I had got used to Julian's company, he announced that he wanted to spend the entire day with Steve.

'It's his last day in Sydney,' he sighed, 'and then I'll probably never see him again, unless we meet up together later on.'

I frowned, struggling to see why he was so bothered at this early stage.

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‘Okay, but do you really care?’ I sat up from my supine position on my bed. I’d been enjoying a rare lie-in when Julian disturbed me.

‘Of course I do; I can’t believe I’ve met someone so special this soon.’

I gave a wide-eyed look of shock, suddenly alarmed at how carried away he was getting. ‘But you’ve only known him a day!’

‘Two days,’ he said, defiantly. ‘And I really like him too.’

‘But you’ve only just found out he’s gay and already you’re dreaming of your first flat together!’

Julian looked hurt by my stentorian tone but I didn’t feel the need to start apologising now. I was only trying to look out for him; I just didn’t want him to waste his entire Australian experience on this one guy.

Tuesday 15th January

Planned to have a restful day today in preparation for the big climb that hung over my head like, well ... a ... bridge.

We booked our first day trip out of the city to the Blue Mountains that morning, and then I tried not to spend the rest of the day thinking about what I would be doing at 6 p.m.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to do anything exciting with my time here in Australia: I did. I wanted to have plenty of adventures; I just didn’t see climbing that bridge as much of an adventure, that’s all. For someone who loathed heights and even hated climbing the stairs, I just knew I wasn’t going to enjoy it.

Julian was ebullient when the time came, but I was definitely less enthusiastic. We signed the forms to say we weren’t prone to fainting fits or had any history of sudden heart failure. As I checked off the boxes to say I was in optimum health, I couldn’t help but think this climb would be more strenuous than previously thought. After all, we were about to go up the main feature of Sydney’s skyline.

We waited nervously in the changing room for our guide to present us with our safety equipment and suits. He helped us to click on the belts that would attach us to the bridge at all times. Once we had put on our boots, he made one last safety check before letting us out on to the platform that overlooked the bridge. I was first in line, right behind the guide. I think he placed me there just in case I froze half-way up the ladders. If that was the case then I couldn’t get left behind.

‘Okay, can you all hear me?’ he bellowed, looking towards the people at

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the back of our group. He clearly wanted everyone's full attention. 'As you can see from here, there are a series of ladders to climb, followed by more platforms and so on.' He looked at my pasty face, 'Are you okay? You've gone pale.'

I nodded, desperately hoping my vertigo wouldn't kick in half way up. I would be mortified if I did actually faint, especially after signing that disclaimer. My guide looked me up and down; I wasn't sure whether he believed me.

'She's fine,' Julian chirped, 'aren't you, Laura?'

I forced a weak smile. The blood was pumping so much around my ears I could barely hear them.

'Alright then,' he replied, still looking hard at me. 'If everyone's okay, we'll get going.'

Climbing the ladders wasn't so bad after all. They were only short with railings either side so I had something firm to hold on to. As long as I didn't have to look down I was fine. I wasn't that bothered about going up anyway, it was the coming down that worried me more.

It was windy when we neared the top and I was almost blown off the final ladder. We stepped out on to the top of the bridge and surveyed the amazing sight, before posing for a photo to prove we had completed the climb.

Heading down, there seemed to be twice as many steps as there were coming up, but I felt proud that I had managed to conquer the challenge.

Wednesday 16th January

I looked out of my dormitory window at 8.30 a.m. Thanks to my early night I had awoken refreshed, alert and ready for more adventures. Positive feelings raced through my veins; I couldn't wait to start the day. The only downfall to the situation was the weather. I looked up into the sky and watched the rain fall hard. Raindrops hit the ground with such force they bounced back six inches into the air. The oncoming clouds only seemed darker than the ones overhead, and there were no signs of things improving, so I decided to spend my day by the pool. A place where I could get just as wet and have twice as much fun.

On the roof, I felt fantastic. I had hated climbing that blasted bridge yesterday, but I had managed to do it and I was so glad I did. The experience had given me a real sense of achievement and a massive confidence boost.

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It was fairly busy by the pool; it seemed that everyone else had the same idea as me. I got into the water and swam around for a while. It felt strange to be doing something active and not sweating as a result. I hated how sometimes you only had to step outside for five minutes before you needed another shower. Perspiring could also make you feel so unattractive; no self-respecting person would want to be seen with anyone who had a face like a mirror and a body so sticky it felt like treacle.

As I was just about to push back off the wall to do another fifty lengths, I noticed someone watching me. He was by the BBQ area wearing some very tight speedo shorts. His body was incredibly lean and muscular, and he had a very distinct face. I smiled at him and he returned it. I turned away and started to swim, but I could still feel his eyes on me. I didn't want to start staring; that would have been too obvious so I paused against the wall again. He saw my subtle sign and came over but instead of approaching me, he walked over to the other side of the pool and made a clean, crisp dive into the water. I was shocked by how professional the manoeuvre looked and then I was even more surprised when I felt a pair of hands grab my ankles.

He shot to the surface and laughed when he saw how taken aback I looked.

'That was quite an entrance. Don't you know how to enter a swimming pool normally?' I gasped, desperately trying to regain my composure. He looked a little puzzled and I wondered just how much of my language he understood; he didn't look particularly English.

'You have a very nice tattoo,' he said in an accent I couldn't quite place. He traced the outline with a finger that was feather-light. I shivered as I looked down at his hand on my arm.

'What exactly does it mean?'

'It's Mandarin for bravery,' I smiled, brushing away a stray piece of hair from my forehead. I was suddenly beginning to feel breathless.

'Ah, I see. You're brave?'

My heart was starting to pound now, as I couldn't believe he was talking to me. I didn't know whether it was my imagination working overtime, but his fiery eyes seemed permanently fixed onto mine. I gave him a coy smile. 'Well yes, I'd like to think so. I climbed the harbour bridge yesterday.'

He nodded as if to tell me he understood this time. Looking straight at me, I could almost hear the air between us crackle with electricity.

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‘Where are you from?’ I enquired.

‘The Pyrenees.’

So that explained the strange, foreign accent. No wonder he looked so unique; he was a mixture of French and Spanish with whatever else thrown in.

He spoke of his job as a paramedic: how a career like that taught you the true value of life. I listened intently to his tales, admiring him as a person for being able to cope with a position like that. As Tom continued to talk, he revealed himself as a true free spirit. He had so much personality, I couldn’t help but feel drawn to him. He told me I was rich, as I had so much time left in my life (hopefully) and that’s what made me so wealthy. I smiled broadly at that analogy: it was a good way to put things. He definitely seemed to be my sort of person.

‘Come and join me in the sauna,’ he said as he climbed out of the pool, the chlorinated water shimmered on his body. As I followed I couldn’t help staring at his perfectly toned body, a body more suited to a stripper than a paramedic.

After forty minutes in the sauna, steaming, Tom suddenly got up and left. I stayed put for the next ten minutes, expecting him to come back any second but he never did, and when I went back into the pool area he was gone. Perplexed, I looked round for a while. We’d just spent the last five hours together and then he had left without a word. His enigmatic nature left me wanting more.

Thursday 17th January

6 a.m. came around a lot faster than I had wanted it to. I couldn’t believe I had to be up this early, just to spend a day at the Blue Mountains. After hauling myself out of bed I quickly dressed and headed down to the reception area to meet Julian.

I spotted him hunched up on a bar stool, tucked away just behind the hostel’s main door entrance. Sporting red-rimmed eyes and pale skin, he looked like he’d had one too many shots of the poison they called ‘alcohol’.

‘Hi,’ he managed to say. ‘How are you?’

I looked at him and smiled, wincing at his obvious discomfort. ‘Well I’m hoping I look healthier than you at this present time.’

Julian forced a watery smile. ‘Very funny.’

He shifted awkwardly on his stool, trying to find a more comfortable

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position and, nursing his head in his hands, he explained the previous nights events.

'Oh Laura, you should have seen me. I had that many tequila shots, I almost passed out on the floor. I knew I'd had enough when I fell down the last three stairs on my way to the loo, but that just gave my room-mate ammunition to buy me more drinks.' With that he took one last gulp of air before rushing off to the toilet. I exhaled slowly as I watched him go. He only just made it through the swinging doors before I heard him be sick. I turned round, cringing. I just couldn't understand travellers' who splurged money on four-day benders. If people want to be inebriated, surely they could do that at home? You didn't have to come to the other side of the world just to pursue something they could do in their own house. I thought the whole point of travelling was to experience things you couldn't experience in your own country; to see things you wouldn't be able to see elsewhere. But as I was finding out, many people didn't seem to share my view — they seemed to think the total opposite.

Friday 18th January

'So, how was your night of passion with the paramedic?' Julian asked, eagerly awaiting the juicy details. He had recovered from the crapulence he had experienced yesterday and was looking forward to starting another session tonight, in the hostel's bar.

I rolled my eyes in response to his question. 'Non-existent, I didn't even see him last night.'

Julian looked dismayed. 'You're not having much luck, are you Laura?'

I shrugged and sighed. 'Our trip to the Blue Mountains tired me out too much.'

My friend gave me a sympathetic smile. 'Oh well, never mind. Plenty more fish in the sea and all that.'

I nodded, picking up my drink that Julian's room-mate had just bought me.

'Is this toxic, or what?' I asked him as he came over with Julian's beer. I perused the drink before sniffing it. The liquid was bright green but it didn't have any sort of smell.

Ben grinned at my expression. 'Drink it and see.'

I wasn't brave enough to down it all in one go so I took a small sip instead.

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The bar was slowly filling up with people, all travellers staying in the hostel. The place must have made an absolute fortune on alcohol alone, so no wonder they could afford to keep the accommodation looking nice. I suppose that was one good thing about it; if it wasn't for the booze, we probably wouldn't have the luxury of the swimming pool.

Julian had almost finished his beer by the time I snapped out of my thought process. 'So Laura, are you hoping to hook up with Tom tonight?'

'I am indeed. That's if he's still talking to me.'

At that precise moment, I spotted the man in question walking to the bar. He noticed me smiling and I motioned for him to come over.

'Hi,' I said. 'How are you?'

He didn't answer. Instead he lifted me from my stool and carried me out of the bar and upstairs to his room.

In bed he kissed every single square inch of me, exploring every nook and cranny. He was in the middle of going down on me when the dormitory door opened and the room flooded with electric light. I quickly yanked the duvet over me before turning towards the door to see who it was. One of Tom's room-mates had come into the room to retrieve his phone charger and luckily for us, being on the top bunk, he didn't notice a thing.

That night, Tom gave me my first orgasm I'd had since being in the Southern Hemisphere and when dawn broke, my departure was swift. I will always have the memory of that night, but I never did see Tom again.

Saturday 19th January

For anyone who is thinking of going to Australia, please remember that at certain times of the year, simple activities like crossing the road can leave you sunburned. This can happen even when you've had no other exposure to the sun's rays, when you've spent the entire day in the shade. And then you realise you have run out of bottled water and need to brave the heat to replenish your stocks. Even then, when you have to face the sun for just five minutes, it can leave you a nice pink candyfloss colour. The factor in my sun cream, obviously, wasn't high enough.

We met Ben on Bondi Beach (part of the coastline near Sydney), as he decided to join us when we checked out of the hostel in the city. I think he wanted our company than be alone by himself, and to be honest it was nice for us to mix with other people too.

Ben had stripped down to his swimming shorts and was sunning himself

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on the white sand. His shorts left nothing to the imagination by anyone's standards, so consequently I found myself staring. Ben looked up, noticed my gaze and smiled at me.

'Hot, isn't it?' he said. I nodded, watching Julian sit down next to him. My friend winced as he crushed the hot sand beneath his body.

'I don't want to go back to our hostel tonight,' he moaned. 'It's full of sand and cockroaches.'

I agreed. 'Yeah, I didn't think it would be like that, especially after staying in such a lovely hostel in central Sydney. We've been spoiled.'

It was true, there was no denying that. Up here in Bondi, the standards weren't the same. Everything was so touristy people spent most of their time on the beach so it really didn't matter what the accommodation was like. When we did eventually go back to the hostel later on, I was near hysterical. Three giant cockroaches were on my dormitory floor.

'Oh my God!' I screamed to my room-mate, who was sitting calmly on her bed reading. 'Have you seen these monsters?'

'Yeah,' she said, putting down her travel guide, 'but there's usually more than three. I've been here for so long I hardly notice them now.'

I stared at the pretty blonde in utter horror and disbelief before I hauled my bag on to the top bunk, the furthest I could get away from these beasts. Suffice to say I didn't really spend a lot of time in the hostel after that; I spent it on the beach instead with everyone else, getting extremely sunburned.

Later that evening, in the hostel's kitchen, I met up with Julian and Ben.

'Good God, what the hell happened to you?' I asked Julian as I surveyed his blood-red skin. 'You look like you should be occupying a bed at the local burns unit.'

My friend smiled sheepishly, averting my gaze. 'Er ... I got a bit sunburned,' he giggled. 'I don't know what I'm laughing for either. It really hurts.'

I put down my tall glass of water and sighed. I looked at Ben and shook my head. 'I don't know, Jules, what are we going to do with you?'

Ben smiled at me, amused by my desperation at my friend's misfortune. I smiled back and suddenly noticed how sexy he looked. Sporting a deep tan, he wasn't overcooked in the slightest. Maybe this was due to him being half-Brazilian. Most foreign men were undoubtedly sexier than their English counterparts, and that was probably the reason why: they tanned

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better.

‘I think we should go for a paddle in the sea, it might help me cool down a bit,’ Julian said, grabbing his mobile phone off the workbench as we headed out of the kitchen.

Down on the beach, it was certainly fresher than before. The waves swirled over our feet as we paddled barefoot along the shoreline. Even though only my feet were exposed to the water, I could still feel the force behind the sea. The waves rushed at us, confident and strong. The tide was so powerful I was glad I didn’t have to venture out any further.

‘I think I’m going to head back,’ Julian suddenly said. ‘I’ve got a banging headache and I’m tired.’

He had been lagging behind us the entire time, so we weren’t surprised.

‘You and Ben can carry on though. I don’t want to spoil your evening.’ With that he turned and hobbled back up to the hostel. We watched him until his silhouette disappeared.

The waves were beginning to have a soporific effect on me; I was almost in a trance as I listened to them crash down on the sand.

‘Do you fancy a dip?’ Ben asked, coming up behind me and grabbing me in a bear hug.

‘No thanks. Water’s too cold,’ I said, before I broke free from his grasp and started to walk again. Ben suddenly stepped out in front me, blocking my path. His piquant eyes sparkled.

‘Okay then, why don’t you just take off your dress?’

My jaw dislocated itself as it hit the ground. I couldn’t believe he’d just said that; I couldn’t believe his brazenness.

‘You know, if it wasn’t for Tom I would have made my move on you back in Sydney.’ He came up to me then and kissed me hard. I stepped back, breathless, my mind racing. Where the hell was all this coming from? Why had I missed all the signs? Or had Ben just seen me with Tom and decided he would like a piece of me too?

I could feel Ben’s hot, moist breath on my neck. As I had taken a sudden step backwards before, surprised at his brazen advances, I felt Ben was letting me make the next move; I had the power to decide whether I would like to reciprocate. I studied his gorgeous face before I gave him the green light and kissed him back. His hands were everywhere, spreading like wildfire, his touch burned my skin.

‘Why don’t you take off your dress, there’s no one else around,’ he

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whispered in my ear while slowly unhooking my bra. I nodded, eager to please. I slipped the soft fabric off me, letting it drop to the floor. Ben began to knead my nipples, bending down to suck them gently while he struggled with his belt, easing his zip over his impressive bulge.

'Suck me,' he panted, pushing my head down as he fought to free his straining cock. I obeyed the order, pushing his member fully into my mouth. I could feel his fingers pushing down my knickers, his hands slowly lifting me up towards his hips. I wrapped my legs around him as he pushed himself roughly inside. Moaning, I arched my back as he held onto me tightly, thrusting violently. I could feel every inch of his throbbing, twitching cock, filling me up. My muscles contracted as he let out a sudden groan, pulling my hair as he exploded inside me.

Sunday 20th January

I didn't want to get up this morning. People had spent the majority of the night talking outside my dormitory window. It was hard enough to sleep because of the humidity, but their constant chatter made it almost impossible. I also felt rough and that didn't help matters either. My skin was still burnt so I put my ill-feeling down to sleep deprivation and overexposure to the sun.

Julian was chirpy, however. His early night had obviously worked wonders for him.

'Hi, Laura,' he said, in a tone far too jovial for my irascible mood.

'Don't, Jules,' I said, cupping my head in my hands. 'Don't speak to me, my head hurts too much.' I pulled up a chair outside a café and sat down.

Julian laughed, 'Rough night, eh? That's not what I've heard.'

I winced, squinting up to look at him through the blinding sun. 'So he's told you then?'

'Told me what?'

'Don't be so coy, it's irritating!'

'Yes, he's told me,' he winked. 'And he also told me it was the best sex he's had in a while.'

'Really? He said that?' I suddenly felt much brighter as I thought to myself that this coming year could be fantastic, if yesterday's events were a regular occurrence.

My friend nodded. 'Yes, he really did say that. Now, I wonder if they do any cocktails round here, I just fancy Sex on the Beach.'

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Monday 21st January

I spent the whole of the day counting down the hours until I could escape from Bondi. Apart from my rendezvous with Ben the other night, the whole Bondi experience was rather disappointing for me. I have never been one for beach holidays anyway, so I was rather looking forward to our trip to Melbourne tomorrow.

'I can't wait to get back in touch with Steve again,' Julian sighed as he pegged out his washing in the hostel's courtyard. Judging by the amounts of clothes in the washing basket, I'd say this was their first wash since being in the country.

'Really?' I said, raising an eyebrow as I leant back in my chair. 'So, do you know what his plans are for the two of you then?'

He shrugged. 'No, not yet, but he said that if we met up at a later date, he wouldn't mind sharing a flat with me.'

I looked at his face in astonishment. 'Are you serious? You've only known the guy for two seconds!'

Julian looked defiant, his tone vitriolic. 'Of course I'm serious. I know what I want.'

'Okay, okay, alright,' I said hastily, keen to avoid an argument between the two of us. I didn't pursue the matter any further after that, as I knew better than to try and force my opinion on to him, even if I was only looking out for him. Instead, I returned to my reading. I wanted to get a feel for Melbourne before I went tomorrow, and judging by what I had read so far, it sounded just like my sort of place.

Tuesday 22nd January

The purpose of a diary is to express emotion, feeling and thought: that's why I like writing so much. I feel if you transfer your soul on to paper, your thought process automatically becomes clearer and you cleanse yourself of emotional clutter. Maybe it was just me, but I always feel better after a good old write; to have a diary is like having your own personal therapist, someone ready to listen when you are bogged down with the minutiae's of life.

I couldn't wait to get out of the hostel and it wasn't just the cockroaches I longed to escape either; it was the pretentious atmosphere of the place. People pretended to be friendly but they weren't. Everyone wanted to be

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cool surfer dudes, like they were starring in *Baywatch.* Why couldn't people just be themselves? Was it because they felt the lack of something in their lives so they wanted to become someone else? Or was it because they didn't like who they were and so wanted to change into someone they admired? Whatever it was that made them act that way, I was just glad I had the confidence to be myself.

It was evening by the time we arrived at Sydney's main airport. We had caught the last shuttle bus of the day as it was the cheaper option, but now we had a five-hour wait before we could check in.

'You know,' I said to Julian, as I dragged a trolley over. 'It would have been cheaper if we had caught the overnight bus into Melbourne, and then we would have saved on one night's accommodation.' I watched my bag overbalance off the trolley, despite my best efforts to save it.

Julian pulled the bag onto his trolley instead. 'Yeah, but think of how tired you would have been. We would have only had to catch up the sleep we missed anyway.'

Our flight only lasted an hour. Compared to the journey from Heathrow to Sydney, the flight to the state of Victoria only felt like a minute. My friend decided to make the most of it, however, and took full advantage of the alcohol on board.

After landing, we made our way out of the airport to flag down a bus into the city centre. It was only then Julian realised he'd left himself short for the fare. I sighed as I watched him walk over to the cash machine, to replace the money he'd spent on the in-flight vodka.

'Is there ever a day when you don't drink?' I quizzed him. 'All this booze is going to have a deleterious effect on your health.' My statement was met with a wall of silence; he obviously didn't think it was worth the effort to answer.

Wednesday 23rd January

'So the hostel's fully booked until next week then?' I groaned.

'Yep,' Julian replied, swivelling around in his chair. 'The place is obviously popular.'

As we didn't arrive in to Melbourne until late last night, we booked the first hostel available. And, as it happened, we managed to strike gold. The hostel had only just opened; it was on the main street of St Kilda, and only a two-minute walk away from the beach, but we'd only been able to book

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one night and because of its location, it remained booked up until the following week.

‘I suppose I’ll just have to keep looking online and hope there’s something available in the city to book for a couple more nights,’ Julian said, going over to a computer in the hostel’s common room.

After spending ninety minutes searching, Julian found a hostel in West Melbourne. We caught a bus in to the city centre and walked the rest of the way. This was totally my idea, of course, but in thirty-eight degree heat, it wasn’t one of my better ones.

Thursday 24th January

After spending a couple of weeks’ in the hostel environment, I was starting to feel unsure about whether I wanted this arrangement to continue. Hostels were fine if you didn’t mind the lackadaisical approach to security — although some had better facilities than others. The one we were currently staying in had access to secure lockers.

But it wasn’t just the security issue either; I felt so dirty in the hostel as the rooms weren’t cleaned regularly and the showers were a haven for mould and mildew.

‘I just feel I would be happier in an apartment, that’s all,’ I tried to reason with Julian, over coffee in the hostel’s kitchen.

Julian sighed, giving his drink one last stir. ‘That’s fair enough, Laura, but I do think it would be more expensive in an apartment, not to mention twice as lonely. You wouldn’t get to meet the same flow of people as you do now.’

‘But that’s the thing,’ I continued, ‘it would be far more private. At the moment I just feel everyone is watching me. I can’t even have a shower without worrying some pervert is spying on me through the keyhole.’

Julian laughed, scraping his chair back to go and wash his cup out at the sink. ‘Well, I suppose if you do really feel that way, it’s something for you to consider.’

After voicing my concerns to Julian, I found an advert in the local paper for a flat to rent in St Kilda. It didn’t say who had placed the advert, but I rang the number anyway. A foreign man with a thick accent picked up the phone and asked a few questions, before arranging to meet me outside Nando’s in the main street of St Kilda at three o’clock that afternoon.

I was so happy then because I really did feel that finding an apartment

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was the next step of my plan. Once I had found somewhere stable to live, I had a much better chance of finding a job. And if the apartment was too expensive in the long run, I could always look for somewhere else.

Julian volunteered to come with me when I met this man; I think he was slightly worried about my safety. After all, this man was a perfect stranger and who knew what he might do to me if he met me all alone.

We spent forty minutes outside Nando's waiting for this man to turn up. My positive feelings along with my patience were starting to dwindle. Where the hell was he and why hadn't he shown up? A sickly feeling began to wash over me as I thought about the intentions of this man. After waiting an hour on the street corner, looking like a nervous hooker with my pimp by my side, I decided to give up and call it a day. It was clear to me by now that this man, whoever he was, was not going to show.

'It's just as well, Laura,' Julian said to me on the bus back home. 'It's obvious there's something dodgy about him when he stood you up like that. Maybe he wanted you alone and when he saw me, he decided it wasn't worth his effort to pursue you any further.'

My stomach churned as I realised that this was probably the case. I don't know, maybe there was a genuine explanation behind his no show; perhaps he'd had a sudden stroke and dropped dead, or something. But I couldn't help thinking the truth was more sinister. And from that moment onwards, I decided any future meetings would only be with women. After all, you never knew who you were meeting up with and it's always better to be safe than sorry.

Friday 25th January

The rain was relentless; it had been pouring down for the past six hours. I looked out of the bathroom window in despair and decided that my mood matched perfectly with the weather.

I didn't know what it was exactly that made me feel so down. I think the combination of yesterday's events mixed with the fact that I couldn't go out anywhere without getting drenched, played an important part. I just felt so lethargic, I couldn't be bothered doing anything. Every task was a mammoth effort and it seemed like I was spending most of my time in my room, searching for my belongings. It wouldn't have been so bad if I didn't have to filter through everyone else's belongings to find my own. I'm a tidy person by nature so cleaning up after other people really drove me insane. I

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think that's why I longed to rent somewhere just by myself. At least then I would only have to worry about my own mess.

By mid-afternoon I was starting to feel better. It had finally stopped raining and I felt brave enough to venture out in to the sodden city.

Australian folk aren't used to downpours. In fact any sign of precipitation usually sends them running for shelter. So when it does rain hard, the streets are flooded in seconds. I did wonder once if drains were present in this country or whether they had yet to be invented.

Saturday 26th January

It was late morning before I dragged myself out of bed and my room-mate, Jaz, couldn't wait to talk to me.

'What's the matter?' I asked, as she manhandled me into a quiet corner of the kitchen. Jaz looked over both shoulders before she dropped her voice to a whisper.

'Have you seen the woman who checked into our dormitory yesterday?'

'No,' I answered, pouring a cup of coffee, my first caffeine fix of the day. 'Why, what's wrong?'

'I'll tell you what's wrong,' Jaz hissed, with a grave look of concern on her face. 'The woman is a stark raving lunatic!'

I put the kettle back down with a sudden jolt. 'Really? What makes you say that?' Jaz wasn't the hysterical sort and she didn't frighten easily. This woman must have been loopy for my room-mate to react like this.

'She was up and down all night,' Jaz explained. 'She's got the bunk above mine and her constant moving around kept me awake for most of the night. She repeatedly switched the lights on and off and, at one point, she even stood in the middle of the room watching us sleep.'

I stared at Jaz, open-mouthed as I felt my blood drop in temperature. 'That doesn't sound good. What are we going to do?'

My room-mate just shrugged and said that if her behaviour didn't improve then we would have to report her.

I met Julian after lunch in the hostel's computer room. It was Sod's Law the only time I needed the protection of my male friend, would be the only time he couldn't give it to me, as the hostel operated a strict, single-sex room policy.

'Maybe I could dress you up as a woman,' I joked, running my fingers through his silky soft blond hair, picturing perfectly what he'd look like.

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Julian snorted. ‘Yeah right! Like that’s going to work. And anyway, even if you did manage to get me in, I’m hardly the macho type. Not even a mouse would be scared of me.’

I sighed, thinking about what my friend had just said. In my younger days I always thought if these situations presented themselves, the person threatening my safety would be a man. Never in a million years did I think it might be a woman. Why would I? You hardly hear of women committing heinous crimes, but it seemed like every day you heard of men murdering people.

‘The only thing I can suggest is you tell the hostel staff about her,’ Julian said, noting my worried look. ‘It sounds like she could be really unstable and you don’t want to wake up one morning with a knife in your neck.’

My eyes widened as a terrifying thought struck me. ‘Oh my God! She has access to the knives in the kitchen!’

Sunday 27th January

I breathed a sigh of relief as I woke up this morning. I felt alive but I checked my pulse just to make sure. There was no sign of our loopy room-mate; her bed didn’t look slept in so maybe that was the reason I had survived to see another day.

After breakfast I dragged Julian down in to the city to look for another place to stay. Even if we did report this person of whom we lived in fear, there was no doubt in my mind I would definitely feel better if we stayed elsewhere … as far away from her as possible.

‘How about that one?’ Julian asked, pointing to a hostel over the road. ‘It says on the board outside it’s only a $100 per week.’

I looked at the building and I could clearly see why it was so cheap. The majority of the paintwork had peeled off and most of its windows were unhinged too. But as it was so cheap, we felt compelled to go in. The decor wasn’t any better on the inside either, but its atmosphere had a nice feel to it, which made us decide we would definitely come back next week.

Back at the hostel, things looked like they had taken a turn for the worse, as was apparent from Jaz’s tear-stained face.

‘Hey, what’s wrong?’ I asked, going over to comfort her.

‘Oh Laura, it’s awful,’ she sniffed, dabbing away the mascara on her cheeks. ‘My friend has been murdered by her ex-boyfriend; she was found on her bathroom floor.’

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I felt sick with the shock; the poor woman, meeting her end in such a brutal way.

'I'm so shaken up,' Jaz continued, 'I can't believe such a thing has happened round here. It's usually such a quiet area and these sorts of things are unheard of.'

Hearing news like this made me want to cry myself. Jaz originally came from Queensland but had lived in Melbourne for many years'. She was in between houses at the moment which was the reason for her stay in this hostel.

'I really don't want to spend another night with this lunatic woman,' Jaz sobbed, reaching for another tissue.

I nodded in agreement, 'No, neither do I. Her behaviour indicates she's unstable and there's no saying what she might do next.'

Monday 28th January

I felt like I had only been asleep for a couple of minutes before someone switched on the dormitory lights. With half opened eyes, I saw my deranged room-mate standing in the middle of the room watching me. I shut my eyes quickly; I didn't want her to know she had just woken me up. If she knew I was watching her, she might not do whatever it was she intended to do. And I wanted her to do something that would be seen as unacceptable; I wanted to gather as much evidence against her as I possibly could.

I continued to lie there, very still, wondering what on earth she was doing. As far as I could tell, she was just standing in the middle of the room cackling to herself. And it was a real psychotic cackle too, not just a giggle; it sounded malevolent.

She climbed the ladder to her bed after switching off the light, but twenty minutes later had resumed her position in the middle of the room.

By now, I was beginning to get over feeling scared. Instead I was feeling incredibly angry. There was no need for this type of behaviour; all it did was disturb everyone else. If she couldn't settle herself, all she needed to do was take herself off to the hostel's common room and leave everyone else in peace. But no, that logic was too simple for her.

Next morning, at our very first opportunity, Jaz and I went down to reception to complain about our anti-social room-mate. The man behind the desk looked decidedly distracted as we explained the situation.

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‘Look, I’m sure she’s harmless enough,’ he said, fiddling with a piece of cello tape. ‘But I will have a word with her if you want me to.’

Jaz and I looked at each other incredulously. I had an uneasy feeling we weren’t being taken seriously. These places had the potential to attract all sorts of undesirables and that was fair enough. On your travels, you expected to meet the odd eccentric here and there, but this, I felt, was much more than that. And the most disturbing thing about the whole situation was the fact that we were being met with such a blasé attitude.

‘No wonder people end up being murdered,’ Jaz hissed to me, on the way back to our room. ‘They know they’ve got a psychopath here and yet they do nothing about it.’

I nodded in agreement. What were we supposed to do if no one took us seriously?

The sun was still blazing down at seven o’clock that evening. Excitement bubbled in my stomach. Tonight was the night I would meet some of the stars from the *Neighbours* cast, one of Australia’s greatest television shows. It was bizarre to think of meeting the people I’d been watching in my living room for the past fourteen years.

The *Neighbours* bus was supposed to collect me at seven thirty from outside the hostel. When there was still no sign of it at seven fifty, I was beginning to feel restless. By ten past eight, I was starting to panic and by eight thirty, I was raging.

‘What the hell is going on?’ I spat at the man behind reception; the same man who had fobbed Jaz and I off earlier.

‘Do you know who booked you on the trip?’ he queried, rustling the pages of his diary hurriedly.

‘Not a clue,’ I replied, flatly.

The man looked bemused. ‘Er, I’m really sorry but whoever booked that trip for you has got their dates mixed up. The cast are still on their Christmas holidays.’

My blood had reached boiling point by that time. ‘You mean to tell me that I’ve just wasted an hour waiting for a bus that was never going to turn up anyway?’

He nodded sheepishly. ‘I’m really sorry. Here’s a DVD of *Neighbours;* it costs $35 but you can have it for free.’

Later on, when my blood pressure had returned to normal, I went to find Julian. He was, unlike myself, having a quiet night in his dormitory. He

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seemed amused when I explained my ruined evening to him.

'You can stop laughing because it's not funny,' I scowled, leaning back against the wall.

'I reckon you should have punched the guy's lights out, I would have done.'

I sighed. 'This just isn't my day.' I was about to say something else but was interrupted by a loud knock at the door.

'Laura, are you in there?' the door opened slightly.

It was Linda, another one of my nicer room-mates. She had a camera with her.

'What's up?' I asked, as she sat down next to me. She passed the camera over.

'Look at these pictures.'

I flicked through several photos; they were all of me, Jaz, and Linda. One showed me in the kitchen, talking to Jaz and another showed Linda on the computer by reception. They were strange photos but they all had one thing in common: their subjects had no idea their photo was being taken.

'So, whose is this camera?'

'Take a wild guess,' Linda replied.

I looked at her in horror but no words would come out.

'I found the camera on my bed,' Linda continued. 'At first I thought it was mine but once I saw these photos, it dawned on me that it must belong to this woman. And for whatever reason, she's been taking photos of us all.'

My eyes almost popped with the shock. 'We have to get another room. I can't take much more of this.'

Tuesday 29th January

Last night was my first night of undisturbed sleep in what felt like a year. Jaz, Linda, and myself had all reached the same agreement to move into another dormitory; we had to do something to save our sanity.

Jaz and Linda had both checked out that morning. Jaz had finally found a house to rent in the city, and Linda was flying out to Perth to continue with her travels.

After lunch I did some much needed washing. Although I'd had a fantastic night's sleep, I still felt sleepy from my busy week. The weather was warm which made me feel all the more tired, so I decided to sit outside with my travel book. I was just about to bring my washing in when Julian

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came out with his new room-mate.

‘Hi, Laura,’ Julian chirped, ‘can we join you?’

I smiled and said yes, eyeing up his room-mate. He looked incredibly sure of himself, sporting a deep tan and sunglasses. Even before he said anything I was convinced he was going to irritate me, and was in no mood for small talk. So I just mainly conversed with Julian. Amused by my frostiness towards him, Dan ignored me too.

My gut instinct proved to be right. Dan did irritate me but it wasn’t anything he said, just the way he kept smiling and staring at me.

‘What is your room-mate’s problem?’ I hissed to Julian, later on, over my plate of fish and chips. Julian, Dan and myself had decided to go to the local pub to give ourselves a break from cooking in the hostel’s kitchen.

Julian grinned at the expression on my face. ‘Oh don’t be so grumpy, he’s alright in small doses.’

‘Yeah,’ I spat, ‘in small doses. I’ve had him staring at me all afternoon and if he’s not careful, I’m going to report him for stalking!’

Julian giggled, glancing over to the bar where Dan stood. ‘I think he’s hoping to ply you with alcohol, so he can have his wicked way with you later.’

I sighed. ‘Well, if that’s what he’s trying to do, then he needn’t make this much effort.’

I know you’re probably thinking I’m easy now after reading my last sentence, but I don’t get why people have to place so much emotion on an act which is just purely physical. Sex is just sex in my eyes. Fair enough if people are in a committed relationship, emotion does come into it then. But if people are just horny, sex is an act to satisfy those needs.

‘Can I get you a glass of wine?’ Dan asked me, raising his eyebrow salaciously.

‘Yes, that would be lovely,’ I smiled back at him.

We were back at the hostel, sat outside in the moonlight. I had quickly changed into something more revealing, hoping this would give Dan a clue. I was going to finish this glass of wine, announce I was going to bed and then see if anything happened.

Dan continued to stare at me as I drained the last drop of wine from my glass.

‘Goodnight then,’ I said as I brushed past. I climbed the stairs to my room and let myself in. Five minutes had passed before there was a soft knock on

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my door.

‘Laura, you in there?’

It was Dan. I was just about ready to get into bed when he opened the door. Standing there with only my silk nightie on, he grabbed my hands and pulled me to him. He kissed my neck as his roaming hands frantically searched beneath the loose fabric.

‘I’ve waited all day for this moment, I hope you’re not going to deny me now,’ he whispered. I smiled as I unzipped his flies, teasing his cock with my tongue before I slipped my entire mouth round it. As I sucked him hard, he moaned in ecstasy, pulling himself gently out of my mouth before turning me around.

‘Open your legs,’ he commanded, ‘I wanna come inside you.’

I parted them and with his hands still groping my breasts, he eased himself into me. I groaned as he began to thrust quickly, working himself up to a climax.

Ten minutes later, he returned to his room and I finally went to bed.

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